

## Space, Time and the Chinese Situation of Christianity

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Several years ago, Logos & Pneuma Press published *Sacred World above the Awn of the Wheat — Faith and Life in a Rural Catholic Community* (by WU Fei, 2001). It is so distinct from other books of "ISCS Monographs Series", since most of them stressed on humanistic study such as theology, philosophy, history and so on, in contrast to WU's empirical study. But it shows the insight of ISCS. Thereafter, the Press also published two books of similar kind: *Christianity at the Foot of Mount Tai — A Study of the Interplay Between Religions* (edited by Peter Tze-Ming, 2005) and *Christianity and Christians in Beijing Today* (by GAO Shining, 2006). The theme of issue 26 (2007 spring) of *Logos & Pneuma: Chinese Journal of Theology* is "Sociology of Religion". All these academic activities echo the trend of the development of the studies of religion in social science in Mainland China. In recent years some scholars doing empirical research of religion emerged and they have done meaningful fieldwork studies.

Faith should be a living faith. In other words, it is a lived faith. If faith is separated from the living context, it would become ossified doctrines or theories, lacking of persuasive grounds. Moreover, any ideologized faith will turn to ruin, and be replaced by vital ones. At least, it must be revolutionized in some ways, so that it may grow fresh again.

Authors mentioned above grasp the insight that Christian faith is a living faith. They think that our studies should pay more attention to the phenomena of this living faith. Religious studies should be based on observing and comprehending faith in the concrete living context, instead of merely constructing or deconstructing some texts abstractly. In fact, GAO once saw religion as a social consciousness which have some kinds of supernatural or superhuman powers or spirits as its core. This is also a kind of social system which manifests that consciousness through special

organization and behavior.<sup>i</sup> But when she engaged in the fieldwork, she inclined to regard religion as a way of living, in which the believers have sorts of relationship to the deity.<sup>ii</sup> The significance of this reflection lies not only in the dimension of academic knowledge, but also reflects the transformation of the author's view on religion. It is a development of her life too.

Furthermore, though these works are all localized studies, we may see from them the interaction between Christianity and the society in China. In the past, studies on the interaction between religion and society focused mainly on how Christianity transformed Chinese culture and took part in the modernization of the Chinese society. It is basically the application of John K. Fairbanks' "Impact and Response" model, regardless of making use of the approach of "history of mission", which analyzes and discusses how Christianity "occupies" China, or the so called new paradigm, which shifts the focus to how the Chinese society responds to this foreign cultural impact. For instance, the author of *Christianity at the Foot of Mount Tai* suggests, "Besides the concern of how Christianity influences Chinese culture, the present study pays attention to how Christianity is influenced by Chinese culture, especially traditional culture of religion and politics, which results in interaction and transformation."<sup>iii</sup> In other words, their focus returned to Christianity. However, it should be noted that this kind of concern is quite different from the "history of mission" approach in the past. It focuses on how Christianity receives impact from Chinese culture, so that it becomes localized and modernized.

However, does "Chinese-style" Christianity really exist, or is it merely a fake question? On the one hand, it seems that "Chinese-style" is unnecessary to Christianity. If Christianity is completely localized, then it would become far away from its universality. On the other hand, Christianity in general must have made different degrees of adaptation in its interaction with local societies in China. "Indigenization" seems to be a redundant term, since Christianity must develop its locality.

Christianity exists in specific spaces and localities, so that Taian is different from Shanghai, and China is different from France. However, Christianity also has a trans-spatial dimension. This means that locality and universality co-exist in Christianity. The "cross" is universal, but since it is at the specific place of Holy Mountain, it already carries local character.

For the same reason, Christianity exists also in time, and has undergone

many changes in history. For example, Jinjiao of 11<sup>th</sup> century is different from the Catholicism in 13<sup>th</sup> century, and even more different from the Protestantism in 20<sup>th</sup> century. Christianity also has trans-temporal dimension. In other words, both the characters of historicity and catholicity co-exist in Christianity. Christianity in 21<sup>st</sup> century should be historical, but also with trans-temporal ecumenical character.

Seen from a wider perspective, it is because of this creative tension between universality and locality, the vitality of Christianity is manifested with growth always. In Chinese people's perspective, it may be appropriately called dialectical harmony. This is in fact also related to the transcendental dimension of Christianity. Since there is such a dimension, there is always an open space in Christianity and the transcendence of Christianity is maintained in specific times and spaces.

It follows that Sino-Christian theology is facing a similar situation. On the one hand, we should not neglect the life experience of the Chinese people. On the other hand, we could not only have the Chinese people and their situation in mind and construct a so-called "Chinese-style theology". Sino-Christian theology, in my opinion, must face the whole world, and open to different epochs. Theology must bear some universal meaning, at least with its grounds and objects. Of course, its growing place is the concrete living situation and life experience in China. A Sino-Christian theology based on such rethinking and reconsideration can make unique contribution to ecumenical theology. It would be both "universal" and "particular", without falling prey to narrow nationalism or some theology-like metaphysical construct of the intellectuals.

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<sup>i</sup> GAO Shining, *Christianity and Christians in Beijing Today* (HK: Logos & Pneuma Press, 2006), p. 49.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>iii</sup> NG Tze-Ming et al, *Christianity at the Foot of Mount Tai* (HK: Logos & Pneuma Press, 2005), p. 30.