

“Back to Classic, Back to History”
Searching for a New Approach for Sino-Christian Theology

LI Tiangang

Professor, Department of Religion, Fudan University

Reviewing the two decades of development of Sino-Christian theology in Mainland China, we find that there is a progress of intensification of knowledge of Christianity among the generation of scholars that emerged after the Cultural Revolution. In the beginning, young scholars found the spiritual value of Christian religion in literature such that they affirmed the significance of the Christian church. Afterwards scholars mainly focused on Christian philosophy, especially interpreting the particularity of Christian faith, such that a gateway to construct Sino-Christian theology became possible. Two decades have passed; it is wonderful that Sino-Christian theology is still developing and showing various approaches. Nevertheless, theology has retreated from the frontline of the academic realm in this postmodern era; scholars usually read this retreating discipline through the window of humanities. "A discovery of theology in China" lets philosophy have a new resource, literary studies become intensified, and other ancient literature have a new light. This is a great contribution of Sino-Christian theology in Mainland China in the last twenty years.

It is absolutely a good thing that Chinese humanities can have "theology". Christian theology is doing the following significant things among Chinese scholars: enriching their horizon, letting them understand a source of western civilization, establishing a proper position for Christianity in the history and culture of China. But according to the principle of "translation-cultivation-rebirth" suggested by XU Guangqi in the late Ming period, it is not sufficient for us to just have "theology". After translation theology is still a "western discipline"; we have not yet introduced a foreign discipline successfully. There must be a process to dissolve the "western" features, so that Christian theology may genuinely root in the Chinese culture. Due to the restriction of local language, semantics and situation, only after "cultivation" and thus the formation of "rebirth", can a true communication between east and west be achieved. Eventually the "western discipline" may

become Chinese "theology", an organic part of our local culture. This is the significance of suggesting the idea of Sino-Christian theology.

The twenty-year history of Sino-Christian theology has already gone beyond the period of "translation" and is progressing toward the stage of "cultivation-rebirth". This means that the culmination of theological resources has provided sufficient supply to scholars for an authentic Chinese interpretation and thus genuine Sino-Christian theology. In view of this, Sino-Christian theology has come to a crossroad. There are different paths towards the goal, but for scholars trained in the history of thought like me, an approach related to "classics" and "history" appears more attractive. "Back to classics" emphasizes the religious text, which is relevant to religious studies east and west, and should be regarded as a basic approach for Sino-Christian theology. Moreover, as theology and biblical studies are absorbed into Chinese culture, they will interact with Chinese experience. Therefore "back to history" means that Christian religion must be interpreted with Chinese experience, which is also necessary for Sino-Christian theology.

In view of the approach of "back to classics" and "back to history" , we notice the theme of "Tianxue Confucianism" developed in late Ming and the relationship between jingxue and theology. In light of the atmosphere of Sino-Christian theology developed in the last two decades, reflecting on the debate between western and eastern scholarship since the May 4th Movement, our understanding of Christian theology is deepened. We come to the view that the Chinese Confucian Christians have left us a great treasure of translation, interpretation and adaptation of Christian theology since 400 years ago. Chinese Christians have already gone a long way with "classics" and "history". There is plenty of Christian literature written in Chinese worthy of our attention. It is more precious that the religious experience of Chinese Christians is filled with dialogue. Sino-Christian theology is basically a kind of "theology of dialogue", i.e. an intercultural "systematic theology" based on the dialogue between western biblical studies, theology, philosophy and Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and the popular religions of Chinese culture. Following the footsteps of our predecessors, we may say that it is possible to discover a Sino-Christian theology in the 400 year history of Chinese thought.

"Back to classics" and "back to history" as approaches for Sino-Christian theology are not very unique. They are just old ways used in the European Renaissance. But old ways may also be used to chart new waters, and they

may also point in the right direction. Contemporary Chinese scholars are still not very familiar with Christian "theology"; biblical studies in Mainland China are even almost a vacuum. Turning back to the Chinese traditional studies, Confucian classics have not been studied very seriously since the May 4th Movement. In this situation it is necessary to emphasize the basic skills of the Renaissance: language and grammar, criticism of versions, interpretation through environment and history, such that the meaning of theology may be correctly understood. For example, it is not difficult to find comparative studies of Aquinas and Zhu Xi, Luther and Wang Yangming. But simple comparison leads only to debates rather than a sophisticated message released from a serious study of different texts and versions. Only through concrete analysis of different classics in their history may we discover the similarities in differences and differences in similarities.

We may find another rule in the 400-year history of Chinese Christianity: the main trend of Sino-Christian theology is integration rather than dissolution. This means that the churches of Chinese Christianity are quite different from those of the west; they need a united Sino-Christian theology. In other words, Sino-Christian theology is not some political import of some secular rulers but a result of inner discussion within Christianity. Following the 400 years of history of Chinese Christianity up to current studies of Sino-Christian theology, we may find a clear direction and make our studies more deeply rooted. Thus we must emphasize more on the studies of history and text. There can be a refined definition of "history and text" here: "history" means the contribution the Chinese church made to modern Chinese culture since the Ming and Qing dynasties, and the experience and lessons learned in constructing Sino-Christian theology. "Text" means the marks left by Chinese culture on the religious literature of Chinese churches.

It is clear that approaching Sino-Christian theology through history requires humanities scholars from different disciplines and assistance from different churches. In other words, there should be no conflict between universities and seminaries, scholars and preachers, society and church. On the contrary they should have more cooperation and interaction. The tension between secular and religious scholars in the 20th century should be resolved in our generation. The dialogue of religions emerging in the 21st century created an open atmosphere for the development of Sino-Christian theology. In the present Chinese situation, secular scholars who are familiar with Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism should turn more to Christian religion. If they are unsympathetic or even hostile to Christian religion, they could hardly understand valuable "theology". In a similar vein, if Chinese

Christians think that they acquired a right understanding of theology naturally because of their confession and can go beyond the restriction of the history of the text, then they would violate modern rationality in interpreting their classics. Modern Christians need the support of rationality too. If we overemphasize the particularity of faith and ignore the concrete Chinese situation, then it would become a kind of naïve fideism. Sino-Christian theology has to face both the Chinese situation and theological tradition. Neither can be ignored, so that an open understanding can be achieved.

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