

Sino-Christian Theology: a Two-level Thinking on Society and the Church

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Generally speaking, theology is the thinking of the church. This concept limits theology within the church. It assumes its destiny if theology gets beyond the church, then it would become sterile.

However, Sino-Christian theology gets beyond the church and thinks about the society and the church. It has been around for more than ten years and has established "a theology of the invisible church" taking society, culture and the church as its objects of inquiry. Therefore the most distinctive feature of Sino-Christian theology is that its construction and development are not taking place in the church, but is the result of thinking about the church and the socio-cultural phenomenon in the Chinese world.

Since the 1990s, theological studies have emerged in the Chinese academia, and serves as a kind of criticism of society, politics and thought rather than a theological heresy. Its emergence gradually forms the public feature of theological studies of the Chinese intellectuals and the unique way of Sino-Christian theology. Up to date there are public theology, political theology, theology of culture, theology of religions, etc. in the Chinese academia. They changed the past situation where there was the absence of theology in modern China.

This phenomenon has a very special sociological meaning in the development of contemporary Chinese society. In the late 1980s there was already a hidden wave of religious discussion in the cultural realm. Some people predicted that after the "cultural heat" there would be a wave of "religious heat". This prediction does not only point to the religious need and choice of the Chinese but points to another level of theological significance. After a nation-wide cultural heat, what the Chinese retain and

use to establish a new value system is not confined to the issue of modernization and the transformation of traditional culture.

According to the social structure at that time, the history of the transformation of the Chinese society has just begun. Before that time the institutional function (of classification of social level, identity with respect to politics and ideology) was still very strong. The contents of thinking in people's mind were all about politics and economic, even cultural discussion was absorbed into the politico-economic realm. Since the early 1990s the autocracy of politico-economic realm declined and the cultural discussion diversified to different "spirits". Scholars suddenly became scattered around intellectually and had no proper foundation for developing discussion. At that moment, religious studies and theological approaches rose up.

Culture as a public requirement needs something to rely on. But the special situation of China is that there is a lack of public sphere. In the last two decades, the dichotomy of church and state is dissolved in the process of indigenization, such that Chinese Christianity has become a "place"-centred (the church building) operation. When people think of Christianity, they are not thinking of the religious community or its theology, but the scale of the church-building, believers and activities. Theological thinking is diluted while the place of activity is emphasized; the expansion of the church and the number of believers seem to be the only parameter of examining the development of Christianity. Under this situation, if there is a public theology which may participate directly in the public discussion, academia, and cultural realm, it appears as if it has provided a way for the interaction between this world and the other.

The present church institution nearly resembles to that of economic-political institution, since it is embedded in the other. If theology could participate in different public discussions of the mass, it has already gone beyond the original church and economic-political institution. At present scholars of different disciplines have already established a space for public discussion with their own identities and thinking. This does not only make Sino-Christian theology a part of the Chinese academia but also creates its publicity and social character. Seen in this way, the approach of Sino-Christian theology has already become an obvious social thought with respect to the mode of contemporary Chinese academic thought. This "society" is on one hand based on the individual decision of faith, and create all academic community on the other.

As the key players of Sino-Christian theology, intellectuals of different disciplines transform faith into cultural form based on their faith and knowledge. In this way their expressions go beyond the church and spread throughout the entire Chinese society. Chinese language is a medium for participating in the society and connecting theology with society, academia and public issues. Theology gets into the core of culture and the academia constitutes the horizon of theology. Intellectuals regard the discussion of public issues as their way of establishing the publicity and social character of Sino-Christian theology, so that a new wave is introduced into the Chinese academia. It established the real influence of Christian theology on the academia, and intensified the thinking of Chinese scholars on their questions of existence. In this way Sino-Christian theology has constituted a "diffused" type (not institutional) of academic community, comprising of scholars from different disciplines and levels.

The remaining question is: can the interaction and influence of this community be universally recognized by others in the wider Chinese-speaking World? How can the normative function of this public theology be institutionalized? If Sino-Christian theology wants to avoid the present form of Confucianism as a kind of non-institutional spirit, this would be a big question to encounter in the future.

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