

Essay

## **The Significance of Schleiermacher's View on Religion to Sino-Christian Theology**

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The Enlightenment spirit developed severe criticism of the Christian religion. One of the profound consequence is that modern people are then living in a secular world after losing faith, facing various forms of evil without any saving hope. But Schleiermacher's *Ueber Religion* inspired many cultured despisers' hearts at the turn of 19th century, and gradually developed a "modern paradigm" for Christian faith and philosophy.

The method used by Schleiermacher is similar to that of modern phenomenology. It asks for an epoche, an apprehension of the cosmos, so that we may return to the heart, to an apprehension of the infinite who is the source of religion. Cosmos is used here not as a physical object, but an "infinite" or "holistic" objective which every finite individual hopes to transcend beyond oneself. It can clearly be seen when Schleiermacher used the term "absolute dependence" in place of "the contemplation of the cosmos" in his later work like *Der christliche Glaube*.

The significance of a book to a culture or age depends largely on the needs of the spirit of that time. Reflecting from *Ueber Religion*, we may ask what is most eagerly needed in the contemporary Chinese culture? My answer is belief: what is needed is what there is a lack of. Why are contemporary Chinese lacking belief? It can be explained through simply reviewing the history of transformation of our spiritual life.

Although the Shenzhou VII spaceship made true the Chinese dream of heaven flying and witnesses to the high standard of the technological capacity of China, the event of contaminated milk powder reflects that the moral standard of this ancient state has descended down to the hell! For most people the most pressing question is what can I believe now? Who can

I trust? Where may I find the hope of salvation? China never has had a dominant monotheistic religion like Christianity, but popular religions has been overwhelming. Although they sometimes are intertwined with superstition and utilitarianism, the traditions of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have offered people foundations of spiritual life. However, the ancient traditions are humiliated during the May Fourth Movement and Cultural Revolution. "Sciences" are twisted instrumentally by corporate structures as murdering tools without shame (as in contaminated milk powder event). Truly, atheistic education is good for destroying superstition. But when pushing to extreme it has manufactured a fearless mob who may do any evils in the society. From this perspective we see the bad fruit of a society without belief and without religion.

As early as in 1927 ZIA Nai Zin said, "Most people in China today are too hungry of religion. They thus may swallow anything such that any strange discourse and heretic speaking may be esteemed." [1] 80 years have passed, the situation has changed a lot and Sino-Christian theology has developed for a long time. However, effort is still needed from us to establish a discourse on belief.

Can Schleiermacher's *Ueber Religion* satisfy the thirsty lips of Chinese? My answer is very positive. Firstly, it offers a view compatible to Chinese traditional philosophy and religion. In the Chinese tradition the problem of belief or faith concerns the relationship between the heaven and the human. The heaven is the subject we worship and rely on; it is the natural heaven (cosmos) and also the ultimate principle. Therefore it is both infinite and transcendent, and also the sustainer of ultimate justice. The way Schleiermacher interprets religion as the human apprehension of the cosmos comes very close to the Chinese thinking of the "infinite".

Secondly, the way Schleiermacher interprets religion as apprehension and feeling of the cosmos also comes close to Chinese traditional philosophy. In Chinese thinking, the heaven and the human have mutual relationship and they rely on each other, in this way a spiritual foundation is constituted.

Thirdly, Schleiermacher sees religion as the apprehension of and dependence on the cosmos of the self-consciousness. This interpretation comes close to the radical revolution of Zen Buddhism, which transformed an Indian religion to an indigenous one. We hope that Schleiermacher's view of religion may also bring about a spiritual revolution in modern China.

Fourthly, Schleiermacher does not see religion as a withdrawal from this world to the kingdom of heaven, but it is rooted in the depth of humanity. This view of transcendence comes close to the Chinese humanistic spirit. The Chinese spirit is rooted deeply on earth. The meaning of the existence of the sacred lies not in its solemnity high above but the effectiveness of its presence. Therefore one need not go to a monastery or long for the kingdom of heaven far away, but can find the infinite and sacred present in our finite existence. If this is what religion means for Schleiermacher, it would be welcome by most Chinese.

Of course, Schleiermacher also holds some views contradictory to traditional Chinese views. For example, he looks down on moral religion or ethical theology, insisting on the independence of ethics and religion. However, as Chinese culture has a high degree of toleration, it may not affect the reception. In addition, the mission of Sino-Christian theology never follows any one stream of thought exclusively, but embraces a creative and synthesizing spirit. In this process, I believe that Schleiermacher's view is an essential constituent in the Chinese spiritual world like Kant's moral religion. ZIA Nai Zin mentioned that Schleiermacher looks like Huainanzi in Chinese history.[2] It is not very accurate. My hope is that he resembles Huineng.

*Notes*

[1] ZIA Nai Zin, *Philosophy of Religion* (Jinan: Shandong Renmin Press, 1998), 206-207.

[2] *Ibid.*, 150.

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