

## **Dialogue between Japanese scholars from Doshisha University and Sino-Christian theologians**

In March 9 2009, three Japanese scholars from Doshisha University visited ISCS in order to have a sharing on Japanese Christian studies. ISCS invited Prof. Knud Jorgensen to present a lecture "Reflection on Sino-Christian Theology from a Western Perspective" as follow:

### **Reflection on Sino-Christian Theology from a Western Perspective Knud Jørgensen**

Areopagos & the Norwegian School of Theology

ISCS is a legitimate child of Areopagos and represents in a special way the objectives and aims of the organization - in a Chinese context. The term 'context' touches the very nerve in the work of ISCS - encompassing translation, publication, visitation programs for scholars and students, conferences and scholarships.

ISCS has had 'translation' as a focal point in its work since its inception. The aim of this translation is to develop a Chinese language that in a new and meaningful way may interpret what the Christian faith is in Chinese. Maybe "interpret" is not the best word since translation is so much more - it is rather to create something new, new ideas, new theology - a theology which, precisely because it is a new creation, builds the bridge between Scripture and tradition on the one side and the Chinese contemporary context on the other side. Translating the faith always implies something new - a new understanding of the old, a disclosure of new aspects, and a continued "revelation" of the original revelation. This is what ISCS has been and is involved in. In the same sense the entire project of spreading the Christian faith can be called 'translation': Transmitting Christian faith into a new setting means an extensive process of translation, in which the most important tool of contextualization is the use by the people of their own

language, according to the African missiologist Lamin Sanneh[1] . By its very nature theology is therefore translation, making faith comprehensible, or the search for words, expressions and meanings for the basic questions of existence

Since the late 19th century missiologists have talked about planting churches that are self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating (Henry Venn and Rufus Andersen), and particularly in China this church model has played a key role since 1949, politically and theologically - within the so-called Three-Self Patriotic Movement. In the course of time we have, however, come to realise that 'Three-Self' is not enough; the model may be criticised in several ways, but it lacks a fourth self: A living church and a living faith must develop its own theology and thinking - become self- theologizing. Sino-Christian theology contributes towards making the Chinese church self-theologizing, in a broader perspective. Over time one would therefore look for more constructive points of contact between the university architects of Sino-Christian theology and the seminary and house church theologians. Without such contacts there could be a risk that the churches either do not develop their own contextualised theology - or that their theological thinking remains an attempt to adjust to political ideologies in China. For the university architects, on their side, there is a risk that they develop theologies in isolation from the faith community and the daily living of the Christian faith. In the West this risk has resulted in what Hwa Yung calls 'an unengaged theology'[2] - a theology of theory and not of practice.

Self-theologizing is a matter of creating a contextual theology - a Christian theology in Chinese. If there is anything we in the North may learn from ISCS, it is this - that a contextualisation of theology and faith - the attempt to understand the Christian faith within the framework of our context - is not optional, neither for the Church in China nor the Church in Scandinavia. But again, this requires some open channels between the intelligentsia in the Chinese context and the actual churches.

Contextualization has to do with bringing together experiences from the past and the present.

...doing theology contextually means doing theology in a way that takes into account two things. First, it takes into account the faith experience of the past

that is recorded in scripture and kept alive...in tradition...Second, contextual theology takes into account the experience of the present, the context. While theology needs to be faithful to the full experience and contexts of the past, it is authentic theology only when what has been received is appropriated, made our own.[3]

Context is complex. It includes personal experience, culture, history, social location, and social change. When I was taught theology in the sixties at the University of Copenhagen, I was taught that theology was a question of understanding Scripture and tradition - and not too much tradition, please, because that was for the Roman-Catholics. Nevertheless the interpretation of Scripture largely happened through Lutheran glasses.... Today I know that Scripture and tradition are not enough - many years as a missionary in an African context and years with experiences from both Asian and Latin-American church life have taught me that theology needs a third leg to stand on: The experience that lies in my context. In my African context this meant that we read Scripture in a collective manner - and not as the story about the salvation of the individual. In addition, the focus was less on justification by faith and more on the risen Christ that has conquered the powers and authorities. In a Chinese context there are many that read Scripture with Confucian glasses: They are preoccupied with harmony and with the connection between faith, moral and philosophy. Our context, also in the North - perhaps more there than in most places - influences how we understand God and express our faith. **There is no unchangeable theology.** This I learn regularly ISCS and their friends - we may only talk about a theology that makes sense in one place and at one specific time. But of course we must learn from others and their theologies - even from Luther, Grundtvig, Kierkegaard and Hallesbye - just to mention a few of our Nordic heroes - but the theology of others can never become our theology. Should that happen, the risk is that it is an irrelevant theology - because it does not relate to here and now, my here and now - because it does not take seriously what the Christian faith is all about - namely about him who became flesh and blood in our context - and who still wants to set up his tent in ever new contexts. Here is the vibrating heart in God's communication with human beings and with his world - he bends down and speaks to us in our own language and within our own culture.

Here is the challenge to ISCS and to us: **Every authentic theology must take root in a specific context, it must reflect the culture, and it must struggle with oppressive forces in that context, like racism, male dominance and our Western exploitation of God's creation. It must relate to the social change of its time and our time - on our way from a modern to a post-modern society, from a fragmented world to a global village. And in the midst of it all, it must create a new language, become a new revelation of the Good News, and open our eyes to make us see more of the height and the depth and the breadth.**

In other words: **ISCS is doing what the Church always has been called to do** - and what the theologians of the Early Church did. They struggled to make the faith understood in a dominant Hellenistic culture - Clement of Alexandria made use of the thinking of the Stoics, Origin made use of Plato, and Augustine stole language from the neo-Platonists of his time. Or go to Thomas Aquinas who used the newly rediscovered Aristotelian thinking as a vehicle for expressing faith. Or Luther who expressed the faith in a context where people in a new way understood the role of the individual. And we might continue along this road and visit all the heroes of our faith.

This illustrates that at the same time as contextualisation implies something new, it is also something very traditional. A study of the history of theology will reveal that every authentic theology has been very much rooted in a particular context in some implicit or real way. In that sense contextualisation has always been with us. Scripture is filled with illustrations of contextual theology[4] . Every gospel is different because of the different contexts and the different circumstances[5] . It may be argued that the Christian message itself contains a basic ambiguity that makes plurality part of the identity and essence of Christianity itself.

Genuine contextualization challenges us in the West to continue today this biblical stream of unfolding the Christian message in ever-widening settings. Are we in the old Christendom eagerly, burningly, vehemently preoccupied with finding language, expressions, thought forms, metaphors, and images - in order to translate and adopt the faith into our changing and often manifold contexts?

What ISCS has done has in my view in a special way pioneered and paved the way for what we now call Sino-Christian theology. In many ways **this is the first time ever in the 14 centuries of Christianity in China that Chinese scholars have a positive and objective attitude to and view of the Christian faith.**

In that sense ISCS's name will be written into the church history of China - you have played a small, but significant role in making the Christian faith find a genuine home in the Chinese language and among Chinese intellectuals.

**Notes:**

[1]Sanneh, Lamin Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture. New York 1990.

[2]Hwa, Yung Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology. Oxford Regnum. 1997

[3]Bevans, Stephen B Models of Contextual Theology. New York. 1992.

[4]see Flemming, Dean: Contextualisation in the New Testament . Intervarsity 2005

[5]Nissen, Johannes: New Testament and Mission. Peter Lang 2004.

*Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, Homepage 2009*

*Mit freundlicher Erlaubnis des Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, Hongkong*