

Tao Fong Shan as "Religious-aisthetical Word Event" and the Task of Sino-Christian Theology

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A pilgrim's mountain: "I lift up my eyes to the hills." (Ps. 121)

Since I have come to Tao Fong Shan and ISCS the first time in 2002, I have always walked up on foot whenever I could. It is an experience from the first step, walking as a pilgrim. At the last curve you will suddenly catch sight of ISCS, then the Christ Temple and finally enter through the gateway with the Chinese words "Realm of the Spirit of the Word": Here is a place where the spiritual "Word event" is promised to take place and which may go with you when you leave. For me this place has indeed become an area where the Spirit of the Word, which is Christ, "blows".

Tao Fong Shan as religious-aisthetical landscape of WORD experience

Tao Fong Shan has been founded and shaped as a religious landscape. It was designed for religious aisthetical experience. The idea of "religious-aisthetics" has recently become a keyword for a new approach in German religious studies. It focuses on the question how religions work through media to produce meaningful experience of an otherwise unexperienceable "absolute" or "transcendent". Tao Fong Shan fits very well as an example of this. One may call it a protestant monastery or a Chinese Christian place of self-cultivation. First, there is the location on the mountain itself, situated far from the city, even the noise of cars and aircons finds its way up only like sounds from afar. Second, there is the arrangement of buildings, spaces and paths providing calmness. Third, the spiritual pilgrim should not miss a special area at the nose of the mountain: A little path leading there with the last 95 steps [\[3\]](#) through a narrow gate to a free, open space with a pavilion and the high, white cross. There one watches down on the "world of dust". The place is "functionless" for those who need aims and ends: you cannot

go further here, and finally you are sent back into the world with a "wide heart of love". [4] As a fourth there is, of course, the "Christ temple" as a place of service and liturgy. The services of Tao Fong Shan partly still go back to its founder Karl Ludvig Reichelt. They are the places where Christ, the Word, in scripture reading, sermon as well as in bread and wine definitely and manifestly becomes event. It is the very place where the living voice of the gospel occurs. The chanted liturgy, its old rhythm, old songs mixed with new tunes, including the more recent Taizé tradition: The density of atmosphere together with the special surrounding at Tao Fong Shan's services have always been one of my deepest impressions over this year: For me it is one of the greatest parts, one of the mysteries, and the middle of Christian life at Tao Fong Shan, the Word's working and the Spirit's blowing.

ISCS as the theological centre of TFS and the task of reflecting how religion really works

In my view the main work of Theology is not idle, abstract theory, but reflexivity upon one's existence of faith as lived in practice and based on the Word, thereby it ideally involves again and leads into living faith. It is the brain, not the heart, not belief itself, but it might be tied back to it.

What connects ISCS with the old idea of Tao Fong Shan's "Mission to the Buddhists" is its theological enterprise to speak to a non-Christian Chinese world in the form of dialogue and in the Chinese language. In this best tradition ISCS continues the heritage of Reichelt. In the changed situation it is now not the Buddhist monks, but the Chinese scholars who became the target group and dialogue partners. This new approach of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies has developed over more than 10 years. The great achievement within this time can easily be measured by the amazingly vast library of translations and other volumes produced. Besides, the Institute has become a hub, affectively connecting the theologies in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the West as well as religious studies in the Mainland. I myself enjoyed this one year with many contacts, residents and guests who are here for a short stay, for one or three months or even longer.

There is one question, however, which arose often when I was speaking with my Chinese colleagues: We all agree that Christian theology is also an intellectual and philosophical enterprise which had a huge impact on Western thinking and society and also that Christianity is "also an ethical

religion" which could be good and helpful for the individual and society. But at the same time there lies a danger: While the first leads only to a philosophical understanding without concreteness, the second may lead to moralization. If the gospel, however, is mainly understood in terms of morality or ethics, it becomes easily the "Law", giving norms, but never the liberating spirit of Christ. In the extreme it would be a word event, but as one of the "killing law", not of the liberating and life-giving event of the gospel.

This leads me back to my experience at Tao Fong Shan and Religious aesthetics. With this concept we will not misunderstand religion, and also Christian faith, as merely moral teaching, but as something which leads to a transformative process, the re-creation of the New Being, the 'new Adam' everyday again and again through bringing us in relation to the divine power. As it brings God and Human together, it might even be called mystical.

Although there is not one way, but many, and there are more individual and more collective ways, they all might much more work through our body and senses than only the mind or through ethical rules and moral exhortation. In the case of Tao Fong Shan the designed landscape may serve this role as well as the services and liturgy which remind of the presence of God as the giver of new life, bodily and spiritually.

Real Theology as reflection upon faith, as I understand it, no matter if done by Christian thinkers or potentially also by scholars of Christian studies, must always more or less relate to such renewing processes. The closer it finds out also how this takes place and what it really looks like, the better it may reflect, and the better it may help understanding Christianity. Beyond all philosophical understanding or social observations, it may show that it takes place much more through concrete religious life and its spiritual aesthetical forms.

I could imagine that also mainland scholars could turn more to the question how Christianity really works, how it lives, not only thinks, in order to really understand it. They might find out that the Spirit of "capitalist" western society is much more rooted not in a crude Calvinism or strong ethical rules, but another "ascetism" of an aesthetical, liturgical, even monastic way of celebrating the living Word.

As Sino-Christian Theology as theological reflection in Chinese language reflects on this, and helps develop a better understanding how Christian faith really works, it may, I would hope, even soften the gap between mainland scholars and church people which is so painfully felt.

Notes

[3] Reminding of Luther's 95 theses, headed by the first and encompassing one: "That the whole life shall be repentance." No wonder, the path leads through a narrow door called 'door of life.'

[4] Below the heading characters boai ('broad love,' charity) left and right the verse Matt.28:19 is inscribed.

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