

Review of *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment: Heaven and Humanity in Unity*.¹

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Despite a number of fundamental weaknesses, this book contains a great deal of information and insight, and deserves careful engagement by those who seek to ponder ways in which the Christian message can be expressed persuasively to Chinese. Dense, tightly organized, and well written, the volume deserves an extended description and evaluation.

Contents

“Sin, more specifically original sin, has often been cited as the principal obstacle for the Chinese people to accept Christianity.” (xiii) With this opening sentence in the Foreward, the author’s dissertation advisor Edmond Tang both states the fundamental assumption of the volume and points toward the thesis, namely that “*Theosis* and related concepts like ‘ancestral sin’ [derived from Eastern Orthodoxy] can be useful in providing a strong theological foundation to complement the Christian theological dialogue in present-day China.” (15)

Chow believes that Eastern Orthodoxy’s doctrine of sin (hamartiology), which speaks of “ancestral sin” instead of “original sin,” “can provide a mediating voice between the anthropologies of Chinese optimism and Augustinian pessimism.” (15)

The “theological dialogue” of which he speaks includes, on the one hand, what he considers to be the “law-based” stance of Western Christianity, as it has been preached by missionaries, accepted by “fundamentalist” Chinese Christians, and recently re-considered by Chinese intellectuals who have come to believe that there is something fundamentally wrong with humanity; and, on the other hand, the traditional humanistic conviction of the “three teachings” (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism) that we are essentially good and, by our own efforts at self-cultivation, can achieve both personal virtue and a unity between Heaven and mankind that has always been the dream of thoughtful Chinese.

A new theological typology

Chow’s goal is to help formulate a truly indigenous theology, one which speaks to both China’s religious and philosophical tradition as well as to its current social, economic, and political context. To do so, he adopts a new theological classification,

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one he thinks is more suited to the real history and situation of Chinese Christians. Previous classifications, including those based on contrasts between fundamentalism and modernism, “Confucian Activism” and “Daoist Pietism,” are inadequate to describe the complexities involved.

A more recent typology assigns various theological streams to one of three categories:

Type A, with Tertullian as its prototype theologian, holds law as its central concept; sees God as Lawgiver and Judge; believes the creation is complete; defines sin as breaking the law of God; holds original sin to be inherited; believes that the human predicament is one of moral debt; and describes the work of Christ in terms of expiation, forgiveness, and the giving of a new law. The *eschaton* will bring a kingdom of law and order. Chinese representatives of this type would include Wang Mingdao, John Song (Song Xhangjie), Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng), the later T.C. Chao, (Zhao Zhichen), and most Protestant Christians today.

Type B looks back to Origen. Its main theme is “truth”; God is seen as “ineffable One” and transcendent; it views creation as originally spiritual and to some degree ongoing; defines sin as “not contemplating the One”; restricts original sin to individuals; considers our predicament to be forgetfulness [of God] and obfuscation; describes the work of Christ as providing an example, teaching, and illumination. Its hope focuses on an eternity of contemplation and return to God. Meanwhile, Type B theologians are “deeply committed to liberation and transformation.” (85) Chinese spokesmen for this type include the earlier T.C. Chao, L.C. Wu (Wu Leichuan), Y.T. Wu (Wu Yaozong)

Type C traces from Irenaeus. In this paradigm, the key theme is God’s revelation in history; God is divine Shepherd and Father; Creation has only begun; sin is “anticipatory disobedience” by Adam and Eve, adumbrating the sinful actions of all their descendents; original sin involves the solidarity of the human race in Adam, and leads to our subjection to death; the work of Christ brings victory over death and evil, and opens the future for us to become like God (*Theosis*); the *eschaton* will usher in a kingdom of freedom and further growth in God-likeness. (Table C.1, p. 160) In China, Chow finds only Bishop K.H. Ting (Ding Guangxun) as an exponent of this paradigm.

Each of these types takes a distinct view of the relationship of Christianity to Chinese culture: Type A mostly rejects, criticizes, or ignores the religious heritage of China. Type B. values, accepts, and even seeks to incorporate traditional ideas into a sinicized Christian theology. In fact, “their fundamental outlooks primarily originate from non-Christian, philosophical truths.” (85)

Following this introduction, the author proceeds to structure the body of his study in terms of the title, but taking up the subjects in reverse order.

Two Chinese Enlightenments

Chapter 1: “The Chinese Enlightenments,” opens with a description of the First Chinese Enlightenment, which began with the May fourth Movement in 1919 and lasted throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Intellectuals, believing that China’s traditional worldviews, including Confucianism, had blinded the nation, locking it into an unworkable and debilitating moral code and religious superstition. They touted the illumination and liberation that would flow from honoring “Mr. Science and Mr.

Democracy.” Some Christian thinkers rejected “superstitious” elements of the faith, such as the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection of Christ, and strove instead for a transformation of society based on human knowledge and effort. This movement paved the way for atheistic communism.

The Second Enlightenment reflected the profound disillusionment following from the sufferings of endless political campaigns, especially the “Great Cultural Revolution,” and then the killing of students and civilians on June 4th, 1989. Their faith in the essential goodness of mankind shattered, intellectuals began to re-consider Christianity’s teaching of original sin. Many have become evangelical Christians. Others sought to formulate a “Sino-theology” that returned to traditional Chinese values while accepting some major doctrines of Christianity.

Three Representative Theologians

Next, Chow describes, analyzes, and evaluates three representative Chinese Christian theologians: Watchman Nee (Type A), T.C. Chao (Type B), and K.H. Ting (Type C). Limitations of space allow only the barest treatment of Chow’s detailed and, for me, extremely helpful exposition of their thought. I ask the reader’s indulgence, and recommend that you study these chapters yourself.

Chapter 2: “Watchman Nee’s Spiritual Man,” finds Nee to expound a typical Type A Christianity, with emphasis upon personal salvation through faith in Christ; individual growth in holiness through conscious cultivation of intimacy with Christ; and the formation of congregations seeking to help believers obey Christ and preach this evangelical message. At the same time, Chow thinks that Nee, consciously or unconsciously, drew upon the basically “synergistic” view of the cooperation between Heaven and mankind, though he probably had little knowledge of Eastern Orthodoxy. Though Nee, like Wang Mingdao, adopted a “basically antithetical approach to the prevalent culture,” (65) he did not totally ignore the societal context of Christians, especially after 1949, when he encouraged believers to help build the New China and sought cooperation with the new Three Self Patriotic Movement.

Chapter 3: “T.C. Chao’s Spiritual Fellowship,” shows that, at least in his earlier writings, Chao (1888-1979) and others of his type “embraced their Chinese context, both in terms of sociopolitical concerns and religiophilosophical legacy.” Chow quotes Stephen B. Bevans, who calls this “the anthropological model of contextual theology,” which seeks the “the establishment or preservation of cultural identity by a person of Christian faith.” Any challenge of the culture “is always viewed with suspicion that the challenge is not coming from God as such, but from a tendency of one (western, Mediterranean) contextual perspective to impose its values on another.” (65)

Chao insisted that Christianity must engage in dialogue with Confucianism if it was to be relevant to contemporary Chinese, as well as being open to the scientific mind of the First Enlightenment. Thus, “the essence of Christianity and the spiritual heritage of Chinese culture [i.e., Confucianism] can be united into one single whole. The religious life of Christianity can be injected into Chinese culture and become its new life blood, and the Chinese spiritual heritage can provide the media for the expression of Christianity.” (67) Chao hoped that the resulting contextualized Chinese Christianity could “contribute to a ‘universal homogenous consciousness’ that aids the realization of Christianity’s catholicity in the global society.” (69)

Evan after his imprisonment, Chao nevertheless resembled a type C theologian in that he believed that salvation enabled people to do good and realize God's kingdom on earth, at least to some degree. In his early years, he was committed to "liberation and transformation," (85) not only for individuals but for society, as humans worked with god to realize their true potential. Insisting that God's fundamental attribute is love, Chao taught that the authenticity of faith could only be expressed through "free acts of love and service." (76) Like others of his type, he worked for the transformation of society rather than looking for the coming of Christ to establish a righteous kingdom, but without divine aid. Instead these theologians adopted a kind of "humanistic monergism. – one can reach salvation by choosing to follow the moral example of Jesus, without any explicit initiation from God." (85) That is because "[t]heir fundamental outlooks primarily originate from non-Christian, philosophical" worldviews. (85)

Chao was imprisoned by the Japanese in 1941. While incarcerated, Chao underwent a profound spiritual and intellectual transformation, which in fact had already begun before the war with Japan. As the result, he realized that "the whole world – himself included – was 'drowning' in sin." (79) Previously defining sin as selfishness, he now saw it as guilt, a crime against God. The atonement of Christ now became the only means by which he and others could be cleansed, forgiven, and freed from the guilt, penalty, and power of sin. Without this, neither the individual nor society could be improved substantially.

As for Chinese culture, Chao now held that "Christianity is what Chinese culture does not have, is fundamentally in contradiction with Chinese culture and is able to save Chinese culture from this contradiction." (81) His former liberal stance, which exalted human reason, now became one of Augustinian *fides quaerens intellectum* – faith seeking understanding.

This return to "Type A" Christianity's doctrine has resonated with Chinese intellectuals, including the leaders of urban churches. Chow sees a problem here, however: How will this view of mankind relate to the resurgence of traditional Chinese optimism about human nature?

Chapter 4, "K.H. Ting's Cosmic Christ," describes the theology of Ding Guangxun (1915-2012), the leader of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) beginning in the 1980s and the leading – perhaps only – prominent theologian in the state-supported Christian organization.

He was influenced by Liberation Theology, but declared that, after 1949, China no longer needed any liberation. Following Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary theology with its view of a Cosmic Christ, Ting taught that Christ is not just savior, but also creator, and that he cares for all people in the world, believers and non-believers alike. Finally, with the process theology of Alfred North Whitehead, Ting emphasized that God is love, and that this love overrode all other attributes of God. He is Cosmic Lover, and we participate in his love for the world, and his ongoing creation of it, as we work towards the *eschaton*, which is the ideal human community.

Ting was highly critical of "fundamentalist," Type A theology, which distinguishes between faith and unbelief, and therefore, in his eyes, fractured the harmony of society. Instead, he taught a "justification by love" which called everyone into the continuing salvation process as collaborators with God. Christ's Atonement meant little to him;

instead, he focused on the Incarnation. He preferred to speak of people as “sinned against” rather than as “sinners.” God is our fellow sufferer, and does not condemn us for our sins but sees the potential in everyone. Ting held to an “optimistic” view of human nature. Christians can cooperate with communists who, like them, seek to construct a better world.

Chow observes that while Ting sought to reconcile Christianity and communism, his theology ended up being “more divisive than helpful in the unity of the Chinese church,” because his view of the human predicament is out of step with the Second Enlightenment’s re-discovery of the doctrine of original sin. At the same time, however, Ting’s thought resonates with Chinese intellectuals who seek a revival of China’s traditional teachings on the possibility of the unity of heaven and earth through a cooperative effort towards universal harmony.

Chinese theology and Eastern Orthodoxy

At this point, Chow pivots towards his point: Eastern Orthodoxy has something valuable to offer Chinese Christians who want to address their culture effectively.

Chapter 5: Theological Concerns

First, he reviews and expands on some what he has said about Chinese theology. He avers that the main question has always been theological anthropology, the nature of individual humans, and their relationship to human society. Starting from the fundamental assumption that “[n]o Chinese contextual theology can exist without reckoning with the [sic] Chinese traditional teachings,” (115) he discusses “three major themes that have shown prominence in the two Chinese enlightenments and Byzantine theology: sin, synergy, and union.” (116)

Because of the traditionally optimistic view of human moral potential and the recent awareness of the depth of human sin, Chow believes that a “realistic Chinese contextual theology . . . must bring together a strong understanding of both sin and the[sic] human potential.” (120)

Likewise, Chinese have emphasized the cooperation between people and Heaven – synergy – more than ascribing moral causality solely to God. The author believes that Chinese Christians, reflecting their own immersion in Chinese culture, have also tended to shy away from Augustinian monergism and ascribe a vital role to human will and action. Even the recent interest in Calvinism seems to stem from “the need for a stronger ecclesiology and to engage in a public theology,” rather than an acceptance of Calvinistic soteriology. (123)

Finally, this “synergistic activity is closely related to the Chinese religious ethos that searches for a unity between heaven and humanity (Tian ren heyi).” (124) Here again, Chow believes that Chinese theologians of all types have propounded a kind of union between Heaven/God and earth through the synergistic collaboration of the divine and human.

Chapter 6, “*Theosis* and China,” seeks to tie all the previous material together, and focuses on the three topics of sin, synergy, and union by way of the Eastern Orthodox of *Theosis*. Orthodox theologians, he says, believe that sin is ancestral, not inherited; that we receive from our ancestors not guilt, but the penalty of death, which tempts us to sin. We have two wills, one of which, the gnomic will, “that seeks the passions of

our mortal bodies against the natural will that leads to God.” (134) This accords with Chinese thought that defines sin as selfishness, “rather than an inherent evil trait.” (135). Likewise, Greek theology emphasis the seed of human potential, as do traditional Chinese thinkers. We can be “perfected through self-cultivation.” (135)

That leads to a belief in synergy, by which God and humans cooperate in salvation, as we accept God’s grace and press towards moral likeness to God. Chow believes that Eastern orthodoxy corrects flawed Western views of divine grace, which is seen as created and working monergistically “along hard determinist . . . lines.” (138) In contrast, Orthodox theologians stress the freedom of humans to cooperate with God in his work of transforming them unto perfection.”Grace is the presence of God within us that we must actively respond to within.” (140)

Finally, Orthodox Christianity teaches aof God and mankind that can resonate to some degree with traditional concepts of *Tian ren heyi*. Man is, indeed, co-creator with God in the continuing renewal of the cosmos. The Incarnation united all humans in Christ, so that we may realize our inherent potential for moral perfection.

Chow also believes that Orthodoxy has potential for relating to the Second Enlightenment’s concern for modernity and the transformation of society, though these elements are as yet undeveloped.

Conclusion

Despite decades of communist atheistic education, Chinese are now showing that they are essentially religious people. Any contextualized theology must speak to their traditional religious concepts, Chow says. Most Chinese theologians, including Nee, have, implicitly or explicitly worked out their thought in terms that make contact with these religious traditions.

Finding “type A” and Type B” theological attempts unsatisfactory for today’s China, he suggests that a new “Type C” theology, informed by Eastern Orthodoxy, may enable Christians to “find a ‘rootedness’ . . . in the dual identities of ‘Chinese’ and ‘Christian.’” (166) Perhaps it could be a mediating way between the “two extremes” of Type A and Type B theologies.

Evaluation

Strengths

By now it should be clear that Alexander Chow has given us a treatise of significant worth. It is a vigorous, even brilliant, attempt to construct a Sino-theology within the context of conversations with Christians and others from the Second Chinese Enlightenment, major Chinese Christian theologians, and Eastern Orthodoxy theology. Chow offers us careful exposition of these different points of view. He makes real efforts to be fair and balanced where possible. His suggestion that Eastern Orthodox theology may be a useful complement or supplement to, not a replacement of, Western theological views is irenic in tone.

There is much more to be said in favor of Chow’s volume.

On the other hand, his monograph suffers from several significant weaknesses. These include internal problems, significant omissions, and questions of fact. The second part of this review will discuss these and conclude with a theological critique.

(To be continued)