

**Christian Philosophy and the Rise of Cultural Christians in China:
An Exploration in the Relationship of Christian Theology and Chinese Culture**

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Introduction

This paper is an exploration of the relationship of contemporary Chinese intellectuals and Christian theology as a case of the encounter of Christian philosophy and Chinese culture. The development of Christian philosophy in Chinese context can be formulated in three interrelated topics. The first is the general problem of religion and culture. This problem is convoluted in the encounter of Christianity and Chinese civilization, a dominant non-Western civilization. Secondly, the issue of the encounter of Christianity and culture is formulated as the theory of contextualization, i.e. the process of assimilating and adapting the Christian faith in a new, alien culture. Thirdly, the idea of contextualization is based on a fundamental idea of the nature of Christianity. In the history of Christian thought, the nature of Christianity is conversed by a succession of German philosophers of religion: Frederic Hegel (1770-1831), Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930), and Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923). All these German thinkers have, one way or the other, penned a work with the title: "The Essence of Christianity." The body of literature constitutes a sustain discourse on the problematic "essential" nature of Christianity. This paper will proceed to address these problems in turn, and attempt to arrive at a preliminary conclusion on the issue at hand.

The Problem of Contextualization

Contextualization is first conceived and used in theological literature by Dr. Shoki Coe and Dr. Aharon Sapsezian in 1972, both theological educational directors in the World Council of Churches.¹ Since then the concept of contextualization gains a wide currency within the circle of the Protestant theology.²

On the Catholic side, contextualization is always used in conjunction with other major terms, such as inculturation and evangelization.³ In the Catholic tradition, inculturation is the major concept-word to describe the problematic issues of faith and culture.⁴ Inculturation as a term has been closely connected to the theological and missionary work of the Jesuits. Its first appearance in theological and ecclesiastical writings was associated with Fr. Joseph Masson, S.J., of Gregorian University in Rome at the times of Second Vatican Council in 1962.⁵ Subsequently it was mentioned in the papal document of 1979, *Catechesi Tradendae*. A regular journal, Inculturation is published by the Cultures and Religions Center of the Pontifical Gregorian University. In

¹ TEF Staff, Ministry in Context. London: Theological Education Fund, 1972, p.20. Also cf. Shoki Coe, "Contextualization as the Way toward Reform," in Asian Christian Theology. D.J. Elwood, ed. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980, pp.48-55; "Contextualizing Theology," in Mission Trends No.3: Third World Theologies. Ed. by G.H. Anderson and T.F. Stransky. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976, pp.19-24.

² Another earlier event that happened in 1957 also accentuates the concept of contextualization. During that period, the Rockefeller Foundation established a three million dollars fund for "contextualizing the gospel." Cf. P. Schineller, A Handbook on Inculturation. New York: Paulist Press, 1990, p.19.

³ Contextualization is used with localization in the Catholic theological writings of Robert Schreiter, Constructing Local Theologies. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993.

⁴ For general Catholic literature on inculturation: Stephen B. Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992; Ruy O. Costa, ed. One Faith, Many Cultures: Inculturation, Indigenization, and Contextualization. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988; Johann-Baptist Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx, ed. World Catechism or Inculturation? (Concilium, 204). Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989; Aylward Shorter, Toward A Theology of Inculturation. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988.

⁵ J. Masson, "*L'Eglise ouverte sur le monde*," in NRT Vol.84:1032-43, as cited in A. Shorter, Toward A Theology of Inculturation, p.10.

1978, Pedro Arrupe, the former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, issues a letter that defined inculturation:

Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about “a new creation.”⁶

Besides contextualization and inculturation, indigenization is the third major word to understand the problematic relationship of faith and culture.

Indigenization means “to make native”, and it usually refers to training and promotion of indigenous leadership in order to make Christianity indigenous within a culture. As an older missiological term, indigenization denotes the dialogue and integration with the classical “large tradition,” as Confucianism and Buddhism in China and Hinduism in India. On the other hand, contextualization views the full entrance of Christianity into a non-Western culture and society as a process that must further include the dimensions of socio-political, economic, and the folk “small tradition,” such as folk syncretistic religious practices in China and India.

In sum, contextualization is more inclusive and contemporary than the older term of indigenization. While inculturation is the central vocabulary in Catholic missiology,⁷ contextualization is more prominent in the Protestant tradition.

⁶ Pedro Arrupe, “Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation,” in Studies in the International Apostolate of Jesuits, 7 (June, 1978), p.2. Besides inculturation, there is a series of terms with related meaning: acculturation, enculturation, interculturalization, cf. A. Shorter, Toward A Theology of Inculturation, pp.5-16.

⁷ Inculturation is not limited to cross-cultural situation but is also applicable to within the same culture, between past and present. For example, see Donald Gelpi, Inculturating North American Theology. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988. Which is an exercise in the “inculturation” of the Lonergan theological project in the context of North American.

According to the contextual theory, Christianity is a “religious essence”, which can be abstracted through a process of distillation and condensation. The final product is a pure, non-historical essence of Christian beliefs, which can be transplanted and inserted into any culture, particularly the non-Christian, and non-Western Asian civilization. In the course of missionary history, the essence of Christianity is never detached from Western culture, and the Westernized form of Christian gospel is being wholesaled into the Third World. It became an abstracted norm and criterion from which all forms of Christian theology have to be measured and evaluated. Contextualization is problematic not so much because of itself but because of its assumption, which is the idea that there is an “essential” Christianity.

The Search for the Essence of Christianity: The German Philosophical Tradition

As noted above, the untenability of contextual theology lies in its implicit assumption of the essence of Christianity. Although many recent forms of contextual theology may emphasize a more inclusive and organic understanding of religion and culture, an assumption of essentialism is still implicit in the idea of contextualization. The assumption is twofold: First, Christian gospel is distinguishable, or even separable, from Western culture. Secondly, there is a distinction, in whatever degree, between Western Christian culture and cultures that are not shaped by Christianity.

The essence of Christianity is a dominant tradition in Christian theology as epitomized in all the classical writings on the “Essence of Christianity” from Feuerbach to Harnack.⁸ In order to summarize the long extended discussion, this section will focus

⁸ Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity. Trans. by George Eliot. New York: Harper & Row, 1957. Adolph von Harnack, What is Christianity? Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987. For a good assembly

on Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) as a consummate thinker of the classical German liberalism. In his key essay, “What Does ‘Essence of Christianity’ Mean?”⁹ Troeltsch takes on the idea of Christian essence as a problem of absoluteness of Christianity.

According to Troeltsch, “the definition of the essence is indeed a purely historical task.”¹⁰ On the one hand, the search for a Christian essence is produced as a result of the rise of historical consciousness and the awareness of the problematic relationship between faith and history, gospel and culture. To be essential is to be a-historical, to be free from the ever-changing history which is itself an impossibility. On the other hand, any formulation of the essence of Christianity is always a reflection of the historical consciousness of a particular time. Thus for Hegel and Baur, the essence of Christianity is the incarnation and manifestation of the Spirit. While for Harnack and Ritschl, it is the ethical kingdom of God in the preaching of Jesus. In sum, the essence of Christianity that they claimed to uncover is in fact a pale reflection of their own historical consciousness.¹¹

Hence the essence of Christianity, to Troeltsch, is not a supra-temporal kernel, which serves as a norm to distinguish and discriminate the essential from the inessential.

The essential in Christianity is not that about it which corresponds to a general truth with a basis of its own elsewhere, such that everything which did not correspond with it would be the inessential. The essential is no

of writings, cf. German Essays on Religion: K.Barth, M.Buber, K.Rahner, F.D.E. Schleiermacher, and Others. E.T. Oakes ed. New York: Continuum, 1994.

⁹ Anthologized in Ernst Troeltsch, Writings on Theology and Religion. Trans. and ed. by R. Morgan and M. Pye. Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1990. Also cf. Troeltsch, The Absoluteness of Christianity and History of Religions. Richmond: John Knox, 1971; and related essays in Ernst Troeltsch, Religion in History. Trans. by J.L. Adams and W.F. Bense. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.

¹⁰ “What Does ‘Essence of Christianity’ Mean?” p.133. Troeltsch also asserts “the whole expression ‘essence of Christianity’ is linked to modern, critical and evolutionary history”(p.128).

¹¹ But Harnack and other classical liberal historical theologians should not be dismissed because we can only overcome history by history. “This is a leading characteristic of the historical studies of all of us, and we can all say from experience that our view of what is permanent and essential in Christianity has been quite inwardly and fundamentally conditioned and in fact extremely stimulated by this immersion in history, through this extension from self-consciousness to the common consciousness, from individual experience to the general experience of Christianity and of religious humanity.” “Essence of Christianity,” p.164.

more and no less than the epitome of fundamental religious ideas which makes itself clear from within its own manifestation in history.¹²

Therefore “the essence of Christianity can only be arrived at in so far as Christianity is thought of as part of an overall religious and cultural development.”¹³ This statement is a reflection of Troeltsch’s theological root in the school of history of religions.

The process of abstraction which provides the essence of Christianity certainly has need therefore of the comparative history of religions and indeed requires the highest level of abstraction from the history of culture in general, in order to be able to proceed historically. The essence of Christianity can only be arrived at in so far as Christianity is thought of as part of an overall religious and cultural development.”¹⁴

As a result of this insight, the concept of essence is not a simple confession of God and Christ. Instead, “it can only be a complex idea which determines the specifically Christian form of the basic ideas of God, world, man and salvation which are linked together in all religion.”¹⁵

What Troeltsch achieved is to search for a mediating ground between complete relativization and exclusive absolutization of Christianity. The perspective of the history of religions does not eradicate the absoluteness of Christianity. Rather it emphasizes that the absoluteness of Christianity is genuinely unique to the Western European culture and

¹² Ibid., p.132. Troeltsch further clarifies that the concept of essence cannot be prescribed by ecclesiastical and dogmatical authorities: “To any unprejudiced observer that Saint Francis, Kierkegaard or Tolstoy certainly stand closer to the real preaching of Jesus than do ecclesiastical dogmatics, and that Meister Eckhart and Sebastian Franck understand certain basic elements of Christianity more profoundly than does the mass Christianity of the church” (p.141).

¹³ Ibid., p.133.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.133. Troeltsch later concludes, “To define the essence is to shape it afresh. It is the elucidation of the essential idea of Christianity in history in the way in which it ought to be light for the future, and at the same time it is a living view of the present and future world together in this light. The definition of essence for a given time is the new historical formulation of Christianity for that time.” (p.162)

¹⁵ Ibid, p.154. The focus on history of religions becomes the distinction that separates Troeltsch from Schleiermacher in their project of *Glauerbenslehre*. “The first task of a dogmatics proceeding on the basis of the history of religions. This task consists, first of all, of establishing, on the basis of a philosophy of the comparative history of religions, the fundamental and universal supremacy of Christianity for our own culture and civilization.” “The Dogmatics of the History-of-Religions School,” in Religion in History, p.95.

needs to be further interpreted within the larger context of history of religions. The absoluteness of Christianity is a relative but not absolute idea. “In our earthly experience Divine Life is not One, but Many,” concludes Troeltsch. “But to apprehend the One in the Many constitutes the special character of love.”¹⁶

Besides Troeltsch, H. Richard Niebuhr’s Christ and Culture¹⁷ has often served as a significant source for treating Christian theology and culture. In Niebuhr’s typology of Christ and culture, Christianity and cultures exists in five kinds of relationship: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture. Of the five ideal types, the fifth typology of Christ as the transformer of culture seems to be most preferable to many theologians.

David Tracy, the notable philosophical theologian from University of Chicago, reviews the Niebuhrian typology within the context of pluralism:

The major pluralistic theological options in our situation may be viewed as Christian responses of disclosive recognition to an uncanny power not our own. By its own disclosive force, that power transforms each theologian’s interpretations of both situation and tradition. In fact, what one might be named variations on the final classical type of H.R. Niebuhr: Christ the transformer of culture.¹⁸

Tracy believes that the problematic relationship between Christian “tradition” and cultural “situation” should be operated on the basis of “mutually critical correlations between interpretations of the situation and the tradition-mediated event will and do work in both directions.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Troeltsch, “The Place of Christianity among the World Religions,” in Christianity and Other Religions. Ed. by J. Hick and B. Hebblethwaite. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980, p.31.

¹⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961.

¹⁸ Tracy, Analogical Imagination, p.374.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Concluding Reflections

In conclusion, two observations can be made. First, Christian faith and western culture are distinguishable but not separable. Secondly, in the encounter of Christianity with another culture is not a simple bilateral interaction but a tri-lateral dialogue between the Western culture, Christianity, and the other culture.

As stated above, Christianity never exists in any “essential” form in the course of history. Christianity was formed as a sect of the Jewish followers, who understood themselves as witness to the life and resurrection of Jesus the Nazareth. Christianity was an offshoot of Judaism, and later has encounter with the Hellenistic culture of the Mediterranean region. This first encounter was represented by the Christian apologists of the first three centuries, and consummated in the Latin theology of St. Augustine (354-430). The second encounter happens in the post-Enlightenment era of the 19th century when Christian theology was challenged by modern philosophy of that time. The total system of Christian belief, from the doctrine of God, the historicity of Jesus, to the possibility of miracles was subjected to fierce challenge of the modern consciousness.

Today the Christianity as the global religion is facing the challenge of the global culture. Seeing from this perspective, the encounter of Christianity with the Chinese culture may be understood as the third phase of the cultural encounter. This is an encounter of Christianity, which is constitutive of the Western civilization, with Chinese civilization, a dominant power of the Eastern culture. What is noteworthy here is to avoid the fallacy of essentialism. As explained from above, there is no such entity as an

essential Christianity, just as it is equally problematic to speak of an essential Western culture.

Both Christianity and Western culture are heterogeneous and highly pluralistic within and without, especially in the thrust of post-modern cultural shift. This is equally true of contemporary Chinese thought, which is a conglomeration of traditional Confucianism, Marxism, Maoism and Western philosophical thought. Hence the encounter of Christian theology with Chinese intellectuals is not a simple bilateral interaction; instead it is a complicated multi-facet process. The spontaneous flourishing of Chinese intellectuals' interest in Christian theology and philosophy, as evidenced in the installation of program of Christian studies and general religious studies in the People's Republic of China today, definitely enriches the breadth and depth of dialogue. What is so special of this picture is the special role of Chinese intellectuals who engaged in the studies of Christian thought and world religions in general. They will in turn serve as the mediator between the Western Christian thoughts and traditional Chinese thought. In the advent of globalization, today's Chinese intellectuals are highly westernized while rooted in their particular Chinese consciousness. This peculiar historical consciousness of oneself as emerging from a post-Marxist context, and opening to the challenge of Western ideas will prove to be a fruitful ground of cultural advancement.

Surely the scenario of cultural interaction is not without and crisis and pitfall. The risky nature of cultural interaction is clearly recognized by Troeltsch when he says:

We must learn to find the authority more within us than without us, and to entrust ourselves more to the creative power of religion to give a living answer to the questions of the present. Of course this is not meant to imply that the mere thoughts of a shortsighted and sinful man might bring forth new truth, but it means that we should trust Christ who comes to us through history to have the power to create new life even in us. The

prophetic element in religion belongs not only to the past but also to the present.²⁰

In spite of all the possible crises and risks, Christian thought will inevitably interact with contemporary Chinese thought. It has to chart its course following the traces of the past and taking some calculated risks.

- The End -

N.B. I may add more reflections from my chapter in the monograph: Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument, published by Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 1997.

²⁰ Troeltsch, "Essence of Christianity," p.168.