"A CHINESE FISH THINKS ABOUT CHINESE WATER": THE CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IN THE EMERGING SINO-CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

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STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP AND SOURCES

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s there has been a rising tide of discussion and debate on the nature and task of an emerging Sino-Christian theology. In 1995, Liu Xiaofeng responded by calling for a renewed attempt to reconstruct a Sino-Christian theology in close connection to its contemporary socio-cultural-political context. Though Liu's project of "Cultural Christians" is problematic, his proposal regarding the future path of the Sino-Christian theology has opened up a number of specific issues needing clarification. These include the goals, methods, and form of Sino-Christian theology, and the way it might effectively engage the competing Chinese thought-systems informing culture and society.

Using Liu's proposal as a point of departure, this thesis intends to further explore the delicate relationship between culture and theology. This project finds Kathryn Tanner's theory of culture particularly helpful in elaborating the inter-relationship of theology and culture, and the significance of cultural context in relation to theological construction in contemporary Sino-Christian context. Along with Tanner's cultural

approach to theology, our project refers to other theological methods such as that of Bernard Lonergan. In so doing it exposes the artificiality of making rigid divisions between theory and practice, reason and faith, and academic and church theology. Christian theology should not be viewed as limited to the interior life of the Church and the faithful, but is relevant in the academic and the wider cultural worlds. As a result, this thesis argues against the separation of Church theology and academic theology, while, at the same time, indicating the academic potential of Christian theology to vigorously engage other concerns as those represented in religious studies, cultural studies and other academic disciplines. Our approach suggests an answer to the question of whether a non-confessional Chinese scholar can contribute to Christian theology conceived of as a multi-faceted discipline involving the collaboration of various functional specialties.

This thesis moves beyond the academic realm by considering the possibility of a public theology in the wider Sino-cultural context. It is argued that theology can appropriately enter into public debates on religious, cultural and ethical issues, while retaining its Christian distinctiveness. Christian theology needs not be so revised as to become publicly acceptable (David Tracy). Nor does it need to be modified in the light of some expected consensus on public issues (Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen), or change its emphasis from Christian arguments to acceptable conclusions

(Kathryn Tanner). Rather, we argue that Christian arguments and conclusions can be admitted into public debate in their own right.

After establishing a theological and philosophical framework for Christian theology's engagement with the wider culture, the public relevance of the biblical heart of Christian theology is demonstrated, following Philip Chia's call for such a development. Here, our project appeals to Kevin Vanhoozer's Canonical-linguistic approach. His elaboration of the dramatic nature of biblical theology proves to be a promising method for relating the canonical text to the contemporary cultural context. Finally, Jesus' teaching on the Golden Rule and its application to the Sino-Christian context is used as an example of how theology can engage the Sino-cultural context effectively.

This thesis has proposed a number of ways in which the emerging Sino-Christian theology might move forward to further development within the contemporary Chinese culture and society. This project has, we believe, contributed something to the foundation of a great building in construction, and clarified the design of what is needed as scholars, with their different viewpoints and talents, collaborate in the building of a new theological edifice on a new site. We hope, therefore, to have contributed to a great work in progress, and that our project can be part of a

Sino-Christian theology *in draft*.

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This project has taken over seven and a half years, during which time I have constantly struggled in the face of several unavoidable interruptions to bring it to completion. However, there were several people and communities who helped me along the way, which made my path easier and more enjoyable. All these deserve my gratitude and sincere acknowledgement here. First of all, I am grateful to my principal supervisor Professor Anthony J. Kelly CSsR who has given so much of his time to advise me in my research and to provide meticulous comments on my work. His guidance, his broad theological knowledge, along with his compassionate and pastoral heart, have all shaped my mind and my life in a significant way. My second supervisor, Professor C. Wayne Hudson, must also be acknowledged. Though he was appointed to me in my final year, his interest in and comments on my work were most encouraging. Further, he invited me to deliver a paper on "Public theology in the Sino-Christian context" (part of chapter six) in the recent international conference on "Christian Mission in the Public Square" at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture in Canberra (2nd-5th Oct 2008).

There are two informal advisers I want to acknowledge here as well. I am most grateful to Professor Kathryn Tanner of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, who guided me when I was a visiting student to her school in November and December of 2002. She also took time to comment on earlier chapters of this thesis in 2005 when she visited Brisbane. It was very beneficial to dialogue with her as she helped me to understand her work and the interaction between theology and culture in a deeper level. When I was in Beijing from November 2005 to January 2006, Professor Sun Yi (孫毅) of the Renmin University of China also read part of this thesis and helped me in understanding the Sino-Christian theology and its context in a more personal way. After that, he continued to provide encouragement and comments on my work in progress.

Thanks should also go to Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History, University of San Francisco, that sponsored me to present a paper on "Kathryn Tanner's theories of culture and their applications to theology" (part of chapter four) at their Third International Young Scholars' Symposium on "Christianity and Chinese Society and Culture" in December 2006. During this conference, I also met Mr. Daniel Yeung, Director of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong, who generously provided me with unpublished conference papers and other

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

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1. Contributing Factors

Since the 1990s, on the rising global and theological tides comes the long-awaited discussion and debate regarding the nature and task of an emerging Chinese theology, particularly in relation to its contemporary socio-cultural context. There are at least four factors that give rise to this important discussion.

First, there is the place and role of Hong Kong in mainland China after 1997 as Hong Kong returned to Chinese government (after a century of British rule). In particular, the concern was how would the Christian Church of Hong Kong survive and flourish in this new political and religious context, and how would this Church affect the existing Church in mainland China. In view of the unavoidable changing context, Lo Ping Cheung (羅秉祥), a Christian academic at Hong Kong Baptist University, raised

the alarm and pointed out some specific crises which the Hong Kong Christian Church would face after 1997.[1] Lo's main concern was whether Hong Kong Christian theologians could compete with mainland's *Chinese Apollos* who were well trained in philosophy and theology (more so in the former than the latter), and who were influential on the Chinese popular culture through their many translated and original publications. But their understanding of Christianity was inevitably limited and sometimes biased.[2] Lo's assessment of the prospective role of the Hong Kong Christian Church after 1997 was premature. He expressed a rather pessimistic view of Hong Kong's Christian community. For instance, he claims that

> Though the Macedonian calling from Chinese academics is resounding, most theological workers in Hong Kong are finding themselves inadequate, helpless, and merely looking at the opportunity by-passing them. This is because, (i) most theological workers do not have much publication, even less are able to publish their works through publishers outside of Hong Kong. (ii) Though Hong Kong theological workers are not lacking in expertise, but most are lacking in rich knowledge of general culture, and thus they find it hard to find common topics to dialogue with the academics. (iii) We are poor in our Mandarin, and thus unable to communicate well with academics in mainland China. Even we have

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[1] These crises include the loss of opportunity to put forward theological views in mainland China, the diminishing of Hong Kong Christians' leading theological stance in the society, the retreat to a more passive role in public theological discussion, and the loss of an opportunity to reach out to the academics in mainland China (Lo Ping Cheung 羅秉祥, "中國亞波羅與香港神學界之九七危機 (Chinese Apollos and the Crises of Hong Kong's Theological World after 1997)," in 文化基督徒：現象與論爭 *(Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument)*, ed. 漢語基督教文化研究所 Institute of Sino-Christian Studies (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 1997), 96-105).

[2] Paulos Huang 黃保羅, "甚麼是漢語學術神學？(What Is Sino-Christian Academic Theology?)" http://blog.ifeng.com/article/1417274.html (accessed 27/04/2008).

opportunity to meet face-to-face with eager Chinese academics, it is hindered by our poor Mandarin. However, the Chinese Apollos do not have these three problems.[3]

Lo's view was criticized both by Hong Kong and mainland academics.[4] Nevertheless, it did spark off a discussion amongst the *Chinese Apollos* which gave rise to the notion of the *Cultural Christians*.[5]

This directly brings one to the question of the relationship of Christian theology to the wider socio-cultural context. Implied too is the further question of who has the right to speak for Christian theology in the public realm in the contemporary Chinese context. For instance, can a non-confessional Chinese philosopher speak on behalf of the Chinese Christian Church? Can Christian theology be reduced to philosophical or cultural studies? If not, how can it compete with other already existing disciplines in the Chinese academia? The answers to these and other related questions bear on the basic issues and concerns of an emerging Sino-Christian theology.

Secondly, we note the program of "modernization" undertaken by the Chinese government, and the emergence of China as a world power in the global economical and political contexts. Indeed, China had declared her open door policy immediately

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[3] Lo, "中國亞波羅與香港神學界之九七危機 (Chinese Apollos and the Crises of Hong Kong's Theological World after 1997)," 103.

[4] See the various responses collected in Institute of Sino-Christian Studies 漢語基督教文化研究所, ed., 文化基督徒：現象與論爭 (Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument).

[5] This issue of the "Cultural Christian" phenomenon shall be taken up in the next chapter.

after the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s and specifically targeted four areas of modernization: industry, agriculture, science and technology, and defence. In the last decade or so, the pace of this "modernization" process increased enormously. This is evident in the way China has proved herself on the world scene, through her remarkable progress in the economic, industrial, technological and scientific fields, along with impressive achievements in the areas of health care and medicine, social aid and infrastructure. In the face of many difficulties, China was successful in her application for membership in the World Trade Organization in 2001. And now she has successfully hosted the 2008 Olympic Games at Beijing, which to some commentators was the best Olympic Games ever. It is clear that China has now won international recognition as an advanced nation in the global political and economic scenes.

As a direct result of China's rise to the status of world power, Chinese scholars began to enjoy more freedom and opportunity, as the wider society engaged in dialogue and discussions with the outside world.[6] Therefore, a new generation of young scholars interested in Christian studies has emerged in China in recent years. This is in response to the rising popular interest in Christianity, some sort of *Christianity fever*.[7]

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[6] It is observed that "China has never been as intellectually and philosophically open to the outside world as it is today" (see David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2003), 13).

[7] Refer Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power*, 170-172.

It has been pointed out that, in China during the last decade, publications in the area

of religious studies, and particularly Christianity, increased significantly.[8] Many

Christian or religious institutions and centres such as Institute of Sino-Christian

Studies (Hong Kong), Centre for Sino-Christian Studies of the Baptist University in

Hong Kong, Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society of the Chinese

University of Hong Kong, The Institute of Christian Culture Studies at Renmin

University of China, Catholic and Cultural Institute in Beijing, and the religious

departments of Peking, Wuhan, Nanjing, and Fudan Universities, among other

universities, have all come into existence to engage academics, churches and the

wider communities in the development of a contextual theology in China.[9] Students in

various universities can now study from undergraduate to doctoral levels majoring in

different aspects of Christian studies. Scholarly conferences are also being conducted

at different centres. Issues peculiar to the emerging Sino-Christian theology are being

explored in a deeper level, such as the history of Christianity in China, dialogues

between Christianity and Chinese religions, between Christian scholarship and

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[8] Kang Phee Seng 江丕盛, "中心主任的話－－宗教信仰的思考、對談和動力 (Director's Message: The Reflection, Dialogue and Dynamic of Religious Faith)," *中華基督宗教研究中心通訊 (Centre for Sino-Christian Studies Newsletter)* 2004; Janice Wickeri and Philip Wickeri, eds., *A Chinese Contribution to Ecumenical Theology: Selected Writings of Bishop K.H. Ting* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), vii.

[9] It is pointed out that, in the late 1980s and 1990s, nearly ten religious academic institutions were set up under the provincial academies of social sciences, see He Guanghu, "Religious Studies in China, 1978-1999 and Their Connection with Political and Social Circumstances," *Studies in World Christianity* 7 (2001): 27-28. See also Chen Jianming 陳建明, "中國大學基督教研究的現狀與意義 (The Present Situation and Significance of Christian Research in Chinese Universities)," in *大學與基督宗教研究 (Univeristy and Christian Studies)*, ed. Lo Ping Cheung 羅秉祥 and Kang Phee Seng 江丕盛 (Hong Kong: Centre for Sino-Christian Studies, Hong Kong Baptist Univeristy, 2002); Sun Yi, "Christianity," in *Religion and Contemporary Chinese Society*, ed. He Guanghu (Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2006).

humanism, the relationship between theology and science, and the contribution of Christianity as an ideology to Chinese society and culture. These have created increasing opportunities for scholars to engage in public dialogue regarding the nature and task of the emerging Sino-Christian theology.[10] The specific questions put forward include: How does Christian theology differ from the already existing religions in China? What and how can Christian theology contribute to the wider Chinese society and culture?

Thirdly, though *Sino-Christian theology* is not a totally new venture, there is an expression of dissatisfaction with traditional Chinese theological approaches. This is especially the case with regard to the question of the relation of theology to Chinese culture and traditional Chinese religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and folk religions. Furthermore, the past approaches have also failed to deal adequately with the impact of ideologies such as humanism and communism, or with the worlds of science and technology. Thus, many scholars in this field see the inadequacy, if not failure, of past theological approaches as the reason why Christianity is still perceived as very much Western and foreign by the majority of

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[10] Aikman argues that various factors (economic growth, increasing access to information, added civic freedoms, and the need for a consciousness to combat the social ills of prosperity) have combined "to create an opportune atmosphere for the growth of Christianity in China both as a movement and as an ideology" (*Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power*, 15).

Chinese today.[11] All the while, Christianity has been made to appear as an externally imported religion.[12] This has adverse effects on missionary work in China.[13] Hence, the discussion of a contextual Sino-Christian theology is not only necessary, it is urgent. A contextualized Sino-Christian theology must take seriously both the contemporary Chinese socio-cultural situation and the culturally-transcendent nature of the Christian Gospel. As rightly pointed out by Liu Xiaofeng (劉小楓), the recognized pioneer scholar in the field, the present focus should be placed on the contemporary context of Sino-Christian theology instead of some past indigenous elements.[14] The degrees to which the Christian Gospel can take root in Chinese soil, and contribute to the wider global theological context are principal concerns in the contemporary Sino-Christian scene. In particular, it is asked along what path can Sino-Christian theology be developed and what method, model, or type should it adopt?

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[11] See discussion in Ken Pa Chin, "What Is "Sino-Christian Theology"? Third Chinese Theology Round Table Conference, Kunming, 18-23 September 2005," *Concilium*, no. 2 (2008): 88-89; Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," *道風 (Tao-Feng)* 2 (1995): 15-22; *漢語神學與歷史哲學 (The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)* (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2000), 3-6.

[12] This is not saying that we must "baptize" Christ totally with Chinese taste and preference. Chin has argued that Sino-Christian theology, like any other local theologies, is presenting a "foreigner who was nailed to the cross." (Ken Pa Chin, "What Is 'Sino-Christian Theology'? Third Chinese Theology Round Table Conference, Kunming, 18-23 September 2005," *Concilium*, no. 2 (2008): 88-89).

[13] Chinese Christians would particularly like to compare the evangelistic efforts and results with South Korea. Though the Gospel was spread to China earlier than Korea, it seems that the latter is more receptive to the Gospel than the former. This brings one to ponder upon the factors that make Koreans seem so receptive to the Gospel but not the Chinese.

[14] Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓, *漢語神學與歷史哲學 (The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 3-4. Liu's view will be considered in the next chapter.

Fourthly, the discussion of the emerging Sino-Christian theology can be seen as a reaction against the suppression and ignorance of religion in the past decades, especially during the period of *Cultural Revolution* (1966-76). As a result of the Cultural Revolution, even in the earlier years of the 1980s, the attitude towards religion was extremely negative. The Chinese from the top authority down to the common people were deeply affected by the one-sided and dogmatic interpretation of religion by Karl Max – "religion is the opium of the people."[15] However, this negative treatment of religion began to change, as He Guanghu (何光滬) observes,

> From the middle 1980s on, partly as the result of the open attitude and partly as the outcome of the influence of the "studies of cultures" current among intellectuals, a relatively new idea appeared and spread swiftly in religious studies, that is, the idea of "religion as culture." It was expressed exactly in such propositions as "Religion is an old and universal social and cultural phenomenon in the history of man," "Religious phenomena are closely connected with cultural phenomena of man" and "Civilizations in the world can be divided into three levels: material productions, institutional organizations and ideological systems." And the first level interacts with religion, the second interacts and overlaps with religion, and the third interacts with, overlaps with and centers round religion.[16]

With this turn from the view of "religion as opiate" to that of "religion as culture," the status of religion and its studies are once again affirmed in contemporary China. Therefore, scholarly views such as that of Zhang Xian (張憲) of Sun Yat-Sen

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[15] See He, "Religious Studies in China, 1978-1999 and Their Connection with Political and Social Circumstances," 25.

[16] He, "Religious Studies in China, 1978-1999 and Their Connection with Political and Social Circumstances," 26. See also Burnett's claim that "By the mid 1980s the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] had basically abandoned the view that 'religion is the opiate of the people'" (David Burnett, *The Spirit of China: Roots of Faith in 21st Century China* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2008), 336).

University – "every society needs some kind of a regulating force that comes from religion"[17] – is now a gradually accepted view. Moreover, the interest in religious and Christian studies is also a direct result of the reaction against the emphasis on science and technology, commercialism and profits, which overlooked the importance of value and ethics. Religious or Christian "fever" thus begins to appear in the last decade or so in China. This directly leads to the question of the form and content of the emerging Sino-Christian theology. It is asked, specifically, how Christianity as a religion with its unique teaching and worldview can have a positive contribution to the Chinese culture and people?

2. Aim and Scope

The above-mentioned factors and their respective issues and concerns have contributed to the urgent discussion of the nature and task of the emerging Sino-Christian theology. Basically they relate to the question of how Sino-Christian theology can be reconstructed in the contemporary emerging Sino-context. In 1995, Liu Xiaofeng, then academic director of *Institute of Sino-Christian Studies* in Hong Kong, called for such a reconstruction. His call was timely and was enthusiastically greeted by many scholars working in this field, both in mainland China and Hong

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[17] Zhang Xian 張憲, "大陸高校開展基督宗教教學與研究之我見 (The Teaching and Research on Christianity in Higher Education in China)," in 大學與基督宗教研究 *(University and Christian Studies)*, 161. Zhang argues that this is clearly illustrated during Chairman Mao's reign and the emergence of his personality cult.

Kong, in Taiwan and the United States. Nonetheless, there is considerable disagreement as to the goals, methods, form and content of this emerging Sino-Christian theology.[18] Though it is not necessary for Sino-Christian scholars to reach consensuses on these various issues and concerns, there is the need to probe more deeply the significance of each of these aspects. Therefore, it is the aim of this thesis to further explicate the various elements that make up the emerging Sino-Christian theology: What is the nature and task of a truly contextualized Sino-Christian theology? How should we view the relation between Sino-Christian theology and its located cultural context? How does Sino-Christian theology engage the academic community, the local culture and society, in a more effective manner? These basic concerns can be pursued under the overarching topic of the cultural engagement of Christian theology in the emerging Sino-Christian context. Hopefully, through this exploration, some basic theological framework peculiar to the nature and task of the emerging Sino-Christian theology will come into clearer view. The overall importance of this project is clear. It will not only benefit the Chinese Church and its various communities, but also would offer a distinctive contribution to the wider discussion of contextual or local theologies that are taking place in their respective

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[18] Refer to the various publications that were the direct result of this discussion: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies 漢語基督教文化研究所, ed., 文化基督徒：現象與論爭 *(Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument)*; Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*; Daniel Yeung 楊熙楠, ed., 漢語神學芻議 *(Preliminary Studies on Chinese Theology)* (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2000).

contexts today.[19] By re-thinking the manner in which Christian theology can engage

its socio-cultural context, the task confronting theologians in this era of rapid change

will be clarified.

The emphasis of this thesis is thus the reconstruction of an emerging Sino-Christian

theology by paying particular attention to the cultural engagement of Christian

theology. This emphasis has determined the issues and questions raised and the

direction of the discussion. Other issues arising from a different context (be they

geographical, linguistic, or sociological) on the same topic of the relation of theology

and culture may be overlooked or by-passed. Furthermore, this is basically a

theological thesis. The issue of the cultural engagement of Christian theology is

primarily approached from a theological perspective, instead of a historical,

philosophical or sociological perspective. This has determined the uniqueness of this

enquiry, though it never undermines the discussions from, and with, other

perspectives.

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[19] Song Choan Seng has reminded us that every contextual theology has its own intrinsic value and not to be assessed in comparison with other theological systems. However, he is careful not to put so much emphasis on each unique contextual theology that there is no communication between them. See Song Choan Seng 宋泉盛, "開拓亞洲基督教神學的新領域 (The Developing of New Territories in Asian Christian Theology)," in 道與言：華夏文化與基督教文化相遇 *(Dao and Word: The Encounter of Chinese Culture and Christian Culture)*, ed. Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓 (Shanghai: Shanghai San Lian Shu Dian, 1995), 742, 763-4.

Some brief comments regarding the thesis title are appropriate here. As it will be pointed out in the next chapter, "Sino-Christian theology" in this thesis refers primarily to mainland Chinese theology with its unique social, historical, political, and cultural context. However, the thesis is not limited to theological viewpoints and works of scholars in the Sino-Christian context. Rather, some important contemporary works in the Western world which are relevant and useful to the discussion are also considered. Nevertheless, these "non-Sino" viewpoints are related and applied to the Sino-context. In a way, the Chinese fish is thinking about "Chinese water," which is also washed by Western and global currents. In this regard, we must accentuate the global context we are living in today, as no one cultural context is shielded from the influence of others. Moreover, it also demonstrates the unavoidable influence of my own personal background and located cultural context. As a third generation Chinese migrant from Malaysia and now first generation Chinese-Malaysian migrant in Australia, my perspective and reflection are naturally influenced by these inter-cultural experiences. This thesis would certainly take a different form if it were done in mainland China or anywhere else. However, the main focus of this thesis is clear. It is a deliberate effort in thinking about the challenge and opportunity in reconstructing an emerging Sino-Christian theology that will engage effectively the Chinese culture and society. It is not a natural thing for a fish to think about the significance of water to itself, unless it jumps out, or is taken out of the water. Likewise, as we so often do

theology "naturally," and "unconsciously," it also requires conscientious effort on our part to reflect on theological method and the influence of located culture on our theological construction. This, I suggest, is by way of engaging Sino-scholars and "the strangers" (or the "others" outside of the Christian circle) to reflect in a dialogical manner on this important question of the cultural engagement of Christian theology in contemporary Sino-Christian context. In a way, maybe the thesis title is more correctly stated as "Inter-ocean fish think about Chinese water." However, at least the form of this thesis remains based on my personal reflection on the topic. Therefore, it remains correct to state it as "a Chinese fish thinks about Chinese water," while the emphasis of "Chinese water" is upon the location where the outcome of the discussion is applied.

3. Overview

This thesis will begin (Chapter 2) by making some preliminary remarks on Sino-Christian theology. These include specifying the meaning of "Sino-Christian theology," exploring the importance of theological context, and examining the problems and limits of past models in constructing the Sino-Christian theology. After establishing a basic framework for reconstructing an emerging Sino-Christian theology, Chapter 3 focuses on Liu Xiaofeng and his call for a renewed attempt to reconstruct a Sino-Christian theology developing in close connection to its

contemporary social, cultural, and political context. Liu's view regarding the possible path Sino-Christian theology can adopt is explored. In particular, his suggestion of the notion of "Christian Christians" is evaluated. The discussion opens up to some specific questions for further discussion, such as the type of Sino-Christian theology, the relationship between church-based theology and academic-based theology, and the relation of Christian theology to cultural and religious studies. Since Liu has raised the importance of cultural context in theological construction, Chapter 4 considers Kathryn Tanner's theory of culture and her cultural approach to theology. There are important implications to be drawn from Tanner's approach for Sino-Christian theology, particularly in its engagement with Chinese culture and the wider society.

Chapter 5 continues to focus attention on the cultural engagement of theology by examining the competency of theology to engage cultural studies and other academic disciplines. Accordingly, the academic credentials of theology are considered. Moreover, the recent hotly-charged debate in North America regarding the relationship between theology and religious studies, and the role of theology in the academy is explored. The outcomes of this discussion are then applied to the Sino-Christian context.

The next chapter follows on to consider the way theology can influence the wider culture through the notion of public theology. After clarifying the basic character of a public theology, three proposals (Tracy, Mouw & Griffioen, and Tanner) regarding how theology can engage itself in public debate are considered. Because of their respective shortcomings, an alternative is proposed. Christian arguments and conclusions should be admitted into public debate in their own right. This chapter ends by drawing some implications of this discussion for constructing a public theology in the emerging Sino-Christian context.

The last two chapters prior to the conclusion of this thesis consider a recent call made by Philip Chia regarding the public relevance of biblical theology. Chapter 7 begins with a critical appraisal of contemporary Sino-Christian scholars in their treatment of the "Christ Event" in their theological construction. Since the present model of biblical theology does not provide a fair treatment of the Christ event and its relation to culture, this thesis sets to find a better model. After considering the past experiential-expressive and cultural-linguistic approaches, it is argued that Kevin Vanhoozer's "canonical-linguistic" approach is more promising in relating the canonical text to its cultural context. Finally, Chapter 8 considers Jesus' teaching of the Golden Rule and its applicability to the Sino-Christian context as an example of how theology can engage the Sino-cultural context effectively.

The readers of this thesis must be reminded that the Chinese titles of the references show that the works are in Chinese. And the translations from Chinese sources are my own translations. Also, since the conventional way of writing a Chinese name is to put the surname in the front, I shall do the same in the main text of this thesis (e.g., Liu Xiaofeng, Lo Ping Cheung), except in the case of scholars with Christian names (e.g., Philip Chia).

CHAPTER TWO

Introduction to the Emerging Sino-Christian Theology:

Some Preliminary Remarks

In order to establish a basic framework for discussing the emerging Sino-Christian

theology, we begin by making some preliminary remarks. They are in regard to the

following issues:

> 1. The meaning of "Sino-Christian theology";

> 2. The significance of theological context; and

> 3. The limits of past models.

1. The Meaning of "Sino-Christian Theology"

Let us begin by attempting to clarify the character of "Sino-Christian theology." Some

scholars have suggested that the defining feature of a genuine "Sino-Christian

theology" is its medium of expression. That is to say, a Chinese theology is

necessarily related to the Chinese or *Han* language (in this case, *Huayu* or "Mandarin").[1] It is properly identified as *Chinese* when it is elaborated in the idiom, thought forms and vocabulary of the language in question.[2] It is thus a vernacular theology or "theology in the mother's tongue."

However, others are not so restrictive and so allow that "Sino-Christian theology" needs not be so exclusively connected to a linguistic referent. Li Qiuling (李秋零) has argued that this linguistic-based definition of "Sino-Christian theology," that is, "theology in the mother's tongue" would be too broad. It may then include all the past attempts to indigenize Christianity, for instance, in the Tang Dynasty by the Nestorians, and the late Ming and early Ching Dynasties by the Jesuits.[3] Li objects to treating these past efforts as constituents of "Sino-Christian theology" since they were limited to the translation of Western Christian texts into Chinese, and lacked any self-

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[1] He Guanghu 何光滬, "漢語神學的根據與意義 (The Foundation and Meaning of Sino-Christian Theology)," in 漢語神學芻議 *(Preliminary Studies on Chinese Theology)*, ed. Yeung Daniel 楊熙楠 (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2000), 29-30; Lai Pan Chiu 賴品超, "漢語神學的類型與發展路向 (The Types of Sino-Christian Theology and Its Developmental Path)," in 漢語神學芻議 *(Preliminary Studies on Chinese Theology)*, 3; Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 道風 *(Tao-Feng)* 2 (1995): 9; Yang Hui Lin, "Some Considerations on Christian Theology in Chinese" http://www.iscs.org.hk/eng/letter03-1.htm (accessed 14/09/2004).

[2] The adjective "Chinese" added to the noun "theology" could refer to different things: (a) Ethnicity – *Huaren* (literally "Chinese race") in contrast to Western, Indian or Latino theologies; (b) Linguistic – *Huayu* (literally "Chinese language") in contrast to English, Greek, German, French theologies; (c) Geographical – *Huatu* (literally, "Chinese land") referring to theology done in Chinese land i.e. China, in contrast to Taiwanese, Korean, Japanese theologies. Thus depending on how the term "Chinese" is used, it could refer to Chinese theology as a whole (i.e. ethnically), theology done in Chinese language (i.e. linguistically) or theology restricted to mainland China (i.e. geographically). At the end, one's definition and usage of "Chinese Christian theology" may be quite different from another depending on its context of usage. Hence, it is better to use "Sino-Christian theology" than just "Chinese theology."

[3] Li Qiuling 李秋零, "漢語神學的歷史反思 (The Historial Reflection of Sino-Christian Theology)," in *The Third Round-Table Symposium of Sino-Christian Studies* (Kunming, China: 2005), 1.

consciousness in their parts of constructing any local theology. Though I would not agree with Li that any translation of foreign texts could not be considered as part of the construction of the contextualized theology, I agree with him that this linguistic definition of "Sino-Christian theology" can only be considered as the broader sense of the term.

On the other hand, Yang Huilin (楊慧林), the director of the Institute of the Study of Christian Culture at Renmin University of China, considers that, though the vernacular form of Sino-Christian theology is primary, it must "certainly include the *distinctive questions and contexts* of 'Christian theology in Chinese,' and its fundamentals are supposed to be brought about by such 'linguistic orientation.'"[4] While the linguistic emphasis remains, the larger concern is how theology can be done in relation to its socio-cultural context, i.e., when the Chinese language is just one aspect of a bigger context.[5] This implies that the most basic criterion is related to the socio-cultural context and theological agenda of Sino-Christian theology rather than the medium alone. As such, if necessary, Sino-Christian theology can also admit other languages (such as English, German, French, etc), provided the subject matter that is being dealt with is related to the issues and concerns of Sino-Christian theology.

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[4] Yang Huilin, "Some Considerations on Christian Theology in Chinese."
[5] He rightly sees the Sino-Christian theology as aiming to show its relationship with the language. And this language refers not only to its linguistic meaning, but also the cultural tradition that contained in its homeland, see also Li Qiuling 李秋零, "關於漢語神學的幾點思考 (Some Thoughts on Sino-Christian Theology)," in 漢語神學芻議 (*Preliminary Studies on Chinese Theology*), 191.

Moreover, Yeung Kwok Keung, the research director of Hong Kong Religious Education Resources Centre, points out that "the Han Language obviously implies a geographical background, where it is used and necessary only in the multi-racial context of Mainland China."[6] Accordingly, he views theology done in the Han language as exclusively belonging to mainland China. He goes on to suggest that it may as well be appropriate to speak of "Taiwan's Chinese Theology" or "Hong Kong's Chinese theology," etc. This brings us to question whether Sino-Christian theology is restricted to mainland China (or the "Greater China" including also Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan). Is it, then, some sort of a subset of the broader notion of "Chinese theology"?

The answer to the above question, as this thesis would argue, is that, though *Hanyu* or Sino-language is the language of the overwhelming majority ethnic group of mainland China (i.e. the *Han* race which is about 94% of the total population), today the *Chinese* language suggests a much larger context compared to a particular ethnic or geographical location. In this regard, the Taiwanese can certainly claim their country to be a *Chinese* nation situated within a *Chinese* language context. Nevertheless, theologies done in mainland China and Taiwan (or in any other nation), though they are using the same Chinese language, their actual theological content and concerns

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[6] Yeung Kwok Keung, "The Multi-Faceted Tension of Christian Theology in Chinese: Reflections on the Academic Seminar: 'Already but Not Yet?,'" http://www.iscs.org.hk/eng/letter03-1.htm (accessed 14/09/2004).

could vary greatly, depending on the social, political, and cultural context proper to each one.[7] The same can be said of theologies done in languages such as English, French, and Spanish, when such languages are used to construct theology in different parts of the world. In other words, Christian theology done in mainland China could have concerns different, say, from the Christian theology done in Taiwan, though both of them can be broadly grouped under "Chinese theology."[8] Thus Liu Xiaofeng could claim that the localized "Sino-Christian theology" represents a new type of awareness and expression of thought; it is a renewed attempt to explore the meaning of Christianity for mainland China, its unique theological agenda.[9] In this regard, "Sino-Christian theology," though broadly referring to theology done in Chinese language (historically or geographically), it is treated in this thesis as restricted to Christian theology in mainland China (as claimed by Yeung KwokKeung[10]). It is therefore

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[7] Daniel Yeung has pointed out, "From my own observation and experience, the 'Christian Theology in Chinese' which emerged in the context of the humanities studies in mainland China has been quite different from the 'Chinese theology' promoted by the Christian communities in Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas since its very inception. Its theological issues and paradigms also differ from other types of theology in East Asia, such as Japanese theology, Korean theology, etc ("總監的話 (Message from the Director)," www.iscs.org.hk/eng/letter03-1.htm (accessed 14/09/2004).

[8] It is interesting to note that "Chinese theology" is being employed by Chin Ken Pa to refer to the traditional approach to "synthesize" Christian message with Chinese culture, while "Sino-Theology" is a new approach which criticizes and overcomes the displacement of "Chinese theology" (Chin Ken Pa 曾慶豹, "甚麼是漢語神學？ (What Is Sino-Theology?)," 漢語基督教學術論評 (Sino-Christian Studies) 1 (2006): 125-157).

[9] Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 9; Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 (The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History) (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2000), 3. This understanding of Sino-Christian theology is defined by Lai Pan Chui as the narrow sense of "Sino-Christian theology." It aims to position itself within the humanistic-social realm, which is quite different from the Church theology. See Lai Pan Chiu 賴品超, "漢語神學的類型與發展路向 (the Types of Sino-Christian Theology and Its Developmental Path)," 3). See discussion later in the thesis.

[10] See Wang Xiao Chao 王曉朝, "漢語基督教神學研究的特質、貢獻及其未來 (The Nature, Contribution and Future of Sino-Christian Theology)," in The Third Round-Table Symposium of Sino-Christian Studies (Kunming, China: 2005), 6, f.n. 27.

"mainland China's theology."[11] As such, the *emerging* Sino-Christian theology"

refers to the renewed attempt to reconstruct Chinese theology in relation to its

contemporary mainland Chinese context. It has its distinctive concerns in relation to

its particular context. Nonetheless, this type of theology is not unrelated to the

theologies of other regions. Nor does it have nothing to contribute to the wider global

context. The emerging Sino-Christian theology has to tackle its own problems and

address the issues arising out of its own particular context – instead of having its

agenda dictated by the theologies of other regions. In short, Sino-Christian theology is

a *contextual* theology. It must engage its particular cultural context in order to present

the Gospel message from *within*, rather than import from *without*[12], similar to

Clemens Sedmak's understanding of "local theologies" as those theologies made *from*,

of, *within* and *for* local cultures.[13] The prepositions "of" and "from" suggest the

relation of a local theology to the language, cultural symbols, customs, institutions

and historical experience of the local or regional culture; "within" evokes the

collaborative activity of those immersed in the culture in question; while "for" the

immediate goal of making sense of the Gospel message as the fulfilment and healing

of what the culture most deeply aspires to. With this understanding of "Sino-Christian

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[11] Cf. Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(the Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 3-4.

[12] Cf. Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002).

[13] Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity*, 124.

theology" as a contextualized mainland Chinese theology, it is necessary for us now

to reflect on the significance of context for doing theology.

2. The Significance of Theological Context

It is commonly agreed that the historical and cultural contexts have great influence on

the theologies that are being constructed. Stephan Bevans expresses the intimate

relationship between theology and context in these words:

> Doing theology contextually is not an option, nor is it something that should
> only interest people from the Third World or missionaries who work there. The
> contextualization of theology – the attempt to understand Christian faith in
> terms of a particular context – is really a theological imperative. As we
> understand theology today, contextualization is part of the very nature of
> theology itself.[14]

Indeed, no theology in this world can escape the influence of culture and history. To

this degree, theology is never "general"; it is always "specific" and "localized."

Genuine theology only begins when this is recognized.[15]

Furthermore, in his work, *Doing Local Theology*, Clemens Sedmak contrasts the

activities and attitudes involved in the preparation of a sermon with the experience of

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[14] Stephan B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 1.
[15] Song Choan Seng 宋泉盛, "開拓亞洲基督教神學的新領域 (The Developing of New Territories in Asian Christian Theology)," in 道與言：華夏文化與基督教文化相遇 *(Dao and Word: The Encounter of Chinese Culture and Christian Culture)*, ed. Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓 (Shanghai: Shanghai San Lian Shu Dian, 1995), 750.

writing a letter, so as to illustrate the importance of putting context into perspective.

Accordingly, he goes on to make the point,

> This is a matter not only of politeness but of mere common sense. In this sense, there is nothing – nothing whatsoever – spectacular about the concept of local theologies and the idea of doing local theology. Whenever we do theology, we do theology "from somewhere."[16]

Sheila Davaney also makes the same point when she surveys the mapping of contemporary theologies:

> [H]umans reside neither everywhere nor nowhere but are situated within particular locales demarcated by distinctive languages, political and economic structures, worldviews, everyday practices and rituals, forms of embodiment and streams of feeling.[17]

Therefore, taking the context seriously actually is not something novel or another *way* of doing theology, it is the *only* way since we are inescapably situated in our context and thus we always do theology "from somewhere," that is, from where we are located. Indeed, Sedmak rightly points out that the origins of Christianity "are found in an unspectacular local setting."[18] Jesus was incarnated into an ordinary, though particular, culture; he grew up within that culture and was familiar with the local customs and traditions. Virgil Elizondo asserts that "If God really became man, then God neither did become nor could become universal man, for universal man does not

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[16] Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity*, 4.

[17] Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Mapping Theologies: An Historicist Guide to Contemporary Theology," in *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Sheila Greeve Davaney (New York & London: Routledge, 1996), 26.

[18] Davaney, "Mapping Theologies," 16.

exist."[19] In addition, the Apostle Paul also worked on locally appropriate theology: he spoke in the local language which his audience and readers were familiar with (Rom 3:5, 6:19). Paul's missionary principle of "all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:20-22) is a further indication of a constructive model for the contextual theology of today. All these show that every human being lives, works, and plays, in a particular cultural location. That is an essential aspect of the human condition. One's theology flows naturally, as it were, and inevitably from such a context.

While there is no doubt that everyone is culturally located, and that such a cultural location exerts great impact in the way theology is constructed, some questions can easily be forgotten: why and how, precisely, does the context affect our theology? What would happen if the context is seriously considered, or, at the opposite extreme, systematically ignored?

To begin with, I would argue that the context affects the very kind of theological questions that arise in our minds. The context brings different emphases and issues into sharp focus. Sedmak observes,

> We know that the context within which theology takes place shapes the form
> and influences the contents of theology. Doing theology in a political setup of

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[19] Davaney, "Mapping Theologies," 16 f.n. 6.

suppression, exploitation, and structural injustice will lead to different results than a theology that comes out of well-protected academic research situations.[20]

Therefore, instead of starting from unrealistic assumptions, contextual theology helps one to tackle the existential issues and concerns at hand. In such effort, the particular theologian explores the meaning and value of God's Word in its relevance to the life and setting of the faith-community. Hence, a contextual Sino-Christian theology would seriously consider the relation of theology to the Chinese culture. It can thus show that Christianity is neither a foreign nor an imported religion, but, by being expressed in the local language and cultural forms, it can provide answers to existential questions and concerns.

It can be argued, then, that every theology is related to a particular historical, socio-cultural, economical, political and religious context. One asks and answers questions that, at least partially, form the context in the first place. The context is a pervasive "given" for all theological constructions. Though the cultural setting is a given in this way for all theology, to name it simply in terms of a "local theology" seems too restrictive, given the actual extent of a particular culture and the global considerations involved.[21] For instance, Peter Phan points out that most of us today live in a multi-cultural society. As a result, the theology must not only be contextual, but also

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[20] Davaney, "Mapping Theologies," 4. See also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 129.
[21] Davaney, "Mapping Theologies," 3-5.

"intercultural."[22] Consequently, according to Phan, the *existential* experience of the people or group entails the development of a distinct epistemology and hermeneutics. This results in a particular way of perceiving and interpreting reality – of oneself, others, the cosmos, and ultimately, God.[23] Phan's approach parallels to some extent the work of Peter Liu in addressing the inculturation of Christianity among the Hakka people in Southern China. Discussing his methodology in this light of this research, Peter Liu remarks,

> The encounter between Chinese culture and Christianity not only existed in the philosophical realm [i.e. the "bigger tradition" of the Chinese], but also existed in the experience, interpretation, and re-presentation in everyday life of both Chinese culture and Christianity by the participants. This process is carried up in different spatial-temporal realms and contexts, and is closely related to their political, economic and social contexts. The understanding of these multi-faceted interactions is indispensable for one to comprehend the relation between Christianity and Chinese culture.[24]

Hence, context not only influences the questions we ask, it also determines the way we perceive meaning and truth. Its orientation and boundaries, in some sense, determine or limit the development of theology. This is exactly what Liu Xiaofeng seeks to emphasize when he claims that "the orientation and boundaries of the

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[22] Peter C. Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 7.

[23] In Phan's personal experience as Asian (Vietnamese) immigrant in America, he proposes that the theology under construction concerns "the existential ontology of the [Asian] immigrant." He then moves on to delineate the social, cultural and ecclesial conditions of immigrants as the context in which a Vietnamese American theology is to be constructed (Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making*, 228).

[24] Liu Peter 劉彼得, "基督教與中國文化：客家個案的反思 (Christianity and Chinese Culture: Reflection on a Case Study of Hakkas)," in 基督教與近代中西文化 *(Christianity and Contemporary Chinese and Western Cultures)*, ed. Lo Ping Cheung 羅秉祥 and Zhao Dunhua 趙敦華 (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000), 195-196.

language of the ethnic-localized thought system limit the concrete talk of Christian theology."[25]

It remains, however, that theology is not reducible to a merely human cultural activity. Theology remains *Theo*-logy, for it seeks to discern how the Spirit of God is working in and through the culture in question. Within this theological horizon, a theologian explores the people's existential experience and its cultural context in order that theology can be both relevant as the incarnation of the Word, and dynamic as open to the surprises of the Spirit. In this way, it would avoid what Song Choan-Seng warned against, namely, that unless the social and political struggles are experienced firsthand, they are understood only in a superficial manner.[26]

So much, then, for the influence of context on theological constructions. Culture influences both the theological questions one asks, and the manner in which truth is perceived in that cultural context. However, the influence is not just one way. Theology must serve the divine Word of revelation. The Word of God transcends all and every context that theology might consider. The event of God's self-revelation judges, widens and transforms every context. Liu, appealing to Barth's view of

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[25] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 41.

[26] Song, "開拓亞洲基督教神學的新領域 (The Developing of New Territories in Asian Christian Theology)," 763.

theology as a critique of human language and philosophy, suggests:

> To the human mind, the Christ event in the past, present and future, is always something unheard of, a surprise and unimaginable. Human reason attempts to grasp, take hold of and describe the mystery of the Christ event through its existing forged words and phrases, which have their own unique language characteristics, not only having the limits of any ethnic-localized language, but also the limits of language in describing the divine event. …The richness of Christian theology undeniably received aid from rich and profound resources of the Greco-Latin language. But on other hand, the collision of Christ event with the ethnic-localized thought system also broadens the dimension of the latter.[27]

Liu, in his consideration of theology in its relation to the proclamation of the Gospel, makes the point that it is dealing with a "post-religious" event. "The Christ event occurred after the religious systems of all peoples and ancient kingdoms, and it would fundamentally conflict with existing religions of all people."[28] Hence, when describing the Christ event as the self-revelation of God human language must be constantly stretched if it is to be in any way adequate to its task. Moreover, not only is human language is stretched to new proportions, so too are the culture, philosophy, experience, arts, social constructs, and so on, that are receptive to the Word of God.

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[27] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 43-44. See also Timothy Lee Yii Lau, "God's Revelation of Himself through Himself: Ontology and Epistemology in Karl Barth's Doctrine of Revelation in Volume One of Church Dogmatics" (Australian College of Theology, 1999), Chap 2: "Talk about God, Dogmatics and Prolegomena to Dogmatics" and Chap 3: "The Doctrine of the Word of God".

[28] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 40, 41. His treatment of religious studies or "religion" as a whole is very much influenced by Karl Barth's view of religion.

In short, since a particular context greatly influences the theology one is constructing, it is aptly called a *local theology*, in that it gives the particular context its due. However, though it is a "local" theology, it is also expansively *public*. A contextual Sino-Christian theology, attentive both to its immediate, broader and even global contexts, must manifest such a public character. This is the position that this thesis argues for, and we shall return to it often in the course of our investigation.

3. Past Models and Their Limitations

Before we proceed further, it is necessary to make one final remark concerning the models and approaches that were used to construct Chinese theology in the past. As stated in the introduction, contemporary scholars working on the emerging Sino-Christian theology are unsatisfied with past theological approaches. It is thus necessary to briefly discuss these past attempts and to indicate their inadequacies, while, at the same time, learning something from them, in view of proposing a better model for the emerging Sino-Christian theology. Moreover, current attempts at constructing Sino-Christian theology cannot be divorced from the past approaches as there are always some organic links between the two – to that degree, it is a matter of reconstruction. Past models and approaches continue to be a resource for any such effort in the present.

In the light of Stephen Bevans' classifications of contextual theology[29], we can point to three models once adopted to construct Chinese theology in the past history of Christianity in China. First, there is the synthetic model evident during the early Jesuit missionary movement which gave rise to the notorious "Chinese Rites Controversy." Second, there is the praxis model as adopted by Bishop K.H. Ting and the "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" in working closely with the Communist regime. Thirdly, there is the anthropological model (Bevans also calls it the ethnographic model[30]) which is most commonly found among Protestant missionaries and Chinese Christians who proposed to indigenize Christian faith in the Chinese soil, particularly as reflected in the Indigenous Church Movement in the 1920s.[31] However, instead of differentiating between the various models, I propose to consider two interrelated tendencies found in these various attempts to indigenize the Christian gospel on the Chinese soil.

The first of these tendencies is found in trying to present Christianity as complementing Chinese culture. It attempts to cultivate the good seed that is already there in the Chinese culture so that it will germinate and eventually produce a harvest. The aim is to bring Chinese culture to its full potential in the light of the Gospel. Therefore, connections are made between Christianity and Chinese culture and/or

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[29] Refer Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*. The five models listed are the Translation, Anthropological, Praxis, Synthetic and Transcendental models.
[30] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 48.
[31] See Lam Wing Hung, *Chinese Theology in Construction* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1983), 49-83.

traditional Chinese religions (e.g., Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Chinese folk religions). The attempt to indigenize Christian faith on Chinese soil is then principally to align it with traditional cultural values and symbols.[32] Though this aim is the defining feature of Bevan's anthropological model, it also serves the synthetic and praxis models as their underlying principle of indigenization.

This "complementing" inclination of Chinese theological approaches is strongly criticized by many Sino-scholars today. For instance, Chin Ken Pa (曾慶豹), commenting on Liu Xaofeng's view, attacks such a theological attempt:

> "The prior consideration of Sino-theology is whether to break from its tradition of complementing Confucianism." Liu Xiaofeng's Sino-theology clearly expresses the view that, whether it is to synthesise, to complement, or to surpass Confucianism (合儒、補儒、超儒), Christian theology was viewed or understood from the perspective of moral context. Therefore, Chinese theology was never a theology defending for "a stranger." Rather, Chinese theology once again affirmed and strengthened the moral potential of the original Sino-thoughts. Chinese theology basically was defending the Chinese ethical system, instead of defending the [Christian] faith. As such, Chinese theology did not deal with theological issues, but issues relating to the Chinese national political identity.[33]

In Chin's view, the complementing of Chinese culture with Christianity only fosters the already existing superior sense of Chinese nationalism. In other words, instead of "converting" the Chinese culture, Christianity itself is being "domesticated" by, and

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[32] See Leung Ka Lun 梁家麟, "基督教在二十一世紀的東亞的角色 (the Role of Christianity in the Twentieth-First Century East Asia)," *Jian Dao: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 20 (2003): 105-106.
[33] Chin, "甚麼是漢語神學？ (What Is Sino-Theology?)," 146.

identified with, Chinese culture. It thus becomes "a sinicized form of Christianity that grew out of the thought of the Confucian Way."[34]

On the other hand, in close connection to this complementing tendency is the moralizing approach. Both are the two sides of the same coin. While past theological approaches aimed to complement the Chinese culture, one route taken was to abstract moral values from Christian system and to inject them into the host culture. In this respect, Christianity was treated as merely an ethical system that had something positive to contribute to the already existing Chinese ethical-and-value system. Christianity has nothing more beyond this ethical contribution. Here, too, Chin is critical of this reclothing Christianity in a Chinese ethical form. He writes,

> Its pursuit of becoming more "ethically Chinese," in actual fact, became a rather heavy burden for Sino-Christian theology, as it blurred the central teaching and basic values of the Christian faith by distorting the truth, while the Chinese ethical position was further strengthened ... [35]

To illustrate his point, Chin points out the problem of moralizing Christianity by the "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" adopted by the official Protestant Church in China in the praxis model: "Christianity was called the 'Doctrine of Pure Love,' but the real object was to meet the needs of China's nationalist struggle, in which the redemptive

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[34] Chin Ken Pa, "What Is 'Sino-Christian Theology'? Third Chinese Theology Round Table Conference, Kunming, 18-23 September 2005," *Concilium*, no. 2 (2008): 91.
[35] Chin, "What Is 'Sino-Christian Theology'? Third Chinese Theology Round Table Conference," 90.

faith of Christianity would be subordinated to a tool wherewith to achieve political

dominance."[36]

Yang Huilin (楊慧林) makes the same observation from a historical perspective. He

writes,

> It was the two basic methods employed after Matteo Ricci that really
> contributed to the effective propaganda of Christianity in China. The first one
> tried "to please" the Confucian way. The second one was to show off the new
> technology. The traditional mission strategies to synthesize, to complement, and
> to surpass Confucianism are actually results of the combination of these two
> methods. However, from the historical viewpoint, when Christianity was
> accepted by Chinese culture, or when Christianity overcame the ban on
> maritime trade through physical force, they were indeed times when its inner
> vitality was most weakened. If we disregard the external form of the [Christian]
> religion, and pay more attention to its fate in Sino-thoughts, maybe we can say
> that, in reality, these two effective mission strategies actually became the
> methods that gradually dispelled the influence of Christianity.[37]

The reason was simply that:

> Christianity, in dissipating its own strength in order to "please" the Confucian
> way blindly, would not only lose its absolute presupposed meanings that
> transcend secular ethics; it would also badly weaken its foundation within the
> Chinese cultural context. That's why we see the earliest converts in the Ming
> Dynasty discussed about the good and bad of Christian faith purely in terms of
> secular ethics, and their misunderstanding of Christianity was astonishing.[38]

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[36] Chin, "What Is 'Sino-Christian Theology'? Third Chinese Theology Round Table Conference," 90.

[37] Yang Huilin 楊慧林, *基督教的底色與文化延伸 (The Grounding and Cultural Manifestations of Christianity)* (Harbin: Heilongjiang People's Press, 2002), 292.

[38] Yang, *基督教的底色與文化延伸 (The Grounding and Cultural Manifestations of Christianity)*, 294.

In other words, these complementary and moralizing efforts of the past indigenous approaches are problematic. They produced a wrong view of the nature of Christian theology, and its relation to the culture. In such attempts, the faith itself was seriously compromised as it was domesticated by the local host culture. The inevitable result, in Yang's words, is that

> when it moves from the absolute goodness to the secular moral standard, the original critical strength of Christian faith is replaced by its accommodation to and its compromise with the local authority, or it simply becomes … "the religion of the good citizens."[39]

From Chin and Yang's critiques of past models and approaches, we can conclude that, despite their impressive achievements in earning converts and establishing the groundwork for Christianity in China, they exhibit serious limitations and problems. In complementing and moralizing Christianity in regard to Chinese traditional values, whether they be religious or ethical, Christian message often was compromised and watered down. In Barth's terms, the Gospel was domesticated. As a result, Christianity and its teachings had never been presented without serious distortions. The Chinese culture was being regarded too highly, treated as a fixed and authoritative cultural entity. Ironically, in such efforts to complement and moralize Christianity so as to conform with Chinese culture, the genuine inner core of

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[39] Yang, 基督教的底色與文化延伸 *(The Grounding and Cultural Manifestations of Christianity)*, 296.

Christianity still appeared as a Western type of religion, and thus was often perceived by the Chinese as a means of Western imperialism. There resulted an entrenched hostility on the part of the Chinese towards "foreign" Christianity. The basic problem lies in an inadequate view of the relation between Christian theology and Chinese cultural context. There was clearly a lack of critical theological and cultural integration which left the Chinese Christian community incapable of transposing the Gospel message into the Chinese cultural context effectively.

Conclusion

In view of the above discussion, a contextualized Sino-Christian theology must be able to respond to these limitations and distortions in the following ways. First, it must be able to maintain a tension between the revealed Word of God and the cultural context.[40] The local context must be taken seriously without losing sight of the revelation of God.

Second, the core of the Gospel message must be rooted in the Chinese soil and presented in Chinese forms and thought-patterns. There is, thus, the need to probe deeper into the question of the relation between theology and culture (especially with

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[40] See the two matrices (religious and culture) mentioned in Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), xi.

Chinese traditional beliefs such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and Chinese folk religions).

Third, there is need to eradicate any unhelpful dualisms between theory and practice, faith and reason, Church (religious community) and academe (university), local and universal, private and public. Though these various aspects should not be dissolved into a reductionist whole, the tensions between them need not be removed but rather appreciated within a larger perspective.

Fourth, a more dynamic model must be elaborated in order to maintain a dynamic interaction between Christian Gospel and the local cultural context.

These concerns will be considered in the relevant sections of this thesis. In the next chapter, we shall move on to consider the recent project of Liu Xiaofeng. He attempted to reconstruct Sino-Christian theology, so that, on one hand, it would avoid the mistakes made by traditional approaches, and on the other hand, it would develop in close connection to its contemporary social, cultural, and political context.

CHAPTER THREE

Liu Xiaofeng and the Emerging Sino-Christian Theology

In the last decade, a name that is often associated with Sino-Christian theology is Liu

Xiaofeng (劉小楓).[1] He was a major figure in the contemporary discussion regarding

the nature and task of the emerging Sino-Christian theology. In this chapter, we shall

focus our attention on Liu and his writings on Sino-Christian theology under the

following headings:

      1. Liu's personal background and view of Sino-Christian theology;

      2. The notion of a "Cultural Christian";

      3. The types of Sino-Christian Theology.

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[1] Refer Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Oxford: Monarch Books), 249; Chin Ken Pa 曾慶豹, "華人神學的語言轉向及其詮釋的衝突：教會性神學與人文性神學的爭端 (The Shift in Chinese Theological Language and the Conflict in Its Interpretations: The Argument between Church Theology and Humanistic Theology)," in 文化基督徒：現象與論爭 *(Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument)*, ed. 漢語基督教文化研究所 Institute of Sino-Christian Studies (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 1997), 188; Lo Ping Cheung 羅秉祥, "中國亞波羅與香港神學界之九七危機 (Chinese Apollos and the Crises of Hong Kong's Theological World after 1997)" in 文化基督徒：現象與論爭 *(Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument)*, 98.

1. Liu's Personal Background and View of Sino-Christian Theology

First, some background regarding Liu Xiaofeng. After initial studies of foreign languages and literature (French and German), Liu continued his studies at Peking University in philosophy before becoming a lecturer at Shenzhen University. Later, he went to the University of Basel to study theology and earned a doctorate degree in 1993. During his time in Europe, he was personally acquainted with Jürgen Moltmann, Hans Küng, and other Continental theologians who had some influence on his theology, which we shall see later. Upon graduation, he became the academic director of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong where he began to promote the study of the emerging Sino-Christian theology.[2] At the same time, he was also a research fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Since 2002, he has moved to Zhongshan University (Guangzhou) to head the Institute of Comparative Religion, while he continues to be a guest lecturer at the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies. Among his many writings and publications include *Approaching the Truth on the Cross: Introduction to Twentieth Century Theologies*[3], *Preface to Social Theory of Modernity: Modernity and Modern China*[4], *Individual*

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[2] This institute was officially established in 1995 in Hong Kong with two clear aims: (1) To promote the contextualization of Christian theology in Chinese culture and further dialogue between Christianity and other religions; (2) To invite and mobilize academicians and scholars from China and across the world, in the church and non-church affiliated, to undertake a joint exploration and construction of a theology of contextualization that is deeply rooted on the Chinese soil as a living embodiment of Chinese culture and thought (refer www.iscs.org.hk).

[3] Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓, 走向十字架上的真理：廿十世紀神學引論 *(Approaching the Truth on the Cross: Introduction to Twentieth Century Theologies)* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1990).

[4] Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓, 現代性社會理論緒論：現代性與現代中國 *(Preface to Social Theory of Modernity: Modernity and Modern China)* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Faith and Cultural Theories[5], *The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History*[6]. He was the editor of two Chinese theological journals, *Logos & Pneuma* (道與風) and *Christian Culture Review* (基督教文化評論).

In 1995, Liu Xiaofeng wrote an article on the urgency of constructing a Sino-Christian theology that was relevant to its contemporary context.[7] It was a development of his speeches in 1994 at both Hong Kong and Peking Universities. Almost at the same time, Lo Ping Cheung (羅秉祥) of Hong Kong Baptist University published an article in the Hong Kong weekly newspaper, *Christian Times*, entitled *"Chinese Apollos and the Crises of Hong Kong's Theological World After 1997."*[8] This article, along with Liu's, created much debate regarding the development of an emerging Sino-Christian theology among scholars in mainland China, Hong Kong, and overseas as well.[9] Most of these articles are now collected and published by the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies under the titles *Cultural Christian: Phenomenon*

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[5] Liu Xiao Feng 劉小楓, *個體信仰與文化理論 (Individual Faith and Cultural Theories)* (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Press, 1997).

[6] Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓, *漢語神學與歷史哲學 (The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)* (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2000).

[7] Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," *道風 (Tao-Feng)* 2 (1995): 9-48. This article was later revised and expanded in Liu, *漢語神學與歷史哲學 (The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 73-96.

[8] Lo Ping Cheung 羅秉祥, "中國亞波羅與香港神學界之九七危機 (Chinese Apollos and the Crises of Hong Kong's Theological World after 1997)". See previous chapter for a brief discussion of this article.

[9] Refer to the summary of the discussion in Peter K. H. Lee, "The 'Cultural Christians' Phenomenon in China: A Hong Kong Discussion," *Ching Feng* 39, no. 4 (1996): 307-321.

and Argument and *Preliminary Studies on Chinese Theology*.[10] In the meantime, Liu

published another book, *The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History*,

which contains the expanded edition of his original article.[11]

In Liu's original article, he suggests that there are many ways one can begin the

discussion regarding the contemporary context of Sino-Christian theology. However,

he proposes to examine the development of Sino-Christian theology in the last two

hundred years in relation to China's socio-political context and development.[12] He

claims,

> [T]here are many focal points or entry points to discuss the issue of
> modernization, for example, the formation of technological bodies, the process
> of industrialization, or the establishment of political institutions in the wider
> society. But with respect to the concern of this essay, the formation and
> contestation of a nationalistic state in the process of modernization shall be
> given the prior consideration, as it forms the basic foundation for the
> contemporary context of Chinese Christianity.[13]

Almost every scholar would agree that, on studying the contemporary history of the

development of Christianity in China, one cannot avoid looking at the conflicts that

have occurred between Christianity and Chinese culture. Such conflicts, according to

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[10] Institute of Sino-Christian Studies 漢語基督教文化研究所, ed., 文化基督徒：現象與論爭 *(Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument)*; Daniel Yeung 楊熙楠, ed., 漢語神學芻議 *(Preliminary Studies on Chinese Theology)* (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2000).

[11] Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*.

[12] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 10-17.

[13] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 10. See pages 9-24 regarding his delineation of the contemporary context of Sino-Christian theology in relation to the establishment of modern nationalistic China.

Liu, must be placed in the context of the establishment of the modern China. In other words, in order to better understand the factors that gave rise to these past conflicts, we have to look at various socio-political issues. To Liu,

> This historical context shows that a mere general treatment of the tensions existing between a nationalistic state and Christianity is problematic. Of the same significance, when one analyzes this tension in a particular case (such as that of China), it must be developed along the sociological dimension, instead of naively defending from an apologetic perspective or describing from a historical perspective.[14]

Liu's rationale is based on the assumption that, in the modern age, the development of Christianity in a country is often closely related to the development of the nation and its respective nationalistic identity. For example, the breakdown of medieval social order and the rise of new political order in Europe had a direct effect on the social status of Christianity, and the two are inseparable.[15] Moreover, clashes between Christianity and any given culture are results of differences found in the anthropological, political and cultural realms of nationalistic identity. For instance, in the anthropological realm, Christianity, since its inception, had clashed with traditional Jewish practices such as circumcision (cf. Rom 2:25ff) and dietary practices (cf. Acts 10:9-16). Then, in the political realm, the lordship of Christ was

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[14] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 11.

[15] Liu claims that "divisions within Christian denominations and implicit tensions between doctrinal theories have close internal relation with the political appeal for national sovereignty by the new rising nationalistic European nations – the unification of Europe is bound up with the unification of Christianity. … The expansion of economic activities of capitalism and the development of a city and the state, which are basic factors in the process of modernization, have created many various forms of tension between a nationalistic state and the form adopted by Christianity," Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 10-11.

perceived as disloyalty to Caesar (cf. Lk 23:2, Jn 19:12, Acts 17:7).[16] In the cultural realm, Christianity clashed with the contemporary Greco-Roman worldview and cultural thought-patterns such as attitudes to spouses, children, slaves, and masters (as demonstrated in the famous "Household Code" in 1 Pet 2:13-3:7 and Eph 5:22-6:9).

Liu rightly claims that the conflict of Christianity with Chinese social practices and cultural values was not, therefore, a unique case.[17] This conflict in the process of inculturation of the Christian Gospel in any culture is common, and is, therefore, to be expected. Even in the West, Christianity had been constantly challenged by modernism and its by-products, such as rationalism and scientism. Likewise, such conflict can be found in Greek and Roman cultures, and now in Chinese culture as well. This understanding of conflict between Christianity and culture is particularly important, when we deal with the relation of the Christian Gospel to the Chinese culture in the modern age.[18] Conventionally, such conflict has always been viewed as a conflict between West and East (i.e., conflict in political and cultural thoughts

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[16] See Paul Barnett's discussion of Jesus' lordship as a challenge to Zealot's violence theocratic programme and Caesar's totalitarian theocratic claims in "Jesus, Paul and Peter and the Roman State," in *Pilgrims and Citizens: Christian Social Engagement in East Asia Today*, ed. Michael Nai-Chiu Poon (Hindmarsh: ATF Press, 2006), 63-77.

[17] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 16; Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 36.

[18] What we emphasize here is the relation of the Gospel to the Chinese culture in the last two hundred years, though there were at least three previous attempts in bringing Christian Gospel onto Chinese soil: during the seventh century by the Nestorians, the thirteen century by the Franciscans and the seventeenth century by the Jesuit missionaries.

between Western missionary-sending countries and nationalistic China).[19] Though

such conflict did exist, conflict of other kinds was being ignored or deemed non-

existent. Despite the obvious conflicts between Christianity and Chinese nationalistic

ideals, and between Western culture and Chinese culture, in reality, there are conflicts

that exist between Christianity and Western culture (in particular, Western scientific,

rationalistic and Enlightenment thought-patterns). Sun Yi has argued convincingly

that in this East-West conflict, we should differentiate between Christian mission in

China, the conflict between Western culture and Chinese culture, and conflict

between the interests of the overpowering Western nations and China.[20] In other

words, Christianity and Western culture are two different entities; they should not be

treated as one and the same. There are many historical incidents we can use to

illustrate such a misconception. One typical example would be the "May Fourth

Movement" (also variously called the "New Culture Movement," the "New Thought

Movement," or the "Chinese Renaissance"). It began around 1917 and continued well

into the 1920s.[21] When Chinese Christian leaders involved in this movement

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[19] This view of East-West conflict might be unavoidable since the missionaries in the nineteenth century were closely associated with the invading Western nations. They came to China on the same boats which carried the overpowering armies and their canons, greedy merchants and their opium. Furthermore, the missionaries in the early years were working for the Western nations as translators, administrators, and advisors since these were the only ways they could get a visa to stay in China. Also, in some occasions, they were quite approving of the unfair treaties signed between the invading nations and the over-powered China, see Duan Qi 段琦, 中國基督教本色化史稿 (The History of the Contextualization of Chinese Christianity) (Taipei: Cosmic Care, 2005), 19-31.

[20] Sun Yi, "Christianity," in Religion and Contemporary Chinese Society, ed. He Guanghu (Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2006), 228. See also Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 (the Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History), 42-43.

[21] See Hwa Yung, Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 1997), 18, 29 f.n.11; Lam Wing Hung, Chinese Theology in Construction (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1983), 165, n.1.

associated Christianity with Western science and technology, they failed to see that, besides the tensions that existed between Western cultural ideals and Chinese culture and religion, there were tensions between Christianity and Western culture. As a result, the Chinese revolutionists could easily adopt Western scientific and enlightenment mentalities, and so bypass the essence of Christianity in the process. The Chinese church, while still naively associating the two (i.e., Christianity and Western culture), in the end missed the opportunity to exert any notable influence on China's socio-political scene during that time.

Indeed, Liu points out that it is this mishandling of "East-West" conflict that created many unnecessary confusions and fatal misunderstandings which served as a catalyst for a hostile Chinese reaction to the Christian Gospel. In this situation, Christianity was viewed as "Western" and foreign, and in direct opposition to Chinese philosophy and culture. Even worse, Christianity was perceived as oppressive and imperialistic, and a tool of Western imperial ambitions. Liu, therefore, claims that,

> Upon this distinction [i.e. the conflict between Christianity and Chinese nationalism versus the perceived East-West conflict], we discover that, to treat the conflict between Christianity and China as East-West conflict is a fundamental mistake; and the contextualized or indigenous approach that was built upon this foundation and had influenced Chinese theology for more than half of century, is to be questioned.[22]

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[22] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 17.

For Liu, Christianity must be distinguished from modern Western culture.[23] The failure to make such a distinction causes Liu to criticize past Chinese theologians and their adopted theological method. They had opted uncritically for a contextualized or indigenous approach in their efforts to overcome the perceived conflict between Chinese culture and the Western brand of Christianity. The over-riding concern of this past indigenous approach was to make Christianity looked more "Chinese," or to use Christianity to "supplement" Chinese religions such as Confucianism or Taoism.[24] To Liu, such an approach has missed the real issues. It assumes that Christianity is Western that needs to be "transformed" in a Chinese way and style.[25] He is thus doubtful of the value of any mere comparative religious studies, since they attempt only to find elements in other religions to supplement Chinese religions.[26] For Liu, "even Christian theology cannot achieve a common ground with Jewish theology and Islamic theology, how can it do so with Buddhism and Confucianism?"[27]

In reality, by distinguishing Christianity from Western culture, Liu is trying to diffuse Chinese hostility towards the Christian Gospel. He is aiming to clarify the genuine

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[23] Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 39.

[24] Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 43, 63ff. For instance, Liu asserts that when one talks about the Trinity within the Sino-Christian context, one should not bring in some western language context but a context that brings a new understanding of human existence which is universal in scope (116).

[25] Refer Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 42.

[26] Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 64.

[27] Ibid.

real points of conflict hidden in the various clashes that have taken place. In the light of the spread and struggle of Christianity in China in the past two centuries, Liu, therefore, proceeds to propose that Chinese theologians of today must learn to face three types of ideological conflict in the process of contextualizing the Christian Gospel in China. These ideological types of conflicts are, first, between Christianity and Chinese Confucian culture – since the latter represents the main thought-form of the modern Chinese society[28]; secondly, between Christianity and contemporary western scientific ideology; and thirdly, between different denominations and traditions within Chinese Christianity.[29] Clearly this is not an exhaustive list, since there might be other types of ideological conflict as well. Take, for example, the possibility of conflict occurring between the traditional understanding of nationality and the responsibilities of belonging to the global communities in which China is situated today. Then, there is a range of possible conflicts between Christianity and its commitment to inter-faith dialogue, and the emerging Christianity in China and other quasi-religious movements such as Falun Gong. Other instances of potential conflict can occur, say, between a Christian value-system and popular Chinese ethics, and between the Christian view of society and culture and the cultural ideals that modern

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[28] Refer Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 33.

[29] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 20.

communist China is adopting.[30]

How, then, is Liu's contribution to the emerging Sino-Christian theology to be assessed? Certainly, Liu has rightly emphasized that the immediate task of Sino-Christian theology requires a study of the concrete socio-political context.[31] In other words, a Sino-Christian perspective must always recognize the existential tensions between nationalistic sentiments of contemporary China and wider political and cultural ideals.[32] This context of Sino-Christian theology should always be kept in view in order to construct a Sino-Christian theology that is relevant and sensitive to its context. It is this particular context of Sino-Christianity today that brings Liu to suggest his notion of the "cultural Christian" (though the term was not originally coined by him). What does he mean by this term?

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[30] Cf. He Guanghu 何光滬, "漢語神學的方法與進路 (The Method and Path of Sino-Christian Theology)," in 漢語神學芻議 *(Preliminary Studies on Chinese Theology)*, ed. Daniel Yeung 楊熙楠 (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2000), 45. He stresses the pluralistic mature of the contemporary Sino context such as the Chinese theology in different Chinese contexts (mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, North America, and other regions with Chinese settlers). As he examines the mainland Chinese context, he sees the following significant issues – economic development and market, equality and ecological protection, stability in politic and constitution, justice and citizen rights. As for the overseas Chinese context, the significant issues may include cultural identification and assimilation, tradition keeping and openness to others.

[31] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 9.

[32] Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 34, 7-17, 27-39.

2. The Notion of A "Cultural Christian"

According to Liu Xiaofeng, since the inception of communist China in 1949, Christianity in China has been affected mainly in two ways: firstly, Chinese Christianity began to be regulated by the Chinese government; and secondly, the influence of Chinese Christianity in the academic-ideological realm has declined.[33] The Christian community began slowly to be exposed to non-church based, academic theology, especially in the last two decades. This new political-sociological situation has given rise to a new context for contemporary Christian church and theology. It is precisely within this context that Liu introduces his particular concept of a "cultural Christian."[34] He explains,

> In the recent years, Christian thought began to be developed in the academic and cultural realms in China, which is an interesting phenomenon in this new period of modernization. If we look at it from the perspective of modernity, this phenomenon relates to the question of modernization of Christianity. If we look at it from the perspective of the history of the development of Chinese Christianity, this phenomenon tells us two things: (1) Christian thought has germinated with the Chinese cultural context out of its own strength, and is not the result of western missionary work; (2) Christian thought and scholarship has never occupied a significant seat within Chinese cultural-academic realm. … [But now] the Cultural Christian phenomenon in mainland China is occurring in the cultural-academic realm, and as a result it alters the status of Christian scholarship within such realm.[35]

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[33] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 21-22.

[34] Though the term was not coined by him but church leaders in Mainland China, he has popularized the term and used it to support his particular view of Sino-Christian theology in relation to its contemporary context.

[35] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 24-25.

He goes on to further specify his notion of "cultural Christian":

> Cultural Christians do not merely refer to Chinese scholars in the universities or academic enterprises who are involved in studying the history and culture of Christendom, but to cultural scholars who are individually converted to Christ. It goes without saying that only those who have faith in Christ can be called Christian, but not those who study Christian culture. If we look at it from the confessional point of view, there is no fundamental difference between cultural Christians and Christians in general. "Cultural Christians" is thus more of a sociological term, referring to Christians among the rank of scholars. Their social status, cultural upbringing and ethical responsibility have determined their religious interests and convictions. Since these Christians are engaging in research into Christian thought or creative art, their modes of expression are not limited to practical Christian living, but extend also to philosophy and art forms.[36]

Liu feels strongly that Chinese theology must enter into Chinese culture before it can assert any influence in that culture, just as Buddhism has done. In particular, given the elite, privileged status of the Chinese scholar in the Chinese society, Christianity must enter into dialogue within the academic-cultural realm in order to show itself as a worthy competitor, and as a potential contributor, in the development of Chinese

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[36] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 25-26. Chen Cunfu prefers to talk about "Scholars in Mainland China Studying Christianity" (SMSC) rather than "Cultural Christians" (CC). He suggests that the understanding of the composition and characteristics of SMSC is the foundation to understand the phenomenon of CC (Chen Cunfu 陳村富, "「文化基督徒」現象的綜覽與反思 (A Survey and Reflection On "Cultural Christian)," in 文化基督徒：現象與論爭 (Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argurment), 17). On the other hand, Li Qiuling subdivides SMSC into three kinds: (1) Those who study Christianity objectively; (2) Those who are sympathetic to Christian values, yet by no means exclude values of other faiths; (3) Those who have faith in Christ (i.e. Cultural Christians) (See Edwin C. Hui 許志偉, "「文化基督徒」現象的近因與神學反思 (The Recent Cause Of 'Cultural Christian' Phenomenon and Its Theological Reflection)," in 文化基督徒：現象與論爭 (Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument), 30-31).

society.[37] Thus, this accentuates the importance of the involvement of "cultural Christians" for the emergence of a contemporary Sino-Christian theology. Here, Liu's concern for Christians to engage Chinese culture by way of involvement in it is to be appreciated. However, what is questionable is his distinction between "cultural Christians" and "Christians in general." In the quotation given above, Liu asserts that "there is no fundamental difference between cultural Christians and Christians in general" except that the former operate mainly in the academic-cultural realm.[38] Later in his article, however, he insists that, in terms of specific dogmatic conviction, the two are quite different.[39] Liu's distinction, therefore, naturally raises questions as to the radical differences that exist between the two groups. The problem has to do with the lack of clarification in the phrase "specific dogmatic convictions." Let us look more carefully at the real or apparent differences dividing the two groups in question.

One of the main differences that Liu sees between cultural Christians and Christians in general is their respective social relationship to the church communities – an area commonly termed "the ecclesial dimension" of their faith. To Liu, cultural Christians do not have any church affiliation.[40] He argues that even the first Christians did not

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[37] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 24-25.

[38] Edwin Hui notices that Liu has employed a few corresponding terms: "Cultural Christians," "general Christians" and "Church Christians" (Hui, "「文化基督徒」現象的近因與神學反思 (The Recent Cause of 'Cultural Christian' Phenomenon and Its Theological Reflection)," 27).

[39] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 26.

[40] Ibid.

appeal to church affiliation for determining Christian identity. Rather, Christian identity in the early church revolved around Jesus' teaching, e.g., the command to love one another (Jn 13:34-35).[41] Liu also appeals to Calvin's argument that Christian identity is dependent upon whether one believes in Christ, and not on whether one believes in an institution.[42] Furthermore, since there are various denominations in existence, it remains problematic to define Christian identity with reference to church affiliation.[43]

Liu's exclusion of the ecclesial dimension for the faith of "Cultural Christians" is not theologically defensible. His reasoning invites refutation, especially when he argues that for the first Christians, church affiliation was not a criterion in determining Christian identity. Clearly, from both Old and New Testaments, the purpose of God's redemptive plan is to create a community of God's people (see Ex 6:6-7, 15:13, Acts 20:28, Tit 2:14, Rev 5:9-10). The direct result of the preaching of God's Word is the formation of a community of the new covenant (as in Acts 2:5, 11:20 and chapter 15; cf. also, Eph 2:11-13, Gal 3:28, 4:26, 6:15-16). In the New Testament, the "Church"

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[41] Another mainland Chinese scholar Jiang Da Wei argues that even Paul desalinated his relationship with the apostles and the Jerusalem church by appealing to Gal 1:12, 17, 18-20 (Jiang Da Wei 江大惠，"中國亞波羅的危機？ (The Crises of Chinese Apollos)," in 文化基督徒：現象與論爭 *(Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument)*, 114-116). But is Jiang's interpretation of Gal 1 correct, i.e., was Paul trying to distant himself from the Jerusalem Church?

[42] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 27, f.n. 45.

[43] Liu is right to view denominations as historical types of Christian religion, and not ideal types (Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 27). However, he often perceives denominationalism in the negative light, and thus it is exclusive in nature.

is regarded as the new, authentic Israel who has inherited the promises God made to

the old (see Rm 9:6, Gal 3:14, 26-29, Heb 6:17, 1 Pet 2:9-10, etc). Hence, there is an

inseparable connection between individual believers and community of believers. The

community of believers, i.e., the Church, is a divinely-created corporate reality.[44] It is

not a mere accidental affair, as claimed by Liu, when he imagines that early

Christians needed to gather together due to fears of persecution.[45]

Moreover, the biblical teaching, with its emphasis on the community of believers, is

consistently taught by the Church Fathers as they claimed that it is in and through the

Church that believers are identified as God's people and are united in His Spirit. For

instance, Justin Martyr holds that all those who believe in Christ are being united "in

one soul, one synagogue, one church, which is brought into being through His name

and shares in His name; for we are all called Christians."[46] Irenaeus sees a close

connection between God's Spirit and the church when he says, "For where the Church

is, there is also the Spirit of God. And where the Spirit of God is, there is also the

Church and all grace; for the Spirit is the Truth."[47] Furthermore, from early times,

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[44] Refer Robert J. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 37.

[45] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 27.

[46] Quoted in J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Fifth ed. (London: A & C Black, 1977), 189.

[47] Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1885), section 3.24.1, 458.

communion with the bishops within the "Catholic Church" was regarded as an essential constitutive element of Christian faith. For instance, Ignatius claims,

> Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as where Christ is, there does all the heavenly host stand by, … It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize, or to offer, or to present sacrifice, or to celebrate a love-feast. But that which seems good to him, is also well-pleasing to God, that everything ye do may be secure and valid.[48]

In addition, Hans Schwarz observes, with Christian theology generally, that the church gradually came to be perceived not just as community of salvation, but also as an institution of salvation.[49] For instance, Cyprian claims that "there is no salvation outside the Church."[50] What Cyprian really means by this claim is not that the church has become an institution that mediates salvation, but that it is in unity with Christ, and therefore it safeguards His saving Gospel.

From the above brief consideration of biblical materials and patristic testimonies, we would be wrong to assert, despite the wide variety of past and present ecclesiologies, that there is no close connection between an individual Christian and his or her

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[48] Ignatius, "Epistle to the Smyrneans," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1885), chapter 8, 89-90.

[49] Hans Schwarz, *Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 322.

[50] Cyprian, *Letter 73*, 21.2, quoted in Schwarz, *Christology*, 322.

belonging to the Christian community.[51] Though Liu is clearly endorsing the role of individual Christian scholars in academia, the individualism of his approach would seem to erode, not only the communal and ecclesial character of Christian faith, but also the mission of the Christian community to give corporate witness in the culture to which it belongs.

Secondly, Liu argues that Calvin viewed Christian identity as dependent upon faith in Christ rather than on the beliefs in the institutional Church. In reality, Calvin's argument had to do with the wording of the article as found in the creed: "I believe in the church."[52] Calvin asserted that it is inappropriate to claim that we believe *in* the church, because faith is *in* God.[53] Nevertheless, Calvin did not so over-emphasize faith in God so as to ignore the corporate beliefs of the Church. His position is clearly stated in these words:

> … all the elect are so united in Christ (cf. Eph 1:22-23) that as they are dependent on one Head, they also grow together into one body, being joined and knit together (cf. Eph 4:16) as are the limbs of a body (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor 10:17; 12:1, 27). They are made truly one since they live together in one faith, hope, and love, and in the same Spirit of God.[54]

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[51] Further critique of Liu's view can be found in Lo Ping Cheung 羅秉祥, "大學還能出甚麼好的神學嗎？ (Can Good Theology Come from University?)," in 大學與基督宗教研究 *(University and Christian Studies)*, ed. Lo Ping Cheung 羅秉祥 and Kang Phee Seng 江丕盛 (Hong Kong: Centre for Sino-Christian Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2002), 385-389.

[52] Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume 2*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), book 4, chapter 1.2, 1012ff.

[53] This confessional statement "I believe in the church" is established upon the faith of the Triune God: "I believe in God the Father, … I believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, … I believe in the Holy Spirit."

[54] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume 2*, 1014.

Therefore, it is right to claim that Christian identity is dependent upon faith in Christ, but this by no means ignores a Christian's organic relationship with the fellow disciples of Christ in the Church as the Body of Christ.

Thirdly, there is a reason for Liu's seemingly unorthodox reaction against the idea of church affiliation. It has much to do with the particular political-religious situation in China. Due to threats of persecution, it was quite often the case that individual Chinese Christians refused to be identified with any definable church community or tradition. Many, thus, opted for home gathering in Christian fellowship. Of course, there is an ecclesial dimension even in this in terms of what can be aptly called the "House-Church," as appears in the Pauline writings (cf. Rom 16:5, 1 Cor 16:19). However, what we need to question is the theological validity of the idea of the solitary individual Christians who opt to live outside any ecclesial affiliation. As already mentioned, a non-ecclesial Christian existence is theologically unthinkable. Ecclesial belonging is a theological necessity, and, therefore, not something optional for the Christian life. Hence, we need to question Liu's position on why cultural Christians *must* be viewed as without any church affiliation. This non-communal understanding of Christian faith inevitably affects its very integrity.

Fourthly, and this is closely linked to the last point, it seems that what Liu wants to assert is the direct communion of the *Cultural Christians* with the Word, but without the mediation of any church or church traditions. He writes,

> Cultural Christians gradually came to faith in Christ through their own studies and experiences of Christian writings and theological publications; through their studies of the history and contemporary context of Christianity in China. They feel that they have come to Christ through direct communion with God, and direct dialogue with the Word. Therefore, they are acknowledged by Christ, and whether the church acknowledges them is not important.[55]

The problem with this assertion is even more obvious; for Liu has failed to see that the transmission and preservation of the Word, and even the production and recognition of the Christian scriptures, are the direct results of the Spirit working in and through the church.[56] Edwin Hui (許志偉) has therefore criticized a number of these cultural Christians for lacking a theology of the church: though they believe in Christ, they do not know where Christ is to be found, and do not recognize that the risen Lord is building His church through the Spirit.[57] More to the point, Hui considers that those he refers to have mistakenly confused belonging to Christ's

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[55] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 34-35. Cf. Edwin Hui argues that the unique experiences of Cultural Christians have made them questioned the objective truth; they have left the "we-ism" and started to reflect upon the "I." Therefore, to them, the theology of the cross has to do with "me" and "my faith," instead of "us" and "our faith" which is dependent upon the church (Hui, "「文化基督徒」現象的近因與神學反思 (The Recent Cause Of 'Cultural Christian' Phenomenon and Its Theological Reflection)," 36).

[56] Leung Ka Lun criticizes Liu and others that they have broke away from the traditional Church in two realms: (1) methodological – they reject the traditional theological approach; (2) conception – they ignore the background and theological traditions of individual theologians under investigation, and treat the works of these theologians without paying attention to their respective context (Leung Ka Lun 梁家麟, "又是我們欠的債嗎？ (Is It Our Debt?)," in 文化基督徒：現象與論爭 *(Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument)*, 108-109).

[57] Hui, "「文化基督徒」現象的近因與神學反思 (The Recent Cause Of 'Cultural Christian' Phenomenon and Its Theological Reflection)," 36-37.

Church with the problem of denominationalism as it has developed in history. It is extreme denominationalism that is theologically problematic, not one's ecclesiastical affiliation. Therefore, Hui strongly maintains that it is theological unimaginable in terms of Christian integrity for anyone to accept the sacred Scriptures of the Church and not to participate in its communal and sacramental life.[58]

Further questions can be raised from the cultural perspective. Liu distinguishes cultural Christians, who are without church-affiliation, thereby avoiding problems associated with denominationalism and the threat of persecution, from church-related "Christians in general." We may ask, then, what notion of culture he is employing. Is it, for instance, described in terms of "high culture" – as Kathryn Tanner explains it – a classical notion involving "a process of individual education and refinement, and by extension, to the products of such processes (works of art and literature)."[59] This is an evaluative and exclusivist concept since, from this classical point of view, not everyone is treated as "cultured" but only the privileged minority. In the opinion of Tanner and others (e.g., Bernard Lonergan[60]), this notion of classical or high culture has not only given way to the modern view of culture, but is also incompatible with

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[58] Hui, "「文化基督徒」現象的近因與神學反思 (The Recent Cause Of 'Cultural Christian' Phenomenon and Its Theological Reflection)," 37. Refer to pages 38-40 for Hui's critique of Cultural Christians' view of sacraments.

[59] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 5.

[60] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 2, 29, 301-302, etc.

the postmodern notion of culture; for everyone exists in a culture, whether it is to be designated as "primitive," "modern" or "postmodern."[61]

And so, by treating cultural Christians as individuals of a refined academic culture, we must question whether Liu has artificially separated academic theology from the lived theology of everyday as it arises out of the experience and praxis of the Christian community. For instance, in reference to his work at the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, Liu claims that "what we are on about is theoretical work on Christian theology."[62] He further insists that pure theoretical theology is neutral, and that it has nothing to do with the Church and its practical communal life.[63] Moreover, on examining the spread of Christianity to China in the 7th Century during the Tang Dynasty (as evidenced through the Nestorian stone), he argues that the existence of the Christian community in ancient China did not entail the existence of Christian theology.[64] Although Liu is surely correct in drawing a distinction between Christian living and theological reflection, are these two so completely separable? When the Gospel was first brought to China in the 7th Century, Sino-Christian theology was

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[61] This view of culture will be taken up in the next chapter.
[62] Ling Shu Fen 林淑芬, "漢語神學心靈的激盪 (Dialogue on Sino-Christian Theology)," in 文化基督徒：現象與論爭 (Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument), 82-83. See Liu's division of Sino-Christian Theology into three different aspects: (a) Chinese Religious Theology; (b) Chinese Philosophical Theology; and (c) Chinese Christian theology (Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 41).
[63] Ling, "漢語神學心靈的激盪 (Dialogue on Sino-Christian Theology)," 83. Though at times he does recognize that there is a relationship found between practice and theory (89), he does not spell it out. In terms of whether there is the possibility of "neutral" theological ground, we shall discuss this in the later chapter.
[64] Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 (The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History), 7.

being created in a seminal form, no matter how inadequate and incomplete, as far as we can work out from the surviving record on the Nestorian stone. Theology, therefore, as a form of Christian reflection, is closely associated with the establishment of Christian community and its continuing striving in a culture in any given point of time. Liu's assertion of a pure theoretical theological is questionable. It also goes against his insistence of the influence of a particular cultural context on the theology that we are constructing.

In addition, Tanner also criticizes this separation of theological theory and practice, for Christian theology is closely connected "with the meaning dimension of Christian practices, the theological aspect of all socially significant Christian action."[65] We shall examine this further in a later chapter. For the moment, the separation of "cultural Christians" from "Christians in general," made with the assumption that the latter are less "cultural," less "educated" or even less "rational" in their beliefs, does little to illuminate the situation – other than saying that Christians can and must bear individual witness to society according to their individual gifts and vocations. Confusion inevitably results from artificial disjunctions, even if distinctions can be made in specific contexts, say, between classical and current notions of culture, between theological theory and Christian life and practice, and between those

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[65] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 70. Tanner's view will be explicated in more detail in the next chapter.

possessing a diversity of gifts in serving the mission of the Church – none of which aspects figure in Liu's treatment of "Cultural Christians."

3. Type of Sino-Christian Theology

Though Liu Xiaofeng's separation of Cultural Christians from Christians in general is problematic, we can still appreciate the rationale behind his distinction. It is fundamentally related to the type of Sino-Christian theology he is proposing. Liu considers that traditional Sino-Christian theology has lost its focus, misplacing its energies into contextualizing concerns. Besides, one must take into account other limiting factors which would include the government's anti-religion policy, the Church's anti-intellectualism, and inward-looking concerns of an ecclesiastical nature. For instance, he feels that the Chinese Church has often failed to see the importance of academic theological research. In Chinese Catholic circles, studies are limited to Matteo Ricci and his efforts to accommodate the Gospel to refine Chinese culture of the day. There is little evidence of research into the scholastic theological tradition and its dialectic methods. Protestants, for their part, were more concerned to follow Luther and Calvin, in their repudiation of scholastic theology. As a result, their emphasis is limited to the religious subjectivity of spiritual experience.[66]

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[66] Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(the Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 161.

Is Liu right in his criticism and his understanding of both Chinese Catholic and Protestant theologies? The limiting factors which Liu has pointed out, along with others, have definitely affected theological and religious studies in China in the past. However, the situation now is slowly changing.[67] In the contemporary theological scene of Chinese Catholics, centres such as Catholic and Cultural Institute in Beijing, and the Centre for Catholic Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, are being set up to promote the studies of the relation of the Catholic Church to Chinese culture, and to engage various dialogue partners from different communities.[68] In regard to the Protestant Church, we have already remarked on Liu's misinterpretation of Calvin in regard to faith and ecclesial belonging. It is also true that he fails to appreciate that the Reformers did not throw out everything that belonged to the scholastic tradition. The Chinese Church, in principle, is not against academic and theological research. However, it is an unavoidable fact that, due to the regulation of the Chinese Church by the government and the closing of many seminaries and theological colleges since 1949, the church has found it difficult to establish a solid academic foundation with severely limited resources. Therefore, the weakness of academic and humanistic theological studies in the contemporary Chinese Church has

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[67] See last chapter regarding the various new opportunities and their emerging context.

[68] "中國天主教和基督教 (Chinese Catholics and Christianity)," http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/ 2003-01/21/content_699210.htm (accessed 19/07/2005); "中國天主教研究進入新階段 (A New Stage of Chinese Catholic Research)," http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2002-08/05/content_ 511425.htm (accessed 19/07/2005).

more to do with the restrictive political-cultural context than with specific church's theological traditions.

To this extent, Liu's assessment of the Chinese Church has a point. The contemporary Chinese Church has no solid academic and theoretical resources sufficient to enable it to enter into dialogue with the wider cultural context. In order for it to engage effectively with the humanistic and social thought of contemporary China, it must develop a humanistic strand, and produce more academics capable of engaging in dialogue with the wider society. This is in line with K. Tanner's view of theology engaged in a constant contest with other worldviews.[69] Ultimately, that may well be the emphasis of Liu's endorsement of the role of Cultural Christians in relation to an academic-humanistic type of theology. In this regard, Liu's Cultural Christians – understood now as ecclesiastically connected with broader Christians community – will play an indispensable part in future Sino-Christianity. Liu does, in fact, make this point:

> Within the contemporary Sino-academic context, Sino-Christian theology still occupies a difficult location. … If Sino-Christian theology does not develop its humanistic strand within the university setting, the dialogical strength of Christian theology in Sino-academic circles will not be able to grow. … If an elite academic community of Chinese Christians cannot be established, it will not be able to carry out the Christian cultural role of developing Christian humanism within the contemporary cultural-conceptual context. It is in regard

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[69] Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 47-48, 54-60.

to this historical context that we see the cultural-social responsibility of Cultural Christian phenomenon in mainland China.[70]

In Liu's proposal, Cultural Christians thus serve as an avenue for individual Christians and Church as a whole to engage effectively with the country's social and humanistic thinking, and so be a voice in the wider society.

However, despite his emphasis on the academic location of the cultural Christian, it should be noted that what Liu is proposing is not some type of "religious studies" based on modern humanistic-social sciences. In fact, he argues strongly that Religious Studies are not theology at all. In his words,

> Christian studies [i.e., religious studies] are not equivalent to Christian theology, though in reality they are inseparable from the God of Jesus Christ. Traditional Christian theology is built upon an individual confessional relationship with the God of Jesus Christ and the tradition of the Church, but those who engage in Christian academic studies may not necessarily be required to have such a relationship, nor to follow particular church traditions. Scholars in Christian studies do not necessarily need to be Christians; whatever belief they have, or their actual church-traditions, have nothing to do with the depth of their scholarship. In reality, many Christian academic studies are set out as religious studies with modern humanistic-social science features. Religious studies are different from theology.[71]

Liu clearly distinguishes Religious Studies (which he calls "Christian academic studies") from Christian theology. His reason for treating religious studies as distinct

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[70] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 33, 35-36.

[71] Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 58.

from theology is due to the fact that he never loses sight of theology as a critical reflection on the Word of God.[72] Here, Liu seem to echo Barth in these words: "The God that Christian theology utters is the God of Jesus Christ, and not any other God, or Supreme Being."[73]

Further, Liu distinguishes an *ideal type* of Christian theology, as directly based on the Christ event – from an *historical type* of local theology, as it is found in different cultures, be they Greek, Latin, English, Russian or Chinese.[74] As a historical type, Sino-Christian theology considers how it may directly receive, reflect on and express the Christ event that is the basis of an ideal Christian theology, rather than aiming to transform or indigenize Western theological constructs. From the perspective of the transcendent Word of God revealed in the Christ Event, it explains why Liu rejects any indigenous approach intent on contextualizing the Christian Gospel on the Chinese soil.

However, here we should bear in mind that his so-called "ideal Christian theology" is still contained within the historical theologies which are transmitted through historical forms. The two may be clearly distinguished conceptually, but historically speaking,

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[72] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 41.
[73] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 39.
[74] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 41-48.

such a distinction is not easily sustainable. In other words, the self-revelation of God

is always mediated. It is the "mediated immediacy" which Colin Gunton uses as a

category to describe Barth's doctrine of revelation.[75] In this light, Liu proposes an

emerging Sino-Christian theology should develop what he terms an "ontic-

Christological theology," as he writes,

> This essay would claim that an ontic-Christological theological construction
> should be the basic orientation in constructing a Sino-Christian theology. Its
> construction is not a matter of blending the Christ event with the ontology or
> philosophy of existing local thought (whether this is Jewish, ancient Greek,
> Roman, or Confucian-Taoist-Buddhist), but the encounter with the primary
> existential experience [of the Word of God] within an ethnic-localized language
> context.[76]

Clearly, the two matrices – receptivity to the Word of God in Christ, and the historic-

cultural context – for developing a theology within a culture, are held by Liu in

tension.[77] As Liu intends to locate Sino-Christian theology within its existential,

cultural-political context, it would seem that the theology he has in mind is quite close

to some type of what is now called "Public Theology." Moreover, in terms of

distinctions current in contemporary discussion in North America of the role of faith-

based theology in the setting of the public university, Liu's notion of Sino-Christian

theology is equivalent to what is referred to as "academic theology" (which he calls

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[75] Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation: The 1993 Warfield Lectures* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 4, f.n. 6.
[76] Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 47.
[77] Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 5.

"humanistic theology"[78]). His program is akin to that of Ronald Thiemann who proposes a public theology as an attempt "to understand the relation between Christian convictions and the broader social and cultural context within which the Christian community lives."[79] The focal point is the cultural context.[80] However, Liu does not so emphasize the cultural matrix as to downplay the revelation of the Christian message. Undoubtedly, Liu remains faithful to the transcendent character of divine revelation. He claims that the contemporary pluralistic context demands that this uniqueness be kept in mind. Only in the light of the living Word of God can the theologian begin to enter cultural dialogue or contestation.[81] This is most evident in Liu's argument for a Trinitarian expression of the uniqueness of Christianity in the context of contemporary pluralistic inter-religious dialogues:

> The pluralistic religious context demands that every faith maintains its own uniqueness, and upon this foundation to engage in dialogue or debate. By appealing to the pluralistic context and to the demand that Christian faith suspend its Trinitarian language is unreasonable. In the context of pluralistic religious discussion, the sticking point of Christian faith continues to be: Why does God become human, and why is Christ God?[82]

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[78] Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 59.

[79] Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 21.

[80] See the last chapter regarding the significance of considering the context for theological construction.

[81] Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 103.

[82] Ibid.

Nevertheless, there is a certain inconsistency in Liu's efforts to achieve a balance between the event of revelation and the historical context. For instance, his treatment of Luther's *sola fides* tends to reduce it to the terms of socio-political phenomenon rather than as a fundamental aspect of Christian existence. He makes an extreme claim in the following words – somewhat at variance with his notion of "cultural Christians" as treated above:

> Luther's *sola fides* is the originator of modern personal liberalism. In the modern world, Christianity has abandoned the concern for human community living, either to be trapped within alienated individualism, or with human souls being captured by the secular political community (i.e. modern nation). No matter what type of situation, it has to do with Luther's *sola fides*. Clearly, this is not only a question of faith, but one of socio-political significance, for it not only involves a Christian denomination (i.e., Lutheran), but raises the question of modernization itself.[83]

In such words, Liu tends to reduce a basic Christian position to a social phenomenon. While Christian doctrine undoubtedly has its social aspect, limiting it to a social phenomenon is reductionist. Admittedly, there may have been a shift in Liu's thinking about the nature of Christian theology, especially in the period after his doctorate studies in Europe. As a result of prolonged exposure to European theology, and especially to the theologies of Barth and Moltmann, a subtle shift is observable in his approach. He seems to have experienced some sort of crisis in this regard. His forthcoming writings may give more indication of his development in this area.

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[83] Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 194, also 196.

Conclusion

Though Liu Xiaofeng's proposal regarding "Cultural Christians" is problematic, his emphasis on the existential experience and socio-cultural context of Sino-Christian theology cannot be ignored.[84] And to that degree, he has made a valuable contribution to the study of Sino-Christian theology and its context. As he outlines the future path of Sino-Christian theology, what is of urgent importance for him is the critical location of such theology in the wider context of Sino thought-systems.[85] As a result, questions regarding the nature and task of Sino-Christian theology, and the manner in which it addresses competing Sino thought-systems emerge as important issues. According to Liu, "if the scholars of Sino-Christian theology do not make a thorough evaluation of themselves [regarding the deeper meaning of Christian theology for its located culture], even though there is already an open and pluralistic political-cultural context, Sino-Christian theology still would not be able to enter into this new thought-system."[86] Liu thus prompts us to delve deeper and to reflect more critically on the nature of Christian theology within the Chinese culture. He is advocating a new effort on the part of contemporary Chinese theologians in their examination of the role and mission of Sino-Christian theology in its contemporary context. This thesis can thus

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[84] Indeed, Liu's interest is to examine the concrete theological issues through existential experience and cultural-political context instead of constructing a systematic theology (Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 4-5).
[85] Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 7-16.
[86] Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 47.

be seen as a dialogical contribution to what is emerging as Sino-Christian theology develops.

One issue in our discussion of Liu's "Cultural Christians" and in his promotion of an academic Sino-Christian theology still remains to be faced. It deals with the very nature of theological studies. The issue is far from simple. There are at least six interrelated questions needing an answer:

- Can one study Christianity without having any Christian conviction or faith?

- Can the Christian Church and its message be reduced to a socio-cultural-historical phenomenon?

- Does Christian theology speak a different language compared to other academic disciplines (e.g., philosophy)?

- Who has the right to interpret and speak for Christian faith?

- In what way are academic theologians answerable and responsible to the church?[87]

- What is the relationship between church-based and academic theologies?

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[87] In his reply to the idea of "Chinese Apollos," Lo Ping Cheung employs David Tracy's view of theological task as presented in *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, (New York: Crossroad, 1981). According to Tracy, "What is theology" and "Who are theologians" are not simple questions. They are dependent on the social status and orientation of the questioners. Theologians maybe found in theological colleges or seminaries, divinity school within secular universities, religion departments within church-founded universities or secular universities. They can do theology on behalf of the Church, academic or even wider social community. Therefore, Christian theology can have many different facets and is pluralistic in its outlook (Lo Ping Cheung 羅秉祥, "敬答批評者 (A Response to Critics)," in 文化基督徒：現象與論爭 *(Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument)*, 207-210).

These are the important issues affecting the emerging Sino-Christian theology which we shall address in the chapters to come.

Since Liu has raised the importance of considering cultural context in theological construction, Kathryn Tanner's cultural approach to theology will prove useful in furthering the discussion. We shall move to discuss Tanner's proposal and its application to Sino-Christian theology in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kathryn Tanner's Theory of Culture and its Application to Theology and the Emerging Sino-Christian Theology

Ever since the beginning of the Christian church, followers of Jesus have attempted to relate the Christian gospel to the cultures in which they lived. How to be a Christian in a given cultural context was the main issue discussed at the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. And how to be a more effective witness, sensitive to the culture and needs of the people but without compromising the Gospel, was a question never far from Paul in his missionary outreach to the Gentiles: being "all things to all men," though simple in principle, was not without its conflicts (Acts 10-11; Gal 2) and complexity in practice (as in 1 Cor 9:19-23). Throughout church history, there have been countless attempts to spell out the relationship between the Christian church, along with its message, and the wider world. The "two cities" of Augustine[1], the "two

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[1] Saint Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1958).

kingdoms" of Martin Luther[2], and H. Richard Niebuhr's more recent treatment of "Christ and culture"[3] are all examples of this.

Knowingly or unknowingly, culture affects the manner in which a Christian should speak, act, and live in that particular context.[4] Moreover, culture not only affects the behavioral aspect of Christian life; it affects how one understands and carries on the theological task. For instance, Bernard Lonergan distinguishes between two different understandings of culture. When the classicist notion of culture prevails, it is supposed that there is a normative and permanent culture as the standard by which all other cultures are measured. Those outside it are simply deemed "uncultured" and "barbarians," be they, say, the young, other racial groups, or simply strangers. When a classicist notion of culture is in place, theology is then envisaged as a permanent achievement and one discusses its nature.[5] On the other hand, there is the more recent anthropological recognition of the empirical notion of culture. This recognizes a set of meanings and values that informs a given way of life; and, is, of its nature, susceptible to slow or rapid change. When theology acknowledges this empirical notion of culture,

[2] Martin Luther, *Luther's Sermons, Volume 5*, ed. John N. Lenker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 366-371. See also W. E. J. Cargill Thompson, *Luther's Political Thought* (New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1984), 148-149.
[3] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1951).
[4] In recent times, there are many scholars who have argued for the influence of culture on theology including: Song Choan Seng, *Doing Theology Today* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1976); Stephan B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992); Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002); Peter C. Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (New York: Orbis Books, 2003).
[5] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), xi.

it is then conceived as an ongoing process, and one discusses its method in mediating

religious meaning and values within a given cultural matrix.[6] It is this aspect of

cultural influence on theology that I shall explore in this chapter by examining

Kathryn Tanner's approach to theology, especially with respect to her work *Theories*

of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology.[7] Though there are other recent works that

examine the dynamic inter-relationship between culture and theology (such as that of

Delwin Brown, Sheila Davaney, Dwight Hopkins, Timothy Gorringe, and Graham

Ward[8]), Tanner represents a more systematic approach compared to others. Moreover,

many issues and concerns that she deals with are those that Sino-Christian theology

can closely relate to. I believe her approach will contribute much to our discussion

regarding the nature and task of a Sino-Christian theology in the emerging context.

Kathryn Tanner points out that the cultural aspect of theological studies has often

been overlooked, if not ignored.[9] She asserts that the notion of culture has an

enormous impact on theology in terms of opening up fruitful new avenues for

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

[8] Delwin Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction* (New York: Suny Press, 1994); Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner, eds., *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Sheila Greeve Davaney, *Pragmatic Historicism: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Suny Press, 2000); Dwight N. Hopkins and Sheila G. Davaney, eds., *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Timothy J. Gorringe, *Furthering Humanity: A Theology of Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004); Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

[9] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, x.

theological exploration and reflection.[10] Her particular concern, therefore, is the

application of the theory of culture to theological investigation, especially given the

interdisciplinary emphases of the contemporary academic scene.[11] This chapter will

be presented under two headings:

1. Tanner's theories of culture;

2. The implications of Tanner's Cultural Approach to Theology.

1. Tanner's Theories of Culture

Tanner begins with a survey of the notions of culture that evolved over time in history.

These historical notions of culture include that of the older view (naturalistic), the

newer view (high culture), and the modern view (anthropological).[12] In the older view,

different cultures are seen as "a God-given order of being like that found in nature."[13]

Differences among people are attributed to environment, climate, and respective

lifestyles. But this naturalistic view of culture later gave way to a notion of high

culture, characterized by particularly chosen values, and resulted inevitably in

patterns of exclusion. A high culture is thus a quantitative term in that "one can be

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[10] Three such areas are being considered in Tanner's work: the nature and tasks of theology, Christian identity and diversified theological judgments.

[11] It is pointed out that even though this cultural approach to theology may seem to be the last attempt of theology's struggle to be relevant in today's context, in reality it reflects more of a paradigm shift within the academy sense and the wider culture from modernism to postmodernism. See Linell E. Cady, "Loosening the Category That Binds: Modern 'Religion' And the Promise of Cultural Studies," in *Converging on Culture*, 17-18.

[12] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, Chapter 1: The History of "Culture," 3-24.

[13] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 3.

more or less cultured," so that the more cultured are judged to be superior to others who are less cultured.[14] This exclusivist view of culture eventually yielded to the more inclusivist notion, instanced in the modern anthropological notion of culture. In this modern view, differences among peoples and respective societies are attributed to the unique character of each culture, instead of a previously conceived biological capacity or personal aspiration.[15] Here, the aim is "to promote a non-evaluative alternative to ethnocentrism," so that no one culture is treated to be better or higher than others.[16] In other words, one's own culture is not, of itself, the standard by which others are evaluated. Rather, each culture must be evaluated by its own merits. Nevertheless, though different cultures highlight differences among people and communities, there remains the idea of culture as a higher human universal that binds these different systems together within the framework of a presumed common humanity. Still, cultures are seen in terms of sharply bounded and self-contained units.

According to Tanner, this modern anthropological notion of culture has been challenged in the recent years due to the postmodern shift in understanding culture. In her own words:

> It seems less and less plausible to presume that cultures are self-contained and clearly bounded units, internally consistent and unified wholes of beliefs and

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[14] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 5.

[15] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 3ff. She discusses how transitions have occurred to the modern notion of culture by examining different trajectories in France, Germany and Britain (18-23); she then spells out the basic elements of this modern notion of culture (25-29).

[16] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 36.

values simply transmitted to every member of their respective groups as principles of social order. A postmodern stress on interactive process and negotiation, indeterminacy, fragmentation, conflict, and porosity replaces those aspects of the modern, post-1920s understanding of culture.[17]

This indicates a transitional phase in the understanding of culture in more recent times. The modern notion depicts culture as static and homogeneous, while the postmodern notion depicts culture as more dynamic and interactive.[18] As a result, the view of a fixed cultural entity in a closed history is challenged by the idea of an interactive and relational reality within a global history. It suggests a transition from conceiving culture as an internally consistent whole to a more contradictory and internally fissured whole; from the primacy of cultural stability to a situation of cultural transformation.[19]

However, though the modern anthropological understanding of culture is being challenged, Tanner does not completely discard it. Instead, she still sees some continuity in the transition, since most aspects of the modern notion are retained, even if they have been "decentered or reinscribed within a more primary attention to historical processes."[20] The focus has shifted, therefore, to the interactive nature of culture, and the phenomenon of constant self-critiquing due to internal diversity.[21] It

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[17] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 38.
[18] See also Maurice Wiles, "Book Review on Theories of Culture," *Journal of Theological Studies* 50 (1999): 830.
[19] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 40-56.
[20] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 56.
[21] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 56-58.

is this decisive postmodern shift in understanding the anthropological notion of culture that Tanner feels deserving of further exploration. She believes it would establish fruitful new avenues for the contemporary theological enterprise. Accordingly, she poses the simple question: "How might some fundamental theological topics appear differently, what new directions for their investigation might arise, were one to experiment in theology with a postmodern view of culture?"[22]

2. Implications of Tanner's Cultural Approach to Theology

The above-mentioned transitional understanding of culture, from modern to postmodern, lies at the foundation of Tanner's critique and reconstruction of contemporary theologies. For the rest of this chapter, we shall discuss how Tanner makes use of this changing notion of culture. As our discussion unfolds, we shall pay special attention to Tanner's understanding of the nature and task of theology in a given cultural context, in terms that can be applied to our discussion of the emerging Sino-Christian theology.

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[22] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 61.

(a) Theology as a Part of Culture: The Location of Theology

As Tanner applies the postmodern theory of culture to theology, she suggests that: "the most basic contribution that an anthropological understanding of culture – postmodern or not – makes to theology is to suggest that theology be viewed as a part of culture, as a form of cultural activity."[23] In other words, theology is a human activity that can be seen either as occurring within a specific culture (presumably a Christian one), or within the general framework of culture (some sort of universal culture).[24] However, Tanner prefers the specific location of culture to the more general possibility. This is because, in the notion of a general culture as proposed, for example, by Gordon Kaufman, theology is connected to certain general characteristics of culture understood as human universals.[25] The language of correlation is then employed. On this method of correlation, Tanner remarks,

> [I]nterpretations of symbols and categories specific to Christianity are existentially meaningful and have a claim on truth only to the extent they disclose and are adequate to common human experience, that is, basic structures of human thought and action fundamental to human life at all times and places. One could say then that, despite the interest in Christian specificity, the whole raison d'être of a method of correlation hinges on assumptions about culture as a summary of human universals.[26]

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[23] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 63, my italics.

[24] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 64ff.

[25] See Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), see pp.105-7, 115-119, 141-3, etc. Song Choan Seng's theological approach to culture is very close to Kaufman, see *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

[26] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 66.

Such a view assumes commonality, universality and predictable forms inherent in all cultures as they correlate with the general human culture. In other words, cultural elements become meaningful and significant only in the light of the higher universal culture. However, in light of the postmodern approach to culture, Tanner carefully points out that such a view overlooks the anthropologists' primary interest in the differences and distinctive qualities of cultures. Moreover, the primary framework for interpreting any cultural content is its own internal context rather than some external frame of reference – whether universal or not.[27] Thus, Kaufman has failed to see that – contrary to his idea of culture as a human universal – the anthropological generalization of cultures is constructed only out of a comparison made among particulars instances of cultural living. Tanner therefore considers that "an anthropological approach to theology will not, then, naturally encourage the formulation of human universals into which the practice of theology can be fit."[28] Rather, what must concern theologians is the particular context, instead of some universal category.

Given her objection to the notion of universal culture, Tanner prefers to treat theology as a "culture-specific" activity. She elaborates the delicate relationship between

[27] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 66-67.
[28] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 67.

theology and culture in the following words:

> To say that Christian theology is a part of culture is to say that theology itself is
> a cultural production; theology is something shaped by concrete social practices,
> and those social practices must be at least, and in their most important respects
> for these purposes, Christian ones.[29]

Theology is thus presented as closely related to its cultural context. It is always
particular and local.[30] Consequently, potentially different theologies can develop
along different trajectories in relation to their respective cultural context. A view of
theology limited to a supposed "high culture" or "universal culture" is to be rejected.
Indeed, Tanner is seriously doubtful of the existence of any universal culture, and in
terms, an acultural theology.

At first reading, Tanner's position seems to call into question the universality of
Christian beliefs and practices since they are so related to particular conditions. She is
quick to respond to this alleged problem.[31] She argues that, though theology operates
within a Christian context, this does not imply that it is limited to its own specific
context. She goes on to explain:

> Because theology operates within a Christian context is no reason to think
> theologians are discussing matters that only concern Christians. Theologians
> can proclaim truths with profound ramifications for the whole of human
> existence; that they do so from within a Christian cultural context simply means

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[29] Ibid. However, Tanner does point out that it is not an easy task to define a Christian communal
culture. See discussion later in this chapter.

[30] See Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*.

[31] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 67-69.

that the claims they make are shaped by that context and are put forward from a Christian point of view. Indeed, as an anthropologist would insist, assertions always show the influence of some cultural context or other, following a procedure like that is the only way that universal claims are ever made.[32]

In other words, although Tanner is intent on emphasizing the particularity and localization of Christian theology, she does not compromise its universal significance. Rather than correlating the local elements of Christian theology with a supposed general framework, she maintains the validity of each specific experience in that it can be shared with people outside the particular situation. In the later chapters of *Theories of Culture*, she argues that Christians basically share the same social relations, languages and experiences with the wider cultural world.[33] For instance, Christians struggle with personal and corporate sins as their neighbours do.[34] In other words, Christians can never be artificially separated from their wider cultural context so as to form their own independent community. In the end, what they experience through the grace of God and salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ – no matter how particular it is – can be related to those who are outside. In reality, the point of Tanner's disagreement with Kaufman and others is not on the universal significance of Christian theology, but rather on making too neat a correlation between universal culture and specific culture. To Tanner, what really underlies this simple view of correlation is the outmoded, self-contained and static view of culture that has affected

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[32] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 69.
[33] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 113-114, 115-116.
[34] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 100.

Christian theology. In contrast, culture is more diverse, fragmented, and indeterminate, when the postmodern context is acknowledged. It is the local specific context that consistently affects theology-in-making, rather than any external, let alone universal, factor.[35]

Tanner is, therefore, strongly opposed to theologies uncritically assimilating the modern notion of culture. Her work redirects our thinking on the relation of theology to culture, especially when theology is appreciated as part of cultural activity. Christian theology is to be located within a specific cultural context, rather than within a general cultural framework. This serves to highlight the significance of local specific context. It therefore, on one hand, precludes abstract generalization, and, on the other hand, it excludes a mere importation of foreign elements into a specific cultural context, as has often occurred in some traditional approaches to Sino-Christian theology.

The implication of this for Sino-Christian theology is that its particular cultural context can be properly appreciated. Sino-Christian theology must be constructed in relation to its cultural context, but without any framework imposed from outside, for

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[35] Regarding the discussion of nonfoundational nature of theology, see Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); John E. Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

example, that of Western theology. Thus, Liu Xiaofeng is right to suggest that, in reality, Sino-Christian theology and any other historical theologies (such as Greek, Latin or English) are merely different attempts to understand the Word of God with respect to a specific cultural context.[36] A right balance must be maintained. On one hand, any self-centered nationalistic approach to theology that would reject all other linguistic and cultural experiences is beyond consideration. On the other hand, any attempt to force an exotic theological framework onto a particular cultural-linguistic system cannot be productive.[37] Here, the positions of Liu and Tanner converge.[38] Christian theology is a part of culture. It is local and culture-specific; and this contextuality of Sino-Christian theology must be acknowledged.

(b) Academic Theology and Everyday Theology: The Nature and Task of Theology

If theology, as argued by Tanner, is a cultural-specific activity, former efforts to elevate – and thereby, limit – theology to a highly specialized intellectual activity

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[36] Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 道風 (Tao-Feng) 2 (1995): 42.

[37] To Liu, there are two local resources that should be utilized by Sino-Christian theology. They are the contemporary Sino cultural thought patterns and their descriptive ideologies (ontological aspect), and the contemporary life experiences and their language (ontic aspect) (Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教 神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 45-47).

[38] However, concern must be raised against Liu's proposal of "Cultural Christian" which seems to be established upon the notion of a "high culture." Tanner's view, for example, as expressed in the next point in terms of the relationship between everyday theology and academic theology can also be used to argue against Liu's proposal of "Cultural Christian."

unconnected to the everyday life of the Christian community is to be questioned.[39]

For Tanner, "putting theology into the cultural context of a Christian way of life challenges this view of theology; it makes theology much more an integral part of daily life."[40] Her presupposition is that Christian theology is "the meaning dimension of Christian practices, the theological aspect of all socially significant Christian action."[41] None the less, specialized academic theology can occur within the same continuum of theological activity in everyday life, since the former arises in an "organic" way out of the latter. Therefore, we should not compartmentalize theoretical reflection in relation to its material object, nor insist on distinctions between second- and first-order theologies so that they are located in two separate fields.

Christian theology should not, therefore, be so compartmentalized, with theory (academic theology) kept separate from practice (everyday theology). How, then, should this inter-relationship of theological theory and practice be construed? [42]

Postliberal theologians would argue that second-order theology, working to establish

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[39] Refer to argument against "Cultural Christians" in separating academic theology and everyday theology in the last chapter.

[40] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 69.

[41] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 70.

[42] Hwa Yung has argued that Western theology, under the influence of the Enlightenment, was built on an idealistic conception of truth which produces an epistemological split between truth and practice. Such a theology emerging out of academic and speculative tradition is unengaged, and thus lacks the power of human and social transformation, and fails to be pastorally and missiologically relevant. See Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 1997), 8ff., David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 489-490.

a coherent system of doctrinal beliefs and values, is in effect a description of the internal logic of Christian social practice – theology of a first order.[43] Tanner explains,

> The language of reflection and of first order/second order suggests that the academic theologian simply follows the dictates of the object studied as he or she goes about clarifying and ordering beliefs and values that circulate in Christian practice. It implies that those beliefs and values already exist as some consistent whole on the level of practice and that the academic theologian is doing nothing more than laying out the elements of that whole in the proper order they already have with one another.[44]

In this postliberal view, academic theology explicates the lived theology of everyday Christian practice. The academic theologian simply fully unpacks what are already contained, as it were, in the everyday lives of Christians.

Tanner objects to this "over-simplified" view of the relationship between academic activity and everyday experience. From the perspective of a postmodern theory of culture, she points out that the cultural dimension of a whole way of life is not as coherent and internally consistent as postliberal theologians would want it to be.[45] Instead of presenting a coherent theological description of Christian social practices, Tanner considers that every theologian is putting forward merely his or her own account of how Christian practices should be understood and organized. If this is the case, each such account is always competing with others. The reason for this

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[43] Tanner asserts that this is what postliberal theologians (e.g., R. Thiemann and H. Frei) have claimed (*Theories of Culture*, 72-74).
[44] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 73.
[45] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 73-74.

unevenness is found in the fact that academic theology is relative to its own cultural

context, and is influenced by a variety of situation-specific factors.[46] Moreover, the

cultural dimension of Christian practice is often undefined; and thus it leaves room for

different interpretations.[47] Hence, Tanner objects to the claim of Schleiermacher and

postliberal theologians that there is a body of rules or patterned order to be discovered

which reflects everyday Christian practice.[48] In reality, the postliberal theology has

projected "onto the object studied what its own procedures of investigation requires –

a coherent whole."[49] Continuing her critique, Tanner claims rather that there is no

internal logic of Christian social practice so evident as to dictate or validate

theological reflection in the way postliberal theology supposes. There is, in short, no

patterned order of either religious experience or cultural-linguistic tradition ready to

be explicated and unpacked. Nonetheless, Tanner is careful not to rule out the

coherent meaningfulness of Christian beliefs or values. Otherwise, some form of

relativism would result. Her basic principle is that "the determination of rightness is a

matter of fit."[50] In other words, a meaningful and "right" Christian belief or value

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[46] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 74-75.

[47] This shows that though theology is an attempt to talk about God and His relationship with His created world, mystery remains. Therefore, no theological talk can claim to be so exhaustive and comprehensive that nothing more can be said.

[48] Though postliberals, such as George Lindbeck, have disavowed the modern liberal, Schleiermachian view that objective, universally valid knowledge is possible, he nonetheless also makes the same point in asserting the normative function of a specific cultural-linguistic tradition. See explication and critique of Lindbeck's view in Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Mapping Theologies: An Historicist Guide to Contemporary Theology," in *Changing Conversations*, 28-32.

[49] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 76.

[50] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 77.

must be able to show that it fits harmoniously with others, and with the rest of

Christian practice.

Nonetheless, Tanner is similar to postliberal theologians in conceiving of academic

theology as an attempt to describe Christian social practices. On this point, she has

been criticized for inconsistency. Previously, she had disagreed with the claim of

postliberal theologians that second order theology describes the internal logic of first-

order theology. But now she seems to hold this view. Philip Kenneson thus criticizes

Tanner for working too hard to distinguish herself from postliberal theology with

which she was once aligned, so that, at certain points, she needlessly caricatures the

positions she is opposing.[51] However, Kenneson may have misread Tanner on these

points. Even though Tanner agrees that there is a close affinity between academic

theology and everyday theology, by no means does she see an *a priori* set of patterned

rules or internal logic that reflects a coherent system with which everything can be

neatly fitted. Rather, for her, a number of theological systems may exist alongside

each other in competition as to which one fits best with the lived reality of Christian

practice. Therefore, various theological systems are, at best, different attempts at

describing Christian social practice. They intend to present a fuller and coherent

description of Christian life. However, by no means are they fixed. They are

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[51] See Philip D. Kenneson, "Book Review on Theories of Culture," *Anglican Theological Review* 81 (1999): 174-175.

susceptible to change in relation to a constantly changing specific cultural context. Therefore, theological activity is more dynamic, varied and dialectical rather than developing along a pre-determined and smooth course.

Tanner's application of the postmodern theory of culture to contemporary theology, with its emphasis on the primacy of process and change, shows how the character of Christian theology may vary with respect to the cultural context. This implies that theological activities are more dynamic, flexible and indeterminate than previously assumed. The direct implication of this is that it precludes any triumphalistic view of the church and of a tradition that rejects any need to engage with cultural context. In other words, it rejects any "high culture" view of specialized theology. Moreover, we are to constantly revise and renew our theological interpretations in relation to future application and use. On the definitive character of Christian belief and practice, Tanner writes:

> The meaning of a Christian belief may have a fairly definite sense in an established context of uses to which it is put, but that meaning presents no absolute standard that predetermines future uses. No given context can control the meaning of a particular belief or value; that belief or value can always be inserted in some other context, the given context itself being perhaps revised or rearranged. The context of usages that establishes meaning is itself ultimately unanchored, in other words. The regular patterns of use that give a belief or value meaning are not themselves ruled by anything. Usage may determine meaning but the patterns of such usages are not fixed or inelastic.[52]

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[52] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 78, my italics.

In other words, future applications and usages are not pre-determined by a present context. Theology is firmly embedded within a specific culture, and its meaning is determined within and not outside its situation. It is thus contrary to predictability and predetermination of any kind. There are no simple rules of engagement. Consequently, theologians need to be cautious in their application of Christian beliefs and practices to a new cultural context. Even within the same cultural context, they should constantly watch out for any changes in context and meaning. Hence, Tanner's overall analysis of Christian theology in relation to culture is at once robust and dynamic.

Given her dynamic, interactive view of the relation between theology and its cultural context, and between academic theology and everyday theology, Tanner envisages the nature of a systematic theologian's task as follows:

> Abiding by the value of systematicity is, then, more opportunistic than principled. Processes of system construction, moreover, are more disassembling and eclectically disruptive than they are strictly cumulative. Instead of building seamlessly on previous theologies in a regular manner, new systematic constructions often proceed by trying to take them apart, by sensing their vulnerabilities at a particular time, and adding, deleting, or emphasizing elements piecemeal so as to put a new spin on the whole.[53]

This portrayal of a systematic theologian's task resonates with the postmodern stress on historical process and change. A systematic theologian's task is thus unpredictable

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[53] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 83.

and indeterminative, depending on the cultural context and its variables. A systematic

theologian must be flexible and spontaneous, with an eye on the goal, but all the while

in close relation to the context. A systematic theologian is thus engaged with culture

from the very beginning.[54] He or she begins with the particulars in order to attempt to

derive a "coherent system." It is not the case that academic theology is concerned, in

the end, only with particulars, as though trying to force something onto Christian

practice. Rather, theology begins with the particular: "Where one starts in these

processes is literally a matter of where one is concretely – socially, politically,

practically."[55] Therefore, at the end, both specialized theology and everyday theology

employ the same logic. In Tanner's words:

> Academic theology has to be concerned about which theological manoeuvres
> will work best to enlist the support or counteract the influence of the most
> significant popular theologies at a particular place and time. Once again, then,
> we see academic theologies internalizing the operations characteristic of
> everyday theological production. The two are not so different after all.[56]

Clearly, critical academic theology, no matter how specialized it is, remains a social

activity. For Tanner, "academic theology (like other culture industries) is a material

social practice specializes in meaning production."[57] Fundamentally, both theological

reflection and practice are activities carried out in relation to their cultural situation.[58]

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[54] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 85.
[55] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 88.
[56] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 86.
[57] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 72.
[58] In Bernard Lonergan's scheme of functional specialties, as each is closely related to the others, the division of theory and practice becomes unnecessary. David Tracy thus claims: "And if theologians can begin to collaborate in that functional way, then the whole series of unnecessary impasses

Tanner's approach can be of great assistance for Sino-Christians in clarifying the

relationship between church-based theology and academy-based humanistic theology

in the contemporary Sino-Christian scene. A division between church and the

academy is evident among some Sino-Christian scholars.[59] According to Tanner's

view of theology, such dualistic separation is not only theologically problematic; it is

also unnecessary. Later, in chapter five, we shall revisit this issue when we discuss the

place of theology within public universities.

(c) Christian Identity: The Nature of Theological Context

After critiquing contemporary Christian theology in the light of a postmodern theory

of culture, Tanner moves on to discuss the nature of the Christian context in which

theology takes place.[60] She raises first of all the question of Christian identity in

relation to the wider culture, and asks, "In what sense can one talk … about

Christianity as a particular culture? In what sense is there a specifically Christian way

of life?"[61]

(dogmatic vs. biblical theology; 'relevance' vs. theory; 'dialogue' vs. foundations) which have tended to dominate much of the theological horizon since the entry of historical consciousness into theology may finally become past history" (David Tracy, *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 262).

[59] This dualistic division is clearly seen in Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)." A similar issue found in North American context is the discussion of the relation between theological studies and religious studies. Refer to Linell E. Cady and Delwin Brown, eds., *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Hopkins and Davaney, eds., *Changing Conversations*. This issue will be discussed in the next chapter.

[60] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 93-155.

[61] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 93.

For Tanner, there are basically three ways of defining Christian identity: (i) through social terms; (ii) with reference to cultural boundaries; or (iii) by looking at intrinsic continuities in Christian belief and action. However, she considers only the last option; or, to be precise, a variant of it, as pointing in the right direction. The other options often wrongly assume Christian society and its culture to be self-sustaining and independent, as a self-contained and unified whole which can be marked off sharply from what is outside its realm.[62] Because the other approaches reflect a narrowly modern understanding of culture, she rejects them as inadequate to the understanding of Christian identity. Let us look more closely at what is involved in defining Christian identity in the three approaches Tanner has identified.

The first way of defining Christian identity is in social terms. An example of this is John Milbank's work portraying Christianity as an "alternative society."[63] To Tanner, this idea of alternative society assumes distinct social groups as displaying different ways of life which can be objectively demarcated. She objects strongly to this view. It is not empirically sustainable. Moreover, any simple correspondence between a way of life and a social group is problematic.[64] Christians are never completely isolated

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[62] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 96, also 97-155.

[63] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 245-252, 380-382, 398-408, etc.

[64] See Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 97-99. Tanner also points out that denying Christianity as a full-fledged society by no means forces one to define Christian identity merely in terms of a distinctive set of attitudes or motivations. This is a reply to Milbank's assertion that denying Christian of its own society is equivalent to "spiritualizing" it (Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 399).

and independent within the surrounding culture and its activities. In contrast, Tanner suggests that "Christian social practices form a voluntary association within a wider society, rather than a separate society in and of themselves."[65] Such an attitude is evidenced in Jesus describing His disciples as "not of the world" (Jn 15:19; 17:16), yet He prays to His Father not to remove them from the world, but to protect them from the evil one (Jn 17:14-15). In Jesus' view, Christians clearly do not belong to this world, but belong to God. Yet they are not removed from the world; they continue to live in it. Moreover, Christians' interests are not just limited to themselves, their church and their own culture.[66] Their concerns extend to the wider world in which they live, especially in the global context of today. Therefore, to define Christian identity in terms of being a separate society must be found wanting.

The second way of defining Christian identity is with reference to cultural boundaries. This, too, assumes that the Christian way of life can be starkly distinguished from the outside world. Though this culture-bounded approach allows that a Christian way of life could be influenced by outside culture, postliberal theology would hold that Christian identity essentially has nothing to do with any external factors. Any borrowed materials are viewed as either taking on new meaning in a Christian context

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[65] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 103.
[66] See Cornelius Jr. Plantinga, *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 13-16. Also note the embracing prophetic vision that God's servants would be able to minister justice in the whole earth, so that the earth would be filled with the knowledge of the Lord (Is 2:4, 11:6, 9, 32:15, 65:19-22, Joel 3:18).

(e.g., as with Schleiermacher and his liberal protestant followers), or are used in the construction of Christian doctrines, according to norms internal to the faith-community, but not external to it – as is the case with correlationist theologians.[67] In the postliberal mentality, what is on the other side of the boundary is simply irrelevant to the Christian context.[68] Therefore, becoming a Christian involves some form of resocialization, and, figuratively speaking, "learning a new language," even though there are continuities of vocabulary with the native language.

Tanner is quick to respond. Her objection is fundamental: "Like the understanding of cultures in modern anthropology, here a Christian way of life seems a tightly bounded entity, essentially unaffected by relations with others and thereby sustaining its distinctive character."[69] Moreover, the idea of resocialization is not only empirically improbable, it is theologically problematic.[70] Christians do not simply deny their original identities when they decide to follow the way of Jesus. For instance, Paul – and other New Testament writings consistently teach that Christian slaves should continue serving their current masters, though with a new Christian attitude (see Eph 6:5-8, Col 3:22-25, and 1 Pet 2:18-21). In other words, Christians continue to live in

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[67] See Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 4, 81; George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 82-83, 117, 129; Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 105-107; Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 74-75.

[68] For instance, Lindbeck holds that religious words can only have meaning within the context of religion (see George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 113-4).

[69] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 104.

[70] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 109.

their former worlds, carry out their usual tasks, and engage in their usual day-to-day activities – provided that they are not contrary to the Gospel[71], and that the Lord has not called them in some other direction. Therefore, instead of seeing a Christian way of life as having nothing in common with the outside world, Tanner proposes to view theology in close association with the wider cultural context, and developing within it. A Christian way of life, "is, then, essentially parasitic; it has to establish relations with other ways of life, it has to take from them, in order to be one itself."[72] There is, then, a continual sharing of social relations, languages, worldviews, and experiences between Christians and the wider world. In other words, Christians are not simply separated from the wider host culture so that they naturally employ what there is within it to make sense of their Christian faith.[73]

Notwithstanding her critique of the postliberal attitude, we might ask whether Tanner's position is really different from what she criticizes. In the end, she too admits that Christian language is essentially transformed in its meaning and metaphorical in its expression.[74] She argues that the external cultural materials need to be transformed and given new meanings in the new-found Christian context. Her

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[71] One exception would be that their previous professions were immoral (such as engaging in sexual or dishonest businesses) and thus they are to leave these sinful lifestyles for a Gospel-centered lifestyle (see, for example, Jn 5:14, 8:11).

[72] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 113, see 116.

[73] Colin E. Gunton argues that, since theology and its located culture share a common language, theology naturally is a part of culture (*Yesterday and Today: A Study of Continuities in Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 205).

[74] At this instance, Tanner also makes use of Kierkegaard's idea (*Theories of Culture*, 113).

approach, then, is remarkably similar to postliberal practice in transferring outside materials into the Christian circle of life and action, and then bestowing new meanings on them.[75] However, despite Tanner's implied agreement with postliberal theology on the transformation of external cultural materials, there is a difference in these two views of the relationships involved. The difference is particularly clear in the way Tanner employs the biblical metaphor of "a second birth" in this context. She describes it in the following terms:

> This is the meaning of Christianity as a second birth; while a second birth means in part the renunciation of prior practices, one's prior life is not simply cast aside but given back to one in a radically different form. It is, indeed, by means of such processes of transference that a world of difference between the two is established. Aside from the practices of others that Christians simply will not perform, the difference between Christian and non-Christian practices is not a matter of direct contrast by way of discrete particulars, say, by way of Christian affirmations or terms that are simply absent from non-Christian outlooks.[76]

What Tanner is saying here is that Christians continue to make full use of their prior cultural language and experiences in describing their Christian beliefs. The theological language they use is not totally strange and novel to outsiders, though meanings and the interpretative framework may be beyond them. More generally, continual connections between Christians and the outside world remain. Christians are not totally removed from the cultural situation; they are not transported to somewhere

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[75] See Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H. R. MacIntosh (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 81-85, 119-121.

[76] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 113, my italics.

else. Instead, they are constantly affected by the wider culture in terms of politics,

economy, public health, environmental threats, and so on. On the other hand, Tanner

acknowledges that the postliberals do acknowledge levels of relationship with the

broader host culture. The trouble is that they are too late in admitting such a

consideration, by expressing it merely in polemic or apologetic terms.[77] Ultimately,

theological activity and the outside world are held apart, and exist only at a distance

from each other. Hence, Tanner critiques the postliberal theological mentality.

Furthermore, consistent with the postmodern stress on change and self-criticism,

Tanner moves to assert that, if Christian theological language and its constructs draw

on outside materials,

> the process of transforming borrowed material should be as much about self-criticism as it is about criticism of other ways of life; it should be a self-directed process of transformation in keeping with an awareness of its own need for criticism. … Theological statements themselves amount to a transformative and re-evaluative commentary on the wider culture insofar as they are double voiced: theological statements mouth the claims of other cultures while giving them a new spin.[78]

In the end, "to one's surprise one finds oneself in a new [Christian] culture without

having had any conscious intention of leaving one's own."[79] In other words, one's

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[77] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 115-6. The typical examples are William Werpehowski, "Ad Hoc Apologetics," *The Journal of Religion* 66 (1986); WIlliam C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989).
[78] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 114, 116.
[79] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 116.

particular human situation, both as the medium of communication and also with regard to its content, is always to be kept in view in attempting to speak God's Word to and within the culture in which one lives. We can never suspend our past, present and future linguistic and cultural experiences. Rather, they are transformed and enriched in the new theological context. Hence, to define Christian identity largely in reference to cultural boundaries with the result that Christian social practices are only loosely connected to their wider host culture is to truncate the theological enterprise.

A third way of defining Christian identity is in terms of cultural commonalities. Here, a coherence or continuity of the character of Christian social practices integrated into a particular way of life is presumed.[80] This continuity can be located either in a shared understanding of common beliefs and values, or in tradition understood as the process by which this transmission of shared beliefs and values occurs; or, finally, rules regulating the process of transmission of shared belief and commitments.[81] Regarding the continuity in question, Tanner expresses reservations about such continuity if it is understood as the human predetermination of fixed patterns of cultural development in relation to shared conceptions, traditioning-processes, or normative rules. She warns that one should not presume "a continuity among the contents of Christian practices over time and space, or, where this sort of continuity seems to be missing,

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[80] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 120.
[81] See discussion and critiques of each of these versions in Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 124-142.

some higher order or deeper level of continuity in the processes of history that span them."[82] She thereby contests a notion of a static and passive character of cultural development. Nevertheless, Tanner does not completely rule out the possibility of cultural commonalities. But she does insist on the questions: What constitutes the commonality? And where can it be found? In response to these questions, she claims:

> What holds all these different practices [of Christians in different times and places] together as a unity is nothing internal to the practices themselves; the center that holds them all together should remain, as Barth says, empty. What God wants of us is not some part or aspect of Christian social practices themselves; it is not anything that those Christian practices contain or encompass of themselves in a way that might be passed down to others in history. God does not direct the efforts of Christian discipleship in different times and places through some feature of Christian practice that itself controls the movements of Christian history. God's own control of Christian history is not identifiable with some historical aspect of what Christians say and do that is nevertheless exempt from history's vicissitudes. Were any of this to be the case, something about Christian history itself would replace God's own directives to human beings, something human would be illegitimately elevated to the status of God and take God's place as the focus for human obedience. The freedom of God to work in new ways would be thereby inhibited by the illegitimate authority lodged there.[83]

Here, Tanner rightly asserts that what unites Christians is not something found in human decision or in human history. This belongs to God alone. We should not mistakenly identify a certain part or aspect of Christian social practices as the organizing principle of Christian identity at the expense of the transcendent will of

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[82] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 135.
[83] Ibid.

God and the Word of his revelation. Tanner explains this point:

> What holds all these different Christian practices together is, instead, their common reference to the God to whom they all hope effectively to witness. … Although the God Christians hope to obey is one and the same, the results of this common effort are not one in any obvious way, because of the fallibility and sin of these human efforts at discipleship and because of the freedom of God to ask the unexpected of people in new times and places. God is one and God's intention for us are marked by consistency and faithfulness, but such unity, consistency, and faithfulness are much older than anything captured by claims for continuity among Christian practices in virtue of shared traditional materials or claims for continuity in the processes that transmit them. … There is a consistency here – the consistency of a God of free grace – but it is a consistency that, because it could not have been predicted in advance, appears to be such only in retrospect. Even beyond the control of human expectation, it is a consistency that cannot rule out rather outrageous novelty to come, novelty that breaks previous human assumptions about the way it all hangs together. … One cannot, in that way, master God's free grace by standing outside Christian history and summing it up as some whole; one cannot know in that way in advance what is to come.[84]

It is "the consistency of a God of free grace, " rather than any human practices or beliefs, that gives Christians their common identity. The diversity of Christian social practices is a result of different applications in each particular context through the discernment of God's will for individuals or communities. All these are to be understood in reference to the God who is one and same God. From that awareness of the divine transcendence, Tanner is clearly not against Christian commonalities. Rather, what concerns her is the contemporary approach of looking for the foundation of Christian identity in merely human formulations, practices or standards. Thus, she

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[84] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 135-137, my italics.

argues that Christian cultural commonalities are not to be found in any shared beliefs, traditions or human rules in history so elevated as to be given a divine status. If such were to be the case, an established theology could easily become oppressively dogmatic, or, even worse, closed to any new application of Christian practices in a new and changing cultural context. In other words, a theology, forgetful of the divine transcendence of the Word, leads easily to some kind of cultural or religious imperialism.

According to Tanner, therefore, the consistency or the ultimate reference point of theology is found in the Triune God who calls us into existence and to responsible living.[85] We are accountable to God Himself and not anything other than Him. Furthermore, God is free and can work in ways beyond our imagination. The human mind is not to set in place beliefs, traditions, or norms that reduce God to the finite and the creaturely. With her strong insistence on the divine transcendence, Tanner is clearly in agreement with the Barthian emphasis on letting the Word of God be truly "of God," and not of human utterance.[86] Out of such a discussion comes a positive

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[85] Cornelius Plantinga argues against "creative anti-realism" which holds that it is our own mind that imposes character and structure on reality, so that if our mind does not imagine anything, there simply world not be any of the things we experience today. Plantinga rightly asserts that "that's true only of God. God created the heavens and the earth, including us. What follows is that there really is 'a way things are,' and this is so even if God is the only being in the universe who knows this state of affairs exactly." (*Engaging God's World*, 43, see also 41-44). This would provide a philosophical foundation for Tanner's claim that everything is referred back to God Himself.

[86] Refer Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. G.T. Thompson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956).

assertion: both theological reflection and Christian living are part and parcel of

Christian discipleship. All Christian thinking, activity and responsibility are brought

together in faithfulness to God's call in Christ Jesus, incarnate, crucified and risen

(1Cor 1:18-2:16; 15:3-8; Gal 6:14-15). Theologians share with all believers the

common responsibility of true discipleship[87], by referring "all things to God." The

consequence is that all theological expressions are relativized, since such efforts are

constantly challenged by God's free grace.[88]

Nevertheless, though we are accountable to God alone and must listen afresh to His

Word, this does not mean that nothing can be learned from the past. On the

relationship of discipleship and learning from others, Tanner writes,

> One only comes to know the character of one's own discipleship by listening to
> them [i.e. the testimonies of others], but one is not made thereby their disciple,
> the disciple of their texts, their words, their deeds. One remains the disciple of
> God, and not the disciple of God's witnesses. In short, then, no isolation from
> the judgments of others, but no demand to approximate them either.[89]

Tanner does not diminish the value of shared beliefs, traditions and norms that have

emerged from the past rigorous efforts of the Christian Church. Rather, she seeks to

establish a sense of proportion in which the present and the past are given their due.

On one hand, we are enriched in our Christian experience by listening to past

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[87] See Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 152ff.
[88] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 145-6, 150.
[89] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 138.

Christian witnesses to God and His work in this world. But, on the other hand, in our present situation, we must be careful not simply to make ourselves into their disciples – "the disciple of their texts, their words, their deeds." The past witnesses aim to promote communion with God Himself, but not by submitting to their authority and prescriptions as the ultimate consideration. John the Baptist has given enduring guidance in this respect: "He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:29-30).

Through their cultural involvement, the theological witness of Jesus' followers is similar to the activity of the Precursor. They, too, are all friends of the bridegroom who "stand and hear" Him. When theology hears his voice and commits itself to him, he increases even as the words of theology never escape the contingency and relativity of their limited historical perspective. While theology as talk of God must be subject to critical control, the Word of God can never be domesticated by any theological and cultural expression, as Barth consistently reminds us.

Since, then, all theological expression unfolds in the light of God's self-revelation as the ultimate reference, theological activity is necessarily marked with a provisional

and transitory character.[90] To this degree, theology, in whatever time and place, is always in a state of transformation and further development. Hence, it is difficult to argue against Tanner when she criticizes the postliberal theological mentality that, "contrary to the good intentions of postliberals, trying to guarantee openness to the Word by human means always ends up making the pretensions of that method itself an obstacle to openness."[91] The more some human rule or organizing principle is prioritized, the more the utter transcendence of God is compromised.

Due to the provisional and transitory nature of Christian practices and theological claims, and instead of defining Christian identity by means of social terms, cultural boundaries, or cultural commonalities of shared beliefs, traditions or rules, Tanner prefers to define such religious identity in terms of a certain "style" common to Christians in all places and times. Here, the "style" that Tanner identifies refers to "the specific way a practice is performed when there are other possible options."[92] This specific way of doing things serves to unify different Christian practices, and characterizes them as uniquely Christian. Her claim here is carefully qualified in that she acknowledges the diversity inherent in "the Christian style." She therefore suggests that "given this degree of diversity, it does not seem advisable to try to

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[90] The plastic character of human equipment, the fact of cultural diversity, and the purported origin of the diversity in the vagaries of human history, combine to suggest strongly the *contingency of cultures* (ref. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 28). Again, since theology is a cultural activity, likewise, it is contingent and provisional.

[91] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 151.

[92] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 144.

characterize the general style of Christian use of borrowed materials by looking for anything that all those uses share, some common denominator that cuts across them all."[93] In other words, the Christian style of transforming the wider culture is not "homologous." What, then, is the unifying notion in all these different instances of a Christian style? In answer to this question, Tanner once more refers everything back to the transcendent God. Any theological construct in the Christian style is relativized[94], in relation to God and as subject to Him. On the one hand, this allows for a diversity in Christian style, for any pattern that weaves Christian practices together must be constantly challenged and transformed by the free grace of God.[95] On the other hand, even though there is a variety of Christian use of borrowed materials that may occasion conflict in some situations, this need not prevent one from making a responsible decision in any given case. In short, "Christian identity hinges on remaining open to direction from the free grace of God in Christ; that is the organizing principle for its use of borrowed materials and what centers the arrangement of the theological claims that arise in that way."[96] Christian discipleship, in any cultural context, is not dispensed from the need of acting with spiritual discernment under the divine guidance.

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[93] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 144.
[94] Tanner points out that this "relativize" has two senses: the sense of containing such material within its proper bounds under God, and the sense of setting it in a proper relation to God (*Theories of Culture*, 145).
[95] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 147.
[96] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 150.

In the discussion of Christian identity, Tanner's cultural approach serves to clarify the nature of a theological context. Her work is clearly of some significance in its applicability to emerging Sino-Christian theology. Tanner seeks to remind us that Christian theology is neither isolated nor cut off from the wider culture. Theologians naturally bring their cultural experiences and social relationships into their exploration of Christian faith – which, in its turn, will undoubtedly influence the cultural experience and outlook of the future. There is, therefore, no theology or practice of Christian faith that can be hermetically sealed off from the wider cultural world. Though stressing the cultural context of theology, Tanner has also emphasized that Christian commonalities are not reducible to human cultural experiences but derive from the Triune God of revelation. The resulting Christian "style" permits both diversity and unity. The diversity arises from the varieties of time, place, culture, social life and individual vocation. The unity resides in a sense of a common orientation to God that is at the heart of faith. She adds a further illuminating and practical point when she observes, "What unites Christian practices is not, then, agreement about the beliefs and actions that constitute true discipleship; but a shared sense of the importance of figuring it out."[97] Presumably, some measure of agreement is envisaged; otherwise, the Word of God would not be received, theology would have no content, and Christian practice would have no goal. But beyond such

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[97] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 153.

fundamental agreement, Christian consciousness is subject to all kinds of differentiation, and legitimately considers both itself and its world from any number of perspectives, and in an innumerable series of contexts. To think of simple agreement in such a setting would be beyond human imagination. Hence, the wisdom of Tanner's remark on a "shared sense of the importance of figuring it out": the "shared sense" connotes a lively Christian community intent on matters of "importance" – above all, that of hearing the Word of God and witnessing to it in a given situation. The task of "figuring it out" cannot escape from the demands of disciplined thinking and accurate information – especially when "it" in this context is the array of problems that faith must face in its different cultural and historical contexts.

The direct implication of Tanner's discussion to Sino-Christian theology is that, social practices and theological works of Chinese Christians are not done in isolation with the wider host culture. They naturally employ local Chinese cultural and linguistic experiences in describing their Christian faith. Consequently, these experiences are enriched and transformed as they come into contact with the Word of God, with the Triune God Himself. This is what Liu Xiaofeng has in mind when he spells out the

nature of Christian theology in these words:

> Christian theology is the faith-based rational reflection and speech about the Christ event as the Word of God. It has a symbiotic relationship with the geographical-historical linguistic (conceptual) experience, that is to say, the expression of Christian ideas are determined by the adopted historical linguistic experience.[98]

Though the outcome of this theological exploration may be different from those in other cultural and linguistic contexts, they are all Christian attempts to comprehend and apply God's Word in different spaces and times. Therefore, no one theology can claim to be above others and to be a permanent establishment. However, this does not mean that the centre of our theology – as an intelligent system – become so empty that we are like the blind merely touching certain parts of an elephant's body. In such a case, the theological knowledge and experience we gain does not actually reflect the reality of God. We then simply slip into some kind of relativism, or worse, agnosticism.

Tanner is strong in her conviction that God is the ultimate referent for theology – which, therefore, because of its vulnerability to distortion and partial viewpoints, needs constant self-critique. But here, the tension must be maintained in Tanner's approach so that it avoids the risk of so "spiritualizing" the theological enterprise that

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[98] See Liu Xiaofeng's discussion of Christian theology as a rational reflection and talk of God as He reveals Himself through the Christ event (Liu, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 41).

it becomes content-less and unfocused. Theology must, of course, be self-critically

aware of human limitation, and, indeed, of the limits of the human word when it

comes to giving adequate expression to God's Word. Still, there is the focal point of

connection between the human word and the Word of God: The Word has indeed

become *flesh*. The focal truth of the incarnation is the area, as it were, in which the

tension between the ongoing and necessary theological tension between the

transcendent Word of God and the "flesh" of human expression, including all its

cultural forms, is played within the commitment of Christian life and the continuing

creative response of theology in all its diverse situations. If the Word has not been

made flesh in this way, theology would be deprived of its assurance of serving the

truth of God's self-revelation within the limits of the human condition. But since this

Word is truly incarnate amongst us, that Word, revealed, written and preached[99],

gives to the intentionality of theology the assurance of attaining to a real knowledge

of God.[100]

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[99] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 52ff.

[100] Refer to Barth's Trinitarian formula: "God's reveals Himself through Himself." Barth claims that "revelation is indeed God's predicate, but in such a way that this predicate is in every way identical with God Himself." (Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1*, 299). Therefore, according to Barth, there is "an undeviating unity between God's being *ad intra* and His being *ad extra*" (see Timothy Lee Yii Lau, "God's Revelation of Himself through Himself: Ontology and Epistemology in Karl Barth's Doctrine of Revelation in Volume One of Church Dogmatics" (Australian College of Theology, 1999), 62-65).

(d) Diversity in Theological Judgment: The Reality of Theological Context

Tanner's proposal of a dynamic and culturally engaged model of theology allows for a diversity of theological approaches. Different thinkers in different contexts may produce different interpretations of what is entailed in being a disciple of Christ in their respective situations. But, as Tanner insists, in as much as contemporary theology continues to be wedded to a modern view of culture so as to accentuate the importance of consensus, a diversity of theological perspectives is often treated in a negative light. Such diversity appears as an undesirable occurrence – due either to an inadequate socialization in the Christian community, or to an improper influence of diverse cultural contexts.[101] In the first instance, owing to a defective socialization, those concerned lack the social and theological skills required to make an informed decision on the meaning of Christian discipleship. This type of problem rests with the distorted judgment of the individual (or group), and not on more objective factors.

There is an alternative view: diverse theological outcomes may derive from diverse cultural contexts, as George Lindbeck, for example, might suggest.[102] But even given this more objective recognition of the cultural situation, Tanner expresses reservations. The first of these concerns the sharp separation of Christian and non-Christian

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[101] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 157.
[102] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, passim.

cultures, followed by a subtle shift of emphasis from the Christian cultural context to

that of the non-Christian. Tanner explains:

> One lives a Christian life differently depending on the cultural materials with
> which one has to work and the challenges to the Christian faith specific to that
> context. Sometimes, however, in the effort to be a Christian in a new situation,
> the cultural context that directs theological judgment shifts illicitly from a
> Christian to a non-Christian one. One is then no longer viewing the new
> situation from out of a Christian cultural context but the reverse; one is fitting a
> question that comes up in the course of the effort to lead a Christian life into,
> say, a secular cultural framework operating according to different socially
> enforced norms and standards.[103]

In this case, what affects Christian integrity is the manner in which "outside materials"

are imported into the Christian cultural context so as to have new meaning bestowed

on them. The determining factor in the interpretation of the borrowed materials is the

context in which such materials are gathered. Different external contexts will

naturally give rise to a diversity of theological judgments – when such judgments are

merely responses to the wider host cultures. But this view assumes a sharp boundary

between Christian and non-Christian cultures, as though Christianity is a way of life

quite apart from the host culture. We have already criticised this approach. But the

more serious aspect of such an approach is its attribution of external, rather than

internal, influences to the diversity of theological judgments. For instance, Lindbeck

argues that, if external influences could be controlled, properly socialized Christians

would come to the same theological judgment. Diversity in theological judgment

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[103] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 157.

would thus be eradicated; and Christians could reach a theological consensus.[104]

However, this is far from empirically verifiable, given the diversified voices in the contemporary theological scene.

In response to such two views, Tanner argues that differences in understanding Christian discipleship is, even in the same cultural context, unavoidable. In that vein, she writes,

> They [i.e., different understandings of Christian discipleship] may be just the product of sincere, equally uncorrupted, and fully capable Christian efforts to lead a Christian life. Persons equally skilled and faithful to Christian culture no longer seem required by that culture to come up with the same conclusions about Christian discipleship in any given circumstance. … Christian culture would just not be the sort of culture that demands uniformity of practice.[105]

Here, different interpretations of Christian discipleship can be seen as resulting from the similar attempts in working out in everyday life what following Jesus requires. Instead of treating diversity in theological interpretation as undesirable, Tanner considers that such diversity should be seen as reflecting a healthy engagement of theology with its located context. She goes further: any effort simply to enforce uniformity of belief and action would result only in a factionalism and divisiveness which would directly threaten Christian fellowship.[106] Unlike others, Tanner sees the diversity in theological judgment as unavoidable. What is more, the source of such

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[104] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 32-42.
[105] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 158-159.
[106] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 172.

diversity does not necessarily derive from some external cultural context – as if there is a dualistic relation between Christian culture and the wider culture in the way, say, John Milbank and George Lindbeck consider it. For her, theological diversity emerges from within its own context. Indeed, Christianity itself prompts this diversity which "is likely to erupt in the same time and place as across different ones; indeed, it is likely to erupt over the same matters."[107] She thus places the source of diversity within Christianity proper, instead of pushing it to the outside – as Lindbeck has done, thus blaming diversity either on the improper socialization of some parties or on corrupting external influences). More provocatively, Tanner claims that, "Christian discipleship is an essentially contested notion," and "the possibility of conflict is … inherent in the kind of culture Christianity is."[108]

Yet, despite her positive evaluation of diversity and dialectic in theological positions, Tanner does not thereby imply opposition to any theological agreement. Rather, what she suggests is that theological judgment proceeds from the effort to make sense of Christian beliefs and actions in relation to their cultural context. Indeed, such judgments are made by every Christian, not just by Christian theologians or specialists.[109] True, it should not be pre-determined by any past or present Christian scheme. As already pointed out, no human words can ever replace God's Word.

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[107] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 159.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 160.

When Christian theology remains a way of hearing the Word of God, no human formulation can be allowed to become some kind of inviolate substitute for God's Word itself.[110] Tanner thus claims, "there are no rules establishing positively what Christians should say and do. The situations addressed are too complex for the simplicity of a general rule."[111] Theological judgments, and the way they are arrived at, must be subjected to constant scrutiny. Still, Christian theological interpretations must be free, and not tied down by any past, present or future human authority. For God's Word transcends all human constructs. In this constant review, there is an ever-present tension. Even a consensus reached after long, conclusive argument cannot be equated with God's Word. The reasons are twofold. First, past established Christian schemes cannot limit future theological creativity. Second, any achieved consensus can be challenged and disrupted anytime by anyone.[112] Therefore, "established productions are always prone to dissolution, to be taken apart, reorganized, and their elements reinterpreted in the process."[113] Theology must always respect its own limits if it is to be true to itself as an authentic hearkening to the Word: all tradition, rules, and theological positions are relative to it.

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[110] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 163.
[111] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 160.
[112] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 163. Tanner even suggests that the claim of consensus may simply be a power play.
[113] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 164, see 161-162.

As for theological agreement, Tanner makes clear that it should be pursued with the utmost patience. In effect, we cannot disagree about everything all the time.[114] However, she objects to any form of premature agreement.[115] Moreover, Christian agreement does not necessarily mean uniformity of beliefs and actions that exclude further discussion and reconstruction. Consequently, Tanner claims:

> … if further agreement on the interpretation and application of Christian materials is reached in the course of argument, that agreement will itself continue to allow for a range of conflicting interpretations and applications: the shared understanding will rule some things out without specifying a particular shape to Christian beliefs and actions that conform to it. Rather than aiming to establish positively what all Christians should say and do by restricting such room for manoeuvre, Christians should be content in their search for consensus with the most that progress in Christian argument would seem to accomplish on that front: negatively, the ruling out of bounds of certain judgments about the meaning of Christian discipleship whose erroneous character has becomes a matter of uncontroversial recognition, while, positively, simply setting the direction for further controversy to move in.[116]

To her mind, the search for theological agreement is always an "open-ended" journey. It is never closed to future discussion and correction, modification or adjustment.

Though Tanner allows for a wide range of disagreement in theological judgment, she understandably argues that they should be kept within bounds; otherwise, a chaotic situation of sectarian conflict would be the outcome.[117] Christian agreements "are

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[114] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 173-174.
[115] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 172-173.
[116] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 173.
[117] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 173-4.

agreements about how to have an argument, an argument that can, at any particular

point, turn back against what was initially agreed upon, in an effort to rework it."[118]

However, she does hold that Christian beliefs and actions shared by all in common

must be the subject of agreement.[119] But a question remains: is this an empirically

verifiable possibility; and even if it is, how often is it possible? Here, Tanner seems to

recognize the difficulty of reaching an agreement between opposing parties, and so

opts for a form of mutual recognition rather than a situation of consensus.[120]

Tanner undoubtedly holds that diversity of theological judgment is inherent in the

Christian context. However, her overall proposal seems to privilege theological

disagreement over any possibility of theological agreement. In the contemporary

theological scene, diverse interpretations of Christian discipleship are clearly evident,

while instances of theological consensus remain elusive amidst diverging positions. Is

she right to place such emphasis on the dialectical character of theological discussion

when she claims, for example that "the shared understanding will rule some things out

without specifying a particular shape to Christian beliefs and actions that conform to

it." To rule "some things out" implies agreement in some areas at least. While Tanner

properly sees theological activity always in reference to its God, its transcendent

object, there is a certain vagueness in her understanding of what constitutes a genuine

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[118] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 174.
[119] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 172.
[120] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 172-173.

theological position. This weakness in her proposal need not be fatal or theologically self-defeating, since it is inspired by a care to respect the tension between God's Word and our human propositions. Any positive or negative human judgment regarding God and His will is valid, provided it is made in the light of God's self-revealing Word. Nonetheless, we need to bear in mind that human words used to refer to God are constantly under the judgment of the revealed Word, even if, of themselves, they are neither meaningless nor wrong. Theological judgment, and any agreement it gives rise to, rests on God's ultimate judgment. Only in the Triune God do we find the form, source and goal of unity in diversity.

Tanner, given her careful and often provocative treatment of theological diversity, is a valuable resource for any assessment of the different forms of emerging Sino-Christian theology. Her approach helps us to see that diversity in interpreting Christian discipleship is inherent in Christian culture itself, rather than being the result of outside influence. Such inherent diversity can be seen as an indicator of healthy discussion and as a spur to the development of theology in relation to its actual context. It is not something inherently evil to be purged from the otherwise healthy life of the Christian community. In practical terms, dialogue on what it means, theoretically and practically, to be a Christian in today's China should be encouraged among Christians of various traditions and backgrounds; and among those scholars

who investigate Christianity from the perspectives of various disciplines, such as theology, philosophy, history, social sciences, cultural and political studies.

Conclusion

We are now able to sum up Tanner's cultural approach to theology and its implications in the following eleven points:

1. Theology is a part of culture, a form of cultural activity. It has specific cultural location, that is, Christian culture itself, instead of being seen in a general or universal cultural context. The local and specific context of this particular Christian way of life can, therefore, be appreciated in its significance, not in reference to a "high culture" or "universal culture," but for what it is.

2. Academic and everyday theologies are closely linked and should not be compartmentalized into two separate fields (such as theory and practice, first-order and second-order of theology). But the relation between them does not presume that academic theological reflection merely describes everyday Christian practices as if there is a body of rules or patterned order to be discovered.

3. Theological investigation represents different attempts in describing Christian social practice. These are neither pre-determined nor developed according to fixed patterns, but rather share a more dynamic, and sometimes even

contradictory, character. This is the source of the diversity of theological positions as determined from within and not from without the cultural context – which itself may be undergoing constant change.

4. Christian social practices can neither be independent of, nor totally isolated from, the host culture. Christian activity is closely associated with and implemented within the wider cultural context; and this affects the human quality of Christian theological language.

5. While borrowed material from the wider cultural context needs to be critiqued and even transformed, this critical activity also contains an element of self-criticism: neither the other (the larger culture), nor the self (the Christian community), are presumed to be above criticism.

6. Any human pre-determination, or imposition, of fixed patterns of cultural development on the Christian life are to be rejected. The first and final consideration is the Word of God, and all else – be they beliefs and practices, or rules and traditions – are relative to it. This recognition of the transcendent role of the divine Word and Spirit does not mean that there is nothing to be learned from the historical and traditional resources. But it does emphasise the God-given and God-directed originality of the Christian community in its specific location.

7. Hence, Christian theology and social practices are based on the free grace of God. God is the ultimate reference point of our theological utterance and Christian living. It is here we find theological and cultural commonality among our diverse understandings of God and what discipleship means.

8. Past Christian experience and traditions have value. They are neither to be ignored, nor impose a conformity that would be unfaithful to originality and the transcendence of God's self-revealing Word.

9. Since theological constructs are subject to constant critique, they are inevitably provisional and temporary, even as they emerge from lively engagement with God's Word in a particular cultural context.

10. Diversity of theological judgment is inherent in Christian culture. Even an established Christian position must be open to further discussion, disagreement, and challenge, as a condition for reaching a provisional theological agreement.

11. The tension between God's Word and human words must be maintained. Although God, as the ultimate reference point, is referred to through human words and expressions, all human language is inadequate to the divine truth and freedom.

These eleven points summarise Tanner's cultural approach to theology, and point to a dynamic relationship existing between culture and theology. Building on this analysis, our thesis, in the next chapter, will continue to discuss the cultural engagement of Christian theology, but now by considering its academic competency as it engages cultural studies and other academic disciplines.

CHAPTER FIVE

Theology and Cultural Studies: The Academic Status of Theology

In the last chapter, I discussed Kathryn Tanner's cultural approach to theology. Her critique of contemporary theology from the perspective of a postmodern theory of culture helps us to see the intimate connection between theology and culture. In this chapter, I shall move to discuss further the inter-relationship of culture and theology, in particular, in the academic realm. This will mean examining the relationship of cultural studies to theology, and the academic status of theology itself. Our discussion is presented under the following headings:

1. The Integration of cultural studies and theology;

2. The academic grounding of theology;

3. The North American case;

4. Theology as an academic discipline in the Sino-Christian context.

1. The Integration of Cultural Studies and Theology

Lai Pan Chiu (賴品超), an academic at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, rightly observes that the integration of theology and cultural studies is not entirely a new venture in the contemporary scene. According to Lai,

> Besides religious studies, cultural studies as an academic discipline could also establish contact with theology, especially by introducing the methods of cultural studies to theology. In reality, some modern theologians have already hinted at this possibility. F.D.E. Schleiermacher's conception of theological work can be seen as an investigation into the culture of Christian community. George Lindbeck also proposes a cultural-linguistic paradigmatic approach to theology, emphasizing the linguistic context of Christian community. These works are in tune with the notion of culture presupposed in cultural studies … [1]

However, Lai argues that it was not until the 1990s that the integration of theology and cultural studies was properly attempted:

> [These works of Schleiermacher and Lindbeck] cannot be considered as fully applying the methods of cultural studies to theology, since what they have proposed only applies to the internal evaluation of religious community, and merely accepting the status quo, but failing to analyse the power relations inside and outside the community. The real attempt to integrate theology and cultural studies, while clearly reflecting some kind of paradigm shift toward culture, appeared only in 1990s.[2]

Lai suggests that the earlier attempts had not done enough. The models adopted were too simplistic, and failed to account for the complexity of theology's relationship to

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[1] Lai Pan Chiu 賴品超, "文化研究與神學：一個後蒂利希的觀點 (Cultural Studies and Theology: A Post-Tillichian Perspective)," in 蒂利希與漢語神學 *(Paul Tillich and Sino-Christian Theology)*, ed. Keith K.F. Chan (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2006), 397-398.
[2] Lai, "文化研究與神學 (Cultural Studies and Theology: A Post-Tillichian Perspective)," 398.

culture. Lai is indebted to Serene Jones' work, *Cultural Labor and Theological Critique*.[3] Jones offers a basic critique of Lindbeck, and claims that his cultural-linguistic framework is too isolated. It fails to deal adequately with the complex socio-cultural context, in particular, in terms of power relations and other complex cultural forces such as class divisions. In this regard, she writes,

> Lindbeck's object of analysis seemed an isolated person of faith, living in an isolated ecclesial community, whose isolated confessional and liturgical actions unfolded in a world untouched by power relations and complex cultural forces (such as the class relations embedded in a capitalist market). He had no analysis of the multiple power relations that course through the language of doctrine, and he provided no conceptual apparatus for seeing faith traditions as linguistic contexts within which political subjects, national subjects, gendered subjects, ethnic subjects, and religious subjects are constructed and deployed.[4]

Clearly, Jones and Lai are expressing dissatisfaction with traditional theological approaches for failing to deal adequately with the complex manifold of the social, cultural, political, and economic context. Traditional approaches were simply too isolated from the complex cultural reality of their situation. There occurred, therefore, a renewal of energy in the effort to bring about a more adequate integration of theology and cultural studies in the contemporary scene. This suggests something of a paradigm shift in the field, as the multiple interconnections of theology and culture

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[3] Serene Jones, "Cultural Labor and Theological Critique," in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, ed. Delwin Brown Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
[4] Jones, "Cultural Labor and Theological Critique," 159.

began to be investigated, so as to include historical, political, economic and inter-religious considerations.[5] This attempt is clearly evidenced in the works edited by Dwight Hopkins and Sheila Davaney's *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis* (1996), and by Delwin Brown, Sheila Davaney and Kathryn Tanner, *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (2001). This new cultural awareness achieved systematic exposition in Kathryn Tanner's *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (1997), which was discussed in the last chapter.

However, Lai continues to express his dissatisfaction with these recent works as they merely apply theories of cultural studies to theology. He claims that such studies "basically concentrate on discussing how theories of cultural studies could be applied to theology or what agenda for theology would contemporary cultural theories suggest, but never study from the angle of Christian theology, nor ask how cultural studies assist the understanding of Christian faith?"[6] Lai's complaint is directed against a situation in which contemporary investigations in the field of theology and cultural studies are largely proposing how contemporary cultural theories set a new agenda for

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[5] Lai, "文化研究與神學 (Cultural Studies and Theology: A Post-Tillichian Perspective)," 398. It has been pointed out that this paradigm shift was a result of a combined effort involving various disciplines and fields including critical theory, revisionist Marxism, poststructuralism, cultural studies, liberationist thought, sociohistorical studies, the turn to postmodernism in literary analysis, philosophy, historical studies and historiographical theory, and social sciences (see Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis," in *Converging on Culture*, 4).

[6] Lai, "文化研究與神學 (Cultural Studies and Theology: A Post-Tillichian Perspective)," 399. Lai proposes to turn to Paul Tillich for an answer to this question.

theology, but fail to provide an adequate theological critique of cultural studies themselves. He laments, therefore, the one-sided nature of the conversation between the two.

Is Lai's dissatisfaction justified? To answer this question, we must bear in mind that Tanner, along with other like-minded scholars, is attempting to reconstruct contemporary theology. Her writings, and those of others, appeal to postmodern cultural theory which is considered to have challenged the traditional notion of culture and the theologies aligned to it. However, as an eminent representative of this new approach, Tanner, as we have pointed out, never treats postmodern cultural theory as permanently fixed, for it is necessarily always in a state of development. Furthermore, though the conversation between theology and cultural studies was originally initiated with the aim to inform reflection on religion with a cultural awareness, the exchange was, in fact, never one sided. Hopkins vividly portrays a lively engagement of theology with cultural studies in these words:

> … religious reflection and cultural analysis engage in a dance as partners in a new conversation, one in which religion and theology open themselves to culture's conceptual interrogation over the fundamental presuppositions of those who study and live out their faith commitments. And likewise, theology and, more broadly, the study of religions challenge cultural analysis to take seriously the adage that philosophers have interpreted the world, and we must keep the

analytic project going, drawing upon the silent spaces of history and the disjunctures of present day struggles as the telos of a possible new imaginative horizon.[7]

Such a dynamic notion implies that the interaction between theological, religious and cultural studies takes place in a mutually beneficial fashion. It is true that the analytical methods of cultural studies have contributed much toward contemporary theological discussion (as we have seen in the last chapter, how Tanner makes use of the postmodern proposals in critiquing contemporary theologies). However, there is the other aspect of the dialectic as well: theology in particular and religious studies in general can also challenge and enrich the wider cultural studies. For instance, it is repeatedly argued that the religious element can never be ignored, or worse, cut off from its relationship to contemporary culture and society. As Lai himself has claimed,

> Since there is a close relationship between religion and culture, the studies of religion cannot be divorced from a cultural context. On the other hand, since religion not only affects the human thought system and the content of faith, it also affects every practice and framework of human habitual conduct, reflecting on and challenging its cultural value-system and character. Therefore in order to apprehend a particular culture, we may need to study its religion.[8]

This indicates the inseparability of cultural studies and religion (and theology). There is a reciprocal influence at work. Serious cultural studies cannot ignore the existence and importance of religion within a particular culture. Max Stackhouse has reminded

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[7] Dwight N. Hopkins, "Introduction," in *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Sheila Greeve Davaney (New York: Routledge, 1996), 20-21.
[8] Lai, "文化研究與神學 (Cultural Studies and Theology: A Post-Tillichian Perspective)," 389.

sociologists more than a decade ago that "there is something that will not be reduced to some other dimension of human need, understanding or ideological imaging."[9] And this irreducible component is the religious dimension. To Stackhouse, religion is "the long-hidden, and in some ways the most decisive, axial sector of society" (along with familial identity, economic structure, politics, and cultural institutions of life).[10] The reason for this is that "religion is indispensable to all serious interpretations of what it is that holds the axial sectors together to form a civilization, and what it is that provides an organizing principle for dynamic stability and flexible integration."[11] Stackhouse then proceeds to pose a radical question on the significance of religious faith for culture and society:

> [H]ow ought sex and kingship, power and public order, wealth and productivity, and the boundaries of cultural conformity and independent creativity be shaped if one takes quite seriously the possibility that there is a transcendent ground for all areas of existence, a source for all that is true and a norm for just living in these areas?[12]

Such a question points to the possible impact that religion and its theological articulation might have in cultural analysis. An irreducible religious component is brought into play.

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[9] Max L. Stackhouse, "The Sociology of Religion and the Theology of Society," *Social Compass* 37, no. 3 (1990): 316.
[10] Stackhouse, "The Sociology of Religion and the Theology of Society," 325.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Stackhouse, "The Sociology of Religion and the Theology of Society," 327.

Admittedly, Lai is right to point out that, though the question of religion was largely ignored in past cultural studies, recent international events have once again demonstrated the importance of religion in relation to culture and cultural studies:

> What is interesting is that the religious question is often being ignored in the field of cultural studies, especially during and prior to the 1980s. However, a series of international events occurred in recent years such as September 11, and the dispute of cultural conflicts, have manifested the important role religion plays in cross-cultural relations. And the important role religion plays in cultural wars in the American context has also prompted scholars engaged in cultural studies to pay attention to religious studies.[13]

In this respect, Lai's words echo Stackhouse's question, in emphasizing the importance of dialogue between theology/religion and cultural studies/social sciences: "Today, theology is the most important conversation partner for the sociology of religion precisely because both are necessary for the future of civilization."[14] Such considerations provide the context for, and suggest the need of, an integration of religious (and theological studies) and cultural studies in the contemporary scene.

Nonetheless, Lai's original concern remains valid. More is required than merely applying cultural theories to theology. Moreover, a clarification must be made: the relationship between theological and cultural studies is somewhat different from the relationship between theology and culture.[15] Given the array of different studies, there

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[13] Lai, "文化研究與神學 (Cultural Studies and Theology: A Post-Tillichian Perspective)," 390-391.
[14] Stackhouse, "The Sociology of Religion and the Theology of Society," 326.
[15] Lai, "文化研究與神學 (Cultural Studies and Theology: A Post-Tillichian Perspective)," 399.

is the question of two distinct, yet not totally unrelated, disciplines. In that intellectual context, a more precise question can be formulated: In what ways, then, can theology contribute to the wider range of anthropological and cultural studies; and how can these different disciplines be related for their mutual enrichment and challenge, especially in the Sino-Christian theological context? The answer to this question will bring to light a further dimension of the complexity in the relationship between theology and culture.

2. The Academic Grounding of Theology

If theology is to engage positively with cultural studies, its academic credentials need to be clarified first. Questions concerning the academic status of theology have arisen in recent discussions of the relation between theology and religious studies and their respective places in the university. A concern is expressed as to whether theology is a legitimate field of enquiry within the academic context. In particular, it is often assumed that, unless theology exhibits some "scientific" features – understood as appealing to established objectivity, and publicly rational criteria – it cannot be regarded as an academic discipline capable of interacting with other scholarly disciplines. The inevitable question, therefore, bears on the meaning of "scientific." Is theology a genuinely scientific discipline?

The question of whether or not theology is a science has a long history. Theology was regarded as "the queen of sciences" in the Medieval universities. Other sciences, although they had their own proper objects, were, practically speaking, a preparation for the study of theology. This hierarchical order of different levels of knowledge was challenged with the onset of the Enlightenment with its privileging of reason as independent of the influence of faith and tradition. Preceding, and in many ways allied to, Enlightenment reason, was the rapid development of the natural sciences proceeding by way of empirical investigation. Richard Tarnas expresses the Enlightenment mood in these words:

> At last the human mind had comprehended God's working principles. The eternal laws governing Creation, the divine handiwork itself, now stood unveiled by science. Through science man had served God's greater glory, demonstrating the mathematical beauty and complex precision, the stupendous order reigning over the heavens and the Earth. The luminous perfection of the discoveries' new universe compelled their awe before the transcendent intelligence which they attributed to the Creator of such a cosmos.[16]

Since then, the empirically based forms of knowledge are generally designated as "science" – or at least as "hard sciences" compared to the allegedly less experimentally based other forms of knowledge – the "humanities." As a result, theology, and the humanities generally, came to be regarded as "non-scientific." Theology, for the most part, was gradually relegated to seminaries or bible colleges. It

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[16] Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 300-301.

is observed that, even in Catholic universities, departments of theology have often been renamed as departments of religious studies.[17] The presumption is that religion can and must be studied scientifically in a way analogous to the natural and human sciences. George Marsden describes this move in American universities in the early to mid-twentieth century as "the impulse to professionalize religious studies." He explains:

> Because of its ties to the residual Protestant establishment, its staffing by seminary graduates, and its associations with Bible requirements at church-related school, the academic field of religion was often regarded as a second-class discipline and seldom taken seriously among the humanities. The response was to define the field increasingly in scientific terms. Thus religious studies would have a methodology more like the social sciences. The new trend was to study religion "phenomenologically, " so that the object of study was the abstraction "religion, " the common traits of which could be exemplified by looking at particular religions. Another manifestation of the professionalizing impulse was the formation in 1964 of the American Academy of Religion … . While the AAR embraced both the humanistic and the social scientific impulse, the latter signaled the dominant direction for the future.[18]

With this development of religious studies, with pressure from within and from without, towards the methodologies of social sciences, many academics consequently have come to question whether theology, because of its essential concern for the data of revelation and faith, is properly an academic discipline, deserving a rightful place within a university setting.

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[17] James B. Sauer, "A Commentary on Lonergan's Method in Theology," ed. Peter L. Monette and Christine Jamieson (The Lonergan Web Site, 2001) (accessed 20/07/2006).

[18] George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment To Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 414.

But the postmodern theory of culture challenges such an attitude, and provokes a rethinking of the status of theology within the university. First of all, the modernist myth of universal knowledge and the possibility of objective truth independent of both the subjectivity of its knowers, and the cultural perspectives that affect them, is called into question. For its part, postmodern theory argues that no one discipline is value-free and neutral in its exercise of rationality. For instance, George Marsden claims that, nowadays,

> few academics believed in neutral objective science any more and most would admit that everyone's intellectual inquiry takes place in a framework of communities that shape prior commitments. Such prior commitments might be arrived at on formal religious grounds or in some more informal way, but they were prior commitments nonetheless. Hence there is little reason to exclude a priori all religiously based claims on the grounds that they are unscientific.[19]

This suggests that every view put forward from any field of study possesses an inescapably subjective component. Therefore, religious positions should not be ruled out on the basis that they are "subjective" – understood as opposed to being "objective" – without much consideration given to the specific truth claims involved. Indeed, as Marsden claims, "Ultimately there seems no intellectually valid reason to exclude religiously based perspectives that have strong academic credentials on all other grounds."[20] However, this is not to imply that every religious view and perspective must be accepted unconditionally. Marsden concedes, therefore, that

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[19] Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, 430, see also 431-435.
[20] Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, 431.

"Religious viewpoints that demand political violence or are presented so dogmatically and aggressively as not to be accommodated within the procedural rules of a pluralistic academy could be excluded on the same grounds as comparable secular viewpoints."[21] Rather, every claim to truth must be subjected to the same rigorous assessment, instead of allowing that religious claims are to be ruled out *a priori*, because they are presumed to be "subjective," and therefore, "unwarranted." Furthermore, the ideal of "objectivity" is attainable only through the activity of human subjects working within a tradition of rationality. The influence of this "tradition of rationality" or "framework of communities" must not be overlooked. For instance, in accord with Marsden's view, Alasdair MacIntyre strongly argues that

> It is an illusion to suppose that there is some neutral standing ground, some locus for rationality as such, which can afford rational resources sufficient for enquiry independent of all traditions. Those who have maintained otherwise either have covertly been adopting the standpoint of a tradition and deceiving themselves and perhaps others into supposing that theirs was just such a neutral standing ground, or else have simply been in error. The person outside all traditions lacks sufficient rational resources for enquiry and a fortiori for enquiry into what tradition is to be rationally preferred. He or she has no adequate relevant means of rational evaluation, and hence can come to no well-grounded conclusion, including the conclusion that no tradition can vindicate itself against any other. To be outside all traditions is to be a stranger to enquiry; it is to be in a state of intellectual and moral destitution, a condition from which it is impossible to issue the relativist challenge.[22]

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[21] Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, 432.

[22] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1988), 367. See also Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kregan Paul, 1962).

With these words, MacIntyre adopts a position strongly at variance with pretensions to pure objectivity, independent both of the rational subject and of the influence of the criteria of a particular tradition. To argue otherwise is to distort the intellectual enterprise. Objectivity lies not in one's standpoint, but in how one derives one's conclusions, while at the same time being aware of the limitations and range of probabilities involved.

In a further refutation of naïve pretensions to pure objectivity, Nicholas Wolterstorff argues that scientific deductions and proofs which reject religious concepts such as "God" simply because they cannot be "proven," that is, they cannot be known non-inferentially, are based on a problematic kind of foundationalism.[23] He writes,

> The foundationalist's explication of a theory's belonging to genuine science uses two main concepts: that of a theory's being justified by some foundational propositions, and that of knowing something with noninferential certitude. In looking at each of these in turn, we shall be considering what is often called "the logic of science."[24]

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[23] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 28ff. See also Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations?," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983). Kwan Kai Man has an interesting observation: "many people would normally reject foundationalism, but when they come to religious questions, they suddenly become foundationalists." (Kwan Kai Man 關啟文, "基督教與學術研究是否水火不容？ (Is Christianity Incompatible with Academic Studies?)," in 大學與基督宗教研究 *(University and Christian Studies)*, ed. Lo Ping Cheung 羅秉祥 and Kang Phee Seng 江丕盛 (Hong Kong: Centre for Sino-Christian Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2002), 318).

[24] Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 36-37.

Wolterstorff pursues his critique against this logic of science, by conceding that,

> even if there is a set of foundational propositions, no one has yet succeeded in stating what relation the theories that we are warranted in accepting or rejecting bear to the members of that set. Even if there is a set of foundational propositions, we are without a general logic of the sciences, and hence without a general rule for warranted theory acceptance and rejection.[25]

Here, science must be critically aware of its own limitations. It must be alert to its own pre-established beliefs that have determined its criteria of judgment. It is, therefore, unreasonable to call for Christian theology to conform to the kind of neutrality that conceals a prejudice against a disciplined openness to the whole of human experience through history. A supposedly neutral "objectivity" disguises a particular kind of uncritical subjectivity. Unless this is recognized, theology's dialogue with other disciplines and sciences is fundamentally compromised. In reality, no neutral ground exists; and every claim, whether it be theological, scientific, philosophical, or psychological, lives out of prior commitments. Only a critically sharpened methodological framework of collaboration, as, for instance, we find in Lonergan's *Method in Theology*, can appreciate both the fundamental dimensions of subjectivity, and the conditions of self-transcendence that make objectivity possible. Lonergan, remarking on the ambiguities underlying such positions as naïve realism,

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[25] Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, 45.

naïve idealism, empiricism, critical idealism, absolute idealism, argues that,

> Once those ambiguities are removed, once an adequate self-appropriation is effected, once one distinguishes between object and objectivity in the world of immediacy and, on the other hand, object and objectivity in the world mediated by meaning and motivated by value, then a totally different context arises. For it is now apparent that in the world mediated by meaning and motivated by value, objectivity is simply the consequence of authentic subjectivity, of genuine attention, genuine intelligence, genuine reasonableness, genuine responsibility. Mathematics, science, philosophy, ethics, theology differ in many manners; but they have the common feature that their objectivity is the fruit of attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility.[26]

This places theology, religious studies, science, mathematics and other disciplines on par with each other. They appeal to the same ideal of objectivity – the objectivity which is the fruit of self-appropriation.

In his analysis of the situation, Lonergan takes issue with the modern view of theology, along with other studies, as based on "values" rather than "facts." Theology, consequently, is deemed merely subjective, and thus incapable of producing any real knowledge, and making any genuine claim to either truth or falsehood.[27] Since religious beliefs were often treated as "values" deriving from privately-held opinions and beliefs, they were naturally viewed as purely subjective and essentially biased. Facts, on the other hand, are objectively established, and thus subject to public and rational enquiry. As a consequence, the Enlightenment gradually separated the secular

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[26] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 265.
[27] See Sauer, "A Commentary on Lonergan's Method in Theology."

from the religious domain. When religion is banished to the private realm, the public

realm is taken over by reason alone.[28] But Marsden, MacIntyre, Wolterstorff, and

Lonergan have argued against this naïve pretension of pure objectivity because it is

demonstrably cut off from an authentically subjective dimension. The point of their

argument is that the objectivity of any academic discipline lies, not in its content or in

the values it seeks to promote, but in the method governing the process of establishing

the truth of its claims. Therefore, to separate objectivity from the dynamics of self-

transcending subjectivity can lead to an irresolvable confusion – to say nothing of an

inability or unwillingness to recognize that theology, in its particular way, is dealing

with a special range of data related to religious experience, and the ultimate meanings

and values enshrined in it.[29]

This typically postmodern shift in treating the objectivity of knowledge and its

foundation in human subjectivity has created both the opportunity and the need to

reconsider the issue of the academic status of theology. On this topic, the subtitle of

Religious Studies, Theology, and the University, edited by Linell Cady and Delwin

Brown, is an apt description of the contemporary context: *Conflicting Maps,*

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[28] See Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 1997), 47-48; Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*.

[29] See various works in Linell E. Cady and Delwin Brown, eds., *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 98-99, 113-117, 127-128, 140-146, 204-207. See also discussion in Kwan, "基督教與學術研究是否水火不容？(Is Christianity Incompatible with Academic Studies?)."

Changing Terrain.[30] Furthermore, from a Protestant perspective, George Marsden makes the claim that "the widespread current critiques of scientific objectivity provide a context for reconsidering the near exclusion of religious perspectives from the academic life of American universities of Protestant heritage."[31] More positively, he hopes that "it should be recognized that religiously defined points of view can be intellectually as responsible as nonreligious ones."[32]

The recent hotly-charged debate in the United States regarding the relationship between theology and religious studies, and the role of theology in the academe, is instructive in our consideration of the Chinese context. For instance, North American discussions on the legitimacy of the place of a divinity school in a public university has its parallels in the present discussion occurring in China, even if the context obviously differs. In what follows, we hope to defend theology's legitimate role in the academic context. A deeper understanding of the intellectual – and hence, academic – status of theology both depends on and leads to a further understanding of the nature of theology. Consequently, we shall be able to argue more tellingly for the contribution of theology to cultural studies and other disciplines, and its continuing relevance to contemporary academic and public arenas.

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[30] Cady and Brown, eds., *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University*.
[31] Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, 429.
[32] Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, 439.

3. The North American Case

In the United States there is considerable agreement among scholars as to the historical and philosophical factors that have affected the status of theology, and its relation to religious studies, within the nation's public universities. These include the effects of the Enlightenment, the secularization of Christian education, and allied influences.[33] Disagreements, however, occur on the respective tasks of theology and religious studies and their inter-relationship in the academe. There are now at least the following three positions.

First, there are those who forthrightly object to the inclusion of theology within public universities. Theology is perceived to be fideistic, dogmatic, narrow and subjective. Ivan Strenski, for instance, concludes that theology is "a perhaps unwittingly sectarian enterprise"; and suggests his theological colleagues across the table "may be misdirecting their energies to projects that are finally not worthy of their efforts."[34] Moreover, according to Strenski, "in the university, primarily for cultural, but also for intellectual, reasons, 'theology' can never be the banner under which students of religion might unite because, rightly or wrongly, the term raises too many suspicions."[35] To Strenski and other scholars like him, only religious studies can be

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[33] See the various works in Cady and Brown, eds., *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University*. The most representative work is none other than Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*.

[34] Ivan Strenski, "Why 'Theology' Won't Work," in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University*, 31, 32.

[35] Strenski, "Why 'Theology' Won't Work," 33.

considered as a university discipline, but not theology as such. At best, theology may be admitted into the university through a religious studies department. Underlying such a position is the opinion that there is a clear distinction to be made between religious studies and theology, in theory if not in practice. Theology is treated as not being on the same par as the "scientific" study of religion. This contrast can be clearly seen in Russell McCutcheon's view of the respective tasks of theologians and scholars of religion when he surmises that if "theologians … study the gods, scriptures, and origins (as opposed to historic beginnings), then scholars of religion study groups of historically embedded people who talk about gods, scriptures, origins, etc."[36] In other words, McCutcheon sees theology as the subjective study of the content of Christian belief, while religious studies allow for an objective inquiry into Christianity as one of the many religions, without assuming any prior commitment or privileged experience. Likewise, Richard Martin asserts that the historical studies of religions in public universities should not be construed, overtly or covertly, as part of the theological enterprise.[37] To impose a theological agenda or worldview onto religious studies is simply equivalent to some sort of academic imperialism. In contrast, Martin asserts that "knowledge about religion is valuable [only] in its own right."[38] Therefore, the material content of theological studies is not irrelevant to

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[36] Russell T. McCutcheon, "The Study of Religion as an Anthropology of Credibility," in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University*. 15. Strenski's position is quite similar to McCutcheon.

[37] For instance, see Richard C. Martin, "Other People's Theologies: The New Hubris of History of Religions," in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University*, 65-68.

[38] Martin, "Other People's Theologies," 68.

religious studies, but only to form part of the wider context of "other people's theologies."[39] The rationale behind this reduction of theology to religious studies lies in wanting to protest against the perceived narrowness and dogmatism of theology, and so to make it more amenable to the established academic culture, and thereby more compatible with other worldviews.

While such views do not object to theology as such, they allow it to exist in public universities only in the form of "religious studies." But the underlying principle of such a position is problematic. It naively presumes that scholars of religion can carry out their task in an objective, scientific, detached manner, similar, say, to the methods of anthropology and sociology – in contrast to the supposed "subjective" standpoint of theology. This is particularly clear in McCutcheon's view when he concludes that "unlike the theologian, for the scholar of religion *qua* anthropologist of credibility, there is nothing religious about religion."[40] But, we would argue, that such ingrained positions are, in fact, trapped in an outmoded theory of culture and rationality. As Thiemann has pointed out, the distinction "between objective (or 'hard') historical studies and subjective (or 'soft') normative studies is a false distinction," one that has contributed to the present problem of the academic status of theology.[41] The norm of

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[39] Martin, "Other People's Theologies," 74-78.
[40] Russell T. McCutcheon, "The Study of Religion as an Anthropology of Credibility," 26.
[41] Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 166.

objectivity is wrongly used to argue against the inclusion of theology in the core of university critical studies. Further, the opinion that the "religiosity" of religion (or theology) is incompatible with academic scholarship and thus needs to be removed or filtered, is not methodologically sound. Moreover, a strict demarcation between the spheres of theology and religious studies is not helpful, since there is considerable common ground between the two. In practice, it will be inevitably problematic to admit religious studies into the university while excluding theology. This has been recognized by the proponents of the next view we shall now consider.

Some scholars do not object to the inclusion of theology in some way within public universities. Nonetheless, they are not prepared to welcome this inclusion of theology in its totality. They propose to divide theology into at least two different kinds. For instance, William Hart tries to avoid treating theology as merely a subset of religious studies. He claims, "I admit being tempted by the view that the intellectual health of religious studies demands that theology be strictly quarantined. But I am skeptical of this view as well."[42] The reason for his reserve on this point is that such "quarantining" would result in losing some elements of theology, such as the confessional and doctrinal content of theological studies – as religious studies would simply by-pass

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[42] William D. Hart, "From Theology to Theology: The Place Of 'God-Talk' In Religious Studies," in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University*, 93.

them.[43] Hart, therefore, proposes a distinction between two kinds of theology –-

"Theology" and "*theology*." He explains this distinction:

> Theology with an uppercase "T" refers to a devotional, confessional, and
> dogmatic enterprise, a professional, church-based enterprise; *theology* italicized
> with a lowercase "t" refers to a liberal, academic, and humanistic enterprise, a
> philosophical enterprise. Theology is fideistic; *theology* is fallibilistic. The
> former is absolutism born of skepticism. The latter is an open, revisable,
> hypothetical form of inquiry that rejects the either/or of absolutism and
> skepticism.[44]

To Hart, "Theology" and "*theology*" can be clearly differentiated. He commends

"*theology*" to public universities, thereby arguing that the exclusion of the traditional

discipline of theology from modern universities is a result of the failure to make a

basic distinction between "*theology*" and "Theology."[45] The problem with such a

proposal is this: how, exactly, can theology be so neatly divided into the subjective

and objective, into the orthodoxy and orthopraxy, into the fideistic and scientific?

Such a kind of theological dualism is problematic, as we have seen in Tanner's

argument against the division of academic theology and everyday theology, as

presented in the previous chapter. To Tanner, the operations of the two theologies in

question really have more in common than any notional differentiation would suggest.

In her words, "The process of specialized theological investigation is not, however,

entirely unlike that of the everyday. The processes have more in common than the

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[43] See Linell E. Cady, "Territorial Disputes: Religious Studies and Theology in Transition," in
Religious Studies, Theology, and the University, 121-122.
[44] William D. Hart, "From Theology to Theology," 94, cf. 106.
[45] Hart, "From Theology to Theology," 95.

differences in their respective norms and interests might suggest."[46] The reasons for this are, first, academic theology is also a form of social action, and secondly, academic theology rarely operates independently of everyday theology.[47] Besides this problematic dualism, there is a further problem with Hart's distinction. He seems, in fact, to be reducing "*theology*" to "religious studies," and so does not in practice offer an alternative to the previous view.

In a similar vein, Delwin Brown has attempted to describe a type of academic theology more explicitly compatible with "university criteriology."[48] Such a norm, he explains, is "the requirement that all claims to knowledge be based on forms of evidence that are open to reproducible processes of examination by any and all qualified investigators."[49] However, Brown is aware of the complexity of his proposal: "what kinds of evidence are appropriate in this or that field of knowledge, what the appropriate qualifications of an investigator are, even how these are to be determined, etc., are debatable and debated."[50] But he makes the point that, since the academy is a subculture itself, it is defined by its own dynamic and revisable criteria and practices of inquiry. Though every discipline has its own academic criteria and standards, it is

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[46] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 82.

[47] See Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 82-86.

[48] Delwin Brown, "Academic Theology in the University or Why an Ex-Queen's Heir Should Be Made a Subject," in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University*, 127.

[49] Brown, "Academic Theology in the University or Why an Ex-Queen's Heir Should Be Made a Subject," 127.

[50] Brown, "Academic Theology in the University or Why an Ex-Queen's Heir Should Be Made a Subject," 127.

obvious that they must also meet commonly recognised academic criteria in order to develop arguments as they engage in cross-disciplinary dialogue.[51] In terms of Wittgenstein's notion of "language games," to play the academic game, theology must play according to its rules. Since academic theology can meet with the university criteria in this respect, it can be included as an academic discipline in public universities, apparently without any problem.

But there is a problem. One can hardly object to the need for theology to show academic competence. But, the distinction between an "academic" theology and a "confessional" or church-based theology is not as obvious. Does the term, "academic theology," imply that there is some type of theology that is recognisably "academic," compared to other types which are "less-academic," and less culturally attuned to the academy? Is the methodology of this "academic theology" exclusively rational and critical compared to other types? An affirmative answer falls into the trap of problematic dualism. Linell E. Candy has noted this dualism when she writes that "Theologians arguing for the inclusion of theology within religious studies typically defend a subset of the discipline called 'academic theology,' thereby signalling

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[51] Brown argues in elsewhere that the postmodernist has transmuted the modernist longing for universals: "If the university cannot *be* the house of universal knowledge, because there is no universal knowledge, let it then be the house of all particular knowledges, the place where they all meet and compete." (Delwin Brown, "Public Theology, Academic Theology: Wentzel Van Huyssteen and the Nature of Theological Rationality," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 21, no. 3 (2000): 97).

agreement that not all theology belongs within the liberal arts and sciences."[52]

Furthermore, as Tanner has suggested, the more theology attempts to become "a rather typical academic guild, the more the churches find their own needs and concerns neglected."[53] In the end, the differentiation between church-based theology and academic theology, along with what is called "public theology," can only end in theology failing to address its actual context, namely, the life, and the critical concerns of the church. Basically, academic theology would be limited to scholarly forms of inquiry divorced from the concerns of communities of living faith. The question, then, must be asked: Is this allegedly "academic theology" or "philosophical theology" really good theology in the first place? Are the essentially manifold activities of theology sufficiently recognized? According to Bernard Lonergan's methodological framework, theological method is differentiated into the eight functional specialties. [54] This collaborative framework comprises research, interpretation, history, dialectic, foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communication. The different but related activities are all grounded in the dynamics of consciousness, operating on four levels, namely, the empirical, intellectual, rational and moral. The neglect of any one of the eight specialized activities would mean that the collaborative framework of theology is distorted. Beginning with research and

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[52] Cady, "Territorial Disputes," 122.
[53] Kathryn Tanner, "Theology and Cultural Context in the University," in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University*, 199.
[54] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*.

terminating in communications, Lonergan's theological method is "a framework of

collaborative creativity." It is conceived as a way of bringing together the specialized

activities of academic theology and the more experiential and communitarian

concerns of everyday theology. Emphasising the value and the necessity of

articulation of the eightfold specialisation, he writes,

> The distinction and division are needed to curb one-sided totalitarian ambitions.
> Each of the eight has its proper excellence. None can stand without the other
> seven. But the man with the blind-spot is fond of concluding that his specialty is
> to be pursued because of its excellence and the other seven are to be derided
> because by themselves they are insufficient. From such one-sidedness theology
> has suffered gravely from the middle ages to the present day. Only a well-
> reasoned total view can guard against its continuance in the present and its
> recurrence in the future.[55]

Implicit in this view is a strong argument against the separation of academic theology

from everyday theology. No theological activity can be treated as self-contained and

self-sufficient in itself. Rather, all work together and belong to the one process of

mediating the meaning and value of religion within a given culture. From this

methodological comprehension of theology, we now pass to the third and final

position.

Some scholars have argued that theology, being by nature an academic discipline, has

no need of any radical revision. In other words, it does not require re-clothing in some

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[55] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 137.

"academic dress" as the previous proposals have suggested. For instance, according to

Kathryn Tanner, we should avoid either re-conceptualizing theology and religious

studies to make them seem alike – as S. Ogden and G. Kaufman have done – or re-

adjusting academic theology by gearing it towards church concerns, in the manner of

G. Lindbeck.[56] For Tanner, no radical revision is necessary if theology is to be

involved in the cultural contest within public universities. Indeed, she argues that "in

university curricula, Christianity could be put on a level playing field with other

religions on intellectual grounds."[57] By implication, theology within universities is

not simply a matter of engaging in a religious or crypto-religious contest with the

academe. Nor, it must be added, does theology depend on Christianity's own

competency as a cultural force as with scholasticism during the Medieval period.

Rather, theology already has the ability of producing "an interestingly different angle

on life," though it can gain something from the university-wide cultural contest as

well.[58] Theology, by its very nature, is able to meet "the university criteriology"

(Brown), and fulfil the requirements of "procedural rationality" (Marsden)[59], and so

act according to "the canons of the university" (Davaney).[60] Once more, the

subjective nature of various academic disciplines and the validity of their methods

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[56] Tanner, "Theology and Cultural Context in the University," 200-203.
[57] Tanner, "Theology and Cultural Context in the University," 206.
[58] Tanner, "Theology and Cultural Context in the University," 206, 208-210.
[59] Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, 431.
[60] Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Rethinking Theology and Religious Studies," in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University*, 151.

become important underlying issues. On criteriological grounds, theology need not accept a position in which it is ruled out by default. In Davaney's words,

> These commitments – to self-critical reflexivity on the part of scholars, to treating religions as human phenomena like other human phenomena, and to arguing for our interpretations in the public context – allow many interpretations and explanations to enter the academic fray. They rule no position in or out because of its origins but only according to whether it is willing to be tested according to reigning academic criteria.[61]

Consequently, theology, religious studies and other disciplines are on the same level; they all must undergo the test of academic rigor. Furthermore, the university itself is not a neutral site, but one that embodies all sorts of values and commitments. Theology, then, can co-exist and collaborate with other disciplines, whether these be religious, social, psychological or philosophical, to name a few. Indeed, Davaney asserts that, given recent cultural theory, both theology and religious studies can be seen as "separate but equal intellectual endeavors." Moreover, P. Cooey, arguing that both theologians and philosophers share many commonalities, considers that "Both philosophers and academic theologians are expected to know, to teach, and to address the scholarly positions with which they disagree with fairness; both are expected to be self-critical in their work."[62] And they differ "by virtue of the emphasis on theological content in their backgrounds." Therefore, according to Cooey, academic theology

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[61] Davaney, "Rethinking Theology and Religious Studies," 151.
[62] Paula M. Cooey, "The Place of Academic Theology in the Study of Religion from the Perspective of Liberal Education," in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University*, 180.

benefits liberal education in general as "a species of cultural studies."[63] What she

means by this is that theology educates students to a critical appraisal of religious

influences, either positively or negatively, on their life and society, especially when

dealing with issues such as gender, class, ethnicity, power, etc. In the end, it helps

students to "think critically and constructively about religious meaning and value in

ways that consider explicitly their own possible responsibilities and choices as 'co-

makers of culture.'"[64] In such a perspective, theology not only has a legitimate role to

play in public universities, but also exerts a positive influence on university-wide

studies. It accentuates the theological-religious dimension of human experiences and

broadens one's view of human reality. In the end, the primary purpose of theology

engaging in the academic cultural contest is that of "'widening the conversation of

mankind' (Greetz), 'deepening understanding' (Karen McCarthy Brown), 'reducing

puzzlement' (Margery Wolf), and 'making intelligible all human phenomena'

(Jonathan Z. Smith)."[65]

In addition, Tanner asserts that theology shares the same cultural and academic

resources as other academic disciplines. Theology is never sufficient unto itself with

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[63] Cooey, "The Place of Academic Theology in the Study of Religion from the Perspective of Liberal Education," 182.

[64] Cooey, "The Place of Academic Theology in the Study of Religion from the Perspective of Liberal Education," 182.

[65] Davaney, "Rethinking Theology and Religious Studies," 152.

specifically Christian sources and norms (as suggested by John Milbank).[66] To Tanner,

> Theology is fundamentally then a parasitic or consumptive field, establishing its distinctiveness from others in and through what it does with borrowed material. As such a parasitic or essentially consumptive field, it repeats within itself the sort of cultural contest or tussle over matters of shared concern that constitutes university life as an integrated whole in my account. One cannot be a constructive theologian for the present day without familiarity with the currency of the other intellectual or cultural fields of the day, and it is through the assessment of how other theologians of the past and present have dealt with comparable material of their own times and places that one develops a sense for what needs to be done now. If this is the basic character of theological construction, then even the most narrowly defined, church-oriented academic theology ignores at its peril the wider cultural contexts of that construction which university disciplines discuss.[67]

In these words, Tanner strongly contests any narrow and inward-looking type of theology. If it is a true theology, it is naturally contextual, and it actively engages with the wider cultural world. Thus, theology can never be contained within the four walls of the church building, or theological seminaries and colleges. It is constantly engaging with different academic disciplines, confronting the newest ethical issues, and seeking solutions for the prevailing cultural and social ills. Moreover, theologians are involved in the same world as other academics and the wider public. Tanner's use of such terms as "parasitic" and "consumptive" in her description of theology's relationship to culture, society and academe should not obscure the more positive possibility: the present world, in its cultural, social and academic structures, is,

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[66] Tanner, "Theology and Cultural Context in the University," 208.
[67] Tanner, "Theology and Cultural Context in the University," 210.

however implicitly, living off the human capital built up over centuries of theology's care for those meanings and values without which society would disintegrate – for example, the dignity of the human person, the possibility of attaining truth, the absolute character of the moral good, the inclusive range of the common good, especially in regard to the powerless, the meaning of suffering, hope for eschatological fulfilment, and the value of forgiveness and reconciliation.

The advantage of treating theology as a methodologically self-aware academic discipline is that the problematic separation of church-based (or confessional) and academic theologies is avoided. According to this problematic view, theology need not be reduced to some kind of academic core with all the peripheral beliefs and dogma peeled off, in order to be a legitimate discipline in public universities. Otherwise, there will be an irreconcilable inconsistency between theory and practice, the polarities of the objective and subjective, and the activities of reason and faith. At the other extreme, the tendency to treat theology as narrow, fideistic, and enclosed in its own subjectivism – in contrast, to the supposed detached and disinterested approaches of religious studies, is mitigated. Theology, when it employs a method that relates it to the deeper cultural concerns of human history, has its own competence in relation to the religious, philosophical, historical and scientific studies taking place in the academic world: it learns from them and contributes to them by

extending the horizons of inquiry and presenting the specialized data which it considers. Theology understood in a collaborative relationship with other academic disciplines, in particular, cultural studies, has its own intrinsic value. It has its own academic strength, and is able to influence and enrich cultural studies. Such a position can be tellingly argued with any scholar involved in cultural studies. We shall now see how this view of theology in relation to other academic discipline can be applied to the Sino-Christian context.

4. Theology as an Academic Discipline in the Sino-Christian Context

Issues relating to the academic status of theology in public universities in China emerge in historical and cultural contexts quite different from those of the North American scene that we have been considering. Peter Ng (吳梓明), a Hong Kong academic specializing in the history of Chinese Christian universities, points out that, though the challenges and changes to Christian theological education experienced in the United States in the last few decades have some parallels with the development in China, some contrasting factors come into play.[68] In the United States, the growing secularization of society has challenged the traditional basis of religious and Christian

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[68] Peter Tze Ming Ng 吳梓明, 基督宗教與中國大學教育 *(Christianity and University Education in China)* (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2003), 292-295.

life and thought. The challenge to that extent has come from within the culture itself.[69] But in China, the factors are mainly political.[70] With the establishment of the new Communist government in 1949, there was a shift to centralized control of education in the 1950s. Since the state was hostile to Christianity, with its official anti-religion policy, divinity schools or religious departments in the Chinese universities were closed down from that time. Though seminaries continued to exist outside the universities, their number was limited; and they had little influence in the academic, public and cultural worlds.[71] However, since 1977, that is, after the Cultural Revolution, departments of religion slowly began to appear in various universities, especially over the last decade. It is observed that, since the 1980s, the philosophy department of main universities in China have begun to offer courses on the history of Christianity, Christian thought and culture, the philosophy of Christian religion, Christian arts, and comparative religious studies including Christianity and other religions.[72] The North American discussion centres on whether theology could

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[69] See Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*.

[70] Ng, *基督宗教與中國大學教育 (Christianity and University Education in China)*, 294. Also see Zhang Xian 張憲, "大陸高校開展基督宗教教學與研究之我見（The Teaching and Research on Christianity in Higher Education in China)," in *大學與基督宗教研究 (University and Christian Studies)*.

[71] Jason Tsz Shun Lam 林子淳, *多元性漢語神學詮釋：對「漢語神學」的詮釋及漢語的「神學詮釋」 (A Polyphonic View on Sino-Christian Theology: An Interpretation Of "Sino-Christian Theology" and Chinese "Theological Hermeneutics")* (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2006), 29.

[72] See Zhang, "大陸高校開展基督宗教教學與研究之我見 (The Teaching and Research on Christianity in Higher Education in China)," 159. The factors giving rise to the re-establishments of religious department in Chinese universities have already been mentioned in the introduction to this thesis.

rightly continue to claim a place in the modern, public university.[73] But in the Sino-Christian context, a different question arises. The main issues are not whether theology can have a place in the university – a theoretical impossibility, given past and present government policies – but who has the right to speak on behalf of Christianity, and who, consequently, has the competence to interpret Christianity, along with its sources, traditions and social applications. Is Christian theology, then, to be left to, say, secular and humanistic interpretations, and thus reduced to the particular philosophical and socio-cultural perspectives foreign to it?

Due to the anti-religious stance of the Chinese state-sponsored universities, the last two decades have seen Christian studies being carried out by scholars within the "non-religious" departments of philosophy, history, sociology, and languages. Though departments of religion are being re-established, most of their founding scholars are formed by other disciplinary areas. He Guanghu (何光滬), a Chinese academic at Remmin Univeristy in Beijing, is a leading scholar in the field of Sino-Christian theology. He comments that, as the majority of these scholars are brought up in atheistic cultural and academic backgrounds, their perspectives and approaches are notably different from those of Western scholars coming from explicitly religious

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[73] For instance, see Davaney, "Rethinking Theology and Religious Studies," 144.

or Christian backgrounds. He claims,

> After the disruption of Christian studies from 1950s to 1970s, Christian research is primarily carried out and dominated by scholars outside of the church circle. These scholars mainly come from different social science colleges and universities and their previous studies were in philosophy, history, humanities, ethics, art theory, and other academic disciplines. They are all raised in an atheistic context, strongly influenced by materialism and scientism from childhood. Therefore, their worldview and methodology naturally tend towards rationalism. This has determined the Christian studies in contemporary Chinese universities, with rationalism very much a characteristic of its academic studies.[74]

With their training in non-theological or non-religious fields, these Chinese academics tend to use the categories familiar to them in their own fields of expertise, even though a growing number of such scholars are becoming aware of multidisciplinary issues. Nonetheless, they cannot easily escape the influence of the established materialistic and scientific outlook of their formative culture – to which any notion of the transcendent and positive revelation and religious tradition is quite alien. Inevitably their approach to Christianity is basically humanistic and historical, extrinsic to the language and experience of Christian tradition itself. He Guanghu further observes that these scholars are embracing the basic ideologies of a free modernized society, namely, the separation of religion/Church and State, the priority

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[74] He Guanghu 何光滬, "基督教研究對當代中國大學的意義 (The Significance of Christian Studies Towards Contemporary Chinese University)," in 大學與基督宗教研究 (*University and Christian Studies*), 154-155. See also Kang Phee Seng 江丕盛, "學術研究的信仰基礎：基督信仰認知意義的探討 (The Fideistic Foundation of Academic Research: The Search for the Congitional Significance of Christian Faith," in 大學與基督宗教研究 *(University and Christian Studies)*, 299-300.

of religious pluralism and the promotion of social harmony.[75] On one hand, these

Chinese scholars, while proposing an academic type of Sino-theology, have no

difficulty in treating Christian theology as part of university studies and research. On

the other hand, they seem to treat theology as merely an academic subject.[76] For

instance, Zhang Xian (張憲) points out that the present religion departments in

Chinese universities, while exploring religious phenomena from a general point of

view, and thereby opening up new areas of academic research, make no effort to

connect the meaning and significance of Christian doctrines to church communities

and personal faith.[77] The faith-dimension, with all the values of personal and social

transformation, often does not come up for consideration. An abstract and theoretical

form of intellectual inquiry holds sway – which may have its value, but not if such

specialized considerations are taken to exhaust the whole of the theological enterprise,

as, say, represented in the methodologies of Tanner, Lonergan, and Tracy.

This situation explains to a large extent why mainland Chinese scholars are proposing

a certain type of Sino-Christian theology. For instance, Liu Xiaofeng (劉小楓)

strongly argues for a liberal, humanistic and academic type of Sino-Christian

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[75] He, "基督教研究對當代中國大學的意義 (The Significance of Christian Studies Towards Contemporary Chinese University)," 155.

[76] See Zhang, "大陸高校開展基督宗教教學與研究之我見 (The Teaching and Research on Christianity in Higher Education in China)," 164-169.

[77] Zhang, "大陸高校開展基督宗教教學與研究之我見 (The Teaching and Research on Christianity in Higher Education in China)," 163-164. See also Lam, *多元性漢語神學詮釋：對「漢語神學」的詮釋及漢語的「神學詮釋」 (A Polyphonic View on Sino-Christian Theology: An Interpretation Of "Sino-Christian Theology" and Chinese "Theological Hermeneutics")*, 30-32.

theology.[78] To Liu, if Sino-Christian theology intends to establish itself as a competitive voice within the pluralistic context of current Chinese thought, it has to develop its academic strength. He Guanghu, similar to Liu in this respect, proposes a "humanistic" Sino-theology. He distinguishes "Christian studies" from "Christian theology," as having very differing concerns. Christian studies employs the resources of reason alone. To this degree, such studies represent an inquiry "from the outside to the inside" as far as Christian faith is concerned. On the other hand, Christian theology is faith-based, and appeals to different criteria of rationality; and so moves "from the inside out" – that is, from what is interior to Christian experience, to the outside world of the academic and the purely secular. It is reflective of Anselm's adage, "faith seeking understanding." From this point of view, "Christian studies" are purely academic, while "Christian theology" can be both academic and confessional.[79] In this differentiation, his approach is equivalent to the second view presented above, in the division of theology suggested by Hart, namely, "Theology" and "*theology*." Though it is understandable why these Chinese scholars have

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[78] Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(the Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)* (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2000), 54, also 55-57. A renewed call to this humanistic/academic approach to Sino-Christian theology can be seen in Paulos Huang 黃保羅, "甚麼是漢語學術神學？(What Is Sino-Christian Academic Theology?)," http://blog.ifeng.com/article/1417274.html (accessed 27/04/2008). This article is a brief introduction to his soon to-be-published book 漢語學術神學：作為學科體系的基督教研究 *(Sino-Christian Academic Theology: Christian Studies as an Academic Discipline)*.

[79] He, "基督教研究對當代中國大學的意義 (The Significance of Christian Studies Towards Contemporary Chinese University)," 153-154. He argues that this rational and academic study of Christianity has always been an important feature of Chinese scholars who studied Christianity. It was simply a result of the interaction between two cultures, which required some kind of interpretation and rationalistic reconstruction.

proposed such a strategic distinction for Sino-theology, problems remain in making these ostensibly clear distinctions between academic and church-based theologies, and between reason and faith. When theological method is understood as a framework of inter-related specializations (e.g., Lonergan's eight theological functional specialties), dividing theology into different types seems artificial and mutually isolating. Nonetheless, theologians, in line with David Tracy's notion of theology's different "publics," have acknowledged the needs and concerns of different spheres of life in relation to church, academy and society.[80] However, it must be emphasized that these different realms may intersect in many ways. Clear-cut divisions of labour must recognize that many areas of concern will overlap, even while permitting a variety of perspectives. Here, too, Tanner's postmodern theory of culture is relevant, given the mosaic of sub-cultural influences and the pluralism inherent in the culture as a whole.[81]

With all this in mind, we can proceed to introduce a greater precision into recent discussions of the academic character of Sino-Christian theology. Consequently, conflicts between university academics and church theologians can be more

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[80] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).
[81] See Tanner, *Theories of Culture*.

accurately identified, and, at least to some extent, resolved.[82]

There is, however, another related issue that bears mention. The problematic divisive view of theology arises principally from failing to understand theology as a method, that is, as a framework of collaboration among specialists in related fields, rather than simply as an objectively designated content of doctrines and themes. Armed with this distinction between method and content, it is easier to address the question, 'Can Christian theology can be studied by "non-confessional" scholars?'[83] Not only may such scholars bring no faith-commitment to their study of the data of theology, they also may not participate in the traditions of Christian experience through familiarity with its meanings and values. As a result, they approach Christian theology simply as an ideological system detached from Christian life and praxis. If "Christian studies" and "Christian theology" are so neatly differentiated, as suggested by He Guanghu, then the field of Christian studies is left open to a variety of perspectives of scholars from differing academic disciplines; but this can result only in confusion and chaos.[84] Given such problems, we must turn to a more adequate alternative.

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[82] It has been suggested that these university academics (who often called themselves "Cultural Christians") with their differing approaches to theology have created disputes with church leaders (see Lai Pan Chiu, "Typology and Prospect of Sino-Christian Theology," *Ching Feng* 6, no. 2 (2005): 211-212).

[83] Lai, "Typology and Prospect of Sino-Christian Theology."

[84] It is at this point that Liu Xiaofeng is dissimilar to He. Liu assumes that a "cultural Christian" is one who must display some personal commitment to Christian faith (Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 25-26.

Stephen Bevans, envisaging a particular contextual situation, asks specifically, "Can a nonparticipant in a context do contextual theology?," thereby bringing some light to the discussion.[85] He argues that, if theology is to take a particular context seriously, it must be understood as "being done most fully by the subjects and agents of culture and cultural change." Consequently, "theology can never be understood as a finished product produced by experts, which is merely delivered to a Christian community for its consumption."[86] With this emphasis on the context and on active participation within it, Bevans assumes that a nonparticipant cannot but fail to appreciate the local context fully. Moreover, nonparticipants tend to bring to the discussion feelings, perceptions, and limitations of experience that have a distorting influence on the local theology. Notwithstanding these reservations, Bevans does not preclude a contribution on the part of the nonparticipant to the dialogue at the heart of any contextual theology.[87] He offers a valuable clarification:

> … a person can participate in another culture to some degree; he or she can provide a kind of counterpoint by his or her critique of a particular culture or situation; and he or she can stimulate people from the culture or situation to do their own theological thinking. … A genuine contextual theology can indeed grow out of genuine dialogue between the participants in a particular culture and the stranger, the guest, the other.[88]

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[85] Stephan B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 14-16.
[86] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 13.
[87] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 14.
[88] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 14-15, 16.

In other words, it is only through interactions between all possible participants, religiously committed or not, that a proper contextual theology can healthily emerge. A good contextual theology and the theologians who promote it, must remain open to conversation with "the stranger," "the guest," and "the other" who, one way or another, are presences in the culture in question.

This observation of Bevans can be helpfully applied to the situation of the "non-confessional Sino-theological scholars." In this case, the "context" in Bevans' scheme is constituted in part by the faith commitment and experience of confessional scholars. Yet, in terms of a confessional faith, there is the contribution, however limited, of non-confessional scholars in the overall theological context. Admittedly, their background, experience and approach may be so different as to prevent them from doing justice to the full range of concerns that make up Christian theology. For instance, their philosophical or ideological positions may be alien to Christian faith. This is in fact the anxiety expressed by Kang Phee Seng (江丕盛) when he asks,

> Do these scholars of different assumptions and approaches have common religious language, or share the same foundation in mutual communication? Can religious or Christian studies be reduced to mere historical, sociological, humanistic, aesthetic or philosophical studies?[89]

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[89] Kang, "學術研究的信仰基礎 (The Fideistic Foundation of Academic Research)," 300.

Nonetheless, he wonders whether the methods guiding the exploration of religion or theology ever exist in a pure state independent of each other. And so, there is the deeper question: at what point can the scholars of different disciplines, with their differing research priorities and theoretical foundations, speak the same philosophical, anthropological and theological language, and so share common conceptual patterns?

Though there is room for this reservation, it does not follow that non-confessional scholars have nothing to offer to Sino-Christian theology, and that their views and perspectives must be rejected in principle. Rather, they can be seen as the "strangers," "guests," and "the others" who can provide local theologians with fresh insights and alternative perspectives. Also, there are areas of overlap between theology and cultural studies, for each academic field does not live in isolation from the others.[90] Interaction between theology and other cultural and philosophical studies cannot but be mutually enriching. All the more reason to require that interaction between theology and other academic disciplines in the universities be conducted in an atmosphere of mutual openness and respect. Indeed, Kang Phee Seng suggests that both religious studies and theology can carry on with their particular pursuits, irrespective of the religious commitment of the dialogue partners concerned. This does not mean, however, that faith has nothing to add to reason, nor that faith

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[90] Kang, "學術研究的信仰基礎 (The Fideistic Foundation of Academic Research)," 299-300.

necessarily compromises serious academic scholarship.[91] By cultivating mutual respect and dialogue, it is hoped, therefore, that Sino-Christian theology can engage with other thoughts and perspective in order to develop in a healthy manner.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen the close relationship between theology and cultural studies. They are able to mutually challenge and enrich one another. In order to further show that theology is able to contribute to the wider anthropological and cultural studies, the academic credentials of theology needed to be clarified. And we have argued, therefore, that theology does not lack its specifically academic credentials. Given the various options concerning the place of theology in the public university, our preference is to argue for a methodologically more differentiated theology without claiming that it need undergo any radical revision in its primary role as "faith seeing understanding" – in a dialogical relationship with other disciplines, and in contextualized communication with a specific culture.

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[91] Kang, "學術研究的信仰基礎 (The Fideistic Foundation of Academic Research)," 301. Chen Yaqian (陳涯倩) makes an insightful comment that theology does not speak against reason, but rationalism ("學園與教會：基督徒學人及其困惑 (Academia and Church: Christian Scholars and Their Perplexity)," 基督教思想評論 *(Regent Review of Christian Thoughts)* 5, no. 2 (2006): 222).

But a question remains: in what way can theology influence, not only academic disciplines, but also the wider culture? This is the question I wish to turn to in the next chapter by considering the notion of the "public theology."

CHAPTER SIX

Public Theology in the Emerging Sino-Christian Context

In the previous chapter, I argued that theology has the academic strength to interact with cultural studies and other academic disciplines. In the present chapter, I wish to move on to discuss the way in which theology can influence the wider culture and society. In particular, I will investigate how the emerging Sino-Christian theology might interact with, and contribute to, the wider culture in its contemporary context.

We can anticipate what is to follow in this chapter with a recent observation by a professor of Peking University, Sun Shangyang (孫尚陽):

> From the perspective of the sociology of religion, especially in the situation of Mainland China, Sino-Christian theology could mainly affect the society in two ways. The first is to deal with the interaction between Christianity and the social order, and the second is to provide an attractive and competitive system of meaning for believers and potential believers. I see that it is very crucial for the

development of Sino-Christian theology in the future if it could play a good role and keep a good balance in these two ways.[1]

The two avenues of Christian influence on Chinese society that Sun mentions can be roughly classified as the "public" and "private" spheres of Christian faith. The public sphere deals with the involvement of Christian faith in the surrounding culture and society. And the private sphere primarily deals with the individual Christian's appropriation of personal faith in its concrete setting. However, we should not artificially separate these two spheres as if they have no relation to one another. The distinction of public-private should not be over-emphasized, though it should be retained, as we will explain more fully later in the chapter. Nevertheless, my discussion will be mainly focused on the public sphere.

In regard to the public sphere of Christian faith, Sun briefly surveys three approaches that had been adopted in the history of Christianity in China. In his judgment, none of them has yielded satisfactory results. The first of these is "to accept the sovereignty and authority of the Chinese empire, and even to the point of providing the ruling order legitimation and justification."[2] Following H. Richard Niebuhr's classifications[3], this approach can be called the accommodation type or the "Christ of Culture" model.

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[1] Sun Shangyang, "A Reflection on the Development of Sino-Christian Theology from the Perspective of the History of Chinese Christian Thought," *Institute of Sino-Christian Studies News* 2007, 1.

[2] Sun, "A Reflection on the Development of Sino-Christian Theology from the Perspective of the History of Chinese Christian Thought."

[3] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1951).

Though it has the advantage of creating friendly relations with the state, it too easily sacrifices the transcendental dimension of Christianity. The second approach is in contradictory opposition to the first. It emphasizes the tension between Christianity and the secular society and worldviews. It is an instance of Niebuhr's "Christ against Culture" model because of its emphasis on the transcendent message of the church. Yet in doing so, it creates the difficulty of appearing hostile to the culture and society in which it lives. The third approach is characterised by its looking inward for "purification in spirit and inner fellowship, regardless of the outside world."[4] It can be roughly classified as Niebuhr's "Christ and Culture in Paradox" model. Again, this model has its strengths and weaknesses. On one hand, it acknowledges the tension Christians presently experience as they await for the final consummation of God's kingdom. On the other hand, the underlying dualistic assumptions are problematic. It has the potential to lead Christians either into an antinomianism that would ignore or devalue the common natural law, or into a cultural conservatism in which only religious matters are regarded as important.[5]

To the degree these former historical approaches have failed to provide a satisfactory model for contemporary Sino-Christian theology in its interactions with the socio-cultural context, we must continue to look further. In this search for a fresh approach,

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[4] Sun, "A Reflection on the Development of Sino-Christian Theology from the Perspective of the History of Chinese Christian Thought," 2.
[5] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 185-189.

I propose to develop the notion of a public theology. I shall present this material under the following headings:

1. What is public theology?;

2. Some basic assumptions;

3. How does public theology engage in public debate?

4. A public theology in the Sino-Christian context.

1. What Is Public Theology?

First of all, a word of clarification on the basic character of a public theology is needed. For instance, in what sense is it a specialized type of theology alongside biblical, systematic, and historical theologies, for example? Or, is it, say, simply a dimension of all specialized types of theology? Various answers to these questions have been put forward.

According to Jürgen Moltmann, public theology has to do with the universal relevance of theology precisely because it is Christian. Christian theology is essentially public in a social and political sense, not by extension or qualification. On this point, Moltmann writes,

> Its subject alone necessarily makes Christian theology a *theologia publica*, public theology. It gets involved in the public affairs of society. It thinks about what is of general concern in the light of hope in Christ for the kingdom of God.

It becomes political in the name of the poor and the marginalized in a given society. Remembrance of the crucified Christ makes it critical towards political religions and idolatries. It thinks critically about the religious and moral values of the societies in which it exists, and presents its reflections as a reasoned position.[6]

Given this inherent public concern, Christian theology seeks to articulate and promote the coming of God's Kingdom so that it will be actualized in the public world of human history – and not therefore, confined to the lives of individual believers.[7] Though the New Testament clearly calls on believers as individuals to respond to the following of Jesus for the sake of the Kingdom of God (e.g., Mk 1:14-15, Lk 9:23-27, Mt 6:33), such individual responses have public and cultural significance. For example, there are the two contrasting characters in Luke 18:18-30 and 19:1-10; the rich young ruler finds it hard to give away his possessions to the poor and to leave all for the sake of following Jesus; Zacchaeus, on the other hand, shows no such hesitation.[8] The Gospel, clearly, introduces no separation between the personal faith of individual disciples and their public and social life manifested in assisting the poor, visiting the sick, welcoming the strangers, and the like.[9] Moreover, Jesus' priestly

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[6] Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 1. See Hans Frei's view as explicated in Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence and History: Hans W. Frei's Public Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 1.

[7] Refer William F. Storrar and Andrew R. Morton, "Introduction," in *Public Theology for the 21st Century: Essays in Honour of Duncan B. Forrester*, ed. William F. Storrar and Andrew R. Morton (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 1.

[8] John Howard Yoder argues that this command of Jesus to sell one's possessions and give to the poor "was not a 'counsel of perfection,' but neither was it a constitutional law to found a utopian state of Israel. It was a jubilee ordinance which was to be put into practice here and now, once, in A.D. 26, as a 'refreshment,' prefiguring the 'reestablishment of all things'" (John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 70).

[9] See also Martin E. Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline, Evangelical, Catholic* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 94ff.

prayer for the disciples in John 17 does not ask the Father to take them *out* of the

world, but to protect them *within* it, and continues, "as you have sent me into the

world, so I have sent them into the world" (Jn 17:15-16, 18). In this prayer, the

disciples' relation to the world is clearly stated: they no longer belong to the world,

yet they are not taken out of the world, but rather they are sent into the world. This,

and other New Testament passages (cf. Rom 13:1-7, Eph 4:25-32, 1 Pet 2:9-10, 12),

clearly show that the followers of Jesus are not to retreat from the secular world and

its affairs, but to live in it and to engage it.[10] Implied in Jesus' sending his disciples

into the world is the missionary impetus of Christian life in the world. It is therefore

necessary for a reflective Christian faith to critically engage with the world, and to

discern how the Spirit of Christ is at work within it.

In this regard, Andrew Morton points out that "If one holds the publicness of theology

(or the public theology), one would strongly oppose to the treatment of theology (or

religion) as limited to private realm as if it is solely a function of individual

subjectivity."[11] More to the point, Ronald Thiemann asserts that "The line between

private and public, between the personal and the political, can no longer be drawn

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[10] When Stanley Hauerwas comments on the political and social significance of the church, he says, "The church need not worry about whether to be in the world. The church's only concern is *how* to be in the world, in what form, for what purpose" (Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know That Something Is Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 43ff).

[11] Morton argues that these two prevalent notions are clearly rejected by Duncan Forrester ("Duncan Forrester: A Public Theologian," in *Public Theology for the 21st Century*, 25).

with absolute clarity."[12] Any attempt to absolutize the private-public distinction or to confine theology to a quasi-spiritual private realm is a distortion. It would lead to the separation of the sacred and the secular, a loss of interest in secular affairs, and a pietistic approach to spiritual matters. When it loses its secular outreach to the political and the social realities in which it lives, theology becomes, by default, an expression of cultural conservatism, incapable of promoting genuinely human values.

A properly understood public theology has consequences. It can no longer be conceived as "a specialized discipline or a technical subspecies with a unique method of inquiry."[13] This is to say that public theology is not separable from theology proper. According to Thiemann, the two do not inhabit different and unrelated realms. Rather, as with theology proper, it is also guided by Anselm's axiom of "faith seeking understanding" – the search for an authentic self-expression within the academic, political, social, cultural and economic world in which it lives. This presumes that the most personal Christian convictions have consequences, not only for the self-understanding of faith, but also for the broader social and cultural context within which the Christian community must exist and to which it must witness.

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[12] Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 19. See also Clark E. Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
[13] Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 21.

However, Gerhard Sauter raises an objection to Thiemann's treatment of the public character of theology. He asks whether there are significantly different tasks and goals to be considered in relation to theology proper?[14] When theology is described in Anselm's terms of "faith seeking understanding," it accentuates the priority of God's revelation – and, consequently, the faith-dimension – given the limitations of any natural knowledge of God arising from the created world. This articulation of revelation and faith has developed a tradition of particular theological methods and approaches to serve its goal. A narrowing, and even a distortion, must result when Thiemann summarily reduces the search of faith for understanding to "a contextual interpretation of Christian convictions." Thereby, the focus has shifted, away from God's revelation and in the direction of the world and its public affairs. Nevertheless, Sauter would concede that the secular or cultural area is important for theological understanding, especially of moral and ethical matters: "This is indeed an important task for the hermeneutics of moral theology, but it does not characterize theology concerning the constitutive elements of faith, hope, and love."[15]

Nonetheless, it should be noted that Sauter is not objecting to public theology as such. His concern is for Christian theology to maintain its fundamental concentration on the Word of God. He thus objects to any suggestion of a public theology that is so

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[14] Gerhard Sauter, *Protestant Theology at the Crossroads: How to Face the Crucial Tasks for Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 158.
[15] Sauter, *Protestant Theology at the Crossroads*, 158.

constructed with secular concerns in mind as to lose its connection with the corporate

faith of the Church.[16] He cautions, therefore, against any form of public theology that

ends by being "reduced to a subject of comparative cultural studies, cut off from its

very roots."[17] Whatever form it takes, public theology is, and must remain, a Christian

theology, even when geared toward public issues.

Max Stackhouse makes the same point, but from an opposite angle. He argues that

"theology in the strictest sense is a type of public theology, which anyone can

participate in and discuss, applicable to every area of life."[18] Therefore, its approach

to the issue of "the sacred" is entirely different from that of humanistic disciplines

(psychology, sociology, anthropology, history or cultural studies).[19] Unlike these

disciplines, theology, properly understood as public, takes spiritual and moral issues

seriously from a Christian perspective. It works as a critical, yet constructive

discipline within the whole domain of human experience. Yet, on the other hand, it

differs from civil religion. In this respect, Stackhouse finds the public outreach of

theology exemplified in theologians such as Martin Marty, Reinhold Niebuhr,

Jonathan Edwards, Horace Bushnell, Walter Rauschenbush, and in politicians such as

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[16] Sauter, *Protestant Theology at the Crossroads*, 165.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Quote in Xie Zhibin 謝志斌, "何以公共？何種限制？公共神學的形式與張力 (What Is Public? What Is Its Limitations? The Form and Tension of Public Theology)," 基督教思想評論 *(Regent Review of Christian Thoughts)* 3 (2005): 142.
[19] Max L. Stackhouse, "甚麼是公共神學：一種美國基督教的觀點 (What Is Public Theology: An American Christian View)," 基督教文化學刊 *(Journal for the Study of Christian Culture)* 14 (2005).

Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and Woodrow Wilson. He therefore claims that

such an approach, expressed in such instances, is clearly "different from that of

civic/civil religion, not only in that they utilize the Bible and doctrinal resources more

fully, in contrast to using political or social theories which constitute the collective

identity, but also in their concern for more fundamental common human context, in

contrast to concern merely for American experience."[20] Stackhouse, like Sauter,

places great emphasis on what he refers to as the "revealedness" of theology, that is,

theology's witness to the Word of revelation, reflection on it, and its application to

every aspect of public life.

Admittedly, Thiemann's notion of public theology may veer toward an unacceptably

generalized notion of "faith seeking understanding." Nonetheless, his emphasis on

"the social, cultural, and moral context within which public policies are developed"[21]

can be integrated into the range of theological concerns. There is no need to reject his

claim that public theology should concern not only its public intelligibility, but also

its public significance. In his brief survey of the contemporary discussion of public

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[20] Max L. Stackhouse, "甚麼是「公共神學」？ (What Is 'Public Theology'?)," *基督教文化學刊 (Journal for the Study of Christian Culture)* 11 (2004): 7-8. This is a translated speech delivered by Stackhouse in 2003 at Beijing. In this article, Stackhouse not only spells out the different understandings of civic and civil religion, he also attacks these notions. See also Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, Chapter 9: "Passion and Civility: Religion in Politics and Policy," 168-188.

[21] Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 21.

theology, he makes the following comment:

> There has been a great deal of discussion in academic theology about "public theology." Most of that debate has focused on the question of whether theological arguments are available for public examination and whether theological assertions are intelligible beyond the confines of a particular religious community. Although such issues are intellectually interesting and important within a rather small circle of academic theologians, they only begin to help us address what I consider the far more important questions: Will religious convictions and theological analyses have any real impact on the way our public lives are structured? Can a truly public theology have a salutary influence on the development of public policy within a pluralistic democratic nation?[22]

For Thiemann, the far more important issue for public theology relates to the public significance of theology, not just to its public intelligibility. This is in line with Moltmann's approach, as mentioned above: Christian theology not only "thinks critically about the religious and moral values of the societies in which it exists," but also "presents its reflections as a reasoned position."[23] Still, the further question arises: how exactly can such Christian "reflections" be presented as a "reasoned position" in the public space in which the faith-commitment of Christian life cannot be presupposed. How is its "position" to be regarded as "reasonable" by its interlocutors

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[22] Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 173.

[23] Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 1. See Vincent Bacote's view of the public theology's task: "Public theology investigates issues such as the potential for theology to serve as a form of public discourse and the development and explication of a theological motivation for public engagement" (quoted in Daniel Strange, "Evangelical Public Theology: What on Earth? Why on Earth? How on Earth?," in *A Higher Throne: Evangelicals and Public Theology*, ed. Chris Green (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 20).

who do not share its presuppositions?[24] A possible implication is that arguments articulated from a Christian standpoint require some alteration or revision of Christian self-understanding. The rest of this chapter will be devoted mainly to the resolution of this issue. But before we explore more fully the implications of a public Christian theology, we must first note some basic assumptions inherent in the notion and conduct of theology as public discourse.

2. Some Basic Assumptions

According to Kathryn Tanner, there are two basic assumptions implied in the public character of theology. First is the requirement of "a confidence in the general importance of the normative outlooks that Christian arguments bring to public debate." Secondly, there must be "a respect for the pluralism in which Christians find themselves just one interlocutor among others."[25] These two requirements come together in demanding of theologians a conviction that they have something distinctive to contribute to the public sphere from the resources of the particular Christian perspective. Thiemann sees this in terms of a challenge to construct a public

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[24] Cf. Nico Koopman claims that "[p]ublic discourse addresses three sets of questions regarding firstly the inherent public nature, scope, and *telos* of Christian faith, and secondly the public rationality, intelligibility, inner coherency, consistency, logic and reasonability of Christian faith, and thirdly the impact upon, and significance, meaning and implications of Christian faith for public life" ("Churches and Public Policy Discourses in South Africa," http://www.csu.edu.au/faculty/arts/theology/pact/papers (accessed 06/10/2008)).

[25] Kathryn Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1996): 79-80.

theology "that remains based in the particularities of the Christian faith while genuinely addressing issues of public significance."[26] A genuine Christian faith cannot but influence the public behaviour of Christians in the world. It affects the whole complex of interpersonal relationships in ways that reach beyond the supposedly "private" domain of individual lives.[27] Obviously, in this, Christians are not simply talking to one another as though in a public square outside a church. In this global era, there is an unprecedented plurality of voices, speaking in the languages of many positions and standpoints – sociological, psychological, philosophical, political and religious.

The would-be public theologian, therefore, comes into the public square as one dialogue-partner among many. The aim of public theological discourse is not to exert religious control over the political process or the social interactions that take place. This is to say that theology is never in a position to dominate the public debate and control its outcome. As Tanner writes,

> The public sphere that theologians are trying to influence is not being identified here with the state or the political institutions that make up the nation's government. Nor do the theological interventions have anything directly to do with party politics – with attempts to create, say, Christian political parties or Christian voting blocks. The public sphere that theologians are trying to

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[26] Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 19.
[27] See Stackhouse, "甚麼是公共神學：一種美國基督教的觀點 (What Is *Public Theology*: An American Christian View)," 299-300.

influence, is, instead, a specifically discursive sphere of interchange in civil society, one that is in principle open to all citizens and that occurs whenever and wherever matters of common concern come up for general discussion.[28]

With these words, Tanner both clarifies what constitutes the public space in which theology operates and specifies the aim of theologians participating in the public discourse. Consequently, developing a public theology is not the same as forming a Christian political party in opposition to the current government or to other political parties. As Max Stackhouse puts it, "it is not the duty of any religious organization to make any political policy, which will only result in theocracy and transform the church into a political party."[29] The church is not reducible to a particularized political entity, nor is its theology merely political.[30] It follows, therefore, that a public theology is not merely intent on promoting or contesting particular political viewpoints.[31] Rather, it is concerned with public issues. As Moltmann expresses it, "It [theology] gets involved in the public affairs of society. It thinks about what is of general concern in the light of hope in Christ for the kingdom of God." Gerhard Sauter, despite his reservations, declares that "the public sphere as the primary space and medium for doing theology."[32] And so, theology actively participates in the

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[28] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 80.

[29] Stackhouse, "甚麼是公共神學：一種美國基督教的觀點 (What Is *Public Theology*: An American Christian View)," 308.

[30] See Clive Marsh's conclusion in "The Point of Theology: Arts, Culture and Godly Living," *Expository Times* 119, no. 6 (2008): 281.

[31] See Stackhouse, "甚麼是公共神學：一種美國基督教的觀點 (What Is *Public Theology*: An American Christian View)," 300-301.

[32] Sauter, *Protestant Theology at the Crossroads*, 154. A good definition of the public realm is that of Jonathan Chaplin: "The public realm refers to that social space within which individuals and communities or associations interact with each other in ways that transcend their own unique rights and responsibilities" (quoted in Strange, "Evangelical Public Theology," 16).

public discourse as one of the voices, even though from a uniquely Christian perspective. When distinguishing public theology from partisan politics, the possibility or desirability of forming or endorsing any Christian political party is not ruled out in certain circumstances. But the first responsibility of the theologian is to think, speak and act as a responsible citizen in society. Tanner makes exactly this point. Theology, precisely as public, "refers to the sort of deliberation in common that shapes a responsible citizenry, the sort of deliberation that the founders of the U.S. republic always thought might legitimately include a religious component without threatening church/state separation."[33] This, then, is the point to keep in mind, especially when we consider the Sino-Christian concerns of this thesis. Public theology engages with public issues in the light of a Christian worldview: it is not a direct involvement in partisan politics.

On the other hand, the goal of public theology is not to construct a new form of Christendom, nor does it envisage a wholly Christianized nation.[34] Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon call such a situation or goal, "Constantinianism" which "demanded one, unified state religion in order to keep the Empire together."[35] It tends

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[33] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 80. Regarding the development of the understandings of public sphere, see Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989); Owen C. Thomas, "Public Theology and Counter-Public Spheres," *Harvard Theological Review* 85, no. 4 (1992): 453-466.
[34] See Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 173.
[35] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 42.

to assume that a nation must be wholly Christianized before Christianity is able to contribute anything positive to the society and nation. In contrast, the public concern of theology is not expressible in such totalitarian or theocratic terms.[36] The "Great Commission," "go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19, see Mk 16:15, Acts 1:8) is not rejected. It does not imply, however, the aim of establishing "all nations" as Christian in a political sense. Indeed, the notion of a Christianized nation along the lines of a "new Christendom," is today deeply problematic.[37]Though many Western countries (such as the United States of America, England, Ireland, Germany, Italy and Poland, etc.) are still often perceived by the East as "Christian nations," it has become necessary to explain the distinction between countries which, with a long Christian tradition, exhibit certain values that can be called "Christian" such as the dignity of the human person, the imperatives of social justice, and the like, this is a long way from their realizing anything recognisable as a fully "Christianized" society. In fact, the countries referred to in this way are basically secular states – and, in some cases, "secular" in the sense of an established secularism which contains

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[36] Cochran observes that "examples of pure theocracies or theocratic theories are difficult to find in the modern world" (*Religion in Public and Private Life*, 173). The closest examples are Saudi Arabia and Iran. Christian Reconstructionist Movement in the United States can be seen as promoting a theocratic government.

[37] It is claimed that "there is no such thing as 'Christian culture' or 'Christian civilization' in the sense that there is an Islamic culture. … The reason for this lies in the infinite translatability of the Christian faith" (Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 131).

strong anti-religious and anti-Christian elements.[38] Their public policies may, in fact, be quite incompatible with Christian values – as in the cases of aggressive forms of nationalism, commercial exploitation of poor countries, attacks on marriage and the family, amoral experimentation in the name of science, and ecological irresponsibility. The notion of a Christianized nation simply confuses politics and religion. According to Clarke Cochran, such total Christianization would eliminate politics and public life, and allow no public space for strangers, non-believers, differences of ideas and political language.[39] To Hauerwas, this would be simply another kind of tribalism, "which sets up artificial boundaries and defends them with murderous intensity."[40] In the end, this however remote and even absurd ideal of a "Christianized nation" must now appear to be contrary to the Christian values of freedom, respect for conscience, equality and love.

Moreover, while Christian hope has an eschatological vision of "God all in all" (1 Cor 15:28, Eph 1: 18-22, Col 1:16-20, Rev 21:5), it does not defer all its concerns to the world to come. It must be productive in contesting evil and promoting good in the present moment of history. Anthony Kelly, in his *Eschatology and Hope*, argues

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[38] A helpful article to read on the notion of secular free state, see Kwan Kai Man 關啟文, "公共空間中的宗教：自由主義對基督宗教的挑戰 (The Religion in the Public Space: The Challenge of Liberalism to Christianity)," in 基督宗教思想與21世紀 *(Christian Thoughts and the Twenty-First Century)*, ed. Lo Ping Cheung 羅秉祥 and Kang Phee Seng 江丕盛 (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2001), 293-330.

[39] Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 174.

[40] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 42.

convincingly that the world to come cannot be separated from the present suffering

world:

> While hope announces the definitive coming of the Kingdom of God in Christ,
> it must also denounce everything that opposes the Kingdom by oppressing
> humanity and enclosing it in despair. True hope must be productive of a more
> just society and a more human world. Eschatological hope is not to be so
> spiritualized as to have no historical consequences. Liberation from injustice
> and oppression is an integral part of the history of salvation.[41]

Christian hope for the Kingdom of God is intimately linked to the world of the present.

The Kingdom of God that Christ proclaims and anticipates is in the state of "already-

but-not yet."[42] Though the Kingdom has been inaugurated, its true nature is supra-

historical and supra-temporal, awaiting its final consummation in the end time.

Simply equating the Kingdom of God with a worldly Christendom is problematic.

In recent years, a scholar whose proposal comes very close to this idea of a new

Christendom is John Milbank. He proposes some kind of an identifiable alternative

Christian society with its distinguishable mode of practice.[43] In his view, a

specifically Christian practice follows logically from a specifically Christian narrative.

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[41] Anthony J. Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 32. See also Hans Schwarz, *Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 160-165.

[42] See George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 57-69, 193-210.

[43] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990, 1993), 245-252, 398-408, etc.

He claims,

> Theology purports to give an ultimate narrative, to provide some ultimate depth of description, because the situation of oneself within such a continuing narrative is what it means to belong to the Church, to be a Christian. … But just as there must be a gnoseologically primarily Christian historical narrative, so also there must be a specifically Christian practice.[44]

When Milbank argues against borrowing from non-Christian sources a fundamental account of society or history, he draws the conclusion: "there can only be a distinguishable Christian social theory because there is also a distinguishable Christian mode of action, a definite practice."[45] What Milbank is proposing is that Christians have a distinguishable social lifestyle and value-system distinct from other ways of life. Questions immediately arise: Does Milbank's proposal reflect the actual reality, and are Christians so basically distinguishable from their neighbours? Must Christians, then, renounce secular society to form their own particular society?[46]

Milbank's proposal is problematic. For instance, we cannot establish the claim that everyone who is against the practice of euthanasia is Christian. There are also non-Christians who are against euthanasia. And what would happen if we find some Christians who, in certain circumstances, are for it? The same conflicts can also occur in other ethical and social issues. In actual fact, we cannot determine Christian

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[44] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 249.
[45] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 380.
[46] See critique of Milbank in Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 97-99.

identity through a particular lifestyle or through moral values alone.[47] To put it another way, Christians cannot simply assume a certain lifestyle with its range of moral values and then claim that this is distinctively theirs. Christians cannot in fact be so easily separated from a given culture and community to form their own distinguishable society as Milbank would suggest. Following Tanner's postmodern understanding of cultures as neither bounded wholes nor self-contained, Kevin Vanhoozer argues that "If one examines the church across a variety of times and cultures, one sees that Christians have not everywhere and at all times believed the same things or acted the same way."[48] Miroslav Volf similarly claims that "Christians are not the insiders who have taken flight to a new 'Christian culture' and become outsiders to their own culture; rather when they have responded to the call of the Gospel they have stepped, as it were, with one foot outside their own culture while with the other remaining firmly planted in it."[49] Christians share many common practices with their neighbours. Sometimes they experience conflicts with non-Christian practice, but at other times, they may find themselves in agreement with secular courses of action. Likewise, there are conflicts among Christians themselves over the interpretation and application of the Gospel. A proposal such as Milbank's

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[47] Regarding this issue of Christian identity, see the discussion in Chapter four of this thesis when dealing with Tanner's position. See Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, Chapters 5 and 6, and Stephen Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

[48] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 121.

[49] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 49.

runs counter to the pluralistic cultural context of our day.[50] Whatever the challenges involved in constructing an effective and relevant public theology, it is not found in a new version of Christendom nor in a comprehensively Christianized alternative society.

3. How does Public Theology engage in Public Debate?

After clarifying the character and intention of public theology, it is time to consider the manner in which public theology might engage itself in public discourse. Tanner asks whether religious or theological claims can be admitted into public debate without "worries about a lack of fairness, about possible divisiveness, and the likelihood of futility"?[51] In a slightly different way, Michael Welker poses the same question: "Should theology, which comes forth from communities of faith and is essentially developed in them, enter into public discourse outside these communities of faith? And if so, how?"[52] The alleged difficulties against admitting religious or theological claims into public debate stem from the common perception of theological positions as authoritarian and oppressive of the legitimate freedoms of unbelieving dialogue-partners. If that is the case, Christian public voices would be divisive, and

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[50] Marty, *The Public Church*, 98.
[51] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 81-87.
[52] Michael Welker, "Is Theology in Public Discourse Possible Outside of Communities of Faith?," in *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Luis E. Lugo (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 111.

obstructive.[53] Sensitive to such reactions, Tracy concedes that "Religion seems private not just in the sociological sense of privatization but private in the philosophical sense of 'without reason,' decisionistic, undemonstrated, and perhaps undemonstrable."[54] This brings Daniel Strange to observe that, for many Christians, "public theology is a game we don't want to play, indeed *can't* play, because in reality it is a game that others don't want us to play."[55]

Another underlying issue is the relationship of religion to politics, and the whole ever-shifting field of Church-State relations. There are age-old questions: should religion engage in politics? How much influence should or can it exert? What are its limits? Any answer is translatable into a further question as to how might religious/theological claims be admissible in public discourse? The validity of public theology is very much dependent upon how such a question is answered. Tanner discusses two such proposals, and then proceeds to offer her own. We now proceed to discuss and evaluate these as to their adequacy.[56]

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[53] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 80-82.

[54] David Tracy, "Particular Classics, Public Religion, and the American Tradition," in *Religion and American Public Life: Interpretations and Explorations*, ed. Robin W. Lovin (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 117-118.

[55] Strange, "Evangelical Public Theology," 17.

[56] Another attempt from a more general nature regarding the role of religious speech in public discourse, see David Halleen, "The Role of Religious Speech in Public Discourse: An Examination of Contemporary Theories through Analyzing the Religious Speech of Martin Luther King, Jr and Ralph Reed" (Southern Methodist University, 2004). Halleen devises four typologies that reflect the contemporary theories concerning religious speech in public discourse: (1) The Witness type (represented by Stanley Hauerwas, Cal Thomas, Ed Dodson); (2) The Silence type (Richard Rorty); (3) The Participant type (Stephen Carter, Richard John Neuhaus. Michael Perry, Nicholas Wolterstorff); (4) The Moderate type (John Rawls, Robert Audi, Kent Greenawelt, Michael Perry).

The first of these consists in so revising the presentation of Christian positions and arguments that they become publicly acceptable.[57] The assumption here is that overtly religious claims or theological arguments must be destructive and divisive. For instance, the use of specifically religious terminology in public discourse often makes common linguistic ground elusive.[58] The solution, it would seem, is to reduce the offensiveness of Christian claims by appealing to some accepted common practice. In effect, this would mean transforming religious language into a common secular discourse.[59] In that case, according to Tanner, public theologians are under the necessity to "come up with the appropriate standards for public theological argument and to police, accordingly, the arguments religious people offer for public consideration."[60] One practical way of doing this is to present Christian claims in terms of illustrative stories or narratives which appeal to common human experience, so to meet the standard of public accessibility. Consequently, religious claims and arguments are opened up to other interlocutors for consideration without any difficulty.

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[57] See Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 82-85.

[58] Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 89.

[59] For instance, Kent Greenwalt claims that the language of public discourse is secular in nature: "The common currency of political discourse is nonreligious argument about human welfare. Public discourse about political issues with those who do not share religious premises should be cast in other than religious term" (Kent Greenawalt, *Religious Convictions and Political Choice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 216-217). See also critique of Greenawalt's view in Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 90-99.

[60] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 82.

Such an approach is clearly exemplified in the work of David Tracy. His identification of three closely related publics is well known: the church, the academy, and the wider society.[61] Underlying these "publics" is the reality of pluralism that one must face in the contemporary context, both within and outside oneself. Tracy claims, "For each of us seems to become not a single self but several selves at once. Each speaks not merely to several publics external to the self but to several internalized publics in one's own reflections on authentic existence."[62] Tracy is surely right in recognising this pluralistic context and to take it into account in his writings. Nevertheless, when he comes to public discourse, his vision becomes less pluralistic. His focus shifts to "what is shareable" among the classics of different traditions.[63] In his own words,

> The classics of any culture have always been considered phenomena in the public realm precisely through their disclosive and transformative shareable possibilities. Those possibilities come to us through the more elusive, but no less real, form of a conversation than through the more usual form of "argument." But once those possibilities come, they come as candidates for consensus for the entire community – candidates whose poetic (as distinct from both analytical and rhetorical) forms is the impact of a truth-as disclosure, not a truth as the explicit conclusion of an argument.[64]

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[61] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 5.

[62] Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 4. Here, Tracy not only continues Bernard Lonergan's emphasis on internal consciousness in one's theologizing, he also emphasizes the pluralistic context any scholar is located.

[63] Owen Thomas notices that Tracy makes a distinction between fundamental and systematic theology as the public character of theology only applies to the former, not the latter (Thomas, "Public Theology and Counter-Public Spheres," 454).

[64] Tracy, "Particular Classics, Public Religion, and the American Tradition," 124. See also David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 82-114.

For Tracy, what is shareable in the public realm is the disclosive-transformative power of any narrative. In another statement, he writes, "The central key to a conversation with a classic is neither the text nor the interpreter but the to-and-fro movement between them."[65] The message that is therefore communicated lies in one's interpretation of the narrative or art work as an expression of common human experience. Basically, Tracy's proposal draws on the theory of critical correlation between Christian texts and common human experience and language.[66] Thus, he emphasises "effects" instead of "origins" – for the origins of Christian arguments are particular, but their effects are public.[67]

Tracy's optimistic constructive method for promoting public theological discourse is, nonetheless, not without problems. We may ask whether it is possible to reduce religious arguments to some non-religious correlative in such a way that they remain distinctively religious.[68] In his critique of Tracy's view, Sauter used a practical example of a recent heated debate regarding Sunday business in Germany. He points out that, by reducing the fourth commandment "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy" (Ex 20:8) to "If there is no Sunday anymore, there will be only working days," actually says nothing about the theological rationale for the observance of the Lord's

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[65] Tracy, "Particular Classics, Public Religion, and the American Tradition," 124.
[66] See David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975). The first thesis he proposes for a revisionist model for contemporary theory is that "the two principal sources for theology are Christian texts and common human experience and language."
[67] Tracy, "Particular Classics, Public Religion, and the American Tradition," 118-121.
[68] See Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 84.

day.[69] He thus questions whether Tracy has treated public theology "as a substitute for a church-related theology and [whether it] might be used as a contribution for re-structuring theology into religious cultural studies."[70] With the same concerns, Gavin D'Costa addresses the gradual shift of theological method in theological institutions from God to historical positivism. His lament can be aptly applied to Tracy's proposal: "Rather than 'incorporating the world into the biblical story,' theology became more and more a 'matter of fitting the biblical story into another world' (which was constructed by secular modernity and 'policed' by its rules and methodology)."[71] Clarke Cochran treats the problem from a linguistic perspective. For him, to alter Christian language into its secular political equivalent would mean "there would be no religion-politics interaction, only *political* argument."[72] Tracy would fall into the "theologian's dilemma" as posited by Jeffrey Stout when he writes, "the more theologians adhere to meaningful patterns of public discourse, the less distinctive is the theological contribution they make to public life, and thus the less able they are to voice the traditional concerns of the religious communities they are meant to serve."[73]

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[69] Sauter, *Protestant Theology at the Crossroads*, 156-157.

[70] Sauter, *Protestant Theology at the Crossroads*, 157. Critiques of David Tracy's overall scheme can be found in Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 20-21; Welker, "Is Theology in Public Discourse Possible Outside of Communities of Faith?," 119-120.

[71] Gavin D'Costa, "On Theology's Babylonian Captivity," in *The Idea of a Christian University: Essays in Theology and Higher Education*, ed. Jeff Astley et al. (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 188. See the gradual morphing of theology into religious studies in Gavin D'Costa, *Theology in the Public Square: Church Academy and Nation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

[72] Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 90.

[73] See Philip Knight, "Pragmatism, Postmodernism and the Bible as a Meaningful Public Resources in a Pluralistic Age," in *Biblical Interpretation: The Meanings of Scripture - Past and Present*, ed. John M. Court (London: T & T Clark International, 2003), 311; Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 163-164.

Thiemann is more to the point: "I do not believe that the kind of metaphysical argument Tracy demands can be consistently or coherently formulated."[74] He therefore suggests that a middle way must be found between, on the one hand, simply adopting concepts and forms of analysis foreign to the Christian faith when dealing with a particular social issue, and, on the other, holding to the unique Christian worldview but failing to engage the public realm in an effective and responsible manner.[75]

As regards Tracy's proposal, therefore, it is not clear that Christian beliefs and convictions can be left behind when engaging in public discourse, even when dealing with seemingly non-religious issues. Cochran argues that this is not only the case for religious participants in public discourse, it also holds true for proponents of secular belief-systems:

> Liberals cannot desert liberal assumptions, and Marxists cannot desert their foundational principles in discussing public policy. It would be unfair and intolerant to demand such abandonment, especially in a pluralist polity. Similarly, a Moslem or a Christian cannot be required to speak non-Moslem or non-Christian language when entering politics. Moreover, there is no universally accessible secular political language transcending all basic beliefs.[76]

Any attempt, then, to translate theological language into its secular equivalent appears to rely on a questionable supposition, namely, that there is some kind of neutral and

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[74] Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 20-21.
[75] Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 19.
[76] Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 94.

universally accessible public language that every interlocutor must speak. This does not appear to be the case in the pluralistic context of today.

Accordingly, Tanner presses an objection to Tracy from another perspective. She argues that he fails to do full justice to the pluralistic character of public debate. Tracy has mistakenly assumed that

> Christian beliefs and symbols have a general cultural currency in the sense that everyone takes them seriously and gives them weight in deliberations about matters of common concern. ... It presumes that all participants in the debate share all the religious materials at issue.[77]

This indeed results in exactly what Sauter has cautioned against, as already mentioned: public theology in this case would no longer be theology but a form of religious cultural studies. More incisively, Tanner maintains that Tracy's proposal "is indistinguishable from a position that religious arguments should be kept out of public debate."[78] This is in agreement with Thiemann who considers that, "by identifying genuine publicness with general philosophical argument, Tracy undercuts the ability of Christians to employ the specific resources of their traditions to engage in public conversation."[79] In the end, Tracy's method appears to these authors as self-defeating,

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[77] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 84-85.
[78] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 84. See also arguments against Michael Perry in Kent Greenawalt, *Public Consciences and Public Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 91-95.
[79] Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, 20-21.

and thus serves to strengthen the position of those intent on ruling theology out of

public debate.

A second proposal for the admission of religious and theological arguments into

public debate is unlike the first. It strongly affirms the validity of essentially religious

and theological arguments in public discourse. Instead of accommodating the formal

content of Christian discourse to its supposed "public," it deals with the expectations

of Christian participants in public discourse. Theologians then "counsel Christians to

expect neither a commonly shared religious basis for public debate, nor an eventual

consensus about matters of public concern. Christians should not expect their outlook

on life to be more than a minority viewpoint."[80] Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen

in their work, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, express a similar view. Although they

emphasize the importance of a theology that engages the public, they recognise the

limits of politics:

> The contest between diverse visions of life cannot be decided by political means;
> politics does not provide us with the resources necessary for adjudicating the
> conflicting claims that give rise to many of our differences in the public arena.
> The outcome of such contests can only be awaited. In the meantime,
> opportunities for political cooperation should be employed as much as possible.
> As we anticipate the future, let us face the present with a tolerant openness that

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[80] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 85.

is not grounded in indifference – whether of the Rawlsian variety or some other sort – but is animated by the hope that in the end all that is important to our patterns of public life will be touched by the divine shalom.[81]

Mouw and Griffioen are surely correct in bringing Christian eschatological hope into the discussion. However, due to their intensely eschatological approach, the present situation all but disappears into the background in the light of their hope for realization of the Kingdom of God in the future. Consequently, though they do try to engage theology in public debate, they no longer expect their proposals or religious premises to be persuasive to their interlocutors in the public discourse of the present. They are disinclined to expend too much effort in searching for commonalities that might soften the conflicts inherent in a deeply pluralistic situation.

Tanner concedes that the obvious weakness of this second proposal is its rather deep pessimism:

> It does not view Christian contributions to public debate as utterly pointless, completely ineffectual witnesses in the face of an irredeemable world, but it is pessimistic, nonetheless, about the sort of agreement that can be reached in genuinely pluralistic debate.[82]

In the end, this proposal does not expect theological argument to be publicly effective.

It leaves one, then, with a question as to its adequacy.

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[81] Richard J. Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 175-176.
[82] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 87.

Given that these two proposals have unresolved problems, Tanner puts forward a proposal of her own. Contrary to the second proposal, she argues for the need to work for greater agreement on conclusions between Christians and non-Christians. To this degree, it is more optimistic. Further, contrary to the first proposal, her focus is not on demanding religious arguments to meet certain standard of public accessibility, for it does not require non-Christians to accept the religious bases of the arguments offered.[83] She sees the need to specify more clearly the shape of public debate: "The basic requirements of such public debate is deceptively simple: it should be the sort of public debate in which it makes sense to expect agreement on *conclusions* but not on *the arguments* in support of them."[84] Tanner thus shifts the focus from arguments to conclusions. Such an approach of religious and theological claims to public discourse can proceed without the problems inherent in the previously mentioned proposals. She explains,

> Since agreement on conclusions comes by way of an overlapping consensus, disagreements about religious matters are not the focus of debate. However intractable and vituperative the debate on religious questions, that spirit need not carry over into public debate on matters of common concern. Because agreement in conclusions does not require agreement on the reasons for those conclusions, disagreement on the religious reasons that some people offer in support of their conclusions need not entail divisiveness in public debate.[85]

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[83] Ibid.
[84] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 88, my italics.
[85] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 98.

The interlocutors concerned must therefore debate on the merits of the conclusions, rather than the merits of the arguments. The focus of public debate is shifted from the religious worldview – often dismissed as narrow, oppressive and irrational – to the reasonable conclusions derived from religious arguments as they are presented. Not only does this strategy have the advantage of by-passing the perceived offensiveness of religious arguments in public discourse, but also the various interlocutors involved are not required to accept either the comprehensive theory or foundational belief underlying the religious arguments: "the primary aim of debate is agreement on policy and not on political theory or comprehensive doctrine."[86] Otherwise, it is not only religious arguments that will have problems in public debate. Any other arguments with underlying disputable theories or worldviews likewise must encounter the same problem. Furthermore, if everyone is required to come to agreement on underlying theories or doctrines, any public consensus would be impossible. In this way, Tanner's proposal allows for diverse viewpoints and a plurality of theories to present their respective arguments in the public area of discourse. But decisions will be made solely on the merits of the conclusions that are presented. By thus emphasizing the conclusions of the religious or theological arguments, Christian participants involved in public debate would not be perceived as forcing their views

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[86] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 90-91.

on others or as attempting to evangelize their non-Christian interlocutors. She

explains further,

> The primary aim of the religious person is to put forward his or her conclusions
> for acceptance by others and not to persuade them to accept the religious
> premises of the arguments made in support of those conclusions. The Christian
> simply points out how a matter for collective assessment and decision looks
> from a Christian point of view and awaits the judgment of others. Respecting
> that others' viewpoints might be genuinely different from the Christian
> perspective and respecting the possible adequacy of these non-Christian
> grounds for arriving at conclusions, the Christian does not presume to make
> arguments for others. The Christian simply hopes that the arguments others
> construct will eventually converge on the conclusions that Christians propose.
> The Christian hopes, in short, for an overlapping consensus to develop as non-
> Christians consider the recommendations that Christians have made.[87]

While Tanner's proposal is both appealing and promising, a question lingers: can

one's conclusions be separated from one's arguments? It seems too much to expect

that our interlocutors consider and perhaps accept our conclusions without looking

into the arguments from which these conclusions derive. In fact, Tanner herself

concedes that "agreement on conclusions is preferably achieved by way of an

argument over how to interpret, critically evaluate, interrelate, and determine the

relative weights of the values, norms, and principles for which there is an initial weak

consensus."[88] Such a multi-faceted consideration of "values, norms, and principles"

unavoidably involves looking at the underlying religious arguments involved before

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[87] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 94-95.
[88] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 90.

there can be any acceptance of the conclusions to which the arguments lead. Moreover, the possibility of an "overlapping consensus" of conclusions, as Tanner envisages it, masks a further difficulty. The conclusions deriving from Christian theology "must be abstractable from the Christian premises that led to them."[89] The need for this process of "abstraction" of public conclusions from Christian premises must suggest that Tanner's approach is very close to Tracy's, and with the same shortcomings. We referred in our earlier discussion to Sauter's example of Sunday business in Germany, as he has pointed out the need not to take theological premises out of the equation. Otherwise, the arguments regarding that particular issue lack genuine weight. No doubt with these problems in mind, Tanner does suggest that there are two situations where it is not possible to remove Christian premises entirely. Firstly, when the recommendations themselves are of an essentially religious nature, that is, when they apply only to Christian believers, say, in the case of teaching Christianity in public schools. Secondly, when the plausibility of the recommendations is tied inextricably to specifically Christian premises – in, for example, arguments against the practice of homosexuality by appealing to religious and biblical authorities, or in arguing against abortion from biblical premises and Christian convictions. Given these concessions, the practical question remains: how

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[89] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 96.

are Christian premises "abstractable" from their public conclusions? Is Tanner's

proposal not doomed to die the death of a thousand qualifications?

In short, all three proposals regarding the place of theology in public debate have their

respective problems. Instead of altering Christian arguments, or altering our

expectations regarding public debate, or shifting the focus to the conclusions of

Christian arguments, we are left with the imperative of presenting Christian

arguments and Christian conclusions in their own right. This is not a counsel of

desperation, as I now hope to demonstrate by making the following four points.

First, Christians speak from a particular theological perspective, which can be termed

"Trinitarian" or "Christological." Hauerwas consistently claims that "the first political

task of the Church is to be the Church."[90] This means that its priority and mission is

determined by the Triune God and the cross of Christ, not by one's culture, institution,

or country. In the case of the American Church, Hauerwas claims,

> For I do not think the church is being the church when it thinks "a choice must
> be made" between America and that bearer of totalitarian alternative, the Soviet
> Union. Nor do I think the church is being the church if it thinks and acts as if
> "America has a peculiar place in God's promises and purposes." Exactly when

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[90] Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Notre Dame:
University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 122. See also Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 46-
47.

the church thinks it must put its spiritual and moral resources behind that kind of understanding of the world it loses its ability to be a "zone of truth-telling in a world of mendacity."[91]

Christians can hardly be trusted in the public and pluralist domain of contemporary dialogical relationships if they feel that they must conceal what is most distinctive and intimate to their faith. Moreover, the Church is a massive public fact in world history. This is quite compatible with respect for their interlocutors, and with a desire not to impose Christian doctrines or values. The public conversation often breaks down, not because of the content of Christian arguments, but because of the attitude of the Christian participants. When Tanner asserts that there is no problem in appealing to religious authorities in public debate, she goes on to say,

> The exclusive appeal to religious sources of authorization is not the culprit here; only when such appeals function to deaden the religious believers to counter charges concerning the unreasonableness or inhumanity of their recommendations do they violate the criteria for public debate.[92]

Hence, though public theologians need to work on their presentations and arguments concerning a particular public issue, they also need to express themselves with Christian humility and compassion. It is the question of the attitude rather than argument, whether religious or not, that often hinders the possibility of a genuine conversation in the public space.

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[91] Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 122.
[92] Tanner, "Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate," 97.

Second, the treatment of religion as private and the polity as public is a problematic

dualism. In the last chapter, I questioned the view that treats religion as subjective and

closed in on itself, while science is objective and open to the world. Such a distinction

relies on the outmoded modernist assumption of detached objectivity and

omnicompetent science. Likewise, the simple compartmentalization of religious

convictions and political activities into private and public realms respectively is a

gross simplification. Owen Thomas points out that "the usual or normal sense of

public applies to very few, if any, disciplines."[93] Care must be taken in employing the

distinction of public and private in too casual a manner.[94] A more realistic approach,

while admitting the value of making such distinctions in particular contexts, consists

in the recognition that distinction does not mean separation: the individual and the

social are inseparable dimensions of human life.[95] Indeed, Cochran, in his research

into the inter-relationship of the public and private spheres, claims that "Religion in

its most elemental character displays both public and private qualities"; and that

"religion is itself an important field of public-private interaction."[96] Religion cannot

be restricted to the private life for it is, of its nature, as public as any political activity.

Consequently, religious reasons and arguments cannot be ruled out of public debate

just because they are religious, and thus should be limited to the private sphere.

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[93] Thomas, "Public Theology and Counter-Public Spheres," 458.
[94] When Hauerwas approaches the public-private distinction from the perspective of an ethics of virtue, he claims that it is a mistaken distinction (Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living in Between* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1988), 191).
[95] Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 3.
[96] Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 1, 91.

Rather, if anything is to be ruled out, it should only be after looking into the merits of

the arguments as is normally required in the case of any other forms of argument.

Third, making the legitimacy of admitting religious arguments into public debates

dependent on publicly accessible reasons is also problematic. John Rawls, Richard

Rorty, Robert Audi and others have claimed that religious arguments are out of

bounds in the public discourse in this regard.[97] However, in response, David Tracy

has questioned whether there is a shared understanding of reason itself.[98] Furthermore,

Kent Greenawalt points out the ambiguity of such view: "The centrality of this

problem is evident once one understands that the argument against reliance on

religious convictions often comes down to an argument for reliance on premises that

are deemed rational in some way that excludes religious convictions."[99] After

Greenawalt draws attention to the unreasonableness of demanding religious claims to

submit to the common criteria of reason, he then moves on to assert that barring

religious convictions from entering into public discourse would simply preclude

sources of insight with considerable practical significance for great numbers of

religious people.[100] In many of the important ethical, moral, and political issues that

arise, it is impossible to disentangle religious and nonreligious reasons in public

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[97] See Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 91; Kwan, "公共空間中的宗教 (The Religion in the Public Space)"; Xie, "何以公共？ (What Is Public?)," 151.
[98] Tracy, "Particular Classics, Public Religion, and the American Tradition," 115-117.
[99] Greenawalt, *Religious Convictions and Political Choice*, 23.
[100] See Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 91; Greenawalt, *Religious Convictions and Political Choice*, 12.

discussion.[101] Cochran observes that that these supposedly public criteria of rationality derive from the specious "public-private" distinction already criticised.[102] There are, then, no grounds for excluding Christian forms of argument on the basis of an alleged rationality that is loaded against them. Rationality must be recognised as taking a variety of forms and as formed by differing traditions of thought.

The fourth point to be made concerns what might be considered as the appropriate form of public discourse. Tracy argues that public theology should alter its form of argument to conform to the standard of publicly accessibility. Tanner suggests that the conclusions, not the arguments, should most figure in public discourse. But, as Cochran has shown, there is no universally accessible and neutral secular political language which somehow transcends all basic beliefs.[103] It is therefore unreasonable to require all participants in public discourse to abandon their basic commitments and convictions. There is then no reason why public theologians should be hindered from presenting the arguments and conclusions embedded in their Christian worldview. Admittedly, the public theologian must be aware of the peculiarity of theological language compared to other forms of public discourse. A public theology must rise to the challenge of applying and presenting its arguments in ways that meet the issues in question and engage those involved in a genuinely dialogical fashion. In this regard,

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[101] Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 91.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 94.

the eighth functional speciality of Lonergan's theological method is termed, "Communications." He writes,

> The Christian message is to be communicated to all nations. Such communication presupposes that preachers and teachers enlarge their horizons to include an accurate and intimate understanding of the culture and the language of the people they address. They must grasp the virtual resources creatively so that the Christian message becomes, not disruptive of the culture, not an alien patch superimposed upon it, but a line of development within the culture.[104]

Communications, as a specialized function in a comprehensive theological method, is designed to preserve the integrity of the Christian faith, while, at the same time, working to mediate Christian beliefs to the culture which believers share with others, so as not to appear alien or negative.[105] Cochran makes the same point when he says,

> Members of religious communities, like proponents of ideological or philosophical positions, need to use lucid political and policy arguments and empirical evidence where available to show how they move from deepest principles to specific policy positions and proposals. No fundamental principles are self-applying. The policy and political debates into which religious believers enter will be a mixture of different languages. The task of participants in a genuinely civil and tolerant public discourse is to bear the burden of trying to understand and appreciate, not necessarily to agree with, the deepest principles and the policy arguments of those with whom they disagree. … Public, civil discourse is genuine to the extent that participants learn to speak with one another in their differences as well as in their shared language.[106]

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[104] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 362.
[105] "Alien" in the sense of language, not in the sense of its message. Theology and its message should never be domesticated.
[106] Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 94.

In another context, Cochran points to the need for religious communicators to become "bilingual" in learning to speak both their own faith-language and the language of the public.[107] Referring to the "language of the public" in these terms, Cochran runs the risk of contradicting himself, given that he had previously objected to the possibility of a neutral and publicly accessible common language. If, however, we accept his admission that "no fundamental principles are self-applying," we can understand his proposal more positively. Religious or theological language needs to make sense to its addressees in the public forum, and exhibit not only its own meaning, logic and applicability, but also to speak intelligently and responsibly to the concerns of the whole cultural community. It is not a matter of watering-down the fundamentals of Christian faith, nor of dissolving them into some kind of neutral rationality. The issue, throughout, is that of communicating the Word of God to the heart and mind of the broader culture in order to offer a distinctive answer to the questions that trouble it, and fresh hope for the achievement of the peace, justice, reconciliation and community to which it aspires.

Such a perspective on the public role of theology is, therefore, not tinged with the pessimism of Mouw and Griffioen, for example. Public theology competes for its place just like any other political or social view if it is to contribute positively to

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[107] Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 163.

public discourse. In this regard, its range is wider than that of "political theology." As

Max Stackhouse observes,

> Political theology inclines toward some kind of social political view (viewing the society through a political perspective). But different from American socialism, a public theology claims that every area of life activity (particularly the religious, and those that closely related to it, cultural, economic, and academic), morality, spirituality, and sociology all have prior existence over political power. And, after-all, political power is responsible to them.[108]

Clive Marsh makes a similar point:

> Christian theology has not simply to position itself to speak publicly, but actively to interact with discourses which occur in public. Such a "public" theology is not a political theology in the sense that it only, or primarily, addresses political issues. .. But it is a political theology in the sense that it is examining what the meaning of God is for the values that people live by and for the many communities in which we live (church included).[109]

This is to say that a genuinely public theology seeks to address the many dimensions

of the public sphere, and limits itself unduly by confining itself to political concerns

alone.

Nonetheless, questions remain as to the place of the political sphere in the concerns of

public theology. As pointed out previously, the public and private realms must be

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[108] Stackhouse, "甚麼是公共神學：一種美國基督教的觀點 (What Is Public Theology: An American Christian View)," 304-305.

[109] Marsh, "The Point of Theology," 281. See also Bacote's words: "Public theology is not Christian social ethics nor is it political theology, though politics is a major if not the most significance part of any public theology. Nonetheless, everything is not politics and politics is not everything" (quoted in Strange, "Evangelical Public Theology," 20).

distinguished, but not separated, in the multiple relationships that make up the context of human life. In addressing this question, Cochran locates public theology, not at the centre of public discourse, but at its "border." He goes on to say, "Because religion is one of the most significant forces on the public-private border, its interaction with politics reveals in a special way the consonance and strain characteristic of the public-private border."[110] As to the complex significance of this "border" metaphor, Cochran offers the following observation:

> Borders are places of tension, and such tension is responsible for a good deal of the creativity, and sometimes bloody confrontation, that occurs on any tense border. The metaphor gets complicated, as two borders, involved with four phenomena, intersect. The border between religion and politics is itself important, as it the border between public and private. These are not the same borders, but they do intersect.[111]

We can take Cochran's border-metaphor as evoking the totality of the field of interactions occurring amongst the various dimensions of contemporary pluralistic existence, not to leave them locked in irresolvable conflict, but aiming for some overlapping area of agreement and negotiated consensus. With specific reference to the "border" between politics and religion, Cochran reaches the following helpful conclusion:

> Thus religion walks a thin line, serving as a challenge to and as a refuge from politics. It performs either of these tasks best when it displays a balance between the private and public sides of religion. Religion must be in contact

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[110] Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 3.
[111] Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 77.

with, but not absorbed in or too closely allied to politics. This balancing act once again suggests metaphors of tension and of borderlands.

Although I have stressed the intersection of religion and public life, religion nevertheless fundamentally reminds us of the limits of politics and of the non-equivalence of politics and public life. We must remember that religion points resolutely to life beyond politics. It reminds us that public problems and their solutions are not entirely political. Indeed, the distinctive contribution of religion to public and private life, to individuals and to culture, is to refer them to what is beyond politics.[112]

One of the advantages of such an approach is that it leaves intact – and intelligible – the hard-won articulation of the separation of church and state. In this respect, theology is not sidelined in public discussion, for it has every reason to speak with its own distinctive voice, critical of society when needed, and yet affirming the best values found within it.

After this long detour into European and North American discussions of the validity of public theology, with such resources we can now re-focus our concerns on the emerging Sino-Christian context.

4. A Public Theology in the Sino-Christian Context

When we come to discuss the possibility of a public theology in the emerging Sino-Christian context, it goes without saying that we must first take into consideration a

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[112] Cochran, *Religion in Public and Private Life*, 68, xi.

specific context that is dissimilar to the North American-European situation. But instead of repeating what has already been said concerning the Sino-context, it is preferable to present a number of points regarding the possibility of a public theology in this Chinese setting.

First, we insist that public theology is not itself a political theory. This implies that the primary task of a public theology, in the present situation, is not the formation of a Christian political party to speak for or against the government and its policies. Nonetheless, there is the practical possibility of Christian discourse having a role in public affairs, especially in regard to such issues as the environment, social security, family values, morality and spirituality. This means working within the present social order and the circumstances that affect it. To this degree, Christian communication must play a constructive role in promoting the progress of the society and nation, rather than merely becoming an opposing force aiming to attack the political institution and its policies. Further, the development of a Sino-Christian public theology engaged with the local culture and society cannot aim to exercise any wholesale control over public discourse. Xie Zhibin (謝志斌) recognises the inherent limits of the situation. [113] The public theology concerned must maintain an independent critical voice, while not becoming an overtly political voice. In line with

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[113] Xie, "何以公共？ (What Is Public?)," 154.

Cochran's border-metaphor, theology must restrict itself to a critical fringe. Xie

advises that "when religion enters into public political culture, the aim of this

participation is not to gain a political leadership role."[114] Furthermore, in its

independent and fringe position, this kind of public theology needs to ensure that it

will not be taken over by revolutionary movements to further their political agenda.[115]

A critical public theology must of necessity not succumb to any political ideology. On

the other side of the dialectic, that is, where the government and the larger society

stand, any effort to control, let alone suppress, the public contribution of Christian

thought must be resisted.[116] It must be resolutely argued that the Christian theological

tradition, not only because of its commitment to the flourishing of Chinese culture

and society, but also because of the vast range of its global resources, has the potential

to make important contributions to the public conversation, especially on humanistic

and moral issues.

Second, the notion of the public importance of theology will broaden the horizons of

Sino-Christian theologians tempted to limit "faith seeking understanding" to the

interior lives of private individuals. For theology has a public function in providing an

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[114] Xie, "何以公共？ (What Is Public?)," 155.

[115] See Leland W. Robinson, "When Will Revolutionary Movements Use Religion?," in *Church and State Relations: Tensions and Tensions*, ed. Thomas Robins and Roland Robertson (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1987), 63. Robinson specifies six types of possibilities where revolutionary movements may use religious resources to aid in their cause.

[116] See James E. Wood, "Public Religion Vis-a-Vis the Prophetic Role of Religion," in *The Power of Religious Publics*, ed. William H. Junior Swatos and James K. Junior Wellman (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1999), 42-43.

overarching principle or transcendent meaning-system in promoting the good of

society.[117] For instance, Xie Zhibin argues that the resources of religious traditions are

better able to provide a strong and moral foundation of freedom compared to that

provided by political science.[118] This is especially true of the Judaeo-Christian

tradition with its vision of human beings as bearers of God's image and stewards of

God's created world (e.g., Gen 1:26-28). It thus underpins the transcendent value of

each individual human person. Moreover, the doctrines of sin and grace establish the

limitations of human authorities, whether in the realms of politics, society or the

academy. In addition, we need bear in mind that public theology is not limited to

providing conceptual frameworks and/or philosophical foundations; it also includes

practical acts of mercy and service in the public realm. In *Jubilee Manifesto: A*

Framework, Agenda and Strategy for Social Reform, Michael Schluter and John

Ashcroft (of Jubilee Centre, a Christian social reform organization based at

Cambridge) state their exemplary aim to be inclusive of both "word" and "act":

> It is essential to reform the structures of society and influence the terms of
> debate in order to create a society which sustains relationships and within which
> Christian service and mission can flourish. This requires moving from fighting
> limited tactical battles to strategic co-belligerence for the common good. It
> means real engagement with those who are not disposed to listen to the gospel.
> Explicitly Christian service and witness are important. The church must let the
> light of its good deeds shine, and the gospel must be verbally proclaimed. But in
> many places Christians no longer have (or have never had) a privileged position

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[117] See Stackhouse, "甚麼是公共神學：一種美國基督教的觀點 (What Is Public Theology: An American Christian View)," 308-309.

[118] Xie, "何以公共？ (What Is Public)," 144-145.

from which to shape the institutions of society. It is in this context that the biblical vision will also need to be commended as a shared vision. This is not on the basis of the real but not universally acknowledged authority of Christ the Lord, but because it is a demonstrably plausible account of human flourishing.[119]

The commitment of theology to the common good is exactly what can make public theology a constructive force in the contemporary Sino-context.

Third, this conception of public theology preserves, maintains and extends the intelligibility and practical relevance of the uniqueness and particularity of Christian faith. Theology thereby shows an appropriate self-assurance in not allowing itself to be banished into a publicly-irrelevant private sphere. To the contrary, it encourages Christian theology to be a competitive agent in the cultural contest, with its unique perspective and worldview, even in the midst of opposing perspectives and worldviews.[120] This means that, when the developing Sino-public theology attempts to discover how the Christian worldview can contribute to the Chinese society and culture, it also reflects on its form and content in relation to the public realm. This is exactly the point Nico Koopman is making when he stresses that a public theology

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[119] Quoted in Strange, "Evangelical Public Theology," 32.

[120] It is recently pointed out that doing theology "in a public square dominated by the ceremonial rites and court theologians of some other religion" will be the coming problem of public theology, see John R. Bowlin, "Some Thoughts on Doing Theology in Public," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 28, no. 3 (2007): 242f.

will unavoidably address three sets of questions:

> Firstly the inherent public nature, scope, and *telos* of Christian faith, and secondly the public rationality, intelligibility, inner coherency, consistency, logic and reasonability of Christian faith, and thirdly, the impact upon, and significance, meaning and implications of Christian faith for public life.[121]

Last, but not least, this notion of public theology assumes the intimate relationship existing between theology and cultural studies, particularly in the emerging Sino-Christian context – though by no means as limited to it. In the Sino-context, cultural studies increasingly take theological perspectives seriously. It is also evident that theological research shows a corresponding respect for the rich humanistic resources made available through cultural studies.[122] Already there are direct positive results discernible through the interactions of theology and cultural studies in the public area of academia. This situation promises further rich developments for the future.

Conclusion

In this present chapter, I have been putting forward a proposal bearing on the relation of Christian faith to a localized culture and society. I have sought to develop a notion of theology as truly public in character and concern, while still retaining its Christian

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[121] Koopman, "Churches and Public Policy Discourses in South Africa."

[122] Zhang Hua 張華, "「文化研究與神學研究中的公共性問題」國際研討會綜述 (A Summary of Summer Institute on 'the Public Issues in Cultural Studies and Theological Studies')," 基督教文化學刊 *(Journal for the Study of Christian Culture)* 14 (2005): 355.

distinctiveness. Christian theology need neither admit to incompetence in the public realm, nor re-cloth itself in a secular guise to gain admission as a distinctive voice within public discourse. With its unique Christian worldview, it must enter into competition with all other views that pretend to offer an over-arching account of the world and its history.

After reflecting on the public role of theology, we must now turn our attention to the particular area of biblical studies in the context of our concern.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Contribution of Biblical Theology to the Emerging

Sino-Christian Theology

In the previous chapter, I argued that Christian theology is, by its very nature a public theology. There is nothing intrinsic to theology to prevent it entering into public discourse. Moreover, it has something to contribute to the public sphere in terms of promoting human welfare and the good of the society by presenting its uniquely Christian outlook. The question I wish to pursue in this chapter is this: in what way can the biblical heart of Christian theology engage the wider culture and society, particularly in the Sino-context? This is a question of crucial importance since it is not enough merely to establish a philosophical framework for Christian theology's engagement with the wider culture without, at the same time, displaying the relevance of its actual content in this regard. Indeed, Philip Chia (謝品然), an academic working in Hong Kong, recently raised the important issue of the public relevance of

biblical studies. He asks,

> What then, has the Bible to do with such a condition of human socio-reality? How then, should the Bible be read and understood in response to such a world of reality and address such human society, if characterized reasonably close in proximity as a "runaway world"? In what way(s), could the Bible function as resources, being a wisdom legacy of human civilization and religious inspiration, for human direction in search of alternative(s)?[1]

For Chia, biblical studies must be situated within the current global context. In other words, he is proposing a "*public* turn" – in response to Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's call for an "*ethical-political* turn"[2] – in contemporary biblical studies. This public "turn" needs to be carried out as an important component of biblical studies if contemporary social and cultural questions are to be properly addressed.[3]

Chia sets himself to develop a critical, public and biblical theology. He sees this as belonging to the role of the public intellectuals.[4] He recognises the present and future

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[1] Philip Chia, "Local and Global: Biblical Studies in A 'Runaway World,'" *Sino-Christian Studies* 1 (2006): 87. See also David Clines' warning: "it will be the end of biblical studies as an intellectual discipline if we do not interact with the intellectual currents of thought of our time, and if we pretend that going on doing the same as we have for a century or more, with refinements and improvements, is addressing our contemporary cultural and intellectual situation in the slightest" (quoted in Donald A. Hagner, "The Place of Exegesis in the Postmodern World," in *History and Exegesis*, ed. Sang-Won Son (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 301), 292-308.

[2] See Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Rethinking the Educational Practices of Biblical Doctoral Studies," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 6, no. 2 (2003): 65-75.

[3] Chia, "Local and Global," 91. See also Philip Knight, "Pragmatism, Postmodernism and the Bible as a Meaningful Public Resources in a Pluralistic Age," in *Biblical Interpretation: The Meanings of Scripture - Past and Present*, ed. John M. Court (London: T & T Clark International, 2003), 310-325; Norman K. Gottwald, "Biblical Scholarship in Public Discourse," *Biblical Interpretation* 11, no. 3-4 (2003): 555-565. In relation to the Sino-Christian context, see He Guanghu, "Three Generations of Chinese Christianity Researches: From the 1950s to 2007," *Concilium*, no. 2 (2008): 69.

[4] Chia, "Local and Global," 94, f.n. 24.

need for their effective training if such scholars are, as he puts it,

> to critically draw on resources of historical-critical-biblical scholarship, while strategically producing [a] contemporary reading of the text with public relevance, for which the intention of engaging their wealth of knowledge rhetorically in discourses of public issues are expected to contribute constructively towards the well being of humankind.[5]

Chia believes that this is the best way for biblical studies to face the serious challenges posed by what he terms the contemporary "runaway world." However, on close reading of his proposal, he does not really offer any detailed presentation of what he means except to highlight the need for biblical studies to be more publicly engaging, along with the implementation of the necessary training in that direction. Just how biblical theologians might engage in public discourse is a question he leaves unanswered. In this chapter, therefore, we shall attempt to take Chia's proposal further. To that end, we will sketch a model of public and biblical theology, in the hope that it will be a useful supplement to Chia's proposal.

I shall present the material of this chapter under the following four headings:

1. The emerging Sino-Christian theology and the "Christ Event";

2. A Cultural-Linguistic approach;

3. A Canonical-Linguistic approach;

4. Some implications for the emerging Sino-Christian Theology.

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[5] Chia, "Local and Global," 98-99.

1. The Emerging Sino-Christian Theology and the "Christ Event"

I begin with a recent critique of contemporary Sino-Christian theology over its neglect of the "Christ event" – the core message of the New Testament, and, more broadly, the focal theme of Biblical theology. It has been pointed out that this neglect is due to the problematic theological approach and hermeneutical method adopted by Sino-Christian scholars. Since this approach and method have failed in one way or another, one should search for an alternative. I will proceed in the section following this to examine an alternative proposal as suggested in Kevin Vanhoozer's *Canonical-linguistic* approach.

But first, the alleged neglect. An academic at Remmin University of Beijing, Sun Yi (孫毅) has recently discussed the ambivalent relationship between the contemporary state of Sino-Christian theology and the "Christ event."[6] The phrase, "Christ event", is to be understood as referring not only to the historical particularity of Christ's birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension, but also to the overarching core message of the Christian Gospel of redemption. In short, "Christ event" refers to the complete salvific work of God in Christ. It is this that is anticipated in the Old Testament, realized in the New Testament, and awaits its full consummation in the new heaven and new earth with the second coming of Christ. Therefore, the "Christ event" is here

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[6] Sun Yi 孫毅, "漢語神學與「基督事件」(Sino-Christian Theology and 'the Christ Event')," 道風 *(Tao Feng)* 29 (2008): 183-198.

taken as an abbreviated expression for the whole message of the New Testament and the biblical theology it inspires. Commenting on the contemporary state of Sino-Christian theology, Sun refers back to Liu Xiaofeng's original formulation: "Christian theology is the faith-based rational reflection and speech about the Christ event as the Word of God."[7] Through this "Christ event," God reveals himself to us. It is thus the focus of God's self-revelation; consequently, it is the basis for human speech about God, humanity and the world. Stressing the inseparability of Sino-Christian theology from the "Christ event," Sun declares emphatically,

> as a type of Christian theology, [Sino-Christian theology's] expressed theological speech must be premised upon the "Christ event"; it must let the "Christ event" be the ultimate reference. According to this understanding of the basic character of Christian theology, Sino-Christian theology as a type of "Christian theology" must deal with the "Christ event."[8]

The intimate relationship between the emerging Sino-Christian theology and the Christ event is also emphasised by another Chinese academic, Zhang Shefu (章雪富), of the Philosophy Department of Zhe Jiang University. To Zhang,

> The innate characteristic of Christian theology is the direct meeting with the "Christ event." No matter how varied theological types are, failing to accept this fact will rule one out of Christian theology. From its beginning, the "Christ

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[7] Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓, "現代語境中的漢語基督教神學 (Sino-Christian Theology in Contemporary Context)," 道風 (Tao-Feng) 2 (1995): 41.
[8] Sun, "漢語神學與「基督事件」 (Sino-Christian Theology and 'the Christ Event')," 183.

event" has produced a theological speech of a different matrix compared to that of philosophical speech. This shows the true nature of theological speech, which is not originated from the philosophical speech.[9]

The strong implication is that any Christian theology is lacking its essential authenticity if it is not focused in the Christ event. The criterion is very clear: "whether the speech is characterised as theological or philosophical depends on how the 'Christ event' is manifested within that speech."[10]

However, Sun notes that there is a subtle change in Liu's view of Christian theology. In his later work, Liu asserts that "Christian theology is the faith-based rational reflection and speech on God's Word; and that such reflection and expression as a faith-induced occurrence takes place within the concrete ethnic-historical and linguistic experience."[11] It is here that Sun detects a subtle shift in Liu's approach: from being reflection and speech about "*the Christ event* as the Word of God," it has moved to being merely a reflection on "the Word of God." It appears that the particularity of the Word of God manifested through the Christ event has yielded to a more general notion of the "Word of God." By implication, the Sino-Christian theology under construction is becoming less Christocentric. In this case, the focus is

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[9] Zhang Shefu 章雪富, "言說之道和上帝之道 (The Addressed Word and the Word of God)," *Regent Review of Christian Thoughts* 5, no. 2 (2006): 195.

[10] Zhang, "言說之道和上帝之道 (The Addressed Word and the Word of God)," 196.

[11] Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓, *漢語神學與歷史哲學 (the Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)* (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2000), 93, my italics.

shifted from the particularity of the Christ event to a more generalised notion of the Word of divine revelation.

With regard to Sun's suggestion of an alleged shift in Liu's understanding of Christian theology, I cannot agree. A careful reading of Liu suggests rather that he maintains the relationship of the local linguistic experience with the "Christ event" before going on to assert that "Christian theology is a faith-based rational reflection and expression of God's Word." Nonetheless, Sun does have a point. He observes that the "Christ event" has often been ignored or left out of consideration in much contemporary discussion of the emerging Sino-Christian theology.

Admittedly, there are difficulties inherent in admitting the "Christ event" into contemporary theological discussion in the Sino-context. For example, it is pointed out by Jason Lam (林子淳) that most Sino-Christian theological works on biblical theology have been produced within the discipline of comparative literature, instead of being based on solid biblical interpretation informed by the Christian doctrinal tradition.[12] A particular disciplinary perspective certainly affects the interpretation of the biblical text, and what conclusions are reached. In a recent newsletter of the

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[12] Jason Tsz Shun Lam 林子淳, "聖經作為神學研究文本的問題意識：論漢語神學與普世基督教傳統的承傳與交流問題 (The Questions Arising from Treating Bible as Text of Theological Research: The Relationship and Exchange between Sino-Christian Theology and Worldwide Christian Tradition) " in 第三屆漢語基督教文化研究圓桌會議 *(The Third Round-Table Symposium of Sino-Christian Studies)* (Kunming, China: 2005).

Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, Tian Hai Hua, an associate professor of Institute of Religious Studies of Sichuan University, makes the following comment regarding the present state of biblical scholarship in mainland China:

> Sino-Christian theology has become an important movement in the Chinese academic context of humanities. A large number of scholars have attempted to explore Christianity academically from different fields. The results are remarkable. Nevertheless, one regrets that the Bible, the scripture of Christianity, has not received sufficient attention in the process … [M]uch of the discussion on the subject remains at the level of general critique and appreciation that lacks profound and creative reasoning.[13]

As a result, Tian would like to see the Bible and its theology studied in a more critically competent manner, and treated at some depth.

There are clearly reasons for this neglect or superficiality in the area of biblical studies. Philip Chia puts his finger on the problem:

> The ethos of biblical studies in the GCR [Greater China Region[14]], unlike in the West, is still largely a church-oriented phenomenon. … [It] is largely an inward looking kind of religious practice, addressing individual Christian's personal or spiritual needs, serving mainly Christian communities. Seldom, would it cross over to consider the public society in general as an arena of direct discourse or engagement.[15]

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[13] Hai Hua Tian, "Biblical Studies in Mainland China: Recollection and Reflection," *Institute of Sino-Christian Studies News* 2007 July, 4. This weak view of biblical studies in the contemporary Sino-Christian context is also mentioned in He, "Three Generations of Chinese Christianity Researches: From the 1950s to 2007," 69.

[14] This is a term familiar to the financial world to include the mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan.

[15] Chia, "Local and Global," 97, 98.

Unfortunately, such inward-looking and restricted concerns of biblical studies have up to the present dissuaded Chinese academics from giving serious consideration to biblical research. Moreover, with the continuing influence of rigid dualisms such as "theory and practice," "reason and faith," "public and private," "philosophical theology and dogmatic theology," it is not surprising to find that Chinese scholars show more interest in the philosophical aspects of Christian theology; and so leave out of consideration the more confessional elements. This may further explain the concerns voiced by Lam, Tian and Sun in their perceptions of the ambivalence of the contemporary state of Sino-Christian theology in relation to its Christological and biblical components. What is clear is that the status and further development of biblical studies is of some concern in the contemporary Sino-context.

After noting the ambivalence that he perceives in the emerging Sino-Christian scholarship, Sun moves on to specify the problem as he sees it. There are especially two factors present in Liu's proposed reconstruction of Sino-Christian theology, and in other like-minded efforts. The first is the humanistic approach to Christian theology adopted by many Chinese academics working in the field. I have already indicated that Liu strongly argues for a liberal, humanistic and academic type of Sino-Christian

theology in contrast to a confessional, fideistic, and church-based type of Christian theology.[16] In reaction to Liu's proposal, Sun makes this criticism:

> The primary academic concern of a humanistic-oriented Sino-Christian theology is to begin from the Christian standpoint, while employing the humanistic-social thought of its linguistic context, and responding to the question of the relation between Christian faith and Chinese culture. According to this understanding, humanistic Sino-Christian theology is thus equivalent to some kind of philosophy of history or cultural theory.[17]

This danger inherent in such a humanistic predisposition in the Sino-Christian theological setting can be expressed in terms of reductionism and relativism. It can be reductionistic to the degree Sino-Christian theology is treated simply as a subset of philosophical or cultural studies. It can be relativistic in the measure that the particular uniqueness of Christian revelation is seriously undermined. Therefore, it is likely that the majority of Sino-Christian theological works employing a humanistic approach will prioritize Chinese cultural and ideological elements over biblical material, which will only diminish the significance of the Christ event itself. To anticipate the view of Kevin Vanhoozer (treated more fully below), we read that the problem stems from a modern, secular style of exegesis:

> Exegetes read the Bible "like any other book" (Benjamin Jowett); theologians, meanwhile, were busy recasting theology in terms of this or that philosophy. In short, non-theological frameworks determined the agenda for theology, with

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[16] See Chapter four of this thesis and Liu, 漢語神學與歷史哲學 *(The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History)*, 54, also 55-57.
[17] Sun, "漢語神學與「基督事件」(Sino-Christian Theology and 'the Christ Event')," 185.

fateful results. Scripture dwindled into human history; tradition shrivelled into human experience.[18]

Consequently, in Nicholas Lash's opinion, the replacement of essential theological interests with non-theological frameworks will result only in a distorted reading of Scripture: "In the self-assured world of modernity people seek to make sense of the Scriptures, instead of hoping, with the aid of the Scriptures, to make some sense of themselves."[19] Humanistic reductionism has, therefore, deeply affected the faithful reading of the Christian text, in ways that have serious consequences for theological constructions in general, and for contemporary Sino-Christian efforts.

Sun's second factor in the neglect of the Christ event in the emerging Sino-Christian scholarship is the adoption of a particular hermeneutical approach. He speaks of "ontic hermeneutics" in this regard. This style of hermeneutics is in reaction to the traditional approach of indigenized theology which simply assumed a universal Western theological system waiting to be applied to a new cultural context – in this case, that of the Chinese. As a result, a more culturally attuned and experientially grounded hermeneutics was called for, namely, an "ontic hermeneutics." As Sun

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[18] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 8.
[19] Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 148.

describes it,

> [The] so-called ontic method of construction is to work through an individual's present existential experience, that is, one's unique existential context, and to combine the two elements (which include individual's inherited faith and one's existential located culture, if they are to be later analysed as two different things) in one's life that is progressing, becoming, and forming.[20]

He proceeds to describe the individual's immediate existential experience in the following terms:

> It refers to the end-product one experiences and apprehends "at the moment," instead of that which results from analytical reflection on a conceptual idea or system. The "meeting" refers to the meeting of the divine Word of God within one's existential context, and not the meeting merely with another ideological system. And precisely in this meeting, an individual apprehends the meaning of one's existence. When one meets the divine Word in one's existential moment, and the respective interpretation of personal individual existential meaning that resulted from it, this forms "the ontic hermeneutical Christian theology."[21]

Predictably, if Sino-Christian theology adopts such an ontic hermeneutic, it would place immense importance on immediate life-experience and its existential setting. Admittedly, the emphasis on the particular experiential context is not a problem in itself – otherwise a wholesale irrelevance would result. However, problems arise when the experiential and cultural context is valued above the given Christ event. Hence, the concern is that it would only compromise, if not distort, the biblical message.

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[20] Sun, "漢語神學與「基督事件」(Sino-Christian Theology and 'the Christ Event')," 185-186.
[21] Sun, "漢語神學與「基督事件」(Sino-Christian Theology and 'the Christ Event')," 186.

Indeed, Sun Yi understandably admits that ontic hermeneutics, along with the humanistic approach to theology, with its reductionistic and relativistic tendencies, is neither a completely new nor an exclusively Sino-Christian theological venture. Rather, such an approach reflects a particular branch of Western liberal theology designed to respond to the effects of modernity, as represented, for instance, by Ernst Troeltsch. Some Sino-Christian scholars would identify quite well with Troeltsch's vision of a liberal Christianity:

> Essentially, a liberal Christianity could be defined in terms of two characteristics: first, it replaces the tie to an authoritative church by an inwardness that derives, freely and individually, from the strength of the common spirit of the tradition; and secondly, it transforms what has been the basic idea of historic Christianity, namely, the idea of a miraculous salvation of a human race suffering from the mortal infection of sin, into the idea of a redemptive elevation and liberation of the person through the attainment of a higher personal and communal life from God.[22]

According to this version of Christianity, human existential experiences are treated as the governing principles. They constitute the horizon in which the Christ event is interpreted. In the process, the Christ event is basically "domesticated" and "relativized" – to use Barth's terms. In the end, the emphasis on the personal existential experience of the Christ event tends to become overtly subjective. As

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[22] Ernst Troeltsch, "On the Possibility of a Liberal Christianity," in *Religion in History* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 343-344.

Bultmann puts it,

> … I acknowledge that I cannot speak of God's action in general statements; I
> can speak only of what He does here and now with me, of what He speaks here
> and now to me. … [W]e cannot speak of what God is in Himself but only of
> what He is doing to us and with us.[23]

This emphasis of personal existence experience ("here and now with me") brings one

to question whether there is really "anything" beyond the subjective realm of

experience. This particular approach to theology and the biblical witness can be

classified as a version of what George Lindbeck termed an "experiential-expressivist"

theological model. For Lindbeck, such a model

> interprets doctrines as non-informative and non-discursive symbols of inner
> feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations. This approach highlights the
> resemblances of religious to aesthetic enterprises and is particularly congenial to
> the liberal theologies influenced by the Continental developments that began
> with Schleiermacher.[24]

Lindbeck argued that such a model exhibits serious shortcomings. It assumes that

"human beings have fundamentally unmediated experiences, universal in scope and

common in character, that then find secondary articulation in historically particular

and culturally specific forms."[25] But, to follow Lindbeck, there is no such thing as an

experiential core, since "the experiences that religions evoke and mold are as varied

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[23] Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London: SCM Press, 1958), 66, 73.

[24] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 16.

[25] Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Mapping Theologies: An Historicist Guide to Contemporary Theology," in *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Sheila Greeve Davaney (New York & London: Routledge, 1996), 29.

as the interpretive schemes they embody. Adherents of different religions do not diversely thematize the same experience; rather they have different experiences."[26] In other words, the view that there is an intra-mundane experiential core waiting to be unpacked by each individual in each unique context is not critically or theologically defensible.

When Kevin Vanhoozer reflects on the experiential-expressive approach, he likens it to a kind of a lyric theology that takes some aspect of human experience as the normatively interpretative framework in its treatment of the Word of God.[27] The essential problem with this is that it seeks to make the Scripture succumb to limited human experience rather than interpreting human experience in the light of the Word that precedes and transcends it. In contrast, Vanhoozer argues in a carefully qualified position expressed in the following words:

> The word of God is primarily located neither in our experience nor in the world but rather in the communicative action that initiates the history of the covenant and that culminates in Jesus Christ. At the same time, it is important not to overact and so marginalize the realm of the affections or the imagination.[28]

Vanhoozer thus allows human experience to have a place in theological consideration, even if it is not the "primary location" of the revealed Word.

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[26] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 40.
[27] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 92.
[28] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 92-93.

A number of points emerge from our discussion so far. First, it is of genuine concern that the Christ event is not being given due consideration in recent formulations of Sino-Christian theology. The causes of this concern lie in the recognition of the limitations of ontic hermeneutics and of the over-generalized humanistic approach being adopted in the current Sino-theological context. In contrast, the more the Christ event becomes the focus, the more a monodimensionally existential hermeneutical method is exposed as inadequate. Secondly, in regard to the problems inseparable from a humanistic approach to theology, I have already offered a critical response in Chapter five by discussing the quandaries latent in the separation of theological (and religious) studies from other academic disciplines and approaches. I will focus, therefore, on the second aspect, i.e., the ontic-hermeneutical method. The inadequacy of this method provokes an effort to find something more appropriate to the present challenge – thus, to enable the emerging Sino-Christian theology to relate more effectively both to a thoroughly biblical theology and to the particular Sino-historical and cultural context.

It is true that Chow Pui Shan (周佩珊) has admitted that George Lindbeck's postliberal cultural-linguistic approach to theology is not sufficiently precise as a model in the Asian setting which traditionally gives priority to experience over the linguistic text. She nonetheless proposes that Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model can

become a fresh option in the construction of a properly Asian theology.[29] Though the cultural-linguistic is more adequate than the experiential-expressive model, problems remain. For instance, Kevin Vanhoozer, in his work, *The Drama of Doctrine*, has recently put forward some serious criticisms of George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach to theology. He suggests that, instead of a cultural-linguistic turn, there should be what he terms a "canonical-linguistic approach to Christian theology." In section 3 of this chapter we shall examine his claim more closely in order to test its adequacy in relating biblical theology to the cultural context in a critical and fruitful manner.

But, before that, let us examine more closely the shape, aims and limitations of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model.

2. A Cultural-Linguistic Approach

George Lindbeck is well-known for his cultural-linguistic proposal. He argues that it would prove more effective than any version of the widely employed theological experiential- expressive model. He reasons that it would not undermine the importance of human experience, but locate it in something more basic, namely, the

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[29] Chow Pui Shan 周佩珊, "後自由神學：建立亞洲神學的另類進路？ (Post-Liberal Theology: Another Approach to Constructing Asian Theology?)," *中國神學研究院期刊 (CGST Journal)* 42, no. 1 (2007): 135-151.

cultural-linguistic framework of social communication. This framework is determined

by a particular view of religion:

> A religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought. … Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities. It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and non-discursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed.[30]

It has been frequently noted that Lindbeck owes a special debt to Wittgenstein in this

respect, for he saw the meaning of a word in terms of its use in language.[31]

Consequently, religious experience and individual theological constructs are always

shaped by the tradition of a certain language-use. Accordingly, doctrines are viewed

as "articulations of the implicit grammatical rules that govern the community's

speaking and thinking about God."[32] By emphasizing such communal grammatical

rules, Lindbeck aimed to avoid the extreme of relativistic subjectivism. The task of

theology is to re-describe the contemporary world through the Christian text, instead

of relying on non-biblical concepts. He therefore proposed a kind of "intratextual"

hermeneutics: the textual meaning is immanent to the text, while providing an

interpretative framework for the Christian community to interpret the world.

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[30] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 33. See also Adonis Vidu, *Postliberal Theological Method: A Critical Study* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005), 165.

[31] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 33, 107. See also Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 10, 212.

[32] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 7. See Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 18-19, 69.

Regarding this concept of "intratexuality," he writes,

> Meaning is constituted by the uses of a specific language rather than being distinguishable from it. Thus the proper way to determine what "God" signifies, for example, is by examining how the word operates within a religion and thereby shapes reality and experience rather than by first establishing its propositional or experiential meaning and reinterpreting or reformulating its uses accordingly. It is in this sense that theological description in the cultural-linguistic mode is intrasemiotic or intratextual.[33]

Lindbeck, therefore, opts to emphasize what is already presented in the text and within the community that preserves it, instead of appealing to some extra-biblical ideas or experiences.

However, Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach to theology is not without serious problems. It displays at least the following shortcomings. First of all, there are problems with the way he shifts the basis of interpretation to the Christian community and its implicit grammatical rules. In such a move, theology runs the risk of being reduced to a form of sociology. In other words, it is more concerned with an ecclesial self-description. The implicit logic of how the Church community works seems to dominate what God has said and how God has acted. Vanhoozer questions whether doctrine so described actually refers "to God, or does it merely describe how

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[33] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 114.

members of the Christian community talk about God?"[34] Moreover, the way in which theology addresses the reality of God transcends the range of any mere human communal experience. The mystery of God is always more. Though God is self-revealed in his Word and Spirit, though faith enjoys a true knowledge of the divine, this does not mean that we know God fully (see, for example, Dt 29:29, and God's questioning of Job in Job 38-41). The divine transcendence is never fully grasped. Vanhoozer is thus right in claiming that "there is something in the nature of theology's subject matter – God, the gospel – that resists being designated as mere 'local custom.'"[35] In the end, Lindbeck is more like Feuerbach than he would admit: "If, for Feuerbach, theology is really only anthropology, a harsh critic might say that, for Lindbeck, theology is really only *cultural* anthropology."[36]

Another problem with Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach is this: where do the implicit grammatical rules that govern the Christian community's speech about God come from? It appears that "In Lindbeck's regulative theory, doctrine does not direct the community but is directed by it. Doctrine stands in a second-order relationship not to Scripture but to the use of Scripture in the church."[37] This would suggest that

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[34] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 7. See also Kevin Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea of a Theological System: An Essay in Aid of Triangulating Scripture, Church and World," in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. A.T.B. McGowan (Leicester: Apollos, 2006), 142-143.

[35] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 7.

[36] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 175.

[37] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 97.

Lindbeck has established a wrong priority – the *use* of Scripture rather than Scripture itself as the organizing principle. Does it not follow that, if the ecclesial use of Scripture is prioritized, then the Church would be powerless to discern which of its usages is authentic when competing accounts present themselves. Vanhoozer sharply concludes that "It is one thing to describe the life and language of the Christian community, quite another to guard the gospel."[38] As a result, it may well be argued that Lindbeck is not so much different from Schleiermacher:

> Whereas for Schleiermacher doctrines are religious affects put forth in speech, doctrines for Lindbeck are articulations of the meaning and logic of habitual Christian practices. Note, however, that in each case doctrine emerges from and is governed not by divine revelation but by Christian existence – subjectivity in Schleiermacher's case, intersubjectivity in Lindbeck's.[39]

The further problem with Lindbeck's approach lies in its inability to make truth claims about anything "outside" the intra-textual story-world of Scripture.[40] Merely unfolding the Bible's story-world is not the same as theology's engagement with the world of today. Would not this point to a serious inadequacy of the cultural-linguistic approach in dealing with contemporary culture and particular contexts?[41] It is all but

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[38] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 174.
[39] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 97.
[40] See Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 95.
[41] Vanhoozer points out that, Lindbeck seems to have shifted his view and have acknowledged that we cannot establish any textual meaning by intratextuality alone, see Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 172, 183-184; George A. Lindbeck, "Postcritical Canonical Interpretation: Three Models of Retrieval," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 26-51.

impossible for theology to abstract an identifiable fixed set of rules or patterns from the linguistic usages of the Christian community that would be immediately applicable to differing socio-cultural contexts.[42] We have already referred to Tanner's postmodern notion of culture. She sees no culture as self-contained, for any culture is always in interaction with others. If this is so, the difficulty is increased when it comes to detecting a stable core of Christian communicative practice – in much the same way as Lindbeck would argue against the possibility of isolating a universal common core of human experience.[43] To sum up, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the cultural-linguistic model that Lindbeck has proposed, despite the clarity and stimulation he has brought to contemporary discussion, is itself too reliant on an outmoded modern notion of culture. We turn then to an alternative proposal, the "canonical-linguistic" model.

3. A Canonical-Linguistic Approach

I will first note the main features of Kevin Vanhoozer's proposal which he designates as a "canonical-linguistic approach." It includes the normative priority of the biblical canon, the dramatic nature of doctrine, and the link between theory and practice. I will

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[42] See my discussion in Chapter four of Tanner's critique of Schleiermacher and postliberal theologians in assuming that there is a body of rules or patterned order to be discovered which reflects Christian's everyday practice. See also Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 121.

[43] See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 72-92, 120-155.

then be in a position to pursue the primary concern of this chapter, namely, the relation of biblical theology to the wider culture.

(a) The Normative Priority of the Canon

Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic proposal is above all a response to Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach. He "aims to correct (without overreacting to) this cultural-linguistic misstep by locating authority not in the use of Scripture by the believing community but in what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls divine authorial discourse."[44] Vanhoozer concedes that the validity of cultural-linguistic consists in its affirming the close connection between theology and the life of the Church. He understands that, "Doctrines arise not from speculative theories but from the core practices – baptism, the Eucharist, prayer, worship – that constitute the ongoing life and identity of the church."[45] However, the cultural-linguistic approach, in his judgement, diminishes the authority of Scripture. Vanhoozer proposes, therefore, to uphold the special authority of the biblical canon through a *canonical*-linguistic approach. Though Vanhoozer's approach relates to church practice, it is God's Word that determines the practice, not the reverse.[46]

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[44] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 11.
[45] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 13.
[46] Vanhoozer rightly differentiates the two: "It is one thing to speak of the church as a correct performance of Scripture (which theology must do in order to assess the integrity of the church's witness), quite another to speak of the meaning of Scripture as a function of the church's performative practices" (*The Drama of Doctrine*, 159).

Vanhoozer addresses Lindbeck's problematic prioritization of church communal practice over canonical text by asking whether the notion of the church as "spirited practices" may help to overcome Lindbeck's shortcomings. [47] These "spirited practices" denote that the sum total of the church's form of life is the work of the Holy Spirit. This expression will "compensate for the perceived 'pneumatological deficit' of Lindbeck's argument."[48] However, Vanhoozer remains unconvinced that the problems inherent in Lindbeck's proposal are resolved through any such adjustment of terminology. Even if the role of the Spirit were to be more fully recognised as the additional factor in the interpretative community reflecting on the text, questions remain. Lindbeck's model labours under the difficulty of how to integrate the distinct realities of the text, the Church, and the Spirit. For instance, if the interpretative community's use of Scripture is authoritative above all else, how then do the Spirit and the canonical text come together without collapsing them into one communal practice? For Vanhoozer, the only possible way forward is to treat the Scriptures themselves as "spirited practices." They constitute a divine discourse transcending both the church and its use of Scripture. He emphatically states that "It is *God's* use of language that must be acknowledged as the source and norm of Christian doctrine" – instead of the ecclesial use. [49] In other words, the correct

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[47] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 98-99.

[48] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 98.

[49] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 99. See Webster's claim: "Crucially, … it is divine, not human or churchly, use which has priority in determining the ontology of the canonical text" (John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 31).

"grammar" is not ecclesiastical, but what properly belongs to the Word of God itself.

He thus describes a kind of grammar with the adjective, "canonical."[50] The priority is

given, as it were, to God's use of the Scripture, not to that of the church. Here,

Vanhoozer appeals to the historical process of forming the canon. He incisively states

his fundamental principle in the following words:

> To think of the church as the context within which Scripture becomes canon
> appears plausible in terms of history and sociology, but it is theologically
> inadequate. … [I]t is not the church's use but the triune God's use of Scripture
> that makes it canon. That the church recognizes the canon authenticates the
> church rather than the canon, which needs no ecclesial approval to be what it is:
> the Word of God. Canonicity is the criterion of catholicity, not vice versa. This
> insight also marks the definitive break between the canonical-linguistic
> approach and its cultural-linguistic counterpart.[51]

On one hand, Vanhoozer agrees with Lindbeck. Meaning and truth are crucially inter-

related to the communal language-use of believers. On the other hand, the biblical

canon has normative priority over the existing ecclesial culture.[52] He reasons that we

cannot naively equate every word that the Church utters and every one of its acts to

the work of the Spirit.[53] Otherwise, there is the danger of either humanizing the Spirit,

at one extreme, or of divinizing the Church, at the other. Vanhoozer concedes the

value of Church practice. But that value derives from a higher source. He allows that

"the knowledge of God may well be embedded in the concrete practices of the church,"

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[50] See Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 213.
[51] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 149-150, emphases original.
[52] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 16.
[53] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 188.

but with this qualification, "it is the concrete practices embedded in the canon that serve as the normative specification of this knowledge."[54] Indeed, Vanhoozer's high regard for the biblical canon is evident in his appreciation of Scripture, not simply as a written record of God's will and action, but because it is God's personal communicative action. Scripture belongs intrinsically within the economy of God's self-communication. To that degree, its meaning is constituted in a way that precedes its use in the Church. On the other hand, the communal activities of the Church interpreting the Word and appropriating its meaning do have their place: the drama of divine communication provokes an appropriate response and "performance" – if the role of Scripture is to be fully appreciated as the salvific expression of the divine will. In the following passage, Vanhoozer conveniently summarises these points:

> What comes first – that to which doctrine is primarily accountable – is triune communicative action. In the beginning was the word – the *promissio*, a communicative act – not propositions or religious experience or community practices. To the extent that Scripture has been taken up into the economy of triune communicative action, it has meaning before it is used by the interpretative community or socialized into the church's life. At the same time, Scripture is incomplete in the sense that, as an authoritative script, it calls for appropriation on the part of the believing community – in a word, performance. … Scripture is essentially theo-dramatic discourse whose authority originates not in a corporate will-to-power on the part of Israel or the church but in a divine will-to-power.[55]

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[54] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 211.
[55] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 101, 134-135, emphases original.

We might remark that Vanhoozer in this respect is very close to Barth's view of revelation as an essentially kerygmatic event anteceding and judging linguistic forms, religious experiences, or communal practices. According to George Hunsinger, Barth sees this kerygmatic event as "an event of personal encounter that was as wholly self-involving for the initiator (God) as for the recipient (the human being)."[56] In other words, for the fulfilment of revelation, both the objective and subjective polarities of divine self-revelation must be given their full weight if theology is to be faithful to Scripture. We recall the words of Barth,

> as we tried to be faithful to Holy Scripture as the only valid testimony to revelation, we saw that we were committed to the statement that as an event which encounters man, this event represents a self-enclosed circle. Not only the objective but also the subjective element in revelation, not only its actuality but also its potentiality, is the being and action of the self-revealing God alone. But this revelation is in fact an event which encounters man. It is an event which has at least the form of human competence, experience and activity.[57]

Barth typically emphasises that the human possibility of actualizing the Word of God is found only in God, revealing himself through the Holy Spirit. Vanhoozer adds two further notes. Like Barth, he sees the canonical Scripture as the communicative act of God through which the Church is drawn, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, to recognise

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[56] George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 45. See also my discussion of Barth's dynamic character of the Word of God in Timothy Lee Yii Lau, "God's Revelation of Himself through Himself: Ontology and Epistemology in Karl Barth's Doctrine of Revelation in Volume One of Church Dogmatics" (Australian College of Theology, 1999), 37-54.

[57] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 280, my italics. See my discussion of Barth's objective and subjective aspects of revelation in Lau, "God's Revelation of Himself through Himself," 71-95.

God's self-revelation. But, taking this position further, he adds, not only an interpretation of revelation in theo-dramatic terms, but also that the canonical norm for Church practices is found in the inspired Word of God. He articulates his central thesis in the following words:

> At the heart of the canonical-linguistic approach is the proposal that we come to know God by attending to the uses to which language of God is put in Scripture itself. … Canonical-linguistic theology therefore takes its primary bearings from the Scriptures themselves, making what we shall call canonical practices the norm for the church's speech and thought of God. … Scripture is the norm for the Christian way, truth and life, but only when Scripture is conceived as more than a handbook of propositional truths.[58]

Later we shall discuss how Vanhoozer's model is actually applied in practice. In the meantime, suffice it to note that "canonical practices," that is, "the uses to which language of God is put in Scripture itself," are the norm transcending in importance any more generalised understanding of ecclesiastical discourse. Vanhoozer adds further precision to his proposal by explaining more fully the meaning of the canonical:

> The canon is the abiding theological witness to God's pattern of communicative action in Israel and in Jesus Christ. As theo-dramatic script, the canon is witness to what God has done. As covenant document, the canon is witness to the solemn agreement that binds God and God's people together.[59]

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[58] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 22.
[59] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 138.

The implication of this is, as Serene Jones interprets it, "that the church doesn't just choose to inhabit the story, it understands itself as being inhabited *by* the story."[60] God, and the divine Word and act, have priority over any human response which might be reduced to the Church's communal practices. The relationship between the two is such that "the canon is the place in which God speaks," while "the church is the place in which canon rules."[61] All this stands in sharp contrast to the more reductive cultural-linguistic approach with its claim that the Scripture becomes canonical only in the context of ecclesiastical practice. To such a view, the Church is a necessary, even if not precisely constitutive aspect of the canon's being and function.[62] It results in overstating the Church's status and in overemphasising human possibilities to the detriment of what is possible to God alone. This is an issue seriously questioned by Kathryn Tanner in chapter four of this thesis. Furthermore, Webster suggests that this "naturalization" of the canon "means that it [i.e., the canon] comes to be seen as product, not norm. … In the end, that is, the canon does not transcend us; we transcend the canon."[63] In contrast to a theology that privileges the *a priori* potential of human activity, Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic approach views theology as an *a posteriori* discipline. It is dependent, as it were, on the data not merely as the "given" in an empirical sense, but as God-given *dona* – the "gifts" of

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[60] Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 158.
[61] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 150.
[62] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 142.
[63] Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics*, 16-17.

grace, since, "we cannot compel God to speak or act, we must attend to those free and

gracious instances of divine word and deed."[64] Therefore, Christian theology and

interpretation must attend to God's communicative action in Scripture, in a receptivity

that must include cognitional, experiential, volitional, and moral aspects.[65]

(b) The Dramatic Nature of Doctrine

Along with the emphasis on the canonical aspect in Vanhoozer's approach, there is

his understanding of doctrine as a "theological drama" – hence, the title, *The Drama*

of Doctrine. Rather than searching for propositional truth claims, establishing

authentic experiences, or discerning the dynamics of a particular ecclesial culture,

Vanhoozer proposes a wholesale construction of theology in dramatic terms,

including in all its phases – from the hermeneutics of interpretation to everyday

Christian practice. The drama is begun by God himself as he communicates his Word

in Scripture. Theology works within a dramatic framework. As Vanhoozer explains,

"If both the subject matter of Scripture (God in self-communicative action) and the

process of interpreting it are dramatic, then so too is theology, the task of bringing

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[64] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 249. This comes close to Richard Pratt's claim that "A redemptive-historical approach is not imposed on Scripture, … it comes from the Bible itself" (quoted in Richard C. Gamble, "The Relationship between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology," in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. A.T.B. McGowan (Leicester: Apollos, 2006), 227-228).

[65] See the four levels of consciousness: empirical (experiencing), intellectual (understanding), rational (judging) and moral (deciding) in Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).

one's interpretation of Scripture to bear on the life of the church in the world."[66] With

this dramatic framework, theology "offers an integrative perspective within which to

relate propositions, experience, and narrative."[67] In Vanhoozer's judgment, previously

accepted models, such as the cognitive-propositional, the experiential-expressive, and

the cultural-linguistic, are deemed "non-dramatic." With their respective limitations,

they tend to place exclusive emphasis on one narrow aspect, be it the informational,

the experiential, or the volitional. Likewise, they tend to confine themselves to a

particular biblical genre, whether it be doctrinal proclamation, history, or narrative. In

contrast, the dramatic canonical-linguistic approach preserves all three of these

aspects by giving each its rightful place, just as various biblical genres are given

proper attention.[68]

Furthermore, the dramatic canonical-linguistic approach helps to deliver theology

from dead-ends of historical and literary criticism. Stephen Barton's observation is

relevant here: "the horizon of meaning is *not restricted to the past nor to the text as*

text."[69] As the canonical-linguistic approach does not stop at merely deriving the

textual meaning of Scripture, it moves on to the dramatic actualization of textual

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[66] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 21.
[67] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 101.
[68] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 106.
[69] Stephen Barton, "New Testament Interpretation as Performance," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52, no. 2 (1999): 196.

meaning in the everyday life and cultural context of Christian believers. Summing up

his "dramatic" view of doctrine, Vanhoozer writes,

> Doctrine helps the people of God to participate fittingly in the drama of redemption, and so to be true and faithful witnesses to God's incarnate wisdom. The canonical-linguistic approach to theology has as its goal the training of competent and truthful witnesses who can themselves incarnate, in a variety of situations, the wisdom of Christ gleaned from indwelling canonical practices and their ecclesial continuations … Viewed against this backdrop, the church is less the cradle of Christian theology than its crucible: the place where the community's understanding of faith is lived, tested, and reformed.[70]

Canonical Scripture is given a normative role. But this must be played out in everyday

Christian life in a dramatic manner, as Christian believers performatively interpret

God's Word in their respectively variable contexts. Though all Christians start from

the same unchanging Gospel, the variable socio-cultural context requires appropriate

"performances" in accord with the canonical practices. I shall return to this cultural

application in more detail below.

Vanhoozer's understanding of the dramatic nature of doctrine helps to avoid a view of

canonical authority as overpowering or as suggesting a rigid application of Scripture.

Sensitive to the dynamics of drama, instead of stressing canonical control, he prefers

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[70] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 25.

to think in terms of direction:

> Hence the canon is the supreme norm and measure of dramatic consistency as we seek to assess the fidelity of our performances to the gospel … Specifically, the canon shows us how to go on following Christ, how to go on in righteousness. It does this by providing criteria for fitting participation in the drama of redemption. It does that by showing us reality as it really is, namely, as created and redeemed through Christ … The drama of doctrine therefore involves the struggle over how best to perform one's discipleship. Theology's task is to equip disciples to speak and act in ways that correspond to the gospel in particular contexts.[71]

As we shall see, the last sentence of this paragraph leads into the specific concerns of this thesis: the divine drama already being enacted in the Sino-Christian context. While theology works within this dramatic dynamism, it does not exclude the mundane and seemingly prosaic responsibility which "seeks to learn the habits of seeing, thinking, tasting inherent in the diverse literary forms of Scripture and to continue them in equally ordinary forms of life."[72] Consistent with its theo-dramatic nature, Scripture is regarded more as "a canonical atlas or rather a collection of maps that variously render the way, the truth, and the life."[73] The metaphorical designation of Scripture as canonical atlas containing a variety of maps suggests both the plurality of Scriptural genres, and also its character as "a symbolic representation of selected aspects of reality."[74] The dramatic unfolding of Scripture is, then, marked by both the

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[71] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 146, 148, 59. Later, Vanhoozer claims that "The canonical-linguistic approach is a proposal about *how to go on*, how to "play" the Christian theo-drama today." (309)

[72] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 310.

[73] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 294.

[74] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 296.

unity of a work of art and, at the same time, as allowing for the creativity of the

ongoing diversity of performance. The transcendent meaning of the Word of God is

never exhausted.

In this perspective Vanhoozer imagines the Church as the theatre in which the drama

of redemption is staged, and in a succession of performances throughout history.[75]

Nevertheless, this succession of performance is no literal repetition. Nor is it an empty

memorial; it is continual re-enactment, or "an active mimēsis."[76] In this respect, the

history of the Church is the history of dramatically biblical performances. Each of

these re-enactments reflects how individuals and communities, in their respective

contexts, are directed by the Spirit to play-out the Scripture according to the theo-

dramatic script.[77] Though the canon is "closed" in the sense that God has spoken his

final Word through Jesus Christ (cf. Heb 1:1-4), it remains open to the church's

continual interpretation and participation.[78] In I. Howard Marshall's words, "*The*

closing of the canon is not incompatible with the nonclosing of the interpretation of

that canon."[79]

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[75] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 400, 402.

[76] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 409.

[77] Vanhoozer derives this view from G. Ebeling who views church history as essentially the history of biblical interpretation (*The Drama of Doctrine*, 418).

[78] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 237.

[79] I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic: 2004), 54.

Vanhoozer's dramatized presentation of doctrine and theology is, therefore, forward looking. It moves from the scriptural narrative of God's self-revelation through the Word and Spirit in his dealings with Israel and the Church, to the continuing performative application of God's Word in today's Church, and in the particular churches, each with its particular contextual location within the wider world. In contrast to the forward-looking dynamism of the canonical-linguistic approach, the cultural-linguistic model cannot but appear backward-looking – even fixated on past and limited to present grammatical rules regulating doctrinal and theological discourse. It does not share the practical and imaginative vitality of the canonical-linguistic approach in meeting new socio-cultural contexts in ways that allow for both the consistency and creativity of Christian theology.

(c) The Inextricable Link between Theory and Practice

Consistent with the forward-looking nature of the canonical-linguistic approach, Vanhoozer makes an essential link between theory and practice: "Theology involves both theory (knowledge) and practice (life) for the sake of its pastoral function: assisting people to enjoy and glorify God."[80] In this theological interconnection of knowledge and life, "Doctrine seeks not simply to state theoretical truths but to

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[80] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 13.

embody truth in ways of living."[81] Here Vanhoozer clearly moves beyond a

propositionalist view of revealed truth: the meaning of the Word cannot be limited to

a series of theoretical statements, practical imperatives, nor, for that matter, in

conceptual systems of universal significance. But, from the other extreme, Vanhoozer

is intending to offer an alternative to a largely experientialist reduction of the biblical

Word. Theology is not based simply on what it considers to be the experience of the

believing community as if theology is a kind of post-experiential afterthought. Rather,

between these two extremes, theology is a form of "believing practice" and "practical

belief." The revealed Word is to be appropriated in both faith and action.[82]

Consequently, neither is canonical-linguistic theology reducible to a form of

hermeneutics. For it envisages not merely an interpretation of the inspired text, but a

way of life, at once biblically scripted and faithfully performed. In short, it is "a

scripted and spirited performance, a way of wisdom generated and sustained by word

and Spirit."[83]

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[81] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 15.

[82] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 113. He claims, "In canonical-linguistic theology, the canon is the measure of *evangelical* and *catholic* alike inasmuch as it specifies both the center and the boundaries of Christian faith. What emerges from such a canonical-linguistic, catholic-evangelical theology is not a set of timeless propositions, nor an expression of religious experience, nor grammatical rules for Christian speech and thought, but rather an imagination that corresponds to and continues the gospel by making good theological judgements about what to say and do in light of the reality of Jesus Christ. … The hoped-for outcome of canonical-linguistic theology is nothing less than the missing link between right belief (orthodoxy) and wise practice (orthopraxis): *right judgement* (orthokrisis)." (30)

[83] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 255.

In offering a further clarification of the connection between faith and practice, Vanhoozer appeals to two traditional and interrelated concepts, *scientia* and *sapientia*. *Scientia*, "science" or "knowledge," in this context, consists more in the activities of interpretation and analysis proper to the exegete and systematic theologian. *Sapientia*, "wisdom," pertains more to the deepest habits of the heart, as the principle of moral action. Our author relates the two in the following paragraph:

> For while the ultimate aim is to produce wise performances or performed wisdom [*sapientia*], its biblical interpretations [*scientia*] are neither uncritical nor unrelated to analytical procedures that seek to explicate the text… Exegetical *scientia* ultimately serves a *sapientia* purpose. Canonical-linguistic theology aims not simply to transmit a set of truths but to cultivate a new *habitus* – the mind of Christ – in order to build up the body of Christ.… To have the mind of Christ, we must enter the sapiential circle, a circle with two focuses, word and Spirit: "I believe in order to understand; I understand in order to put into practice; I put into practice in order to grow in knowledge and belief."[84]

Theology, as dramaturgy, thus begins with the canonical script; but it does not end with exegetical *scientia* alone, no matter how competent such knowledge might be.[85] It strives to fulfil its *sapiential* purpose. The drama must move beyond the biblical text into realistic performances staged in the theatre of the Church. The linking of theory and practice in this manner does not undermine biblical authority, but

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[84] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 247, 256.

[85] The theological *scientia* Vanhoozer has in mind is neither the "objective" exegesis according to the modern ideal of an autonomous reason, i.e., the interpreters is transcendent above history and culture, nor the "subjective" exegesis of the postmodern inversion, i.e., any interpretation is merely a projection of a particular community's interests and biases. He promotes a postfoundationalist type of exegesis which seeks to "hold onto the ideals of truth, objectivity, and rationality, while at the same time acknowledging the provisional, contextual, and fallible nature of human reason" (*The Drama of Doctrine*, 293).

intensifies it. In fact, the venerable principle, *sola scriptura* ("by Scripture alone"),

takes on new life:

> *sola scriptura* refers not to an abstract principle but to a concrete theological
> practice: a performance practice, namely, the practice of corresponding in one's
> speech and action to the word of God. The supreme norm for church practice is
> Scripture itself; not Scripture as used by the church but Scripture as used by
> God, even, or perhaps especially, when such use is over against the church.[86]

Thus, *sola scriptura* is not simply a theologically abstract principle but a theologically

engaged practice. Even more to the point, "it is the Spirit-enabled practice of

participating in the 'canonical practices' that comprise Scripture."[87] Nevertheless, the

practice governed by *sola scriptura* in this way is not to be employed as if it were the

antithesis of tradition. The tradition of the Church's faith has its proper validity. By

distinguishing Scripture from tradition, and then to respect the validity of both, is to

recognise, in traditional terms, that Scripture is the *norma normans*, the "norming

norm," while tradition is *norma normata*, the "normed norm."[88] In other words, the

canonical Scripture has normative priority over tradition, while tradition has its

didactic and formative function as it illustrates how God's word has been variously

heard and applied in the past.[89] Thus, Vanhoozer brings together Scripture and

tradition, Word and Spirit, theory and practice, *scientia* and *sapientia*, in the

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[86] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 16-17.
[87] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 32.
[88] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 234.
[89] To Vanhoozer, the treatment of tradition as authoritative interpretative framework for reading Scripture has three obvious problems: tradition is humanly created, is fallible, and cannot simply assumed to be entirely the work of the Spirit (*The Drama of Doctrine*, 162-165).

canonical-linguistic approach of *The Drama of Doctrine*. This brings us to our last

point regarding Vanhoozer's contextualized application of the canonical text.

(d) Cultural Application

As we have already noted, Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic approach to Christian

theology clearly accepts that the Gospel must be applied to each cultural context.

Indeed, "considerations of culture and context are part and parcel of the canon itself,

for engaging culture with the gospel is a prime canonical practice."[90] As a result, a

properly contextual theology is not just intratextual; it must move beyond the text to

engage the outside cultural world.[91] The supreme exemplar of this movement is found

in the Incarnation itself. The Word was made flesh, two millennia ago, in Judaea, an

outer province of the Roman Empire (John 1:1-14). The socio-cultural context is an

inextricable dimension of the divine economy.

There are thus two closely interconnected matrices in Vanhoozer's dramatic scheme

of theology: Scripture and context. If Scripture is the script of the drama, and if the

context includes the stage on which it is performed, both need to be closely studied if

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[90] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 129. He also says, "Canonical-linguistic theology attends both to the drama *in* the text – what God is doing in the world through Christ – and to the drama that continues in the church as God uses Scripture to address, edify, and confront its readers." (17)

[91] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 251.

Christians want to participate fittingly in the theo-drama.[92] Given this dynamic interrelation of text and context, Vanhoozer is looking for a theo-dramatic correspondence and coherence.[93] Hence the canonical Scripture – and the canonical practice it expresses and inspires – must be seen to occupy a normative and authoritative status when it comes to cultural applications.[94] On the other hand, the context also has its influence. It determines the concrete form of the Christian response to the divine "director." In Vanhoozer's words,

> The situation does not change our script, but it may affect the staging. Situations do not themselves have authority, then, but they do exert a certain influence over how one goes about responding to what is authoritative – namely, God's word – in particular contexts.[95]

In this way, both Scripture and context are given their due, but never as unrelated to one another. The mission of the Church is certainly to preserve the integrity of the Gospel as contained in the Scripture. But the ecclesial mission is also intent on the responsibility of contextualizing what has been revealed through the improvised performance of Christian life in a particular socio-cultural situation.[96]

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[92] Vanhoozer sees this fittingness as the ultimate aim of canonical-linguistic theology (*The Drama of Doctrine*, 260).

[93] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 419.

[94] Vanhoozer claims that "script and performance are equally necessary, though not equally authoritative." (*The Drama of Doctrine*, 78, 362).

[95] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 325.

[96] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 129.

However, though the normative status of Scripture does not change, various contexts do require creative application of the biblical norm. Essential to this ongoing, performative praxis, are the two essential elements of what we might interpret as canonical fidelity and cultural creativity. He writes, "Canonical-linguistic theology shapes Christian identity in new situations by looking to the canon as both catalyst and criterion for 'creative fidelity' and 'ruled spontaneity.'"[97] He wants to avoid two extremes. Merely to recreate or repeat the unchanging message in each new context may mean that fidelity is maintained. But that would be at the expense of cultural freedom and improvisation. On the other hand, to accommodate the message to contemporary thought forms in a particular context, may preserve freedom, but at a cost to fidelity.[98] Vanhoozer rejects such alternatives as too one-sided. They fail to take seriously either the cultural context or the canonical message. He opts instead for a transpositional model. As he puts it, "The task of the theologian is not to compose but to transpose, not to author but to resituate and interpret for a new audience."[99] Exegesis without application, *scientia* without *sapiential* – or a sapiential application without biblical exegesis, are not alternatives. Theology must go further than limiting its concerns to a recovery of the original sense of the text. For Vanhoozer, two

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[97] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 129, also 253.
[98] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 253-254.
[99] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 254. See also these words: "Faithful performance and creative improvisation need not be at odds with one another; the biblical script itself is a record of previous improvisations – of God, of the prophets, and of the apostles – that display creative fidelity. The best improvisation, like the best translation, is precisely the one that displays narrative continuity (*ipse-identity*) with what went on before. Theology is no different." (344)

horizons fuse, that of the past context of the text, and that of the present context of the

reader. Both must be brought into inter-play.[100]

In order to appreciate the diversity of cultures and languages in the performance of

the theo-drama – and, indeed, to preclude mere repetition unresponsive to the

historical and cultural diversity of the situation[101], Vanhoozer suggests a particular

kind of Christian identity, at once creative and flexible, yet unchanging in its

essentials. In an effort further to clarify what is entailed, our author here appeals to

two Latin words. He employs the Latin word, *ipse*, (literally, "the very same," to

emphasise the identity of the acting subject). But he uses this particle as suggesting a

"soft identity," in contrast to the "hard identity" connoted in the Latin word, *idem*

(literally, "the same" – as permanent and immutable in time). Whatever one thinks

about his interpretation of the Latin terms in question, he is attempting to suggest a

necessary permanence of fundamental elements, such as the continuity of character

and the constancy of the responsible self.[102] This is to say that he wishes to highlight

"*constancy* across cultures rather than exact *sameness*."[103] For instance, the then

newly found term, *homoousios*, as employed in the 4th Century Nicene Council to

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[100] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 352.
[101] Vanhoozer's critique of epic style of theological approach can be used to warn against the mere repetition of biblical narrative without taking the present context into consideration (e.g., Hegelian treatment of doctrine as epic) (*The Drama of Doctrine*, 84-96). See also Delwin Brown who argues that a synchronic activity must occur between a tradition's canon which requires continuity and a contemporary historical context which requires change (Delwin Brown, *Boundaries of Our Habitations: Tradition and Theological Construction* (New York: Suny Press, 1994), 81-83).
[102] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 127-128, also 314.
[103] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 314.

interpret the phrase "equality with God" as found in Philippians 2 shows how *ipse-*

identity is used in the best sense: "it is a creative means of rendering for a new

situation the same judgment made in an earlier situation, thus ensuring *both the*

identity and the relevance of the claim being made."[104]

With regard to how the canonical text can be applied to each socio-cultural context,

there are at least three different strategies detectable in church history.[105] The first

strategy tries to derive doctrines/laws from Scripture. Vanhoozer considers that

Lindbeck's model is more akin to this approach. The problem is that, by its very the

nature, this strategy is backward-looking rather than moving forward. Tanner, for

example, criticized Lindbeck at this point: "The rules themselves do not establish in

advance what players can do; they merely sum up how the practice has been

performed so far."[106] She goes on to say, with more emphasis, "no formalized or

codified set of rules determines of itself the manner of its application."[107] In other

words, the cultural-linguistic approach – and any approach intent on deriving

doctrines/precepts from Scripture – has grave difficulty in dealing with new contexts.

When confronted with issues or situations not mentioned in the biblical text, this

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[104] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 343-344.
[105] These strategies can often be found in the studies of Christian ethics concerned with how Christian texts are applied to concrete ethical situations. For instance, Stanley J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997); James Gustafson, "Ways of Using Scripture," in *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*, ed. Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 21-26.
[106] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 315; Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 169.
[107] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 140.

strategy becomes powerless. Furthermore, laws so derived can easily lead one to assume that salvation is by works instead of by grace.[108] In a cultural-linguistic theology, too many issues remain unresolved in its strategy.

The second strategy is to turn to principles instead of precepts. It assumes that there are *transcultural* principles behind specific and culturally-bound biblical laws, narratives, poems or epistles waiting to be discovered. Once discovered, these transcultural principles can then be applied to any new context. Though this second strategy seems preferable when compared to the first, it still seems to assume that salvation is by works – in this case, by following certain biblical principles. As a result, what actually attracts the interests of exegetes are the moral principles, instead of the theological significance of the text under consideration (as we have often seen in traditional Chinese theological approaches). This is not saying that theological interpretation of a text does not have moral implications, but that these must be placed within the more basic theological framework of Scripture. In reference to this problem, Stanley Grenz remarks that "viewing the Bible primarily as the repository of timeless truth or timeless principles for human conduct risks overlooking the actual goal of revelation."[109] Furthermore, Vanhoozer points out that, behind such a strategy, there is a misunderstanding, if not serious confusion, on the part of the interpreter: "those

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[108] Grenz, *The Moral Quest*, 243.
[109] Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics*, 245.

who principlize assume that what gets contextualized is a pristine, culture-free principle, when what actually gets imported is one's culturally conditioned understanding of a biblical principle."[110] There is, then, the problematic assumption that theological interpreters can inhabit some kind of acultural context, uninfluenced, as it were, by the culture in which they live and work.

The third strategy is to focus on paradigms or exemplary models. As Richard Hays puts it, the basic assumption of this strategy takes for granted that there are "imaginative *analogies* between the stories told in the texts and the story lived out by the community in a very different historical setting."[111] Vanhoozer endorses this view: "What is noteworthy in Richard Hays' account is his refusal to abstract the paradigms from their original culturally and canonical setting. The paradigm is not an acultural abstraction but a culturally embedded form of action."[112] Obviously, Hay's account is very close to Vanhoozer's canonical- linguistic approach with its inextricable link between theory (doctrines) and practice (culture), and canon itself is firmly embedded in cultural forms. However, Vanhoozer enters one important qualification. To his

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[110] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 316. See also Vanhoozer's other criticisms of this strategy.
[111] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 298.
[112] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 317.

mind, the canonical-linguistic approach

> considers paradigmatic not merely the stories and characters described in biblical narrative but the sum total of the communicative practices that comprise the canon. … What is exemplary and worthy of contextualization, in other words, is the communicative praxis of Scripture itself.[113]

Doubtless, Vanhoozer is justified in maintaining his consistent emphasis on the canonical Scripture as the normative expression of the communicative acts of the Triune God. Moreover, by emphasizing the divine communicative nature of biblical paradigm, he avoids falling into the trap of treating the Bible as a book of moral examples. Hence, his suggestion that Hays' vision would be better construed as "theo-dramatic/theological" rather than "moral." [114] This is exactly the point James Gustafson makes, commenting on how the Bible is used in contemporary Christian ethics:

> the most significant alterations in Christian ethics in mid-twentieth century took place not as a result of the reassessment of the liberal and optimistic interpretation of human nature, but as a result of the introduction into ethical thinking of the idea of a "God who acts," or a "God who speaks" in particular historical circumstances … [B]iblical theology provided a framework for the interpretation of the historical events in which men and nations were involved; and out of this interpretation came certain assessments of the moral significance of events, certain clues about how they were to be judged, and what persons ought to do in them. The primary question became not "How ought we to judge this event?" nor even "What ought we to do in this event?" but "What is God doing in this event? What is he saying to us in this event?"[115]

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[113] Ibid.
[114] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 315.
[115] James Gustafson, "Ways of Using Scripture," 24.

When God is theologically regarded as the dramatic subject revealed in biblical canon,

theology can properly be termed "theonomous" – in contrast to heteronomous or

autonomous approaches to the Bible. To Stanley Grenz,

> The theonomous approach suggests that we can properly understand the law
> only within the relational context in which the ethical life occurs. God did not
> give us the law in order that we might thereby produce the ethical life. Indeed,
> even if we could live in perfect conformity to the law (which we cannot), our
> lives would not thereby correspond to God's intention for us (cf. Mt 19:16-26).
> Because God's intent is that we develop person-to-person relationships which
> reflect God's own relationality, true obedience is not marked by outward
> compliance to a set of laws but by inward piety (e.g., Mk 7:1-23). Indeed in
> itself the law is simply powerless to create the kind of godly relationships God
> wants us to enjoy.[116]

In a theonomous horizon, God and the personal relationship with him are located at

the centre of the biblical message. In other words, a moral life is a response to who

God is and what he has done for us. Allen Verhey is in agreement with such an

approach to biblical ethics:

> Biblical ethics does not provide an autonomous and timeless and coherent set of
> rules; it provides an account of the work and will and way of the one God and
> evokes the creative and faithful response of those who would be God's people.
> The one God of Scripture assures the unity of biblical ethics, but there is no
> simple unitive understanding even of that one God or of that one God's will. To
> force biblical ethics into a timeless systematic unity is to impoverish it.[117]

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[116] Grenz, *The Moral Quest*, 253.
[117] Allen Verhey, "Biblical Ethics," in *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*, 17.

Even as we allow for different emphases expressed in the works of Hays, and Vanhoozer Grenz, or Verhey, what these authors have in common is the respect for divine speech-act as expressed in the canonical text. This self-revelatory, divine speech-act cannot be "domesticated," and so reduced to some timeless system or generalised principles. Rather, following Vanhoozer, we would argue that the Scripture must be interpreted theo-dramatically and "performed" fittingly, in accord with the divine purpose – and with the help of the Holy Spirit. As a result, in the divine economy, the written Word is not without the Spirit. As Vanhoozer argues, "*word and Spirit together, canonical language and the Spirit of life, are the joint bearers of that unique culture of the kingdom of God that entered the world in Jesus Christ.*"[118] The faithful yet creative understanding and actualization of God's Word in any given situation is ultimately dependent on God's self-communication in Christ and the Spirit to the Christian community. Only by entering into the theo-drama of God's self-revelation can the canonical script be successfully applied to a socio-cultural context.

4. Some Implications for the Emerging Sino-Christian Theology

If, as we argued, there is considerable merit in Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic approach, then there are consequences for the development of a Sino-Christian

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[118] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 318.

theology in assessing the importance of biblical studies. The canonical-linguistic approach returns theology to its originating doctrinal and dramatic norm, though there is no question of minimising the importance of either the cultural context or church tradition. Indeed, as Vanhoozer noted, the cultural-linguistic approach has succumbed to the postmodern tendency that attends to "what the present church says, thinks, and does"[119]; and thereby runs the risk of becoming a form of cultural investigation or a sub-section of studies in the "history of religions." He develops this point:

> The prevailing critical approach to biblical studies may result in a measure of historical knowledge, but it stops short of theo-dramatic knowledge – the knowledge of what God was doing in history or of what God is saying and doing in the text. Historical- grammatical understanding is clearly relevant, for what God is saying often coincides with what the human authors are saying, but it is only a moment in the larger process of theo-dramatic understanding.[120]

We conclude, then, that Vanhoozer does not rule out the importance and usefulness of historical and cultural studies.[121] Nevertheless, they must be subsumed under the theological vision of the canonical text.

Admittedly, the theological situation is complex. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has indicated four dominant paradigms in contemporary biblical studies: the "scriptural-theological," the "philological-historical," the "hermeneutical-postmodern," and the

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[119] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 146.
[120] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 251.
[121] Regarding the indispensability and compatibility of historical-critical method to biblical studies, see George Eldon Ladd, *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967); Hagner, "The Place of Exegesis in the Postmodern World," 292-308.

"rhetorical- emancipatory."[122] Against Thomas Kuhn's conception of the struggle for dominance between different paradigms, she proposes "the possibility of constructing paradigm research in terms of dynamic intellectual collaboration."[123] We can hardly argue against her view that contemporary biblical studies need to undergo an "ethical-political" turn; that is, they must pay more attention to the rhetorical-emancipatory paradigm. But such a move need not imply that the rhetorical-emancipatory paradigm continues merely to sit alongside other paradigms, particularly the scriptural-theological paradigm. If that were the case, biblical studies could easily be reduced to historical and comparative studies of the ethics and politics of the ancient cultures of the biblical era, and so forth. To Webster, this would inevitably result in the mislocation of the canon out of its proper soil – "the saving economy of the triune God."[124] He further spells out the consequences:

> Unless it [i.e. the canon] is set in the larger structure of divine action and its creation of human response which we call revelation, "canon" can become simply "rule"; its normative status becomes its own property, rather than a consequence of its place in the divine economy. Above all, reference to divine action falls away, the canon becomes the textualization of revelation, and the substance of revelation is resolved into "a system of truths or a set of normative doctrines and formulated beliefs" (T.F. Torrance). But as a function of revelation, the canon is not merely list or code; it is a specification of those

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[122] Fiorenza, "Rethinking the Educational Practices of Biblical Doctoral Studies," 69. See also Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

[123] Fiorenza, "Rethinking the Educational Practices of Biblical Doctoral Studies," 69. She also claims later that "paradigms are not necessarily exclusive of each other but can exist alongside each other and are best understood as working in corrective interaction with each other" (72).

[124] Webster, *Word and Church*, 9.

instruments where the church may reliably expect to encounter God's communicative presence, God's self-attestation. It is normative because of what it presents or, better, indicates (this is part of what it means to have "apostolicity" as the criterion for inclusion in the canon).[125]

We must exercise caution, therefore, when dealing with the emerging state of Sino-Christian theology not to undermine the authoritative direction of the canonical Scripture, and so reduce theology to the investigation of Christianity as a particular cultural or historical phenomenon. In other words, the central focus of biblical theology – the Christ event and its significance – must be brought to the forefront in any serious re-construction of Sino-Christian theology. As Richard Gamble has claimed, biblical theology should inform the development of a theology at once biblical and systematic.[126]

The canonical-linguistic approach as described is by no means incompatible with the engagement of biblical theology either with other academic disciplines or the practical concerns of the society. It is designed for a creative "performance" of the Gospel in response to the ethical, political, and economic issues of the day. This may, in fact, be what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has in mind when, in rather fulsome terms, she called for a biblical scholarship that would be "a critical pedagogy [that] aims for the self-understanding of the biblical scholar as a public, transformative, connected, or

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[125] Webster, *Word and Church*, 29.
[126] Gamble, "The Relationship between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology," 239.

integrated intellectual who is able to communicate with a variegated public with the goal of persona, social, and religious transformation for justice and well-being of all."[127] Indeed, the emerging Sino-Christian theology is already displaying such qualities in the many collaborative and interdisciplinary works we have referred to. But if such collaboration is to bear further fruit in a genuine Sino-Christian theology, there is the need for a re-invigorated understanding of the essential role of biblical studies in the process.

The canonical-linguistic approach, with its emphasis on both normative Scripture and performative context, goes a long way to satisfy Philip Chia's call for a public relevance of biblical studies. Within such an approach, biblical studies do not end at deriving message from the canonical text, but move on to relate it to the contemporary socio-cultural context. In Vanhoozer's framework, the theologian begins with the canonical text to discern the theo-drama presented therein. Then, the biblical theologian must contribute to the creative performance of that theo-drama to meet the inherent demands of the historical context in which that drama must unfold. If Christian faith and practice do not bear fruit in public life, Christian life is incomplete and failing in its mission.

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[127] Fiorenza, "Rethinking the Educational Practices of Biblical Doctoral Studies," 73.

Lonergan refers to four dimensions of meaning – cognitive, effective, constitutive, and communicative. [128] When applied to theology, the cognitive dimension of meaning includes an objective articulation of the Trinitarian mystery, and God's self-communication in word and deed. The effective dimension bears on the world-transforming role of Christian meaning, values, mission and moral conduct. The constitutive dimension would attend to Christian consciousness and the transformed identity it experiences. The communicative dimension would deal with the kinds of community that result from divine revelation and personal responses to it. The following comment by Anthony Kelly on the various dimensions of meaning, though originally made in reference to the Johannine community, can fruitfully be applied to the whole of canonical Scripture, as in the case of Vanhoozer: "These various dimensions point to the density of the past experience of the Johannine community to suggest ways in which it can be personally appropriated now, and so transposed into the present cultural situation." [129] Vanhoozer's description of "spirited practices" makes a similar point, as the drama of God's self revelation calls forth a present response in a particular cultural and social situation.

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[128] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 76-81.
[129] Anthony J. Kelly, "Dimensions of Meaning: Theology and Exegesis," in *Transcending Boundaries: Contemporary Readings of the New Testament* ed. Rekha M. Chennattu and Mary M. Coloe (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 2005): 41-55.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to show how biblical theology is able to engage the public and the wider culture. Though Philip Chia does not specify any particular model when calling for the public relevance of biblical theology, Kevin Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic model is presented as a constructive proposal for meeting Chia's concerns. In the broader context of theological method and its essential connection with culture, we have referred already to Bernard Lonergan's *Method in Theology*, with its eightfold "functional specialties." Vanhoozer's proposal can be taken as an instance of the eighth functional speciality of Communications. In "a framework of collaborative creativity," theology has as its goal to "mediate between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of religion in that matrix."[130] Vanhoozer's treatment of the canonical Scripture, and subsequently, Christian theology, in dramatic terms clearly shows the lively engagement of the Canonical text (and theology) with the particular cultural context.

In the chapter to follow, I shall illustrate the public significance of biblical theology in the contemporary Sino-context in reference to one particular Christian teaching – what is often called "the Golden Rule." Its aim is to show that biblical theology can

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[130] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, xi.

effectively engage its located culture, and its content is relevant to the contemporary

society and people.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Golden Rule in the Emerging Sino-Christian Context

In the last chapter, I pointed out that there is an urgent call for the contemporary biblical theology to be publicly engaged. I proposed that Kevin Vanhoozer's dramatic approach to Scripture and theology is a valuable response to such a call. For Vanhoozer, Christian theology does not finish when the technical exegesis of the biblical text is done, but requires its interpretation be enacted dramatically in the contemporary living situation. The implication is that all the secular conduct of the public realm is never beyond the concern of Christian faith and theology. Developing such interrelationship between theology and culture is particularly vital if the Christian gospel is to take root in the emerging Sino-Christian context. Wang Xiaochao (王曉朝), an academic at Tsinghua University in Beijing, has argued that,

to a certain degree, the Chinese society has "accepted" Christianity.[1] Wang spells out

the three levels of acceptance as follow:

> On the personal level, we can say that, individual Chinese have accepted
> Christianity as their religious and spiritual foundation; on the cultural level, we
> can say that, Chinese culture has accepted Christianity as a significant factor in
> motivating the renewal and transformation of Chinese culture; on the social
> level, we can say that, Chinese society has accepted Christianity as a vital force
> in the stability and development of Chinese society.[2]

He then places his observation in a larger political context as he writes,

> Since the opening up for reform, the Chinese government has emphasized in
> numerous occasions that the next step in the development of Chinese society is
> to bring into play the different positive roles of religions. This certainly includes
> the vital role Christianity can play.[3]

This view is supported by Zhuo Xinping (卓新平), the director of the Institute of

World Religions, in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Zhuo sees the situation

in these terms:

> The mainstream of Chinese ideology has proposed to bring in any theory of
> religion that is compatible to the socialist view of society, to view and evaluate
> the role of the Christian church in contemporary Chinese society from the
> perspectives of cultural values, moral significance, and social function.[4]

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[1] Wang Xiaochao 王曉朝, "全球倫理與基督信仰 (Global Ethics and Christian Faith)," in 基督宗教與
當代社會 *(Christian Religion and Contemporary Society)*, ed. Zhuo Xinping 卓新平 and Josef
Sayer 薩耶爾 (Beijing: Religious Culture Press, 2003), 53.

[2] Wang, "全球倫理與基督信仰 (Global Ethics and Christian Faith)," 54.

[3] Wang, "全球倫理與基督信仰 (Global Ethics and Christian Faith)," 54.

[4] Zhuo Xinping 卓新平, "中國教會與中國社會 (Chinese Church and Chinese Society)," in 基督宗教
與當代社會 *(Christian Religion and Contemporary Society)*, 247.

The views of both Wang and Zhuo suggest that Christian theology is being perceived as a significant dialogue partner, and that Christianity is even welcomed as a religious force in shaping Chinese individuals, culture, and society in the contemporary Sino-context.

As a practical response to Wang's view on the role of Christianity in contemporary Chinese culture and society, this chapter limits itself to considering one particular teaching of Jesus. Our overall aim is to further demonstrate the public relevance of the canonical Scripture. At the same time, we wish to show how, in this instance, Christianity might present a positive contribution toward the wider Chinese society. The teaching of Jesus that is our focus is the so-called "Golden Rule": "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Lk 6:31; cf. Mt 7:12). If Christianity is to be regarded as a religion of love, the golden rule epitomizes, in ways to be explained, the love-based ethics of Christian living, and its possible application in the emerging Sino-Christian context. We shape the material of this chapter under the following three headings:

　　　1. The Golden Rule: Preliminary Observations;

　　　2. The Biblical Context: Matthew and Luke;

　　　3. The Golden Rule in the Sino-Christian context.

1. The Golden Rule: Preliminary Observations

This famous teaching of Jesus, "do to others as you would have them do to you," has been called the "Golden Rule" since the late Middle Ages. From the 13th to the 17th Century, the English term "golden rule" referred to "any important and beneficial standard in a given field," such as a carpentry tool or a mathematical rule.[5] As Jesus' maxim had already been described by Clement of Alexandria as a comprehensive and all-embracing precept[6], it is not surprising to find the appellation, "Golden Rule," being attached to Jesus' teaching in the 18th Century. Today, this so-called "Golden Rule" is most often cited in the religious and philosophical contexts of a search for a common morality.[7] It is "the most widely recognized formula of 'natural law' ethics in the West."[8] However, though the golden rule is most often associated with Christian teaching, it is not a uniquely Christian norm. Keith Stanglin rightly points

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[5] Keith D. Stanglin, "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33, no. 2 (2005): 358. See also Philip S. Alexander, "Jesus and the Golden Rule," in *Hillel and Jesus: Companions of Two Major Religious Leaders*, ed. James H. Charlesworth and Loren L. Johns (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 363, f.n. 1.

[6] "Here is then a comprehensive precept, and an exhortation of life, all-embracing: 'As you wish that people should do to you, you do to them.' We may comprehend the commandments in two, as the Lord says, 'You will love the Lord your God … and your neighbour as yourself'" (*Paedagogue*, 3.12., cited in Stanglin, "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," 361).

[7] Gene Outka's view as cited in Stanglin, "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," 358. See also Hans D. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)* (Minnespolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 509.

[8] Jeffrey Wattles cited in Stanglin, "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," 358.

out that,

> Although it manifests itself in slightly different forms, the golden rule, which is a modern appellation for the ancient saying, has been not only a staple of Western culture since the time of Homer, but has also played a major role in Judaism since the writing of Tobit, and in Eastern philosophy and religion at least since the time of Confucius.[9]

Though the golden rule is highly regarded as a moral maxim by Christians and non-Christians alike over the centuries, it has not been beyond criticism. For instance, in Christian circles, Rudolf Bultmann held it in low regard, since it "gives moral expression to a naive egoism."[10] Moreover, Albrecht Dihle sees it as nothing but an elaboration of the ancient idea of reciprocity, that is, when one's own action is determined by the action expected or hoped for from others.[11] For Dihle, the golden rule was rooted in the oldest norm of human conduct – the legal principle of retribution identical with the *ius talionis* (i.e., the "law of retribution" as in the Mosaic code of Exodus 21:23-27 containing the expression, "an eye for an eye.")[12] We ask, then, is the golden rule a naïve or socially conditioned moral principle?

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[9] Stanglin, "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," 357-358.

[10] Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), 103.

[11] See Johannes Nissen, "The Distinctive Character of the New Testament Love Command in Relation to Hellenistic Judaism: Historical and Hermeneutical Reflections," in *The New Testament and Hellenistic Judaism*, ed. Peter Borgen and Soren Giversen (Oxford: Aarhus University Press, 1995), 131.

[12] See discussion of Dihle's view in John Topel, "The Tarnished Golden Rule (Luke 6:31): The Inescapable Radicalness of Christian Ethics," *Theological Studies* 59 (1998): 476; Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)*, 512. Paul Riccoeur also shares similar view in "The Golden Rule: Exegetical and Theological Perplexities," *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990): 395.

A further criticism is that the golden rule is regarded as too imprecise and unsophisticated to function as a moral rule. It fails to offer any criteria for judging what is obligatory, permissible, or forbidden.[13] In other words, "acting on the basis of the golden rule is no guarantee of moral correctness."[14] It can easily be misused, say, in the hands of a sadomasochist, or a drug addict. The question then needs to be asked is: How should the golden rule to be interpreted meaningfully and responsibly, if its moral function is not to be trivialized?

Before we reply to these criticisms, there is another issue to be noted. It is the question of the positive and negative formulations of the golden rule. There are some biblical interpreters who assert the radical superiority of the positive formulation over its negative counterpart (e.g., A. Plummer, J. Jeremias, W. Grundmann, H. Kahlefeld).[15] Others see no difference between them (e.g. Bultmann, Dihle, J. Fitzmyer, C.F. Evans).[16]

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[13] See Stanglin, "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," 359; Alexander, "Jesus and the Golden Rule," 380-382. That's why Marcus G. Singer prefers it "to be understood as a moral principle, and not as a moral rule. That is to say, it does not, as does a moral rule, state some specifically determined kind of action that is right or wrong, or that it ought or ought not to be done. It rather sets forth, or has to be understood to set forth, in abstract fashion, a method or procedure for determining the morality of a line of action, and thus is intended to provide a principle from which, or in accordance with which, if it is valid, more specific or concrete moral rules can be derived" (cited in Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 509, f.n. 654).

[14] Stanglin, "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," 360.

[15] Barrett has pointed out that: "on the whole Christian writers have maintained the superiority of the positive form, forgetting perhaps that it is the negative form that predominates in early Christian literature" (Charles K. Barrett, "The First Christian Moral Legislation," in *The Bible in Human Society: Essays in Honour of John Rogerson*, ed. M. Daniel Caroll R., David J.A. Clines, and Philip R. Davies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 65).

[16] See references in Topel, "The Tarnished Golden Rule (Luke 6:31)," 479.

In arguing for the superiority of the positive formulation, Stanglin proposes that the negative form merely forbids person A from insulting person B, while the positive form obligates person A to respect person B.[17] Hans Betz holds a similar view: "the positive form prescribes an initiative and substantial contribution, while the negative form implies mere abstraction without initiative and contribution."[18] Therefore, the positive version is perceived to be superior in nurturing moral character. Likewise, Topel claims that "The positive form has greater extension and higher quality of actions and desires than does the negative formulation."[19] He thus follows others in naming the negative formulation, the "Silver Rule" – to indicate its comparative inferiority.

One obvious reason for some interpreters wanting to assert the superiority of the positive formulation over its negative counterpart is that it derives from Christian revelation itself, so that Jesus' "new commandment" is radically superior to others because of its origins. Though Topel concedes that it is historically indefensible to

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[17] Stanglin, "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," 360.

[18] Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 510.

[19] Topel, "The Tarnished Golden Rule (Luke 6:31)," 479. Marshall also sees the positive formulation as more demanding and superior (I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New Testament Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978), 262).

argue for the positive formulation as original to Jesus himself, he can still argue that,

> Jesus' positive formulation of the general moral maxim of altruistic mutuality is then unique in ancient literature. In fact, it is so unique that even the Christian tradition seems not to have been able to maintain it in its purity and almost always cites the Silver Rule.[20]

Though the uniqueness of Jesus' teaching is undeniable (which we will see later when considering the biblical context), this uniqueness cannot be deduced from the fact that Jesus quoted the positive formulation of the golden rule. As a matter of fact, there is good historical evidence indicating that, among the ancients, both formulations of the golden rule are not much different in meaning. Both formulations are manifestly found in ancient Jewish and Greek texts. In Tobit 4:15 (dated back to ca. 200 BC), we find the negative formulation: "And what you hate, do not do to anyone." In *Mishnah tractate b: Shabbat 31a* (compiled ca. 200AD[21]), it is recorded that a pagan asked Shammai, the famous teacher of the law, and a contemporary of Jesus, "Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot." Shammai threw him out of the house. But when that pagan asked Shammai's rival, Hillel, he received this reply: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary on it; go and learn!" Though different in formulation, Hillel's words are quite close to Jesus' command in

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[20] Topel, "The Tarnished Golden Rule (Luke 6:31)," 485, see also 481, f.n. 26.
[21] But Philip Alexander argues that it was redacted at least five hundred years after Hillel. Thus it is questionable whether Hillel himself has ever cited the Golden Rule (Alexander, "Jesus and the Golden Rule," 364ff).

Matthew's Gospel, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Mt 7:12). The golden rule, despite its different formulations, seems to have been regarded by both Hillel and Jesus as a didactic principle guiding the practical interpretation of Mosaic law.[22] In other words, it served as a handy and provocative summary of the Torah.[23]

Beside the negative formulation of the Golden Rule, its positive counterpart can also be found in ancient texts, either predating or contemporary with Jesus. For instance, Xenophon (ca. 431-355 BC), a Greek historian contemporary with Socrates, wrote in *Cyropaedia* 6.1.47: "To pay a debt of gratitude, try to be to him what he has been to you."[24] In his *Epistula* 94.43, Seneca the Younger, a Roman Stoic philosopher (ca. 4 BC–65 AD) claimed, "You must expect to be treated by others as you yourself have treated them."[25] This is an expectation in line with the practice of the golden rule. A more complex form of the golden rule is found in Greek orator Isocrates (436-338 BC)'s *To Nicoclem* 49: "You should be such in your dealings with others as you expect me to be in my dealings with you."[26] It involves a three-way relationship between king, officials, and their subjects. But the underlying principle is still based

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[22] See Nissen, "The Distinctive Character of the New Testament Love Command in Relation to Hellenistic Judaism," 132.

[23] Commenting on Hillel's words, Alexander expresses that "the text makes no sense if the Golden Rule is not a reasonably satisfactory statement of the essence of the Torah." (Alexander, "Jesus and the Golden Rule," 375.)

[24] Cited in Topel, "The Tarnished Golden Rule (Luke 6:31)," 482.

[25] Seneca, "Seneca's *Epistles* Volume Iii," http://www.stoics.com/seneca_epistles_book_3.html, (accessed 6/8/2008).

[26] Quoted in Topel, "The Tarnished Golden Rule (Luke 6:31)," 483.

on the reciprocal relationship contained in the golden rule. What is even more

significant among the ancient citations is the combination of both positive and

negative forms in the *Epistle of Aristeas* 207 (c. 150 BC):

> The King … said: "What is the teaching of wisdom?" And the other [i.e., the
> Jewish envoy] replied: "As you wish that no evil should befall you, but to be a
> partaker of all good things, so you should act on the same principle towards
> your subjects and offenders, and you should mildly admonish the noble and the
> good. For God draws all men to himself by his benignity.[27]

From these and other ancient citations of both positive and negative formulations of

the golden rule, it is reasonable to assert that both were known in the ancient Greek

and Jewish worlds, and that there is little point in separating one from the other.[28]

This may even explain why the early Christians were unreserved in their approbation

of the negative formulation. If this were the case, then Nissen is right to conclude that:

> From the fact that both the positive and the negative form are found in Greek as
> well as Jewish sources, the conclusion can be drawn that the negative form
> cannot be interpreted in a negative way in the sense of "not harm." It must
> rather be understood as a restraint on unwanted action as a necessity for vital
> and positive action. It has also been argued that the negative and positive

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[27] Quoted in Nissen, "The Distinctive Character of the New Testament Love Command in Relation to
Hellenistic Judaism," 132-133.

[28] Alexander observes that the "indifference toward nuancing the forms continued down through the
Middle Ages to the philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Hobbes, Locke,
and Kant. … Only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries do Christian writers begin to insist on
the superiority and originality of the positive form" (Alexander, "Jesus and the Golden Rule," 379;
see also Dale C. Allinson, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York:
The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 159).

formulations are expressions of the same basic aphorism, and that *Ep. Arist.* 207 should rule out any claim to the effect that Jesus was absolutely unique among Jews in positively stating the same basic principle."[29]

However, though the historical evidence shows that the positive and the negative forms of the golden rule were used interchangeably, this may not solve the problem of determining what Jesus wanted to convey in his use of it. There is still a need to look into the biblical context as each usage may highlight a different aspect of the rule. Stanglin has claimed that "the various expressions of the golden rule throughout the world's religions all appear in their own particular contexts."[30] Bearing the variability of contexts in mind, Nissen moves on to ask:

> Is Jesus' maxim simply an alternative version of all these [previous] formulations? Or does the rule receive a new tone when Jesus says it? What occurs with the rule when it is made part of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:12) and when it is combined with the command to love enemies (Luke 6:31)?[31]

There is thus the need for us to examine closely the biblical texts and context if we are to rightly interpret Jesus' golden rule.

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[29] Nissen, "The Distinctive Character of the New Testament Love Command in Relation to Hellenistic Judaism," 133. Barrett also suggests that "each form implies the other" ("The First Christian Moral Legislation," 66).

[30] Stanglin, "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," 360.

[31] Nissen, "The Distinctive Character of the New Testament Love Command in Relation to Hellenistic Judaism," 133.

2. The Biblical Context: Matthew and Luke

The golden rule is included in what are traditionally called "the Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew and "the Sermon on the Plain" in Luke. It is presented slightly differently in the two discourses. Therefore, we will consider the two biblical passages separately. In this consideration, our main aim is to examine what Jesus actually wanted to convey through the golden rule as he used it.

(a) Matthew 6:12

We begin by considering A. Dihle's view since it represents an original and influential biblical interpretation of the golden rule. He takes the $\pi o \iota \varepsilon \iota \tau \varepsilon$ ("[you] do") of Matthew 7:12 (and Lk 6:31 as well) as an indicative, thus expressing the current synagogue morality which the disciples were practicing.[32] He argues that the golden rule, though representing a common ethical practice, is contrary to Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God. There are at least three arguments that speak against such an assumption. First, there is no indication from the context that would suggest that Jesus is contrasting the disciples' current moral practice with that required by the Kingdom of God. Though Dihle argues that this retributive morality is corrected by Jesus in Luke 6:32-36, there is no such contrast suggested in the

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[32] See Topel, "The Tarnished Golden Rule (Luke 6:31)," 477.

Matthean passage. In other words, there is no indication here of a polemical contrast between two opposing moralities. Secondly, it is more natural to read the verbal form of ποιειτε in Matthew 7:12 as an imperative, since the immediate context, before and after, is overwhelmingly filled with imperatives: μη κρινετε ("do not judge," v.1), ἐκβαλε ("take out," v.5), αἰτειτε ("ask," v.7), ζητειτε" ("search," v.7), κρουετε ("knock," v.7), εἰσελθατε ("enter," v.13), and προσεχετε ("beware," v.15). The most probable reading would indicate that ποιειτε is to be read as an imperative, and not as an indicative form, when Jesus commands to "do to others as you would have them do to you." He is clearly not referring to some higher moral principle to be adopted. Thirdly, Jesus describes the golden rule with a special emphasis: "*this is* the law and the prophets." He had earlier made mention of "the law and the prophets" at the beginning of the discourse (Mt 5:17). It is a matter, rather, of inclusion, and not of contrast between a higher and lower form of ethical action. The inclusive nature of his words is further supported by the word οὐν ("therefore/so") in Matthew 7:12 which seems to give "the rule its function of being a conclusion of the main body of the sermon (Mt 5:17-7:12)."[33] If Matthew 5:17-7:12 contains the main body of the sermon, then the golden rule is included as such in Jesus' ethical teaching. It has an essential place in the morality of the Kingdom – rather than being a lesser form of

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[33] Nissen, "The Distinctive Character of the New Testament Love Command in Relation to Hellenistic Judaism," 133. Regarding treating 5:17-7:12 as the main body of the Sermon on the Mount, see Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 62, 427, 518; Allinson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 36-37, 158; H. Benedict Green, *Matthew, Poet of the Beautitudes* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 178.

morality that is to be superseded. This interpretation coheres with Jesus' words, "Do

not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to

abolish but to fulfil" (Mt 5:17). This point is supported by Douglas Hare's view of the

slightly different arrangement of the golden rule in the Gospel of Matthew compared

to that of Luke. Hare argues that, though the Lucan location of the Golden Rule is

more original – possibly reflecting an earlier Q sermon – Matthew moves the golden

rule from the section treating love of one's enemies to where it appears in Matthew

7:12. Hare comments on the significance of this rearrangement:

> At this point [i.e., Mt 7:12], we complete the long section on the better
> righteousness initiated at 5:20 and begin the concluding eschatological section.
> In its new location, the Golden Rule serves Matthew as a summary not merely
> of the sayings about love of enemies and non-retaliation but of all the other
> ethical teaching as well. It becomes for Matthew a shorthand reference to all the
> intervening material concerning the righteousness that anticipates the kingdom
> of heaven.[34]

This strongly suggests that the golden rule is an essential element in Jesus' teaching,

in line with Betz's argument that "everything" in Mt 7:12 should be regarded as

including the entire ethics of the Sermon on the Mount. Hence, Dihle's reading of

ποιειτε of Matthew 7:12 as an indicative cannot be established. It is rather an

imperative, representing Jesus' command to his disciples.

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[34] Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 81.

The next question to be addressed is whether the golden rule in Matthew represents a

morality of naive egoism, as Bultmann has claimed. On this point, the first matter to

note is that the golden rule must be located within the whole context of the Gospel of

Matthew. Our attention should not be fixed on a particular passage so as to lose sight

of its linguistic and thematic connection to the whole Gospel. With this wider

perspective in view, Nissen observes that Matthew 7:12 points forward to chapter

22:40 where there is a similar reference to "the law and the prophets." In this later

chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is being asked by one of the Pharisees,

"Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" (v.36). Jesus replies:

> "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,
> and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a
> second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two
> commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Mt 22:37-40).

For Jesus, the greatest commandments on which "hang all the law and the prophets"

are none other than those of love for God and neighbour. If the golden rule is thus

included in "the law and the prophets," Nissen is surely right in his conclusion:

"Matthew understands the rule in 7.12 in the sense of the commandment of love."[35]

This connection is supported by Stanglin's study of the link between the golden rule

and the second greatest love command.[36] Stanglin goes further. He places Mt 7:12 and

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[35] Nissen, "The Distinctive Character of the New Testament Love Command in Relation to Hellenistic Judaism," 133. Stanglin also makes the same link, see "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," 364-365.

[36] Stanglin argues that the link can be traced back to the ancient time: e.g. *Palestinian Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, *Didache*, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, Calvin, and, Kant ("The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," 360-363).

Mt 22:40 together with Mt 5:17 in the Gospel, since the phrase "law and prophets" occurs only in these three places. Stanglin, therefore, concludes that,

> Matthew intends to say that Jesus and his followers fulfil the Law and Prophets (5:17) by practicing the golden rule (7:12) and both love commands (22:37-40). The *is* [i.e., "for this is the law and the prophets" in 7:12] means that the golden rule is a summary of the Law and Prophets, which are based on the love commands.[37]

The golden rule thus cannot be read apart from the love commands in Matthew. R.T. France confirms this interpretation: "Matthew undoubtedly intends us to understand this [golden] rule as spelling out what it means to 'love your neighbour as yourself.'"[38] Here we have an explanation of why the golden rule is often regarded by the early Christians simply as a variant or restatement of the love command. For instance, Paul's love command (Rom 13:10) echoes the negative form of the golden rule: "Love does no wrong to a neighbour."[39] Philip Alexander concludes that, "It is unlikely that these were two mutually exclusive or contradictory points of view. Rather the Golden Rule and the Love Command would have been seen simply as alternative statements of the same principle."[40] All this is to say that the golden rule

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[37] Stanglin, "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," 365.

[38] Richard T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 145. However, Stanglin argues that the connection between the golden rule and the love commands cannot be argued outside of their biblical context as Victor Furnish and Klaus Bockmuehl have done (Stanglin, "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," 367).

[39] See Alexander, "Jesus and the Golden Rule," 371.

[40] Alexander, "Jesus and the Golden Rule," 374. See also J.I.H. McDonald, "The Great Commandment and the Golden Rule," in *Understanding Poets and Prophets: Essays in Honour of George Wishart Anderson*, ed. A. Graeme Auld (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 214; Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 106.

cannot be simply regarded as an expression of self-interest in the way that some critics have claimed.

The second argument against an egoistic reading of the golden rule turns on the interpretation of what Jesus intended in this respect. If one compares the golden rule (Mt 7:12) with the love commands (Mt 22:40), the obvious difference between them is that the former seems to be dealing only with the human aspect, while the latter includes both divine and human aspects. Nevertheless, Nissen points out that the golden rule is not limited to human interactions. It has been observed that the same form ("as … so") appears twice in the Matthean Sermon on the Mount.[41] In Matthew 7:12, it is "*as* you would have them do to you, [so] *do* to others", while in 5:48, it is "*as* your heavenly Father is perfect, [so] *be* perfect." If this parallel form is Matthew's deliberate arrangement, it shows that the golden rule must be read in close relation to divine imitation (Mt 5:48). It follows, therefore, that Jesus is not commanding a reciprocity of response between oneself and others in accord with some human calculation of legal entitlement or decent dealings. Rather, right behaviour must be in accord with the character of God's way of acting. In Nissen's words, "the substance and mode of God becomes the criterion of human action."[42] Yao Xinzhong (姚新中)

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[41] See Nissen, "The Distinctive Character of the New Testament Love Command in Relation to Hellenistic Judaism," 134.
[42] Ibid.

sees this as the unique characteristic of Christian love:

> In the Christian viewpoint, the universal nature of human love is only possible upon the foundation of God; no matter whether it is love of one's neighbours or love of one's enemies, it comes from God's command. Regarding the love of one's neighbours, this type of love undoubtedly is established upon God's love. … Likewise, the love of one's enemies is established upon the foundation of God's love.[43]

This interpretation is supported by linking the golden rule with Jesus' words: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of those who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). This shows that one's action towards others involves God at the same time. Moreover, the prohibition of judging others arises from the criterion, "the measure you give will be the measure you get" (Mt 7:1-2). The clear implication is that one's actions will be ultimately "measured" by God. Note also that the parallel passage in Luke concludes with these words: "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*" (Lk 6:35-36).

The golden rule, therefore, is not limited to the human realm of social interaction, but is related to the character of God and the aspiration "to be perfect like your heavenly

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[43] Yao Xinzhong 姚新中, 儒教與基督教：仁與愛的比較研究 *(Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study of Jen and Agape)*, trans. Zhao Yanxia 趙艷霞 (Beijing: Chinese Social Sciences Press, 2002), 258.

Father is perfect." Dale Allison makes exactly this point: "The Sermon [on the Mount] makes it plain that acting according to 7:12 will involve obedience to God's revealed will (5:17-18) and an exceptional 'righteousness' (5:20) and will include within its purview even one's enemies (5:43-48)."[44] By locating the golden rule within its Matthean context, we can see clearly that Jesus intends to move the focus from mere self-interest to the higher realm of citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

Thirdly, though a superficial interpretation of the golden rule seems to nurture a self-interested motivation, an examination of the Scriptural context leads to a deeper understanding of what is implied. It can be expressed in a more radically proactive fashion: our social interactions must be determined by what we do in the first place. According to Topel, "the Golden rule, however, in both its positive and negative form, is not a response to an action, but the consideration of an appropriate *first* action."[45] In practice, to act in accordance with the golden rule with a certain expectation of how others will react, may not, in fact determine how they will respond. The golden rule, in this regard, is not simply passive, and thereby dependent on the reactions of others. Rather, observing the golden rule results from a prior decision to commit oneself to act as a disciple of Christ, and thereby follow the example of God himself. Nissen

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[44] Allinson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 160.
[45] Topel, "The Tarnished Golden Rule (Luke 6:31)," 477.

summarises this line of argument:

> It does not mean: "Do to people what they have done to you – or what they do to you". Neither does it mean: "Do to people what one is used to doing – according to the custom". Neither does it mean: "Do to people what you want them to do – provided they do it to you". Instead it means: "Take what you naturally wish others to do for you as the criterion for your actual behaviour towards other people, no matter how they behave towards you."[46]

He goes on to explain:

> In other words, the golden rule has to be understood as an injunction to do for others the good thing we wish for ourselves, quite apart from the behaviour we experience or expect from them. In this way the rule corresponds to the behaviour which is characteristic of the heavenly Father. He grants in advance and he grants contrary to what we would expect: "He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good" (Matt 5.45, cf. Luke 6:35). This, however, means: "Following the Golden Rule opens up in practical life the perspective of the merciful Father in a world marked by the principle of retaliation." Here – in the context of the Sermon on the Mount – is presupposed a surplus, a confidence which the rule itself cannot create. It is out of this confidence the person can act according to the rule.[47]

Thus, there is a recurring emphasis: the golden rule is not self-centred, but rather radically God-directed, orienting one's action as modelled on the character and will of the heavenly Father. Here lies the radical nature of Jesus' teaching. This is to say that the radical quality of Jesus' teaching is not to be found simply in his positive

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[46] Nissen, "The Distinctive Character of the New Testament Love Command in Relation to Hellenistic Judaism," 134.

[47] Nissen, "The Distinctive Character of the New Testament Love Command in Relation to Hellenistic Judaism," 134-135.

formulation of the golden rule, as E.A. Harvey claimed when he writes,

> Stated quite generally, as Jesus states it, the maxim (unlike its negative counterpart) goes beyond even the most enlightened common sense. That is to say, like "love your enemies", or "divorce is equivalent to adultery", it takes up a theme already rehearsed in the tradition of moral teaching, but expresses it in an extreme and unconditional formulation (due to its positive, instead of negative form) that goes beyond the maxims of other moralists.[48]

For Harvey, Jesus is radical purely because of his positive formulation of the golden rule. But, as I have already mentioned, Jesus was not the first person to offer a positive formulation of the golden rule. There were the historical precedents already mentioned – such as *Cyropaedia* 6.1.47, *To Nicoclem* 49, and *Epistle of Aristeas* 207. Rather, what is radical about Jesus' teaching is the way he brings together the golden rule and the theme "to be perfect like your heavenly Father" – as in the Matthean discourse. The perfect righteousness of the heavenly Father and his will is taken as the reference point instead of one's own wishes and calculations of self-interest. In reference to personal wishes and desires, Hans Betz explains:

> "that which you want" receives its precise meaning not from one's own arbitrary wishes and desires but from the will of God as revealed in the Torah. … Torah and Scripture are the resources for knowing what God's will is, and this is the needed presupposition for the interpretation of the Golden Rule. In other words, the phrase "all that you wish" is not to be left to egotistical arbitrariness, but focuses on the will of God.[49]

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[48] Cited in Nissen, "The Distinctive Character of the New Testament Love Command in Relation to Hellenistic Judaism," 135.

[49] Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 518.

In a similar vein, Stanglin incisively concludes,

> It would then be irresponsible in today's non- (often anti-) Christian culture to use the golden rule as a self-sufficient moral principle, independent of the Decalogue to which it is linked. When it functions independently, it prioritizes each individual's corrupt desires over any semblance of a normative moral order. … In itself, the golden rule is not equivalent to the love command. But for those who assume a biblical, Judeo-Christian, foundational, action-guiding moral order based on the Decalogue and the two love commands, it is legitimate to allow the golden rule to be an expression of that order, and to connect it with the duty of love of others. Perhaps a better way to state the historically assumed relationship is that the golden rule is one expression of something that the majority of the Judeo-Christian tradition has regarded as foundational for interpersonal ethics, namely, the love command.[50]

To conclude: an interpretation of the golden rule in egotistical terms simply ignores its biblical context. On the other hand, a close reading of the golden rule in its Matthean context indicates its close connection with the love commands and the aspiration to imitate the perfect character of the heavenly Father. Furthermore, such an approach goes a long way in answering the charge that the golden rule is too imprecise in determining what is truly moral. The golden rule *and* the love commands clearly manifest the uniqueness of Christian ethics in their orientation to both God and neighbour, aptly summing up "the law and the prophets." Zhao Hanqing (趙汗青) is thus right to interpret Christianity as a religion of love:

> "Love" is mostly highly regarded as a moral character and ethic in Christian religion. "Love" is associated with sacrifice. The moral character of "love" is able to eradicate selfishness, to put oneself in another's shoes. "Love" is "do to

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[50] Stanglin, "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," 368.

others what you would have them do to you." The love that is demanded by Christian religion is not just love for close ones (as this is mere human love), but a transcendental broader kind of "love." This "love" should be elevated to the state of "when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." Once this kind of thinking becomes one's criterion, one's value system will be totally transformed. Then the world will be filled with love.[51]

(b) Luke 6:31

The golden rule in Luke's passage is arranged differently to Matthew. In Luke, the golden rule (Lk 6:31) is located within Jesus' teaching on loving one's enemies (6:27-30, 32-36). Despite this explicit connection between the golden rule and the command to love one's enemies, a question arises: How are the golden rule and the command to love one's enemies related?

Dihle considers that the golden rule and the love command are opposites. As noted above, he reads the golden rule indicatively, "as describing rather than prescribing the conventional way of acting."[52] It goes no further than the commonly accepted "reciprocity ethics" rejected by Jesus in the subsequent verses (i.e. vv.32-34).[53]

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[51] Zhao Hanqing 趙汗青, "中國當代道德基礎建設與基督宗教的道德觀 (The Reconstruction of the Ethical Foundation in Contemporary China and the Morality of Christian Religion) " in *基督宗教與 當代社會 (Christian Religion and Contemporary Society)*, 79.

[52] Alan Kirk, "'Love Your Enemies,' The Golden Rule, and Ancient Reciprocity (Luke 6:27-35)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 4 (2003): 668. Traditionally, it is read imperatively along with vv.27-30, in contrast to vv.32-34 in the indicative form, while the concluding words in v.35 are imperative.

[53] See Betz, The Sermon on the Mount, 512-513; Kirk, "Love Your Enemies," 667-668; Nissen, "The Distinctive Character of the New Testament Love Command in Relation to Hellenistic Judaism," 136; Topel, "The Tarnished Golden Rule (Luke 6:31)," 477.

Dihle's argument is questionable. There is no contrastive conjunction such as $\varepsilon\dot{\iota}\ \delta\varepsilon$ or $\dot{\alpha}\lambda\lambda\alpha$ to warrant reading the golden rule as an indicative.[54] Furthermore, there is not a hint here that the golden rule is representing an unacceptable common reciprocity-ethics. Rather, it fits nicely within the context of the injunction to love one's enemies. Here, Nissen argues, "to love one's enemies is directly supported by means of a criticism of the commonly practiced 'reciprocity ethics'. The point is that one's action toward others should not be shaped by what one has received or can expect or hope from them."[55] In this sense, the golden rule is elevated above the conventional reciprocal exchanges between social equals. Still, Alan Kirk has argued strongly that Lk 6:27-35 must be located within the tradition of common reciprocity ethics. For instance, in verses 27-30, Jesus is undeniably dealing with negative reciprocity – "maximising benefit to oneself at the absolute expense of another"[56] – as would be the case in the forms of coercion, forceful seizure, violence, and injustice. Jesus' is thus directing his disciples to respond to these negative reciprocal possibilities by doing good to one's enemies (v.27), by offering blessings and prayers for them (v.28), turning the other cheek (v.29), and unrestrained generosity (v.30). To Kirk, "these are stunningly liberal acts of general reciprocity [i.e., open-ended exchange of benefits among friends], not abandonment of reciprocity in principle."[57] In other words, it is

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[54] Kirk, "Love Your Enemies," 688. See also Betz's critique of Dihle in Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 513-514, 600.

[55] Nissen, "The Distinctive Character of the New Testament Love Command in Relation to Hellenistic Judaism," 136.

[56] Kirk, "Love Your Enemies," 681.

[57] Kirk, "Love Your Enemies," 682.

reciprocity of a higher kind. The benefaction and generosity is extended, not just to those who are close associates, but to those who are "undeserving" (for whatever reason – social, financial, racial, or spiritual differences), and to those who may not even be likely to return the favour – as in the case of one's enemies.

This definitive expression of general reciprocity is further demonstrated in the rhetorical questions of verses 32-34.[58] The χαρις ("grace," here often translated as "credit" as in v.34) that Jesus promises is different from the conventional understanding within "an evaluative framework that restricts exchange relationships to persons likely to reciprocate."[59] In contrast, Jesus is proposing a lavish generosity patterned on the action of the heavenly Father, "for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked" (v. 35). The emphasis once again is "to be like God" (Lk 6:36; cf. Mt 5:48). To cite Nissen yet again,

> The emphasis is on the mercy of God towards the ungrateful and evil doers,
> Luke 6:35-36. One of the main characteristics of God's action in Luke's gospel
> is that he practices redistribution through reversal (1:51-53, 6:20-26). Therefore,
> to give without expecting a return is to act like God, to be merciful and to show
> compassion.

When disciples are influenced by the goodness and mercy of God, a submission to the golden rule leads to the love of enemies. There need not be any contradiction between

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[58] Kirk mentions that the "lending" in vv.34, 35a "should be construed not as contractual but as open-ended lending among friends, widely practiced among all social strata in Greece and Rome" (ibid).
[59] Ibid.

the two, neither in Luke nor in Matthew. In both cases belief in the heavenly and merciful Father is the basis on which to understand the rule. It is particularly the Lucan version which makes clear that the rule in itself is a formal principle, close to the principle of reciprocity. This positive form and its connection to the love of enemies keep it from any egoistical calculation, but, rather, fill it with a boundless and uncalculating neighbour-love.[60]

Therefore, in this Lucan context of reading the golden rule in close connection to the command to love one's enemies, Dihle's treatment of the two as contradictory is not persuasive. Rather, as McDonald has claimed, the golden rule

> Far from being the detached saying that some suggest, it is in fact the interpretive hinge in Lk. 6:27-36. On the other hand, it interprets the themes of love of enemy, non-retaliation and sharing of resources; reflecting as they do the Levitical neighbour-love, these themes also represent what we may call the elevated Golden rule.[61]

If the golden rule must be interpreted through the love commands in Matthew's Gospel, it is similarly true in Luke – though with the difference that here the love commands are now interpreted by means of the golden rule. The golden rule has been extended. The command to love "one's neighbour" must now include loving "one's enemies," and so has a universal reference.[62] Moreover, Stanglin observes that the

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[60] Nissen, "The Distinctive Character of the New Testament Love Command in Relation to Hellenistic Judaism," 137-138.
[61] McDonald, "The Great Commandment and the Golden Rule," 222.
[62] Alexander, "Jesus and the Golden Rule," 375-376.

love command in Lk 10:27 as expounded in the parable of the Good Samaritan, is ultimately "the classic case of doing unto others as you would be done by."[63] Such a conclusion speaks against the view of many interpreters that "the logic of reciprocity ethics renders the golden rule morally inferior to the altruistic, unilateral stance of 'love your enemies.'"[64] Consequently, Paul Ricoeur's view that love for enemies does not coincide with the golden rule is called into question, as when he writes, "The one is unilateral. The other bilateral. The one expects nothing in return. The other legitimates a certain kind of reciprocity."[65] On the other hand, Alexander treats the rule as "too imprecise a principle to bear with much philosophical weight."[66]Alexander's point is valid if the golden rule is taken out of biblical context and is considered as a stand-alone maxim.[67] However, when it is read in the context of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, the golden rule is elevated and expanded in its range. As Hare concisely observes, "the golden rule is 'golden' only when interpreted in the

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[63] Stanglin, "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," 364.

[64] Kirk, "Love Your Enemies," 667.

[65] Ricoeur, "The Golden Rule," 396.

[66] Alexander, "Jesus and the Golden Rule," 380. He further claims that "Theologians and philosophers can nuance the Rule to their hearts' content, but the fact remains that it is a popular saying and should not be asked to bear the weight of a theological or philosophical system. If Jesus' positive formulation of the Golden Rule marked a profound moral breakthrough, then it is very odd that no one – whether theologians or philosophers – seems to have spotted the fact till the nineteenth century." (382)

[67] The Golden Rule can easily be subjected to various misinterpretations if it is taken out of context. For instance, it can be seen as basing on corrupted desires; it has nothing to do with the moral good such as love but merely pursuing to satisfy one's desires (see Stanglin, "The Historical Connection between the Golden Rule and the Second Greatest Love Command," 359-360).

light of its Christian context, not in a secularized abstraction."[68] In other words, the

Christological context of the golden rule has elevated it beyond the conventional

exclusive χαρις ("grace") ethics of offering love only to close friends, to the wider

circle, including even one's enemies. Such is the morality of the Kingdom of God,

even though Jesus' interpretation of the golden rule may have been an adaptation of a

common ethical maxim.

To sum up the biblical context of both Matthew and Luke regarding the golden rule,

the words of Yeo Khiok Khng are to the point:

> Jesus (according the Matthew and Luke) suggests that to love one's enemies is a
> mark of a higher righteousness, because even tax-collectors and Gentile sinners
> "love their neighbors" (Matt. 5:46). Matthew's Jesus characterizes the mark of a
> higher righteousness as "to be perfect as your heavenly Father is" (Matt. 5:48).
> Luke's Jesus characterizes the mark as "to be merciful as your heavenly Father
> is" (Luke 6:36). The love command pushes the envelope for those who would
> be children of God from loving the self to the love of the family, friends and
> neighbors, and ultimately to one's enemies.[69]

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[68] Hare, *Matthew*, 80. See also Betz's claim: "The Golden Rule thus prevents the ethics of the SM from becoming a separatist ethic (*Sonderethik*). Consequently, as such the Golden Rule is neither non-Christian nor Christian; it is recognized as universal and is as such "Christianized" by its insertion in the SM. This insertion takes place first at the level of the Judaism of Jesus, then Jewish Christianity (SM), and finally by the appropriation of the SM by the Gospel of Matthew (the same is true for the SP and its adoption by the Gospel of Luke)" (Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 518). Also, Nissen' conclusion: "the love command is not unique in the history of ideas; what is new is its relationship to Jesus Christ who calls forth a new world, a new community which makes love possible" (Nissen, "The Distinctive Character of the New Testament Love Command in Relation to Hellenistic Judaism," 150).

[69] Yeo Khiok Khng, *Musing with Confucius and Paul: Toward a Chinese Christian Theology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008), 300.

Nonetheless, even such an interpretation must be placed within the Christological framework of the Gospels. Jesus is not just a teacher of a higher righteousness and, consequently, of a higher responsibility for others. He is, rather, the model and source of a new life, a gift bestowed through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. He himself embodies the meaning of the golden rule, and incarnates the selfless love that his disciples must live and witness to. His cross demonstrates what loving one's enemies entails when he prays, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). He is himself the revelation of the Father: "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8; cf. 1 John 3:16, 4:9). The golden rule must, therefore, be interpreted in close relation to its Christological and theological context within the Gospel of salvation.

3. The Golden Rule in the Sino-Christian Context

We now come to the question of how Jesus' golden rule can be applied to the Sino-Christian context. But before we answer this question, it should be noted that the golden rule in itself is not a new ethical principle for the Chinese. Confucius, the venerable master in the history of Chinese culture, had quoted the negative form of the golden rule even before Jesus:「己所不欲，勿施於人」("Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire"). I have argued that there is little difference between the positive and the negative formulations of the golden rule. However, I

have also stressed the importance of the context in determining its meaning and significance. The Confucian and the biblical contexts of the golden rule differ. For that reason, let us consider the golden rule in the context of Confucius' teaching.

Confucius' teaching regarding the golden rule occurs in the context of him being questioned about the most central principle of his teaching: "Tzu-kung asked, 'Is there a single word which can be a guide to conduct throughout one's life?' The Master said, 'It is perhaps the word *shu* (恕). Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.'"[70] To Confucius, the golden rule, summarized by the word *shu*, is the central ethical principle. However, as Topel observes,

> Although shu can mean "reciprocity," Confucius explains it not in the sense of a response to another's action, but in the sense of "fellow feeling" or "mutual consideration," coming from the initiative of the ethical person. Confucius has, in its negative formulation, a moral maxim of altruism, but it is not general, for he does not, as does Jesus, apply this shu to enemies, but only to friends.[71]

This interpretation is supported by Yeo: "Confucius' understanding of *ren*, comparable to the Stoic ideal of universal brotherhood, is … limited. The extension of self to others often stops short of concern for persons who are not family members."[72]

This suggests that Confucius' reciprocity-ethics, though certainly a formulation of the

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[70] *Analects* XV.24, quoted in Robert E. Allinson, "The Ethics of Confucianism and Christianity: The Delicate Balance," *Ching Feng* 33, no. 3 (1990): 163.

[71] Topel, "The Tarnished Golden Rule (Luke 6:31)," 481-482.

[72] Yeo, *Musing with Confucius and Paul*, 300. See also Yao, 儒教與基督教：仁與愛的比較研究 *(Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study of Jen and Agape)*.

golden rule and concerned with moral regulation, is similar to that found in the first century Judaism, as in the Zealot injunction to "hate the enemy and love the friend" (see Mt 5:43).[73] Thus, Confucius' version of loving others is often limited to family members, and so would be significantly different from Jesus' requirement to extend love even to one's enemies. It is unthinkable for Confucius and his followers to take the golden rule as extending to include one's enemies, as Jesus does (Lk 6: 27-36). The Confucian interpretation is, in this respect, more restrictive compared to the Gospel. How, then, can the unique character of Jesus' teaching be applied in the contemporary Sino-Christian context, considering its greater and extreme inclusiveness compared to Confucian ethics?

We propose the following ethical and theological applications in relation to today's Chinese context. First, the biblical golden rule challenges any culture (and individuals as well) on the moral issue of self-seeking and self-centredness. Of course, we are not judging Chinese culture to be uniquely self-oriented. The point, rather, is that, like all cultures, it is a variation of human nature – with all the problems implied in selfishness and other distortions when it comes to recognizing and welcoming the other. There is a famous Chinese saying that "if one is not for oneself, heaven and earth will be long gone" (人不為己，天殊地滅). This means simply that there is a

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[73] Paul Barnett, "Jesus, Paul and Peter and the Roman State," in *Pilgrims and Citizens: Christian Social Engagement in East Asia Today*, ed. Michael Nai-Chiu Poon (Hindmarsh: ATF Press, 2006), 64.

natural and inevitable propensity in every human being to think only of oneself. However, if such a proverbial expression of human behaviour is taken as a moral maxim for social interaction, it can be used to justify any kind of selfish lifestyle. As a result, any appeal to the Confucian golden rule will tend to support a calculus of mutual benefit among the more privileged. Moreover, such reciprocity would come to a sudden end if there is a rupture in the relationship: former friends become enemies, and the way is then open to the excesses of hatred, violence and revenge. Since the perverse dynamics of such breakdowns are most familiar in marriage, the skyrocketing divorce rate in today's China is a cause for alarm. According to governmental statistics, there were 341,000 divorces in 1980, 800,000 in 1990, 1,210,000 in 2000, 1,331,000 in 2003, and 1,613,000 in 2005.[74] From the 1970s until now, the divorce rate in China has surpassed that of Japan and Korea, and is among the highest in Asia.[75] Though there are many complex factors that contribute to this increasing divorce rate, it is certainly exacerbated by a cultural style affected by individuals who are increasingly self-sufficient, and self-centered in their aspirations.

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[74] Global News 環球時報, "各國離婚率調查 (Statistics of Divorce Rate in Different Nations)," http://world.people.com.cn/GB/1030/4377723.html (accessed 28/08/2008). Another report claims that the divorce rate has reached 50.90% in Beijing, the highest in China (Frontier Magazine 前線雜誌社, "北京離婚率高達50.90% (The Divorce Rate Has Reached 50.90% in Beijing," http://www.bjpopss.gov.cn/bjpssweb/n9705c51.aspx (accessed 28/08/2008).
[75] 前線雜誌社, "北京離婚率高達50.90% (The Divorce Rate Has Reached 50.90% in Beijing."

At this point of moral breakdown, the reconciling and redemptive power of Jesus'

distinctive appeal to the golden rule has public significance. It demands an extension

of self-referential concerns into an ever-larger realm of moral responsibility. Jesus'

inclusion of love for enemies, and call to treat others in a manner not determined by

their prior treatment of oneself, presents a challenge to the contemporary materialist

Chinese culture increasingly adrift from its ethical traditions.[76] On the other hand, it is

claimed that "most people in China now realize that Marxism has not produced the

promised 'New Man' who works for the benefit of others. Today, everyone is chasing

after wealth and few care who they push aside to gain this."[77] The outcome of this can

be disastrous, as manifested in the recent melamine-contaminated milk products,

when negligence, greed, and self-interest rule the day. Hence, Jesus' teaching from

this perspective is not an alien intrusion into the Chinese way of life, but a powerful

inspiration to recover and develop what is best within it – in terms of its Confucian

tradition of harmonious relationships and the social inclusiveness that the Marxist

revolution of the modern era most aspired to. By linking the golden rule of Jesus both

to the Confucian tradition of ethics and the socialist aspirations of the Peoples'

Republic, a Christian practical theology can introduce a transformative element into

the emerging situation – with consequences for married and family life, for everyday

[76] Yang Fenggang argues that the single most significant factor contributing to moral crises in today's Chinese society is the decline of morality (Fenggang Yang, "The Decline and Reconstruction of Morality in Chinese Society," in *Imagination in Religion and Social Life*, ed. George F. McLean and John K. White (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2003), 198).

[77] David Burnett, *The Spirit of China: Roots of Faith in 21st Century China* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2008), 337.

transactions and dealings with one another, for the worlds of science and technology, for government policy-making and the exercise of government. In such ways, the Gospel can be inculturated so as to work as an inspiration for the country as a whole in living up to its moral responsibilities toward others, especially towards those in greatest need, whether they be near or far.

In the global situation, China has emerged as a superpower nation on the international scene. In that context, also, the selfless and self-sacrificing type of love for the other that Jesus' golden rule demands can be commended as a guiding principle in the formation of the national conscience. For instance, it can be applied to environmental responsibility, integrity in trade and business transactions, the production of high-quality goods, moral responsibility in scientific research, and so on. This directly opposes the kind of moral evils that would seriously imperil a society and its healthy development. According to Yang Fenggang, these ethical shortcomings include "the corruption of officials, degeneration of social mood, disintegration of family, unscrupulousness of manufacturing and commerce, as well as selfishness, egoism, irresponsibility, superficiality and impetuosity."[78] Even in its global responsibilities, the traditional Chinese moral teaching "to sacrifice one (small) self, in order to fulfil the greater self" (犧牲小我，完成大我) can be applied to good effect. A narrow self-

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[78] Yang, "The Decline and Reconstruction of Morality in Chinese Society," 198. See also the recent crime rate statistics of China in Li Pingye 李平曄, "「因信稱義」與「金規則」之隨想 (Thoughts on Justification by Faith and the Golden Rule," 神學與生活 (Theology and Life) 25 (2002): 14-15.

centredness and self-interest cannot be a genuine moral norm guiding the

development of individuals or the people as a whole. The golden rule inspires a nobler

and more inclusive vision of the common good of all. Yang Fenggang thus strongly

commends Christian values and teachings to the Chinese society as a way forward:

> In this light [of the cross of Christ] there is hope for overcoming old enmities, for forgiveness and reconciliation, for peace among men. This is not merely an ideal which ignores evil and hence is unrelated to reality. Christ's victorious encounter with evil gives hope that it can and must be overcome. In this perspective, there is no need to suppose that [a] man is a wolf to other men and merely a channel of conflict, nor is there need to abandon personal freedom in order to have social unity. On the contrary, community is built of the personal triumphs of generosity over selfishness and of love over enmity. Society is ever emerging as victories are won in the struggle of human freedom to overcome selfishness and to reach out to others in truth and love.[79]

This vision can be actualized by bringing Jesus' moral (and theological) teaching of

the golden rule to the Chinese people.

Secondly, given the importance of relationships in traditional Chinese culture, Jesus'

version of the golden rule has special relevance. The traditional relational values of

China are being undermined as the country becomes more and more industrialized

and taken over by commercial drives. The relational recognition of the personal worth

of the other, and of responsibility exercised within an overall harmonious state of

being, are made to yield to the demands of productivity: wealth, pride and self-interest

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[79] Yang, "The Decline and Reconstruction of Morality in Chinese Society," 213.

become the dominant social drives. In contrast, under the influence of the Christian

ethos, the *Relationships Foundation* at Cambridge underlines the enduring importance

of a relational way of life: "Society is a network of relationships, private and

professional. If those relationships don't work, quality of life goes down and

organisational performance suffers. Consequently, it's in everybody's interest to make

sure that relationships work well."[80] The authors associated with this foundation, even

though primarily interested in Western society, go on to observe a state of affairs that

well describes the Chinese situation:

> But the idea that "relationships matter" has fairly shallow roots in the culture we
> live in. The word "love" crops up a lot, and feel-good stories of friends enjoying
> good times together will often draw high ratings in the media. But strip this
> away, and you find that many of the hard economic and cultural drivers are
> pushing in a different direction. … Where relationships exist – personal or
> contractual – we find it increasingly easy to think in terms of what others owe to
> us rather than what we owe to others. We have rights. We have freedom of
> choice. And we have possessions (income, house, clothing, car, holiday
> destination) from which we derive a sense of status and by means of which we
> signal who we are.[81]

The effects of this breakdown of relationships in Chinese society is graphically

described in Jasper Becker's view of today's China:

> China is now a society in which everyone seems to be engaged in deceiving and
> cheating one another. In such circumstances, the transition to a market economy
> has not led to any fairness. Hard work and honesty are not rewarded; corruption
> is. The privatization process in a dictatorship such as China has brought about

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[80] Michael Schluter and David John Lee, *The R Option: Building Relationships as a Better Way of Life* (Cambridge: The Relationships Foundation, 2003), 7.
[81] Schluter and Lee, *The R Option*, 17-18.

the criminalization of the state. Party members, who are beyond the law, have been free to engage in the theft of state assets on a grand scale. The cynicism and hypocrisy which this has fostered are destructive, particularly so in a society that has abandoned a once fanatically held ideology. A society in which no one is prepared to tell the truth, whether about historical events, small or large, or commercial transactions, individual or corporate, cannot prosper.[82]

These remarks serve to highlight the relevance of the biblical golden rule to Chinese society as it undergoes an unprecedented transformation. Traditional relational values need to be recovered and given new life in a society in which the dignity of the individual is being assessed only in immediately instrumental and economic terms. The golden rule, alongside the Christian Gospel, as taught by Jesus has a dramatic public relevance in today's extremely industrialized Chinese society and culture.

Thirdly, the golden rule will be invaluable for the practical application of Sino-Christian theology to Chinese culture. A recent survey was conducted in China on what constitutes "a good person." The results are instructive: "good character" scores most highly (72.5%), compared to "easy to get along with" (10.9%), "helpful" (7.3%), "responsible" (6.1%), "do not offend others" (1.9%), "can't tell" (1.2 %).[83] Admittedly, being "a good person" in character and conduct is not incompatible with the Christian ethical values informing the golden rule as expressed in the Gospels. But much more is implied for Christian life. Stanley Hauerwas provocatively remarks,

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[82] Quoted in Burnett, *The Spirit of China*, 333.
[83] Liao Shenbai 廖申白 and Sun Chunchen 孫春晨, *倫理新視點：轉型時期的社會倫理與道德 (New Ethical Perspective: Social Ethics and Morality in Period of Transition)* (Beijing: Press of Chinese Social Sciences 1997), 360.

"The first task of Christian social ethics … is not to make the 'world' better or more just, but to help Christian people form their communities consistent with their conviction that the story of Christ is a truthful account of our existence."[84] Bonhoeffer, contesting the inhumanity of the Nazi state, expressed something similar: "What is of importance is now no longer that I should become good, or that the condition of the world should be made better by my action, but that the reality of God should show itself everywhere to be the ultimate reality."[85] Rasmussen adds an ecclesial note: "the moral vocation of the church is to 'be for others.' But it does so as a community of the cross."[86] What Hauerwas, Bonhoeffer, and Rasmussen are stressing is that a genuine ethical life bears the character of conformity to Christ crucified. From that point on, one's life is empowered with divine love and compassion enabled to heed the injunction of love even for one's enemies. Therefore, the Christian Gospel is not reducible to its ethical dimension. It is addressed to the depths of the human person, thus affecting every dimension of consciousness, summoning to a self-transcendence on many fronts. This is exactly the point Anthony Kelly is making when he comments on the relationship between self-transcendence and the incarnate *Logos* in the Gospel

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[84] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981), 10.

[85] Quoted in Larry Rasmussen, "The Meaning of the Cross for Social Ethics in the World Today," in *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*, ed. Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 311.

[86] Rasmussen, "The Meaning of the Cross for Social Ethics in the World Today," 315.

of John. He claims,

> The theology of John unfolds as the thoroughgoing effort to bring out the meaning of everything in terms of the incarnate *Logos*. In this regard, it suggests its own "*Log*-ic." What it inspires is not simply the ongoing demand to search for unconditional truth and goodness (the transcendentals of philosophical tradition) as might be too easily deduced early in the Gospel when the Father is depicted as seeking out genuine worshippers "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24). For John, however, true adoration is made concrete through humble service of the other in accordance with the supreme example of Jesus himself washing his disciples' feet (John 13:14-15). Not only is it a matter of service of others but also of laying down one's life for them (John 15:13-14; 1 John 3:16-17). This aspect of dying to each one's present individual life – or of dying into the realm of communal and eternal life – is likened to the grain of wheat falling into the ground to bring forth much fruit (John 12:24). Manifestly, the dynamics of self-transcendence are shared by all genuine searchers, be that search religious, philosophical, artistic or scientific. It is the source of meaning for such terms as meaning, truth, life and goodness. But this general movement is given a special intensity in John's understanding of faith, love and discipleship. The unfolding horizon is not simply that of ultimate self-realisation, or even of self-transcendence, but of "true life." The form of this true and endless life is the self-giving love that Jesus reveals, incarnates and inspires.[87]

These words of Kelly resonate the Johannine presentation of divine love expressed in

all its intensity in 1 John 4:7-12:

> Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an

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[87] Anthony J. Kelly, "Dimensions of Meaning: Theology and Exegesis," in *Transcending Boundaries: Contemporary Readings of the New Testament* ed. Rekha M. Chennattu and Mary M. Coloe (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 2005), 47.

atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

The Gospel message, therefore, is more than seeking for a relatively ethical life or achieving self-fulfilment. Rather, it summons toward the One who is love, the defining instance of the reality of love. In that horizon, determined by God whom Jesus reveals, as the source, form and goal of life and of love, the mission of the Chinese Church is to witness to God as the ultimate foundation and measure of all human relationships.

But returning to the explicitly ethical dimension, a Chinese theology of Jesus' golden rule finds its practical application in acts of mercy and in all the variety of social works performed in the name of Christ. The missionaries who came to China in the 19th and early 20th centuries certainly excelled in this regard. They established, for instance, numerous hospitals, educational institutions, orphanages, rehabilitation centres, and the like. Today, Christian commitment will be most effectively demonstrated by caring for the well-being of those at the fringes of the society. In so doing, Christians will witness, not only to the individual dignity of each human being, not only to the moral responsibility required of society as a whole, but also to the very character of the God as revealed in Jesus himself (cf., Mt 25:31-46). Such a contribution on the part of the Chinese Church to society is not only a divine

imperative, it is also mostly welcomed by the Chinese government which, as mentioned above, is showing signs of welcoming people of all religions to actively participate in the economic development and social construction of the nation.[88]

Conclusion

This chapter, in order to offer an example of a public, practical, biblical Sino-Christian theology, has concentrated on Jesus' application of the golden rule. By moving from the interpretation of the biblical Word of God to its practical application, we arrive at a deeper understanding of the public relevance of a genuinely biblical theology, particularly in the contemporary Sino-context. Through such an application to its located culture, the horizons of the Chinese Christian mission are extended. Vanhoozer conveniently evokes the larger theological context of what this chapter has attempted in its reflection on the canonical golden rule: "When the church follows canonical directions, its horizons expand. The script discloses the strange new eschatological horizon inaugurated in the history of Jesus. Scripture thereby summons the reader to be part of a new thing that God is doing in the world."[89] In other words, the divine drama continues to be played out in today's Sino-Christian context when Chinese Christians listen afresh to the scriptural Word of God and act accordingly.

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[88] See Burnett, *The Spirit of China*, 336ff.

[89] Kevin J Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 235.

This "listening" does not stop here. The Christian message must be continually related to their located cultural context and society. This kind of practical and lively cultural engagement on the part of Christian theology is surely an indicator of authentic discipleship.

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been, admittedly, an ambitious project. In our efforts to recognise the

intimate relationship of the emerging Sino-Christian theology with its located cultural

context, we have sought to give some indication of its shape, its direction, and its

needs. At the same time, we have called on quite a variety of Western (in particular,

North American) resources which, we feel, could be fruitfully applied to the Chinese

situation. With this goal in mind, we have covered a wide variety of related topics.

These include:

- the nature and task of a particular Christian theology;

- the emerging Sino-Christian theology in relation to its particular and, in some

  ways, unique socio-cultural context;

- the form and content of Sino-Christian theology as it actively engages the

  Chinese culture;

- the interaction of theology with academic disciplines such as cultural and religious studies;

- the role of Christian theology in relation to the public square;

- the public relevance of a specifically biblical theology in this Sino-context.

There is an inevitable sense of defeat, given the limitless scope of a project such as this. We have ranged over numerous immense themes such as Chinese culture and society, the mission of the Church in such a situation, theology in its content and methods, and the open-ended implications of the adjective, "emerging." Though such subjects resist any adequate description, let alone definition, we retain the confidence of having made a modest but useful contribution to an expanding field of the greatest future significance.

The whole project was initiated as a response to some recent writings of Liu Xiaofeng on the reconstruction of Sino-Christian theology. More specifically, his notion of the "Cultural Christian" demanded a critical assessment. Though this idea has its problems, particularly with the distinction of "cultural Christians" from Christians in general, Liu was making a valuable point. We appreciated his emphasis on the need to find a type of Sino-Christian theology that would be relevant to the contemporary cultural context.

I have tried to take this discussion further. It meant spelling out the danger of interpreting a number of inescapable polarities in terms of an artificial dualism. For example, theory and practice, or reason and faith, or public and private, or academic and church theology, which are not so opposed as to be incapable of being reconciled in a larger methodological viewpoint. At this juncture, we gave special prominence to Kathryn Tanner's theory of culture. In the light of her analysis, it appeared that the artificiality of the divisions or compartmentalisations just referred to derived from the continuing influence of an outmoded modern notion of culture on contemporary Christian theologies. The unfortunate result was that Christian theology tended to be understood in the wider culture of academia as necessarily limited to the Church and its theological institutions. Beyond that intra-ecclesial setting, theology was deemed to be dogmatic, fideistic, of private relevance only, and disqualified from any dialogical engagement in relation to its cultural and social setting, and without the academic resources to be accepted as a voice in scholarly debate. The resulting prejudice would rule out theology, and above all Christian theology, from a place in public universities and the wider public. Faith would be deemed inherently opposed to reason. The subjectivity of Christian experience would be in direct contrast to any genuine objectivity. Any claim to divine revelation then had no place in the world of academic research, and so on.

In contrast to this secularist prejudice, I argue in this thesis for a more inclusive and public role on the part of theology – as it is understood both within the Christian community, and in the broader cultural aspect of which, we emphasize, it is a part. To move in this direction I appealed both to Tanner's cultural approach to theology and to Lonergan's theological method which set theology always within a particular cultural matrix. With this cultural orientation, and in the light of Lonergan's differentiated methodological framework involving the collaboration of some eight functional specialties, theology is never a fixed achievement. It is set within history, an ongoing and creative activity intent on mediating the meaning and values of faith to its cultural world. In this regard, it is of its very nature, "public." The Gospel itself is meant for all ages and cultures. Faith seeks understanding, communication and application to culture and society in its every dimension.

Turning to the Chinese cultural context, I addressed the question of who is qualified for this theological task in the public arena. Can non-confessional scholars, for instance, do justice to the demands of theological studies? On one hand, the danger of eminent non-confessional scholars in today's China misconceiving the aims, methods, and goals of Christian theology is real. On the other hand, given that theological method envisages the collaboration of a variety of specialized activities, there is much to be gained from dialogue with Sino-scholars working beyond traditional theological

disciplines. When due weight is given to Tanner's culturally-engaged theology and, from a different perspective, to Lonergan's methodological framework, the mutually-enriching scope of theology's engagement with a wide variety of disciplines evidenced in religious studies, historical and literary scholarship, and cultural studies can be welcomed.

We have argued, therefore, for a more active and intentionally aware engagement of theology with Chinese culture. There is no reason for a failure of theological nerve when it comes to entering the academic and the public worlds in order to engage with the various disciplines, cultural thought-forms and contemporary issues of the Chinese society and its people. Such a development in Sino-Christian theology does not require any revision in regards to its fundamental doctrines or commitments (as suggested by David Tracy). It does require, however, a fresh awareness of its methods and modes of communication in its specifically Chinese setting. There is no question of Sino-Christian theology needing to shy away from public discourse and debates on contested issues – if it is all the while presenting itself as an intelligent dialogue partner and contributor committed to the good of the society and people.

In the effort to communicate the Word of God in all its riches within the milieu of Chinese culture, this thesis had found a special resource in Kevin Vanhoozer's

Canonical-linguistic approach to Scripture and theology. We found in it a helpful

hermeneutical model for relating the Christian Gospel to the wider culture and society

in ways that are at once practical and creative. In this regard, the "dramatic" form of a

genuinely biblical Christian theology inspires a performative participation in the event

of divine revelation in its outreach to the actual cultural and social world in which

believers must live their lives, as stewards of the gifts of God.

There are many further issues waiting to be explored. More in-depth studies of the

interaction between theology and cultural studies on particular Sino-issues in the

fields, say, of sociology, psychology, or even in the field of fine art (for instance, the

emerging Chinese Christian artworks of He Qi[1]) will illuminate our topic as theology

becomes more public, more practical and more assured in its engagement with the

culture. On the other hand, the outcome of presenting Christian theology in its own

right, as it treats the classic themes of systematic theology such as the Trinity, the

Incarnation, redemption, the sacraments of the Church, and the grace of the Holy

Spirit, in the public and academic sphere, waits on exciting new kinds of exploration.

As they extend the range of our particular project, further contextualized studies and

instances of dialogue are full of possibilities for the Church and the China of the

future. Much is anticipated regarding the further development of Sino-Christian

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[1] See He Qi's work at http://www.heqigallery.com. Also see Susan Wunderink, "From Mao to Moses," *Christianity Today*, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/aprilweb-only/11752.0.html?start=1 (accessed 13/11/2008).

theology to which Liu Xiaofeng, He Guanghu, Lai Pan Chiu, Sun Yi, and others have contributed and are still contributing.

To sum up, this thesis has proposed a number of ways in which the emerging Sino-Christian theology might move forward to further development within the contemporary Chinese culture and society. There will always be more that can be done. But our exploration has, we believe, contributed something to the foundation of a great building in construction, and erected some signposts for scholars moving in this direction. We hope, therefore, to have contributed to a great work in progress, and that our project can be part of a Sino-Christian theology *in draft*.

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