

AN EMERGING HOPE —
A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR CHEN ZE-MING'S TALK
ON 'SOME THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS IN THE CHINESE CHURCH'

by Maria Goretti Lau

"Some Theological Insights in the Chinese Church" is a talk given by Professor Chen Ze-ming, Vice-principal of Nanjing Union Theological College, at the Montreal meeting. This talk more or less represents the viewpoint of a group of Christians who work at Nanjing Union Theological College. These Christians living in a socialist country intend to work out a new and relevant theology for their church in China. They have diligently reflected upon their own faith and have searched for an adequate 'language' to interpret it in their very particular situation. A genuinely relevant theology which is able to speak for the contemporary Chinese experience is sincerely intended, Professor Chen indicated in his talk. Professor Chen is familiar with the characteristics of Chinese culture and aware of the present situation of his compatriots. As a Chinese theologian, he is likely to have some contact with the theological currents in the West and in the Third World.

Undoubtedly, the idea of 'incarnation' which has dominated the indigenization movement in every local church since Vatican Council II, is also guiding the formation of a Chinese theology. Like Jesus Christ Who was incarnated into this world and took upon himself all the iniquities of human beings, the Chinese Protestant Church, described in Professor Chen's talk, would accept the 'imperfection, the error, the failure, and even tragedy' of the country during its national construction. The indigenous Chinese theology which Professor Chen and his colleagues want to establish and to develop is obviously a 'theology of the masses,' that is, a theology that speaks for the masses of Chinese people who obtained political liberation

some thirty years ago. Professor Chen considers that taking sides with the masses will provide theological thinking with broader perspective.

The issue of nature and grace is very fundamental in Christian theologies. A different interpretation of the relation between nature and supernature not only will influence the explanation of the mysteries of Jesus Christ, the Church, sacraments, and other salvific realities, but will also affect the Christian worldview. Professor Chen suggests a 'unified' interpretation as an alternative to the dualist theory which separates nature and supernature into two contradictory realities.

In the past, it was an undeniable fact that this dualism created some difficulty in our Christian life. Many Christians considered this world as worthless and vain, so that they did nothing to change social reality and to eliminate injustice. Facing intolerable wickedness, they just folded their arms, passively waiting for a happy future which is unpredictable and unknown to them. This attitude towards life only proves the truth of Marx's famous dictum that 'religion is the opium of the people.' However, according to the authentic tradition of theology, nature and grace are not antithetical. As Professor Chen has already mentioned in his talk, St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century said, 'God's grace perfects nature and never destroys it.'

Professor Chen's worldview is a unified, dynamic, and theistic one. His viewpoints on the 'universe' and on 'sin' reflect the thought of Teilhard de Chardin, a Catholic theologian and a scientist as well.

Since taking sides with the masses is the starting point and backbone of the indigenous theology of the Chinese (Protestant) Church today, it is easy to understand why 'social implications' and the concept of 'collectivity' derived from the doctrine of the Trinity are emphasized. The controversial problem of the 'consubstantiality of the three Persons' in traditional theology loses its weight in such a theology. In the framework of this theology, the Christology to be developed will inevitably focus on the mystery of Incarnation. The 'incarnated Jesus Christ' is the centre of the whole of this theological

system, and Professor Chen has described this theological system as a round circle.

Professor Chen's ecclesiology is based upon the mystery of incarnation. He presents the Church not as an institution, but as 'leaven.' The Church is not above the world, nor is it a bridge between God and the world. She is in the midst of the human family and the Chinese people. She is in the world; together with the world she responds to God's calling. In such a framework, it is no wonder that Professor Chen says, 'The Church is first of all a spiritual community in which one can find true brotherhood, and then a community called out from people by God.' In other words, in China, the Church should first side with the masses and then respond to God's calling through the people.

I am not denying that an ecclesiology should be based upon the idea of a spiritual community 'taking sides with the masses.' However, current developments of ecclesiologies still maintain the primacy of God's calling for the existence of the Church. The Church is not a Church unless she is first called by God. God calls her out from the world and sends her back to the people to make her a 'servant, leaven, salt and light of the world.' The fact that we consider God's calling as the primary element in ecclesiology highlights a different emphasis. It will not do harm to a genuine Chinese theology. Many contemporary theologians have developed excellent ecclesiologies based upon the ideas of servant and leaven, without giving up the primacy of God's calling for the existence of the Church.

As for eschatology, Professor Chen agrees with Moltmann's opinion that 'eschatological hope' should be stressed, not the catastrophe and the destruction of the world. I think this suggestion is very positive. Christian hope should be emphasized when we talk about the 'new heaven and the new earth.' Moreover, this eschatological hope is well grounded on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrected Christ is the fountain of our hope. The Paschal Mystery should be introduced into eschatology. The incarnated Jesus inspires Christians to walk with the masses, to share with them their anxiety, happiness, failure, and success; the resurrected Christ gives Christians hope in this world. This hope, as the liberation theologians say, engenders action and

changes the unjust order into justice and peace. For Christians, eschatological hope is the source of all the actions transforming the world. Incarnation without resurrection is incomplete. Therefore, I would suggest that the theological system which Professor Chen has envisaged as a circle where the incarnated Jesus is the centre and human society is the circumference, can be enlarged that the incarnated and resurrected Jesus Christ is the centre of the circle and human society is the circumference.

Finally, Professor Chen says that this theology which has the characteristics of Chinese culture and is able to deal with the contemporary Chinese experience is different from the liberation theology of Latin America. There are certain similarities between these two theologies, such as: the two of them are very concerned with the needs of the masses; both churches have the experience of the oppressed. But, they have different purposes. Liberation is the aim of the Latin-American theology. This liberation is achieved through political and social struggle. The goal of the Chinese theology is 'reconciliation.' Unlike the people in Latin America, the Chinese people (according to the Chinese delegates at the Canadian conference) already attained political liberation some thirty years ago.

Comparatively speaking, this Chinese theology which aims at 'reconciliation' is taking a further step than the Latin American theology. It has the characteristic of 'yuan-rung' (圓融 the oneness and unity of things in the universe) of the Chinese culture.

As a matter of fact, many problems in this theology of reconciliation still need to be deliberated. For instance, the relationship between the reconciliation of God and man and of men among themselves; how can this vertical and horizontal reconciliation be simultaneously actualized in the Chinese society? If this reconciliation theology is sound, on the one hand, it will include the message of liberation of the Gospel and will see the fulfillment of this message in the present situation of China as its task; on the other hand, reconciliation theology will resolve some of the conflicting factors in liberation theology, e.g., the relation between salvation and liberation, God's gift and human action, religion and politics, all controversial problems in liberation theology. Since the Chinese

reconciliation theology insists upon the idea of 'unity', the antitheses mentioned above might be unified or integrated into the whole in that theology. Hopefully, this new theological system in the making will give a balanced place to every essential element in Christian faith.

I sincerely appreciate the effort Professor Chen and his colleagues have made. Actually, only Christians living in China are qualified and capable of creating a genuinely relevant theology for their local church. Outsiders do not have the unique experience of the Chinese Christians, and such experience is very important for theological reflection. No matter what will happen in the future, whether this attempt proves successful or not, the hope of a genuinely relevant theology for the Church in China is gradually emerging now!



Professor Chen Ze-ming addressing at Montreal Conference