

Basic Problems of a Chinese Contextual Theology*

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In the following analysis, the term "theology" will be used in the sense of fundamental theology and dogmatic theology as they are taught in separate courses such as Christology, sacraments, grace, etc. In short, theology will be understood as "classroom Dogmatic Theology on the first (undergraduate) level." Limiting myself to this very restricted investigation, I in no way deny the (perhaps greater) importance of moral theology and social ethics for a contextual Chinese theology and admit that this limitation to classroom theology is regrettable. I confine myself to dogmatic theology simply because I am not competent to deal with questions faced by a contextual moral theology. I hope that I can thus avoid repeating what has already been said many times in more general terms about the need for contextual theologies. I hope to give here a more concrete example of how attention to the cultural context should affect the ordinary teaching and studying of theology and what contextuality can possibly mean on this level.

Since, on the one hand, I intend to speak about "classroom theology" which cannot freely select some points but must aim at giving an introduction to the whole field of theology, and since, on the other hand, I cannot even outline one single course of dogmatic theology, I shall limit myself here to pointing out some "basic problems." By this term I mean problems which arise in a dialogue which touches both upon the hearts of Christian faith and the heart of Chinese mentality but which becomes painful whenever something must be said which goes against the grain of one of the partners.

By choosing to speak only about these basic problems, I do not

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deny the importance that a contextual Chinese theology must attribute to topics which may be of greater interest to Chinese people: e.g., original sin, which presents special difficulties for the Chinese due to their basic conviction of the goodness of human nature; similarity between Chinese and Christian moral views, because of their special interest in ethical questions, etc. I choose to speak about some basic questions, because, in my view, these problems underlie and color many other questions which a genuinely contextual theology must face.

"Chinese theology"

In the following, I cannot outline the actual theological thinking in the Chinese Church or describe what a genuinely Chinese theology should be. The author does not have a thorough knowledge of Chinese history, culture and contemporary mentality. Deplorable as this might be, it has its advantages: readers with only a similarly superficial knowledge of the Chinese mentality can better follow and judge for themselves the opinions set forth here. Moreover, just as in Europe most questions of faith on which theology must reflect do not arise from a detailed knowledge of ancient, medieval and contemporary philosophy, similarly ordinary Chinese people and even students of theology have often only a vague knowledge of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and contemporary currents of thought. Their questions with regard to the Christian faith arise most often from the general atmosphere, from the unquestioned assumptions of the Chinese world. If theology is to serve the whole People of God, it must also answer these questions.

Since I cannot treat all basic questions of contemporary Chinese theology, I shall focus on those problems which have their origin in traditional Chinese culture, leaving aside the problems which are the result of the enormous economic and political changes in the Chinese world. These latter problems are in a certain degree common to many other contemporary contextual theologies, and are outside the scope of my reflection.

What will be said in the following cannot claim to be representative of Chinese theology. It simply sets forth the debatable views of its foreign author on how attention to the mentality of Chinese students should influence the teaching of regular courses of dogmatic theology on the first level of theological training. Chinese colleagues will perhaps set different emphases, regard other problems as more important or even totally disagree with the views set forth here. However, after having taught dogmatic theology in Mandarin for 11 years, I regard as

basic those problems which originate in the basic self-understanding of China as the "Middle Kingdom", and in an ethicist, pragmatic-agnostic approach to religion.

China -- The Middle Kingdom

In both spoken and written Chinese, the word "China" is different in structure from the names of other countries such as Japan, Germany, England. "China" (Zhongguo) is composed of the words and characters meaning "middle" ("center") and "kingdom" ("country"). Although (since 1911) it is no longer ruled by kings and emperors, "China" is still commonly rendered as "Middle Kingdom" when translated into English.

This self-designation as "Middle Kingdom" is based not only on the natural tendency of groups and individuals to regard themselves as the center of the world (cf. "Mediterranean Sea"). It can claim geographic and historical reasons for its justification. The largest portion of the Asian land mass belongs to China. Despite the vastness of its territory, difficult communication, diversity of tribes and languages, China has a basically unified culture. It was strong enough to assimilate foreign conquerors and to influence neighboring Vietnam, Korea and Japan. Since China was superior to its neighbors for many centuries, "Middle Kingdom" also has overtones of "center of culture."

Although in recent history this self-understanding of China was seriously called into question by its contact with Europe and America, its confrontation with Japan and its realization of the need for modernization, the idea of China as the Middle Kingdom and the center of culture still influences the mentality of the Chinese at home and abroad. Many Chinese go abroad for studies, but they are mainly interested in learning Western know-how; and not every Chinese at home knows the history of China and the Chinese classics (just as in the West only a few know Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, Hegel, etc.). Nevertheless the language, traditions and customs, the knowledge of history as transmitted through the schools preserve and nourish the consciousness of being members of the Middle Kingdom and of the center of culture. Precisely on account of this consciousness do Chinese have special difficulties with Christianity, its history and its claims.

Conflict with Christianity

Christianity's relation to the Israel of the Old Testament, whose books Christians regard as Holy Scripture, seems to many quite discon-

certing and provocative. Asked, for example, what impression the readings from the Old Testament make on ordinary Chinese, a Catholic student of theology replied without hesitation: "Childish, crude, barbaric." A Sister teaching "Bible as Literature" in a State university is often questioned about the genocidal actions which, according to the Old Testament, were ordered by Yahweh and executed by the People of God. In a seminar on Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, a student clearly articulated the question which Chinese feel instinctively: "Why did God not choose a (culturally and ethically) more noble people?" A reply like "Israel was not chosen for its greatness or merits and for its own sake, but for playing a role in the history of salvation" will not satisfy an intelligent Chinese, because he will continue: "What has far-away and insignificant Israel contributed to the salvation of the Chinese at the time of Moses, David and today?"

In accord with the teaching of Scripture, Christians confess Jesus Christ as the only Mediator of salvation (cf. 1 Tm. 2:5; Ac 4:12; Jn 1:18; 10:7f; 14:8; 15:5). For Chinese familiar with the long history of their people and the riches of its culture, the uniqueness attributed to Jesus of Nazareth, Who lived and died in a corner of the world unknown to generations of the Middle Kingdom, is extremely difficult to accept, not only for non-Christians, but even for sincere Catholics. For example, during the preparation of a series of lectures on Christology, it was readily agreed that the uniqueness of Christ deserves special attention, but it was equally clear that a Chinese speaker should try to present the viewpoint of Christian faith with regard to this highly sensitive question. This conflict becomes even more acute if, on the basis of the uniqueness of Christ, Christianity claims absoluteness for itself. In a lecture on "Chinese Thought and Christian Religion" given during a workshop conducted by the Fujen Faculty of Theology, a Catholic speaker called this claim an "un-Christian and sinful" assertion.¹

In short: the Christian belief in the special role of the people of Israel and especially the central confession of Jesus Christ as the only and universal Mediator of salvation violently clashes with the basic self-understanding of the Chinese as members of the Middle Kingdom and the Center of True Culture.

Theology in dialogue with this mentality must address and even sometimes articulate the often silent yet constantly present questions of the students. Many problems can be solved easily, following Vatican II, but each solution raises further problems. For example: the question regarding the salvation of non-Christians (which for many students means

parents, grandparents, the vast majority of their friends and countrymen, their sages and heroes) can be easily answered with the biblical teaching on God's universal salvific will and the traditional doctrine of sufficient grace. The bishops of Taiwan have inserted into the Canon of the Mass a remembrance of the ancestors. All this is certainly orthodox faith and sound theology. But it raises a host of questions: what then is the meaning of being a Christian and living as a Christian? If God reaches all men through their fellowmen, through the thought of the sages and popular wisdom and even "pagan" religions, what then is the precise role of the non-Christian popular religions? These display a great vitality in Taiwan, but do not - as it seems - pave the way for the Gospel; rather, they resist and obstruct the spread of Christian faith.

If what Thomas Aquinas says² is true ("Omne verum, a quocumque dicatur, a Spiritu Sancto est" - "all truth, regardless of who speaks it, comes from the Holy Spirit"), what then is the precise difference between the role of the Chinese classical books and the books of the Old Testament in the history of salvation? Can the Chinese classical books take the place of the Old Testament for the Chinese? If so, must other Christians (Europeans, Americans, Africans, Indians) accept the Chinese classical books as inspired in the same way and thus regard them as equally normative as the Old Testament? If not, what is the precise difference between the moral teaching of the Old Testament and the Chinese classics?

These and numerous other questions call for thorough theological investigation, especially in the following areas:

What is the relationship between God's universal salvific will and Christ's role as Mediator of salvation? How can Christ's mediatorial role be explained without dissolving - by a sort of Monophysitism - the historical character of his person and work? How can the concept of salvation be formulated (in accordance with Scripture and Tradition) in such a way that we avoid the Scylla of denying the universality of God's offer of salvation to all men, without heading for the Charybdis of dissolving the historical character of Christ's person and work or only verbally asserting his mediatorial role? Or does the concept of salvation admit qualifications and degrees perhaps in accordance with 1 Tm. 4:10 ("God...is the savior of the whole human race but particularly of all believers")? These are questions usually treated in both soteriology and in the theology of grace.

Confronted with a mentality which takes pride in a great cultural

and moral heritage, theology must thoroughly investigate the problem of man's need for salvation, because the fundamental question is: why should the Chinese look for something outside their achievements and heritage in the pursuit of fulfillment, of salvation? Is there a need that cannot be satisfied by indigenous values? Is there a question that cannot be answered by the thought of the Chinese sages and the achievements of the sciences? These are questions for philosophy of religion and for fundamental theology.

How does (the message of and about) Christ respond to man's quest for salvation? In what sense is He then the only and universal Mediator of salvation? Can this mediatorial role perhaps be further qualified and thus take more seriously the historical character of Christ's person and work and the experiential aspect of salvation and of the Christian being? These are questions to be studied by soteriology, i.e. the systematic reflection on Christ's work and message of salvation.

But when Christianity presents the core of its proclamation as a message of salvation, theology must face another set of basic questions which originate in the conflict between the Chinese pragmatic-ethicist outlook on life and the Christian Gospel of grace.

Chinese ethicism and the Gospel

Traditional Chinese thought strongly emphasizes ethics. Confucianism, which for centuries has dominated Chinese philosophy and Chinese life, in the family and in public, focuses on ethical questions. The violent attacks against Confucianism during the Cultural Revolution on the Chinese Mainland bear witness to the continuing strength of this ethical philosophy. Contemporary Taiwan, with 50 years of recent Japanese occupation, its revival of popular religions, its rapid industrialization and Westernization is also heir to the traditional ethicism of China: addresses to school children, students, public servants, inscriptions in homes, etc., all stress the traditional virtues. During the Prayer of the Faithful at Mass, Catholics sometimes ask for the preservation of traditional morality. In his first Pastoral Letter, one bishop declared the promotion of Confucianism to be a primary task of the Church in Taiwan. Most sermons are on morals (to such an extent that the Archbishop of Taipei, in a foreword to the translation of "The Sunday Readings, Cycle A" by Kevin O'Sullivan, reproached priests for constant moralizing with the words: "The faithful are sick and tired of the perennial moralizing of the Sunday sermons"). Favorite topics of articles dealing with Chinese culture and Christianity and of the dia-

logue with non-Christians are comparisons between Chinese and Christian moral views on "filial piety", "benevolence", "love", etc.

This ethicism has its justification: throughout the centuries, life in China has been a continuous struggle for the immediate necessities of life. Floods and droughts, typhoons and earthquakes posed a constant threat to the basic conditions of life. The need for concrete action, for reasonable rules of living together in peace and harmony possessed highest priority. Concern for religious beliefs, expectation of the gracious intervention of divinities seemed - and are in a way - unessential. Whereas people often disagree on religious questions, they can more readily agree on mutual duties because they experience immediately what helps or destroys peace and harmony.

This emphasis on the ethical is justified even in the light of biblical teaching. Throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament we can hear the recurrent theme that "God will repay each one as his works deserve" (Rm. 2:6; cf. Jr. 17:10; Ps. 62:12; Rv. 2:23). According to Mt 25:31-46, no one will be asked about his creed on the day of judgment, but about his love and service to other men. In his monumental work on grace, E. Schillebeeckx points out a certain priority of ethics:

"Like every other religion, Christian belief must lend some priority to ethical over religious content... For the ethos is characterized by a most imperative urgency, which cannot wait until unanimity concerning the final vital questions is achieved among men... Despite religious and philosophical pluralism, an answer must be given, here, now, to the inner challenge and appeal of the ethical situation: These people here and now... must be helped actively and immediately... considering their situation of need. The situation itself places us before this ethical challenge, whether or not I am a Christian, a Buddhist, a humanist or whatever. I am a human being".³

Because of the similarity between Chinese and Christian moral views, Christian faith is attractive for many Chinese and a welcome support of traditional morality. For example, a father remarked gratefully about his family's conversion to the Catholic faith: "Yes, it is good that we became Catholics - the children are more obedient now." This aspect of the Christian faith might thus even serve as a sort of preamble for faith. Yet this ethicist approach to life in general and to religion has its peculiar problems with the Christian message of salvation.

However justified this attitude may be by the necessities of life and even by the teaching of Scripture and theology, it may easily misconstrue the Christian message in a serious way, as just one form of ethics, as a welcome support of (mostly conservative) traditional ethics, and thus fail to comprehend the newness of Christianity. For example: an excellent teacher of the Taiwanese dialect, who through his work of training foreign missionaries knew the catechism very well, once remarked that he saw no difference between the Christian idea of hell and the idea of reincarnation in the popular Chinese religions. Both are forms of inculcating the duties of filial piety, the one by threatening the pains of eternal hell, the other by threatening reincarnation to the miserable life of a water buffalo toiling in the fields and being mistreated by men. Chinese like to point out that Confucius already formulated the golden rule of human conduct (in a negative form). If Christian belief is just another system of ethics, why should Chinese subscribe to it?

Basic Problems of a Contextual Theology

The conflict between Chinese ethicism and the Christian proclamation cannot be resolved by comparing the worst of Chinese practice with the best of Christian ideals or even with the practice of Christian saints, because this is methodically wrong, pharisaical and ineffective.

Neither can the problem be answered by showing that the highest Chinese ideals do not equal the moral teaching of Christianity, because the *connexio virtutum* warrants a substantial identity of every genuine virtue. Nor can the argument be settled by saying that the Chinese have and acknowledge the (moral) law, whereas only (faith in) Christ gives the strength to keep the law; this would amount to a denial of the serious salvific will of God and the sufficiency of grace offered to all men and imply a denial that non-Christian Chinese did and do live ethically good lives.

Since the ethicist attitude easily misconstrues the Christian proclamation as just another system of ethics, as a law, not as the Good News of salvation, and also misunderstands man, his desires, hopes and needs, theology must turn its attention to fundamental questions such as the following:

What is the object of man's quest for happiness, meaning, fulfillment? Does man seek something which is beyond the realm of ethics, i.e., beyond that which he can and must realize, beyond that for which he is

responsible? Could an absolutely unblemished existence - if it were possible - satisfy man who longs for freely given recognition, acceptance, love? Is man's quest for happiness only directed to goodness achieved by his own efforts or does he seek something that he cannot and may not and does not wish to bring about by himself, something that would be destroyed if it were brought about by his own efforts, something that can only be gratuitously given? Is man only interested in the actual attainment of his fulfillment or is he also vitally interested in knowing that he can find the fulfillment he seeks? All these are questions belonging to fundamental theology and the philosophy of religion.

Does (faith in) Christ and his work of salvation, especially his death and resurrection offer to man what he seeks? In what sense? These problems are to be dealt with by soteriology.

If the Christian proclamation is basically not a sort of ethics, not a law, but a Gospel of grace (cf. Ac 20:24), what then is the relation between faith and ethics? This is the question contained in the topic "Law and Gospel" treated by the theology of grace.

Closely related to pragmatic ethicisim is the similarly pragmatic religious skepticism which also characterizes the Chinese mentality. This brings us to a third set of basic questions for a contextual Chinese theology.

Chinese skepticism and Christian dogmas

The Chinese mentality is marked by a certain skepticism with regard to religious questions. Confucius himself steadfastly refused to speculate with reference to the afterlife. "Don't know life - how know death," he replied when asked concerning death (to use the Pidgin English translation of Lin Yutang, who thus thinks to reproduce something of the terseness and force of the original utterance).

This was an agnostic position, certainly no basis for any robust teaching concerning the individual in another world, nor well calculated to serve as a sanction for human conduct in the present world.⁴

He was similarly hesitant to make statements about God and the spirits so that W. Eichhorn deals with Confucius' religious views under the heading "Vague Religious Attitude of Confucius" ("Unbestimmte religiöse Haltung des Konfuzius").⁵ In more recent times the pragmatism of Dewey deeply influenced the whole system of education and thus rein-

forced the traditional Chinese inclination towards religious agnosticism and skepticism. This agnostic attitude is - in my opinion - one of the roots of the tolerance towards religious beliefs in which many Chinese take pride. Chinese are not prone to religious fanaticism. Everyone is free to hold his own opinion about religious questions - as long as this does not interfere with family life and public order.

Good reasons may be advanced for this skepticism and reservations regarding religious questions. The immediately pressing problems of life and society can and must be solved without recourse to religious convictions. Although St. Thomas defends the possibility of knowing God without the help of Christian revelation, he also knows that it is difficult to attain. Among other reasons for this difficulty, he lists the necessity to care for one's family.⁶ The First and Second Vatican Councils (cf. DS 3005 and *Dei Verbum*, 6) implicitly acknowledge the difficulty of arriving at a clear and pure knowledge of God without the aid of Christian revelation.

When this deeply skeptical and pragmatic mentality meets definite assertions (dogmas) about the divine reality, it cannot but ask: "How do you know?" and "What difference does it make to believe all this?" In response to these often only silently asked questions, a genuine contextual theology must focus on the experiential and rational foundations of faith, without however forgetting to emphasize the role which a *theologia negativa* must play in accordance with the apophatic theology of the Eastern Fathers and the famous word of the Fourth Lateran Council "*inter creatorem et creaturam non potest similitudo notari, quin inter eos maior sit dissimilitudo notanda*" ("No similarity can be observed between the Creator and the creature without, at the same time, noting that the dissimilarity between them is greater." DS 806). These questions presuppose thorough investigation in the area of fundamental theology.

When expounding the dogmas of the Church, dogmatic theology should show how the experience of the Resurrection of the crucified Jesus is at the source of the Christian faith - including faith in the Trinity - and show the existential meaning of this faith. In short, in the context of a skeptical and pragmatic attitude towards religious ideas, theology must stress the experiential and existential aspects of all facets of Christian faith.

Summary

Looking more closely at what have been called basic problems for

a Chinese contextual theology, it must be admitted that these questions are also important topics for classroom theology everywhere, though perhaps not in this configuration and in the same degree of acuteness. This conclusion should not be surprising: if Chinese theology reflects on the same object of all Christian theologies (God's revelation completed in Jesus Christ) and truly serves men (who - despite racial and cultural differences - are one human family, ask basically the same questions about the meaning of life and death, and share in each other's joys and anxieties), we can and must expect that a genuine Chinese theology play the same tune, though on different instruments, with different rhythms and in a different key. In other words: If a theology thoroughly investigates its basic questions and consistently develops its thought in response to the mentality of its audience, the result will be a contextual theology which as a whole is certainly different in its accentuation, but has much in common with all other truly Christian contextual theologies. If we do not seek contextuality for contextuality's sake, this conclusion should not disappoint anyone. It rather shows that, at least at the present time, no contextual theology can be developed in "splendid isolation," or in a ghetto. If all theologies face the same fundamental questions and try to respond to them in the light of the revelation completed in Jesus Christ, there can be fruitful dialogue and mutual help. Chinese theology can warn theologians in the West not to mistake ideas to which they have become accustomed for genuine and well-founded solutions. Since, on the other hand, questions which are basic for Chinese theology have been and still are also debated in the West, Chinese theologians can receive help from their Western colleagues. This exchange could certainly be very fruitful, because some of the basic problems discussed above have already been debated and investigated in perhaps a more favorable climate in the West.

FOOTNOTES

1. Collectanea Theologica Universitatis Fujen. no. 32 (Summer 1977), p. 216

2. Quaestiones disputatae de veritate, 1,8 sed contra

3. "Der christliche Glaube muss - wie jede Religion - dem Ethos eine gewisse Priorität vor dem Religiösen verleihen... Denn das Ethos hat den Charakter einer höchst notwendigen Dringlichkeit, die nicht warten kann, bis unter Menschen Einmütigkeit über letzte Lebensfragen besteht... Trotz des religiösen und weltanschaulichen Pluralismus muss, hier und

jetzt, auf die konkrete innere Forderung und auf den Appell der ethischen Situation geantwortet werden: Diesen Menschen hier und jetzt... muss, in Anbetracht ihrer Notsituation, tatkräftig und sofort...geholfen werden. Die Situation selbst stellt uns konkret vor diese ethische Forderung, ob ich nun Christ bin oder nicht, Buddhist oder Humanist oder was auch immer, Ich bin Mensch." E./Schillebeeckx, Christus und die Christen. Die Geschichte einer neuen Lebenspraxis (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1977), p. 638

4. Cf. S. Braden, Man's Quest for Salvation (Chicago and New York: Willet, Clark and Company, 1941), p. 102

5. W. Eichhorn, Die Religionen Chinas (Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln/Mainz: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1973), p. 51

6. Summa Contra Gentiles 1,4

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