

Critiquing the Method of Traditional Western Theology and Calling for Sino-Theology

by

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When writing these articles, the author has no personal agenda against the church of the West and the missionary from the West. I am forever grateful to the American missionaries who led members of two generations both in my family and my wife's to the Lord. However, when dealing with issues related to the danger of Westernization and the need of contextualization, critical analysis is necessary and valuable.

Part I

I. INTRODUCTION

Theology is foundational to Christian faith and practice; just as worldview of a certain cultural tradition is foundational to group members' belief and practice. Therefore "contextualized Chinese theology" (i.e. "Sino-theology" or "ST") is essential to further discussion on practical contextualization. A critique of the method of "Traditional Western Theology" (TWT) is offered in this article from a Chinese perspective and a call is issued for the formulation of ST specifically for the contemporary Chinese Christian.

This article is written as a warning that some Chinese Christians might have blindly swallowed some Western cultural elements (both the good and the bad) in the process of theologizing when receiving the sound Christian doctrine from Western theological tradition. This subtle form of westernization is not easily detected and the bad elements might be dangerous and poisonous.

Clarification of several concepts and terms is in order at the outset. The term "**contextualization**" is used in this series to denote "the efforts of formulating, presenting and practicing the Christian faith in such a way that is relevant to the cultural context of the target group in terms of conceptualization, expression and application; yet maintaining theological coherence, biblical integrity and theoretical consistency."

"**Sino-theology**" is one such "contextual theology" that is specifically designed for the Chinese people; not by transplanting Christianity in the "pot" of Western culture but by planting it in the Chinese cultural soil so it can take root, flourish and grow. ST should be done by using the Chinese cognitive pattern (e.g. shame culture vs. the guilt culture of TWT), Chinese cognitive process (e.g. synthetic vs. the dialectic of TWT), Chinese way of social interaction (e.g. relational /complementary vs. dichotomistic/confrontational of TWT), Chinese vocabulary, topics, etc. **Only one of these aspects of ST is the focus of**

this article in contra-distinction from TWT, i.e. “both-and” of ST vs. “either-or” of TWT. (For other details regarding the complexity of the issues and debates related to ST and TWT, readers may consult two separate titles by the author listed at the end. The extensive quotations from Arnold Yeung’s 1988 title are included with the intention to show that the view presented here is neither to be regarded as esoteric nor to be dismissed as the author’s idiosyncrasy.)

II. THEOLOGY, THEOLOGIES, AND THEOLOGIZING

“Theology” is man’s attempt and accomplishment in studying God (including His attributes, action and accomplishment) and His relationship with the created order (including man, angel, nature, etc.) systematically and academically. Since men differ from one another in terms of time, temperament, cultural background, circumstance thus they do not have uniform cognitive pattern, process, method, etc. when theologizing. As a result, there are numerous kinds of theology (e.g. Puritan and contemporary, liberation and feminist, Catholic and Protestant, etc.) and multiple ways of theologizing (e.g. biblical vs. historical, conservative vs. liberal, dispensationalist vs. reformed, etc.).

One of the characteristics when theologizing in TWT is the use of the “either/or” thought pattern of Greek philosophy. Since the time of Aristotle, scholars of the Western tradition have been strongly influenced by Aristotle's dualistic epistemology. Subsequently, the dualistic thought pattern was reinforced and refined by the Gnostics (Yeung 1986, 27-29). Henceforth the dualistic pattern of "either/or" has been well entrenched in the Western mind. This "either/or" pattern has several variations: the dualistic cosmology of ancient Greece, the dialectics of Hegel (dialectic idealism), Marx (dialectic materialism), and Augustine (dialectic sociology of the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Man), etc. The quotation below is Arnold Yeung’s comments on Augustine’s impact on TWT in this regard:

"Unfortunately, since Augustine the Church fell once again into the trap of Hellenistic dualism. This impact was prolonged by scholasticism of the Medieval period and naturalism in the West, spreading worldwide..." (Yeung 1986, 17, translation from Chinese by the present writer)

THE PATTERN OF EITHER/OR IN TWT

As shown in Figure 1 below, according to the Aristotelian logic (i.e., the law of non-contradiction: A is A, B is B; A cannot be B and B cannot be A at the same time) -- the left half is A, the right half is B. Thus, each half is either A or B.

FIGURE 1 - THE WESTERN PARADOX OF EITHER/OR (Wan 1998:120)

Great thinkers of the Western tradition have been forced to follow the path of either/or thought pattern for too long. The compartmentalization of disciplines (extreme, reductionistic and tunnel-vision type of specialization) and dichotomistic conceptualization (e.g. scientific vs. spiritual, rationalistic vs. mystical, natural vs. supernatural, cultural vs. supra-cultural, human vs. divine, this-worldly vs. other-worldly, empirical vs. intuitive, etc.) are just manifestations of the either/or dualistic thought pattern in TWT. In **Figure 2**, examples of dualistic thought pattern are presented in diagram format.

FIGURE 2 - THE EITHER/OR PATTERN OF TWT (Wan 1997: 4)

TOPIC	EITHER	OR
Christology	<u>Either</u> the deity of Christ	<u>or</u> the humanity of Christ
	<u>Either</u> the Christ of <u>kerygma</u>	<u>or</u> the historical Jesus
Soteriology	<u>Either</u> God's sovereignty	<u>or</u> human free will
	<u>Either</u> faith	<u>or</u> reason
	<u>Either</u> grace	<u>or</u> work

TOPIC	EITHER	OR
	<u>Either</u> evangelism for conversion	<u>or</u> social gospel as witness
Ecclesiology	<u>Either</u> the universal church <u>Either</u> organic unity	<u>or</u> local congregation <u>or</u> organizational uniformity
Eschatology	<u>Either</u> already realized	<u>or</u> yet to come
Bibliology	<u>Either</u> divine revelation	<u>or</u> human authorship

The first several hundred years of the Christian church were known for the christological controversies due to the either/or perspective on the nature of Christ. This debate has been revised in the last few decades by biblical scholars in the New Testament studies of the "historical Jesus" as a response to the neo-orthodox insistence on the "Kerygmatic Christ".

After the series of "christological heresies," controversies and conflicts occurred repeatedly for many centuries between the Augustinians and the Pelagians on the sacraments, and later between the Reformer (salvation by grace through faith) and the Catholic (salvation by self-effort through work). The theological debates on the issue of salvation by God's sovereign will or human free-will has consumed much time and effort of theologians and church leaders in TWT.

The "fundamentalist movement" of the early part of the 20th century was mostly a struggle to proclaim and practice evangelism as a matter of personal and spiritual conversion, fighting first against the "social gospel" of the liberal, and later against "institutional salvation" of World Council of Church and liberation/feminist theology. The underlying assumption is that salvation is either a spiritual/personal matter or an institutional/collective matter.

In the last few decades, the Christian church has been preoccupied with the "inerrancy debate" (i.e. the Bible is either of divine revelation without error or of human authorship and thus not error-free). These historical precedents clearly demonstrate the pattern of either/or thinking in TWT. The resultant events and the costly undertaking are not to be slighted at all.

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IV. THE BOTH/AND PATTERN OF THE CHINESE & THE TRINITY

The alternative to this either/or pattern is the both/and of the Chinese and that of the doctrine of the Trinity. As shown in **Figure 3** below, given A to be “yang” (the left half) and B to be “yin” (the right half), inside A is the darkened dot of B and inside B is the small circle of A; therefore, the left half is both A and B, and the right half is both B and A.

FIGURE 3 - THE BOTH/AND PATTERN OF THE CHINESE (Wan 1998:121)

(Note: This is a pictographic symbol of “tai-qi” in Chinese thought pattern. Reader is forewarned that its inclusion here is neither a subscription to Taoism nor an endorsement of folk superstition. Please keep in mind that just as no Korean Christian will have any conscientious objection to the fact that this symbol is used for his national flag; here it is employed for the sake of scholarly discussion.)

This both/and of ST is totally free from the Aristotelian logic and is in contrast to the either/or of TWT. Theologizing is a matter of conceptualization closely related to cultural conditioning. Perception of reality and conception of spirituality cannot be separated from the enculturation process of members of the cultural group. The cultural theme of the Chinese is unity/harmony/integration/union/equilibrium /wholeness/balance: e.g. emphasis on the unity of “heaven” and man; equilibrium of “yin” and “yang;” social harmony with others; unity of knowledge and action; solidarity of family and nation; inter-dependence of the living and the dead, ancestor and descendents; the balance of “cold” and “hot” for good health, etc. **Thus the focus on and striving for both/and is clearly a cultural characteristic of the Chinese in thought, action, relationship, sentiment and institution. Therefore both/and should be the pattern for ST theologizing.**

The Jewish thought pattern of the OT, the traditional Chinese and the New Testament writers all shared the same both/and pattern and all are free from the either/or paradox that has troubled many great thinkers and theologians of TWT. According to Christian orthodoxy, the doctrine of the Trinity teaches that there is only one God and one only. This God exists eternally in three distinct persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. These three are fully equal in every divine perfection. They possess alike the fullness of the divine essence. In other words, **God is one in essence and three in existence. God is both one and three.** God is both the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit at the same time. God is not either the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit as in cases of extremists, heresies and cults. There is both unity and diversity. **This both/and paradigm is found in both orthodox Christian theology and Chinese cultural tradition.**

The menace of dichotomistic dualism of either/or is clearly described by Arnold Yeung’s observation quoted below:

“Furthermore, New Testament writers were not the only ones who fought fiercely against dualism. Throughout the 2,000 years of church history in theologizing, at the critical moments time and time again, there have been those who discerned the destructive forces of dualism and rallied for an integrative understanding of facts and truth: early Hebrew patriarchs (of the many schools of Chinese philosophy, Taoism is most distinctive in this aspect); the church fathers Irenaeus, Damascus, Athanasius, Calvin and some Lutherans of the Reformation; contemporary theologians such as Barth, Pannenburg...Karl Heim, Torrance, etc.” (Yeung 1986, 41, translated from Chinese)

As shown in **Figure 4** below, failing to employ the both/and pattern of theologizing will result in the left-hand column:

FIGURE 4 - THE TWO PATTERNS OF THEOLOGIZING (Wan 1998:122-123)

TOPIC	LIBERAL/EXTREMIST/HERETICAL	ORTHODOX & CHINESE
Christology	<p><u>Either</u> the deity of Christ <u>or</u> the humanity of Christ</p> <p><u>Either</u> the Christ of <u>kerygma</u> <u>or</u> the historical Jesus</p>	Both/And
Soteriology	<p><u>Either</u> God=s sovereignty <u>or</u> human free will</p> <p><u>Either</u> faith <u>or</u> reason</p> <p><u>Either</u> grace <u>or</u> work</p> <p><u>Either</u> evangelism for conversion <u>or</u> social gospel as witness</p>	Both/And
Ecclesiology	<p><u>Either</u> the universal church <u>or</u> local congregation</p> <p><u>Either</u> organic unity <u>or</u> organizational uniformity</p>	Both/And
Eschatology	<p><u>Either</u> realized <u>or</u> yet to come</p> <p>(G.E.Ladd’s “already-but-not-yet” is an exception)</p>	Both/And
Bibliology	<u>Either</u> divine revelation <u>or</u> human authorship	Both/And

The only exception to **Figure 4** is the few “conservative Christian leaders in China during the period of the 1920s to the 1940s (such as Chia Yu-ming, Wang Ming-tao, and Watchman Nee),” who according to Arnold Yeung’s analysis, “had been influenced by fundamentalist missionaries who fought against humanism and the 'social gospel'.” (Yeung 1988, 60, translated from Chinese)

V. THE SAD PRECEDENTS OF CHINESE WHO ADOPTED THE EITHER/OR WAY

In recent history, there have been two groups of Chinese who departed from the traditional both/and way with serious consequences. First, there were the scholars who chose to embrace the either/or philosophy during the May Fourth Movement as reported by Arnold Yeung,

“...but the ‘law of cause and effect’ of Plato and Aristotle had shaped the Newtonian cosmology via medieval scholasticism. Since then, the Western thought world had been imprisoned by the (dualistic) closed system of cosmology for two thousand years. Pitifully, though the traditional pattern of Chinese thought had been similar to that of the Hebraic, being integrative and open, yet ever since the May Fourth Movement, Chinese scholars have indiscriminately embraced Western thought. Gathering the tares with the wheat, these scholars have lost their distinctive Chinese cultural heritage. Thus under the spell of foreign dualism (of either/or), they have viewed the ‘law of cause and effect’ as an impenetrable and unbreakable net. Until the day when this net is broken through, we will continue to be imprisoned in the dark dungeon of Medieval thinking.” (Yeung 1988: 24, translated from Chinese)

Another group is contemporary Chinese Christians, affected not in their faith but in their practice. Again the prophetic voice of Arnold Yeung should be heard:

“You ask, ‘What do contemporary Chinese have to do with ancient Hellenist philosophy?’ May I answer by raising some questions? How many of our cosmology that is neither polytheistic nor dualistic compartmentalizes spirit and matter? ...God’s participation and man’s duty?...Maintaining the balance between God’s work and man’s freedom? Or are we practically living in the 20th century version of dualism? Holding God, eternal life, heaven, hell with one hand and Newtonian causal law in another? ...Are we Christians not impoverishing ourselves by this type of dualism?...” (Yeung 1988:30, translated from Chinese)

VI. CONCLUSION

Critique of the either/or pattern in TWT is offered to show the necessity of formulating ST. It is to our peril when we utilize the either/or pattern for ST. Since the both/and pattern is the cultural theme of the Chinese, it is both right and good to employ it in the formulation of ST.

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