

Tao — The Chinese Theology of God-Man

By Enoch Wan

INTRODUCTION

The call for a Chinese theology

Christians are commissioned by Christ to preach the Gospel to all nations (Matt. 28:19, Mark 16:15). The Church cannot carry out the Great Commission without reaching the Chinese (one quarter of the world's population) with the Gospel message.

"Chinese theology" is theologizing in Chinese concepts within the Chinese cultural context that the Gospel may take root in the soul and soil of the Chinese. Developing "Chinese theology" is, therefore, not an option, but an obligation to those who desire to evangelize, disciple Chinese individuals and develop Chinese churches. To show that there is nothing radical or heretical in such an attempt, we shall first examine the "theology" of "western Christianity."

The Theology of the West

"Theology" is the human understanding or the discipline pertaining to God, His Word, and works. Within the context of western culture, students of "historical theology" are to study Arianism, Sabellianism and other heresies, and examine the Nicene Creed, the Apostle's Creed and other symbols which are summary statements of the faith of western Christians. Similarly, "systematic theology" is western Christians' (e.g. Calvinism, Arminianism, dispensationalism...). "Practical theology" is the application of theological understanding in church polity (e.g. congregational vs. presbyterian). Christian counselling (e.g. J. E. Adams' directive vs. C. Roger's

non-directive approach), and Christian living (e.g. Puritanism vs. Methodism).

The increasing number of foreign students in western countries studying theology and the frustration of teaching (western) theology overseas by missionaries have taught Christians a new lesson: western theology is the accumulated efforts of many western scholars' theologizing in western terms and concepts with western frame of reference (e.g. Platonism, Aristotelianism, etc.) within the western cultural context (e.g. Renaissance, Enlightenment, etc.). Therefore, western theology is not to be transplanted to foreign lands for it will not take root in foreign soils and souls. It is not only inevitable, but desirable, to develop theology in diversified cultural contexts for different peoples.

A Theology for the Chinese based on the unifying concept of "Tao"

For centuries, Chinese people resisted missionary effort and rejected the Gospel message of western Christians for legitimate reasons. For example, there is the time-honoured "marriage" of western Christianity with western culture since Constantine, the unfortunate "alliance" of missional and political expansion of western countries, and the exclusive nature of Christianity vis-a-vis the syncretistic Chinese religio-philosophical traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religion. In addition, western Christian's theologizing would be very different from the Chinese way (e.g. the former being dichotomize/dialectical vs. monistic/integrative/harmonize of the latter, analytical vs. intuitive, rational vs.

relational, etc.).

"Tao" is the transliteration of the Chinese character "道" with many usages and multiple senses such as "way," "word," "speech," "means," "truth," etc. There is not one adequate dynamic-equivalence in English for all these meanings and nuances thus the transliteration "tao" is used in this brief study.

There are three major religio-philosophical systems in Chinese culture, i.e. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. These three systems have influenced each other and confluently formed and fashioned the Chinese mind for many centuries. However, they share one common emphasis on "Tao."

Like Christianity being named after Christ, Taoism is named because of the preoccupation with and the prominence of "tao" in that religio-philosophical system. The bible of Taoism is "Tao-Te-Ching" ("tao-virtue-book") which is a treatise on the name and nature of "tao."

Two of the Four Books of Confucianism begin with a statement on "tao." The Book of Great Learning begins with the sentence "the way of ta-hueh (great learning) is tao." The opening statement of The Book of the Golden Mean is, "the nature-given is the mandate of heaven, its cultivation is tao...tao is that which no one can depart for a moment." Even Confucius himself admitted that if he should hear "tao in the morning, dying by the evening would not be regrettable." (Confucius Analect Book 2).

In Buddhism, the fourth of the Four Noble Truths is "tao" or the "Eight

Noble Tao (path)," which has been extensively developed in Chinese Buddhism in contrast to that of other forms of Buddhism.

Though the term and concept of "tao" have a unique emphasis and implications in each of the three Chinese religio-philosophical systems (i.e. socio-ethical emphasis in Confucianism, autosoteristic focus in Mahayana Buddhism of China, mystical and agnostic nature in Taoism), nevertheless "tao" is a prominent theme of all three of them.

Providentially, the word "tao" is used extensively in the Chinese Union Version of the Bible (translated in 1919 by western missionaries, hereafter "CUV"). For example, "tao" is used for Hebraic wisdom (Pr. 8); Johannine Christology of incarnation (Jn. 1 and I Jn. 1); the apostolic preaching (Acts 13); the Christian faith (Rom. 10); and the truth of love (I Cor. 12, 13); the Word (Eph. 5:26, I Thess. 1:8).

The following is a brief comparative study of the term "tao" in the CUV, Chinese classical writings and cultural connotation. Only some insights on the theology of "tao" are listed here and any adequate treatment would require a volume or two.

First, Christ Jesus can be perceived and introduced to the Chinese as the God-Man Christ Jesus, "The Tao," the Second Person of the Trinity, The Way, the Revealer, etc. (CUV Jn. 1, 14, 16; I Jn. 1). Of course the deistic and pantheistic nature of "tao" as described in Tao-Te-Ching should be corrected by the biblical teaching of the theistic and personal nature of the "Tao." "Tao" is

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neither mystical and agnostic (Tao-Te-Ching chapters 1, 21) but the mystery revealed (Col. 1:16, 17) in the Incarnation of Christ Jesus ("Tao became flesh" CUV Jn. 1:14).

The dual nature of the God-Man Christ Jesus ("The Tao") is the harmonious/aesthetic unity of both divine and human attributes in the perfect personal Being of "The Tao." To the Chinese mind this is neither paradoxical nor dialectical for Chinese perceive reality in terms of "yin" and "yang;" conceive physiological well being as the balance of the "hot" and "cold;" and living human being as the unity of "hun" ("of yin") and "pao" ("of Yang"). Therefore, the Aristotelian logic of contradiction which brings the debates on faith and reason, divine sovereignty and human free will, Christ of the kerygma and the historical Jesus of western theology pose no threat to the Chinese Christian's faith in "The Tao." It is very unnecessary and unprofitable to force the Chinese Christians to theologize in dialectical and paradoxical terms and concepts. The natural way is to introduce them to the God-Man Christ Jesus and develop the theology of "The Tao."

Secondly, the Bible can be introduced to the Chinese as the supreme and sacred "Tao" (CUV Mk. 16:20, Jn. 17:17 etc.). It is the God-to-man revelation. If the term and concept of "Ti'en" (heaven) be a Chinese equivalent of Hebrew "shamayim" and Greek "ouranos" as contended by many sinologists, then the Bible is indeed the "Ti-en-Tao" (cf. Confucius Analects, Book V, chapter 12, Book VIII, chapter

20; Tao-Te-Ching chapters 77, 81). The Bible is the divine-human Book, written by human writers who have been inspired by the Holy Spirit, the "Tao/Truth" for the Chinese. The doctrine of inspiration and the debate on inerrancy can be relatively easier handled by those who are willing to theologize in term of "The Tao" for the Chinese.

Thirdly, Christians are the beings transformed by "Tao." They are the God-man beings as compared to Christ Jesus the God-Man Being "The Tao." They are the God-saved-men, the children of God born from above with two natures, living in the tension of the "already" but "not-yet." If Christ Jesus is introduced to the Chinese as the perfect God-Man Being ("The Tao") then Christians are the God-man beings ("the tao"). They are positionally and progressively sanctified in Christ Jesus, the followers of "tao" (CUV Ac. 15:7, 16:17, I Co. 12:3, etc.). This is the spiritual reality in Christ Jesus, the biblical answer of Christianity for the Chinese ideals in Confucianism ("Ti'en-Jen-Hah-Yeh," unity between heaven and man), Taoism ("man follow earth/nature which follows tao, and tao follows ti'en," Tao-Te-Ching, chapter 25), Mahayana Buddhism of China (returning to the original and all pervading "Buddha essence" or "tao") and Chinese folk religion ("tseng-sin" "成神", becoming-heavenly-being or "tsang-si-ti'en", "上升" rising-to-western-heaven). The doctrine of the Kingdom and man, salvation and sanctification, can also be theologized in term of the "tao."

Conclusion

"Tao" is the Chinese character "道" with many usages (e.g. singular or plural noun for personal beings and things, verb of different tenses, etc.) and multiple meanings such as "way," "word," "speech," "means," "truth," etc. There is not one adequate dynamic-equivalence in other languages, therefore the transliteration "tao" is maintained throughout this brief study. "Tao" is repeatedly used in Chinese classical writings (e.g. "Tao-Te-Ching 道經"), advocated by sages and statesmen (e.g. Confucius' "論語"), embedded in the mind of Chinese gentry and peasantry (e.g. Chinese concept of "filial piety"), embraced by the rulers and the ruled alike (e.g. Chinese concepts of various virtues "八德"), practised by the privileged and the populace (e.g. "the golden-mean 中庸").

"Tao" in our Chinese theology of God-man is rich in its content, powerful in its communication to the Chinese mind and sentiment, valuable as a bridge from the Jewish elements of the Old Testament and the Hellenistic elements of the New Testament to the Chinese cultural tradition, readily understood and easily accepted by the non-Christian Chinese and extensively used in Chinese Christianity.

Chinese Christian apologetics and evangelism should begin with the proper understanding of "tao" in Chinese culture and the biblical meaning of "tao" in the Scriptures. If Chinese Christians can guard against the syncretistic nature of the Chinese mind and folk religion without compromising biblical belief with Chinese culture in term of "tao," then the theology of "tao" is to be developed for the Chinese.