

Issues in Sino-Christian Theology¹

DAVID JASPER

I AM VERY CONSCIOUS that the chapter that follows is the perspective of a Western Christian theologian with a very limited grasp of Chinese language and an outsider's view of the constraints upon religious belief and practice in contemporary China. This means that I do not have access to a great deal of material in Mandarin, but I do have the benefit of having taught for a period of each year in a Chinese university over the past decade, and of having friends with whom I can converse and share ideas.

The project known as “Sino-Christian theology” (*hanyu jidu shenxue*) has its origins in post-Cultural Revolution China during the 1980s, very largely though not exclusively among a group of Chinese scholars who are sometimes called “cultural Christians” (*wenhua jidutu*). This was a term probably coined by church leaders in Mainland China to refer to scholars who were mainly outside the church in China and whose studies of Christianity were pursued within the academic contexts of universities, most commonly in departments of philosophy. Sino-Christianity became finally established in academic discussion in a wider English speaking context on the publication of a volume of essays entitled *Sino-Christian Studies in China*, edited by Yang Huilin of Renmin University of China in Beijing and Daniel Yeung, the Director of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong, in 2006.² Among its early leading and most well known ex-

1. An earlier version of this chapter was published as “Issues in Sino-Christian Theology,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 19.2–3 (2019) 120–32.

2. See Yang and Yeung, *Sino-Christian Studies*; Lai and Lam, *Sino-Christian Theology*; Chow, *Theosis*.

ponents, Liu Xiaofeng was unusual inasmuch as he was formally trained in Christian theology, holding a doctorate from Basel University. Others were often academics within philosophy departments, many without church affiliation, frequently remaining unbaptized and as a result viewed with some degree of suspicion by members of Christian churches. Most typically, but by no means exclusively, “cultural Christians” have been described somewhat dryly by Jason Lam as among:

[those] scholars [who] are not committed to the Christian faith. . . . But they do not study Christianity from a cultural-nationalistic perspective: their approach is more value-neutral. Their frame of reference is shaped by the academic standards of the social and human sciences. Some of them show an appreciation of the Christian faith however.³

However, it is clear that no academic program can be entirely value-neutral and Sino-Christian theology has its roots firmly set in the political and cultural circumstances of contemporary China. After the events of 1949 all Christian educational institutions from schools to universities and including seminaries were closed in China. But if the study of religion remained on the agenda only to be criticized during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), in the period of relative openness afterwards, in the early 1980s, it was recognized that just as communism itself was rooted in Western thought, so behind that lay the doctrines of the Christian faith, as acknowledged by Marx, Engels and those who followed them.

Thus, while confessional Christianity remained controlled and confined to the churches in the “private sector,” attention to Christianity and its thought flourished, at least to a degree, within the broader stream of cultural studies and within the philosophy departments of state universities. As Jason Lam admits,

If the period of communist rule has accidentally and paradoxically created an appropriate situation for Christian study to become a formal part of the cultural and educational system of the state, this implies that the Christian faith already possessed the potential to influence the construction of modern Chinese thought in Mainland China. Liu Xiaofeng claims that this is a chance Chinese Christian intellectuals cannot afford to miss.⁴

3. Lai and Lam, *Sino-Christian Theology*, 22–23.

4. Lai and Lam, *Sino-Christian Theology*, 33. See also Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*.

To identify more closely such Chinese “Christian intellectuals,” Lo Ping Cheung (Luo Bingxiang) of the Hong Kong Baptist University wrote an article in 1997 using the term “Chinese Apollos,” which referred back to a passage in Acts 18, and the Alexandrian Jew named Apollos, who was an “eloquent man and well-versed in the scriptures,” but who needed Priscilla and Aquila to explain “the Way of God to him more accurately” (Acts 18:24–28 NRSV). Lo Ping Cheung refers particularly to He Guanghu, Zhuo Xinping and Tang Yi, all scholars from the Institute on World Religions at the highly prestigious Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. None of them was baptized.⁵ In some respects the work of such scholars resembled the “cultural-linguistic alternative” in the study of Christian doctrine as proposed by George A. Lindbeck in his influential, and still important, volume *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-liberal Age* (1984) which suggested that “religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought.”⁶ The difference, however, is that Lindbeck was writing as a Professor of Theology at Yale University in a society that was deeply grounded in the traditions and forms of Christian thought, while Chinese cultural Christians study Christian theology in the context of post-Mao communist China. Chinese culture has never in its long history openly accepted Christianity to the same degree as it once accepted (and adapted) Indian Buddhism. What then, it might be asked, is the precise religious status of Sino-Christian theology, a predominantly academic and non-ecclesial phenomenon, within the larger context of the Christian tradition? What happens to Christianity as a religion when it finds itself absorbed into a cultural context so unfamiliar, perhaps even uncongenial, both ideologically and philosophically?

A key essay in response to these questions is Yang Huilin’s essay “Inculturation or Contextualization: Interpretation of Christianity in Chinese Culture,” first published in *Sino-Christian Studies in China* (2006), and more recently re-published and revised for Yang Huilin’s book *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture* (2014). Yang examines the process of interpretation that Christianity undergoes in the context of Chinese Confucian, and more recently Communist, culture. In past ages both Matteo Ricci in the seventeenth century and James Legge in the nineteenth century suffered

5. See further Lee, “Cultural Christians’ Phenomenon in China: A Hong Kong Discussion,” in Lai and Lam, *Sino-Christian Theology*, 53–54.

6. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 33.

as Christian missionaries through the processes of inculturation into Chinese culture. As Ricci and Legge became more and more deeply absorbed in the Chinese language and culture, they were perceived by the church and by their Western colleagues as becoming too “Chinese” and were thus in danger of diluting the fundamental and “exclusive” claims of Christianity. Ultimately in such moves, adaptation to Chinese culture tended in China towards a “functional interpretation of Christianity to supplement Confucianism,”⁷ Christianity accepted in China, if at all, as something like an ethical equivalent of the traditional teachings of Confucius.

After the revolution of 1911 and the establishment of the republic, the Chinese churches embraced Chinese traditional Confucian culture as a form of defense mechanism and a means of survival. In a moment we shall give some attention to Wu Leichuan’s influential work *Christianity and Chinese Culture* (1936) as an articulate example of Christianity’s inculturation into China, and, in many ways, a precursor of the Sino-Christian theology of the cultural Christians. In his essay Yang Huilin refers to Wu Leichuan’s book and its immediate precursor, a brief article by Wu, which begins with the words, “The Chinese nation is rejuvenating! The Chinese nation is rejuvenating! The Chinese nation is rejuvenating!”⁸ Christianity, it is argued by Wu in this article, should be regarded as being at the heart of the rediscovery of Chinese culture, but Yang notes that Christian theology in China seemed to have advanced little from the position of Wu Leichuan by the end of the twentieth century, quoting a 1999 essay of Liu Tingfang that “Christianity in China . . . is rich in expressions of practice, but lacks precise and accurate reasoning.”⁹

In fact, Wu Leichuan and, a little earlier, Zhao Zichen¹⁰ sought to associate the concepts of the ancient Daoist classics with Christian ideas—a process of contextualization that is frequently repeated in more recent Sino-Christian studies. Thus, for example, *tian ming zhi wei xing* in *The Doctrine of the Mean* was associated and compared with Genesis: “[God] breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Gen 2:7 NRSV).¹¹ The result

7. Yang, *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture*, 27.

8. Yang, *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture*, 30.

9. Liu, “What, After All: Is Christianity Spreading?,” in Zhang and Zhuo, *Exploration of Indigenization*, 119.

10. See Zhao, “Christianity and Chinese Culture,” in Zhang and Zhuo, *Exploration of Indigenization*, 1–17.

11. Yang, *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture*, 31.

of such comparisons of ideas was a blunting of scriptural Christian beliefs within the broad elements of the Chinese cultural context, and ultimately a dislocation between the Christian community of *faith* in the churches of China, and the academic community of *discourse* which sustained the project of Sino-Christian theology. Although this distinction is also necessarily somewhat blurred and subject to many exceptions, it still serves to express a profound truth.

In its New Testament origins, Christianity seems to have been a counter-cultural movement, born out later in such examples as the lives and teaching of the Egyptian desert fathers and mothers of the fourth century. On the whole where churches and Christian communities have been counter-cultural in later conditions they have frequently flourished despite (or perhaps even because of) the pressures of a ruling secular culture. Such now might be the case in the numerically burgeoning contemporary Christian church, both official and unofficial, in China as it is strictly supervised or controlled by the Chinese government. The Sino-Christian theology of the cultural Christians, however, is perhaps more difficult to evaluate. While many of its exponents in Chinese universities are undoubtedly sympathetic, or even more than that, towards Christianity and its theology, it might be seen, in terms set by Yang Huilin and in a shift that extends inculturation towards contextualization,¹² as the last of three great phases of Christian theology in China. The first is that of “interpreting Jesus in terms of Buddha and Laozi” during the Nestorianism of the Tang dynasty (618–907). The second is that of “interpreting Jesus in terms of Confucianism” in the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1912) and beyond into the twentieth century. And the third, after the Cultural Revolution, is the period of interpreting “Jesus in terms of existential existence.”¹³ In the twentieth century and up until the present time, the stress has been upon the ethical role of Christianity and the perceived close links with Confucian tradition.

We should acknowledge here the profound ethical connections (as well as the distinctions) between the Christian church in China, known as the Three Self Movement (a particular compromise, it may be, with post Cultural Revolution China), and Sino-Christian theology, while recognizing the often barely theological nature of the former and the intellectualism of the latter. After Mao Zedong, Sino-Christian theology, from within the culture of Chinese academic life, has both acknowledged and to a degree

12. Terms established in Criveller, *Wan Ming Jidu lun*, 17–27.

13. See Yang, *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture*, 36.

resisted the tendency towards the “ideologization” of religion, even as, since the 1970s, the “religious” character of the ideological teachings of Mao has often been noted.¹⁴ For example, both Mao Zedong and Christianity looked towards a new world and in it to new laws. Similarities have also been noted between Christianity and Mao Zedong’s observation that “it is not difficult for a person to do one good thing; what is difficult is doing good things and no bad things all one’s life.”¹⁵ But one senses that at the heart of Sino-Christian theology there is a deeply rooted unease expressed by Yang Huilin as the “nonreligious interpretation of Christianity” from which Yang makes the distinctly uneasy comparison with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s idea of religionless Christianity.¹⁶ But coming from the deeply non-Christian culture of China this connection is difficult to sustain in a cultural context where compromise and lack of resolution are fundamental necessities, prompting Yang Huilin to end his essay slightly enigmatically with a quotation from Hans-Georg Gadamer that has been translated from German into Chinese and then from the Chinese into English concerning the interpretation of religion in different cultures: “The interpreters tend to be gradual compromises with the truths they interpret. . . . What else can interpretations be?”¹⁷ Is compromise, then, at the center of the whole discussion?

But Yang Huilin’s reference to Bonhoeffer is not entirely without significance. In a remarkable essay entitled “The Contemporary Significance of Theological Ethics,”¹⁸ Yang draws a comparison between the two perhaps most traumatic events of the twentieth century, one in Europe and one in China: the Holocaust and the Cultural Revolution. He compares them under what he calls two “dimensions.” 1: The uncontrollable fantasies of the collective unconsciousness, and 2: the frailty of our existing order and values. In each case there is an issue of who is responsible for such acts, and of the possibility of forgiveness. It is upon the latter that the conclusion of his essay concentrates. Yang writes:

The Christian logic of love and forgiveness especially requires further expounding in the context of Chinese culture. Its premise should be “the Wholly Other,” external and extrinsic to man, but

14. See Lardreau et al., *Christian-Marxist Dialogue*.

15. Yang, *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture*, 40.

16. Yang, *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture*, 43

17. Gadamer, *Zhe xue quan shi xue*, 197–98, quoted in Yang, *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture*, 45.

18. Yang, *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture*, 61–75.

not merely a rational choice between good and evil in actual ethical relationships or a relativized social check and balance.¹⁹

Yang's point is not that the "Confucian religion" of China is without a "latent motive force in ethics," but that it is nevertheless clear that "the Christian tradition is more concerned with ultimate ethical values."²⁰ And in both Auschwitz and the Cultural Revolution the necessary concern to establish a sense of responsibility cannot finally acknowledge forgiveness (Elie Wiesel would agree that this is here quite beyond the capacity of our humanity) except in the divine sense. Only in the divine transcendence recognized within the Christian tradition and located finally within the person of Jesus Christ, is forgiveness and reconciliation possible. Is such transcendence similarly available within the Chinese religious and philosophical tradition?

Perhaps there is indeed a sense of this possibility also in the mystical tradition of the *Tao Te Ching*, which acknowledges the decline that ensues from the loss of *Tao* (the Way) in chapter 38:

Hence when the way was lost there was virtue; when virtue was lost there was benevolence; when benevolence was lost there was rectitude; when rectitude was lost there were the rites.²¹

What is here translated as "the rites" might best be understood as a sense of propriety or, in Yang's translation, "behaviour manners."²² His point seems to be that within Taoist culture there is no necessary link between the religious pursuit of the Way (*Tao*) and social propriety—that is merely performing the rites of good manners which elude a proper sense of responsibility. Writing, it may be suggested, as a Sino-Christian theologian, Yang in his moving meditation upon the Holocaust and the Cultural Revolution, seems to imply the need for a sense of transcendence linked with immanence to allow for the possibility of forgiveness—or should we perhaps say salvation?

The task, then, of Sino-Christian theology, with its ultimate ethical values, within Chinese culture is indeed acknowledged, and this brings me back to the theology of Wu Leichuan as in so many ways the twentieth-century precursor of Sino-Christian theology today. We may recall Wu's

19. Yang, *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture*, 73.

20. Yang, *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture*, 73.

21. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, 43.

22. Yang, *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture*, 74.

startling phrase, “The Chinese nation is rejuvenating!” written shortly before the publication of his most significant book *Christianity and Chinese Culture*. What he is speaking of here is the salvation of the nation. As Sze-kar Wan, a Chinese New Testament scholar working in the United States, has written:

Wu began with national salvation, and subjected all things, including his biblical interpretation, to that concern. For example, since it should be an individual’s highest goal to sacrifice self for others, especially for the country, service for others should be regarded as the essence of religion. Religion, in turn, must serve society by reforming and transforming it; *it must therefore rid itself of the mystical and the fantastical to accomplish that purpose.*²³

As a trained Confucian-Christian scholar Wu Leichuan was always suspicious of the theology and principles of biblical interpretation of Western missionaries in China. For him, as for many modern Chinese scholars in Christian theology of his time and since, “soteriology could only mean national salvation.”²⁴ At the heart of such Chinese Christian theology lies a Christology that regards Jesus’s task and mission as to reconstruct society and within it to remake the individual.²⁵ In short, Jesus emerges as a Confucian sage from the pages of the gospels read through the lens of Confucian ethics and philosophy, and Grace Hui Liang is led to conclude: “Wu’s biblical hermeneutics thus failed to make clear the contribution Christianity could bring to China which Confucianism could not provide.”²⁶ Christian theology then, it would seem, becomes little more than an addendum to Confucian thought.

As Chloë Starr has made clear in her recent fine book *Chinese Theology* (2016), Wu’s concept of the Messiah and the Kingdom of Heaven was constructed around the rebuilding of the Chinese nation and there was little ecclesial in his Christian thinking or theology. Starr suggests:

23. Wan, “Six Competing Tensions: A Search for May Fourth Biblical Hermeneutics,” in Starr, *Reading Christian Scriptures in China*, 107 (emphasis added).

24. Liang, “Interpreting the Lord’s Prayer for a Confucian-Christian Perspective: Wu Leichuan’s Practice and Contribution to Chinese Biblical Hermeneutics,” in Starr, *Reading Christian Scriptures in China*, 124.

25. Wu, “Jesus as I Know Him,” 77.

26. Liang in Starr, *Reading Christian Scriptures in China*, 128.

If there was no need for miracles in the kingdom of the Republican or Nationalist China, *the church was not essential to its construction, either.*²⁷

For Wu, the Kingdom of Heaven is the key metaphor in Christianity and it is perceived fundamentally in terms of social reform, almost entirely lacking in any eschatological or ecclesial dimension. His understanding of the Trinity connects the Holy Spirit with Confucian teaching on *ren* (universal love or benevolence), even going so far as to suggest that they are simply “different names for the same reality,”²⁸ and Wu’s teaching on Jesus and the Kingdom of Heaven are taken almost entirely from Confucian ideas.

I have given some attention to Wu Leichuan and his writings in China during the Republican period in the 1930s, as they clearly relate to many of the characteristics of the more recent, post-Cultural Revolution, project of Sino-Christian theology. That too is primarily an intellectual, non-ecclesial movement, largely set apart from the life of the Christian church in China, and rooted in the cultural context of contemporary university and academic life. This observation is not intended to be cynical, but rather to extend the difficult questions of the contextualization of Christianity in Chinese culture, both ancient and modern, and even the debated understanding of the nature of “religion” itself. Ancient Chinese philosophy and religious thought do not offer the same categories and concepts, not least that of transcendence, as lie within the Greek philosophical roots of Western Christian theology, making it more comprehensible why Nestorianism²⁹ was able to take some root in the seventh century³⁰ and Christology was largely regarded within the concept of the Confucian sage in the early part of the twentieth century.

The writings (I am limited, of course, to those published in English) and theology of more recent Sino-Christian theologians become more readily understandable against this background. In Pan-chiu Lai and Jason Lam’s edited volume on *Sino-Christian Theology: A Theological Qua Cultural Movement in Contemporary China* (2010), an essay by the Chinese New

27. Starr, *Chinese Theology*, 152 (emphasis added).

28. Wu, *Christianity and Chinese Culture*, 38.

29. This term is notoriously difficult to pin down, but by the later fifth century in the West was applied to upholders of a strict Antiochene Christology by all their opponents. See *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1145–46.

30. See Whyte, *Unfinished Encounter*, 33–40.

Testament scholar, now teaching in the USA, Yeo Khiok-Khng, is entitled “Messianic Predestination in Romans 8 and Classical Confucianism.”³¹ This is hermeneutically more sophisticated than the writings of Wu Leichuan, but it remains very similar in terms of its understanding of Messiahship and the Kingdom. Yeo Khiok-Khng begins his essay with these words:

[This] experimental essay seeks to use an inter-subjective hermeneutic to read the texts of Paul and Confucius intertextually. The reading is concerned with crossing borders and fusing horizons in cross-cultural interpretation. The paper will read Paul’s messianic (Christological) predestination language using the lens of the Confucian millennial understanding of *Datong* (Great Togetherness).³²

There is certainly here a more intercultural, dialogical tone together with a post-Kristevan sense of intertextuality, but one is left again with a sense that the Confucian foundations remain essentially undisturbed and the language of the Christian “supplement” still lingers. Yeo Khiok-Khng admits to his “Confucianist assumptions of history,”³³ significantly noting in his conclusion that he finds that “Paul’s eschatological definition of the goal (the end) of history from the future *supplements* my Confucianist retrieval reading of history from the past golden age.”³⁴

Religious shifts, and the even the meaning of religion, between cultures are never simple or straightforward. During the Jesuit mission to China of 1583–1721, Matteo Ricci identified closely with the culture of Chinese literati in Beijing, though his welcome was also balanced by a deep suspicion among many Chinese intellectuals as to his intentions. But the really fatal opposition to Ricci and the Jesuit mission came from the papacy and Rome itself, fearing the dilution of the fundamentals of Christianity in an alien culture. On March 26, 1693, Charles Maigrot, the Vicar-Apostolic in Fujian, forbade rites honoring ancestors (which Ricci himself viewed as commemorative and not a form of worship) and the use of the terms *Tian* and *Shangdi* for God.³⁵ Although the Emperor was willing to negotiate, the

31. Lai and Lam, *Sino-Christian Theology*, 179–201.

32. Lai and Lam, *Sino-Christian Theology*, 179.

33. Lai and Lam, *Sino-Christian Theology*, 181.

34. Lai and Lam, *Sino-Christian Theology*, 200 (emphasis added).

35. See Whyte, *Unfinished Encounter*, 70; Ebrey, *Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, 225.

Papal Bull *Ex Illa Die* of 1715 finally brought the Jesuit mission to a close. The Vatican did not reverse its ruling until 1939.

Sino-Christian theology, then, is a Chinese venture born out of a complex and lasting intercultural context. The Christian exclusivity that ended the work of Matteo Ricci was experienced again by perhaps the best known Western missionary to China of the nineteenth century, James Legge (1815–1897), later the first professor of Chinese Literature and Language in Oxford. Legge was a strong advocate for the term *Shangdi* as the most appropriate for the scriptural and Christian word God.³⁶ In 1877, the Shanghai Missionary Conference effectively brought Legge's long years as a missionary in China (or more precisely Hong Kong) to an end as the "heretic" Legge was understood as promoting Confucianism as a religion and Confucius himself was being promoted as more or less on a par with the Hebrew prophets.³⁷ In the official proceedings of the Shanghai Conference, at which Legge was not present, we read that "a resolution proposed by Rev. S. L. Baldwin to omit [Legge's] essay and discussion on Confucianism from the published record" was passed "without dissenting voice."³⁸ Legge was, by training and inclination, an intellectual and a scholar, with an increasingly uneasy relationship to his church, to which he nevertheless remained faithful to the end. But his true vocation was found in Oxford, as a university professor.

Thus it is perhaps not entirely surprising that James Legge is better remembered today among Chinese scholars in Chinese universities than he is in either Oxford or his native Scotland. In recent years, Sino-Christian theology and scholars like Yang Huilin (who actually first introduced me to the writings of Legge) have been attracted to the project known as "Scriptural Reasoning" in the promotion of Christian theology and intercultural religious study in China. Yang describes Scriptural Reasoning simply and clearly:

36. James Legge was at the heart of what in the nineteenth century was known as the Term Question—whether there is an appropriate Chinese word for God and what it should be.

37. In his lectures given in London in 1880 and published as *Religions in China: Confucianism and Taoism Described and Compared with Christianity*, Legge more or less overtly links Confucius with Hebrews 1:1–2: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past to the fathers by the prophets." In making this link between the Hebrew prophetic tradition and the writings of Confucius, Legge was also anticipating Karl Jaspers's concept of the Axial Age of the global flourishing of cultures ca. 600–300 BCE.

38. *Records*, 15, quoted in Girardot, *Victorian Translation of China*, 216.

The term “scriptural reasoning,” originating from the term “textual reasoning” was first introduced in the early 1990s by a group of Jewish scholars who followed the examples of Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas, and attempted to re-read the Christian Bible and the Jewish Tanakh and later on also the Muslim Quran, from the perspective of transculturalism and comparative studies.³⁹

Immediately evident is the academic quality of Yang’s definition—the remark of a scholar who is concerned with textual interpretation, with scholarly predecessors and with dialogical exercises in transcultural reading. It is no accident that the essay that precedes this remark in Yang’s book is concerned with the work of James Legge. And the Sino-Christian theological unease that ended Legge’s years as a missionary in China remains today among the Chinese scholars who continue to study his legacy as one of the greatest translators of the Chinese Classics and Confucianism into English and yet also a promoter, as a missionary, of Christianity and its theology.

In a book which I recently co-edited with Geng Youzhuang and Wang Hai, two Chinese colleagues from Beijing, entitled *A Poetics of Translation: Between Chinese and English Literature* (2016),⁴⁰ there is an essay by a young Chinese scholar from Renmin University of China, Zhao Jing, entitled “A Study of the ‘Preface’ and ‘Introduction’ to James Legge’s *The Texts of Taoism*.”⁴¹ The final few pages of this essay, concerned with Christianity and “comparative studies,” are slightly uneasy and even hesitant in their tone. That is not intended to be a criticism, for perhaps this is necessarily the case. Zhao is clear that Legge never abandons his sense of the priority of Christianity, “while nevertheless the three Chinese religions⁴² (*san jiao*, ‘three teaching systems’) can give another lesson *less pharisaical*.”⁴³ On the other hand Zhao clearly shows the limits of Legge’s understanding of Taoism even while he shared some of its most profound principles such as “deep predilections for a Divine order or fixed imperial design and traditional moral civility.”⁴⁴ But Legge’s affinity with many of these principles has

39. Yang, *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture*, 163.

40. Later also published in Chinese.

41. Jasper et al., *Poetics of Translation*, 93–111.

42. Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

43. Zhao in Jasper et al., *Poetics of Translation*, 108 (emphasis added).

44. Girardot, *Victorian Translation of China*, 438.

been attributed by the American Legge scholar Lauren Pfister to his academic rootedness, established while he was a student at Aberdeen University, in the Scottish Enlightenment⁴⁵—a recognition of apparent similarities between cultures that might often cloud deep differences.

Legge clearly appeals to Chinese scholars in contemporary Sino-Christian theology for a number of reasons, not least his profoundly academic sense of theology and religion. Nevertheless, and at the same time, the deep fissures in the project are illuminated by the comparison. Just as Legge, like Matteo Ricci before him, remained solidly Christian and Western in his thinking, his immersion in Chinese thought and culture was the cause of suspicion, more from his fellow Protestant European missionaries than from China itself. So Chinese scholars of Sino-Christian theology, though often learned in Western thought and theology as well as intercultural projects such as “Scriptural Reasoning” (which originated in the USA), and holding in respect the learned tradition of Christianity, yet remain embedded in Chinese and Confucian values, ethics and forms of thought. In academic contexts, comparative studies are certainly to be encouraged as cultures and traditions seek to address one another. But the lack of an ecclesial context and practicing faith-based community within the Chinese church must place questions as to what kind of “Christian” theology can emerge in Sino-Christian theology from an essentially academic context, as well as to the nature of how these two contexts—the church and the academy in China—finally relate to one another.

45. Pfister, *Striving*.