

## Response to Issues in Sino-Christian Theology

OU GUANG-AN

BEING ALMOST A COMPLETE outsider in the field of Christian theology, I am somewhat at a loss as to how to begin to respond to David's acute perception, only this time it is the perception of the history, development and current problematic situation of Sino-Christian theology. At the same time being an outsider also has some sort of advantage, that is, one can look at something from an out-of-the-circle perspective, as a famous Chinese short poem by Bian Zhilin suggests: "You are standing on the bridge looking at views, / The person looking at views from a window is looking at you. / Bright moonshine decorates your window, / While you decorate someone's dream."<sup>1</sup> Thus, there is the case for my reading of David's essay on Sino-Christian theology. I am not qualified to discuss in theological detail what is happening inside the field of Sino-Christian theology, to quote René Wellek and Austin Warren from the *Theory of Literature* (1949), the "intrinsic study," but I may have some reflection to offer on some "outside" factors of the theology in general, or the "extrinsic study." And one such extrinsic factor which interests me is the investigation on the possible reason that contemporary Sino-Christian theological studies are pursued most commonly in departments of philosophy in various Chinese universities or academic institutions.

1. Bian Zhilin, *New Collection*, 13.

The reasons on the surface are not difficult to find. On one hand, in the modern Chinese academic context, theological studies are normally considered as belonging to the broader field of “religious studies” and in most academic institutions there is no specific department of religious studies. Rather religious studies is situated within the philosophy department of a university or college. On the other hand, within the church there probably is not enough staff who can both hold an ecclesiastical position and enjoy intellectual or academic influence. However, I would like to argue about this from another perspective, that is, the subtle interplay between the neglected role of philosophical studies and the inseparability of literature, history and philosophy within the Chinese tradition.

The Chinese sense of philosophy and the forming of philosophical concepts within the ancient traditions come much later than those of literature and history, and some researchers would argue that the Chinese understanding of philosophy derives ultimately from Indian influence. As far as disciplines are concerned, philosophy is invariably the last that is talked about, written about and discussed in Chinese traditional culture, understood in its broadest sense. Synchronically the traditional ancient Chinese texts are categorized into four types: classics (especially Confucian classics), historic records, records of different schools of thoughts and collections of poetry. Among these four categories, the branch that philosophy is closest to is the third and even in this third category not all of the works can be defined as philosophical works. Diachronically, the numbers of literary and historical works in Chinese history significantly outnumber those of philosophical works. We only have to take a brief glimpse at Chinese traditional writings to know that in the time of the Tang Dynasty the dominant writing was poetry, in the Song Dynasty it was *ci* (a variation of poetry, or lyrical poetry), in the Yuan Dynasty it was *qu* (a type of verse) and, finally, in the Ming and Qing Dynasties it was fiction and the novel. With each period of historical writing there have appeared volumes and volumes of historical records on previous dynasties. As for philosophical writing, it is either scattered in various other writings or entirely absent for some periods. When it comes to academic writing, various periods in ancient Chinese history witnessed some writing in appreciation of poetry or lyrical poetry such as *Cang Lang's Discussion on Poetry* by Yan Yu around the 1230s, and so on. However, what can be claimed as authentic academic writing on philosophy is quite sparse and systemic research on the discipline of philosophy came only as late as the early twentieth century with the publication of Hu

Shi's *Outline of Chinese History of Philosophy* (1919) as the landmark event. Another influential work of a similar stature is Feng Youlan's *Brief History of Chinese Philosophy* (1948), published in the United States by Macmillan, a collection of his lectures on Chinese philosophy history given at the University of Pennsylvania. In the modern Chinese academic context, with the introduction of an education system that is drawn mainly from western academic models, a department of philosophy is normally an independent institute like that of history and literature and it is usually combined with the discipline of languages. Also, the absence of any religion being formally recognized as a primary way of thinking and practice in any dynasty in ancient Chinese history gives rise to the result that the study of religion is subordinated to the broad study of philosophy in the modern Chinese academic context.

In traditional Chinese culture, understood in its broadest sense, the marginal position of philosophy is clear enough. However, from another perspective, philosophy, or at least philosophical observations took place quite often, mainly scattered in other forms of writing as literature and history. Thus one often heard the saying, almost a cliché, that "literature, history and philosophy are in one integrated family." This does bear some truth in it, especially for such classical works as the *Analects* or the *Historical Records*. In Book XI, Chapter XXV of the *Analects*, Confucius the Master asked his disciples about their wishes and one of them Zeng Dian answered:

In this, the last month of spring, with the dress of the season all complete, along with five or six young men who have assumed the cap, and six or seven boys, I would wash in the I [a river] enjoy the breeze among the rain altars, and return home singing." The Master heaved a sigh and said, "I give my approval to Tien (Zeng Dian)."<sup>2</sup>

Before Zeng Dian, several other disciples had expressed their wishes, mostly about becoming statesmen, managing states of different sizes. So when Zeng Dian stated his answer, which was in distinct contrast to others, the dramatic moment came when the Master "heaved a sigh" and said he would agree with Zeng Dian. The historical context of the passage, compared to literary narration, seems the more obvious because in Confucius's time (the period of Spring and Autumn, roughly from the eighth to the fifth century BCE) different rulers controlled different parts of China and

2. Confucius, *Confucian Analects* [Legge], 153.

warfare was frequent. Even Confucius himself had to flee for safety from time to time. Thus it is no wonder that the majority of his disciples on this occasion would choose to manage the affairs of state. But with that meaningful action of heaving a sigh comes the complexity of Confucius's thought. For one thing, he actively proposed that one should make great efforts in "entering into the world," that is, talking less of eccentricities or baseless things and shouldering more responsibility in the management of a state with benevolence. This is quite opposite to the Daoist submissiveness to whatever happens to one, an attitude of "walking out of the world (worldly affairs)." For another thing, after making so many endeavors in publicizing his idea in various states, when Confucius saw that the states were still in conflict with one another the Master probably revealed his frustration and even hopelessness by showing such an "out-of-the-world-affair" attitude in agreeing with Zeng Dian.

The formation of the *Analects* took place in what the German thinker Karl Theodor Jaspers once called the Axial Age and a further investigation of classical works in such an age would reveal that the integrated nature of literature, history and philosophy did not only conform to Confucian canons but probably also to a large degree to the Hellenic and Hebrew traditions. And probably this is another reason that scholars in Sino-Christian theology could identify with such methodologies as "Scriptural Reasoning," again, in its broadest sense.

One of Aesop's fables goes like this:

A waggoner was driving his team along a muddy lane with a full load behind them, when the wheels of his wagon sank so deep in the mire that no efforts of his horses could move them. As he stood there, looking helplessly on, and calling loudly at intervals upon Hercules for assistance, the god himself appeared, and said to him, "Put your shoulder to the wheel, man, and goad on your horses, and then you may call on Hercules to assist you. If you won't lift a finger to help yourself, you can't expect Hercules or any one else to come to your aid."<sup>3</sup>

The philosophical significance of this fable is easy to discern. Indeed the English saying "God helps those that help themselves" is derived from this very fable. The literary elements are also not so difficult to understand; the beginning (the Waggoner's driving a heavy load along a very muddy way), the development (his wagon becomes caught deep in the mire), and

3. Aesop, *Aesop's Fables*, 89.

the climax (the Waggoner's asking for help from Hercules and Hercules's refusal). The historical and cultural origins of the fable are clear enough—in the situation of a common trade such as a waggoner in ancient Greece, and, the background in the formation of Greek mythology and fable.

In the Hebrew tradition, such origins would also seem apparent, though probably with a more religious overtone. For instance, the Babel narrative runs thus:

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from hence, upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth. (Gen 11:1–9 KJV)<sup>4</sup>

Here there is cause (people want to build a tower to reach into heaven) and effect (they are scattered all over the earth) and there is also in the narrative the beginning (people decide to make a name), the development (they build the tower), the climax (God decides to interfere) and the ending (people are scattered). One of the historical investigations into this narrative could be into the beginnings of different languages in the primitive stage of civilizations. The theological significance can be found in many volumes of writings and for an outsider to theology such as myself at least some observations can be made such as the subtle relationship between the Creator and the created, the complexity of the authority of the Lord and the people's challenge to this authority and so on. Thus, after Babel, how we can

4. The intentional use of the Authorized Version here is to keep its classical tone as in the *Analects* and *Aesop's Fables*.

communicate at all requires our detailed attention. Thus different cultures struggle with the origins of religious thinking—and the Chinese have their own way of addressing the nature of biblical—and Christian—theology.

SAMPLE