China, Christianity and the Question of Culture

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BOOK REVIEW

China, Christianity and the Question of Culture, by Yang Huilin, Baylor University Press, Waco, TX, 2014

Christianity and its relation to Chinese culture and society has been a hot topic in the Chinese academy since the 1980s. This new volume by Professor Yang Huilin (b. 1954), a Professor of Philosophy and Comparative Literature at Peoples’ University, Beijing, represents a vigorous and sophisticated cross-cultural discourse against the background of history, philosophy, religion, theology and hermeneutics. Professor Yang has been a significant Chinese voice in Sino-Western Christian studies for more than 20 years. His new book is a series of essays drawn from earlier English and Chinese publications. Much of the material is also found in Yang’s Zai Wenxue yu Shenxue de Bianjie [At the boundary of literature and theology] (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2011) and Yiyi [Meaning] (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2013). The re-arrangement of this English-language edition is in three parts. Western readers can find here useful material to appreciate more fully the Western academic and missionary legacy in the thought of an indigenous, contemporary Chinese scholar.

Part I, ‘Christianity and Chinese Culture’, reflects some aspects of the historical and contemporary interpretation, adaptation and ‘ethicisation’ of Christianity within Chinese culture. Part II, ‘Theology and Humanities’, continues his aim to present the interaction between Christian theology and the humanities as a possible way forward for Sino-theology. Yang also considers here the value of theology in the humanities and especially in regard to literary theory. He gives examples from the theological writings of Slavoj Žižek (b. 1949), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) in a Chinese context. Part III draws on the contemporary Western exercise in ‘Scriptural Reasoning’ to propose a trans-cultural and comparative way of reading texts as a rich resource for a dialogue between Chinese and Western cultures. In his interaction with Western hermeneutics (e.g. the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1900–2002), Yang looks at Chinese hermeneutics in dialogue with the work of the nineteenth-century British missionary sinologist James Legge (1815–1897) and the translation of the Chinese Union Version of the Bible (first published in 1919). Overall, the volume makes a valuable contribution to understanding the nature of language, and particularly how religious language needs to be re-addressed, not only for ongoing dialogue between traditions, but also ultimately for Christianity to take ground in the Chinese cultural context.

Yang’s accomplished scholarship covers material from the East and the West, the past and the present. The dialogue between the Chinese Classics, Western hermeneutics and Christian theology demonstrates his intellectual penetration and cross-cultural creativity. The volume makes insightful observations and suggestions for Sino-Western-Christian studies. He proposes, for example, a non-religious interpretation of Christianity through the concepts of ‘knowability’ (知 zhi), ‘will’ (意 yi) and ‘sentiments’ (情 qing), in order to develop what he terms ‘axiological theology’ or ‘theological axiology’ (44–5); that is, the functionality of Christianity needs to be explained at the level of its significance for the humanities and theology. Yang recognises the paradoxical nature of the Christian cultural spirit as the most important source of meaning; something Chinese-language Christianity is yet to fully comprehend and utilise (60). He identifies ‘speaking about the “unspeakable”’ and ‘common values’ as the basis of dialogue in a pluralistic world (191–7). In all of this, he raises important questions, drawing especially on his expertise in the field of comparative literature and the study of religion (161).
In the end, Yang’s presuppositions are more philosophical than theological or biblical. His aim is to explore the cultural value of Christianity without the bondage of pre-determined language or an institutionalised Christian system. However, his portrayal and analysis of Chinese Christian movements (especially the charismatic dimension to some forms of Chinese Christianity) is not always accurate (41–2), and some of the translation is in inadequately explained ‘Chinese’ (for English readers). That said the volume presents daring proposals for Christianity’s translation, interpretation and ‘ethicisation’ in Chinese soil. The book is ideal for those who seek to understand current thinking in China, and want to listen to and learn from a leading Chinese intellectual who is engaged actively in Sino-Western Christian dialogue.

**Notes on contributor**

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