

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

Enoch Wan

Professor, Western Seminary

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Abstract

The third article in a series is a transitional piece related to "the challenge of" and "the change for" contextualization for contemporary Chinese. 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. Critique of the either/or cognitive pattern in TWT is offered to show the necessity of formulating 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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Send comments to: ewan@westernseminary.edu

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.

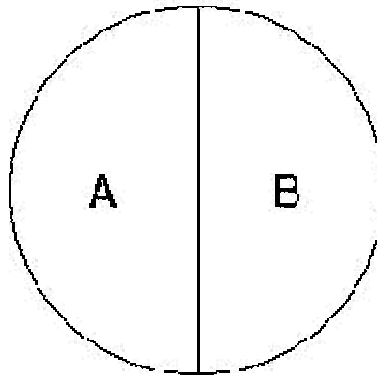


FIGURE 1 - THE WESTERN PARADOX OF EITHER/OR (Wan 1998:120)

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>E</u> ither the deity of Christ	<u>o</u> r the humanity of Christ
	<u>E</u> ither the Christ of <u>kerygma</u>	<u>o</u> r the historical Jesus
Soteriology	<u>E</u> ither God's sovereignty	<u>o</u> r human free will
	<u>E</u> ither faith	<u>o</u> r reason

TOPIC	EITHER	OR
	<u>Either</u> grace	<u>or</u> work
	<u>Either</u> evangelism for conversion	<u>or</u> social gospel as witness
Ecclesiology	<u>Either</u> the universal church	<u>or</u> local congregation
	<u>Either</u> organic unity	<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.