

The Search for God in Chinese Culture and Contemporary China¹

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Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone--an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

Acts 17:22-31 (NIV)

The Chinese Fever and the Christianity Fever

In 1972, an American Forrest Gump received the invitation of Chairman Mao Tse-tung and Premier Chou En-lai to represent USA to play ping-pong in China. After he returned to USA, he said to the reporters, "They are all very poor, and they don't go to the church." Although it was a fictitious story, what was said above was in fact quite true. Around thirty years later (2003), the resident reporter of *Time* in Beijing (Peking), David Aikman, published a book, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power*, which has shocked both the government and the common people. He pointed to the dramatic increase of the number of Christians in China, and then boldly predicted, "After thirty years, it is possible that one-third of the Chinese population will have become Christians. China will then become one of the biggest Christian countries. The Dragon of China will be subdued by the Lamb of Christ. A Christian China will also become an important ally of America, & will shoulder bigger moral responsibility in contemporary world."³

Chinese have a saying, "Thirty years on the East of the river; thirty years on the West of the river." It is referring to the Chinese concept of Fung Shui, and the implication is that the world is constantly changing. Aikman may be overly optimistic about the future of Christianity in China.

¹ In this paper, I hope to introduce the relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture to the audience. I will first emphasize their common points but will come to their differences later. All the issues are very complicated and what I can do here is merely the scratching of the surface.

² In this paper, I will stick to the Chinese convention of putting the family name in the beginning rather than the end.

³ <http://www.thinkwan.net/hatlist.asp?id=401> ; <http://www.21sz.org/show.aspx?id=2510&cid=15> ;

<http://www.xschina.org/show.php?id=1486> .

However, he is entirely correct about the phenomenal of Christianity in China (and also in other parts of Asia).⁴ In 1900, the number of Christians was around 30 to 50 thousand. After half a century of anti-Christianity movement, the struggle among the warlords, the war against Japanese invasion, and the civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists, the number of Christians has risen to around a million in 1950.⁵ After the Communists took over, there were the expulsion of the missionaries, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the ten-year disaster of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). During these thirty years, the churches were first closed down (except the official Three-Self Church⁶) and forced to go underground. Then the underground or house churches were severely persecuted. However, in 1982, the Christian church not only emerged unscathed, it has even grown further: the official statistics listed at least three million Christians.

According to the government's statistics in 1992, the number of Christians reaches 63 million, more than sixty times the figure in 1949, a million. During this period, the population of China has only increased by 150%.⁷ We need to bear in mind the fact that the government did not count those Christians in the underground or house churches. So some people estimate that the current number of Chinese Christians may reach a hundred million.⁸ I think nobody knows the exact figure but it is widely recognized that Christians now constitute a significant minority of the Chinese population, and that the absolute number is quite staggering (since China is such a big country!). The wonder is that the Christian church in China can maintain this kind of vitality even after years of systematic and brutal suppression (comprehensive atheistic education in schools; tearing down of all the church trappings- buildings, finance, bibles, etc.; legal prohibition of evangelization; imprisonment of church leaders; beating up of the ordinary Christians).

It is hard to say what exactly are the reasons for this kind of "miraculous" growth (even stronger than the Chinese economy!). Some people say that just like the Early Church, the blood of the Chinese martyrs has become the seed of the gospel.⁹ Others think that suffering has even produced a greater driving force for people to turn to God. Perhaps because the atheistic education has swept away the folk religions and superstitions, it has also cleared the ground for the acceptance of Christianity by creating a spiritual vacuum. Or maybe the association of Christianity with the modern civilization in the West has helped.

All of the above views have some insight but I want to look at this question from the cultural perspective. First, although Christianity and the Chinese culture have a lot of differences, they are not incompatible. They may even possess important similarities, especially in contrast with modern ideologies like secularism and communism. Furthermore, after facing the challenge of modernity for two centuries, the Chinese are now much more aware of the deficiencies of the Chinese culture and religions. This provides a motivation for them to look for something new in Christianity.

⁴ 約翰·麥克曼勒斯主編，《牛津基督教史》，張景龍等譯，貴陽：貴州人民出版社，1995年，頁531。

⁵ <http://ks.cn.yahoo.com/question/1307052302505.html>

⁶ The Three-Self principle basically means a church free from the influence of foreign missionaries and churches. In the three areas of governance, finance and evangelization, the Chinese Church all rely on *itself*.

<http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%B8%89%E8%87%AA%E6%95%99%E4%BC%9A>。

⁷ Jonathan Chao and Rosanna Chong, *A History of Christianity in Socialist China, 1949-1997* (Taipei: CMI Publishing Co., 1997), p. 605. This is a book in Chinese.

⁸ The Director of the Religious Affairs Bureau, Ye Xiao-wen (葉小文), has recently said in some internal meetings that the number of Chinese Christians has reached 130 million (including 20 million Catholics)!

<http://www.wangbingzhang.us/forum/wbz/messages/6243.html>

⁹ <http://www.zanmei.netthatbbs/redirect.php?fid=20&tid=65406&goto=nextoldset>

Second, although in the West some people want to discard the “baggage” of Christianity, from a cross-cultural perspective, the Chinese are keenly aware of the importance of the Christian tradition for the modern Western civilization. For those Chinese who are actively seeking the modernization of China, the Christian faith is immensely attractive. Third, the Chinese culture places a special emphasis on morality and ethics. However, China is now facing a moral crisis due to severe challenges from different ideologies and the social problems caused by the rapid rise of the market economy. It is natural for the Chinese to treat Christianity as a moral ally. In fact, the exemplary behaviour of some Chinese Christians has been recognized even by atheistic government officials. Fourth, after decades of cracking down, the Chinese churches have developed a kind of indigenous model: house churches which are constituted by small communities of close friends; putting emphasis on family ethics and faith tradition, etc. These are organizations which emerge spontaneously from the soils of Chinese culture. The label “foreign religion” is no longer applicable. In this paper, I will investigate some of these cultural factors.

One interesting phenomenon amid this kind of Christianity fever is the emergence and establishment of Christian studies in the Chinese academy. It can be even said to be one of the fastest growing disciplines in contemporary China. (One may talk about a Christian studies fever here as well.) This is hardly expected even ten years ago- we only need to note the dominance of the atheistic and Marxist ideology in all universities and higher education institutions in China. Since the second half of the eighties, academic books on Christianity have been published (translations of Western works on Christian Culture and theology, encyclopedia; history). Many book series and journals about Christian studies were even published and promoted by communist institutions.¹⁰ Research Centres for Christian studies have been established in many universities, and religious studies programs (including Christian studies) have started to appear in some universities for the first time in the Communist China. There are even more postgraduate programs in Christian studies. It should be noted that even in Hong Kong and Taiwan, Christian studies in the university and books on Christianity published by government press are rare.

In general, the scholars involved in Christian studies can be divided into several types. First, the great majority of them have a purely academic interest in Christianity, and they may not take a stance towards the Christian faith. Second, quite a large number of them not only do academic study, but also express a sympathetic attitude towards the Christian faith. Third, there are a small number of scholars who come to embrace Christianity as a personal faith. Among these people, some participate in the Chinese churches, and this becomes increasingly common in the recent decade. However, there are also some who take their Christian faith as a spiritual and individual matter. They do not go to church. This kind of people is sometimes called “cultural Christians,” and one representative is Liu Xiao-feng (劉小楓).¹¹

I think the fact that so many scholars can freely discuss the Christian faith in the universities of the Communist China, and can publish books on Christian ideas is already a very interesting phenomenon. We should note that the churches are still forbidden to publish books to be sold openly in the bookstores, but the scholars can. An even more interesting fact is the existence of

¹⁰ 《宗教與世界》叢書、《歷代基督教學術文庫》、《基督教學術研究文庫》等大型叢書，《宗教》、《世界宗教資料》、《基督教文化評論》、《宗教文化論文》等學刊。

¹¹ <http://www.chinese-thought.org/gjzx/003533.htm>。

scholars in the second and third categories. It is rather strange that the people who effectively recommend the Christian faith in China are not Christians associated with the church but the cultural Christians or even non-Christians. The major sympathetic Christian studies scholars include He Guang-hu (何光滙)—he is now a philosophy professor in the Renmin University of China.

Another notable scholar is Zhuo Xin-ping (卓新平)—he is the Director of the Institute for World Religions in the Chinese Academy of Social Science(中國社會科學院世界宗教研究所). We can also mention Zhao Dun-hua (趙敦華)—he is the Head of both the Department of Philosophy and the Department of Religion in Beijing University. All these people are non-Christians but they write numerous books and articles about Christianity. These help a lot of Chinese understand the Christian faith, and they all show keen appreciation of the ideas of Christianity. They are all directly involved in the development of the discipline of Christian studies in China. They also occupy influential positions in the three most respected academic institutions in China which are all directly related to the Communist government.

Scholars interested in Christian studies are not confined to religious studies or philosophy. In fact, they come from all kinds of academic background like politics, sociology, law, economics and literature. More and more scholars in various fields are particularly interested in the relationship between Christianity and modern Culture. Many of them also express the wish to incorporate the values of Christianity as the spiritual and ethical resources of modern China. For example, scholars like Cong Ri-yun (叢日雲) and Wang Yi (王怡) suggest that the Christian tradition is relevant to the construction of constitutional democracy in China.¹² In the area of sociology and economics, Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* has sparked off discussions about the spiritual and cultural factors conducive to a healthy market economy in China. A China economist, Zhao Xiao (趙曉) once said in the *China Youth Daily* (《中國青年報》), "China needs the spirit of Christ." This saying has been spread widely on the internet. Zhao's idea is that Christianity teaches people to fear God and to do good. This can help to build up the spirit of honesty, integrity and mutual trust. In contemporary development of market economy in China, the major problems are exactly the lack of integrity and mutual trust. So he concludes that Christianity is indeed significant for the development of market economy in China.¹³ All these ideas are controversial but my point is that in recent decades, the Christian faith is not only spreading rapidly among the common people, but is also investigated (and sometimes embraced) by the Chinese intellectuals with enthusiasm.

It is also within the same period that we witness the emergence of China as a world power. Since the reform in 1978, the Chinese economy has maintained a high rate of growth. For example, from

¹² <http://www.gongfa.com/wangyijiduijiaoyutiandao.htm> ,

<http://www.china-judge.com/ReadNews.asp?NewsID=2539andBigClassID=16andSmallClassID=16andSpecialID=28>

<http://jpkc.cupl.edu.cn/jpkc/%E8%A5%BF%E6%96%B9%E6%94%BF%E6%B2%BB%E6%80%9D%E6%83%B3%E5%8F%B2%E6%BC%88%E5%BC%A0%E6%A1%82%E7%90%B3%E6%BC%89/teacher.htm> .

¹³ 《有教堂的市場經濟與無教堂的市場經濟》 <http://www.365bx.com/user1/1716/archives/2007/10502.html> , <http://www.canaanland.net.cn/news/funonews.asp?id=249> .

1979 to 2004, the average annual growth rate of GDP is 9.6%. Now China is the fifth largest economy in the world (recently may have become the fourth largest).¹⁴ Alongside the increase of the self-confidence of the Chinese, the foreigners also show more and more interest in China: both the language and the culture. In fact, we can say that there is a kind of "Chinese fever" around the whole world. From 2004 onwards, the Chinese government plans to establish many institutes for Confucianist studies abroad, and to use the internet to promote the study of the Chinese language (the aim is to find 100 million students of the Chinese language).¹⁵ China is no longer contented with waiting for foreigners to come to China to learn the Chinese Culture; it is now actively promoting the Chinese Culture to the whole world.

From April 13 to 16, 2006, the Chinese Buddhists have organized the first "International Buddhist Forum." Over a thousand Buddhist monks came from all over the world to China to discuss the topic "the world's harmony begins from our hearts." The emphasis is on the cooperation among the Buddhists to fulfill their social responsibility and peace mission.¹⁶ In April 2007, the working meeting for the first "International Tao Te Ching Forum" was held in Xian. The international conference, organized by the China Taoist Association, is going to discuss the implications of the Taoist classic for the contemporary world.¹⁷ So we can see that the traditional Chinese Cultures are not only experiencing a kind of self-renewal; they are also reaching for the whole world. Although their worldwide impact at this stage is still quite small, they will certainly emerge as one of the major actors in the arena of world Cultures.

At the same time, Christianity is really taking root in the Chinese society for the first time, and inevitably will face the Chinese Culture. Christianity in China has at least a history of over a thousand years (for example, the Nestorian Christianity which came to China in the Tang Era). If some church legends can be trusted, the apostles themselves may have already brought Christianity to China.¹⁸ Unfortunately, Christianity has not been able to take root in China through these initial contacts. The first breakthrough happened when the Jesuits like Matteo Ricci came to China near the end of the Ming Era. They managed to have a real engagement with the Chinese tradition, and succeeded to win a few converts among the famous and influential Confucian scholars. However, due to the Chinese Rites Controversy, their activities had to come to a abrupt halt. Despite this, their work did have a lasting influence, and a small Catholic church has maintained its existence from that time up to now.

The door of China was open again to Christianity in mid-nineteenth century. In this period of 150 years, Christianity has at last taken root (especially in the recent decades as indicated above). It seems that after some false starts, the biggest nation and the largest religion in the world are destined to meet and have dialogue, & this is in fact happening. We believe the Spirit of God is moving over the land of China as it is reflected in the spiritual longing for God in the hearts and

¹⁴ http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2006-07/05/content_4796766.htm;

http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2006-02/10/content_4160431.htm

¹⁵ http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2004-12/23/content_2373866.htm

¹⁶ http://news.finet.com/yw/ywq/t20060413_23752.htm

¹⁷ http://www.wuvs.com/news/Article_Show.asp?ArticleID=10217

¹⁸ Some ancient documents claim that Thomas, Bartholomew or the Christians who fled to avoid the persecution of Nero have already come to China in the first century (around the East Han Era). However, these claims are far from substantiated. Some books in the Ming Era mention the discovery of a big iron cross which can be dated back to the Era of Three Kingdoms. Since the cross is almost never mentioned in the traditional Chinese culture and religions, this cross could be the sign of the presence of Christianity at that time.

minds of innumerable Chinese.

The Search for the God of the Ancient Chinese

From the brief historical sketch above, it looks as if the God of Christianity is entirely foreign to the Chinese culture. Indeed Christianity has been treated as a foreign religion since it first came to China, and the spread of Christianity has been treated as a kind of cultural invasion by some traditionally minded Chinese (especially among the scholars who guard the Chinese cultural orthodoxy). It is also common for some people to claim that the Chinese culture is entirely non-religious, and only amounts to a kind of ethical humanism.

On the other hand, the Jesuits have contended that the God of Christianity is in fact the Unknown God of the ancient Chinese (cf. Paul's speech to the Greeks in Areopagus; see Acts 17:22-31). The most common Chinese translations of the word "God" are Shang-ti (上帝), which means "the

Emperor above," and the Lord of Tien (which means Heaven) (天主). Both Shang-ti and Tien are not terms created by the missionaries. They are in fact widely used in the ancient Chinese classics, and point to the belief in a kind of personal God among the ancient Chinese. Before coming to the details about these names, I want to mention the approach of Figurism (索隱論) among some

Christian missionaries. The representatives of this school are the Jesuits who came to China in the Qing Era, Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730) and J. F. Foucquet (1665-1741). The Figurists suggest that just as the Old Testament prefigures the truths of the New Testament, some ancient Chinese classics also prefigure the truths of Christianity. For example, Bouvet managed to "unveil" some references to Holy Mary and Jesus in the *Book of Poetry*. While their particular historical interpretations are no longer taken seriously, the Figurist approach is still popular among some contemporary Christian preachers and scholars who argue that the truths of Christianity are in fact contained in the Chinese characters. Some examples:

- 1) 木 means tree or wood; 女 means woman. 婪 means greed. It can be seen that 婪 is in fact a woman under two trees. It is taken to refer to the first act of greed in human history: when Eve was faced with the choice of two trees, she took the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil out of her lust for food.
- 2) Again 木 means tree; 示 means revelation. 禁 means prohibition. It can be seen that 禁 is in fact the revelation under two trees. It seems to hide the ancient Chinese's original memory of God's revelation before the two trees in the Garden of Eden: the prohibition to take the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
- 3) 舟 means boat; 八 means eight; 口 means mouth but can also be taken to mean the number of people. 船 means ship, or a big boat—in fact eight people in a boat. It seems to suggest the most important ship in human history—Noah's Ark which saved humanity from a universal disaster. There were exactly eight people on the Ark!

- 4) 羊 means lamb; 我 means me, self; 義 means righteousness. You can see that 義 in fact stands for the self beneath the lamb. It seems to contain the gist of the Christian message of redemption: righteousness can be attained only when the Lamb stands in the place of me (my self).

While this kind of code-cracking sounds interesting (just like the Da Vinci Code!), they are not much more than speculation. We just can't get into the minds of those people who created these characters in very early times. Fortunately, we do have some clues to the thinking of the ancient Chinese through their writings. Matteo Ricci argues that the God of Christianity can be identified with the Shang-ti (the Emperor above) or Heaven in the ancient classics.¹⁹ The name Shang-ti has already appeared in the oracle bones, and it stands for the Supreme Lord of the universe.

In the *Doctrine of the Mean*, Confucius said, "By the ceremonies of the sacrifices to Heaven and Earth they served Shang-ti."²⁰ In the *Book of Poetry*, there is a Hymn of Zhou (《周頌》) which praised Shang-ti, "Lord Wu with mighty power, Above all else will tower, Cheng the lord and Kang lord, Shang-ti likewise will laud."²¹ Another poem said, "A good crop of barley and wheat, Will soon be ready to reap, Oh by Glorious Shang-ti blest."

Shang-ti is One who can receive sacrifice, One who can bless. He is also One whom we should serve. In the *Hymn of Shang* (《商頌》), it was said, "So wise and prudent in his prime, He always cherished glorious fame; Toward the Shang-ti meek and tame."²² The Major Odes (《雅》) said, "This son, in due time our Lord Wen, Was good and kind to all the men. Servile to Shang-ti night and day."²³

Shang-ti or Tien (Heaven) cannot just mean the physical nature or some impersonal force because He was regarded as a fearful God who had a moral will. For example, in the *Book of History*, there is the Pledge of Tang (《湯誓》) which said, "The leader of Xia is guilty, and I, who is afraid of Shang-ti, dare not but send a punitive expedition against him!"²⁴ Besides being the source of judgment, Shang-ti is also the source of goodness or happiness: "The great emperor of heaven grants happiness (or goodness) to the people below. The one who can follow the human nature of the people and make the people follow the instruction single-heartedly is not other but the sovereign."²⁵ The emperor below receives his mandate from the Emperor above, Shang-ti. For example, in the Matal-Bound Coffers (《金縢》), the first emperor of the Chou Era said, "The more

¹⁹ 鄭安德主編，《明末清初耶穌會思想文獻彙編》(第一卷)，北京：北京大學宗教研究所(內部出版)，頁 92。

²⁰ "郊社之禮以事上帝也。"《四書·中庸》，陳威譯注，澳門：聚文堂書局，1962 年，頁 32。

²¹ "執競武王，無競維烈。不顯成康，上帝是皇。"《詩經》(《The Book of Poetry》)，汪榕培、任秀樺譯注，瀋陽：遼寧教育出版社，1995 年，頁 1438。

²² "聖敬日躋，昭假遲遲，上帝是祗。"《詩經》，頁 1566。

²³ "維此文王，小心翼翼，昭事上帝。"《詩經》，頁 1134。

²⁴ "夏氏有罪，予畏上帝，不敢不正。"《尚書》(《The Book of History》)，羅志野英譯，長沙：湖南出版社，1997 年，頁 69。下文所引《周易》翻譯均來自此書。

²⁵ "惟皇上帝，降衷於下民。若有恆性，克綏厥猶惟後。"《尚書》，頁 332。

important is that he has received the great task from the emperor of heaven (or the palace of Shang-ti), he has got the whole empire.”²⁶

The name Shang-ti was used widely in the Shang Era but later in the Chou Era the name Tien (Heaven) became more and more popular. Some scholars suggest that Heaven has entirely lost the meaning of a personal God, and just stands for Nature or something like that. This is not quite true though the situation is complicated. The Chinese people continue to use the name Shang-ti until recent times, and Heaven sometimes is just another name for Shang-ti. For example, Heaven has a moral will: “but the leader of Xia is guilty, and I, who is afraid of God, dare not but send a punitive expedition against him!”²⁷ Heaven is a kind of creator: “Heaven made the high mountains.”²⁸ Heaven is the ultimate root of the social and material order:

- The favouring appointment was from Heaven, Giving the throne to our king Wen ²⁹
- “Heaven gave birth to the common people, and it was the source of both the material world and its principle.”³⁰

It functions as the focus of the Confucianist religion(儒教), and the Chinese emperor needs to offer sacrifices to Heaven(祭天) on behalf of the people to secure divine blessing.³¹ An altar(天壇) has been built explicitly for this purpose and today it is one of the main tourist attractions in Beijing.

The Figurist Bouvet has compiled two books on the theme of “paying homage to Heaven”(《古今敬天鑒》). He quoted a lot of texts in ancient classics to show that the Chinese also have the ideas of God’s creation, God’s love (or benevolence), God rewarding good and punishing evil, and humans’ duty to fear and love Heaven, and to love other people, and so on. It is true that among the Confucianist intellectuals, there is a trend to conceive of Heaven in a more abstract and impersonal way. But as many folk sayings collected by Bouvet show, the common people still maintain a personal conception of Heaven- in fact they call Him “the Old Grandpa Heaven”(老天爺). The common people will affirm in the end it is the Old Grandpa Heaven who is in charge of the world, and provides for their living.³² Similarly, the *Book of Poetry* also said, “Shang-ti orders us to eat.”³³

So a famous Chinese scholar, He Guang-hu (何光滬) thinks that the above view of Shang-ti and Heaven is the root of Confucianism, which believes in a personal God who is the Maker of the

²⁶ “乃命於帝庭，敷佑四方。”《尚書》，頁 126。

²⁷ “有夏多罪，天命殛之”(書·湯誓)

²⁸ “天作高山”(詩·周頌)

²⁹ “有命自天，命此文王”(詩·大雅)，自 <http://enguji.blogspot.com/>

³⁰ “天生蒸民，有物有則”(詩·大雅)

³¹ 李申，《上帝——儒教的至上神》，台北：東大圖書，2004。

³² “頭上有老天爺作主”；“那個人不是老天爺養活？”；“一飲一啄，莫非天定。”

³³ “帝命率育。”《詩經》，頁 1443。

world and humankind, who is powerful, righteous, loving and willing to communicate with human beings.³⁴ Although it is not entirely identical to the Christian God (I will come to this later), the claim that these two concepts do refer in the end to the same God is not incredible. As a Christian, I believe that God has not left the Chinese alone. From very early times onwards, He has granted some kind of general revelation to our ancestors, which helps them to maintain the social and moral order.

However, Confucius once said, "The subjects on which the Master did not talk, were—extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings."³⁵ It has been used as a proof that he is an atheist. It is true that Confucius did not show special interest in matters about the spirits, the paranormal or the after-life, and he rarely used the word Shang-ti. However, he also believed in a personal Heaven. For him, Heaven, rather than the spirits or the gods, is the supreme God: "It is only Heaven that is grand."³⁶ Indeed, Confucius seems to have a personal relationship with Heaven: he prayed to Heaven and knew that Heaven can be offended: "He who against Heaven has not none to whom he can pray."³⁷ He even practiced intercessory prayer. Once his student Zi-lu, (子路) was sick and asked Confucius to pray for him. Confucius replied, "I have prayed for you for a long time already!"³⁸ He cherished the genuine relationship between Heaven and himself. He disliked deception and lies because he did not want to deceive Heaven.³⁹ He felt that only Heaven could really understand him, and this understanding was the basis of his mission in life: "I do not murmur against Heaven. I do not grumble against men. My studies lie low, and my penetration rises high. But there is Heaven; —that knows me!"⁴⁰

So it is wrong to say Confucianism is only a kind of ethical humanism. It is indeed a religion, and as Rodney Taylor points out, the "religious core itself is found in the relationship of humankind to Heaven.... In the Classical Confucian tradition Heaven functions as a religious authority or absolute often theistic in its portrayal." However, he also points out that in the later Neo-Confucian tradition, which flourished in the Sung and Ming Eras, "Heaven, or the Principle of Heaven, *T'ien-li*, also functions as a religious authority or absolute frequently monistic in its structure."⁴¹ This has been regarded as a kind of paradigm shift within the development of the Confucian tradition, and opinions differ sharply as to whether this shift from a personal Shang-ti to a much more impersonal *T'ien-li* is a wise move or not. Some believe it makes Confucianism less superstitious and more rational. However, other scholars contend that this move makes Heaven immanent within the universe, and compromises its transcendence. This feature accounts for many drawbacks of the Chinese Culture. So He Guanghu contends that we should transcend the Neo-Confucian tradition and Confucianism should return to its root, i.e., the primitive Confucian belief in Shang-ti and Heaven.⁴² I will explore this issue in the next section.

³⁴ 何光滬,〈中國文化的根與花〉,《原道》第二輯,1995年5月,頁29-56。

³⁵ "子不語怪力亂神"。《四書·論語》,頁87。

³⁶ "唯天為大"。《四書·論語》,頁104。

³⁷ "獲罪於天,無所禱也"。《四書·論語》,頁31。

³⁸ "丘之禱久矣!"。《論語》

³⁹ "無臣而為有臣,吾誰欺?欺天乎?"。《論語·子罕》

⁴⁰ "不怨天,不尤人,下學而上達,知我者其天乎?"。《四書·論語》,頁211。

⁴¹ Rodney L. Taylor, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism* (SUNY, 1990), p. 2.

⁴² 何光滬,〈中國文化的根與花〉,頁42。

The Search for the Transcendent God

So far I have tried to emphasize the similarities between Chinese Culture and the Christian faith. Some Chinese theologians suggest that we should go all the way to Confucianize Christianity. We should either gloss over or even remove those elements in Christianity which sound alien to the Chinese mind, e.g., the absolute transcendence of God, original sin, the need for redemption. Interestingly, not only the orthodox theologians object to this move; many non-Christian intellectuals also think that this strategy is not helpful, especially in the contemporary context. It is because they recommend Christianity exactly for those cultural elements which can correct the deficiencies of the Chinese Culture, or at least can help to inject new spirit into the stagnant Chinese Culture. Only in this way Christianity can help the renewal of Chinese Culture and the modernization of China.

Let me first explain the crucial differences between the Chinese Culture and the Christian tradition. Some Chinese scholars use the contrast between inner transcendence (內在超越) and external transcendence (外在超越) to capture this difference. Both Confucianism and Christianity believe in some kind of transcendence. Christianity is a form of external transcendence because it emphasizes the qualitative difference between God and humanity, between the Creator and the creature. This is supported by the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* which is absent from the Chinese tradition. In contrast, Confucianism is a form of inner transcendence (especially as it is developed by the Neo-Confucianists), which believes in the union of Heaven and man. So the movement of transcendence can be achieved within humanity itself. The fulfillment of humanity itself is transcendence. Although the primitive Confucianism entertains some form of external transcendence as well (as I explain above), the trend is towards inner transcendence. For example, Mencius believes that as we realize the potentials of our hearts and come to know our own nature, we will then know Heaven. So to cultivate our own humanity is already serving Heaven.⁴³ Although it is vaguely acknowledged that the moral and social order originate from the Heaven, the Heaven does not speak with a distinctive voice. Mencius even says that the Heaven only sees through the eyes of the people, and hear through the ears of the people.⁴⁴ Although it is still called inner transcendence, we can't help feel that the independent existence (or transcendence) of Heaven is to some extent compromised.

The Neo-Confucianists are even more emphatic about the unity of Heaven and Man. Cheng Yi (程頤) believes that there is only one Tao, and it is wrong to think Heaven and Man are two things.⁴⁵

Lu Xiang-shan (陸象山) even claims that the Universe is identical to his heart, and his heart is identical to the universe.⁴⁶ This kind of philosophy does possess merits. It affirms the value of

⁴³ “盡心知性知天，存心養性事天”

⁴⁴ “天視自我民視，天聽自我民聽。”

⁴⁵ “道一也，未有盡人而不盡天地也，以天人為二非也。”

⁴⁶ “宇宙便是吾心，吾心便是宇宙。”

humanity. It places emphasis on self-reliance rather than the dependence on a Saviour, and this leads to a humanistic approach to our society and culture. Although the idea sounds excellent, many contemporary Chinese intellectuals, who are keenly aware of the deficiencies of the Chinese Culture as manifested in recent historical experience, are critical. For example, a philosophy professor in Beijing University, Tang Yi-jie (湯一介) believes that this idea of inner transcendence is not conducive to the development of the rule of law. The exclusive reliance on human moral efforts leads to moralism. Chinese place their trust in persons- the rulers- and hope for a saintly king. In contrast, from the perspective of external transcendence, we are much more aware of the limitations or even corruptions of humanity, and this is more conducive to the development of external constraints of human behaviour, e.g., the system of the rule of law, the democratic political system.⁴⁷

The idea of the unity of Heaven and man also overlooks the discontinuities between Heaven and man, which are quite obvious in our concrete experience. Even the contemporary new Confucianist, Liu Shu-xian(劉述先) admits that "the infinite expansion of humanity ... leads to the retreat of Heaven (Shang-ti) . The humanistic network covers everything ... and is suffocating ... After all, man is not identical to Heaven."⁴⁸ Another contemporary Chinese scholar Liu Xiao-bo (劉曉波) even repudiates inner transcendence as a kind of moral arrogance: "The absolute trust in the moral power of human personhood necessarily presupposes the ignorance of human limitation and weakness, and this necessarily leads to the infinite expansion of all kinds of human weakness. In the end it leads to self-destruction."⁴⁹ He even provokingly says that the tragedy of Chinese is the tragedy of the absence of God.

In his book *On the Christian Religion*, Zhuo Xin-ping affirms the relevance of the Christian view of transcendence for the reform of the contemporary Chinese society. He believes that if we lack a transcendental measure for our society, then our reforms can hardly escape the frameworks of utilitarianism and pragmatism. The belief in transcendent standards will overcome our tendency towards easy self-contentment and urge us on the way to deepen and perfect our reforms. He believes the traditional idea of inner transcendence easily succumbs to existing socio-political limitations, and the intellectuals are largely bounded by the existing political system. In contrast, external transcendence refuses to absolutize any kind existing socio-political arrangement. For example, the Christian ideal of the equality of all before God has paved the way for modern

⁴⁷ 湯一介,《湯一介學術文化隨筆》,北京:中國青年,1996。In fact this kind of criticism can be traced back to the Ming Era. For example, Wang Zheng (王徵) in his *Weitian Airen Jilun* (《畏天愛人極論》) already suggests that the much secularized Chinese Culture does not have sufficient capacity to restrain concrete evils of this world, and the Christian consciousness of transcendence can help in this respect.

⁴⁸ 劉述先,〈當代新儒家可以向基督教學些甚麼〉,《大陸與海外》,頁 263-264。

⁴⁹ 劉曉波,〈狂妄必遭天責〉,《明報月刊》,1989年8月,頁 37。

democracy and the pluralistic society.⁵⁰

The Search for Humanity and the Rediscovery of the Spirit of Repentance

One corollary of the doctrine of the unity of Heaven and man is an optimistic view of humanity. For example, Mencius says, "The feeling of commiseration belongs to all men; so does that of shame and dislike; and that of reverence and respect; and that of approving and disapproving.....Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and knowledge are not infused into us from without. We are certainly furnished with them."⁵¹ "All things are already complete in us. There is no great delight than to be conscious of sincerity on self-examination."⁵² This produces a positive view of humanity, and an inspiring ideal of personhood: "To dwell in the wide house of the world, to stand in the correct seat of the world, and to walk in the great path of the world; when he obtains his desire for office, to practice his principles for the good of the people; and when that desire is disappointed, to practice them alone; to be above the power of riches and honors to make dissipated, of poverty and mean condition to make swerve from principle, and of power and force to make bend—these characteristics constitute the great man."⁵³ All these are parts of the Chinese heritage that I cherish. Naturally, in this kind of Culture, the Christian doctrine of original sin or total depravity has always been alien to the Chinese mind, and in fact has offended many Chinese.

However, in contemporary China, there is an unexpected turn-around. As Zhuo points out, the concepts of repentance and confession have become fashionable among the intellectuals and writers lately, and some writers praise the spirit of repentance and try to embody that spirit in their literary works. That leads to the rise of confession literature. He concludes, "The idea of original sin in the Christian faith has been regarded as the foremost stumbling block for Chinese. However, it has miraculously become something that reflects the experience of some Chinese in the modern society, and something that they can identify with."⁵⁴

What are the reasons for this turn-around? I think as long as the idea of the moral self-sufficiency of humanity seems to mirror the socio-political self-sufficiency of China the Central Kingdom, the former idea will retain its plausibility to the Chinese mind. However, the harsh historical experience that Chinese face in these two centuries have exposed the weakness of both our society and our Culture. In the end, many perceptive Chinese intellectuals are forced to do very painful soul-searching, and they discover after all our humanity does seem to possess weaknesses that may not be inappropriately called sin or depravity. They discover that even after some immense social disasters for which we all share some responsibility, the Chinese can still easily point their fingers at the faults of other persons but refuse to reflect deeply on their own culpable participation in the events. In short, we lack the spirit of repentance or contrition. A good example is the writers' response to the Cultural Revolution. Only the writer Ba Jin (巴金) is honest enough to expose his

⁵⁰ 卓新平,《基督宗教論》,北京:社會科學文獻出版社,2000,頁212-213。

⁵¹ "惻隱之心,人皆有之;羞惡之心,人皆有之;恭敬之心,人皆有之;是非之心,人皆有之。……仁義禮智,非由外鑠我也,我固有之也,弗思耳矣。"《四書·孟子》,頁433-434。

⁵² "萬物皆備於我矣。反身而誠,樂莫大焉。"《四書·孟子》,頁507-508。

⁵³ "居天下之廣居,立天下之正位,行天下之大道。得志,與民由之;不得志,獨行其道。富貴不能淫,貧賤不能移,威武不能屈。此之謂大丈夫。"《四書·孟子》,頁222-223。

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 209.

own participation (or at least complicity) in the tragedies or even atrocities during that period in his work *Sui Xiang Lu (Casual Thought)* (《隨想錄》). This kind of contrition is exactly notable for its exceptional nature.

I think the famous writer Liu Zai-fu (劉再復) has produced the most thorough study of this problem in his big book *Confession and Chinese Literature*.⁵⁵ According to his analysis, the root problem again resides in the fundamental difference between the Confucian tradition and the Christian tradition. Since the ancient Chinese Culture lacks interest in the other world and does not hear the call from the transcendent world, its focus is how to live a good life in this world. There is no search for the salvation of the soul, and hence no need for spiritual struggles or inner soul-searching.⁵⁶ In contrast, Christianity views human life as a process of repentance and redemption. Liu thinks that the idea of original sin can be confirmed by our inner experience, and it is a good way to establish our moral responsibility.⁵⁷ This kind of spirit also leads to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of humanity than is commonly reflected in modern Chinese literature.

Another philosophy professor in Beijing University (now retired), Yang Shi (楊適), also has a keen appreciation of the Christian doctrine of original sin. He points out that the Chinese Culture has turned different kinds of natural human relationships (e.g., father-son relationship, husband-wife relationship) into a rigid hierarchical system, and that has led to a lot of abuse of power. This can be likened to the Fall of the Chinese Culture, and is the source of much evil in Chinese history. He thinks that the common criticism of original sin only reflects an unreflective attitude towards the sins of Chinese Culture. He suggests that we "ought to admit the universal presence of sins and sinful humanity in human history from the very beginning. Only so we can keep alert and start to repent, leading to the way of salvation. The unconditional emphasis on the goodness of human nature will only serve as the opium which numbs our conscience."⁵⁸ He passionately says, "In this time, we have seen that the Chinese Culture has an urgent need for the word of Christ. It is because the Chinese Culture is starting to admit its own original sin, is painfully crying out to express its feeling of remorse and its willingness to be reborn. We can be certain that a new era of the convergence of the word of Christ and the Chinese Culture has arrived." I know Professor Yang personally. It is interesting to note that as far as I know he has never claimed to be a Christian.

The Search for the God of Universal Love

The Confucianists emphasize ren (benevolence) and Christians talk about love. By and large these two ideas are similar. However, when we look deeper, we can discover subtle but also in the end important differences. Mencius' doctrine of five relationships (五倫) emphasizes that different

⁵⁵ 劉再復、林崗，《罪與文學——關於文學懺悔意識與靈魂維度的考察》，香港：牛津大學出版社，2002。

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 40-41.

⁵⁸ 楊適，〈對中國文化傳統的一種新詮釋——基督教與中國文化會通的一個前提問題〉，《維真學刊》第五卷第二期，1997，頁18。

relationships have their specific natures and entail specific obligations.⁵⁹ This naturally leads to the idea that love or benevolence also has a kind of order and priority. The love for family members takes precedence to the love for other people, both logically speaking and temporally speaking. Then the love of other people takes precedence to the love of the natural world, and so on.⁶⁰ Furthermore, it is wrong to treat your enemies as you treat your friends.⁶¹ The basic idea is that the degree of love needs to be appropriate to the specific relationship. So universal love for all without distinction is condemned by the Confucianists because it amounts to a denial of the special love that we should show to our fathers.⁶²

In contrast, while the Christian tradition does not deny the love for family members, it puts the emphasis on *Agape*. According to Anders Nygren's analysis, *agape* is spontaneous and "unmotivated." It "is directly opposed to rational computation and calculation. *Agape* gives and sacrifices even where rational calculation would suggest that any sacrifice was useless"⁶³ It is also "indifferent to value": "It is only when all thought of the worthiness of the object is abandoned that we can understand what *Agape* is."⁶⁴ As Frank Whaling points out, the transcendent element of the Christian love is clearer, and it "has given a greater urgency and personal motivation to many Christians to go out and change the world in times and places of need because their perspective was not fully enclosed within this world and they were not bound by the norms of this world."⁶⁵ In comparison, the Confucian *ren* relates to transcendence from within human situation, and it can integrate better elements of transcendence, humanity and nature. Whaling suggests that the Confucians can learn from the Christian love the importance of universal love and the zeal for transcendence. On the other hand, Christians can also learn from the Confucian *ren* the need to integrate the three spheres of God, human nature and nature.

The above suggestion seems balanced enough but it is interesting to note that it is again a contemporary intellectual, Yang Shi (楊適), who is even more critical of the Chinese Culture here.

He does appreciate the practicality of the Confucian philosophy of *ren*. It is indeed easier for us to love our family than the strangers. However, this merit is also the source of other deficiencies. Exactly because the Confucian idea makes concessions to the "natural" human tendency, it easily leads to compromises and tolerance of impurities or distortions of *ren* in the real world. In contrast, the purity or seemingly impracticality of the Christian ideal of *agape* has enabled itself to refuse to compromise. This keeps up the power to criticize impurities or distortions of *ren* in the real world, and leads to incessant reforms. He concludes, even to those science-minded intellectuals, "it is perfectly acceptable to understand God as the most perfect love of humanity, such as the noblest spirit of Christ as manifested in his sacrificial love for others. This is the idea of cultural Christian..."

⁵⁹ "父子有親，君臣有義，夫婦有別，長幼有序，朋友有信。" 《孟子·滕文公上》

⁶⁰ "親親而仁民，仁民而愛物。" 《孟子·盡心上》

⁶¹ 參孔子的「以直報怨」的思想。

⁶² 墨家的兼愛被斥為「無父」。

⁶³ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, p. 90.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 77.

⁶⁵ Frank Whaling, "Jen and Love," in *Confucian-Christian Encounters in Historical and Contemporary Perspective*, ed.

Peter K. H. Lee (Lewiston: Mellen, 1991), p. 267.

it is very likely to be a feasible way to integrate Chinese Culture with Christian Culture.”⁶⁶

I think Yang has a very good understanding of the critical potential of *agape*, and this is comparable to Niebuhr's discussions. Exactly because *agape* cannot be fully realized in history (“even the most perfectly balanced system of justice in history is a balance of competing wills and interests”⁶⁷), it can be used to judge the arrogance of the ideologies and crimes in human history: “sinful egoism makes all historical harmonies of interest partial and incomplete; and a life which accepts these harmonies as final is bound to introduce sinful self-assertion into the ethical norm.”⁶⁸ So *agape* is “a resource for infinite developments towards a more perfect brotherhood in history.”⁶⁹

The Search for the God of Modern Democracy and Human Rights

The Chinese intellectuals are very concerned about the relevance of Christianity to the modernization of the Chinese Culture, in particular the modernization of the Chinese political system. Since the May-Fourth Movement in 1919, Chinese have expressed their wish to invite two gentlemen from the West to come to China: Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science. In recent decades, it is increasingly realized that these two gentlemen have a close relationship with Christianity. In fact they have already come to China with Matteo Ricci, who has brought knowledge of modern science (mathematics, astronomy) and technology (clocks) to China, together with some preliminary modern political ideas. The Protestant mission which started in mid-nineteenth century has also greatly helped the modernization of China. The missionaries (e.g., Robert Morrison) have founded hundreds of secondary schools and some higher education institutions. This has introduced modern education system to China, and has promoted the exchange of the Western and Chinese cultures. Most of the early organizations related to science education or research are the direct or indirect efforts of the Christian churches.

Some missionaries are particularly keen on the spreading of modern Western Culture. They worked in the organizations set up by the Chinese government to promote modernization, e.g., William Alexander Parsons Martin, John Fryer. They also published newspapers and books, e.g., Timothy Richard. No one can deny all these efforts are very important to the modernization of China, especially in the initial stages.⁷⁰ Even today, this process is going on, and as I have explained, scholars like Zhuo Xinping believe that the new elements of the Christian culture can continue to help this process.⁷¹ Other scholars like Zhang Hao (張灝) also explicitly suggest that in Chinese history, the insufficient emphasis on the dark side of humanity has hampered the development of democracy. In contrast, the Christian consciousness of sin has been instrumental to the rise of democracy in the West because it suggests the idea of check and balance in the political system.⁷²

⁶⁶ 楊適,〈在現代化挑戰中的基督教和儒家的仁愛觀念: 比較與回應〉,《金陵神學誌》總第 21 期, 1994 年 12 月, 頁 36-44。

⁶⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, *Human Destiny*, p. 75.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 77.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 89.

⁷⁰ <http://www.godoor.com/article/list.asp?id=925>, <http://c-highway.nethatbook/lishi3/zgjhs/disi.htm>。

⁷¹ <http://cclw.nethatgospel/explore/idjdzgxdh~.html>。

⁷² 張灝,《幽暗意識與民主傳統》,北京:新星出版社,2006 年。

As the number of Christians increases, their impact on the society also increases. Since the eighties, a number of social surveys show that the Chinese Christians are exemplary in matters relating to the observance of the law, paying taxes (that is a big problem in China), and contribution to charities. Many scholars sympathetic towards Christianity, in the fields of Christian studies and other disciplines, have started to introduce Christian values into the public realm (e.g., moral education, business ethics). As the number of Christian intellectuals increases, they are also seeking ways to express their opinions on faith, politics and Culture. One convenient means for this is the internet, and the Christians' discussion has also inspired a lot of interest. This can be regarded as a kind of virtual public realm.⁷³ So in all these practical ways, the Christian faith is continuing to contribute to the development of a civil society in China.

The more direct involvement in politics is more tricky. On the one hand, this is a very sensitive area for all in contemporary China. On the other hand, Christians need to be careful not to violate the separation of religion and politics.⁷⁴ In this aspect, there are some breakthroughs in these few years. Some Christian professionals, especially those in the legal field, have consciously used law to promote the realization of love and justice in China. Besides defending their own religious rights,⁷⁵ they are also willing to take up legal cases for the weak and the vulnerable, e.g. "the case of Cai Zhuo-hua (蔡卓華)."⁷⁶ In this way, they hope to promote human rights and the rule of law in China.⁷⁷ The major representatives are the Christians from the Ark Church (方舟教會) in Beijing, e.g., Gao Zhi-sheng(高智晟)、Yu Jie(余傑)、Li Bo-guang(李柏光)、Fan Ya-feng(範亞峰)、Guo Fei-xiong(郭飛雄). Some others are trying to initiate a dialogue with the government in order to pave the way for full religious freedom of the churches. The representative is the Watch Church (守望教會) in Beijing. They have a clear sense of mission: although the church is a spiritual community, it also needs to care for the tasks of cultural and social reconstruction.⁷⁸ Although these two churches are only small ones, their work has significantly advanced the public participation of Christianity in China.

Conclusion

The current era is both exciting and confusing. A lot of changes are going on in China. There are both crises and opportunities. In this essay, I want to introduce many exciting recent developments of contemporary Christianity in China. All the developments show that the Chinese church is already taking deeper and deeper roots in China, and there are a lot of opportunities for the church

⁷³ <http://www.21sz.org/show.aspx?id=4437&cid=16>。

⁷⁴ <http://www.blogchina.com/newwithdisplay/148173.html>。有關政教關係的討論還有很多
<http://godoor.nethatjidianlinks/cd/zvzv.htm>。

⁷⁵ <http://www.observechina.nethatinfo/ArtShow.asp?ID=40018>，
<http://www.artblog.cn/more.asp?name=fangzhou&id=18842>。

⁷⁶ <http://www.cicus.org/info/ArtShow.asp?ID=35734>。

⁷⁷ <http://www.gospelherald.com/template/view.htm?code=den&id=3089>。

⁷⁸ <http://www.artblog.cn/more.asp?name=jdx&id=29716>。

to participate in culture and society. Many Chinese, both common people and intellectuals, have a renewed appreciation of the strength and relevance of the Christian faith, and many others are crying out for something that can satisfy their spiritual longing. Yes, indeed many people are searching for God, or perhaps it is God Himself who has been actively searching for the Chinese since very early times.

Biographical Information

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He was born and grew up in Hong Kong. He was converted to Christianity when he was 14. He studied Electrical Engineering in the University of Hong Kong, and had been a high school physics and mathematics teacher. During his university days, he was drawn into an agonized reflection on the purpose of life and other ultimate questions. He became critical of his own faith, and almost lost it. Finally, he kept his faith and decided to devote his life to an exploration of religion and philosophy.

In 1989, he got a Bachelor of Divinity (First Class) from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. In 1991 and 1993, he was awarded a M. Phil. in Philosophical Theology and a D. Phil. respectively by the University of Oxford. He finished his PhD thesis under the supervision of Professor Richard Swinburne, one of the foremost contemporary analytic philosophers of religion.

Shortly after, he returned to Hong Kong. He had taught theology in the Theology Division, Chinese University of Hong Kong. Now he is an Associate professor in the Department of Religion and Philosophy in the Hong Kong Baptist University. He has published articles in journals like *Faith and Philosophy*, *Philosophia Christi* and *Philosophy Compass*, and in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2nd edition). He has also published numerous Chinese articles in a wide range of areas: philosophy of science, philosophy of science, systematic theology, science-religion dialogue, social ethics and so on. He is the author of several Chinese books which include *I Believe, Therefore I Think, God, Secular Society and the Foundation of Ethics, Christian Ethics and the Liberal Society*. Books edited by him include *Postmodern Culture and Christianity*, and *Christian Values and the Humanistic Spirit*.

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