

Traditional Mission Theology and Contextual Mission Theology: A Response

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I want to thank Dr. Wan for this very interesting paper on mission theology, and for the opportunity to respond to his ideas relating to mission from the perspective of traditional Western mission theology.

I agree with much of the analysis provided in Figure 1 of Dr. Wan's presentation. Generally speaking, contrasting concepts such as linear and cyclical, analytical and unitive, competitive and cooperative hold true when comparing Western and Chinese cultures. It seems, however, that Dr. Wan puts traditional Western categories at a great disadvantage from the very beginning when he *equates* their nature with their weakness. Whereas the weaknesses inherent in the Chinese contextual categories are derived from their nature (i.e., monism may be *derived from* a unitive understanding of reality), in the traditional Western categories, nature *equals* weakness (i.e., relativity and dialectical method are both nature *and* weakness). Traditional Western categories are thereby summarily dismissed as inferior. This section of the chart perhaps needs some revision.

I also agree with Dr. Wan that there is a need for a reevaluation of theology relating to mission within the Chinese context, a reevaluation that takes very seriously the great wealth of Chinese thought and cultural expression. In fact,

the time in which we are living seems set to challenge the church's traditional theology as in no other time since the fourth century, and the contribution of Chinese culture will be a large part of this process.

Dr. Wan rightly points out that contextual theology takes seriously issues such as age and time, space and place (2.2). But surely traditional theology also takes these issues seriously. As David Bosch points out in his book *Transforming Mission*, "it is necessary to submit every definition and every manifestation of the Christian mission to rigorous analysis and appraisal."¹ A quick look at traditional Western mission theology over the past one hundred years will immediately make it clear that this is not a static theological category, but a series of "new and vibrant" (as Dr. Wan describes contextual theology) attempts to live out the mandate of Christ within changing contexts. These include such ideas as "the church as sacrament," "the church with others," "*missio dei*," "justice, peace and the integrity of creation," and "liberation theology," to name only a few. In fact, rather than being an alternative to traditional Western theology, I believe Dr. Wan's theological ideas themselves fall well within the boundaries of an on-going and energetic tradition of revision and reassessment of traditional theological categories.

This is so primarily because the categories identified by Dr. Wan simply restate traditional Western theological concepts using Chinese vocabulary. The content remains unchanged. Contextual theology must take seriously the world-view within which the writer is located *to the point that* it constructs theological categories that express core concepts in entirely new ways. In Dr.

¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 9.

Wan's analysis, the traditional theological concept of God as Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) remains virtually unchanged, except that it is associated with the Chinese ideas of heaven (*tian*), humanity (*ren*), and earth (*di*). *Dao* is also used to refer to the Word (*logos*). But how has the core concept of "God" been influenced by the Chinese world-view? God remains triune, three-in-one, in essence the same God as the one conceived at the Council of Nicaea in 325, without a significant reevaluation of the nature of the relationship of the Father God, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit. If, indeed, God can be known and understood within the categories of *tian*, *ren*, and *di*, taking seriously the integrity of such categories within the Chinese world-view, then this suggests that there are important and valid ways that God can be known apart from the traditional concept of Trinity. If not, then this remains an example of traditional Western theology in Chinese clothing.

The Chinese concept of *dao* as used by Dr. Wan may be given as an example. In Figure 4, the passage from John 1:14 (the *dao* became flesh) is included, and it is stated that the *dao* becoming flesh, suffering, dying, being resurrected, rising to heaven and being glorified is an example of the coming together of heaven and humanity (*tian/ren*). This is certainly a proper and creative use of Chinese terminology within a traditional theological framework, but the understanding of *dao* found within the Chinese cultural context has not been genuinely contextualized into the nature of Jesus Christ. *Dao*, within the classical Chinese context, is understood as the foundational element of all that exists. It is ultimately unknowable (*dao ke dao fei chang dao*), yet it is immanent in all things: human beings, trees, wind, sunlight, thoughts, feelings. It is the responsibility of a truly contextual Chinese theology to incorporate this classical Chinese understanding into its definitions. If *dao* did indeed become (a particular) flesh, suffer, die, and rise to glory, then a contextual theology

might be expected to make this explicit. This would have immense consequences for the Christian understanding of "the other," especially in terms of missiology. Those to whom we preach the good news, in fact all of creation, would already possess in their very essence the resurrected and glorified *dao*. Not only would such a contextualization change traditional missiology, but would alter the traditional understanding of God as well. As it is, however, it remains within traditional theological categories.

I am not suggesting that to remain within traditional Western theological categories is somehow of less value than to create new contextual categories. In fact, traditional Western theological categories serve an important function, *especially* within a non-Western environment. I remember very well visiting a church in Taiwan that was designed according to traditional Chinese architecture, by Christian missionaries from Europe. I admired it very much. To me, this attempt at concrete contextualization was the very spirit of the gospel. I mentioned my feelings to the wife of the pastor. I said, "You must be very happy with the design of your church." She responded, "Well, the missionaries like it." In other words, "I want a church to look like a church," i.e. Western. In another situation, also in Taiwan, I suggested to some of the members of the church I served that we should develop a special liturgy that we could use on Tomb Sweeping Day (*ching ming jie*), so our members could participate fully in this important Chinese festival. To my surprise, the young people of the congregation voiced the strongest opposition. "We want something that makes us different from those around us. We don't want to fit into our culture; we want to stand out." In other words, we want ceremonies and symbols that are based on Western traditions. A third story goes much deeper into the issue of theological categories. As Dr. Wan points out, Chinese culture emphasizes "shame," while Western Christian culture emphasizes "guilt." It

would seem natural, then, to find ways to move from guilt to shame when developing Chinese contextual theology. Yet, I recall listening to a new Chinese Christian explain her experience of law and gospel this way: "I never knew I was a sinner, a criminal, until the pastor explained it to me. I had never done anything really wrong. But now I see that I have been a terrible person, but Jesus has saved me and taken away my guilt. I feel free. I am a child of God." In other words, traditional Western theology challenged me, caused me to see the world in a new way.

In each of these cases, it is clear that it was traditional Western theological categories, expressed in architecture, liturgy and theology, that provided a new world-view, that challenged the traditional concepts and expectations of the person's own setting. The importance of this must not be minimized. As bold and innovative as contextual Chinese theology may be, it runs the risk of losing the ability to call the culture itself to account.

An example of this is the concept of *guanxi*. There is perhaps no more typical Chinese concept than this which would seem to be available for incorporation into a Chinese contextual theology. As Dr. Wan points out, *guanxi* is highly regarded (*guanxi zhi shang*), and helps to avoid conflict. But the full implications of *guanxi* when applied to Christian theology must be questioned. If there is a doctrine that is central to the Western Christian tradition (especially the Reformation tradition), it is grace. Without grace, Christianity ceases to have any "good news." Superficially at least, *guanxi* would seem, as Dr. Wan suggests, to relate to reconciliation with God through Christ our mediator. But this is, I believe, a misapplication of the concept of *guanxi*. Rather than creating relationships of grace, *guanxi* creates relationships of obligation, and even of power. *Guanxi* is an expression of social obligation within one's circle of life: family, business, friendships. While it may very well

express a close, even intimate, relationship with another person or a group of people, it is nearly always the case that the relationship assumes reciprocal, beneficial obligations. In fact, *guanxi* at its most pragmatic expresses a relationship of influence and power. In one way or another, one always pays a price for *guanxi*. It is never given without the expectation of reciprocity; and this is the antithesis of grace, especially the kenotic idea as expressed in the second chapter of Philippians. It is in such cases that traditional Western theology (in this case, a concept of unalloyed mercy and grace) provides a challenge to the prevailing cultural expectations; a new world-view that has the ability to change lives.

Is a contextualized theology really the best thing for the Chinese people? Perhaps it is, but it should be no surprise that the church that rises from within such a contextual theology may appear quite different from the Christian church we have come to know and expect. Right now, in rural China, the contextualization of Christianity is taking place, although it is not being discussed at symposia such as this. It is being lived out in the daily lives of Christians. And it often looks as much like Chinese traditional religion as it does Christianity. It does not rely on systematic theological formulations but on concrete results from prayer. The qualifications of its leaders have little to do with theological education, and more to do with the efficacy of their ministry in providing for the needs of the congregation. The Chinese church will become contextualized to one degree or another, but will this contextualization provide a life-affirming vision; and will it lead to unity or disunity within the body of Christ? These are questions that must be asked of all Christian theology, whether traditional or innovatively contextual.