

# Contextualizing the Christian Message in China

Kay Danielson

In 1995, Douglas Hayward wrote an article for the *International Journal of Frontier Missions* on the issue of contextualization.<sup>1</sup> In his article he holds out eleven indicators by which mission leadership should be evaluating whether their efforts are the local expression of faith. For the purposes of this article, I would like to highlight two of these indicators and use them as a basis to evaluate the

situation in China today, not simply from the point of view of mission agencies (involvement of outsiders), but also from the standpoint of the local Chinese church (both official and unofficial).

First however, it is useful to review what is meant by contextualization. In his book, *Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ*, Dr. Ralph Covell writes that “contextualization means that the gospel addresses itself to those broader issues of the social, economic, and political context within a receptor culture.”<sup>2</sup> Many missiologists speak of contextualization as making the gospel relevant within a particular culture. I prefer to think of it in terms of

Graham Cousens



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making the gospel accessible and understandable within a particular cultural context. In a world where “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” where all stand in need of redemption, the gospel is automatically, and by its very nature, relevant to all people in all cultures at all times.

This article is not a theological examination of the contextualization of the gospel, nor is it a historical overview. For an excellent treatment of those issues, I recommend Dr. Covell’s book, mentioned above. Rather, this article is a look at some things that are going on in China today that are making the gospel accessible and understandable.

When talking about the contextualization of the gospel in China today, we must make note of the

fact that today's context is different from the context of missions in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s when the concept was first popularized. Although there have been indiginization movements in missions down through the ages, the term contextualization came into vogue during the period of the 1970s and 1980s when much of the developing world was shaking itself free from centuries of colonialism. At that time, one of the main issues facing the local churches was how the church in general, and believers in particular,

“theological construction” campaign. What Bishop Ding, the leading proponent of (and authority behind) this campaign is trying to do is demonstrate Christianity's compatibility with the nation's goal (actually, the Party's goal) of “building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.” Unfortunately, the theology side of the equation is an extremely liberal, universalist theology which blurs the distinction between belief and unbelief, and the campaign side of it is political—an attempt to force this

talitarian China, Islamic Pakistan or radically pluralistic America. We need to know when to stand within and embrace cultural norms and when to stand above them.

Let's return to the indicators put forth in Dr. Hayward's article. The first indicator is that of the local language. “In order for the gospel to be truly at home in a culture,” he writes, “the people must be able to hear the Word

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should relate to foreigners. In some ways, the Chinese Communist Party dispatched with this issue back in the early 1950s when it expelled the foreign missionaries and established the Three Self Patriotic Movement. In effect, what it was saying to the church was, “This is how you will deal with foreigners. You won't!” The TSPM did the defining on what it meant to “do church a Chinese way.” Later on, in the 1960s and the 1970s, when the church in Africa and other parts of Asia was struggling with how to relate to foreigners, the church in China was struggling just to survive.

At the present time, the leadership of the TSPM is dealing with this issue of contextualization with its so-called

theology onto the TSPM clergy. In other words, his answer to the question of how to make the gospel understandable is to water it down. There are many evangelicals within the TSPM who are resisting this campaign.

Ironically, while the TSPM is trying to define Christianity in terms of its relationship to Chinese socialism, Chinese believers are, in fact, wrestling with a much more pertinent question, namely, how does a believer participate as a member of Chinese society? Of course, this issue is not unique to the Chinese for it is an issue that all Christians must face—how to live as a Christian within a particular social, cultural, and political context whether it is to

of God, as well as expositions on it, and descriptions of appropriate responses to it, in their own language in which they feel the most comfortable.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the primary means of the preaching and living out of the gospel must be in the heart language of the people.

The good news on this indicator is that because foreigners were out of the game for so many years in China, most of the work of the spread of the gospel has been, and continues to be, in Chinese. Foreign participation in the official church (and of course the unofficial church) is discouraged and, therefore, rare. As far as the church

Brent Fulton, Editor • Julia Grosser, Managing Editor • Dona Diehl, Layout and Design

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goes, this really is not an issue anymore.

The not-so-good news is that many (but certainly not all) ministries from the outside still rely on English as the primary language of both evangelism and discipleship. When China first opened in the early 1980s, one of the first areas the nation sought assistance in was English language learning. Consequently, the earliest bearers of the gospel (from the outside) into the new China were English teachers. In our zeal to take advantage of this new access that was being afforded, and given the fact that the vocational task was English teaching, we convinced ourselves that learning Chinese was not important, and that the gospel could be

lar, with a great deal of suspicion, and thus works to keep the church out on the margins of society. The good news is that (at least for the time being) the state is no longer seeking the eradication of the church as it did in the 1960s and 1970s. Rather, it seems to have settled on what a friend of mine calls “reluctant tolerance.” As the state in China gradually increases its tolerance of Christianity, the church is increasing its involvement in a variety of ministries of both evangelism and mercy.

A recent example of the church’s more visible participation in outreach is the performance of the Messiah in Beijing the past two Christmases. The first performance, in 2001, was organized and sponsored by the conductor, himself a Christian.

in the hardest hit hospitals, a fact that was reported in the party-run newspaper, *The China Daily*.

I know of groups of Christians, from both official and unofficial churches, who are involved in outreach and care ministries to the elderly and to children whose parents are in prison. As many of the societal safety nets break down in this era of change in China, Christians are stepping in to fill the void, becoming salt and light and meeting the needs of the community.

At the same time, outsiders are also increasingly involved in meeting the needs of society through ministries to orphans, street children and public health work. This gives the authorities a chance to see that foreign Christians are not a threat and have much to contribute towards the needs of society. In



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taught and received in English. This was (and continues to be) a major barrier to the contextualization of the gospel in China.

Dr. Hayward’s second indicator is “membership in society.” He speaks of the need for the church to “demonstrate a capacity to serve as a responsible institution in meeting the well-being of the needs of the society” and to “function as salt, light, oil or in other ministrations that bind up the wounds or meet the needs for community and harmony development,” while at the same time serving the spiritual well-being of the believing community.<sup>4</sup>

This is a particularly tricky endeavor in China where the state views religion in general, and Christianity in particu-

lar, with a great deal of suspicion, and thus works to keep the church out on the margins of society. The good news is that (at least for the time being) the state is no longer seeking the eradication of the church as it did in the 1960s and 1970s. Rather, it seems to have settled on what a friend of mine calls “reluctant tolerance.” As the state in China gradually increases its tolerance of Christianity, the church is increasing its involvement in a variety of ministries of both evangelism and mercy.

involved, printing and distributing posters that could be seen around town. I asked an evangelical pastor friend how this was possible. Clearly it was being done with official blessing and permission, but I was curious as to how they had received it since the Religious Affairs Bureau is not known for approving such overt expressions of faith. “Simple,” she replied, “we sought and received permission from the Cultural Affairs Bureau.”

During the SARS epidemic this past spring, the churches also became involved in the support of health care workers dealing with the disease and patients afflicted by it. Even the Beijing International Christian Fellowship collected food and gifts to be distributed

Word of the performance in the Forbidden City Concert Hall was primarily by word of mouth. In 2002, the churches became

each of these situations, honest and sincere service to the people of China opens many doors to sharing the gospel.

The more visible the church becomes as a force for good in society, the less likely it is that it will continue to be viewed as a threat. A change in perception on the part of the government on this score will unleash a church that is poised to engage itself in society. It is to this end that we must continue to work and pray.

#### Endnotes

1. Douglas Hayward, “Measuring Contextualization in Church and Missions,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, (Jul-Sep. 1995).
2. Ralph Covell, *Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ: A History of the Gospel in Chinese*, Orbis Books (1986), p. 15.
3. Hayward, p. 10.
4. Hayward, p. 10.

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# History, Myth and Missions

Carol Lee Hamrin

Every nation has its national cultural mythology, part truth and part legend. Sometimes it is in formal social consensus around a “civil religion,” like American patriotism, which sees a role for the U.S. as God-ordained defender of freedom. Sometimes it is a more explicit state ideology as in China which, under Communist rule, has been positioned as a victim of and defender against Western imperialism or American “hegemonism.”

Usually there are both myths of glory and also myths of trauma or crisis. In China, there is a widespread understanding that before the year 1500 China was a great civilization, perhaps the greatest in the world. There is a strong sense that China deserves a chance to regain its “rightful” position as a great power and influential cultural center. For much of the past fifty years in China, the Communist party-state promoted a strong sense of “victimitis” by recalling the trauma of the “century of humiliation” at the hands of the Western imperialist powers. This was marked by a series of military defeats by Western (and then Japanese) powers after 1840 and the “unequal treaties” that gave Westerners extra-territorial rights, including the rights of missionaries to live and travel in the interior. This century is said to have ended with the “liberation” of 1949-50 when Communist forces occupied the mainland and expelled the Western powers and their “puppets” in the Nationalist government, and also, of course, the missionaries.

Despite the rapid social and cultural transformation underway with China’s continued reopening to the outside,



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this mythology is still alive, if not exactly well. The return to PRC sovereignty of Hong Kong in 1997 and Macau in 1999 was celebrated as a symbol of the final closure of the colonial era. The Pope’s canonization in 2000 of dozens of Roman Catholic missionaries and Chinese believers who had been martyred one century before by the anti-foreign martial sect, the “Boxers,” along with thousands of others including Protestants, was met with a barrage of highly emotional state propaganda denouncing all these “saints” as tools of Western imperialism—almost implying they deserved their violent fates! Knowledgeable Chinese, embarrassed by this “over-kill,” commented at the time that the media articles seemed to have been unearthed from the files of the 1950s Mao era, dusted off and reprinted without editing. However inappropriate and out-of-date, given recent positive academic and popular reevaluation of the contributions of missionaries and growing acceptance of and interest in Christianity,

these episodes reveal heartfelt attitudes lying just beneath the surface. They reflect a deep and abiding ambivalence about Western culture and the Christian faith, which is seen to be the heart and root of it.

## Rising Cultural Nationalism

Believers are interested in helping to build the Kingdom of God in China. Educated Chinese in the cities, though, are focused on building up the nation of China. If kingdom-building in China is to meet the challenge of nation-building, I believe it is vital to redress the weaknesses in church and mission activities in a way that produces synergy rather than conflict between these two powerful currents.

On one hand, there is an unprecedented opening for Christianity to become the mainstream of belief in China. Fifty years of Communist party rule has stripped China of its traditional religion or ideology, leaving a vacuum. China is so morally empty that the greatest obstacle to China’s becom-

ing a great power may be the lack of a shared public morality. Concerned Chinese are trying to address this problem. Trying to preserve their monopoly on power, the younger political elite is seeking to revise or “modernize” the state ideology of communism. Realizing that economic development is not all sufficient, the social elite is seeking a social philosophy for the future that will provide a better path to social and political progress, in addition to economic development. Some Chinese are seeking a “Third Way,” a path better suited to Chinese tradition than either Soviet-style communism or American democratic capitalism. Now, perhaps more than at any other time in history, is the time to hope and work for Christ to become this Third Way—their Way, their Truth and their Life.

### State-sponsored Nationalism

Throughout the 1990s, the content of official political education has been shifting from socialist doctrine to “patriotism.” The positive content is pride in Chinese history and culture. Hosting the Olympics in 2008, for example, with its friendly international competition, will encourage a positive link between cosmopolitanism and patriotic values. However, there is a large negative anti-Western component as well, as reflected in a series of books on the theme, “the China that can say, ‘No.’” Especially noteworthy is that these books were written by young scholars who had studied in America but then returned to China. These young returnees resented American “bullying” of their homeland in the 1990s. These themes have captivated younger audiences, reflecting and further developing this new pride in China’s accomplishments and capabilities. To some extent, the SARS episode tempered this hubris and was a reminder of how far China still has to go. Nevertheless, the desire of the Chinese to have pride in their nation and culture remains powerful. When I asked a Chinese friend about an unusual mainland newspaper report about a Chinese seminary professor’s claim that Han dynasty stone carvings contained biblical sym-

bols, he scoffed in reply, “Oh the press will print anything that shows China was first!”

This national and cultural pride has also brought about a resurgence of interest in Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. There is a strong fascination and interest in native products, a search for cultural “roots,” and an academic focus on “national studies.” The Tang dynasty especially holds a high current level of interest.

### Chinese Disillusionment with the U.S.

Unfortunately, some of this nationalistic intensity, with its positive and negative aspects, is a reaction to the activities of American political and cultural conservatives, including Christians. In raising concerns about religious rights abuses in China, these conservatives lobbied the federal government to use tactics of economic pressure and public shaming against the Chinese government. The Chinese people viewed such actions as anti-China, not just anti-communist—actions such as opposition to U.S. funding for China through the U.N. Population Fund, to China’s bid to host the 2000 Summer Olympics, to renewal of China’s Most Favored Nation (MFN)

status (now called Normal Trade Relations or NTR), and to China’s membership in the WTO. Being cynical about their own politics and politicians, the Chinese were likewise cynical about ours; no one believes these actions were motivated by genuine concern.

It proved both ineffective and even counterproductive to use the U.S. government as a bully pulpit against religious freedom violations. Let me stress here that I favor more, not less effort by all of us (especially creative involvement of nongovernmental actors) to keep religious freedom on the front burner. However, political pressure should be the last resort, not the first. Such involvement of the U.S. government fueled Chinese resentment of U.S. hypocritical “preaching” and aroused old suspicions of American and Chinese Christians as pawns of foreign political interests, undermining the image of Chinese Christianity as indigenous—won through Mao-era sacrifice and suffering.

As the Chinese government has encouraged nationalistic pride and the confidence that China will regain its “rightful” status as a great power by mid-century, younger Chinese have become more nationalistic and more supportive of the regime—which then feels freer to oppress the church. I am worried that a new wave of persecution is building up, as has happened before, as the government becomes more concerned about social instability and is threatened by the mass appeal of the Christian social movement.

### A Warning From History: China’s “Disappearing Church”

There have been four waves—each with about a 200-year duration—of Christian missions and church growth during long eras of relative state toleration of religious pluralism (see box).

Within each period, there were shorter cycles of relative growth and repression. But following these larger waves of missions and church growth came waves of persecution in the name of purifying China from foreign implants and with the goal of imposing a

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#### Four waves of Christian missions and church growth

- ★ **Church of the East** (Nestorians) during the Tang dynasty (7th–9th centuries)
- ★ **Church of the East** (Nestorians) revival in the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty (13th–14th centuries)
- ★ **Jesuit and other Roman Catholic Missions** in late Ming—early Qing (Manchu) dynasties (16th–18th centuries)
- ★ **Protestant Missions** in the modern era. (Soon it will be 200 years since Robert Morrison’s arrival in China in 1807)

# “Spiritual Pollution” in the Chinese Church?

*John Peace*

**A** crisis threatens the Chinese church worldwide. We have heard of the dangers of materialism and the seductions of cults such as Lightning from the East, but this wolf has crept into the sheep-fold almost undetected. I refer to the “spiritual pollution” of alien ideas from the West. To deal with this threat, we need to understand it. That requires an awareness of two often-neglected realities: (1) “philosophical” ideas permeate culture, usually without being recognized; and (2) these concepts also penetrate the church. History abounds with examples of both these facts.

## **What is “Philosophy”?**

What is philosophy? The answers include definitions such as, “speculative inquiry concerning the source and nature of human knowledge; any system of ideas based on such thinking.”<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, philosophers have tried to answer three basic questions: “How do we know?” (epistemology); “What is real?”—that is, “What do we know?” (ontology); and “What is good?”—that is, “Based on what we know, what should we do?” (ethics).

Philosophy is different from religion, ideology and worldview. However, in developed societies, religions, ideologies and worldviews reflect ideas which are really “philosophical.” So, regardless of whether we realize this fact, our lives are shaped by “philosophical” ideas of various sorts.

## **“Philosophy” Penetrates the Church**

What about Christians? Don’t they take their ideas mostly from the Bible? Aren’t they immune to the “pagan” notions of non-believing neighbors? To some degree, yes. As they learn the “truth as it is in Jesus” by having their minds transformed by the Word of God, followers of Christ gain substantial liberation from the worship of the idols of their society—whether physical images or mental concepts.

On the other hand, we are all creatures of our own time and culture. Furthermore, until the Lord returns, we will struggle against indwelling sin. Each day, we need to identify and renounce the “futile ways inherited from our forefathers” (1 Peter 1:18) and “be renewed in the spirit of [our] mind”

(Ephesians 4:23). That process includes understanding the non-biblical ideas which have shaped our values and assumptions and replacing them with truths found in the Scriptures.

Should not the Bible and the Holy Spirit be enough to guard our minds from pollution? Again, to some degree, yes. On the other hand, the history of the church is filled with examples of failures by very learned theologians to avoid the “spiritual pollution” of alien ideas.

## **A Sad Story**

Origen and Clement in the early Church, along with the monastic movement that followed, were heavily influenced by Platonic thinking. Ambrose’s treatise on the duties of Christian ministers was based on Stoic ethical catego-

ries. Theologians in the Middle Ages, attempting to integrate Aristotelian concepts and logical analysis into Christian doctrine, created the massive synthesis that became the authoritative theological statement of the Roman Catholic Church.

While Luther and Calvin strove mightily at the start of the Reformation to “expel Aristotle from the universities,” where theology was taught and learned, both Lutheran and Calvinistic thinkers after them produced treatises on Christian doctrine which, though clearly Protestant and biblical, resembled some of the Medieval scholastic works. Meanwhile, newly-discovered works from ancient Greece and Rome that flooded Europe during the Renaissance fueled the “Enlightenment,” a movement which increasingly repudiated Christian categories.

As the modern era dawned, skeptical philosophers like Hume rejected the possibility of knowing absolute truth, especially truth about God. A new rationalism treated all “supernatural” ideas as superstitious. The church immediately felt the impact of these ideas, in the form of a denial of the deity of Christ followed closely by a wholesale rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity.

This devastating process picked up speed in the 19th century. Darwin spun a web of scientific speculation that led to the abandonment of the first nine chapters of Genesis by many Christians. Marx asserted that religion represents the will to power of the oppressing classes, and Freud claimed that faith in God flows from our own feelings about our earthly fathers. German biblical scholars who had drunk deeply from the wells of Enlightenment skepticism “discovered” contradictions in the Bible and then proceeded to question all Scriptural accounts of miracles. Soren Kierkegaard called for a leap of faith. Twentieth century existentialism sprouted from this root.

### **The Low Point of “Christian” Theology**

The 20th century witnessed one of the greatest declensions in the history

of Christian theology as various philosophical strands produced Liberalism, with its belief in the goodness of mankind and its denial of key doctrines, such as the virgin birth, miracles and the resurrection and deity of Jesus Christ. Process Theology reflected the spirit of the age by asserting that God, like the world, was constantly developing, and that he somehow lives in dependence on human history.

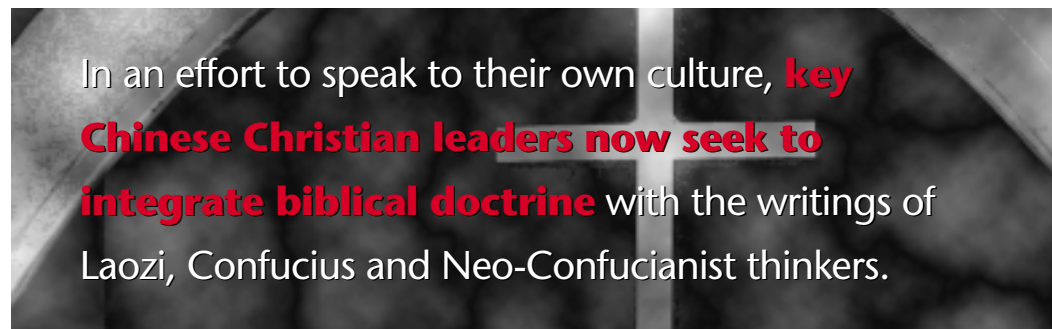
In the Roman Catholic Church, traditional beliefs were steadily eroded by the new critical views of the Bible and by the evolutionary speculations of Teilhard de Chardin and Karl Rahner.

Among “conservative” and “evangelical” Christians as well—partly because they too are creatures of their time, and partly through the influence of

feelings and extraordinary emotional experiences. Secular humanism manifests itself when Christians live as if this world is all there is, and “personal peace and affluence” is all that matters.

### **Philosophy and the Chinese Church**

What has all this to do with the Chinese church? Along with Coca Cola and McDonald’s, the winds of European speculation have blown westward across the Pacific, dropping the acid? rain of alien ideas onto the East Asian coast. Seminaries in Taiwan and Hong Kong, staffed with teachers educated in the West, inculcate future pastors with all the latest trends (and many outdated ones, too!). You can find the views of Barth, Liberation Theology,



seminary professors who received their training under non-evangelicals—formerly “conservative” seminaries, publishing houses and pulpits now bend before the prevailing “winds of doctrine” that have blown westward across the Atlantic.

Post-modernism, which repeats the Marxist claim that all thought-systems merely reflect the views of a powerful elite, has entered the professedly evangelical classroom, book stores and evangelical pulpits. As a result, the belief that we can know any absolute truth has lost favor among more and more professing Christians.

One does not have to look far to see the results of the cumulative impact of non-biblical ideas upon ordinary Christians. While some still hold to the Deist idea that miracles no longer take place, others display the influence of the Romantic Movement and 20th century existentialism in their search for religious

Moltmann, Pannenberg and “Openness” theologians on the lips and in the books of Chinese Christian leaders along with the routine denial of the entire trustworthiness of the Bible.

In China itself, the Three-Self Movement is committed to a theology heavily indebted to Marx, Process philosophy and the evolutionary ideas of Teilhard de Chardin, and Karl Rahner.<sup>2</sup> As more and more Western and overseas Chinese theologians lecture in the TSPM seminaries, we shall doubtless see an increase in the influence of Western philosophical concepts.

In an effort to speak to their own culture, key Chinese Christian leaders now seek to integrate biblical doctrine with the writings of Laozi, Confucius and Neo-Confucianist thinkers. Like their Western counterparts, they assume that key concepts from their own culture can be used to understand, illuminate and organize theology.

The huge rural house church movement is known for its fierce loyalty to a literal interpretation of the Bible, and few of its leaders have received formal theological training. Surely we can assume that Chinese Christians have nothing to fear from Western philosophy!

To some degree, that is true, though even the independent house churches are not exempt from alien ideas. To choose just one example from the 20th century, the sermons of Wang Ming Dao reflect as much Confucianism as they do biblical categories and concepts. This great man resolutely refused to read theology and confined himself to the study of the Scriptures, but he could not escape the philosophical milieu in which he grew up.

Among ordinary Chinese Christians, should we be surprised to find vestiges of ancient culture, such as a belief in yin and yang, *Qi (ch'i)*, the primacy of ethics in religion, or the necessity of “doing what is natural?”

As more and more house church leaders receive instruction from overseas teachers, or even from educated Christians from within China, we can expect Western errors to creep into this relatively “pure” movement.

### So What Do We Do?

Faced with the failure of previous generations to avoid the “spiritual pollution” of alien philosophical ideas, those seeking to communicate the Gospel among Chinese should keep in mind the following facts:

- An ignorance of the history of philosophy and of theology almost always leads to a repetition of previous mistakes.

- An awareness of the trends of our own culture will help us discern what “winds of doctrine” might be blowing through the windows of the church.

- Any time we begin with non-biblical categories or assumptions, we open ourselves up to alien influences. For example, if we assume that science, or psychology, or any particular philosophy or culture is a good starting point, we have already lost the battle for fidelity to the Bible as the sole authority for Christian truth.

“Contextualization,” for example, can mean the necessary requirement that we communicate the gospel in terms understandable to our hearers and relevant to their situation. On the other hand, it could refer to the age-old attempt to allow some non-biblical “context” to set the agenda for Christian teaching — whether that “context” is religious, social, political or theological.

- When Christians have tried to “integrate” Christianity with some other set of ideas, the resulting mix has contained much that diverges from biblical truth.

- When we seek to be accepted and respected by non-Christian thinkers, we make ourselves vulnerable to their ideas. Thus, sending people to study in “prestigious” universities often produces seminary professors who are not fully committed to the authority of the Scriptures.

- Christian theologians have succeeded best when they have allowed the Scriptures to pose the questions and establish the categories, while being attentive to what non-Christians are saying.

We who call ourselves Christians would do well to remember daily the necessity to present ourselves to God as a living sacrifice and to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, lest we be conformed to the world (Romans 12:1-2). After all, we desire to communicate the life-giving truth of a gracious God to a world in search of hope!

#### Endnotes

1. *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

2. I am indebted to scholars of the Chinese Church Research Center for this insight and for the one on Wang Ming Dao which follows.

► **Note:** For further reading on the relationships between the gospel, philosophy and Chinese culture, see the book review in this issue which represents a huge body of literature on these topics.

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#### History, Myth and Missions

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monolithic indigenous state religion or ideology. The banning of Christianity and other religions led to long eras of silence when believers went underground or disappeared, awaiting another chance. It is possible, and historically supportable, that such a wave of persecution could happen again.

### Lessons to Learn from Missions History

History shows us that it is impossible to insulate the church from context, and that domestic and international politics can bite you. Mission leaders have been too quiet in the U.S.-China policy debate leaving the field to extremist voices and ignorant advocates. It is necessary to be savvy and involved in shaping your own political environment.

Mission cultural strategies make a big difference. Insistence on Western cultural patterns for the church, such as the monasticism and asceticism of the Nestorians and Roman Catholics, put them in opposition to the Chinese family-centered culture and failed to build on biblical values and patterns found in indigenous beliefs and history. Here American evangelicals seem particularly vulnerable. There is little awareness that Christianity arrived in China earlier than in most countries—in the early part of the 7th century. Thus, Christianity in China is centuries older than the American Christian experience or Chinese communism. Encouraging Chinese to recover their own ancient traditions—about which future archaeology may tell us still more—could be a powerful approach to evangelism.

Certainly, though, our priority should be to allow the Chinese church to set the agenda based on its own experience and expectations for the future.

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Since China opened its doors and began reforms in the late 1970s, foreign influence has been visible and social change undeniable. The visitor to Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou or Shenzhen, seeing the numerous skyscrapers, private cars, traffic jams, McDonalds, blue jeans, busy airports and night clubs, may forget there is still a big cultural gap between China and the Western world. The reality is that China is experiencing the process of Westernization.

Indeed, this is true in many ways. China joined the WTO and implemented a market economy. Now, even its educational system is geared toward satisfying market demand. English is gradually replacing *pinyin*. Millions of Chinese travel overseas each year. Western nations and companies have increased their investments in China annually.

However, when we shift our focus to the Chinese political system, we notice that political reform has not kept pace with market reform. Western influence is obvious in the economic realm, and the Chinese government encourages people to embrace such influences calling this “connecting with the world.” Nevertheless, in the political realm, China stubbornly resists any Western influence. The Communist Party still has a tight grip on power. If any changes occur within the political realm, they come very slowly. Sometimes, the Party needs to appear as if it is making progress in political reform, but its approach is generally passive. For example, direct elections are still limited to village and township levels. As a whole, the Party’s resistance to Western influence in the area of political reform has been successful.

### A Spiritual Vacuum

One unique but subtle social change occurring in China today is that of ideology—people’s spiritual beliefs. Even though the government has lessened its tight control over the grassroots working class level, it nevertheless hangs on tightly hoping to win the ideology battle. The government is still in control of the mass media. Religion is still viewed as a “negative element” of society that requires tight control. After the 1999 *Falungong* incident, the government formed “Office 610” to combat the spread of “evil cults.” It began to pay a lot of attention to all religions.

Despite the fact that the government has not let up its tight grip over people’s ideology and spiritual beliefs, the Chinese people have all but given up on Communism. They have endured fifty years of communist propaganda and have

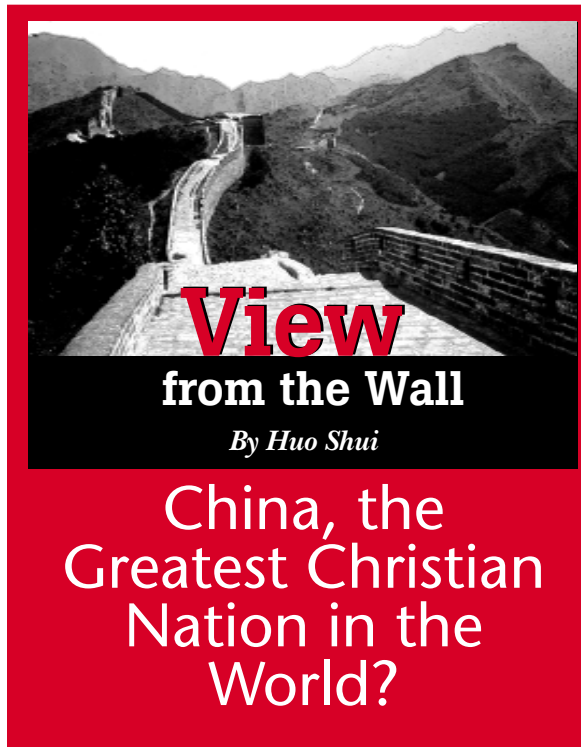
grown tired of hearing the same line over and over. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern block nations, coupled with China’s own economic boom, further convinced the Chinese people that Communist and Socialist ideology are hopeless and irrelevant. They recognize that the hope they put in Communist ideology in the past is merely a mirage today. Nowadays, what troubles people is what should replace communism as the core ideology or spiritual belief of the Chinese people.

Some people have thought Confucianism should be brought back. They proposed combining Confucian ideology with capitalism to fill the spiritual void. However, this approach would soon be proven unrealistic. Confucianism teaches loyalty to your rulers and emphasizes different levels of social class. These concepts will never be accepted by today’s people whose thinking is more scientific and democratic. It is impossible to ask people to return to a society that existed two thousand years ago. Today’s Chinese live in a vibrant market economy. Materialism, not religion, fills their minds.

At the same time, various religious beliefs were able to experience unprecedented growth despite the government’s efforts to curtail them. The fastest growing religion by far is Christianity. Many people turned to Christian-

ity because they were thoroughly disappointed with classic Marxism, and they were looking for something to fill that spiritual void. On the other hand, the rapid spread of Christianity can also be attributed to strong evangelistic efforts by Chinese Christians, overseas Chinese Christians and foreign Christian workers. It is difficult to determine how many Christians there currently are in China, but even the most conservative estimate would place the number in the tens of millions.

Why is Christianity the fastest growing religion in China? Is it possible for other religions to surpass Christianity? The answers are very clear. Christianity will continue to be the fastest growing religion in China in the next one hundred years. No other religion can surpass Christianity in number of believers. Although Buddhism and Daoism are regarded as having a part in China’s culture and history, and while Buddhism is popular in southern China, neither religion carries the evangelistic fervor that Christianity does. They are not popular among the intellectuals or the political elite. Furthermore, most professed Buddhists and Daoists do not have a good grasp of their own doctrinal teachings because they are difficult to understand. Very few people delve



## View from the Wall

By Huo Shui

## China, the Greatest Christian Nation in the World?

deeply into the teachings of these two religions. Most of their followers put their emphasis on external forms and functions of worship. The relationships and fellowship among followers of Buddhism and Daoism are also loose and unconnected. All these factors make it difficult for them to catch up with Christianity.

Islam is organized and has experienced clergy to teach Islamic doctrines. However, the spread of Islam is limited to certain minority people groups in China. Very few people among the Han majority (90 percent of China's population) are Muslims. From these perspectives, it appears that no religion in China today is in a position to meet the needs of the Chinese people more than Christianity.

Historically, the Chinese people have always had reverence toward "heaven." In contrast, Marxism's popularity in China lasted no more than fifty plus years. Personal stress and conflicts resulting from rapid social transformation argue for a greater role for religion. Many people seek spiritual shelter in an ever competitive society. In the past, Communism provided a sense of belonging for people in addition to its ideology. However, as corruption has become a fast spreading cancer of the Communist party, people no longer feel a sense of belonging by joining the Party. As personal income and living standards continue to rise, a lack of peace, joy and purpose in life are prevalent among many Chinese. A crisis regarding what life is all about plagues people from all levels of society

### No Longer a Foreign Religion

Christianity in China before 1949 looked very much like a foreign religion. However, after 1949 when China shut its doors to the outside world, there were virtually no foreign missionaries in China anymore. Yet, even in the midst of many political movements—especially the Cultural Revolution—the number of Christians grew despite the absence of foreign missionaries. The Christian faith also became more indigenous. Today, when you visit a church in China, whether it is a

house church or a TSPM church, you can no longer say that Christianity is a foreign religion. The churches are led by Chinese. You see Chinese Bibles. You hear Chinese worship songs. You experience a Chinese style of worship. The church looks and feels Chinese. Christianity in China has taken a form that is indigenous and contextualized. These things testify to the fact that Christianity has finally taken root in *Shenzhou*—in China, the land of God.

Another important fact about Christianity in China is that more and more movers and shakers of society are becoming Christians. In the past, people tended to picture Christians as rural, female and uneducated. Today, you can find Christian fellowship in almost any university. Christians commonly include professors, doctors, lawyers, engineers and managers. You can even find believers among government officials. During the Christmas season, books with Bible stories tend to be the hottest sellers in bookstores. No longer are voices heard in society attacking Christianity. Regardless of the government's attitude toward Christianity, people usually have the impression that Christians are kind, ethical and law abiding citizens.

### Setting Examples

What kind of influence are Christians having on society? It may still be too early to tell. This is because Christians do not have a voice in the state controlled mass media. The government still does not allow purely civilian newspapers, TV stations and publishers. Everything in the media must be approved by the government. Therefore, there has not been any reporting on how Christians are impacting society.

On a personal level, Christians do contribute greatly in shaping changes in values and worldview. The Christian idea of "love" touches many hearts. Unfortunately, the concept of repentance is lacking in Chinese culture. This poses a challenge for individual salvation. From this angle, it seems that the road to full acceptance of the Christian worldview is still long and winding. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the

foundation for Christianity to spread in China is in place. While most Chinese no longer hold hostile attitudes towards Christians, by and large they have not recognized the need for repentance. Individual Christians may be the light and salt at home and in the workplace, but the church as a whole still does not have permission to enter the center stage of society.

Despite these limitations, Christianity's impact on society cannot be underestimated. It has provided truth, salvation and hope. These are the issues in some of life's deepest quests. What kind of hope are people looking for? That is, without an authentic faith, without an absolute moral standard, without reverence from a repentant heart, without a sacrificial calling, a person will never experience all he or she is created to be and, as a nation, China will never be truly strong. When the truth of God is hidden in people's hearts, it will, one day, be expressed in an unpredictable and powerful way.

Although the Chinese people have not accepted Christianity entirely, neither have they rejected it. The door is wide open. The question is how to enable millions of people to hear the Gospel. Although currently evangelism is done one-by-one on a personal basis, in time it will confront and challenge Chinese society publicly.

China is on the road to becoming a world power. The question is not if it will, but rather what kind of influence it will exert on the world scene. What path will the nation take? In fifty years China will be a world superpower possessing a large population and destructive weapons; it will rival the U.S. and other world superpowers. It is clear that international criticism, slander, or so called "containment" do not help China or the rest of the world. Only a change in the ideology and spiritual beliefs of the Chinese people will ultimately help a powerful China to become a responsible and reliable world power.

**Huo Shui** is a former government political analyst who writes from outside China. Translation is by Tian Hui. 译

## Peoples of China

# The Cultural Crisis of Peasants in the Cities

Janet Chan

Urbanization in China is proceeding at full speed with no return. Nowadays, more and more factories are being established in Special Economic Zones (SEZs). These bring not only many opportunities to entrepreneurs, but many young people from villages seize the moment and rush to the cities for jobs. The city is a place full of possibilities and pitfalls. There are non-Christian peasants who come to know Jesus Christ in the city; however, there are also Christian peasants who lose their faith there.

### Life Crisis in Cities

Many peasants, most of which are young women, rush to cities everyday. Hoping to improve their standard of living, they leave their native villages and travel great distances to the SEZs to find jobs. However, once in the city, they find that urban life is thorny. It is beyond their imagination and they are seldom able to get on their feet. As new immigrants, they are often referred to as a "marginal community." They are frequently discriminated against by urbanites and are regarded as poorly educated or even uncivilized. With such an exceptionally low social status, it is not surprising to find that no matter how able they are, they can only find menial work such as cleaning, working in

Graham Cousens



**Facing a life crisis, workers may be more receptive to the gospel than they have ever been.**



homes as servants or factory jobs with unreasonably low wages. Mistreatment is very common and they suffer greatly due to harsh working environments such as fourteen hour workdays seven days a week, low wages, crowded factory dormitories and so on. Some of them are sexually harassed by their bosses or foremen.

The problem they face is more than

just one of adaptation or culture shock; the harsh working and living conditions depress these young workers. During this dreadfully tough time, they find very little support. Although most of them are accompanied by friends and neighbors, social support is meager as family members, their most important support system, are all far away.

With their families far away, and unable to adapt to city life and its harsh living and working conditions, these workers are drawn into an acute life crisis.

Nevertheless, this crisis period is sometimes helpful in pushing them to a point at which a definite decision must be taken.

Facing a life crisis, workers may be more receptive to the gospel than they have ever been. The positive witness of Christian workers among them arouses their curiosity; they become very interested in

the special vitality of the Christians. The Christian workers then have a golden chance of leading lost or strayed sheep to Jesus Christ.

### Traps in Cities

Multifarious city life opens the eyes of the newcomers to both the good and the bad. They are surrounded by all kinds of information and knowledge including that of the life and teachings of Jesus. Geographic accessibility in the cities helps pastors to preach and have Bible study classes or Sunday services with the factory workers. In addition, foreign investment attracts many foreigner investors and entrepreneurs. This enables many Christian industrialists to establish factories and then let the gospel be intro-

duced.

The openness of the city, on one hand, helps the spread of the gospel; on the other hand, it may have a negative impact on factory workers. Not only the environment, but the values of the city and village are poles apart. City life may destroy many of the factory workers' traditional values. Many Christian workers, who have already converted to Christianity in their villages, gradually lose their faith after working in the city for a time. While they were in their villages, they were able to spend much time in worship, Bible study and so on, but continuing these religious activities becomes difficult owing to the long working hours. How can young workers concentrate on Bible study after working fourteen hours without a break? The unreasonable and demanding work hours make them exhausted; many would rather rest or participate in relaxing activities instead of attending a Bible study class during their precious time off.

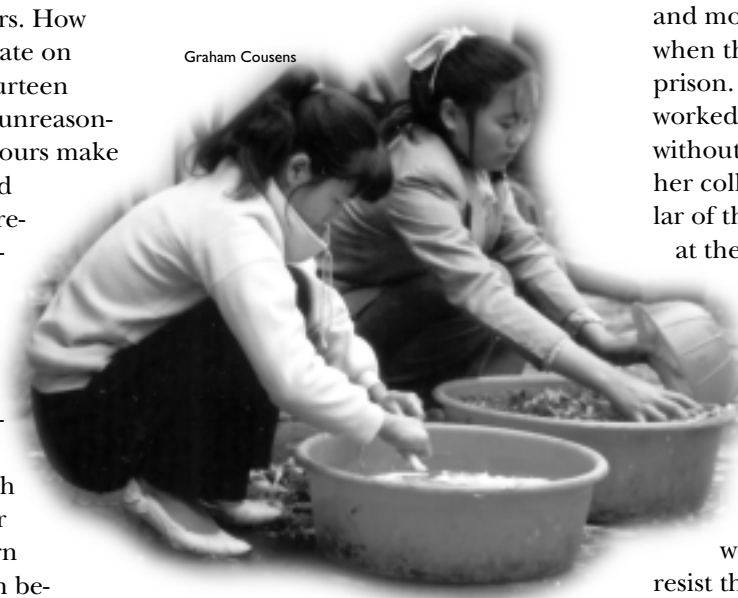
Back when the factory workers were still in their villages, they thought in a simple manner without much understanding of the secular world. In the cities, they learn new ways and ideas, but soon become confused and may give way to various temptations. Many factory workers, especially female workers, cannot resist the enticements and soon become involved in illegal businesses such as prostitution. Even though these women would never have thought of such degrading activity previously, trickery is often used. Many factories or stores claim to recruit clerks or sales women by offering a high salary. At first glance, these seem to be wonderful jobs; nevertheless, many female workers find it too late to resign when they finally realize that their actual job details involve immorality. They may strongly say no at the onset, but their cunning employers will ask them to stay and do just some cleaning work. As it is not easy to get a job in the city, most of them will, at last, choose to

stay, but swear to guard their bodies. Sooner or later however, having been tainted by what they constantly see and hear, they become one of the prostitutes. These kinds of "getting the foot in the door" stories are easily found in SEZs.

### Stories of Christians in Cities\*

It is said that the city is a good place for conversion; it is also an appalling place for desertion. The following stories tell the struggles of Christians in the city.

**Siu-nam's story:** Siu-nam was an 18-year-old girl who was born into a rural



**It is said that the city is a good place for conversion; it is also an appalling place for desertion.**



Christian family. Both of her parents are church leaders. She had attended church since her childhood and converted to Christianity in her teens. One day, her father became lost when he went out preaching; no one knew

his whereabouts. Siu-nam's mother had no choice but to take up the heavy burdens of the family and church. However, misfortune never comes singly; her mother was later apprehended by government officials. Siu-nam was told that her mother would not be released for three years. Siu-nam, with her younger ten-year-old brother, fell into serious financial difficulty. Having been encouraged by a neighbor, she decided to go to Guangdong for a job.

In the beginning, Siu-nam worked in a factory. She dedicated herself to hard work even though factory life was boring and exhausting. She intended to earn as much as possible so her father and mother would have a good life when they were discharged from prison. However, the factory she worked for suddenly closed one day without any forewarning. Siu-nam and her colleagues could not get even a dollar of the money they were owed. It was

at the end of the year and the possibility of finding another job was dim; yet, the family financial crisis was pressing. Siu-nam was completely at a loss. She finally walked into a hair salon knowing it was a common place for prostitution activities. Siu-nam, just like other girls working in the salon, could not resist the temptation for material gain and soon became one of the salon girls (prostitutes). After that, she did not pray to Jesus believing that He would never welcome and forgive a "dirty" girl like her.

Thank God that his grace is everlasting. One day, on the street, Siu-nam met a pastor. He told her, "God will not reject anyone; He never despises a broken and contrite heart. He has never forsaken you. Don't you know He might be the One who called me to meet you at this particular time and place? He loves you and hopes you will return and repent." With tears and gratitude, Siu-nam said goodbye to the pastor promising to say goodbye to the salon and her unprofitable days in the city.

**Wong's story:** Temptation is not reserved only for factory workers, but for Christian factory employers. Madam

Wong is the key person in a factory. At one time, she faced a struggle in obtaining a contract. This was a decisive contract which, if not signed, might imperil the prospects of the factory and upset the livelihoods of several hundred employees and their families. Her client gave her a hint that “rewards” (meaning money and sex) were needed for it to be signed. Wong brought the struggle to her pastor and prayed for a proper decision. Consequently, Wong signed the contract successfully without having to provide any additional rewards.

**Chan’s story:** Another employer, Mr. Chan, faced a similar situation, but was not as fortunate as Wong. He was also asked for additional remuneration as he strived for a significant contract. Like Madam Wong, he also brought the struggle to his pastor and prayed for God’s guidance. He lost the contract after refusing to provide additional remuneration and his factory went bankrupt. Although Chan lost his business, he gained back his family. He was once so busy that his family was left totally unattended, but following this event he was able to spend plenty of time with his wife and children.

### Feeding Christ’s Sheep

With openness and accessibility, the city is unquestionably a key area for preaching the gospel to Christ’s lost sheep. However, it is also an easy arena for “thieves and robbers” to enter the “sheep fold,” creating a high risk that the sheep may be stolen away. It is crucial to open the front door while at the same time keeping the back door shut. In the Special Economic Zones of China, feeding and taking care of Jesus’ sheep is vital and urgent requiring the ability and vision to carry this great responsibility through thick and thin.

\*Names of individuals have been changed.

**Janet Chan, B.Soc.Sc., M.Div., is currently studying for her Th.M. and is a research assistant at the Chinese Mission Seminary with a concentration in the study of Chinese society and churches.**

## Book Review

# The Gospel, Philosophy and Chinese Culture: Some Helpful Resources

*In this issue ChinaSource has deviated from its usual book review format to provide the reader with a selection of books that provide an in-depth look at the relationships between the gospel, philosophy and Chinese culture.*

### Reviews by John Peace

#### Non-Chinese Philosophy and Theology

*Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, by Colin Brown. Inter-Varsity Press, 1968, 320 pages. ISBN 0-87784-712-6, paper.

Dr. Brown begins his study with the Middle Ages and ends it with various thinkers in the mid-1960s. In his book, one recurring theme is the tendency of theologians to start from a non-biblical assumption.

Throughout the history of Christianity, many outstanding writers have chosen a philosophical principle or idea and used that to interpret—and usually to distort—what the Bible says. Always, these men desire to be “modern” and “relevant” and to present the Christian faith in a way that non-Christians will accept it. Almost always, they end up presenting something other than the Christian faith.

However, does that mean that Christians should ignore or avoid philosophy? No, because we are, inevitably, influenced by the underlying ideas of our culture. Brown suggests that knowledge of the history of ideas can help us

to recognize as “old” what claims to be “new”; to see where ideas that seem harmless can end up; to notice the contrasts between biblical faith and secular speculation; and to realize ways in which presentations of the Christian faith can be either weak and unpersuasive, or strong and persuasive.

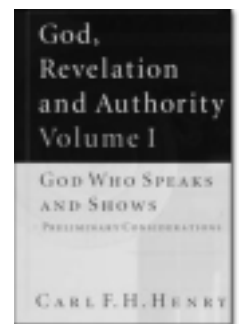
We are to measure all our theologies against the standard of the Bible and realize that the main goal is to know God—not to speculate about Him.

• • •

*God, Revelation, and Authority*, by Carl Henry. Word Books, 1976-1983, reprinted by Crossway books, six volumes of 3054 pp. ISBN 1-58134067.

Henry’s magnum opus will put off most potential readers by both its length and complexity, but those who take time to finish it will reap a rich reward. Chinese readers have the advantage of an abridgment of the first four volumes with the last two in preparation.

Henry’s major contribution is to restate biblical Christianity in the face of a multitude of competing and conflict-



ing views. In the process, he answers virtually all the questions raised by Chinese intellectuals today. Examples include: Can human language communicate divine truth? Is the Bible true? If so, in what sense? Has science disproved the Bible? Is the Bible filled with myths and legends? What is the meaning of history? Most importantly of all, he deals with the question: Is there an essential core of beliefs which transcend culture and can be considered normative for all peoples at all times? Henry makes a good case for an affirmative answer.

Henry discusses Kant, Spinoza, Hegel, Fierbach, Marx, Whitehead and a host of others. He evaluates the theological views of Augustine, Aquinas, the Reformers, Liberalism, Neo-orthodoxy, Radical theology, Neo-Thomism, the more recent Roman Catholic thinkers, Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology and much more. He refuses to give simple answers but does not claim to know everything or to understand God fully. Throughout, he insists upon taking the Scriptures as the sole authority for Christian truth.

• • •

***Integrative Theology***, by Gordon R. Lewis & Bruce A. Demarest. Zondervan Publishing House, 1996, three volumes in one: 394, 574 & 576 pp. ISBN 0-310-20915-3.

Though intended primarily as a textbook for seminary-level courses in systematic theology, this work may also be the best treatment of different theologies throughout the centuries including recent attempts to restate the Christian faith.



In addition to the usual systematic (that is, topical) discussion of the key doctrines of Christianity, Demarest and Lewis also present various points of view from the early church to the present and then interact with both Christian and non-Christian positions

different from their own. Since they take the Bible as their standard, they include thorough and nuanced Biblical exegesis of key texts pertaining to the subject under investigation. In this well-rounded process, they show how philosophical presuppositions have influenced different thinkers and how competing systems compare with Biblical teaching.

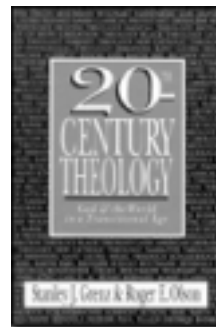
Like Carl Henry, the authors believe this method can result in a transcultural theology that can be communicated intelligibly in all societies. They also insist that true faith must issue in personal piety and works of love in community.

• • •

***Twentieth-Century Theology***, by Stanley J. Grenz & Roger Olson. Inter-Varsity Press, 1992, 392 pp. ISBN 0-8308-1761-1, paper.

Olsen and Grenz provide us with detailed but understandable explanations of the musings of the past century's well-known "Christian" writers. ("Christian" is in quotation marks because most of the theologians surveyed rejected basic tenets of orthodox Christian faith.) In the process, they show how most of the thinkers they examine started with non-biblical philosophical assumptions.

This helpful volume has several weaknesses, one being that evangelical theology receives very little consideration and much of that is derogatory. Nevertheless, the survey provides much useful background information for this new generation of Chinese scholars.



### Indigenization of the Gospel among Chinese

***Asia's Religions: Christianity's Momentous Encounter with Paganism***, by Lit-Sen Chang (Zhang Lisheng). China Horizon and P&R Press, 1999, 306 pp. ISBN 1-

892-6323-09.

Professor Chang writes with an authority based upon broad scholarship and profound reflection. His views on world religions are especially relevant because he became a Christian as a mature man after he had been a humanist, materialist, relativist and an ardent Buddhist.

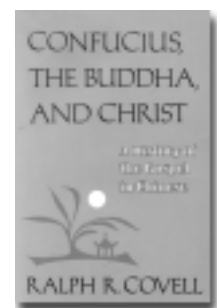
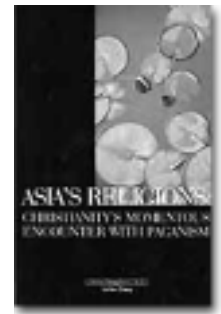
After a brief chapter on different approaches to world religions, Chang examines, in turn, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Zen, Hinduism, and Islam from a Christian viewpoint. As professor Chang discusses each religion, he includes a critique of the philosophy connected with the faith. After each analysis, he offers a "Christian criticism," in which he points out the significant differences between each faith and orthodox Christianity. Because of the irreconcilable nature of these disagreements, Chang would probably not advocate evangelism that begins by calling Chinese back to their own heritage.

• • •

***Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ: A History of the Gospel in Chinese***, by Ralph R. Covell. Orbis Books, 1986, 285 pp. ISBN 0-88344-267-1, paper.

Ever since the Nestorians, both foreigners and Chinese have wrestled with the relationship between the Gospel and Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and other facets of Chinese culture. Some have tried to adapt the Gospel to China; others have taken the reverse tack. Still others have tried to point out similarities while clarifying the differences.

Covell traces this complex story with a wealth of information and incisive analysis. His book should be required reading for all who would understand both the necessity and the difficulty of



indigenization.

Sometimes his comments seem to underplay the essentially “confrontational” (to use his word) relationship between the gospel and any other system of thought—a major weakness of his treatment. Nevertheless, though he firmly believes that the gospel must be communicated in dialogue with Chinese traditions and with a profound awareness of the suffering of her people, his study also shows the pitfalls of starting with non-Biblical categories or of trying to express the biblical message in non-Christian terms.

It strikes me that Chang, a former Buddhist and a Chinese, takes a less accommodating stance towards traditional Chinese thought than does Covell, an American Christian.

• • •

*Chinese Intellectuals and the Gospel*, by Samuel Ling and Stacey Bieler, Editors. *China Horizon and P&R Press, 1999, 254 pp. ISBN 1-892-63204-7.*

This excellent work is divided into two parts: Understanding Chinese Intellectuals and Reaching Chinese Intellectuals with the Gospel. The first part traces the history of the gospel in Chinese culture; the vicissitudes of Chinese intellectuals since under the Communists; and the intellectual searching of these brilliant minds today.



These chapters contain valuable insights into their openness to Western thinking. Led by scholars like Liu Xiao-feng, Chinese are studying and publishing translations of theorists like Heidegger, Weber, Durkheim, and Berger; Protestant theologians such as Tillich, Barth, Bultmann, Rienhold Niebuhr; and Roman Catholics such as Teilhard, Rahner and Kung.

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*John Peace, Ph.D., is a scholar who has worked among Chinese in Asia and America for 27 years.*

## Resource Corner

### China's Confession

A DVD in Mandarin with English subtitles

1 hour playing time

**F**or five thousand years the Chinese have called their native land “Shen Zhou”—the Land of God. This DVD explores long forgotten devout traditions and legends in Chinese history and the nation's search for salvation throughout the years.

It looks at early contacts between China and the West, reveals the bewilderment, struggle and difficult search for China's outlook since the Opium War and discusses the bitter lessons of the past fifty years, the hidden crisis of today and the solutions for tomorrow.



**Text versions:** Full length book available in Chinese only. See website.

English text available in abridged version from website:  
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### Evolution? Degeneration? Creation?

By Dr. William Ho

**T**his book, written by a medical doctor, has proved invaluable in opening the minds and hearts of China's intellectuals. It provides:

- An apologetic for creation and evolution
- A comparison of evolution and biblical creation
- Scientific evidence focusing on eight essential areas
- A presentation of the gospel
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# Culture, Contextualization and Character

Ever since the Gospel first entered the Middle Kingdom, its messengers have struggled to make the Christian message relevant within the Chinese cultural context.

Nestorian missionaries in the seventh century, recognizing Buddhism as the dominant cultural influence, dressed in Buddhist robes and borrowed Buddhist and Taoist terms to translate the Bible into Chinese. While their efforts at contextualization resulted in many accepting their message, the uniqueness of that message was ultimately lost, with Christianity being seen as merely another variant of Buddhism.

Centuries later, in the late Ming Dynasty, Matteo Ricci also donned the robes of a Buddhist monk, but quickly discarded them in favor of a scholar's gown as he turned his attention to the scholar-officials who were the cultural trendsetters of the day. Gospel tracts took the form of scholarly treatises, and homilies gave way to learned conversations as the Jesuits patiently engaged in an ongoing dialogue with China's Confucian elite. Later, the Jesuits' tolerance of

traditional ancestor practices brought them head-to-head with more conservative factions within the church. When the Pope sided with the conservatives and forbade Chinese converts from partaking in rituals honoring their ancestors, the Emperor responded by outlawing the Catholic faith in China.



Brent Fulton

Christianity returned under the cloud of the Opium Wars. Despite the efforts of many Protestant missionaries, like Hudson Taylor, to adopt Chinese dress and customs, Christianity was still identified with Western aggression. Only after the missionary presence was removed and the church in China underwent a lengthy and painful process of indigenization was it able to shed the label of "foreign religion."

More recently, following the failed student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, Christians outside China realized that Chinese intellectuals' attraction to Western-style democracy could become a bridge for communicating the Gospel. Many did in fact come to faith in Christ in the years following 1989. However, the "China can say 'no'" fever that swept the intellectual community in the mid 1990s made it clear that associating Christianity too closely with foreign democracy could ultimately

prove detrimental.

As the viewpoints represented in this issue of *ChinaSource* suggest, the debate over how to present Christianity within the cultural context of China is alive and well. Harking back to unanswered questions in the classics and in Chinese folk legends, some would seek to find a foothold for the Gospel in China's ancient history. Others contend that scripture alone must be the starting point for any attempt to introduce the Gospel.

While we continue to work out these difficult questions of contextualization, mindful of the mistakes of the past and trusting the Holy Spirit to lead us into the future, we must not lose sight of how the life of the messenger affects receptivity to the Gospel. In this regard we would do well to take a lesson from Matteo Ricci, whose brilliant mind and intimate knowledge of Chinese culture opened many doors in China, but whose exceptional character enabled him to walk through those doors and be received as a "friend of China."

*Brent Fulton, Ph.D., is the president of ChinaSource and the editor of the ChinaSource journal.*

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