

God and China

by Zhiming Yuan

The sermon explores the relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture, arguing that God's sovereignty over China is evident in Chinese history and culture, and that Christians should interpret Chinese history and culture with God's inspiration.

Scripture: Psalm 29:10, Psalm 47:2, Psalm 77:14, Jeremiah 10:10, Matthew 5:45, John 1:4, Acts 14:16, Acts 17:23, Acts 17:26-27, Romans 1:19, Romans 3:29

Topics: "Christian Culture", "God's Sovereignty"

Description

Zhiming Yuan delves into the intricate relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture, exploring the historical tensions, biases, and hindrances that have existed over the past 5000 years. He challenges the notion that Christianity and Chinese history are unrelated, emphasizing the essential connections between the two based on the concept of God defined in the Bible. Yuan highlights the need for Chinese Christians to engage in concrete research to confirm and manifest God's will in Chinese culture, rather than following the ways of atheists or being influenced by cultural biases.

Transcript

As Christian faith has spread unprecedentedly far and wide in Mainland China and as millions of Chinese, including hundreds of thousands of intellectuals, became Christians, a significant issue emerged: Is there a relationship between the God we believe in and the historic fate of the Chinese people? Has God had sovereignty over China during the past 5000 years? Has He been the God of the Chinese people since time immemorial?

We all know that since the incoming of the Chin religion during the Tang dynasty, the relationship between Christianity and the Chinese people has become tense. Due to the cultural arrogance of the Chinese people, the Boxer grudge, plus the bias of the Vatican Pope and western theologians toward Chinese culture, a series of hindrances in the fields of culture, politics, and theology have existed. Thus, any argument regarding the essential connection between Christianity and Chinese culture has been banned, either by Communist ideology or by certain theological cults.

At present, we can no longer avoid admitting or discussing this essential connection. With their hearts flowing in a bloody and tearful river for 5000 years, hundreds of thousands of Chinese intellectuals have experienced the bitter fruit that has remained. Now, having received the light, could that light not have shone throughout China's long history? How could the Chinese whose hearts have been enlightened by

God forget the 5000 glorious years? How could the past become a void in their hearts?

If the overseas Chinese who have been nurtured by the church or are only familiar with western theology, have never pondered this question, then today, the China issue obliges them to ponder it.

In view of the essence of the gospel, are Christianity and China's 5000-year history closely related or divided in their way?

Christianity, as a religion, with a history of 2000 years, nurtured in the west, is indeed not much related to China, which has a 5000-year long history and culture. Those who think that Christianity and Chinese history have nothing in common assume that Christianity is just a religion with a unique heritage restricted to time and space, and an organization with distinct terminology. No matter if they are atheists, chauvinists, or theologians, no matter if intentional or unintentional, they are prejudiced.

However, no true Christian will agree that the Christianity, he or she believes in, is not a religion as they assume. Christians believe there is a creator, who is "I am who I am," who is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient, who is the Word become flesh. He, who came to the world for redemption of the people, has fulfilled the predestined universal salvation. In this sense, Christianity and 5000-years of Chinese history have a series of essential relationships.

According to the concept of God defined in the Bible, God is not merely the God of the Israelites, but "From one man he made every nation of men" (Acts 17:26). "In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). "...The great king over all the earth" (Psalm 47:2,8). "Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles, too? Yes, of Gentiles" (Romans 3:29).

This revelation in the Bible tells us: God's general revelation is over the whole universe (Psalm 19); it inquires about culture (Acts 17:23); God has made plain to the people (Romans 1:19); maybe we can guess, for he is not far away from each of us (Acts 17:27).

According to the concept of history in the Bible, God controls the history of mankind (Acts 14:16; Psalm 29:10; Jeremiah 10:10). Similar happenings of mankind, as recorded in the first 11 chapters of Genesis, presumably can be found in the history of any of the ancient countries.

Evidently, since time immemorial, God has been the God of the Chinese people. Being China's sovereignty, God's work can be discerned in Chinese culture. The Chinese people are also Noah's descendants. Traces may be found in ancient Chinese classics of similar happenings as those recorded in the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

From the point of view of missionary strategy, is the gospel separated from or connected to Chinese history and culture?

It is said that just to preach about Jesus is enough. Those who know me are aware of my stubbornness. Those who have heard my speech at evangelistic meetings will have no doubt about my nature. Why do I want to probe the 5000-year history of China? The Bible says, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight the path for him" (Matthew 3:3). "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low...And the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all mankind will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Psalm 40:4-5). Referring to these passages, it seems China is included.

Since the May 4, 1919 Movement in China, atheism, under the cloak of scientism, humanism, chauvinism, history and culture, has been monopolizing these fields. The most destructive influence on Chinese culture is atheism. Defined as a national statute, its influence was even accepted by some Christians. When the atheists said that God is the God of the westerners, and the Bible is just a Jewish classic, some Christians echoed that God's work or revelation is nowhere to be seen in China. What does the Bible have to do with China? Then some non-believers doubted and said, "Since Christianity is a religion of the westerners and God has prejudices, why do I have to believe in it?"

It is said that we gain new insight by reviewing the old. At the end of the Ming Dynasty and at the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, western missionaries like Matteo Ricci, Jean Adam Schall Ban Bell, Ferdinand Verbiest, and Chinese reformers like Xu Guangqi, Emperor Shunzhi, Emperor Kangxi, and others triggered a gospel movement, bearing the maxim, "The road to heaven has now been made clear by the Holy Son; every true Confucianist was struck with awe." However, people like Yang Guangxian and Emperor Yongzheng thought that Christianity was incompatible with Chinese culture, while the Pope considered Chinese culture incompatible with Christianity. Under such an unfavorable situation, Chinese Christians and western missionaries had a difficult time in China. Then, for more than a hundred years, China closed its doors to foreign influence until the booming of canons along the coast, bringing subsequent humiliating results, jeopardized Chinese sovereignty.

Today, an ancient question has resurfaced with more acuteness: Is the gospel forever incompatible with Chinese culture? Must we defame ancient philosophers and teachers like Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, and Chuangzi, while teaching the gospel? Must the Chinese people forsake their 5000-year history when they believe in Jesus?

God is never so narrow-minded. At the birth of Jesus, God displayed a star in the sky to lead the three Magi of the east to Jesus, while none of the Jewish Rabbi saw the star. 700 years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah said, "See, they will come from afar~~some~~ from the north, some from the west, some from the region of Aswan" (Isaiah 49:12). It is true that Christianity has existed for only 2000 years. But Jesus was with God in the beginning, therefore, the Chinese have already lived under the shining of the true light. "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world" (John 1:4,9).

Evidently, to separate China and her 5000-year history from God's control is not the intention of the Bible. However, the notion of separation has produced obstacle after obstacle along the road to the spread of the gospel in China.

From the standpoint of faith, should Christianity interpret Chinese culture in its own way or follow the way of atheists?

Presumably, no Christian would approve of following the way of atheists, but actually, many people are doing so, consciously or unconsciously. For instance, when we are talking about "the Five Classics", "the Analects of Confucius", "Laozi", heaven, the Dao, the legendary figure "Nu Wa", the dragon, hieroglyphics, or "the History of 24 Dynasties", we interpret them based on hearsay or folklore with which we are familiar. Such interpretations came from the mouths of atheists years ago. When one is expressing his or her view on what Dao means, what heaven means, or what the original meaning of God is, he or she may not be aware that they are repeating atheistic interpretation which can be heard in the classroom or merely from other people.

There are a variety of myths regarding ancient Chinese classics or history. Marxism interprets it one way, while chauvinism interprets it another way. Buddhism and Confucianism have their respective interpretations. Then why can't Christianity have its own way of interpretation? Interpretations are usually based on prejudices or beliefs that have been handed down. Even the history of the Israelites, when interpreted by the atheists, has become a history of atheism. The interpretation of ancient Chinese history, which was handed down by atheists, has a variety of versions, with or without God's inspiration. When a person becomes a Christian, his life is renewed, and his mind is renewed too. His interpretation of values and his argument will be changed. He will no longer think and speak in the same way as a non-believer. He no longer airs his view as an atheist.

To interpret Chinese history and culture with God's inspiration is a matter of priority. Chinese churches must deal with it as soon as possible. The 5000-year Chinese culture should not be submitted to the discretion of the atheists, nor should Chinese Christianity be submitted to their command. We should not be involved in mutual fighting or just be blindly led.

From the perspective of present-day theology, should we emphasize or depreciate the essential connection between Christian faith and Chinese culture? Should we research the issue or avoid it?

Perhaps someone might say that the problem regarding the issue stated above is non-existent. The question lies in the methodology of carrying it out. But the bothersome fact is, few are taking actions, while the majority are merely critiquing. Time spent in research is little, while much time is wasted in rhetorical comment.

Where does God's sovereignty show itself in Chinese history? What inspirations of God have been reflected in Chinese culture? Are there traces indicating that the Chinese people are also Noah's descendants? How do the Chinese people reflect the sufferings they have endured and their longing for salvation? Is China ready for the eternal redemption of God? Such problems need research, but there lacks systematic and in-depth probing.

Research on faith and theology in China, during the past 5000 years, has been non-existent. Chinese theologians do not study the history of Chinese culture. Chinese theological circles have no interest in China's 5000-year history. Chinese seminaries do not offer courses about God's light in China.

Years ago, I bought a copy of "Outline of the History of Atheism in China." Then I began to think if there were a book, entitled "Outline of the History of God in China," it would surely be thicker than the book on atheism. It is a pity that the atheists are unable to write it, yet the church won't do it either. As I know, Xie Fuya, Xu Songshi, Wang Yongsin, Lin Zhiping, and Liang Yencheng have experiences in such research. But on the whole, there are more sticks and hats, which are very forceful, than researches. In order to write this article, I have scanned two versions of the subject index for the Bible, but the item "God and human history" is missing. It seems that, in the view of Christians, history may be only referred to as the history of the church, and God is only referred to as the God of the church. When has the great faith of God been reduced to such a level? I wonder.

For the sake of the sacred gospel mission in China, Chinese Christians should not be indolent and self-contained. We should follow God's vision and bravely step onto Mainland China. God needs supporters and researchers as well as people who will dedicate themselves to the sacred cause.

What perspective of concrete research should we engage in when probing the relationship between Chinese culture and Christian faith?

In general, there are three types of research in recent history, as follows:

Type One - Cultural Research: When Christianity is considered a part of western culture, the research has focused on the similarity and differences between Christianity and Chinese culture. Such research was usually carried out among academic circles, yet it remained unaccepted by the church as orthodox faith.

Type Two - Complementary Research: Some people maintain that Christianity can serve as supplementary to what Confucianism lacks. They even believe that the views of Christianity, such as original sin and redemption, can cure the China problem. Some people suggested that since the Old Testament recorded entirely Jewish history, Chinese ancient classics could serve as supplementary or replacements in the Old Testament, such that Christianity could be widely spread in China. The influence of such research does not have much effect within or outside the church.

Type Three - Comparative Research: Such research, which is obscure, will carry out parallel comparisons to discover the similarity between Chinese culture and the Bible. The result, whether it would bring pride to the Chinese culture or pay compliment to the Bible, is still not clear. Such research is valuable, but something is lacking at the root.

The root of mankind is God. The Bible is the inspiration of God. The truthfulness of the Bible is everlasting, no supplement or human evidence is needed. On the other hand, all human activities, including culture, history, archaeology and science, can only testify or manifest the faithfulness of God and His work. This can be seen through certain perspectives, certain eras and certain methods. The truth to be testified and manifested exists all over the world. China is no exception. Personally, I think the relationship between Chinese culture and Christianity is definitely a relationship of mutual confirmation. My research is a research of confirmation.

The foundation of such research is based on God and His word. No matter what you have discovered in Chinese culture, no matter that the discovery is so close to the contents of the Bible, it is a testimony to the truth of the Bible. In other words, they are the manifestation of God's will in China. It is not replacement, nor substitution, nor evidence bearing. It is not an obscure parallel comparison, but confirmation and manifestation. Based on this solid foundation, what do we fear? Should we be happier for our effort in glorifying God, when our research accumulates deeper and wider evidence? "You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples" (Psalm 77:14).

What does a flower, a bird, a ray of sunshine, or a drop of rain mean to the atheist? To Jesus, to believers of Jesus, these objects manifest God's power, God's boundless love (Matthew 5:45; 6:26-30). Reviewing the 5000-year Chinese culture, how can we say there is no manifestation of God's will?

It is God's compassion that Chinese culture testifies to God's work, that finite culture testifies to infinite truth, and that special revelation testifies to general revelation. If God has not revealed the former, we would not be able to see the confirmation of the latter. If He is not the light, how can I see? May be I will be reminiscing the June 4 incident, adjusting myself and criticizing other people, yet without which I would have never seen the justice and love extended throughout the 5000 years. I would not see God's light penetrating humanism in rancorous thorns. I would not see that we are not descendants of the dragon, but God's children. Moreover, I would not see that He has been sharing with us our sufferings in rebellion, nor

would I hear his persistent loving call...

Undoubtedly, a Chinese person who has become a Christian is still Chinese, but he is a newborn Chinese, a Chinese, who is enlightened about China's past, present and future in perspective and who has a new awareness of his new mission. Being such a Chinese, I should not, and dare not conceal what God has let me see. Except for the love and righteousness of God and His light of life, nothing in this world can disperse the shadow of hatred, bitterness and death, which has been overshadowing the Chinese people as long as three thousand years. This awareness, which surpasses all the principles of political factions and theological denominations, comes from the call of love from the Cross, the Cross produced by Pilate and the high priest.

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