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In Search of the Third Space: Theological Anthropology in Eastern Orthodoxy and Sino-Christian Theology

ALEXANDER CHOW

Abstract

This paper explores the growing field of Sino-Christian theology (*Hanyu Jidu shenxue* 漢語基督神學) in mainland China since its origins in the late-1980s. Born in a context of social unrest, many of the earlier voices within Sino-Christian theology have been interested in questions around theological anthropology. However, these scholars have tended to rely upon Western or Latin Christian resources. This paper proposes that Eastern Orthodox theology and, particularly *theosis* (θέωσις) or deification, can have a significant role to play in the future of Sino-Christian theology.

INTRODUCTION

The postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha (1949–) argues that it is impossible to accommodate different cultures under an overarching, universal framework. Whether this be a liberal democracy or Marxism or any other framework, “I try to place myself in that position of liminality, in that productive space of the construction of culture as difference, in the spirit of alterity or otherness.”¹ In what he terms the “Third Space,” Bhabha looks towards the articulation of a culture which mediates between what he sees as a politics of polarity between dominant cultures.

In the last three decades, academic study in China has been reborn in a context that has been searching for this Third Space.² In the early 1980s, intellectual debates were encouraged to free people from the dogmatic thinking engendered decades earlier. Many scholars began reexamining China’s intellectual framework and exploring foreign theories in social sciences and humanities. Like the intellectual fervor of the May Fourth Enlightenment (*Wusi qimeng* 五四啓蒙), this Second (Chinese) Enlightenment (*Di er ci qimeng* 第二次啓蒙) or New Enlightenment (*Xin qimeng* 新啓蒙) has seen many hoping for a true cultural revolution.³ Unlike its early twentieth-century predecessor which sought to completely overthrow the previous culture, the Second Chinese Enlightenment has followed a German approach of enlightenment that is more sympathetic to China’s historical legacy and traditional teachings.

¹ Homi K. Bhabha, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 209.

² The sinologist Arif Dirlik argues that the revival of Confucianism in China since the 1980s is partly due to a kind of postcolonial discourse. In this paper, I am extending this view to encompass the growth of Christian studies in China in the Second Chinese Enlightenment. Arif Dirlik, “Confucius in the Borderlands: Global Capitalism and the Reinvention of Confucianism,” in *Boundary 2* 22, no. 3 (1995): 229–273.

³ Xu Jilin 許紀霖, “The Fate of an Enlightenment: Twenty Years in the Chinese Intellectual Sphere (1978–1998),” trans. Geremie R. Barné and Gloria Davies, in *Chinese Intellectuals Between State and Market*, ed. Edward Gu and Merle Goldman (London: Routledge, 2004 [1998]), 183–203; Edmond Tang 鄧守成, “The Second Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and Christianity Today,” in *Identity and Marginality: Rethinking Christianity in North East Asia*, ed. Werner Ustorf and Toshiko Murayama (Frankfurt am Main / New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 55–70.

Since the late 1980s, the academic study of Christianity has played a significant role in the Second Chinese Enlightenment. In the growing trend of “Sino-Christian theology” (*Hanyu Jidu shenxue* 漢語基督神學) or “Sino-theology” (*Hanyu shenxue* 漢語神學),⁴ Christianity has been studied by a number of Christian and non-Christian scholars from departments of philosophy, humanities and social sciences of secular universities and research institutions throughout China. Among other things, Sino-Christian theology attempts to understand how resources within Christianity and traditional Chinese culture can help identify a Third Space for China in the process of modernization and nation-building.

While a tremendous amount of academic output has been produced within Sino-Christian theology in the last few decades, it is curious to note that much of it has focused on a Western or Latin form of Christianity. A number of studies have begun to discuss various aspects of Eastern Christianity with the Chinese context,⁵ however, the tendency of many scholars in Sino-Christian theology has been to remain focused on Western formulations of Christian theology. As a consequence, Christianity and Chinese culture are often understood as opposing worldviews—particularly in their respective understandings of human nature. Interestingly, several observers from outside mainland

⁴ This term has also been used in a narrower sense encompassing the theological thinking of the so-called “cultural Christians” (*wenhua Jidutu* 文化基督徒). However, for the purposes of this paper, “Sino-Christian theology” will be used more broadly to refer to the academic study of Christianity in mainland China since the late 1980s. See Lai Pan-chiu 賴品超, “Typology and Prospect of Sino-Christian Theology,” *Ching Feng*, n.s. 6, no. 2 (2005): 211–230.

⁵ See Su Yuntai (So Yuen-tai), “Ren keyi cheng shen? Shi lun Jidu zongjiao yiyi xia de chengshenguan” 人可以成神？——試論基督教意義下的成神觀 [Can Human (sic) Become God? On Christian Deification], *Logos and Pneuma* 22 (Spring 2005): 201–229; Lai Pinchao (Lai Pan-chiu), “Jidu zhengjiao zhi shenxue fuxing jiqi dui Hanyu shenxue de yiyi” 基督正教之神學復興及其對漢語神學的意義 [Renaissance of Orthodox Theology and Its Significance for Sino-Christian Theology], *Logos and Pneuma* 32 (Spring 2010): 247–272.

“Eastern Christianity” refers to Christian traditions which find their origins in the Greek-speaking Eastern Roman Empire, while “Western Christianity” finds its origins in the Latin-speaking Western Roman Empire. The main focus of this article will be on “Eastern Orthodox” or “Byzantine” theology—the theological tradition affiliated with the Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which encompasses more than a dozen autocephalous churches like the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Orthodox Church of Russia, etc. While there is some historical and theological crossover, Eastern Orthodox Christianity does not include other groups of Eastern Christianity such as the Oriental Orthodox Church, the Eastern Catholic Church or the Assyrian Church of the East.

China have suggested that there is an affinity between anthropological orientations of Eastern Christianity and traditional Chinese teaching.⁶ However, very little has been written from within the mainland engaging in these two broad traditions. In recent years, there has been some interest in the history of Orthodoxy in China and, in Hong Kong, the publication of a handful of translations of Eastern Orthodox writers like Vladimir Lossky (1903–1958) and Georges Florovsky (1893–1979).⁷ Regretfully, there has been very little analysis conducted between Byzantine theology and Chinese religions and philosophies.

Can Eastern Christianity be a more mediating voice between the traditions of the West and China and be useful in the construction of the Third Space in China? In particular, this article proposes that the key Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* (θεωσις) or deification and several related subjects can add a much needed dimension to the discourse of Sino-Christian theology.

A SOCIOLOGICAL CRISIS

He Guanghu 何光滬 (1950–) recalls that his generation of scholars in Sino-Christian theology “had to quit school because of the disastrous Cultural Revolution, and they struggled for life at the bottom of society.”⁸ They experienced great hardship and frustration but, during the beginning of the Second Chinese Enlightenment, were no longer bound by a rigid ideological dogmatism and were allowed to freely pursue a variety of intellectual endeavors.

⁶ Julia Ching 秦家懿, *Chinese Religions* (London: MacMillan, 1993), 7–8; Robert C. Neville, *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2000), 164. Cf. Chan Wing-tsit 陳榮捷, *Religious Trends in Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), 175.

⁷ Zhang Sui 張綏, *Dongzhengjiao he Dongzhengjiao zai Zhongguo* 東正教和東正教在中國 [The Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church in China] (Shanghai: Xuelin, 1986); Vladimir Lossky, *Dongzhengjiao shenxue daolun* 東正教神學導論 [Orthodox Theology: An Introduction], trans. Yang Deyou 楊德友 (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 1997); Georges Florovsky, *Jidujiao yu wenhua* 基督教與文化 [Christianity and Culture], trans. Li Shuqin 李樹琴 (Hong Kong: Logos and Pneuma, 2009).

⁸ He Guanghu, “Three Generations of Chinese Christianity Researchers: From the 1950s to 2007,” in *China and Christianity: A New Phase of Encounter?* ed. Felix Wilfred, Edmond Tang and Georg Evers (London: SCM, 2008), 65.

However, these newfound liberties would face several developing sociological concerns. During the 1989 conflict in Tiananmen Square, these and upcoming scholars would again witness firsthand of the moral turmoil that humanity could offer through the draconian practices of their own government. Additionally, as China in the early 1990s began to develop its so-called “socialist market economy,” the material success experienced by some was accompanied by existential anxieties experienced by others. Chinese society has since then become much more affected by consumerism, individualism and widespread corruption. Within this context of social unrest, the academic discourse began to explore questions around the human person. Especially among some of the earlier voices in Sino-Christian theology, there have been at least two notable themes related to theological anthropology: the doctrine of sin and the question of moral responsibility.

Human Condition

Before turning to the academic scene, it is worth noting that the doctrine of sin has played a very important role within the Chinese churches. Part of this may be due to the existential resolve that many Christians find in an explanation of social problems as being sourced in a depraved world. But this is also due to the fact that the vast majority of Protestant Chinese congregations, both registered and unregistered, come from conservative theological traditions where original sin and individual salvation have played an important role. However, Ding Guangxun 丁光訓 (K. H. Ting, 1915–) advocates moving away from teachings on “sin” or “justification by faith.” Instead, he prefers to speak about God as the Cosmic Christ (*yuzhou de Jidu* 宇宙的基督) whose love surpasses the universe and beckons all to love as co-creators who share in God’s creative process.⁹ Ding believes his theology acts as a corrective to conservative teachings on the human condition that marginalize non-Christians—particularly communists, many of whom he considers “humanistic atheists.”

In contrast, scholars in Sino-Christian theology have taken a very different approach to the Christian understanding of the human condition, often focusing on cultural comparisons between the East and the West. As early as 1988, Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓 (1956–) characterized

⁹ K. H. Ting, “The Cosmic Christ,” in *Love Never Ends: Papers by K. H. Ting*, ed. Janice Wickeri (Nanjing: Yilin, 2000 [1991]), 408–418.

China as a culture of joy and Christianity as a culture of salvation in his influential work *Zhengjiu yu Xiaoyao* 拯救與逍遙.¹⁰ Liu points out that Daoism and Confucianism tend to view humanity as originally good with a goal of joy and happiness, giving little space for spiritual attitudes towards suffering and sadness.¹¹ Additionally, Confucianism teaches about an inner-transcendence (*neizai chaoyue* 內在超越) which emphasizes the innate self-sufficiency of the human person to achieve joy and perfection by oneself. However, the presence of evil in the world shows the impossibility of such a task because one's inner-transcendence is bound by the natural realm. He argues that unlike the Chinese culture of joy, the Christian culture of salvation is realistic about the world that has sin, evil and suffering. Influenced by the writings of Karl Barth (1886–1968), Liu believes that hamartiology highlights the stark separation of natural and divine realms and demonstrates the limits of human ability.

In contrast with Liu Xiaofeng, Zhuo Xinping 卓新平 (1955–) points out that hamartiology has struggled in the West due to the rise of humanism since the Renaissance.¹² Likewise, Chinese thinkers like Mengzi 孟子 (c.372–c.289 BC) speak of both humanity's original goodness and its "inhuman" or "animal" inclinations. Zhuo sees this darker side of human nature lurking in the thoughts of many Chinese philosophers and even in the 1990s when many in China have found themselves with "moral bankruptcy, human corruptibility and pessimism about life."¹³ However, Zhuo is also concerned with how missionaries have translated the biblical term "sin" (*zui'e* 罪惡). Conveying ideas of "crime" and "evil," the neologism carries legal, social and moral connotations without necessarily any existential or religious meaning. Zhuo, who is not a Christian, proposes that the church adopts new terminology which highlights a view of sin that is stripped of moral implications and refocused on our inabilities in reaching a transcendent God. Such amendments would make Christianity a better

¹⁰ While Liu Xiaofeng has later written more on the subject, the focus here is on his earlier and more influential text. See Liu Xiaofeng, *Zui yu qian* 罪與欠 [Sin and Debt] (Beijing: Huaxia, 2009).

¹¹ Liu Xiaofeng, *Zhengjiu yu xiaoyao* 拯救與逍遙 [Salvation and Indifference] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's, 1988), 173–183.

¹² Zhuo Xinping, "The Concept of Original Sin in the Cultural Encounter Between East and West," trans. Edmond Tang, in *Christianity and Modernization: A Chinese Debate*, ed. Philip L. Wickeri and Lois Cole (Hong Kong: Daga, 1995), 93–96.

¹³ Ibid., 94–95.

partner in the modernization of China by addressing its existential needs.

When one examines the works of scholars in Sino-Christian theology like Liu Xiaofeng, Zhuo Xinping, Yang Huilin 楊慧林 (1954–),¹⁴ Zhang Qingxiong 張慶熊 (1950–),¹⁵ etc., one must wonder why intellectuals, many of whom do not have faith commitments, are interested in the doctrine of sin. At least for the non-Christians in the group, it is not as though the task of clarifying this doctrine is with the end of receiving the salvific work of Christ. Rather, these scholars have experienced great evil in the Chinese society and find resources from Christianity (especially through the writings of the Russian Orthodox novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky [1821–1881]) useful for the Chinese context. Yet in China, the problem of evil is not discussed using the common Western category of theodicy (i.e., justifying the goodness of God). The main tension is not between the existence of evil and the existence of a good and omnipotent God, but a tension between the existence of evil and the existence of a good and omnipotent humanity. The optimism and hopefulness about humanity found in traditional Chinese teachings are challenged when faced with societal and personal conflicts. Instead of a theodicy, these scholars are attempting to work out an “anthropodicy” (i.e., justifying the goodness of humanity), and the notion of “sin” provides intellectual resources to address the existential struggles of Chinese society today.

Human Response

A second, related subject of concern that has played an important role since the 1980s has been the question of moral responsibility. For two millennia of China’s history, morality was largely defined by Confucianism, the official state ideology. However, Confucianism was severely attacked during the May Fourth Enlightenment and the subsequent communist revolution. Morality would then be understood in terms of liberating China from the feudalistic thinking that Confucianism and other ideologies had shackled upon the Chinese mind. How-

¹⁴ Yang Huilin, *Zui’e yu jiushu: Jidujiao wenhua jingshen lun* 罪惡與救贖——基督教文化精神論 [Sin and Atonement: The Spirit of Christian Culture] (Beijing: Dongfang, 1995).

¹⁵ Zhang Qingxiong, “Sin and Evil in Christian and Confucian Perspectives,” in *Christianity and Chinese Culture*, ed. Miikka Ruokanen and Paulos Huang (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 22–36.

ever, by the time of the Cultural Revolution and 1989, the fundamental moral problem now seems to be the lack of any moral compass at all.

As has already been mentioned, Protestant congregations which have dominated the church scene since the 1980s tend to maintain more conservative theologies. Earlier on, this meant that the Christian response involved individual piety and an otherworldliness—somewhat along the lines of H. Richard Niebuhr’s “Christ against culture” motif. But since the 1990s, there has been the development of many newer urban churches that express more of a “Christ the transformer of culture” view of the broader society. Though still coming from a conservative theological orientation, Christians of these younger churches have an interest in social issues and public theology, moving from individual piety to a stronger sense of societal piety.

For academics in Sino-Christian theology, discussions around human responsibility have attempted to understand how China has arrived at its current predicament and where it must go. Liu Xiaofeng explains that China’s faltering ethics has mainly been due to the lack of appropriate intellectual resources.¹⁶ “Sin” is the spiritual starting point for Christians to pursue salvation in God. In Confucianism and Daoism, “virtue” (*de* 德) is the basis for pursuing joy and happiness. While he sees “virtue” as being content with a process of self-development in the natural life, “sin” rejects the natural and is driven towards a holy life to transcend the natural with the supernatural. Liu believes China’s interest in humanistic moralities has goals that are too low, immanent and utilitarian. A naturalistic inner-transcendence is unable to recognize the weaknesses of humanity. In contrast, the pessimistic anthropology of Christianity highlights for him the need for the divine—a transcendent moral reference point. He believes that this offers China a much higher goal that promises a non-utilitarian morality.

From the perspective of You Xilin 尤西林 (1947–), morals in the Chinese society are the habits of collective behavior, traditionally modeled by the ruling class (*junzi* 君子) and imitated by the rest of society (*xiaoren* 小人).¹⁷ In today’s China, where corruption exists among many officials, individuals find it much more difficult to maintain moral integrity against the behavior of the majority. In contrast, Christianity denies any malleable moral position, but esteems only the

¹⁶ Liu, *Zhengjiu yu xiaoyao*, 175–183.

¹⁷ You Xilin, “Christianity’s Dual Meaning in Chinese Modernisation,” in *Sino-Christian Studies in China*, ed. Yang Huilin and Daniel H. N. Yeung 楊熙楠 (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2006), 46–47.

perfect self-sacrifice of Christ as the ultimate moral exemplar. Like Liu Xiaofeng, You Xilin believes that Christianity provides an absolute moral reference point to overcome the relativized morality of Chinese thought and the corruption that persists in modernizing China.

However, Du Weiming 杜維明 (Tu Wei-ming, 1940–) argues that traditional Chinese teachings do have the resources for an appropriate moral response in China today.¹⁸ Du writes that Confucianism teaches about “anthropocosmic” humanity where humans are both creatures and co-creators with Heaven.¹⁹ On the one hand, this highlights the interconnectedness between Heaven and the cosmos. But more importantly, Du Weiming argues that humanity is endowed with an innate sense of morality to realize, through self-cultivation, the will of Heaven (*Tian ming* 天命). Hence, if China were to once again embrace Confucianism, it would be able to lift itself from its dire moral state.

As China continues to pursue its goals of modernization and nation-building, it has tended to do so at the cost of a strong sense of morality. However, are Christianity and traditional Chinese culture as antithetical as has often been portrayed? Are there perhaps other resources which can help mediate these discussions and provide an additional voice in Sino-Christian theology?

THEOSIS IN THE THIRD SPACE

The academic study of Christianity has developed dramatically over the course of the past three decades. However, one of the major issues of intellectual discourse is the prevalence of several false dichotomies. Firstly, these academic discourses often work from understandings of China and the West by comparing a Christian culture against a Confucian culture. While both Christianity and Confucianism have served important roles in the foundations of respective cultures (or plurality of cultures), there is little discussion about the fact that Christianity is not

¹⁸ Since 2009, Du Weiming has been member of the faculty at Peking University 北京大學; prior to this, the Confucian scholar had mainly been staying at Harvard University in the United States. However, ever since the 1980s, Du has been an important participant in China's intellectual discourse.

¹⁹ Tu Wei-ming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*, rev. and enlarged ed. (New York, NY: SUNY, 1989), 78, 102–107.

limited to the West or Confucianism to China. Christianity has had a long tradition in Eastern Europe (and, even earlier, in the Eastern Roman Empire) and the Middle East and has since the twentieth century been gravitating away from the West and towards Africa, Asia and Latin American. Likewise, Confucianism has a long history not only in mainland China, but also in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore and other regions of Asia. It has also more recently grown in status in the West, particularly in forms such as “Boston Confucianism.”

Secondly, these debates tend to generalize that “original sin” is universal within Christianity and “original goodness” is universal within Chinese religiosity. Rarely is it remembered that, for many centuries, Christianity existed without such a term. It was not until the fourth century when “original sin” entered the Christian lexicon through the debates between Augustine (354–430) and Pelagius (c. 354–c. 420/440). Additionally, Confucianism today tends to focus on Mengzi’s teachings on the potential of goodness in human nature. However, it is often overlooked that Mengzi was opposed by Xunzi 荀子 (c. 310–237 BC) who, until his popularity waned during the Tang Dynasty 唐朝 (618–960), was considered a legitimate transmitter of Confucianism.

An additional concern can be found in the theological resources that individuals use when discussing Christianity. Specifically, there is overt dominance of understanding Christianity in terms of the Western or Latin tradition. It is curious that though Eastern Orthodoxy has not been explicitly discussed by academics within mainland China, many scholars in Sino-Christian theology have been interested in writers like Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) who have been greatly influenced by Orthodox Christianity. Perhaps Byzantine theology can provide a mediating tradition between the pessimistic anthropology of Western Christianity, especially after the Reformation, and the optimistic anthropology of traditional Chinese teachings and offer additional resources for developing the Third Space in China today.

Theosis or deification is one of the most significant doctrines within Byzantine theology and can be found in the writings of many church fathers, East and West.²⁰ In the context of the Second Chinese En-

²⁰ While many have characterized *theosis* as the key doctrine in Eastern Orthodoxy, Andrew Louth argues that this perception exists mainly due to the diminishing role the teaching has played in the West. Nevertheless, Louth does agree that the doctrine maintains a significant place within Byzantine thought. Andrew Louth, “The Place of *Theosis* in Orthodox Theology,” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and*

lightenment, particularly in relation to Sino-Christian theology's interest in theological anthropology, it is perhaps worthwhile to examine three key concepts related to the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*: ancestral sin, union with God and humanity as microcosm and mediator.

Ancestral Sin

One of the major hallmarks of Byzantine theology and traditional Chinese thinking, as opposed to Latin theology, is a much more optimistic anthropology. Humanity, as we read from Genesis 1:26–27, is created in the image and likeness of God. In the West, both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) hold that the “image” and the “likeness” referred to two distinct aspects of God endowed upon humanity.²¹ However, by the time of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564) identified the two terms as referring to a single idea, expressed using Hebrew parallelism.²² In their view, after the Fall, the image/likeness of God remains in humans only as a relic of God's intention for his creation. In the case of Orthodox writers, many have tended to follow the model laid out by Irenaeus (c.130–c.200) who believes that the divine image gave humans the ability to reason and make free choices while the divine likeness was a supernatural endowment of the Holy Spirit.²³ After the Fall, humanity lost the divine likeness, but the image of God remains intact—albeit enslaved by the Devil.²⁴

Maximus the Confessor (580–662), considered by many as the father of Byzantine theology, adapts Irenaeus' idea by speaking about four divine attributes communicated to and preserved in humans. In God's creation of humanity in his image, the first two attributes, being and eternal being, are given as the very essence of human existence. The latter two, related to his likeness, is goodness and wisdom; they are

Development of Deification in Christian Traditions, ed. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 32–44.

²¹ Augustine, *The Trinity* 7.6.12; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.93.

²² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, trans. George V. Schick, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), 1:60–65; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.15.3.

²³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.6.1 and 5.16.2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.18.1; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1978), 171.

only offered to humanity's volitive faculty "in order that what [God] is by essence the creature might become by participation."²⁵ Humans have the freedom to choose whether they wish to participate in God. The divine likeness is humanity's goal and potential. Following Irenaeus, Maximus believes God created humanity immature but with every intention that it may grow in maturity and moral perfection.²⁶ However, the likeness of God was lost in postlapsarian humanity. While the image of God cannot be defaced (as in Luther or Calvin) or destroyed, the likeness can be and is destroyed by sin. It is only by divine grace through a spiritual process that humans once again pursue the likeness of God. Hence, Orthodox Christians maintain that part of human nature is self-determination to make moral choices, enabled by God's grace and allowing a person to move either towards or away from the likeness of the Creator.

This seed of potential in humanity to reach maturity and perfection is found not only in Eastern Orthodoxy, but also within traditional Chinese teachings. For example, within the Chinese school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, all sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature (*Foxing* 佛性) and have the potential of attaining enlightenment (*puti* 菩提). Likewise, Mengzi asserts that humans have the fundamental ability for goodness and are endowed with a moral sense which enables all to become a sage. This is even true of Xunzi who, though opposed Mengzi by asserting that humans have a tendency towards chaos and destruction,²⁷ insists that human nature can be transformed by social and moral education, enforced by laws and guided by moral code. Some may argue that this trajectory towards maturity and perfection cannot be said of philosophical Daoism (*Daojia* 道家). However, while the Daoist's goal is to return to one's primordial simplicity (*pu* 樸), this is the place of perfect understanding and insight into life experiences and understandings of right and wrong. Though these examples do not encompass every facet of Chinese religious and philosophical thought, its general tendency shares with Eastern Orthodoxy a desire to champion the positive progress of humanity.

However, from the Byzantine perspective, there is a fundamental hurdle that must be overcome in order to reach the God-created goal of

²⁵ Maximus the Confessor, *The Four Hundred Chapters on Love* 3.25, in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, ed. George C. Berthold (London: SPCK, 1985), 64.

²⁶ See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.38.1–2.

²⁷ Antonio S. Cua, "Dimensions of *Li* (Propriety): Reflections on an Aspect of Hsün Tzu's Ethics," *Philosophy East and West* 29, no. 4 (October 1979): 381.

humanity: ancestral sin.²⁸ Along the tradition of many Greek and Latin fathers, Orthodox commentators often speak about “ancestral sin” rather than “original sin”—a later invention of Augustine in his debates against Pelagius. In prelapsarian humanity, the church fathers tend to agree that Adam and Eve’s free will allowed them to commit that first sin. However, ancestral sin means that the first humans alone must be held guilty of that sin and that postlapsarian humanity shares in the punishment which, in contrast with Augustine, is primarily death. The fundamental error in Augustine’s view, so Byzantine writers claim, is in the inheritance of Adam’s guilt; a person can only be held responsible for a sin he or she has committed. The inheritance of guilt is erroneous.

One of the main texts Augustine used in his debate with Pelagius was from Romans 5:12. Mainly having access to the Latin translation of the Bible, Augustine would have read “*in quo omnes peccaverunt*” (“in whom [i.e., Adam] all sinned”); this conveys the idea that death spread to all humans because, through Adam’s sin, all of humanity has sinned. However, the Latin differs from the Greek rendering: “ἐφ’ ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον.” One Byzantine scholar explains, “*Eph ho*, if it means ‘because,’ is a neuter pronoun; but it can also be masculine, referring to the immediately preceding substantive *thanatos* (‘death’).”²⁹ From this basis, many Orthodox interpreters hold that all sin because all are mortal—death makes individual sins inevitable. We cheat and kill and steal because of our mortality; we sin with hopes to enhance and prolong our temporary existence. Therefore, Christ’s death and resurrection do not satisfy God’s wrath or act as a penal substitution for our personal and inherited guilt; rather, his atonement was one of victory over death and sin.

As earlier discussed, scholars of Sino-Christian theology engage with the doctrine of sin as a means to deal with the problem of the existence of evil and the existence of a good and omnipotent humanity. Likewise, Eastern Orthodoxy holds a tension between the optimism of attaining God’s likeness and the realism of evil tendencies found in the mortality of postlapsarian humanity. Byzantine theology agrees with

²⁸ John S. Romanides, *The Ancestral Sin*, trans. George S. Gabriel (Ridgewood, NJ: Zephyr, 1998).

²⁹ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, rev. 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1983), 144. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 342–343.

Zhuo Xinping in that it does not view humanity's main problem in terms of legal or moral bankruptcy; the main problem is our distance from God—that is, death. While the Orthodox position of “ancestral sin” does not have the same concept of inherited guilt as the Augustinian tradition, they share similar understandings of an incapability of humanity. Hence, like the hamartiology of Liu Xiaofeng and Zhuo Xinping, ancestral sin points to the need for supernatural help. We cannot rely on our inner-transcendence because we are limited by our mortality; we need the outer-transcendence of God. For the Eastern Orthodox, morality is not merely a humanistic goal; only by seeking Christ and responding to his divine grace can we hope to aspire towards deification beyond the natural realm, and journey towards a supernatural perfection in our moral lives.

Union with God

Theosis must be understood as more than merely reaching a “perfect human” state in this life. Maximus the Confessor sees the divine design of humanity as progressing from “being” to “well-being” and “eternal well-being.”³⁰ Eternal well-being, however, is unattainable in this world but understood eschatologically as eternal participation in the divine life.

Earlier, we saw how You Xilin contrasted the more collective nature of morality in Chinese thought with the self-sacrificial, individual morality of Western Christianity. While Eastern Christianity shares the understanding of self-sacrifice in the West, Orthodoxy has a different understanding of how one participates in the divine life. Firstly, before the eschaton, Byzantines are able to participate in the divine life today through the sacraments. Different from any theology of “particular grace” bestowed upon individuals by appointed ministers, sacraments are unique mysteries that God shares with humanity, redeeming humanity from sin and death and bestowing the glory of immortality.³¹

³⁰ The destructive nature of sin also degrades this process whereby the individual may move from “being” to “ill-being” and “eternal ill-being,” resulting in a complete inability to participate in God's love and grace. Maximus the Confessor, *The Four Hundred Chapters of Love* 3.23-24; Melchisedec Törönen, *Union and Distinction in the Thought of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 27; Torstein T. Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 173.

³¹ Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 191.

Baptism, for example, is seen as liberation from the bonds of Satan which enables individuals to once again have human freedom. Likewise in the Eucharist, according to Gregory of Nyssa (335–395), “By dispensation of His grace, He disseminates Himself in every believer through that flesh, whose existence comes from bread and wine, blending Himself with the body of believers, to secure that, by this union with the Immortal, man, too, may be a sharer in incorruption.”³² The sacraments are therefore the communal means whereby the individual is able to participate in the glorified Christ.

Secondly, Byzantine theology emphasizes a synergy of God’s power and human effort. It is not merely individual piety, but also self-sacrifice that is empowered by the life of God in humanity. In the West, Augustinian-Reformed theologians often emphasize a divine monergism while Pelagius and modern liberal theology have tended towards a humanistic monergism. From the Eastern Orthodox perspective, Vladimir Lossky writes, “For it is not a question of merits but of a co-operation, of a synergy of the two wills, divine and human, a harmony in which grace bears ever more and more fruit, and is appropriated—‘acquired’—by the human person.”³³ In contrast with Pelagius, it is impossible to reach salvation and participate in the God’s likeness apart from divine grace and initiative. Against Augustine, the Byzantine approach does not see divine grace as deterministic upon the human will. The Eastern Orthodox understands grace as the presence of God within us which we must actively respond to. Moral maturity and perfection is hence achieved through a synergistic relationship with God. As the Apostle Paul writes, “For we are God’s fellow workers (συνεργοί)” (1 Corinthians 3:9, RSV).

It is worth noting that, historically, traditional Chinese thinking has also tended towards a more synergistic understanding of causality. Hence, early proponents of Chinese Buddhism needed to translate Indian metaphysical concepts like *hetu-phala* (cause and effect) into a Chinese context that had no similar understanding.³⁴ In contrast with the Western mechanical approach where “A causes B,” the Chinese

³² Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical oration* 37, in Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 201.

³³ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 198.

³⁴ Ultimately, the choice of translation was to use the Chinese words *yin* 因 (origin) and *guo* 果 (fruit). See Whalen Lai, “Chinese Buddhist Causation Theories: An Analysis of the Sinitic Mahāyāna Understanding of Pratitya-samutpāda,” *Philosophy East and West* 27, no. 3 (July 1977): 241–264.

mindset was much more biogenerative with “origin (*ben* 本) producing an end (*mo* 末),” as the natural outgrowth of a tree trunk is its branches. This is reflected in the Confucian idea of Heaven and Earth giving birth to the myriad of things and the *Dao* 道 of Daoism as the Mother of all created things. It is additionally seen in the Chinese aphorism *Tian-sheng, rencheng* 天生人成 (Heaven engenders, humanity completes) where there is a cooperation seen between the wills of Heaven and humanity.

Despite the similarities, an important nuance is found in the Eastern Orthodox distinction between God’s essence (ουσία) and his energies (ενέργεια).³⁵ Articulated most fully by the Archbishop of Thessalonica Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), the divine essence is common to the three hypostases (ὑπόστασις) of the Trinity and, in classic apophatic manner, is transcendent and inaccessible to humanity. In contrast, the divine energies or activities include everything God has revealed of himself in the economy of salvation, including his attributes, his will and his “uncreated light”—the very light that permeated from Christ’s transfigured body (Matthew 13:43) which can be received by every Christian. While it is impossible to come in contact with the divine essence, through *theosis*, humans participate in the divine life through union with God’s divine energies.

This essence-energies distinction is significant on two fronts. On the one hand, it moves away from the pantheistic tendencies that exist within many teachings of Chinese religions and philosophy, as seen in the Chinese maxim *Tian ren heyi* 天人合一 (Heaven and humanity in unity).³⁶ It is for this reason that Liu Xiaofeng disagrees with *Tian ren heyi*. If one is able to reach ontological identity with the ideal (e.g., a sage, an immortal or a Buddha), then the existential goal can be understood as achieving some super-human status rather than attaining the likeness of a God who is beyond anything in this natural world. But secondly, it is only through the divine energies that God bridges the gulf between the transcendent and the immanent worlds. Hence, the ideal relationship between God’s grace and human freedom is a synergy of unequals where the energies of God and energies of humanity cooperate and intermingle with one another. *Theosis* is unity with the

³⁵ John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, trans. George Lawrence (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 202–227; Jeffrey D. Finch, “Neo-Palamism, Divining Grace, and the Breach between East and West,” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 234–237.

³⁶ Ching, *Chinese Religions*, 5–6.

divine energies without diluting the divine essence with this natural world.

Microcosm and Mediator

In Orthodox theology, *theosis* must be understood as not merely a matter of individual salvation, but part of a larger vision whereby humanity is both microcosm and cosmic mediator.³⁷ Timothy Ware (1934–) explains, “As microcosm . . . man is the one in whom the world is summed up; as mediator, he is the one through whom the world is offered back to God.”³⁸ In Orthodox cosmology, God formed two aspects of creation: the noetic and the material. In the noetic, he created angels who have no material bodies; in the material, God formed galaxies, plants, animals, etc. The only creature to participate in both the noetic and the material realms is humanity. Hence, humanity is a microcosm or a “little universe” of the whole of creation. But God has also given humanity the responsibility as cosmic mediator to bring unity to all the forces of division in creation.³⁹ Humanity has a central role in all of creation. However, after the Fall, these divisions are accentuated even more and are impossible to overcome by human abilities alone. It is only Jesus Christ who can once again bring mediation across all the cosmos. On the one hand, the Christ-event had cosmic ramifications because Christ is the divine Logos and, as God, the Creator of the universe. Yet on the other hand, he was also human and, therefore, microcosm and mediator. As the new Adam, Christ recapitulated all things and has restored to humanity the ability and the calling to be both microcosm and mediator of the universe.

This understanding of humanity as microcosm and cosmic mediator follows a similar line of thinking as at least two voices in the Second Chinese Enlightenment. Whether this be Du Weiming’s “anthropocosmic” dimension of Chinese metaphysics or Ding Guangxun’s “Cosmic Christ,” these thinkers want to emphasize a humanity that is both creature and co-creator. In the case of Du, self-cultivation is not merely a

³⁷ Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, 2nd. ed. (Chicago / La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1995), 19, 132–143.

³⁸ Kallistos (Timothy) Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 2nd ed. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 50. See Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 142.

³⁹ Maximus the Confessor specifies five divisions that humanity must overcome: (1) created and uncreated, (2) noetic and material, (3) heaven and earth, (4) paradise and the world and (5) man and woman. Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator*, 143.

process isolated to an individual but where Heaven empowers humanity with a sense of morality to realize the will of Heaven. For Ding, he believes that a cosmic Christology highlights the role that all humans—Christians and humanistic atheists—play in conveying Christ’s love. But this is also true of the pursuits of Eastern Orthodoxy where God imparts his divine grace upon humanity with a desire that humans may freely turn towards God, receive from the abundance of his grace and, by the Holy Spirit, participate in the divine likeness. Moreover, humans were created immature but with the explicit intention of reaching moral perfection through deification to fulfill their callings as microcosms and cosmic mediators. While this was made virtually impossible by the Fall, Christ has restored this vision and ability to humanity. Du Weiming, Ding Guangxun and Eastern Orthodoxy all argue that humans are creatures and co-creators with God (or Heaven), called upon to transform not only the self, but the world at large.

However, some may accuse the Orthodox Church as bearing a similar separatist view of culture as found in some conservative Christian circles and as being relatively static in its relations with the world. But this assessment would be ignorant of the church’s missionary history that predates Roman Catholic and Protestant missions and, more recently, during Tsarist Russia. Despite setbacks to Orthodoxy in the last few centuries due to suppressions under Islam and communism, Byzantine churches understand their relationship with the world in this way: “Trinitarian theology points to the fact that God is in God’s own self a life of communion and that God’s involvement in history aims at drawing humanity and creation in general into this communion with God’s very life.”⁴⁰ The Orthodox position does not see missions as primarily seeking the transmission of intellectual convictions or moral commands, but the transmission of the unity in diversity found in God’s Triune self. Deification is not merely the task of uniting an individual with God but empowering the individual to fulfill the God-given responsibility as microcosm and mediator. This means a continual participation in the divine works in this world to bring harmony where divisions once prevailed. To put it another way, humans are given the task of microcosm and mediator not only to offer the world to God, but to offer God to this world.

⁴⁰ Orthodox Advisor Group to the WCCC-CWME, “Go Forth in Peace: Orthodox Perspectives on Mission,” in *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization I: Basic Statements 1974–1991*, ed. James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 204.

CONCLUSION

As we have highlighted, the theological category of *theosis* as found in Eastern Orthodoxy is a fairly rich tradition which has had a somewhat different path from Western Christianity. It beckons the discourse in Sino-Christian theology to go beyond the binary opposition of “Chinese culture” versus “Western (Christian) culture,” but identifies a possible mediating voice between two multi-faceted systems of thought. It also gives shape to a more comprehensive picture of Christianity, provides interesting possibilities in the contemporary Chinese intellectual context and helps to give an additional resource for Sino-Christian theology to create a Third Space for China today.

While many similarities have been highlighted between Byzantine theology and the Chinese religious and philosophical traditions, there also exist many important distinctions as well. Here, we shall list only a select few. Firstly, while Liu Xiaofeng’s emphasis on the Chinese inner-transcendence may be an exaggeration,⁴¹ Eastern Orthodoxy shares with Liu his Barthian view of the stark otherness of God. The divine essence is completely inaccessible to humanity. Secondly, due to this otherness of God, it is only God himself who is able to bridge this divide. Following Athanasius’ (c. 297–373) “blessed inversion,”⁴² Christ’s incarnation enables humanity’s deification showing that only through divine initiative can humanity rectify its problems. But finally, the quest of humanity is not merely to become ontologically equal with God as has been seen in traditional Chinese thinking, but to participate in the divine nature through divine energies.

However, how has Eastern Orthodoxy addressed one of the major concerns held by Second Enlightenment scholars, namely, the modernization and nation-building of China? Of particular importance is the relationship between Eastern Orthodoxy and Eastern European

⁴¹ For example, Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (Fung Yu-lan, 1895–1990) argues that there are several spheres of living within Chinese philosophical thought—one of which is the transcendent. Likewise, Mengzi writes that we are not merely members of the social organization, but also citizens of Heaven. The Chinese sage must be concerned with both this world and beyond. Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy: A Systematic Account of Chinese Thought From its Origins to the Present Day*, ed. Derk Bodde (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1948), 338–340.

⁴² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 54.3.

countries, many of which have had a significant number of Byzantine adherents. Firstly, Orthodoxy played a significant role in the Russian Enlightenment during the reign of Catherine the Great (1762–1796). How does this compare with Sino-Christian theology's role in the Second Chinese Enlightenment? Additionally important is the fact that Eastern Orthodoxy has prevailed under several regimes of militant Islam and dogmatic communism. In regard to the latter, further studies may find it beneficial to compare Orthodoxy in the former Soviet Union with Christianity in New China. What lessons can be learned from Eastern Orthodoxy behind the Iron Curtain for the Chinese context?

Eastern Orthodoxy also provides an ideological framework that has a high regard for the human individual—the basis of many enlightenment ideals like human freedom and democracy. As one commentator states about Maximus, “[S]in and guilt in the Maximian system are due to the gnome (γνώμη), which is a hypostatic, rather than essential, quality. What mankind has inherited from Adam is the subjugation to death and corruption, and not culpability.”⁴³ If they are not essential qualities of human nature, then the rejection of sin and guilt does not mean the rejection of the individual self. Moreover, the Eastern Orthodox view of synergy assumes that free will is an essential quality of humanity. While enlightenment thinkers of Europe and North America tended to attack Augustinian pessimism about human nature in order to highlight the possibilities of the modern “self,” Eastern Orthodox thinkers have consistently argued for a more positive evaluation of humanity. Rather than being bound to the guilt of a forefather, each individual is created with free will and is, therefore, capable and responsible for his or her own choices.

Also important for the context of the Second Chinese Enlightenment is the recent renaissance in Orthodox thought. Part of this revival has occurred within Eastern European diaspora communities found in places like Paris, the United Kingdom and the United States. Many Byzantine scholars have begun to explore Orthodox theology from the disciplines of science,⁴⁴ democracy,⁴⁵ postmodernity⁴⁶ and postcolo-

⁴³ John Boojamra, “Original Sin According to St. Maximus the Confessor,” *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 20, no. 1–2 (1976): 27. See Jean-Claude Larchet, “Ancestral Guilt According to St. Maximus the Confessor: A Bridge between Eastern and Western Conceptions,” *Sobornost* 20, no. 1 (1998): 26–48.

⁴⁴ Alexei V. Nesteruk, *Light from the East: Theology, Science, and the Eastern Orthodox Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003); John Breck and Lyn Breck, *Stages on Life's Way: Orthodox Thinking on Bioethics* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's

nialism.⁴⁷ However, the growing interest in Byzantine thought has also been seen among many Western Christians. In general, the increase in Western scholarship looking at Eastern Orthodox theology has helped clarify (mis)understandings of the theologies of many significant figures of the Western church (e.g., Augustine,⁴⁸ Thomas Aquinas,⁴⁹ Martin Luther,⁵⁰ John Calvin⁵¹ and Karl Barth⁵²) as well as to provide a critique against extremes in the Western modernity.⁵³ Many of these themes and individuals are of particular interest to the growing number of scholars in Sino-Christian theology and some of the newer urban churches previously mentioned. Karl Barth and John Calvin and many other “heroes” of the Western church may be much more multifaceted than previously understood and may or may not be as useful within China’s present context. Yet at the same time, this begs the question of whether Byzantine theology can act as a corrective not only for Western theology, but Sino-Christian theology as well.

Seminary Press, 2005); Daniel Buxhoeveden and Gayle Woloschak, ed., *Science and the Eastern Orthodox Church* (London: Ashgate, 2011).

⁴⁵ Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Byzantium, Orthodoxy, and Democracy,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 1 (March 2003): 75–98.

⁴⁶ Christos Yannaras, *Postmodern Metaphysics*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox, 2004); Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*, trans. Haralambos Ventis (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2005); Arthur Bradley, “God sans Being: Derrida, Marion and ‘A Paradoxical Writing of the Word Without,’” *Literature and Theology* 14, no. 3 (2000): 299–312.

⁴⁷ Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Orthodoxy, Post-Modernism, and Ecumenism: The Difference that Divine-Human Communion Makes,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 42, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 527–544.

⁴⁸ Gerald Bonner, “Augustine’s Conception of Deification,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 37 (1986): 369–386; Robert Puchniak, “Augustine’s Conception of Deification, Revisited,” in *Theōsis: Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006), 122–133.

⁴⁹ A. N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁵⁰ Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, ed., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998); Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther’s View of Justification* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

⁵¹ Julie Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010).

⁵² Adam Neder, *Participation in Christ: An Entry into Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

⁵³ Stanley J. Grenz, *Social God and Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 323–336; Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (El Cajon, CA: Emergent YS, 2004).

As intellectuals of the Second Chinese Enlightenment continue to assess and contribute to China's process of modernization and nation-building, there must be an awareness of the growing reappraisals of Western Christianity from the vantage point of Eastern Christianity. Eastern Orthodoxy has become a growing intellectual resource within Western Christianity and has the potential to become a vital intellectual resource within the Second Chinese Enlightenment to transform humanity and society and to help bring shape to China's emerging Third Space.