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Item Type	Article
Authors	He, Jianming
Publisher	Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, Chung Chi College
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-06-16 00:52:31
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166173">http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166173</a>

# The Modern Chan Society and the China Lutheran Seminary in Conversation: A Case Study of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in Contemporary Taiwan\*

HE JIANMING

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Historically speaking, the Christian-Buddhist dialogue in China since the arrival of Protestant missionaries can be said to consist of three stages. First, in the late Qing dynasty, the dialogue was mostly initiated by foreign missionaries. Second, during the Republican era (1912–49), it was mostly initiated by Chinese Christians and Buddhists in mainland China and Hong Kong, and also by a few foreign missionaries such as Karl

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\* This paper is an abridged, slightly revised version of the Chinese original published as *Yi dangdai Taiwan wei li kan jindai Zhongguo fojiao yu jiduzongjiao de duihua: Xiandai-chan yu Zhonghua xinyi shenxueyuan de duihua chutan* 以當代臺灣為例看近代中國佛教與基督宗教的對話——現代禪與中華信義神學院的對話初探, CSRCS Occasional Paper 15 (Hong Kong: Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2004). It was rendered into English on the basis of a draft translation produced by Cecilia Wing-sze Man 萬穎詩, to whom thanks are expressed. The editorial assistant of *Ching Feng* is however responsible for the present form of this paper.—Ed.

Ludvig Reichelt (1877–1952). Third, since 1950, it has been led by Chinese Christians and Buddhists in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Nevertheless, most scholars studying the Christian-Buddhist dialogue in modern China have only focused on pre-1949 mainland China, thus neglecting its subsequent development in Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.<sup>1</sup> It is to these regions that the centre stage of the Christian-Buddhist encounter in China has shifted since 1949.<sup>2</sup>

In Taiwan, the development of Christian-Buddhist relations in the second half of the last century can be divided into two phases.<sup>3</sup> From 1950 to 1970, Christianity was expanding at a much faster rate than Buddhism on the island. Two major Christian-Buddhist debates took place during this period. The first debate was opened by Wu Enpu 吳恩溥 and Gong Tianmin's 龔天民 responses to Master Xingyun's 星雲 paper titled "Fojiao yu jidujiao zhi bijiao" 佛教與基督教之比較 (A comparison between Buddhism and Christianity); Master Shengyan 聖嚴 joined in the debate. The second featured the debates that followed Masters Yinshun 印順 and Shengyan's responses to some recently published writings, including Gong Tianmin's *Fojiaoxue yanjiu* 佛教學研究 (Contributions to Buddhist studies) and two books by Du Erwei's 杜而未, namely, *Jieshi fojing yuanyi* 揭示佛經原義 (Uncovering the original meaning of Buddhist

<sup>1</sup> An exception is Su Yuntai 蘇遠泰, "Zhang Chunyi de fohua jidujiao shenxue" 張純一的佛化基督教神學 (PhD diss., The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> See Winfried Glüer, "The Encounter Between Christianity and Chinese Buddhism during the Nineteenth Century and the First Half of the Twentieth Century," *Ching Feng* 11, no. 3 (1968): 47–50; He Jianming, *Fofa guannian de jindai tiaoshi* 佛法觀念的近代調適 (Foshan: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1998); idem, "Buddhist-Christian Encounter in Modern China: A Case Study of *Ren Jian Jue Banyuekan*," *Ching Feng*, n.s., 1, no. 2 (2000): 121–42; idem, "Cong ershi niandai jidujiao suo shou fojiao de yingxiang kan jidujiao zai Zhongguo weilai de fazhan" 從二十年代基督教所受佛教的影響看基督教在中國未來的發展, in Zhuo Xinpeng, ed., vol. 3 of *Jiduzongjiao yanjiu* 基督宗教研究 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua, 2001), 204–22; idem, "Jindai jidujiao lai hua dui fojiao jindaihua de yingxiang" 近代基督教來華對佛教近代化的影響, in Zhuo Xinpeng, ed., vol. 3 of *Zongjiao bijiao yu duihua* 宗教比較與對話 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua, 2001), 251–301; Lai Pan-chiu and He Jianming, "Fojiao dui jiduzongjiao zai hua de bensehua de qidi" 佛教對基督宗教在華的本色化的啟迪 *Chengda zongjiao yu wenhua xuebao* 成大宗教與文化學報 1 (December 2001): 273–308; He Jianming and Lai Pan-chiu, "Jidujiao dui fojiao yu xiandai Zhongguo xiang shiyi de yiyi" 基督教對佛教與現代中國相適應的意義, in Peter T. M. Ng, ed., *Zhongjiao shehui juese chongtan* 宗教社會角色重探 (Hong Kong: Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2002), 87–112.

<sup>3</sup> Yu Jibin 俞繼斌, "Chongji yu fanxing: Cong fojiao yu Yiguandao de fuxing kan chuantong xinyang yu minjian zongjiao dui jidujiao de tiaozhan" 衝擊與反省：從佛教與一貫道的復興看傳統信仰與民間宗教對基督教的挑戰, <http://www.modernzen.org.tw>.

scriptures) and *Fojiao yuanyi de faming* 佛教原義的發明 (Exposition of the original Buddhist teachings).<sup>4</sup>

During the last two decades of the last century, Buddhism grew dramatically on the island while Christianity made little progress. Realizing this new situation of religious plurality, Masters Xingyun, Shengyan, Zhengyan 證嚴 and other leading Buddhist figures initiated interreligious dialogue and cooperation between different faith communities at a global level. Their goal has been, despite interreligious differences, to join efforts to build a better world on the basis of interreligious commonalities, rather than indulging themselves in endless debates.

At the centennial turn, there was a Buddhist-Christian conversation in Taiwan, between Li Yuansong 李元松, the founder of the Modern Chan Society (hereafter, MCS), and the China Lutheran Seminary (hereafter, CLS). Aiming at discussing issues that relate to Buddhist-Christian relations in contemporary Taiwan, this paper will concentrate on a succession of conversations between these two institutions. It will analyse both the standpoint of each of the dialogue partners and how they influenced each other during that conversation. We shall also go into the background, methods of interpretation and the historical significance of this historic dialogue.

## 2. THE MODERN CHAN SOCIETY AND THE CHINA LUTHERAN SEMINARY: BACKGROUND AND STANDPOINTS

From August 2000 to 2003, the MCS and the CLS held five meetings and exchanged about ten letters, which constituted their interfaith dialogue during that period. Not all of the Christian representatives present at the meetings belonged to the CLS, though. Yet the dialogue could admittedly be regarded as one between the MCS and the CLS, in that it was the latter that arranged the attendance of all the Christian participants of the meetings.

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<sup>4</sup> Gong Tianmin 龔天民, *Fojiaoxue yanjiu: Yi wei mushi yanjiu foxue de baogao* 佛教學研究：一位牧師研究佛學的報告 (Taichung, Taiwan: Zhongguo jidutu wenzi budao zhongxin, 1963); Du Erwei 杜而未, *Jieshi fojing yuanyi* 揭示佛經原義 (Taipei: Shangwuyin shuguan, 1969); idem, *Fojiao yuanyi de faming* 佛教原義的發明 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1977). Owing to his special relationship to Gong and Wu, Wang Jingqing 王景慶, a scholar based in Tao Fong Shan, Hong Kong, was also involved in both debates.

In 1966, the CLS was co-founded in the city of Hsinchu by four mission partners, namely, the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Norway, the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission, Lutheran Brethren China Mission (USA) and the Norwegian Lutheran Mission. In 1995, the seminary established the Research Centre for the Traditional Chinese Religions and New Religious Movements (hereafter, RC). While holding fast the Christian faith, the centre aims to candidly and earnestly dialogue with popular religions and new religious movements.<sup>5</sup> Thomas Yu (Yu Jibin 俞繼斌), the CLS's president, has expressed the urgent need to establish such a research centre in his paper that studies the revival of Buddhism and Yiguandao 一貫道.<sup>6</sup> Yu points out that in the past, Buddhism, the then most influential religion in China, was generally regarded as pessimistic, supramundane and aiming only at nirvana; whereas Christians tended to regard themselves as generally more sensitive than other religious traditions as to social problems and spiritual needs. However, in the past 20 years during which the Taiwanese society underwent drastic changes, Taiwanese Buddhism rapidly transformed itself into a modernized, humanistic religion committed to purifying human souls and society. Buddhist charities, moreover, have been receiving donation from millions of Taiwanese; many of the province's social elite have been devoting their professional talents to the furtherance of Buddhist visions. In view of these, Yu contends that the emergence of religious organizations such as Foguangshan, the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Association and Yiguandao has to some degree exposed some of the blind spots and deficiencies of Taiwanese churches, and has thus challenged them to rethink their role and evangelistic method.

Despite Yu's claim that it is not the CLS's intention to strive for a bigger share in the religious market, lying behind the seminary's efforts to promote interreligious dialogue has been its aim to convert people to Christianity. In fact, one of the stated objectives of its new research centre is "to listen to and understand in depth the lives and worldviews of adherents of different religions, such as to affirm whatever is acceptable and to challenge whatever is dubious we might find therein, and to enable believers of other religions to understand the Gospel at the right time and at the right place."<sup>7</sup>

In November 1999, the RC sponsored a seminar on "New Mission Challenges for the New Millennium: New Religious Movements in Tai-

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.cls.org.tw/lutheran/lutheranchinese.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Yu, "Chongji yu fanxing" (see note 3 above).

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.cls.org.tw/lutheran/lutheranchinese.htm>.

wan,” in which one of its researchers, Helen Cheng (Zheng Lijin 鄭麗津), spoke on Chan Buddhism. Some religious background of Cheng will be helpful for us to better understand her engagement with Buddhist believers—particularly with the MCS. Since Cheng graduated from Soochow University, she had been a nun for 23 years and held teaching and administrative positions in different Buddhist institutions in Taiwan. In 1996, then an academic dean of a Buddhist seminary, she was caught up in a notorious scandal that plunged her into a life-shattering religious crisis. A year later Cheng converted to Christianity while she was staying in the United States. In 1998, she studied briefly at Christian Witness Theological Seminary before she returned to Taiwan in the same year to join the CLS’s recently established RC.<sup>8</sup>

What initially motivated Cheng to engage the MCS in dialogue was her acquaintance with a former Buddhist nun who had joined the MCS and became one of its active members. During Cheng’s visit to the MCS in May 2000, its members listened to her with great curiosity. Afterwards Li Yuansong formally invited the CLS to pay a visit to the MCS.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, Cheng’s efforts to bring Buddhism and Christianity into dialogue not only reflected her academic interest, but also represented her own ambition to convert Buddhists to Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Her standpoint and missionary purpose as to this dialogue were to some degree indicative of those of the CLS.

On the Christian side of the dialogue were, besides the CLS’s members, several Scandinavians, including Knud Jørgensen and Ernst Harbakk, who are the mission director and the Asia secretary respectively of Areopagos. The involvement of Areopagos in the dialogue was reminiscent of the founder of the Christian Mission to Buddhists (now Areopagos), Karl Ludvig Reichelt, whose lifework was sharing the Christian Gospel with Chinese Buddhists and Taoists. He had learned from Sunzi’s famous saying since he began his missionary work in Nanjing: “To know one’s own strengths as well as those of one’s rival is the sure way to success.”<sup>11</sup> Obviously, neither Areopagos nor the CLS, which engaged the

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<sup>8</sup> See Zheng Lijin 鄭麗津, “Cong kongmen dao jiaotang” 從空門到教堂, <http://www.lingliang.org/newlife/gb108/108032.htm>; eadem, *Jidutu vs. fojiaotu* 基督徒 vs. 佛教徒 (Hsinchu, Taiwan: Zhonghua xinyi shenxueyuan chubanshe, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Yu Jibin 俞繼斌, “Fei jihuaxing de duihua he yiliao budao de xiyue” 非計劃性的對話和意料不到的喜悅, in Xiandaichan jiaoyanbu, ed., *Fojiao yu jidujiao xinyang de jiaohui: Xiandaichan yu Zhonghua xinyi shenxueyuan de duihua* 佛教與基督教信仰的交會：現代禪與中華信義神學院的對話 (Taipei: Xiandaichan chubanshe, 2002), 7–10 (hereafter cited as *FJJJ*); English translation in *ibid.*, 296–301.

<sup>10</sup> *Xinshen zhoubao* 信神週報 (15–21 April, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> *FJJJ*, 80. For details of the missionary work of Reichelt, see Eric J. Sharpe, *Karl Lud-*

MCS in dialogue, intended to convert only Buddhists or Taoists, as did Reichelt; they would engage believers of other religions as well. Nonetheless, it remains clear that they, not unlike Reichelt, dialogued with other religious believers in order to share the Christian faith with them, rather than sharing with them their own faiths.

The key figure on the Buddhist side of the dialogue was Li Yuansong, who went by the name of *Xinforen* 信佛人, meaning “Buddha-believer.”<sup>12</sup> Born in 1957, he took a serious interest in religion and philosophy ever since he was 13 years old. When Li was an adherent of Yiguandao, he became acquainted with Confucianism, Chan thought, psychoanalysis and logic as well as in scholarly works of different other subjects. After his conscription ended in 1979, Li began to read Master Yinshun’s writings, which eventually led him to a concentrated study of Mādhyamika thought. Despite the intellectual maturity he was said to have attained by 1983, he still found himself unable to dispel the anxieties and doubts as to the problems of life and death deep inside his heart. He was quite certain that, after questing for the right mentor in vain, he would have to overcome the predicament only on his own. During three years of practising meditation, he experienced an enlightened state of mind hundreds of times, and was said to have shattered, by March 1988, “the latent human delusions regarding space, time and all existence.”<sup>13</sup> Since then he appeared among Taiwanese Buddhists, teaching two meditation methods, namely, *zhiguan shuangyun* 止觀雙運 (the combination of concentration and insight) and *bendi fengguang* 本地風光 (the inherent state). Since 1988, Li published more than a dozen writings on Chan meditation. It is to be noted that most of Li’s followers were highly educated, and that his influence extended well beyond traditional Buddhist groups.<sup>14</sup>

Li encouraged his interested audience to approach Chan practice in an

*vig Reichelt: Missionary, Scholar, and Pilgrim* (Hong Kong: Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> Li Yuansong passed away on 10 December 2003 at the age of 47; “Jingde zhaozhang: Jingsong (Li Yuansong) fashi zhiyou ganhuailu” 淨德昭彰：淨嵩（李元松）法師摯友感懷錄, *Hongshi shuangyuekan* 弘誓雙月刊 66 (December 2003), <http://www.awker.com/hongshi/mag/66/66-0.htm>.—Ed.

<sup>13</sup> *FJXJ*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Li’s representative publications include: *Cong ziwo shixian dao chanding jietuo* 從自我實現到禪定解脫 (Taipei: Xiandaichan chubanshe, 1992); *Jingyanzhuayi de Xiandaichan: Li Yuansong jushi fangtanlu* 經驗主義的現代禪：李元松居士訪談錄 (Taipei: Xiandaichan chubanshe, 1990); *Xiandai ren ruhe xue chan: Chaoyue xinling de maodun yu buan* 現代人如何學禪：超越心靈的矛盾與不安 (Taipei: Xiandaichan chubanshe, 1994; Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubanshe, 1995). See <http://www.modernzen.org.tw>. For a discussion on Li and the MCS’s work and thought, see Xing Dongfeng 邢東風, “Qian yi ‘Xiandaichan’ de linian yu shijian” 淺議「現代禪」的理念與實踐, *Foxue yanjiu* 佛學研究 11 (2001): 236–49.

empiricist, rational and scientific spirit, and never to shy away from raising questions and doubts. In response to multiplying Chan practitioners in Taiwan as well as to growing popularity of some traditional Buddhist practices that he saw as nothing worse than superstitious, he established the MCS and the Modern Chan Foundation, in April 1989. Li aspired thereby to enable more people to gain spiritual fulfilment through humanistic, rational teachings that can cultivate a mature personality. In July 1996, he founded a community of urban practitioners in Xiangshan, which was the first of its kind in the history of Chinese Buddhism. Having left a remarkable spiritual legacy, Li resigned in May 2002 as president of the MCS, and served since then as its dharma-transmitting elder. Interestingly, he also vowed from then on to start anew as a student.

The MCS's contact with Christianity had already begun in May 1999 with the visit of Albert Poulet-Mathis, SJ, who is a specialist in interreligious studies.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Li had been in touch with Christianity well before he founded the MCS, and had held a positive attitude towards it: he once mentioned a minister who remarked that if he converted to Christianity, he could become a minister himself and turn his community of Chan practitioners into his own congregation. Li replied that he could not exclude any possibilities, and continued, "I really have no idea where I am going tomorrow ... May the incomprehensible, mystical power of the *dharma-dhātu* [*fajie bukesiyi de shenmi liliang* 法界不可思議的神秘力量] lead me wherever it wills."<sup>16</sup> "Throughout the past ten years," said he, "I could hardly find any word or sentence about the Christian faith or any Christian doctrines that isn't good." He thought that the biblical teachings, albeit unfathomable, could yet present a challenge to other religions and philosophies.<sup>17</sup> In Li's contention, Christianity should dialogue with Buddhism regarding Buddhist teachings on dependent origination and nirvana experience, and the two religions should dialogue in an objective and penetrating manner so as to create an improvised collision of thoughts. He also believed that the Christian belief of God, insofar as he understood it, can withstand any challenges. Hence he stated that genuine interreligious dialogues should not be allowed to degenerate into "professional shows" interested individuals or groups would like to attend so as

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<sup>15</sup> Wen Jinke 溫金柯, "Jian jie fojiao Xiandaichan jiaotuan ji qi yu jiduzongjiao duihua gaikuang" 簡介佛教現代禪教團及其與基督宗教對話概況, *Dao* 道 (March 2003). See also <http://www.modernzen.org.tw/gb2312>.

<sup>16</sup> *FJJJ*, 138–39.

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.modernzen.org.tw/good/zentook/zentook-074.htm>.

to be gratified by some more or less predetermined outcomes. For in such shows “truth” is only a prop.<sup>18</sup>

Li advocated complete openness on the part of each dialogue partner, who would not adopt an apologetic stance. On the other hand, he stressed that an interreligious dialogue serves to attest that God’s word is, as he claimed to believe, perfect after all.<sup>19</sup> It is on the basis of these presuppositions that the MCS and the CLS were engaged in the dialogue.

### 3. THE DIALOGUE: A BRIEF CHRONOLOGICAL ACCOUNT

From May 2000 to early 2003, the MCS and the CLS held seven meetings and wrote to each other more than ten times. Their dialogue can be divided into six successive phases.

The first phase of the dialogue consisted of four exchanges of letters—all dated June to July 2000. The first phase of the dialogue was a direct result of Helen Cheng’s visit to the MCS’s Xiangshan community in May 2000.

#### *The First Exchange of Letters*<sup>20</sup>

In his first letter to the CLS, dated 12 June, Li expressed his high opinion of Christianity as regards its well-developed church organization, spirit of universal love and, above all, its ideas of serving God with humility, putting one’s faith in an exoteric power, and the selfless soul that would give all glory to God. Acknowledging the existence of God, Li moreover believed God to be equivalent to the “self-existence generated without cause” (*wuyinsheng de zixing cunzai* 無因生的自性存在) and that the one true God in Christianity to be equivalent to Brahman in Buddhism. In its written reply to Li dated 20 June, the RC affirmed that “in [Li’s] heart the Word of God has already existed,” and made clear that his “hope as to God’s existence ... had opened up a quest for ‘eter-

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<sup>18</sup> Xinfofen 信佛人 [Li Yuansong], “Zhi Xinyi shenxueyuan zongjiao yanjiu zhongxin: Humian yi tangzheng zhi shi duihua bing bimian zongjiao hunyao” 致信義神學院宗教研究中心——互勉以堂正之師對話並避免宗教混淆, in *FJJJ*, 211.

<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.modernzen.org.tw/good/zentook/zentook-074.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> *FJJJ*, 148–58.

nal life.”” Nonetheless, the reply rejected Li’s Buddhist explanation of God and stated that universal love is a divine gift that cannot be obtained merely by means of religious practice. This exchange of letters seems to show that, whereas Li expressed his sympathetic and approving attitude towards Christianity,<sup>21</sup> the CLS was trying to distance itself from—even to the point of condescending to—Buddhism.

### *The Second Exchange of Letters*<sup>22</sup>

On 23 June, Li wrote his second letter to the CLS, expressing his agreement with it as to the notion of universal love as God’s gift. He regarded divine nomenclature as where the only difference between Buddhism and Christianity lies. He did not consider his own positive attitude towards the Christian faith as contradicting the Buddhist “revelation,” and even admitted that he could not have fully expressed his admiration for the Christian religion because, if he had done so, he would have caused misunderstanding among some of his fellow Buddhists. Again, Li received a reply from the CLS, dated 30 June, which shows that the seminary, though engaged in an interreligious dialogue, still had in mind mainly the fundamental differences between the two religions. In this reply the CLS found Li’s openness and humility especially commendable; yet it criticized Li’s attempt to identify the Christian God with the Buddha, and emphasized that one must not lose sight of the divergence between Christian theology and Buddhist studies as to their distinctive modes of intellectual inquiry. In effect, the reply was to caution Li against confining his appreciative understanding of Christianity to a Buddhist mode of thought, which had, from the Christian perspective of the CLS, stood in the way of his acceptance of Christianity.

### *The Third Exchange of Letters*<sup>23</sup>

In his third letter, dated 6 July, to the CLS and its RC, Li further ex-

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<sup>21</sup> After Li’s first letter to the CLS, titled “Ganxie zhu, zanmei zhu” 感謝主·讚美主, was posted on the internet, he received phone calls and emails and was mockingly censured for “ingratiating non-Buddhist religionists” (*taohao waidao* 討好外道); see Shi Chanxuan 釋禪宣, “Jing fu zhu nei jiemei de yi feng xin” 敬覆主內姐妹的一封信, 17 June 2000, <http://www.zennow.org.tw/gb2312>.

<sup>22</sup> *FJJJ*, 159–66.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 167–76.

plored the question: “What is the highest truth for humanity?” In the letter he stated that his own religion, Buddhism, was neither the highest nor the absolute truth; the consummation of the quest, i.e., the discovery of the highest truth, is in his view not as important as the quest itself. The process of the quest is more important because it constitutes a joint effort to generate rules for negotiating what the majority would accept—even if results thus reached would still be less than impeccable. Li believed that to value the process above the results was in line with both the spirit of the early Buddhist sangha and the notion of causation without the existence of self.

In their response dated 12 July, the CLS argued that Buddhism and Christianity are so different that their “general characters” (*zongxiang* 總相) can respectively be compared to one large lake and a group of separate yet connected lakes. These metaphors were explained in this way: whereas Buddhists are subsumed within an all-embracing compassion of the Buddha, Christians remain individual parts of a body yet joined together in God’s love. Further, the two religions differ also in terms of their “specific characters” (*biexiang* 別相): Buddhism holds that the sentient beings and the Buddha are one and that all are the one undivided whole, but Christianity holds that God and humanity are not to be confused. Although the two religions have some “common characters” (*gongxiang* 共相) such as passionate concern for all sentient beings and enormous, positive influence they both have on society, they display “particular characters” (*yixiang* 異相); for instance, the Buddhist practice of meditation is generally directed towards one’s own self, whereas Christian meditation is directed towards God.

While Li tried to relativize, even at the risk of offending his fellow Buddhists, the belief in the Buddha as *the* “supreme truth,” the CLS seized the opportunity to urge him to carry through his quest for truth, by taking a step further to become a Christian. At this point the CLS’s engagement with its “dialogue partner” came close to slide into a unilateral proselytizing attempt.

#### *The Fourth Exchange of Letters*<sup>24</sup>

In his reply to the CLS on 13 July, Li stated his attitude towards the question of conversion. He thanked the CLS for thrice inducing him to accept the Holy Spirit and to believe in God, and pointed out that his af-

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 169–78.

fections and reverence for Master Yinshun could only be matched, if not outweighed, by his high regard for the Christian faith. Nonetheless, he confessed that his disposition as a rational religionist and his will to be true to his intimate knowledge and experiences rendered it unlikely that he would receive baptism in a short period of time. He did not exclude this possibility, however, and mentioned that he had expressed his great disappointment as to contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism. True practitioners were, in his contention, to be found only in such countries where Tibetan Buddhism (e.g., Nepal) or Theravāda Buddhism (e.g., Burma and Laos) is practised. “If I should die prematurely,” said Li, “I hope my followers in the MCS will then convert to Christianity, which is nearer at hand.”

On 24 July, the CLS wrote back to Li, illustrating their position with the parable of the prodigal son. The theme of a prodigal and homecoming son, so the CLS’s reply pointed out, is also found in the Buddhist scripture. Whereas in the Christian version the son returns home voluntarily, in the Buddhist version the son returns home only under coercive measures the rich father (referring to the Buddha) has taken to discipline him. According to their interpretation, the Christian parable teaches that whoever repents and returns to God as does the prodigal son, will thereupon be welcomed home to receive the glory God the father bestows. By contrast, they likened Buddhists such as Li to the homecoming son in the Buddhist scripture, who, to regain his lost sonship (i.e., to attain Buddhahood), must toil as an excrement-cleaning labourer in submission to certain power-wielding agents sent from the rich father until the son has gradually and relentlessly risen through the echelons of his father’s household (referring to the hierarchy of the Buddhist sangha)—yet only to become another power broker himself. The letter of the CLS suggested that Li, who was still not recognized by mainstream Buddhist circles as a legitimate master, had been a victim of the power game, because he had doggedly refused to play the submissive homecoming son, i.e., both to subscribe to all the teachings of Master Yinshun despite reservations Li had blatantly voiced about some of them, and to become a “rightful” Buddhist master himself by observing the official hair-cutting rite.

The religious prejudice in the “reply” of the CLS against Buddhism is just too obvious. It urged Li not only to abandon hope of attaining Buddhahood or being recognized as a rightful sect founder, but also to “return” to the Christian God to receive the grace he would freely bestow.

After these four exchanges of letters, the two institutions proceeded with the second phase of the dialogue, which consisted of another formal

visit of the CLS representatives—this time led by President Yu—to the Xiangshan community on 17 August.<sup>25</sup>

*The First Face-to-Face Colloquy*<sup>26</sup>

In the meeting Li iterated and explained his appreciative attitude towards Christianity. He also described the work of the MCS and told the Christian visitors how his intellectual development had been influenced by the Japanese school of Pure Land (Shin) Buddhism, Louis Cha's novels and Yinshun's *Miaoyunji* 妙雲集. Yu then shared with the MCS practitioners his conversion experience. The two sides of the colloquy, moreover, had an in-depth discussion over issues of common concern, including their principles and expectations as regards their interreligious dialogue, and the doctrine of justification by faith.<sup>27</sup> As regards the impact the dialogue might have on himself, Li remarked that maybe he, now still a “prodigal son,” would “return home” some day. He even appealed to the CLS representatives “not to give up on us, but to persist in guiding me and all of us so that one day we may join the Christian communion and preach the Lord's Gospel together.”<sup>28</sup> Cheng responded to his appeal by promising to pray for the MCS. “I've sensed that we are consanguineous,” said she, “in the sense that we have so many commonalities. We are but one name away from each other.”<sup>29</sup> That single fundamental difference in naming God or “the supreme” (*zhigaozhe* 至高者), with all its implications, was still too vast to be elided. Nonetheless, by getting to the core of their religious doctrines during this colloquy, the MCS and the CLS deepened their mutual understanding and paved the way for reaching consensus on some major issues.

Following this first face-to-face colloquy was the third phase of the dialogue, which consisted of another four exchanges of letters between the MCS and the CLS, dated 19 August to 14 November 2000.

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<sup>25</sup> The CLS representatives included Lü Yizhong 呂一中 and Helen Cheng, who were both at that time researchers at the RC.

<sup>26</sup> Shi Chanxuan 釋禪宣, “Huanying Chanxueyuan yuanzhang lilin Xiandaichan: Zai fu zhu nei jiemei de yi feng xin” 敬歡迎禪學院院長蒞臨現代禪——再覆主內姐妹的一封信, 1 August 2000, <http://www.zennow.org.tw/gb2312>.

<sup>27</sup> *FJJJ*, 64.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

*The Fifth Exchange of Letters*<sup>30</sup>

One day after Yu and his colleagues visited the Xiangshan community, Li wrote to the seminary to share his feelings about their first face-to-face conversation. He listed seven items, including Christian themes, dictums and sayings that he heard during the conversation and found particularly impressive.<sup>31</sup> On 25 August, the CLS wrote back to clarify its standpoint with Li, that Christian notions such as “sin” and “salvation” are not to be understood in Buddhist terms. The letter moreover urged Li and the MCS to avoid inducing doctrinal confusion by “unnecessary fawning rhetoric.”

This exchange of letters suggests that, despite the CLS’s appreciation for Li’s continuous engagement with their dialogic encounter, the Christian side of the dialogue was no longer content with his Buddhist approach to Christianity.

*The Sixth Exchange of Letters*

Li wrote to the CLS on 14 September to respond to their criticism that his seven-point reflection would induce “doctrinal confusion.” He emphasized that he trusted in his religion as much as his friends of the CLS would trust theirs. There was according to Li nothing wrong with Buddhism itself. Its problems rather came from its unruly adherents. Yet he pointed out that Buddhism was inferior to Christianity in terms of ecclesial organization. Iterating that he did not find “one word or sentence about Christian doctrines or the Christian faith that isn’t good” and that “the ‘Word of God’ is perfect,” Li likened Buddhism and Christianity to two spirally intertwining, endless threads that remain in a mutually en-

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 189–98.

<sup>31</sup> Li wrote: “To describe what I feel: (1) I heartily admire the gospel of ‘justification by faith’! (2) The dictum ‘No longer I but Christ’ has touched me! (3) The saying ‘He must grow greater, I must grow less’ moves me to tears! (4) Example is better than precepts. I and many friends of mine have been astonished by the words and deeds of Christians animated by the spirit of ‘being free and subject to none yet being a servant of all.’ This is so unimaginable according to my own limited experiences! (5) Your words ‘we share a sense of humility towards “the supreme” with you’ make me feel at home! (6) Is the saying ‘I am too a seed of hell’ comparable to the belief that ‘we are all sinners’? I’ve had no answer yet; (7) ‘Isn’t it amazing that I have no share in anything of the human realm?’ With this thought, I’d naturally praise and give thanks to the Lord. Amen!” (ibid., 189).

hancing and supporting relationship; a fusion of them would thus appear rather unnecessary.

On behalf of the CLS Cheng wrote back on 21 September.<sup>32</sup> She did not directly respond to what Li said in his most recent letter to the seminary. She found it vexing that Li was trying to maintain the essential defensibility of Buddhism as though he was inviting her and her colleagues (back) into the “Buddhist world.” Over against Li’s using the names of Amitābha and “the supreme” interchangeably, she argued that if “the supreme” is indefinable and ineffable, then one should not settle for the name of Amitābha as did Li. Hence she challenged Li not to cling to the name of Amitābha, but rather to seek in the name of Jesus Christ, which “cannot be confused with any names of idols,” to strike out in the path to the kingdom of God together with his community of Chan practitioners. With Cheng’s response, it became all the more obvious that she, if not the CLS as a whole, saw the MCS as an object of proselytization rather than a dialogue partner.

#### *The Seventh Exchange of Letters*<sup>33</sup>

Li replied on 22 September, making clear that he had never intended to invite anyone of the CLS, especially Cheng, “to enter the Buddhist world.” He agreed that “the supreme” is indefinable and ineffable, and thanked Cheng for continually inviting him to convert to Christianity. Li also maintained his earlier expressed view that Buddhism and Christianity are like “two spirally intertwining, endless threads.” The CLS wrote back on 25 September, specifying the details of a “religious visit” a group of “church workers from Denmark” would pay to the MCS on 14 November.

#### *The Eighth Exchange of Letters*<sup>34</sup>

On the same day he received the CLS’s letter dated 25 September, Li wrote back to confirm that the MCS would make all arrangements neces-

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<sup>32</sup> Although the CLS’s replying letter purports to be written by the RC, its reference to “my book *Jidutu vs. fojiaotu*” (ibid., 204; see note 8 above) points to the fact that the letter was written by Helen Cheng herself.

<sup>33</sup> *FJJJ*, 207–9.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 210–13.

sary for the “Danish visitors.”<sup>35</sup> In the same letter, he talked out his feelings about two things. First, he expressed his “slight uneasiness” about his own stubbornness despite Cheng’s incessant attempts to convert him. Secondly, besides reading the gospels daily, he made mention of some books on Christian-Buddhist dialogue he dipped into in the most recent month, including those by Thich Nhat Hanh and Gong Tianmin. Li found Gong, a Lutheran minister well versed in Buddhist thought, a bit disappointing, in that this author unfairly made out that Christianity is superior to Buddhism by juxtaposing the former’s best elements with the latter’s worst; he thus stopped short of seeking truth impartially. On 27 September Cheng replied on behalf of the CLS, admitting that her most recent letters to Li overly pressed him to convert to the Christian faith. She also expressed her hope that he would share with them some God-given insights he had gained from his recent study of the gospels.

*The Ninth Exchange of Letters*<sup>36</sup>

In his letter to Li, dated 9 October (in reply to a letter from Li<sup>37</sup>), Thomas Yu expressed his appreciation for both the sincere conversation over the past few months and Li’s tolerance of their misunderstandings. He also mentioned that Thich’s book, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*,<sup>38</sup> which Li had recommended to him, fell short of elucidating the essence of the doctrine of “justification by faith.” Li replied to Yu’s letter on the same day, iterating his “affections for and his growing bond with the Christian faith.” He emphasized that human frailties would also be inevitable in Christianity; the fact that he was still on the learning stage prevented him from noticing its frailties. “In the meantime,” Li asserted, “we are both receivers of the mercy and salvation of the supreme; whether his name is Christ or Buddha is not at issue for now.”<sup>39</sup>

On 12 October, the CLS wrote back to express their appreciation for

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<sup>35</sup> Yu later made clear that those “church workers” (who included Danes as well as Norwegians) in fact referred to the representatives of Areopagos visiting Taiwan (*ibid.*, 214).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 214–20.

<sup>37</sup> Since neither side has disclosed the letter, its date and contents remain unknown.

<sup>38</sup> Yixing chanshi 一行禪師 [Thich Nhat Hanh], *Sheng sheng Jidu shi shi Fo: Dang Fotuo yu Jidu xiangyu* 生生基督世佛：當佛陀與基督相遇, trans. Xue Xuan (Xindian, Taiwan: Lixu, 1997); originally published as *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> *FJJJ*, 215.

both Li's silence about the "frailties" of Christianity and his serious and receptive attitude. They claimed that they had been trying so hard to persuade him to convert to Christianity simply because they knew that his freedom to pursue religious truth was not circumscribed by the given form of the religion with which he was nominally affiliated. They were pleased that Li had not been bounded by any particular religion, but set his mind first and foremost on attaining religious wisdom that enhances human life.

*The Second Face-to-Face Colloquy*

The dialogue between the MCS and the CLS entered the fourth phase, when the representatives of Areopagos and the CLS, led by President Yu, paid a visit to the Xiangshan community on 14 November 2000. The colloquy was opened by a discussion on the nature of interreligious dialogue. The representatives of Areopagos suggested that different religions can engage in dialogue at theological, academic and experiential levels. The purpose of interreligious dialogue, in their contention, is to share life and beliefs, to learn to live and to live together in a pluralistic religious context. Agreeing with what they said, Li stressed that his last first-to-face meeting with the CLS was not so much a dialogue as a learning experience. The question of truth, then, was discussed. Both sides contended that the modern society has been so wrapped up in striving for efficacy that the question of truth is often eclipsed. Ernst Harbakk said that "truth is not just a scientific statement, not just something we can see with our eyes. We consider and we believe that the truth is a person, Jesus Christ, the Son of God."<sup>40</sup> Li responded, "If I come to the realization that Jesus Christ is the truth and that's what my conscience experiences, I will leave behind all Buddhist belief or authority."<sup>41</sup> Lastly, they turned to the topic of self-awareness and humility. Li affirmed that the virtue of humility or self-awareness of one's insignificance, which Christianity advocates, is the real foundation of religious faith. He was therefore rather disappointed by the fact that "in Buddhist circles I seldom discover this kind of awareness."<sup>42</sup> After this meeting, Li and the representatives of Areopagos wrote to each other a couple of times. As regards Li's letters to Knud Jørgensen and to Lars Nielsen and Birger Nygaard, dated 21

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 81; English rendering quoted from *ibid.*, 82.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 84; English rendering quoted from *ibid.*, 86.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 99; English rendering quoted from *ibid.*, 99.

November and 7 December respectively, it is obvious that both sides had been deeply impressed by their interfaith encounter. Li ended the former letter thus: “May we all finally get our satisfaction with everything under the blessing of the Supreme! Amen!”<sup>43</sup> By this benedictory ending he seemed to profess that he and Christians believed in the same “supreme being.”

### *The Third Face-to-Face Colloquy*

The conversation between the MCS and the CLS entered the fifth phase, when they resumed dialogic meeting in mid-2002. At the invitation of the CLS, Li, now the MCS’s elder, paid a visit to the seminary on 10 June, along with 20 other MCS members. They were warmly greeted by President Yu, researchers of the RC, and some teachers and students of the CLS.<sup>44</sup>

Focusing on the core differences between Buddhism and Christianity, they exchanged their ideas on four issues. First, Li further elaborated on the importance of the notion of “the supreme” in Buddhism, its manifestation and its close relationship with Christianity. He believed Mādhyamika philosophy excludes neither the existence of God nor faith in “the supreme.” However, he insisted that it was yet no time for the MCS and him to convert to Christianity unless otherwise willed by “the supreme.”<sup>45</sup> Secondly it was pointed out in the colloquy that according to Christianity, it is not possible for humans to take away sin by their own efforts; only the saviour, Jesus Christ, is able to bear their burdens. Li found this notion extremely appealing and suggested that if contemporary Buddhists would want to enhance their religious experience, they must first subscribe to the notion of other-power.<sup>46</sup> Thirdly, the definition of “the supreme” and the meaning of his “presence” were discussed. Yu asserted that the cross, in which God’s love was manifested, is the core of the Christian faith. Li appreciated the way Christianity has had truth embodied or enfleshed, although he maintained that thus concretizing truth would eventually invite more challenges than he could withstand.<sup>47</sup> Fourthly, they discussed whether interfaith dialogue would entrench

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 111; English rendering quoted from *ibid.*, 331.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 128–30.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 133–36.

one's religious belief or would afford an opportunity to switch one's religion. Yu believed that "sincere interfaith dialogue enables us not only to learn, but also to understand our friends and their religious belief so that we may better understand ourselves and whom we believe." Li restated that he would not exclude the possibility of his conversion to Christianity.<sup>48</sup>

### *The Last Three Colloquies*

The sixth phase of the conversation between the MCS and the CLS consisted of three face-to-face colloquies held in December 2002 and January 2003. Through an arrangement of the seminary, Pan Ju-ta 潘儒達, accompanied by Lü Yizhong 呂一中, visited the Xiangshan community and held two interfaith colloquies with Li Yuansong on 18 December and 30 December 2002 respectively. The dialogue continued shortly afterwards, when Thomas Yu, Wang Jung-chang 王榮昌 and Yao Yu-shuang 姚玉霜 paid a visit to the MCS on 27 January 2003.<sup>49</sup>

During the colloquies between Lü, Pan and Li, the first issue discussed was the attitude of Christians and Buddhists engaging in a dialogue. Pan believed that a world vision would be necessary for interfaith dialogue. Li expressed strong reservations about Buddhists who manifested a kind of religious absolutism in judging that Christianity was an "alien way" (*waidao* 外道). He proposed that it must not be presumed that only one religion is allowed to exist and that both sides should reckon on the possibility of converting to the other religion as a result of an interfaith dialogue, without a tenacious insistence on certain truth claims. The second topic discussed was religious practice. Lü observed that some Chan-practising groups used religious symbols and credal formulas to replace knowledge and un-manipulated experience. Li insisted that one does not attain the states of liberation and emptiness by evading one's duties and commitments or eschewing all pleasure-seeking. He believed that a person can still become "shackled" if he or she imitates the Buddha intentionally, and that genuine nirvana experience is infinitely inclusive.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 137–42.

<sup>49</sup> Pan Ju-ta was a doctoral student at the University of Edinburgh. Lü Yizhong was researcher at the RC (see note 25 above). Wang Jung-chang is a Presbyterian minister and specializes in religious studies and interreligious dialogue. He took his PhD at Lancaster University in 2003 and was appointed as researcher at the CLS. Yao Yu-shuang took her PhD in sociology of religion at the University of London in 2001. See <http://www.zennow.org.tw/gb2312>.

The colloquy between Yu, Wang, Yao and Li, which was held in the following January, covered more issues than the last two. The issues discussed included the consistence in word and deed of Christians, the right attitude towards interreligious dialogue, the possibility of attaining nirvana in religions other than Buddhism, problems pertaining to defining “the supreme,” and the classification of nirvana experience. But the focal issue of the colloquy was whether and to what degree the notion of absolute faith, or its historical manifestation, is found in Buddhism and Christianity. It is interesting to note that during this meeting, the MCS practitioners sang two Christian hymns, “Lilies of the Field” and “Jehovah’s Blessings Abound,” to their visitors, which were sung to greet the MSC visitors last June by a choir of the CLS.<sup>50</sup>

#### 4. THE FUNDAMENTAL CONCERN OF THE DIALOGUE: WHO IS “THE SUPREME” — AMITĀBHA OR GOD?

Emphasis on self-power is one of the major differences between traditional Buddhism and other religions. While claiming that Buddha nature is in all human beings and denying an external object of worship, Buddhism is usually regarded as atheistic. In contrast, the first premise of Christianity is that God exists. Hence in the past the dialogue between the two religions often caused antipathy whenever the question of “the supreme” was touched upon. Yet the belief of Li Yuansong and the MCS in “the supreme” provided a common ground for Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Apart from the MCS’s emphasis on the principle of empiricism and the capacity of modern rationality and its affirmative attitude towards sensual passions or desires, the belief in other-power marked this Chan-practising community off from groups subscribing to traditional Buddhism. Thus, the conceptual question of concern in the conversation between the CLS and the MCS was not whether “the supreme” exists, but was rather how the characteristics and the name of “the supreme” are to be defined or determined.

Although encompassing the belief in “the supreme” was the cause of much criticism from the traditional Buddhist circle, the MCS insisted that

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<sup>50</sup> Wen Jinke, “Jian jie fojiao Xiandaichan jiaotuan ji qi yu jiduzongjiao duihua gaikuang” (see note 15 above).

this belief is the prerequisite for a true follower.<sup>51</sup> In Li's view, whoever cannot recognize "the supreme" stops short of grasping the teachings of the Buddha. While Li was devoted to Mādhyamika thought, he stated that even the founder of the Mādhyamika school, Nāgārjuna, could not have been able to determine whether "God" existed or not.<sup>52</sup> But from what was Li's belief in "the supreme" derived?

Firstly, Li claimed that this belief originated from his own practice. Inspired by the fundamental doctrine of Buddhism, that is, the principle of interdependent causation and non-self, he believed that if one really understands this principle and puts it into practice, one will realize how insignificant, ignorant and sinful one is. This awareness of humility, according to Li, makes it possible for one to be aware of, and hence to believe, the existence of "the supreme."<sup>53</sup> However, such awareness, which is primarily based on personal religious experience, does not constitute sufficient grounds for universal validity of the belief in "the supreme."

Secondly, Li referred to his own discovery of the esoteric meaning regarding "the supreme" in the Buddhist canon. Without direct reference to any specific text, he emphasized that there were explicit and implicit meanings in the sūtras. For instance, according to his reading of the *Amitābha Sūtra*, the determining factor in attaining rebirth to the land of ultimate bliss at the moment of death, rather than observance of rules and practices, is absolute faith in Amitābha's grace and the efficacy of the vow.<sup>54</sup> Still, such "esoteric meaning" could be fairly subjective and unconvincing. For it is generally accepted that the *Āgamas*, which are among the earliest Buddhist texts, explicitly teach self-power faith and exclude other-power faith. Moreover, one wonders why certain central teachings have had to be concealed and why the great Buddhist masters in the past all failed to discover such "esoteric meaning." In this regard, Li argued that even though the fundamental doctrine of interdependent causation and non-self originated in the *Āgamas*, the sūtras themselves are less than perfect, in that they make no mention of other-power faith. He even stated that if these sūtras were the only words of the Buddha, he would have left and followed Mahāvairocana instead, whom Li termed the "incomprehensible, mystical power of the *dharmadhātu*."<sup>55</sup> Yet being a Buddhist, Li maintained that self-power and other-power in fact

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<sup>51</sup> *FJJJ*, 121.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

constitute a coherent twofold concept. To him, the notion of self-power, which is based on a language-bound, elementary interpretation, is only the first step towards thorough understanding; whereas salvation can basically be obtained through the absolute other-power. In the way towards Buddhahood, therefore, the greatest merit is to have faith in Amitābha, and the worst is not to have that faith. One may moreover attain nirvana by one's faith in Amitābha no matter how sinful one is.<sup>56</sup>

Thirdly, Li acknowledged the influence the Pure Land School had had on his thought. But as far as the belief in “the supreme” is concerned, his thought was more akin to a branch of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan—Shin Buddhism—than to the “traditional” Pure Land School. With regard to the level of spiritual attainment pertaining to various Buddhist schools, Li likened the *Āgamas* to the age of twenty years, the *Prajñā-pāramitā* to thirty, the Chan school to forty, the Tantrayāna to fifty and the teachings of the Pure Land School to sixty, which is the advanced age of maturity.<sup>57</sup> He believed that even though the Amitābha doctrine has incorporated the notion of “the supreme,” the mature and genuine Pure Land thought still remained to be fully expounded with regard to this notion.<sup>58</sup> The school of Shin Buddhism was founded in 1214 by Shinran. In his teachings on the Primal Vow, the name of Amitābha signifies the attainment of rebirth and Buddhahood. In his view, the sangha and laypeople alike can attain rebirth in and through the other-power of Amitābha rather than their self-power. Li pointed out that Shinran attained, in his forties, firm faith of the dharma, i.e., the fourfold pure faith that pertains to the *paramārtha-satyā* (highest truth). Believing that Amitābha knew everything and was always compassionate towards humanity, he said he would continue to practise Buddha-recitation; “even if I had been deceived by Amida,” said he, “I would have no regrets; for I should have deservedly fallen into hell.” Yet in his late eighties, after he had composed his discourse on *jinen hōni* 自然法爾 and several years before he died, Shinran claimed that he did not know for sure whether he would be able to attain rebirth. In view of Shinran's unwavering faith in Amitābha, Li argued that such words Shinran uttered can by no means be taken literally, because “the experience his words reflect, which is ineffable, far surpasses rationalistic doctrinal philosophy.”<sup>59</sup> He noted that his notion of Amitābha as the “incomprehensible *dharmadhātu*” or “incomprehensible mystical force” was in

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 49–50.

fact more akin to the later Shinran's thought than to the Pure Land Buddhists in Taiwan, who generally regarded Amitābha as a mere entity and individual Buddha.<sup>60</sup>

In short, it is clear that Li's belief in "the supreme" is not as novel as it seems in the history of Buddhism, although this belief is not entirely compatible with Buddhist philosophy. Not unlike Li and the MCS, Shinran advocated the practitioner's fulfilment of secular commitments and duties.<sup>61</sup> Li pointed out that the MCS, rather than overemphasizing the *vinaya* inherited from ancient Indian Buddhism, proudly held a positive attitude towards passions and sensual desires, held in high regard human potentialities of being morally sensible, compassionate and "chivalrous," and "cherished especially the spirit of the modern age."<sup>62</sup>

When the dialogue between the MCS and the CLS was about to begin, some Buddhists in mainland China wrote to Li and the MCS, stating that "although the doctrine of the Primal Vow in Japan seems to belong to the Pure Land School, in effect it runs counter to its theory and premises and to the whole Buddhist teaching. Thus the doctrine has never been advocated by the Pure Land School."<sup>63</sup> Li and the MCS tended to agree with them in their replies.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, it remains difficult, if not impossible, to tell the MCS and the school of Shin Buddhism apart insofar as their understanding of the nature of faith is concerned. Thus Li's interpretation of absolute other-power could not be taken as representing Mahāyāna Buddhism in China as a whole, but only the school of Shin Buddhism with its doctrine of the Primal Vow.

Holding in high regard the notion of "the supreme" and the belief in other-power not least found in Christianity, Li said, "I am not going to advocate the doctrine and faith of God. Yet I dare not arrogantly claim I can judge that God doesn't exist. ... It is rather my hope that their God does exist and offer them ultimate salvation."<sup>65</sup> In Li's view, Buddhism

<sup>60</sup> Xinforen 信佛人 [Li Yuansong], "Jing fu Zhongguo dalu jingtuzong gaoren de yi feng xin" 敬覆中國大陸淨土宗高人的一封信, <http://www.zennow.org.tw/gb2312>.

<sup>61</sup> Lan Jifu 藍吉富, ed., *Zhonghua fojiao baikequanshu* 中國佛教百科全書 (Tainan, Taiwan: Zhongguo fojiao baike wenxian jijinhui, 1994), 7:3986–89.

<sup>62</sup> *FJJJ*, 8.

<sup>63</sup> E.g., Changzhen fashi 昌臻法師, "Benyuanfamen yu jingtufamen de san buxiangying" 本願法門與淨土法門的三不相應, <http://www.zennow.org.tw/gb2312>.

<sup>64</sup> Xinforen, "Jing fu Zhongguo dalu jingtuzong gaoren de yi feng xin"; Wen Jinke 溫金柯, "Jing fu Zhongguo dalu jingtuzong jushi: Xiandaichan rentong jingtu bi dei liji yu san-fayin" 敬覆中國大陸淨土宗居士——現代禪認同淨土必得立基於三法印, 8 September 2000 and 13 September 2000, <http://www.zennow.org.tw/gb2312>.

<sup>65</sup> *FJJJ*, 148–49.

does not necessarily disallow the concept of God; what it disallows is rather the act of safeguarding one's own "truth" even to the point of ignoring others' feelings and lives.<sup>66</sup> Hence the conversation between Li and the CLS turned to the question of the nature of God.

In delineating the concept of God, Li asserted that God is "independent self-existence" and that the one true God is Brahman. Obviously, the CLS did not accept Li's delineation of the concept of God from a Buddhist point of view. To them, even though Brahman is one of the highest gods in ancient Indian religion, he is only a guardian god in Buddhism that belongs in the Three Realms. By contrast, Christians worship God as Trinity of three persons: the Father as the creator, the Son Jesus as the saviour of humankind and the Holy Spirit, who is the ground of the church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, bodily resurrection and eternal life.<sup>67</sup> While the Christian God lives and acts throughout human history, the presence of other gods or buddhas is confined to specific periods. Furthermore, the CLS could not accept Li's employment of the notion of "independent self-existence" to define God; for God is, according to their biblical interpretation, the "first cause of all existence," which determines the "law pertaining to the cause and effect of life."<sup>68</sup>

In response to the CLS's disagreement, Li said his "being well disposed to the belief of God did not in the slightest run counter to the doctrine of interdependent causation and non-self, which the Buddha has revealed to me."<sup>69</sup> He also pointed out that one must take into account the correspondence between the analytical and the experiential dimension of the belief in God. For illustration, Li mentioned how his profound experience (Buddhist teachers since the earliest times had similar experiences) had informed his appreciation of the inner coherence of Martin Luther's paradoxical saying: "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, subject to every one."<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, Li believed that those Buddhists who tried to understand the Christian doctrine of God on a language-bound level and built their critique of it merely on the basis of either a narrow understanding of Mādhyamika philosophy or general

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 148–49.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 151–54.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 150–57.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>70</sup> The saying is found in Luther's *Concerning Christian Liberty*; the English rendering of the saying is based on an English translation of the treatise available at <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/web/cclib-2.html>.—Trans.

Buddhist knowledge, had failed to appreciate the essence of Christianity.<sup>71</sup>

Trying to point to Li the core of the Christian faith, different representatives of the CLS and Areopagos explained that such names as “the supreme,” “truth” and “heavenly father” all point to the same referent, i.e., God.<sup>72</sup> Owing to his Buddhist identity, Li was reluctant to directly acknowledge that “the supreme” he believed in was in fact God. Nevertheless, he was no less reluctant to deny that the two could be identical. His indifference to naming “the supreme” God or Amitābha was evident. “One will stand in awe of the ‘incomprehensible, mystical power of the *dharma-dhātu*,” said Li, “whether it is called ‘Amitābha,’ ‘God’ or ‘the supreme,’ only when one realizes one’s weak, lowly, tiny and finite existence. There are two ways to instil such a sense of awe deep into human hearts: either to enable one to fully realize one’s tininess and finiteness or to make a vow, that is to say, to be guided by the supreme.”<sup>73</sup> Moreover, Li contended that “the belief in God or the ‘incomprehensible’ Amitābha is not necessarily irrational, in that it is to be based on a realization of the doomed condition of one’s extremely finite, humble and tiny life.”<sup>74</sup> As the below extracted letter he wrote to a Catholic priest shows, Li seemed to name “the supreme” “Amitābha” just out of habit (whose name he confessed he didn’t really know for the time being<sup>75</sup>); for him the names of “God” and “Heavenly Father” conjured up “the supreme” whenever he heard them:

As the *Taishang qingjing jing* 太上清靜經, which you suggested be printed, describes: “The Great Dao has no form; it brings forth and raises heaven and earth. The Great Dao has no feelings; it regulates the course of the sun and the moon. The Great Dao has no name; it raises and nourishes the myriad beings. I do not know its name—so I call it Dao.” Such a vision is congruent with my faith of “the supreme.” Although I don’t know the name of “the supreme,” owing to the circumstances in which I grew up I have been venerating it as “Amitābha.” Whenever I hear such names as “*Shangdi*” 上帝, “*Shen*” 神 or “Heavenly Father,” however, I’ll be overtaken by an impulsive joy in my heart! I’m such a petty and impotent sinner. All I can do is to praise the

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<sup>71</sup> *FJJJ*, 18.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 46, 116, 122.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 224–25.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

supreme, to do my best to fulfil my duties and to entrust all to its providence over all.<sup>76</sup>

In view of Li's notion of "the supreme" as an "incomprehensible mystical force," it seems apt to quote the following passage, which puts the notion of mystery in the context of interfaith dialogue:

That God is the mystery transcending all conceptions and languages is widely held as one of the basic axioms justifying theological pluralism within the Christian circle. In the context of inter-religious encounter, the notion of mystery also provides a basis for the "dialogical theology," a new style project Heinrich Ott calls for. Ott suggests that in what we call religious experience or faith (*pistis*), we experience an inexhaustible and fundamentally inexpressible mystery. Since this mystery transcends all forms and doctrinal formulations, the believer of a given religion can at least think it possible that the adherent of another religion is actually confronted with the same inexpressible reality.<sup>77</sup>

Even though the CLS shared the "liberating view" that "the supreme" is ineffable and cannot be defined by humans, its representatives still tried to push Li to give a clearer explanation of "the supreme" and not to insist on using the name "Amitābha."<sup>78</sup> One of the representatives argued that if "the supreme" were an entirely incomprehensible, and thus rather remote, entity, it would be impossible for a religious believer to come into contact with it; whereas Christians can know with certainty who their divine creator is and whom they believe in through what is revealed in the Bible, even though they may not be able to acquire still higher, esoteric discernment.<sup>79</sup> Li responded that although he personally found the Christian endeavour to "concretize truth" impressive, he believed that the best way to avoid unnecessary controversy was to avoid "concretizing truth";

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 240. [English translation of the passage of the *Taishang qingjing jing* is adapted from Livia Kohn, *The Taoist Experience: An Anthology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 25. —Trans.]

<sup>77</sup> Pan-chiu Lai, *Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Religions: A Study of Paul Tillich's Thought* (Kampen, Neth.: Kok Pharos, 1994), 160. Lai cites the works of Paul Avis (*Ecumenical Theology and the Elusiveness of Doctrine* [London: SPCK, 1986], 112) and Heinrich Ott ("Does the Notion of 'Mystery'—as Another Name for God—Provide a Basis for a Dialogical Encounter between the Religions," in Frederick Sontag and M. Darrol Bryant, eds., *God: The Contemporary Discussion* [New York: Rose of Sharon Press, 1982], 5–17).

<sup>78</sup> *FJJJ*, 205.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 130–31.

for whoever concretizes it will have to bear the burden of proof and to come under challenges from different dissenting quarters.<sup>80</sup>

As to the Christian view of “God’s presence in the world,” the CLS affirmed the belief of the real, historical presence of “the supreme,” which is not limited by one’s personal feelings, senses or mystical experience. Responding to Li’s view on “concretizing truth,” Yu said “the supreme” did not need to appear in the world at all if it were only a mystical force; it would have to take not a small risk appearing in the world. In Christianity, so Yu further pointed out, the Heavenly Father took a great risk sending his only begotten Son to Earth for missionary work, which resulted in his gruesome death on the cross; “the heart of our faith,” said Yu, “is this cross, where heaven converges with earth, humanity with God and justice with love.”<sup>81</sup> Without directly calling into question Li’s somewhat agnostic view on “concretizing truth,” Yu seemed thereby to suggest if “the supreme” of the MCS could not even take the risk of manifesting itself, it could not be the real saviour of humankind.

Li, on the one hand, expressed his high regard for the Christian notion of divine presence and, on the other hand, explained to the CLS representatives the Buddhist notion of nirvana, which is to be achieved by religious practice. In contrast to Theravāda Buddhism, which teaches *anupadhi-śeṣa-nirvāna* (nirvana of no fuel remaining), Li stated that Mahāyāna Buddhism teaches *apratīṣṭhitam nirvānam* (nirvana of no abidance), which can be classified into two types: one is to be achieved by self-power and the other by other-power. It is the latter type that the MCS advocated, whose practitioners believed the attainment of nirvana to be a gift of “the supreme.” However, there were according to Li “fundamentalist” Buddhist groups that upheld the teaching of self-power and denounced Buddhist groups advocating the teaching of other-power as heterodox (*waidao* 外道).<sup>82</sup> Li’s explanation of the MCS’s doctrine of absolute other-power, which was then still in the making, did not seem to have answered the CLS’s challenge, which in fact mainly concerned the MCS’s Buddhist interpretation of the relationship between “the supreme” or the Buddha and the worldly or human realm.

Li rationalized his refusal to go further into the speculative delineation of “the supreme,” by referring to the exemplary work of Marjorie Bly (b. 1919).<sup>83</sup> A missionary from the United States, Bly has been caring for

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 133–34.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 134, 137.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 114.

leprosy patients in Taiwan's outlying island of Penghu since 1952. "We can see the presence of God," averred Li, "in the person of Bly! Why do I mention Bly? Isn't it because she's self-giving for what she's done? Could any other persons of the same human nature do what she's done? I don't think any other ordinary men or women could, unless God's Spirit manifests himself in them. Rather than discussing what the supreme looks like, let us turn our thoughts to more visible things, such as the word and deed of those who have faith in the supreme. . . . What's the point in ceaselessly discussing abstract metaphysical questions, without ever being able to perceive any palpable truths via those questions?"<sup>84</sup>

Yet Li was challenged on the "concretization of truth." For he seemed to have failed to obviate his "burden of proof," by defining the "incomprehensible force of the *dharmadhātu*" as the cause of suchness (*rushiyin* 如是因), the condition of suchness (*rushiyuan* 如是緣), the effect of suchness (*rushiguo* 如是果) and the retribution of suchness (*rushibao* 如是報). In response to the challenge, he explained that as to matters relating to the practitioner's enlightenment experience, he would take an empirical position; whereas he would take a fideistic position as to matters relating to the "incomprehensible force of the *dharmadhātu*" and ascribe his position on the "incomprehensible force of the *dharmadhātu*" and his belief in *samsāra* to the *śabdapramāṇa*—the authoritative utterance of the Buddha. Li contended that he was not at fault in believing the doctrines of *samsāra* and *karma*, because they are not empirically verifiable and have never been disputed by any bodhisattvas or distinguished masters throughout Buddhist history.<sup>85</sup>

At any rate, Li's ambivalence, paradoxical views and eschewal of tying "the supreme" or the "incomprehensible force of the *dharmadhātu*" exclusively to any particular name seem understandable in the light of the following words Frederick J. Streng speaks about the "ultimate reality" in the context of interreligious dialogue:

This is to say that the ultimate reality in which one lives is not contained by one person's, one scripture's, or one community's statements, attitudes, or activities. That reality might be called "the mystery of being," in Western philosophy, the "suchness of form and nonform" in Buddhism, "the lord of life and death" in the theistic traditions, or the "peak experience" in humanistic psychology. It is the fundamental religious reality that causes scholars of religion and religious people of all

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>85</sup> See <http://www.zennow.org.tw/gb2312>.

cultures to stammer, speak in paradoxes, and remain silent when they try to spell out its power and depth.<sup>86</sup>

Thus, in stark contrast to Li's attitude towards naming "the supreme," the CLS's fervent hope that he would lead the MCS to subscribe to a different name of "the supreme" seemed somewhat less than sensible.

##### 5. THE FOCUS OF THE DIALOGUE: JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH IN THE BUDDHA OR BY FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST?

One can hardly fail to notice the centrality of the doctrine of justification by faith—generally rendered as *yinxin chengyi* 因信稱義 in Chinese—in one of the standard Chinese names for Lutheran denominations: *xinyizong* 信義宗. It was therefore quite natural for the CLS to put a special emphasis on the notion of faith in its dialogue with the MCS. In its letter to the MCS dated 25 August 2000, the CLS wrote: "It's by faith that the Christian is the completely free lord of all yet subject to none; it's by faith that the Christian is the completely submissive servant of all yet subject to every one.' ... Christians do not become holy through their own efforts in religious practice. Instead, their holiness attests to the grace of the loving God."<sup>87</sup> Li had noted, in his second letter to the CLS dated 23 June, that he was deeply impressed by the words he read in the CLS's letter: "... it's God's grace that Christians trust. It's not due to any religious practice, but to 'faith' alone."<sup>88</sup> He also mentioned that he was well disposed to the faith of his dialogue partner because he was particularly impressed by the notion of justification by faith; hence he would like to find out whether this notion is also found in Buddhism.<sup>89</sup> Thus "justification by faith" became a focal point of the interfaith conversations between the MCS and the CLS.

Li asserted that Pure Land (Shin) Buddhism, in respect of its emphasis on the doctrine of "attaining rebirth by Buddha-recitation," is not inferior to the methods pertaining to the *Āgamas*, the *Prajñā-pāramitā* and the

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<sup>86</sup> Frederick J. Streng, *Understanding Religious Life* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1985), 246.

<sup>87</sup> *FJJJ*, 198.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 159–60.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 26–27, 236–37.

sect of Chan. Noting that this Shin doctrine is superficially comparable to the Christian notion of eternal life attained on account of one's faith, Li said: "In the sounds of Buddha-recitation, which old men and women can faithfully practise, both the meditative principle of attaining nirvana for sentient beings and the precedence as to the meditative practice become evident."<sup>90</sup> He also mentioned Martin Luther's view that faith is an extremely difficult path and explained, from a Buddhist perspective, why he agreed with that: "Taking refuge in the Buddha is the most difficult yet highest way; only those who do not have self would take refuge in the Buddha.' The highest possible spiritual state attainable during one's lifetime is having faith in the Buddha."<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, the CLS disagreed with Li's attempt to understand the Christian notion of "justification by faith" by comparing it with the Buddhist concept of non-self, and pointed out that the biblical "motto" Li had mentioned—"no longer I but Christ"—implies not so much the elimination of one's self or the state of non-self as a self yielding unreservedly to the lordship of Jesus Christ. The CLS moreover remarked that if one is given only to striving for the state of non-self, there will be a danger that one becomes self-righteous and turns against God, thus forfeiting eternal life God unconditionally bestows on whomever is justified "by faith."<sup>92</sup>

In response to Li's interpretative attempt, Helen Cheng pointed out a fundamental difference between Buddhism and Christianity in respect of their views on the notion of faith: whereas knowing and understanding precede believing in Li's Buddhist understanding of religious faith, Christian believers come to truly know and understand God only after they have wagered for God, by believing in him.<sup>93</sup> It is to be noted that Cheng distinguished between the Christian notion of religious faith from Li's or the MCS's conception as though the latter's position was representative of mainstream Buddhism. Hence she failed to notice, in respect of belief in other-power, her dialogue partner in fact had stronger affinity with Christianity than with mainstream Buddhism. Nevertheless, Li argued that the meaning of faith in Buddhism is twofold, that is, faith prior to the stage of *darśana-mārga* or seeing the path and faith after the stage of *darśana-mārga*.<sup>94</sup> While the former is developed through rational

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<sup>90</sup> Li Yuansong 李元松, "Heng kan cheng ling ze cheng feng: Tan nan- beichuan fojiao de shenqian yitong (shang)" 橫看成嶺側成峰——談南北傳佛教的深淺異同(上), <http://a112.com/0207/0-a6/a2.htm>.

<sup>91</sup> *FJJJ*, 19.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

thought, the latter is identical with the pure faith or *prasādyā* that belongs in the highest truth or *paramārtha-satya*. Li pointed out that it was the latter type of faith that he had been speaking about when discussing the notion of justification by faith. This type of faith, so Li believed, is identical with the fourfold imperishable and pure faith in the Buddha, dharma, the sangha and morality; a Buddhist should have made the best use of his or her rational, critical thought by the time he or she attains this type of faith, yet only to discover the limitation and unreliability of human reason and henceforth “to give in to truth.”<sup>95</sup> Li moreover surmised that most, if not all, Buddhists and Christians do not become fully converted all of a sudden; they must have undergone an intense and protracted intellectual struggle before they could come to faith. “Impetuous submission of asinine people and complete submission,” said he, “look alike but are not the same thing.”<sup>96</sup> The MCS believed that “salvation comes from the reliance on absolute other-power, and that in the course of attaining salvation and Buddhahood, the greatest virtue is to have faith in Amitābha and the worst evil not to believe in Amitābha. All evils can be remedied by faith in Amitābha, without which one sees all evils as insignificant and will attain neither salvation nor nirvana.”<sup>97</sup> In contrast to the teaching of self-power in traditional Buddhism in China, the faith in Amitābha taught by the MCS resembles, at least in outward form, the Christian doctrine of faith in Christ.

A related question was raised during the last colloquy: although both the Christian doctrine of “justification by faith” and the Buddhist doctrine of “attaining nirvana by faith in Amitābha” require absolute faith, is it plausible that Christians and Buddhists have the same experience even though their objects of belief are not the same?<sup>98</sup> Yu suggested that because of their different objects and contents of belief, the answer to the question should remain uncertain even if their faiths are essentially the same. He moreover remarked that it is difficult for a believer to have “absolute faith” and that he himself was from time to time in want of faith, beseeching divine assistance. “Faith as tiny as a mustard seed,” said Yu, “will suffice. The Heavenly Father can fulfil his plan even with a smattering of our faith, which is like the fulcrum of the Archimedean lever.” Wang Jung-chang added: “Throughout Christian history few people had resolute faith in God; it’s formidably difficult.” “Ever since the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>98</sup> See <http://www.zennow.org.tw/gb2312>.

Buddha's nirvana," Li responded, "few practitioners have been able to attain resolute faith through the *tri-ratna* [Three Treasures]." He believed that the Christian notion of self-kenosis (*xuji* 虛己) is the key to having faith in God: "When one comes to perceive one's own filthiness, baseness, tininess and limitations, and to know that human reason has its own limits, one will become less arrogant and more willing to come to faith." "No human beings," Li furthermore said,

can ever understand God or Amitābha. It's like a gamble: they can never know for sure whether they have bet the right number of the dice in God's or Amitābha's mind. When humans realize their insignificance, finiteness and ignorance, the relative greatness of God or Buddha becomes visible. In view of this situation, a perhaps pragmatic or even opportunistic idea would come to mind: a religion is the best bet if it can enable humans "to live peacefully and love their works, to settle themselves both materially and spiritually, and to become compassionate and generous towards each other." In fact this is congruent with the ideals of the MCS: to quest for liberation without evading one's commitments and obligations, and to hold fast the Buddha-dharma while leading a peaceful, settled life.<sup>99</sup>

Li emphasized that both the belief in Amitābha and the belief in Christ are ineffable. He said to Helen Cheng during the first face-to-face colloquy: "Both philosophy and religious dogma are bound by language and thus have limitations. Your faith in the Lord must be a thousand times more than you can express in words. It can be said that what you communicate [in words] can by no means [fully] express the faith it points towards. We should confess that whatever is bound by language cannot be flawless and perfect, because it originates from humans. ... In Buddhist terms [faith] is given by Amitābha and originates from absolute other-power."<sup>100</sup> After he said these, he articulated his "provisional," intrareligious understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith: "It's not the Christian himself or herself who is capable of believing in Lord Jesus; his or her faith must rather be a gift offered by Lord Jesus."<sup>101</sup>

Furthermore, Li believed that whichever name an object of religious faith is called, its nature remains the same: a rose's fragrance remains the same whichever name it is called. In the meantime, he remarked,

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> *FJXJ*, 49.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 49.

I've said these words before: "Life is like a gamble; even if I bet everything of mine on the Buddha, I shouldn't care too much about whether I'll lose the bet or not." I suppose these words still apply if the name of "Buddha" is replaced with "Lord Jesus." If someone supposes he's of some worth, he might want to play safe in choosing his religious belief. But I'm just a nobody, so I couldn't care less about that. That made it easy for me to come to believe in the supreme, even at the risk of being duped. My life was worth nothing after all!<sup>102</sup>

The CLS participants in the dialogue understood that Li's view—that to name "the supreme" "Buddha" or "Jesus" does *not* alter its substance—is more or less grounded in the principle of "all-pervasiveness and complete consonance amidst differences" (*yuanrong-wuai* 圓融無礙) and embodies the spirit of "compassion and commiseration" (*tongti-dabei* 同體大悲). Nevertheless, they still maintained that "the Buddha is the Buddha, Jesus is Jesus." To them, it is nonnegotiable that the belief of God and the salvation of Jesus Christ are unique (John 3:16–18 was quoted as a proof-text).<sup>103</sup> In fact the CLS did not seem to fully understand Li's intent: in thus "confusing" the names of "Buddha" and "Jesus," he and the MCS wanted to point out that their focus was not on the divine name itself, which is bound by human language, but rather on the "faith behind the name." Hence Li stressed that it was not his intention for the time being to find out whether the Buddha and the Christian God are in fact ontologically identical, although he made clear his view that they were clearly distinguishable either at a language-bound level or at a philosophical level. He also said that he avoided committing any "syncretistic error" by equating Buddha with Jesus, yet noting that both religions should share certain things that are of the same substance. Moreover, he said he was still more interested to delve into the ineffable level of religious discernment—albeit only after the dialogue partners have grasped the contents of each other's religious faith at a language-bound level.<sup>104</sup>

Finally, the possibility of switching to another name of "the supreme" was discussed. Li clearly stated:

If the spirit, discernment and compassion of the Buddha become generally realized by men and women in the whole world, it doesn't matter any longer if the name "Buddhism" is still in use. Likewise when the world comes to receive the Gospel of God, I suppose God doesn't need

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 161–66.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 19.

be named “God” any longer. ... the name or the way the name is pronounced is not as important as the content itself! God loved the people of the world: what really matters is that they may attain salvation and love. I must avoid creating any offence to the Christian faith in speaking any further about the issue of naming God or Buddha. Yet from a Buddhist standpoint, here’s my view: “Does the name matter? What we name ‘rose’ is still fragrant if it’s named ‘egg.’ If we all held a rose in our hands, does it make any difference at all to call it an egg?”<sup>105</sup>

However, the CLS representatives maintained that the issue of switching names should be taken more carefully.<sup>106</sup> Admittedly, Cheng understood that Li cared about the substance of truth rather than the name itself. And she seemed to agree that switching to a different name would not affect the substance of its bearer. Yet she pointed out that many words or names are normally associated with certain specific, “subjective” meanings. In other words, to a certain group of language users, some specific meanings may only be evoked by a particular word or name. “In any case,” Cheng said, “a name may have a commonly agreed sense of its own. For instance, we will not think of a rose when we hear the word ‘egg.’ ... Therefore, the name ‘Buddha’ has its specific sense in Buddhist usage and the name ‘Jesus Christ’ too has its specific sense in the Bible.” She thus insisted that the names of Buddha and the Christian God are as a matter of fact neither interchangeable nor replaceable.<sup>107</sup>

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

(1) During the past twenty years, there have been in the main two kinds of interfaith dialogues developed in Taiwan. The dialogue between Buddhist leaders such as Masters Xingyun, Shengyan and Zhengyan and the Taipei Ricci Institute stands as a good example of the kind of dialogues that aim at interfaith cooperation in building a humane society rather than theological reflection that can lead to the change of religious identity. The conversation between the MCS and the CLS exemplifies the other kind of dialogues, which can deepen religious self-understanding by enabling

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 44.

the participants to reassess their own faith vis-à-vis their dialogue partner's. In that conversation it is Li and the MCS that are more notable, in that during their interfaith encounter with the CLS, they displayed admirable courage, adventurousness and sincerity that contributed to effecting a profound collision and conciliation of religious faiths or, in Streng's words, "an opportunity for genuine transcendence":

If each participant in religious dialogue remembers that every authentic encounter with another person is also an opportunity for genuine transcendence to enter their lives, the dialogue can be a means to expand a narrow, culturally centred point of view. At the same time, the function of a dialogue is not to reduce all the various beliefs and religious concepts to one position; different theological and philosophical formulations will flourish.<sup>108</sup>

Indeed, Li and the MCS's efforts made it possible for both dialogue partners, as representatives of Buddhism and Christianity respectively, to fully make clear both their commonalities and their particularities. Despite the risk of being censured for pliability in doctrinal matters, Li and the MCS's sincere quest for religious truth without precluding any possibilities as to the outcomes of the dialogue must be regarded as a prerequisite for an authentic interreligious encounter. Nonetheless, it is still to be noted that Li and the MCS's sentiments and beliefs are not to be taken as representative of contemporary Taiwanese Buddhists in general. For the MCS emerged as an outspoken critic of both traditional and contemporary Buddhism (albeit with the exception of academically informed modern Buddhist thought).<sup>109</sup> Moreover, it advocated other-power faith not least derived from Shin Buddhism, a doctrine that has decisively distanced Li and the MCS from mainstream, traditional Buddhism—even though they stopped short of replacing Amitābha with God or Buddha with Jesus. One must not therefore overestimate the historical significance of the conversation between the CLS and the MCS as an instance of the ongoing Buddhist-Christian encounter in modern China.

(2) Because of increased transnational migration, the ascent of the Eastern world, globalization and the religious and cultural superiority of the West coming under severe challenge since the two world wars, more and more scholars and religious leaders have taken cognizance of the fact that cultural and religious pluralism has become an integral part of our

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<sup>108</sup> *Understanding Religious Life*, 243.

<sup>109</sup> *FJJJ*, 229.

present civilization.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, religious pluralism as a theoretical notion or as a transnational historical phenomenon has received increasing attention of religionists and academicians since the 1920s.

An influential advocate of religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue, Raimon Panikkar, suggests that truth is pluralistic and has no centre, in that “reality itself is pluralistic; that is, incommensurable with either unity or plurality.”<sup>111</sup> He does not subscribe to ecclesiocentrism, christocentrism or theocentricism. “What is not necessarily true,” he explains, “is that truth needs always the same centre. ... The ‘interfaith’ meeting is not just a dialectical affair. It requires also love, dialogue, and human touch.”<sup>112</sup>

Advocating what he called “empiricist inclusivism” (*jingyanzhuyi de baorongzhuyi* 經驗主義的包容主義) and “fideistic pluralism” (*xinyangzhuyi de duoyuanzhuyi* 信仰主義的多元主義) respectively, Li, in his last face-to-face colloquy with the CLS, expressed his disagreement with Panikkar’s theory on at least two counts. Over against Panikkar’s assertion that truth is pluralistic, Li believed that to claim that truth is pluralistic is “to trespass outside the limits of empirical knowledge.”<sup>113</sup> Differing with Panikkar on the issue of ecclesiocentrism, Li insisted on the centrality and particularity of the “ecclesia”; he doubtless had the MCS in mind when he asserted, “the highest and the best can only exist in the subjective consciousness of individual communities.” Moreover, he repeatedly expressed his desire to learn from Christian churches in respect of their well-developed organization “founded on modern Euro-American civilization.”<sup>114</sup>

It is also to be noted that Li’s denial of “pluralism of truth” is in line with his insistence on a unitary view of “the supreme.” To him, “the supreme” of Buddhism, at least from the MCS’s perspective, differs from the Christian God in terms of divine nomenclature rather than substance.

<sup>110</sup> Richard J. Plantinga, ed., *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), 1.

<sup>111</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *Invisible Harmony: Essays on Contemplation and Responsibility* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 97. See also Pan Fengjuan 潘鳳娟, “Zongjiaonei duihua yu zongjiaoji duihua: Jian jie Pannika (Raimon Panikkar) zhi zongjiao huiyu fangfalun” 宗教內對話與宗教際對話：簡介潘尼卡 (Raimon Panikkar) 之宗教會遇方法論, <http://www.guoxue.com/fxyj/dialog/pnik/pfj.htm>.

<sup>112</sup> Panikkar, *Invisible Harmony*, 98–99.

<sup>113</sup> See <http://www.zennow.org.tw/gb2312>.

<sup>114</sup> See <http://www.zennow.org.tw/gb2312>. For a recent discussion on the harm ecclesiocentrism may do to interfaith dialogue, see Wang Zhicheng 王志成 and Si Zhu 思竹, *Shensheng de kewang: Yi zhong zongjiao zhexue* 神聖的渴望：一種宗教哲學 (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2000), 265–67.

Insisting on the belief that truth—at least insofar as the notion of “the supreme” is concerned—is unitary, Li could either continue the debate over nomenclature in his dialogue with Christians, or allow his view of “the supreme” to draw him further closer to the Christian faith.

(3) The primary goal of interreligious dialogue should be to deepen mutual understanding rather than to proselytize. If interreligious dialogue is primarily intended to bring about conversion, few religionists, if any, would want to take part therein unless their loyalty to their faith has already begun to falter.

During its dialogic encounter with the MCS, the CLS continuously took an apologetic or defensive position and urged Li to subscribe to the Christian name of “the supreme.” In the face of this proselytizing attempt, Li remained sympathetic and never tried to convert his dialogue partner.<sup>115</sup> He mentioned that he did not care whether or not he was regarded by his fellow Buddhists as a “non-conformist,” and stressed many times that he did not exclude the possibility of being converted to Christianity as a result of the dialogue. He told the CLS representatives:

Strictly speaking, I belong neither in Buddhism nor to Śākyamuni Buddha. Instead, I am a seeker of enlightenment and truth. If one day having convinced myself that Christianity is the more perfect truth, I leave the Buddha and believe in Lord Jesus, I don't think I'm thus turned against Śākyamuni Buddha. Why? Because my conversion to Buddha has from the beginning been a commitment to truth, or to the “dharma.” When I call myself a disciple of the Buddha, the name “Buddha” doesn't mean the person of Siddhārtha only, but also any person who has attained enlightenment of truth or embodied truth. I don't think enlightened sages are exclusive to Buddhism.<sup>116</sup>

Obviously, Li and the MCS still remained unconvinced that Christianity is “more perfect” than their version of Buddhism, although their dialogic encounter with the CLS deepened their understanding of some aspects of Christianity such as the doctrine of “justification by faith.”

Personal conversion not least of widely known figures such as Lin Yutang 林語堂, Zhang Chunyi 張純一 and Helen Cheng has been the main focus of Christian-Buddhist encounter and dialogue in modern China. Every convert must have engaged in an intense intrareligious dialogue with the religion to which he or she has converted. Thus, intrareligious

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<sup>115</sup> *FJJJ*, 40–41.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 27–28.

dialogue can be more fascinating than interreligious dialogue as a subject for those interested in the study of religions or apologetics. Yet we must not overlook the correlation between intrareligious and interreligious dialogue, in that every conversion results from an interreligious dialogue whose form, depth and intensity may vary from person to person. And it is not wide of the mark to say that every religious believer is constantly faced with both intra- and interreligious dialogues and presented with the challenge of conversion. For we live in a multi-religious and multi-cultural society in which access to information of all kinds has become virtually unlimited.