Religious boundaries in Chinese Christianities

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Religious Boundaries in Chinese Christianities

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In the academic study of Chinese Christianities, how can the concept of "religious boundaries" help us to map our field, its scholarly purpose, and its object of study? In recent years, scholars of Christianity in China have rightly invested energy in exploring the contextual contours which bound, inform or splinter Chinese Christianities.[1] By paying attention to regional and social boundaries, we have learned much about the history and experiences of Chinese churches on the ground. In foregrounding "religious" boundaries here, however, we have an opportunity to move from an attempt to explain Chinese Christianities as phenomena to an inquiry about all that which is not exhaustively explained by context: What is sinicization, theologically? Is there a distinct religio-spiritual logic at work in different Chinese Christianities? What does Chinese Christianity, if it can be taken as a whole, offer to the tradition of Christianity worldwide?

I reflect here on the work of three scholars who have nobly taken on the difficult task and knotty problem of "religious boundaries." These three scholars—Jin Lu, Alexander Chow, Lai Tsz-him—presented at the 2017 Chinese Christianities Seminar of the American Academy of Religion and contributed their papers to this issue.[2] I hope to accomplish several goals: First, I offer a reflection on the value of this turn to the

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[1] At the Chinese Christianities Seminar of the American Academy of Religion, these were our themes in the years 2015 (crossing regional boundaries) and 2016 (social boundaries).

[2] American Academy of Religion Conference, Boston, November 17–20, 2017.

specifically religious content of our subject matter. Second, I offer a framework for thinking about "religious boundaries" as a tool for intellectuals with different stakes in bounding, defining or delimiting Chinese Christianity. Third, I identify some methodological concerns in the use of "religious boundaries," drawing insight and examples from the contributed papers. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how religious boundaries must be used in such a way to further, rather than hamper, inquiry into the religious dynamism of Chinese Christianities.

TURNING TO THE "RELIGIOUS": AN APOLOGIA

I affirm the contributors' reflection on the religious nature of Chinese Christianity, since it is a necessary but often under-studied part of our work.

Granted, the subfield studying Chinese Christianity has tended to prioritize historical, sociological and inter-cultural elements of the phenomena for good reason. This contextual focus is important for ensuring that we do not import pre-conceived notions of "religion" into the Chinese context. For instance, it is all too easy to re-inscribe the Western post-Enlightenment characterization of religion as that which is privately spiritual in opposition to that which is publicly communal, political or ethical.[3] Therefore, in turning to focus especially on "religious boundaries," we must keep interrogating the category of religion itself.[4] The religious character of Chinese Christianities cannot be separated from the demographic, cultural, political and historical phenomena that make up human experience. Nonetheless, focusing on "religious" boundaries

[3] For a history of the term "religion" and its introduction to China, see Chen Hsi-yuan 陳熙遠, "Zongjiao: Yige jindai Zhongguo wenhua shi shang de guanjian zi" 宗教——一個近代中國文化史上的關鍵字 [Religion: A Keyword in the Cultural History of Modern China], *Xin Shixue* 新史學 [New History] 13, no. 4 (2002): 37–66.

[4] Indeed, as Jonathan Z. Smith has put it, "'Religion' is not a native category." There is significant debate about the appropriateness of applying the category of "religion" to phenomena that the participants may or may not themselves define as religious. For a history of the term and its taxonomy and usage, see Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 179–96, or Tomoko Masuzawa, "Introduction," in *The Invention of World Religions, Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1–33.

will only be an enlightening heuristic strategy if it attends to the dynamism in which Chinese Christians not only respond to contextual pressures but also generate religious expressions.

At stake is the purpose of academic scholarship on religion, a concern for both theologians and scholars of religious studies in Christianity in China. Of course, theologians may more readily start from a conception of the religious as something *sui generis.* However, even scholars of religious studies, such as the American scholar Jonathan Z. Smith, might reject a *sui generis* understanding of religion and have called the academy to take as its prime object those aspects of human and social experience which are *not* easily reduced to socio-historical explanation.[5] In his compelling account of the 1978 Jonestown murder-suicides, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," Smith suggests that the utility of the study of religion (as a field distinct from other social sciences) lies in taking what seems most inexplicable and making it more intelligible.[6] Using the public reaction to the disturbing end of Jones and the Peoples Temple to make a point, Smith expresses dissatisfaction with two responses. On the one hand, the popular media cast it in wholly religious terms, characterizing Jones as a completely unintelligible "fanatical" and "bizarre," "madman" and "self-proclaimed Messiah," with no attempt to make anything of him other than to gawk.[7] On the other hand, the American academy of religious studies generally left it to the economists to explain:

> The profession of religious studies, when it would talk, privately, within its boundaries, had a different perspective. For many, Jones's declaration that he was a Marxist, a communist, one who rejected the "opiate" of religion, were greeted with relief. He was not, after all, religious. Hence there was no professional obligation to interpret him.[8]

Smith laments that while the popular media saw Jonestown as thoroughly mysterious and inexplicable, academics in religious studies saw nothing at all in need of explanation and washed their hands of it. He

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[5] For the debate on religion as *sui generis,* see Daniel Pals, "Is Religion a *Sui Generis* Phenomenon," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 2 (1987): 259–92, and Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[6] Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 103–20.

[7] Ibid., 109.

[8] Ibid., 110.

points out the irony of this, given that "one of the most important religious phenomena of this century has been the combination of revolutionary Marxism and Roman Catholicism in Latin America, Marxism and Buddhism in southeast Asia, Marxism and Islam in the Middle East"[9]—a list to which we might add Christianity in twentieth-century China. In sum, whether one is a theologian or a scholar of religious studies, whether one takes religious phenomena to be *sui generis* or not, we must rise to the occasion and grapple with the religious element of our subject matter.

China's academy operates along different trajectories and fault lines, but its intellectual landscape is shaped by related debates. Liang Yongjia 梁永佳, in his article "The Anthropological Study of Religion in China: Context, Collaborations, Debates, and Trends,"[10] documents how during the 1980s and 1990s the Chinese discipline of anthropology of religion tended not to foreground "religion" as its central concern. Instead, "many scholars consciously or unconsciously adopt terms alternative to 'religion' as subjects of study, terms like 'culture,' 'folklore,' 'symbol,' 'heritage'" and so on.[11] Liang notes good reason for this discomfort, given that both "anthropology" (*renleixue* 人類學) and "religion" (*zongjiao* 宗教) are imported concepts, introduced by Chinese elites from imperial colonial powers. Nonetheless, his survey of Chinese studies in anthropology of religion leaves him dissatisfied by all that this work avoids by working around "religion."[12] In the early 2000s, as the field of religious studies has grown in China, Chinese scholars engaged with religion more directly. For instance, Mou Zhongjian's 牟鍾鑒 "religious ecology" framework sees religious and secular cultures interacting dynamically within a relatively independent community, aiming to promote social harmony.[13] Chinese scholars also engage with Yang

[9] Ibid.

[10] Liang Yongjia 梁永佳, "The Anthropological Study of Religion in China: Contexts, Collaborations, Debates, and Trends," *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series No. 250* (April 2016): 1–23.

[11] Ibid., 2.

[12] Liang notes one exception where "religion" was in fact common. Those Chinese anthropologists of the 1980s and 1990s studying religions among ethnic minorities that were not included among the officially recognized religions were able to use the term "religion" for their research. He notes the reasoning: "The ethnic religions are often seen as 'living fossils' legitimate in Chinese social sciences and the society in general dominated by social Darwinism. The idea supposes that all ethnic minorities are socially backwards, in the feudal, slavery, or primitive stages, in contrast to the prevalent majority Han. Therefore, it is natural to find religions, or "primitive religions" among the ethnic minorities.

[13] Mou Zhongjian 牟鍾鑒, "Zongjiao shengtai lun" 宗教生態論 [On Religious Ecology], *Shijie zongjiao wenhua* 世界宗教文化 [World Religious Culture] 1 (2012): 1–10.

Fenggang's 楊鳳崗 "market theory" of religion in China, which considers how government regulation impacts supply-demand relations in the "red," "grey" and "black" religious markets.[14] In short, there is ongoing debate in the Chinese academy on whether religious phenomena are best understood as derivative of other socio-cultural factors or with a nature of their own, and on whether studies of "religion" are best approached obliquely or directly.

In the case of Chinese Christianity, the American and Chinese intellectual communities are each, unsurprisingly, internally split. In the U.S. academy, there has long been a bifurcation between theological (generally missiological) studies of the Church in China and a newer socio-ethnographic, Chinese-centered focus on the experience of Chinese Christian communities. As for the Chinese intellectual community, Zhuo Xinping, Director of Religion at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) offers a trip-partite categorization: First, there is "Chinese theology" (*Zhongguo shenxue,* 中國神學) which is "peripheral" to academic work and refers to the "theological reconstruction" undertaken by the Chinese Church to adapt Christianity to Chinese society in culture. Secondly, "Sino-Christian theology" (*hanyu shenxue,* 漢語神學) "intends to shift theology from the 'ecclesiastical' to the 'humanistic.'" This scholarship engages Christian thought in philosophy, history and critical theory, and it prioritizes doing so in the "mother-tongue," Chinese. Finally, there is "academic theology" (*xueshu shenxue,* 學術神學) that takes a "neutral attitude towards faith" and seeks to promote inquiry about the Christian intellectual system in the context of Chinese society.[15] Not included in his framework is the theology or *shenxue* done in seminaries, as seminary degrees do not count in China's university system. This multiplicity of approaches reflects the difficulty in accounting for both etic and emic concerns in the study of religion.

Given this range of stances, we as scholars of Chinese Christianities must approach our subject with a methodology that is both rigorous and open enough to capture the phenomenon in all its complexity. I am encouraged to see how the Chinese Christianities Seminar continues to pay

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[14] See Yang Fenggang 楊鳳崗, "Dangdai Zhongguo de zongjiao fuxing yu zongjiao duanque" 當代中國的宗教復興與宗教短缺 [Religious Revival and Religious Shortage in Contemporary China], *Wenhua zongheng* 文化縱橫 [Beijing Cultural Review] 1 (2012): 26–31, and Yang Fenggang "The Red, Black, and Grey Markets of Religion in China," *The Sociological Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2006): 93–122.

[15] Zhuo Xinping 卓新平, "Dangdai Zhongguo Jidu zongjiao shenxue fazhan qushi" 當代中國基督宗教神學發展趨勢 [The Status of Christian Theology in China Today], in *Christianity*, ed. Zhuo Xinping (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 7–29.

careful attention to both socio-historical context and the explicitly religious dynamism of Chinese Christianities. Surely it is when we hold the two together that we reach the most fruitful part of our inquiry.

THREE KINDS OF RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES

What can "boundaries" do for us in our enterprise to better understand religion, especially Christianity, in China? I propose that we can consider three kinds of boundaries, each of which has utility for a different kind of inquirer.

1) Firstly, we can think of religious boundary in terms of a heuristic horizon. In considering what makes for "Chinese Christianity," is there a horizon of wider Chinese religiosity upon which, or against which, scholars can most clearly make out a distinctly *Chinese* profile of Christianity? In this usage, a religious boundary as "horizon" is the scholar or politician's tool for a kind of third-order classification. By first starting with the general, drawing a tentative and wide horizon for what Chinese religiosity or Christianity might be, one can then consider questions of how Chinese Christian structures, practices and beliefs measure up against it.

In this volume, Alexander Chow's paper "Christianity as a Chinese Religion: A Theological Reflection" considers one such horizon and seeks to propose another. On the one hand, the Chinese government since 2014 has proposed a process of Chinafication or Sinification (*Zhongguohua* 中國化, or *Hanhua* 漢化) of religion.[16] This program hinges on the fact that Christianity is not already a Chinese religion, at least according to the government's horizon for what counts as a Chinese religion. As Chow notes, this horizon is the boundary between Chinese versus "foreign religion" (*yangjiao* 洋教).[17] So long as Christianity is located as something foreign and beyond the bounds of Chinese religiosity, it will always be subject to calls for further Sinification.

Chow seeks to demonstrate why Christianity must be accepted as being already a Chinese religion and he finds a helpful horizon in the principle of the unity between Heaven and humanity, *Tian ren heyi* 天人合

[16] Alexander Chow, "Christianity as a Chinese Religion: A Theological Reflection," *Paper at the American Academy of Religion*, Boston, November 18–21, 2017.

[17] Ibid., 2.

一. He offers examples of how "the theme of the unity of Heaven and humanity is regarded by many scholars as the central thread that runs through all Chinese religions and philosophies."[18] Adopting this theme himself as the horizon for authentic Chinese religiosity, Chow then draws our attention to the way Chinese Christianity's treatment of subsidiary themes (transcendence, causation and ecclesiology) fits that profile. Insofar as Chinese Christian theologies share the characteristic philosophical and theological orientation towards *Tian ren heyi*, Chinese Christianity should be counted as a Chinese religion. In this discussion, we can see how boundary-drawing is a tool that analysts, whether political or academic, use to make category claims.

2) Secondly, we can consider religious boundaries in terms of those lines of internal logic according to which Chinese Christian theologies develop. Are there certain perennial questions that animate the development of Chinese Christian thought and activity? I would characterize this as a second-order enterprise, as it is the work of the religion scholar teasing out the contours of a distinct theological or sociocultural religious tradition.

Each paper discussing this issue engages in this kind of boundary-drawing, offering cases of Chinese Christian religiosity developing or operating along discernible lines. As noted before, Alexander Chow identifies three such lines of logic in the work of Chinese theologians: transcendence, causation, and ecclesiology. Jin Lu, in her piece "From Pagan Virtues to the Salvation of Non-Christians: Father Wang Changzhi's Contribution to Chinese Christianity," finds that the question of the *salvation of non-Christians* is an especially pressing concern for Christians in proximity to other Chinese religio-philosophical traditions.[19] Finally, Lai Tsz-him's paper "A Nonviolent Model of Liberation Theology in Hong Kong: A Dialogue with Maoism" offers another guiding crucible: nonviolence. Lai shows how in Fr. Mella's mix of Italian and Chinese Maoism, civil disobedience and liberation, the impulse toward a Catholic *nonviolent* permanent revolution distinguishes it from non-Catholic, non-religious understandings of revolution.

In short, each of these papers highlights that certain themes might operate as internal engines for the development of Chinese theology and practice. These themes are "religious boundaries" insofar as lines of in-

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[18] Ibid., 3.

[19] Jin Lu, "From Pagan Virtues to the Salvation of Non-Christians: Father Wang Changzhi's Contribution to Chinese Christianity," *Paper at the American Academy of Religion*, Boston, November 18–21, 2017.

quiry work to focus and intensify the Church's expression of faith, distinguishing between what is and is not of prime concern to the developing religious tradition. Boundaries of this sort are a second-order tool for understanding the thoughtful Christian's reflection on Christian faith.

Thirdly and finally, we can think of religious boundaries in terms of claims that bound or *delimit* the religious community over and against what it is not. This is the first-order, and hotly contested realm of religious identity where religious adherents render their own evaluative judgements on who is really a Chinese Christian and who is not.[20] Often, Chinese Christianity cannot be explained by wholly political or economic factors. Individual communities' beliefs, attitudes, practices—in short, their drawing of a religious boundary—are determinative.

While politicians and analysts may engage in third-order categorizations of Chinese religiosity, and while scholars of various sorts may offer second-order articulations of the Chinese Christian tradition, we must not forget that Chinese Christian communities take shape through first-order boundary-drawing of their own. If we can attend to all of this in our scholarship, we may do justice to the multi-level, multi-faceted religious dynamism of Chinese Christianities.

REMAINING BOUNDARY QUESTIONS

In this final portion of my reflection, I seek to identify some methodological concerns that the theme of "religious boundaries" in these rich papers brings to light.

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[20] While it is not included in this issue, the 2017 Chinese Christianities Seminar included a paper by Justin Tse on evangelical rejections of Buddhist cooperation in Vancouver. This was a case study of this final type of religious boundary-drawing. Tse's "illiberal Cantonese" interviewees engaged in efforts to bound and define Chinese Christian identity in keeping with their sense of betrayal when the representative Raymond Chan tried to coalition-build with local Buddhists. For instance, one woman reflected: "Raymond Chan's problem was that he burned incense and worshipped ancestors. That's the problem. Because he said that he was Christian, people said, No, that's not Christian, and then they began to pay attention to what he did—is it really for us? That's how they discovered that he said one thing and did another." Similarly, he relates how when the Canadian Alliance for Social Justice and Family Values Association (CASJAFVA) began selling Buddhist statues, its Christian constituency opposed it on religious grounds, that such economic activity did not reflect their beliefs. Justin Tse, "Refusing to Be Played for Fools: Illiberal Cantonese Evangelical Suspicions of Coalition-Building with Buddhists in Vancouver, BC," Paper presented at the American Academy of Religion Conference, Boston, November 17–21, 2017, 4 and 6.

One primary concern is how we might engage in scholarly boundary-drawing without imposing a falsely static view of Chinese Christianity. After all, there are two terms in "Chinese Christianities." There exists always a risk that, in trying to prove the phenomenon is species of the genus "Christian" that we might essentialize the Christian tradition. On the flip side, there is a risk that in trying to make the case that it is "Chinese," we render China and its culture as something static. In these pages, Alexander Chow makes a compelling case that Christianity is already a Chinese religion, suggesting that Christianity does *not* need to undergo Sinification, at least not in the way that the Chinese state envisions it. Yet surely Chinese Christian theology still needs to undergo some process of transformation—not because Christianity has yet to flip the switch from "foreign" to "indigenous," but rather in recognition of the fact that *China* is a changing context. Moreover, if we move beyond categorization into the constructive realm where intellectuals seek to develop "Chinese Christian theologies," even there adapting the Christianity pole is only half of the project. Even that part is bound to fail, if to do so one pins down Chinese culture as a deposit or principle. Contextualization must be undertaken again and again or else it risks contextualizing Christianity in terms of a China that does not exist anymore. What can be done, then, besides holding all categorizing boundaries (foreign vs. Chinese, *Tian ren heyi* as Chinese, etc.) as provisional?

Another limitation of identifying boundaries is that doing so can blind us to the trans-national, inter-religious, and otherwise boundary-defying factors that shape Chinese Christianities. Jin Lu focuses on the content of Wang Changzhi's theological thought on topics such as the immanence of heavenly or moral norms stirring our moral cooperation, self-examination in spiritual practice, and the question of pagan virtues and implicit faith. But throughout this exposition, she deftly acknowledges Wang's indebtedness to both Chinese philosophers and non-Chinese Catholic thinkers such as Ignatius, Augustine and de Lubac. Wang was a thoroughly Chinese theologian, well-versed in both Chinese Catholic and Chinese non-Catholic philosophy. However, he was also in conversation with a wide number of thinkers in multiple times, locales and languages. As Lu notes, Wang embodied the fact that Chinese theology transcends linguistic and geographical boundaries. Our scholarly methods must remain flexible enough to see these border-crossings. A figure like Wang prods us to ask, what might be the relationship between Chinese Christianities and world Christianity?

In this vein, it is especially important to work across the permeable boundary between the "religious" and the "political." In this issue, Lai

Tsz-him's subject, the Italian Hong Kong priest Fr. Mella, shows how inseparable they can be: Fr. Mella's life has spanned British as well as PRC control of Hong Kong. Mella is a Catholic Maoist, but his Maoism is a 1960s Italian Maoism that Mella has refracted back to the Hong Kong context. His hymns are Catholic, but their lyrics quote "permanent revolution" from Mao's Little Red Book. This is a manifestation of Chinese Christianity that seems to defy any too-narrowly bounded definition of religion. Because of this, we scholars have an opportunity to consider trends that we might not otherwise look at. For instance, is Fr. Mella's liberation theology better understood as politicizing or depoliticizing Hong Kong theology? In *Theological Reflections on the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement*,[21] Justin Tse has proposed that the Umbrella Movement brought the politicization of Christianity in Hong Kong to a point of crisis; after decades of Christianity's politicization both under British control and under the one-country-two-systems, the Umbrella Movement brought about an ironic depoliticization in the practice of theology.[22] However, Lai's research in this issue provides a counter-example. It would seem Fr. Mella's liberation theology does not fit the trend in the post-umbrella era, but may rather affirm the politicization thesis. Theoretical reflection on the nature of "religious" or "political" activity in contemporary Chinese societies is much needed, to ensure that such boundaries, if used, help us to identify and answer the most pressing questions.

CONCLUSION

We are fortunate as scholars to work at a time when categories are in flux, the methodological toolbox is open, and one can productively contribute any number of pieces to the incomplete mosaic, which is the academy's understanding of "Chinese Christianities." Therefore, the study of Chinese Christianity need not shy away from the religious element in our object of study even as we press on to better understand its inseparability from the whole human experience.

I began by referencing Jonathan Z. Smith and I find his conclusion helpful as well. Smith insists that scholars of religion have a professional

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[21] Justin Tse and Jonathan Tan, ed., *Theological Reflections on the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

[22] Ibid., 165.

obligation to "persist in the quest for intelligibility."[23] By this, he means that we must investigate that which seems most unintelligible, that which is not already accounted for in the work of historians and sociologists, in order to render it more intelligible. Indeed, if there is not something to be explored in what we tentatively call "religion," or if theologians or scholars of religious studies are not attempting to bridge that gap between the unintelligible and the more intelligible, then why not leave theology wholly in the ecclesiastical realm of confessional faith statements and leave the history and sociology to those historians and sociologists more specifically trained to do it?

Chinese Christianity captures the interest of so many precisely because the typical boundaries in thinking about "religion" break down and because so much is unknown and at stake in every attempt to theorize new boundaries. In agreement with Smith, however, that the purpose of scholarship is to be productive of knowledge, I am hopeful that there remains a distinct task and contribution to be accomplished by scholars of Chinese Christianity.

[23] Smith, "Devil in Mr. Jones," 120.