

Preface for Ge Muzhi's

Shengjing yaoyi shi jiang: xie gei 21 shiji Zhongguo zhishiren de shengjing sixiang daodu

圣经要义十讲: 写给21世纪中国知识人的圣经思想导读

(Ten Lectures on the Essential Teachings of the Bible: An Introduction to Biblical Thought for 21st Century Chinese Intellectuals), Taipei: Glory Publications 2024.

He Guanghu¹

Translated from Chinese by Leopold Leeb

I.

Karl Barth said once that the Bible is a “wonderful new world.” I would also say that the Bible is truly “wonderful,” because it is inspired by the Holy Spirit, and it is like a kaleidoscope: When we read the Bible and shift the view angle a little, we will soon obtain a new picture or pattern, a fresh insight or inspiration. Truly the Bible is always “new” – it is never like any other book, it seems to speak of the past but it really points to the future, it seems to tell of ancient events, but in fact it holds new meaning for today, and the inspiration and understanding of the readers is always fresh and new!

Furthermore, the Bible is really a “world” – it has a long history of recording events and covers a huge range in time and space; as it runs through many dynasties and empires in a thousand and more years, its narrative extends to three continents and to the struggles and wars of many nations in the vicinity of Israel, describing times of peace and war, of unity and separation, and of the political changes throughout many generations and centuries. As to the recording of God's Word, it also profited from the wisdom and labors of innumerable people, including leaders, prophets, kings, priests, poets, tax collectors, physicians, fishermen, missionaries, scholars and was also shaped by the oral traditions of numerous local church communities, by their legends, examples, insights, writings, witnesses, evangelization efforts, recordings, research, argumentations, and editorial works. As for its languages, the way it goes from the local dialects to the international and commonly used languages, and then to the languages of nearly all the nations in the world – could any other book in the world be compared with it? We only need to review the

¹ Professor He Guanghu 何光沪 (born 1950) is an outstanding representative of research on Christianity in China. He first worked at the Institute for World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and from 2001 at Renmin University of China.

richness and variety of the themes of the Bible, their profundity, horizon, and everlasting meaning, which is always linked to the most crucial and vital issues of humanity, and we will understand why many theologians, philosophers, and scientists have said: “God gave two great books to humanity: one is nature (or the world), the other is the Bible!”

The world is so vast that most people have not traveled throughout it or are not able to do so. Likewise, the Bible is too vast. I believe that most people, including most Christians today, have never been able to fully understand it. In antiquity and in the Middle Ages, most people and most Christians were illiterate; they could not read books. In the modern and contemporary age, more and more people can read, and the number of books is also constantly growing, but in recent decades the time people spend on reading books seems to become less and less, and the number of avid readers seems to be decreasing!

While the number of different Bible editions and the books related to the Bible (for example Bible commentaries and exegetical literature) is constantly increasing, I think, the time which people spend on perusing these books is also decreasing. Is this not a discouraging trend of our age?

Therefore, to sum up the essential teachings of the Bible in a small book, so that the readers could get a clue in a very short time, can be a good idea. In this way, the readers may quickly understand why the teachings of the Bible have such profundity and horizon, and why its meaning is so rich and everlasting, and why it is always related to the crucial and vital matters of humanity ... Of course, this cannot be a substitution for the reading of the Bible itself, but it may be able to offer a much needed guide for reading the Bible today, just like providing a traveler with a simple and practical tour guide or road map.

This work entitled *Ten Lectures on the Essential Teachings of the Bible (Shengjing yaoyi shi jiang)* by Prof. Ge Muzhi is exactly such a much-needed guide for today's Chinese readers, be they Christians or non-Christians, be they in China or elsewhere in the world, be they familiar with the simplified Chinese characters or with the traditional script and idiom.

For those who are familiar with all the texts of the Bible, or who know well various theories of the exegetical experts, perhaps some of the explanations in this book may sound debatable, but for me, this book offers many insights, and I profit a lot from it. And I believe, not only for many common believers, but also for the many unbelievers who are interested in the Christian faith, and for all who care about their true life or their souls, this book is worth reading.

II.

In recent decades, the world has changed dramatically, and many people are confused about it. In the “world of people who read simplified Chinese characters” (meaning: in Mainland China), the situation is no better. Many of our compatriots are facing many unspeakably absurd and unjust matters, and their way of thinking is confused and unreasonable to such a degree that they gloat over or acclaim disasters or terrorist attacks that happened in some other countries, and abuse or insult public intellectuals who speak out for social justice – this may be because of the great info-walls within which they live or

because of the serious prejudices they have harbored for a long time ... all these phenomena must painfully awaken us to this conviction: What our compatriots need most today is common sense and reason!

When people have common sense and reason, they would, when they encounter anything, try to find out and understand the relevant facts as much as they can in some objective way (and not cling to a propagandist version of “facts”), and try to follow the logic of practical life (and not the “logic” of some theories or of authoritarian tenets), and so to arrive at their own conclusions. For example, in the face of the war in Ukraine, they would first find out who launched the invasion, and follow this logic of practical life and international law – peaceful life demands such principles as “do not change the status quo through violence,” and then arrive at the conclusion of opposing the invaders. However, so many people think the opposite way, ignoring the facts around the start of war, following the argumentation of the invader, and accept the position of the aggressor, all this shows us the lamentable result of such lack of common sense and reason.

As to the Christian faith, many of our compatriots claim that this faith is incompatible with common sense and with reason. They say that, for example, a virgin giving birth, or the resurrection of Jesus, is incompatible with the common sense about birth and death. Furthermore, the saving grace of God and the incarnation of the eternal word seem not to be in line with scientific reason. Therefore, they feel that the basic teachings of Christianity are untenable and not worth believing.

Then, am I not contradicting myself, while I claim that what my compatriots need most is common sense and reason, and at the same time I say that they need the Christian faith? Not at all! For in fact Christianity is the religion which is most in line with common sense and reason. If you use the standard of common sense and reason to choose a religious faith for yourself, then Christianity should be your best choice.

In this limited space I can only briefly elaborate this point, but these cases are all the central teachings of Christianity. Before I explain it, please recall the memories of the popular tale *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, where the carpenter Antonio made a wooden puppet named Pinocchio. Now when Pinocchio left home and went to school, he ran into two bad fellows and gave in to the temptation of a life of pleasure, and so he quickly forgot about his “father” who hoped the puppet would become his “true child.” After many twists and turns, sorrows and miracles, the “blue fairy” especially helped Pinocchio to leave his ocean of confusions and return home to the bosom of his father, thus becoming a real and good child. In the following lines I want now to explain how Christian teachings are in line with common sense and reason.

1. The Creator

We are living in a world of matter and spirit, with rules and laws, complicated and fine-tuned. To accept this as an objective fact is in line with common sense, but to deny this would be contradicting common sense. Then, does this world have a “Creator”? We may consider two different solutions to this question and ask which one would be more reasonable, and which one may be less reasonable (modern science no longer speaks of “absolutely right” or “absolutely wrong” theories, but only talks of theories with higher or

lower probability, or theories which are better or worse in explaining facts; this is what is meant by “more reasonable” or “less reasonable” here). The first answer is something like this: The world has been always there; it is eternal and has no origin or creator (what is the evidence or reason? Sorry, unclear!). The second answer is that the world is so wonderful that there must be an origin, an intelligent source, or a wise creator. The first answer is like when one faces a huge river and claims that it has no source, or one sees a tall tree and says it has no roots, or one stands before a piece of elaborate furniture and says there is no carpenter: Is that more or less “reasonable”? This reminds me of a little story: Newton once made a model of the solar system and invited his friends to have a look. His friends were amazed at the beauty of the model and asked who made it. When he answered, “Nobody made it,” the friends did not believe him. Then Newton said: “Seeing this small model, you would not believe that there is no creator of it, so, when you see the great and real solar system, how could you deny that it has a Creator?” Following the practical logic of life, must we not concede that Newton’s claim, or the first answer is “more reasonable”?

2. The Creation of Humanity

Among the many things in the world, there is one special thing which is different from all others, and that is humanity which possesses free will, intelligence, and creativity. Again, this is also a fact of common sense. Since we have accepted the Creator as a “more reasonable” answer, let us see, then, which one of the two following statements would be more reasonable, A or B? Here is A: After the Creator had made all kinds of inferior (to humanity) things and items, He incomprehensibly stopped making any creatures of a higher order, although He was well able to create something of a superior quality which would be like himself (for example, having the three characteristics mentioned above). And B: Just like the smart and benevolent carpenter Antonio, who first produced many wooden things and then made the human-like puppet Pinocchio, hoping it would behave well and become his real son, so in a similar way, the Creator (whose magnificent creation was an expression of great love) first made all things and then created a most supreme being which was like himself, namely humanity, to which the Creator gave some special gifts that only the Creator possessed, hoping that human beings would obey His word and become His children sharing His great love. Seen from the practical logic of life, a comparison of the two cases would make the statement B obviously look “more reasonable” (as it is more in line with the reasoning of life or common sense). Also we may say, that seen from the “normal human relationships and daily life” (*lunchang riyong* 伦常日用), case B is more in line with human feeling and thinking ways than case A.

3. God and Humanity

After having accepted that the Creator made human beings as the position more in line with common sense and with reason, we still must face two mutually contradictory theories: A: Just as the deists claim, after creation, God abandoned the world and humanity, leaving them to their own courses of events, retreating to a remote place of carelessness. B: Just like the carpenter Antonio who was always worried about the fate of Pinocchio, ever

hoping the puppet would return home, so in a similar way, God, possessing perfect knowledge, power, justice, and merciful love, would not abandon humans; having observed well their fall, sin, pride, unjust and unloving acts, God will not only teach, direct and punish, but also forgive and save them; and just like the merciful father, He hopes for His prodigal son's contrition and conversion, welcoming his return. Of these two theories, which one is more in accordance with common sense and reason, more in accordance with human feelings? The answer is again B.

4. The Method of Salvation

As to the method of salvation, we may imagine a boy watching a group of ants forming a long row; being attracted by some smell, the ants march toward a perilous place. The boy may hastily take a small piece of wood and place it in the way of the ants, to prevent them from moving ahead – but this method for saving the ants in the situation is very likely leading to failure. We also may imagine another boy with magic powers, now he changed himself into an ant; then he would run to the front of the row of ants, leading them to safety and peace – only this could achieve the goal of salvation. Since the salvation of humans does not mean to avoid external or physical pain (which are necessary elements of human life), but means the liberation from inner sins (namely to save the humanity or the soul), then, would it not be the most preferable and effective method if the savior could, as one of them, enter the group of those to be saved, if he would suffer the trials of human life, bear the guilt of the people, live a model life of selflessness, great love, and sacrifice, thus setting an example for imitation? Many people imagine the method of divine salvation as like the approach of the first boy, but compared with that, would not the Christian teachings concerning God's word taking on flesh, the incarnation, by which Jesus descends to the world to save people, be more effective, sensible, and reasonable?

5. The Precondition for the Effectiveness

The effectiveness of this method of salvation requires some precondition, namely that Jesus' followers must believe that Jesus, who obviously had full humanity, at the same time also had full divinity (as Son of God). If one does not believe that He was God, the demand to follow Him would become a relative demand, not an absolute one. He would not be different from a worldly moral model or a wise teacher, then people could never argue that following him was "a vital matter." If this is so, then which method could be used by God to induce the people to believe that the son of a carpenter was the Son of God? Let us think, beside these methods (of course the omnipotent God could do all the things) – making miracles or signs around his birth and baptism (the announcement of angels at his birth, the descending of the Spirit in his baptism), many signs and miracles in his life (healing of the sick, reviving the dead), and especially after his death, his resurrection and communication with many people, and finally, his ascension to heaven before a crowd of people (so that many people could give witness to all of these events) – could we think of any other better way or method, so as to make the people of that era believe that He was not only a man but also God? Seen from this point, the Christian understanding of history

(“his-story” as “God’s story”) is not also very sensible and fair, logical and meaningful, and thus “more reasonable”?

6. “Saving People Must Be Completed”

Since God will save people, it would be absurd or opposed to common sense/practical reason to suppose that He will leave humans and not care about them anymore, after Jesus’ death and ascension. Even a Chinese proverb could say “Saving people must be completed,” how can God neglect this logic? Therefore, according to the Bible, Jesus announced to the apostles, before his death and ascension, that God would send a Helper to humanity, that is the Holy Spirit; therefore, the apostles and the following generations of disciples could get directions from the Spirit and communicate with Him; therefore, their faith, the guarantee for their salvation, could be established and strengthened through the grace from the Spirit. As for the course of salvation, is it not rather natural and reasonable?

7. The Community of Believers

As for the Church: Firstly, since all the justified (through their faith) have some relationship to their Lord (they are children reconciled with the Father), they have some relationship to each other (they are like brothers and sisters); so, they are not isolated, but consist in or form a body; so, the birth of the Church is natural and reasonable. Secondly, since the believers’ salvation requires their faith in their Lord, it is natural and logical that they should follow His teaching, obey His command, and preach the gospel; so, it is in line with common sense and reasonable for the Church to take this as her ministry. Lastly, since the saved still are human, living in this world, not yet fully sanctified, they still have human limitations and weakness, still have the possibility of sinning and being guilty, therefore, the churches consisting of humans still have all kinds of defects, errors, and guilts, need to be examined, corrected, and improved from time to time. This is also in line with common sense and with practical reason.

As a conclusion, we can say that concerning these great and vital issues, in comparison with the opposite statements (both philosophical and religious), the statement of Christianity is clearly more in line with what we call “common sense and reason”!

III.

Dear readers, here I have only mentioned a few issues, but the little book in your hands discusses many more important questions, and it does not only expound these in a profounder way but also in a way which is more perfectly based on the texts of the Bible. And at least for Christians, the Bible is the real authority.

I have said above that common sense and reason demand that we should reach our conclusions by following the practical logic of life and not by adhering to the logic of certain theories or authoritarian teachings. In the Chinese parlance, the difference of the two words “authority” (*quanwei* 权威) and “authoritarianism” (*weiquan* 威权) is not just

the order of juxtaposition of two characters, there is also a huge difference in meaning. True authority relies on inner truth and persuasive power, and it is not contradictory to common sense and reason. But what we call authoritarianism is based on outer force and pressurizing power, and often against common sense and reason, even works at the sacrifice of the latter two. As to theories, they are all relative, conditional, and some may contain absurdities.

The Bible is the authoritative basis of Christian teachings, and this little book elucidates for the reader the biblical basis of ten basic tenets of Christianity. Therefore, I am glad to recommend this book to all readers in the Sino-phone and Chinese literary world, to all who want to understand Christian teachings and the Bible!

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