

International Conference “Catholicism and China: Dialogue, Inculturation and Responsibility” in Hong Kong

Katharina Wenzel-Teuber

Translated by Jacqueline Muhlberge

From the late 1980s onwards, intensive research into Christianity and Christian theology has been developing outside the Church in universities and academies in Mainland China. Until today, however, only a relatively small number of these researchers concern themselves with Catholic theologians. Then again, inner Church theological efforts at inculturation such as began in Taiwan and Hong Kong several decades ago are still in the initial stages in Mainland China. Among the establishments in the Catholic Church of Mainland China that are active in the field of theological research – apart from theological seminaries as places of study – there are the Sapientia Press 上智编译馆 (since 1946 / 1997) in Beijing, with the associated Beijing Institute for the Study of Christianity and Culture 北京天主教与文化研究所 (since 2002) as well as the Faith Institute for Cultural Studies 信德文化研究所 (since 2001) in Shijiazhuang, which, however, concentrates more on pastoral and social topics.

Though not based in Mainland China, the Yuan Dao Study Society 原道交流學會, which belongs to the Diocese of Hong Kong, and the Centro Studi Li Madou 利玛窦研究中心, founded in 2010 by Mainland Chinese Catholic theologians in the Italian town of Macerata – birthplace of the China missionary Matteo Ricci SJ – also aim to promote the development of an inculturated Chinese theology in a Catholic context. At the same time, they intend to foster dialogue between theologians within the Church and university researchers into Christianity in Mainland China. These two organizations introduced themselves to an academic public for the first time with a joint conference in Hong Kong from November 6–8, 2013. “Catholicism and China: Dialogue, Inculturation and Responsibility” 天主教與中國: 對話、本地化與責任 was the title of the international conference. Co-organizers of the conference were the Monumenta Serica Institute and the China-Zentrum (both in Sankt Augustin, Germany).

The composition of the participants already clearly showed that dialogue was a central aim of the conference: More than half of the approximately 50 regular participants at the conference came from Mainland China, from both State universities and Church theological seminaries and research institutes. The others were mainly theologians from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Europe.



Conference participants in the meeting hall of the Caritas Oswald Cheung International House in Aberdeen.
Photo: Rubie Chung.

The conference opened with the question of the **inculturation of theology**. The Jesuit fundamental theologian **Hans Waldenfels** (University of Bonn) presented “**Contextual Theology.’ Origin – Purpose – Method,**” relating it to China. According to Waldenfels, one of the gravest questions for theological teaching in China is how far it has to adopt the Western processes of inculturation and contextualization – as for example its history of encounter with the Greek philosophy. Waldenfels argued for a theology which expresses biblical faith with concepts of the Chinese tradition and in which today’s Chinese can find answers to their needs and questions, while still transmitting the feeling of belonging to the universal Church. Such a theology, however, can only be developed by Chinese Christians.

An interesting new phenomenon was dealt with by **Geng Youzhuang** 耿幼壯, expert for studies in comparative literature at the Renmin University in Beijing. His presentation was entitled “**Movable Borders: How ‘Scriptural Reasoning’ Can Enter the Chinese Context.**” Scriptural Reasoning is a method of dialogical reading and reflection of sacred Scriptures during which Jewish, Christian and Muslim participants jointly discuss texts of their respective religions. It was developed in the 1990s in the USA in academic circles but in the meantime has been used in the broader Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue. According to Geng, there has been a discussion for some years on whether the method of Scriptural Reasoning (chin. *jingwen biandu* 经文辩读) could also be used for the joint reading of Chinese and Western classical scriptures. That could be a way of dealing with the crisis which befell subjects such as comparative literature, *guoxue* [“national studies”] and sinology, Geng said. According to Geng there are parallels between Scriptural Reasoning and hermeneutic techniques used in the study of the classics of the Confucian tradition, in spite of the difference in the fact that the Confucian classics (in the predominant opinion) have no theological or religious content. Geng mentioned that his colleague Yang Huilin, a driving force in the introduction of Scriptural Reasoning in China, uses a special

approach: Yang regards the reading, translation and interpretation of Chinese classical scriptures by the early Christian missionaries and the new discovery of these activities of the missionaries by today’s Chinese academics as Chinese-Western Scriptural Reasoning reaching beyond time and space.

The presentation of **Madeleine Kwong** (Kuang Lijuan 鄭麗娟) gave a concrete example of the efforts to express Christian content with the help of Chinese concepts. She is the superior general of the Sisters of the Precious Blood in Hong Kong and is a professor at Holy Spirit Seminary College. The title of her talk was “**Taking the Inspiration of the Holy Spirit as Starting Point to Reflect Anew on the Work of Theological Inculturation.**” She pleaded for the development of a “theology of the Spirit” which, unlike the “theology of the Word” which is determined by reason, is based on emotion and in her opinion suits the East Asians better. She proposed especially to connect the Holy Spirit with the experience of the *qi* 氣 (breath, vital energy). She argued that the *qi* which penetrates everything in the world has an important place in the thinking and in the daily life of the Chinese; it pervades cosmology, the doctrine of human nature, society, ethics, medicine, art, etc. Unlike the Greek *pneuma*, which under the influence of dualistic thinking finally came to be understood as essence and pure spirit, the Chinese *qi* has retained the original life force and could, thus, renew the western theology of the Spirit which – in the words of her teacher Zhang Chunshen – is “anemic.” Based on the Holy Spirit’s appearance in the significant stages of the life of Jesus, she sought to develop and present a Christology from the experience of the *qi*.



Sr. Madeleine Kwong connects the experience of *qi* with the Holy Spirit. Photo: Rubie Chung.

An historic encounter between Christian and Chinese thought was presented by **Rui Xin** 芮欣 of the faculty of Chinese Literature of Xiamen University in her paper “The French Jesuit Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730) and His Studies of the *Yijing*.” – Two further talks at the conference also dealt with historical questions: **Li Jianqiu** 黎建球, former president of the Catholic Fu Jen University in Taiwan, discussed developments “From Matteo Ricci to China Today” and **Li Zhengrong** 李正榮 (Beijing Normal University) dealt with the research of the scholar Chen Yuan on “Yelikewen” of the Yuan era.

Christianity and Chinese Society was a second major focus of the conference. Three talks sought answers to the questions of today’s China:

The well-known researcher of Christianity **He Guanghu** 何光沪 (Renmin University, Beijing) dealt with the foundations of the political system from a Christian point of view in his talk on “**The Goal of the State in Today’s China – a Reflection from a Christian**

and also a Non-Religious Perspective.” The Chinese Christians – and theologians – ought to share in the reflection on this question, He Guanghu stipulated at the start. Their voices would be heard, he said, giving the following reason: While with 100 million (sic) adherents only the second largest religion in China, the Christians are more organized, more “in the world” and with their socio-political thinking are closer to the pulse beat of the times than the more numerous Buddhists. Then he argued that since 1949 the goal of the State has always been the State itself. He explained that all the resources of the country, even human lives (in the course of the campaigns up till 1978), had been utilized as a means for this purpose. The “Chinese Dream” also pursues the goal of the rich, strong State and the strengthening of the nation. From the Christian viewpoint – which He Guanghu supported with statements from the Bible, the Fathers of the Church and also of theologians and political philosophers – the State is not a goal in itself. The secular State ought to serve the people and is relativized by the Kingdom of God. If, therefore, the State is not an end in itself, what goal should it pursue in first place, asked He. The rights of the citizens or the power of the State? Justice or a rich, militarily strong State? World peace or the rise of an individual nation? He stated that Christianity as well as reason and historical necessity all speak for the first of these alternatives. Since 1949, however, China chose the second alternative each time, he argued. In his view, the “old system” with its false understanding of the nature and goals of the State is the “root of the malady.” The main problem according to him lies in the absolute power of the State while the rights of the citizens are unprotected. He pointed out that today the clearest visible result of that is the large number of civil servants who are corrupt and commit criminal offences. Whether the leadership of China is capable of carrying out truly far-reaching reforms will be decisive for the future of China and of the world, He said.

The Catholic theologian **Jing Baolu** 靖保路 (Centro Studi Li Madou, Macerata) gave a talk on **“Crisis and Salvation of the Nihilistic Era – a Reflection on the Transformation of Chinese Society and Culture based on the Thinking of the German Philosopher of Religion Bernhard Welte.”** It presented an interesting application of Welte’s theological approach to the China of today. Confronted with the nihilism of the modern age, Welte developed the thesis of the ambiguity of the Nothing: the Nothingness that the human person experiences can be understood either as the experience of a completely senseless emptiness or as the hidden presence of an eternal power; in that it can be a path to the (mystical) experience of God. Jing stated that the nihilism of today’s Chinese society is especially shocking because the Chinese intellectuals [in the 1st half of the 20 century] threw out the tradition and its values more radically and in a shorter time that was the case in the West; the rest was destroyed later in the political campaigns. The result, according to Jing, is a complete collapse of the value systems which has left people deeply insecure and has led partially to a distortion of human nature. Jing interpreted the resulting emptiness, however, also as a possibility and space for the people in China – in a “reversal of the Nothing” in Bernhard Welte’s thinking – to be able to experience God anew. Jing saw a significant responsibility for Chinese Christians and adherents of other religions to contribute to a new value system for China.

The moral crisis in today's China does not consist in first place in a lack of a value system – it is more the lack of the motivation to do what is right, stated the theologian and priest **Geng Zhanhe** 耿占河 (Centro Studi Li Madou and Holy Spirit Seminary College, Hong Kong). Geng studied theology in Sankt Augustin and did his doctorate in Bonn. In his presentation “**The ‘Kingdom of God among Men’ and Pure Love [Agape]: From Potential to Realization**” he spoke about love which he identified as this necessary motivation. Love is the Christian response to the longing for the ideal society and harmonious relationships among people which is deeply rooted in Chinese tradition, he said. This longing has risen anew in the face of the moral crisis of society today. In his talk Geng described the essence of Christian love. Every person needs to believe that God is love to be able to realize the ability to love that dwells within him or her.

Kang Zhijie 康志杰 (Hubei University, Wuhan), who for many years has studied the history of the Catholic Church in China in the 19th and in the first half of the 20th century, contributed a historical component to the topic “Christianity and Society”: “**How the Chinese Catholic Church Went the Way of Self-Support: The Example of the Church in the Countryside.**” She reported on the purchase of land by the missionaries (later criticized as “feudalism”) where they settled converts who came mainly from the poorest classes. In that way Catholic villages came about. The missionaries not only built schools and hospitals, they also brought new ways of farming (such as new types of seed, new plants and methods of farming, special breeds of pigs) and new trades (such as cheese-making methods, machine shoe production, printing presses). The respective villages still partially draw profit today from the infrastructure introduced in the past. These efforts at “self-support” are also a form of inculturation in the opinion of Kang.

While the first two days of the conference were interesting due to the variety of perspectives, the third day was to a certain extent the most surprising. It concentrated on a topic that one would not particularly have expected to find in the Chinese academic landscape: research on the **Theology and Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas**. A focus on Thomistic research has developed at Wuhan University and they have established an exchange with Fu Jen University in Taiwan. Four of the five speakers came from Fu Jen or from Wuhan. First, however, the Italian theologian, Dominican **Antonio Olmi** (Facoltà Teologica dell'Emilia-Romagna, Bologna) spoke on “Il paradigma di Calcedonia e il realismo sapienziale di S. Tommaso d'Aquino.” The four Chinese speaking contributors all came from the field of philosophy. The religious sister **Gao Lingxia** 高凌霞 (Fu Jen University, Taiwan), doyen of Chinese language Thomistic research, spoke on “Analogy in Thomas.” **Huang Zhao** 黃超 (Wuhan University) spoke on “Freedom of Emotion and Good and Evil in Thomas Aquinas,” **Dong Shangwen** 董尚文 (Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan) on “The Religious Philosophy of Language of St. Thomas.” **He Jiarui** 何佳瑞 of Fu Jen University even risked an attempt at a comparison in her talk on “The Role of Emotions in Morality: Thomas and Confucius.” With the presence of so many professional colleagues, the discussion naturally went into greater detail, and the appetite for research with which the Chinese Thomistic experts take up their topic was tangible.

The Bishop of Hong Kong **Cardinal John Tong** spoke in his closing address once again of dialogue and the responsibility of Chinese Christians for their country and said he hoped that such conferences would take place again in future. **Peter Choy**, Director of the Yuan Dao Study Society (and also Rector of the Holy Spirit Seminary College), expressed thanks for the financial support given to the conference by the Institute of Missiology Missio e.V., by Aid to the Church in Need and by a benefactress in Hong Kong.

The conference took place in a good and open atmosphere to which the active, organizational collaboration of Hong Kong volunteers contributed. Naturally the conversations and establishment of new contacts on the margins of the conference were also important and will hopefully help to promote research in Catholic theology in Mainland China still further. Consequently it is greatly to be hoped that a continuation of this conference can be realized in one or the other form, as Peter Choy expressed in his closing address.