
Alexander Chow’s monograph addresses an important question in the study of Chinese Christianities: namely, is it possible to construct a Chinese Christian theology that is fully responsive to its Chinese context, both socio-political and religio-philosophical? Chow answers this question in the affirmative, drawing on Eastern Orthodoxy as a useful theological resource for engaging the Chinese cultural world. The Orthodox doctrines of ancestral sin and theosis (deification), in particular, are used by Chow not only to highlight common themes in Chinese theologies of the twentieth century, but also to propose an alternative approach in the quest for a modern Chinese contextual theology.

After contextualising his study within the two ‘Chinese Enlightenments’, Chow looks at three major Christian thinkers of the twentieth century: Watchman Nee (1903-72), T. C. Chao (1889-1979), and K. H. Ting (1915-). Chow systematically analyses the theologies of these three individuals, showing the relevance of a tripartite typology to the Chinese context as well as key points of contact with the theological worldview of Eastern Orthodoxy. Chow’s analysis of T. C. Chao is particularly good, as it highlights the importance of both cultural (T. C. Chao initially constructed a Confucianised Christianity) and socio-political (Chao renounced his Confucian-Christian theology following his imprisonment under the Japanese in the 1940s) contexts in the construction of new Chinese theologies. This key analytical point shows that the theoretical implications of Chow’s study extend beyond the twentieth century to the broader history of Christianity in China.

Chow’s main purpose in examining Nee, Chao, and Ting is to show that Chinese Christian thinkers, whether intentionally or not, have frequently articulated ideas that connect with the theological tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy. Chinese theologies and Eastern Orthodoxy share, for example, an appreciation of humankind’s moral potential and a synergistic understanding of the relationship between God and humanity. It is in such areas of overlap that Chow identifies the value of Eastern Orthodoxy for Chinese contextual theology. Just as Eastern Orthodoxy affirms that humankind has the potential to participate in the divine activities, so too Confucianism (and other Chinese belief systems) holds that humankind must complete what Heaven engenders and work to bring Heaven and humanity into unity.

Chow’s use of the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of theosis as a useful resource for Chinese contextual theology also has implications for the broader study of Chinese cultural history. By moving beyond the conventional emphasis on Western forms of Christianity, Chow’s work highlights the need to transcend traditional dichotomies such as Christian/Confucian and China/West. Christianity and Confucianism are not antithetical entities in themselves. The problem is that a narrow understanding of Christianity (focused on Western, or Latin, notions of human nature and salvation) has allowed many previous interpreters to present the two belief systems as antithetical. By bringing Eastern Orthodoxy into the debate, Chow shows that Christianity and Confucianism are not binary opposites, but rather partners in the search for a Chinese contextual theology.

I would strongly recommend this book to anyone with an interest in the history and development of Christianity in China. Those with a general interest in Chinese cultural history will also find this a thought-provoking work.
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