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Sinolization of Christianity: Increasing Gospel Relevance or Distorting the Gospel Message?

One critical predicament Christianity encounters in China is the long-term unresolved problem of its legitimacy in the Chinese cultural context (Yang, 2014). The Western packaging of the gospel still hinders the acceptance of Christianity in Chinese society because of the tremendous difference between the Chinese religious spirit and the traditional Christian message. Based on this reality, scholars from mainly non-Christian perspectives propose the concept of Sinolization in order to bridge these differences (Tang 2013; Fan 2015; Zhang and Tang 2017).

Due to the unique cultural and political environment in China, the motif of Sinolization has become a prevalent theme among the official Three-Self churches. Even though there are different opinions regarding the ways of Sinolization, these voices have not received adequate attention from the authorities. At the same time, the Chinese church, especially the Adventist Church, has basically neglected any study of the effect of cultural on its beliefs and practices, and as a result, it has not developed an appropriate response to Sinolization. This has placed it at risk in losing its identity in the Chinese cultural context.

This study aims to address the concept of the Sinolization of Christianity in light of cultural studies, biblical principles, and the Great Controversy perspective. It will then set forth some ideas on how it could affect the communication of the gospel in the Chinese context. It will attempt to see if Sinolization makes the gospel more relevant or further distorts the Christian message through the lens of the Chinese culture. The answers to these questions should help Chinese Christians, and especially Adventists, better understand their mission in China.

The Background of Sinolization of Christianity

What is the Sinolization of Christianity? At first glance, it seems to be a wonderful concept because the gospel must be contextualized if it intends to influence Chinese culture. We may assume that under Sinolization, Christians find a more effective way to communicate the gospel as a culturally relevant message without sacrificing its true meaning. However, there could be unexpected twists of meaning as Sinolization is evaluated in its specific political and cultural contexts.

It is notable that the Sinolization of Christianity is a relatively new concept set forth by some official Chinese government scholars such as Zhuo (2014) and Zhang (2011). Based on Zhuo's theory, Christian thought is alien to Chinese culture, and must be Sinolized in order to be understood by Chinese society. He claims that the purpose of this strategy is for the benefit of Christianity. However, Zhang's theory, which adopts Mou's (2006) religious ecological concept, makes the observation that the rapid development of Christianity has broken the religious ecological balance in Chinese society, and therefore, it needs to be Sinolized in order to maintain the harmonious relationship within the larger Chinese culture.

The two theories of Zhang and Zhuo appear to be somewhat contradictory. Either Sinolization benefits Christianity (Zhuo) or it is responding to the rapid development of Christianity (Zhang). These two explanations cannot escape the fact that the concept of Sinolization is "a political movement per se" and aims to transform Christianity with a political ideology (Guo 2017). The current emphasis of Sinolization is similar to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in the 1950s, which was designed to meet a political purpose to control Christian churches so they would not be a disruptive element in society. As Cohen explains, the government regards the existence of Christianity as an "uneasy presence" (Lim 2013:3) in Chinese society and makes the regime's long-term viability as "the most important" issue in its political agenda (Vala 2013:59). Based on this assumption, religion must be placed in a subordinate position under political control. Therefore the Sinolization of Christianity seeks to limit the freedom to propagate the Christian message, which if not limited might in turn threaten the balance of influence in Chinese society.

The Sinolization of Christianity as a Cultural Movement

Despite its strong political influence, Sinolization still needs to be studied as a strategy to deal with the vast difference between Western Christian thought and Eastern Chinese culture, which is a mixture of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and various folk beliefs.

After thousands of years of development, Chinese culture has become a formidable power that not only includes the philosophy of the ancient thought leaders, but also seeks to absorb any alien religious thought and philosophies into its own system. Under the diversity of religious forms, the main principle that guides Chinese religion is the philosophy of “the unity of heaven and man” rooted in Taoist thought (Li 2013). Unlike Western philosophy, which is constructed based on concepts and categories and which makes a clear division between opposite concepts, the Chinese people see no such demarcation. They try to reconcile different thoughts based on their understanding of heaven (truth) by absorbing them into their hearts.

As a result, one significant characteristic of Chinese culture is pragmatism. It means that people choose a religion based on their personal everyday needs instead of whether their religion is based on truth. They tend to be polytheistic and thus have no problem in incorporating the Christian God into their pantheon. They can even create new gods or add new functions to their existing gods when it is necessary to experience help in their daily lives. Anything that is not in violation of the key principle of the “unity between heaven and man” and the principle of pragmatism, is acceptable. As a result many people have no trouble in blending the concept of the Christian God into their belief system. Therefore, the Sinolization of Christianity is not a problem for Chinese cultural practices and its capacity to accommodate outside religions.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that the Sinolization of Christianity has the capacity to appropriately communicate the Christian message in a Chinese cultural setting while maintaining the true biblical meaning of salvation. Even though Chinese culture can accommodate Christianity, it cannot accept Christian truth. It seems there is a strong mechanism within the Chinese culture which prevents it from truly accepting the Christian message.

This mechanism influences Chinese people to regard their culture as superior to anything from other cultures, especially Western ones, and thus causes most Chinese to reject the Christian message. At the core of this mechanism is the Chinese people’s worldview, which emphasizes and takes its inspiration from nature with its resonance between the human heart and the natural spirit (Qi 2016). This view leaves no room for pursuing truth. Driven by this pragmatic thinking, Chinese culture tends to have a strong anti-intellectualistic sentiment.

Anti-intellectualism is a concept coined by Hofstadter. He notes that this word is difficult to define, but it can be treated as “an attitude” that dislikes “intellect or intellectuals” (1962:7). Even though it is a relatively new concept, the reality of anti-intellectualism has existed in various

cultures for a long time. For Chinese culture, its anti-intellectualism can be seen in Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

For example, Lao Zi says, "It is when knowledge and wisdom appear that the Great Hypocrisy emerges;" "Banish wisdom and discard knowledge, and the people will benefit a hundredfold" (Cai 2009:75, 79). However, this anti-intellectualism, as Hofstadter mentions, is not found "in a pure form but in ambivalence" (1962:7). It is a relative, rather than an absolute anti-intellectualism because it has its own pursuit of knowledge (Song 2008).

Based on this anti-intellectualism, even though Chinese culture can accommodate Christianity, it cannot readily accept Christian truths such as the worship of only one true God or the need for redemption from sin because those concepts stand in contrast to the polytheistic worship and pragmatism in Chinese culture. In other words, Chinese culture can only accommodate Christianity in the sense that the Christian God provides another possible way of receiving a blessing in people's daily lives. Based on this assumption, the Sinolization of Christianity will eventually look like the Sinolization of Buddhism, which is a Buddhism clothed in the form of Indian Buddhism while accommodating the meaning of Chinese culture and the creation of their own Chinese scriptures (Fan 2015). Obviously, this result is not acceptable for a biblical Christian identity.

Sinolization of Christianity from the Biblical Perspective

When presenting the gospel message in new cultural settings, Christians seek to communicate the gospel in biblically appropriate ways that are also culturally sensitive. Christian witnesses seek to "raise up effective sources of the Christian message from within the respondent culture" (Hesselgrave 2009:428). In other words, gospel communication should be receptor oriented (Kraft 1991). This communication strategy is based on biblical teachings, such as the incarnation of Jesus in John 1:14. He set an example of becoming flesh in order that people could be reached. The apostle Paul also established the principle of becoming "all things to all people" in order to save some "by all possible means" (1 Cor 9:22). This well-known strategy is called contextualization.

Contextualization espouses that the Christian message needs to be clothed in a form that is understandable to people in different cultural settings, including the Chinese culture. In other words, the Christian message can be resilient in different forms as it encounters different contexts. As a result, from both the Chinese cultural side and the Christian side, there are no barriers for the Sinolization of Christianity. Both have adequate capacity to accommodate each other.

However, any contextualization is risky and can lead to syncretism (Kraft 2009:405), which further leads to a loss of the Christian identity. Because of this, Paul Hiebert (1984) proposes the concept of critical contextualization, which requires abandoning any cultural practices that violate biblical principles and keeping those that are in harmony with the Bible.

Hiebert's proposal demonstrates that the extent of contextualization is only partial, instead of complete. In whatever form the Christian message may take, the essential message of salvation should not change. It means that from both the Chinese cultural side and the Christian side, some respective elements exist, which makes them resistant to one another. From the biblical perspective, the gospel tries to maintain its core value, which is the Savior's redeeming of humanity from sin. The biblical goal is the Christianization of China. From the Chinese cultural side, it tries to maintain its cultural framework, which is the unity between heaven and humanity and to reject the Christian doctrines regarding salvation. Its aim is the Sinolization of Christianity.

Christianity, like Chinese culture, also possesses a certain degree of anti-intellectualism. As Hofstadter mentions, Protestantism is "the first arena for an anti-intellectual impulse" in North America (1962:55). For example, the evangelist Charles Finney was convinced that "the schools are to a great extent spoiling the ministers" and he considered the young ministers coming "out of college with hearts as hard as the college walls" (94). John Piper's (2010) book *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* also describes in great detail the phenomena of anti-intellectualism in Christianity. In the Chinese version of this book, the translator especially mentions that not only Christians in America, but also those in China possess this strong sentiment of anti-intellectualism.

This Chinese-Christian anti-intellectualism, like that in Chinese culture, is driven by pragmatism and pluralism (Piper 2010). The difference is that the anti-intellectualism in Chinese culture causes it to resist the core of the Christian message such as salvation from sin and eternal life. In some sense, it Sinolizes Christianity not only in its cultural form, but also in its meaning. It means that the anti-intellectualism in Chinese culture serves as a self-protecting force by entirely assimilating Christianity. The result is syncretism.

However, the anti-intellectualism among Christians is not uniform. For example, the Shouters (a Chinese denomination whose worship is featured with shouting "Amen" all the time) generally reject both theological study and Chinese culture at the same time. But for many other Christian anti-intellectualists, although they despise theology, especially systematic theology, they still are inclined to accept Chinese culture. Whether rejecting or accepting Chinese culture, as Piper (2010) indicates,

this anti-intellectualism causes many Christians to lose the knowledge about salvation as presented in the Bible and thus results in Christianity losing its identity in the process of Sinolization.

In summary, the pragmatism in Chinese culture and the contextualization of the Christian message both allow for the possibility of the Sinolization of Christianity. But the anti-intellectualism in Chinese culture requires that the Sinolization of Christianity must allow for the Eastern cultural superior to overshadow Christianity. As a result, it is not pragmatism that has caused the failure of the Christian mission in China, rather the danger is that Chinese pragmatism is the starting point for Sinolization (Fan 2015). This is dangerous because the pragmatism will ultimately require that Christianity be completely assimilated, including its core values. Therefore, the Sinolization of Christianity is entirely different from the missiological concept of contextualization or indigenization, which seeks to present the gospel in understandable cultural forms while keeping its Christian meanings. Sinolization does not make the gospel relevant, but, on the contrary, distorts the gospel in the Chinese context.

The Sinolization of Christianity from the Perspective of the Great Controversy

The preceding discussion shows that even under the influence of Sinolization, there is an irreconcilable contradiction between Christianity and Chinese culture. The former seeks to bring the nation of China into the kingdom of God, while the latter intends to assimilate the kingdom of God into the Chinese context. This controversy is in fact the same great struggle between God's kingdom and Satan's kingdom. It does not mean that a certain country or culture belongs to Satan while others belong to God. It simply implies that the intention, in trying to assimilate the gospel into any human culture, will only serve the purpose of Satan.

H. R. Niebuhr proposed five different possibilities in the relationship between gospel and culture (1951). These views include Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture. Niebuhr's view indicates that within every culture of the world, there are elements in accordance with biblical principles, but at the same time, every culture also bears elements distorted by sin. This reality justifies the principle of critical contextualization.

When considering Chinese culture, although it is open and tolerant to other religions on a superficial level, it is in fact opposed to any religion's deeper meaning. The Christian message can by no means be Sinolized if it still wants to keep its identity. The communication of the gospel in

human contexts is “caught up in a great struggle—the conflict of the ages” (Ladd 2009:88). The Christian mission is to announce the coming of God’s kingdom to this world. When God’s kingdom is announced in any other kingdom, conflict cannot be avoided. As Jesus says, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt 12:28).

This theme of conflict is echoed in the Great Controversy that is featured in Adventist theology. We believe that this cosmic conflict started in heaven even before the earth was created (Rev12:7-10). This same conflict led to the fall of Adam and Eve. Furthermore, this conflict is repeated throughout the whole Bible, in human history, and even in the heart of every person. Naturally, this conflict exists whenever the gospel is communicated in any cultural setting, and is especially evident in the process of the Sinolization of Christianity.

Adventist theology provides special means that help people overcome anti-intellectualism. Doctrines such as the Great Controversy, the sanctuary, the pre-Advent judgment, and the emphasis of God’s laws help people focus on biblical truth and encourage people to think rationally about the Christian faith and the world to come. Both an emphasis on the Great Controversy and the elements of anti-intellectualism help people better understand the nature of the Sinolization of Christianity. Understanding these issues also help Christians know how to deal with the cultural problems in cross-cultural gospel communication.

Conclusion

The Sinolization of Christianity is a double-edged sword for the Christian message. It provides space allowing Christianity to be expressed in understandable forms for the Chinese people. Both Chinese culture and Christianity have the capacity to embrace each other. However, Sinolization will most likely also cause syncretism, with Chinese culture assimilating crucial elements of Christianity and causing it to lose its unique identity. The Sinolization of Christianity in fact does not make gospel relevant in Chinese culture, it distorts it.

The way to avoid such a distortion is to recognize that both Chinese culture and Christianity have inner immune systems to guard their respective core values, and thus reject each other at the deepest levels. Chinese culture will not abandon the unity of heaven and humanity as its basis or its emphasis on pragmatism. In addition, its anti-intellectualism greatly strengthens these foundational principles. Christianity, in the same manner, cannot be assimilated into the Chinese culture, which would sacrifice its message of salvation. As a result, there is an irreconcilable

conflict between the Chinese culture and Christianity, which is reflected in the Great Controversy theme of Adventist theology. Such a theme will help people understand more accurately the relationship between gospel and culture and help Christianity maintain its identity in its cross-cultural mission.

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