Editorial Foreword

Theological Clues to Modernity*

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If the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire (represented by Augustinian theology) marked the end of Classical civilization, a series of transformations in Christian theology from the late Middle Ages (represented by Nominalism and the Reformation) marked the beginning of modern civilization.[①] After a millennial journey between "end" and "beginning," Christianity not only become one of the most important contributors to the emergence of modernity, but it couldeven be said that the fate of modernity is simultaneously that of Christian theology itself. Only by engaging in in-depth study of Christianity and its theological intricacies can we genuinely comprehend the spiritual roots of modern civilization in the Middle Ages, and its tortuous evolution from inception to development.

As numerous studies have demonstrated, modernity and a transcendent Christianity may appear to be in conflict in their advocacy of principles such as rationalization, secularization, subjectivity, and individuality, but the relationship between the two is far from a simple rupture. Christianity's own transformations and renewals not only played a significant role in the development of modernity but also supplied it with its most profound

① This article and the theme of this issue employ the concept of "theology" in a broader sense.

theological and metaphysical underpinnings.[1] The medieval and the modern eras encompass not only the "Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns", but also demonstrate significant continuity in content, form, and questions. It was precisely theology that furnished the modern secular sciences, liberated from its influence, with the concepts and paradigms essential for comprehending "state" and "society."[2] Instead of being perceived merely as an era of anti-religion or de-religionization, the modern age, to a certain extent, arises from Christianity's own evolution; its rebellion against tradition is rooted in the "theological revolution" within Christianity.[3] The examination of the "invention of the individual" by one of the scholars featured in this issue, Larry Siedentop, exemplifies this. Siedentop contends that the tenets of modernity, including individualism, liberalism, and secularism, all stem from Christian "moral intuition," in which St. Paul, Augustine, the papal revolution,

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[1] There are countless relevant discussions, e.g., Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, trans. MAO Zhu (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2019); Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World. A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). In addition, Vögelin's and Jonas's studies on Gnosticism and modernity are also quite representative, see Eric Vögelin, *Modernity Without Restraint*, trans. ZHANG Xinzhang, LIU Jinglian (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2007); Hans Jonas, *Gnosticism and Modernity*, trans. ZHANG Xinzhang (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2005). For related studies in the field of social theory, see Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethics and and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. KANG Le, JIAN Huimei (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2010); Ernst Troeltsch, *Christian Theory and Modernity*, trans. ZHU Yanbing et al. (Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 2004); Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress: A Historical Study of the Relation of Protestantism to the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2017). Compare studies of Radical Orthodoxy in the UK: John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006). Also, one can refer to Charles Taylor's reflections on modern society from a Catholic background: Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, trans. ZHANG Rongnan, SHENG Yun et al. (Shanghai: SJPC, 2016).

[2] See Karl Löwith, *History of the World and History of Redemption*, trans. LI Qiuling, TIAN Wei (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2016); Karl Schmitt, Political Theology, trans. by LIU Zongkun, WU Zengding et al. (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2015). On the Schmitt-Peterson debate, see Wang Zhiyuan's article in this issue.

[3] One of the most famous studies in this regard comes from Gillespie, who traces the theological origins of modernity to the nominalist revolution of the late Middle Ages. See Michael Mien Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, trans. ZHANG Butian (Changsha: Hunan Science and Technology Press, 2012).

and the practice of canon law played a decisive role. Thus, delving into Christian thought not only enhances our comprehension of the theological underpinnings of modernity, notably the intimate interplay between modern philosophy, political ideology, social theory, and the scientific revolution, all intertwined with Christianity since the 16th and 17th centuries, but also reveals the possibilities that theology presents for modernity, including its various attempts to to address and surmount the problems and quandaries caused by the latter.

Since the 1980s, Chinese scholars such as Liu Xiaofeng, Yang Huilin, Li Qiuling, and He Guanghu have made significant contributions to the question of theology and modernity, both in original research and in translations, spanning various disciplines within the humanities and social sciences from philosophy, religion, literature and social theory to political thought. To continue the scholarly legacy of our predecessors, the theme of this issue of the *Journal for the Study of Christian Culture* is "Extension of Theology and Modernity." Our aim is to deepen an understanding of the theme by featuring the reflections of several young researchers, and we hope that their contributions will garner further attention to this and related issues.

There are four papers in this issue focusing on core concerns, including: the German mystic Böhme's concept of "Ungrund," Martin Luther's concept of the "hidden God;" Kierkegaard and Heidegger's exploration of "the moment and eternit," and the examination of these concepts in the works of Kierkegaard and Heidegger; and the concept of "sacredness" as explored by the French phenomenologist Levinas. While each of the four essays represents the independent thinking and writing of their author, they form a remarkably cohesive collective whole as they echo and intertwine under the overarching theme of "theology and modernity." For this reason, it is essential to read all four essays together to grasp modernity's theological threads through their direct and indirect connections.

The four essays cover a span of five centuries of intellectual history in their objects of study, from early modernity to postmodernity, from the construction to the deconstruction of the philosophy of subjectivity. An intricate relationship exists between the five philosophers addressed in the four essays. Firstly, Luther and Böhme can be considered part of the same intellectual lineage. Recent studies have revealed how Luther's theological

breakthroughs were deeply influenced by the German mystical tradition in which Böhme was situated, as demonstrated by Sun Shuai's discussion of the concept of "Deus abscoditus." Subsequently, Luther's Protestant theology significantly impacted Böhme's theology, and vice versa. Lei Siwen highlights in his article how Luther's Protestant theology greatly influenced the development of Böhme's mystical thought, and how Böhme's focus on the concept of evil is closely linked to Luther's ideas. Secondly, as Deng Ding notes at the outset of his article, Kierkegaard's heavily religious philosophy was deeply influenced by Luther's theology and German idealism. Kierkegaard, along with Luther and Böhme, played a significant role in the inception and evolution of Heidegger's phenomenology (see Lei Siwen's article for further insights on Böhme and Heidegger.) It is widely recognized that the French phenomenologist Levinas was steeped in Heidegger's and the broader German phenomenological tradition: as Wen Han notes, Levinas's concepts concerning God or divinity are entirely rooted in the legacy and critique of Heidegger's existential theology, or existential theological logic. The profound interconnection among these five thinkers illuminates the inherent complexity of the relationship between theology and modernity, where critics of modernity, such as Heidegger and Levinas, can draw upon the intellectual legacy of key figures in shaping modernity, such as Luther, Böhme, and Kierkegaard. Their critique of modernity meanwhile does not necessarily entail a straightforward return to tradition, but may involve an exploration of alternative possibilities, such as Heidegger's notion of "another beginning" or Levinas's emphasis on "the singularity and sacredness of the sensuous."

In contrast to Descartes, who is often regarded as a pivotal figure in shaping modernity through his emphasis on subjectivity, the successive transformations of Christian theology initiated by Luther and Böhme primarily focused on the question of "God." According to Sun Shuai's article, "Luther on the Hiddenness and Reconstruction of God," Luther significantly altered, or deconstructed, the concept of God as portrayed in scholastic theology. He carried out this transformation in a radical manner by critiquing the "theology of glory" as a manifest theology, and proposing the "theology of the cross" as a hidden theology. This implied excluding philosophy or reason from the domain of theology, as he contended that philosophy tends to interpret God solely in terms of creation and human behavior, perceiving God as Manifest.

For this reason, Luther endeavors to portray God as a stranger who is entirely incomprehensible and can only be trusted through a double concealment. According to Luther, in terms of nature and majesty, God is concealed and can only evoke fear, rather than worship. There exists a significant tension between this "hidden God" and the "revealed God," who is manifest through promises or the gospel. Furthermore, under Luther's theology of the cross, revelation is also a form of concealment, and a profound one, as the God revealed in this manner is concealed within God's own antithesis. God's self-denial comprises two dimensions: passive and active. The passive dimension is exemplified in Christ's crucifixion, while the active dimension is evident in God's forsaking of Christ and the saints. These dimensions are complementary and mutually reinforcing. The concept of hiddenness in Luther's theology fundamentally undermines the rational theology of the metaphysical approach. Consequently, God's manifestation can only be comprehended in its concealed or unmanifest aspects, while the dialectic between the hidden and the manifest must be apprehended through "faith" alone: devoid of a rational basis, faith is the sole means by which God's concealment and negation can be transformed into manifestation and affirmation. In this sense, Sun Shuai regards Luther's "faith" as the concept of "subjectivity." It is evident that in Luther's theology of hiddenness, the supreme being, the first entity, and the divinity itself is de-constructed, and that what is significant is not God Godself and the manifestation of God, but rather God and God's hiddenness for human beings. Heidegger's critique of existential theology undoubtedly represents a systematic advancement of Luther's deconstructive effort.

In contrast to metaphysical theology, Luther's God becomes a concept fraught with inherent tensions and contradictions, prominently exhibiting dualities such as hidden and revealed, good and evil. This line of thought is clearly reflected in Lei Siwen's study of Böhme. Unlike Luther's suspension of the divine itself, the crux of Böhme's doctrine depicts the divine as unfoundedness. Lei Siwen's article, "Abyss and Creation: Jacob Böhme and the Birth of the Concept of Ungrund," illustrates how the importance of Böhme's theology in the emergence of modernity revolves around a unique comprehension of the "Ungrund" and its fundamental dynamics. According to Lei, Böhme's "Ungrund" differs conceptually from Eckhart's "Abgrund." The latter focuses on the divine's return and ascent to a state of non-differentiation

and lacks temporality and reality, while the former addresses the evolution of the divine from the nothingness of Ungrund into the structure of the eternal Trinity which initiates the historical process of the creation of time and all things. In the author's perspective, Böhme's concept of Ungrund entails a volitional desire for grounding and foundation, one that inherently triggers a dialectical progression from nothingness to existence, from concealment to manifestation, facilitated by the longing eternal will and God's duality of the gazing eye and the reflecting mirror. The Trinity is born of the process of the eternal will's thirst and fulfillment" the Son embodies the fulfillment of the Father's will and the suffering it entails, while the Holy Spirit symbolizes the joyful spirit resulting from this fulfillment. Unlike Augustine's Latin orthodox Trinity, which is rooted in the concepts of essentia and relationality, Böhme's Trinity, expounded in terms of Ungrund and Grund, is more dynamic. In Böhme's Trinity, the self-founding and essentialization of God from nothing to something does not negate the existence of the nothingness of Ungrund.[1] The Ungrund not only generates God who is eternally existing-of-Godself but through that eternal nature also creates external nature. This external nature is simultaneously perceived as God's inner spirit and the external manifestation of God's material essence. In the intricate framework of non-groundedness and inner and outer nature, Böhme must preserve the delicate balance between the dualism of good and evil and the monism of Ungrund. In his article, Lei Siwen highlights how Böhme's doctrine of Ungrund has found resonance in the works of Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Berdyaev andHeidegger, among others, and is particularly evident in Heidegger's critique of existential theology and the later discourse on Zuschicken and Entziehen, openness and obscurity. This explanation enables us tobetter understand Deng Ding's study of Kierkegaard and Heidegger.

Deng Ding's article, "'Between' Theology and Philosophy," aims to offer an inter-interpretive examination of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, using the concepts of eternity and the moment as guiding threads. According to Deng's analysis, Kierkegaard draws three significant instant moments from Christianity: the moment when sin is judged, the moment of Christ's advent, and the moment of the Last Judgment. Strictly speaking, only the advent

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[1] Augustine, *On the Trinity*, trans. Zhou Weichi (Beijing. The Commercial Press, 2018).

of Christ is a moment in the true sense of the "word" because, unlike the two one-off moments before and after, only the encounter and union of eternity and time in Christ can be experienced repeatedly in the individual's "leap of faith."[①] In contrast to original sin, where time intersects with eternity, the advent of Christ signifies eternity penetrating and saturating time. Kierkegaard's doctrine was utilized and further developed by Heidegger. Heidegger recognized that Kierkegaard's analysis of the actual existence of the individual, although deeply rooted in categories of Christian theology and the recent philosophy of subjectivity, needed to undergo a radical existential transformation to unveil the general structure underlying the actual existence of the individual. After Heidegger's existential transformation of Kierkegaard's concept of eternity, eternity ceases to be the divine/God manifest as subjectivity in Kierkegaard's writings, but an actual mode of existence in the present, a parousia that depends on the authentic determination of Dasein (the transformation of the "leap of faith"). Th so-called instant is this eternity as a way in which Dasein comes to be, rather than a synthesis of time and eternity. Heidegger's existential transformation of Kierkegaard implies a radical deconstruction of theology and of God. However, without God's guidance, would Dasein's determination of the real in the here and now plunge into an emptiness devoid of all content? This is the question that Deng Ding's article ultimately addresses. Deng argues that God is not absent from Heidegger's philosophy; rather, the one being summoned is not the God of Christianity or Kierkegaard, who is a Person or extant Being, but the "last God" (der lezte Gott) of historial Heaven's Mandate. This "last God" will be "passing by" (Vorbeigang) where dasein opens and upholds, maintaining its own secrecy without appearing directly or meeting with human beings.

Whether phenomenology still requires a God, and what type of God it necessitates, is also a concern of Levinas. In the fourth thematic essay, "The Disappearance of Mediation and the Appearance of Singularity: On Divinity in Levinas," Wen Han begins by highlighting that Levinas's consideration of the sacred or the singular in the context of "ethics" represents both a critical inheritance of Heidegger's existential theology and a critique of the latter's

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[①] This doctrine of Kierkegaard's can evidently be traced directly to Luther, who had differentiated between the singular presence of Christ in objective history and the recurring presence within the believer.

doctrine of existential difference. Levinas believes that the dilemma of Western metaphysics in attempting to comprehend, but ultimately failing to reach, the Supreme One has two consequences: the "separation of the hand and the eye" and the devaluing of the body, as well as the idolization or materialization of the Supreme One in the face of finite reason. To experience anew, from a phenomenological perspective, the Supreme, or God, is necessarily premised on the death of God as an "idol." Furthermore, the encounter with God must entail a departure from all totalizing doctrines, including Heidegger's theory of being as the mediator, whether his early doctrine of existential difference or his later doctrine concerning the duality of existence between the apparent and the hidden. Wen Han argues that the break with structures of totality means that Levinas moves from existential difference to existential separation, based on the "disappearance of mediation," which guarantees and honors the otherness (alterity) of the other in relation to the self, which is embodied in the non-theorizable sensuous bodily contact or encounter between the self and the other. For Levinas, it is only through impenetrable sensibility, and within the ethical relations of corporeality, that the experience of the sacred can be rekindled and the connection of the self with the sacred can be reconstructed. That which is called sacredness is the singularity of what is manifest through the senses: the self-manifestation, invisibility, infinity and transcendence of the face of the other. In the face-to-face sensual encounter, every other person who cannot be rationally understood or grasped, and who is unique, strange, and unfamiliar, embodies the divine in the sense of Levinas. It is only in this sense that we can accurately speak of a "theological turn" in Levinas's phenomenology.

To summarize, if the first two articles in this issue elucidate the inception and foundational significance of the theological revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries to modernity, the next two illuminate the breakthrough that phenomenology brought to the dilemma of modernity and the potential for reconsidering theological questions. The studies conducted by the four authors each offer one theological thread to grasping modernity from one aspect. Even in the works of Heidegger and Levinas, the theological question has not truly vanished, and modernity continues to evolve in novel forms and possibilities, somehow intertwined with theology. At the same time, we can observe that Böhme and Luther, along with Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Levinas,

each endeavor to transcend the conventional metaphysical and theological approaches to understanding existence and God, albeit in distinct ways, and all tend to accentuate the incomprehensibility, secrecy, and enigmatic nature of "God," hence forging a strong intellectual connection among them.

Coming to theological research through the starting point of the question of modernity has formed a significant tradition in Chinese Christian scholarship over the past half-century, and thinkers like Heidegger have played a significant role in advancing this process. Today, due to various factors both within and outside the discipline, our entire study of Christianity and Western philosophy faces even greater challenges than it has before, and it has become increasingly difficult to discern the academic approach of the times through the evolution of thought. Hence, how to reconsider Christianity and its relationship to modernity through systematic and in-depth professional research, as well as how to reconstruct the "sacredness" (in Levinas's terms) of the modern human being in an era of post-metaphysical secularization, have become formidable tasks facing the new generation of scholars. Ultimately, this is not solely an academic matter but also an existential matter.

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