

Editor's Foreword

Publics of Theology and the Humanist's Theological Concern

Christian theology has been studied and researched within China's academic circles, but largely in an adjunct capacity. Obviously this is in part because theology has yet to be accepted as an independent field within the academic structure of China. But it may also be true that there is a significant difference between the theological language within the church and the academic context. In both cases, we face the issue of theology's Publics. Simply put, exploring the issue can help us (1) to understand the reason for theology's allegation to an adjunct position, and (2) how theology can move from the confines of the church into secular society and establish its relevance. Only as these two aspects of theology's Publics are understood, can the "faith community" of the Christian Church realize its potential as a "community of discourse".

Preposterous as the association may appear to some, we would like to trace the origin of "adjunct theology" to C. S. Lewis. We credit to the success of adjunct theology, works such as *Mere Christianity*.^① "Mere" means "pure" or "only", in the very

^① C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Tainan: Southeast Asia Theological Association, 1991.

tradition of Karl Barth. As Cambridge University's Chair of Literature, C. S. Lewis not only discussed Christianity on the BBC radio program, but was widely accepted by theologians and laity alike. Therefore, an adjunct role need not imply diminution of quality or significance. C. S. Lewis has shown us that theology could dialogue with the public and address society in a meaningful way. It is therefore deserving of greater appreciation by students and scholars of the humanities, and should not be cloistered within the walls of the church. If this was possible in times past, why not today?

From the standpoint of humanities research, the *raison d'être* of "adjunct theology" or theology as a resource or reference, is not simply for the sake of "comparative" or "interdisciplinary" study, or a case of what scholars would call "the crisis of the lost word". In all honesty, there should be just one basic question: does humanities research (or the study of "self") require the theological perspective, its breadth and the creation of a space for theological studies? If the answer is no, then theology has no part in the humanities or the inquiry of "self". There is no point in forcing an alliance. But if the answer is yes, then we must offer a legitimate reason for its place according to the parameters of humanities.

From the Aristotle's epistemological distinctions between "pure knowledge", "practical knowledge" and "creative knowledge", to Kant's critical framework based on the distinctions of "reason", "volition" and "emotion", to Jürgen Habermas's definitions of the realm of action versus the realm of awareness, of "societal system" versus "the world of daily living" — in all these ideas are three

fundamental elements: the pursuit of truth, the maintenance of morality, and the expression of human emotion. In the 1960's, the Commission of Humanities, founded by American scholars, defined "Humanities" as research in the fields of linguistics, philosophy, literature, religion, and art.^① The definition encompasses the same fundamental elements. China, understandably, has its own tradition of Humanities. But in recent years, indigenous Chinese thought has increasingly adopted these western conceptual tools and interpretive frameworks. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to choose to describe the entire humanist experience along these three fundamental lines. In so doing, we encounter a series of challenging questions.

Question One: in the pursuit of truth, one encounters the tension between "truth" and the "narration of truth". Because there is no seamless match between the two, Kant had to resort to "reductionism", defining the objective world of reason as the world in which man legislates for nature, distinguishing it from the "world itself"^②. For the same reason, Wittgenstein believed that the awareness of the world necessarily exists outside the world itself^③, while Hans-Georg Gadamer propounded that language is existence

① Du Weiming said, "Once the questions of the value and meaning of life, the ideals of truth, goodness and beauty... and man's own self-transcendence are expelled from the mainstream of philosophical discourse, they become... the object of concern for theology." "Religious Study: from Theology to Humanities", published in *Times*, vol. 23, March, 1998, pp. 22 - 23.

② Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Reason: Preface*, 3: IX, refer to *Selections from Kant's Three Major Critiques*, translated and edited by Yang Zutao and Deng Xiaomang, Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2001.

③ Ludwig Josef Johan Wittgenstein, *Philosophy of Logic*, translated by Guo Ying, Beijing: Commercial Printing Press, 1985, p. 94.

that can be understood.^① If “knowledge” has to be redefined time and time again, and can only explain itself by logic, in what sense is this knowledge “true knowledge”?

Question Two: in maintaining morality, we must ultimately deal with the relationship and distinction between ethical conduct and value thinking, “moral oughtness” and “absolute rightness”. Since the early philosophers who believe in natural law, God’s “covenant” with man has been discarded in favor of mutual contract between men to ensure self-preservation and mutual benefit, thus explaining the evolution of “morality”, “law” and “nations”^②. However, if “morality” is simply the product of an effort to balance benefits, and “rightness”, a mere factor of situations and viewpoints so that it can entertain completely opposite interpretations as situations and viewpoints shift, then wouldn’t “goodness” become a highly dubious concept? Any immoral behavior can be justified as moral, depending on the situation and one’s point of view.

Question Three: in expressing emotion, the ultimate purpose is to find the unique visible form that embodies the invisible ideal. Beginning with Plato, beauty lies on the distant shores (Plotinus)^③,

① Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Garpett Barden & John Cumming, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1975, p. 432. See also, *Truth and Method*, translated by Hung Ying, Shanghai: Shanghai Translations Publishing House, 1994, p. 606.

② Refer to Yang Huilin’s *Guide to the Western Literary Theory*, chapter 5, section 2, Beijing; Renmin University of China Press, 2003.

③ Plotinus, *Aneades*, translated by Miao Langshan, see Zhang Anqi edited, *The Collection of Aesthetical Translations by Miao Langshan*, Vol. 1, Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 1998.

poetry must romanize the world (Novalis)^①, and art expresses the inexpressible (Jean-Francois Lyontard).^② Ultimately, they form the mainstream of western literary theory and aesthetics. On occasion, even philosophers would borrow from “poetic narrative” (Heidigger)^③. In modern man’s practice of artistic appreciation, the so-called “poetic wisdom” and “artistic symbolism” have been transformed, having become a theory about symbols or a direct sensory experience or expression. In the former case, the theory of symbols is the perception of what is by nature imperceptible, deriving its meaning from realizing the ultimate meaninglessness of things, and presenting the reality that possibly absolute truth does not exist for humanity.^④ In the latter case, sensory expression has become a commodity of public consumption. Meantime, the public is itself consumed by what is “trendy”. Art itself has become a new religion, an object of worship.^⑤

Based on the questions above, it is imperative and natural for theology to become part of humanities’ field of vision. Only then will theological hermeneutics, ethics, and aesthetics and their comple-

① *The Reader of Western Religious & Philosophical Studies in 20th Century*, edited by Liu Xiaofeng, Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore, 1994, pp. 1293 – 1294.

② Jean-François Lyontard, *Sublimity: to express what is inexpressible*, see *Postmodernism*, 2nd issue, Beijing: Social Sciences Documental Press, 1993.

③ Martin Heidigger, *Phenomenology and Theology*, translated by Sun Zhouxing, see *Heidigger and Theology*, edited by Liu Xiaofeng, Hong Kong: ISCS Press, 2003, p.36.

④ Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Laughter*, translated by Zhou Hui, Hong Kong: ISCS Press, 2003, p. 36.

⑤ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976, p. 35.

mentary concerns become legitimate and consequential. Here, we must reiterate the following issues: (1) The commonest question in theological hermeneutics is how one can confirm “meaning” given the premise that knowledge, reason, and interpretation are all finite. (2) Recognizing that human values are relative, contradictory, and often reflect limited points of reference, theological ethics asks how man can fulfill the imperative of goodness. (3) Theological aesthetics seeks to transcend the instructional purpose and appreciation of art, so that art communicates with man’s ultimate encounter and self-redemption, in the process of which it expresses the depth of man’s spiritual longing.

Over the past five years, the Institute for the Study of Christian Culture at the Renmin University of China has published ten issues of the *Journal for the Study of Christian Culture*. Since Issue No.8, we have focused on a chosen theme in each issue: “Secular Theology”, “Religious Ethics”, “Theology and Interpretation” and “Publics of Theology”. Along the same line, the following themes will appear in our publications for the next three years:

Issue 12: Theology of Dialogue (focus: the nature of dialogue in Christian theology and its response to contemporary pluralism)

Issue 13: Option for the Poor (focus: globalization and post-colonial Christianity)

Issue 14: Kenosis & “Double Negation of Emptiness” (focus: Buddhist notions of “emptiness” and “non-emptiness” and Christian notions of “kenosis” and “self-emptying”)

Issue 15: Theology of Artistic Appreciation (focus: the relationship between Christianity and literature, art, aesthetics and

artistic appreciation and experience)

Issue 16: The Myth of Theology (focus: the narrative and logic of theology, structural similarities with or inspiration for humanities)

At times, the very quintessence of humanities will be all the more manifested when it is encounters the ultimate theological consciousness. Only the logic of theology may probably break through the prison of language and open up a new vista so that we can cast aside all fantasies of playing the role of God and at the same time find the strength to exercise our responsibility of guarding human consciousness.