

Editorial Foreword

God-Human Relationship as *Bu Yi Bu Er* (Neither Oneness Nor Separateness) and Controversies over the Translation of Religious Texts

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The theme of this issue of our *Journal* is “Controversies over the Translation of Religious Texts.” The “translation of religious texts” in question is about both the translation of the Christian *Bible* into Chinese and the translation of Chinese religious texts into Christian idioms. In the broad sense the translation of the Christian *Bible* into Chinese involves translating the text into the Chinese language as well as translating the thought of the *Bible* into Chinese intellectual discourses. This huge, non-ceasing, project involves the mutual interplay between Chinese and Western civilizations as well as the contextualization of Christianity in Chinese culture. *The Journal for the Study of Christian Culture* has been committed to studying Christianity from Chinese cultural perspectives. Hence we should preface the theme of this issue by reviewing a contemporary debate among overseas Confucian philosophers on Heaven-human relationship, which leads us to reviewing theological understanding of God-human relationship and its implications for the theme of this issue of our *Journal*.

Mou Zongsan (1909-1995) is the most eminent Chinese philosopher outside mainland China and his influence in China now is still ongoing. Mou, as well as other overseas neo-Confucian thinkers, argue

that though Confucianism per se is not an organized religion, Confucian thought has a definite religious dimension or religiosity. This is because an important theme in Confucian thought revolves around Heaven-human relationship, and Heaven in Confucianism is roughly equivalent to God in theistic religions. Furthermore, Mou argues for “immanentism” of Heaven in human nature, which can be summarized in three theses:

1. The Transcendent (the Heaven) is radically immanent in human beings so that it is called “transcendence within,” not “transcendence without.”^① This modern idiom of “transcendence within” is traditionally rendered as “the oneness of Heaven and human beings,” i.e., the distinctly human nature (*xin* or *xing*) substantially shares or participates in Heaven’s nature.

2. Religious life is the unfolding of Heaven-nature in our human nature (i.e., the nurturing or realizing of *xin* or *xing*), through which the knowledge of Heaven will be acquired and service to Heaven will be rendered. In other words, religious knowledge is derived from introspecting *xin* or *xing*.

3. Since this *xin* or *xing* happens to be the moral faculty or moral nature of human beings, religious life is identical to moral life; they are two sides of the same coin. Religious knowledge of the profundity of Heaven is confined to the limits of moral reason (or moral consciousness) alone.

^① This distinction between “transcendence within” and “transcendence without” is very popular among the followers of Mou. Some scholars in mainland China (e.g., TANG Yijie, *Ru Dao Shi yu nei zai chao yue wen ti*, Nanchang: Jiangxi People’s Press, 1991), also accept its usage whereas some other scholars (e.g., Li Zehou) deem the phrase “transcendence within” self-contradictory. See LI Zehou, “Xu (Preface),” in *Dang dai xin ru xue lun heng*, ed. ZHENG Jiadong (Taipei: Laurel Book Company, 1995), 1-3; “Shuo ru xue si qi,” in *Ji mao wu shuo* (Beijing: China Film Press, 1999), 1-31.

Briefly speaking, the immanentism of such “numinous feeling of the self” and of “an exalted self” entails the following views on human beings:

1. The attributes of God or Heaven are systematically transferred to a particular faculty of human nature so that human nature begins to acquire divine or heavenly attributes.^① Hence in human nature we can find infinite goodness, unlimited love, pure justice, boundless moral sensitivity, etc.

2. Human beings have a natural capacity for ultimate self-transformation. There is an efficaciousness of self-effort in realizing the perfectibility of human nature. Properly nurtured, human beings possess a moral omnipotence that can ultimately triumph over evil world-wide.

3. Human beings are free and unbounded by any order imposed from without. They are self-regulators and self-legislators, observe only the orders arise from within, i.e., they have absolute autonomy. Moral, social, and political orders have to originate from within. External constraints have to give way to internal constraints that come from within each human being.^②

Shu-hsien Liu (1934 -) is Mou’s former student and an outstanding philosopher in his own right. He boldly criticizes this understanding of Heaven-human oneness, first in the festschrift dedicated to Mou, then in other writings. He concludes that for neo-Confucian philosophy to move forward, the traditional understanding of Heaven-human relationship of

^① In a recent and fine study of Kant’s immanentism, Michalson detects in Kant’s religious thought a tendency “to appropriate to the immanent domain of rational activity those prerogatives, traits, and characteristics traditionally associated with divine transcendence”. See Jr. Michalson, E. Gordon, *Kant and the Problem of God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 20-21.

^② For details, see Ping-cheung Lo, “Neo-Confucian Religiousness vis-à-vis Neo-orthodox Protestantism,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 32:3 (September 2005): 367-390.

oneness should be modified as neither oneness nor separateness, neither identity nor apartness (literally “neither one nor two,” *bu yi bu er*).^① On the one hand, Heaven and human beings are not separate because (1) finite human beings can have communion with the infinite Heaven; (2) through nourishing the Heavenly endowed, distinctly human nature human beings can participate in the work of Heaven; (3) the mind-heart of the sage is no different from the mind-heart of Heaven. On the other hand, Heaven and human beings are not one and the same because (1) Heaven-human communion does not imply Heaven-human one-and-the-sameness; (2) the transcendence of Heaven needs to be maintained to prevent the disastrous moral-political consequences of Heaven’s total immanence in human nature, confusing the human with the divine; (3) the reality of human finitude. He confesses that he comes to this conclusion by learning from the idea of “to revere Heaven” (*wei tian*) in Confucius, from neoorthodox Christian theology, from reflecting on the Cultural Revolution, and from assessing Mou’s ambitious philosophical-religious project.^②

In learning from neoorthodox Christian theology, Liu as well as his contemporary neo-Confucian philosophers often make reference to the idea of God as the Wholly Other. They reject this Wholly Remote God in

^① LIU Shuxian, “Mou xiansheng lun zhi de zhijue yu Zhongguo zhe xue,” in *Mou Zongshan xiansheng de zhe xue yu zhu zuo* (Taipei: Taiwan Student Bookstore, 1978), 757-758.

^② See LIU Shuxian, “You dang dai xi fang zongjiao si xiang ru he mian dui xian dai hua wenti de jiao du lun ru jia de zongjiao yi han,” in *Dang dai Zhongguo zhe xue lun: wen ti pian* (Taipei: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte Ltd, 1996), 97-98; “Christianity in Reflection of Chinese Philosophy,” in *Wen hua yu zhe xue de tan suo* (Taipei: Taiwan Student Bookstore, 1986), 181, 186; “Dang dai xin ru jia ke yi xiang Jidu jiao xue xie shen me,” in *Da lu yu hai wai* (Taipei: Asian Culture, 1989), 259-271; “Mou xiansheng lun zhi de zhijue yu Zhongguo zhe xue,” 760; “Some Reflections on What Contemporary Neo-Confucian Philosophy May Learn from Christianity,” in *Confucian-Christian Encounter in Historical and Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Peter K. H. Lee (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1991), 74, 79.

favor of the Confucian Heaven.^① Little do they know that in neo-orthodox theology, not to say classical theology, God's transcendence is only one aspect of God-human relationship. Divine transcendence is emphasized then as a revolutionary slogan to revolt against the dominant liberal, immanentist theology. Karl Barth is the most important representative in this regard. Barth realizes that theologically one must construe a critical distance between God and human beings (including human culture) lest theologians would identify God's will with some national policies, as the best German theologians did at the outbreak of World War I and thus became Germany's cultural captives. As Karl Barth famously explains later in his life,

One day in early August 1914 stands out in my personal memory as a black day. Ninety-three German intellectuals impressed public opinion by their proclamation in support of the war policy of Wilhelm II and his counselors. Among these intellectuals I discovered to my horror almost all of my theological teachers whom I had greatly venerated. In despair over what this indicated about the signs of the time I suddenly realized that I could not any longer follow either their ethics and dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible and of history. For me at least, 19th-century theology no longer held any future.... The Christian was condemned to uncritical and irresponsible subservience to the patterns, forces, and movements of human history and civilization. Man's inner experience did not provide a firm enough ground for resistance to these phenomena. Deprived of a guiding principle man could turn anywhere. It was fatal for the evangelical Church and for Christianity in the 19th century that theology in the last analy-

^① Tu Wei-ming construes the "wholly other" God as "pure objectivity" whereas Shu-hsien Liu construes the non-liberal God as "pure transcendence". See TU Weiming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 120, and LIU Shuxian, "Dang dai xin ru jia ke yi xiang Jidu jiao xue xie shen me," 260; "Lun Zongjiao de chao yue he nei zai", in *Twenty-First Century*, no. 50 (Dec 1998):106.

sis had not more to offer than the ‘human,’ the ‘religious,’ mystery and its noncommittal ‘statements,’ leaving the faithful to whatever impressions and influences from outside proved strongest.^①

“Thus the ‘wholly other’ was ‘no metaphysical-distancing but rather a social-qualifying concept’,” as a Barth scholar recently explains.^② Later in his career, when the successful revolt is over, Barth admits that his earlier emphasis on the radical alterity of God is one-sided, and needs to be balanced by the emphasis of “His *togetherness* with man.”^③ The key is the Incarnation, which becomes the center of Barth’s mature theology. The Incarnation discloses an understanding of deity which is different from that of his early emphasis, which misleads one to think of God in isolation from human beings. The mature Barth declares,

It is precisely God’s *deity* which, rightly understood, includes his *humanity*.... In Jesus Christ there is no isolation of man from God or of God from man.... He is the Word spoken from the loftiest, most luminous transcendence and likewise the Word heard in the deepest, darkest immanence.... He is wholly the one and wholly the other.^④

Emil Brunner, another neo-Orthodox theologian and contemporary of Barth, makes it plain that his view of God is a middle way between the Deistic God of absolute transcendence (“God is not immanent in the world in any sense at all, but that He is quite separate from the world”) and the Pantheistic God of absolute immanence (the absolute distinction between “Godhood” and humanity is erased).^⑤ In classical theism

^① Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox, 1963), 14, 27.

^② Timothy J. Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 37.

^③ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 45.

^④ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 46-47.

^⑤ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God (Dogmatics, volume 1)*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), 175.

divine transcendence and divine immanence always go hand in hand.^① Martin Buber, a Jewish thinker contemporary with Barth and Brunner, puts it well, “Of course God is the ‘wholly Other’; but He is also the wholly Same, the wholly Present. Of course He is the *Mysterium Tremendum* that appears and overthrows; but He is also the mystery of the self-evident, nearer to me than my *I*.”^②

In short, we can also say that Karl Barth’s, as well as the neo-Orthodox movement’s, theological view of God-human relationship is *bu yi bu er* (neither oneness nor separateness). On the one hand, in rebelling against liberal theology’s confining theological discourses to anthropological discourses, the early Barth emphasizes God as Wholly Other; hence God and human beings are *bu yi* (not in ontological oneness). On the other hand, the later Barth does not oppose “theology from below,” i.e., an anthropological starting point for theology; hence God and human beings are *bu er* (not in separation). I think most Christian theologians can endorse this thesis as well.

Such a delicate balance between divine transcendence and divine presence has significant implications for cross-cultural interpretations of Christian faith. In translating the Christian *Bible*, we need to maintain the alterity of Christian faith as contained in the *Bible* (*bu yi*, not one and the same) as well as to build a bridge between Christian faith and Chinese culture (*bu er*, not unconnected). All foreign missionaries involved in the Bible translation work in nineteenth century China agreed to this general principle, but they differed on how to uphold this balance. The most heated controversy at that time was known as “The Term Question.”

^① “Immanence” in classical theism means “the presence of God in the world in such a way that the source of the presence remains distinct.” See *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 470. However, Mou employs the term “immanence” in a different sense, viz., “to be present in the cosmos and not existing apart from it.” See *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 481.

^② Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, second edition (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1956), 79.

The translation work started with the *New Testament* (1843-1850), and there was an unceasing debate on how to render the Greek “*theos*” into Chinese. There were two major positions: “*shen*” (argued for largely by American missionaries), and “*shangdi*” (largely by British and German missionaries). Both sides agreed that the translated term should not be alien to Chinese readers (*bu er*, not erecting a gulf between the Bible and the Chinese readers); hence they agreed not to transliterate the word “*theos*.” They also agreed in principle that the Chinese term to be used should safeguard the alterity of God (*bu yi*, not one and the same as a deity in Chinese culture), but the estimated strategies of the opposing sides clashed seriously. For those who were in favor of “*shangdi*,” on the one hand, they argued that this term had been traditionally used to refer to the supreme deity (hence *bu er*, the term “*shangdi*” was not remote from Chinese understanding). On the other hand, they also argued that the other term, “*shen*,” had been used to refer to spirits of all kinds, e.g., “*shan shen*” (spirit of the mountains), “*he shen*” (spirits of rivers); hence to translate “*theos*” into “*shen*” cannot maintain the distinctness of the Christian God (*bu yi*, not one the same). For those who were in favor of “*shen*,” on the one hand, they argued that this term was a generic term, which was true of the Greek word “*theos*” in the Greek language in the First Century. On the other hand, they also argued that the other term, “*shangdi*,” had a linguistic-religious life of its own; hence to translate “*theos*” as “*shangdi*” could lead Chinese readers mix up two concepts of deity as this term could not safeguard the distinctiveness of the Christian God (*bu yi*).^①

Accordingly, “The Term Question” controversy was only the tip of the iceberg. Deep down below their intense disputes were the more fundamental controversies concerning the proper understanding Chinese classical texts and Chinese religious culture. As it is still true today, a good Chinese translation of the *Bible* requires a good command of the

^① WU Yixiong, “The Term Question and Early Translations of the Bible into Chinese,” *Historical Research*, no. 2(2000): 205-222.]; Jost Oliver Zetzsche, *The Bible in China: The History of the Union Version or the Culmination of Protestant Missionary Bible Translation in China*; Monumenta Monograph series (Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica Institute, 1999), 82-88.

knowledge of the biblical world as well as the knowledge of the world of Chinese classics. Hence the British missionary James Legge at that time devoted much time to learn the ancient Chinese classics. The first article of this thematic issue of the *Journal* is authored by David Lyle Jeffrey, who tries to analyze how James Legge studied and translated the *Shi Jing*, the ancient Chinese *Book of Odes*, with much religious reverence. His career of missionary and sinologist was a Protestant replay of the work of the Roman Catholic Jesuits hundreds of years ago. The first assignment when Matteo Ricci and his colleagues arrived China was a long period of studying the Chinese language and Chinese classics. Then they composed Catholic catechisms in Chinese and simultaneously translated the Chinese classics into Latin.

The choice of key translated terms was only the first major hurdle in the translation of the *Bible* into Chinese. The second key hurdle and controversy was rendering the *Bible* into appropriate literary style. Should the Chinese Bible be read obviously as a strange new world, preserving the discontinuity (*bu yi*) between the biblical text and typical works composed by Chinese authors? Or should the Chinese *Bible* be purged of traces of translation so that readers could have a sense of literary intimacy (*bu er*) in reading the Chinese text? The second thematic article of this issue of the *Journal* is authored by Archie C. C. Lee, who explains and analyzes the reasons for the foreign missionaries to invite Yan Fu, a highly esteemed translator and non-Christian, to translate the *Gospel of Mark* into elegant literary Chinese.

Last, but not the least, translating religious texts is much more than translating words and sentences; it is about traveling back and forth in two very different worlds. Should we keep a distance between the Christian faith and Chinese culture so as to preserve the distinctiveness (*bu yi*) of the former? Or should we “contextualize” Christian faith within Chinese culture, erasing its foreignness, so that Chinese readers would not be alienated (*bu er*)? The third article of this thematic issue, authored by John T. P. Lai, is about the American missionary Timothy Richard’s attempt to translate the Chinese literary-Buddhist classic *The Journey to the West* into English, nay, into Christian idioms. Hence the

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Rulai (*Tathāgata*) was rendered as the Incarnate God, Kwanyin (*Avalokiteśvara*) as the Holy Spirit, and Xuanzang, the protagonist of the novel, as the Apostle Paul. In other words, Mahayana Buddhism was rendered not differently (*but*) from Christianity. This strategy of “dynamic equivalent” in translating religious texts is highly contentious and merits our attention.

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