

# Negotiating Tolerance: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Researching Religion in China<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Just as G. E. Lessing criticized what he saw as the narrow-mindedness of his contemporaries by creating characters that exemplified a morally enlightened rationalism, religious studies scholars in contemporary China have helped instruct and reshape uninformed or generalizing attitudes towards religion in Chinese society. Reflecting on

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<sup>1</sup> In the footnote references to texts, note that the order of names, including all Chinese names, is written as given name first and family name second (e.g. “Xiaofeng Liu” instead of the conventional “Liu [family name] Xiaofeng [given name]”). Throughout this article, all names are written out according to respective conventions, i.e. family name first and given name second for most Chinese names. Chinese names of people, places, and texts are mostly written in pinyin Romanization (with Chinese characters added for clarification) except in the case of some Hong Kong Chinese names, which often appear in print as Anglicized given name followed by Chinese family name not transliterated in pinyin, but in Wade-Giles, for example. In the bibliography, family names are listed in front of given names throughout.

Lessing's literary case for religious tolerance, the present article discusses different understandings of the nature and significance of religion in the field of so-called "Sino-Christian studies" (汉语基督教研究 *Hanyu Jidujiao yanjiu*). It demonstrates how religious and "theological tolerance" are variously understood depending on the stances, approaches, and constructions of meaning of individual scholars, influenced, in one way or another, by Western Enlightenment thought.

**Keywords** *Sino-Christian studies, Sino-Christian theology, religious studies in China, theological tolerance, G. E. Lessing, Zhuo Xingping, Yang Huilin, He Guanghu*

## I. Introduction

The present article introduces the emerging field of Sino-Christian studies (汉语基督教研究 *Hanyu Jidujiao yanjiu*<sup>2</sup>) in contemporary Chinese academic discourse by discussing how some of its participants relate to theology

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<sup>2</sup> The term literally means "Chinese (or *Han*)-language Christianity research." It has been promoted among scholars conducting Christian studies in China as an alternative to the term "Sino-theology" (汉语神学 *Hanyu shenxue*), which many found an inaccurate description. *Hanyu shenxue* in the 1990s was used by the Chinese contemporary thinker Xiaofeng Liu 刘小枫 (1956-) to denote an innovative intellectual movement among Chinese scholars that was independent

and the study of religion as academic disciplines. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's case for religious tolerance, his critical contributions to ushering in the Age of Reason in Eighteenth-century Germany and beyond, and his formulation of a "Christianity of Reason"<sup>3</sup> have permanently influenced the Western imaginary and also left their mark on modern Chinese scholarship. The modern Chinese university is in one way or another shaped by Western categories of learning,<sup>4</sup> as well as modern academic disciplinary divisions, while intellectual discourse remains to this day heavily influenced by terminologies adapted from Western academic jargons and taxonomies. Over the past century, these have been introduced into Chinese discourse in different stages, particularly in the wake of the anti-imperialist May Fourth

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of church theology, an endeavor some described as elitist. Liu is currently promoting a program of classics studies at Renmin University in Beijing.

<sup>3</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) was a German philosopher, playwright, dramaturg, art critic, and one of the most important thinkers of the Eighteenth-century German Enlightenment. He wrote many plays, as well as a number of theoretical and polemic texts discussing religion and religious tolerance in an "age of reason." Although he might be criticized for his depiction of humanity's progressive development from ignorance to universal human reason and ethical conduct (he was an optimist), he had a lasting impact on the Western philosophical tradition, which is interesting since Lessing described the stage as his lectern—an unlikely pulpit for one who started out, as other noted thinkers of his era, as a student of theology, meant to follow his father into the profession of a cleric.

<sup>4</sup> Xiaofeng Liu reminds us, too, of the origins of many Chinese universities today: "Chinese universities were founded either by Western missionaries [if founded before 1949] or by Chinese following Western models." See Xiaofeng Liu, "Leo Strauss and the Rebirth of Classics in China," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 42.2 (2016): 171-89.

Movement (五四运动 *Wusi yundong*) of 1919. By the time the country was mainstreaming its own adaptation of Marxist-Leninist terminology, entire bodies of earlier philosophical concepts, including theological and political, had already gained household currency in their respective fields of specialization. While some lament the fact that contemporary study of Western philosophy de facto restricts itself to *modern* and *post-modern* Western works and theories,<sup>5</sup> the fact is that theology was already being written and read in Chinese during the Republican era (1912-1949), as well as during earlier cultural encounters and transmissions, which trace back to the seventh century with the Nestorians' entry and the Catholic and Protestant missions and their respective developments of contextualizing theology many centuries on.<sup>6</sup>

There are thus, in addition to a long and contested, a fruitful as well as turbulent, missionary history, two important influences on Christian theology in China: first, theological work undertaken in the early 20th century, whose leading theological representatives included prominent academics such as Wu Leichuan 吴雷川 (1870-

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> A fascinating study of the importance of text alongside context in the development of Chinese theology over the past five centuries is Chloë Starr's recent *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016). The work highlights the vital role of Chinese texts and textual culture in transmitting and shaping Chinese understandings of Christianity and God.

1944) and T. C. Chao (Zhao Zichen) 赵紫宸 (1888-1979); and, second, the transmitted heritage of the West's (post-) Enlightenment digestion of theology, imported into China via translations of Western literature and philosophy undertaken particularly in the 20th century, which witnessed a cultural revival in the wake of the Cultural Revolution decade (1966-76). Our chief concern here is the second aspect and its bearing on contemporary Christianity research in Chinese scholarship. To narrow down the scope of the influence of Western Enlightenment thought, this article focuses on G. E. Lessing, more specifically on his writings and ideas concerning religious tolerance and reason-guided "religious" morality.

## **II. The Academic Study of Religion and Christian Theology in China Today**

Attitudes toward Christianity and Christian theology have widely changed since the 1980s, when individual writers and academics promoted the discussion of Christian thought in intellectual discourse through voluminous translations of theological classics as well as writing about Christian topics that interested them, such as Christian existentialism, favorite Christian writers or theologians, including Christian mysticism. At the time, most educated Chinese were influenced both by Marxist-Leninist doctrine as it was taught in schools and undergraduate university curricula and generally propagated in other sectors, which often set the tone for people's publicly expressed opinions on religion.

Views that largely reduced Marx's writings on the religious question to his widely quoted opium analogy initially saw some rectification in the form of pioneering work in the field of religious studies and theology<sup>7</sup> during the years leading up to 1989, while the 1990s witnessed a turn toward a more academic treatment of the subjects.<sup>8</sup>

Today we are witnessing different approaches in the study of religion and Christian theology, which can be seen as represented by the following contemporary Chinese scholars.

The first is Zhuo Xinping, whose affirmation of religious plurality in Chinese society alongside the continued need for state regulation that legitimates itself in the form of the officially promoted "state religion" of Marxist ideology reminds us of the traditional role of scholarship in Chinese governance to inform policy and, where necessary, rectify common misconceptions.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Guanghu He, "Jingshan dai you rencai chu – Ershi Shijimo zhi Ershiyi Shijichu Zhongguo Jidujiao Yanjiu Xuezhe Sumiao" ("Trends of Chinese Scholars in Christian Studies at the Turn of the 20th-21st Century"), *Logos and Pneuma* 29 (Autumn 2008): 53-73; and "Three Generations of Chinese Christianity Researchers: From the 1950s to 2007," in *China and Christianity: A New Phase of Encounter?*, eds. Felix Wilfred, Edmond Tang, and Georg Evers (London: SCM, 2008), 58-70.

<sup>8</sup> See Gloria Davies, *Worrying About China: The Language of Chinese Critical Inquiry* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> See Zhuo Xinping's talk on the relationship between religion and the state in China today, "Relationship between Religion and State in the People's Republic of China," trans. Jaqueline Mulberge, *Religions & Christianity in Today's China* 4.1 (2014): 16-24, accessed March 20, 2014, china-zentrum.de/fileadmin/redaktion/RCTC\_2014-1.1624\_Relationship\_between\_Religion\_and\_State\_in\_the\_PR\_China.pdf.

Professor Yang Huilin, who teaches comparative literature and comparative religion at Renmin University (formerly known in English as People's University) of China, is interested not primarily in what connects religions in terms of their commonalities, but in their *differences*, in what makes them unique and thus meaningful. Christian theology is a *language*, the Christian religion a set of cultural symbols unlike their Chinese counterparts; understanding Western literature or post-modern philosophy requires more than a working knowledge of Russian or French. Theological text is woven too deeply and intricately into the fabric of Western culture as to be ignored or superficially read for its common traits with other philosophical traditions. Therefore, what interests Yang is Christian culture as the *other*.

He Guanghu, also based at Renmin University for many years, began his academic career in religious studies as soon as Chinese universities began enrolling graduate students in the late seventies, after a nationwide shutdown of all universities from the mid-1960s to 1970s. Though described by some as a philosopher of religion rather than a theologian, He has taken a keen interest in theology and written about possible directions for "Sino-Christian theology," which he has been associated with alongside the theologically trained writer and academic Liu Xiaofeng. He stresses that both the *universal* essence as well as authentic Chinese life experience must be consciously integrated into a viable formulation of Chinese theology.

### **III. Lessing's Age of Reason and China's "Second Enlightenment"**

My interest in comparing Lessing's ideas on tolerance with the interpretive positions or stances of Chinese scholars of religion, Christian culture, and theology stems from my research interests in the different dimensions of international, cross-disciplinary theological dialogue. I first began interviewing Chinese scholars researching Christianity in 2011 for my PhD field research. As someone looking at theology in Chinese academia from the outside, as I am neither a native Chinese speaker nor a theologian, but a fellow academic and a quasi-insider, I was fascinated by the dynamics that characterized this field of discourse. It was not like theology in the West, once rooted in confessional theology, a discipline whose self-understanding had once been that it was an intellectual endeavor of and for the church. Certainly at theological seminaries at least this is still largely the case. Sino-Christian studies or Sino-Christian theology, the latter often conceived of as referring to a much smaller number of scholars in China whose interests are more narrowly "theological" (and not including all Christian studies covering a wide array of disciplinary approaches), these two discourses were different in that they assumed a position outside the church from the time they first emerged in post-Maoist China in the 1980s.

Several reversals are of interest in examining these fields: the norm here is not a theologian in or connected with the



church, but often a consciously agnostic student of theology observing the subject as an outsider maintaining a deliberate distance, which is seen as conducive to intellectual work, a reversal of traditional theology as the queen of disciplines in pre-Enlightenment Europe, before Kant for instance in 1798 argued for its dethronement in favor of the elevation of a supposedly less partial discipline, philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Further, orthodoxy in any academic setting in Mainland China is the political orthodoxy of Marxism—and officially this has not changed in China, although the academic world, along with the rest of the country, has been opening up ideologically, as it has opened up “virtually” with the rise of online discussions on topics ranging from civil society to virtually any topic in world news. Justified concerns over tighter controls by means of censorship and other measures in recent years are expressed alongside the recognition of the country’s continuing trends of “opening up” and internationalization in all sectors. As scholars in China reflect on modernization, they are examining both its development in the Western world and how modernity impacts China, leading many to question if Western modernization should or can even be the model for China

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<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Der Streit der Facultäten: In drei Abschnitten*. Königsberg: Friedrich Nicolovius, 1798, *Projekt Gutenberg*, accessed April 1, 2014, <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/-3509/1>.

to emulate. After all, why should the European experience be seen as universal? Indeed, as Zhang Xudong opines: “The search for an alternative indicates a refusal to view the Eurocentric notion of modernity as modular or universal; it is an effort to analyze and break the colossal and often mythologized categories—capitalism, market, modernity, democracy, etc.—and to see them as bundles of historical contingencies.”<sup>11</sup>

As in the West, some Chinese intellectuals have questioned the modernity project wholesale, among them the early “Sino-Christian theologian” Liu Xiaofeng who, in the early 2000s, began to gradually turn his attention away from theology to classics studies and Straussian political philosophy. He has introduced (as editor, not translator) Lessing’s work on the relationship between philosophy and religion for its politico-philosophical significance, and for his book series “Classics and Interpretation,” he selected those works of the German philosopher with a strong bearing on political philosophy. The translated texts include *The Education of the Human Race* (1780), a commentary on what Lessing saw as the continual progress of humanity from primitive religion, to Judaism, Christianity, and morally enlightened rational humanism, although not secularism, as

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<sup>11</sup> Xudong Zhang, “The Making of the Post-Tiananmen Intellectual Field: A Critical Overview,” in *Wither China: Intellectual Politics in Contemporary China*, ed. Xudong Zhang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

understood in the later sense.<sup>12</sup> Liu was among the earliest importers of Western theology and Christian thought into Chinese intellectual discourse in the 1980s. He later obtained a doctorate in theology in Switzerland, in 1989 to 1993.

Chinese society after 1979 entered a period referred to by some as China's "Second Enlightenment" (第二次启蒙 *dì èr cì qimeng*)—second to the Enlightenment of the anti-imperialist 1919 May Fourth Movement.<sup>13</sup> It was a period of renewed and popular engagement with foreign literature and scholarship, as translated works became more widely available to an eager reading public. So while the European Enlightenment questioned establishment theology and criticized the dominance of the church's authority, China's "Second" or "New Enlightenment" Movement two hundred years later opened up intellectual discourses to what after 1949 had been uncharted territory in the People's Republic, at least in any public setting, which was of course

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<sup>12</sup> See Liu's introduction in the Chinese version of G. E. Lessing's *Education of the Human Race*. *Lun renlei de jiaoyu* 论人类的教育 (Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts), trans. Zhu Yanbing (Beijing: Huaxia, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Xu Jilin refers to the period beginning in the mid- to late 1980s as China's "New Enlightenment": "The movement of liberation of thought at the beginning of the 1980s," followed by the "cultural fever" (*wenhua rè*) of the mid-1980s (later called "The New Enlightenment" after the May 4th Movement of 1919), saw the appearance of a group of renowned public intellectuals who reached a wide readership; cf. Jilin Xu, "What Future for Public Intellectuals? The Specialisation of Knowledge, the Commercialisation of Culture and the Emergence of Post-Modernism Characterise China in the 1990s," *China Perspectives* 52 (2004), accessed November 24, 2013, <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/799?lang=fr>.

true of other academic disciplines at the time. “Religious studies” during the Maoist era had served as a platform for criticizing religion. China had produced its own theologians a century earlier,<sup>14</sup> and some wrote about contextualization and religious dialogue, but after the Cultural Revolution an open re-introduction of religion and religious works took place, referred to as “culture fever.” Some also talk about a “religion fever,” “Christianity fever,” even “book series fever.” The religious and theological underpinnings of literary works were discussed, the major tenets of Christianity introduced in scholarly journal articles, new journals and book series were launched, and gradually, beginning in the 1990s, large-scale translation projects of classic theological works into Chinese, beginning with the church fathers all the way to contemporary Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox theologians, were undertaken.<sup>15</sup> These publications were more than straightforward translations into Chinese; in one way or another, a Chinese interpretation of their cultural-historical significance was

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<sup>14</sup>The most prominent Republican-era Chinese theologian was Wu Leichuan (1870-1944), chancellor of Yenjing (Yenching) University, who wrote about what he saw as correspondences between Christianity and Confucianism. T.C. Chao, or Zhao Zichen (1888-1979), was another well-known theologian. An important figure in the arduous history of the Chinese church, Zhao, too, wrote on Christianity and Confucianism. See “Introduction.”

<sup>15</sup>See Daniel Yeung, “Twenty Years of Publication: Looking Back How Far We Have Gone,” *ISCS Newsletter* (December 2015): 1-2; and Xiping Zhuo, “The Positive Trend Toward the Sinicization of Christian Thought: On the Translation Work of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies,” *ISCS Newsletter* (December 2015): 3-4.

published with each translated work, such as introductions of the authors, their historical contexts, and their influences. Studying “Christianity” meant studying the history of Western thought. Conversely, the reason many scholars in China have and are still entering the field of Christian studies has been to gain a deeper understanding of Western culture. While translations of seminal Western works are still ongoing—only a selection of Lessing’s works, for instance, has been translated into Chinese, and the same is true for many formative Western thinkers—much of this scholarship now centers on East-West dialogue, including comparative studies, and, for some, the question of Christianity’s Sinicization.

As concerns disciplinary categorizations in the diffused field of Christian studies in China, while many readily place their work on Christianity in the discipline of religious studies, comparative philosophical studies, history, or comparative literature, few scholars, with some exceptions, would describe themselves as theologians. And yet they are increasingly incorporating the language of theological inquiry into their intellectual discourse. The distinctions between “religious studies” and “theology” as academic disciplines are contested and not straightforward in this context. Some, as Zhuo Xinping 卓新平 (1955-), who is introduced below, understand a purely “academic theology” in the classical Greek sense of a discourse on ultimate truth(s). Most scholars in religious studies, however, focus

their research on a particular religion; theology here is analogous to a particular religion, a study object itself, rather than the description of a discipline with its own rationale, methodology, and claims to legitimacy. For some confessional scholars, who may also be interested in developing a theology for the church, the issue is perhaps more complex. On the one hand, these scholars are in the minority, considering the field of Christian studies as a whole, spread across half a dozen disciplines. On the other hand, some of the confessional scholars I spoke with stressed that they draw clear lines between their academic work, which they decidedly place in other disciplines—whether philosophy, literary studies, or history—and their interest in theology as church-goers for example. Religious studies in China, a sub-discipline to philosophy at Mainland Chinese universities, is often divided along similar lines as the Chinese government's division of religions, that is, the five official religions, Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Sometimes folk religions or “local religions” are added, and Protestantism and Catholicism will generally fall under one departmental heading or research institute; sometimes Judaism is added to Christianity. All of this means, however, that Christian theology as a research focus can just as well be found in a department of literature as under the heading of religious studies—and scholars studying religion empirically might just as well work in a

department of sociology or anthropology. Both fields then are mixed, and definitions at times contradictory.

Zhuo himself has written extensively about both Protestant and Catholic Christian theology. However, maybe because his research spans different religions and he has in interviews often described his function as being that of a mediator or bridge between religious and secular Chinese, between the interests of religious groups and, as a Party member, the Chinese government, and between Chinese and Western observers, no one I have spoken with would describe Zhuo as a theologian. This, however, does not mean that he is not well-versed in Christian theology, but reflects an understanding of a theologian that exists in China as elsewhere that differentiates between those studying certain doctrines and scriptures and giving some sort of an account of the divine or of eternal truth, perhaps for reasons that go beyond scholarship and the production of knowledge, and those in the study of religion, or science of religion, as the Chinese 宗教学 *zongjiao xue* is sometimes translated. Admittedly, trying to draw clear distinctions between theology and religious studies is a precarious undertaking. “One in the service of the church, another an interest-free academic discipline” would hardly cover the complexities and runs the risk of disregarding much scholarship on both sides. Lessing, in his literary oeuvre as well as in his theoretical writings, concerns himself with both.

#### IV. A “Christianity of Reason” and the Philosophical Sino-Christian Encounter

The son of a Lutheran minister who began his university studies in theology, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) on the one hand calls for an acceptance of people of other religions (whether in his comedy *Die Juden* of 1754 or his well-known “dramatic poem” *Nathan der Weise* of 1779); in the character of the wise Jewish merchant Nathan, the central character of the play, he also alludes to the wisdom of a reverent openness to transcendence.

Lessing condemns both the cynic and the religious bigot, and points out in his late work *The Education of the Human Race* the “usefulness” of revelation, or humans’ absorption thereof through practicing faith and theological reasoning, for the positive development of the human race at a particular time in history. Lessing views history as continuously progressing toward a “time of completion” (*Zeit der Vollendung*)—from the Old to the New Testament, to a time of reason, when, he thinks, good will be done for the sake of good, rather than in anticipation of future rewards and punishments (immediate in the Old Testament era and postponed to the afterlife for New Testament adherents). Lessing also wrote, theologically speculatively, of a “Christianity of Reason,” although his thoughts on this are preserved mostly in fragmentary form.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See G. E. Lessing, *Lessing’s Theological Writings*, selections in translation with an introductory essay by Henry Chadwick (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1956).



One might criticize Lessing's view of historical progressiveness and how one religion thus seems to be portrayed as superior to another. However, Lessing's plea for religious tolerance, especially in his late work, is still echoed in every German classroom; he is also the earliest German dramatist whose plays have been continuously performed on German stages. The stage, for Lessing, was a didactic tool<sup>17</sup> with which he meant to educate his audiences by holding out before them the grave and petty vices of middle class Germany. But the stage was not his only instrument. In his writings directed at his philosophical and theological adversaries, unafraid of polemic rhetoric, Lessing wants to offer a reasonable alternative to orthodox theological views, but he does so without sparing deists, atheists, or those who tried to merge reason with faith in fruitless ways. At the same time, Lessing calls for an ethical Christianity, a faith, one might say, that is proven by her works.<sup>18</sup>

In the eighteenth century, Lessing, using the stage as his lectern, preached tolerance for difference and *Hochachtung*, meaning "deference, esteem, and veneration," also for the other's intellect. He advised open-mindedness not only toward those of other faiths but toward the religious systems

<sup>17</sup> See G. E. Lessing, *Die Juden. Ein Lustspiel in einem Aufzuge verfertigt im Jahr 1749. Mit Anmerkungen und Materialien herausgegeben von Wilhelm Grosse* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981).

<sup>18</sup> James 2:14-18.

themselves, which served their proper function in the evolution of human goodness. Straightforward or commonplace as such a “sermon” may sound, it can actually show itself as loaded, challenging, and controversial when transported into a concrete historical setting. Considering the anti-semitism of his time, for Lessing, the relationship between religion and philosophy was a matter of import not only for theologians; it was rather a question with far-reaching socio-political implications. Chinese intellectuals who are seeking a Chinese alternative to Western modernity must first establish what theirs would be an alternative to; to avoid this question would be to ignore one’s own history. This necessity of attention, apart from affinity or other personal considerations, constitutes one of the main reasons for the serious scholarly interest in Christian studies in China over the past thirty to forty years. It is an interest that, as it plays out in scholarly publications and research, finds expression in varying degrees of openness or tolerance with regard to religion and theology. Some scholars, while rejecting religious belief for themselves, express admiration and respect for religious believers, or for their practices. Others speak openly of their religious belonging while criticizing institutional religion, or popular religion. Others again explain that their stances are purely neutral and objective. Philosophically, there are some scholars who express “tolerance” for the transcendental dimension in their theological research; they neither negate nor ignore its

possibility and meaning. An example of a scholar exhibiting such “theological tolerance” is the philosopher of religion He Guanghu, who is also introduced in this article.

Lessing’s *theology* is perhaps not the first association of most people when they think of his wider influence. However, it was his first occupation (as a university student), and he continued to write about theology for much of his career. His “Christianity of Reason” makes use of traditional theological categories, and while today we might associate Lessing’s “Son-God” with reason itself, there is still something initially brought to humankind from some other source, whose importance Lessing affirms. He does not ignore the possibility of a connection between what is immanent in the world and what exceeds it. In his earlier play *Der Freigeist* (1749), Lessing mocks the proud disbelief of a mulish atheist, because it expresses itself in irrational distrust of his fellow human beings, in particular the Protestant clergy, adds misery and inconvenience to his life, and threatens to stand in the way of his experiencing authentic friendship. But Lessing also commends the virtuous behavior of people of faith and shows their motivation to act charitably towards others as being rooted in their faith, an embrace of something that is thought to exist outside the limits of natural experience. As discussed below, “theological,” in addition to “religious tolerance,” is promoted in Lessing’s writings, especially his late works. Both notions are convincingly defended in his dramatic

poem of 1779 *Nathan the Wise* and exemplified in the open-minded and benevolent Jewish humanist Nathan, a character inspired by Lessing's friend, the German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786).

Lessing's well-known play—or “dramatic poem” as he subtitled it—*Nathan the Wise* stands out as the author's lasting testament of a literary contribution to religious tolerance. This in many ways didactic work, or “ode to tolerance,” set in twelfth-century Jerusalem during the Third Crusade (1189–1192), is most often recounted for its compelling allegory introduced in the middle of the play. The “Ring Parable” is Nathan's response to a philosophical challenge offered by the Sultan, who asks his Jewish guest which of the “three religions” is the true faith. Instead of giving the Sultan a straightforward answer, the wise Jewish merchant tells a story:

A dying father gives each of his three sons a ring, but only one, apparently, is the true, powerful ring. The potent ring, which by this time has been in the family for many generations, has the ability to make its bearer “pleasing” in the sight of men. A dispute arises after the father's death: Did he (willfully) deceive all three or only two of his sons? Or, to apply the question to the context of the three faiths fighting over Jerusalem, are all three religions “fakes,” or is one the true religion, rendering the other two imposters? A judge is brought in whose verdict is no verdict but an encouragement that each son should try to live up to the

ideal of a pleasing life in the eyes of men, i.e. adherents of each religion should do good in the world and prove that theirs is the religion with the legitimate claim to truth. So goes the parable.

Religious tolerance has, since Lessing, taken on a broader definition, but it has also lost some of its weight in terms of an argument for religiously motivated action: act without the certainty of your own superiority, but act and do good in the world (and, if need be, let your actions prove the legitimacy of your faith). This ethical admonition based on religious imperative is largely lacking in a secularized context demanding both “religious tolerance” and ethical action on grounds other than those of religious motivation. And yet, as Hans Küng explains, religious factors nonetheless still function as strong motivators for social action by offering an alleged surplus, that is, of motivation: “Religion can, however, when understood correctly, offer a surplus of motivation, and norms can only attain absolute validation [when understood] religiously—with recourse to an unconditional authority.”<sup>19</sup>

## **V. Three Scholars in Contemporary Chinese Christian Studies**

Tolerance toward religion, religious diversity, and the role religion can play in society is expressed not only through

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<sup>19</sup> Hans Küng, *Handbuch Weltethos: Eine Vision und ihre Umsetzung* (München: Piper, 2012).

policy and its implementation but, in perhaps a more fundamental way, educational politics and the status the study of religion is granted in publicly funded institutions, including academic research at state institutions. Here it might help to take a closer look at the research concentrations of individual players. Chinese scholars have expressed their attitudes toward religion explicitly or implicitly, through the choices of their research topics for example. Below I discuss three prominent scholars researching Christianity in contemporary China and their views toward religion and theology. They are Zhuo Xinping 卓新平 (1955-), Yang Huilin 杨慧林 (1954-), and He Guanghu 何光沪 (1950-). Incidentally, all three scholars are based in Beijing, they also travel and lecture widely across China and around the world.

### A. Zhuo Xinping's "Academic Theology"<sup>20</sup>

Below are some quotations from a recent interview with Zhuo Xinping, Director of the Institute of World Religions at China's leading research institution, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Zhuo's publications on religion and Christianity are numerous and include such titles as *Religion and Culture* (1988), *On the Origin of Religions* (1988), *Introduction to Religious Studies in the West* (1990), *History of Christianity and*

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<sup>20</sup> See Zhuo's "The Status of Christian Theology in China Today," in *Christianity*, ed. Zhuo Xinping (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 7-29.

*Judaism in China* (1998), *Understanding of Religion* (1999), *On Christianity* (2000), *Between the Holy and the Secular* (2004), *Global Religions and Contemporary China* (2008), and *Christianity* (2013).

[W]hen there is discussion, there needs to be the attitude of listening. In mainland China there is what we call “transposition of thinking.” You ought to put yourself into other people’s shoes and consider their opinions . . . . find the common ground, see if there are any commonalities. If there are none, there is the “agree to disagree” in the Chinese culture. We can be different but we can still co-exist harmoniously . . . .

When I first started research in this area [Christianity, religious studies], people couldn’t distinguish the differences between doing research on religion and being a follower of religion. They thought that researchers must be followers and had very negative attitudes as if you were an unreasonable person. From that perspective, it shows even more the problems of our society. It’s getting better now. Now when I tell people that I do research on religions, people think it’s interesting or it’s worth studying . . . .

There is a phrase called, “bringing order out of chaos.” To some extent, it is not mandatory [for

the government to support religions], but from the societal management point of view, also from an ethical point of view, it is mandatory, because China has its own historical conditions. Besides, because the government is in a relatively strong position and religions are in a relatively weak position, it's a good thing that the government helps religions to solve some problems. It's also necessary during the transition stage of China.<sup>21</sup>

Zhuo promotes what he calls “academic theology”—*Xueshu shenxue* 学术神学—a “theology of learning” rather than a “theology of confession.”<sup>22</sup> This, in his words, “open and comparative type of theology, which is free of any stipulations or restrictions imposed by the preconditions of religious or sectarian faith,”<sup>23</sup> is set in contrast to Sino-Christian theology as promoted since the mid-1990s, which Zhuo regards as a “new trend emerging between the church and academia, one which intends to shift theology from the ‘ecclesiastical’ to the ‘humanistic.’”<sup>24</sup> Zhuo offers a number of suggestions for its development, including a stronger

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<sup>21</sup> Siru Zhu, “Religion and the State in Conversation: Interview with Xiping Zhuo,” *China Focus*, published February 22, 2015 and accessed February 26, 2017, <http://chinafocus.us/2015/02/22/religion-and-the-chinese-state-in-conversation-interview-with-xiping-zhuo/>.

<sup>22</sup> Xiping Zhuo, “The Status of Christian Theology in China Today,” 28.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



focus on the “Chinese dimension,” integration of “Chinese” cultural resources, and a readiness to exploit cross-cultural theological dialogue for the mutual benefit of universal Christian theology and Chinese philosophical thinking.<sup>25</sup> Most scholars I interviewed who are engaged in Christianity research in fact attributed these particular points mentioned by Zhuo both to Sino-Christian studies in the broad sense, and Sino-Christian theology more specifically.

Zhuo likens this “academic theology” to the pursuit of ultimate truth, as in the Platonic tradition, according to which God is not the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” Zhuo writes that this academic theology “aims to inquire into knowledge about God, to be academically rigorous, and to take a keen interest in fundamental issues such as ultimacy, authenticity, eternity, supremacy, absoluteness, regularity, and truth. It is resolved to ponder these issues deeply . . . and trace them back to their roots.”<sup>26</sup>

Zhuo himself has broadened the field of religious studies and been among those who have helped to reinterpret the legacy of Christian tradition in China.

As Lessing’s advocacy for religious tolerance was rejected by religious orthodoxy at the time—the Church banned his play *Nathan the Wise* from the stage during Lessing’s lifetime—politically orthodox, Marxist scholars have

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 21-23.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 25.

forcefully criticized Christian studies in China, Sino-Christian theology in particular. One interviewee also elaborated on the problem that within religious and philosophical studies, scholars studying worldviews are sometimes themselves cast in the roles of ideological competitors. This may amount to little more than inter-departmental quibbling in some of the cases, but it also points to a trend toward diversification as well as the prominence religious studies has gained in interdisciplinary research. It is here, too, that explicitly theological approaches have in the last few years been employed in humanities scholars' articulations of meaning, or to address "the crisis of meaning,"<sup>27</sup> including theological hermeneutics, theological ethics, and comparative theological studies.

### **B. Yang Huilin: Theological Tolerance and Theology as Translation**

Yang Huilin has written about Western theology since the 1990s from the perspective of comparative studies with representative works such as *Theological Hermeneutics: Word of God and Words of Man* (2002), *Christianity in China* (2004), *At the Boundary of Literature and Theology* (2012), and *Religion and Interpretation* (2012). Yang is known in China both as a scholar of comparative literature and comparative religions.

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<sup>27</sup> Huilin Yang, *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture* (Waco: Baylor UP, 2014), 138.

His focus is on interdisciplinary approaches to research on religion. A willingness to consider and converse with the “theological dimension” in the Chinese humanities is reflected in a range of projects<sup>28</sup> and academic partnerships<sup>29</sup> with different institutions and initiatives that promote theological discourse. Beyond thus displaying the type of religious tolerance required in cross-cultural dialogue, Chinese scholars have shown an openness that might be termed “theological tolerance,” such as when Yang Huilin proposes an extension to the Chinese discourse on the Cultural Revolution and the problem of evil by considering “the perspective furnished by theological ethics.”<sup>30</sup>

Yang Huilin offers a positive evaluation regarding the potential contribution of a theological hermeneutics to discourses in the humanities: “The unique logic of theological hermeneutics is not meant to eliminate the heterogeneity between ‘divine Word’ and ‘human words’. . . .

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<sup>28</sup> One could mention here the longstanding collaboration on Hans Küng’s Global Ethic Project with Chinese intellectuals. In 2001, an “International Symposium on Traditional Ethics and Global Ethic” was jointly sponsored by the Foundation for a Global Ethic, Hong Kong’s Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, and Remin University’s Institute for the Study of Christian Culture, along with two other institutes at Renmin University. Cf. Hua Zhang, *Quanguo Lunli Duben (A Reader of Global Ethics)* (Jinan: Shandong Daxue Press, 2013), 224.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Chloë Starr, “Classroom Christianity: How Theology Is Flourishing in China,” *The Christian Century* 130. 3 (June 2013): 28-31, posted January 25, 2013, <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-01/classroom-christianity>.

<sup>30</sup> Huilin Yang, *China, Christianity, and the Question of Culture*, 74.

It is meant to establish a significant relationship between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ through the medium of such absolute heterogeneity and in the process of absolute difference, to use Derrida’s term.”<sup>31</sup>

Yang further highlights the value of the theological perspective for discourse in the humanities as one that helps facilitate dialogue whilst acknowledging inherent tensions:

In theology, the particular nature of hermeneutics and object of interpretation requires one to maintain the tension between “truth” and “method” and to work with the erosion of definite meaning that arises from a varying discourse context. One needs to find an anchorage so as not to escape into “blanks”: one necessarily affirms the realness of the “enigma,” while acknowledging the limitations of human beings, of language, and of interpretation itself. This ought to be the character of humanities.<sup>32</sup>

Yang makes a statement here that surpasses the polite obligatory inclusiveness of (religious) tolerance and effectively creates discursive space in the Chinese humanities that recognizes the distinct value of the (Christian) theological dimension.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 98.

### C. He Guanghu: “Opening and Reform in the Intellectual and Spiritual Realms”

He Guanghu has written a number of texts on the subject of Sino-Christian theology which put forward suggestions for possible directions of the discourse.<sup>33</sup> In his article “The Methodology and Approaches to Sino-Christian Theology,”<sup>34</sup> he groups these under the following headings: “From the Inside Out”; “From Plane to Point”; “From Bottom to Top.”

Under the first point, He Guanghu argues that the Chinese must stop viewing Christianity as foreign or as a tool of Western cultural imperialism. Sino-Christian theology in turn should move from an approach of receiving theology from the outside (as during the missionary era) and adopt an “inside out” mentality in its theological work, itself

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<sup>33</sup> One interviewee notes that debates around the question “What is *Sino-Christian theology*?” features prominently in the discourse. Further, according to this interviewee, the use of the term is in constant flux: “I believe that Sino-Christian theology may never attain a very static identity . . . we have to struggle with a basic . . . definition of Sino-Christian theology. [W]e always start from the basics: . . . we always have to ask ‘What is *Sino-Christian theology*?’ [W]e are always being asked ‘What is *Sino-Christian theology*?’ [I]t’s very liberating because we never have a clear definition or identity. We always have to struggle. We always have to think afresh, with freshness. And this provides the energy for this theological movement. [I]t is an ongoing theological experiment; it is an ongoing cultural interaction . . . like Augustine in *Confessions*: it is always an identity in flux—it is always a search of faith. It is never static. [. . .] If theology is always about life, then I believe *Sino-Christian theology* is one of the best cases to show the world how Chinese intellectuals are . . . struggling with their own identity while embracing another faith.”

<sup>34</sup> Guanghu He, “The Methodology of and Approaches to Sino-Christian Theology,” in *Sino-Christian Studies in China*, ed. Yang Huilin, and Daniel Yeung (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), 106-19.

becoming the originator and disseminator of theological discourse.<sup>35</sup> The second heading refers to the order in which Christian doctrine should be introduced in the Chinese context, specifically “Sino-Christian theology’s doctrine of God should come before its Christology” (“From Plane to Point”). This method, He puts forward, is more compatible with the Chinese psyche.<sup>36</sup> Finally, “From Bottom to Top” refers to He’s suggestion to consider Chinese speakers’ rich cultural heritage and their present-day life experiences in constructing a Sino-Christian theology suited first to serve its primary addressees (Chinese speakers) and secondly to make a contribution to universal theological discourse.

He Guanghu repeatedly emphasizes the resourcefulness and significance of the Han language.<sup>37</sup> Introducing the concept of “mother tongue theology”—母语神学 *Muyu shenxue*—or “theology of native language,” he argues that *Muyu shenxue* “has a much broader scope of relevance as compared with indigenous theology or contextualized theology”:<sup>38</sup> “The theology of native language refers to a theologian using his native language or mother tongue or major language as a medium and the life experiences and

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Guanghu He, “*Hanyu shenxue de genju yu yiyi* 汉语神学的根据与意义” (The Basis and Significance of Sino-Christian Theology), in *Sino-Christian Studies in China*, ed. Yang Huilin and Daniel Yeung (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), 129.

cultural heritage inherent in this language as his materials to serve this particular linguistic group.”<sup>39</sup>

Though He himself has eschewed the label, theologians in and outside of China have referred to He Guanghu as a theologian. He, who until 2016 was teaching for a department of philosophy and religion, does not refer to his academic colleagues as theologians either, and this despite the fact that he is generally considered one of the promoters of “Sino-Christian theology” by observers of the field. In 2015, he stated: “I have never abandoned the understanding of Sino-Christian theology in a broad sense, and have always clearly differentiated ‘Sino-Christian studies’ from ‘Sino-Christian theology.’ Thus, I wrote . . . that the writings of the three generations of scholars after the Cultural Revolution [three academic generations from the late 70s to the present] ‘are not strictly theological in themselves but about theology or Christian studies.’”<sup>40</sup>

However, He Guanghu himself, in addition to writing as a philosopher of religion, has written much that might be classed as theology. He is often invited to speak at international conferences as an authoritative voice on the state of academic theology in contemporary China. At Renmin University in Beijing he gave courses with a clear

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>40</sup> Guanghu He, “In Search of “Between Heaven and the Human: The Trend of the Sino-Christian Theology Movement,” *ISCS Newsletter 20th Anniversary Special Issue* (2015): 1-2.

focus on classic theological texts and streams of thought or seminars on individual theologians, such as the Christian existentialist thinker Paul Tillich (1886-1965), a popular theologian in Chinese academia. In addition to this, he is known in China as speaking out publicly on social issues and has been referred to as a public intellectual, speaking out against such outrages as the church and cross demolitions in Zhejiang province.

Writing in 2004, He related the meaning of a “Christian theology in Chinese”:<sup>41</sup>

‘Christian theology in Chinese’ is the theology communicated in the native language of [that] ethnic group that has the highest population in the world. It will direct Christian studies in China away from [the] two extremes [of focusing either too heavily on the universal aspect of Christianity or concentrating exclusively on a Chinese contextualization]. As I have pointed out in another essay, “The Basis and Meaning of ‘Christian Theology in Chinese,’ this particular form of theology employs “the life experience and cultural resources expressed in this language.” Thus we have to conduct

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<sup>41</sup> Guanghu He, “The Present and Prospect of ‘Christian Theology in Chinese’ in the Academic Community in Mainland China,” *ISCS Newsletter* no. 1 (2004), accessed September 26, 2016, [iscs.org.hk](http://iscs.org.hk).



original studies firmly grounded in the life experience and cultural resources of Chinese language users. Moreover, one must not forget that the situations of Chinese language users in the past are different from those in the present. There are also differences between Chinese language users in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other overseas Chinese communities. Christian theology in Chinese should not be confined to the translation of Western theology, nor can it afford to reject it altogether. After all, a certain amount of translation surely facilitates the introduction of original works.<sup>42</sup>

He goes on to list specific works written by Chinese scholars in this field, showing the breadth and variety of the discourse since the 1990s. For He Guanghu, the specific language-dependent theology he envisions is meant to serve a specific community, that is, a worldwide community of Chinese-language users.

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<sup>42</sup> Regularly updated information on the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong can be found on their website, [iscs.org.hk](http://iscs.org.hk), which serves as an important portal for documenting the publication work of the institute. Their projects include not only the classics translation series, “Chinese Academic Library of Christian Thought,” but also a research monographs series, as well as a bi-annual journal, *Logos and Penuma*, in which scholars from Hong Kong Taiwan, the Chinese diaspora, and Mainland China publish their research on Christianity and theological studies. The journal is in Chinese, but provides English abstracts of all its articles, which are now also available online.

## VI. Religious and Theological Tolerance

From my conversations with Chinese Christianity researchers it is clear that many of the traits characterizing this field can be summarized under the heading “openness.” Scholars are open to cross-cultural engagement, open to interdisciplinary collaboration, open to the perspectives of faith and atheism, open to engaging with ecclesial theology—and open to the theological dimension not only in theoretical experiment but in reformulating responses to contemporary ills and articulating a new problem consciousness. In reflecting upon the driving forces behind Chinese intellectuals’ interest in studying Christianity in the 1980s, one interviewee summarizes: “[T]he main reason for the passionate drive of the Chinese scholars to study Christianity was the condition of Chinese society at that time. They really wanted to find some inspiration and resources to deal with the deep-set problems within the Chinese life experience.”

This, according to the same and other interviewees, included an interrogation of the transcendental dimension. When touching upon the topic of “tolerance” a young professor from Shanghai noted that the engagement of Chinese scholars with Christianity—including the transcendent dimension—is more than tolerance: “It’s *openness* . . . it’s not that you are here and I tolerate you, no . . .

it's a kind of drive towards different resources – it's not just tolerance . . . it's a kind of positive openness.”<sup>43</sup>

In light of what may be called an open-minded approach toward employing the terminologies and perspectives of Christian theology to certain problems in the Chinese humanities, what should we make of the assertion by some of the scholars that a Sino-Christian theology has “yet to be launched”? Chin Ken-pa 曾庆豹, (Zeng Qingbao, 1966-), a Malaysian-Chinese professor of philosophy working in Taiwan, points to the loaded issue of Chinese nationalism. He means here a cultural nationalism, which considers the Christian cross savagery; Chin rewrites Paul's statement on the cross as a cultural “stumbling block” thus: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, and the Chinese honor morality, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, and savagery to the Chinese but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the strength of God is stronger than human strength, and the savagery of God is nobler than human civilization.”<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Personal interview with the author, Hong Kong, August 2011.

<sup>44</sup> See Ken Pa Chin, “From Chinese Theology to Sino-Theology: The Paradigm Shift,” *Sino-Christian Studies: An International Journal of Bible, Theology and Philosophy* no. 8 (December 2009): 81-108.

If Chin is referring here to a theology as that proposed by Liu Xiaofeng in the 1990s, one that encounters the Christ event directly, perhaps this is not a possibility, neither in the Chinese academy nor elsewhere, if theology is understood as content mediated through and conditioned by language to begin with.

If we return to Lessing's literary argument for tolerance, one can find more than a straightforward admonition to engage with and embrace those of neighboring faiths. Nathan experiences a deep existential crisis long before the first scene of the play sets in. The audience only becomes privy to this personal history as Nathan recounts it. He relates to a Christian monk the desperate prayer he prayed after mourning the murder of his wife and seven sons by the hands of "savage" Christians:

For three days and nights, I had lain before God in ashes and dust, and wept—wept? No, I also complained to and was angry with God. I raged against him and condemned the world. I swore irreconcilable hatred toward all of Christendom.

But then **reason** gradually returned. It spoke to me in a gentle whisper: "And yet, God is. Even in this was his counsel. To it! Come! Practice what you have long understood, what surely is no more difficult to practice than it is to understand if only you truly want to. Get up!"

I got up! and called to **God**: I want to!  
(Emphases mine)

What is striking here is Nathan's willingness to listen to "Reason," which whispers to him. First, the Old Testament introduces personified Wisdom speaking to those who are willing to listen,<sup>45</sup> while the New Testament equates Christ with the "wisdom of God."<sup>46</sup> Further, God is "in the whisper" when he speaks to one of his prophets.<sup>47</sup> Lessing uses these allusions to draw a link between humanism motivated by faith and humanism motivated by reason. He considers both of them to be meaningful, having his character answer "God" directly, rather than reason (even though elsewhere in the play Nathan's love of reason, rationality, his rejection of superstition and certain types of miracles is emphasized). He responds to a transcendent being who prompts him to love his enemies (this points to the love of the Christian God for his enemies to the moment of the Cross, the stumbling block to religion and culture that Chin stresses). Next, we are told, a Christian child left with nobody to care for her is brought to Nathan. His resolution to "practice what he has long understood" is unbroken and he adopts the child, raising her to be a free thinker and showering her with all his love.

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<sup>45</sup> Prov. 1.

<sup>46</sup> 1 Cor. 1.

<sup>47</sup> 1 Kings 19.

Unlike the German philosopher-theologian Nicholas of Cusa's<sup>48</sup> staged meeting of religions from a few centuries earlier, Lessing's plea for tolerance reflects a much more ethicized view of faith than the carefully orchestrated meeting of worldviews, but, in this play at least, it reflects the hope of divine intervention no less than the Word that speaks in Cusa's envisioned religious harmony. Nathan's Wisdom is shown to be both "reasonable" and "benevolent"; moreover, it is not produced from within through concentrated thought but "comes to" the petitioner from without. Nathan, the character whose wisdom the audience is presumably meant to emulate, does not abandon religion in the interest of religious tolerance. And yet, we learn from Lessing's *Education* that it is another force, the force of reason, an inner-worldly, or, if you will, secular faculty, rather than strength on loan to humanity from an outer or other-worldly power that will constitute the culmination of human development. This is all part of Lessing's progress thinking.

Lessing's model clearly does not explain the complexities of the development of human religion, nor was that probably his purpose. However, what Lessing called for, more than what he predicted or described, and that is

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<sup>48</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, or Nicholas of Kues (1401-1464), was a German philosopher, theologian, and natural scientist and an early proponent of Renaissance humanism.

respect—*Hochachtung*—for the reasonable views of others (where “reasonable” refers not necessarily to rational calculation, but also to beliefs that are expedient because they promote desirable behavior) has had a lasting impact on the protocol of modern academia, something now taken entirely for granted.

## VII. Conclusion

The establishment of modern-day Chinese learning is influenced by such divergent historical factors as to confound any scholar attempting to trace its development. China’s wisdom tradition is among the most ancient in the world that can boast a continuous tradition of sorts; Confucianism, if we call it a system of learning, self-cultivation, and governance, still demonstrably influences Chinese society in every sphere and sector, including Party politics. Add to this the import of foreign learning, Buddhism, Christianity, Western Enlightenment and secularization, Marxism, and liberalism to name just a few of the -isms that have been introduced into Chinese discourse over the last hundred years in particular, alongside the movements and streams of thought that advocate a “Chinese way” of realizing each of them, and it is not difficult to understand the appeal of someone like the 20th-century political philosopher and classicist Leo Strauss (1899-1973), who advocated a return to and modern-day application of Platonism. Why, one might ask, should

Chinese intellectuals not question the *Western* modernity project wholesale? Why not look for a Chinese alternative?

Some Sino-Christian scholars have made the turn from studying theology to promoting classics studies, the most prolific of whom is in fact Liu Xiaofeng, who has, as mentioned above, become an avid promoter of Leo Strauss in the present university setting in China. Others have kept their optimism regarding the potential of theology and Christian faith in Chinese discourse and society today. It is their openness for the theological dimension that has sparked the emergence of what has also been called by some a new academic discipline<sup>49</sup> and led veteran scholars of religion such as He Guanghu to speak in hopeful terms of the reemergence of public Christianity and theology in contemporary China. Quoting other scholars who speak of the dialogue potential of the Sino-Christian discourse to tackle a range of issues in conversation with their Buddhist, Confucian, Daoist, and Marxist counterparts (including “nationalism, capitalism, social ethics, women’s liberation, and the ecological crisis”), adding constructive voices to discussions in China’s growing public sphere, He predicts that “this academic approach will start from the outside to the inside, from ‘Christian cultural studies’ to ‘Christian studies’ and then to ‘Sino-Christian theology’; but the

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<sup>49</sup> See Daniel Yeung, “Message from the Director: Who Am I? Reflection after 20 Years,” *ISCS Newsletter 20th Anniversary Special Issue* (2015): 40.



influence is from inside to outside, from Sino-Christian theology to Chinese Christianity and then to Chinese culture. In other words, the developing trend of Sino-Christian theology will ultimately contribute to the regeneration of Chinese culture.”<sup>50</sup>

This paper has discussed different approaches to the study of religion and Christian theology in contemporary Chinese academic settings and intellectual discourse that emerge from looking at the views and approaches of some of the major players in the emerging field of Sino-Christian studies. As this interdisciplinary field is still young and seems to be developing in different directions, it remains to be seen what its impact on Chinese scholarship will be in the long run. The scholars presented in this brief introduction, as well as many other Chinese scholars with whom I spoke, however, share one trait, which, I think, is an approach to religion and theology also found in the writings of the eighteenth-century philosopher and playwright Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and that is a sort of optimism quite distinct from “tolerance” as understood in the sense of modern political correctness. Lessing engaged religious arguments on their own terms without compromising the rational approach he valued. Again, this is different I think

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<sup>50</sup> Guanghu He, “In Search of Between Heaven and the Human: The Trend of the Sino-Christian Theology Movement,” *ISCS Newsletter 20th Anniversary Special Issue* (2015): 1-2.

from modern anthropological approaches, which enter into the logic of another and then weave an outsider's narrative around a particular phenomenon observed. Lessing was much more confrontational when it came to his attacks on theists, atheists, or deists, not sparing any he disagreed with based on religious sympathies if he found their arguments lacking in logic—or humanity. He was, however, fundamentally optimistic about the development of the human race, thinking it not only capable of, but headed toward, a more reason-guided, ethical existence.

The stances of Chinese scholars in theology and religion presented here are varied. They include an engagement in research on religion from an official policy standpoint that treats Marxism as the established and necessary state religion while acknowledging the need for and efficacy of in-depth religious study that examines and respects the multiplicity of religious life in contemporary China and recognizes the value of peace-advocating religions contributing toward stability and social harmony within an ideologically socialist setting.<sup>51</sup> Further, there is the approach to religion and theology that looks at both as products of culture that can and ought to be studied much in the same way as a literary canon. This approach is less practice-oriented than the first,

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<sup>51</sup> See Lauren Pfister, "Post-Secularity and Its Manifestations in the Works of Zhuo Xinping" (conference paper, Christian Faith and Ideological Trends in Contemporary China, Oxford, August 20-23, 2013).

but it, too, displays a positive openness to understanding the other on the other's own terms, but without ignoring or circumventing issues of potential conflict or perplexity. Finally, we can see that theology is not only studied and examined from the outside in Chinese academia today: some are in fact deeply interested in and have worked towards formulating a "Chinese(-language) theology" (汉语神学 *Hanyu shenxue*), or Sino-Christian theology, that draws on the life experiences and rich cultural resources of the Chinese language itself. There are parallels to indigenous or contextualized theologies, and some might argue that this would necessarily be a kind of contextualization, but this particular movement has stressed that it views itself as originating not from within the Christian church, but as a philosophical movement among Chinese academics. The movement has been widely criticized, but all I want to point to here is the recognition of some of its leading advocates from the 1990s (when this movement was initially institutionally promoted<sup>52</sup>), who emphasize that both the universal and Chinese aspects of Sino-Christian theology would need to be sufficiently embraced to make it authentic and meaningful. A Chinese theology that is not Chinese is not a Chinese theology. On the other hand, if theology's universal claims are rejected—if it is not seen as inherently

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<sup>52</sup> See the website of the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong, <http://www.iscs.org.hk>.

meaningful for its own sake—there is also no Chinese theology, but only meaningless imitation or the attempt to place Christian theology in the service of other disciplines:

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 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 inquiry of "self." There is no point in forcing an alliance. But if the answer is yes, then we offer a legitimate reason for its place according to the parameters of humanities.<sup>53</sup>

Theology has been described as "intrinsically an international and ecumenical project of a community of

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<sup>53</sup> Yang Huilin, "Publics of Theology and the Humanist's Theological Concern," *Journal for the Study of Christian Culture* no.11 (Spring 2004): 6-7.

scholars,”<sup>54</sup> the imploring of wisdom, the Sultan talking to the Jew. Apart from all differences in approach, these are the qualities that, in my view, characterize the contemporary field of Sino-Christian studies.

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<sup>54</sup> Clifford Green, “Editor’s Foreword,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Sino-Theology*, eds. Clifford Green, and Thomas Tseng (Chung Li: Chung Yuan Christian University Press, 2008), 10-14.

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