

## **The Cross and the Confucian Imagination: T. C. Chao's Confucian Christian Theology of Salvation**

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*T.C. Chao (1888–1979) is considered one of the greatest Chinese Christian theologians of the twentieth century. He strove to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ in touch with Chinese culture, and bring Christianity in dialogue with Confucianism. This article explores the ways Chao furthered reflection on Christian salvation in his early career (c.1922–1937), especially as he attempted to align it with Confucianism's emphasis on cultivating virtue. It argues that Chao develops his own moral exemplar theology of the cross, depicting Jesus Christ as the virtuous sage of Confucianism whose personality was capable of engendering widespread moral reform in society. The article highlights how Chao furthers this thinking against the background of Confucianism and observes the ways he engaged in comparative theological reflection as a Chinese Christian. It sheds light on the ways such representative Christian theologians from the Majority World are deeply "intertexted" within multiple religious traditions and practice Christian theology from such a vantage point.*

*Keywords: T. C. Chao, Christianity, Confucianism, virtue, moral exemplar, multiple religious belonging*

T. C. Chao (1888–1979) was one of the foremost Chinese Protestant theologians of the twentieth century. Among scholars in the Western academy, however, much of his theology remains relatively unexplored.<sup>1</sup> Throughout his life Chao attempted to bring Christianity in correspondence with the Chinese mind, a mind that he believed was steeped in Confucianism. He did this in order to demonstrate Christianity's potential for China's social reconstruction in the early twentieth century, as well as to overcome what he felt were Western barriers to Chinese belief. A gifted intellectual and prolific writer, Chao taught at Suzhou University and later became the dean of the School of Religion at Yenjing (Beijing) University.<sup>2</sup> Actively involved in the International Missionary Council (IMC), he was elected in 1948 as one of the six presidents for the World Council of Churches (WCC), representing East Asian Christians. His career spanned one of the greatest periods of upheaval and transition in modern Chinese history. The Qing Dynasty (1640–1912) collapsed, the New Culture Movement (c.1919) confronted the inpouring of Western science and democracy, the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) devastated the Chinese population, and the founding of the People's Republic of China (c.1949) brought to an end the ongoing civil war between China's Nationalist and Communist parties.

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<sup>1</sup> The major monographs on Chao's theology in English and German include: Yongtao Chen, *The Chinese Christology of T. C. Chao* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2016); Daniel Hoi Ming Hui, *A Study of T. C. Chao's Christology in the Social Context of China* (New York: Peter Lang, 2017); Winfried Glier, *Christliche Theologie in China: T. C. Chao: 1918-1956* (Gütersloh, Germany: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Chao's collected works are assembled in a four-volume Chinese edition and another volume consists of his English writings. See T. C. Chao, *Collected Works of T. C. Chao*, ed. Yong Wen and Yan Jiu Yuan Yanjing, vols. 1–4 (Beijing: Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan, 2003); T. C. Chao, *Collected English Writings of T. C. Chao*, ed. Yong Wen and Yanjing Yan Jiu Yuan, vol. 5 (Beijing: Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan, 2003).

These were the circumstances under which Chao practiced Christian theology and sought to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ in touch with his Chinese context. His extensive theological and literary output covers various developments in his thought. Although several periods mark his development, it is his early theological career (c.1922–1937) that is of special interest to us here, particularly for its significance for comparative theology.<sup>3</sup> After all, it was specifically in this period when Chao crafted a theologically robust, contextually sensitive understanding of Christian salvation that incorporated the Confucian emphasis for transforming society by the cultivation of virtue. Chao was, by no means, the only Chinese theologian of the time who attempted to reconfigure Christian theology within a predominately Confucian worldview.<sup>4</sup> However, due to his voluminous scholarly output, his privileged position at Yenching University, and his ecumenical involvement with both IMC and WCC, he is arguably one of the most noteworthy. In this article, I argue that in his early career, seeking to bring Christianity in correspondence with the Chinese mind, Chao developed his own moral exemplar theology of the cross, depicting Jesus Christ as the virtuous sage of Confucianism whose personality was capable of engendering widespread moral reform in society. I believe that Chao was in this way deeply “intertexted” as a Chinese Christian committed to Confucianism on the one hand and Christianity on the other.<sup>5</sup> Fully aware of how the Chinese responded to “exemplary” moral action, he drew upon Christianity and Confucianism and advanced comparative theological reflection with the hopes that the Chinese people might see Christianity’s appeal, and find embodied in Jesus Christ the true sage who could save the Chinese people.

To demonstrate this, I will touch briefly on the moral exemplar theory of the cross as it was first put forward by Peter Abelard. I shall then examine Chao’s understanding of Jesus Christ’s death at the cross against the background of Confucius’s emphasis on the virtuous sage, or man of humanity (*ren*). Finally, in observation of the ways Chao integrates his understanding of Jesus Christ’s personality with this Confucian emphasis, the significance of Chao’s multiple religious belonging and comparative theological reflection may come to the fore.

### **The Moral Exemplar Theory of the Cross**

It is difficult to say when the moral exemplar theory of atonement was first developed, or under what circumstances it first became widely accepted. Peter Abelard (1079–1142), usually considered the first proponent of the theory, laid emphasis on the cross’s power to evoke inspiration and moral influence in light of Christ’s display of love at the cross in dying for sinners.<sup>6</sup> Abelard

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<sup>3</sup> This is the period Peter Ng considers as typifying Chao’s early theological reflection. Ng sets out the three periods that he considers capture the key developments in Chao’s thought, viz., 1922–1937, 1937–1949, and post-1949. See Peter Tze Ming Ng, *Chinese Christianity: An Interplay Between Global and Local Perspectives* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 169.

<sup>4</sup> Another figure would be L. C. Wu (Wu Leichuan, 1870–1944), also a professor at Yenching University, who believed the Confucian understanding of *ren* was amenable to the Christian gospel. See John C. England, Jose Kuttianimattathi, John Mansford Prior, Lily A. Quintos, David Suh Kwang-sun, and Janice Wickeri, eds., *Asian Christian Theologies: A Research Guide to Authors, Movements, Sources* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 3: 141–3.

<sup>5</sup> “Intertext” is a term that Francis Clooney uses to describe both the process of comparative theology and an important effect in the practice of such theology, to which I will return in due course. See Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 148; and Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993), 226–7 n17.

<sup>6</sup> Alister McGrath argues that historians of dogma mistakenly trace the origins of the moral exemplar theory of atonement back to Abelard, and that Abelard, instead of propounding such a theory, saw it contained within a theology

held that “redemption is that greatest love kindled in us by Christ’s passion, a love which not only delivers us from the bondage of sin, but also acquires for us the true freedom of children, where love instead of fear becomes the ruling affection.”<sup>7</sup> With this in mind, Abelard disagreed strongly with Anselm of Canterbury’s view that the atonement functioned as a “satisfaction” for sins, instead arguing:

How cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please [God] that an innocent person should be slain—still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world!<sup>8</sup>

While many variations on the moral exemplar theory abound, a consistent emphasis has been the cross’s power to evoke love and kindle affection. Rather than functioning as a mere act of the past, Jesus Christ’s voluntary act of self-sacrifice possessed the power to move human beings by the evocation of love. As Abelard believed, “Christ died for us in order to show us how great was his love for humanity and to prove that love is the essence of Christianity.”<sup>9</sup>

### **T. C. Chao, Confucius, and the Cross of Jesus Christ**

T. C. Chao, raised in a Buddhist family and educated at Suzhou University, was steeped in the Confucian classics.<sup>10</sup> Yet it was also at Suzhou where he became a Christian, prompting him to study theology at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee before returning to China in order to teach in the religious studies department at Suzhou University. It was this period of Chao’s life and academic context that establishes the basis for much of his early reflection on “indigenizing Christianity”—a preferred term of his that reflects his attempt to reconfigure the Christian gospel within a Chinese, Confucian mindset, and thus free it from what he believed were Western obstacles to Chinese belief. While Chao’s debts to Abelard are unclear, his understanding of the cross’s moral influence certainly brings him close to the medieval theologian, albeit with appropriate adjustment for his Chinese context. Chao’s central emphasis was the power of the cross of Jesus Christ, with Christ’s embodiment of self-sacrifice putting on display for the Chinese people a virtuous example to follow. This, Chao believed, came close to the very heart of the Chinese culture and religiosity, at the centre of which was Confucius and the entire school of thought that followed him.

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of redemption that was more thoroughly “objective” rather than merely “subjective.” Whether this is in fact the case, it seems that in this commentary Abelard is unmistakably putting forward a theory that would either later become, or in his mind already was, the moral exemplary. See Alister McGrath, “The Moral Theory of the Atonement: An Historical and Theological Critique,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38, no. 2 (May 1985): 205–20.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Abelard, “Commentary on the Book of Romans 3:19–26,” in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, ed. Eugene Rathbone Fairweather, Library of Christian Classics 10 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 284.

<sup>8</sup> Abelard, 283.

<sup>9</sup> Abelard, 283.

<sup>10</sup> The Four Books (四书) of the Confucian canon are *The Analects*, *The Book of Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, and *The Book of Mencius*. These four books came to complement the five Classics of Confucianism (五经) *The Book of Changes*, *Book of History*, *Book of Songs*, *Classic of Rites*, *Spring and Autumn Annals*. See Wing-Tsit Chan, ed., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).

Confucius himself laid emphasis on the ways in which leaders in society, by serving as a moral example, could garner a widespread following in the path of cultivating virtue. Confucius said, “A ruler who governs his state by virtue is like the north polar star, which remains in its place while all the other stars revolve around it.”<sup>11</sup> Julia Ching notes that one of Confucius’s great merits was his “discovery of the moral character of human relationships.”<sup>12</sup> In this tradition, the person who lived a righteous life evoked righteous living in the people around them, like an overflowing well they shifted the entire sociopolitical landscape. For instance, Confucius said, “A man of humanity [*ren*], wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, also helps others to be prominent.”<sup>13</sup> However, what was so striking about Confucius’s ancient message about the wisdom he retrieved from the sage kings of China’s most ancient dynasties was the attainability of moral virtue: any person could become a sage. Reflecting on his own journey Confucius said:

At fifteen my mind was set on learning. At thirty my character had been formed. At forty I had no more perplexities. At fifty I knew the Mandate of Heaven. At sixty I was at ease with whatever I heard. At seventy I could follow my heart’s desire without transgressing moral principles.<sup>14</sup>

Confucius believed it was incumbent upon rulers, however, those at the vanguard of society, to pave the way for moral living and give others a genuine example to imitate. This is certainly the way Confucius’s teaching is understood in the *Book of Great Learning*, one of the four books of Confucianism:

A ruler will first be watchful over his own virtue. If he has virtue, he will have the people with him. If he has the people with him, he will have the territory. If he has the territory, he will have wealth. And if he has wealth, he will have its use. Virtue is the root, while wealth is the branch.<sup>15</sup>

This affinity for moral virtue in leading a people would become a dominant theme in Confucianism throughout the ages, in contrast especially to Legalism, the school of thought that emphasized the efficacy of law, order, and punishment in governing a people and directing their course. It would leave an indelible mark on Chinese cultural and religious identity with the establishment of Confucianism as the official state ideology in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE).

Chao was deeply aware that Confucianism permeated Chinese cultural identity and characterized Chinese religiosity. “The Chinese people,” Chao said, “are a moral people.” Morality lies close to the heart of Chinese philosophical reflection and captures the ambitions of Chinese philosophers throughout the ages, from Confucius down to the present. According to Chao, despite the fact that China had fallen short of its ancient moral splendour, the Chinese mind still thinks in ethical terms; it responds “with gladness to moral heroism and [condemns] with wrath immoral things.” The Chinese people, Chao believed, saw morality as written into the fabric of the universe, with the result that a person began by bringing to light the manifest virtue inherent

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<sup>11</sup> Confucius, *Analects* 2:1, as quoted in Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 57.

<sup>13</sup> Confucius, *Analects* 6:28, as quoted in Chan, *Source Book*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Confucius, *Analects* 2:4, as quoted in Chan, *Source Book*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> *Book of Great Learning*, 10, as quoted in Chan, *Source Book*, 92.

in themselves, and ended “in assisting Nature to perform its work of nourishing and developing life.”<sup>16</sup> In keeping with the Confucian pursuit of virtue, which unfolds outwards from within oneself, to their familial relationships and society, Chao held that the virtuous person commences with a sincere heart and a rectified will, then “controls their family, manages [their] state, and extends [their] moral work and influence till they establish the universal moral empire among [humanity], through the realization of themselves, then of others, then of all things.”<sup>17</sup>

The work of morality in one’s own life had the potential to bring about large-scale moral reform among members of society. In thinking of such a moral figure, Chao drew upon Jesus Christ and looked especially to the cross as the means of supplying the kind of ethical vision conducive to changing the hearts of the Chinese people. For the cross contained a kind of power because of what Jesus Christ’s sacrifice could evoke in the hearts of human beings.

In a sermon delivered in January of 1936, Chao expounds on the relevance of the cross for China. “When Jesus died on that instrument of death . . . it did not have a halo around it, nor the glory that our wishful thinking or idealizations imparted to it.” It was the means of the most terrible and humiliating kind of execution, such that it was not surprising that Jesus’s friends and disciples believed the crucifixion had terminated the whole movement Jesus started. But the most ignoble death of Christ, Chao states, “only serves as the gate through which the life of indomitable righteousness takes on its glorious hues.”<sup>18</sup> What is more, the cross reveals the law of moral life, with the self-sacrifice of the righteous human, Jesus Christ, delivering humanity from sin and destruction. Any person with a spiritual vision could read from the cross the very meaning of life. For the cross stood for shame and death before Christ was nailed to it, the negation of all values and hopes, but after Christ’s crucifixion it “turned out to be the symbol of the highest moral glory, the very hope of [humanity] after [Christ] died on it.” The cross contained the means of putting love and righteousness on display, with the potential to save [humanity] from moral ruin and make “the world a place where the children of God may live in love, joy, and peace.”<sup>19</sup>

The message of the cross according to Chao was God’s response in Christ to moral evil, being as well a means of knowing how one ought to act rightly. It was a sign of “the adventurous and revolutionary spirit of righteousness.”<sup>20</sup> This, however, was a morally instructive righteousness: the cross *teaches* “not submission to unrightful authority or endurance of moral injuries, but insists on *doing right* under all circumstances.”<sup>21</sup> What we see in Jesus’s death at the cross, according to Chao, was not primarily his punishment in the place of sinners, but the revelation of God’s moral character in the face of darkness and evil. This is while “the cross has . . . no power in itself to do anything.” The power comes from God as he brings it in touch with one’s own existence, as Chao states:

The believing heart knows that the power of Christianity lies in the very powerlessness of believers themselves. It is this and this alone in the *religious experience*

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<sup>16</sup> T. C. Chao, “Appeal of Christianity to the Chinese Mind,” *Chinese Recorder*, no. 45 (May 1918): 292.

<sup>17</sup> Chao, 293.

<sup>18</sup> T. C. Chao, “Message of the Cross for China,” *Chinese Recorder*, no. 47 (March 1936): 135.

<sup>19</sup> Chao, 136.

<sup>20</sup> Chao, 138.

<sup>21</sup> Chao, 138. Emphasis added.

of [human beings] that drive them to the almighty God who can use the weakest thing to defy the greatest strength of the world.<sup>22</sup>

God displayed his love on the cross in Christ and as a result men and women in experiencing such love became empowered to live out God’s righteousness.

According to Chao, this powerful life conferred upon believers at the cross was not actualized in another world to come, but had profound present-day implications for members of Chinese society. “Words about another world beyond, to which the human soul may go,” Chao maintains, “may indeed be a part of the message, but these words are the opiate of the people if they are moved from its periphery to its core.”<sup>23</sup> Concerning the poorest in China, Chao argued that it is incumbent upon Christians to impart to them a “revolutionary spirit,” creating in their hearts and minds a love of the values that make the cross necessary in human life.<sup>24</sup> Concerning the intelligentsia and those of the educated class, what they needed was religious faith and power, which they would only accept upon a “clear demonstration of such realities in actual life.” While such an aim of preaching to the intelligentsia of China for Chao seemed an endeavour doomed to fail, the only possible means of approaching them was through a “*demonstration* of the power of the cross in our lives and in the services that Christian people can render to China in times of emergency.”<sup>25</sup>

Given the Chinese orientation towards social conduct and harmonious human relationships, Chao believed that it was Jesus Christ who embodied moral perfection in going to the cross and dying for humanity. What is more, he demonstrated filial piety by submitting to his Father in heaven. This filial piety, which has remained a defining feature of the Confucian tradition throughout the centuries, was—Yongtao Chen notes—the reason Jesus “thoroughly followed God’s will throughout his whole life.”<sup>26</sup> “Christianity,” Chao believed, “makes the ethical appeal and presents a moral system and life which will at once fulfill the requirements of Chinese ethics and provide a perfect ideal, a realized norm, and an adequate power for moral living.”<sup>27</sup> This was not an abstract ethical code, but concrete moral action. Chao believed that the appeal of Christianity to China must be the appeal of “real, visible moral power and spiritual *personality*.”<sup>28</sup> Jesus Christ was the moral exemplar, the Confucian sage who possessed the personality amenable to imitation by those who followed him, for the benefit and transformation of society at large. Chao held that “as Christ appeals through his loyal disciples to all [people], so he uses us in his appeal to the Chinese mind. Reveal to the Chinese mind the miracle of a holy *character* and the battle is won.”<sup>29</sup>

## **Christianity, Confucianism, and Comparative Theology**

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<sup>22</sup> Chao, 137.

<sup>23</sup> Chao, 138.

<sup>24</sup> Chao, 139.

<sup>25</sup> Chao, 140. Emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> Chen, *Chinese Christology of T. C. Chao*, 157.

<sup>27</sup> Chao, “Appeal of Christianity to the Chinese Mind,” 379–80.

<sup>28</sup> Chao, 380. Emphasis added.

<sup>29</sup> Chao, 380. Emphasis added.

Chao went to great lengths to give Jesus Christ a home in Chinese thinking, seeking to dialogue extensively with China's rich philosophical and religious heritage.<sup>30</sup> The sophistication of Chao's message of the cross for China, however, the cultural and religious literacy that enabled him seamlessly to bring Christianity and Confucianism across a single horizon, is likely due to the reality of his "multiple religious belonging." This, Peter Phan argues, refers to the fact that

some Christians believe that it is possible and even necessary not only to *accept in theory* certain doctrines or practices of other religions . . . but also to adopt and live in their personal lives the beliefs, moral rules, rituals and monastic practices of religious traditions other than Christianity.<sup>31</sup>

In considering himself "Chinese," Chao made evident the fact that his thinking "belonged" to Confucianism as much as it did to Christianity. For him, to think about Jesus Christ's death on the cross, and make a case for his exemplary moral action, necessarily entailed that he grapple with those religious and moral aspects of Confucianism. This was neither in paradoxical tension with Christianity nor a syncretic blending of the two traditions. As a Christian drawing upon Confucianism, he engaged many of its central beliefs, which is an important aspect in multiple religious belonging that Phan identifies as relating closely with the idea of inculturation and interreligious dialogue.<sup>32</sup> Chao's thinking, however, was attentive to Confucianism not merely as a cultural or historical movement, but to its religious character concerning the ethical ultimate and moral transformation.<sup>33</sup> A man steeped in a Chinese worldview, committed to engaging seriously

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<sup>30</sup> While Chao was in many ways charting new territory in his engagement with Chinese philosophy and religion, these efforts were not without some precedent among Western missionaries who strove to bring Christianity in touch with Chinese culture. The Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) became learned in Classical Chinese and retrieved the ancient Chinese notion of the Lord of Heaven (*tian zhu*) to describe the God of the Bible. Not unlike Ricci, Hudson Taylor also sought to align the Christian gospel with a Chinese perspective, taking up Chinese custom and dress to express his solidarity with the Chinese. See R. Po-chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci, 1552–1610* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); John W. O'Malley, Gauvin A. Bailey, Steven J. Harris, and T. Frank Kennedy, eds., *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540–1773* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 364–65; See also Dr & Mrs Howard Taylor, *Hudson Taylor: The Growth of a Soul & The Growth of a Work of God* (Littleton, CO: OMF International, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 61. Emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup> Phan, 61.

<sup>33</sup> The senses in which Confucianism is a religion or has religious elements is highly contested by scholars. However, Julia Ching believes that in Chinese traditions in general, one can find what is functionally equivalent to the religion or religions in the West, describing Confucianism in particular as a "humanism that is open to religious values." Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 2, 52. Those interpretations of Confucianism that have understood it as a humanism devoid of religious character, Rodney Taylor believes, are deeply mistaken. See Rodney L. Taylor, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 1. Many scholars seek to identify and make evident Confucianism's religious dimensions, with its doctrinal as well as ritual and ethical prescriptions for proper behaviour in family and society. Simon Chan notes in this sense how Confucianism's "religious character . . . is confirmed by its interface with the cult of ancestors going back to very ancient times." Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014). Ching observes this with Confucian teachings, in how they "helped to keep alive the older cult of veneration for ancestors and the worship of Heaven, a formal cult practised by China's imperial rulers who regarded themselves as the keepers of Heaven's Mandate of government." Ching, *Chinese Religions*, 60. For more on the religious character of Confucianism see also Tu Wei-ming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989). For an account of Confucian spirituality and multiple religious identity see Robert Cummings Neville, "Contemporary Confucian Spirituality and Multiple Religious Identity," in *Confucian Spirituality*, ed. Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker, vol. 2 (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004).

with his cultural and religious context, Chao remained firmly grounded in Confucianism—and yet as a convert to Christianity and a firm believer in Jesus Christ, he was committed to Christianity.

In light of Chao’s example of navigating these two traditions in an attempt to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ for the Chinese, I believe it would not be inaccurate to consider him a practitioner of comparative theology. Comparative theology, as Clooney remarks, is the “practice of rethinking aspects of one’s own faith tradition through the study of aspects of another faith tradition.”<sup>34</sup> The word “comparative” in comparative theology is theological and necessarily a spiritual practice according to Clooney, with the result that it is a “reflective and contemplative endeavour by which we see the *other* in light of our *own*, and our *own* in light of the *other*.”<sup>35</sup> This captures the ways in which Chao believed his becoming a Christian and engaging in the practice of Christian theology never severed his ties to or lessened his appreciation for Confucius. As Chao himself reflects:

While I am an aspiring follower of Jesus, I have not been able to see that this should hinder me at all as a faithful student of Confucius and other Chinese sages. In fact, I have growingly become attached to Confucius, seeing in him also a clear revelation of God, though only in certain particulars.<sup>36</sup>

For Chao, this operated not merely at the level of cultural admiration or religious affiliation, but entailed a crucial ingredient in the task of theological reflection itself. Exemplifying a definitive feature of comparative theology, he considered how he might make Jesus Christ a compelling figure in the Confucian imagination by engaging these two traditions in their particularity.<sup>37</sup>

As noted above, Confucius emphasized the efficacy of virtue in leading people on the way: “A ruler who governs his state by virtue is like the north polar star, which remains in its place while all the other stars revolve around it.”<sup>38</sup> In his essay “The Appeal of Christianity to the Chinese Mind,” Chao cites this saying of Confucius and then makes a clear connection with the incarnation, stating that it is the “Christian north star” around which other stars gather: “Christ represents not only the harmony between the human and divine, but also humanity’s reconciliation to fellow creatures and whole creation.”<sup>39</sup> Chao saw in Christianity the Confucian moral sage, and Jesus Christ in Confucianism. As Confucianism’s virtuous sage, Christ’s exemplary moral action, he believed, left human beings a personality to emulate.

In this way, it seems that Chao’s Christian identity was both complexified and deepened by his familiarity with and utilization of the Classics of Confucianism that served to resource his understanding of Jesus Christ. He was an attentive reader across the textual boundaries of Christianity and Confucianism, reflecting from his Confucian vantage point on God, Jesus Christ, and Christian salvation. In a sense, this may broaden what Francis Clooney means when he

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<sup>34</sup> Francis X. Clooney, S.J., “Comparative Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain R. Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 654.

<sup>35</sup> Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 11. Emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> T. C. Chao, “Jesus and the Reality of God,” in *Collected English Writings of T. C. Chao*, ed. Xiaochao Wang (Beijing: Zongjiao Wenhua Chubanshe, 2009), 5:343.

<sup>37</sup> Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 32.

<sup>38</sup> Confucius, Analects 2:1, in Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 22.

<sup>39</sup> Chao, “Appeal of Christianity,” 378–9.



suggests, “if . . . we bring to our spiritual understanding and practice images that belong to more than one tradition, we ourselves begin to belong to those multiple religious traditions in new and complex ways.”<sup>40</sup> Clooney believes we are in this way deeply “intertexted in our spiritual practice,” when we draw upon and inhabit another tradition and begin to imagine differently God’s presence and accommodation to us.<sup>41</sup> This seems to be the case for Chao. And yet he also provides a different way of understanding “intertexting” in his attempts to further reflection on the cross of Jesus Christ. Clooney observes how intertexting and religious belonging relate especially to one’s contemplation of God. He believes that in contemplation we construct a “path of religious belonging that suits our own spiritual imagining; we do this according to our traditions but also the possibilities available in our time and place.”<sup>42</sup> I believe that Chao furthers Clooney’s understanding by showing how religious belonging and intertexting relate not only to one’s contemplation of God, but factor into how one reflects on their faith and articulates the knowledge of God in their context. Comparative theology happens from no isolated standpoint nor in a vacuum. As surely as it is a contemplative endeavour, it is also a concrete undertaking.<sup>43</sup> It unfolds not only through the reading of texts, which Clooney considers as one of its “foremost prospects”;<sup>44</sup> it is a practical mode of negotiating how to communicate to others the knowledge of God. As a theological endeavour, it is also a contextual activity, such that the way one draws comparisons or identifies the continuities between two different traditions may vary depending on their circumstances, sociocultural location, and practical judgment. In this time of China’s cultural transition, Chao saw the cross of Jesus Christ as an effective means of drawing upon and making evident the intersection of Christianity with Confucianism.<sup>45</sup> For him, Christianity’s continuities with the Confucian tradition were apparent: Confucius was intent that any person could achieve the development of their moral nature,<sup>46</sup> and likewise Jesus Christ left human beings a model, or personality, which they themselves could attain.

It is here, however, where Chao, like many Chinese Christians who revered their cultural and religious heritage, had trouble holding together two of the traditions’ central and yet seemingly conflicting emphases: the status of human nature. Chao’s comparative theology was in this way no mere theoretical enterprise or neutral engagement with religion. It encompassed the lived reality of his decisions and practices as a theologian who cared deeply for the traditions to which he believed his thinking “belonged.” In Confucianism, the attainability of moral perfection in one’s life was predicated upon the reality of humanity’s natural goodness, a central feature of the tradition from as early as Mencius (372–289 BCE), who believed that humanity (*ren*), righteousness, propriety, and wisdom were not “drilled into us from the outside”; rather “we originally have them within us.”<sup>47</sup> Just as water naturally flows downward, Mencius believed that there was “no person

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<sup>40</sup> Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 148.

<sup>41</sup> Clooney, 148.

<sup>42</sup> Clooney, 130.

<sup>43</sup> This relates to what Phan believes is a productive way to discuss the dynamics of multiple religious belonging, not from abstract consideration but, drawing upon Jacques Dupuis’s understanding, on the “concrete experience” of those pioneers who have attempted to combine their own Christian commitment with that of another tradition. See Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*, 70.

<sup>44</sup> Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 58.

<sup>45</sup> For more on China’s cultural transition especially in the wake of the May Fourth Movement, see Chow Tse-tung, *The May 4th Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

<sup>46</sup> For more on this particular aspect of Confucianism, see Rodney L. Taylor, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 12.

<sup>47</sup> Book of Mencius, 6A:6, in Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 54.

without this good nature.”<sup>48</sup> This orthodox strand in Confucian thinking was in tension with Christianity’s position on sinful human nature.<sup>49</sup> In his early years, with debts to Protestant Liberalism, Chao was inclined towards emphasizing this natural goodness latent within the human soul, with it being actualized upon following Jesus Christ’s virtuous example shown at the cross.<sup>50</sup> In this way, however, it appeared as though the difference between Jesus Christ and the rest of humanity was a difference in degree, not in kind. Alexander Chow observes how for Chao, Jesus was “described as the ‘Son of God’ not because of any divine qualities or relationship with God. He gained this title because he lived a morally perfect life.”<sup>51</sup> It was only upon witnessing the violence of the Second Sino-Japanese War and finding compelling aspects in the theology of Karl Barth (1886–1968) that Chao came to see the theological significance of affirming Christianity’s traditional understanding of human sinfulness, Christ’s divinity, and salvation as a divine act of God who was capable of doing for men and women what they could not do for themselves. He would, however, continue to find ways of bringing Christianity in correspondence with his Chinese context, and make comparative connections with Confucianism along the way without denigrating its core elements.

## Conclusion

T. C. Chao is remembered by Chinese Christians as one of the pioneers of indigenous Chinese Christianity, striving his entire life to articulate Christian wisdom for his cultural and religious context. In his early career, that is the period between 1922 and 1937, Chao’s theological and literary output was immense. This period also marks one of his most robust and sophisticated attempts to reconfigure Christian theology within a Confucian worldview. Aware of the ways the Chinese people responded to exemplary moral action in society, and conscious of how unstable was China’s cultural and political environment in the wake of the New Culture Movement (c. 1919), Chao developed his own moral exemplary theology of the cross, believing that Jesus Christ possessed the personality capable of advancing China’s social reconstruction. As the Chinese sage, Jesus Christ could give men and women a model to imitate, such that by their own character and cultivation of virtue, all of society would be changed. Chao’s sustained engagement with Confucianism made apparent the reality of his multiple religious belonging, and shored up the varying aspects of his comparative theology as I have examined here. His legacy extends beyond China and serves as a good example of what it looks like in practice to bring the Christian gospel in touch with the religious and cultural sensibilities in the non-Western world.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Book of Mencius, 6A:2, in Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 52.

<sup>49</sup> For more on orthodox Confucian thinking in the wake of Mencius, see Chan, *Source Book*, 49.

<sup>50</sup> Protestant Liberalism is a movement, typically associated with Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and his successors, that attempted to respond to modern challenges posed to orthodox Christianity.

<sup>51</sup> Alexander Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment: Heaven and Humanity in Unity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 77.

<sup>52</sup> See Winfried Glüer, “The Legacy of T. C. Chao,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6, no. 4 (October 1982): 165–9.

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