Epilogue. Multiple Sinicizations of Multiple Christianities

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Any concrete study of religions will yield a picture of immense variety, of forms of life that, although they may have roots in common human experiences, have traveled different paths usually over long periods of time. If we take this perspective seriously, how would it affect our research on the sinicization of Christianity in China?

Christianities and Christianity

To start with, we would need to study Christianities rather than Christianity, not a common set of beliefs and practices, but many branching paths from the same beginning.

The basic Christian sacred story is that of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the basic ritual is the Lord's Supper, which re-enacts that sacred story and renders it present across the passage of time. The sacred story has been told in many forms and the ritual enacted in many different ways and there are a countless multitude of theologies explaining the cosmic significance of Jesus. There are of course, multitudinous forms of Christian religious orientation, such as in Troeltsch's formulation, churches, sects, and loose networks of mystics. From earliest days, Christianity has sometimes taken the form of an oppositional sect, but has also been fused with state power (as in Byzantium), closely collaborated with state power (as in medieval European Christendom), fused with national identities (as in post-Westphalian nation states), identified with different ethnic groups within a common empire (the Irish and the English, for example), rejected the world (as in monasticism), transformed the world (as through the Protestant ethic), adapted to the world (as in early-twentieth century, American mainline Protestantism). In Asia, it has served as an agent of imperialism, as well as (at times) a force of indigenous opposition to imperialism. It has become the basis for ethnic identities, as among some national minorities in China, an agent of national unity (as

the Three Self Protestant movement, with its “reconstructionist theology”), a source of support for the market economy (boss Christians in Wenzhou), and opposition to the market economy (the Little Flock). It has promoted modern science (Matteo Ricci and the seventeenth century Jesuits) and resisted natural science (various fundamentalist sects).

There are so many variations in meaning and social function that from a sociological point of view it is best to talk of Christianities. From a sociological point of view it is best to be neutral on contending claims about Christian authenticity. For research purposes, I would accept as Christian any community that bases its identity on the basic Christian sacred story of Jesus (however interpreted) and its basic rituals. But I would recognize that some of these communities are so dissimilar in way of life and worldview, organizational form and social function, that it is best to see them as a separate religion. We need to leave it to each community’s theologians to argue about what is or is not “true” Christianity.

There is something about the fundamental stories and rituals stemming from the life of Jesus, however, that gives certain common potentialities to each of the different Christianities. From its beginnings, Christianity carried the perspectives of the Hebrew prophets and classic Greek philosophers from the first millennium BC. These were products of what Karl Jaspers called the “axial age”, a time also represented by the Buddha and Confucius, when religious-cultural creators developed visions of universal ethics and introduced the idea of a fundamental tension between transcendent and mundane orders. Christianity continued and radicalized this way of thinking. It posited a model of reality different from the model dominated by earthly rulers. As Jesus said to Pilate, “My Kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36) As Saint Paul said, “We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a scandal and to the Greeks foolishness, but, to those who believe, the wisdom and power of God.” (1 Corinthians, 1: 23–4)

In setting up such a radical tension between an earthly and transcendent reality, Christianity from the beginning has been potentially threatening to earthly rulers. The Christian sacred story implies that the will of God supersedes that of any earthly ruler. It provides a potential justification for radical critique of any political order. Moreover, the Christian sacred story posits a transcendent logic of human fulfillment that contradicts the incentive structures available to earthly rulers. Jesus triumphed through dying on the cross. Generations of martyrs have followed his example, enduring torture and death in his name. The standard political carrots and sticks for social control do not work with such people. Insofar as the Christian sacred story is still alive, therefore, worldly powers cannot completely count on the loyalty of Christians. And

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