

# Theology in Crisis: Re-evaluating the Influence of Karl Barth on Chinese Theologian T. C. Chao

*Jin Li and Li Ma*

Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) was once an adherent of liberal theology, rejecting the more traditional views of Christian theology. But the crisis of his time in Europe soon triggered a transformation in Barth's theology, a position later known as neo-orthodoxy. In the 1930s, Barthian theology traveled far and influenced a prominent contemporary theologian in China, who lived in a completely different Asian context. T. C. Chao (1908–1979) also first embraced liberal Protestantism and rejected historical Christianity. But the same sense of crisis brought Chao closer to Barth's theology. As China's most prominent theologian in the twentieth century, T. C. Chao and his works have been examined by scholars interested in how Christianity can be relevant to Chinese culture. Scholars generally agree that Chao, though shaped by his own time, achieved a certain level of integration. When it comes to how Chao's theological change drew on the theology of Karl Barth, however, the few scholars who have addressed this question failed to account for the similar crisis experienced by Barth and Chao, despite their geographical and cultural differences. As the first Chinese who introduced Barthian theology to the Asian context, Chao was initially critical of Barth but later became aware of Barth's relevance even to China in a global crisis facing its churches.

## 1 Scholarship Tracing Barth's Influence on Chao: A Literature Review

German scholar Winfried Glüer, also the biographer of T. C. Chao, considers the early thought of Chao to be a result of borrowing western thought, sometimes even contradictory streams, into his own theology as a way to respond to contextual needs. For example, Chao once quotes Henry Bergson when rebuking materialism and empiricism. Chao also uses the social gospel to emphasize the importance of social ethics. Thus, Glüer concludes that Chao's theology cannot be attributed to the influence of any single school. Despite Chao's frequent synthetic approach, one can still grasp a main theme – Chao has been

searching for the potential contact points between China and Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Glüer marks the time between 1927 and 1941 as a shifting phase for Chao's thought, and German theologian Karl Barth's thoughts had a significant influence on Chao. Glüer proposes that Chao largely resorted to Barth's theology when trying to resist liberal theology. Although Chao does not embrace all of Barth's theology, his views of revelation and salvation were formed by Barth.<sup>2</sup> Glüer correctly points out that Chao's theological transformation was also shaped by Chinese politics, societal circumstances, and his own religious experiences. Nevertheless, Glüer points out that there was a chasm between Chao's earlier theology and his later Barth-formed tendencies.

In the study of another scholar Xiaofeng Tang, he places T. C. Chao's liberal theology and Barthian theology side by side when examining the sources of western influence on Chao. Such comparisons led Tang to conclude that Chao had always been neo-orthodox. Regrettably, Tang does not differentiate between Chao's reception or critique of these theological sources at different phases of his life. Thus, Tang's contribution is limited to only listing the intellectual sources that had some influence on Chao. Despite such a limitation, Tang elaborates on Chao's understanding of God's sovereign transcendence and revelation in Chao's introduction to Barthian theology. He points out that Chao later frequently uses Barth's concepts such as "morality under grace" and "dialectics." Despite the appropriate use of primary sources, Tang fails to go deeper into the relationship between Chao's liberal theology and these aspects of Barthian theology.<sup>3</sup>

Yongtao Chen, who studies Chao's Christology, puts forth the idea that Chao was not as neo-orthodox as others suppose, especially when it comes to equating the term with Barth's theological thought. Chen proposes that the early Chao emphasizes rationality and science in his Christology, which has a close affinity with Bultmann's demythologization. But Chen does not provide much evidence in support of Chao's understanding of Bultmann (or even whether Chao had ever read Bultmann's work). Chen writes that in Chao's introduction to Karl Barth's theology, Chao used the "Word" of God or special revelation as the criterion for Christian theology.<sup>4</sup> However, Chen's analysis remains descriptive. Another scholar Ronghong Lin disagrees with Chen on this point, because he notices that Chao's theological reflections were closely related to

---

1 Winfried Glüer, *T. C. Chao's Theological Thoughts*, translated by Zhaoming Deng (Shanghai: China Christian Council, 1999), 75–82.

2 *Ibid.*, 212–214.

3 Xiaofeng Tang, *A Study of T. C. Chao's Theological Thought* (Beijing: Religion and Culture Press, 2006), 260–271.

4 Yongtao Chen, *The Chinese Christology of T. C. Chao* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 66–68, 235–236.