Book Notes and Review - Chinese Christian Theology

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Alexander Chow’s pioneering book, Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment, provides a long-awaited scholarly discussion of theosis, or “divinization,” vis-à-vis the theological trends in the history Chinese Christianity. While not without some problematic assertions, Chow’s inaugural venture into this Eastern (Eastern Rite Catholic and Eastern Orthodox) theological understanding of sin and man’s significance in light of Christ’s Incarnation opens avenues of Christian understanding largely unknown or neglected among China’s theologians. This book follows the theological “typology” of the Cuban-American Methodist theologian, Justo L. Gonzáles, and two Catholic theologians, Fathers Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, who were influenced by Gonzáles’ ideas. Chow places his discussion of theosis in the Chinese context into the three categories formulated first by Gonzáles: Types A, B, and C.

Type A “is a law-oriented theology” that emphasizes the need for Christ’s redemptive act on the Cross as a “penal substitution for the world” (p. 9). Type B theology, based on the Platonic ideas of Origen, “believes that truth must be at the forefront of theology,” and while Type B centers on “saving souls,” It is more “synthetic,” and proposes a “mutual enrichment between culture and Christianity” (p. 10). Type C is more closely aligned with the theology of “Eastern Orthodoxy,” whereby the “goal of human life is the be adopted as God’s children and become more like the creator,” a process known as
“divinization” (p. 10). Alex Chow employs these three types to help sort through the question of Christianity’s adaptation to Chinese religious and philosophical traditions. Just as the early Church in Rome and the Middle East largely built upon the pre-Christian foundations of Plato (ca. 424-347 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC). Chow asks how China’s Christian history has responded to such Chinese thinkers as Confucius (551-479 BC), Mencius (372-289 BC), Xunzi (310-237 BC), and even Chinese Buddhists.

Chow’s central argument is that, “there is an incredible similarity between the Chinese theological concerns and the core concerns of the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of theosis or deification” (p. 154). His suggestion that Chinese theological sensibilities resonate with the Eastern Christian notion of theosis is placed within a chronology of two “Chinese Enlightenments,” one set in the context of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, when Chinese intellectuals mostly rejected their own cultural heritage and abandoned religion as “backward.” And the “Second Enlightenment,” according to Chow, emerged in the 1980s, when a renewed religious interest grew and a “Sino-Christian Theology” began to focus more “on sin’s role in highlighting the limitations of humanity” and a turn toward a more Eastern notion of “ancestral” rather than “original” sin (p. 147). Put another way, China’s Christian theologians during the “Second Enlightenment” have realized that Eastern theology (theosis) more organically fits with long-held Chinese traditions such as Confucianism and Daoism than with some Western theology (original sin/inherited guilt). My first concern is that Chow misrepresents or misunderstands Catholic ecclesiology and theology.

Two important points are absent in Chow’s book: First, one tenth of Catholic Christians are Eastern, and live theological and liturgical lives similar to Eastern Orthodox Christians; and second, even Western (Roman) Catholic Christians may be argued to have
always shared the Eastern idea of theosis, or deification, though perhaps in different terms. The forthcoming book, *Called to be Children of God: The Catholic Theology of Human Deification*, edited by Fr. David Meconi, SJ, and Carl Olson, discusses how theosis has always been present in Catholic tradition. Chow’s suggestion that Catholic theologians first experimented with theosis in the twentieth century under the influence of such thinkers as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ (1881-1955) misrepresents the reality of Catholic belief regarding theosis. Granted, in the turbulent post-Reformation era of disputes concerning justification and works, the Western Church’s idea of theosis became obscured, but it was not absent. Divinization was perhaps more absent from Protestant theology, which grew even more distanced from the teachings of the early Fathers on divinization, such as St. Basil the Great (330-379), St. John Chrysostom (349-407), and St. Athanasius (298-373). And let us not miss the words of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who is so often falsely accused of being apposed to the notion of divinization: “The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods” (*Opusculum*, §57.1–4). That said, Chow’s book does serve to expose important Chinese theologians to Western readers who have long neglected these voices.

To illustrate Chinese examples of Gonzáles’ three typologies, Chow devotes three chapters to the Protestant theologians, Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 1903-1972), T. C. Chow (Zhao Zichen, 1888-1979), and K. H. Ting (Ding Guangxun, 1915-2012). Placing Nee into the “Type A” theology, Chow illustrates how his writings were “law-oriented,” while also seeking encourage an independent Chinese Church, one that “attacked denominalationism” and “the work of foreign missions” (p. 62). Being a “Type B” theologian, T. C. Chow’s most important concern early in his thinking was “the question of contextual theology,” or fitting Christian ideas into the fabric of Chinese intellectual beliefs.
The result of T. C. Chow’s theological “indigenization” was, arguably, an erasure of some of orthodox Christianity’s central doctrines, rejecting, for example, the “teachings such as the virgin birth and the resurrection as incompatible with reason” (p. 72). Chow argues that K. H. Ting’s “Type C” theology most closely matches the Eastern idea of divinization. Following Chardin’s idea of an “Omega Point,” or “Cosmic Christ” as K. H. Ting preferred to call it, Ting’s “process theology” suggests that Christians can advance toward what in classical Chinese terms is called a “mystical union between Heaven and humanity” (p. 111). Essentially, Chow asserts that Ting’s theology best accommodates China’s traditional cosmology of Tian ren heyi (天人合一), or “the harmonious union of Heaven and Man,” to a similar theological idea expressed in Eastern Christian theology. While in several ways Chow’s argument is compelling, some of his assumptions about traditional Chinese thought are problematic.

One questionable area is Chow’s understanding of the Confucian notion of human nature, which is not nearly as monolithic as he suggests. He compares the “optimistic anthropology” of Confucianism to Eastern Christian theosis (p. 13). Confucianism is undecided as to whether humans are intrinsically good or intrinsically evil. Xunzi, who was much more popular than Mencius in the early history of Confucianism, argued that humans may never become essentially good; the best they can do is act at goodness under the forceful influence of a Confucian teacher. (人之性惡，其善者偽也。《荀子》性惡篇) Chow is incorrect when he argues that Xunzi “believes that humanity has a tendency toward chaos and destruction” that can be transformed “to become a good and morally beautiful person” (p. 136). According to this major Confucian thinker mankind is irrevocably “evil”; the best
he can do is benefit himself in society by acting well. This is far from the “positive anthropology” suggested by Chow.

Also it is a stretch to suggest, as Chow does, that the Confucian practice of “self-cultivation” (自修) mirrors the Eastern Christian process of self-divinization, since for most of the history of Confucianism it has been agnostic. When one disciple asked Confucius about the possible reality of ghosts and spirits (鬼神), he responded: “If life cannot be understood, how can one understand death?” (未知生，焉知死。《論語》先進篇). And in other instances, Confucius makes it clear that believing in spirits is not something that he can endorse; self-cultivation is intended to improve social harmony by improving one’s actions, not grow closer to some “unverifiable God.” And finally, Chow misrepresents Mencius’ belief regarding the corruptibility on human nature. Mencius, who holds human nature to be originally good, does not argue, as Chow insists, that while “environmental elements may affect one’s development, this [inborn] moral sense cannot be lost” (p. 136). In fact, in his famous “Ox Mountain” parable, Mencius compares inborn goodness to a tree-covered mountain. If it is deforested once the trees may grow back, but if woodcutters continually chop down the trees, and if cattle and sheep graze upon the new shoots, it’s original nature – that of having trees – will be lost forever. Quoting Confucius, Mencius ends this passage with, “Hold it and it will remain, but if you let it go it shall disappear” (操則存，捨則亡《孟子》告子章句上). Again, Chow’s comparative statements inaccurately represent the Chinese side of his analysis, which unfortunately distracts from his more
important description of the native Chinese progression toward a more indigenous expression of Christian belief.

Despite my quibbles with his sometimes-faulty understanding of ancient Chinese thought, I recommend Chow’s book as a praiseworthy introduction to the important theological voices of China’s three most famous Protestant thinkers in the last century. There is much to learn from in Alexander Chow’s contribution, and I hope that others follow in his footsteps to help us better understand how Chinese Christians today can continue to learn from the Eastern Church, which has given us such wonderful words as those by Maximus the Confessor (580-662), who once said, “Because God has become human, humans can become God. He rises by divine steps corresponding to those by which God humbled himself out of love for us” (Theological and Economic Chapters; Patrologia Graeca 90.1165).

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**Protestant Chinese theologians:**

- K. H. Ding
- T. C. Chow
- Watchman Nee