

WHAT CHRISTIANITY MIGHT HAVE LEARNED ABOUT “SALVATION” FROM THE DIALOGUE WITH CHINESE RELIGIONS



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Through (1) a reflection on the concept of “salvation” in the Western theological discourses concerning religious diversity, (2) an exploration of the comparable concept in Chinese religious context, and (3) an analysis of the prevalent Chinese Christian discourses on religious diversity, this study attempts to argue that contemporary Chinese Christian theology can and should articulate a multi-dimensional understanding of salvation(s). In comparison with a conventional monolithic concept of salvation, this multi-dimensional understanding matches better the richness of the Biblical understanding as well as the Christian experience of salvation and can facilitate better the Christian dialogue with other religions, especially the Chinese religions.

In contemporary Christian theology, especially the theology of religions, “salvation” is one of the key concepts in dealing with the problem of religious diversity. It is usually assumed that there is only one salvation, and the issue at stake is whether there is only one way or many ways to salvation.

It is well-known that John Hick (1922–2012) argues for a pluralist hypothesis that the world religions are responses to the same ultimate reality and equally valid ways to the same salvation, which is defined monolithically in terms of transformation from self-centered-ness to Reality-centered-ness.¹ Against Hick and some other pluralists, S. Mark Heim queries if the “pluralism” advanced by the representative pluralists is thoroughly pluralistic, and if we should better talk about “salvations” (plural) instead of “salvation” (singular), given the diversity of the world religions’ respective understandings of and approaches

1. See: John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

to salvation(s).² Heim is perceptive in highlighting the diversity of the world religions' understandings of salvation(s) and the inadequacy of a monolithic understanding of salvation. However, one may wonder if a more "pluralistic" understanding that the world religions are different ways to different ends (rather than the same end) is a tenable position. When all the world religions claim for the universality of their respective salvation, it is very difficult to imagine how all these claims can be true without contradiction and how all world religions can be equally valid and true ways to the radically divergent ends (salvations). In fact, even Heim himself identifies himself as a "convinced inclusivist" instead of a pluralist.³

This debate raises the most basic question: what is salvation? This study aims to revisit the concept of salvation from a Chinese Christian perspective. It will start with an analysis of the Western theological approaches to religious diversity, especially their conception of salvation. It will then outline the Chinese religious context and indicate how Chinese Christian discourses on religious diversity have been shaped by the other religions as well as the cultural, social and political contexts of China.⁴ With this understanding, it will review existing Chinese Christian discourses on salvation, especially how they respond to socio-political discourses on "salvation" in modern China and the concepts of "salvation" in Chinese religions. This study will conclude with a proposal concerning how Chinese Christian theology may articulate a multi-dimensional understanding of salvation(s) through dialogue with the Chinese religions.⁵

Western Theological Approaches to Religious Diversity

It is obvious that the Christian doctrine of salvation plays a pivotal role in the Western Christian theological approach to religious diversity. In the contemporary discussion of the theology of religions, especially the widely used tripolar typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, the dividing lines among the major positions or paradigms are based primarily on their respective positions on salvation, especially whether and in what sense other religions are valid

2. See: S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995).

3. S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 8.

4. See further: Pan-chiu Lai, "Christian Discourses on Religious Diversity in Contemporary China," *Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, edited by Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Joachim Gentz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 215–230.

5. See further: Pan-chiu Lai, "Religious Diversity and Public Space in China: A Reconsideration of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation," *Interactive Pluralism in Asia: Religious Life and Public Space*, edited by Simone Sinn and Tong Wing Sze (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 2016), 43–58. Some parts of this paper are derived from this book chapter.

ways to salvation. In other words, these Western theological discourses on other religions are dominated by the theological judgments on the salvific status of “non-Christian” religions. In this kind of discourse, Christian theology seems to play the role of a judge, passing on a theological verdict on the salvific validity of other religions. When doing this, Christian theologians usually adopt a particular and monolithic understanding of salvation derived from the Christian tradition. In addition, they tend to disregard the divergent understandings of salvation advocated by other religions. This assumption concerning monolithic salvation seems to be shared by the divergent positions on religious diversity.

- For pluralism, taking Hick’s position as an example, all the great religions share the same salvation, which can be defined monolithically in terms of transforming people’s lives from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.
- For exclusivism, there is only one salvation, which is accomplished by Jesus Christ and can be accessed through Christianity alone.
- For inclusivism, there is only one perfect salvation, which is entirely accomplished by God and completely embodied in Christianity, while other religions may partially share this perfect or complete salvation.

In recent years, this tripolar typology, together with the assumed normative monolithic understanding of salvation, is challenged directly by particularism and indirectly by comparative theology.

In addition to exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, some contemporary theologians of religions argue for a fourth position called “particularism.”⁶ For the advocates of particularism, Christianity is a particular way to salvation and has its own peculiar understanding of salvation. Different from the position of exclusivism, the particularist affirmation of the particularity of the Christian salvation does not explicitly exclude the salvific validity of other religions. Particularism tends to assume that the world religions have radically different understandings of salvation, and it is illegitimate to assume that they share the same understanding of salvation. This assumption might echo the view that even the concept of “religion,” though pretended to be “objective” and/or “universal,” is merely a western modern academic construction. For particularism, a common mistake shared by exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism is that they all assume a monolithic understanding of salvation, and thus fail to respect the particularity of the Christian salvation as well as the divergent understandings of salvation promulgated by different religions.⁷

6. For a contrast among these four positions, see: Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Philips, eds., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996).

7. For a summary and criticism of particularism, see: Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 146–196.

In my opinion, many of the criticisms made by particularism against the other positions are largely valid. However, this particularist position itself is by no means better. It is reminiscent of the cultural-linguistic paradigm proposed by George Lindbeck, which argues that different religions are comparable to different languages with incommensurable grammars or rules of game, borrowing the famous ideas from Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951).⁸ When highlighting the radical divergence among the religions, particularism may be able to respect the diversity among religions and their respective integrity, but it may also overlook that there may be significant similarity or commonality among the religions' understandings of salvation. Whereas the other three positions naively assume a monolithic understanding of salvation, particularism may risk the danger of swinging to the other extreme that different religions have radically divergent and even incommensurable understandings of salvation(s). Its emphasis on the incommensurability among the religions may prevent Christian theology from imposing theological judgement on the other religions, but it may also undermine the necessity, desirability and workability of inter-religious comparison or dialogue.

From an epistemological point of view, one may query whether it is possible to be certain whether and how far the religions' understandings of salvation(s) are radically different from each other without a proper empirical study of other religions. For example, some decades ago, it was quite common among Protestants to assume that Christianity is unique because Christianity is a religion of grace, promulgating salvation of *sola gratia*, whereas other religions are religions of work attempting to attain salvation through human efforts. However, this understanding of the uniqueness or particularity of Christian salvation might be challenged by the case of Shin Buddhism, which also emphasizes the inability of human beings to save themselves and that the only possible way of salvation is to rely solely on the saving grace of Amida Buddha. As Karl Barth (1886–1968) acknowledges, the doctrine of “Salvation by Grace through Faith” might not be unique to Christianity; given their apparent structural similarities, both Protestant Christianity and Shin Buddhism can be recognized as religions of grace, and the only decisive difference is constituted by the name of Jesus Christ.⁹ For Barth, the affirmation of Christianity as the “True Religion” should be understood in terms of the doctrine of justification by grace. But this does not mean that Christianity has a unique doctrine of justification by grace and is thus superior to other religions. Instead, as a human religion, Christianity is not

8. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK, 1984).

9. See: Timothy C. Tennett, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 135–164.

better than other religions. Its status as "True Religion" is based entirely on the divine election and comparable to a justified sinner. Obviously, this "*a priori*" affirmation of Christianity as "True Religion" is based on the "divine revelation" or the relevant Christian doctrinal tradition, rather than any "*a posteriori*" academic comparative studies of Christianity and other religions.¹⁰ Considering Barth's discussion about Shin Buddhism, one may wonder whether the particularist affirmation of the particularity of Christian salvation should be based entirely on the *a priori* affirmation of the distinctive name of Jesus Christ or a *a posteriori* observation of the similarities between the Christianity and, say, Buddhism. However, it is important to note that as a theology of religions, particularism remains a theological discourse based on the doctrinal tradition of Christianity, and it may tend to adopt an *a priori* or "tradition-specific" approach to Christian theology. Its advocacy for particularism is not based on comparative studies of religions, and it may not require or favor empirical comparative studies of religions.

The particularist *a priori* approach to the affirmation of the particularity of the Christian way of salvation may lead to an "agnostic" attitude towards salvations of other religions and leave open the possibility of salvation of other religions. However, it also allows or even invites other religions to make comparable counterclaims for particularity, superiority, uniqueness, or being the "True Religion." In addition to the problem of comparability or incommensurability among these claims, one may also wonder whether there is any room for genuine dialogue among religions with all these *a priori* claims and counterclaims.

The particularist position may imply that there may be no such thing called "salvation" (singular) but only different (understandings of) "salvations" (plural). Furthermore, the concept of "salvation" is merely an intellectual construction of western academia, and there is no "essence" of salvation shared by the salvations advocated by different religions. If this is the case, a possible consequence of particularism is that the Christian salvation is so particular that it is incommensurable with the "salvations" of other "religions." One may further query if this implies that a comparative study of "religions" is impossible and undesirable. However, against these possible queries concerning the possibility and desirability of a comparative study of religions, "salvation" remains one of the key terms used in religious studies, especially when scholars attempt to define "religion." In a sense, Frederick J. Streng's famous definition of religion in terms of "means to ultimate transformation" already implies a

10. Pan-chiu Lai, "Barth's Theology of Religion and the Asian Context of Religious Pluralism," *Asia Journal of Theology* 15.2 (2001): 247-267.

concept of “salvation.”¹¹ Martin Riesebrodt’s *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion* even explicitly makes use of the concept of “salvation” to define “religion.”¹² These seem to indicate that for some scholars of religious studies, at least, the understandings of salvation(s) championed by different religions may have a certain family resemblance, even though there may be no commonly shared “essence.” For example, the multi-dimensional understanding of salvation advocated in this study may echo the broader theological understanding of salvation in terms of “*yshuwah*” in Hebrew (meaning liberation, protection, safety, success, restoration, etc.) as well as the Latin concepts of “*salvus*” and “*salus*” (meaning health, well-being, safety, etc.). It may differ significantly from the more restricted concept of “*go’el*” (in Hebrew) or “redemption,” which tends to assume a sort of passive reception of the redeeming act performed by a redeemer. For the traditional Chinese religious concept of “*jiu du*,” which combines the meaning of “save” (救 *jiu*) and “passing through” (度 or 渡 *du*), may come closer to the broader theological concept of “salvation” than to the more restricted concept of “redemption.” Though these terms or concepts may have different meanings and are subject to various interpretations, they remain comparable to a certain extent rather than absolutely incommensurable. Furthermore, the assumption concerning the incomparability or incommensurability among the religions’ understandings of salvation(s) seems to be implicitly challenged by the approach of comparative theology.

Unlike the “*a priori*” or “dogmatic” approach adopted by the theology of religions which is based on the doctrinal tradition of Christianity rather than empirical studies of other religions, comparative theology prefers a more “experimental” method to theology together with a more “empirical” approach to other religions. Instead of making judgements on the salvific status of other religions, comparative theology attempts to study the texts of other religions in order to reflect critically on relevant issues in Christian theology.¹³ According to this approach, the questions concerning whether and in what sense other religions have salvation(s) should be *a posteriori* rather than *a priori*, and can be answered only after certain empirical studies of particular religions and “experimental” reflection on the Christian tradition. Any simplified “yes or no”

11. Frederick J. Streng, *Understanding of Religious Life*, Third Edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Inc., 1985).

12. Martin Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*, translated by Steven Rendall (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago, 2010).

13. Francis X. Clooney, *Theology After Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany: SUNY, 1993), 1–10; John Renard, “Comparative Theology: Definition and Method,” *Religious Studies and Theology* 17 (1998): 3–18; Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

answer or indiscriminating judgment on “other religions” in general should be avoided. Theoretically speaking, this kind of comparative study should be more “open minded” to the salvation(s) of other religions or their understandings of salvation(s).

To a certain extent, I share this approach of comparative theology. I have edited a special issue of a journal to introduce comparative theology to the Chinese speaking world,¹⁴ and adopted the experimental method of comparative theology in articulating a Sino-Christian theology through comparison with Mahayana Buddhism.¹⁵ However, based on my reflection of my experiments as well as the others’ theories and experiments, I would like to point out two possible limitations of prevailing practices of comparative theology. First, the prevailing practices of comparative theology tend to focus on how Christian theology may reflect critically on itself through learning from other religions. This humble attitude to other religions is admirable. However, this unilateral way of learning from non-Christian religions may overlook the reverse possibility of letting people of non-Christian religions learn from Christianity through comparative study or bilateral dialogue. This mutual or reciprocal sharing approach may be as humble as the unilateral approach, and even more in line with the Christian spirit of *agape* (love) and *koinonia* (fellowship, participation, or sharing) as well as, say, the Bodhisattva attitude of compassion and the practice of reciprocal altruism (non-duality of helping oneself and the others) advocated by Mahayana Buddhism. This is precisely one of the lessons to be learnt from the dialogue between Christianity and Chinese Buddhism.¹⁶ The other limitation is that since comparative theology tends to focus on conducting theological reflection through reading the texts of other religions, its theological reflection may not cover non-religious texts properly. However, Christian theological reflections on salvation may be done through dialogue with other religions as well as voices beyond the religious sphere. For example, the political liberation movement in Latin American may have provoked Christian theology, especially liberation theology, to rethink the Christian concept of salvation. Besides, the contemporary environmental movement has also made Christian theology reconsider the concept of salvation in the ecological context.

14. See: 賴品超 Lai Pinchao (also known as Pan-chiu Lai), ed., 《比較神學》(Comparative Theology), special issue of 《道風》 Logos & Pneuma 25 (2006): 17–164. The citation of Chinese document below will follow the same style: starting with the Chinese name of the author, followed by the transliteration, Chinese title of the publication, and then the title in English translation.

15. See: 賴品超 Lai Pinchao, 《大乘基督教神學:漢語神學的思想實驗》Mahayana Christian Theology: Thought-Experiments of Sino-Christian Theology (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma Press, 2011).

16. Pan-chiu Lai, “Buddhist-Christian Relations in China: A Christian Perspective,” Buddhist-Christian Relations in Asia, edited by Perry Schmidt-Leukel (St. Ottilien, Germany: eos Verlag, 2017), 375–398, especially 391.

As we are going to see, Chinese Christian discourses of salvation have been shaped by both the religious and socio-political contexts of the Chinese-speaking world. Furthermore, in order to explore the salvation(s) of religions, one may have to take into account the relevant disciplines, including neuroscience, which traditionally do not belong to theology, religious studies or even philosophy. I would thus prefer to take “reciprocal illumination” as a more appropriate method and replace “comparative theology” with “comparative philosophy of religion” for my own endeavor.¹⁷

Religious Diversity in Contemporary China

In contemporary China, there are five religions legally recognized by the Chinese Communist government. They are Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. Of course, the legalization of the five religions does not mean that there is no adherent of other religions in contemporary China. In fact, other than the institutional religions, “diffused religion” also plays a prominent role in Chinese society.¹⁸ Apart from Chinese popular religions, Confucianism was traditionally regarded as one of the three teachings or religions, alongside Buddhism and Daoism. In contemporary China, some people propose to make Confucianism the state religion, while some others prefer to recognize it as the civil religion of China.¹⁹

The recognition of five legal religions betrays the political reality that religions in China are largely controlled or regulated by the government.²⁰ In other words, although the Chinese government allows a certain degree of religious diversity, it also tends to pro-actively control and regulate the religions, including their expressions in the public sphere. Legally speaking, religious meetings are restricted to registered religious places. Religious education is forbidden in state schools, and there is no private school or university run by religious organizations. This contemporary situation reflects the influence or continuation of the historical tradition of “subordination of religion to the state” (政主教從 *zheng zhu jiao cong*) in imperial China, where the state, instead of being

17. See: 賴品超 Lai Pinchao, 《宗教都是殊途同歸? 宗教研究與漢語神學的視角》 Divergent Religious Paths to Convergent End? Perspectives of Religious Studies and Sino-Christian Theology (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma Press, 2020), especially chapters 3 and 4 on “comparative theology” (73–100) and “comparative philosophy of religion” (101–121).

18. See: C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* [1961] (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1991).

19. See: Philip J. Ivanhoe and Sungmoon Kim, eds., *Confucianism, A Habit of the Heart: Bellah, Civil religion, and East Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

20. See: Pitman B. Potter, “Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China,” *Religion in China Today*, edited by Daniel L. Overmyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11–31.

entirely secular, had its own cult and bore certain religious characteristics.²¹ In a similar vein, Communism and nationalism, which perform certain “religious” and “ideological” functions in contemporary China, can be recognized as “quasi-religions” according to Paul Tillich (1886–1965).²²

It is important to note that the Chinese government’s control extends to religious or theological discourse. When the government attempts to launch the political propaganda associated with the slogan “building a harmonious society,” the religions will be “encouraged” to emphasize their messages of harmony, the harmonious relationship among religions, and how the religions may contribute to the building of a harmonious society. Any discourse which may provoke or intensify hostility among religions will be suppressed. Instead, inter-religious dialogue on “harmonious society” will be strongly encouraged.²³

Given these characteristics of the contemporary Chinese context, it is quite understandable that contemporary Chinese Christian discourses on religious diversity as well as salvation might have been shaped not only by its religious context but also the social and political factors in China.²⁴

Christian Salvation and Public Issues in China

It is interesting to note that the terminology of “salvation” was rather popular in the public discourse in modern China, especially during the Republican period (1911–1949). At that time, many Chinese intellectuals felt the national crisis and endeavored to explore various ways of “saving the nation” (救國 *jiu guo*). Some modern Chinese intellectuals criticized religions, especially their longings for other-worldly salvation at the expense of concerns for the present life, as irrelevant or even detrimental to the salvation of the nation. In response, some Chinese Christians attempted to interpret how the Christian gospel might be relevant and could contribute to the salvation of the nation.²⁵ This kind of socio-political discourse on the salvation of the nation remains quite popular among the intellectuals in contemporary China. Many of them are interested in

21. See: Pan-chiu Lai, “Subordination, Separation, and Autonomy: Chinese Protestant Approaches to Religion-State Relation,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 35.1 (2020): 149–164.

22. Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

23. For a Christian contribution to this kind of dialogue, see: Pan-chiu Lai, “Interreligious Dialogue, Harmonious Society, and the Kingdom of God,” *Asian Christian Review* 5.2 (2011): 69–84.

24. Pan-chiu Lai, “Christian Discourses on Religious Diversity in Contemporary China,” *Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, edited by Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Joachim Gentz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 215–230.

25. See: Fredrik Fällman, *Salvation and Modernity: Intellectuals and Faith in Contemporary China* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, revised edition 2008).

examining or exploring the relevance of Christianity to modernization, and a few of them, especially the “Cultural Christians,” might also look for individual and spiritual salvation or liberation from the Christian faith.²⁶ In recent years, Sino-Christian theology, a cultural qua theological movement associated with this small group of Chinese intellectuals, became interested in public theology and launched various inter-religious and cross-disciplinary research projects on public issues.²⁷ Some of these research projects might have involved the Christian doctrine of salvation, but not in a very prominent way.²⁸

The influences of the socio-political context on Chinese Christian discourses on salvation are particularly explicit in the institutional churches. Bishop 丁光訓 Ding Guangxun (also known as K. H. Ting, 1915–2012), the then leader of the official Three-Self Protestant Church in China, adopted a largely accommodating attitude to the socio-political context of contemporary China and advocated a more inclusive understanding of salvation. With the concept of “cosmic Christ,” Ding affirmed that the grace and salvation of God could be found beyond the church boundary and even outside the religious realm. For Ding, this affirmation of the universality of salvation might help the Chinese churches to recognize the values of the works done by non-Christians, including people of other religions and members of the Communist Party. Of course, this might also imply that political liberation could be considered a form of salvation. However, Ding was well aware that the liberation theology of Latin America might not be so appropriate to Communist China, which had been politically liberated. According to Ding, considering the severe socio-political conflict during the Great Cultural Revolution, the most appropriate interpretation of the Christian doctrine of salvation should be articulated in terms of reconciliation theology, instead of liberation theology.²⁹ In line with the policy of “establishing a harmonious society,” Ding further proposed to “dilute” the doctrine of justification by faith in order to overcome the apartheid between

26. For a brief survey of the Chinese Christian theological responses during the Republic period, see: Wing-hung Lam, *Chinese Theology in Construction* (Pasadena, CA: W. Carey Library, 1983).

27. Pan-chiu Lai & Jason Lam eds., *Sino-Christian Theology: A Theological Qua Cultural Movement in Contemporary China* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 2010); Alexander Chow, *Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

28. For example, Zhibin Xie, Pauline Kollontai and Sebastian Kim eds., *Human Dignity, Human Rights, and Social Justice: A Chinese Interdisciplinary Dialogue with Global Perspective* (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore PTE, 2020).

29. For an analysis and response to the proposal, see: Pan-chiu Lai, “Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Peace-Building: A Sino-Christian Perspective,” *The Role of Religion in Peacebuilding: Crossing the Boundaries of Prejudice and Distrust*, edited by Pauline Kollontai, Sue Yore, and Sebastian Kim (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishing, 2018), 35–51.

believers and non-believers and avoid the impression that Christianity “abolishes” morality by despising the good works done by and for the neighbors.³⁰

Apart from the socio-political issues, the Christian doctrine of salvation is also involved in the discussion related to ecological concerns. It is noticeable that there are many Chinese Christian theological attempts to address the ecological issues.³¹ One of the theological issues raised is that the theological mainstream of Chinese Christian churches seems to emphasize salvation more than creation. Other than its anthropocentric interpretation of creation, its doctrine of salvation is not only anthropocentric, but also rather individualistic and other-worldly. To be more precise, the doctrine of justification by faith seems to assume that only human beings can be saved because only human beings can have faith. All non-human creatures are thus excluded from the scope of salvation. In response to this individualistic and anthropocentric understanding of salvation, some Chinese Christian ecological discourses propose to emphasize the unity between creation and salvation,³² to rethink the ecological relevance of the doctrine of justification by faith, and to reconsider whether and how the scope of salvation may be extended to cover non-human beings.³³

The above survey of the Chinese Christian discourses on salvation indicates that there are various actual and potential criticisms on the Christian doctrine of salvation in the public sphere. These criticisms may remind Christian theology to explore the meaning of “salvation” in social, political and even ecological contexts, instead of restricting the meaning of “salvation” to the spiritual or religious realm, where Chinese Christian theology meets different challenges.

Salvations in Chinese Religions and the Chinese Christian Responses

As Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism are considered integral parts of Chinese culture, though some Chinese Christians vehemently reject them as false religions or idolatries, some other Christians affirm the cultural and/or religious values of Chinese religions as preparation for the gospel.³⁴ Based on

30. For an analysis and response to the proposal, see: Pan-chiu Lai, “Justification by Faith and Protestant Christianity in China: With Special Reference to the Finnish Interpretation of Luther,” *International Journal of Sino-Western Studies* 16 (2019): 21–33.

31. For a review and analysis of these discourses, see: Pan-chiu Lai, “Ecological theology as Public Theology: A Chinese Perspective,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 11.4 (2017): 477–500.

32. See: Pan-chiu Lai, “Creation and Salvation in Chinese Perspective,” *Creation & Salvation*, Vol. 2: A Companion on Recent Theological Movements, edited by Ernst Conradie (Berlin: lit Verlag, 2012), 344–349.

33. Pan-chiu Lai, “The Ecological Heritage of Protestantism from a Chinese Christian Perspective,” *Ching Feng (New Series)* 19.1–2 (2020): 21–47.

34. Pan-chiu Lai, “Chinese Religions: Negotiating Cultural and Religious Identities,” *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths*, edited by Alan Race and Paul M. Hedges (London: SCM Press, 2008), 270–288.

the latter attitude, some theologians attempted to indigenize or contextualize Christian doctrine of salvation by employing some expressions from Chinese culture, especially Confucianism.³⁵ However, the Chinese religions are not merely raw materials waiting for Christian theological explorations—not to say the Western theological judgement on whether Chinese religions have salvation or not. In fact, this sort of Western imperialistic theological attempt will meet serious resistance and challenges in the Chinese context.

Since religious diversity is part of the Chinese religious tradition, the Chinese religions are very experienced in engaging in inter-religious disputes and ranking different religions in a hierarchical way according to their doctrinal profundity or spiritual attainment. This hierarchical method of handling religious diversity, which might be derived from the Chinese Buddhist practice of doctrinal classification (判教 *pan jiao*), aiming originally at handling the doctrinal and scriptural diversity within the Buddhist canon, exhibits an inclusivist attitude towards other religions.³⁶ In any case, the Chinese religions have no difficulty proposing their judgments or counter judgments on the salvific value or status of Christianity and assigning Christianity to an inferior rank or even the low end of a hierarchy of religions.

In fact, representatives of Chinese religions did raise their criticisms against Christianity and rank it as an inferior religion. For instance, some Confucians criticize that the Christian doctrine of salvation, especially the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith, together with the doctrine of original sin, emphasizes the sinfulness of human nature and the futility of moral cultivation. This approach to salvation is morally inferior to the Confucian approach, which emphasizes the goodness of human nature and the approach of becoming sage through moral cultivation. This Confucian criticism of Christianity attracted many Chinese Christian theological responses. For example, 黃保羅 Paulos Huang (also known as Huang Baoluo) points out that there are significant differences between Confucianism and Christianity with regard to the object of salvation, the means of salvation, etc.³⁷ But he also notices that the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith may be only part, rather than the whole, of the Christian doctrine of salvation, which should include sanctification as well.³⁸

35. For a recent example, see: Jackson Wu, *Saving God's Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2012).

36. See: Kristin Beise Kilblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes towards Religious Others* (Aldershot, England/Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 44–68.

37. Paulos Huang, *Confronting Confucian Understandings of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation: A Systematic Theological Analysis of the Basic Problems in the Confucian-Christian Dialogue* (Helsinki: Department of Systematic Theology, University of Helsinki, 2006), 279–283.

38. Paulos Huang, *Confronting Confucian Understandings of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation*, 280.

Huang has certain reservations on the Orthodox doctrine of deification (*theosis*) and is more sympathetic to the Finnish interpretation of Luther's theology. Huang believes that this interpretation of Luther's theology, though different from the official Lutheran doctrinal tradition, may be more capable of integrating justification with sanctification, on the one hand, and preserving the distinction between Christ and Christians as well as between Christianity and Confucianism.³⁹

Alexander Chow addresses to a similar issue, but in comparison with Huang, Chow is more positive on the Orthodox understanding of theosis. Based on Justo L. González' typology of Christian thought, Chow surveys the three types of theology in China and further argues that unlike the Latin/Western theological tradition, which is quite dominant in Chinese Christian theology, Orthodox theology, which is more associated with the type C of González' typology, will be more beneficial to the further development of Christian theology in contemporary China. What is particularly important is the Orthodox doctrine of deification, which is more compatible with the Confucian doctrine of unity the Heaven and humanity.⁴⁰

Similar to Chow, I also find the theological tradition of deification embodied primarily in the Greek fathers and the Orthodox Church relevant and beneficial to the Christian-Confucian dialogue on salvation.⁴¹ However, I argue that the concept of deification can also be found in the Latin-Western theological tradition and is not restricted to the Greek fathers and the Orthodox Church.⁴² Furthermore, there are some other contemporary theological alternatives, for example, process theology, which can respond to the Confucian criticism on the Christian doctrine of salvation.⁴³

These theological responses seem to share the view that the Christian doctrine of salvation does not necessarily contradict Confucianism. It is noticed that many of the Confucian criticisms of Christianity actually focus on the Protestant understanding of salvation, especially the Lutheran doctrine of

39. Paulos Huang, *Confronting Confucian Understandings of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation*, 262–263.

40. Alexander Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment: Heaven and Humanity in Unity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

41. Pan-chiu Lai, "Christian Transformation of Greek Humanism and its Implications for Christian-Confucian Dialogue," *Korea Journal of Systematic Theology* 22 (2008): 245–269.

42. Pan-chiu Lai, "Shaping Humanity with Word and Spirit: Perspectives East, West and Neither-East-Nor-West," *Word and Spirit: Renewing Christology and Pneumatology in a Globalizing World*, edited by Anselm K. Min and Christoph Schwöbel (Berlin & Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), 131–149; "Chinese Explorations of Orthodox Theology: A Critical Review," *International Journal for the Study of Christian Church* 18.4 (2018): 315–331.

43. For the example of process theology, see: Pan-chiu Lai, "Process Christology and Christian-Confucian Dialogue in China," *Process Studies* 33.1 (2004): 149–165.

justification. Through a more thorough and/or comprehensive exploration of the Christian theological tradition, including the Orthodox doctrine of deification, one may find that the Christian doctrine of salvation is not restricted to the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith and does not necessarily assume an Augustinian doctrine of original sin. In other words, many of the Confucian criticisms of Christianity are based on an inadequate understanding of Christian theology, and thus not entirely fair to Christianity as a whole. These Chinese Christian responses to the Confucian criticisms highlight the plurality of understandings of salvation even within Christianity.

It is interesting to note that, borrowing the distinction between “other-power” (他力 *tali*; *tariki* in Japanese) and “self-power” (自力 *zili*; *jiriki* in Japanese), whereas the Confucian criticism of Christianity is focused on the “other-power” character of Christian salvation, this might not be an issue at all for Chinese Buddhism because salvation by “other-power” is part of the Chinese Buddhist tradition, especially the Pure Land School. In fact, being a champion of Mahayana Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism tended to emphasize the universality of salvation, and might query if the Christian understanding of salvation is a restricted “Hinayana” salvation. The universality of salvation advocated by Chinese Mahayana Buddhism is exhibited in four major ways. First, according to the Buddhist doctrine of skilful means, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas can offer divergent and even contrary ways to salvation, including both “self-power” and “other-power,” in order to meet the divergent needs and orientations of the sentient beings. Secondly, according to the story about Amida Buddha, he vowed to save all those who might have called upon his name by receiving them right after their death to a pure land built by him. Thirdly, according to the story about Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva, he vowed to save all the evil-doers’ suffering in hell before his entering into nirvana. Lastly, according to the doctrine of Buddha-nature, all sentient beings have buddha-nature and can equally become Buddhas eventually. In response to the Chinese Buddhist understanding of universal salvation (but not point-by-point), I proposed a Mahayana Christian understanding of salvation that has the following features. First, there can be a variety of paths to salvation in accordance with different people’s diversified orientations. Secondly, it is legitimate to hope for the eventual salvation of those who suffer in hell or have not accepted the gospel during their lifetime. Thirdly, the Christian salvation can cover all lives, including non-human beings. Fourthly, salvation includes various dimensions of life and reaches its perfection in complete participation in the divine life.⁴⁴ I

44. Pan-chiu Lai, “Reconsidering the Christian Understanding of Universal Salvation in Mahayana Buddhist Perspective,” *Ching Feng* (New Series) 12 (2013): 19–42.

then further offered a Mahayana Buddhist reinterpretation of Barth's position on universal salvation.⁴⁵

In addition to the challenges derived from Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism, Daoism and the Chinese popular religion(s) may make the challenges even more complicated. It is interesting to note that the ancient Chinese religion is characterized by "in search of personal welfare,"⁴⁶ which is contrary to Hick's understanding of salvation in terms of transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. This character of self-centeredness can also be found in Chinese popular religions, including the practices of Chinese geomancy (also known as 風水 *fengshui*), changing-name and fortune-telling. One may then ask whether Hick's theory of salvation, which is part of his criteriology for religion of the axial period, is applicable to or compatible with Chinese popular religions.⁴⁷ Of course, if Hick's theory aims to cover the "world religions" originated during the axial period rather than all religions, it does not matter whether Chinese popular religions match the soteriological and/or ethical criteria proposed by Hick. This is especially the case if one recognizes Chinese popular religions as independent religious traditions. However, Chinese popular religions are indeed intertwined deeply with Chinese Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. On one hand, Chinese popular religions have incorporated various elements from Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism in its ethics and beliefs; on the other hand, they have also influenced Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism.⁴⁸ This can be seen clearly in the Daoist religion, which includes not only the Daoist philosophy, which understands salvation in terms of individual spiritual liberation such as "easy-wandering" (逍遙 *xiao yao*) or following the course of nature, but also the Daoist religious practices, such as exorcism, Tai Chi, Qigong, fasting and interior alchemy, aiming at longevity, good health, and becoming immortal. Similar trends can be found in popular Buddhism in China, exhibiting certain syncretism between popular religion and Chinese Buddhism. Unlike Theravada Buddhism, which tends to understand salvation or liberation primarily in terms of nirvana, Chinese Buddhism, which includes worship of the Mahayana bodhisattvas, might long for salvation in terms of escaping from physical danger, having good health, prosperity, longevity and

45. Pan-chiu Lai, "Karl Barth and Universal Salvation: A Mahayana Buddhist Perspective," Karl Barth and Comparative Theology, edited by Christian T. Collins Winn and Martha Moore-Keish (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 85–104.

46. Mu-chou Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

47. See: Wai-Yip Wong, "Incompatibility between Chinese Folk Religion and John Hick's Criteriology," *Journal of Comparative Scripture* 2 (2013): 153–192.

48. See: Wai-Yip Wong, "Incompatibility between Chinese Folk Religion and John Hick's Criteriology," 153.

even obtaining off-spring (especially male child). It is quite unclear if the Buddhist and Daoist multivalent understandings of salvation should be classified as self-centered or Reality-centered.

The diversity of understandings of salvation among the Chinese religions and the multivalent understanding of salvation in individual Chinese religions seem to challenge the validity or workability of the assumption of a monolithic understanding of salvation. These understandings of salvation seem to converge on a multi-dimensional understanding of salvation covering various dimensions of life. They thus raise a rather basic theological question concerning whether salvation should be restricted to a spiritual and other-worldly salvation, or it should cover various dimensions of life in this world.

Multi-dimensional Salvation

Apart from the challenges derived from individual Chinese religions, there are also challenges related to Chinese religions as a whole. Daniel Overmyer (1935–2021), an expert of Chinese religions with training in Christian theology, in addition to an analysis of the understandings of salvation in Chinese religions, raised questions concerning whether and how Chinese religions are to be considered as part of the history of salvation from a Christian perspective.⁴⁹ In response to Overmyer, I mentioned the examples concerning how some of the Greek fathers affirmed the positive role played by Greek culture in the divine economy before the incarnation or the arrival of the Christian gospel, and further elaborated the soteriological implications of Tillich's theory concerning life as a multi-dimensional unity.⁵⁰ I suggested that, corresponding to his understanding of life as a multi-dimensional unity, Tillich interprets salvation primarily in terms of healing and wholeness, which may include not only the physical and psychological dimensions but also the socio-political dimension (or healing of broken relationship) and the spiritual dimension. This inclusive and multivalent understanding of salvation not only affirms the participation of Chinese religions in the history of salvation, but also offers a better alternative to Hick's monolithic understanding of salvation. In comparison with Hick, Tillich's understanding is more universalistic, for it affirms the participation of nature in the process of fall and salvation instead of focusing on humankind. Furthermore, Hick's theory tends to assume that the world religions are equally valid ways to the same salvation. This may impose a monolithic understanding

49. See: Daniel L. Overmyer, "Chinese Religions as Part of the History of Salvation: A Dialogue with Christianity," *Ching Feng* 40.1 (1997): 1–14.

50. Pan-chiu Lai, "Chinese Religions and the History of Salvation: A Theological Perspective," *Ching Feng* 40.1 (1997): 15–40.

of salvation on various religions and disregards the differences among their respective understandings of salvation(s). In contrast, Tillich's understanding of salvation allows different religions to have their own understandings of salvation, which may correspond to different dimensions of life and may have different emphases on different dimensions. According to this multi-dimensional understanding of salvation, salvation is not a matter of none or all.⁵¹

This multi-dimensional understanding of salvation can be found not only in Tillich but also in the writings of some other theologians. For example, in line with his Wesleyan theological tradition, John B. Cobb, Jr. also advocates a holistic view of salvation, which includes various dimensions of life such as personal salvation and social justice.⁵² In comparison to a monolithic understanding of salvation, this holistic multi-dimensional understanding of salvation may do better justice to the richness of the meaning of salvation in the Bible as well as the salvific experiences of ordinary Christians, who might have recognized the salvation of God through their various experiences of physical healing, psychological healing, healing of the broken human relationship, political liberation, struggle for social justice, healing of the environment, etc. Furthermore, this multi-dimensional understanding of salvation may offer a better account of the results of recent neuroscientific studies of religious experience. It is interesting to note that Hick argues that the neuroscientific studies of religious experience support his pluralist hypothesis.⁵³ However, as I have argued elsewhere, upon closer scrutiny of the most recent neuroscientific studies of religious experience, one may find that religious practices of different religious traditions activate responses from various areas, instead of the same area, of the brain.⁵⁴ In addition to the diversity of the nature of these practices in their respective traditions, these religious experiences can bring forth various psychological impacts and behavioral changes of the individual concerned, and thus can make further impacts on society and even the natural environment. In other words, salvation in the spiritual and/or psychological dimension(s) will affect salvation at social and/or physical dimension(s).⁵⁵

51. Pan-chiu Lai, "Chinese Religions and the History of Salvation: A Theological Perspective," 25–26.

52. Pan-chiu Lai, "Inter-religious Dialogue and Social Justice: Cobb's Wesleyan Process Theology in East Asian Perspective," *Asia Journal of Theology* 25.1 (2011), 82–102.

53. John Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

54. Malcom Jeeves and Warren S. Brown, *Neuroscience, Psychology and Religion: Illusions, Delusions, and Realities about Human Nature* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2009), 96–97.

55. 賴品超 Lai Pinchao, 〈宗教比較學、神經科學與多維度的拯救:再思宗教多樣與宗教對話〉(Comparative Religion, Neuroscience and Multi-Dimensional Salvation: Reconsidering Religious Diversity and Inter-religious Dialogue), 《景風》Ching Feng (New Series) 17.1–2 (2018): 93–116.

This multi-dimensional understanding of salvation may query the distinction between exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism employed in Christian theology of religions. According to this multi-dimensional understanding of salvation, it will be very difficult to hold the exclusivist claim that all other religions cannot bring forth any salvation—not even healing of the human body. It is also difficult to justify the inclusivist claim that only Christianity has the most completed salvation, while the other religions have only some portions of it. For there is evidence indicating that sometimes other religions are more effective than Christianity in healing in certain dimensions, such as psychological or physical health. It will also be difficult to justify the pluralistic view that all religions are equally valid paths to the same salvation because obviously different religions may have relative strengths and weaknesses in different dimensions of salvation. In fact, this view of salvation also challenges the so-called “particularism” that, in its critique of the pluralist’s monolithic understanding of salvation, tends to stress the radical divergence and even incommensurability of the understandings of salvation among the religions. The multi-dimensional view of salvation may challenge that although the religions’ understandings of salvation of the spiritual dimension may be quite different, there may be similarities in some other dimensions, for example, psychological health. Although different religions may understand the concept of “human liberation” differently, it remains a useful concept for inter-religious communication because there remains certain commensurability in the understandings of it in different religions.⁵⁶ The rhetoric of particularism seems to pay full respect to the diversity of the religions’ understandings of salvation. However, it may actually disregard the complexity of the respective religion’s own understanding of salvation as well as the overlapping among the religions’ multivalent understandings of salvation. It may then adversely affect the comparison and dialogue among religions.⁵⁷

Concluding Remarks / Tasks Ahead

From the brief survey and analysis of the challenges to the Chinese Christian discourse on salvation, one may find that in order to address these challenges, what is needed is not a theory of salvation, but various theological models of

56. William R. Burrows, “Commensurability and Ambiguity: Liberation as an Interreligiously Usable Concept,” *World Religions and Human Liberation*, edited by Dan Cohn-Sherbok (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 127–142.

57. For a critique of the position of particularism, see Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 146–196.

salvation. Given the metaphorical nature of theological language,⁵⁸ including the metaphorical nature of the Christian doctrine of salvation,⁵⁹ it is legitimate to affirm the plurality of soteriological models.⁶⁰ Without denying that the reality of salvation remains a mystery beyond the capture of one single theological model, one may explore the possibility of the complementary use of several soteriological models.⁶¹ This complementarity of soteriological models may assume a holistic and multi-dimensional understanding of salvation, which is what Christianity might learn from the dialogue with Chinese religions. A more systematic articulation of this multi-dimensional understanding of salvation may be one of the tasks ahead for Chinese Christian theology.⁶²

In China, Christians as a minority group must work with people of other religions for the common good. With an articulated multi-dimensional view of salvation, Chinese Christianity may be able to clearly affirm that even though Christianity and other religions may have divergent ultimate religious ends, they may share some "preliminary" goals, including relief from physical suffering or danger, bodily and psychological healing, political liberation, harmonious social relationship, sustainable environment, etc. Christians can thus engage in inter-religious dialogue and work with people of other religions or no religious affiliations on these preliminary goals.⁶³

58. See: Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms: The Nature of Scientific and Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1974); Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

59. Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 27–52.

60. John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), 26–52.

61. See: Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms*, 152–155.

62. 賴品超 Lai Pinchao, 〈漢語神學與拯救論〉(Sino-Christian Theology and Soteriology), 《道風》*Logos & Pneuma* 44 (2016): 153–179.

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