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BY JERRY AN

Public Theology Begins with God

Public theology remains a somewhat awkward and easily misunderstood concept for Chinese churches. Their social and political environments vary greatly, and public space is often constricted. Culturally, our experience of the "public" is limited, and "theology" often raises suspicion. Is public theology truly important? What exactly is its significance?

If public theology is understood merely as a theological response to social issues, it may indeed lead to a dead end. Yet like all theology, public theology begins not with issues, but with the knowledge of God. It is "public" not simply because it concerns human beings and society, but because the God we believe in reveals himself to the world and is open to all things. It concerns how we know, interpret, and witness to this "public God."

In this sense, its foundation does not depend on specific contexts, but on our understanding of God, the church, and the world—that is, our ecclesiology, Christology, and overall worldview. Yet because God enters history and is present in the world, public theology must be expressed, practiced, and tested in concrete settings. Its foundation is consistent; its expression contextual.

Because of this, Chinese churches in the global diaspora possess a unique advantage. Different systems, cultures, and public spaces lead to different concerns and responses. If churches in these different settings can listen to, converse with, and reflect upon one another, they can form a healthier and more holistic understanding and practice of public theology. The Malaysian Chinese church offers a highly representative paradigm.

From the Malaysian Chinese church to Anabaptist public theology, recent explorations in Hong Kong, and cases from Taiwanese church history, voices from different settings converse with and learn from one another. This issue unfolds against that background. David Doong's lead article explains the significance of public theology for Chinese churches, especially in our present era.

These discussions also return us to a more fundamental question: How does the church exist in the world as the church? Through its independent and distinct existence before society, the church manifests that God is a public God. Public theology, therefore, is not a set of theories. It is establishing churches where there are none; holding fast to the faith where the church is persecuted; not being ashamed of the gospel where the church is mocked; and remaining humble and vigilant where the church is honored. It means the church neither fears oppressive power nor depends on it, and is willing to pay the price for this independence, whether in the mainstream or on the margins, in need or in plenty.

This is also an issue of church aesthetics. The church's understanding of "beauty" affects its outward presentation of life, and aesthetic poverty and perceptual coarseness can make its witness rigid and dogmatic. For a long time, the church has perhaps been more accustomed to seeking to "be heard," but not necessarily to "be seen." Public theology must therefore confront theological aesthetics. How we understand beauty, and how we present the tangibility and visibility of faith in life, liturgy, and community relations, will profoundly affect the church's public witness. As the essays in this issue remind us, we truly need an "aesthetic repentance."

Finally, this issue includes a book review of a work on the public theology concepts and practices of Martin Luther King Jr. and Billy Graham. The book contrasts the two pastors' public theology and processes of change, helps us understand relevant American history, and answers many of our perplexities. With compelling history and theological reflection, it can even be considered a practical textbook on public theology and excellent further reading beyond this issue.

Jerry An *(安平) serves as the Chinese Team Leader at ReFrame Ministries and has worked in media ministry since 2001. Under his vision and leadership, ReFrame's Chinese language ministry has become a pioneer, think tank, and partner in new media ministry. Jerry regularly trains Chinese church leaders worldwide in new media ministry and is also a publisher, producer, radio host, and writer.*

This issue brings together a collection of Chinese-language essays translated into English by Dr. Jordan Zhixi Wang, alongside the ChinaSource Perspective by Brent Fulton. We are grateful for Dr. Wang's careful work in bringing these conversations in Chinese public theology to English-language readers. Dr. Jordan Zhixi Wang is a historian of World Christianity and the Associate Director of the Mandarin Theology Program at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Trinity Western University.

Cover Story

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From the Enlightenment to the Digital Age

The Development of Contemporary Pluralistic Society and the Public Witness of the Church

BY DAVID DOONG

The challenges we face did not arrive suddenly—rather, they developed gradually over the long river of history. Today, when we discuss "pluralistic society," we usually define it as an aggregate composed of different beliefs, worldviews, and values. In such a society, people are required to respect and tolerate the beliefs and lifestyles of others.

When we deeply explore the seemingly "value-neutral" appearance of contemporary pluralistic society, however, we are startled to discover that its underlying logic possesses a "strong exclusive narrative." Lesslie Newbigin pointed out in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* that the society of today, dominated by secularism, claims that it does not commit to any specific tradition or worldview; yet, this in itself is a very specific tradition and worldview that rejects the worldviews of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.[1] The contemporary pluralistic society dominated by secularism is not a value-neutral society; rather, it is a society that rejects the one true God. In this pluralistic society that seemingly embraces diversity but demonstrates hostility toward any belief system that claims to possess absolute truth, Christians must first understand the social and cultural developments of the past five hundred years if they are to live out the power of the gospel in this context. They must understand how the cultural narrative of contemporary society formed step by step.

"The contemporary pluralistic society dominated by secularism is not a value-neutral society; rather, it is a society that rejects the one true God."

THE FORMATION OF CONTEMPORARY PLURALISTIC SOCIETY: FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The emergence of contemporary pluralistic society is not an accidental coincidence. Rather, it is the result of multiple historical narratives interweaving together. From the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth century to the explosion of AI technology, human society experienced a thorough reconstruction of ontology and values.

THE SUBJECT-CENTEREDNESS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT: ESTABLISHING THE SUBJECT AND RESPECTING PLURALISM

The starting point of this transformation traces back to the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth century and the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It originated from the objectification of the material world during the sixteenth-century Scientific Revolution, and it evolved into a ruptured dichotomy between "fact" and "value" during the

subsequent Enlightenment. When science took responsibility for explaining the operational mechanisms of the material world, the objective foundation of traditional ethics was hollowed out, and value judgments shifted toward the subjective preferences of the individual.[2] The subsequent Enlightenment further established "human subjectivity," and it liberated the individual from the divine right and royal power of the past. Philosophically, this provided a foundation of legitimacy for "value pluralism": since everyone is an independent thinking subject, they have the right to define their own good, evil, and truth.

THE POLITICAL NARRATIVE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: GUARDING HUMAN RIGHTS AND SUPPORTING PLURALISM

At the level of political practice, the founding of the United States at the end of the eighteenth century and the lessons of the European wars of religion became crucial. To end the bloody conflicts triggered by religious differences over many years, immigrants practiced "religious freedom" in the New World. The motto *E pluribus unum* (out of many, one) on the Great Seal of the United States marks that "supreme tolerance" officially became the core value of mainstream society. This set of political narratives views human rights as the highest standard. It aims to ensure that groups with different beliefs can coexist under the same political framework, but it also invisibly restricts religious belief to the private sphere, so that it no longer possesses the binding force of public truth.

THE CONSUMER SOCIETY UNDER GLOBALIZATION: PROVIDING CHOICES AND ADVOCATING PLURALISM

From the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century to the consumer society of the twentieth century, pluralistic choices gained the support of a material foundation. As productive forces exploded, the social structure shifted from being "producer-oriented" to "consumer-oriented." In this fluid society, traditional institutions could no longer solidify human behavior, and the fragmentation of values became the norm. Individuals began to reconstruct their lifestyles and the meaning of life according to their own preferences, like a "collage."[3] In this culture, personal identity is no longer endowed by the community; rather, it is achieved through constantly changing "consumer choices."

THE SOCIETY OF STRANGERS WITH COLLAPSED COMMUNITIES: HIGHLIGHTING DIFFERENCES AND PURSUING PLURALISM

As we enter the twenty-first century, the rise of the internet and social media thoroughly dismantled traditional closed communities. Individuals are no longer permanently attached to a single geographical or blood-tie group; instead, they wander among point-to-point digital connections. This collapse of community brought about profound anxiety over identity. To be seen in the vast sea of humanity, people turned to strive for individual differences, and they constructed unique identity positioning through the "pursuit of pluralism."[4] This extreme pursuit of difference, however, often causes people to lose the language of deep connection with one another.

"This set of political narratives views human rights as the highest standard. It aims to ensure that groups with different beliefs can coexist under the same political framework, but it also invisibly restricts religious belief to the private sphere, so that it no longer possesses the binding force of public truth."

"Individuals are no longer permanently attached to a single geographical or blood-tie group; instead, they wander among point-to-point digital connections."

THE TECHNOLOGICAL NARRATIVE OF AI DEVELOPMENT: BREAKING BOUNDARIES AND RECONSTRUCTING PLURALISM

The popularization of contemporary AI and the enhancement of computing power are pushing this pluralistic movement to the extreme. If the previous four developments pursued pluralism within realistic physical boundaries, AI further "breaks boundaries." It shatters human biological limitations in language, physical strength, and even creative speed. It recalculates the fragmented values and massive data accumulated over the past five hundred years, and it creates a new type of diversity

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that crosses the virtual and the real and involves human-machine collaboration.

The "pluralism" brought about by contemporary AI and big data is often essentially an "echo chamber under algorithms." This is exactly the opposite of the "independent thinking subject" pursued by the Enlightenment; individuals may have already lost true freedom of choice within the illusion of infinite choices. AI is not merely a tool. It is more like a potential "digital Tower of Babel." It is attempting to reconstruct human ontology through technologies such as "digital avatars," shifting the definition of humanity from the "call of God" to a "combination of data."

AI also makes the building of a digital Tower of Babel seem possible. It translates human expression into information that can be processed and connected, promising that technology might one day solve all human problems. In that promise, people are persuaded to surrender freedom and privacy. Tech giants and nations alike now compete to become dominant builders of this future order, forming new alliances and rivalries in pursuit of digital power. In this emerging digital empire, users live under surveillance, enjoy an illusion of privacy, and are guided by algorithms while believing they have free choice.

Viewed across these five hundred years, digital technology and AI are not merely innovations; they intensify the logic of contemporary pluralistic society. The digital age turns post-Enlightenment subjectivity into calculable data and transforms liberal democracy's tolerance into a false neutrality defined by algorithms. Today's pluralism often becomes an algorithmic echo chamber, wearing the cloak of tolerance while excluding any claim to ultimate truth. This shift from the "call of God" to a "combination of data" is a severe challenge for the church's public witness.

> "Today's pluralism often becomes an algorithmic echo chamber, wearing the cloak of tolerance while excluding any claim to ultimate truth."

PARADIGMS OF FAITHFULNESS OF GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE POLYTHEISTIC SOCIETY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

When we face contemporary pluralistic society and digital technology, we may think this is a challenge humanity has never known. Yet the Old Testament world was also an extremely complex pluralistic society, marked by polytheistic worship and competing gods. In this sense, it profoundly echoes our secular age.

In the Old Testament era, people generally believed different tribes and regions were governed by different deities. Today, this concept of "territorial idols" has become a specialized "domain idol." We no longer bow to wood and stone, but we divide life into fragments—economics governs wealth, biology health, psychology trauma, and algorithms truth. Christians face the same temptation as ancient Israelites—to compromise with different contemporary deities in different areas of life and lose complete allegiance to the one true God. Yet the Old Testament also offers paradigms of faithfulness for public witness today.

THE PATRIARCHAL PARADIGM

In Canaan, wherever Abraham went, he built an altar, declaring that the land belonged to Yahweh (Genesis 12:7). Yet his worship was not closed or exclusive. He hosted travelers and even interceded before God for Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18).

THE LIBERATION PARADIGM

The exodus is a battle against domain idols. Through the ten plagues, God not only saved enslaved Israelites but also directly challenged Egypt's gods. From the Nile to the sun, God exposed these idols before the power of the true God and revealed his absoluteness to Egyptians and Israelites alike.

THE SANCTIFICATION PARADIGM

Joshua's entry into Canaan emphasizes sanctification—God's people are set apart and must not mix with sin. Under the pressure of pagan worship, the Israelites had to separate themselves in life and belief, avoid erosion by syncretism, and guard the identity of God's people from the customs of a polytheistic culture.

THE DYNASTIC PARADIGM

In the dynasties of David and Solomon, public witness became highly visible. The temple and Solomon's wisdom manifested God's glory; First Kings records that his wisdom attracted people from all nations (1 Kings 4:29–34). When God's people live according to truth, their life can produce public attraction in a pluralistic society.

> "When God's people live according to truth, their life can produce public attraction in a pluralistic society."

THE EXILE PARADIGM

When God's people fell into idolatry, they experienced the subjugation of the kingdom. Yet God made himself known not only through the strength of David's dynasty but also through judgment upon it (Isaiah 56–66). In exile, he did not call his people to escape or military resistance, but to live in the land without assimilation and to "seek the welfare of the city" (Jeremiah 29:4–7). Daniel likewise bore witness within foreign courts while practicing nonviolent resistance when faith required it (Daniel 2–3).

THE TRANSFORMATION OF PARADIGMS UNDER THE NEW TESTAMENT CROSS EVENT

When we enter the New Testament era, the Greco-Roman world also resonates with contemporary pluralism. It was not only a vast empire but also a mixed cultural and religious laboratory. There Christians developed action paradigms that inherited Old Testament theology and were renewed through the cross.

The Greco-Roman world emphasized pluralistic coexistence, but its pluralism served imperial stability and expansion. Pax Romana was a false pluralism built on violence and conquest. Many beliefs could coexist only if they did not challenge Caesar as supreme lord.

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Precisely in this context, Christians were viewed as aliens. They insisted on the uniqueness of God and the sovereignty of Christ, refusing Caesar's narrative. Their stance brought hostility, ridicule, and persecution. Similarly, today, when Christians declare the absoluteness of the gospel, they are often labeled as destroyers of pluralistic harmony. Yet the New Testament church did not shrink back; the Spirit transformed and renewed the Old Testament paradigms for a more penetrating witness.

FROM THE PATRIARCHAL PARADIGM TO THE "BOUNDARY-CROSSING PARADIGM"

Abraham's altar-building in Canaan becomes, in the New Testament, boundary-crossing action propelled by the Holy Spirit. From Pentecost (Acts 2:5–13), to the Samaritans (Acts 8:1–8), the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–29), the calling of the Gentiles (Acts 9:4), and the Macedonian call (Acts 16:6–10), God's people cross barriers of race, class, and gender. This is a new pluralistic practice, demonstrating the kingdom's inclusive power beyond geography and blood ties.

FROM THE LIBERATION PARADIGM AND SANCTIFICATION PARADIGM TO THE "POWER PARADIGM"

The Old Testament liberation paradigm becomes a New Testament confrontation of power. The apostles heal and cast out demons in Jerusalem (Acts 5:12–16), and Paul confronts Elymas the sorcerer (Acts 13:9–12), demonstrating Christ's sovereignty over darkness. This power is not secular strength; as Paul says, power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). In suffering and martyrdom, Christian hope exposes the impotence of the world's idols.

FROM THE DYNASTIC PARADIGM TO THE "SELF-EMPTYING PARADIGM"

The glory and wisdom of Israel's dynasties are reinterpreted as self-emptying. Paul

becomes a slave to all and becomes all things to all people, not seeking his own advantage but the salvation of others (1 Corinthians 9:19–23; 10:31–33). He exhorts believers to have the mind of Christ, who emptied himself and took the form of a servant (Philippians 2:5–11). This subverts old images of authority and glory and becomes what Timothy Keller calls "subversive fulfillment": Christ alone fulfills the deepest desire for truth.

> "Christ alone fulfills the deepest desire for truth."

FROM THE EXILE PARADIGM TO THE "SOJOURNING PARADIGM"

The exile paradigm develops into the New Testament theology of sojourning. Under Rome's dominant narrative, Peter offers another narrative: "the household of God." He calls believers to live as aliens and exiles according to God's standards (1 Peter 1:1–2, 1:13–2:12), challenging them to ask which narrative truly governs their lives.

This exilic witness is embodied in priestly identity (1 Peter 2:9), holy life in hope (1 Peter 1:13–16), good deeds (1 Peter 2:11–12), gentle responses to challenge (1 Peter 3:13–16), and a mindset prepared to suffer (1 Peter 4:1–5). From Peter and John before the authorities, to Paul and Silas singing in prison, to Paul debating while on trial, the church speaks from the margins to the center. This powerless witness becomes profound public dissent.

Within the crevices of the Roman Empire, the church demonstrated the subversive nature of the gospel through these four paradigms, showing that the narrative of God's household can counter earthly mainstream narratives. Today we face not Pax Romana enforced by swords, but a digital empire woven from big data and algorithms. This emerging "digital Rome" likewise flaunts pluralism and convenience while invisibly reconstructing humanity. The church must therefore inherit the New Testament paradigms and live anew as Christ's alternative people.

FOLLOWING CHRIST IN THE PLURALISTIC SOCIETY OF THE DIGITAL AGE

People desire to be loved, known, and accepted. Today's digital services provide us with the illusion of being loved, known, and accepted, and they use this to collect more information about us. They use algorithms to more precisely analyze our desires and wants, and they feed this experience to us in a "painless" and "frictionless" manner. Everything seems beautiful, and we are satisfied—at least temporarily. The digital empire earns massive wealth. This enables it to develop products that make us even more addicted, and it continues this "flywheel effect." The only problem is that our humanity is reduced to "relevance" and "statistical probability," and this makes the separation between spirit and flesh increasingly severe. Over time, true humanity will inevitably rebel or reveal warning signs of maladaptation or even collapse.[5] Perhaps the obvious worsening of mental health among American teenagers since the popularization of social media in 2012 is exactly such a warning sign![6]

When facing secularism and technological challenge, the church's public witness should not become a political movement to recapture power. It must be a way of life and communal witness that returns to the gospel. Through the reshaping of narrative, existence, and power, the church becomes an alternative community set apart for the common good amid shattered meaning and pluralistic values.

RESHAPING NARRATIVE: RESHAPING IDENTITY WITH THE GOSPEL OF GRACE

Under the narrative of contemporary science and AI, human identity is often reduced to matter or data. Praveen Sethupathy, a professor at Cornell University, once pointed out in a lecture that science tells us humans are astonishingly similar to other living creatures. We have surprising dependencies with other species, and we can even be viewed as being composed merely of stardust. He then emphasized, however, that the key that makes humans different from all creation is not biological superiority, but that God chose to speak to us. It is God's own action that sets us apart from all creation.[7]

The foundation of human dignity lies in the fact that what makes a human being human is that God speaks to humans and endows them with a unique mission. When our identity narrative is no longer built upon consumer choices or algorithmic labels but is built upon God's grace (Genesis 1:26–28), this gospel reshapes our life mission and our way of responding. Precisely because they deeply know that their identity originates from God's call, believers can demonstrate gentleness and patience amidst the impact of a pluralistic society and remain firm amidst turbulent values (1 Peter 3:15–16).

When digital hegemony reduces human value to predictable and manipulable data labels, the gospel of grace becomes an anti-hegemonic narrative. It declares that human uniqueness lies in a created "dialogical nature," not a computational "functional nature." We are not merely digital users defined by clicks, but creatures made in God's image, called by grace, and given a sacred mission.

RESHAPING EXISTENCE: RESPONDING TO THE DIGITAL TOWER OF BABEL WITH THE WITNESS OF AN EMBODIED COMMUNITY

When digital hegemony reconstructs human ontology, the church's public witness must return to Pentecost to counter the false communion of the digital Tower of Babel. Digital Babel pursues frictionless, depersonalized homogeneity.

Pentecost did not cancel linguistic plurality; the Spirit enabled all nations to hear God's mighty works "in our own languages" (Acts 2:11). True unity does not erase difference. In an age where algorithms categorize and isolate, embodied fellowship is Pentecostal witness: deep communion through the Spirit beyond the logic of data.

"True unity does not erase difference. In an age where algorithms categorize and isolate, embodied fellowship is Pentecostal witness: deep communion through the Spirit beyond the logic of data."

The digital empire manufactures fear through surveillance, evaluation, and cancellation, causing people to self-censor in public spaces. Pentecost, however, is marked by the boldness of the Spirit, enabling disciples who once hid in the upper room to proclaim truth within a hostile mainstream narrative. The church needs this boldness—not manipulated by algorithms or seeking digital volume—to offer a true dissent full of warmth.

The digital age reduces humans to "users" or "labels" possessing specific functions, but Pentecost demonstrates the Holy Spirit distributing diverse "gifts" to all (1 Corinthians 12:4–7). These gifts are not meant to build individuals into brands, but to build up the church community and

Image: Cheng Kamyin | Unsplash

care for the neighbors around us. When the church uses the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we are declaring humans are not replaceable parts or data that can be commodified, but recipients of God's gifts. Through the mutual coordination of the diverse gifts received, the church community produces an "organic influence" that algorithms cannot simulate, and it demonstrates wisdom and creativity in a hostile public sphere.

When AI attempts to reduce human existence to the flow of information, the Eucharist and physical fellowship of the church declare: humans are creatures who must live within flesh and the limitations of time and space. The church is not meant to fight for the right to speak in the public sphere. Instead, it must become a visible witness, and it must witness to the reality of the kingdom of God with the identity of an alternative community. When Christians gradually lose their influence in politics, economics, and culture, this is actually an opportunity. When we no longer worry about losing influence, we can properly return to the call to be the church, abandon the desire to try to control the world, and instead faithfully live according to the way of Christ.[8] Theologian Stanley Hauerwas once pointed out that the most powerful public witness of the church is not to influence or formulate policies. Rather, it is that when the world observes the church community, it can see the church's humility toward power, its passion for truth, and its insistence on peace, thereby realizing that the world's logic in treating these things is completely different from that of the church.[9] This embodied witness is reflected in concrete life practices: the Eucharist, as a true boundary-crossing paradigm, connects different classes and races in the bread and the cup (1 Corinthians 10:16–17); physical fellowship counters the virtual barriers of algorithmic echo chambers, and it practices the dialogue paradigm in true neighborly relationships. By being present with those in pain, the church demonstrates the reality of the gospel in the flesh (Colossians 1:24).

Although digital technology promises connections that break boundaries, it also brings about a rupture between soul and flesh. When society indulges in virtual social illusions and wanders in depersonalized digital spaces, the "embodied" witness of the church is precisely the most radical response to digital hegemony. We choose to encounter our neighbors within physical time and space, and to receive the Eucharist in the limited material bread and cup. This "real presence" directly challenges digital hegemony's depersonalizing deconstruction of life. Through physical fellowship, we puncture the false communion woven by algorithms, and we demonstrate the kind of true, warm life connection in the kingdom of God that cannot be datafied.

RESHAPING POWER: RESPONDING TO HOSTILITY WITH A MINDSET OF SUFFERING

In the power struggles of a pluralistic society, the best public witness of the

church is not to fight for cultural leadership, but to become an alternative community that people yearn for. This attraction is often revealed through the witness of facing suffering, which is exactly God's way of responding to the suffering in the world. Christian compassion is built upon a double paradox: our love will bring suffering, but this suffering will lead us to a greater love.[10]

Only when we allow ourselves to be broken by the pain in the world and are willing to cross boundaries to host others and be hosted by others, can we truly experience and embrace God's love. To risk giving love in a cold world is a mindset prepared to suffer (1 Peter 4:1–2). This action of not countering hostility with power, but transforming hostility with suffering, is exactly the logic of power that Christ manifested on the cross, and it is also the most powerful narrative of the church in today's pluralistic society.

When the mainstream logic of the digital age is to pursue a "painless, fast, zero-friction" consumer experience, the Christian "mindset of suffering" becomes the most shocking dissent in the culture. Digital hegemony encourages us to escape conflict and hide in echo chambers to attack one another, but the gospel calls us to cross boundaries and connect with people in true suffering. When the church does not respond to hostility with online volume or the hegemony of data but responds to the violence and indifference of the digital age with the suffering spirit of the cross, this "anti-efficiency" compassion instead becomes the only power in this cold algorithmic world that can cause human hearts to be reborn after breaking.

> "The public witness of the church is not to win political power or cultural hegemony in this 'competition of gods.' Rather, it is to imitate Christ."

CONCLUSION

Contemporary pluralistic society seemingly provides infinite choices, but it actually imprisons people in the echo chambers of data and consumption. The public witness of the church is not to win political power or cultural hegemony in this "competition of gods." Rather, it is to imitate Christ, seeking the peace of the city in exile, living out embodied love in the virtual, and witnessing to the eternal kingdom in suffering. As the church of Christ, we remain unique at this moment not to isolate ourselves from the world, but to let the world see in us another possibility of "what makes a human being human." CSJ

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3 Sung Ming Chow 鄒崇銘, Jiangxue Han 韓江雪, and Catherine Yeung 楊夢瑩, *Yong xiaofei gaibian shijie—gongping maoyi @ xin shehui jingji yundong* [*Buy Brings Changes! Fair Trade@New Social Economic Movement*] (Hong Kong: Inpress & Hong Kong Fair Trade Power, 2012), 123.

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Public Mission in a Pluralistic Social Context: The Malaysian Chinese Church

BY YEW KUAN YEE

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian Chinese Church inherits the missiological tradition brought by Western missionaries, particularly the traditional fundamentalist and evangelical view of the gospel that emphasizes "believing in Jesus and going to heaven." While this view of the gospel certainly values individual salvation, it easily weakens the gospel's capacity to renew society, culture, politics, and the created order within real-world contexts.

This article explores how the Malaysian Chinese Church can reinterpret "holistic mission" within a context characterized by ethnic pluralism, religious diversity, and multiple structural tensions, and how it can find possibilities for constructing a public theology from this reinterpretation. In other words, the question is not merely how the church can continue to grow. Rather, the question is: can the Malaysian Chinese Church shift from a community primarily concerned with its own survival to one that participates in the holistic mission of God and seeks the peace of this land?

THE MISSION OF GOD AND THE HOLISTIC GOSPEL

In *The Mission of God*, Christopher J. H. Wright systematically articulates the concepts of "holistic mission/holistic evangelism/holistic gospel." He reminds us that if "mission" translates directly as "evangelism," people in the Chinese context easily and mechanically equate it with "preaching and sending." This obscures its more original meaning: it is God's own mission. The correct sequence should be to first ask what the mission of God is, and only then ask how the church participates in this mission.

Leading people to Christ is certainly an important goal of the gospel, but it is not the only goal. The arrival of the gospel of the kingdom of heaven can address various dimensions, such as human physiological needs, psychological brokenness, spiritual oppression, social injustice, and public relations. Jesus fed the five thousand, healed the sick, conversed with the Samaritan woman, delivered the demon-possessed man in the region of the Gerasenes, and entered Zacchaeus's house to compel him to confront his economic injustice. All these actions demonstrate that the gospel does not deal abstractly with the "soul," but concretely enters into human life, relationships, and social reality.

> "The arrival of the gospel of the kingdom of heaven can address various dimensions, such as human physiological needs, psychological brokenness, spiritual oppression, social injustice, and public relations."

The Exodus event in the Old Testament operates in the same way. God liberated the Israelites from imperial slavery, supplied their daily needs, established a covenant with them, handed down the law, and built a just and orderly community that feared God. This demonstrates that God's salvation is never confined to the abstract level of "saving souls." Instead, it involves the comprehensive renewal of political, economic, social, and religious life.

When public theology intervenes in missiology, therefore, it broadens the missiological vision on the one hand, directing its attention toward public policy, institutional structures, and environmental crises. It helps missiology identify, on the other hand, "structural sin." Poverty is not merely a problem of personal morality; it can also be a systemic problem caused by political, economic, and class structures. Merely giving a poor person bread and leading them in a sinner's prayer sometimes fails to truly address the root causes of their chronic poverty.

John the Baptist's preaching by the Jordan River embodies exactly this holism. He called on the crowds to share their surplus food and clothing with those in need, while also demanding that tax collectors collect no more than the prescribed amount and that soldiers extort money from no one. In other words, repentance is not merely an adjustment of personal morality. It must also manifest as a renewal of justice and institutions. Jesus's mission follows the same lineage as John the Baptist's, simultaneously calling for repentance and renewal at both the individual and structural levels.

Once it realizes this point, if the Malaysian Chinese Church wishes to reinterpret mission, it must reposition its own mission work within the "holistic mission of God." The church's "church missions" should not be viewed as a department that operates only when resources are available. Instead, it should be understood as how the entire church participates in God's project of renewing the world within the local pluralistic context.

> "If the Malaysian Chinese Church wishes to reinterpret mission, it must reposition its own mission work within the 'holistic mission of God.'"

In other words, public theology is precisely the "missing piece" in the missiology of the Malaysian Chinese Church. Mission that lacks a public theological consciousness easily degenerates into a method of "cultural-religious colonization"—the focus of the mission shifts from "creating goodness and beauty" to "numerical and ministerial growth," and the targets of mission are viewed as an "untapped market" rather than "a world that is loved and saved alongside us."

MALAYSIAN SOCIAL HISTORY AND THE CHINESE CONTEXT

To consider the localized mission of the Malaysian Chinese Church, one must return to the social and historical context of this land. Since the Ming dynasty, traces of Chinese people "migrating to the Southern Seas" were already visible during the era of the Malacca Sultanate. By the British colonial period, the colonial metropole systematically imported large numbers of Chinese and Indian laborers from China

and India to mine tin, build railways, and plant rubber. The Chinese were mostly concentrated in mining areas, which later developed into towns, and ethnic Chinese gradually developed commerce and enterprises. Indian laborers were mostly assigned to rubber estates and suburbs along the railways. Later, as the rubber industry declined and the highway network developed, many estate areas became increasingly marginalized.

After the war, Malaya's three major ethnic groups—Malays, Chinese, and Indians—formed an alliance within the colonial-era political party framework to negotiate with Britain for independence. Malaya gained independence in 1957, and in 1963, Malaya united with Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore to form the Federation of Malaysia, though Singapore withdrew in 1965.

During the negotiation process for independence, a certain political and social consensus existed: the descendants of immigrants from China and India would no longer "return to their roots like falling leaves" (*luoye guigen*) but would instead "take root where they landed" (*luodi shenggen*). They would relinquish their political identities tied to their original homelands, acquire citizenship in the new nation, and simultaneously respect the special status of Malays and the indigenous groups of East Malaysia as "bumiputera" (*tuzhu*). Since the founding of the nation, however, complex racial politics and religious issues have gradually eroded this original vision of national relations.

Malay nationalism was originally a mobilizing force against colonial rule,

Image: Mateo Krossler | Unsplash

but its extended development has sometimes evolved into hostility toward "all outsiders." The Chinese and other non-Malay ethnic groups have long felt a massive disparity between their contributions to nation-building and their experiences regarding the distribution of political, educational, and economic resources. Institutional affirmative action policies and political discourse structures frequently cause non-Malay ethnic groups to feel that they occupy the position of "second-class citizens."

The problem of ethno-religious hegemony is therefore particularly prominent in Malaysia. The Constitution stipulates that "a Malay must be a Muslim," which causes ethnic identity and religious identity to overlap to a high degree. Any incident that people interpret as "offending Malays/Muslims" can rapidly escalate into an ethno-religious dispute under the influence of public opinion and political manipulation. Ethnic relations at the level of many towns and villages are actually relatively harmonious. Once politicians deliberately manipulate issues, however, the social atmosphere abruptly becomes tense.

As it lives long-term in this environment of structural injustice and inequality, the Chinese community inevitably accumulates deep scars and resentful emotions. Benedict Anderson's concept of "reverse racism" can be used precisely to describe this phenomenon: a group that was originally marginalized gradually develops an "imagination of the other" tinged with hostility and contempt over a long period of suppression, thereby replicating or even reverse-replicating racism at the linguistic and psychological levels.

In such a national context, the Malaysian Chinese Church must seriously confront a question: as a member of this society, how does the church understand and respond to these deep structural injustices and scars? In an environment long filled with racial tension, religious sensitivity, and environmental crises, what kind of public theology and missiology does the Chinese Church need in order to face these challenges, rather than continuing to remain in a state of internal self-maintenance within its congregations?

> "The Constitution stipulates that 'a Malay must be a Muslim,' which causes ethnic identity and religious identity to overlap to a high degree."

FROM "THE CHURCH IN MALAYSIA" TO "THE CHURCH OF MALAYSIA"

From the perspective of church history, the early Malaysian church was fundamentally the "fruit" of foreign missionaries preaching the gospel among the Chinese, Indians, and indigenous peoples, and its spiritual ethos naturally bears a strong imprint of Western missions. Today, the Malaysian church exists primarily in four linguistic groups: English-speaking churches, Chinese-speaking churches, Tamil-speaking churches, and Malay-speaking/indigenous churches.

Regarding Chinese-speaking churches, older generations of believers often retain an emotional connection to "China" in their identity, and this imagination of the "motherland" sometimes even surpasses their identification with "Malaysia." Compounded by the fact that some politicians frequently attack the Chinese with rhetoric like "go back to China," over time, many Chinese people experience a weakened sense of national belonging and identity, and there is no shortage of powerless remarks such as "at worst, I will just emigrate."

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"Regarding Chinese-speaking churches, older generations of believers often retain an emotional connection to 'China' in their identity, and this imagination of the 'motherland' sometimes even surpasses their identification with 'Malaysia.'"

At the cultural level, the identity of the Malaysian Chinese community has also undergone multiple shifts. The early generation grew up on Hong Kong television dramas and Hong Kong pop culture, and later they were influenced by Chinese film and television, Korean culture, and overseas media. This media environment similarly shapes the church. Whether using English or Chinese, many churches rely heavily on overseas spiritual resources. From books to online sermons and training courses, many experiential cases and examples come from abroad. Over time, local believers' familiarity with overseas contexts may even exceed their understanding of their own country's reality.

In recent years, quite a few local church leaders have called for "learning to think locally." This is not merely a methodological change, but a reshaping of identity. Take the "40-Day Fast and Prayer for the Nation" promoted by the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia, as an example. This ministry has continued for more than twenty years and has gradually driven churches of various streams to develop a higher sensitivity to the national situation and local issues. Many denominations and congregations now regularly hold "prayer meetings to watch over the nation," where believers learn in prayer to intercede for Malaysia's politics, justice, ethnic relations, and environmental conditions.

As the church begins to pay attention and pray from a local perspective, believers' sense of belonging and national identity also increases. The church is no longer merely "the church in Malaysia," but consciously begins to become "the church of Malaysia." It cares deeply about what happens on this land, including political abuse of power and corruption, tense ethnic relations, the neglect of vulnerable groups, and the imbalance in land and environmental development.

THE THEOLOGY OF LAMENT: SEEKING THE PEACE OF THE CITY

Situated long-term amid structural injustice and political manipulation, an ethnic group inevitably forms a deep-seated victim consciousness. Not every Malaysian Chinese person directly suffers explicit oppression in their daily life—for many town and village residents, grassroots interactions between different races are often relatively harmonious. The collective impression of "feeling oppressed" is, however, deeply rooted in the minds of a significant portion of the Chinese population.

With the development of social media, extreme rhetoric and fake news spread rapidly, some politicians or opinion leaders deliberately incite ethnic sentiments, causing many Chinese people and other ethnic groups to respond in similarly emotional ways. A "victim complex" thus continuously ferments within the Chinese community.

To forge genuine peace in society, one must first possess the will and resolve for peace. The long-standing impression of oppression causes many Malaysian Chinese to fall into a psychological victim complex, which they use as their fundamental perspective for viewing other ethnic groups. The Chinese community also develops its own forms of racism internally; people use derogatory terms for Malays on social media, for example, or describe them with stereotypical labels like "lazy" and "stupid." This mentality makes it difficult for the Chinese to establish genuine mutual trust and peaceful relations with the Malays and other ethnic groups. Regrettably, such emotions and attitudes sometimes also permeate the interior of the Chinese Church.

In this reality, the question becomes prominent: what is the way out for the Chinese community? Can the Chinese Church play a role of renewal and reconciliation within it? Can the church help Chinese society break out of the cycle of the victim complex and reverse racism?

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If one views this from the grand narrative of the Bible—although the early Chinese experience of leaving their hometowns and migrating to the Southern Seas cannot be simply analogized to the Israelites exiled to Babylon—both contain resonant elements such as "settling in a foreign land," "ambiguous identity," and "feeling incompletely accepted." For many ethnic Chinese settled in Malaysia, the feeling of "living in this place but being viewed as an outsider" is indeed a scar that is difficult to ignore.

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Against this background, the Old Testament "theology of lament" provides an important interpretive framework. The theology of lament is not self-pity and emotional venting. Instead, it is a profound tradition of national and communal reflection—the traumatized community honestly pours out its pain before God, acknowledges that it also has sins and blind spots and simultaneously rediscovers hope and mission through repentance and trust.

In Jeremiah 29, although the exiles in Babylon occupied a weak and marginalized position within the imperial structure, God still commanded them: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (ESV). This passage acknowledges on the one hand that the Israelites were in "a city controlled by the other." On the other hand, it points out that even in a foreign land and within an oppressive structure, they still possessed the mission to seek the peace of the city where they resided.

These words are both a comfort and a sending. The exiles are not passive characters who merely "survive temporarily." Instead, they are active participants whom God calls to forge peace in a foreign land. If the Malaysian Chinese Church can draw resources from the theology of lament, it will have the opportunity, when facing its own historical scars and social injustices, to no longer merely wallow in victimhood emotions and continuously respond to reality with extreme rhetoric and reverse racism. Instead, it can honestly articulate its pain before God, repent for its own sins and prejudices against the other, and set out anew from God's healing and sending.

Injury is an objective fact. However, if the Chinese Church remains in a victim complex for a long time, it may gradually evolve into the role of a new perpetrator. Only when the Chinese Church itself is healed by the Lord, recognizes that it is both "the injured" and "the called," and learns in lament and prayer to seek the peace of this land, can it truly become a spiritual driving force that promotes social change and prevents scars from being replicated across generations.

ETHNIC INTEGRATION IN DAILY LIFE

The preceding part discussed national structures, ethnic tensions, and public policy, with the focus falling mostly on the macro-political level. For the majority of believers, however, issues of national politics and systems often appear distant and massive. To transform public theology from an abstract concept into a practicable path of life, one must start from the daily world of ordinary believers.

Deep-rooted racist thinking is one of the greatest challenges that Malaysia's pluralistic community structure faces. Racism easily treats its own ethnic group as the center of the universe. It views resources and benefits as "exclusive to its own group," rejects or disparages the other, and continuously manufactures ethnic conflicts in the public space to stimulate internal "solidarity against the outside." In the past, political parties and certain civil groups frequently relied on inciting ethnic sentiments to win political capital and grassroots support.

> "Racism easily treats its own ethnic group as the center of the universe."

In this atmosphere, slogans such as "Malays first," "Chinese first," and "Indians first" emerge endlessly, but this logic of priority only produces more hatred and cannot bring lasting peace. To break monoculturalism, people must learn to embrace the practice of pluralistic coexistence.

Dr. Jimmy Chong Chuin Min of Seminari Theoloji Malaysia proposes the concept of "multiethnic integration in daily life," viewing it as a Christian spiritual-political action. This perspective advocates converting the ideology of "a certain ethnic group first" into a "Malaysians first" perspective. On the premise of acknowledging the subjectivity of each ethnic group, it involves learning to appreciate the goodness and beauty of other ethnic cultures. It also involves adopting attitudes and behaviors conducive to promoting ethnic harmony in everyday life situations—including how one treats others, speaks on social media, observes etiquette in public spaces, and interacts with other ethnic groups in various scenarios.

Image: Umar Al Farouq | Unsplash

These actions may seem trivial, but they are precisely the grassroots spiritual-political practices that the general public can participate in. When people change society through government policy reform, they enact a top-down structural change. When they shape the social atmosphere through the daily interactions of individuals and communities, they enact a bottom-up cultural change. The two are not in opposition but echo each other.

From this perspective, ethnic integration is actually the daily politics of Christians—striving to be reconciled with everyone in every relationship, learning to love neighbors and accommodate differences, and practicing the acceptance and respect of the other. This way of life resembles the early church situated in the torn society of the Roman Empire two thousand years ago. Through the gospel witness of loving enemies and practicing forgiveness and reconciliation, the early church gradually influenced the value orientation of the entire empire.

RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND INTERRELIGIOUS COOPERATION

Malaysia is a multireligious country. Mosques, Chinese temples, churches, and Hindu temples are scattered throughout cities and towns, and religious festivals such as Thaipusam, Vesak, and Christmas have become part of public life. In such a context, daily contact with believers of different religions is the most ordinary thing. Religious topics are also extremely sensitive, however; once exploited by those with ulterior motives, they easily manufacture tension and group antagonism.

> Religious dialogue is not a substitute arena for evangelism or preaching. Its purpose is not to convert the other party, but to acknowledge and confront the massive influence of religion in society.

Some people believe that religious dialogue is "ineffective" because it "cannot directly lead people to believe in Jesus." This view clearly misunderstands the significance of religious dialogue. Religious dialogue is not a substitute arena for evangelism or preaching. Its purpose is not to convert the other party, but to acknowledge and confront the massive influence of religion in society. Religion is culture, and it is also education. Furthermore, it intertwines with media and politics, and it exerts a profound influence on social emotions and value trends.

Dialogue does not mean abandoning one's own faith stance or understanding of truth. Rather, on the premise of firm faith, it means being willing to listen to the narratives of the other, finding space for cooperation amid differences, and forging basic consensus on common humanity and public concern.

Regarding religious freedom and rights, Malaysia has experienced multiple instances in recent years where Islamic authorities restricted the practices of other religions. For example, when authorities prohibited the use of the word "Allah" to refer to God in the Malay-language Christian Bible, they caused immense inconvenience for indigenous churches that have long used Indonesian and Malay Bibles. Incidents of this kind demonstrate that the public space for non-Islamic religions frequently faces the risk of being compressed.

In the face of such challenges, Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Daoism jointly established the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism as a platform for communication and coordination between religious communities and the government. Whenever the government implements policies that violate the spirit of religious freedom, or when extreme and discriminatory public rhetoric appears in society, the council can raise collective concern, striving to maintain basic equality and justice within the reality of multireligious coexistence.

For the Malaysian church, this is an important experience in public practice. In the past, the church was accustomed to viewing other religions as targets for evangelism and rarely considered the possibility of cooperating hand in hand with other religious groups from the perspective of civil society when jointly facing oppression and injustice. The current context compels the church to learn to form strategic cooperation with other religions regarding civil rights, religious freedom, and the public good, while maintaining its stance on gospel truth.

SPEAKING FOR THE OTHER AND CARING FOR THE LAND

Socially vulnerable groups and environmental issues are particularly prominent in contemporary Malaysia. Groups such as refugees, migrant workers, stateless persons, and the Bajau sea nomads of East Malaysia face severe economic and social acceptance challenges under biased policies. They are the most vulnerable groups at the bottom of society, possessing the weakest survival resources and social status.

The Chinese Church has been established in Malaysia for nearly two hundred years. Many of those who were initially a vulnerable group have now become a middle class equipped with education, professional expertise, and economic capacity. In addition to advocating for its own ethnic group, the Chinese Church should also begin to pay attention to the needs of the other. It should speak out for the demands of the other and pay the price for doing so. The Chinese Church not

> The current context compels the church to learn to form strategic cooperation with other religions regarding civil rights, religious freedom, and the public good, while maintaining its stance on gospel truth.

only needs to explore its own theology as a formerly diasporic people but should also begin to seek happiness and rights for other diasporic groups.

The Chinese Church must, therefore, not only develop institutions for poverty alleviation, medical care, and education in terms of social concern. It must further become a "missional church"—adopting "for others" as the identity orientation of its ultimate concern.

Land and ecology are equally part of the public mission. Malaysia possesses one of the oldest tropical rainforests in the world and is rich in natural resources. In recent decades, however, illegal logging and overdevelopment have drastically reduced the national forest area. Many regions have experienced severe ecological imbalance due to a lack of planning and regulation. Whenever the rainy season comes, floods cause an inestimable loss of human life and property, and rural indigenous people and grassroots citizens often bear the brunt.

Ecological destruction is not merely a technical or policy issue; it is a theological subject concerning "land—habitation—justice." Environmental conservation involves the safety and dignity of human habitation, and it also involves the right of other created beings to survive. From a theological perspective, this belongs to the core domain of stewardship theology.

In recent years, some churches in Malaysia have begun to consider the importance of ecotheology, calling on congregations to pay attention to environmental issues and participate in environmental protection actions. Although not many churches actively engage in the practice of ecological theology at present, this is already a starting point that one cannot ignore. It helps the church realize that "seeking the peace of this land" also includes taking responsibility for the shared destiny of the land itself and its inhabitants.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the church is not legally a "statutory public institution," and it does not need to replace the government, enterprises, or social organizations to assume all public responsibilities. From the perspective of faith, however, the church cannot avoid considering its own public positioning. The Christian faith has never taught believers merely to look out for themselves; rather, it continuously calls people to "look to the interests of others"—just as Paul states in Philippians 2:4: "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

> "Philippians 2:4: 'Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.'"

The kingdom of heaven points to the transformation of the world, and the transformation of the world has no prewritten operational formula. The church needs to narrate the present, discern needs, conduct theological reflection, and repeatedly search for practical paths that better embody the true meaning of the gospel within a constantly changing context.

The actions and reflections in which the Malaysian Chinese Church has already participated, past and present—whether regarding workplace ethics, religious dialogue, social construction, the struggle for religious rights, or ecological conservation issues—can all be viewed as a modest starting point intended to inspire further contributions. These experiences represent the continuation of contemporary local Christians conducting faith explorations within their context, and they follow the legacy of the early missionaries who brought the gospel to this land.

From the perspective of mission, what the contemporary Malaysian Chinese Church needs is no longer merely mission work focused on "preaching and sending" in the traditional sense. Instead, it must consciously place itself within a larger framework: the mission of God.

On this land, the mission of God concretely means a willingness to play the role of promoting peace, justice, and reconciliation within a pluralistic community. It means a willingness to respond to injustice and brokenness with gospel values in all areas of life and public arenas. It also means a willingness, in prayer and in action, to seek the peace of this city and the renewal of this nation.

This understanding of mission not only continues the essence of the gospel but also points the direction for the Malaysian Chinese Church to carry out its public mission in the future.

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From "Set Apart as Holy" to a "Community of Virtue"

The Inspiration of Anabaptist Public Theology for the Chinese House Church

BY YUCHENG BAI

If we briefly summarize how the Chinese house church has thought about public affairs over the past fifty years, we can broadly identify two basic approaches. I tentatively call these the "set apart as holy" approach and the "city on a hill" approach. This article attempts to trace the historical background of these two approaches, along with their respective significance and deficiencies, and proposes the "community of virtue" based on Anabaptist public theology as a third approach worthy of consideration by the Chinese house church.

SET APART AS HOLY

The "set apart as holy" approach is one of the long-standing traditions of the Chinese house church. For a considerable period, the Chinese house church was influenced by traditional pietistic theology and premillennial dispensationalism. Consequently, it not only paid little attention to political and social issues but also tended to maintain the purity of the church by withdrawing from a fallen society and oppressive political forces.

> "For a considerable period, the Chinese house church was influenced by traditional pietistic theology and premillennial dispensationalism."

In 1955, Wang Mingdao, who faced immense political pressure for refusing to join the Three Self Church, wrote the article "We—For the Sake of Faith," which can be seen as a manifesto for the house church's "set apart as holy" attitude. In the text, Wang points out that the house church refuses to cooperate with the Three-Self Movement primarily because the latter consists of the "unbelieving faction"—that is, liberals who do not acknowledge miracles or biblical inerrancy. Another part of the reason, however, is that the church should not unite with any political organization. As Wang states,

> *We not only refuse to have any union with this 'unbelieving faction' or participate in any of their organizations, but even with all who truly believe in the Lord and faithfully serve God, we can only have unity in the spirit, and we should not have any organizational form of union, because we cannot find such truth and teaching in the Bible.*[1]

Beyond the fundamentalist branch represented by Wang, other theological theories popular within the traditional house church, such as premillennial dispensationalism, also laid a theological foundation for the house church's separation from the world. The Little Flock church, for example, traditionally emphasized that believers should constantly look toward the end times to welcome the imminent return of Jesus. Social or political problems in this world not only hold limited significance for Christians but may even distract them as they pursue the life to come. During more than a decade of the most severe persecution, many house church elders who refused to join the Three-Self Movement paid a tragic price for their non-cooperation. Through their testimonies, the traditional house church further deepened this tradition of being set apart as holy—that is, maintaining a conservative theological stance and a strong spiritual atmosphere by not participating in, and even rejecting, social or political movements.

CITY ON A HILL

The "city on a hill" approach is a new path that the emerging urban house churches in China began to actively explore after 1990. Unlike the traditional rural house churches, the members of the emerging urban house churches are mostly highly educated individuals and white-collar professionals who are deeply involved in the operations of modern society. The intellectual spheres, and indeed the personal lives, of these believers are inevitably closely tied to society and politics, which naturally makes it easier for them to think more deeply about public issues. After the reform and opening up, the broader environment for the house church also improved significantly compared to the Mao era. Although the house church still has not obtained legal status, overall persecution has weakened. Some official policies can also be interpreted as encouraging religious figures to integrate religious thought with China's modernization reforms. In this context, some house churches developed a "city on a hill" vision that differs drastically from the traditional underground church.

> "Unlike the traditional rural house churches, the members of the emerging urban house churches are mostly highly educated individuals and white-collar professionals who are deeply involved in the operations of modern society."

The 2013 article "Being a City on a Hill" by Sun Yi, an elder of Beijing Shouwang Church, can perhaps be seen as a representative of this new approach. Sun points out that the Chinese house church in the new era needs to live out the public spirit of a "city on a hill" both internally and externally.[2] Internally, the underground, secretive, and small-group operational methods of the traditional house church were special countermeasures for special times, but today they are unable to help new types of churches establish a healthy and complete church order or implement professional preaching and discipleship training. Externally, Christians are not only citizens of the kingdom of heaven but also citizens of contemporary Chinese society; therefore, they should fulfill their civic duties, which include advocating for social justice. Christian intellectual and spiritual resources are also important wellsprings for social justice.

This witness to social justice can be relatively moderate, or it can involve stronger political conflict. An example of the former might include the years-long efforts of Beijing Shouwang Church to register with the Religious Affairs Bureau while refusing to join the Three-Self Movement. An example of the latter can be seen in Ark Church, founded by Yu Jie in Beijing. They combined their experiences as persecuted dissidents with the biblical spirit of empathizing with vulnerable and marginalized groups—"weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15)—to launch a series of ministries, such as the petitioners' ministry that provides services for socially marginalized populations, especially political dissidents.[3] Furthermore, in the intellectual sphere, scholars rooted in the church, such as He Guanghu, Sun Yi, and Li Quan, actively demonstrate the significance of the broader Christian tradition for social justice, modernization, and the transition to liberal constitutionalism.

THE DILEMMAS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE "CITY ON A HILL" APPROACH

The "set apart as holy" and "city on a hill" approaches each have their merits and shortcomings. In contexts of severe persecution, the profound spirituality and martyr's heart forged through suffering by churches that persist in the "set apart as holy" path are commendable. However, when taken to an extreme, this path easily breeds a narrow-mindedness and anti-intellectualism that turns a deaf ear to the outside world, and thus it often fails to encourage Christians to witness to the holistic renewal of the gospel for all of society. The "city on a hill" approach is indeed more suitable in many respects for the context of urban churches during the era of reform and opening up, but over the past decade or so, the limitations of this approach have also become increasingly apparent.

"Internally, the underground, secretive, and small-group operational methods of the traditional house church were special countermeasures for special times, but today they are unable to help new types of churches establish a healthy and complete church order or implement professional preaching and discipleship training."

First, the successful operation of the "city on a hill" model relies on the secular regime implementing relatively lenient religious policies. The Reformed churches that inspired this vision historically relied on a close church–state partnership in which ecclesiastical and civil authorities acted in concert. Whether in Geneva or New England, the public influence of the church was inseparable from the political order of the time. Although the Dutch Reformed tradition from the twentieth century onward has made significant revisions to this traditional model, it generally still requires the secular regime to guarantee the basic rights of the church and to be willing to cooperate with it. This presents the "city on a hill" vision with a practical problem in the context of the Chinese house church: if the church lacks institutional guarantees and public space, how can it continue to participate in public life in an open manner? The Reformed churches in China have never enjoyed this kind of "preferential treatment," not to mention that over the past decade, the already limited public space for the Chinese house church has been rapidly disappearing. In other words, a major objective condition for the "city on a hill" vision was never stable to begin with, and today it no longer exists.

When the secular regime no longer allows the church space to speak out on public issues, and is even compressing the church's basic space for worship, if the church wishes to continue practicing the "city on a hill" vision, does it first need the government to adopt a more lenient and cooperative church-state relationship? When there is no hope of the government changing its mind, continuing to promote the "city on a hill" vision through methods such as public advocacy will inevitably lead to conflict with the secular regime. At this

point, must the church maintain this conflicting and antagonistic attitude, even at a tragic cost, simply because the calling of the "city on a hill" vision lies ahead?

In the midst of conflict, the second deficiency of the "city on a hill" approach also emerges. Although the theological sources of the "city on a hill" vision are generally the Reformed and Puritan traditions, for many churches, this tradition often entered the Chinese house church only after being filtered through American fundamentalism, via missionaries and theologians influenced by fundamentalism, such as Stephen Tong.[4] This has caused some Chinese Reformed house churches to inherit the weaknesses of American fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism consistently carries a very strong combative mentality, and internally it always pursues theological uniformity. These two aspects complement each other. When the broader environment is no longer friendly, fundamentalism easily establishes an absolutized friend-enemy relationship, viewing itself as the last pure land.[5] This mode of operation often brings harm to the congregants' spiritual and mental health.

ANABAPTIST PUBLIC THEOLOGY AND THE "COMMUNITY OF VIRTUE"

So, as the Chinese house church undergoes intellectual and theological enlightenment while simultaneously facing persecution once again, can the church combine the strengths of the "set apart as holy" and "city on a hill" approaches to forge a third path of public theology? I propose here the "community of virtue," based on postliberal theology and inspired by the Anabaptist tradition, as a possible approach. It does not seek to negate the church's concern for public affairs but rather reminds us that the church's public witness does not primarily consist in proposing a certain political program, but in whether the church itself becomes a community shaped by the gospel.

In the contemporary American context, important representatives of Anabaptist political theology include John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas. They criticize some churches for sacrificing unique testimonies of the Christian faith in order to enter the social mainstream and gain stronger social influence. In Hauerwas's view, the primary ethical responsibility of the church is not to persuade the government to adopt a certain policy or to elect a certain candidate to the White House, but to "let the church be the church."[6]

"The church's public witness does not primarily consist in proposing a certain political program, but in whether the church itself becomes a community shaped by the gospel."

This does not mean that the church can escape the world, nor does it mean that the church has no responsibility regarding public issues. On the contrary, Hauerwas is concerned with how the church exists in the world in a manner different from the world. The political difference between the "world" and the "church" is not merely that the former supports one policy and the latter supports another, but rather a difference in their basic logic of operation. The world often measures success by power, efficiency, profit, and victory or defeat; the church, however, is a community that learns that "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Matthew 23:11). In the church, Christians learn a public life different from the world through humility, mutual service, patience, forgiveness, and love. The primary identity of the church is, therefore, not as a participant in specific political issues, but as a "community of virtue" shaped by specific character.

Hauerwas once pointed out that the church is a place that tells, practices, and listens to the story of Israel and Jesus. If the church wants to enable itself and the world to truly hear this story, it must become a specific kind of community: living out peace and truth in a world full of lies and fear, and patiently caring for widows, the poor, and orphans in a world full of injustice and violence. In other words, the church's care is not merely social welfare in the general sense, but a concrete way for Christians to practice virtue and learn what justice is.[7]

This also responds to a common question: does this church-centered virtue ethics still count as a public theology? At first glance, Hauerwas seems to distinguish church ethics from worldly ethics very clearly, which makes it easy to understand his approach as lacking public character. I believe, however, that this character ethics still holds significance for public theology not because it can be translated into a set of secular theories, but because the church itself is inevitably a public community.

The public nature of the church does not depend solely on whether it holds public lectures, issues public statements, or directly influences a certain policy. As long as the church gathers, worships, governs, serves one another, and opens itself to people in the world, its way of life is already bearing witness in the public square. In other words, the public engagement of the church depends not only on what theories or political resources

it exports outward, but also on how the community of the church truly exists in the world.

Similarly, even if the church does not speak out directly on political issues, it still possesses a political nature. If we understand politics broadly as how a community distributes and balances power, cares for the welfare of its members, and shapes public character, then the church itself is a political community. The church must face questions such as the legitimacy of the authority of pastors and elders, how power is balanced, how resources are distributed, how the weak are protected, and how dissenting views are heard. It is in this sense that Hauerwas says, "The church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic."[8]

THE INSPIRATION OF THE "COMMUNITY OF VIRTUE" APPROACH

This church-centered "community of virtue" approach of the Anabaptists holds great significance for the house church as it faces a new round of oppression. I venture to highlight three points. First, Anabaptist public theology redirects the ethical focus of the church back to the church itself without sacrificing the political and public nature of the church. This public theology does not need, therefore, to rely on the secular regime to grant the church space to participate in public affairs; instead, it can still practice public and political affairs by building the church into a community of virtue. As the house church faces a new round of persecution, Anabaptist public theology ensures that the house church does not abandon public theology and political theology simply because it lacks the space for public advocacy. Although the broader environment is not optimistic, if the church can think about public and political issues internally—such as where the governing legitimacy of pastors and elders comes from, how the church internally grants and balances the power of leaders, and whether the church should practice freedom of speech and religious tolerance—then the church can still deepen

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the intellectual dimensions of public theology and political theology, and can even serve as a precedent for social and political transition. If the broader environment changes in the future, the intellectual resources accumulated during this time can contribute to larger social movements.

Second, even if the broader environment does not improve for a long time, Anabaptist public theology can still give Christians hope and meaning in their participation in public affairs. From the Anabaptist perspective, the ultimate focal point of the church's public witness is not whether it has changed certain specific policies, but whether the church, through these witnesses, has cultivated certain characters or virtues essential for Christians. Some of the church's public witnesses may fail to change the social status quo or specific policies, but if, through participating in these witnesses, the church congregation cultivates the courage to express its own legitimate needs, the universal love necessary to cooperate with others, and the intellect required to study social and public issues, then the church has already reaped the most precious treasure. Even if the church temporarily chooses not to speak out in a high-profile manner because the environment is too dangerous, it can still practice the virtue of wisdom as a result. Even in an unoptimistic environment, therefore, the public life of the church remains meaningful. Conversely, the public life of the church does not necessarily have to take changing policies as its mission, and thus it can provide a certain degree of flexibility under specific circumstances.

Third, because the public and political witness of the church must be grounded in the church's own virtues, Anabaptist public theology also demands that the church live out internally the ethical ideals it proclaims in public. If a church has a vision to make the surrounding society more just through public engagement, then that church must first be willing to cultivate the virtue of justice internally, and the church's own operations must first reflect this vision of justice. When participating in public witness, some churches sometimes fall into a vicious cycle. They claim to establish independent schools and educational institutions for the sake of religious freedom, but when implementing these measures internally, they use highly coercive methods to implicitly force the congregation to give generously. If the church calls for freedom of conscience in

the public square but lacks patience with and protection for different opinions in its internal governance, this discrepancy itself will weaken its public witness. Anabaptist public theology is, in my view, an effective witness that prevents this inconsistency between the internal and the external. After all, to quote the American Christian ethicist Rosemary Radford Ruether, "an organization that pursues democracy must also be democratic internally; a movement that fights for freedom must itself be free."

Even churches that lack such social reform ambitions externally can still benefit from the consciousness of a community of virtue. In recent years, many house churches have been attempting to institutionalize, transitioning from the "rule of man" to the "rule of law" or "constitutional rule." The institutionalization process of some churches, however, is not a triumph of the spirit of the rule of law, but a new round of high-pressure politics. During the institutionalization process, for example, some churches redefine gender and ministry roles; if they lack sufficient communication and pastoral sensitivity, this may cause sisters who have participated in ministry for years to feel excluded, thereby hurting the feelings of the congregation and the traditions of the church. Even churches without such problems, because of their short histories, often feel overwhelmed by the dazzling array of church order traditions when institutionalizing, and thus they swallow them whole and experiment blindly.

In fact, both constitutional theory and the theology of the community of virtue emphasize that political communities generally require certain intangible qualities beyond legal texts to guarantee the healthy operation of constitutionalism. The core of constitutionalism (especially from the perspective of Anglo-American conservatism) is not the charters written by leaders, but the self-evident values—that is, the character of the community—that the political community has forged over many years through the continuous practice of community life. Here, the path of virtue ethics can inspire some house churches to focus not only on charters and regulations during institutionalization, but even more on maintaining the virtues that the church already possesses or ought to possess.

CONCLUSION

Because Anabaptist theology originated in Europe and took root and blossomed in the United States, applying it to the context of the Chinese church requires considerable localization and contextualization. Yet I

> "How can the church first become an alternative community that the world can see?"

believe this effort is worthwhile. I offer this article as a modest starting point to invite further discussion; it is not a negation of other approaches but rather points out that there is not only one approach. In a context where public space is restricted and church institutionalization is still taking shape, the "community of virtue" reminds the Chinese house church that public theology is not only about how the church speaks to the world, but also about whether the church itself lives out a life of peace, justice, humility, and mutual service. This is not a rejection of existing approaches, but an invitation for the church to rethink: when it cannot always change the external world, how can the church first become an alternative community that the world can see? CSJ

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Cultivating Peace

A Public Theology Practice in Post-2019 Hong Kong[1]

BY WAI LUEN KWOK

BACKGROUND OF THE "CULTIVATING PEACE" PROJECT

Between 2012 and 2019, the social movements that occurred in Hong Kong presented two major unresolved public theology problems for the Christian context—the first was the problem of relevance, and the second was the problem of identity. Insisting on a Christian identity created difficulties for participation, while overemphasizing relevancy also posed a significant challenge. Public theology is often a "theology by the public"—public issues actually dictate our thinking. Christians appear to hold their own faith positions, but a closer look reveals that their methods and goals do not respond with a gospel-based theology. This is not genuine public theology.

After 2020, more than 300,000 people from Hong Kong migrated to the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Taiwan. Following the social movements, the church, the family, and the society fell into division. This division exists not only between different political positions but also between new immigrants from the mainland and the local younger generation.

“The ‘Cultivating Peace’ project attempts to encompass psychological, spiritual, social, and communal dimensions, which peacebuilding research recognizes as essential keys for achieving long-term social peace.”

Starting in October 2022, we collaborated with numerous educational and social institutions to plan and promote a “Cultivating Peace” project. Through participation in social services, social research, and art activities, we reflect on the true meaning of peace and put it into practice in the community. We promote the concept of peacebuilding among Christians and the general public to bring about social transformation and renewal.

The “Cultivating Peace” project attempts to encompass psychological, spiritual, social, and communal dimensions, which peacebuilding research recognizes as essential keys for achieving long-term social peace. It helps participants (both Christians and non-Christians) explore four dimensions of peace—inner peace, interpersonal peace, communal peace, and social peace. It shares concepts such as compassion, peace, truth, and justice with participants, and it provides them with experiential and service activities so they can understand peace and build peace with one another.

In this project, we collaborate with different educational organizations, social welfare institutions, churches, art groups, and individual artists to adopt a “relational-transformative” approach to peacebuilding. This relationship-oriented practice keeps us on the track of a public theology attempt, rather than merely a political action.

Using the “Cultivating Peace” project as an example, this article explores whether a “public theology of peace” based on Christian narrative is a theologically sound attempt in the current public context of Hong Kong. It also explains why we should position ourselves as a “public theology project,” and it introduces how narrative practice helps us develop and formulate this project.

REFLECTIONS ON BEING A PUBLIC THEOLOGY PROJECT: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE “SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE” AND PUBLIC THEOLOGY

The term “public theology” is clearly a product of theological discourses in the United States. In the era of the rise of global Christianity, however, a public theology with American theological roots may be questioned as an expression of colonial power. Paul Chung, for example, calls for a “postcolonial reorientation” of public theology. He perceives this reorientation as a resistance to the dominance of Western colonial interpretations of history and culture.

Following this logic, the long-standing public theology tradition in the United States, which endorses the separation of church and state, democracy, and a liberal society, may be challenged by non-Western intellectuals as hegemonic. Alexander Chow, for example, argues that, undoubtedly, theological arguments related to the separation of church and state and the freedom of religion (at least in the ways many Western societies conceive them) have almost no relevance to the Chinese political and religious situation.

Under this postcolonial ideology and critique, we find that the traditional public theology of establishing a civil society may become a problematic project. The renowned Chinese mainland religious scholar Zhuo Xinping, for example, emphasizes that the separation of church and state is a political choice of the church and Christians. It is a theological construct (like liberation theology and Minjung theology), not an unchangeable core of the Christian faith. In his view, Christians throughout history need to make realistic political choices, and these choices can still align with authentic Christian faith. “State dominance and church abidance” (*zhengzhu jiaocong*) is the reality of church-state relations and the public engagement of religious institutions in China.

The aforementioned “postcolonial reorientation” destabilizes the equivalence between public theology and theological efforts to develop a civil society in an environment where church and state are separated. If we follow this line of thought, however, postcolonial experience and critique may become a means of self-legitimization for establishment political powers. It may subvert another important perspective of postcolonial reflection: postcolonialism is not only about criticizing Western colonial power, but it also includes a sensitivity to the voices of marginalized groups and victims. In other words, while the separation of church and state might be a product of Western or American political thought, the sensitivity of postcolonial public theology to social differences and marginalized experiences makes it an inevitably pluralistic project. It recognizes that the political reality of its context requires it to chart out a unique public theology proposal, but it should not accept the dominance of a certain power in society and use that as a theological norm.

Public theology, therefore, should be self-critical, open, and dialogical, aiming to promote a kind of civil society.

Although Max Stackhouse always emphasizes the "universal," which may seem highly offensive to a postcolonial mindset, this concept can be translated as seeking common ground, common sense, and values for people from different cultures and beliefs to live together constructively.

In short, in the Hong Kong and Chinese contexts, public theology discussions should remain sensitive to cultural, historical, and social backgrounds. We need to discern, furthermore, the direction of power operations and pay attention to the voices of marginalized groups. Overall, we seek to promote the well-being of different members of society through theological discourse and practice, which in turn develops civil society.

REFLECTIONS ON BEING A PUBLIC THEOLOGY PROJECT: THE CHURCH AS GOD'S "COLONY"

Besides postcolonial considerations, public theology may also be problematic because it is theologically "basically accommodationist—that is, Constantinian." This is the view of Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon. The problem with Constantinianism is that the church comes to serve the state rather than the Christian God.

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> "'Colony' is a metaphor here, symbolizing a church that actively engages the unbelieving world with the call to follow Christ. It offers an alternative way of life rather than following the political agenda of the state."

On the contrary, Hauerwas and Willimon encourage: "The church exists today as 'resident aliens,' an adventurous colony in a society of unbelief."

"Colony" is a metaphor here, symbolizing a church that actively engages the unbelieving world with the call to follow Christ. It offers an alternative way of life rather than following the political agenda of the state.

All these theological critiques are highly insightful and important. When applied to non-American or non-liberal democratic societies, however, they may create unexpected difficulties for authentic Christian life. Some Hong Kong theologians, for instance, have used the concept of "Constantinianism" to argue that the electoral system should not be a Christian concern, and that Christians should not take politics seriously. Unfortunately, these theologians did not offer clear alternative Christian actions during political crises, even though they claimed that Christianity is by nature an alternative political entity.

On another front, the theological concept of the "church as a colony" may cause misunderstanding or even resentment in non-Western contexts. Many non-Western countries have painful and disturbing colonial histories. Describing the church as a "colony" projects a theological message that is completely different from the original intent of the metaphor.

Nevertheless, the importance of the "colony" metaphor lies in its emphasis on the mission of the church. It is a sign of an alternative "way of life together." In other words, when articulating the nature of Christian life, one should prefer to use "aliens" or "sojourners." An alternative "way of life together" indicates a connection, rather than a disconnection, between Christians and their non-Christian compatriots. In this sense, it is always essentially a public theology.

As Hauerwas states, "the virtues needed can only be displayed by drawing on a particular community's account of the good, and that account necessarily takes the form of a narrative." For non-Christian societies in missionary work, the "good" of the Christian faith can only be understood by translating it into native languages. Translation is not a technical task, but rather the work of adding, or even

integrating, Christian stories with the native stories of non-Christian societies. The "good" and "virtues" of the Christian faith will enter into dialogue with the traditional narratives of non-Christians. In some instances, non-Christian narratives will be adopted by Christians and integrated with Christian narratives; in other instances, Christian narratives will challenge native traditions and call for change. The Christian faith is "intertextual," joining the continuous narrative of the native people in non-Christian societies. The dialogue, discernment, and witness of Christians in these societies will inevitably make this a public theology project.

NARRATIVE PRACTICE AS A PUBLIC THEOLOGY PROJECT

Recognizing that narrative is the core human experience and a characteristic of Christian life, the "Cultivating Peace" project explores a narrative practice of peacebuilding in Hong Kong. Narrative practice guides the project in the following ways:

> "Recognizing that narrative is the core human experience and a characteristic of Christian life, the 'Cultivating Peace' project explores a narrative practice of peacebuilding in Hong Kong."

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Narrative as Method

Narrative practice is the methodological orientation for the public engagement of the "Cultivating Peace" project. It guides the project to remain sensitive to differences and minority groups, and it helps the project become a practice that forms a Christian "habitus," rather than merely a discourse. First, narrative theology allows us to construct public theology through "critical correlation" as a hermeneutical method. Second, narrative theology allows public theology to be a "habitus." These two models help us illustrate how narrative practice frames the theoretical contours and methods of the peacebuilding project.

Hermeneutical "critical correlation" as a method requires public theology practitioners to remain sensitive to the differences of others and to empathize with their needs. Our lives are "living human documents." To borrow hermeneutical language, these "horizons" must be merged through a process of understanding and empathy to produce meaningful dialogue.

Living together while seeking common ground and preserving differences is always the goal of peacebuilding work. From a methodological perspective, narrative provides a way for peacebuilding participants to respect differences and gain understanding and empathy at the cultural, historical, social, psychological, metaphysical, and ethical levels.

Furthermore, narrative as hermeneutics reminds us that story is a human condition: "We live out of our own story," and story "is how we relate to others." Through stories, we realize that we share bonds and common ground with others. At the same time, it reminds us that the church is the fellowship of a common story regarding the salvation and hope of Jesus Christ. In short, it informs Christian peacebuilders to draw resources from the Christian heritage on the one hand, and it asserts that human beings share a common destiny even when in conflict on the other.

The embrace of differences and the affirmation of communal connections allow the narrative practice of peacebuilding to adopt "narrative practice" from psychotherapy as a framework. In narrative practice, counseling conversations shift from a "language of deficit" to a language of "reflexivity" and "partnership." In addition, narrative practice adopts a strategy of "externalizing the problem," viewing the problem not as the person, but as something the person faces. It helps us "name" the problem, enabling us to describe it in detail and realize that it is a product of circumstances. In other words, "externalization" reconstructs problem-saturated descriptions into descriptions with new possibilities for life and relationships.

Narrative as hermeneutics provides a framework for peacebuilding work, while narrative as "habitus" makes the current peacebuilding effort not merely a task, but a cultivation of our minds and hearts. Cultivating habits is an effort to build spirituality. It is a life journey of being open to the Holy Spirit, growing in Christ, and living in the communion of saints.

Narrative as "habitus" reminds us that Christian peacebuilding work is a cultivation of spirituality. It is not limited to conflict resolution; rather, it strives to

cultivate a habit or everyday life of peace among people.

Through narrative as "habitus," the "Cultivating Peace" project recognizes that peace is a multidimensional experience. It includes inner peace, interpersonal peace, communal peace, and public peace.

Biblical Narratives and Metaphors

Narratives in the Bible can be articulated as foundational metaphors for peacebuilding work. Metaphors are widely recognized as important elements in peacebuilding. As John Paul Lederach and Angela Lederach point out, metaphors and metaphor-phenomena like sound, music, and poetry can facilitate the generation of "ideas, suggestions, and qualities that stimulate the imagination about the challenges and mechanisms by which social healing may be observed and perhaps understood." Metaphors are always summaries of narratives and stories. They are powerful precisely because they are shortcuts to core meanings and profound insights.

With the metaphor of the "Tower of Babel," the project team describes "losing hope" and "fear" as a saturation of narrative. Division, hopelessness, or power cohesion becomes the grand narrative that dominates people. It saturates their lifeworld. The metaphor of Babel also deconstructs power narratives and the cognitive error of mistaking peacebuilding for "pacification." With the metaphor of "Pentecost," it explains that constructive and creative life relationships among people are achieved through different, diverse, yet mutually understandable and inclusive narratives. With the metaphors of "Noah's Ark" and the "Eschaton," they inform the importance of individual agency and the nature of hope in peace work.

Narrative Practice for People Affected by Conflicts and for Conflict Resolution

In a period when justice cannot be fully achieved, narrative practice records the voices and stories of the suffering and the oppressed. Through these stories,

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the intercession of Christians serves as witness and lament, mediating painful memories with God's salvation and justice. Besides their theological significance, these narratives are crucial for achieving restorative justice and reconciliation in a divided society.

At the same time, narrative practice enables people to express and acknowledge their inner suffering and anger. It also helps them learn to be active listeners to build inner peace. More importantly, narrative practice helps people gain the capacity to discern and reflect on conflicts.

Although many conflict resolution methods in strategic peacebuilding focus on the objective analysis of conflicting issues, contexts, and parties, Lederach recognizes that the processes of social healing and reconciliation are not as linear as politicians or officials suppose. They encourage us to understand social healing through a narrative lens. We should realize that human beings construct meaning based on their responses to the past, present, and future. Our lives consist, therefore, of multiple realities that are simultaneously present in the ways we make sense of our lives, our place, and our purpose. In the context of protracted conflicts, these realities create a complex nexus of conflicting experiences. Lederach thus opts for "hearing voices" rather than imposing a linear concept of conflict resolution.

In the "Cultivating Peace" project, we organize "sharing and listening groups" for participants. The participants share their experiences in conflicts and learn to engage in empathetic listening to others' stories—others' stories are not limited to those of people with different political views, but they also include the stories of marginalized groups in the community.

Narrative Practice as a Ministry of "Being With"

Finally, the narrative practice of the "Cultivating Peace" project emphasizes the importance of the voices of marginalized groups and the primacy of their experiences and agency. We emphasize the strengths and agency of marginalized groups rather than their problems. Narrative peace work at the communal level can empower groups and position peace work as a ministry of "being with," rather than a top-down "help."

The concept of "being with" helps us recognize that we may not completely fix the problems of violence, but we should and must live with others. The best way to live out a meaningful life is to support others in exercising their strengths and enjoying their lives for their own sake.

In the "Cultivating Peace" project, we aim to develop the relationships, creativity, partnership, compassion, and joy of community members. We trust that

empowering people to regain control of their lives can, in turn, form a cycle of "multi-empowerment," which enlightens, enriches, and empowers the "helpers."

CONCLUSION

Peace has four dimensions: inner peace, interpersonal peace, communal peace, and social peace. Based on these four dimensions, we can see what we can do or what the people around us need. The quickest to achieve are likely inner peace and interpersonal peace, which are also crucial cornerstones. If we lack inner peace, we cannot endure or face people who hold different opinions from ours. Regarding the communal dimension, the church can pay attention to the needs of different groups around it. The "Cultivating Peace" project also conducts community work alongside churches, but the focus is not on what the church wants to do; rather, it is on the church finding the constituent members within those communities, listening to their needs, observing their situations, and then discovering what they want. Churches like to engage in social care, often rushing to distribute materials or conduct visits, yet failing to see the true needs of the community. After completing these tasks, the church forms no real relationship with the community. When the "Cultivating Peace" project collaborates with churches, it encourages church workers to live with community groups, chat with them, and listen to their needs. The church is no longer just a partner or neighbor to the community; instead, it starts by purely offering help, observing their strengths, and utilizing those strengths through ministry. This transforms them from people receiving help from the church into partners of the church within the community.

As a narrative practice of public theology, the "Cultivating Peace" project aims to do more than resolve individual conflicts. It serves as a cultivation of everyday spirituality, allowing people to experience renewal across the four dimensions of inner peace, interpersonal peace, communal peace, and social peace. It articulates and strives for the common good and well-being of the entire society, though, of course, it may still face suspicion and challenges from various sides.

Peace in Chinese culture, for example, often means requiring others to be the same as oneself, whereas biblical peace means being able to live with people who are different. Jin Guantao argues that Chinese culture is an ultra-stable structure; people need stability and immovability, but this immovability poses a significant challenge to Christianity. Although the history of Christianity in China can be traced back to the Tang dynasty, it is still viewed today as a foreign culture or an alien entity, and alien entities bring instability. When we lack self-awareness, a stable culture can create major problems, turning into a state that appears inclusive but is actually quite exclusive. The Taiwanese scholar Chang Hao believes that Christianity offers great help to Chinese culture because Chinese culture lacks a consciousness of the dark side of human nature—that is, it does not gaze into the dark dimensions of humanity. Christianity possesses abundant resources because Christian peace is not merely harmony or silence; rather, it involves confronting sin, seeing the problems, and finding a way out through the gospel. This is, on the one hand, a reflection on public theology, and on the other hand, a reflection on culture.

The Chinese church is facing the challenge of being further marginalized or fully assimilated. As a marginalized and suspected group, the Christian church's resistance should be something more than dissent. The church should not limit its practice of peace to practical nonviolence. Peace is more than a mode of action. The gospel's vision of peace is a meaningful resistance because it enshrines cultural transformation and reconciliation. We seek the common good rather than threaten national security. The church can articulate an authentic and impactful public theology only by upholding the gospel's vision of peace for the well-being of the people.

> "Christianity possesses abundant resources because Christian peace is not merely harmony or silence; rather, it involves confronting sin, seeing the problems, and finding a way out through the gospel."

[1] This article is compiled based on the author's lecture at Duke Divinity School in the United States on February 13, 2024, and related materials.

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Anti-Child Prostitution Movement

Justice for the Marginalized and Public Theology

BY KEN-PA CHIN

In the 1990s, the Christian community in Taiwan launched a movement to save young girls from prostitution in the name of "justice for the marginalized." The phenomenon of child prostitution is closely related to human trafficking, the collapse of social values, poverty in Indigenous families, and the violence and inhumanity of the sex industry. Child prostitution reflected the experiences of the marginalized, and it called for a "faith that stands with the weak" to take action. Consequently, wave after wave of anti-child prostitution social movements emerged, primarily led by Christians. These movements ranged from street protests to the placement of young girls, and from nationwide covenant signings to the enactment of the *Child and Juvenile Welfare and Rights Protection Act*.

"JUSTICE FOR THE MARGINALIZED"

To confront the situation of the marginalized and to help "justice for the marginalized" cry out, Chris Nan-chou Su, the convener of the Anti-Child Prostitution Action Project, quoted two passages from the Book of Amos in the Bible:

> *You who afflict the righteous...and turn aside the needy...Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time, for it is an evil time...But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:12–13, 24; ESV)*

Su bitterly criticized the distorted concept of justice held by Christians. They often sought only superficial fairness and merely considered fulfilling their personal social obligations under the principle of "legality." They failed to confront the inherent unfairness that already existed in society. Justice frequently tilted toward the strong in society. That is, society defined justice according to the logic of the strong under the law of the jungle. As a result, society further ignored and sacrificed the marginalized who truly needed justice to be upheld.[1]

What is "justice for the marginalized"? Why is the justice of the weak the true justice?

The so-called "marginalized" are not merely severely neglected in terms of power and status, nor are they simply poor and helpless in the distribution of wealth. Their primary difficulty lies in their inability to change their own circumstances. Furthermore, society often considers their circumstances and sacrifices to be reasonable. In fact, superficial justice only causes them to repeatedly drown in their original plight. Justice only manifests among those who have not suffered losses, but its concrete results have nothing to do with the people who truly need assistance. Su pointed out that the experiences and fate of child prostitutes accurately portray the reality that the marginalized face.

He used the "Eight Beatitudes" from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount to interpret the justice of the weak:

> *Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. (Matthew 5:2–10; ESV)*

This is a passage recorded in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, and people call it the "Magna Carta of the Kingdom of Heaven." Scholars frequently interpret it as the core values that Christianity upholds.

Although Su did not explicitly deduce an argument from this passage, we can infer his core concept. Christians follow Jesus and make the realization of the kingdom of heaven their lifelong ambition. These eight value beliefs precisely subvert the assertion that the strong bear witness to justice.

The "blessedness" discussed here is not a blessing or reward in the ordinary sense. Whether it is being poor in spirit, mourning, being meek, hungering, being merciful, being pure in heart, making peace, or being persecuted, each represents an expression of weakness. In other words—it embodies a set of values that differ from the world's emphasis on "strength" or "victory." It expresses the beliefs that are severely neglected yet indispensable to the concept of justice. Without this belief or basic assertion, so-called "justice" merely legitimizes a justice based on power or violence. It repays "evil with evil," and ultimately, all victories have nothing to do with the weak. The weak inherently lack or do not possess the ability to display such power. They have always been helpless, incapable, and powerless. When our concern for justice manifests in the experiences and treatment of the weak, justice can truly be upheld. No one needs justice more than the weak, and they do not even have the ability to articulate demands for justice. Therefore, the weak should not remain ignorant of the justice they deserve, yet we treat them with silence or contempt. In other words, we should actively stand on the side of the weak. As people gladly quote from Haruki Murakami: "Between a high, solid wall and an egg that breaks against it, I will always stand on the side of the egg." This aligns exactly with what Chou Lien-hua strongly voiced at the October 1989 seminar "Care for the Marginalized and Support for Liu Hsia": "a faith that stands with the weak."

Christians establish human dignity on the basis that humans possess the image of God. The difficult circumstances and unfortunate experiences that trap the marginalized often damage their human dignity. This means they "fall short of the

"Whether it is being poor in spirit, mourning, being meek, hungering, being merciful, being pure in heart, making peace, or being persecuted, each represents an expression of weakness. In other words—it embodies a set of values that differ from the world's emphasis on 'strength' or 'victory.'"

image of God." Whether they are laborers, women, Indigenous people, the elderly, children, or the disabled, and whether they are poor or rich, or differ in skin color or language, God created all people, and all possess the image of God. Economic development and competition cannot serve as reasons to sacrifice these marginalized groups.

Taiwan in the 1980s was an era when traditional values collapsed rapidly. What Taiwan called "modernization" at that time was the social manifestation of highly booming commercial and industrial development. It accompanied the pace of economic takeoff. The phrase "Taiwanese money floods up to the ankles" drove the entire society to act with the attitude that "profit takes precedence" and "victory is above all." Consequently, in terms of values, society exhibited the phenomenon of "laughing at poverty but not at prostitution." In the experiences and circumstances of child prostitutes, we saw a microcosm of the collapse of Taiwanese social values. These phenomena included the prostitution of young girls, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, violent coercion, dropping out of school and running away from home, monetary temptation, and extravagant hedonism.

In fact, the various phenomena of collapsing social values mentioned above originated from "structural social problems." Society sacrificed, therefore, the marginalized within this structure, and this allowed a minority interest class to reap massive profits. Young girls suffered violence, threats, exploitation, and restricted freedom in the sex industry. Human traffickers, madams, and pimps ruthlessly and heartlessly sacrificed the girls' education, growth, and bodily autonomy, and they extracted massive profits from them. The problem of "child prostitutes" was the worst example of the overall collapse of values in this society. It involved the worst aspects of human nature, such as underage girls, Indigenous people, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking. Therefore, saving child prostitutes did not merely target the "child prostitutes" themselves. It involved all groups of people in Taiwanese society: clients, parents, teachers, businesspeople, police, judicial personnel, and government officials.

"The problem of 'child prostitutes' was the worst example of the overall collapse of values in this society."

Christians believe that truth exists in this world. Truth does not exist merely as truth, but people seek it as goodness. Truth only becomes real when people can practice it as goodness. The truth of the weak is the goodness of the weak. The goodness of the weak is not their inherent goodness. On the contrary, truth provokes us to love, to sacrifice, and to die, not for the strong, but for the weak. Showing strength rather than weakness actually demonstrates an unwillingness to surrender to the truth of ultimate goodness and ultimate love. When Christians surrender to God, they show weakness to the weak. This reveals that we are even more vulnerable than the weak, because we always hesitate before the truth.

Su mentioned that Christians could not turn a blind eye to the distorted phenomenon and the cruel reality that Taiwan society actually had up to 60,000 "child prostitutes." "Caring for the marginalized" is the fundamental responsibility of Christians. In particular, trafficked "child prostitutes" are the "most marginalized among the marginalized." Christians should act on their faith and conscience to do their part for those "child prostitutes" who have fallen into the fiery pit. This is the concrete cry of justice for the marginalized, and it challenges the religious morality and the bottom line of conscience of all Christians.[2]

THE "ANTI-CHILD PROSTITUTION" MOVEMENT

If the goal is only to do "charity," ordinary people can donate some money within their means, but this will not bring about any transformation in the overall values of society. On the contrary, only actions that awaken "justice" can truly put an end to the continuous tragedy of young child prostitutes. Su therefore proposed a strategic concept for reconstructing social engineering. He invited people from all walks of life and various active roles in society to participate in this "anti-child prostitution movement." The movement shifted thus from a negative or passive "rescue movement" toward a positive or active "opposition movement." It achieved a reconstruction of social morality and transformed the act of doing "charity" into an action that upholds "justice."

Su provided an important "strategic" concept. The design of this "strategy" was highly critical. Its purpose was to include everyone in participating in this movement, because justice is a matter for the entire society, rather than a matter for individuals who suffer unfortunate experiences. This movement aimed to bring about an awakening of social values or conscience. Only in this way could the movement be considered truly successful. Su asked Liang Wang-hui:

> *If the Garden of Hope Foundation truly wants to start paying attention to the issue of 'justice' and carry out institutional reforms, rather than merely doing 'charity' like running a halfway house, you must be mentally prepared. When you do 'charity,' everyone will clap, praise you, and encourage you. But when you start promoting 'justice,' you will face challenges, and some people will even oppose you.*[3]

Image: GuruXOX | Adobe Stock

This highlights the major difference between "charity" and "justice." If it is "charity," this means that only those who care or are related participate when their abilities or conditions permit. In other words, the vast majority of people stand by and watch, so everyone will clap, praise, and encourage. "Justice" is different. It makes clear that no one can remain indifferent to this value. On the contrary, it draws everyone in, because it seeks to confront or change the existing system or attitude. The problem of child prostitution violated the basic moral bottom line of human nature, and the movement had only one goal: "Let Taiwanese society no longer have child prostitutes!" Therefore, to solve the problem more fundamentally and eliminate this social ugliness, it was absolutely necessary to combine the forces of all sectors and fields. The movement invited government and non-governmental organizations to join, so that the effort would not fail due to a lack of strength.

Su believed that to thoroughly solve the problem of child prostitution, one must target the mechanism of the entire industry and launch a comprehensive anti-child prostitution movement. On the one hand, the movement strengthened moral appeals (such as humanity, religion, corporate image, society, family ethics, and health and hygiene). On the other hand, it mobilized social resources (such as tourism, hotels, the catering industry, the military, the education sector, the media, the business sector, elected representatives, law enforcement agencies, health and medical care, the arts and culture sector, the entertainment industry, religious circles, political parties, and social groups). Together, they formed an anti-child prostitution network to comprehensively and effectively prevent the recurrence of the child prostitution problem.[4]

Consequently, Su, who possessed experience in social movements and expertise in architecture, designed a reconstruction project for the anti-child prostitution movement. This project included three parts: the "source" (*guantou*), the "end of pipe" (*guanmo*), and the "processing" (*guanzhong*). The source referred to the "supply source" (the young girls and their families). The processing referred to promoting collective social awakening and participation (social advocacy and education). The end of pipe was the prevention system (shelter).[5] He believed that to construct a comprehensive anti-child prostitution social network and provide concrete goals that were easy for all levels of society to engage with, the Garden of Hope Foundation needed to take specific actions. In addition to strengthening and expanding the existing halfway houses for child prostitutes, the foundation's short-term plan involved inviting all sectors to sign an anti-child prostitution covenant, promoting daisy care activities (such as jogging and evening galas), and holding public hearings and seminars. In the medium and long term, the foundation would push for the establishment of a child prostitution prevention law and halfway schools for child prostitutes. It would also form an anti-child prostitution alliance with all sectors of society to prompt the complete eradication of this evil through comprehensive and practical actions.[6]

The year 1992 was the most landmark year for the anti-child prostitution movement. Starting in May, Su launched a "movement" in the name of "justice" with the theme "Let Society Be Their Mother." On May 2, he held the "Garden of Hope Service" at Grace Baptist Church, where all believers wore masks to demonstrate the faith confession of "weeping with those who weep." On May 9, he held the "Garden of Hope Musical Evening" at the National Taiwan University Alumni Club, where a group of young girls who are survivors of trafficking performed the autobiographical play "Xiao Li's Story." On June 4, he held the "Buy a Daisy, Save a Child Prostitute" street flower sale and rescue event in front of the Evergreen Department Store. On June 13, he held the "Public Hearing and Seminar on the Prevention of Child Prostitution" at the Legislative Yuan. On August 26, the Music Grove Ensemble (*yuelin xiaoji*) performed the "Garden of Hope Musical Evening" at the Social Education Hall.[7] Finally, he launched the Anti-Child Prostitution Action Project, which more than twenty groups jointly initiated. He promoted the signing of the Anti-Child Prostitution Covenant. He conducted individual visits and seminars

targeting eighteen types of community groups, including tourism, news media, political parties and the military, education and medical care, and individual parents. This comprehensive and society-wide participation led to the planning of a series of activities at the end of the year, such as the "Path of Daisies: Huaxi Street Jogging" and "Transforming Pornography Landmarks into Historical Relics." These efforts gathered vast social power and launched comprehensive child prostitution prevention work. Only then did the movement fully achieve social education and administrative reform, and it marched toward the general direction of turning the child prostitution industry into a sunset industry.[8]

Therefore, challenging the entire industrial structure of pornography—that is, "increasing the risks and costs of the child prostitution industry"—was the most important action in the anti-child prostitution movement project, and it struck directly at the core of the problem. Su proposed that only by thoroughly terminating this industry could they truly help child prostitutes escape this structure. At the same time, this would prevent other young girls from entering the industry for various reasons. In other words, turning this industry into a sunset industry was the only way to truly end the industrial phenomenon of child prostitution. Su specifically pointed out:

> *Usually, there are two methods to turn an industry into a sunset industry: First, increase business risks and operating costs (such as mobilizing all sectors of society to launch advocacy and supervision, and strengthening law enforcement). Second, cause an imbalance between supply and demand (for a product, this means increasing costs and raising prices [which reduces demand] or lowering the price of raw materials [which leads to an insufficient supply of raw materials]). At this point, we have found the mechanism to turn the child prostitution industry into a sunset industry. It lies in increasing its costs and raising its risks, which naturally produces the effect of an imbalance between supply and demand. This is also the reason why traditional methods, such as moral appeals and rescue and shelter, have failed to comprehensively block the problem of child prostitution. If we want to prevent these girls from returning to their old profession, simple vocational training is absolutely ineffective. Changing their mentality and values is the only way to solve the problem, and this requires long-term cultivation by professionally trained and loving counselors to be effective.*[9]

Undeniably, the vast majority of these child prostitutes who fell into the abyss and were arrested were underage girls. Their paths into exploitation varied. Some had experienced vulnerabilities that exposed them to exploitation, while many were deceived by boyfriends or other trusted adults. Parents even sold many of them and pushed them into the fiery pit. The most common deceptive excuse was that a kind uncle would arrange to take care of them in the city, and the parents could receive a reward of hundreds of thousands of New Taiwan dollars by selling their daughters. Because of the concepts of carrying on the family line and favoring boys over girls, parents calculated in their hearts that this money might allow the older sons in the family to enter university and study.[10]

Chiu Hei-yuan's "Evaluation Report on the Anti-Child Prostitution Movement" mentioned this transformation. Liang Wang-hui, who came from a background in counseling work, said that when she served as the executive director, she indeed felt quite unaccustomed to the anti-child prostitution movement when it first began. She felt that in engaging in counseling work, it was basically unnecessary to take public action. Liang Wang-hui felt, therefore, that she was not very suitable to participate in promoting the anti-child prostitution movement. Fortunately, in the early days of the movement, Su, a board member with extremely rich experience in social movements, primarily led the effort. The cooperation between the two was quite harmonious. Furthermore, Liang Wang-hui highly affirmed Su's various concepts and practices. The evaluation report detailed:

> *This was also the initial important factor for why the foundation succeeded in its major transformation from 'counseling' to a 'movement' in solving the problem of child prostitution.*[11]

This shift from counseling to movement reached its clearest public expression in the Anti-Child Prostitution Covenant. Rather than treating child prostitution as the concern of a few social workers, churches, or charitable organizations, the covenant framed it as a matter implicating the whole of Taiwanese society. Its force lay not only in gathering signatures but in making visible the moral claim that no sector could remain outside the struggle

"Challenging the entire industrial structure of pornography—that is, 'increasing the risks and costs of the child prostitution industry'—was the most important action in the anti-child prostitution movement project, and it struck directly at the core of the problem."

Image: Yupachingping | Adobe Stock

to care for exploited young girls and reconstruct social ethics. The movement thus turned "justice for the marginalized" into a public summons addressed to society as a whole.

The covenant's content directly criticized the overall distortion of human nature, moral corruption, and apathy in Taiwanese society:

> *In the affluent society of Taiwan, tens of thousands of underage girls sell their bodies every day. This is the act of the rich being heartless, and it is a 100 percent evil deed. Shockingly, there are fathers and mothers who sell their daughters into prostitution for economic gain or vain greed. Shockingly, there are modern people in a developed country who brutalize underage girls to satisfy their abnormal sexual demands. Shockingly, there are enterprises that use child prostitutes as social tools to secure business. Shockingly, there are hotel and inn operators who use child prostitutes to earn extra money. Shockingly, there are tourism operators who use child prostitutes to attract customers...It turns out that the seemingly prosperous society of Taiwan is so dark inside. We cannot tolerate such shameful facts continuing to happen every day!*[12]

Because "a sound society does not tolerate child prostitutes, and a society with child prostitutes is certainly not sound," the movement broadly invited all Taiwanese citizens who could not stay out of the matter to join in signing the anti-child prostitution movement. Approximately 100,000 people participated in the joint signature campaign. In inviting people to sign the "Anti-Child Prostitution Covenant," the most unexpected achievement was persuading the tourism, hotel, and catering trade associations to also join the ranks of "anti-child prostitution." CSI

1 Su Nan-chou, "Xu" [Preface], in *Buxin zhengyi huan bu hui: Ruoshi zhengyi guanhuai wenji* [*Cannot Believe Justice Cannot Be Restored: A Collection of Essays on Care and Justice for the Marginalized*], ed. Kuangye zazhishe (Taipei: Ya-ge Publishing, 1993), 8.

2 Su Nan-chou, "Zai kuangye fasheng: Yi Jidujiao xiaozhong meiti jieru gongmin yundong" [Speaking in the Wilderness: Intervening in Civic Movements through Christian Niche Media], *Xin shizhe zazhi* [*The New Messenger*], no. 121 (December 2010): 26–29; Liao Pi-ying, "Taiwan seqing wenti: Xiankuang baogao" [Taiwan's Pornography Problem: A Status Report], in *Yazhou de nanti: Guanguang yu maichun* [*Asia's Dilemma: Tourism and Prostitution*] (Taipei: Presbyterian Church in Taiwan Women's Ministry Committee, 1986), 231.

3 Liang Wang-hui, "Ba" [Afterword], in Angelyn D. Golmon, *Wo zhishi tideng de ren: Gao Aiqi xuanjiaoshi zai Taiwan de jianzheng* [*I Am Just a Lantern Bearer: Missionary Angie Golmon's Testimony in Taiwan*], trans. Lin Shuwen, Su Yukai, and Huang Jingkai (Taipei: Garden of Hope Foundation, 2023), 201.

4 Su Nan-chou, "Taiwan chuji wenti zhi jingji shehuixue chubu fenxi" [A Preliminary Economic and Sociological Analysis of Taiwan's Child Prostitution Problem], in *Jidutu de shehui canyü* [*Christian Social Participation*] (Taipei: Ya-ge Publishing, 1995), 70–71.

5 Su Nan-chou, "Cong shehui gongcheng guandian kan Taiwan fanchuji yundong zhi celüe yü zhanwang" [Strategies and Prospects of Taiwan's Anti-Child Prostitution Movement from the Perspective of Social Engineering], in *Jidutu de shehui canyü* [*Christian Social Participation*], 73–74.

6 Su, "Taiwan chuji wenti zhi jingji shehuixue chubu fenxi," 71.

7 Su Nan-chou, "Guanhuai chuji, jianquan shehui" [Care for Child Prostitutes, Perfect the Society], *Kuangye* [*Wilderness*], no. 33 (May/June 1992): 3.

8 Su, "Cong shehui gongcheng guandian kan Taiwan fanchuji yundong zhi celüe yü zhanwang," 72.

9 Su, "Taiwan chuji wenti zhi jingji shehuixue chubu fenxi," 70.

10 Golmon, *Wo zhishi tideng de ren*, 54.

11 Chiu Hei-yuan, "Fanchuji yundong pinggu baogao" [Evaluation Report on the Anti-Child Prostitution Movement], unpublished manuscript, June 1997, 87, accessed June 8, 2026, https://share.google/N0l3f6D2YSZVjLXYI.

12 Garden of Hope Foundation, *Wilderness* magazine, and other initiators, "Fanchuji gongyue" [Anti-Child Prostitution Covenant], *Kuangye* [*Wilderness*], no. 34 (July/August 1992): 4.

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From "Being Heard" to "Being Seen"

How Art and Aesthetic Education Shape the Perceptual Capacity of Public Theology

BY SHENG-YU PENG

INTRODUCTION: THE BLIND IN THE CLAMOROUS SQUARE

In recent years, "public theology" has become a prominent field of study within Chinese church circles. In the face of a polarized social context, we urgently seek to position ourselves. We organize forums and issue statements to secure a voice in the public square. Yet a blind spot exists behind these efforts: we desire to "be heard," but we rarely ask how to "be seen," nor do we ask whether we ourselves can "see." Today's public square resembles a rapidly scrolling screen: short videos, memes, and images determine who is seen and who is bypassed. If the church trains only its tongue and ignores its eyes and ears, we may exert greater effort in the competition for volume, yet we will become increasingly aphasic in our perception.

This article argues that the core of the Chinese church's public dilemma lies in a lack of "perceptual structure"; the deficiency in discursive ability is mostly just an outward symptom. For a long time, we have treated art as an evangelistic tool or a decorative element for gatherings. We rarely realize that art and aesthetic education affect how faith is felt and how the public is understood; they also shape our ethical imagination when we encounter the Other.

When the church loses its sensitivity to "beauty," we frequently display aesthetic poverty and perceptual coarseness in the public sphere, and our witness becomes rigid. When we encounter complex issues, we are left with only black-and-white dogmatic responses. When we restore art and aesthetic education to public theology, therefore, we are forced to ask again: what kind of face does the church present in public? Do our tone and rhythm make people willing to approach us, and do they make us easier to understand?

DIAGNOSIS: THE AESTHETIC NIHILISM OF THE CHINESE CHURCH

Art's absence from the public theology discussions of the Chinese church has clear origins: three traditional mentalities intertwine to form a kind of "aesthetic nihilism."

The first is the restrictive spell of pragmatism. Chinese culture emphasizes practicality, and when this combines with the strong missional orientation of evangelicalism, "instrumental rationality" dominates value judgments. In the eyes of many, the value of a thing depends on "efficiency"—can it be converted into a number of conversions? From this perspective, art is marginalized because of its "usefulness of the useless."

> "The first is the restrictive spell of pragmatism."

> "When the church loses its sensitivity to 'beauty,' we frequently display aesthetic poverty and perceptual coarseness in the public sphere, and our witness becomes rigid."

We habitually ask, "What doctrine does this painting express?" but we rarely ask, "How does it expand our capacity to feel?" The habit of rushing to find standard answers causes the church to lose the ability to engage in "patient contemplation" in the public sphere.

> "The second is the fastidiousness of moralism."

The second is the fastidiousness of moralism. Because the church is influenced by the caution toward "human desire" and "idols" in both the Confucian tradition and certain Protestant traditions, it often holds a suspicious attitude toward the sensory world. Art involves the stimulation of emotion and the exploration of humanity's darkness, so the church views it as dangerous and uncontrollable. Consequently, the church tends to develop a "sterilized aesthetics"—it permits only bright and harmonious expressions, and it rejects tension and critique. This fastidiousness makes the church appear naive and pale when it confronts a broken society. It struggles to bear the pain of others with profound language, and it can only offer cheap comfort or cold judgment. A deeper fear is idol anxiety: believers worry that images will replace revelation and that emotions will hijack faith, so they simply surrender the visual world to the market and to politics. As a result, the church loses both its discernment and its creativity; only prohibitions and warnings remain.

The final mentality is a Gnostic-like dualism: it values the spirit over the body, and it prioritizes rational propositions over sensory intuition. We mistakenly believe that public theology is merely a clash of ideas, and we forget that the Word of God "became flesh" and is witnessed through concrete senses. When the church ignores

the sanctity of matter and the senses, it loses a crucial public language: we excel at debating truth, but we are clumsy at displaying the glory and beauty of truth.

RECONSTRUCTION: THE TURN FROM "DECORATION" TO "EPISTEMOLOGY"

To break through aesthetic nihilism, we must place art and aesthetic education on the level of "cognition": how we approach truth and how we move toward the Other. If we lack the ability to interpret "form," truth will struggle to take root in us.

Aesthetics as a Moral Exercise in "Unselfing"

One deep difficulty of public theology is collective self-projection. True publicness begins with genuinely seeing "the Other." The philosopher Iris Murdoch points out that beauty can pull people out of their self-absorption and facilitate "unselfing";[1] the beauty of art provides a training ground that we can enter repeatedly. When we gaze at great works of art, we are forced to temporarily forget our self-anxieties and to accept an external, real existence.

This "attentive gaze" is precisely the quality we lack the most. Aesthetic education trains eyes that are accustomed to "scanning" and "judging" so that they learn to "gaze" and "accept" instead. If we cannot practice seeing the uniqueness of the Other in art, how can we see the concrete faces of the marginalized in a complex society?

Enduring Complexity: Resisting the "Sloganization" of Public Discourse

The contemporary arena of public opinion is filled with slogans and binary oppositions. The church's traditional apologetic mindset easily makes us rush to reduce complex realities into black-and-white judgments; although this reductionism brings a sense of security, it sacrifices the richness of truth.

The essence of art is precisely anti-reductionist. Tragedy shocks us because it presents human struggle; poetry moves us because it allows for ambiguity. Aesthetic education teaches us to remain honestly "present" when there are no simple answers. When a community shaped by aesthetic education confronts thorny issues such as wealth disparity, gender, or politics, it is better able to pause immediate moral judgments and leave internal space for tension. Consequently, the empathy and grace it displays are no longer mere emotional postures, but rather resemble a practiced public virtue.

The Redemption of Imagination: The Path to Justice

In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry argues that beauty issues a call to justice; it awakens the imagination, leads people away from egocentrism, and trains them to think and judge from the position of others.[2]

Outsiders sometimes view the church as insufficiently sensitive to the situations of others; the deeper problem often stems from a depletion of "ethical imagination" rather than a simple lack of knowledge. Through literature and art, we can shift our positions in our imagination and attempt to "put ourselves in someone else's shoes." We do not rush to pass judgment, but we first learn to acknowledge the reality of that situation. In the dimension of public theology, aesthetic education is a sensory education in justice: it first softens the soil of the heart, so that people do not merely know justice, but also feel the sting of injustice. If this sensory awakening is absent, even the most precise discourse may become mere noise, like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal, which is loud but struggles to touch human hearts.

> "Through literature and art, we can shift our positions in our imagination and attempt to 'put ourselves in someone else's shoes.'"

Practice: The Training Ground of Public Aesthetics

If aesthetic education constitutes an epistemological foundation, the church's practice must enter into communal life itself. It must make "sensory discipleship" a daily reality, rather than stopping at exhibitions or events. In other words, aesthetic education is not just program planning; it involves how the community cultivates habits of watching, listening, and lingering.

One concrete example is The Light of Christ Salvation Church in Taichung, Taiwan. Inspired by Noah's ark, the building uses exposed concrete, glass, and openwork to draw natural light into the interior. As people move through its corners, stairways, and corridors, they repeatedly encounter changes in light; faith thus first becomes a perceptual experience one can enter and linger within.[3]

Image: Courtesy of Sheng-Yu Peng

Exterior of The Light of Christ Salvation Church in Taichung, Taiwan.

Taiwan's National Cultural Memory Bank describes the space in three parts: the main sanctuary as a "spiritual space," the Pear Café as an "affective space," and the offices, classrooms, and stairways as a "rational space." This arrangement is worth pondering for Chinese churches: rationality, affect, and spirituality need not exclude one another but can echo within a space where the body can move and the eyes can see.[4] More importantly, it is not only a "beautiful church." The architect's office has described the design as a "church without walls": the ground floor minimizes barriers so that neighbors can pass through and the church can become a place to linger and converse within the life of the city.[5]

In recent years, the church has also hosted "It Can Be Beautiful" exhibitions, lectures, and workshops, linking aesthetic perception with faith formation.[6]

Here public theology has another entrance: a beam of light, a staircase, an open café, an exhibition that invites people to pause and read. The church opens itself first

Image: Courtesy of Sheng-Yu Peng

Interactive instructions from the "It Can Be Beautiful" exhibition.

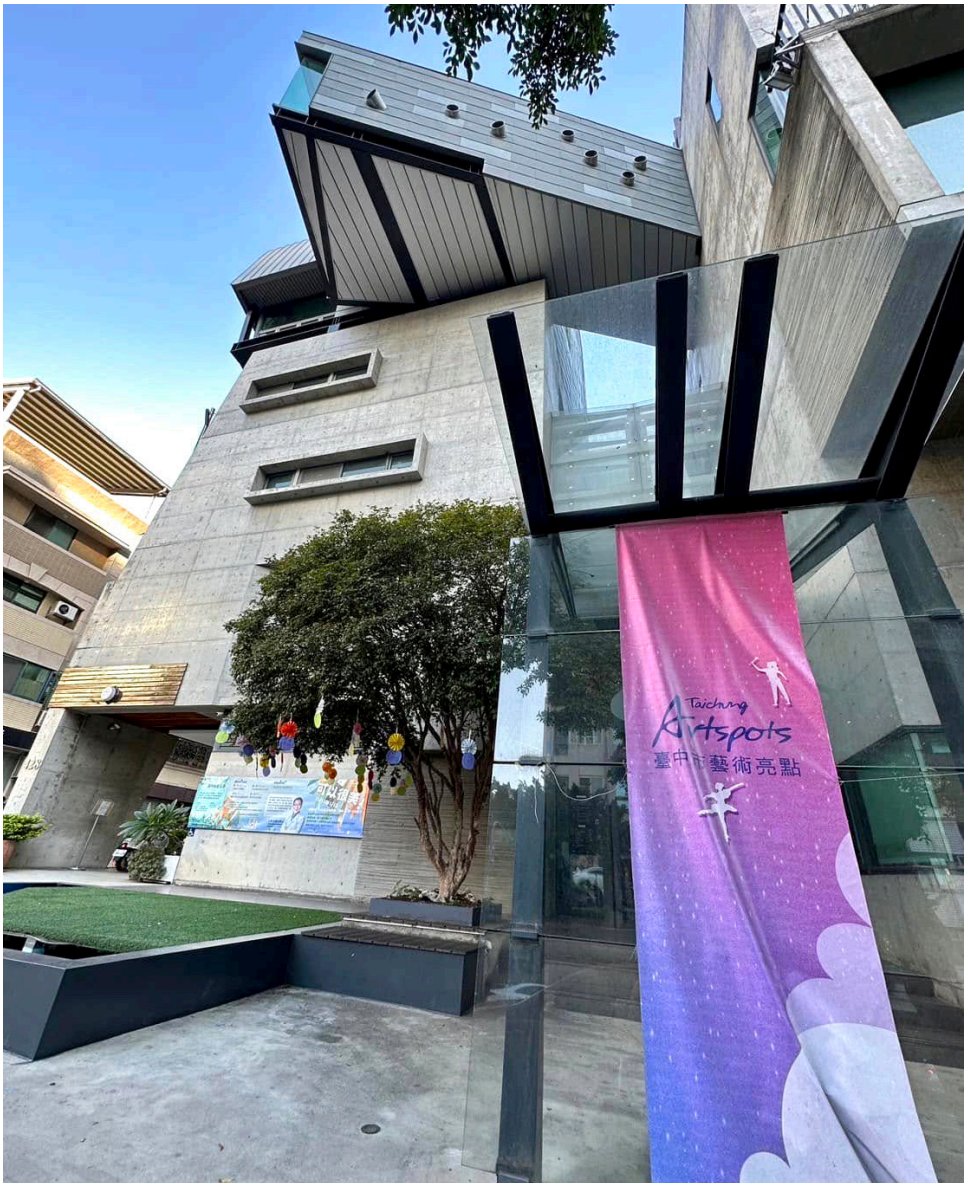

Image: Courtesy of Sheng-Yu Peng

Entrance of The Light of Christ Salvation Church with the Taichung Artspots banner.

through space, rhythm, and hospitality; public witness thus moves from speech to presence, from being heard toward being seen. When faith can be experienced spatially, the next question is whether the church's weekly worship likewise forms people's eyes, ears, and hearts with such patience.

The Aesthetics of Liturgy: Returning from "Propaganda Rallies" to "Sacred Space"

Contemporary worship is deeply influenced by the entertainment industry and corporate training, and it pursues audiovisual stimulation and efficiency. Many churches have also unconsciously borrowed the rhythm of consumer culture: fast, intense, and immediately effective. The practice of public theology can begin with "silence" and "blank space" in the liturgy. Amidst information bombardment, if the church can provide a sacred space where the senses can rest, this act itself is a form of public resistance.

Through solemn liturgy and spatial aesthetics, we train believers to grow accustomed to a "sacred slowness." Only a community that knows how to watch in silence before God can issue a voice that is carefully considered, discerning, and measured amidst clamorous issues.

Image: Courtesy of Sheng-Yu Peng

Sheng-Yu Peng at The Light of Christ Salvation Church during the "It Can Be Beautiful" lecture series.

The Transformation of Narrative: From "Victors' Templates" to "The Honesty of the Wounded"

For a long time, the narratives presented by the church have mostly been singular "victors' narratives": peace, success, and perfection. Although these "beautified" testimonies are glamorous, they appear hypocritical because they lack a true depiction of suffering.

True aesthetic education teaches us to face brokenness honestly; one-third of the Psalms are laments. The church should learn to use artistic language to tell stories that include struggle and sighing. When the church dares to display an "Aesthetics of Brokenness" and admits that we are also wounded healers rather than moral judges, it breaks down the dividing wall. This human honesty can win the respect of public society far better than moral slogans.

> "The church should learn to use artistic language to tell stories that include struggle and sighing. When the church dares to display an 'Aesthetics of Brokenness' and admits that we are also wounded healers rather than moral judges, it breaks down the dividing wall."

Collaborating with the City: Returning Art to the Public

Future aesthetic education does not need to begin with "large-scale art ministries." The church can first establish a community of watching and listening at a small and steady pace. It can regularly invite people to view exhibitions or films, or it can use a painting, a poem, or a piece of music as a text to practice description, questioning, and listening. It can also collaborate with local arts and cultural spaces, and it can open the church during non-gathering hours for readings, lectures, or workshops. When the church is willing to yield its space to its neighbors, publicness is no longer merely a declaration, but becomes an accessible hospitality.

CONCLUSION: GENTLE RESISTANCE

The public theology of the Chinese church currently faces the test of a turning point. In the past, we often used the "sword of truth" to slice through social fallacies, and we frequently wounded the possibility of

> We raise the topic of 'art and aesthetic education' again to bring the church back to a more fundamental question: how do we see in public, and how are we seen?

dialogue. We fought for the right to speak, but we forgot that if speech is not carried by "beauty," it ultimately becomes dry and grating.

We raise the topic of "art and aesthetic education" again to bring the church back to a more fundamental question: how do we see in public, and how are we seen? In a violent and binary era, beauty is not merely a decoration; it is also a gentle and resilient resistance entrusted to us by God. Art draws our gaze away from self-absorption and teaches us to unself. Aesthetic education brings this posture into daily life, and it makes us willing to linger and endure before complex issues. When the senses are no longer numb, justice transforms from a concept into a calling; it both stings and draws us into action.

Of course, power can also misappropriate beauty and turn it into a whitewash that conceals the truth. The beauty that Christians pursue requires calibration through the cross: it does not evade trauma, nor does it romanticize trauma. It allows light to shine into the cracks, so that people can still hope. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, a character once relayed a statement with a prophetic tone: "Beauty will save the world."[7] If this phrase is treated merely as a slogan, it is certainly lightweight. When we place it back into the core of the Christian faith, however, it points to a more solemn promise: that supreme beauty is the incarnate Christ. When the Chinese church learns to see in public and to live out this beauty in daily life, the world will also begin to see and listen to us anew.

> The beauty that Christians pursue requires calibration through the cross: it does not evade trauma, nor does it romanticize trauma. It allows light to shine into the cracks, so that people can still hope.

1 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 82–84.

2 Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 109–12, 118–21.

3 "光中與神對話：基督救恩之光教會" [In Conversation with God through Light: The Light of Christ Salvation Church]. *GOOD TV 好消息國度新聞*, April 11, 2017. Accessed May 11, 2026. https://goodtvnews.goodtv.tv/goodtvnews/taiwan-church2/.

4 "基督救恩之光教會的階梯" [Staircase of The Light of Christ Salvation Church]. *National Cultural Memory Bank*. Accessed May 11, 2026. https://tcmb.culture.tw/zh-tw/detail?id=666024&indexCode=Culture_Place.

5 "基督救恩之光教會" [The Light of Christ Salvation Church]. *AMBi Studio 立建築師事務所*. Accessed May 11, 2026. https://ambi.com.tw/project/10.

6 "2023年 特別講座～主題「可以很美！」" [2023 Special Lecture—Theme: "It Can Be Beautiful!"]. *OursEvents*. Accessed May 11, 2026. https://event.oursweb.net/w/vlVApf38.

7 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 382.

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Why Beauty Matters for the Chinese Church

BY JIUSHUANG CHEN

"Many Chinese churches place great emphasis on 'truth' and 'goodness' in their teaching and practice, yet they pay less attention to 'beauty.'" Complaints of this kind are not uncommon. The Chinese church strives to defend doctrinal purity and earnestly emphasizes moral standards and the sanctification of life. When the discussion turns to art, the senses, form, and atmosphere, however, people often consider these matters secondary, or even somewhat unreliable.

This "absence of beauty" often reflects itself in many details of church life. Pulpit messages prioritize theological rigor—which is, of course, important—yet the worship space often appears crude and monotonous. Various utilitarian segments frequently fill the worship program. The selection of hymns prioritizes doctrinal correctness, but it does not necessarily care whether the melody possesses aesthetic value, and the musical accompaniment often merely fulfills a basic function. From Sunday bulletins to Communion vessels, in many churches I have encountered, co-workers often first evaluate only whether these items are "sufficient for use," rather than whether they can also help people experience the solemnity and glory of worship.

A NEGLECT SHAPED BY SURVIVAL

When looking back at the history of the Chinese church, we see that this neglect of

art and aesthetics did not actually develop by accident. Over the past century, war, poverty, and social turmoil made "survival" and "national salvation" the most urgent matters for the entire society. In such a context, art—which can neither be eaten nor worn—naturally struggled to become a priority if it lacked immediate utility. This social atmosphere also entered the church. People often viewed art as a dispensable luxury; in severe cases, they even treated it as a deviation from spiritual priorities.

THE USEFULNESS OF "USELESS" BEAUTY

The most valuable aspect of art lies, however, precisely in the fact that it does not entirely submit to utilitarian logic—it often appears "useless."[1] For this very reason, it instead reminds us that human beings do not live merely to produce, to solve problems, or to see immediate results. The value of beauty does not always need to prove itself through external utility. Zhuangzi provides a very good reminder here when he speaks of "the usefulness of the useless"—a large tree that is unsuitable for timber survives precisely because people do not consume it for utilitarian purposes. Instead, it provides shade and fulfills its own existence.

> "The value of beauty does not always need to prove itself through external utility."

The Bible actually affirms this seemingly "useless" beauty as well. The Gospel of Mark records that Mary of Bethany broke an alabaster jar and poured very costly ointment of nard on Jesus's head (Mark 14:3–9). Bystanders immediately questioned her from a utilitarian perspective: "Why was this ointment wasted in this way?" Yet Jesus called this a "beautiful deed."[2] He did not view this action as an unprofitable waste; rather, he saw the love, honor, and appropriateness within it. To the bystanders, this was not cost-effective; to the Lord, however, it was beautiful.

> "If worship, art, silence, and hymns are left with only the single standard of 'whether they are effective,' we have actually strayed very far from the core of the gospel. When the Chinese church, influenced by pragmatism, habitually asks 'how many conversions can this painting or poem actually bring about,' we have drifted very far from a heart that simply thirsts for Christ."

WHEN BEAUTY BECOMES KITSCH

It would not be entirely fair if we said that the Chinese church completely lacks aesthetics. A more common situation is perhaps the other extreme: the church does not lack visual expression, but it lacks a mature and honest aesthetic sense. Cheap and kitsch religious imagery and design often take its place. The problem with kitsch is not merely that the style looks tacky. Rather, it frequently lacks honesty, fails to respect reality, and even reduces faith to emotional manipulation or visual consumption. This also relates to a very subtle exchange mentality within church culture. I do not mean a public denial of grace. Instead, in our practical life of faith, we often unconsciously understand spiritual disciplines as an exchange of investment and return. Consequently, serving and working easily and gradually lose their true flavor, as expectations and calculations of "I should receive as much as I have given" become mixed in.

For this very reason, "uselessness" does not necessarily mean worthlessness; instead, it safeguards the most important element in the faith. When coming before God, we do not first ask what we can do for him. Rather, we first learn to exist quietly before him, to receive his love, and to enjoy him. If worship, art, silence, and hymns are left with only the single standard of "whether they are effective," we have actually strayed very far from the core of the gospel. When the Chinese church, influenced by pragmatism, habitually asks "how many conversions can this painting or poem actually bring about," we have drifted very far from a heart that simply thirsts for Christ. If the church wants to relearn beauty, therefore, it probably must do more than merely add some designs or art activities. It must rethink: do we ultimately view beauty as a tool, or as a response offered to God?

FORMATION BEYOND INFORMATION

James K. A. Smith once reminded us that

human beings are not primarily thinking machines, but rather beings who desire and love.[3] If the church merely wants to use more information and more comprehensive sermons to counter the formative power of secular culture, this is often still insufficient. This is because concepts do not solely shape human beings—rhythm, space, repetition, sound, and bodily habits also shape them. This is also why the church needs to reemphasize the dimensions of time, space, the body, and habit. Through the church calendar, hymns, silence, blank space, and even some seemingly minor liturgical movements, our bodies and senses can slowly enter a different order of life and a different imagination of the world.

FROM USEFUL ART TO AESTHETIC REPENTANCE

In recent years, many Chinese churches have significantly upgraded their hardware facilities. Modern worship and multimedia visuals have long become the norm, and some churches have even established arts ministries. These efforts are not without value. In many cases, however, people still treat art as packaging to attract young people, or merely as a visual aid alongside the sermon. Furthermore, people often treat artists as technicians responsible for executing effects. The church desires "useful art," yet it has not necessarily prepared itself to accept the rhythm, depth, and freedom of art itself.

> "The church desires 'useful art,' yet it has not necessarily prepared itself to accept the rhythm, depth, and freedom of art itself."

Image: Zhuojun Yu | Unsplash

If today's Chinese church wants to experience true renewal in art and culture, must it first undergo an aesthetic repentance? Is the church willing to make room again for this seemingly "useless" beauty, allowing artists to grow slowly in a soil free from performance pressure, without having to deliver immediate results?

To break out of the inertia formed in the past, we need to look outward as well as backward. Looking outward means seeing how some churches do not treat art merely as a tool, but genuinely equip artists, encourage them to pursue excellence in broader cultural fields, and view their entire artistic life as worship to God.[4] Looking backward means cherishing the Chinese people's own cultural soil anew. For example, concepts in traditional Chinese aesthetics such as "leaving blank space" (*liubai*), "emptiness and stillness" (*xujing*), "grasping the meaning and forgetting the words" (*deyi wangyan*), "words cannot fully express the meaning" (*yan bu jinyi*), and that ineffable "flavor beyond flavor" (*weiwai zhiwei*) do not necessarily equate directly to Christian theology. In terms of modes of perception, however, they can indeed initiate a very interesting dialogue with the silence, mystery, and reverence that Christianity values.

RELEARNING HOW TO LOOK, LISTEN, AND WAIT

If aesthetics is truly to enter church life, aesthetic education cannot remain merely the interest of a few; rather, it should become part of the church's daily discipleship. The formation of disciples involves not only the accumulation of knowledge but also the awakening of the senses and the restoration of the

> "If aesthetics is truly to enter church life, aesthetic education cannot remain merely the interest of a few; rather, it should become part of the church's daily discipleship."

imagination. Ultimately, this is also an exercise in attention. In an era flooded with short videos, we are increasingly unaccustomed to looking slowly and patiently, nor are we accustomed to lingering very long before a poem, a painting, or a period of silence. Yet true attention is never in vain. As the church relearns how to look, listen, and wait, the disciples' perception of beauty will also slowly awaken.

In the final analysis, the Chinese church needs more than just decorating its chapels with better taste or hosting a few more art exhibitions; we need a deep "aesthetic repentance." We need to repent of our past mentality that reduced faith to utility and pragmatism, and we must acknowledge anew that beauty has never been a peripheral ornament to the gospel. Instead, it is a grace that God uses to awaken human hearts and expand the imagination. When we are willing to make room for God in those seemingly "useless" beautiful things, we might then truly experience what it means to worship purely before the Creator, and what it means to foretaste the incomparable glory of the future new heaven and new earth.

Image: Hongwei FAN | Unsplash

"Beauty has never been a peripheral ornament to the gospel. Instead, it is a grace that God uses to awaken human hearts and expand the imagination."

1 The philosopher Immanuel Kant described beauty as a "purposiveness without purpose": true beauty does not depend on any external utilitarian purpose but is an end in itself. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, ed. Paul Guyer, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 105–6 (AA 5:220–21). For a discussion of the concept of "purposiveness without purpose" in Kant's aesthetics, see Rachel Zuckert, "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Fall 2023 ed.), accessed May 11, 2026, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/kant-aesthetics/.

2 The term used in Mark 14:6 is καλὸν ἔργον (*kalon ergon*). Kalos can be translated not only as "good" but also as "beautiful," "noble," and "admirable." See Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Company, 1889), s.v. "καλός"; and *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th rev. ed., ed. Barbara Aland et al. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), Mark 14:6.

3 "...we are primarily desiring animals..." See James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 9.

4 We might draw upon the paradigm of Redeemer Presbyterian Church: the church does not use art, but rather equips artists, encouraging them to pursue excellence in secular art circles and to view their entire artistic careers as worship to God. For example, their Center for Faith & Work, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, "Who We Are" and "Vocation Groups," explains its role as the church's "cultural renewal arm" and promotes faith-and-work integration across various vocational fields, including the arts.

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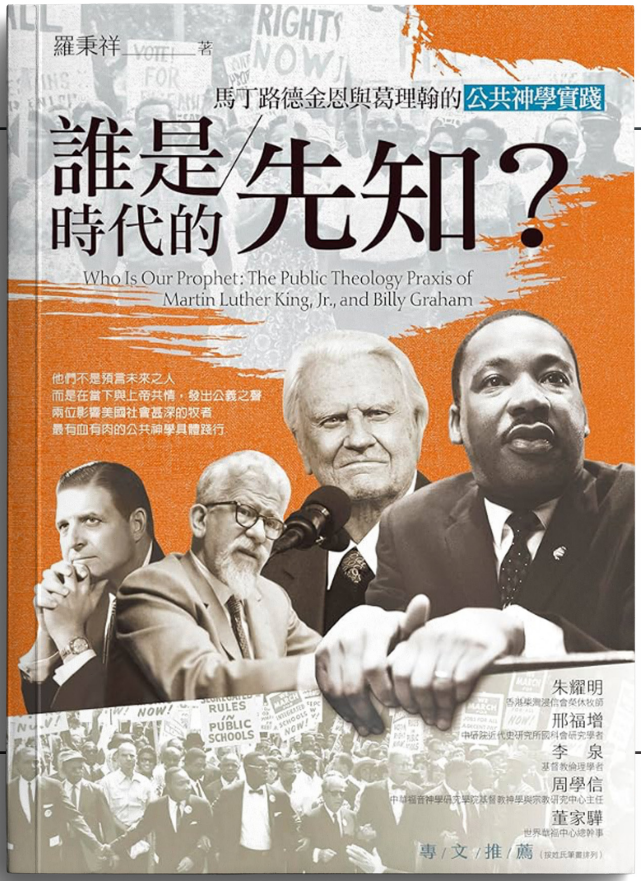
Book Review

Between History and Public Theology

Reading King and Graham for the Chinese Church



BY JERRY AN

Ping-cheung Lo's *Shui shi shidai de xianzhi?—Mading Lude Jin'en yu Gelihan de gonggong shenxue shijian* [*Who Is the Prophet of Our Time?: The Public Theology Praxis of Martin Luther King Jr. and Billy Graham*] is a voluminous, structurally complex, and highly ambitious work. The book spans nearly six hundred pages. It employs a case-study approach to construct a parallel narrative of two of the most representative religious figures in twentieth-century America, and on this basis develops a systematic reflection on public theology. When evaluated by its overall design and arrangement, the book is not only an academic monograph that intertwines history and theology; it also clearly intends to serve as a textbook on public theology for Chinese churches.

GRAND AMBITION

The most prominent feature of this book lies in its highly self-aware structural design. The book consists of eight chapters. Each chapter contains historical narrative and concludes with sections such as "Extended Discussion on Public Theology," "Summary," and "Questions for Discussion," forming a highly pedagogical textual format. In the first chapter, for example, the extended discussion is subdivided into five topics: the need for Chinese churches to fully grasp the cautionary lessons of the American church; the case-study method; the relationship between Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and the case studies in this book; the movement from Lausanne and integral mission to public theology; and the argument that public theology should not merely be an application of theology, but a proper theological enterprise with a practical dimension. These topics are especially concerned with the context of Chinese churches, showing the author's intention to transform historical narrative into resources for theological reflection and classroom discussion.

Although the "extended discussion" sections are labeled as extensions, they in fact often occupy a considerable

"These topics are especially concerned with the context of Chinese churches, showing the author's intention to transform historical narrative into resources for theological reflection and classroom discussion."

portion of the book. In the first chapter, this section spans sixteen pages (pp. 27–43), even exceeding the length of the main text (pp. 13–26). Similar patterns appear in other chapters, where the extended sections and the main narrative form a kind of parallel structure. This arrangement means that the book does not simply treat history as primary and theology as secondary. Rather, it attempts to establish a dual axis between narrative and reflection. This style of writing is uncommon in Chinese theological works. It also reflects the author's attempt to integrate his previous research into a framework of public theology, thereby producing a comprehensive work representative of his scholarship.

From this perspective, the book's ambition does not stop at introducing public theology. It attempts to define its methodology, practical pathways, and pedagogical form. The appendix's summary of the definition, characteristics, and methods of "public theology" (pp. 515–527) further reinforces this point. Just as the "extensions" are in fact a parallel track, the "appendix" may also be viewed as the book's theoretical conclusion.

COMPREHENSIVE DEVELOPMENT

Another important contribution of this book lies in its detailed reconstruction of the development of Martin Luther King Jr.'s and Billy Graham's public theology. The book painstakingly traces their thought and action from their early pastoral ministries through key historical moments such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal. This dense narrative allows readers to enter concrete historical situations rather than remaining at the level of abstract theory.

The author does not simply contrast the two men as "prophet" and "priest." Instead, he presents their interactions, divergences, and transformations within historical tension. For example, their "total split" during the Vietnam War (pp. 370–384), as well as Graham's later reflections and shifts (pp. 474–481), form a complex dynamic relationship. This treatment shows not only the author's training in ethics, but also an attentiveness closer to historical description and the theological presentation of tension.

Although the book's main line of argument narrates and compares the public theology praxis of Martin Luther King Jr. and Billy Graham, its cover also features two figures relatively unfamiliar to many Chinese churches: the Jewish rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and the evangelical theologian Carl F. H. Henry, the first editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*. The book devotes considerable space to Heschel's theological vision (pp. 30, 334–344, 398–419, 489–494) as a point of comparison, and it also traces *Christianity Today*'s changing attitude toward Martin Luther King Jr. (pp. 18, 184–188, 275–282, 327–331, 384–387, 435–439, 481–487). These supporting figures are not merely interesting; they are almost indispensable frames of reference for the book. This is another important feature of the work.

MULTIPLE GOALS

The difficulty of writing this book is extremely high, involving tensions across at least three dimensions. It must possess research value while also being suitable for classroom teaching, and therefore it must balance the functions of an academic monograph and a textbook. It is both historical writing and theological reflection, and therefore it must organically combine narrative and argument. At the same time, the author strives to balance professional depth and accessibility: he must maintain the theoretical depth of theology and ethics while also making the book understandable to non-specialist readers, so that it can function as an introductory and popular work on public theology.

In terms of its overall effect, the author largely succeeds in achieving this balance. His narrative is fluid, and he is especially skilled at controlling pace. The writing even carries a distinct cinematic quality, advancing historical scenes like a documentary or screenplay. This is particularly evident in the descriptions of key events in the Civil Rights Movement, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott in chapter 2 and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in chapter 5. The inner drama of certain figures is also compelling, such as King's movement from reluctant participation to wholehearted commitment in the Civil Rights Movement (pp. 52–58), and Graham's strategic compromises and political calculations regarding segregation during his crusades in the American South (pp. 120–133).

Yet the success of these multiple goals also brings an unavoidable cost: the sprawling nature of the text. When historical narrative, theological reflection, pedagogical design, and conceptual explanation unfold simultaneously, the book's center of gravity becomes difficult to hold. Readers may easily experience fatigue, as though they are constantly switching channels.

THE RISK OF LOSING FOCUS

For this reason, the book presents several points worthy of reflection.

First, its structural overexpansion weakens the concentration of the argument. From the perspective of a textbook, the amount of information may also exceed what an ordinary classroom can bear.

Second, the book's genre positioning is ambiguous. It resembles a historical work, a theological treatise, and a textbook at the same time, yet no clear hierarchy among these three functions emerges. This strategy of trying to do everything makes the book difficult to categorize and, to some extent, affects its pathways of reception and dissemination.

Third, there is a tension between narrative density and theoretical distillation. The detailed historical descriptions certainly strengthen the sense of immediacy, yet they also compress the space for theoretical abstraction and conceptual construction.

Readers can "see" how public theology happens, but they may not always clearly grasp its theoretical contours. At times, they may become absorbed in the story and lose sight of the theoretical framework. In this sense, the theoretical dimension of public theology appears relatively thin and almost seems to occupy the position of an appendix.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINESE CHURCHES

Of course, our concern with this book is not limited to its scale or structural challenges, but also to how it helps Chinese churches today reflect on their witness in public contexts. This, after all, is also the author's purpose.

Image: Juan Domenech | Unsplash

For many Chinese Christians who are thinking about the relationship between faith and public life, the importance of this book lies not only in helping readers gain a fuller and deeper understanding of the intellectual journeys of two well-known American religious leaders, including the tensions and changes within those journeys. More importantly, it offers a mirror: when the church faces political pressure, social injustice, and the crises of the times, how should it discern what constitutes gospel-shaped public witness? What is a truly prophetic voice? And how can it avoid reducing prophetic witness to a political position, or retreating from gospel witness into private faith?

"It offers a mirror: when the church faces political pressure, social injustice, and the crises of the times, how should it discern what constitutes gospel-shaped public witness? What is a truly prophetic voice? And how can it avoid reducing prophetic witness to a political position, or retreating from gospel witness into private faith?"

Overall, *Who Is the Prophet of Our Time?: The Public Theology Praxis of Martin Luther King Jr. and Billy Graham* is undoubtedly a landmark work of Chinese-language public theology. It reaches a considerable height in its integration of historical sources, narrative ability, and interdisciplinary synthesis. In my view, it has indeed achieved its writing aims: it is at once a rigorous and detailed academic work, a vivid and moving historical biography, and an introductory text and classroom resource for public theology. It provides an important and rare starting point for Chinese churches to enter into discussions of public theology. CSJ

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Jerry regularly trains Chinese church leaders worldwide in developing ways of using new media to advance the kingdom. He is also a publisher, producer, radio host, and writer.

Resource Corner

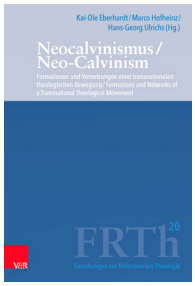
A Reading Guide to Chinese Public Theology

Both a Pearl and a Leaven: Contextualising Herman Bavinck's Public Theology of the Kingdom of God in Mainland China

In Neocalvinismus: Formationen und Vernetzungen einer transnationalen Bewegung / Neocalvinism: Formations and Networks of a Transnational Theological Movement.

BY XU XIMIAN

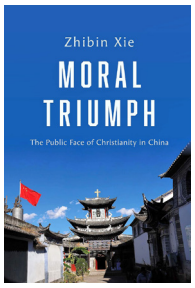
Edited by Kai-Ole Eberhardt, Marco Hofheinz and Hans-Georg Ulrichs. 427–441. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2025.



Moral Triumph: The Public Face of Christianity in China

BY ZHIBIN XIE

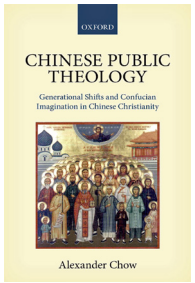
Fortress Press, 2023.



Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity

BY ALEXANDER CHOW

Oxford University Press, 2018.



《誰是時代的先知？：馬丁路德金恩與葛理翰的公共神學實踐》

羅秉祥著，校園書房出版社，2025.10

《人人都需要的公共神学》

普世佳音出版， 2025.3

《神學美學：一部談美說愛的敘事》

彭盛有著，宇宙光出版社，2026.4

《活出國度的福音：與神共創華人教會的大未來》

董家驊主編，校園書房出版社， 2026.5

《秉烛：汉语公共神学国际学刊》

汉语公共神学学会主编

《谁在你的世界掌权？人人都需要的公共神学2 》

普世佳音出版， 2026.7

Image: David Tomaseti | Unsplash

Becoming an Alternative Community

BY BRENT FULTON

From "a city on a hill" to "a pine tree in winter," the shifting metaphors for China's church reflect the progressively shrinking space for Christian expression over the past decade. In this era of rapid transformation, assumptions about how China's church might engage with society, find its role vis-à-vis the state, and function as the visible representation of Christ are being brought into question. The thoughtful and wide-ranging contributions in this issue of *ChinaSource Journal* are particularly relevant to where China's church finds itself today. By looking not only at the church in China itself but also to Christian communities in the global Chinese diaspora, these scholars offer both cautionary tales as well as hopeful visions of what it means to be a witness to the "public God."

Experiencing what many have termed a "golden era," the church in the mid-2000s began moving toward increasingly public expressions of faith. Unregistered megachurches appeared in major cities, and with the explosion of the internet, Christian websites and social media platforms flourished. Universities welcomed scholarly discussions on Christianity, publishers produced hundreds of titles for sale in Christian bookstores, and social service agencies run by believers pushed the bounds of civil society as they worked with people on the margins. Some pastors and Christian intellectuals directly engaged political authorities, seeking to

carve out legal space for activities that, although technically forbidden, were nonetheless happening in plain sight.

Today the shape of the church is very different, comprising less visible, smaller congregations and Bible study groups. The robust conversations in cyberspace have been silenced, along with the faith-centered discussions in classrooms and lecture halls. Civil society groups face tight restrictions. Public discussion of policy is off-limits. With so much of what had been assumed to be the future of the church's public witness now gone, the church finds itself rethinking its role, or at least the means by which to fulfill it.

Perhaps in the void left by these rapid and seemingly unfortunate developments may be found the seeds of a new kind of public presence. The attraction model inherent in megachurch ministry is giving way to the very real attraction of human warmth and relationship that can only be found in a safe, trusting community. True human fellowship stands out in stark contrast to the digital fragmentation and depersonalization that have come to dominate modern society. Freed from what David Doong calls "the algorithmic echo chamber," with its never-ending competition for more clicks and online followers, the church can offer a real-life alternative to the enticing yet disappointingly hollow world of AI-generated experiences. As Doong writes, "It must be a way of life and communal witness that returns to the gospel."

Yucheng Bai and other contributors to this issue argue that, if the church desires to promote virtue in society, it must first cultivate virtue internally. Following a season in which rapid church growth was the norm and institutional developments often outpaced spiritual readiness, the church may be at a place where it can reexamine practices—many of which were hastily adopted from outside China—that are not conducive to becoming the community Christ intends. As Bai writes, "In a context where public space is restricted and church institutionalization is still taking shape, the 'community of virtue' reminds the Chinese house church that public theology is not only about how the church speaks to the world, but also about whether the church itself lives out a life of peace, justice, humility, and mutual service."

Jiushuang Chen's critique of the church's approach to art (Is it useful?) mirrors the bottom-line mentality that has too often characterized evangelical endeavors globally. With the increased sophistication of China's church in the opening decades of this century came a greater emphasis on efficiency. Perhaps, as Sheng-Yu Peng suggests, the present moment provides an opportunity to move from needing to be seen to a new desire to see, from an emphasis on technique and results to a genuine interest in the needs and concerns of the church's neighbors. Over-produced worship can give way to silent contemplation, nonstop information to sacred space. Relieved of the demands of putting on a public performance, believers can rediscover beauty as a means of appreciating and sharing God's glory. "As the church relearns how to look, listen, and wait," Chen writes, "the disciples' perception of beauty will also slowly awaken."

The case studies from Taiwan, Malaysia, and Hong Kong presented in this issue provide a hopeful look at how the church can create a new kind of civil society, engaging with the larger culture even when the powers that be are inherently opposed to the gospel. Pushed to the margins, China's believers have the opportunity to imagine anew how—to quote guest editor Jerry An—"through its independent and distinct existence before society, the church manifests that God is a public God." Barred from using public platforms to speak prophetically against structural evil in society, the church can instead respond to the call to suffer quietly with the victims of injustice, just as Christ suffered quietly on our behalf.

As this issue goes online, Christians in many parts of the world are bitterly divided over how to live out their faith in the public sphere. The example of Martin Luther King Jr. and Billy Graham, which Ping-cheung Lo examines in detail in his book, *Who Is the Prophet of Our Time?*, has given way to the ethics of "I'll fight for you" and "Take back our country!" As China's church steps back from building a city on a hill and reconsiders the nature of its witness in society, perhaps its example can serve as a much-needed corrective for Western Christians who have exhausted themselves and tarnished the church's witness in their pursuit of power.

David Doong writes, "Through the reshaping of narrative, existence, and power, the church becomes an alternative community set apart for the common good amid shattered meaning and pluralistic values." China's church finds itself at a crossroads. Exchanging the narrative of conquest for the values of the Beatitudes means living out its public witness from a position of vulnerability, humility, and service. In the months and years ahead, may it contribute a new chapter to the larger Chinese public theology story, showing the world what this alternative community can look like. CSJ

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