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Experiencing Jesus Christ Through Chinese Eyes

Panel Presentation

"The Role of the Bible in Forming People of Authentic Faith in China"

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Western media often describes China as an "emerging giant" and a future "world power." These descriptions might be true to a certain extent, but the word "world power" needs some clarification. Globalization is the dominant reality of the world. However, the modern global system is unjust at its core, the rich world, a little over 20% of world population, consumes 80% of the earth's resources. The promise of a first world consumer lifestyle for all is simply impossible.

China has 21% of the world's people and is commonly estimated to consume, at present 5% of the world's resources; an average American consumes 20 times more energy than an ordinary Chinese. China is the second largest country in the world in terms of greenhouse gas emission only after the US; yet China is still struggling to solve problems like unemployment, health, education and degradation of the environment. It is clear that China could not really become a world power in terms of consumerism. The resources of the world are simply not enough.

A different way forward is needed. All humanity has to settle for a quality of life that respects the physical capacity of the earth. It is in this regard that China is most likely to play a crucial role in economic development and political reconstruction. China has the potential to make a difference in the future by its moderate prosperity, plurality in its economic and political systems and the unquenchable searching spirit of its people, especially among the young. China's grounds for hope require "a real cultural revolution" during which all that was valid in the past is brought forward but put in a new context. In this process, people of authentic faith "whose openness is not restricted, whose commitment is unconditional, whose minds are free of illusions and whose emotions are integrated"¹ have a special role to play.

In this presentation, I will focus on the role of the Bible in forming people of authentic faith in China. The Bible is of the utmost importance for studying and doing

¹Sean McNulty, "Grounds for hope: the Future of Church Engagement in China," East Asia Pastoral Review, 2001.

theology in China and the content of the Bible is extremely rich. I will especially emphasize two parts in the Bible: the Lament Prayers which are essential for people of authentic faith and much neglected in our liturgy, and the Wisdom Literature which is similar to classical Chinese literature in many ways.

1. The Lament Prayers in the Bible

a. Lament prayers for Christians of Authentic Faith:

Lament prayer is an essential part in the Bible. Among the 150 psalms, two thirds are lament psalms; yet these have been very much neglected in our liturgy and daily prayers.

We are trained as Christians to thank God and to praise God at all times. It is a curious fact that the Church has, by and large, continued to sing songs of orientation in a world increasingly experienced as disoriented. Such a "mismatch" between our life experience of disorientation and our faith speech of orientation could be a great block in announcing the word of God. This denial and covering up is not from faith, but rather from "the wishful optimism of our culture."² It is not true to our life experiences, it is not true to who we are, neither is it true to who God is.

Much Christian piety and spirituality is romantic and unreal in its positiveness. As children of the Enlightenment, we have censored and selected around the voice of darkness and disorientation, seeking to go from strength to strength, from victory to victory. But such a way not only ignores the Psalms; it is a lie in terms of our experience.³

We are often caught in the tension of the paradox that God can be known and yet remains hidden. The essence of the paradox is that it must not be resolved. It holds together two truths which at first sight may seem logically contradictory, but which need each other and interact with each other. The knowability and the hiddenness of God have to be held together, to take either one and lose the other is to go away from the right speech about God. Questioning and doubting become necessary when belief does not fit reality, when God seems distant and hidden; this seems to be the right path to retain faith in God. Yet many, even within the believing community, find themselves forced to question and doubt, and often do so with an unnecessarily guilty conscience.⁴

While holding on to our compassionate and loving God, we cannot turn aside from the suffering of the world and the dark side of life. While believing God is the source of everything, we have to face squarely the problems of evil and injustice in the world. We cannot go on singing "happy songs" and hymns to God in face of raw reality and suffering. The conversation with God has to match our real life experiences.

Then how shall one pray in these times of crisis and pain, of anger and confusion? Can we address God and describe how events really are and tell God how we

² Walter Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 51.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴ Cf. Rober Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt: Exploring an Old Testament Theme* (London: SCM Press), x-xi.

really feel? Lament prayers are good models of prayer during times of crisis and deep pain. It is astonishing to notice how frank, daring, and direct these prayers are. They hold God against God. They question honestly about the incoherence between actual events of life and the fidelity of God. This honest questioning is not an act of *unfaith*; on the contrary, it is an act of *bold faith*. The large number of lament psalms in the Psalter is a good testimony to the truthfulness of this honest questioning. What goes on in the psalms is peculiarly in touch with what goes on in our life. On the one hand, this honest questioning insists that the world must be experienced as it really is and not in some pretended way. On the other hand, it insists that all experiences of disorder are a proper discourse with God. As Brueggemann points out:

*There is nothing out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate. Everything properly belongs in this conversation of the heart. To withhold part of life from that conversation is in fact to withhold part of life from the sovereignty of God . . . Everything must be brought to speech, and everything brought to speech must be addressed to God, who is the final reference for all of life.*⁵

It is by this honest questioning and candor about suffering that we reach a new level of understanding toward ourselves and toward God. The journey of our quest for God has its ups and downs. It is a journey of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation.⁶ It is like a spiral, it is never a straight line, but always moves forward and upward toward God. Our life is constantly on the move from one stage toward the other. The move is never obvious, easy or natural. It is often in pain and surprise, and each time it is often that a different move might have been made.

The faith community is not a community of “yes” men and women toward God; it is a community of mature people who can respond to God with courage and honesty, who can engage in serious conversation with God and this conversation is dialogical.

*Where there is lament, the believer is able to take initiative with God and so develop over against God the ego-strength that is necessary for responsible faith. But where the capacity to initiate lament is absent, one is left only with praise and doxology. God then is omnipotent, always to be praised. The believer is nothing, and can uncritically praise or accept guilt where life with God does not function properly. The outcome is “false self,” bad faith which is based on fear and guilt and lived out as resentful or self-deceptive works of righteousness. The absence of lament makes a religion of coercive obedience the only possibility.*⁷

Hopefully our understanding of God will be changed through lament prayers. God addressed in lament is a God who knows sorrows and is acquainted with grief; such a God takes the divine-human relationship seriously; such a God is grieved to the heart when the relationship is broken; such a God is present when the people are suffering;

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 52.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷ Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” *JSOT* 36 (1986): 62-63.

and such a God is willing to immerse Godself in the depth of the people's troubles in order to make deliverance possible, and to give them new life.⁸ It is more appropriate then to speak of this God in the categories of fidelity than of immutability; for when fidelity displaces immutability, our notion of God's sovereignty and our image of God are fundamentally changed.⁹

b. Lament Prayers for Chinese Christians

No matter how fast Christianity has been growing in China, Christians still remain a minority. It is not a casual decision to be and to remain a Christian in China. Since Christianity really entered China in 1583 brought by Matteo Ricci,¹⁰ Christians have often experience misunderstandings, mockery and sometimes ill treatment. Our God talk and our retelling of the story of Jesus have to be matched with our personal experiences and our experience as a community. Only through this can the Church in China be an active partner with God and to give effective witness to the kingdom of God.

However, the spirituality of Chinese Catholics is strongly *sin oriented*. God is always right and we cannot complain to him. The Chinese were often taught with politeness and good manners from a very early age, to be docile to parents and superiors and to obey them in everything. To question God is unimaginable. The gap between real life experiences and such one-sided prayer has often made Catholic belief irrelevant.

To restore Lament Prayers in the Church's liturgy could have far reaching effects. A good example of its significance would be the rescue work of the recent Sichuan earthquake. The Chinese public has reacted to the 8.0-magnitude Sichuan earthquake with sympathy, compassion and generosity. The Chinese people have become closer and the moral stance of the country is rising too. But the effects of the earthquake are still being experienced far and wide and the relief effort is just the beginning; more perseverance, patience and endurance will be needed. People will start rebuilding and start a new life, but the pain of those who have lost loved ones, the parents who have lost their children, for many their only child, is beyond words and the healing process will last for the years to come. The Catholic Church can help people to articulate their pain and even their anger through prayers of lament. Knowing that God cares for them and suffers with them could be very comforting and liberating.

The importance of lament may also have practical pastoral implications in the Chinese context: First, it is helpful for many to understand that lament is a right form or even an indispensable and required form of prayer when God is absent. This understanding might take away our guilt for being angry with God. We do not need to hide our anger before God; we can stand before God the way we are. God is gracious and God cares. Lament helps us to understand ourselves and God better so that we may become more responsible and committed believers in God. Second, language can shape

⁸ Cf. Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 107-48.

⁹ Brueggemann, *Message*, 52.

¹⁰ The first time Christianity entered China was in 635, then disappeared. Second time was in 1294, lasted until 1368, and disappeared again. It is Matteo Ricci who helped Christianity to take root in China in 1583.

reality. So the language of lament must be expressed. It not only balances the distribution of power between the one who is lamenting and God, but also puts the unjust social structure into serious question. Claus Westermann points out that it is valuable if some of the young churches take the initiative in restoring lament to its rightful place in prayer.¹¹ He refers to the churches in the third world that have been exploited and victimized under unjust social systems as in Latin America; the churches that have been experiencing discrimination and being marginalized; the churches that are minority groups in a region as in China, etc. Lament will give them the courage to hope and the strength to work out a better future.

The prayers of lament could have a social dimension in the context of China as well. Many people's search for religion is stimulated by a crisis. The Chinese historian Si Maqian had said a long time ago: "When human beings are sick, feel pain, they call their parents; when they are desperate and helpless, they call upon God."¹² Many people's encounter with God, Christians and non-Christians alike, happens through a marginal experience. When one is down in a pit, one could hear God more clearly, like Jonah in the belly of the fish and Joseph in the dungeon.

Many Chinese, especially those who are honest and searching for the meaning of life are yearning for God. Searching for the meaning of life and seeking social justice will ultimately drive us to theological issues. Liu Xiaobo, a lecturer in Beijing university, has said that the tragedy of the Chinese is the tragedy of not having a God. Can Chinese lament to God without knowing God? The answer should be yes because God is nearer to us than we to ourselves. When utter despair and pain cannot be humanly overcome, humanity merges with God. The Catholic Church in China could offer people a space for such an encounter. Lament is essential for such an encounter to happen and to form people of authentic faith.

2. The Bible and Traditional Chinese Literature

The Bible is an extremely rich book with various literary styles and genres. The Bible itself is a dialogue between cultures: the Jewish, Mesopotamia, Greek and Roman. The Bible is often regarded at the core of western culture, but it is actually very Asian based. Most part of the Bible was written in Asia. "*The thought structure of the Bible, its literary style, and manner of writing are all very oriental.*"¹³

First of all, the Hebrew language in which most of the Old Testament is written is closer to the Chinese language than to Indo-European languages. Like the Chinese, the Hebrew is also a picture language in which the shape of the letter could give meaning to it.

Secondly, the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible is similar to the ancient Chinese literature in its subtleness and playing with words. One has to read between the lines and fill in the gaps in order to understand it. The traditional Jewish way of interpreting

¹¹ Claus Westermann, "The Two Faces of Job," in *Job and the Silence of God*, ed. Christian Duquoc and Casiano Floristan, Concilium 169 (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 18.

¹² Si Maqian, (born around BC 145-135, died ?) Historian, Literalist and Thinker, he wrote the first Chinese history book "Shi Ji."

¹³ Maria Ko, "The Bible in China," *Tripod* 27, 2007.

the Hebrew Bible is also similar to the teaching of the Chinese sages. They use simple words and daily stories to convey profound insights. They pay special attention to every letter and every symbol in the Torah (the Pentateuch) just like in Ancient Chinese literature, every word is considered.

Thirdly, the Bible is often written in layers and different schools of thought, all of which find a way to present their ideas; and the final editors often keep the diverse thoughts intentionally. The book of Job is a good example which provides three ways of looking at God's relationship with humanity: (1) predictable causality according to Satan which is represented in retribution theology: if you do good, God will bless you; if you do evil, God will punish you; (2) causality but no predictability according to Job; and (3) neither causality nor predictability according to God. God and the human person are both free partners. The three ways are interwoven in the book and none can be ruled out unequivocally. Traditional Chinese philosophy is often known for its inclusiveness. Confucianism and Taoism are often in dialogue with each other and they complement each other. Confucianism emphasizes social involvement and Taoism emphasizes inner freedom achieved by solitude. It is often said that for an individual person, the social ideal is Confucianism and the personal ideal is Taoism.

To read the Bible in the Chinese context will be rewarding. To interpret the Bible in the Chinese way to a Chinese audience will bear abundant fruits. The Bible will definitely enrich Chinese culture and vice versa, as reading the Bible in the Chinese context will benefit Biblical interpretation as well.

Conclusion

As China moves forward to become a more harmonious society, the Catholic Church as a community of people with authentic faith can play an essential role. The Bible is at the center and the lament prayers are indispensable. By keeping the honest dialogue with God going on, the Church becomes an active covenant partner with God and hope shines through pain and despair; the divine spark that is in every one of us will become more visible and radiant in the vast land of China.