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A Chinese Look at the Divine Face: Images of God in Contemporary Taiwan

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I. Introduction

It is a privilege for me to attend the Areopagos summer meeting in this beautiful place, and an honor to be invited to speak on this occasion. It is also a great joy to meet all of you here. First of all, I would like to bring you warm greetings from the community of China Lutheran Seminary in Hsinchu, the so-called Silicon Valley of Taiwan, particularly from my colleagues at the Research Center for Traditional Chinese Religions and New Religious Movements. And I would also like to take this opportunity to give thanks to God and to express our gratitude to the friends of Areopagos for the common vision and close partnership we have been privileged to share in the past five years.

When I was informed that the key text of this conference would be I Cor. 13:12, and was asked to make a presentation somewhat related to this text as well as to the contemporary religious context in Taiwan, I was for a moment not quite sure what I should prepare to speak. After some thought I later decided to try the topic: A CHINESE LOOK AT THE DIVINE FACE: IMAGES OF GOD IN CONTEMPORARY TAIWAN. To be frank, I submitted this topic not out of a whim, but a hunch. For quite sometime I was not even sure whether or not it was an educated hunch. For this, I had experienced much anxiety about the workability of this audacious attempt. Today, I am here to present this topic, not as a qualified expert, but as one who takes interest in it, and ventures to share with you some of my limited personal observations and preliminary reflections related to the theme.

II. Clarification of Terms

The adjective “divine” is used here to connote “of or from a god, especially the Supreme Being.” (Random House Webster’s College Dictionary) Its meaning also includes “of the divinized figure or the deified object.” The “Divine” refers to “of or from the God who revealed Himself through the Old and the New Testaments.”

The word “face” implies “look,” “expression,” as well as “presence” of the divine being.

The term “image” is used in three basic ways. First, it is related to the likeness of God, which He imprinted into the human being, He created. Secondly, it has to do with the way He manifested or portrayed Himself in the historical context. Thirdly, it can also imply the way the religious portray the deity they worship, or the way they characterize or project their perception of the deity they worship.

III. A Brief Overview of the Characteristics of Chinese Religiosity

The concept of Chinese religiosity encompasses a broad range of content and a wide variety of components. Here we will only point out some of the key characteristics.

A. The Underlying Piety Toward T'ien (Heaven):

The Chinese consciousness of T'ien can be traced all the way to the very dawn of ancient Chinese civilization. At its earliest stage T'ien was revered by the ancient Chinese as the Supreme Being, the Lord-on-high, or the Divine Person who oversaw the well-being of people on earth, listened to their prayers, and judged and rewarded them according to their conducts. Such piety toward T'ien has seeped into the Chinese consciousness, and has formed the backbone of Chinese religiosity for four millennia.

In the Chinese mind T'ien was understood in three categories of meaning. First, it points to the Supreme Ruler in Heaven, or the Lord-on-High. Second, it is the Personification of the Moral Principle. Third, it represents the Nature as a whole or the physical universe. At the earliest stage, the religious significance of the term was most conspicuous. But in the formation of Confucian thought the understanding of the concept of T'ien was ethicized and later pedagogically internalized. In other words, T'ien became immanent in the human being, and its mandate constitutes the very core of human conscience.

However, in the development of Taoism T'ien was thoroughly naturalized. To an extent, it was equated with Nature. It is worth noting that Confucianism highlights the attainment of sagehood, i.e., the state of union between T'ien and human, whereas Taoism seeks total harmony between Nature and human. For most Chinese today they still deem T'ien to be

compassionate, and take it as a Name to whom they could cry and make petition from time to time.

In the later development of Chinese religion T'ien was not only politicized, but also pluralized. This took place when more and more deities were imported and invented. As a result, Chinese religiosity moved from the early monotheism to highly populated polytheism.

B. A Vague Sense of Transcendence

Despite the underlying piety of the Chinese toward T'ien and a common reverence toward deities there is in Chinese religiosity a lack of the personal encounter with the Numinous. That encounter with the Numinous causes one to be keenly aware of one's creatureliness and finitude, and one's inauthenticity and uncleanness. This is what Rudolf Otto describes as the experience of *mysterium tremendum*. The Numinous is not a religious object invented or fabricated by any human mind. He is a Wholly and Holy Other whom none could manipulate, distort or bribe. When one stands before the Holy Other he/she comes to see whom they really are. Therefore, under the exposure of His Light there is no possibility for excuse and hideaway.

Such experience with the Numinous has been recorded in numerous ways in the Old and New Testaments. However, when it comes to the Chinese history of religion there is a curious lack of similar encounter. This does not mean that there was no or only scanty record of theophanies. There were a great many. But those experiences of theophany did not fall into the same category of *mysterium tremendum*.

How to account for this strange absence of such essential experience? Professor Tu Wei-ming of Harvard University offers an interesting hint to the answer for this question. He points out that the belief in "the continuity of being" is "a basic motif in Chinese ontology." The fact that in the ancient Chinese records there was no creation story, nor a narrative of a primeval fall as described in the Book of Genesis gives us a clue as to why the disruption of being was absent in the general consciousness of Chinese religiosity. This also explains why the union of T'ien and human, and the harmony of nature and human have formed a central place in the Chinese

way of life and thought.

C. A Lack of the I-Thou Component

According to the Chinese mentality deities could be created by human imagination, and spirits be domesticated through rituals, and appeased by way of offerings or sacrifices. Generally, deity is worshipped as an object, rather than as a subject or a person who reveals his/her will and interacts with the worshippers in accordance with his/her ordinances. In many cases deities are treated as the Sacred Thing, which has the power to bring people blessings or curses. This means the relation of the worshipper to the deity tends to be impersonalized to the extent that dialogue with the deity becomes the worshipper's own monologue.

D. The After-life as the Replica of This-life

From ancient times Chinese have tended to conceive the after-world to be an alternate form of this world. The living and the deceased are in a symbiotic state. The living looks to the deceased for their protection, whereas the deceased depend upon the living for their offerings. The ancestral spirits must be fed from time to time through the offerings of food so that they are not deserted and turned into the precarious wandering ghosts.

In elaborated Chinese funerals even today we see the mourners burn bamboo-and-paper-made mansions, luxurious limousines, refrigerators, paper money, and even paper credit cards with the intention that all these would be transferred to the underworld of the beloved and into their account. I suspect the ordinary Chinese people do not take into account at all whether there might be an underworld inflation or a fluctuation of exchange rate at transfer. Such belief reflects the desire of the Chinese whose longing is to continue the enjoyment of this life in the after life.

E. Practicality as the Chief Concern

Most Chinese see religion and deity from a pragmatic perspective. Which religion they choose to affiliate with and which deity or deities to worship depends largely on whether their prayer was answered, and how much they receive blessings from the very deity to whom they made particular petition.

In case their prayer was not granted or their wish fulfilled, they may turn to another deity for favor. With such a pragmatic mentality, the function of religion is basically instrumental. Deities are chosen because they serve to fulfill the wish of the worshipper. Greater power to meet the needs of the worshippers means greater popularity of the deity, and subsequently more the abundant income the temple will receive from its devotees.

However, in the past when *liu-ho-tsai* (six combination lottery game) was the most widespread form of gambling in Taiwan, many gamblers turned to specific idols for the foretelling of the lucky number. Some even made heavy bets, but when their dream was shattered and they suffered a terrible loss, they turned their anger toward the deity by cutting off its limbs, and in some cruel instances the idol was even beheaded.

II. Images of the Divine in Contemporary Taiwan

The images of the divine in contemporary Taiwan are numerous. In the following we will mention only a few.

- A. Bestower of Prosperity: The god of richness and prosperity is one of the most welcomed deities among the people in Taiwan. The prayer for success is likely the most frequent item in the petition list.
- B. Guardian of Security: Through regular observance of festivals and frequent offerings of incense people look to the deity they worship to protect them from harm and misfortune.
- C. Restorer of Well-being: When sickness falls upon oneself or one's family member familiar or unfamiliar deity is approached for weathering the particular crisis and for the restoration of well-being.
- D. Guide for Direction and Decision: In time of confusion and uncertainty people turn to deity, spirit, medium or fortune-teller for guidance.
- E. Liberator from Entanglement: Those who see life itself as a jungle of karma seek the Enlightened One and follow the prescribed path which intends to lead them to liberation from all entanglement.

- F. Encapsulator/Mediator of the Cosmic Energy: The guru of Qigong is seen as someone who finds the secret path to the source of the Vital Force or to the connection with the Cosmic Energy. As a result, they view themselves or are seen by their followers as either semi-divine or even divine.
- G. Embodiment of Selfless Compassion: Like the ancient Chinese heroes or sages who were later revered as deities the living paradigm of selfless care and service can also be wittingly and unwittingly divinized.

III. Images of God in Contemporary Churches in Taiwan

A. Lord and Savior

The kerygma of the apostolic church proclaimed Jesus to be the Lord who reconciled sinners to God through His own death, and delivered them from the slavery of sin and darkness by the power of His resurrection.

The testimony of the early church on the Lordship of Christ was based not so much upon their own fancy or claim, but upon the reality of Christ's resurrection from the grip of invincible death. Through His atoning death the judgment of God upon sinners had been removed. And sinners who put their trust in Him were not only forgiven, but also granted the privilege to call God their Abba Father. Thus the broken relationship with God was restored, and we became the children and heirs of God.

Although this objective aspect of salvation was sure and clear, the actual preaching heard from many pulpits in Taiwan stresses instead the subjective appropriation. Consequently, baptism is seen and taught as the new converts' acceptance of Christ as their personal Savior, rather than Christ's acceptance of them into the family of His Father. In the same manner, the celebration of the Lord's Supper is considered to be the believer's remembrance of Christ's sacrificial love rather than the real presence of the risen Christ, and the partaking of His life-giving Body and Blood.

B. Liberator

Before the lifting of the Martial Law the liberation theologians and preachers in Taiwan took their cue from the Exodus, and made use of the concept of the Kingdom of God in the New Testament to bring about the liberation from the oppression from the ruling party, and to establish a new and independent nation. Now the ruling authority has changed hands, but the new party in power finds themselves caught in a predicament of where to go from the liberation they won through the election.

C. Wonder Worker

Christians are a very small minority in Taiwan. And the work of evangelism has not been easy in the past fifty years. The growth of Christian church in Taiwan was significant in the fifties and sixties. However, when Taiwan's economy began to take off, the growth of the Christian church started to slow down. While some denominations suffered a significant loss of members, a number of independent churches continue to grow in membership.

It was during this period of time that the church growth movement was at its heyday. And most of the church workers were attending one seminar after the another with high expectation, listening with great attentiveness to the high sounding words from the star speakers for the magic method of rapid church growth. Later, the idea of power ministry was introduced. It conveyed the impression that the manifestation of power and the occurrence of miracles is a necessary means to draw attention and to bring about the phenomenal church growth.

As a result, the pursuit of miracles and mystical experience is valued as something prior to the diligent study of the Scripture and the faithful preaching of the Word of God. In this connection, a majority of church workers tend to project God as a Wonder Worker who will draw people to His church and glorify His name through the work of miracles.

IV. The Face of God Amid the Multiplicity of Images

A. Jesus Christ, the Manifestation of the Face of God

According to the Jewish understanding, no one is able to live when he sees the face of God. None can withstand God's majestic light and His consuming fire. His holiness was the very thing before which the sinner is most afraid to stand. In other words, the presence of God is more than anything else, that which brings fear and trembling rather than peace and joy.

When Jesus was born in accordance with the Old Testament prophecies, His name was called Immanuel, which means "God with us." As the Gospel of John unfolds, He was the Word that became flesh, and dwelled among us. "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made Him known." (Jn 1:18, NIV). In II Cor. 4:4 the apostle Paul pointed out that Christ is the image of God. In Col. 1:15 Paul affirmed again, Christ is "the image of the invisible God." The Epistle to the Hebrews further declares, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being...." (Heb. 1:3) Through Christ's atoning sacrifice we may come to God's very presence with freedom and confidence. (Eph. 3:12) It is in Christ that we are adopted as the child of God, and that we have the boldness to call Him our Abba, and the joy to behold the Father's face.

B. Beholding the Face of God in the Walk of Life

The new life in Christ is the life before God and in full communion with Him. The life of *coram deo* is a life that walks and works with God whose companionship is the rock of peace and fountain of joy. The life that is under the cross and hidden in God is also a life lived through ups and downs, calm and storm, always with the assurance of His unchanging promise and ever-sufficient love and grace.

C. Seeking the Face of God in Dialogue with the People of Other Faiths

Dialogue with other faiths is not just a friendly superficial conversation.

Neither is it merely an academic or intellectual discussion on the conceptual framework of each other's belief system. Genuine dialogue involves a face-to-face exposure, a person-to-person exchange, and a common exploration into the realm of the ultimate concern, an open and humble listening for a true understanding of the partner's faith and conviction, and an honest quest for the light of truth.

Such dialogue is neither a game nor a gamble. It has no place for propaganda nor triumphalism. True dialogue seeks the Face of God in the pilgrimage of mutual disclosure of and exploration into each other's understanding and experience of the ultimate sphere. Each stands to learn from the other, and is prepared for new insights and fresh challenges for growth. As Christian partners we enter into dialogue with faith and prayer. We pray that Christ, the Face of God, will reveal Himself in our journey, and that His light will shine upon us, and His Face will be seen in a way which transcends our human understanding. Thus true dialogue is a work of the Spirit of Truth. Sometimes we may be led into a path less traveled, and sail in water not chartered before. Even so, we enter into it with a deep trust, knowing His face will guide our way and lead us to see who He truly is, and what things really are.

D. Seeing the Face of Christ in the Service of Love Toward Neighbors

In his booklet, *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther said,

We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love, as Christ says in John I[:51], "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

The Christian life is a life in Christ and for others. The life in Christ is a life of servanthood. As Christ came not to be served, but to serve, so our daily life ought to be lived in a humble and joyful service to our

neighbors. And when we thus serve our neighbors, we serve Christ and behold his face in the need of our neighbor. “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Matt. 25:40, NIV)

V. Epilogue

As mentioned in the beginning, I have been wondering whether or not an amateur like me could meaningfully deal with a topic like this. So far I am only able to share with you my very limited personal observations and reflections on the focus I chose. My own evaluation is that I am *yen-kao-shou-ti*, a Chinese idiom that means literally “High is one’s eyes, but low his hands.” It depicts a person who has a high aim but lacks a sufficient skill. Despite all the insufficiency I would like to end this presentation with one quotation from C.S. Lewis’ *Till We Have Faces*.

Lightly men talk of saying what they mean. Often when he was teaching me to write in Greek the Fox would say, ‘Child, to say the very thing you really mean; that is the whole art and joy of words.’ A glib saying. When the time comes to you at which you will be forced at last to utter the speech which has lain at the center of your soul for years, which you have, all that time, idiot-like, been saying over and over, you’ll not talk about joy of words. I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, not let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should we hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?

Then a poem by Jerry Ham titled *The Face of God*,

I have seen a face not beheld by man,
 He holds me gently in the palm of His hand.
 I cannot describe the love in His eyes
 Or the words that dried the tears that I cried.
 How can I tell you of the way that I feel?
 My body is whole, Oh My! I am healed!
 The body you see is not really me.
 That is just the shell of what used to be.

There is no more pain, my mind is clear,
 And God Himself has wiped away my tears.
 The joy I feel is impossible to tell.
 But I wanted to tell you that all is well.
 I hope that God will help you to see,
 That at last, at last, I am finally free.
 I have seen a face not beheld by man,
 He holds me gently in the palm of His hand.
 For years I've prayed this would be my lot,
 And now I have touched the face of God.

To end, I am reminded of the story of Dr. Ernest Edwin Ryden, a well-known hymn writer. Once he was staying in a motel with his little son. It was the first time for his son to be away from the mother. They were staying in the separate beds. The light was off and the room was dark. Somehow the father was aware that the child was restless. So he said to him: "Everything is all right, my child. Now go to sleep." After a few minutes Dr. Ryden heard his son calling him: "Daddy, are there?"

"Yes, my child, I am right here!"

"Daddy, are you turning your face toward me?"

"Yes, my child, I am turning my face right toward you. Go to sleep now."

"Since your face is toward me. I can go to sleep now. Good night, Daddy!"

O Eternal Lord God, the Creator and Savior of all men and women, we pray thee to guide us with thy Holy Spirit as we meet people of other faiths. Grant us friendliness to arouse their confidence, patience to listen, and wisdom to understand what they say; and readiness to learn any truth they have from thee, any ways of presumption to defend thee who didst put thyself at the mercy of men at Bethlehem and Calvary. Invest us with thine own love for each. And ever purify our faith and worship, that we may become more wholly thine, through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, and the Lord and Savior of all. Amen.

~George Appleton~