Theology of Religions and Intertextuality: A Case Study of Christian–Confucian and Islamic–Confucian Dialogue in the Early 20th-Century China

Wai Luen Kwok

Department of Religion and Philosophy, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong; wlkwok@hkbu.edu.hk

Received: 29 May 2019; Accepted: 30 June 2019; Published: 3 July 2019

Abstract: In this paper, I will propose an intertextual theology of religions from a non-Western cultural perspective through the works in The True Light Review, an official magazine of Chinese Baptist churches, and Yue Hua, a prominent and long-lived Muslim magazine. My aim is to show that the religious discourses in these Chinese religious periodicals inform us of an alternative understanding of literary construction of religious plurality and challenge the current versions of theology of religions. With the concept of intertextuality, the differentiation and integration of religious identities indicates that language-constituted realities are multi-dimensional and multi-directional. In some respects, religious believers would like to differentiate themselves in the search for an authentic and meaningful life, but, they are nonetheless already interconnected and interrelated. In some other respects, they approach and embrace each other for integration to assert a common identity among religions in that area, but that could transform their religions with new meaning. Our case study will also further theological reflection of the nature of Christian life in predominantly non-Christian societies as an intertextual religious reality.

Keywords: theology of religions; intertextuality; postliberal theology; Chinese Christianity; Chinese Islam; Confucianism

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show that the religious discourses in Chinese religious periodicals inform us of an understanding of the literary construction of religious plurality alternative to that of the missionaries. The analysis can help us to think afresh the relationship, interaction and blending between Christianity, Islam and Confucianism. Also, it will further theological reflection of the nature of Christian life in predominantly non-Christian societies as an intertextual religious reality. In the area of theology, I will focus primarily on the Christian discussion because an intensive Islamic theological discussion cannot be meaningfully undertaken within one article. However, this paper can show that both monotheistic religions in China share a similar construction which provides us with evidence for the assertion of an intertextual religious reality.

In the religious history of China, Confucianism has been the dominant ideology and religion of society (Yang 1961). In the imperial period, we can see many examples of religions attempting to show their affinity with Confucianism. Conversely, Confucian scholars, who were usually government officials, criticized religious teachings that did not converge with Confucianism as “evil doctrines” or “heterodoxies” (Liu and Shek 2004, pp. 6–7). One may wonder if the Sinicizing process of religions in China of that period was a product of power and coercion. The relationship between religions may have been likely to have been twisted by political authority.

However, in the Republican period (1911–1949), Confucianism lost its political dominance. Although there was a campaign to call for establishing Confucianism as the state religion between
1912 and 1916, it ultimately failed. Meanwhile, the advancement of modern Western science and technology in China made Confucianism an outmoded school of thought in the eyes of intellectuals (Gao 2007). However, Confucianism was still influential in the culture. Therefore, it is interesting to study how Christianity and Islam, which were considered to be “foreign” religions in China, approached Confucian teaching in this period. This will inform us how this important religion has been embraced, integrated and differentiated by monotheistic Christians and Muslims.

Religious periodicals will be the research materials of this study. Periodical literature reflects immediate responses of the contemporary religious sentiment of the groups. Also, articles are much shorter than monographs, which mean that the authors can only put the most important points and arguments in them. The spontaneity and brevity of the works has made them good subjects for observing the patterns of engagements of different religious norms and worldviews. I will use the works in The True Light Review, an official magazine of Chinese Baptist churches, and Yue Hua, a prominent and long-lived Muslim magazine to propose a theology of religions from a non-Western cultural perspective.

The True Light Review was a long-running Chinese-language Christian periodical in the early twentieth century. It was first published as The True Light Monthly in 1902 and edited by an American Baptist missionary, Robert E. Chambers. In 1911, the magazine had subscribers in China, the United States, Canada, South America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Hawaii, Japan, the East Indies, Burma, and South Africa (Mu Lu (Contents) 1911, p. 1). In 1917, its name was changed to The True Light Review. It has been considered as the ‘ancestor’ of Chinese Christian periodicals and one of the six most important Christian periodicals from 1914 to 1937 (Tang 1938a, p. 5; 1938b, p. 6). In 1926, the editorial office moved from Canton to Shanghai and in 1932, the magazine had enough financial resources to construct its own office building within the Shanghai International Settlement (Liao 1932). In 1936, the China Baptist Alliance passed a resolution to install The True Light Review as the official magazine of the China Baptist Church (Liu and Liang 1937, p. 66).

Yue Hua was founded by ahongs (from Persian akoond, equivalent to the Arabic imam), Hui literati, and local Hui leaders in October 1929 at Peiping. It served as a bulletin of the Chengda Normal School. The founders were Ma Fuxiang (a powerful Hui warlord and joined the Kuomintang in 1928), Tang Kesan (the principal of the Chengda Normal School), Sun Shengwu, Sun Youming, and Zhao Zhenwu (Ning Xia Shao Shu Min Zu Gu Ji Zheng Li Chu Ban Gui Hua Ling Dao Xiao Zu Ban Gong Shi 2010, p. 1). The Hui are an ethnic minority group in China with foreign ancestral origins that follows a form of Islam that is highly Sinicized in its language and cultural practice (Gladney 1991). In terms of Islamic theology, we can consider Yue Hua was influenced by the Islamic Modernism of Al-Azhar University in Egypt (Matsumoto 2006; Benite 2013). Yue Hua has been praised as a long-lasting Muslim periodical with a circulation of about 10,000 copies (Bai 1939; Wang 1939). Zhao Zhenwu wrote that the periodical had subscriptions from all over China, Southeast Asia, India, Middle East, Africa, Europe, and America (Zhao 1936, p. 25). The impact of Yue Hua was also noticed by overseas scholarship on Chinese Muslims (Matsumoto 2006, p. 118; Benite 2013, p. 253). The founding aims of the magazine were to: 1. Illustrate Islamic teachings that are relevant to modern trends; 2. Report the Muslim news around the world; 3. Promote the knowledge and status of Chinese Muslims; 4. Resolve the misunderstanding between the Old Sect and the New Sect; 5. Develop the national identity among Muslims in China; 6. Promote the education and livelihood of Muslims (Ben Kan Zong Zhi [The Aims of the Magazine] 1929). In this sense, the magazine bore a mission of building a national identity of the Republican China and promoting a religious revival among Chinese Muslims.

In Sections 2 and 3 of the paper, I will introduce the concept of intertextuality and how it can be related to the discussion of the theology of religions. From the Sections 4–7, I will unfold my analysis with the evidence of religious discourses in Yue Hua and The True Light Review. Finally, I will offer a theological remark on revising the theology of religions with a vision of intertextual reality.
2. Conceptualizing Intertextuality

As mentioned above, in this paper, I propose to understand our case study as an intertextual religious reality. It implies that we should understand text ontologically. According to John Frow, intertextuality means that,

a culture is structured as a complex network of codes with heterogeneous and dispersed forms of textual realization . . . In this sense the ‘reality’ both of the ‘natural’ and the social worlds is text-like in that it can be thought as a grid or a texture of significations, an intrication of heterogeneous materials. (Frow 1990, p. 47)

One can assert that the reality is a “grid of significations”, because we find that, “Texts are made out of cultural and ideological norms; out of the conventions of genre; out of styles and idioms embedded in the language; out of connotations and collocative sets; out of clichés, formulae, or proverbs; and out of other texts” (Frow 1990, p. 45). In other words, applying the concept of intertextuality, I will study how the discourses in religious periodicals revealed the complexity of the structure of religious faith and the reality of Monotheistic Christians and Muslims in China.

One may be aware that understanding religion as a kind of textual or literary reality is walking along the path of postliberal theology. According to George Lindbeck, “A religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought” (Lindbeck 1984, p. 33). “[R]eligions are thought of primarily as different idioms for constructing reality, expressing experience, and ordering life” (Lindbeck 1984, pp. 47–8). Through the case study, we will find that language does not only represent or express the beliefs of Chinese Christians and Muslims, but that the language, and its cultural/religious matrix, also regulates and formulates their reality. Although the postliberal theology can capture the main idea of a textual construction of reality, I have chosen to use intertextuality as the basis of my analysis and I will investigate whether postliberal theology should be revised to accommodate the fact of intertextual reality in the discussion of the theology of religions.

3. Theology of Religions: A Reflection on Current Thought

What is a Christian theology of religions? According to Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen,

Theology of religions is that discipline of theological studies which attempts to account theologically for the meaning and value of other religions. Christian theology of religions attempts to think theologically about what it means for Christians to live with people of other faiths and about the relationship of Christianity to other religions. (Kärkkäinen 2003, p. 20)

He considers the “main question” of theology of religions to be “naturally, that of salvation: Is salvation to be found only in Christianity, and more specifically in the church” (Kärkkäinen 2003, p. 23)? In other words, theology of religions comes to the discussion because Christianity meets other religions and needs theological accounts to articulate the experience. In particular, its main discussion topic is whether other religions are salvific, an agenda which comes from a missionary concern. One can be aware that Kärkkäinen and his Catholic counterpart in the field of theology of religions, Paul Knitter, approaches the theology of religions in a similar way. Knitter suggests that a theology of religions is a discipline of “Christians trying to understand themselves and their faith in relation to their religious neighbors and their faiths” (Knitter 2002, p. 2).

Although he aims for a transformation in mainstream discussion, Gavin D’Costa still shares a similar missionary mindset. He states that the theology of religions comes to exist because, Christianity was born into a religiously pluralist world and has remained in one ever since. The mandate to go preach the gospel to the corners of the earth, as well as its own socioeconomic political position in society, has resulted in a complex range of relations and responses to other religions. (D’Costa 2005, p. 626)
In short, in the theology of religions of these theologians, Christians are considered as one group and other religious believers another. Thus, the theology of religions is mainly on inter-religious interaction, and the purpose of interaction is to discern whether other religions are salvific.

However, this approach shows that it is an outgrowth of missionary enterprise. It assumes that Christianity is fundamentally different from other religions and that when Christians interact with other religions, our main concern is whether their believers will be saved or converted. One may change the perspective from that of missionaries to that of native Christians in the missionary field. Native Christians need to engage with world religions theologically not because we want to have a mere dialogue or understanding of the other, but because the religions are already part of our self. For native people in the missionary field, they were living in and as other religion(s) before they became Christians or Christianized. The religions constitute their social and cultural life. More importantly, native Christians in the missionary fields are still living in cultures that are blended with religions of that part of the world. The task of theology of religions or an inter-religious dialogue is to make sense of this experience.

Even if we stick to a missionary approach to theology of religions, we will find that the religious reality of the native people presents a challenge. The challenge can be seen when one discusses the relationship between religion and culture. For example, though Harold Netland, an evangelical missiologist, emphasized that we should not reduce religion to culture; he admits that the line between religion and culture is complicated and “intertwined.” Netland’s words are worth quoting at length, although religion and culture are closely interconnected, we must be careful not to reduce a religion to its particular cultural expression … The connection between religion and culture has significant implications for missiology. A central concern of missiology is contextualization, which involves using forms or symbols that are sufficiently familiar to a particular culture and that adequately convey biblical meanings in an effort to maximize understanding and acceptance of the gospel within that culture. Since culture and religion are often so intertwined, serious consideration of contextualization inevitably leads to questions about the relation of Christian faith to indigenous religious beliefs and practices, affecting everything from translation of the Scriptures to how Christians should regard local customs. The line between cultural and religious issues can be imprecise. (Netland 2001, p. 329)

Lesslie Newbigin, a missionary and theologian active in the discussion of religious pluralism, straightforwardly pointed out the division of religion and life is artificial: “In most human cultures religion is not a separate activity set apart from the rest of life” (Newbigin 1989, kindle loc. 3226). He also frankly criticized the assumption that the only question of theology of religions is, “What happens to the non-Christian after death” (Newbigin 1989, kindle loc. 3315)? He wisely told us that, “Wherever the gospel is preached it is preached in a human language, which means the language of one particular culture; wherever a community tries to live out the gospel, it is also part of one particular human culture” (Newbigin 1989, kindle loc. 3546). However, it is very perplexing that although he recognized the cultural matrix that Christians in the missionary field are living in and with, his suggestion for Christians’ dialogue and social life with other religious believers neglects this important reality and goes back to a mode of self-centered monologue. He proposed that an exchange, interaction and dialogues with other religious believers “will be initiated by our partners, not by ourselves” (Newbigin 1989, kindle loc. 3407), and that Christian dialog “will simply be the telling of the story, the story of Jesus, the story of the Bible. The story is itself, as Paul says, the power of God for salvation” (Newbigin 1989, p. 3417). He conceived that the first group of Christian converts in the missionary fields are those “radicals” that “question” their traditions (Newbigin 1989, p. 3551). From missionary history in China, we can find that Newbigin’s assertion cannot be valid. For example, when Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and other Jesuits came to China, they were evangelizing Confucian scholars that were dedicated members of Chinese society and culture. Theologizing the meaning of Confucianism for Christians in the late Ming dynasty was not a passive task. The effort of
Jesuit missionaries and native Christians of that time was certainly not merely “telling of the story of Jesus” (Hsia 2012).

Newbigin’s analysis of religion and culture clearly showed that a contextual faith is one that is embedded within a cultural-religious matrix. However, one should recognize that theology of religions is not a theological discussion of others. It should address and articulate the complexity of the construction of our selfhood. At this point, Raimon Panikkar has valuable insight for an ontological reflection:

We are conscious of things (the “external” world), and at the same time conscious that this light of consciousness is within and without ourselves … We have to obey not only the external things but also the structure of our own thinking, which has been given to us. Our very consciousness is a given, a gift. Nevertheless, the fact that we are the bearers of that consciousness makes all the difference with regard to everything else. Human life is not just what we detect with our experiments. It is the “we” which is alive, which makes the experiments and endures the experiences. (Panikkar 2013, kindle loc. 7391–7396)

From the complexity and interconnectedness of our conscious life, Panikkar further suggests that “the very constitution of the real” is a “solidarity of all beings” (Panikkar 2013, kindle loc. 7457). In this light, theology of religions from a native Christian perspective is a description of the wholeness of our reality. However, I should point out that Panikkar’s assertion of “solidarity” neglects the complexity of the interconnectedness. In many examples, religions and our life experience are not in unity, but rather, in conflict though interconnected. Panikkar’s position may be in danger of removing the complexity and becoming a self-harmonized projection. Our religious reality is an intertextuality rather than a unified text.

If Christian theology of religions should be an articulation of one’s real experience of religious complexity, the usual categories of “exclusivism,” “inclusivism,” and “pluralism” are not very helpful for the task. These words can only refer to the discussion of salvation and divine reality in the relation between Christianity and other religions. Or, they may only account for the self-identity of Christians in a non-Christian society and cannot explicate how and why local Christians engage, embrace and integrate or reject particular aspects of other religious traditions in their Christian life theologically. I hope that my analysis can chart out how practices and articulations reflect a self-understanding of multi-religious embedded life of Chinese Christians and Muslims. Also, I hope that I can offer a tentative proposal of theology of religions for further reflection.

If religious reality is governed and operated by discourse, it seems that postliberal theology is the most suitable candidate for a renewed theology of religions. However, George Lindbeck suggested that different religions and philosophies are incommensurable (Lindbeck 1984, p. 49). He believed that if we attempt to use a given religious framework to introduce ideas from other religions or philosophies, the discourse is reduced to “simply babbling” (Lindbeck 1984, p. 49). Knitter read Lindbeck’s notion of incommensurability as establishing a hard boundary between religions. According to Knitter,

To describe just how Lindbeck and the Acceptance Model look at proper relations between religions, we can use the image of “a good neighbor policy.” But to do that, each of them needs to recognize that, indeed, “good fences make good neighbors.” Each religion has its own backyard. There is no “commons” that all of them share. (Knitter 2002, p. 183)

In our case study, we will find that the conception of religions as self-contained and incommensurable ghettos is not accurate. If language constitutes our reality, and religions are textual reality, then the experience of Chinese Christians and Muslims indicates that they do not live in cultural-linguistic ghettos. Rather, their linguistic realities embed and intersect with other religions and form a complex life-world. Our case study shows that Lindbeck’s understanding of religion as cultural-linguistic reality is too neatly linear and one-dimensional. Likewise, using the theological concept of the Divine common grace to explain this phenomenon will also be too simplistic.
Our theological reflection will be much more fruitful if we can illustrate and explicate the patterns, rationales, and implications of such cultural-linguistic reality theologically and furthermore, the concept of intertextuality can help us to capture the logic of the phenomenon. In the following sections, I will attempt to show how inter-religious discourses of Chinese Muslims and Christians can operate in this logic.

4. The Tension between Foreign Religions and Confucianism and Self-Identity

When we talk about Christian–Confucian and Muslim–Confucian dialogue, we quickly become very aware that Islam and Christianity were experiencing tensions with Confucianism in the period of Republican China. From Christian and Muslim perspectives, Confucianism discriminates against other religions. Zhang Wenkai (alias Yijing), the editor of The True Light Review from 1905 to 1931, complained that “when the discussion of installing Confucianism as the national religion began in the last year [i.e., 1913], there were incidents of using Confucianism to persecute Christianity in different provinces” (Zhang 1921, p. 48).1

Jin Jitang (alias Qishu), a renowned Chinese Muslim scholar, cited Confucian Shiji (The Book of Poetry) and Analects to show that Confucianism has a long tradition of antiforeignism and self-centrism. He quoted that, “In Shiji (The Book of Poetry), [it stated], ‘To deal with the tribes of the west and north, and to punish [those of] Jing and Shu.’ Confucius said, ‘The rude tribes of the east and north have their princes, and are not like the States of our great land which are without them.’” Even the Chinese words rendered for unreasonable and irritating speech and acts are “Hu Shuo” (words of northern barbarians) and “Man Bu Jiang Li” (unreasonable as southern barbarians) (Jin 1935, p. 10).

The tension arose from a fear of minority religious identities being entirely assimilated into Confucianism. Jin criticized Chinese Muslim attempts at “interpreting Islam through Confucianism” in the Qing Dynasty for having a very bad impact on the Chinese Muslim community. It made Islam “flattering” (e fu) to Confucianism so that Muslim and ordinary Chinese became nearly indistinguishable with one another (Jin 1935, p. 10). Another author asserted that because Confucianism was under the patronage of the emperors, no religion in conflict with it could exist in China. As a result of this, “our [Muslim] scholars always relate Confucianism and Islam with far-fetched analogies” (Wang 1931, p. 8). In The True Light Review, a Chinese pastor and later a leader of Chinese Baptist Church, Princeton S. Hsu, described the Chinese religious culture as a “Salt Sea” that can dissolve everything within it. Confucian scholars in the imperial period absorbed every other religion into Confucianism and became a religious syncretism (Hsu 1932, p. 22). He warned that Christianity should not change its nature in order to adapt to Chinese culture (Hsu 1932, p. 32).

Chinese Christians and Muslims rejected Confucianism also because they found it ethically, socially and spiritually incompetent. In the Republican period, Christianity enjoyed a privileged position for the presence of western scientific power in China. One author in The True Light Review simply called for replacing Confucianism with Christianity because Confucianism was backward and unscientific (Yu 1934). A second author rejected Confucianism because it allied itself with monarchical authoritarianism and a philosophy of social hierarchy. Confucianism was considered to be inappropriate for a modern society. Conversely, he argued, Christianity could meet the needs of modern society for it promoted a democratic society with values of equality, freedom, love, sacrifice and industriousness (Ji 1928, p. 57). Zhang Wenkai criticized the Chinese superstition veneration of idols as coming from Confucianism (Zhang 1921, p. 29). Islam in China by that time was in a weak social and political position, but nonetheless, from the Chinese Muslim point of view, Confucianism was “incomplete. It can only be a part of the philosophy of life. It cannot support the whole life” (Wang 1931, p. 11). Another author claimed that, “All crimes in the world are caused by individualism. Individualism is an idea of I . . . Confucianism dunked too deep in the idea of I . . . Confucianism is merely an individualism”

1 The book is a collection of articles that Zhang Wenkai has published in The True Light Review.
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(Ding 1931, p. 9). Arguments that Islam or Christianity are the only way of salvation usually follow. Zhang Wenkai advised that Confucius is only a lamp and Christ a sun. If we reject the light of the sun and remain under the lamp, our life will be as illusory and hopeless as opium addiction (Zhang 1921, p. 75). Ding Zhengxi commented that Confucianism is individualist and Moism is collectivist. Islam is superior to either for it addresses the dimensions of both the individual and the community, leading individuals and communities back to Allah (Ding 1931, p. 9).

I would call the tension described in this section as an action of language differentiation. We may find that the segregation and conflict between religious communities entails a differentiation in religious discourses. Interestingly, this differentiation exists exactly because the communities are living together, interacting with each other, and searching for a better life and society. Muslims and Christians continue to follow their religions because they believe that their faith gives them a better life, which excels among their Confucian fellow Chinese. Because they dwell within a common lifeworld, they search for the good but come to be aware of their differences. In this sense, a theology of religions begins with a desire for a common good life with an awareness of different claims about that life. Differentiation is a description of the resources of my religion and the limitations of other religions for achieving that goal. Theologically speaking, we can find that the exclusivist position in the theology of religions accounts for the inadequacy of good in other religions to the absence of sole salvation of God in them. For Christianity, it is the salvation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. For Islam, it is *tawhid*, the acknowledgement that Allah alone is God and that all worship, service and obedience are due unto Him alone (Al-Faruqi 1998, p. 79). Both *The True Light Review* and *Yue Hua* are in this “exclusive” mode of thought, but one should note that the logic of exclusivism is a comparison of good and a claim to own the supreme and irreplaceable good.

5. Studying the ‘Learning/Scholarship of the Nation’ (*Guo Xue*) or the ‘National Heritage’ (*Guo Gu*) and Theology of Religions

However, in the midst of tension and “exclusivism”, we can find that Chinese Christians and Muslims cannot merely treat Confucianism as the other. Confucianism is an inescapable reality within the life of Chinese Christians and Muslims. In *Yue Hua*, Jin Jitang argued that Chinese Muslims should learn *Guo Gu* (national heritage) for it is the essence of Chinese civilization, which “nationals have a duty to learn it” (Jin 1935, p. 9). Jin cited a Confucian idiom, “texts is supposed to carry the way [truth]” (*Wen Yi Zai Dao*), and advised that Muslims need good classical knowledge and literary skills to articulate Islamic doctrines:

> If there are persons, who do not only understand the theory and teaching of the [Islamic] religion … but are also deeply immersed in Chinese literature, can in the greatest extent publish and promote the teaching of the sacred texts in Chinese; one can anticipate the day that the doubts of outsiders will be relieved, the ignorance of fellow believers will be removed, and the true religion will be revived. (Jin 1935, p. 10)

Chinese traditions in the past, obviously including Confucianism, signified by text can embody Islamic messages—they can carry the Dao. Language, and thus the text, is a powerful tool for presenting Islam as a reality in China. Also, *Guo Gu* can inform the Chinese Muslim community about their historical development. The historical past is not only a piece of information, but also a reality directly related to Muslims. Jin wrote that, “In summary, our people were born here, were clothed here, live on the land and eat what it produces. The milieu here really has a direct relationship with our people … The national heritage (*Guo Gu*) is the essence of all times and of above and below.” Jin believed that the national heritage has formed the belief and practice of Hui Muslims. Muslims should perceive the changes in the modern Chinese society through understanding the lives of Muslims in the past. It helps

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2 The idiom comes from Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian scholar Zhou Dunyi’s (1017–1073) book, *Tong Shu* (*The Gist of Confucian Thought*).
to form a more effective Muslim life mode in the present time (Jin 1935, p. 10). Ma Songting, one of the founders of Yue Hua, explicitly used an analogy of a body’s life to explicate the point. He stated that, “Our people have settled in China for a thousand and hundreds of years. We are mostly common in language and habits with others. Thus, our people should drink from this spring for behavioral principles that are appropriate for our people living in the present time” (Ma and Zhao 1934, p. 20).

For Christians, we can also find this embodiment of Confucianism. In the 25th anniversary issue of The True Light Review, Zhang Wenkai requested Fan Bihui, the editor of the Association Progress of the Young Men’s Christian Association, to write “Scholarship of the nation in two thousand five hundred years” as the first article of the issue. Fan argued that Confucius was the master establishing the learning of the nation and had the most influence on thought throughout Chinese history. Confucius’s main contribution was to establish the canon (jin) of Chinese civilization. He asserted that “No scholarship of the later time can escape from the scope of the classical study” (Fan 1927, pp. 3–4).

In The True Light Review, T. C. Chao (Zhao Zichen), a famous Christian theologian at Yenching University, wrote that Chinese Christianity cannot secure a foothold in China unless it becomes indigenized. He clearly expressed that indigenized Christianity is an embodied representation of Chinese religion and culture. According to Chao, a Chinese “indigenous church” is a creation of Chinese Christians. He explained that,

Our creating method is to digest and then write. [It] makes the Chinese and the Western cultures in our blood and consciousness become forms of expression of Chinese Christian life. Sophisticated doctrines, music, architecture, and rituals are signs of self-expression of religious life. Theory that can be understood by itself is science. Theory, that is immanent within theory and at the same time transcends theory, and that nearly becomes metaphor and conveys its elusive mystery, is religion. Religion does not make us radiant from without. It expresses from within. (Chao 1927, p. 9)

Although religious communities would like to differentiate themselves from others, relatively recently introduced religions cannot avoid inheriting qualities of their older counterparts. In this respect, language is not only a tool for differentiation and self-identity, but also constitutes a space for interaction and communal life. Under this light, theology of religions in its primary operational level is not inter-religious dialogue; instead it is the reality of the language-events of different religions taking place. We need to chart out how different religions occupy the common place, interpret human life and how the newer religions take on qualities of their context. In particular, this means what idioms, story, ideas, and religious beliefs are employed and shared by believers of different religions in the same region should be investigated.

6. Paralleling and Transposing Confucian Texts and Theology of Religions

In our case of Yue Hua and The True Light Review, we will find that at a deeper level, the reality of inheritance points to an integration between Confucianism and Islam/Christianity. The integration is accomplished by transposing Confucian words and concepts in religious discourses, or at least by placing them in parallel. The parallelization and transposition present an immediate interconnectedness between the religions.

In the front-page article of the first issue of Yue Hua, Imam Wang Meng Yang pointed out that Islam and Confucianism could “collaborate” with each other, for Confucianism teaches benevolence/love (Ren) and righteousness (Yi), and Islam the most mercifulness of Allah (Meng 1929). Imam Ding Zhanbin taught that Confucian ‘five constant virtues’—benevolence/love (Ren), righteousness (Yi), propriety (Li), wisdom (Zhi), fidelity (Xin) can be understood as the five pillars of Islam. For example, Ren is the testimony of faith. Because Allah created human beings and shows his mercy to Muslims, the true love or Ren for Muslims is to bear the testimony of faith in every moment (Ding 1935).
In another piece of work, the author praised Confucianism for its very insightful teaching on love. He then put the Confucian and Islamic teachings in parallel and implied that they are in harmony with each other. He wrote that,

The totality of human life is the venerate [ion of] (Jing) [heaven] and love (Ai). For example, we perform the eight great works [in The Book of Great Learning]: extend our knowledge, investigate things, [are] sincere [in] our thoughts, rectify our hearts, cultivate our persons, regulate our families, govern the state rightly, and make the whole kingdom tranquil and happy. Or, [we uphold] the five pillars: testimony, prayer, giving, fasting, and pilgrimage. [We uphold] the five cardinal virtues of relationships, which are kindness, filiality, friendship, humility, gentleness and faithfulness . . . They are helping us to know how to live as a person, handle the things, and serve heaven for achieving veneration and love. Therefore, Allah teaches us veneration and love, and sowed the spirit of love within humanity. (Zhang 1934, p. 21)

We can find similar practice in The True Light Review. For example, in an article, “Only love can move people,” the author used an idiom aligned to Confucius’ saying in Analects, “sacrifice life for fulfilling benevolence/love” to describe Jesus Christ’s salvation work (Deng 1912). We can also find the strategy of paralleling the texts in the magazine. Zhang Wenkai, wrote that,

The problem of people is that they do not turn round upon themselves. Mencius said, “That whereby the gentleman (Jun Zi) is distinguished from other men is what he preserves in his heart—namely, benevolence/love and propriety. The benevolent man loves others. The man of propriety shows respect to others. He who loves others is constantly loved by them. He who respects others is constantly respected by them. Here is a man, who treats me in a perverse and unreasonable manner. The gentleman in such a case will turn round upon himself, ‘I must have been wanting in benevolence/love; I must have been wanting in propriety—how should this have happened to me?’ He examines himself, and is especially benevolent. He turns round upon himself, and is specially observant of propriety. The perversity and unreasonableness of the other, however, are still the same. The gentleman will again turn round on himself, ‘I must have been failing to do my utmost.’ He turns round upon himself, and proceeds to do his utmost, but still the perversity and unreasonableness of the other are repeated. On this the gentleman says, ‘This is a man utterly lost indeed! Since he conducts himself so, what is there to choose between him and a brute? Why should I go to contend with a brute?’” . . . “Do not let the sun go down on your wrath”. “Forgive people until seventy times seven”. “Love others as yourself”. “Whatever you desire for men to do to you, you shall also do to them”. “First remove the beam out of your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother’s eye”. All these are ultimate works of turning round upon oneself. (Zhang 1924, p. 90)

Zhang interpreted Christian doctrines of interpersonal relationship as “ultimate works” of the Confucian “turning round upon oneself.” In other words, Christians live according to a Confucian concept, which is at the same time ultimately Christian. From Zhang’s alignment of Confucian with Christian teaching, we can expect that Zhang holds Confucianism in high regard. He asserts that Christians should learn Confucianism and venerate Confucius in the manner of Confucians (Zhang 1925, p. 81).

One may think that what we have seen above is similar with Knitter’s “fulfilment model”: “They believe that other religions are of value, that God is to be found in them, that Christians need to dialogue with them and not just preach to them” (Knitter 2002, p. 63). However, the fulfilment model is different from my analysis on the point of the direction of dialogue. The fulfilment model’s direction of dialogue is mainly towards the religious other. However, my analysis shows that it is also an exploration and a realization of the self. With the strategy of transposing and paralleling, Chinese Muslims and
Christians are creating new integration of Confucianism and their own religions. Language facilitate a practice of “mutual participation.” Transposing and paralleling creates an interface that allows the meaning of the original cultural or religious languages to arrive at a new convergence.

7. Translating Western/Arabian Works into Chinese and Theology of Religions

Finally, the integration and mutual participation can reflex back to the original religious tradition. From Yue Hua and The True Light Review, one can find that the magazines published many articles that were originally written in Arabic or English. More importantly, these works are usually on doctrinal expositions. In this sense, one may argue that the language does not only function as a way to cross over traditions and create openness, it also acts as the connection between religious communities and their original religious tradition. For example, in Yue Hua, Li Tingbi translated an article on the interpretation of Quran from the Indian Muslim magazine, The Light.\(^3\) The article recommended that Muslims should use a scientific mindset to study the Quran (Li 1931, p. 5). In the translation postscripts, Li encouraged Hui Muslims to gain education for themselves and criticized them for preventing girls and women from receiving education, asserting that the practice is un-Islamic but Chinese (Li 1931, p. 6). In The True Light Review, Chen Haosheng translated some sections of an English book titled, Pungent Paragraphs. Interestingly, he titled his column as “Yu Dao Xiao Pin (Homiletical Illustrations)”. He believed that the translation can help preachers to acquire good public speech skills and use illustrations that are relevant to Chinese social life (Chen 1928, pp. 69–70).

Moreover, in translated language, a text is already something new to the original religious tradition. It creates a new experience between the religious communities and original religious tradition. Arabic is always considered to be irreplaceable and sacred in Islam, but Yue Hua translated passages of the Quran and gave detailed commentary on them. For example, in Yue Hua, Ma (1932) cited a poem of Li Bai (701–762, a famous Chinese poet in Tang Dynasty), Chun Ye Yan Tao Li Yuan Xu (Preface to the Feast in Peach and Plum Garden on a Spring Night) to comment on Surah Al-Mulk (67:2), “[He] who created death and life to test you [as to] which of you is best in deed—and He is the Exalted in Might, the Forgiving.” Ma cited the following lines of the poem (Ma 1932, pp. 1–2):

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\text{The universe is a temporary inn for all living things. Time is the transit visitors over the span of one hundred generations. This drifting life is like a dream. There is too little time to enjoy the pleasure of living. Thus, it was quite appropriate for ancient people to, with candlelight in hand, roam at night. (translated by Edward C. Chang)}
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Ma’s application of a classical Chinese poem as a part of commentary of the Quran made his interpretation very different from Arabic commentaries available for Muslims. Although the Christian Bible has already been translated, The True Light Review frequently translated hymns and religious poems. In these translated works, we can find similar applications of Chinese classical idioms and literary phrases. An author with the nom de plume, Zhi Bai (direct and easy to understand), translated a poem “Ni Le Ye Mo? (Are you willing?)”. In one of the verses, he used a Chinese idiom, “Sui Yu Er An” (be at ease with one’s current situation) for his translation (Bai 1937, p. 51). The move also indicated that the translation added new sensibility to the original.

More strikingly, the translation process is able to have an impact on the original tradition and urge readers to be open to a wider understanding of other religious realities. Lian Xi’s work, The conversion of missionaries: liberalism in American Protestant missions in China, 1907–1932, showed how this influence in turn changed the missionaries’ understanding of Chinese culture and religions (Lian 1997). Also, in Islam, Ma Jin’s (alias Muhammad Makin) Arabic translation of Confucius’s Analects aroused a great deal of interest in Chinese culture among Egyptian Muslim scholars (Benite 2013). I would

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\(^3\) The Light is an English magazine of Ahmadiyya, an Indian Islamic revival movement in the early 20th century.
call it a language-event of bringing back and consider it to have created a new tension and possibility for openness.

8. Concluding Remarks and Tentative Theological Proposal

In the process of articulating a religious self-identity and relation with Confucianism, we can find that language constitutes reality for Chinese Christians and Muslims. More strikingly, Islam and Christianity are working in a similar manner. In this light, the theology of religions should not operate in the mode of missionary encounter. Rather, it should describe how our religious discourse formulates and negotiates our religious identity, how it enables our distinctiveness, creates new common experience, and creates possibilities for changes in the religious communities.

Yue Hua and The True Light Review showed that Chinese Muslims and Christians do not live within one religious-linguistic reality. Their life is constituted by multi-linguistic realities and this is where intertextuality happens. As Julia Kristeva put it, “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva 1980, p. 66). The differentiation and integration of religious identities indicated that language constituted realities are multi-dimensional and multi-directional. In some respects, religious believers would like to differentiate themselves, because they searching for an authentically meaningful life according to their teaching. But, we find as a given that at the same time they are already interconnected and interrelated. In some other respects, they approach and embrace each other for integration, because they are asserting a common reality among religions in that area—but it will also transform religions with new meaning. It is the intertextuality that constitutes the religious believers’ selfhood. Putting back this finding to a discussion of the Christian theology of religions, Robert Jenson wisely pointed out that language links us with the past, the present, and the future:

What I mean is this: the language in which you say to me “Good morning” comes to us both from the past; the conventions that make words of these sounds were already set before you spoke, otherwise you could not have spoken. Yet the utterance of these words is the breaking into my life of someone other than me, and that means of something new and different from me. I am challenged to see what I was not seeing, to take up new tasks and expectations; utterance opens the future. (Jenson 1995, p. 2)

Here, a theology of religions is not a public relations nor a preaching task. It reminds us of the ontological nature of the church, Christians, and the whole world as beings called into existence by the Word of God. This leads us depart from the debate of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Also, Lindbeck’s postliberal theology is inadequate in describing the interconnectedness of the language. When Christians integrate words, concepts, and expressions of their own religious culture with their present Christian life, we should study carefully how, where and why the convergence happened. In the past, theologians used syncretism to describe the phenomenon, but as our case study shows, the native religious believers intentionally blended the religions in particular areas while at the same time maintaining their own religious identity. They did not consider themselves to be syncretizing their religion, but offering instead differentiated and faithful religious discourses. It is a general phenomenon across Islam and Christianity, two monotheistic religions, that they emphasize special revelation. Our case shows that a revised theology of religions should articulate a doctrine of creation and Christian life that can encompass the religious others. In Colossians 3:11, Paul reminded us that “Christ is all, and in all.” Then, he taught that Christ can dwell in our teaching, psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, which we can counsel one another (3:16). Paul Fiddes reminds us that if we realize the whole world is a complex system of signs and if text is always a kind of extension of our body; we should be convinced that “the whole world of a text . . . the space in which we find ourselves addressed, where we can hear the Word of God and see as God sees” (Fiddes 2013, p. 342). Christian belief thus does not “exclude the presence of God in the world through all bodies” (Fiddes 2013, p. 345). The task for theologians committed to theology of religions is that how we discern Christ in every moment of
the Christian life and our life with others, which is already intertextual and multi-linguistic. In this sense, the theology of religions will go beyond a discussion of the salvific power of other religions and start to investigate “the same [trinitarian] pattern in all other bodily life” (Fiddes 2013, p. 345).

**Funding:** This research is funded by The General Research Fund of the Research Grant Council of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, grant number 12403714.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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