

An Overview of Theological Education in China ——Trends and Challenge

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Greetings in the names of Chinese Christians and theological seminaries in China!

Firstly let me express my gratitude to the Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany for inviting me to this conference, through the conference I know that our European friends really concern about theological education of the Church in China. It makes us know that we are not isolated. Since Chinese church tradition is close to the mainstream churches, it is exactly identified with and respect European theologians. Chinese seminary students can remember many names of European theologians. Many ambitious students dream to study in Europe, especially in Germany, because Germany has produced a lot of famous theologians. CCC takes the relationship with the European churches very seriously.

I ever studied in the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Hong Kong, I had a very good relationship with the European missionaries who worked there. So I could know the European theological understanding of Mission. I found their understanding of Mission very profound, and gave fully respect to non-Christian tradition and embodied the spirit of

tolerance and fraternity of Christianity. It is very different from some missionary organization which want to use Chinese to do mission to Muslim countries with imperialistic method. China's Church does not oppose Mission, but it stresses to evangelize among its own people, especially take the social service seriously. We are really illuminated by the idea of upholding academic study and social service European churches.

CCC\TSPM held transitional conference in February, 2008. we voted new leadership of the two national church organizations. New leaders are much younger than the older generations. The chairperson of TSPM Elder FU Xianwei was in charge of church of Shanghai for a long time and full of experience, the president of CCC Rev. Gao Feng was the highest leadership of church of Shandong Province. President Gao Feng, Secretary General Rev. Kan Baoping(CCC), Secretary General Rev. Xu Xiaohong are all the alumni of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary. They graduated in the seminary in 1980's, now they are the high leaders of the national church organizations, it is the achievement of Chinese theological education. Pastor GAO Feng ever studied in USA, and now is still doctorate candidate of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Hong Kong. Rev. Kan Baoping ever studied in Canada. They are in charge of theological education and foreign ministry, I believe they will base on their works with open mind and the spirit of seek the truth from facts.

In order to work more effective, CCC\TSPM have established twelve commissions for special ministries. The Theological Educational Commission is presided by Rev. Kan Baoping, as the vice general

secretary of CCC and director of the Theological Educational Commission, my responsibility is to assist Rev. Kan for the ministry.

I. The Situation of China's Christian Theological Education

China's Christian theological education was rehabilitated with the reopen of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary from 1981. now we have run nineteen seminaries and Bible schools, there are more than 1700 students in the campuses. From 1981 to nowadays, more than ten thousand student have graduated from the seminaries, most of them are working in the local parishes, some of them have been ordained as pastors. Most of the leaderships of local churches belong to the new generation. It makes Chinese church look younger and younger.

Then what is the situation of China's theological education? I would like use an English word NOW to summarize it. N means new, O means opportunity, W means work.

I) New—new faces of Chinese theological education

a. New leadership. Today most of the seminaries and Bible schools are in charged of new generation. Even some seminaries are still led by old ministers, the daily work has been responsible by the young deans and vice presidents.

b. New teachers group. Most of the theological professors grew up from 1980's , some of them have the oversea study experiences. They are young of age and full of energy, they have put their enthusiasm into China's theological education.

c. New campuses. Many Chinese seminaries have moved to the new campuses, the conditions of schools are improved. For example,

Nanjing Union Theological Seminary just move to the new campus, the property of the new campus occupies about 200 Chinese acres, it could contain more than 500 students. So it will recruit more new students from next semester. If we could say there are many old buildings in Europe, China can give you much new feelings. The seminaries can give you the same impressions.

d. New thoughts. China's Church has preserved Christian tradition, at the same time it has been renewing its theology. The new generations are becoming not to care about the ideas of denominations. They are easy to absorb new ideas, this is the new characteristic of the post-denominational age.

Chinese Church has been undertaking the theological renewal for ten years, the purpose of theological renewal is to promote contextual thinking of theology. We held the tenth anniversary about theological renewal, we saw that Chinese Christian theological ideas were renewed, include the ministers, they had left the theology and absorbed new theology to adapt to the social situation. The most transparent phenomenon is that they came to appreciate and support Chinese traditional culture, they are identified themselves with Chinese society and taking up their responsibility. They began to combine their heavenly identity with earthly citizenship. It is a great progress and renewal to China's Church. Today, theological students also can serve the society beside their pastoral ministries. It was impossible in the past. The believer's offering can be used for both church members and non-believers. Last year Chinese Christian donated one hundred and fifty million RMB during the devastating earthquake of Sichuan on May 12th. It shows the great change of China's theology. It is very different from

old theology that only concern about the the church members. It is significant that the spirit of tolerance, inclusiveness and fraternity is being established among China's Christians. It is meaningful for Christianity rooting in China.

II) Opportunity

China's Christianity meets the good opportunity today, one side, the Chinese government affirms and highly esteems religions, including Christianity, recent years, the official leaderships spoke in public to stress to take religions seriously. And let religions play the positive roles in the society. They extremely emphasize to nourishing the new religious leaderships. No doubt all of these are the benefit to China's Church and theological education. For instance, without the supporting of the central government, Nanjing Union Theological Seminary could not move to the new campus. And many local government also give their hands to the local seminaries. The helps of the government are good opportunity to the seminaries when they were in poverty.

Secondly, the intellectuals are beginning to study Christianity. Many institutes were established in the public universities. A lot of books about Christianity were issued. Such kinds of studies supplied the wonderful materials for the theological education.

Thirdly, with the improving and developing of the relationship between mainland China and Taiwan, the exchange on theological education between both sides of the strait started. During 27th to 28th of May, CCC sent a delegation to Taiwan for “The Forum between Two Sides of the Strait on the Development of Theological Education”. The exchange was effective, We came to consensus at last. Since we speak the same

language, belong to the same culture. So it will have a wide prospect. It is also a good opportunity.

III)Work

The new leadership of CCC\TSPM is full of enthusiasm and works effective. Beside make orientations they also participated in the really works of church affairs. They are very diligent and do much than the former generation.

On theological education, we are planning to do two things, organize to write a set of textbooks for the seminaries and promote the theological teachers' training. About twenty years ago, we ever published a set of theological textbooks, but they are out of date. So we are panning to publish the new ones, and from this we begin to take the training work seriously.

Firstly we are training the leadership of the provincial churches to improve the ability of leadership.

Then we are opening the intensive courses to the ministers in north-western areas. We are planning to train the theological teachers during the summer, we are ready to invite some famous professors from abroad, at the same time we plan to sent more seminary teachers to study abroad, some can get degrees, some study a short time.

II.The Challenges to the Theological Education in China

When we meet opportunities and also meet challenges, opportunities and challenges co-exist at the same time.

I)Pattern Adjustment

Our pattern of seminaries was developed from 1980's. Without experiences, so we had to try to cross the river by touching a stone. So we firstly established national seminary, that is Nanjing Union Theological Seminary. When we found it can not satisfy our need, so many regional seminaries were found, then by and by there was provincial seminaries. That is how the national, regional, provincial seminaries come from. These three levels pattern developed by experience, not according to the educational rules, so it is not scientific. with the developing of the Church, the shortcoming is becoming more and more serious. So we should adjust the pattern. We hope to run the seminaries well according to the reality. And seminaries should be developed by their own characteristics.

II)Degree of Students and Grade of Teachers

Because theological education does not belong to the national common education, and not join the oversea academic standard organization, we should draft our own way about students degree and the method of teacher's title.

Since past time the church did not take the degree seriously, many considered that may make the church ministers arrogance. So we did not start the work for a long time. But today we find so be adapt to the contemporary social educational system. So we think it is necessary to make effort to do the work.

III)Most Teachers Are too Young ,not mature enough

Since most of the professors are young, they have not much experience whatever in academic or pastoral level. So there is few excellent teachers

can take the serious responsibility. So they need further more training, more opportunities to be trained or to put their theory into practice.

IV) Enrich the Pedagogical Model

The congregation of Chinese church increase rapidly, especially the educated young people increase these years. We think there will be more young people come to study theology, but the fact is not as we think. On the contrary, most seminaries are lack of students. There are two reasons, first the salary of the ministers are lower than the average level, so it can not attract the young generation. Secondly, the educational system is very simple. Up to now we only recruit the full-time students who are ready to be pastors. But with the change of the society, the ideas become more liberal and diverse. Some people do not want to be pastors, they just want to improve themselves and increase their own theological knowledge. But they are rejected. So we should renew our idea and change the pattern. As the president of Guangdong Union Theological Seminary, I get some inspiration from seminaries of Hong Kong. We are planning to open some extensive course to the believer. Of course our situation is the believer's number is too much, but the pastors are so small, we should continue to train more seminary students who want to be pastors.

V) Strengthen Dialogue with Scholars who is Studying Religions in Universities

Today in China there are a lot of centers of religious study, and there are many excellent scholars who are studying and teaching about religions, some called "Cultural Christians". I individually consider it is

wonderful act of God, nevertheless their motive or attitude, they are good to theological education of China. At the same time they also become the challenge to the theological education.

Someone said, the scholars are more bold than the pastors. We believe that is true. That shows the liberty of Chinese academic space is wide. The scholars are honest and diligent. But as pastors, we should be prudent. Whatever in speech or behavior.

Maybe some states, the religious scholars are higher in academic level than theological professors. But I think we should not compare in different circles. As theological teachers, we do research with our belief and inner experience. That is the different nature with the scholars in the universities. Of course we can develop dialogue among us.

Chinese theological education is different from Germany. In Germany all theological institutes attach to universities, they are high in academic level. It is the model of religious study center of China. But the seminaries are independent. The goal is to train the pastors not only for the pure knowledge.

Here I would like to mention the opinion of an American Catholic theologian David Tracy(1939-), he points out three kinds of public space in theology in his book, *Imagination of analogy*, they are college, church and society. He said theology is public discourse, is interrelated. I still remember when I was a seminary student(1983), Bishop K.H. Ting ever said, our seminary should train the Christian intellectuals, pastors and citizens who love the country and love the Church. It is more

understandable.

Ting stressed the importance of the interrelationship between theological education and the academic research and social responsibility. In 1980's, Nanjing Union Theological Seminary and Center of Religious Study of Nanjing University use the same campus and same professors. There were a lot of talent personnel grew up from the center. So many universities followed the model to established the religious centers. These years the Center of Religious Study of Nanjing University removed from the Seminary, but a lot of religious center is coming out from the universities. When we retrospect the history, we find that in the beginning, Chinese theological education quite emphasize the academic research, but with the developing of the church, the church members focus their concentration on the church ministries. We are backward in academic level today. We should stand up and go fast to follow the academic step. Then we can get the qualification to develop the dialogue with the scholars.

I do not agree with the word “Cultural Christian”, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in his the Cost of Discipleship, Christian should be make full commitment to God. In today words, it is not discounted, it can not stop at cultural dimension. Because be Christian include the belief and way of life. If there is sole culture, it is not enough to be called Christian. If they are already converted, they should be called Christian Scholars.

We get a certain achievement in theological education, but we are in a constant changing society, we should be humble in our heart and work diligently, and learn from others, of course learn from you, then we can ran the Chinese Church well.

In Europe the churches are not crowded as in China, but the spirit of Christianity is infiltrated everywhere, it becomes an important part of European culture. Although Chinese churches are full of people, but our culture is not rooted in Christianity. So European theological education are more academic, and Chinese are more pastoral, so we can mutually compensate. There is strong evangelicalism in European Church. But the patterns are different for the past. It more emphasizes communication and service than before. Particularly you have sent many missionaries abroad work in the universities and seminaries. I think it be a good way. Chinese Church does not oppose mission, but first of all we should run the Chinese Church well and serve our own people. Then we also concern about the paradigm of the mission. Real mission is not arrive at the missionaries' own aim, but evangelize the people. So the task of the Chinese Church is to do its own work well. Particularly on the theological education. So we would like to strengthen the communication with European churches and improve ourselves.

Thank you!