

Yeo, K. K. *Musing with Confucius and Paul: Toward a Chinese Christian Theology*. Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2008.

Yeo's Exegetical Method and Presuppositions

In *Musing with Confucius and Paul: Toward a Chinese Christian Theology*, K.K. Yeo explores the question, “What would a Chinese Christian theology look like?” This leads him to ponder “how it is possible to maintain a Chinese identity and a Christian identity *concomitantly* without capitulating to some western or other cultural model of Christian identity.”¹ He employs a methodology aimed at harmonizing these two identities, utilizing Confucius’ *Analects* and Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Some might question whether this sort of comparison is even suitable, since the former presumes to summarize the whole of Confucius’ teachings, whereas the latter focuses on the specific concerns of a given context, not adequately representing the whole of his corpus. The key to Yeo’s approach is his hermeneutical assumption that meaning does not derive from the author of a text but rather from the interaction between reader and text.² He cites Paul’s use of Genesis in Gal 3:8–9. There, Paul asserts that the promise given to Abraham is the “gospel in advance.” Yeo claims that Paul’s adaption of original intent is warrant for his own “indigenization of the gospel of Christ into the cultural language of Confucianism.”³ In the end, Yeo’s “intertextual reading” leads to conclusions that are more Chinese than Christian.⁴

Although Yeo claims to not want to “flatten out the otherness” of other cultures, his Chinese-laden hermeneutic undermines his attempt to understand Galatians or the sayings of the

¹ K.K. Yeo, *Musing with Confucius and Paul: Toward a Chinese Christian Theology* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2008), xxi-xxii.

² *Ibid.*, 34.

³ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴ This is Yeo’s term; See pp. 32–34. He says, “A text not only carries meaning but allows, and even requires, the reader to create meaning in the act of reading” (p. 34).

Analects “in their context”.⁵ He rejects the “‘exegesis/eisegesis’ differentiation” largely because he holds that a purely objective reading of ancient texts is impossible. He asserts, “A faithful reading is not simply a historical recovery of what a text meant, but a creative engagement with the text that continues to speak to the later generation of readers.”⁶ As a consequence, Yeo’s use of Confucian categories causes him to reinterpret Galatians primarily in terms of social ethics; he departs from most evangelical readings of Paul when he says that Galatians is not “talking about *individual* salvation, but about group identity and what is required to be a full member of God’s people.”⁷ Thus, it becomes apparent that Yeo’s biographical struggle with identity⁸ heavily influences his approach to theological contextualization, or what he calls “cross-cultural hermeneutics.”⁹ Repeatedly, Yeo claims that the “basic issue” Paul addresses is how Gentiles can be “full members of the people of God”, free from Jewish symbolism (which he thinks is oppressive).¹⁰ One cannot help but see how Yeo frames this “Chinese theology” explaining how one can be a *Chinese* Christian free from western “imperialism”.

Yeo argues that the Galatians letter represents a fight against cultural imperialism. For example, he suggests that Paul’s opponents were oppressing the Gentile Christians by insisting on Jewish symbols, like circumcision, thus excessively blurring culture and theology. As a result, Paul must write to explain how Christ “liberates” people from symbols of Jewish identity, like the Mosaic Law.¹¹ It is clear that, for Yeo, Christ’s work on the cross does not solve the problem sin (traditionally defined), God’s wrath, and hell—categories usually associated with the atonement. Instead, Christ crucified serves as an “inclusive identity symbol” for both Jews and

⁵ Ibid., 56, 67.

⁶ Ibid., 53-54.

⁷ Ibid., 80.

⁸ See this interspersed throughout pp. 3-25.

⁹ Ibid., 10-11.

¹⁰ Ibid., 79, 81, 83, 84.

¹¹ Ibid.

Gentiles.¹² Yeo absorbs the goals of Confucianism, justifying them with his own interpretation of Paul. Since Chinese philosophy is the lens through which he reads the Biblical text, Yeo generally refrains from using Paul to rigorously critique *Confucius*.¹³ The latter is simply assumed authoritative for exegeting Christian Scripture. Confucius' this-world, socio-political orientation saturates Yeo's reflection. His so-called Chinese theology is really an apologetic for a harmonious community. The question of *divine* authorship or intent is never taken up. "Virtue", as defined by Confucius, is more persuasive than revelation.¹⁴ Therefore, it is not surprising to read Yeo say, "whether Christ or the law should best symbolize the identity of the people of God is ultimately to be determined by the virtuous life of the community."¹⁵ Christ's work is thus reduced to a "divine paradigm for being a community."¹⁶

Yeo's postmodern agenda becomes clear when he equates "religious imperialism" with "proselytism," which he says "is akin to the Roman ideology of conquest".¹⁷ According to the author, the "gospel" confronts any such ethnocentric superiority that "bind[s] others into a particular identity—violently".¹⁸ Jesus fulfills the Abrahamic promise, "overcoming the problem of discrimination."¹⁹ As a result, Yeo says Paul's conversion was not a change in religion, but rather a new way of identifying oneself socially and symbolically, such that "distorted religious zeal" does not destroy cultural distinctions.²⁰ By implication, traditional notions of evangelism or

¹² Ibid., 83. I have combined his two phrases, "inclusive symbol" and "identity symbol".

¹³ One exception can be found on p. 342, where Confucius' view of human nature is called "naïve" and Yeo uses Paul to correct it.

¹⁴ For more discussion on the Confucian concept of virtue (*de*, 德), see pp. 88-109.

¹⁵ Ibid., 109.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 134, 149.

¹⁸ Ibid., 136, 140-141, 173.

¹⁹ Ibid., 181.

²⁰ Ibid., 136-137.

missions are acts of “terror” or “social control” used by outside ideologists.²¹ However, one must then also question Yeo’s own proposal by asking, is not preaching Christ as usurper of exclusivistic religion(s) just another variety of religious imperialism? Underlying Yeo’s contextualization is an unwavering commitment to Confucianism, whose founder passed on theological “speculation” for the sake of “the more fundamental moral task of deciding how to live and act.”²² Yeo has not formulated a *Christian* theology as much as he has reinterpreted Paul to justify Chinese philosophy. Yeo reads Confucius’ context into Galatians, thus entirely ignoring authorial intent.²³ Hence, Yeo’s “Christianity” sounds more Confucian and pluralistic than Palestinian. Practically, the “Paul” of Yeo’s book is a product more of politics than Jewish monotheism.

Theological Implications of Yeo’s Cross-Cultural Hermeneutic

In Christian theology, everything begins with God. Throughout his book, Yeo reiterates the point that Confucius and Paul held quite different ontologies.²⁴ Paul’s God was the personal Creator who reveals Himself and redeems the world. Confucius’ *tian* (天) both created the world and “*is* the world”; it is “both *what* our world is and *how* it is”.²⁵ Although “the source of moral power”, *tian* is not personal.²⁶ Not surprisingly, Yeo concedes that this one difference steers them to

²¹ Ibid., 148-149. These terms comes from Yeo himself.

²² Ibid., 114. Citing Loudon, “What Does Heaven Say?": Christian Wolff and Western Interpretations of Confucian Ethics,” in *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays* (ed. Brian W. Van Norden; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 80.

²³ Yeo unapologetically blurs Confucius’ politics and Paul’s theology. He confuses possible political implications of Paul’s theology with the main point of the letter itself. He gives no exegetical defense for using “the hermeneutical lens of Confucius” to overthrow traditional, non-political interpretations of Galatians. See discussion on pp. 144-150, 174-175.

²⁴ For example, see pp. 115-122, 258, 270, 272.

²⁵ Ibid., 119. He cites Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York, Random House, 1998), 47-48.

²⁶ Ibid., 116.

vastly divergent views on anthropology and morality.²⁷ Yeo's "Chinese cultural framework" for interpreting the Bible is too restrictive; he forces everything in Paul to be read in Confucian categories.²⁸ In so doing, Yeo has given up the essential categories of Christian theology (i.e. the Christian God). His entire work hinges on ignoring the fundamental importance of *God's identity* in Christian theology. After all, most of Yeo's chapters deal with ethics, politics, society, human nature, and freedom. All the while, he admits that Paul and Confucius disagreed on these topics because their views of God and *tian* differ. This observation is key to assessing Yeo's contextualization. He must constantly labor to get around this difference. The reader should notice that Yeo never throws out the metaphysical presuppositions of *Confucius* (as he does with Paul). Confucianism always wins out against orthodox Christianity. Eventually, it is plain that Yeo's contextualization is not "fully Confucianist and fully Christian", as he had hoped.²⁹ Yeo's insistence on building *this* sort of contextualization, while on ignoring this philosophical chasm, is like saying, "I know there is an ocean between American and Africa, but we can still walk there."

Yeo's doctrines of sin and salvation are shaped by Confucian philosophy as well. "Sin" is essentially a break from social traditions, practices that should reflect the order of the universe.³⁰ Perfection means living in harmony with what is natural, including society and the web of relationships that constitute our human identity.³¹ Evil is "the occasional departure" from the

²⁷ Ibid., 258, 270, 272.

²⁸ Ibid., 204, 252. Yeo asserts that Peter's behavior among the Gentiles in Galatia "does not match the *li* ([ritual] propriety) of his conviction". On pp. 191-195, *li* is defined as a ritual or rite by which community membership is maintained or those "cultural patterns that are deemed proper or decent." Yet, the terms in Chinese philosophy carries ontological implications, for it is the *li* that helps people find "harmony with a greater, cosmic *Dao*" (202). In addition, the term has distinctive cultural or behavioral connotations not necessarily found in first century Asia Minor.

²⁹ Ibid., 252.

³⁰ Ibid., 257.

³¹ Ibid., 220-221, 266.

universe's harmonious balance.³² The human predicament is social alienation, such that Yeo can assert, "Salvation in Galatians is essentially about different ethnic groups becoming the people of God *via* baptism and unconditional love".³³

Yeo's theology has a distinctly moralistic Christology. Like many, his language echoes convention usage, "The Cross is a system of harmony because of the virtue and work of Christ whose sacrificial love rejects fear, transcends enmity, and mends division."³⁴ Yet, as we have seen, for Yeo, Christ is an "identity symbol", changing us sociologically not soteriologically.³⁵ Christ's death exposes the evils of ethnocentrism, typified by the Jewish law. Christ's life and death are used to "supplement" Confucian ethics.³⁶ Contra orthodox interpretations, Yeo asserts that the promise in Genesis concerning Abraham's seed does not actually refer to Christ, "as though [Paul] were rewriting the story."³⁷ Rather, references to the Old Testament should be read "typologically".³⁸ His differing views are no doubt influenced by his view of human nature. He seems to uncritically affirm the Confucian doctrine of human goodness. As a result, sin merely points to the disconnectedness people in society feel towards others. Sin is essentially social independence. Law cannot unite human beings in relationship; rituals like the Jewish law exclude people. The cross, for Yeo, is a paradigm for forgetting oneself in order to love another

³² Ibid., 344.

³³ Ibid., 249. Yeo uses an entire chapter to compare the concept *li* (which he translated "rites") with law, including the "rituals" of circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

³⁴ Ibid., 245.

³⁵ By "soteriological", I mean the tradition understanding of salvation from sin, death, and hell. For Yeo, salvation is a sociological-relational term (pp. 249, 258-259). He does not use the term as much *theologically* as anthropologically.

³⁶ Ibid., 301.

³⁷ Ibid., 182. Yeo is very willing to question Paul's exegesis, see pp. 305-309.

³⁸ A more fitting word might be "analogy". His point is that Old Testament "references" to Christ are simply analogies by which we can explain the worth of Christ's life and death.

person.³⁹ Christ's sacrificial love obligates us to love others and to restore mutual dependence, which Confucianism says is "fundamental" and a "prerequisite to becoming human".⁴⁰

Conclusions and Applications

What can be learned from Yeo's "Chinese Christian Theology"? For better or for worse, Yeo's work shows the importance of context. Personal assumptions, our social setting, historical-cultural background, in addition to Biblical context will influence how we see the world, interpret Scripture, and do contextualization. Thus, Yeo argues, "In the context of cultural and religious imperialism, Christ's self-surrender models for the community the subordination of privilege and identity, not forcing others to subscribe to one's own zealous convictions..."⁴¹ He admits that his reading of Romans 13 is "influenced by my Confucian presuppositions".⁴² Yeo's blending of contexts causes him to suppose that Paul's Christology gives us insight into the "Confucius' moral and political world".⁴³ Contextualization demands that we know not only the Biblical context and theology; we must also carefully examine our *own* influences and the surrounding culture.

In Yeo's theology, the absence of talk about God is deafening. His entire project is socio-political and oriented towards humans. Although he mentions topics like sin, salvation, the cross, and the church, they are constantly redefined. The larger motifs of Scripture—like covenant, the kingdom of God, and the glory of God—are generally lacking. Of course, he has limited his pericope to Galatians; yet, such a narrow sliver of the Scriptures cannot form the backbone of a fully contextualized, Biblical theology. We are challenged and reminded that Christian theology

³⁹ Ibid., 362.

⁴⁰ See Yeo's discussion on pp. 257-303 for more detail elaboration.

⁴¹ Ibid., 152.

⁴² Ibid., 174.

⁴³ Ibid., 175.

must base its practice and conceptions of identity on the nature and person of God. This requires comprehensive exegesis of the Bible; otherwise, we fall prey to flimsy proof texts.

Positively, Yeo uses Confucius to highlight key ideas largely absent from western theology. He takes great effort to esteem individuality without collapsing into individualism. To be human is to be in relationship with others.⁴⁴ This is certainly one lesson to be drawn from Gen 1-2. God created man and women *together* in his image. “Becoming fully human is achieved not by detaching from the world but by making sincere efforts to harmonize one’s relationship with others.”⁴⁵ The Christian cannot be enslaved to autonomous individuality.⁴⁶ Yeo helpfully reminds us that theologians and missiologists must also listen to other cultures in order that they can expose the potential blind spots in our own theology.

Finally, Yeo has impressed upon us the concept of identity. Both Christianity and culture strive to shape our sense of identity. As Yeo exemplifies, there are times when the prevailing culture uses religion to justify itself. Identity is crucial in forming meaning.⁴⁷ Yeo reminds the reader that we are prone to identify ourselves according to our various contexts, whether ethnically, vocationally, or familial. In the end, Yeo’s zeal to “be faithful to being Chinese” has ironically “strip[ped] Chinese Christians of their identity and dignity”, *as Christians*.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid., 264-265, 399-400.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 346.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 392.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 405.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 425, 428. Sadly, Yeo does not follow what he calls “words of wisdom” (427), and instead does “radical violence to both the character and content of the biblical message.” The latter quotation comes from William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 13-14.