



## RETURNING TO THINKING THEOLOGICALLY – BREAKING DOWN THE BORDERS BETWEEN EAST AND WEST: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY EXERCISE

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*Received 26 November 2012; accepted 18 January 2013*

This essay explores the developments in Christian theology which are taking place in the encounter with the ancient Chinese classic texts. These are being revisited in Chinese universities where scholars from the West and the East are seeking a common religious language through what has been termed a form of “scriptural reasoning”. Links are especially made through the work of radical European thinkers of the present time such as Slavoj Žižek and Gianni Vattimo.

Keywords: interdisciplinarity, mysticism, theology, unconditionality, *wu wei*.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Jasper, D. 2013. Returning to thinking theologically – breaking down the borders between East and West: an interdisciplinary exercise, *Limes: Borderland Studies* 6(2): 149–158.

### Introduction

In the new encounter of Western universities with the universities of China, the term “interdisciplinary” takes on a richer meaning, not least in the field of religion and theology. Linking a reading of the Chinese Classics, and in particular the *Chuang Tzu*, with the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible, especially through the work of the Christian monk Thomas Merton, this essay will seek commonalities that are best explored not through the work of Christian theologians, but here through the thinking of contemporary European radicals, above all Žižek, leading us to take more seriously the “weak philosophy” proposed by Vattimo as the key to the return to thinking theologically.

## The encounter between European and Chinese academics in interdisciplinary fields

The origins of this essay lie in my experience of teaching, as a theologian and literary critic, in Renmin University of China in Beijing for the past three years. It reflects a growing sense of the expansion of the term that we have begun to grow used to, “interdisciplinary”, to embrace not only the traditional disciplines of the academy in the West, but the complex intercultural issues that have begun to attract our attention as we begin to work more closely in the humanities with colleagues in China and East Asia.

I begin with some words of an extraordinary woman traveller in the Ancient Near East in the early part of the 20th century – Gertrude Bell, a person of no professed religious faith: “<...> the Wilderness of Judaea has been nurse to the fiery spirit of man. Out of it strode grim prophets, menacing with doom a world of which they had neither part nor understanding; the valleys are full of the caves that held them, nay, some are peopled to this day by a race of starved and gaunt ascetics, clinging to a tradition of piety that common sense has found it hard to discredit” (Bell 2001: 10).

It is with this sense of striving against common sense, going back in Judaea to early biblical times, that I embark upon an exercise that is, in a way, a response to the work of some contemporary and non-Christian Chinese thinkers, in particular Professor Yang Huilin of Renmin University of China in Beijing, on what they have described as “scriptural reasoning” and its connections with the sense of the perversity that lies at the heart of Christianity and its core that characterizes the work of the Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic, Žižek (see Žižek 2003). In other words, this is an attempt to view the emancipatory potential of Christianity and its theology from the outside. Of necessity this must also be an exercise in interdisciplinarity, understanding this term not in its feeble and unreflective sense as it is rather vaguely employed in the current rhetoric of Western academia, but recognizing, with Stanley Fish that “interdisciplinarity is so very hard to do” and that its more difficult agenda flows naturally, as he says, from “the imperatives of left culturalist theory, that is, from deconstruction, Marxism, feminism, the radical version of neopragmatism, and the new historicism” – all movements which are “alike all hostile to the current arrangement of things as represented by” current social and institutional structures in the West (Fish 1994: 231). In short, there is something deeply radical about true interdisciplinarity, and deeply unknown in our present academic exercises. Yet at the same time we may learn also from the work of Yang Huilin and others in China concerning the current intellectual interaction between East and West that it is in true acts of interdisciplinarity that we might find the essential marks of deepest value within the humanities in the cultures of both the Eastern and Western world.

But what might this actually mean? In form, perhaps, such interdisciplinarity seems to bear resemblance to a kind of ancient rabbinic conversation with its roots in the hermeneutics of midrashic discourse. This presumes to cross textual and cultural boundaries in a way that common sense and reason admit the offense yet find it hard to discredit the practice. Thereby we might begin to suspect, for example,

and following the lead of Žižek, that just as what he knows as the subversive core of Christianity is accessible only to a materialist approach, so the very opposite of this is also the case. We might begin, then, with something like Terry Eagleton's reading of the opening chapters of the book of Isaiah in his book *After Theory* (2003), and his comment that "the poet who wrote this book opens with a typically anti-religious bout of irascibility on the part of Yahweh, the Jewish God" (Eagleton 2003: 174–175). Yahweh denounces the religious obsessions of solemn assemblies and sacrificial cults, retorting that "incense is an abomination to me" and proposing salvation as a political rather than a religious matter. When the stranger is made welcome, the fatherless and widowed cared for, the hungry fed and the rich sent away empty, then Yahweh will be known for what truly he is. In Eagleton's words, at present "he himself is a non-god, a god of the "not yet", one who signifies a social cause which has not yet arrived, and who cannot even be named for fear that he will turn into just another fetish by his compulsively idolatrous devotees".

In such a context the suggestion made by Yang Huilin and others makes perfect sense, when they remark that the present growth of religious studies in China is taking place not in the seminaries (which are simply too "religious" in their obsessions), but within the interdisciplinary study of the humanities, philosophy and the social sciences within the Chinese universities, a study which can, perhaps, pursue a theological logic unrestricted by religious belief. This very observation, of course, contains a perversity, indeed, it might even be said, an offence to believers, though one which, in the end, may not be too far from the offence of the gospels themselves, with their revisionary challenge in the figure of Jesus to established forms of belief – "you have always thought, but I say to you". The offence is greatest, however, not so much in *thought* but in the *action* of the passion narratives.

### A new generosity and the "enlightened false consciousness" of post-Enlightenment thought

Furthermore, the generous tone of such a claim, made by a Chinese scholar as he draws upon the work of a leading Western leftist intellectual, Žižek, who is at once, Yang Huilin admits, "attractive and easy to misread", stands in marked contrast to the residual cynicism of Western intellectualism in the last decades of the 20th century as characterized by works like Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1988), with its perversion of the Kantian tradition of Enlightenment thought in the cynicism which is the "enlightened false consciousness" of our contemporary unhappiness (Sloterdijk 1988). What is beginning to emerge now, on the other hand, is a new sense of humanity which recognizes, in Yang Huilin's work, Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope with its ecological energy and its acknowledgement of the obligation to be human, as well as Hans Küng's global ethics – though, paradoxically, as an admitted Christian theologian, I am far less persuaded by either of these readings of Christian thinkers than I am by the writings of Žižek, and remain, in a deep sense, suspicious of both of them in my own readings of their works. For, in short, both Moltmann and

Küng remain finally too *religious* to sustain a proper theological logic. Actually, it is only when, as in Isaiah, the religious is dropped as a prerequisite that a true commonality can be recovered that appears to religion as a perversity but which actually forms the recovery of a more profound theological logic in which the status of the *theos* is, at the very least, a matter of profoundly serious debate.

### Merton and the *Chuang Tzu*

And so, in the recovery of such theological thinking we might begin to return to ancient texts, of not dissimilar antiquity, whose wisdom and forms of reasoning might not be so very far apart – that is to the Hebrew Bible and to the Chinese classics. And so let me begin with a reading of a Chinese text, the *Chuang Tzu*, by an acknowledged master of Christian spirituality, the trappist monk Merton. Merton's book *The Way of Chuang Tzu* does not claim to be a scholarly exercise by an "expert". Perhaps it is in the nature of all true interdisciplinarity that discourses which are rooted in deeply held beliefs find similarities or "imitations", in Merton's word, in other discourses that have wholly other origins. As scholars and experts, or as religious practitioners, perhaps even political thinkers, we must begin to admit our weaknesses and dare to find harmonies in language, in philosophical forms of thought, in ontologies and in music, in which we may claim absolutely no expertise or even experience, presuming to tread upon grounds of thinking for which we are neither culturally nor intellectually equipped. Only thus can we begin to recognize those weak forms of philosophy and thought which will be the manner of our endeavour to which this essay will finally lead us. And so Merton begins his work on the *Chuang Tzu* with the admission that his "readings" are "not attempts at faithful reproduction but ventures in personal and spiritual interpretation". We need to be prepared to get it wrong, in one sense, in order to hear something of the harmonies for which we are listening. Thus Merton suggests that "Chuang Tzu is not concerned with words and formulas about reality, but with the direct existentialist grasp of reality in itself. Such a grasp is necessarily obscure and does not lend itself to abstract analysis" (Merton 1999: 11).

The literary forms which such concerns give rise to are, indeed, the opposite of abstractions – parables, fables and riddles or "historical" accounts of dealings with kings and rulers. They are, in short, also the literary stuff of the Bible. Their purpose is to provoke thought, to unsettle assumptions, to challenge reason and common sense through the arguments of saintly, seemingly childlike fools, though at the root of their thinking is a tough, uncompromising sense of realism: Merton suggests that in the Bible it is Ecclesiastes that most closely resembles the Taoist classics. (The connection in my mind, then, is to one of the most underrated political thinkers of the 18th century in England, Dr. Samuel Johnson and his thoughts on human vanity.)

In Merton's reflections on *Chuang Tzu* we are brought close to an underlying form of reasoning that curls back on itself, and is to be found also in the scriptural prophetic writings (of which the most practical, as we have seen, are those of Isaiah), and in the traditions of mysticism (which will eventually lead us back in this essay

to Žižek and contemporary perversity). Such reasoning involves the abandonment of binary oppositions and the structures which seem to suggest to us the nature of values, discernment and ethics: the oppositions of good and evil, right and wrong, and so on. Merton, on the other hand, reminds us of the paradox of Lao Tzu, with which Chuang Tzu agrees: “‘When all the world recognizes good as good, it becomes evil’, because it becomes something that one does not have and which one must be constantly pursuing until, in effect, it becomes unattainable” (Merton 1999: 30). There is here a profound common sense, for thus to pursue “the good” is finally to reach for an abstraction, mere futurity.

Although it is not hard to avoid confusing the personalism of Chuang Tzu with the political thinking of Confucius, and although his philosophy is essentially mystical and religious, it remains thoroughly down-to-earth and even sceptical. The reason for such realism is that such thinking, just like that of the Hebrew Bible, is only possible in the context of a society in which everything in life is seen in relation to the sacred.

To take this a stage further, when life is seen thus there is no necessity to strive to bring everything into oneness precisely because it already is so. In the *Chuang Tzu* there is the story of the monkeys who were told that they were to receive three acorns in the morning and four in the evening. This made them angry, and so the monkey trainer said that instead they would receive four in the morning and three in the evening. The monkeys agreed and were happy. The *Chuang Tzu* concludes: “Of course, the number of acorns remained the same but it was the arrangement of the feeding that caused the problem or the solution. The sage moves beyond right and wrong and rests in the still centre” (Chuang Tzu 2010: 34–35). It takes a little while for the “logic” of this to sink in. That is because it is not resolvable by any immediate reasoning but rather by a willingness to rest in paradox and to meditate within the deeper reasonings of language and poetic structures – forms of speech which we generally associate with the business of literature. In the West, at least (and in my own experience), poets and teachers of literature are not infrequently accused of living rather useless lives, divorced from the real, tough business of politics, ethics and so on. In fact, it may be that they really touch upon the deeper logic which finds its common sense and discourse in the *Chuang Tzu*, the *Tao Te Ching*, the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, and later the writings and sermons of Meister Eckhart, Thérèse of Lisieux – and finally (and most oddly and perversely) those of Jacques Derrida and Žižek. Of course, this is not to conflate all of these, which would be quite absurd and utterly to miss the point. There is no necessity, as has been remarked, to strive to bring everything into oneness as it is already so at a deeper level than we can ever attain. A key to this might be found as we reflect on one of the most difficult concepts in Taoist philosophy, *wu wei*. Roughly translated this means “doing nothing” in a sort of passive acceptance of everything that comes along. More precisely Alan Watts calls *wu wei* a “form of intelligence”, and Solala Towler, a recent translator of the *Chuang Tzu*, elaborates on this: “Far from being an attitude of passive acceptance or resignation, it is, instead, an active engagement with things as they are. It is a way of working with the dynamics of any situation in order to find the path of least resistance and then

follow through. The true meaning of the term *wu wei* is something like ‘not doing anything against the flow’ or ‘not doing anything that does not have its roots in Tao’” (Chuang Tzu 2010: xvi).

Merton, trained in the ways of the Christian mystics, Antony the Great and Desert Fathers, readily recognizes the mystery of *wu wei* as not simply inactivity but rather “perfect action”, that is, an act without activity and “not carried out independently of Heaven and earth and in conflict with the dynamism of the whole, but in perfect harmony with the whole” (Merton 1999: 28). Such unconditionality seems to link the thought of *Chuang Tzu* and its roots in Tao, with the thinking of the Hebrew prophets, rooted in the present / absence of Yahweh, and with Meister Eckhart’s spirituality in which God is everything and nothing. Blaise Pascal, to make another improper leap, might have acknowledged that it is finally to know the reasons of the heart – of which reason knows nothing.

### Chuang Tzu and Western thought

In his book on philosophical argument in ancient China, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*, the sinologist Angus Charles Graham is never far from either religious or political questions. Like all great scholars who try to write commentaries, his text finally begins to take on the form and nature of the texts which is attempting to elucidate, so that the reader repeatedly finds him or herself on the edge or even the outside of a conversation whose very form is baffling. Graham’s introduction to the *Chuang Tzu* places that work in highly suggestive company for the Western reader: William Blake (in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*), Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, though he claims far more coherence for the Chinese sage than for any of these Western depressives or madmen. Graham begins with the stories about Chuang Tzu himself, what he calls “anecdotes” that give us but practical clues and fragmentary insights into the unity of his vision and the place of personal identity in universal process. Above all, of course, Chuang Tzu is an anti-rationalist who, like all of his kind, “has reasons for not listening to reason”. He is a sceptic for whom the fundamental error is the drive to pose alternatives, cultivating instead the notion of *tzu jan*, that is the “spontaneous”. But a phrase which is yet more characteristic of the *Chuang Tzu* seems to be in direct contrast to this, *pu te yi*, that is the “inevitable”. Graham comments: “If ‘spontaneous’ suggests freedom and ‘inevitable’ compulsion, that is only another of the dichotomies we should be leaving behind” (Graham 1989: 176).

This, of course, is only the merest scratch on the surface of an ancient Chinese text whose very language is inaccessible to me, and yet here there are odd echoes of a form of perverse reason that is somehow familiar and which the ordered worlds of the Western religious establishments of religion and politics have always held in profound suspicion (and yet oddly deeply admired at the same time), a reasoning that is present in the passions narratives of the gospels, in the political diatribes of the great prophetic writings, in the platonic writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite,



which Derrida both embraced and rejected. And so, I turn for a few moments to the monstrosity of a Western thinker whom I at once find intensely irritating and perversely fascinating, uncertain (perhaps rather like Chuang Tzu) whether he is a charlatan, slightly mad – or a sage – or all three.

### Slavoj Žižek and G. K. Chesterton

In the book *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, written jointly by Žižek and John Milbank, I have to admit that I am far more drawn to Žižek than to Milbank, who, as the Christian thinker, ought, by reason, to be closer to myself in the roots of his thought. Yet the very opposite is true. I do not want to attempt any philosophical reading of this book and attempt to link this back to the reflections in the earlier part of this essay, even if I were capable of that. More interesting than the references to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel or René Descartes, I find that it is the opening of Žižek's essay which draws my attention. He begins with a literary allusion to a rather unfashionable English author of detective fiction of whom I am rather fond myself – to G. K. Chesterton, a Catholic writer, and his stories of the amateur sleuth Father Brown. These stories of the early 20th century are deceptively simple, naïve and often absurd, but hold us in a deeper logic that surpasses their immediate world of ridiculous Edwardian English aristocrats and endless murders that call for the unerring logic of the little priest, Father Brown. Žižek begins with the conclusion to one story, “The Oracle of the Dog”, and with Father Brown's defence of commonsense reality “and the Christian miracle of Incarnation [as] the exception that guarantees and sustains this common reality”.

“People readily swallow the untested claims of this, that, or the other. It's drowning all your old rationalism and scepticism, it's coming in like a sea; and the name of it is superstition. It's the first effect of not believing in God that you lose your common sense and can't see things as they are. Anything that anybody talks about, and says there's a good deal in it, extends itself indefinitely like a vista in a nightmare. And the dog is an omen, and the cat is a mystery, and the pig is a mascot, and the beetle is a scarab, calling up all the menagerie of polytheism from Egypt and old India; Dog Anubis and great green-eyed Pasht and all the howling Bulls of Bashan; reeling back to the bestial gods of the beginning, escaping into elephants and snakes and crocodiles; and all because you are frightened of four words: He was made Man” (Žižek 2009: 25).

I do not wish to follow Žižek's lead in his essay, of which the professed axiom is that there is only one philosophy which thought the implications of those last four words through to the end: Hegel's idealism. That may, or may not, be the case. But I do wish to suggest something that is more, shall we say, “literary” in its scriptural reasoning, and which allows us to connect this rather anarchic contemporary thinker (I use the word advisedly) with the Roman Catholic G. K. Chesterton (of whom the brief biography which prefaces my edition of his detective “novel” *The Man Who was Thursday*, says that “despite his efforts to achieve honourable oblivion at the bottom

of his class, he was singled out as a boy with distinct literary promise”), Merton, Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu. It is all a matter of their common form of reasoning.

Father Brown’s menagerie of “bestial gods” refers us to the religions of ancient Egypt, India – and also, in their midst, to those terrors of the Psalms and prophetic writings, the fat bulls of Bashan. No doubt there are also equivalents within the Chinese traditions, unknown to G. K. Chesterton’s saintly sleuth, but the point is clear: that against the superstitions into which all religions, and rationalisms and intellectual scepticisms of modernity inevitably fall, there is a perversity which lies at the heart of Christianity as well as the more ancient logic of the Hebrew and Chinese sages. Actually much of Žižek’s essay in *The Monstrosity of Christ* is a perfectly coherent theological discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity and the philosophical problem of the *filio-que* clause of the creed which divided the Christianity of the East from that of the West. In fact, Žižek turns out to be a perfectly decent theologian, well aware of both the importance and the necessary weakness of Meister Eckhart – far more so than the Jewish thinker Derrida. He sees that it is Meister Eckhart who leads us, via the Godhead who is “the abyss of *Unding*” to something very close to the reason which famously opens the *Tao Te Ching* – and which leads early Western Christian translators of the Chinese classics like James Legge in the 19th century to connect the *Tao* with another untranslatable biblical term, the *Logos*.

But before we move towards something like a conclusion to this brief literary exercise, let us return to Žižek and his passion for the English writer G. K. Chesterton, and this time specifically for his darkly brilliant mystical sleuth fiction, *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* (1908). It is here, in the paradoxes of his literary parable, that G. K. Chesterton’s hero, Gabriel Syme, confronts “matter more dark and awful” that is finally beyond all religious orthodoxy and even beyond Meister Eckhart himself. The novel, in Žižek’s words, deals with “the discovery of how order is the greatest miracle and orthodoxy the greatest of all rebellions”. At the dark centre of it is the recognition that all our categories of evil and wickedness are limited by a conditionality that is rendered genuinely meaningless in the face of the unconditionality of the one completely destructive and cynical individual amongst us, “the entirely lawless modern philosopher” – or (and this is the final paradox, for the two are, in the end, utterly indistinguishable – both destructive and creative) that which is known to reason only as unknown, the non-god of Isaiah and the Tao – the same and yet that can not be so.

In G. K. Chesterton’s words, “The common criminal is a bad man, but at least he is, as it were, a conditional good man. He says that if only a certain obstacle be removed – say a wealthy uncle – he is then prepared to accept the universe and to praise God. He is a reformer but not an anarchist. He wishes to cleanse the edifice, but not to destroy it. But the evil philosopher is not trying to alter things, but to annihilate them (Žižek 2009: 44).

But let us add one more layer of perversity to this. Is this unconditional moment that G. K. Chesterton is recovering actually the supreme moment of modernity – not only the moment of the evil philosopher, but of that unconditionality that moves be-



yond good and evil, the *coincidentia oppositorum* that Hegel and Nietzsche knew as the death of God, or Lao Tzu, in his way as *yin / yang* – the moment of supreme creation as extreme *yin* transforms into *yang* and extreme *yang* transforms into *yin*? In this unconditionality is also the unconditional character of *wu wei* that is not limited by our own needs and desires, our own theories and ideas.

### Texts of the Axial Age

Of course, I do not know if any of this is true. Are we here in the realm of freedom or compulsion, left with the paradox of free speech as it has been defined by Fish – that which is left over when a community has determined in advance what it does not want to hear? Or has modernity, modulated in the West into postmodernity, and in the perverse writings of leftist thinkers like Žižek in his encounter with the ancient wisdom of China, stumbled upon a more ancient truth of reason that just might hold the key to our emancipation from the contemporary political and ethical dilemmas that we all share? Perhaps it is no accident that the forms of reason that we find in the literature and philosophy of ancient China seems to originate in just about the same period as the wisdom of the ancient Hebrews in their scriptures, about from 800 to 200 BC, the so-called Axial Age. They are, more or less, contemporaries. In each culture there is a profound sense of the sacred understood as a power for good. But is this where Confucius irrevocably separates from Isaiah? Is God always the problem? Or does scriptural reasoning at its most intense moments rest upon a paradox, or perhaps a perversity that Christianity knows as the death of God, his absence – a perversity that is known also, in its own way, in the paradoxes and dazzling word play of the *Chuang Tzu*?

### Conclusions

If such wild proposals might suggest the importance for both East and West of the recovery of ways of thinking theologically, then we might briefly suggest in conclusion that this begins modestly, in the manner of Vattimo and some others, in philosophies of “weak thought” (see Zabala 2007). In one sense, perhaps, we have always tried to think too much, as all religious wisdom, at its depths, has always known. The more difficult form of reason, which common sense has found it hard to discredit, is to think beyond thought, with Chuang Tzu to the complementarity of opposites, or follow the Yahweh of Isaiah away from the interests of the status quo to the state of balance when the hungry are filled with good things and the rich sent away empty, a wisdom which was enough for a young pregnant peasant girl in first century Palestine in words put into her mouth by Luke the Evangelist.

We may conclude that there is today a remarkable growth of understanding between China and the West in forms of religious or theological thinking that might seem to offer new ways forward for Christian thought. These are, however, rooted in the ancient wisdom of both the East and the West – Chuang Tzu closer to Isaiah than we might ever have thought possible.

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GRĮŽIMAS PRIE TEOLOGINIO MĄSTYMO,  
GRIAUNANT SIENAS TARP RYTŲ IR VAKARŲ:  
INTERDISCIPLININĖ TRENIRUOTĖ

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Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje tyrinėjama krikščioniškosios teologijos raida sandūroje su senovės kinų klasikų tekstais. Šie tekstai buvo peržiūrėti Kinijos universitetuose, kur mokslininkai iš Vakarų ir Rytų ieškojo bendrosios religijos kalbos, apibūdinančios „biblinį mąstymą“. Šašajos yra sudarytos ypač per dabartinės Europos radikaliųjų mąstytojų, tokių kaip Slavojus Žižekas ir Gianni Vattimo, darbus.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: interdiscipliniškumas, misticizmas, teologija, besąlygiškumas, *wu wei*.

Nuoroda į šį straipsnį: Jasper, D. 2013. Grįžimas prie teologinio mąstymo, griauant sienas tarp Rytų ir Vakarų: interdisciplininė treniruotė, *Limes: Borderland Studies* 6(2): 149–158.