

‘Towards a Christian Model of Religions: Yuan Zhiming as a case study in Fulfillment Theology’

by David Marshall

OCMS, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

A key need for Christians today is for a model that makes sense of the complex data of world religious traditions, and is rooted in coherent Christian theology. This need is especially apparent within the rapidly-growing Chinese Church, which seeks to relate what was long regarded as a ‘western’ faith to one of the world’s most distinct, ancient, and rich traditions. The most popular contemporary typology of religions numbers three models – exclusivism, pluralism, and inclusivism – that attempt to explain how Christianity relates to other religions. The goal of this study is to define and test a variant solution called Fulfillment Theology within the Chinese context, especially in the work of contemporary philosopher Yuan Zhiming.

‘Fulfillment Theology’ (FT) is first defined in relation to two key New Testament texts, Matthew 5:17 and Acts 17: 16-34. It is argued that FT tends to exhibit six characteristics: metanarrative, dialectic, teleology, apologetic, reform and synthesis. The development of fulfillment-type thinking in China is then traced through the Tang, Ming, early and late Qing, and Republican eras. Yuan’s work is shown to be in continuity with that developing perspective, though he extends FT by offering unique interpretations of the Dao De Jing. It is argued that Yuan’s interpretation of ancient Chinese concepts of God, the Sage, and sacrifice are for the most part viable in relation to the Chinese Classics, though Yuan’s understanding of the Classical era is overly optimistic, and therefore his idea of reform needs to be reformulated. It is finally argued that the success of Fulfillment Theology at relating Chinese tradition and traditional Christian thought reveals this model as a coherent, orthodox, and potentially valuable alternative to pluralist and exclusivist theologies.