THE CHRISTIAN ESSENCE OF THE WEST

Text: Exodus 3.1-12a ("And God said, 'I will be with you'"); 4.10-16

This being Epiphany, let me take you abroad. One of the main themes of this season of the Church’s year, you’ll recall, is the manifestation of God’s incarnation in Jesus to the whole world—starting with the paying of tribute at Bethlehem by the Three Wise Men from the East.

So let’s go a long way east, to Shanghai, whither I travelled with the Bible Society last November. I went to take part in the 6th annual seminar on ‘The Bible in China’, which was organised and largely paid for by the prestigious and state-funded Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.

Why, you might ask, is the Shanghai Academy interested in the Bible, and why is the Chinese state prepared to fund annual seminars on the topic?
One reason has to do with the rapid growth of the Christian Church in China. Official figures now reckon Chinese Christians at about 40 million, but that only includes the members of the state-sponsored church, the so-called Three Self Patriotic Movement. It doesn’t count the membership of the Catholic Church, which the state treats as a completely different religion, because of its suspect international allegiance. Nor does it count the members of informal house churches. Altogether, Chinese Christians probably number about 100 million—although in recent years the Bible Society has distributed 150 million Bibles, so the number could be higher still.

So why does this interest the Chinese state? In part, because it’s worried about social and political unrest. It’s worried about unrest, because it’s an authoritarian regime and that’s what authoritarian regimes do. But it’s also worried because of history. In 1850 a young Chinaman, Hong Xiuquan, influenced by Protestant missionaries, supposed himself to be Jesus’ younger brother, called by God to overthrow the corrupt Qing dynasty. Consequently, he led a rebellion that lasted fifteen years, engulfed most of China, and resulted in the deaths of between 20 and 30 million people. So the Chinese state is nervous about Christianity, rather, I think, as the 16th century Tudor state in this country was nervous about Puritan sectaries and the agents of hostile Catholic Europe. The Chinese state is nervous, and it’s keen to channel Christianity’s rise in a socially cohesive direction.
That’s one reason why the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences is interested in sponsoring annual conferences on the Bible in China. But there’s another reason, too. The Chinese are keen to understand ‘the West’ and its success, and they think that Christianity has something important to do with that. They perceive that the West has enduring, characteristic features to which Christianity has made a signal contribution. They recognise that the bundle of these characteristics is quite distinct from China’s traditional civilisation and modern communist culture. And they reckon that some Western features could be well worth adopting. This is where I want to focus in the rest of what I have to say.
The Bible in China seminar opened on Wednesday 9 November at an island resort in the middle of the Yangtze river. The day before, not far from the banks of the Thames, the New York-based academic, Kwame Anthony Appiah, had delivered his BBC Reith Lecture on culture. In this Appiah argued that the West doesn’t exist and it’s time we gave up on the very notion of Western civilisation, for it has no essence.

The West is not essentially Christian, since even medieval Christendom drew many of its ideas from pagan Greece and Rome. And it isn’t even essentially Greek or Roman, since it shares its classical inheritance with the Islamic world. Indeed, Christian Europe only rediscovered Aristotle in the thirteenth century thanks to translations of the works of the Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd.

‘The West’ is an invention of Cold War propaganda, which flattered us with the narrative that Western culture is, at its core, individualistic, democratic, liberty-minded, tolerant, progressive, rational and scientific. “Never mind”, commented Appiah, “that pre-modern Europe was none of these things”.

Indeed, even in the early modern 1780s the inheritance of Athenian liberty and Anglo-Saxon freedom didn’t prevent the United States creating a slave republic. And within living memory Spain, at the geographical heart of ‘the West’, resisted liberal democracy for two generations after it had taken off in India and Japan in ‘the East’, the alleged home of ‘oriental despotism’.

If Appiah is correct, the Chinese state is pouring good money after bad. There is no Western essence, and Christianity isn’t part of it. So the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences is on a hiding to nothing.
But is Appiah right?

It’s quite true that concept of ‘the West’ is crude, drawing exaggerated contrasts between Christendom and the Islamic world in the medieval period, between imperial Europe and Asia in the nineteenth century, between liberal democracies and the Soviet empire last century, and between the North Atlantic and the ‘global South’ now. Different cultures and civilisations are seldom hermetically sealed against each other. (That said, China did develop independently for several millennia before its first serious encounter with Europe and the US a mere two hundred years ago.)

It’s also true that ‘Western civilisation’ has found much to admire in other cultures and has borrowed liberally from them—not only Aristotle but also algebra from the Islamic world, and of course cuisine from India, paper and gunpowder from China, and fine arts from Japan.

And it’s quite evident that the natives of one culture can grasp and appropriate ideas and values that reach them from a foreign source. Indeed, Africans and Asians can be sometimes be better humanists than contemporary Westerners, most of whom know more about Beyoncé and Burger King than they do about Aquinas and Kant. As Appiah says, “No Muslim essence stops the inhabitants of Dar al-Islam from taking up anything from western civilisation, including Christianity or democracy. No western essence is there to stop a New Yorker of any ancestry taking up Islam”.

Truth, goodness, and beauty surely transcend time and place; no one culture has a monopoly of wisdom. Christians at least, who worship a God who transcends and judges limited and distorted human understandings, should recognise that.
Nevertheless, if every human cultural grasp is limited and distorted, not every grasp is equally so. Some values are better recognised in one culture than another, more deeply embedded in its dominant traditions of thought and enshrined in its law and institutions. And it is certainly arguable that individuality, liberty via-á-vis the state, and the accountability of ruler to ruled are more thoroughly entrenched in those ‘Western’ cultures historically shaped by Christianity than in those ‘Eastern’ ones shaped by, say, Confucianism.

Appiah goes too far in blurring the distinction between ‘the West’ and ‘the Rest’, because he is excessive in hardening the distinction between modernity and what preceded it. To say that pre-modern, Christian Europe knew nothing of individualism, democracy, political liberty, rationality, or empirical science is nonsense.
As Larry Siedentop and Nick Spencer have shown in their recent books—respectively, *Inventing the Individual* and *The Evolution of the West*—the very idea of the individual and its prominence in ‘the West’ is owing to the Christian notion of the prophet called by God to stand up for justice and therefore out from the surrounding mass. Think of Moses, whose reluctance to answer God’s call and stand out from the crowd was the subject of our first reading. Think of the Hebrew prophets, like Jeremiah. And not least, think of Jesus himself.

As for the concept of a right attaching to an individual as a kind of property, that was first developed by thirteenth century Christian canon lawyers, not seventeenth century atheist philosophers.

Regarding political liberty, Christianity’s origins on the wrong side of the social tracks developed into an institutional stand-off between Church and State in the Latin West, which created space for an independent flourishing of civil society—a space that some have observed to be generally lacking in the Islamic world.

And the germ of democratic accountability lies partly in late medieval attempts to curb the power of an absolutist papacy by lodging supreme authority in an ecumenical council of the whole Church.

As for rationality, no one acquainted with the intellectual rigour of Scholastic philosophy and theology can suppose pre-modern Christendom a stranger to reason.

And it was fourteenth century theologians who pushed natural science in an empirical direction by affirming the biblical contingency of a world that God happened to create against the Aristotelian idea that it exists by necessity. For what could have been other than it is—what is contingent—can only be known by *looking* at it, empirically, and not by speculating about it, philosophically.
So I think that the West does exist. It does have an essence, albeit neither absolutely distinctive, nor static, nor immortal. And Christianity has been a major factor, if not the only one, in shaping it. And it shapes it still.

What Western cosmopolitans like Appiah are busy trying to obscure, the Chinese see clearly.

So whereas the original wise men from the East came to observe the Incarnation itself, the Shanghai academics are now inspecting its transformative, humanising, liberal cultural effects.

Nigel Biggar
Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford
29 January 2017