

# The Change of Views of Protestant Missionaries toward Chinese Traditional Religions

(An abstract)

**Kevin Xiyi Yao**

Assistant Professor

China Graduate School of Theology

The way to deal with non-Christian religions has been one of the major issues confronting Protestant missionary movement since the nineteenth century. The goal of this study is to analyze and summarize the viewpoint of Protestant missionaries towards Chinese religions, to reveal the diversity involved and the transmutation of it in history, and to gather lessons for contemporary dialogue.

In general, early Protestant missionaries in China held negative view on Chinese religious traditions. “Heathenism” was the common word used in defining and evaluating Chinese religions. By the late nineteenth century, missionaries by and large still considered Chinese religions the core of “heathenism.” In their eyes, the nature of Chinese religions was evil, and their function was negative. They were stumbling block for the spread of Gospel, and were definitely among the enemies they needed to overcome.

On the other hand, different or even conflicting mission theologies and approaches began to emerge among Protestant missionaries in the late nineteenth century. Timothy Richard, James Legge, W. A. Martin, Young Allen, Gilbert Reid and others located positive elements in Chinese religions, especially Confucianism. In their view these elements were

in agreement with the Gospel. They advocated a tolerating and accommodating approach, replacing the “Jesus or Confucius” model with a “Jesus plus Confucius” one. This was at that time a minority view within the missionary circle, and it clashed with the majority view at the general conference of missionaries in China in 1890. The clash signifies the growing diversification of Protestant missionary view on Chinese traditional religions.

In the 1910s and 20s, consensus and unity began to collapse. Rejecting the former exclusive approach to non-Christian religions, liberal missionaries openly affirmed the good effects of other religions, and urged for dialogue and cooperation with them. Their new stance was advocated in a strongest way in the famous “Laymen’s Report” of the early 1930s. The report caused intensive debate and division among missionaries in China. Subsequently, positions of the modernist and the fundamentalist were polarized. From then on, the Protestant missionary community was no longer able to speak with one voice on issues regarding non-Christian religions.

From the early nineteenth century onwards, views of Protestant missionaries on Chinese traditional religions have undergone significant changes. Diversification, and plurality, should be taken fully into account as we study the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions in China.