



“No Distinction between Contemplating the Created Realities and Contemplating the One God”: The Earliest Chinese Natural Theology

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Abstract: The Church of the East sent its missionaries to China in the seventh century. As the earliest Christian presence in pluralistic and scientific-techno China, they not only remained faithful to their theological tradition but also creatively engaged in natural theology to demonstrate to the polytheistic Chinese people the existence of one God. This paper argues that Jingjiao's earliest natural theology in Chinese bridged between the Greek concept of kosmos and Chinese cosmology and cosmogony. This paper will begin by surveying natural theology and the development of the concept of ziran 自然 in the Chinese context. Next, the paper will analyze the texts of the Jingjiao documents, and present its natural theology. Then, the paper studies the continuity between Jingjiao and the Church of the East in terms of its Greek learning. Finally, the significance of Jingjiao's theology toward the interdisciplinary study of theology and science.

Key words: Natural Theology, Jingjiao, *kosmos*, *ziran*

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When the Church of the East¹ sent their missionaries to China in the seventh century and established *Jingjiao* 景教 (the Luminous Teaching), they hardly realized that the land they were about to set their feet on had never known of the Christian faith, let alone the one God responsible for the creation and sustenance of the entire universe. One may be curious to ask these questions: How did the earliest Christian missionaries express the idea of Creator God to the techno-scientific China, whose spiritual world is filled with a pantheon of gods and ghosts? This paper studies the *Jingjiao* documents in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and argues that the Syriac missionaries creatively developed the earliest "natural" theology in Chinese to demonstrate to the polytheistic people the existence of one God by resorting to nature and natural phenomena. In this paper, I will first briefly present natural theology and the study of nature. Then the paper will investigate *Jingjiao's* natural theology based on a study of their primary texts. Then, I will trace their root and identify their theological connections with the fathers of the Church of the East. Finally, the paper will analyze its theological significance for the interdisciplinary study of theology and science.

Introduction: Natural Theology and Nature in Ancient Chinese Context

In order to properly define natural theology, it is imperative to study the concept of nature. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen surveys the development of the concept of nature in modernity and postmodernity in the West.² In the seventeenth century, the radical interpretation of nature happened due to the Enlightenment and scientific revolution. The reworked concept of nature is characterized by several interrelated features such as quantification, mechanization, seeing nature as "other," and secularization.³ The image of a machine rather than a living organism became dominant.⁴ The autonomy of nature pushed to the margins the idea of God as the first cause.⁵ Due to human

¹ Also known as Nestorian Christianity, Syriac Christianity, East Syrian Church, and Assyrian Church of the East. In present academia has followed Sebastian P. Brock in recognizing that the so-called Nestorian church has, in antiquity, preferred to self-describe itself as the "Church of the East," or more recently, the Assyrian Church of the East. For some excellent recent works on the history of the Church of the East, see Glen L Thompson, *Jingjiao: The Earliest Christian Church in China* (Eerdmans, 2024).; Christine Chaillot, *The Assyrian Church of the East: History and Geography* (Peter Lang, 2021).; David Wilmshurst, *The Martyred Church: A History of the Church of the East* (East & West, 2011).; Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*, New ed (I.B. Tauris, 2016).; Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (Routledge-Curzon, 2003).

² Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, vol 3 (Eerdmans, 2015), 40–45.

³ Richard S. Westfall, "The Scientific Revolution of the Seventeenth Century: The Construction of a New World View," in *The Concept of Nature*, ed. Torrance (Oxford University Press, 1992), 86–87.

⁴ For nature as machine, see Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology. Vol. 1, Nature. Vol. 2, Reality. Vol. 3, Theory*. (Eerdmans, 2001, 2002, 2006 [2003]), 1:107–10.

⁵ Among the Enlightenment advocates, none surpasses Francis Bacon. See Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Baylor University Press, 2011), 47–58. See also Jürgen

desire for autonomy,⁶ nature and other people are used instrumentally, as a tool of "technocratic attitude,"⁷ rather than experienced relationally and in terms of mutual belonging. It also rips from nature any purpose.⁸ Due to modernity's perverted vision of rationality, human reason and universals take the place of God.⁹ Rather than human liberation and integration with nature, a new kind of "slavery"¹⁰ emerges in the world left under the power of human reason alone, which ultimately "operates deceptively or oppressively."¹¹ Such oppression may express itself politically, socially, and in relation to nature. Rather than diversity and plurality, homogeneity and totalitarianism lie on the horizon for the world of modernity.¹²

For Kärkkäinen, not all are convinced of the legitimacy of such absolutely irreversible breaks in intellectual history as Gunton and many others claim about modernity.¹³ Radical Orthodoxy maintains that modernity is rather a continuation of developments started in the late medieval period under the tutelage of Scotus and his school, which came to their zenith with Descartes and Kant.¹⁴ Consequently, "late" modernity represents not a break in but rather an intensification of modernity.¹⁵ In the Radical Orthodox assessment, the Scotist view of univocity brought about "secularism," a radical shift from the time when "there was no 'secular.'"¹⁶ For Kärkkäinen, this is the positive insight of Radical Orthodoxy's view of secularism, notwithstanding whether or not the Scotus-driven "modernity" arguments stand historical scrutiny.¹⁷ Modernity's dominant philosophical-theological orientations and its appraisal of nature are in direct opposition to Christian tradition's ontology of participation,¹⁸ the idea that being is nothing in itself but is based on its

Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology* (Fortress, 1999), 98–99.

⁶ Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 19–20.

⁷ Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many*, 14.

⁸ Steven Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction* (SPCK, 2007), Kindle loc. #165.; cited in Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 41.

⁹ Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Eerdmans, 1998), 37. Cited in Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 41.

¹⁰ Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many*, 28–29.

¹¹ Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many*, 31.

¹² Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many*, 28–40.

¹³ Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 42.

¹⁴ Catherine Pickstock, "Duns Scotus: His Historical and Contemporary Significance," *Modern Theology* 21, no. 4 (2005): 545.

¹⁵ As argued in detail in Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Blackwell, 1998), chapters 1–3. Cited in Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 42.

¹⁶ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (B. Blackwell, 1991). 9; cited in Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 42.

¹⁷ Kärkkäinen himself doubts if Scotus can be made the "first modernist." He also cites other critics such as D. Ford and Cross. See Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 43n27.

¹⁸ For a short statement, see James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular*

relatedness and dependence on the Creator.¹⁹

Continental postmodern philosophy is not only deconstructing the rationality and objectivity of concepts and values, it also maintains that "nature is not possessed of the epistemological finality and inevitability implied by the category of the *given*; it is created in the process of historical construction, and may be reconstructed as and when required."²⁰ A corollary implication among many postmodernists is that even natural sciences are therefore but social constructions and "stories," no more reliable than, say, political opinions. They push the claim of the perspectival and relativistic nature of human knowing to its logical end. Such postmodern rebuttal of the rationality of the scientific enterprise is both misguided and deeply biased.²¹

In Kärkkäinen's theological assessment, the modernist construction of nature as autonomous and the postmodern deconstruction of its rational basis are both mistaken.²² However, both moves make a critical positive statement that nature is a socially constructed concept.²³ The contested nature of "nature" should be welcomed by theologians as it gives new and unsurpassed resources in loading the concept with a robust trinitarian theological meaning. At the same time, theologians should be constantly reminded of the impossibility of speaking properly of "natural theology," "natural knowledge of God," or "natural law" unless nature's meaning is determined. Kärkkäinen laments that with the exception of the trilogy by McGrath in his *Scientific Theology*, even the most recent major theological accounts of the doctrine of creation are basically silent about this essential task.²⁴

Kärkkäinen's survey and assessment are to be complemented by an eastern, and in particular, an ancient Chinese view of nature. Chinese philosopher Zhang Dainian 张岱年²⁵ (1909-2004) surveys the historical development of the concept of *ziran* 自然 and concludes that for most of the time, *ziran* in ancient Chinese literature refers to "that which is naturally so, or spontaneously so." Laozi 老子 (571 BC-471 BC) uses *ziran* and argues against the concept of God creating the universe. Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210-263) is the first who employs *ziran* to refer to the totality of heaven, earth, and the ten thousand

Theology (Baker Academic, 2004), 74–75, 193–95. Cited in Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 43.

¹⁹ John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Blackwell, 1997), 44. Cited in Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 43.

²⁰ McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 1:111.

²¹ Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 44.

²² Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 45.

²³ Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 45–46.

²⁴ Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 47.

²⁵ For English translation of Chinese words, the standard *pinyin* system will be used in italics, followed by the Chinese character in simplified form.

things.²⁶ Therefore, Tomohisa Ikeda rightly concludes that in ancient China, the phrase *ziran* did not carry with it a connotation that corresponds to today's concept of nature.²⁷ Here, one discerns the similarity between the ancient Chinese view of nature and that of modernity in that first, both insist on nature as an autonomous entity; second, both reject the idea of God as first cause.

The phrase *ziran* is used in the Tang *Jingjiao* documents²⁸ ten times (seven in Discourse; once in Blessedness; twice in Origin). In Origin, Xu Xiaohong, Tang Li, and Nicolini-Zani all translate it to "nature,"²⁹ and therefore err anachronistically because the correspondence between *ziran* and the Western European sense of nature didn't take place until the modern era in Japanese

²⁶ Dainian Zhang, *Zhongguo Gudian Zhexue Gainian Fanchou Yaolun* 中国古典哲学概念范畴要论 (Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 2017), 95–96.

²⁷ Tomohisa Ikeda, "中国思想史における「自然」の誕生 (自然の意味するもの--東アジア世界の生活, 思惟, そして情感<シンポジウム>)," trans 池田知久, *Zhongguo shehui yu wenhua* 中国社会与文化 8, no. 1 (1993).

²⁸ The Tang *Jingjiao* documents refers to the seven widely accepted authentic documents, which include 大秦景教流行中国碑并序 (Stele of the Diffusion of Daqin *Jingjiao* in China and Preface, abbreviated as Stele), 大秦景教三威蒙度赞 (Hymn in Praise of the Salvation Achieved through the Three Majesties of Daqin *Jingjiao*, or Praise, 尊经 (Honored Persons and Sacred Books, or Honored), 一神论 (Discourse on the One God, or Discourse), 序听迷诗所经 (Book of Righteous Meditator, or Mediator), 志玄安乐经 (Book on Profound and Mysterious Blessedness, or Blessedness), and 大秦景教宣元至本经 (Book of Daqin *Jingjiao* on Revealing the Origin and the Deepest Foundation, or Origin). This collection of the Tang *Jingjiao* documents excludes the documents that were published in the late 1940s, namely, the so-called Kojima documents (Kojima manuscript A, or *Daqin Jingjiao Dasheng tongzhen guifa zan* 大秦景教大圣通真归法赞, and Kojima manuscript B, or *Daqin Jingjiao xuanyuan zhiben jing* 大秦景教宣元至本经), which have recently been recognized as modern forgeries. See Matteo Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East: Texts and History of the First Encounter of Christianity with China* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 154–55, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197609644.003.0005>. Lin Wushu and Rong Xingjiang are among the earliest scholars who concluded that the Kojima manuscripts are more likely than not forgeries executed by a knowledgeable antiques dealer. See Wushu Lin and Xinjiang Rong, "Suowei Lishi Jiucang Dunhuang Jingjiao Wenxian Erzong Bianwei 所謂李氏舊藏敦煌景教文獻二種辨偽," trans 林悟殊 and 榮新江, *Jiuzhou xuekan* 九州學刊 [Chinese Culture Quarterly] 4, no. 4 (1992).; Wushu Lin and Xinjiang Rong, "Doubts Concerning the Authenticity of Two Nestorian Christian Documents Unearthed at Dunhuang from the Li Collection," trans 林悟殊 and 榮新江, *China Archaeology and Art Digest* 1, no. 1 (1996). The list is confirmed in Zhijun Nie, *Tangdai Jingjiao Wenxian Yanjiu* 唐代景教文獻研究 (Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社, 2016), 6–7., with the exception that Nie considers Praise and Honored as one document. For the whole list of the documents, see the diagram in p. 7, according to which there are in total 16355 (Chinese) characters. According to Sun Jianqiang who redated the seven Dunhuang documents, only two belong to the Tang era, namely, Blessedness and Origin. See Jianqiang Sun, "Re-Dating the Seven Early Chinese Christian Manuscripts: Christians in Dunhuang before 1200" (PhD diss. Leiden University, 2018). However, this paper does not follow Sun's dating, but the majority view by including the seven genuine documents in the Tang *Jingjiao* corpus.

²⁹ See Xiaohong Xu, *Tangdai Jingjiao Wenxian Yu Beiming Shiyi* 唐代景教文献与碑铭释义 (Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe 宗教文化出版社, 2020), 146.; Li Tang, "A Preliminary Study on the Jingjiao Inscription of Luoyang: Text Analysis, Commentary and English Translation," in *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, ed. Winkler and Tang (LIT, 2009), 115.; Nicolini-Zani, *Luminous Way*, 300.

history, which then was adopted into Chinese.³⁰ None of the references in the Tang *Jingjiao* documents corresponds to the modern sense of nature. Instead, the *Jingjiao* authors employed *ziran* in the sense of "naturally" and "autonomously."

1. *Jingjiao's Natural Theology*

Jingjiao's natural theology is exhibited in Discourse, which is "one of the earliest works among the *Jingjiao* classics in Chinese, and also one that carries the most theological weight."³¹ In Discourse, one finds the earliest version of what we now know as "natural theology"³² in Chinese if we adopt its earliest form in Latin, namely, *theologia naturalis*, which could arguably be translated as either "a natural theology" or "a theology of nature."³³ The term was coined in the pre-Christian classical world to describe a general mode of reasoning which ascended from the natural world to the world of the gods.³⁴ For classic Greek philosophers, natural theology was often framed in terms of a rational or scientific quest for an *archē*—a first principle. In contrast to the pre-Socratic tradition, which showed little interest in developing arguments in support of the existence of the gods,³⁵ the author of Discourse appeals to *wanwu* 万物 (the ten thousand things) and the sustenance of heaven (without the need of pillars and walls) and earth to argue for the existence and the power of one God:

万物见一神。一切万物，既是一神，一切所作若见；所作若见，所作之物，亦共见一神不别。以此故知：一切万物，并是一神所作；可见者不可见

³⁰ Tomohisa Ikeda, "'Ziran' De Sixiang '自然'的思想," in *Zhongguo Guannianshi* 中国观念史, ed. Yuan (Zhongzhou guji chubanshe 中州古籍出版社, 2005), 39.

³¹ Xianglin Luo, "Jingjiao Ruhua Jiqi Yanbian Yu Yiwu Tezheng 景教入华及其演变与遗物特征," trans 羅香林, *Huagang xuebao* 华冈学报 1, no. 1 (1965): 148–49. Also see Xianglin Luo, *Tang Yuan Erdai Zhi Jingjiao* 唐元二代之景教 (Zhongguo xueshe 中国学社, 1966), translation mine.

³² In terms of the definition for "natural theology," Alister McGrath argues that it is not acceptable to offer a contemporary definition of natural theology which has gained acceptance within some particular community of discourse, as if that settled the matter, or become locked into a "metaphysical deployment of ideal significations" capable of delivering clear and crisp answers. He proposes that we study the genealogies of these core concepts, which is one of the most effective (although not unproblematic) means of subverting the vested interests of intellectual power groups, and allowing the retrieval of suppressed or marginalized notions which remain nonetheless live intellectual options for contemporary theological discussion. See Alister E. McGrath, *Re-Imagining Nature: The Promise of a Christian Natural Theology* (Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 11.

³³ See Jonathan R Topham, "Natural Theology and the Sciences," in *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*, ed. Harrison (Cambridge University Press, 2010). Padgett argues constructively for interpreting *theologia naturalis* philosophically as "natural theology" and theologically as "a theology of nature." See Alan G. Padgett, "Theologia Naturalis: Philosophy of Religion or Doctrine of Creation?," *Faith and Philosophy* 21, no. 4 (2004).

³⁴ Hans-Josef Klauck, "Nature, Art, and Thought: Dio Chrysostom and the Theologia Tripartita," *Journal of Religion* 87, no. 1 (2007).

³⁵ See, e.g., James H. Leshner, *Xonophanes of Colophon: A Text and Translation* (University of Toronto Press, 1992), 114–19.; Markus Enders, *NatuRliche Theologie Im Denken Der Griechen* (Josef Knecht, 2000), 47–73.

者，并是一神所造 *The ten thousand things reveal the One God. All ten thousand things, [having been created] by the One God, [namely,] all having been created that are visible. There is no distinction between contemplating the created realities and contemplating the One God. From this, one understands that it is God who made all ten thousand things. Both what is visible and what is invisible are created by God.*

The manifestation of God through creation is further expounded: "There is no distinction between contemplating the created realities and contemplating the One God." Here Wang Lanping surmises that the *Jingjiao* author most likely draws his insight from Rom. 1:19-21.³⁶ Even more probably, the natural theology in Discourse can be traced to the early Syriac fathers. The "no distinction" statement in Discourse corresponds to Ephrem's grand conception of the harmony between God and all the orders of creation, based on which one understands Ephrem's poetical-theological method, beyond his use of types, symbols, and even sacramental "mysteries." God has filled creation with his traces and has given humans the mind and the faculty of language that can appreciate these pointers, express them, and follow them by the light of the gift of faith.³⁷

2. *Jingjiao's* Continuity with the Church of the East in Greek Learning

For the author of Discourse, the ten thousand things in the universe have been *anzhi* 安置 (set and placed, or set in a stable course)³⁸, indicating the orderliness of God's creation. The concept of the world as an ordered whole, that is, as a *kosmos*, was used by the Ionian philosophers to develop a natural theology, according to which such an orderly world was, at least to some degree, transparent to the human intellect.³⁹ Pythagoras is often credited with being "the first to call the containing of all things the *kosmos*, because of the order which governs it."⁴⁰ The Greek term *kosmos* thus developed overtones of order and intelligibility. The universe is something that we can *understand*, however partially and imperfectly.⁴¹ *Jingjiao's* connection with Greek thought can be traced to their ancestors, namely, the believers of the Church of the East

³⁶ Wang Lanping also observes the proximity between these two sets of verses. See Lanping Wang, *Tangdai Dunhuang Hanwen Jingjiao Xiejing Yanjiu* 唐代敦煌汉文景教写经研究 (Minzu chubanshe 民族出版社, 2016), 181.

³⁷ Robert Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism in St. Ephrem's Theology," *Parole de l'Orient* 6 & 7, no. 1 (1975-1976): 2.

³⁸ The phrase is used 15 times in the entire Tang corpus, among which 11 instances have to do with God's creation (all in Discourse).

³⁹ Lloyd P. Gerson, "Metaphysics in Search of Theology," *Lyceum* 2, no. 2 (1990): 1-2.

⁴⁰ Rémi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 17-25.

⁴¹ McGrath, *Re-Imagining Nature*, 12.

who were known as inheritors of the Greek culture.⁴²

In the same text, the author of Discourse speaks of the power of the One God:

天无柱支托，若非一神所为，何因而久立，不从上落？此万一神术妙之力，若不一神所为，谁能永久住持不落？（论一 7-8）*Heaven does not have pillars to support it. If the One God did not support it, how could it have stayed in place so long without collapsing? This is only possible thanks to the power of the One God, whose ways are mysterious. If it were not the One God who acted, who could sustain [heaven] to keep it from collapsing? (Discourse 1:7-8)*

Todd Godwin observes that Aristotle's unmoved mover concept is present in the above passage (in combination with 1:23-24).⁴³ It is known that during the seventh and eighth centuries, Greco-Roman scientific texts and thought were spreading into Tibet and Central Asia, and in a milieu in which Iranians and Iranian Christians were doing missionary work. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the appearance of Aristotelian metaphysical notions within the apologetics of the Church of the East in the Tang setting stems from these larger developments.⁴⁴

3. Significance of *Jingjiao's* Natural Theology

Jingjiao's natural theology contributes significantly to Chinese culture in general and Chinese theology in particular. First, ancient Chinese culture did not develop a monotheistic religious faith. Kuang Zhiren 邱芷人 traces the religious activities of the Chinese people in the early Qin Dynasty. By studying *Shujing* 书经 and *Shijing* 诗经, Kuang asserts that people of the Yin 殷 and Shang 商 Dynasties practiced polytheistic faiths, to whom *Shangdi* 上帝 (the Supreme God) is the highest authority of humans and the natural world. Although *Shangshu* 尚书 personifies *Shangdi* who have emotions such as fondness, anger, and mercy, such a concept was later mixed with the metaphysical concept of *Tiandao* 天道 (heavenly mandate) in Western Zhou (1046 BC-771 BC), producing a kind of monotheistic religion, which was later inherited by Mozi 墨子 (468 BC?-376 BC). However, such a trend was

⁴² Qianzhi Zhu, *Zhongguo Jingjiao: Zhongguo Gudai Jidujiao Yanjiu* 中国景教：中国古代基督教研究 (Dongfang chubanshe 东方出版社, 1993), 69, translation mine.

⁴³ R. Todd Godwin, *Persian Christians at the Chinese Court: The Xi'an Stele and the Early Medieval Church of the East* (I.B. Tauris, 2018), 90-91. Also see Aristotle's *Physics*, 258b, 32-259a, 8, in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol 1 (Princeton University Press, 1984), 432.

⁴⁴ Paul Pelliot, "Un Traité Manichéen Retrouvé en Chine" (Ed. And Trans. Édouard Chavannes," *Journal Asiatique* 11, no. 1 (1913).; Christopher Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia* (Princeton University Press, 1987), 297-313.; cited in Godwin, *Persian Christians*, 92n78.

interrupted by Confucianism, which replaced religious faith with the humanistic spirit. Therefore, the concept of One God was never fully developed in ancient China.⁴⁵ Therefore, the Church of the East missionaries are the first who introduced to the Chinese people the concept of One God by resorting to things of nature, such as the mechanism of the sustenance of heaven.

Second, the Church of the East missionaries brought with them the Greek thought of *kosmos* with the inherent understanding of nature's orderliness and intelligibility. The noted philosopher of religion Richard Swinburne identifies the importance of observable ordering within the natural world as follows:

Regularities of succession are all-pervasive. For simple laws govern almost all succession of events. In books of physics, chemistry and biology we can learn how almost everything in the world behaves. The laws of their behavior can be set out by relatively simple formulae which men can understand and by means of which they can successfully predict the future. The orderliness of nature to which I drew attention here is its conformity to formula, to simple, formulable, scientific laws. The orderliness of the universe in this respect is a very striking fact about it. The universe might so naturally have been chaotic, but it is not—it is very orderly.⁴⁶

Elsewhere, I have reconstructed *Jingjiao's* *qi*-tological theology of creation due to their creative, conceptual imagination by "dancing" around the Chinese metaphysical concept of *qi*.⁴⁷ Coupled with their natural theology, the *Jingjiao* authors creatively brought their Greek understanding of *kosmos* and the orderly creation of God into the Chinese society.

Third, Kärkkäinen argues that Christian tradition has been a major catalyst in facilitating the empirical study of nature with its idea of orderliness and rationality of the created order.⁴⁸ This is made more interesting if we connect it to the Syrian monks' scientific and technological strategy in their bold engagement with the techno-scientific Tang China. They were known for their medical expertise, accomplishments in astronomy, and other Greek-Byzantine technologies such as bell-making techniques and architectural skills. They

⁴⁵ Kuang Zhiren 龐芷人 traces the religious activities of the Chinese people in the early Qin Dynasty. By studying *Shujing* 書經 and *Shijing* 詩經, Kuang asserts that people of the Yin 殷 and Shang 商 Dynasties practiced polytheistic faiths, to whom *Shangdi* 上帝 (the Supreme God) is the highest authority of humans and the natural world.

⁴⁶ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Clarendon, 1979), 136. Cited in McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 1:219–20.

⁴⁷ Jacob Chengwei Feng, "Christianity's Earliest Encounter with the Ancient Techno-Scientific China: Critical Lessons from *Jingjiao's* Approach," *Christian Perspectives on Science and Technology, New Series* 2, no. 1 (2023): 92–99, <https://doi.org/10.58913/UJZZ2394>.

⁴⁸ Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 25.

incorporated their comprehensive scientific learning and technological expertise in their missionary endeavor, which contributed to their success as the first missionaries in ancient China.⁴⁹ Therefore, *Jingjiao's* natural theology serves as a promising field of research for theology and science.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have offered a study of *Jingjiao's* earliest Chinese natural theology. First, the paper briefly studied the concept of nature and its development in the Western world. In comparison, the Chinese concept of *ziran* 自然 in the ancient literature was presented, followed by its usage in the Tang *Jingjiao* documents. Then by analyzing *Jingjiao's* natural theology and its continuity with the Church of the East, the paper argues that the *Jingjiao* authors creatively resorted to nature and the natural phenomena to convey the ideas of one God and God's creation. The paper concluded with a three-fold significance of such natural theology.

If there is anything original in this paper, it is the theological retrieval and analysis of the earliest Chinese natural theology and its connection with the Greek thoughts and theological roots in the Church of the East. More in-depth research is needed to fully explore its potential in theology and science dialogue in general, and the theology-science-religion trialogue in particular.

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