



“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 (2015, pp. 40–45) surveys the development of the concept of nature in modernity and postmodernity in the West. In the seventeenth century, the radical interpretation of nature happened due to the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution. The reworked concept of nature is characterized by several interrelated features such as quantification, mechanization, seeing nature as "other," and secularization (Westfall 1992, pp. 86–87). The image of a machine rather than a living organism became dominant.² The autonomy of nature pushed to the margins the idea of God as the first cause.³ Due to human desire for autonomy (Gunton 1993, 19–20), nature and other people are used instrumentally, as a tool of "technocratic attitude" (Gunton 1993, p. 14), rather than experienced relationally and in terms of mutual belonging. It also rips from nature any purpose.⁴ Due to modernity's perverted vision of rationality, human reason and universals take the place of

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 (Thompson 2024; Chaillot 2021; Wilmshurst 2011; Baumer 2016; Baum and Winkler 2003).

² For nature as machine, see (McGrath 2001, 2002, 2006 [2003], pp. 1:107–10).

³ Among the Enlightenment advocates, none surpasses Francis Bacon. See (Bauckham 2011, pp. 47–58; Moltmann 1999, pp. 98–99).

⁴ See (Shakespeare 2007, Kindle loc. #165); cited in (Kärkkäinen 2015, p. 41).

God (Gunton 1998, p. 37). Rather than human liberation and integration with nature, a new kind of "slavery" (Gunton 1993, pp. 28–29) emerges in the world left under the power of human reason alone, which ultimately "operates deceptively or oppressively" (Gunton 1993, p. 31). 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 (Gunton 1993, pp. 28–40).

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 (Kärkkäinen 2015, p. 42). 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 (Pickstock 2005, p. 545). Consequently, "late" modernity represents not a break in but rather an intensification of modernity.⁵ In the Radical Orthodox assessment, the Scotist view of univocity brought about "secularism," a radical shift from the time when "there was no 'secular'" (Milbank 1991, p. 9). 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.⁶ Modernity's dominant philosophical-theological orientations and its appraisal of nature are in direct opposition to Christian tradition's ontology of participation,⁷ the idea that being is nothing in itself but is based on its relatedness and dependence on the Creator (Milbank 1997, p. 44).

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" (McGrath 2001, 2002, 2006 [2003], p. 1:111). 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 (Kärkkäinen 2015, p. 44).

In Kärkkäinen's theological assessment, the modernist construction of

⁵ As argued in detail in (Pickstock 1998, chapters 1–3).

⁶ Kärkkäinen (2015, p. 43n27) himself doubts if Scotus can be made the "first modernist." He also cites other critics such as D. Ford and Cross.

⁷ For a short statement, see (Smith 2004, pp. 74–75, 193–95).

nature as autonomous and the postmodern deconstruction of its rational basis are both mistaken (Kärkkäinen 2015, p. 45). However, both moves make a critical positive statement that nature is a socially constructed concept (Kärkkäinen 2015, pp. 45–46). 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 (Kärkkäinen 2015, p. 47).

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⁸ (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 things (Zhang 2017, pp. 95–96). Therefore, Tomohisa Ikeda (1993) rightly concludes that in ancient China, the phrase *ziran* did not carry with it a connotation that corresponds to today's concept of nature. 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* documents⁹ ten times (seven

⁸ For English translation of Chinese words, the standard *pinyin* system will be used in italics, followed by the Chinese character in simplified form.

⁹ 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 (Nicolini-Zani 2022, pp. 154–55). 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 (Lin and Rong 1992,

in Discourse; once in Blessedness; twice in Origin). In Origin, Xu Xiaohong, Tang Li, and Nicolini-Zani (Xu 2020, p. 146; Tang 2009, p. 115; Nicolini-Zani 2022, p. 300) all translate it to “nature,” 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 history, which then was adopted into Chinese (Ikeda 2005, p. 39). 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” (Luo 1965, pp. 148–49; 1966). In Discourse, one finds the earliest version of what we now know as “natural theology”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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 (Klauck 2007). 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,¹² 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:

The ten thousand things reveal the One God. All ten thousand things, [having

1996). The list is confirmed in (Nie 2016, pp. 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 (2018), who redated the seven Dunhuang documents, only two belong to the Tang era, namely, Blessedness and Origin. However, this paper does not follow Sun’s dating, but the majority view by including the seven genuine documents in the Tang *Jingjiao* corpus.

¹⁰ In terms of the definition for “natural theology,” Alister McGrath (2017, p. 11) 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.

¹¹ See (Topham 2010). Padgett (2004) argues constructively for interpreting *theologia naturalis* philosophically as “natural theology” and theologically as “a theology of nature.”

¹² See, e.g., (Leshner 1992, pp. 114–19; Enders 2000, pp. 47–73).

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. 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；可见者不可见者，并是一神所造。

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. 1:19-21.¹³ 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 (Murray 1975–1976, p. 2).

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)¹⁴, 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 (Gerson 1990, pp. 1–2). Pythagoras is often credited with being “the first to call the containing of all things the *kosmos*, because of the order which governs it” (Brague 2003, pp. 17–25). The Greek term *kosmos* thus developed overtones of order and intelligibility. The universe is something that we can *understand*, however partially and imperfectly (McGrath 2017, p. 12). *Jingjiao’s* connection with Greek thought can be traced to their ancestors, namely, the believers of the Church of the East who were known as inheritors of the Greek culture (Zhu 1993, p. 69, translation mine).

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

¹³ Wang Lanping (2016, p. 181) also observes the proximity between these two sets of verses.

¹⁴ 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).

God:

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) 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)

Todd Godwin observes that Aristotle's unmoved mover concept is present in the above passage (in combination with 1:23-24).¹⁵ 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 (Pelliot 1913); (Beckwith 1987, pp. 297–313).

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 邝芷人 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 interrupted by Confucianism, which replaced religious faith with the humanistic spirit. Therefore, the concept of One God was never fully developed in ancient China.¹⁶ 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.

¹⁵ See (Godwin 2018, pp. 90–91). Also see Aristotle's *Physics*, 258b, 32-259a, 8, in (Barnes 1984, p. 432).

¹⁶ Kuang Zhiren 邝芷人 (2003) 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.

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 (Swinburne 1979, p. 136).

Elsewhere, I (2023, pp. 92–99) have reconstructed *Jingjiao’s* *qi*-tological theology of creation due to their creative, conceptual imagination by “dancing” around the Chinese metaphysical concept of *qi*. 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 (2015, p. 25) 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. 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 incorporated their comprehensive scientific learning and technological expertise in their missionary endeavor, which contributed to their success as the first missionaries in ancient China (Feng 2023, pp. 84–88, 102). 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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