

Experience, Culture and Religion in Systematic Theology

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An Integrative and Pluriform Methodology

Edmond Zi-Kang Chua



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To the Father, my origin, my present and my eternity

Thank you for having been in the thick of all that I have gone through

You are truly a God who sees me and through whom I can hope to see

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Foreword

Experience, Culture and Religion in Systematic Theology is the work of an up-and-coming, emerging Asian theologian that is significant and wide-ranging, bold in its scope and aims. Impressive for its depth and erudition, this is no superficial ‘overview’ of its subject matter. Rather, it tackles some key doctrines and beliefs from a broadly critical evangelical perspective, informed by the author’s own context and experience. This book is not the product of an armchair ruminant. It is the result of someone grappling with very real existential-theological questions and issues. The work is marked by deep intentionality and integrity.

Edmond Chua, a convert to Christianity from his familial Chinese religious upbringing, is acutely sensitive to the question of theology and other faiths and especially how Christian theology views other religions. He is sensitively alert to what salvation means in regard to those who remain faithful to their own and who see no need to embrace Christianity. Does God spurn or abandon them? Coming out of the stable of conversion, Chua’s view may surprise some; it will be welcomed by others.

Chua’s work is marked by deep Christian engagement with uncomfortable perennial matters, bringing to bear novel and creatively complex perspectives. Theology is not reduced to simplistic aphorisms; it fronts up to demanding questions with challenging answers. A careful reading – this is not a work for the theologically faint-hearted – will be amply repaid.

Chua clearly believes theology should not, indeed cannot be done in a cultural or religious vacuum: theology is not an other-worldly enterprise. It is an intellectual task of marrying the intentions, aspirations and visions of faith with the realities of the world in which the faithful are engaged. It is rooted in the existential realities of human diversity – cultural, contextual, religious, gender – to name but a few that fall into the horizon of Chua’s purview.

The first three of the book’s seven chapters dive into an exploration of the foundations of theology, aptly identifying a mix of experience, culture

and world religions as one contributing matrix, alongside a quadrilateral of faith, scripture, tradition and reason. Chua's discussion of the multi-religious context for doing theology is particularly important, especially in the way he integrates elements of the biblical narratives into his argument, along with references to early Christian doctrine and interpretation.

Together with useful introductions to Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, Chua also provides succinct overviews of the Bahai, Zoroastrian, Taoist and Sikh faiths, as well as a useful discussion of Shintoism and traditional or tribal religion, together with 'Non-Theisms', all in order to provide necessary background and context for exploring the topic of Christian engagement with world religions.

There is also a penetrating discussion proposing a 'Christian Global Systematic Theology', which Chua speaks of as 'recognising the legitimacy of other faiths and studying their doctrine to see how our own might be enhanced, deepened, or made more comprehensive in its scope'. This is a high ideal, but one which is undoubtedly necessary especially in our time. His methodology section is particularly useful and helpful and shows the extent to which Chua is deeply engaged with the historic Christian theological tradition as well as contemporary perspectives and thought.

Following the first three chapters, the four doctrinal chapters address, respectively, the Trinity, Christology, Theodicy and Sin and Salvation. Each follows a novel scholastic structural schema that provides definition; location in the field of systematic theology; strengths and weaknesses of current conceptions; a proposition with advantages and prolepses outlined; and a conclusion. Each is a very competent, thorough, challenging and penetrating presentation and discussion. Many pertinent questions are raised and addressed.

Not everyone will concur with all of Chua's perspectives and suggestions – but they are worthwhile nevertheless, and very much grist to the ongoing theological mill. Many readers will undoubtedly find themselves challenged, encouraged by and agreeing with much of Chua's thought and ideas. In any event, Chua offers a stimulating combination of a solid grasp of the Christian tradition with a capacity to proffer novel ideas that may yet resolve theological conundrums, or at least open up the possibility of fresh theological thinking actually making a difference.

This is an exciting, must-have book. There is much here for a hungry student to digest and learn from and for the mature scholar to appreciate and be challenged by.

Douglas Pratt, FRHistS
The University of Auckland, New Zealand
26 January 2023

Acknowledgements

Almost every book is a product of collective effort, and this is no exception. Many books contain an imprint of their author's personal history, and there is much to say about those who have come and gone in my life and who have left a mark in some way on it.

Foremost among them is my father, now deceased, whose lovingkindness spurred me to imagine what an empyrean Father could be. I am grateful to my mother for her unstinting care and support; to my spouse for being a comforting oasis; and for my children, beacons of unending joy and hope.

This is a suitable setting to recognise my theological dependence upon the ideas of Professor Jung Young Lee, a prolific Korean-American systematic theologian of the last century. I will always fondly remember the kindness of Professor Douglas Pratt in writing a Foreword, as well as providing a positive assessment of my book. I am also appreciative to Professor Paul Hedges for his timely and useful feedback.

Many thanks are due to Samuel Fitzgerald, editor at James Clarke & Co., for taking on my book and seeing it through to publication, and Dorothy Luckhurst, copy-editor, for her meticulous work.

Above all, I will not fail to extol the supreme benefits I have received from my God, for and about whom this work is written. In a world of ever-contested truths, this book stands as an expression of my experiential understanding of God, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, whose name is unalloyed love, supplying the moral nature of all established creeds and human communities and favouring all in any place and time who choose to do that which we reasonably know to be humane and right.

Edmond Zi-Kang Chua
Singapore
14 July 2023