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Buddhicized Christianity: Creative Transformation and the Boundaries of Interpretation in Zhang Chunyi's Buddhist–Christian Dialogue

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Abstract

Zhang Chunyi (张纯一) was a significant thinker in modern Chinese intellectual history, but his profound ideas had long been marginalized. He demonstrated exceptional intellectual creativity in his practice of dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity. His religious identity evolved from that of a Confucian scholar to a Christian, and finally to a Buddhist who advocated “Buddhicized Christianity”. This faith-based transformation constituted a theological revolution grounded in internal religious dialogue and rational reflection, ultimately heralding the construction of an original theological system of Buddhized Christianity. With Mahayana Buddhism as its hermeneutical foundation, this system employs strategies like conceptual correspondence, the ontological internalization of mind–nature, the transference of meaning, and the harmonization of practices in order to systematically and creatively reinterpret core Christian doctrines. Not only does it provide unique historical resources for theories of interreligious dialogue, but it also profoundly reveals the internal tensions and interpretive boundaries inherent in creative transformation. The intellectual experiments and religious practices of Zhang Chunyi, drawn from a Chinese religious context, provide invaluable historical references and theoretical insights that can still inform key contemporary issues such as interreligious dialogue and multiple religious affiliations.

Keywords: Zhang Chunyi (张纯一); Buddhist–Christian dialogue; Buddhized Christianity; interreligious interpretation; creative transformation



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1. Introduction

In the first half of the 20th century, Christianity in China witnessed the rise of the “indigenization” (本色化) movement, which sought to integrate the faith with local culture and social customs while maintaining its core doctrines, so as to gain acceptance among the Chinese populace (Duan 2004). Operating in parallel to this was the Buddhist revival movement of the late Qing and Republican periods, which confronted the challenges of monastic decline, the impact of Western learning, and competition from foreign religions. Centered on the reorganization of Buddhist scriptures, the establishment of monastic education, and reform of the monastic system, this movement targeted the modernization of Buddhism. In particular, leading Buddhist reformer Venerable Taixu (太虚, 1890–1947) proactively deployed the institutionalized church organizational models and charitable operations of Christianity in order to imbue traditional monastic communities with

a more socially engaged orientation, ultimately resulting in the “Humanistic Buddhism” (人间佛教) system (Tai 2005; Pittman 2001). The interweaving of these two movements facilitated the profound encounter between Buddhism and Christianity. In this context, several Chinese intellectuals pursued various means of integrating Christianity and Chinese culture. Wu Leichuan (吴雷川, 1870–1944), for instance, sought to reconcile Christianity with Confucian political ethics, presenting Jesus as a Confucian-style moral exemplar. Zhao Zichen (赵紫宸, 1888–1979) drew upon Chinese literary and philosophical traditions to construct a Christology centered on the luminous humanity of Jesus (Starr 2016, pp. 96–97). Wu Yaozong (吴耀宗, 1893–1979) focused on the Social Gospel and socialist practice, combining Christian faith with progressive political movements for national salvation. He also emphasized Christianity’s active participation in social transformation and national rejuvenation. Starr observes that these intellectual texts differ markedly from Western systematic theology in form and expression—Chinese theology, she argues, is deeply embedded in indigenous literary genres and writing traditions (Starr 2016, p. 280).

From the perspective of Buddhist–Christian dialogue, various major representatives approached the indigenization of Christianity. For example, Wang Zhixin (王治心, 1881–1968) drew upon the historical experience of Buddhism’s sinicization to argue that Christianity should emulate the Buddhist model of indigenized missionary adaptation. Thereby, it would shed the rigid patterns of Western missionary methods and transform its religious form from an exogenous “Christianity in China” into a rooted “Christianity of China” (Z. Wang 1924, p. 2). Meanwhile, Xu Baoqian (徐宝谦, 1892–1944) went a step further. Drawing upon the Buddhist frameworks of *Hīnayāna* and *Mahāyāna*, he criticized Christianity’s prevailing overemphasis on individual salvation while neglecting social concerns. Instead, he proposed a vision of a “Mahāyāna Christianity”, advocating a more socially engaged orientation (B. Xu 1934). Xie Fuya (谢扶雅, 1892–1991) supported the interpretation of Christian theology through the philosophical resources of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. He sought to dissolve Christianity’s cultural barriers by integrating Chinese and Western spiritual values with indigenous ethical concepts in order to construct a localized theological system (Xie 1980). From a Chinese cultural identity perspective, Xu Songshi (徐松石, 1900–1999) posited the indigenization of Christianity through the multidimensional adaptation of liturgy, doctrine, and methods of dissemination, while maintaining the core tenets of that faith (S. Xu 1935, 1941). Overall, however, while these attempts at indigenization drew considerably upon Buddhist cultural and missionary models, they did not stretch to a fundamental reconstruction of core doctrines and theological foundations.

In contrast, Zhang Chunyi (张纯一, 1871–1955) distinguished himself with his radical proposal of “Buddhicized Christianity” (*fohua Jidujiao* 佛化基督教). He sought to systematically integrate the core philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism—particularly its non-dualistic paradigm—into Christian theology, with the aim of constructing a new religious system that synthesizes Eastern and Western wisdom and embodies both Buddhist and Christian insights. Consequently, Zhang Chunyi’s profound and distinctive exploration of Buddhist–Christian dialogue represents a research case of exceptional value within the modern historiography of Christian indigenization. His trajectory of religious transformation, alongside the theoretical foundations and creative constructions of “Buddhicized Christianity”, provides substantial intellectual resources for contemporary explorations of Buddhist–Christian dialogue. Furthermore, by situating his intellectual experiment in the framework of contemporary theories of interreligious dialogue, this case study also contributes to the critical reexamination of the theoretical implications and hermeneutical boundaries of cross-religious encounter.

However, due to his radical intellectual stance, Zhang Chunyi was often regarded as a marginal figure oscillating between the Buddhist and Christian camps. His unorthodox interpretations were resisted by the Christian Literature Society; among Buddhists, although he obtained Taixu's approval, his "Buddhicized Christianity" remained a controversial proposition. This marginal religious position objectively hindered the early dissemination of his ideas. Nevertheless, in the past two decades, scholarly research on Zhang Chunyi has significantly improved: Su Yuntai conducted the first scholarly analysis of the intellectual trajectory of Zhang Chunyi (Su 2007); however, the "limited biographical materials" (Su 2007, p. 286) mean that further research is needed regarding his conversion process and certain areas of his thoughts. Lai Pan-chiu also regards Zhang Chunyi as a key figure in the process of Buddhist–Christian dialogue in modern China (Lai 2008). He Zhuoen and Li Tao, through new historical materials, have revealed the social factors that facilitated his conversion (He and Li 2023, 2024). Moreover, the Collected Works of Zhang Chunyi (C. Zhang 2021j), edited and annotated by He Zhuoen and Li Tao, is the first systematic compilation of this author's important writings, providing a solid textual foundation for a comprehensive exploration of his philosophy.

Nevertheless, research on Zhang Chunyi has generally followed a linear narrative paradigm of intellectual history; it has neither systematically analyzed the internal mechanisms underlying Zhang's conversion, nor extensively examined the methodological characteristics of his intellectual construction, nor engaged his case in profound dialogue with contemporary theories of religious dialogue; thus, the theoretical potential of this case study was limited. Given this, the current paper seeks to transcend the singular narrative paradigm used in the research by integrating interdisciplinary perspectives and conducting a systematic study of Zhang Chunyi's "Buddhicized Christianity" thought and practice across three levels. First, at the level of personal faith journey, the study analyzes the trajectory of his faith transformation and its internal generative mechanisms. Second, at the intellectual system level, the theoretical foundations and creative construction of "Buddhicized Christianity" are systematically analyzed. Third, extending to the practical dimension, this study examines the theoretical implications and reflections on the interpretive boundaries of this intellectual experiment for contemporary interreligious dialogue; to achieve this, contemporary theories like internal dialogue and multiple religious affiliations are deployed as points of reference. These three levels are grounded in the internal structure manifested in Zhang Chunyi's own intellectual trajectory: his doctrinal innovation originates in concrete biographical experiences (the personal faith level), is developed into a systematized theological system (the intellectual system level), and is tested through comparison with contemporary religious practices (the practical dimension).

2. The Transformation of Religious Identity: Process and Internal Mechanisms

"Buddhicized Christianity" was Zhang Chunyi's intellectual experiment rooted in the modern context of national salvation and driven by both an individual spiritual quest and rational reflection. Zhang Chunyi experienced two major religious transformations in nearly half a century; from a Confucian scholar, he became a Christian and then a Buddhist. The magnitude and thoroughness of these transitions are relatively rare among modern Chinese intellectuals. This evolution of a trans-religious identity offers a unique historical case through which to understand the formation, maintenance, and reconstruction of religious identity in the context of interreligious dialogue.

Important academic foundations have been established regarding Zhang Chunyi's religious transformation. Su Yuntai divides Zhang's life into three periods: his conversion to Christianity, the fusion of Christianity and Buddhism, and his transition from Christian-

ity to Buddhism. The same author astutely identifies how the ideas of each period exhibit “a certain degree of ambiguity” (Su 2007, p. 82). Drawing on newly discovered historical materials, He Zhuoen and Li Tao revealed the external roles that Buddhist figures like Venerable Taixu played in facilitating Zhang’s conversion. They also systematically traced the phased evolution of his stance from a “fellow traveler” to a critic (He and Li 2023, pp. 82–96; 2024, pp. 180–89). In methodological terms, however, these studies largely adhere to a linear narrative paradigm of intellectual history. They focus on the external process of religious transformation and its periodic divisions while failing to systematically analyze the internal generative mechanisms of his faith transition. This section shifts the focus to his inner world, examining how multiple systems of meaning, via continuous internal dialogue, led to the metamorphosis of his faith and the innovation of his philosophy.

2.1. *The Path of Religious Conversion: From Confucian Scholar to Christian to Buddhist*

2.1.1. From Confucian Scholar to Christian: The Foundations of His Worldview and Initial Tensions

A native of Hanyang, Hubei, Zhang Chunyi was a Xiucai (a holder of the entry-level imperial degree) in his early years who devoted himself to studying Song Dynasty Confucianism. His background as one who “enjoyed researching the philosophers of the Zhou and Qin dynasties” (C. Zhang 2011c, p. 101) established the foundation for the initial cognitive framework of his philosophy: the cultivation of mind and nature in Song Confucianism endowed Zhang with a spiritual inward-seeking dimension, while the Confucian ethos of practical engagement with the world formed the basis of his deep concern for social reality. The structural tension between “inner sageliness” and “outer kingliness” became the fundamental driving force behind the evolution of his later thought. Crucially, the Song-Ming Neo-Confucian paradigm of “synthesizing myriad differences under a single underlying principle” directly shaped Zhang’s fundamental stance toward Buddhism and Christianity: he had no intention of making a singular choice between the various religions, but he was determined to pursue a higher framework of truth capable of synthesizing them all.

After the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the political situation induced Zhang to seek ways to save the nation, and he began to engage with Western learning. Initially, he had no particular affinity for Christianity, but after assuming a teaching post at Wenhua Academy in Wuchang in 1904, his close contact with Christian communities and frequent chapel visits eventually led to his baptism into the Anglican Church in 1905. His motivation for this was distinctly rooted in social reform, as he believed that Christianity’s “willingness to serve all, sparing no sacrifice for the sake of others, is the very remedy for our nation’s selfishness” (C. Zhang 2011c, p. 102). However, beneath this pragmatic concern, the internalization of his religious belief had already begun: around 1906, he interpreted a professional setback as “God’s wondrous and loving guidance, intended to lead him to attain the eternal Way” (Su 2007, p. 88). This indicated that the Christian concept of divine providence had penetrated his thoughts. Thus, a profound dialogue and tension emerged between Confucianism’s impersonal moral order of the “Mandate of Heaven” and Christianity’s personal divine guidance of “Divine Providence”. This became the internal driver of his subsequent creative development.

2.1.2. Synthesizing Various Schools of Thought and Surrendering to Christ: From Intellectual Tension to Creative Interpretation

Zhang Chunyi served at the Guangxue Society from 1909 to 1918, a period that marked a pivotal transformation in his religious understanding. As he explored Christian doctrine more deeply, he found it difficult to identify genuine intellectual resources capable of elucidating “God’s loving and wondrous workings”. While consulting the *Lec-*

tures on Mark by missionary Ernst Faber, he found the latter's Confucian-based interpretation extremely superficial, failing to allude to deeper truths (C. Zhang 2011c, p. 104). In his confusion, he "took several Buddhist sutras to read, finding many points of convergence; comparing them further with the New Testament, he began to grasp the true essence of religion. He then devoted himself to the Mahayana sutras, frequently cross-referencing them with the New Testament, and came to realize that the Three Baskets of Buddhist scriptures are all true commentaries on my Christian faith" (C. Zhang 2011c, p. 104).

This discovery was decisive for the genesis of his philosophy. Through comparison, he selectively rejected "ritual Confucianism"—which represented the ideology of the patriarchal order—while retaining the spirit of "inner seeking" cultivated by the cultivation of mind and nature in Song Confucianism. He believed that the Mohist "universal love" concept provided an entry point for his understanding of Christian "brotherly love", although it was greatly inferior to Mahayana Buddhism's subtlety on a metaphysical level (C. Zhang 2021e, pp. 314–49). Buddhist doctrines like "dependent origination and emptiness", however, offered far more powerful theoretical tools for understanding Christianity, in terms of both ethical equality and ontological depth. Consequently, he asserted that the Buddhist scriptures are "the true footnotes to Christ" and conceived a grand vision of "selecting the strengths of the Buddhist and Jing traditions (*Nestorianism*) to establish a new religion", as well as "gradually integrating and harmonizing the Christian and Buddhist traditions to advance them, thereby humbly repaying the compassionate grace of Sakya-muni and Jesus" (C. Zhang 1921, p. 8).

His representative works from this period trace clearly the trajectory of his intellectual evolution: Inner Chapters on Christianity, included in *Mr. Zhongru's Writings on Promoting the Way* (C. Zhang 2021c), had already begun to reinterpret Christian doctrines through the lens of Mahayana Buddhism, revealing the early seeds of the idea of "Buddhicized Christianity". Meanwhile, *A Discourse on Harmonizing All Religions and Returning to Christ* (C. Zhang 1921) drew upon Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist sources to address various objections; another work, *An Interpretation of Jesus Christ as the Son of Man* (C. Zhang 2021i), combined Chinese religious thought with biblical texts to interpret the identity and redemptive work of Jesus. Collectively, these works—covering apologetics, syncretism, and exegesis—constitute the fundamental framework of his early philosophy of "Using Buddhism to Interpret Christianity".

2.1.3. From Christian to Buddhist: A Shift in Ultimate Concern and the Reconstruction of Identity

Around 1918, Zhang's situation at the Guangxue Society grew increasingly precarious. His writings, which sought to synthesize various religions to elucidate Christianity, repeatedly met resistance from foreign missionaries. His work *Examples of Synthesizing Various Religions to Return to the Origin with Illustrations from the I Ching* was shelved for failing to "resolutely reject other religions and exclusively venerate Christ" (C. Zhang 2021f, p. 213). He was even required to cease independent writing and devote himself solely to translation. In October 1918, he left the Guangxue Society resolutely, stating bluntly in a letter to a friend that he had "broken away from the sphere of foreign religion (*yangjiao* 洋教)". His use of the phrase "foreign religion" signaled that, from his perspective, the Christianity represented by the missionaries had become clearly differentiated from "true Christianity".

In contrast, the Buddhist community held him in the highest regard. The high esteem of lay Buddhist Liu Renhang, as well as Venerable Taixu's hope that he would establish a Buddhist–Christian sect, provided Zhang with a sense of spiritual belonging and intellectual space that the Christian community could not offer (He and Li 2023, p. 88). During this period, his later body of work on "Buddhicized Christianity" was gradually formulated: *A Discussion on Reforming Christianity* (C. Zhang 2021b, pp. 441–72) systematically addressed

Xu Qian's ten points of criticism of the church, marking a transition from private discourse to public challenge. *Buddhicized Christianity* (C. Zhang 1933) and *The Secret Meaning of the Gospel* (C. Zhang 2021a, pp. 473–584) undertook systematic doctrinal construction, reinterpreting Christian doctrines through the Buddhist doctrinal classification framework.

Zhang Chunyi formally converted to Buddhism in or around 1925, and his public proposal of “Buddhicized Christianity” sparked intense debate within both Christian and Buddhist circles.

The term “Buddhicization” (*fohua* 佛化) was not Zhang's coinage but a core concept among the Taixu-led Buddhist reform movement of the 1920s and 1930s. Influenced by the prevailing revolutionary currents, Taixu was determined to revive Buddhism by adapting its truth to the modern state and society, so he promoted the “Three Buddhisms” (*san fo zhuyi* 三佛主义) (S. Wang 2023, p. 43; Pittman 2001, pp. 70–152), namely “Buddhist-monasticism” (*foseng zhuyi* 佛僧主义, monastic reform), “Buddhicization” (*fohua zhuyi* 佛化主义, the socialization of Buddhism), and “Buddha-land-ism” (*foguo zhuyi* 佛国主义, the ideal of a pure land on Earth). Of these, Buddhization assumed the social function of translating Buddhism from monasteries into modern life. Accordingly, Taixu praised Zhang's undertaking of “Buddhicized Christianity”, commenting that “the evolution of Christianity into Buddhism is indeed the single most important event for saving the world today” (Tai 1924). Moreover, Taixu regarded it as part of the new Buddhization movement. Some scholars have suggested that this praise also reflected Taixu's intention to recruit Zhang to his “Buddhicization of the world” (He and Li 2023, p. 91). Taixu also cautioned that “Buddhicized Christianity” should not be assumed to encompass the whole of Buddhism, nor should one use it to reject other aspects of Buddhism; Taixu saw it as merely an “expedient means” for adapting to the world (Tai 1924). Thus, although Zhang's “Buddhicized Christianity” was a logical extension of Taixu's Buddhization program, his direct application of the principle of Buddhization to transform another religion actually went beyond the original boundaries of Taixu's movement, becoming a radical experiment in “interreligious interpretation” within the framework of Buddhization.

Some in the Christian community accused him of “renouncing Christianity”, while others attempted to initiate church reforms in response to his criticisms. However, Zhang did not regard himself as an “apostate”. He firmly believed that he was not rejecting Christ but seeking to purge the distortions of the “true meaning of Christ” caused by “foreign religion” and to restore Christianity to its original form. At this point, he had completed his transformation from a “Christian who interpreted Christianity through a Buddhist lens” to the “advocate of Buddhized Christianity”.

2.2. The Driving Mechanism of Faith Transformation: The Synergistic Interplay of National Salvation Concerns and the “Triple Dialogue”

Zhang Chunyi's transformation of faith and thought manifested as the continuous collision and restructuring of multiple systems of meaning within his inner life. This change was driven by both his practical concern for national survival and the internal drive generated by his ongoing dialogue across different systems of meaning. Based on the actual trajectory revealed in his intellectual writings, a synergistic mechanism of “triple dialogue” is identified in this paper to elucidate the internal logic of his intellectual development: dialogue with ultimate reality, dialogue with historical tradition, and dialogue with the self.

It should be noted that the theoretical framework most closely aligned with this study is Raimon Panikkar's theory of intrareligious dialogue. Panikkar proposes that authentic religious experience and identity involve the integration of three dimensions: the *sensum* (the sensory-emotional), the *intellectum* (the intellectual-reflective), and the *spiritum* (the spiritual-transcendent) (Panikkar 1999, pp. 15–28). The “triple dialogue” framework of this study corresponds to this tripartite structure: the “dialogue with ultimate reality” cor-

responds to the spiritum—the direct encounter with the sacred mystery; the “dialogue with historical tradition” corresponds to the intellectum—its extension to the cross-cultural hermeneutical level, involving critical reflection on and integration of multiple horizons of meaning; and the “dialogue with the self” corresponds to the sensum—its unfolding at the individual psychological level, entailing the narrative integration of emotion and identity. It should be emphasized, however, that while Panikkar’s framework focuses on the universal structure of religious experience, the framework of this study is a case-oriented analytical tool designed to illuminate the specific mechanism of Zhang Chunyi’s intellectual genesis. The two frameworks can complement and enrich each other through comparative dialogue, thereby broadening their respective theoretical horizons.

2.2.1. Dialogue with Ultimate Reality: The Quest for Truth Driven by a Concern for National Salvation

Zhang Chunyi’s ongoing quest for truth was based on clear practical concerns. Deeply concerned about social disorder and moral decline in the early Republican period, he continued to contemplate using the power of religion to salvage the moral fabric of society. As one scholar has noted, “Zhang Chunyi’s life, thought, and mission underwent several major shifts, which were in fact guided by an internal logic: his hope to find a path to national salvation and revitalization through the spiritual and cultural realm. Consequently, he engaged in arduous exploration and constantly negated his former self” (Wei 2021). It was precisely this grand concern that induced him to seek a more explanatory doctrinal foundation for Christianity, while he continually examined the ultimate profundity of doctrines and practical efficacy across various religions.

Initially, he was deeply dissatisfied with the superficial nature of the biblical interpretations of missionaries; this dissatisfaction reflected an inherent yearning for a higher standard of truth, prompting him to draw upon Mahayana Buddhism concepts to reshape Christian doctrine. At first, Buddhist thought served merely as an interpretive tool. However, Zhang Chunyi discovered that, firstly, the “dependent origination and emptiness” of Buddhism offered greater philosophical rigor than the doctrine of creation in explaining the true nature of the universe, and secondly, “self-enlightenment through one’s own nature” aligned more closely with his inward-seeking spiritual orientation than the personal model of vicarious atonement. At this point, a profound paradigm shift occurred: the systematic nature and persuasiveness of the Buddhist interpretive framework demonstrated a superior explanatory power that gradually eclipsed his initial theological framework; no longer merely an auxiliary interpretive tool, it became the yardstick of truth. Meanwhile, the marginalization and lack of understanding he encountered within the Christian establishment reinforced his identification with Buddhist truth. Ultimately, the combined force of internal factors and external circumstances precipitated a crucial reversal, which was the “self-transformation of the tool into truth”. Originally an interpretive tool, Buddhism was elevated to the standard of truth itself, while Christianity was repositioned as a partial manifestation of this ultimate standard. For Zhang, only Christianity presented in this manner could be considered “true Christianity”. This persistent pursuit of deeper doctrinal foundations constituted the core driver of the evolution of his thought.

2.2.2. Dialogue with Historical Traditions: Selective Dialogue and Creative Reorganization

As a thinker who held triple identities—“Confucian scholar, Christian, and Buddhist”—Zhang Chunyi’s intellectual development can be regarded as a “creative synthesis” unfolding across multiple sources. He rejected the hierarchical ethics of Confucianism while retaining its pragmatic, this-worldly spirit, ensuring that “Buddhized Christianity” remained committed to social reform. Meanwhile, he initially believed that “Christianity

possesses the plainness of Confucianism, the profundity of Daoism, and is no different from the subtle principles of Buddhism” (C. Zhang 2011c, p. 104). In his later years, despite criticizing Christianity’s form as a “foreign religion”, he retained the biblical text and image of Christ’s “sacrifice”, interpreting these as the manifestation of the Mahayana bodhisattva path’s compassionate vows. Finally, in relation to Buddhism, he fully accepted the truths of “dependent origination and emptiness” and “all sentient beings possessing Buddha-nature”, yet he rejected the monastic system of otherworldly seclusion, insisting on social engagement as a lay practitioner. These multiple traditions engage in dialogue within a complex structure of “critique, selective retention, and creative transformation”, resulting in a philosophical framework embodying this-worldly compassion, a spirit of sacrifice, and the wisdom of liberation.

2.2.3. Dialogue with the Self: The Strategic Rewriting of Autobiographical Narratives

Through his autobiographical narratives, Zhang Chunyi strategically reconstructed his religious journey. This “dialogue with the self” was a process of integrating meaning on an individual psychological level and a negotiation of his identity as a public intellectual. He needed to provide a narrative for his religious conversion that was both understandable and logically coherent within the public discourses of both Christian and Buddhist circles. In *An Account of the Reasons for My Conversion to Christ and My Views on the Church*, he incorporated his early experiences into a providential narrative of “God’s guidance”; in later retrospectives, he characterized his “Using Buddhism to Interpret Christianity” during his time at the Guangxue Society as a “skillful means” (upāya) for guiding Christians. Even after breaking with the church, he continued to position “Buddhicized Christianity” as “vindicating Christ”, rather than as a complete rejection of Christianity. Through this narrative strategy, the discontinuous “conversion” event was skillfully transformed into a continuous process of reverting to “true Christianity”.

The analysis of the dimension of “Dialogue with the Self” also resonates with theoretical research on self-unity and narrative identity. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James introduced the concept of the “divided self”, describing conversion as the process of unifying a divided self (James 1902, p. 189). Zhang Chunyi’s oscillation between Confucian, Christian, and Buddhist identities parallels this dynamic. However, rather than depending on a single religious conversion event to achieve unity, Zhang Chunyi endowed the divisions with coherent meaning through continuous autobiographical narratives. Through this, the integration became more reflective and process-oriented. Furthermore, the narrative identity theory developed by Paul Ricoeur and Dan McAdams advances this perspective. Through his distinction between *idem* (identity) and *ipse* (selfhood) (Ricoeur 1992, pp. 2–3), Ricoeur explains how narrative reconstructs self-identity within the tension that exists between “remaining the same” and “undergoing change” (Ricoeur 1992, pp. 113–68). Meanwhile, McAdams defines narrative identity as “an internalized and evolving story of the self that integrates the self synchronically and diachronically” (McAdams 2001, p. 102). Through his autobiographical narrative, Zhang Chunyi transformed the disruptive conversion event into a continuous narrative of his return to “true Christianity”, which vividly illustrates narrative identity construction. However, Zhang Chunyi’s situation also involves unique interreligious narrative pressures: not only must he maintain coherence of the self across time, but he must also establish logical coherence among the three competing religious frameworks of Confucianism, Christianity, and Buddhism. Therefore, Zhang Chunyi’s case study effectively extends narrative identity theory from “general self-construction” to the specific “interreligious identity construction” domain. Thus, it provides a valuable case-based foundation for the application of such narrative theories in comparative religious studies.

In summary, the “triple dialogue” mechanism operates synergistically to drive the creation and development of Zhang Chunyi’s intellectual system. However, this internal mechanism’s functioning is constantly affected by external social factors. In Henri Gooren’s Conversion Career Model, conversion is viewed as a dynamic “career” that spans an individual’s life. Meanwhile, religious participation is deemed a series of choices the individual makes within their social networks and institutional environments, which may fluctuate in intensity at different stages. Gooren specifies five levels of religious participation: preaffiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession, and disaffiliation. Individual religious choices are influenced by a combination of personality, social, institutional, cultural, and contingent factors, while “acceptance” or “rejection” by external groups directly affects whether individuals can continue to participate in a particular religion (Gooren 2007, pp. 337–53). Zhang Chunyi’s case corroborates this logic: his rejection by the Guangxue Society deprived him of the space to continue within the Christian system, whereas his acceptance by the Buddhist community provided a renewed sense of social belonging and spiritual identity. Arguably, the “triple dialogue” provides the internal logic of how this conversion is possible, while the synergistic interaction between external structures and individual circumstances explains the reasons for its occurrence at this particular time and place.

3. The Theological Construction of “Buddhicized Christianity”: Theoretical Foundations and Interpretive Innovations

Zhang Chunyi’s “Buddhicized Christianity” is rooted in a pluralistic perspective of religion. His early thought manifested as a creative interpretation of “Using Buddhism to Interpret Christianity”; that is, he offered Buddhized interpretations while upholding the framework of core Christian doctrines. In his later work, he transitioned toward a radical reconstruction of “using Buddhism to judge Christianity” (以佛判耶), subsuming Christianity under the Buddhist system of truth. This theological construct is highly creative, yet it also profoundly reveals the tension and boundaries between creative transformation and doctrinal substitution.

3.1. Theoretical Foundation: A Pluralist View of Religion

3.1.1. The Distinction Between “Zong” and “Jiao”: Ontological Presuppositions of the Theory of Substance and Function

Upon first converting to Christianity, Zhang Chunyi viewed religion as a manifestation of “divine perfection and infinite love”, believing that Christian revelation was the most complete form (C. Zhang 2021j, pp. 152–61). However, delving deeper into Buddhist studies, he reinterpreted the essence of religion as the “ultimate spiritual entity of the universe”—that is, the manifestation of “Tathāgata” (真如) or “the Dao” (道) in different cultural contexts.

Consequently, he proposed that “Zong” (宗 the ultimate ground) is the substance (*ti* 体) of “Jiao” (teachings or doctrine 教) (C. Zhang 2021e, p. 314) and “Jiao is the function (*yong* 用) of Zong” (C. Zhang 2021e, p. 326). This *ti-yong* (体用, substance–function) distinction between substance and function formed the theoretical framework for his pluralistic view of religion: all religions under heaven converge at the ontological level of “Zong”, while their differences exist solely at the functional level of “Jiao”. In other words, “the Dao originates from a single source; it is merely that different schools apply it in distinct ways, and thus their expressions may vary” (C. Zhang 2021c, p. 179). Through the distinction between “Zong” and “Jiao”, “substance (*ti* 体)” and “function (*yong* 用)”, he established the philosophical foundation for the interreligious integration of doctrines.

The “*ti-yong*” analytical framework employed by Zhang Chunyi has deep intellectual-historical roots (Shimada 2010, pp. 45–70). As a core category of Chinese philosophy, *ti-yong* initially took shape in *Wei-Jin Xuanxue*; however, its establishment as a self-conscious, systematic philosophical tool occurred in the Buddhist literature of the Qi-Liang period in the early sixth century. Buddhist texts of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, such as the *Collection of Commentaries on the Nirovāṇa Sūtra* (*Niepan Jing Jijie* 涅槃经集解), are generally recognized to have completed the theoretical codification of the *ti-yong* category (W. Zhang 2023, p. 49). By the Eastern Jin period, figures like Dao'an (道安) and Sengzhao (僧肇) had begun to employ indigenous Chinese concepts such as *ti-yong* and *ben-mo* (本末, root-branch) to reconcile the Buddhist doctrines of *sūnyatā* (emptiness) and existence (Tang 2011, p. 185). Extending into the Sui and Tang dynasties, the Huayan and Chan schools developed the implications of *ti-yong* further, embedding it into their theories of ontology, doctrinal classification (*panjiao* 判教), and practical cultivation. Of these figures, the most representative is Guifeng Zongmi (780–841), the fifth patriarch of the Huayan school. Based on his syncretic Huayan-Chan stance, he employed a “non-duality of substance and function” (*ji ti ji yong* 即体即用) mode of thinking in his *Chanyuan zhuquanji duxu* (禅源诸论集都序 General Preface to the Collected Explanations of the Sources of Chan) to unify the Chan and scriptural traditions. His “unity of Chan and the teachings” (*chanjiao yizhi* 禅教一致) theory was precisely structured around the *ti-yong* framework of “the ultimate is substance-truth, and the teachings are provisional expedients” (Hu 2013).

Thus, the use of *ti-yong* to differentiate “ultimate true nature” from “provisional expedient teachings” represents an inherent theoretical paradigm of Chinese Buddhism that developed over centuries. Zhang Chunyi's theoretical innovation is evident in his creative transposition of this intra-Buddhist hermeneutical tool to the interreligious sphere. By maintaining that all religions share a single ultimate reality, and that any differences among them can be merely characterized as provisional teachings and expedient means (*upāya* 方便), Zhang Chunyi thereby established a core theoretical foundation for dialogue and integration across different faith traditions.

3.1.2. The Doctrine of “Expedient Means” (Upāya): The Provisional Nature of All Doctrines

If all religions share the same essence, why do such diverse religious forms exist in the world? Drawing upon the Daoist idea that “the Dao cannot be spoken of”, Zhang Chunyi argues that ultimate truth itself transcends all linguistic concepts: “The Dao cannot be spoken of; to speak of it is inevitably inadequate. Yet, to awaken the deluded masses, one must resort to words to facilitate understanding” (C. Zhang 2021e, p. 326). Accordingly, all scriptural teachings are “expedient means”, educational tools devised by sages to suit the capacities of sentient beings and particular historical contexts. This idea is deeply rooted in the scriptural tradition: the *Mahāyāna-sūtrālamkāra* defines “expedient means” as the core skillful way in which bodhisattvas liberate sentient beings. The “*Parable of the Three Carts*” (or “*Parable of the Burning House*”) in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra* (*Lotus Sūtra*; *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法莲华经) provides a paradigmatic model—the three vehicles of *Śrāvakas*, *Pratyekabuddhas*, and *Bodhisattvas* are all provisional teachings, ultimately converging on the one Buddha-vehicle. The *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* (*Weimojie jing* 维摩诘经), in its “Chapter on the Buddha Land,” reveals the operational principle of expedient means through the analogy of “prescribing medicine according to the disease”: since the capacities and conditions of sentient beings vary, the teachings addressed to them must do so too. Thus, “expedient means” is a clearly articulated hermeneutical principle in the Mahayana Buddhist canon: all scriptural teachings have been accommodated to the capacities of beings, while ultimate truth transcends all verbal formulation. Therefore, while the forms of religions differ at the level of “Jiao”, they all indicate the same ultimate reality at the

“Zong” level. This doctrine of expedient means legitimizes the Buddhist reinterpretation of Christianity: since all “teachings” are merely expedient means, the Buddhist reconstruction of Christian doctrine is a necessary path to restoring Christian doctrine to the authentic meaning of its “Zong”.

3.1.3. A Hierarchical Sequence of Religious Values

Zhang Chunyi further argues that while all religions share the same “essence”, their functions contain varying degrees of perfection. Buddhism and Daoism possess a “lofty and profound spiritual realm” and offer the most definitive interpretations of ontology and the nature of the mind. Meanwhile, Christianity is “sincere and straightforward, resonating with ordinary people”, but its doctrines “still have shortcomings” with regard to the harmony of their principles (C. Zhang 2021c, p. 179). Consequently, Zhang posits a theoretical hierarchical value sequence: Buddhism occupies the highest rank in its depth of doctrinal meaning, while Christianity holds a practical advantage in its universal function as a “religion”. This premise constitutes the ontological foundation for “Buddhicized Christianity”. Precisely because of the limitations of Christianity’s “religion”, supplementing and perfecting it with Buddhist doctrine is the only path to restoring “true Christianity”. According to Paul Knitter’s interreligious dialogue typology (Knitter 2002, pp. 63–106), Zhang’s position lies between the “fulfillment model” and the “substitution model”: in his early period, he leaned toward the former, wherein Buddhism “fulfills” Christianity, making its doctrines more complete. In his later period, however, he drifted toward the latter model, arguing that Christianity’s authenticity lies precisely in its being a part of Buddhism. Therefore, considering his early and later thought collectively, Zhang Chunyi’s pluralism tends to shift from religious pluralism to Buddhist inclusivism, or what could be termed “Buddhism-oriented weak pluralism” (Shang and Liu 2025, p. 1047).

3.2. Early “Using Buddhism to Interpret Christianity” (以佛解耶): Interpretive Strategies and Creative Transformation

Zhang Chunyi’s early “Buddhicized” thought was primarily shaped between the moment he became a Christian and around 1920. The core characteristic of this phase was that, despite upholding certain core Christian doctrines, he utilized Mahayana Buddhism as an interpretive resource, and he employed strategies like conceptual reinterpretation to endow Christian theology with greater universality and philosophical depth. As Lai Pan-chiu noted, “Synthesizing various religions to seek the truth, while not being constrained by the doctrines of any single religion, was the ultimate principle of early ‘Buddhicized’ Christianity” (Lai 2008, p. 158).

3.2.1. The Boundaries of Interpretation: Upholding Core Concepts

Zhang Chunyi’s early approach involving the use of “Buddhism to interpret Christianity” was a creative interpretation performed on the premise of explicitly affirming specific core doctrines. Regarding the doctrine of God, Zhang Chunyi affirmed Him as the one true God, stating that “the one true Ruler is God” (C. Zhang 2021d, p. 192). He advocated that “venerating God alone and rejecting other gods is the principle of the one true reality of the Dharma Realm” (C. Zhang 2011c, p. 103). Furthermore, by employing devotional language like “conducting oneself righteously to please God” (C. Zhang 2021h, p. 178), Zhang indicated that the personal nature of God had not been negated. With regard to creation, he explicitly upheld the belief that “heaven, earth, and all things were created by Him” (C. Zhang 2021d, p. 192). Concerning Christology, he regarded Jesus as “the only begotten Son of God”, “one in essence with God”, and the Savior of humanity. Furthermore, Zhang contended that “Christ” was a title specific to Jesus, and he deployed language that synthesized Buddhist and Confucian thought to explain the threefold office of Jesus as

Prophet, Priest, and King (C. Zhang 2021i, pp. 204–10). In soteriological terms, he employed the basic language of substitutionary atonement, stating that “the only-begotten Son of God was specially commissioned to come into this world to die for the redemption of human sins” (C. Zhang 2021d, p. 194). These tenets demonstrate that the early practice of “Using Buddhism to Interpret Christianity” was not intended to replace Christianity with Buddhism. Instead, the objective was to conduct an in-depth, internal “translation” of Christian theology utilizing Buddhist doctrinal resources. Consequently, Zhang’s early thought exhibits a structural tension: the depth of transformation is constrained by the traditional framework, while the latter, in turn, gains new interpretive space through this transformation.

3.2.2. Conceptual Correspondence: Establishing a “Translation” System for Christian Doctrine Using Buddhist Categories

The fundamental method of Zhang Chunyi’s creative transformation was the establishment of a cross-religious system of conceptual correspondence. Deploying core Buddhist categories as “translation tools”, he systematically undertook correspondence with, or supplemented, core Christian terminology, thereby expanding the theoretical depth of Christian doctrine.

At the expression level, Zhang enriched the forms of core Christian terminology through conceptual correspondence, such as translating “God” as “the One True Dharma Realm” (一真法界 *yī zhēn fǎ jiè*), the Holy Spirit as “Spiritual Enlightenment” (灵明 *líng míng*) or “Awareness” (觉性 *jué xìng*), and the Kingdom of Heaven as “Pure Land”. Furthermore, regarding the name of Jesus, he employed a method of mutual corroboration between philological exegesis and Buddhist scriptures to interpret “Ye” as the compassionate and merciful “Father of the World”, and “Su” as one who brings the dead back to life and relieves suffering to enable joy to be attained. To substantiate this, he cited the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (Huayan Jing 华严经) “Wondrous Adornments of the World Rulers” (Shizhu miaoyan pin, Chapter 1, Section 4): “Extinguishing the heat of all sentient beings’ afflictions, enabling them to depart from suffering and remain ever joyful”. On the level of meaning, Buddhist concepts were used to interpret Christian doctrines, which were endowed with new theoretical depth. The most representative example is his reinterpretation of “sin” as “ignorance” and “self-grasping”: As stated in the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* (Lengyan jing 楞严经), “All sentient beings, from beginningless time, have been caught in the cycle of birth and death—and this is because they fail to recognize the permanent true mind, whose nature is pure and luminous by nature, and instead rely on delusional thoughts. Since these thoughts are not real, they revolve in the cycle of rebirth.” Zhang Chunyi transposes this description of the human condition into his reinterpretation of sin: he traces the root of “sin” to a form of “self-grasping” (*ātma-grāha*) that arises from “turning away from God”—that is, separation from God due to clinging to an illusory “self” and constantly seeking to satisfy its desires. This interpretation shifts the understanding of “sin” from a “transgression” of divine law to a “loss” of one’s true self, bringing it into greater proximity with the Buddhist model of “ignorance obscuring Buddha-nature”. Regarding theological challenges, Zhang interprets the “Incarnation” using the Buddhist concepts of the “physical body” (*rūpa-kāya*) and the “dharma body” (*dharmakāya*); he describes Jesus as “the infinite dharma body of God incarnated into a finite physical body” (C. Zhang 2021i, p. 206). Furthermore, Christ took upon himself the suffering of all beings through his “perishable body” while granting them eternal bliss through his “imperishable dharma body” (C. Zhang 2021h, p. 175). In the Buddhist context, the physical body serves as the function, while the dharma body represents the essence; the former body is the compassionate manifestation of the latter. The two are not opposites but different manifestations of the same reality. This interpretation mitigates the dualistic contradiction between divine and

human nature, offering a Buddhist-inspired resolution to the theological paradox of “the infinite entering the finite”.

3.2.3. Ontological Interpretation: The Tendency Toward the Internalization of Mind–Nature and the Trend Toward Depersonalization

Building upon conceptual translation, Zhang Chunyi’s creative transformation extends to the ontological. By embedding Buddhist Tathāgata ontology into the Christian doctrinal framework, concepts such as God, the Holy Spirit, and the Kingdom of Heaven tend toward the internalization of mind–nature and toward depersonalization, forming a dual ontological structure of “the juxtaposition of creationism and mind–nature theory”.

Firstly, the concept of God undergoes a “*Tathatā-ization*” (真如化) and a marginalization of its personal attributes. Zhang interprets God as the cosmic ontological ground, describing this as “the vast source of the Dao, sharing the same essence as *Tathāgata* (真如) and possessing a perfect and complete nature” (C. Zhang 2021h, p. 172). Its personal attributes are transformed into Dharma-nature virtues like “compassion” and “*prajñā*” (慈悲), thereby bringing it closer to the Buddhist ontology of Tathāgata and weakening the emotional connotations of a personal God.

Secondly, the functions of the Holy Spirit tend toward the inner manifestation of Buddha-nature. Through his interpretation of the “omnipresence of the Holy Spirit”, Zhang bridges the lineages of sages in both the Eastern and Western traditions, asserting that all virtuous governance and good deeds, as well as the pursuit of truth by sages and philosophers, “are all accomplished by the Holy Spirit working silently within the human heart” (C. Zhang 2021g, p. 180). Building on this, the concept of “prolonged veiling” is utilized to explain the manner of the Holy Spirit’s inner manifestation: it “comes from a place of neither coming nor going” and it “has dwelt among the masses since the dawn of humanity”. However, the Spirit remains “veiled and hidden” solely because it is veiled by the “six thieves” (the six sensory faculties: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind). This frames the Holy Spirit’s operation as a dynamic of “presence, veiling, and unveiling”; thus, it clearly resembles the Buddhist model of mind–nature theory, which holds that “Buddha-nature is inherently present but tainted by transient defilements”. Furthermore, Zhang Chunyi uses the metaphor of “lamps illuminating one another” to depict a luminous picture of the Holy Spirit’s operation: “It is like a single lamp that shines upon hundreds or thousands of other lamps; the original light of the lamp remains undiminished and grows brighter, while the lamps it illuminates also shine upon one another, each light enhancing the others’ radiance” (C. Zhang 2021h, pp. 175–76). At the ontological level, Zhang deploys the power of the “bodhisattva’s lamp of bodhi-mind” from the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*’s metaphor of “a single lamp entering a dark room”. The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* states: “It is like a single lamp entering a dark room; the darkness of a hundred thousand years is entirely dispelled. The bodhisattva’s lamp of bodhi-mind is likewise”. Zhang internalizes the bodhisattva’s “lamp of bodhi-mind” as the “luminous awareness” (lingming 灵明) inherent in every person. At the relational level, he appropriates the philosophical vision of the “*Indrajāla*” (Indra’s net) in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*—the mutual reflection of jewels in the net, where each jewel reflects all others and one encompasses all—to depict the interactive vision of “each light enhancing the others’ radiance.” At the transmissive level, he incorporates the dynamic process of “the inexhaustible lamp” from the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*—the transmission of light from lamp to lamp, with light never ending—to capture the ongoing transmission of illumination. In this metaphor, the undiminished light of the original lamp preserves the transcendence of the Holy Spirit, while the mutual illumination of the other lamps affirms the Holy Spirit’s inner workings within the hearts of all humanity. This also implies a relational dimension of interconnectedness, transmissibility, and additivity without diminution, thereby bringing the Holy Spirit closer to the state of universal illumination of the Buddha-nature.

Finally, the last trend involves the internalization of the Kingdom of Heaven and the proposition that “the mind is God”. Building upon an affirmation of creationism, Zhang Chunyi incorporated the “Three Thousand Realms in a Single Thought” concept of the Tiantai School, asserting that “all ten directions, containing as many as the sands of the Ganges—three thousand great thousand-world systems—are fully contained within my single mind” (C. Zhang 2021k, p. 173). Since humans were created by God in His own image (C. Zhang 2011a, p. 173), Zhang further deduced that a Christian’s “own mind” is the temple of God (C. Zhang 2011a, p. 173), and that “the Kingdom of Heaven is within one’s own mind, where God dwells in everlasting joy” (C. Zhang 2021k, p. 178). Only when the heart renounces discrimination and delusion can it restore its true mind and become God’s temple, thereby engendering the proposition “the mind is God” (jixinjishen 即心即神) (C. Zhang 2011b, p. 169). However, at this stage, Zhang still maintains the ontological distinction between God and humanity. As Su Yuntai recognized, the term “ji” (即 meaning “is”) here signifies not ontological identity but that “God is inseparable from the human mind”: the human mind and God remain ontologically distinct (Su 2007, p. 219). This distinction and limitation maintain the fundamental tension between the creation doctrine and the mind–nature theory, forming a “dual ontological structure”. On one side is the external, transcendent dimension of God’s creation of the world (the doctrine of creation); on the reverse is the inner path of awakening where God is inseparable from the heart (the theory of mind–nature). The two concepts coexist in a creative tension.

3.2.4. The Creation of Meaning: Expanding the Redemptive Connotation of the Cross Through the Spirit of the Bodhisattva Path

Regarding the cross, a central narrative of Christianity, Zhang employs a semantic reinterpretation strategy: without altering the event itself, he imbues it with fresh meaning through the spirit of the Bodhisattva path.

In regard to spiritual significance, he directly likens the self-sacrifice of Jesus to the Bodhisattva path, describing Jesus as possessing “the holy heart that declares, ‘If even one sentient being fails to attain Buddhahood, I shall not attain Buddhahood myself’”. Taking as his guiding principle “the Son of Man came to serve, not to be served” (C. Zhang 2021i, p. 211), Zhang reveals that the essence of Jesus’ identity lies in “willingly bearing immeasurable suffering on behalf of countless brothers and sisters, so that all may find peace and joy and attain eternal life” (C. Zhang 2021i, p. 212). Furthermore, by employing Buddhist concepts of time and space—such as being “willing to sacrifice oneself to bear the endless sufferings of the perishable bodies of sentient beings across innumerable *asamkhyeya kalpas* (incalculable eons) and countless worlds” (C. Zhang 2021h, p. 175)—this compassionate vow was expanded to a cosmic scale. By doing so, the suffering on the cross was elevated from a singular historical event to a Bodhisattva virtue pervading innumerable worlds, placing Christ’s sacrifice on the same spiritual plane as that of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

On the redemptive logic level, this enriches the meaning of vicarious atonement. Zhang believed that the death of Jesus involved not merely his “sacrificing himself for sin”, but rather his “sacrificing himself for the Way, to set an example”. In other words, Jesus established a model of life for others to emulate. By willingly sacrificing his mortal body on the cross, Christ “manifested” to the world, through his own suffering, the impermanence of the physical body and the preciousness of the dharma body (C. Zhang 2021h, pp. 174–75). Thus, the legal connotation of “vicarious atonement” is imbued with the educational connotation of “manifestation”, while the logic of atonement generates the logic of the exemplary life of spiritual practice.

3.2.5. Harmonizing Practice: Enriching the Path to Salvation Through a Dual Structure of “Self-Power and Other-Power”

Within the traditional Christian framework of salvation—based on “repentance and faith”—Zhang Chunyi incorporates the Buddhist practice of “removing veils” to attain enlightenment of the mind, thereby forming a dual structure involving the coexistence of “other-power” and “self-power”.

Building upon a reinterpretation of “sin” as “ignorance” and being “self-grasping”, Zhang Chunyi cites the *Platform Sutra* (Tanjing 坛经) to argue that repentance can “instantly eradicate accumulated sins of delusion”. As recorded in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, “Repentance” chapter, the Sixth Patriarch Huineng, when teaching the “formless repentance”, explicitly stated: “Now I will transmit to you the formless repentance, which eradicates the offenses of the three periods of time, and purifies the three karmic actions... All previous evil deeds, ignorance, and deluded offenses—may they all be fully repented and instantly extinguished, never to arise again.” Meanwhile, Zhang maintained that trusting in God can “generate self-effort, thereby rendering the realm of ultimate principle crystal clear, liberating one from the cycle of birth and death, and eliminating all fear” (C. Zhang 2021d, p. 194). “Trusting in Jesus, gathering in worship ensures that nothing is beyond our reach”. Zhang simultaneously emphasized the inner practice of “removing veils”, contending that the Holy Spirit is inherently present in the heart but merely obscured by the “six thieves and karmic obstacles”. Through repentance, faith, and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, one can restore one’s original spiritual clarity. This model clearly leverages the Buddhist logic of practice: “eliminating ignorance to reveal Buddhahood”. No longer is salvation merely a passive acceptance of external redemption; rather, it is the removal of veils and the restoration of one’s true nature through inner cultivation. This endows the salvation doctrine with the dual characteristics of “other-power” (Christ’s vicarious atonement) and “self-power” (awakening of the mind–nature). It also reveals a shifting trend from “passive salvation” toward “active cultivation”.

3.3. The Later Phase of “Using Buddhism to Judge Christianity” (以佛判耶): Doctrinal Substitution and Its Theological Cost

From the 1920s onward, Zhang Chunyi completed his transformation from Christian to Buddhist, and his thought consequently shifted toward a framework of “using Buddhism to judge Christianity”. This panjiao (判教 doctrinal classification) was based on the distinction between “True Christianity” and “foreign religion”: the profound truths of the former were deeply embedded within the Gospels and could only be perceived through the lens of Buddhist doctrine. Conversely, “foreign religion” referred to the institutionalized Christianity imported from the West. This distinction thoroughly subsumed Christianity within Buddhism’s doctrinal framework, dissolving the internal tensions of Zhang’s earlier thought. The “truth” of Christianity ultimately manifested only as a synonym for Buddhist truth.

3.3.1. The Complete Ontological Identification of Mind: From “Not Separate from One’s Own Mind” to “Is One’s Own Mind”

In his early writings, Zhang Chunyi posited that “God is not separate from one’s own mind”, yet he maintained that God and humanity still differed in ontological essence. Later, however, he explicitly stated that “The mind, Heaven, and God—there is no inherent distinction between them; though their names differ, their essence is one”. He further asserted that “the Heavenly Father of the Jingjiao (景教) is what Buddhism calls the One True Dharma Realm” (C. Zhang 2021e, p. 314)—that is, the equal Dharma-body of all Buddhas, which is neither born nor perishes, neither empty nor real, and transcends both name and form. Thus, God is no longer a personal deity independent of the human

mind, but He is thoroughly internalized and transformed into the nature of the mind. Consequently, the creation doctrine was transcended: the universe and all phenomena were not created by an external personal God. On the contrary, they were “the manifestation of the *Ālayavijñāna* (阿赖耶识 storehouse consciousness) arising from the *Tathāgatagarbha* (Buddha-nature) within the human mind” (C. Zhang 2021b, p. 451), and all things would ultimately return to the True Suchness. At this point, the earlier tension between creationism and mind–nature theory was completely dissolved, and personal theism was replaced by a non-personal ontology of *True Suchness* (真如).

3.3.2. The Reverse Reconstruction of the Core Narrative: From “Incarnation” to “The Flesh Became the Way”

Since God has been thoroughly internalized into mind–nature, the ontological foundation of “Incarnation” no longer exists. Consequently, Zhang proposes the reverse proposition that “The Flesh Became the Way”: Jesus was not the Son of God incarnate but an enlightened being who realized the truth of emptiness through spiritual practice and whose essence is that of a “*Bodhisattva*” (C. Zhang 2021a, p. 531). *The Avatamsaka Sūtra*, in its *Chapter of Brahma Practice* (Fanxing pin 梵行品), states: “To know all dharmas as nothing but the inherent nature of one’s own mind is to attain the wisdom body, without relying on the enlightenment of others”. Zhang Chunyi holds that Jesus is exactly such an enlightened sage who has “understood the mind and seen its nature” (mingxin jianxing 明心见性). Therefore, his entire life and deeds manifest the bodhisattva path, embodying the core principle of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra’s Chapter of Samantabhadra’s Vows* (Puxian Xingyuan pin 普贤行愿品): “By nurturing all sentient beings with the water of great compassion, one brings forth the flowers and fruits of the wisdom of all Buddhas and bodhisattvas.” “The Flesh Becoming the Way” shifts the theological focus from “how the Way became flesh” to “how humans attain the dharma body”. Moreover, the entire theological framework pivots comprehensively from “other-power salvation” to “self-power enlightenment”.

However, the cost of this shift was a fundamental transformation of the person of Jesus; the term “Christ” was expanded to a generic representation for all enlightened beings. Furthermore, the doctrine of vicarious atonement was completely discarded, and the redemption concept was regarded as a “false teaching of ‘foreign religion’”. The death of Jesus was deemed merely a “model for transcending birth and death” (C. Zhang 2021a, p. 571), whose purpose was to enable all sentient beings to return from delusion to truth and become enlightened beings.

3.3.3. The Harmonization of the Trinitarian Structure: From Personal Entities to the Interdependent Origination of the Dharmadhatu (法界缘起)

Zhang Chunyi equates the Holy Spirit entirely with “Buddha-nature”, asserting that “Buddha-nature is another name for the Holy Spirit, also known as the *Tathāgata-garbha*” (C. Zhang 2021a, p. 520). Furthermore, since everyone inherently possesses Buddha-nature, the Holy Spirit is inherent within everyone’s mind (C. Zhang 2021b, p. 455); it “has no coming or going, does not increase in the wise, nor decrease in the foolish”. This argument reduces the Holy Spirit to a non-personal capacity for enlightenment, while the doctrine of salvation consequently shifts entirely toward a self-powered model wherein “the Holy Spirit is inherently complete and requires no external source”.

Building on this foundation, Zhang incorporated the holistic and interpenetrative thinking (圆融 yuanrong) of the Huayan School (华严宗) to reconstruct the Trinity doctrine. He believed that the difficulties in Western Trinitarianism stemmed from “the hindrance of provisional scriptural language and the ignorance of the truth that the one and the many are non-dual”, so he invoked the Huayan School’s holistic and interpenetrative thinking to explain the relationship between the one and the three through the concept of

“the compatibility of the one and the many”. “A single drop of water and the water of the ocean differ in quantity, yet their nature is the same”. Therefore, “the one is the many, and the many are the one”. Zhang further compared the Triune God to the Buddha’s three bodies (*Dharmakāya*, *Sambhogakāya*, and *Nirmāṇakāya*): God corresponds to the *Dharmakāya Buddha*, Jesus Christ to the *Nirmāṇakāya Buddha*, and the Holy Spirit to the *Sambhogakāya Buddha*. The *Dharmakāya* is the absolutely transcendent essence; through compassion, it enters the world to save all beings, manifesting in the form of a visible Buddha—that is, Jesus incarnate. The categories of “essence, manifestation, and function” were further borrowed from the *Treatise on The Awakening of Faith* (*Dasheng qixin lun* 大乘起信論) in the Mahayana to elucidate the relationship among the three entities. Zhang took True Suchness as the “Ti” (体, essence, corresponding to the Father), and this was manifested in accordance with conditions as the “相” (xiang, manifestation, the Holy Spirit) and the “用” (yong, function, Christ), thereby saving sentient beings. Meanwhile, ignorance is the obstacle preventing sentient beings from seeing the essence, manifestation, and function as they truly are. Thus, “when distinguished, they are three; when united, they are one; the Trinity and the One are inherently non-dual”. Finally, Zhang uses the phrase “mind, Buddha, and sentient beings” (心佛众生, xin fo zhong sheng) to explain the relationship of enlightenment. Citing the statement in *Avatamsaka Sūtra* that “the mind, the Buddha, and sentient beings are without distinction”, he corresponds the three as follows: the mind is God, the Buddha is Jesus, and the Buddha-nature shared by all sentient beings is the Holy Spirit. Thus, the association between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is transformed into a relationship of enlightenment: they share the same essence but differ in their degree of enlightenment.

In summary, through the early interpretive approach of “Using Buddhism to Interpret Christianity”, Zhang Chunyi was able to maintain a structural tension within his thought—between creationism and mind-nature theory, vicarious atonement and the exemplary model, and self-power and other-power—precisely because he adhered to the core framework of Christianity. This led to a series of creative achievements and disclosed an unprecedented philosophical depth of Christian theology in the Chinese context. However, when Buddhist philosophy was later elevated from an interpretive tool to a standard of truth, the personal nature of God, the historical uniqueness of the Incarnation, and the other-power nature of grace in Christianity were successively dissolved. “True Christianity” ultimately became a mere synonym for Buddhist truth.

4. The Practical Dimension: An Interreligious Existential Experiment and Its Contemporary Implications

Zhang Chunyi was not only a theorist but also a practitioner of interreligious dialogue. The evolution of his interreligious identity and his intellectual creativity constitute, in themselves, a unique “case of interreligious dialogue”. This intellectual and practical exploration offers significant insights into cutting-edge issues in contemporary interreligious discourse, such as intra-religious dialogue and multiple religious affiliations.

4.1. Conversion as Intrareligious Dialogue

Zhang Chunyi’s “Buddhicized Christianity” is an interreligious existential experiment undertaken through his own spiritual life. His conversion journey profoundly exemplifies the theory of “intra-religious dialogue” proposed by theologian Raimon Panikkar.

Panikkar believes that genuine interreligious dialogue must first occur within the inner lives of the participants themselves. He also contends that their faiths and beliefs must “meet fully in the hearts of the participants”. His central thesis is that “understanding means being transformed by the truth that is understood”. True interreligious understand-

ing is not a neutral cognitive activity but an “existential engagement” that may lead to a transformation of a participant’s own faith (Panikkar 1999, p. 35). Applying this theory to Zhang Chunyi, his work during his Guangxue Society period—reinterpreting Christian doctrine through the lens of Buddhism—was, essentially, a profound dialogue that continued to unfold within his inner life. This dialogue concerned aspects like the divergent naming of ultimate reality and the logic of two paths to salvation. It was precisely the encounter of these two ways of articulating truth deep within his heart that produced his early creative thought of “Using Buddhism to Interpret Christianity”; this involved, for instance, interpreting God as Suchness (*Tathatā*/zhenru 真如), reconciling Christ with the bodhisattva path and explaining the Holy Spirit through Buddha-nature. However, his deep engagement with the truths of Mahayana Buddhism ultimately heralded a fundamental transformation of his own religious identity. His journey reveals that religious dialogue does not necessarily remain confined to the safe ground of “mutual understanding” and “mutual learning”; when delving into ultimate levels such as ontology, the intrinsic momentum of dialogue may well push participants toward a radical rewriting of the other’s doctrines and even their own conversion.

Furthermore, Zhang Chunyi’s case can be brought into dialogue with the core paradigm of contemporary Buddhist–Christian dialogue scholarship.

Drawing on process philosophy, process theologian John B. Cobb Jr. posited a plurality of ultimate and practical goals in religious existence; he termed this position “deep pluralism” (Cobb 2006, pp. 63–73). Based on this acknowledgment of pluralistic divergence, he advanced the theoretical framework Beyond Dialogue, arguing that authentic interreligious engagement ought not to be limited to superficial exchange or mere mutual comprehension. Instead, it should advance toward reciprocal transformation, rooted in an openness to being reshaped by a religious other (Cobb 2008, pp. 26–49). Zhang Chunyi’s intellectual journey illustrates the profound transformative dynamic envisaged by Cobb, yet the former’s later thought constitutes a far-reaching limit case for this framework. Zhang’s intellectual reorientation is not the reciprocal transformation that Cobb anticipated, but a systematic subsumption of Christianity under Buddhism.

Nevertheless, according to Perry Schmidt-Leukel’s fractal theory of religious diversity, similar structural patterns exist among and within religions, as well as among individual believers (Schmidt-Leukel 2020, p. 20). On this basis, he analyzed the fractal similarities that exist between Buddhism and Christianity in areas like world-renunciation versus worldly engagement, the impersonal versus the personal nature of ultimate reality, awakening versus incarnation, and self-power versus other-power. Schmidt-Leukel pointed out that these dimensions coexist in both traditions, albeit with different emphases, thus opening space for complementary dialogue (Schmidt-Leukel 2020, p. 56). In the early phase of his thinking, Zhang Chunyi sought doctrinal similarities and commensurability between Buddhism and Christianity, a practice that substantially validated the presupposition of similarity in fractal theory. However, he later deployed impersonal ontology to subsume personal theism, revealing the profound challenges that fractal theory may encounter in interreligious dialogue. Yet Schmidt-Leukel argues that the two traditions can complement and enrich one another—that is, scope can be found for mutual illumination, even within their critical and opposing stances (Schmidt-Leukel 2006, pp. 1–12). He points out that the tension between Buddhist dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and Christian *creatio ex nihilo* constitutes the most fundamental ontological divergence in Buddhist–Christian dialogue (Schmidt-Leukel 2006, pp. 109–78). As he summarizes, both traditions enrich each other, with the spirituality of one illuminating that of the other (Schmidt-Leukel 2017, p. 118).

From the broader perspective of the global history of Buddhist–Christian dialogue, Zhang Chunyi’s case becomes even more obviously unique. Whalen Lai and Michael von Brück trace the diverse forms of Buddhist–Christian encounters in world history, identifying the distinctive characteristics of Buddhist–Christian dialogue that occurred in China (Lai and von Brück 2001, pp. 68–103). For instance, the early Jesuit strategy of “supplementing Confucianism” (*buru* 补儒) was a culturally adaptive form of dialogue, whereas the contemporary Western ideal of mutual transformation embodies reciprocity in dialogue. By contrast, Zhang Chunyi’s later “Buddhicized Christianity” constituted a systematic intellectual reconstruction of Christianity grounded in a Buddhist ontological framework. It was, essentially, a form of “subsumptive dialogue”. No clear counterpart of this type can be identified in the global history of Buddhist–Christian dialogue as outlined by Lai and von Brück. This is precisely the typological gap that Zhang Chunyi’s case fills.

4.2. Experiments in Identity and Boundaries of Multiple Religious Affiliations

If the intra-religious dialogue theory focuses on the dynamics of interreligious comprehension, then “multiple religious affiliations” focus on the possibility of overlapping interreligious identities: whether a person can sincerely belong to at least two religious traditions simultaneously. Theologian Catherine Cornille is an early systematic theorist on this topic. She points out that true religious affiliation is not a simple collage of identities; instead, it involves “the whole person (emotions, will, and reason) responding comprehensively to ultimate reality”. For this reason, Cornille maintains a cautious stance regarding the possibility of multiple affiliations in respect of faith depth, arguing that significant structural tensions exist between different traditions in their definitions of ultimate reality and their understandings of the path to salvation (Cornille 2002).

Zhang Chunyi’s case provides a test case for this argument from the Chinese religious context, revealing the difficulties and constraints facing those with multiple religious affiliations in the realm of Buddhist–Christian dialogue. His earlier approach of “Using Buddhism to Interpret Christianity” could be sustained for nearly a decade because he consistently maintained an ontological boundary of “separate yet not identical” between Christian creationism and Buddhist mind–nature theory. This enabled him to identify with both traditions simultaneously without having to choose between them. However, the doctrinal tensions inherent in this dual identity created a constant tendency to drift to one particular side. Zhang’s later transformation resulted from internal doctrinal tensions and shifts in interpretive methods, causing the scales of his identity to tip. The core tensions between the two religious systems ultimately lost their balance within the identity of a single subject, forcing him to select between being a “Christian” and a “Buddhist” — his choice was to fully embrace Buddhism.

In contrast to Zhang’s eventual exclusive Buddhist affiliation, the three Chinese religions—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—have maintained mutual interpretation and exchange for over a thousand years, and one’s Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist identities can coexist simultaneously. This is fundamentally because all three traditions tend toward a transpersonal or non-theistic conception of ultimate reality: Confucianism’s “Heavenly Principle”, Daoism’s “Dao”, and Buddhism’s “True Suchness” all converge toward an impersonal ontology. The differences among the three traditions relate more to varying emphases in spiritual practice and the description of spiritual states than to a fundamental divergence over whether the ultimate reality itself possesses a personal will. This contrast between affirmation and negation clearly demonstrates that the deep-seated possibility of multiple religious affiliations depends, to a significant extent, on whether the traditions that are engaged in dialogue share any “family resemblance” in their original naming of ultimate reality.

Cornille's assessment that multiple religious affiliations face structural limitations is evident in this profoundly insightful example from the Chinese experience. The case study of Zhang Chunyi demonstrates that when dialogue explores ontological foundations, the two paradigms of "personal" and "impersonal" can generate structural tensions and ultimately produce a trajectory of identity transformation.

4.3. *The Creative Contributions and Insights of Buddhized Interpretation*

Although Zhang Chunyi's intellectual experiment of "Buddhized Christianity" has been the subject of some controversy regarding doctrinal interpretation, it represents an unprecedented philosophical depth for Chinese-language Christian theology. It demonstrates concrete methodological approaches for interreligious interpretation. More importantly, it offers a cautionary insight into the boundary between creative transformation and doctrinal substitution in contemporary interreligious dialogue.

In the field of theology, Zhang Chunyi's creative contribution is most evident in his transposition of the Buddhist "substance–function" (ti-yong) framework and its related conceptual categories to a cross-religious application across the various core domains of Christian theology: in his theology of God, he employed the "zong-ti (宗体 transcendent substance) and jiao-yong (教用 immanent function)" logic to understand God as a unity of being and function, wherein transcendence is embodied as the substance (zong) as transcendent ground, and immanence as the function (jiao) as immanent operation, the two being different aspects of the same reality. This provided a non-substantialist interpretive path for reconciling the transcendence and immanence of Christianity.

In Christology, incorporating the Buddhist distinction between the physical body (*rūpa-kāya*) and the dharma body (*dharmakāya*), Zhang proposed that Christ manifested in the world by "transforming the dharma body into the physical body", thereby offering a non-dualistic approach to resolving the theological "Incarnation" dilemma. Simultaneously, by imbuing the cross with the ethical depth and cosmic breadth of the Bodhisattva path, he revealed a new imaginative space for understanding the significance of Christ's death. Regarding the Holy Spirit doctrine, the metaphor of "mutual illumination of the heart-lamps" upholds the transcendent origin of the Holy Spirit while affirming its mode of operation within the hearts of all sentient beings. Thus, it provides an open and inclusive perspective for interreligious dialogue on the Holy Spirit.

Regarding the Trinity doctrine, Zhang interprets the relationship between the One and the Three through holistic and interpenetrative thinking, such as the "compatibility of the One and the Many", pointing out that the difficulties in Western Trinitarian theology originate from an adherence to ontological logic. Soteriologically, he incorporates the "avidyā-āvaraṇa (ignorance–veil removal)" model into the spiritual path of awakening to one's true nature, thereby presenting salvation as a coexistence of "other-power" and "self-power", which enriches the cross-cultural expressive space of Christian soteriology. In methodological terms, Zhang demonstrates a systematic approach to interreligious interpretation, spanning from foundational theory to practical application. Beginning with conceptual translation at the terminological level, he delves into ontological reinterpretation, proceeds to the creation of meaning within core narratives, and culminates in the harmonization of spiritual practices. This complete chain, extending from "conceptual correspondence" to "harmonization of practices", represents a practical methodological model for engaging with the core narratives of religious scriptures.

However, Zhang Chunyi's subsequent shift also offers a cautionary lesson that should not be overlooked. When interpretive tools are elevated to the status of criteria for truth, and when the core doctrines of other traditions are subsumed by one's own system, the boundary between creative interpretation and doctrinal substitution may be crossed. Core

Christian doctrines—such as the personhood of God, the historical uniqueness of the Incarnation, and the grace of vicarious atonement—tend to be gradually dissolved in such a process. This trajectory suggests that the boundary of creative interpretation is closely related to whether one acknowledges and maintains the structural tension between the core creeds of the two dialogue partners. It should be emphasized, however, that this observation is primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive. Its purpose is not to establish a set of normative rules or fixed boundaries for interreligious dialogue, but rather to offer an open-ended cautionary insight. It is an invitation to reflect on the potential risks encountered when cross-religious interpretation moves toward unilateral subsumption, rather than to etch a predetermined line that cannot be crossed.

Zhang Chunyi has left a two-fold legacy to contemporary interreligious dialogue: he demonstrated the creative depth that cross-cultural dialogue can achieve and, through his own evolutionary trajectory, he warned of the potential consequences of interpretive overstepping. Therefore, religious dialogue must actively explore conceptual resonances between different traditions while confronting deep-seated differences with integrity. It should neither close the creative space for dialogue via an exclusivist attitude nor readily dissolve tensions in the face of core disagreements, leading to one tradition being subsumed by the other.

5. Conclusions

Zhang Chunyi's "Buddhicized Christianity" intellectual experiment represents a unique and complex case in the history of Buddhist–Christian encounters in modern China. It is also a profound demonstration of the creative "depth" and interpretive "boundaries" of religious dialogue. This study reveals several core findings, which are outlined below.

Zhang's "Buddhicized Christianity" was essentially a theological transformation rooted in the modern context of national salvation and driven by both an inner spiritual quest and rational reflection. The "triple dialogue" mechanism (between ultimate reality, historical tradition, and the self), combined with the influence of external social factors, collectively constituted the internal logic and driving force behind his philosophical evolution. His early interpretive strategy of "Using Buddhism to Interpret Christianity" demonstrated considerable creativity in its interreligious theological construction. Through strategies such as conceptual translation, ontological reinterpretation of the mind–nature, the transference of meaning, and the harmonization of practices, Zhang provided a unique Chinese philosophical expression for Christian doctrine. Meanwhile, he also offered rich perspectives and innovative ideas for research on Buddhist–Christian dialogue. The radical shift in his later period toward "using Buddhism to judge Christianity" marked the dissolution of the earlier intellectual tension, with Christianity ultimately becoming subsumed under Buddhism. This transformative process represents a warning: while interreligious interpretation can utilize the resources of the "other" to deepen one's understanding of one's own tradition, once interpretive tools are elevated to the status of truth standards—and the core creeds of dialogue partners are reduced to partial manifestations of one's own system—dialogue easily slides from "mutual interpretation" into "substitution". Therefore, the boundary between creative transformation and doctrinal substitution lies in whether one respects the core creed of the other tradition and maintains the necessary structural tension within the dialogue.

Zhang Chunyi's case provides a profound and complex historical reference for contemporary interreligious dialogue. He not only demonstrates the intellectual depth that religious dialogue can attain but also warns of the potential toll of radical dialogue. Now that mutual learning among civilizations is becoming an increasingly global issue, Zhang Chunyi's intellectual experiment—whether in its creative achievements or its inherent

limitations—offers unique exemplary value and enduring intellectual inspiration for examining the possibilities and boundaries of interreligious understanding.

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