



Book Review of The Ten Commandments

A Chinese Catechism of Living

Wenjuan Zhao,
Oxford Center for Religion
and Public Life, United Kingdom

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Abstract

This book review discusses You Bin’s intercultural approach to construct a Chinese version of catechism through the Ten Commandments as the vital content for both Chinese Christians and non-Christians in the Chinese context. It shows that integrating God’s Ten Commandments into Chinese traditional culture and social settings is not necessarily meant to compromise its biblical-theological essence with one’s self-critical awareness of culture. It suggests how this book might set an example for both theologians and practitioners to bring back the catechism, to bear upon the needs of contemporary Christians in the non-Western setting.

Corresponding Author: Dr Wenjuan Zhao, wenjuan.zhao@ocrpl.org.

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1. The Chinese version of Christian catechism: universality, contextual cultural and religious considerations

Readers such as Chinese Christian educationists, scholars and Church leaders would benefit from reading the book *The Ten Commandments: A Chinese Catechism of Living*, Geneva: Globethics Publications, by Dr. You Bin¹. Throughout the history of Christianity, various commentaries on the Ten Commandments (known as the Decalogue) were written and rewritten in different periods, forming a fundamental part of Christian training material for instructing adult converts and children—alongside the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and basic knowledge of the sacraments. These commentaries appeared in both the early days of Western and Eastern Christianity. However, the profound tradition of valuing and honoring the Decalogue for this religious purpose has been waning in Western ecclesial settings following the author. Specifically, the Ten Commandments has been fashioned into a secular moral shorthand to regulate the modern-day citizen; the format of a religious “catechism” was also appropriated—particularly in twenty-first century North America—to rehearse the basic knowledge of a nonreligious subject in secular contexts, which preserves no original biblical meaning.

It is therefore encouraging to see You Bin (游斌)’s *The Ten Commandments: A Chinese Catechism of Living* addressing the revival of the Decalogue in its more biblical sense in the Chinese context. The book’s release is timely, and its interpretation is very exigent—it draws reader attention back to the vital role of the Decalogue in both Christian and non-Christian life, even within broader society. As one of four volumes of *Chinese Catechism* articulated from a theological-biblical perspective rooted in the Chinese setting—*The*

¹ Bin, You. 2022. *The Ten Commandments: A Chinese Catechism of Living*, *Chinese Catechism* 3, Geneva: Globethics Publications, 171p. Online ISBN: 978-2-88931-508-6. See: <https://www.globethics.net/publications>

Creed (v. 1), *The Lord’s Prayer* (v. 2), *The Ten Commandments* (v. 3), and *The Liturgy as Celebration of Life* (v. 4)—this volume aims to revive the biblical-classical teachings through dialoguing with Chinese culture with the goal of guiding Chinese Christian faith practice.

The Chinese version of the Christian catechism makes a remarkable contribution to the global church by displaying the possibility that this exceedingly ancient teaching could be continued and contextualized within Chinese culture to enrich its meaning and nurture Christians and the broader society. The Chinese catechism shares similarities with historical and some contemporary catechisms, tracing back to the Israelite period. From that time onward, God’s Ten Commandments were immersed in Jewish culture and inherited from Christian traditions. On the other hand, it differs from the Western and denominational catechisms, as it crosses the denominational boundary to embrace the insights and legacy of various Christian traditions to construct itself. Most importantly, it communicates God’s everlasting commandments into Chinese traditional culture and social settings in a practical and systematic way to provide a firm foundation for Chinese Christian faith practice based in scripture. Additionally, part of the teachings of the Chinese Catechism have been updated to serve both Chinese Christians and non-Christians. In the words of You Bin, “the Ten Commandments marks the bottom line of human life and contains the true guidance of human nature,” which can be considered a universal rule of life for all people. For instance, the final six commandments are broadly accepted within different cultures, and they reflect virtue and wisdom of the law to lead all creatures to achieve common good and build a functional society.

While You Bin does address the universality of the catechism, he still places a high value on the vital role and origin of the Ten Commandments in the biblical context to instruct Chinese Christian life. In Chapter 1, he argues that the Ten Commandments are God’s words bestowed upon the Israelites first and then extended to Christians to bless them. Through their way of life, people would know the Lord they worship and why following God’s commandments itself leads to a good life. The Ten Commandments hence does not stand alone, but echoes the Sermon on the Mount wherein Jesus Christ calls for all God’s people to live virtuous under the guidance of the

Holy Spirit and witness God's salvation of the world. This link reveals the internal relation of the Ten Commandments to the Gospel: the former acts as the herald for the Gospel to show the way of life for God's people, while the latter urges people to fulfill God's commandments as a path for following this way of life.

In terms of living a virtuous life, it is not a foreign concept among Chinese people that one may capture the essence of what a virtuous life means in accordance with cultural heritage, such as through Confucianism and other traditions. Christianity and Confucianism share intercultural similarities in that belief is about a way of life to achieve its telos, and cultivating a virtuous life is the goal of everyone. Understood this way, Christian virtues can be intricately woven into Confucian virtues, the two working together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to regulate Chinese Christians' desires and transform their sinful nature with rational will. Moreover, cultivation of such virtues leading to an upright and godly life reveals how a Chinese Christian way of life can fulfill God's will in the local setting while journeying with all other earthly saints in the global setting. But despite these cultural opportunities, You Bin primarily states that Jesus Christ is "the king of virtues" and in Him we can find the real meaning of the Ten Commandments and become empowered to practice them.

In Chapter 2, You Bin furthers his accounting of what a virtuous life ought to be on an individual level. Dwelling in God's biblical text, You Bin emphasizes that Christian identity is defined by divine rather than earthly words, and it begins and ends with a reference to Jesus Christ in relation to God's truth and a way of salvation. Like the Israelites, the Chinese Christians are called out from the world by the triune God to live a sanctified life by putting on the virtue of true righteousness and holiness. Living a sanctified life means to obey God's commandments, imitate Jesus Christ, love God and one another, and proclaim and *become* the Gospel by grace to the very end of the age. Putting this into practice, You Bin adopts a Chinese way of thinking about religious practice: enabling unity in knowledge and action in a way that is genuine to Chinese culture to achieve its goals (知行合一). Regarding action, however, Jesus Christ sets the greatest example to demonstrate that

knowing God through His words, prayer, and confession should be Christians’ daily practice.

Given the degree of parallelism between the Confucian and Christian ways of understanding virtuous life, You Bin skilfully weaves together both the unique Chinese cultural factors manifested in Chinese expressions of moral law, virtues, and conscience with their biblical-theological interpretations to elaborate how they can be incorporated into God’s Ten Commandments and be renewed in divine meaning to point the Chinese towards true goodness and living a good life. Early Chinese Christian scholars valued these cultural aspects but sometimes had to compromise the essence of Christianity so that it could be more easily adapted in their communities. In contrast, You Bin holds strongly that a Christian virtuous life must be grounded in “the faith traditions of Christianity itself and rely on the Church’s universal theology as its intellectual resource.” For example, the Chinese concept of the Mandate of Heaven still covers moral aspects, but it refers solely to people; whereas Christian moral law covers both human and the divine. This theological awareness leads You Bin to differentiate the Confucian concepts of sin and virtue and delineate them with unshakable Christian doctrine. He even emphasizes the crucial role of the church in the formation of a virtuous life—as Christians’ eternal goal is shaped by the local Chinese church, it is also influenced by all saints in a lifelong journey both then and now within an ecumenical church.

For You Bin, the Ten Commandments serves as a Christian manual of instruction in the faith as well as a universal law for performing basic duties in all cultures and religions. This interpretation is based on his catechetical exposition of the theological concept of the *Imago Dei*, which suggests that all humans share certain characteristics—such as morality and rationality—with God. *Imago Dei*, combined with the doctrine of *Perichoresis*, provides the crucial grounding for developing the human role at the social level. In Chapter 3, You Bin articulates that God has existed for eternity within a loving relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The model of *Perichoresis* inspires Chinese people to imagine a harmonious and united relationship among humans, their communities, and societies, while each person remains unique. Putting this triune relationship into practice, Chinese

people take responsibility for others, act in the interests of others, act for public good, and pursue social justice, all with the aim of achieving common good. Grounded in Chinese society and the Ten Commandments, You Bin delineates practical advice on how social institutions could be more just and equal from the micro to the macro and how people in particular roles should behave in God's way to transform institutions for the better.

Having discussed Christian life through individual and social dimensions, in the final chapter You Bin returns to the formation of human life and daily practice in response to teaching the Ten Commandments. For You Bin, the Ten Commandments are both the whole law of the Israelites and Christians as well as the law of all other peoples on Earth. Through the Ten Commandments, the Israelites were called to enter into a covenant with God, and human beings, Christians included, are invited to follow the rules of the world made by God to live with dignity and harmony in this world. The Ten Commandments hence can be described as the whole law of God to speak to all people and regulate the many facets of their lives. You Bin therefore situates each commandment in both ancient and present Chinese contexts to expound their specific meanings and update some nuances given the new temptations and challenges facing Chinese people in the twenty-first century. As he expounds on this idea, he employs terms embedded in Judeo-Christian culture, such as justice, dignity, covenant, and natural rights, to fill in the gaps he perceives within Chinese culture. Meanwhile, he contextualizes some biblical-theological concepts and endows them with Christian philosophies through Chinese expressions. He sees a profound cultural-religious combination in which "all people under heaven are from Adam, created by God in His image, so there is but one family." The Confucian and Daoist philosophical expressions of heaven are crucial and familiar to Chinese people, as they refer to a deity or power or will that doesn't reveal itself yet is known to exist. But in You Bin's interpretation, a new connotation of "heaven" is engendered as the whole world, conveying that there is one world, one God, and all humans bearing God's image belong to each other.

The *Ten Commandments* brilliantly completes its agenda in multiple ways. Perhaps its most distinguished achievement lies in its intercultural approach and contribution to current scholarship. The intercultural approach to

Christianity has allowed Christian faith to be deepened and expressed in ways intelligible within different contexts since the geographical shift of Christians from the West to the South. However, it remains an ongoing debate regarding where to find the balance between contextualization and Christian truth and faith in light of Christian biblical-historical traditions to avoid overvaluing certain positions. *The Ten Commandments*, perhaps, sets an extraordinary example for both theologians and practitioners seeking this balance. The book testifies that substantial reconstruction of beliefs through the Ten Commandments depends on both the internal doctrinal nucleus of truth and one’s self-critical awareness of culture without devaluing either side. It also indicates that communicating God’s Ten Commandments to the world is itself the interaction where one encounters the living God in which God acts in diverse settings and where one also responds to God’s acts. This interaction keeps the biblical-historical tradition alive by integrating faith in God, as God is at work not merely in general but in every particular context. This book arrives not long after the distribution of the Chinese edition of the catechism to both the seminary and the church in China, which has inspired the development of contextual-biblical thinking in the region. I believe that this English edition will stimulate cross-border insight into this thinking, which will further the discourse and illuminate a path toward a deeper understanding of God’s words and how it can work in practice in the face of contemporary challenges.

2. The Bibliography

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3. Short Biography

Dr. Wenjuan Zhao is an academic program leader and researcher at the Oxford Center for Religion and Public Life (OCRPL). She received her Ph.D. from Hong Kong Baptist University with a specialization in theology. Prior to the OCRPL, she worked at Hong Kong Baptist University and then *Journal of Ethics in Higher Education* 1(2022)

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conducted her research at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina in the United States.

Email: wenjuan.zhao@ocrpl.org