The Way of Christ – The Way of Dao
Exploring Liturgy through the Production of Artefacts

Grete Refsum
Oslo National Academy of the Arts, Faculty of Visual Arts
grete.refsum@khio.no

Abstract. This paper accounts for the concept development in an ongoing art/design practice-led research project that explores Christian thinking in relation to Chinese, non-Christian terminology. Its point of departure is twofold: the central Christian ritual, the liturgy of the mass, and Chinese philosophy. In this project, a double series of eight images is produced, one Western, the other Eastern. In the Western series, the liturgy is interpreted into a sequence of eight components. The Eastern series parallels the Western concepts by substituting them with Chinese ideas, particularly as found in the book Dao De Jing. The work is completed by a shared image representing the Golden Rule. Together these images, 17 in all, account for basic notions within Christian and Chinese thinking, suggesting similarities and complementarities between the two.

1 Introduction

This paper accounts for the concept development in an ongoing art/design practice-led research project that explores Christian thinking in relation to Chinese, non-Christian terminology. The project aims at contributing to inter-religious dialogue and revitalization of Christianity.¹

In our time, many cultural Christians have become foreign to their inherited religion and rituals. Often, post-Christians keep ideas of Christianity based on what they left behind, expressed negatively as what they do not believe in. At the same time, the need for rituals and religion has opened a market for new religious practices, many of which, from a Christian perspective, may be superstitious and mentally unhealthy. Instead of looking for something new, this project intends to highlight what may be valuable and worth keeping within Christianity.

Current theology offers numerous interpretations that may suit contemporary needs of all aspects of the Christian tradition. Bold voices are the US Episcopal theologian John Shelby Spong, who interprets the Gospel in accordance with secular thinking [1], and the German Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng who propagates inter-religious dialogues based on a common understanding of ethical principles [2]. Theology in context (liberation theology) takes its point of departure in the individual’s experience of everyday life [3]. One of its branches is Feminist theology

¹ Its address is to Christians, post-Christians, denoting cultural Christians who have lost contact with their Christianity as religion, as well as non-Christians.
It is a global theology, committed to the struggle for justice for women, ecological stability and the transformation of society. Eco-theology seeks to tell new stories about human living on earth. A liberation theology for nature is presented, and eco-feminist theologians give their share in formulating how the new perspectives can motivate change in a troubled world. To contribute to a peaceful world, religious leaders worldwide regularly meet for inter-religious talks. The Roman Catholic Church recognizes the need for respect of non-Christian beliefs, and the late Pope John Paul II (pontificate 1978-2005) stressed the importance of justice and freedom to all people, in addition to the primacy of prayer in the meting with the other. The problem, as I see it, is that this lively theological development scarcely reaches outside academia.

There is a close relationship between a religion and its material culture. Theology provides the narratives and concepts that artists/designers reflect in images. The images in turn influence the way one may think theologically. Thus, artists/designers take part in the development of religious thinking. In our time – speaking generally – religious iconography has lost contact with contemporary art. Thereby, the potential contribution artists/designers represent in regards of religious development is lost.

The project presented is an exception to the rule, an art/design development work, which aims at contributing to the reviewed theological discourse by providing new images that allow new ideas to emerge.

According to the late Scottish philosopher of religion John Macmurray (1891-1976), humans have three principal modes of reflection: scientific, artistic, and religious reflection. Concerning the religious reflection that is communal and ritual, the most important Christian ritual is the service, the mass. It consists of a set sequence of components: prayers, readings and actions that taken together are called liturgy, and may be varied from mass to mass. Liturgy may be regarded the supreme example of religious reflection.

The question to be explored in this project is: how can Western Christian liturgy be expressed in a theologically contemporary way that may communicate beyond the Christian faithful? This question is open-ended, and any answer will take the form of a hypothesis that cannot be falsified or proved, only discussed. It is the privilege of practice-led art/design research to answer their research questions by the production of artefacts in addition to explanatory text.

The paper accounts for the concept development of the project: artistic intentions, analysis of liturgy and Chinese concepts, basic composition, and choice of materials and technique for production. It exemplifies one way artists/designers may write
about their work. The art/design outcome will be completed and shown in spring 2008.

2 Artistic Intentions

In addition to the general renewal efforts within current Christian thinking, two pragmatic circumstances have given rise to this project: an exhibition appointment in The Round Tower in Central Copenhagen, and an artist residency period in China.

The exhibition space in Copenhagen is a rectangular room situated above an Evangelical Lutheran church built in 17th century. The long walls are regularly intersected by double windows, eight on each side, with one at the Eastern end, 17 in all. Above the pairs of windows a circular, glassed opening, ca. 30 cm in diameter, is placed centrally. Through these windows you only see the sky (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. The Round Tower: building and gallery window

Entering this room, my instant idea was to work in dialogue with the ecclesial life of the church below, which means liturgy, and the small circular windows above that gave visual access to the sky, and thereby the universe. Building upon my previous work, I considered combining components of the liturgy with a representation connected to the windows. One early idea was to make an installation so that on-

von Balthasar". Frankfurt am Main and London: IKO - Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation.

7 See online: http://www.rundetaarn.dk/engelsk/frames.htm.
lookers by walking the room up and down would be brought through a visual representation of the mass. But since the crescendo of the mass takes place at the altar, and the altar in the church below is at the far side of the entrance/exit, such a linear arrangement was unsatisfactory. At this stage of planning, I was stuck.

However, at the time I was leaving for China with the intention of working inter-religiously on Christianity and Chinese thinking (Fig. 2 and 3).

Fig. 2. Studio building: outside and looking into the studio

Fig. 3. Studio: entrance door, windows and table

Then came the idea to let one side of the gallery room represent the Christian West, and the opposing side the Chinese East; in the middle above the altar, then, a shared image could be placed representing the mystery of life, or any religious practice! Thus, the composition got the character of two separate ways that lead to a common goal, in my opinion, a beautiful expression of an inter-religious attitude. Accordingly, I named the project: The Way of Christ – The Way of Dao. The title refers to Jesus’
saying: “I am the way, the Truth and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me” [17], and to the Chinese concept Dao that means way, or the way of right living [18].

As a start, I decided to make 2 x 8 two-dimensional hangings constructed by metal wire of approximately the same dimension. Taking point of departure in the small windows, I framed a circle of diameter 30 cm, by a square, 50 x 50 cm. Within this basic form, images and text could unfold according to their theme (Fig. 4).

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3 Liturgy

Structurally, the liturgies of the mass in the Evangelical Lutheran and the Roman Catholic Church are almost similar. In this project I have chosen to work on the

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8 It lies in the Christian tradition to dare act astonishingly: St. John when he lets Jesus say “The wind blows wherever it pleases; you hear the sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going” [19].
9 This format proved to be very convenient for the studio working table.
10 I am at home in both Churches, being raised in the first and married in the other.
current (after conciliar) version of the mass in the Roman Catholic rite in Latin,\(^\text{11}\) because this language is international and timeless.\(^\text{12}\)

The selection of eight components has been done in accordance with the underlying theoretical perspective of the project and in consideration of three factors: a) what is theologically essential; b) what I personally find most meaningful as lay participant; and c) how I think the liturgical contents best may be communicated to post- and non-Christians.

The mass consists of two principal parts: The liturgy of the Word and The liturgy of the Eucharist. I have included moments from both parts, and decided upon the following.\(^\text{13}\)

1. **Confession** is a personal prayer of introspection. The individuals are to look critically at their actions toward others, and to understand the consequences of what they have done, or failed to do. Everyone has to accept personal failure in doing what is right (sin), saying: “by my fault” (*mea culpa*)\(^\text{14}\). In today’s world, I consider the idea of confession of great importance.

2. **Kyrie eleison** (Greek, God have mercy) is one of the eldest Christian prayers. The congregation prays together for mercy, thereby indicating the communal hope that there is mercy to get.

3. **Readings** from the Gospel are essential in mass. I decided to let the hymn used in Easter liturgy *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est* (Where charity and love are, God is there) condensate the Christian readings.\(^\text{15}\)

4. **Credo** (I believe) is a statement and renewal of the Church’s faith. Christians believe in one God that is contemplated in three forms, as: Father (*Pater*), caring and creating beyond our understanding; son (*filii*), the Palestinian man Jesus living in Nazareth 2000 years ago; and Holy Spirit (*Sancto Spiritu*) that upholds the Church, and acts in the lives of the faithful [21].

5. **Et resurréxit tértia die, secúndum Scriptúras** means: “on the third day he rose again in fulfilment of the Scriptures”, is part of the Creed.\(^\text{16}\) This saying indicates that the Church does not proclaim an irrational stance concerning the resurrection, but simply confirms what the Scripture records.

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\(^\text{11}\) See *Missale Romanum* available online at: <http://www.katolsk.no/liturgi/messen/lat-alm.htm>. All the Latin citations are taken from here. The English version is available online at: <http://www.katolsk.no/liturgi/messen/eng-alm.htm>.

\(^\text{12}\) This is not in opposition to the use of the vernacular language, as encouraged by The Second Vatican Council, [20] but in this context, Danish is the language in Copenhagen, which is not similar to my own tongue Norwegian.

\(^\text{13}\) The listed moments are the outcome of thinking before and during the production process. Thus, it constitutes the research findings within the project.

\(^\text{14}\) If nothing else is said, the words in brackets are Latin. For Credo (I believe) it is contrary.

\(^\text{15}\) See online: <http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Hymni/UbiCaritas.html>.

\(^\text{16}\) The excerpt is from the Constantinopolitan Creed used in ordinary Sunday masses, credited to the Council of Constantinople 381 BCE [22].
6. **Peace** (*pax*) is ritually granted the congregation by the celebrating priest, in words and gesture: “Peace be with you” (*pax vobiscum*). The congregation then greets each other by saying: “Peace be with you” (*pax tecum*) in reconciliation and mutual respect.\(^\text{17}\) This component is a symbol of the right condition between people: poor and rich are equal, and everyone is dependent on and part of the group.

7. **Gifts** are given by the congregation and put symbolically on the altar table as bread and wine.\(^\text{18}\) The priest consecrates the gifts starting the prayers by saying: “Fruits of the earth [...] and the work of the human hand” (*Fructum terrae [...] et operis manuum*). This prayer is essential; it explicitly says that it is the outcome of the earth and our human efforts that constitute the holy meal.

8. **Eucharist** (Greek, thanksgiving) is the sacrament of the body of Christ. A sacrament is defined as a religious ceremony or act that are regarded as imparting spiritual grace to the participants or having spiritual benefits [23]. The Eucharist is a commemoration of the Last Supper\(^\text{19}\) when Jesus said: “do this in memory of me” (*hoc facite in meam commemorationem*). It takes the form of a symbolic meal of bread and wine, in which Christ is conceived as present [24]. Through the sacrament the congregation is nourished by God. The meaning is in effect to strengthen the individual to go into the world and act well.

### 4 Chinese Concepts

The religious thinking in Chinese culture takes the form of philosophy on life rather than theology. Although different from the West, it has long been respected by Christian missionaries.\(^\text{20}\) The Norwegian Karl Ludvig Reichelt (1877-1952) was a modern pioneer who spent 45 years in China.\(^\text{21}\) The ancient book on the way and the virtues of right living, *Dao De Jing*,\(^\text{22}\) he considered having a holy quality: “I have no doubt that this text, even with all its shortcomings and absurdities, has a mission in the West” [26].

As an artist, I have taken the liberty of being inspired by the foreign, the teachings in *Dao De Jing* in particular (Fig. 5, 6 and 7).

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17 The Latin text means peace be with you in plural (*vobiscum*) and singular (*tecum*).
18 Today, the gifts normally are given symbolically as money, but historically, and occasionally in our time, it was food, or the bread and wine to be consecrated.
19 The name of the supposedly last meal Jesus ate with his disciples before he died, in which he established the evening meal as the supreme ritual to follow.
22 The work is accredited to the legendary author Laozi (Lao Tzu or Lao Tse) in the 6th-5th c. BCE [25].
23 My translation from Norwegian: “Jeg er heller ikke i tvil om at skriftet, med alle sine mangler og absurditeter, har en gjerning å gjøre også i vesterlandene”.

Fig. 5. My China: Morning in the local park, crafts and flowers

Fig. 6. Old and new, construction and deconstruction

Fig. 7. Lettering: chalk on roadside, cutting relief in wood
I have chosen the concepts in the Eastern series in direct relation to the Western concepts, so that the two sets of series may reflect, mutually explain, or contrast each other.

1. *Confession* is a personal, individual prayer that concerns me, I, as a member of society. Here I is central. In a culture defined by the common good on behalf of the individual [27], I thought that I, Chinese wo, would be a challenging starting point.

2. *Lord have mercy* is a prayer that shall induce hope and restore meaning in a broken situation. The prayer is said collectively after the individual confession; it may stand for the group, a we, Chinese *women*.

3. *Readings* from the Bible find their counterpart in *Dao De Jing*. In the Western series, God is defined as charity and love. *Dao De Jing* starts with the impossibility of defining Dao: “The Way that can be told is not the Unvarying Way” [29]. However, the text goes on speaking about and characterising Dao, therefore I chose *Dao* as this third concept.

4. *Credo* defines dogmatically how Christians understand their concept of God. *Dao De Jing* elaborates likewise on the Dao principle. First is said: “The name that can be named is not the constant name. The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth” [31]. Dao is that which is not yet created, and has no being, no *name*, Chinese *wu ming* [32].

5. *Credo explained* finds a parallel in *Dao De Jing*. The unspeakable Dao that is outside being is at the same time everywhere, within everything, *all things created*, Chinese *you ming* [33].

6. *Peace* is the underlying goal of *Dao De Jing*, its teaching is all about how to create peace in the state. If we follow the principles of Dao, by seeking virtue, Chinese *de*, we may live peacefully. The concept *de* may well stand for the gesture of peace.

7. *Gifts* to be consecrated and turned into sacraments, are hard to parallel. However, in *Dao De Jing*, it is repeatedly stressed that the *soft* is stronger than the hard [34]. Water, Chinese *shui*, is the primary example; water drops hollow out stone in the long run. This term can also mean simplicity. I decided to let *shui* reflect consecration and the gifts.

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24 *Dao De Jing* represents a development in a school that advocated egoism as opposed to the moral teachings of Confucius that were solely concerned with the common good of society [28].

25 Chinese: *Dao ke Dao*. Alternatively: The Way that can be told Is not the constant Way [30].

26 Explained in Book II of *Dao de Jing*. 
8. Eucharist, the holy sacrament that communicates God and induces the strength necessary to do God’s will on earth, what might possibly match that? The author of Dao De Jing is persistently concerned about people’s right to live in peace in accordance with the laws of Dao. He recommends rulers not to interfere, but leave people alone, so that they can follow their own traditions and regulate their societies themselves. The key concept to create harmony is no-action, Chinese wu wei.

Since the Eucharist in effect has to do with how we shall go on living our lives, I suggest wu wei as a term that may shed light on the meaning of the Eucharist. Wu wei is here understood as the teaching of a positive pedagogy: a belief in the individual’s good will, and the qualities within man and the created world to grow positively, regardless of moral rules. The principle of Dao is spontaneity. Dao De Jing professes a thinking that advocates freedom to develop in according to one’s personal needs, and from this attitude the group to which one belongs, will grow and develop harmoniously. I think this idea phenomenologically is close to what the Eucharist is all about.

5. The Complete Concept

Conceptually, The Way of Christ – The Way of Dao consists of the following components:

1. Confession – Wo (I)
2. Prayer of mercy – Women (we)
3. Gospel reading – Dao (the Way)
4. Creed I – Wu ming (formless, nameless, no thing, uncreated)
5. Creed II – Hao ming (named, all things created)
6. Peace – De (virtue)
7. Gifts – Shui (water, simplicity)
8. Eucharist – Wu wei (non-action, freedom)

The 17. completing, shared image has to reflect some common truth. I suggest some version of the Golden Rule. In the Chinese teaching of Mo Tzu (5th c. BCE) is said that a man should love others as himself: “love without discrimination”. The same principle seems underlying one of the final phrases in Dao De Jing about the sage: “Having given all he has to others, he is richer still”. In the Analects of Confucius (5th c. BCE) it is explicit: “Do not do to others what you would not like yourself “. We find The Golden Rule expressed twice in the Gospels:

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27 In ancient Chinese philosophy there is no concept of a personal, Trinitarian God, in a Christian sense. However, in the thinking of the previous Confucian Mo Tzu (5th c. BCE) a close resemblance to God as Father or Creator is found in the conception of heaven, Chinese tien.

28 One of the prayers in liturgy comprise the element of praying for people of good will.

29 A list of expressions from various cultures, see online: <http://www.religioustolerance.org/reciproc.htm>.
“So always treat others as you would like them treat you; that is the meaning of the Law and the Prophets”, and “Treat others as you would like them to treat you” [42]. The more explicit form: “You must love your neighbor as yourself”, is found both in the Old and the New Testaments [43].

6 Material Composition

Starting the production process in the Western series, I decided to fill the inner circle of the basic square composition with added materials and let the rest of the image be open. The chosen texts would somehow be written around the core, framing it. This arrangement could not be repeated in the Eastern series since the Chinese concepts consisted of one single or at the most two characters. The solution was obvious: the Eastern series had to be complementary with the square filled ornamentally, and the characters set in the inner circle (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8. The principal composition in the Western and the Eastern series

The composition given by the characters in the Eastern series become as shown (Fig. 9).

30 Alternative translations of the same are: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets”, and “Do to others as you would have them do to you”. See online: <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%207:12,%20Luke%206:31&version=31;>.
The production builds by necessity on my previous art/design work, my competences and skill. Constructively, I use metal thread, iron and copper, to build form. Technically, I bind by hand. It is simple, cheap, non-polluting, and universally recognizable regardless of culture and language. Because of my inter-religious focus, I prefer non-figurative images in geometrical, or ornamental patterns (Fig. 10 and 11).

Fig. 9. The composition of Chinese characters in the Eastern series

Fig. 10. Previous art/design work: wire letters and glass grid with text
Fig. 11. Various nuts bound by metal thread

Since the mass is a symbolic meal, and the preparation of food is of most importance in Chinese culture [44], I decided the material to add into the metal structure for ornament production to be food-related (Fig. 12).

Fig. 12. Chinese food: market, lunch, and dinner

These choices of materials, technique and imagery all reflect the intentions of the project, not least the feminist approach. Besides, I do what is possible and convenient for me to do the place I am situated (Fig. 13).
Conclusion

The question of how Western Christian liturgy can be expressed in a theologically contemporary way that may communicate beyond the Christian faithful is answered by the production of a series of images consisting of ornaments and lettering, in which Christian and Chinese concepts are juxtaposed to shed light on each other. Additionally, I have written this explanatory, autoethnographical text [45].

The clarity of the concept outlined has been gained through the making process and this retrospective reflection. It constitutes my personal theory for practice [46] through which I get awareness about what I have done, can discuss my work and thinking, and receive critique.

Religion is a sensitive field with strong and by its nature conservative traditions. Through my art/design work I suggest similarities and differences between Western and Eastern religious thinking, and thereby, new understanding may emerge. In accordance with the Golden Rule, my hope is to contribute to a deepened universal empathy without provoking.
References

22. Ibid., pp. 353-54.
38. Langfeldt, G. *Den gyldne regel og andre humanistiske moralnormer*. Universitetsforlaget, Oslo (1966) p. 34
43. Ibid., OT, Lev 19.18, p. 155; NT, Mt 22.39-40, p. 51