Aelred and Sworn Brotherhood

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Abstract

Friendship seems to be a subject that is not often talked about in church and, even if talked about, it is usually in the context of providing support for single Christians or those struggling with same-sex attraction. Ironically, such an approach exposes the deep flaws, particularly within Protestantism, due to the neglect of the vocation of celibacy as well as the rich resource on friendship within the Christian and cultural tradition. Retrieving from Aelred's theology of friendship, together with the idea of sworn brotherhood in Luo Guanzhong's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, this article seeks to show the promise of theological retrieval for the life of the church. It argues that while Aelred's theology provides a helpful way of thinking theologically about friendship, the portrayal of sworn brotherhood in Luo's novel provides the embodiment of such friendship. Ultimately, it is through this process of retrieval that the church can convincingly put forth spiritual friendship to those who are single or same-sex-attracted as an option that is no less viable than marriage.

Keywords

spiritual friendship, sworn brotherhood, Aelred, ecclesiology, retrieval, singlehood

INTRODUCTION

The churches in Singapore, particularly the Protestant churches, have been vocal about their objections to sexual unions between two persons of the same sex.¹ In place of the conjugal union between a male and female, these churches have sought to offer and provide support groups for those struggling with same-sex attraction (SSA) and singlehood. While

1 This is seen not only in the press releases made by the National Council of Churches (NCCS) once in 2017 and again in 2018, but also through various Christian networks such as Love Singapore's "Wear White" movement. Collectively, both the NCCS and Love Singapore represent over two hundred churches.

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such initiatives are welcome, they ironically expose a problem unique to Protestant churches.

The problem with this approach is that, given the value placed on marriage in Asian culture, any alternative to marriage tends to be seen as less than ideal.² This is exacerbated by the fact that modern-day Protestant churches have generally discarded the vocation of celibacy in preference for family-life ministries. While churches in Singapore are quick to talk about the importance of extending friendship to singles to provide support,³ few have considered what a theology and practice of friendship might look like,⁴ much less find themselves able to point to a living community that reflects this aspect of the life of the church.⁵ This failure renders the efforts of Protestant churches to those struggling with singlehood and SSA deficient and, at times, hypocritical.

To move past this deficiency, the church must put forth a vision of friendship that promises nothing less than the familial status that is afforded to heterosexual married couples. Fortunately, there is a wealth of resource on friendship within the church catholic as well as in the Chinese (my own) tradition. In this regard, the church today is not left helpless in this task of constructing a theology of spiritual friendship or forming a vision of what it might look like. What we need is to engage in the task of retrieval.

2 Carrie English has made an astute observation that “However much our society might pay lip service to friendship, the fact remains that the only love it considers important—important enough to merit a huge public celebration—is romantic love.” See Carrie English, “A Bridesmaid’s Lament,” *Boston Globe*, http://archive.boston.com/lifestyle/weddings/articles/2011/06/12/a_bridesmaids_lament/ (accessed February 19, 2020).

3 It must also be noted that the language of providing support for those who are single already betrays an understanding of singlehood as weaker and less ideal than marriage; hence the need to provide support for them.

4 Tan Soo Inn and his ministry Graceworks might be an exception. See Soo-Inn Tan, *3 2 1: Following Jesus in Threes* (Singapore: Graceworks, 2013), Soo-Inn Tan, *Friends in a Broken World: Thoughts on Friendship from the Emmaus Road* (Singapore: Graceworks, 2008).

5 This stands in clear contrast to other Christian traditions that have maintained not only monastic orders but also the sacrament of Holy Orders. While the retention of these two orders does not automatically address the concerns of single Christians or Christians with SSA, at the very least it provides a polemic against any accusation that what is being offered is inferior compared to marriage.

With this context in mind, the aim of this article is to retrieve insights on what a theology of friendship is and how it might look. I seek to demonstrate that spiritual friendship, or sworn brotherhood, as understood by the Christian and Chinese traditions is far from inferior to marriage. Instead, an invitation or call to friendship is a call to establishing an eternal kinship status. This will be demonstrated by examining two influential texts written roughly around the time of medieval Europe.

The first, titled *Spiritual Friendship*, was composed by the twelfth-century monk Aelred of Rievaulx. This treatise contains an extended discussion of what true friendship is in light of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Aelred's treatise thus provides Christians with a theological framework in understanding Christian friendship. The second text we will examine is the great Chinese classic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by Luo Guanzhong, written some time in the fourteenth century. Unlike Aelred's *Spiritual Friendship*, Luo's *Romance* is a piece of historical fiction. However, embedded in his work lies a rich expression of Chinese ideals that have been recognized among the Chinese.⁶ Because of this, Luo's work paints for us a good picture of what the embodiment of friendship might look like. If Aelred's treatise gives us a good framework to thinking about friendship, Luo's highly admired work concretely shows us how friendship, in the Chinese context of sworn brotherhood, may be played out.⁷ After examining these two texts, we will look at the contribution that sworn brotherhood can make in better understanding the life of the church as seen in the ritual of baptism.

6 For instance, it has been acknowledged that *Romance of Three Kingdoms* draws on the Confucian virtue of Yi by embodying it through the three characters at Peach Garden. See Yu Jiyuan, "The Notion of Appropriateness (Yi) in Three Kingdoms," in *Three Kingdoms and Chinese Culture*, ed. Kimberly Besio and Constantine Tung (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 39.

7 In surveying these two texts in the medieval period, I am not suggesting that other texts on friendship are to be deemed as less influential or comprehensive. For instance, the theme of friendship can also be found in the letters of the Cappadocian Fathers, the *Sanyan* stories, and *Outlaws of the Marsh*. The use of these two examples of literature serves merely as an attempt to express a coherent expression of friendship for the life of the church.

ÆLRED'S VIEW OF SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

Drawing from the richness of the doctrine of the incarnation, Aelred begins his description of friendship by grounding it in the person of Jesus Christ. As Aelred states at the start of his conversation with Ivo, friendship must “begin in Christ, continue with Christ and be perfected by Christ.”⁸ Undergirding Aelred’s christological friendship lies the profound realization that in Christ we encounter a God who overcomes the distance between divine love and human love. Through the incarnation, true friendship becomes the context for experiencing divine love. Yet, not all forms of friendship can properly be called friendship.

In his writings, Aelred distinguishes among three different types of friendship.⁹ The first type is driven by carnal pursuits. Under this view of friendship, both parties are committed to vices and a life of crime, so much so that they are willing to “endure for the other any possible crime or sacrilege.”¹⁰ Abusing Cicero’s definition of friendship as having a shared interest,¹¹ carnal friendships are “blown in all directions by gusts of affection.”¹² The fleetingness of such friendships is seen in how “it either exhausts itself or disappears into the mist from which it is formed.”¹³

The second type of friendship is worldly friendships. Worldly friendships, like carnal friendships, are not pure or true because they are “always marked by fraud and deception” due to “greed for temporal goods or for wealth.”¹⁴ While Aelred’s definition of carnal and worldly friendships may appear to be similar, they differ in terms of outward appearance.

8 Aelred, *Aelred of Rievaulx: Spiritual Friendship*, ed. Marsha L. Dutton, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland, Cistercian Fathers Series 5 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2010), 1.10.

9 In his writings, Aelred does not in fact think that there are three different *kinds* of friendship. In his conception, Christian friendship is the only true friendship. However, he nevertheless retains the use of the word “friendship,” “because of a similarity of feelings in our attachments.” See Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.37.

10 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.40.

11 Cicero, *De Amicitia*, 6.20, Perseus Digital Library, Tufts University, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2007.01.0041%3Asection%3D20> (accessed May 24, 2020).

12 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.41.

13 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.41.

14 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.42.

Worldly friendships, unlike carnal friendships, may initially resemble true and trusting friendships, when in reality they are self-seeking and do not last in times of trouble. They are worldly because they do not seek the good of the other person but only how one can benefit from the relationship. As Aelred clarifies, "Remove his hope of reward, and at once he ceases to be your friend."¹⁵

Aelred's third category of friendship, and the only one that he considers true friendship, is spiritual friendship. Spiritual friendship enjoys the friendship for what it is and not because of a reward that can result from the friendship. For Aelred, true friendship is the reward.¹⁶ True friendship is what is given to those who are righteous by virtue of how, following the command of Christ, they bear fruit and love one another. In this regard, Aelred agrees with Cicero's definition that friendship is an agreement "in things human and divine, with good will and charity."¹⁷ However, he appropriates Cicero's definition within the Christian framework, such that what is meant by charity must come from an understanding of God's love as *caritas*, and good will as that which awakens within us the intent to love as God loves through Christ.¹⁸ For these reasons, carnal and worldly friendships cannot properly be understood as friendship. If friendship reflects God's nature and teleologically serves to will what is good for the other, then true friendship must always be friendship that is Christian, especially since Christ himself is the greatest good. Christian friendship, then, is the *committed* response to God's initiative in gathering his people in order that they will grow in their love for God and for one another. But practically, how does this differ from love in general? For Aelred, the source of love is God himself. Hence, agape love is not preferential but universal.¹⁹ Friendship, however, does not automatically apply to anyone and everyone. He says:

15 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.43.

16 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.45.

17 Cicero, *De Amicitia*, 6.20.

18 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.47.

19 Paul J. Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 70.

Since a friend is the partner of your soul, to whose spirit you join and link your own and so unite yourself as to wish to become one from two, to whom you commit yourself as to another self, from whom you conceal nothing, from whom you fear nothing, surely *you must first choose, then test, and finally admit someone considered right for such a trust*. For friendship should be steadfast, and by being unwearied in affection, it should present an image of eternity.²⁰

As seen in the above quote, Aelred recognizes the reality that not everyone makes the cut to becoming friends. There is a testing that is required, given both the intensity and the intimacy that comes with friendship. Pezzini helpfully describes this testing process as marked by “selection, probation, admission”.²¹

At the same time, it would be a mistake to think that Aelred believes that friendship can take place only between two persons. Despite his description of friendship as a “covenant of sweetest love”²² or as a uniting of self “to become one from two,”²³ his concern is not with the number but with the intensity and commitment that friendship demands.²⁴ Crucial to Aelred’s understanding of friendship is the eternality and security of it. As seen in his earlier dismissal of carnal and worldly friendships, true friendship, for Aelred, never ceases, for the friend loves always²⁵—all the more so if the grounding for friendship is rooted in the nature of God’s unity.²⁶ Akin to Christian marriage, friendship is the context in which Christians belong to one another without the existence of any “separation of spirits, affection,

20 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.6. (Italics mine)

21 Domenico Pezzini, “Aelred’s Doctrine of Charity and Friendship,” in *A Companion to Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167)*, ed. Marsha L. Dutton, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 240.

22 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.21.

23 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.6.

24 This point is particularly relevant in light of any possible criticism made against the notion of covenanted friendships or friendships that are vowed. The concern with the use of friendship as covenanted love is that it bears too much resemblance to the exclusive nature of marriage. However, one only needs to recall that even the friendship between David and Jonathan also included a covenant. That Aelred does not also consider friendship to be limited to two persons is evident from how he locates friendship within the church, as will be seen later.

25 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.24.

26 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.53.

will or opinion.”²⁷ As a result, Aelred, like the early church, advocates the sharing of possessions as well.²⁸

Conversely, during the selection process of friendship, should there be any vices that threaten to maintain the security of friendship, the friendship must eventually come to an end. However, the termination of any friendship should not be done without first exercising patience. Recognizing the process of sanctification that human beings go through, Aelred maintains a realistic view of human beings as having the strong potential to fail in fulfilling their responsibilities as friends. Because of this, though you

may find in someone you are testing some traits that offend your spirit, either through careless disclosure of some secret or greed for some temporal gain, through some tactless reprimand or some lack of due gentleness...you should not immediately abandon your intended preference or choice as long as a glimmer of hope for improvement remains.²⁹

However, if even after much patience, one still does not find in a person the trust and security that comes with friendship due to certain vices, then no friendship can take place. The vices that Aelred has in mind are principally “upbraiding, reproach, pride, disclosing of secrets, and dealing a treacherous wound.”³⁰ The reason for these specific vices is that they are the antithesis of “love and affection, reassurance and joy”³¹ Yet, Aelred goes on to argue that even if friendship cannot take place, “love must not be withheld.”³² While “the familiarity proper to true friendship, that is interior

27 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.7. Aelred’s view of friendship does come remarkably close to marriage. But that is only because he does not view the two as competing spheres. For instance, Aelred views the creation of Eve as intended for the purposes of charity and friendship. In Book Three, he also uses the relationship between Boaz and Ruth as an example of what friends ought to do for one another. It is perhaps best not to think of these two relationships as competitors, but rather of one as an expression of the other. In this case, marriage is merely another expression of spiritual friendship. See *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.57, 3.100.

28 The historical setting of Aelred should be taken into account. He lived as a monk in a monastery. Hence the sharing of properties would not have been uncommon to him.

29 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.74

30 Pezzini, “Aelred’s,” 241.

31 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.52.

32 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.52.

delight, security, and happiness”³³ is lost, God’s agape love must not. From here we see an even clearer distinction that Aelred draws between love and friendship. The relationship between love and friendship is such that while “love can exist without friendship, friendship can never exist without love.”³⁴ With friendship, there is a mutual love whereby the friend may

in loyal silence protect all the secrets of my spirit and may bear and endure according to his ability anything wicked he sees in my soul. For the friend will rejoice with my soul rejoicing, grieve with it grieving, and feel that everything that belongs to a friend belongs to himself.³⁵

The Indispensability of Friendship

Can one be a Christian and not have friends? Aelred’s answer would likely have been a negative. For one, this would go against the fundamental nature impressed upon all creation. Even animals, which are considered irrational,

so follow the leader, so frolic together, so express and display their attachment in actions and sounds together, and so enjoy one another’s company with eagerness and pleasure that they seem to relish nothing more than what resembles friendship.³⁶

If even animals display such behavior due to the nature of God impressed upon them, how much more humans to whom nature impressed “this attachment of charity and friendship”?³⁷

Moreover, friendship for Aelred is a virtue. He says, “Friendship is that virtue, through which by a covenant of sweetest love our very spirits are united, and *from many are made one*.”³⁸ Because of Aelred’s understanding that friendship falls under the larger category of love, the practice of not exercising this mutual love would be unchristian. Near the end of the first book of *Spiritual Friendship*, Aelred goes one step further to propose the

33 Pezzini, “Aelred’s,” 241.

34 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.2

35 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.20.

36 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.55.

37 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.58.

38 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.20.

claim that friendship is wisdom too. His basis for this claim has to do with an understanding of how wisdom is tied to what is eternal, where truth is, and what charity delights in.³⁹ Because he argues that friendship contains these latter three elements, it too is wisdom. In this regard, just as love, truth, and wisdom are indispensable, Aelred makes the argument that friendship is also indispensable.

Finally, the indispensability of friendship for the Christian life has to do with the eschatological and sacramental nature of friendship. As mentioned in his works, Aelred insists on friendship representing what will take place in eternity. What we experience within the context of friendship here and now is part of the experience of what Christians will eventually experience in a post-fallen world. This is seen in Aelred's explanation to Walter when he says that "the true and eternal friendship that begins here is perfected there."⁴⁰ Because of this, regardless of the imperfect friendship that we now experience, we can still meaningfully speak of loving and experiencing God through friendship. This is all the more possible because Christ is made present in friendship. As Aelred explains in Book Two,

All this (honesty, kindness, truth, joy, sweetness, good will, affection and kind action) begins with Christ, is advanced through Christ, and is perfected in Christ. The ascent does not seem too steep or too unnatural, then, from Christ's inspiring the love with which we love a friend to *Christ's offering himself to us as the friend we may love*, so that tenderness may yield to tenderness, sweetness to sweetness, and affection to affection.⁴¹

This eschatological and sacramental character of friendship also means that all friendship is an ascent toward Christlikeness and the full experience of Christ's friendship that we will get to enjoy eventually. The ascent is made possible because of God's descent through Christ, who first offers himself to us as the friend we may love and abide in.⁴²

Given Aelred's high view of friendship, one natural concern is the possibility of even finding or attaining such friendships. As one of the monks conversing with Aelred observes,

39 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.68.

40 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.80.

41 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 2.20. (Italics mine.)

42 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.20.

Since there is so much perfection in true friendship, no wonder those whom the ancients praised as true friends were so few. From so many centuries past, as Cicero says, legend extols only three or four pairs of friends! But if in our own Christian times friends are so few, I seem to be slaving in vain to acquire this virtue, for I am terrified now by its astonishing height, and I almost despair of reaching it.⁴³

Crucial to this concern is whether Aelred's view of friendship is even realistic to begin with. If such a view of friendship cannot be attained, then why bother striving toward it? Interestingly, Aelred rejects the notion that spiritual friendship is an unrealistic ideal. As evidence, he points to the fact that the blood of the martyrs for fellow brothers and sisters in Christ is evidence of such a friendship. On top of this, Aelred argues that the testimony of Scripture concerning the practice of the early church as found in Acts 4:32 highlights the *koinonia* that is precisely to be found among spiritual friends.⁴⁴ The location of spiritual friendship, then, is to be found firmly within the church, the people to whom Christ himself is a friend (Jn 15:13).

SIGNIFICANCE OF AELRED'S SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

Aelred's approach to friendship is significant for a few reasons. First, against certain classical views that friendship can never take place between gods and humans due to the vast remoteness of gods,⁴⁵ Aelred shows, through the doctrine of the incarnation, that it is in fact possible for such a chasm to be bridged. More than that, Aelred's theology of friendship appropriates Cicero's view of friendship by placing Christ as the exemplar of what it means for someone who is superior to condescend in order that the inferior can be lifted up.⁴⁶ In so doing, Christ is presented as the honorable friend. Second, while recognizing that agape love is extended to all, Aelred concretizes the experience of God's love by locating it within the context of friendship that can be found in the body of Christ. Love, for

43 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.25.

44 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 1.28-29.

45 Aristotle, "Ethica Nicomachea," in *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W. D. Ross, trans. W. D. Ross, vol. 9 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1925), 1158b.30–1159a.1-5.

46 Cicero, *De Amicitia*, 20.72.

Aelred, can be seen and concretely experienced by being in fellowship with members of the church. Third, Aelred draws a closer relationship between marriage/family and friendship. If friendship is to present an image of eternity, then the pledge “till death do us part,” as often heard in marriage, is as much a part of friendship.⁴⁷ This view of Aelred is perhaps much more palatable especially if we consider how the language of Scripture does not pit Christian friendship against family. On the contrary, Christian friendship can be understood as a form of kinship.⁴⁸ Fourth, in defining true friendship as that which begins in Christ and moves the other toward Christ, Aelred builds a closer link between the vertical and horizontal love for God and people. For Aelred, the two loves are one and the same since they both flow from the same source. As Carmichael aptly puts it, “Aelred’s affirmation ran counter to the theological trend that narrowed *caritas* to love directed to God while love of all else was secondary.”⁴⁹ For Aelred, these forms of love “must form an integral whole.”⁵⁰ Love for God is love for people as friendship accurately expresses.

SWORN BROTHERHOOD IN *ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS*

In our earlier treatment of Aelred, we saw how he understands friendship as a covenant between friends. However, Aelred’s work is a lot more conceptual as it is a discourse about friendship. This stands in contrast to Chinese literature that often depicts ideals and virtues through the form of stories.

47 However, unlike marriage, one of the grounds for breaking off spiritual friendship, according to Aelred, is when the foundation of loving God is departed from irrevocably. This conclusion is consistent with his view that true friendship is one that loves Christ and motivates the other toward Christ. For Aelred, the foundation of spiritual friendship is “love of God, to which everything must be referred” See Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.5-7.

48 Jesus, while calling his disciples friends (Jn 15:15), recognizes that they, too, are part of God’s kingdom and children of God, and thus he taught them to pray, “Our Father in heaven...” (Mt 6:9).

49 Liz Carmichael, *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love* (London; New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 97.

50 Carmichael, *Friendship*, 97.

The idea of covenanted friendship is not foreign to the history of the Chinese.⁵¹ In Chinese culture, differing degrees of friendships do exist. But unlike the limitations of the English language, the Chinese have different words to describe different kinds of friendship. For instance, in her study of friendship beginning with the Han dynasty, Anna Shields has noted that by adding a prefix to the word ‘friend’ (you, 友), the meaning changes from that of a general friend to one who might be considered a friend “bound even after death, a *siyou* (死友).”⁵² The closest type of friendship, however, is one that employs a kinship title—sworn brothers, *baxiongdì* (把兄弟). Sworn brothers within Chinese culture is a common way in which friends take it upon themselves to establish a sort of quasi-kinship status, thus making the relationship more lasting and permanent.⁵³ In line with the Confucian emphasis on familial piety, establishing a kinship status to the friendship symbolizes the intensity, depth, and obligation one has to the other.⁵⁴ As sworn brothers, an allegiance is formed that transcends political and social statuses, potentially causing moral conflicts. Indeed, what makes *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (hereafter RTK) a choice text for this article is precisely how Luo intentionally pushes the vision of sworn brotherhood to its extreme in order to reflect the inherent tensions and complexities in life that result from multiple duties that we often have, as will be demonstrated. RTK hence portrays an idealized vision of friendship that serves as a useful text for our present purpose of retrieving what an embodiment of friendship might look like.

51 In fact, more than it not being foreign, it has also been significant for the Chinese. This is evident in the need to address this topic by the sixteenth-century Italian missionary Matteo Ricci. See Matteo Ricci, *On Friendship: One Hundred Maxims for a Chinese Prince*, trans. Timothy James Billings (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

52 Anna M. Shields, *One Who Knows Me: Friendship and Literary Culture in Mid-Tang China*, Harvard-Yenching Institute monograph series (Cambridge, MA: London: Published by Harvard University Asia Center: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2015), 35.

53 David K. Jordan, “Sworn Brothers: A Study in Chinese Ritual Kinship,” in *The Chinese Family and Its Ritual Behavior*, ed. Hsieh Jih-Chiang and Chuang Ying-Chang (Institute of Ethnology Academia Sinica, 1985.), 235.

54 The use of sworn friendship as descriptor may also serve as a bridge to signify the quality of relationship given Confucianism’s placement of friendship as inferior to familial relations.

The setting of RTK, though written in the fourteenth century, finds itself in the period following the end of the Han dynasty, when Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei take an oath of allegiance to one another at the Peach Garden:

We three, Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei, though of different families, swear brotherhood and mutual help to one end. From now on, we will aid each other in difficulty and rescue each other in danger. We will serve the country and protect the people. We ask not the same day of birth but we are willing to die at the same time. May Heaven, the all-powerful, and Earth, the ever bountiful, read our hearts! If we break our oath or betray each other's trust, may Heaven and man smite us!⁵⁵

Relevant to the topic of discussion is what the oath entails. As seen above, this oath entails an invocation of the supernatural as witness to the bond that friends enter into. So serious is this oath that it invokes heaven as its witness. Equally insightful in the oath is the recognition of how sworn brotherhood serves as the nucleus in bringing together people from different families to a commitment that is almost unrivalled. This bond is not only expected to last until death, but at times it also leaves those under it in a state of conflict, especially when values begin to compete with one another.

We see this most clearly when the character Liu Bei, who assumes the title of king over the Shu Han state, finds himself caught in a dilemma between taking revenge over the death of his sworn brother Guan Yu and putting the interest of the nation first. On the one hand, due to the oath made at the start of the story, the sworn brothers are pledged to aid one another in all matters, presumably including the taking of revenge for one another. However, as king, Liu Bei has an interest and responsibility in doing what is best for the nation as well as in establishing himself as emperor. Added to this is the fact that the original oath taken by Liu Bei also includes an oath to serve the country. What we see here are competing priorities of duty. As an officer of the court reminds Liu Bei, "The enmity against Wei is a public matter whereas vengeance for your brother is personal. Matters of empire should be placed first."⁵⁶ While there is every wisdom

⁵⁵ Luo, *The Three Kingdoms*, 1.33-34.

⁵⁶ Luo, *The Three Kingdoms*, 81.127.

in the words of Liu Bei's officer, Liu Bei remains firmly unpersuaded.⁵⁷ It is only after continuous persuasion, involving also the chief advisor, that Liu Bei begins "to waver a little in his determination."⁵⁸ However, any plan to deprioritize revenge for Guan Yu is abolished when Zhang Fei, the third person involved in the sworn brotherhood, comes in lamenting the death of his sworn brother Guan Yu. Initially, Liu Bei tries to explain the rationale for his hesitancy. But he is met with a harsh rebuke from Zhang Fei, who retorts, "What do others know of our oath? If Your Majesty will not go, then let me sacrifice myself to avenge our brother. If I fail, I would rather die than return to see you."⁵⁹ Hearing the cry of his fellow brother to remain faithful to the oath, Liu Bei gives in and decides to seek revenge.

Evident within this short account, lies a concept of sworn brotherhood that takes precedence even over the seemingly more strategic war tactic and prestigious title of emperor. While this certainly goes against many of our modern senses, the giving in of Liu Bei to prioritize revenge for his brother can in fact be understood as the honorable move.⁶⁰ The failure to see this is perhaps due to a misapprehension of sworn brotherhood as individuals remaining *separate* individuals even after oath. On the contrary, the oath that is taken among sworn brothers places them within this category of blood brothers, such that each one of them *belongs* to the other rather than existing as autonomous individuals. As Liu Bei explains his final decision to his officers, "Yun-chang [Guan Yu] and I were as one body, and it is a very important matter of integrity. How can I forget that?"⁶¹ Due to the oneness that is shared from this brotherhood, Liu Bei finds himself unable to act as though the death of Guan Yu is separate from him. In prioritizing Guan Yu's revenge, Liu Bei ultimately upholds integrity and portrays himself as the brother who honors his family member even at the expense of attaining emperorship. As Yu aptly points out, "Initially, kinship

57 Luo, *The Three Kingdoms*, 81.128.

58 Luo, *The Three Kingdoms*, 81.130.

59 Luo, *The Three Kingdoms*, 81.130

60 Within Confucianism, such an act would exemplify the loyalty and trustworthiness of a person. See *Confucius: The Analects*, trans. D. C Lau (Shatin, Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2000), 1.4.

61 Luo, *The Three Kingdoms*, 81.131.

is a means to kingship, but in the end kingship is sacrificed for the sake of maintaining the appropriateness of kinship.”⁶²

The other section in RTK that tells us something about sworn brotherhood is found in Guan Yu’s reply to Zhao Liao. In this account, Guan Yu finds himself surrounded by soldiers belonging to the shrewd Cao Cao, an enemy of his sworn brother Liu Bei. Acknowledging Guan Yu’s combat skills and noble character, Cao Cao hopes to win Guan Yu over to his side. However, Cao Cao is immediately told that this will be unlikely due to Guan Yu’s loyalty to his brother even unto death. True enough, when confronted, Guan Yu chooses death. When chided for making a foolish move that results in mockery, Guan Yu responds by saying, “I will die for loyalty and righteousness. Who will laugh at me?”⁶³ Guan Yu’s statement is indicative of the value prized within Chinese culture. True mockery falls on the one who betrays his sworn brother rather than defends him till his own death. This point is further enhanced when Zhao Liao, a spokesperson sent by Cao Cao, eventually manages to convince Guan Yu to stay alive. He does this by appealing to Guan Yu’s oath:

First of all, you and your elder brother pledged to live and die together in the Peach Garden. Now your brother has only suffered a defeat and you want to fight to death. If your brother rises again by and by and wants your help, where is he to find you? That would be a betrayal of the Peach Garden oath. Secondly, your brother left his family in your care and, if you should die, the two ladies would be left without a protector. That would be a betrayal of trust. Thirdly, although your military skill stands unmatched and your learning profound, yet you do not aid your brother in his noble attempt to maintain the Han Dynasty. On the contrary, you are after a vain reputation and are ready to go through fire and water to die a valiant fool. What is the sense in that? That would be a betrayal of righteousness. These are the three faults and I feel it my duty to point them out to you.⁶⁴

In response to this accusation, Guan Yu chooses not to forfeit his life and instead submits under certain conditions. For Guan Yu, preservation of life is ruled and governed not by the promises of riches or rewards but by loyalty to his sworn brother. When offered a new robe, Guan Yu instead

62 Yu, “The Notion of Appropriateness (Yi) in Three Kingdoms,” 35.

63 Luo, *The Three Kingdoms*, 25.512.

64 Luo, *The Three Kingdoms*, 25.512

chooses to wear the old robe over the new robe. The rationale given is simple: "The old robe was a gift from my brother and to wear it is like seeing him. I cannot allow the new gift to eclipse his old one."⁶⁵ It is loyalty to this established kinship that determines when to live and when to die.

Features of Brotherhood in RTK

In both short accounts that I have extracted, certain features of sworn brotherhood become immediately prominent. First, we see that sworn brotherhood does not necessarily begin with an equal footing in so far as all the characters come from not just a different family but also from different backgrounds. Liu Bei comes from the imperial family whereas Zhang Fei grew up in a farm and made a living as a butcher, while Guan Yu was a fugitive on the run who wanted to volunteer his services to the army. Second, brotherhood is driven by a shared goal and duty. Despite the vast difference in family background and social status, what unites the brothers is a common goal: to help one another, to serve the country, and to protect the people. Indeed, one of the most striking features of RTK is that the oath is *not* presented to us as that made between already close friends. On the contrary, the time from which the three characters meet to the moment the oath is taken spans only a single day. Despite the romanticizing and dramatizing presented in this classic novel, it still stands to reason that what unites brotherhood is not a common class or familiarity, but oneness of heart and a common sense of duty toward attaining the same goal. Third, as already mentioned, sworn brotherhood involves a relentless loyalty to one another even at the expense of one's own life or personal ambition. This trait is seen in all three characters and their willingness to protect or avenge the other. While RTK may be historical fiction and thus slightly exaggerated, the notion of sworn brotherhood unto death is not. As the Chinese poet Liu Yuxi once wrote, "The Way of friendship survives to the end, and must indeed grow even stronger."⁶⁶ Applying kinship status to a friendship compels one to be loyal to his sworn brother as he would be to a family. The anthropologist David Jordan elaborates by noting that

⁶⁵ Luo, *The Three Kingdoms*, 25.518.

⁶⁶ Liu Yuxi, cited in Anna M. Shields, *One Who Knows Me: Friendship and Literary Culture in Mid-Tang China*, 1st ed., Harvard-Yenching Institute monograph series (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 298.

in Chinese culture, friendship takes second place to family. As a result, no friend would compromise on the resources intended for family, for a friend. However, this rule is lifted among sworn brothers.⁶⁷ As a sworn brother, there is both an ideological reason and an obligation to help even at the expense of family resources. He adds, "When there is nothing you can do, you still have to think of a way to help him."⁶⁸

SYNTHESIZING SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP AND SWORN BROTHERHOOD IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

Having looked at friendship in both Aelred and RTK, what becomes apparent to us are the stark similarities they share. For instance, in Aelred's understanding of friendship as having "no separation of spirits, affection, will or opinion,"⁶⁹ we see also in Liu Bei's confession, that he and his sworn brothers share the same body.⁷⁰ On top of that, both Aelred and RTK recognize the permanence of friendship. Aelred as a Christian monk thus provides a strong theological grounding for what friendship should be. But it is the Chinese concept and expression of sworn brotherhood found in RTK that best embodies Aelred's theology of friendship.

While we may be tempted to think that the concept of sworn brotherhood is long outdated, the reality is that the legacy of brotherhood as featured in RTK extends beyond its time and into our culture today. Various forms of such quasi-kinship status can still be seen among the Chinese. The practice of godparenting is one such example. Ironically, other concrete expressions of sworn brotherhood can also be found among the Chinese triads where a blood oath is taken.⁷¹ In their ritual practices, the recruits would have their fingers pricked until blood appears.⁷² This

67 Jordan, *Sworn Brothers*, 238.

68 Jordan, *Sworn Brothers*, 240.

69 Aelred, *Spiritual Friendship*, 3.7.

70 Luo, *The Three Kingdoms*, 81.131.

71 Outside secret societies, it is also not uncommon to come across people introducing their friends as little brother or big brother within Chinese culture. The point of bringing up triads only serves to highlight the more organized nature of this sworn brotherhood.

72 W. P. Morgan, *Triad Societies: Triad Societies in Hong Kong* (London; New York: Routledge, 1960), 259.

practice highlights and reinforces the new familial status that is bestowed upon the recruit. Jean Chesneaux notes further that on entry, recruits must acknowledge the following oath:

After entering, you swear not to debauch a brother's wife, daughter, or sister: if you do, may you perish under the knife.

After entering, you swear to regard the parents of a brother as your own father or mother, and if a brother place his wife, or deliver his son into your charge, you will regard them as your own sister-in-law or your own nephew: if you do not, may Heaven destroy you.⁷³

The influence and relevance of RTK is further observed in how the character of Guan Yu is often looked up to as the patron god of secret societies.⁷⁴ This is likely due to the loyal nature displayed by Guan Yu as well as his fighting prowess.

While Aelred would most certainly not consider friendship among triads as true friendships due to its carnal nature and participation in vice, it is easy to see how this can be appropriated within Aelred's theology. The kind of loyalty and commitment expressed in sworn brotherhood helps to convey not only the intensity of Christian friendship as affirmed by Aelred, but also its relation to biological families. On the one hand, sworn brotherhood affirms that the person is not family in the biological sense. But on the other hand, there is the recognition that to be a brother is so much more than having the same biological parents. Following Aelred's theology of friendship and retrieving the practice and language of sworn brothers allows us to see how friendship "is elevated to something more than simply the sort of relationship that leads to a night at the pub; it becomes, instead, a way of speaking about the bonds between Christian siblings."⁷⁵

Ecclesialogically speaking, sworn brotherhood should not be foreign to us. In form, it finds its expression in the prayers of baptism. Like sworn brotherhood, there is similarly an appeal to the divine:

73 Jean Chesneaux, cited in Hugh D. R. Baker, *Chinese Family and Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 165.

74 Baker, *Chinese Family and Kinship*, 164.

75 Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015), 60.

Manifest yourself, Lord, in this water, and grant that the one being baptized in it may be transformed for the putting off of the old self that is corrupted after the desires of deception, and may put on the new that is renewed after the image of the One who created him/her. So that, planted in the likeness of your death through baptism, he/she may also become a partaker in your resurrection, and having guarded the gift of the Holy Spirit and increased the deposit of grace, may *receive the prize of his/her high calling and be numbered with the firstborn*, whose names are inscribed in heaven, in you our God and Lord, Jesus Christ.⁷⁶

After the blessing of the water, in the baptismal vows of *both* the catechumen and the assembly, there is an oath for the former to pledge himself as a follower of Jesus and for the latter to vow that they will guide and nurture the new member.⁷⁷ This nurturing is often designated to the godparent or sponsor. The godparent not only vouches for the catechumen but also undertakes the responsibility of being a guardian to the child.⁷⁸ His or her appointment would normally be based upon the friendship within the Christian community. This practice is still *presently* found in the baptismal rites across various Protestant denominations. However, the clearest expression between the relationship of godparent and friendship is perhaps best expressed in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults as found in the Roman Catholic Church:

Their godparents (for each a godmother or godfather, or both) accompany the candidates on the day of election, at the celebration of the sacraments of initiation, and during the period of mystagogy. Godparents are persons chosen by the candidates on the basis of example, good qualities, and *friendship*, delegated by the local Christian community, and approved by the priest. It is the responsibility of godparents to show the candidates how to practise the Gospel in personal and social life, to sustain the candidates in moments of hesitancy and anxiety, to bear witness, and to guide the

76 Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (London: SPCK, 2013), 108. (Italics mine.)

77 *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 406–407.

78 See Joseph H. Lynch, “Godparents,” ed. Paul F. Bradshaw, *New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 230–231; Karen E. Spierling, *Infant Baptism in Reformation Geneva: The Shaping of a Community, 1536–1564*, St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History (Aldershot, Hants, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 105–157.

candidates' progress in the baptismal life. Chosen before the candidates' election, godparents fulfil this office publicly from the day of the rite of election, when they give testimony to the community about the candidates. They continue to be important during the time after reception of the sacraments when the neophytes need to be assisted so that they remain true to their baptismal promises.⁷⁹

Put differently, the testimony that godparents or, for that matter, the entire baptismal rite point to is the reality of kinship ties that we see in sworn brotherhood.⁸⁰ The retrieval of sworn brotherhood as a language for the church thus enables us to make better sense of the sacraments of the church⁸¹ together with the duties that we owe to each other as brothers and sisters.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have sought to retrieve a vision of friendship as found in the theology of Aelred, as well as the embodiment of such a theology as seen in RTK. I argued that Aelred's theology of friendship serves as a complementary framework to the already deep and rich practice of sworn brotherhood familiar to the Chinese. The argument was then made that retrieving this rich heritage and language of sworn brothers falls in line with our understanding of the life of the church and its use of the sacraments, principally baptism. The objective of this retrieval is not to lay claim to a single theology or practice of friendship that the church must accept.⁸²

79 Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, no. 11. (Italics mine.)

80 This might also explain why parents of Chinese religions fear less about their child going to church than about being baptized. Due to their heightened awareness of the efficacy of rituals, Chinese parents recognize that in being baptized, their child actually undergoes a change of status, and with this change of status comes certain implications such as the permissibility of praying for and sacrificing to the dead.

81 On this note, one can also argue that even in the Eucharist, the partaking of the elements in order to be formed into the one body of Christ also finds a similar language practiced in sworn brotherhood.

82 Bonhoeffer for instance, seems to present a different theology of friendship that does not sit well with the recognizable form of sworn brotherhood. For him, the beauty of friendship is found precisely in its fragility due to not having any external formal recognition that forces a bond or commitment. It is the inherent voluntary nature of friendship that finds itself dependent purely on the other rather than on any imposed duty that makes friendship precious. Therefore, applying a kinship status

Instead, it is to demonstrate the hope and promise of what retrieving from our past may offer to us. From it, we can at least make the convincing case that the offer of spiritual friendship is no mere second option. The offer of friendship is the highest offer that one can give because it is as eternal and sacramental as marriage.⁸³ If the offer of friendship by the Protestant church is seen as second to marriage, it is likely because we have failed both in our understanding and practice of it. Unfortunately, until and unless we shake off our enchantment with modernity and start to look back, I suspect we will eventually reach an impasse for the inclusion of those who struggle with either SSA or singlehood.

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to friendship would take something away from it. See Eberhard Bethge, *Friendship and Resistance: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Geneva and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 90–92.

83 Affirming the sacramentality of marriage need not equate with affirming marriage as a sacrament. Borrowing from Augustine's definition of a sacrament as an outward sign, we can affirm marriage as sign of God's love for the church. Similarly, we can affirm spiritual friendship as a sign of Christ's offering of himself to us as friend.