

A Religion of Love and A Philosophy of Struggle

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In 1990, the magazine *The Study of World Religions* (1990, #4) published an article by Wang Weifan and Ji Fengwen entitled “Forty Years of the Chinese Protestant Church,” hereafter called “Forty Years.” Basically “Forty Years” did not, in the spirit of China’s open door policy and in accordance with the new pattern of righting wrongs, re-examine the tortuous road followed by the Chinese Protestant Church. In some ways it carried on as before, still citing outmoded materials, conclusions and ideas. As such, it did not provide a detailed examination of the near-fatal sufferings inflicted on the Chinese Church. It also did not give a responsible self-criticism of the Church. Moreover, its comprehension of “the freedom of religious belief” and its understanding of a citizen’s normal contacts with the international Church is still full of oft-repeated mistakes. The impression the article gives is that the Chinese Church is always “held aloft,” and that it must “keep in step.”

When “Forty Years” recalls the last 40 years of Chinese Christianity, it pays no attention to a fact recalled with fear by everyone, namely that from the mid-50’s to the late 70’s, the Chinese government followed an extremely leftist line. This inflicted untold sufferings on religious believers and indeed on all the citizens of the country. In some ways believers suffered more severe torments and cruelties than non-believers. Nevertheless, the essay blithely returns to those frightening years of the 50’s, when an atmosphere of “struggle” reigned. Everyone knows that Chinese

intellectuals and religious scholars were more infatuated with the extreme “leftist” campaigns of rectification than the “ignorant” masses. This was because they had theory, ideas, and the possibility of becoming “leaders.”

In recalling the history of Chinese Christianity, we cannot forget one embarrassing yet thought-provoking fact. That is that the leftist line came not only from administrative systems and trends of thought outside of religious circles, but it also deeply penetrated religious organizations and the thought of religious personages. They internalized the leftist line and adopted its way of thinking. Religious personages seemed to be very self-effacing, but they were extremely cruel to their own kind.

“Forty Years” says that the history of Christianity in the last 40 years is one of cutting off contact with foreigners. It is a history of “accommodating” itself to socialism, of continually and conscientiously “keeping in step” with the times, and of ingratiating itself with the ruling authority. But problems arose precisely because of this stance. “Forty Years” does not see the defects and limitations of the Church oneself in the midst of this “adaptation.” The religion, which blindly follows the political direction of higher authorities, finds it difficult to adapt to the present open situation of “facing the world,” and therefore becomes extremely passive. Religion continues to cherish the outmoded way of doing things when the political line of the higher authorities changes.

Everyone knows that it was only at the 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee that the “leftist” line was completely overturned, and a change came about in the main direction of work. The extreme leftist line not only harmed the Christian Church, but the Church had also implemented the extreme leftist line itself. “Forty Years” did not adequately examine the Christian Church against this overall background. It neither mentioned the unjust treatment meted out to the Church, nor did it mention the leftist mistakes of the Church itself.

When speaking about “accommodating” to socialism, one should not forget to mention the many campaigns of the 50’s and 60’s, like the Great Leap Forward, the communes, “living socialist poverty,” “pulling up the white flag and planting the red flag,” education in socialism and in class struggle, all of which proved harmful in practice. Those seriously harmed were not only the Party

cadres and intellectuals, but also religious believers. I believe that the upper echelons of church leaders, who cooperated with these things and benefited from them, cannot forget those "chrysanthemums of yesteryear."

In the past, the Church had unilaterally sought to "adapt" to reality, and to "accommodate." But the result was that many seminaries and schools closed their doors, and many places became "non-religious areas." In some places preaching became heavily laden with political content. Religion's one-sided "adaptation" to reality completely overlooked the principle of independence. Too much administrative interference and thought inculcation caused the appearance of the Church to change; it caused the Church to a certain extent to separate itself from the mass of believers. The Church came to be called "official," and so it was. Nevertheless, "Forty Years" blithely paints that period of history in attractive and glorious colors.

The "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" (along with the Catholic Church's "Patriotic Association") is our country's longest lasting political movement. All the other social and political movements, like the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, Land Reform, movements to get rid of "the four pests" and to "eliminate illiteracy," etc., all had a beginning and an end. It is only the ever-glorious "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" that has a beginning but no end.

"Three-Self" is a product of "class struggle," both internationally and domestically. It was a crystallization of the "self-reliant" period before China opened up. In this new period of history, the Chinese Church should be shouldering a responsibility poles apart from the one it is performing today. The Church should be promoting cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and friendship between Churches abroad and Churches at home. A blindly, self-important Three-Self, which closes and locks up the nation, should dissolve of its own accord. This would really be "self." The most important duty of the Three-Self Movement was to "cut off" the Church's relations with foreign countries, to make the Church "self-run" by "seizing" its administration from the hands of foreigners, and to "change thoughts" under the guidance of Marxist-Leninism. Therefore, since this important "duty" has

already been accomplished, is there any necessity now for the Three-Self Movement to continue?

Unfortunately, we always read that the Three-Self has become a holy idol, which we cannot offend. To oppose the Three-Self is like opposing the Party and socialism, or like committing treason. To oppose the Three-Self has become a crime. "Forty Years" and other articles always mention opposition to the Three-Self in the same breath as opposition to the Communist Party and to socialism. I often think that people who are afraid of opposition are a bit unhealthy. To be afraid of criticism is like being afraid of the sunlight. It proves that one has a fatal weakness.

On the other hand, not to go along with the Three-Self principle, and not to participate in Three-Self activities, is not the same as opposing the "independent" running of the Church, nor the same as opposing "patriotism," and it is not equal to "treason." The two ideas have absolutely nothing to do with each other.

"Forty Years" promotes "Three-Self patriotic education." Does "patriotic education" necessarily include "love of the Three-Self?"

According to the stance taken in "Forty Years," non-participation in the Three-Self is of itself a grave "mistake," and a sign of "backwardness." The line of class struggle is drawn between the "Three-Self" and the "non Three-Self." It is a line between right and wrong, a line between being progressive or conservative. It is only due to the compassionate hearts of the lovable leaders that backward people are not regarded in an unfavorable light. There is some flavor here of a "drawing of lines." It is as if those who participate in the Three-Self should be carrying out organizational education among those who do not participate. What authority do you have to carry out "thought" work towards others? We should not forget that religious believers and responsible persons in the Three-Self church are themselves only objects of united front work; they are only objects of "correct organizational education." No wonder that Three-Self history is one of continually "cleansing" and "attacking" those believers who do not follow them.

In our country there are many Protestants and Catholics who do not want to participate in church activities. They are antipathetic and suspicious about the Three-Self and the Patriotic Association. Some Christians also maintain friendly relations with

foreign Christians. One cannot indiscriminately label these as “secret destructive plots.” People have the right to maintain an attitude of suspicion towards the Three-Self and to criticize it. Some criticisms are irrational or unsuitable, but others are reasonable. At least they can raise one’s awareness.

Christianity (including Catholicism) is different from Buddhism, Islam and Daoism. It entered the country from the West. Christianity involves a very sensitive issue, namely relationships with overseas Churches. The most important use of the Three-Self and the Catholic Patriotic Association has been to solve the problem of the relationships with the foreign missionaries and missionary organizations. However, as we see it, the Three-Self is not the only, most important, or exclusive channel for international religious exchange and interaction. Following the rapid development of openness and reform, the Christian Churches have already adapted to the situation of change, and have increased their contacts with religious bodies from many other countries. However, when “Forty Years” talks about problems we should deal with in the future, it spills too much ink on vigilance against “forces opposed to China” and to “religious infiltration.” Not a word is said about the legitimate right of believers to participate in international exchange. Not a word is said about how Churches should positively become involved in the global society. Not a word is mentioned about how the Churches should break down their rigid structures.

“Anti-China forces” should not be used lightly, and the phrase is frequently misused. In the outside world, for instance, “Anti-Iraq Coalition” referred to all the countries that opposed Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait. If on the international scene there really does appear an organized, scheming “anti-China force,” then accusations should point to a definite government, political party or political organization. The phrase should not be used as a vague reference applied to all persons, organizations and cultural bodies, who have different political views or religious beliefs from China. How does one determine the meaning of “forces”? Only people with weak nerves are afraid of those who oppose them, and fabricate the label “anti-China forces” to unlawfully do away with all dissent. It only matters that the person is an “enemy.” Is it not necessary to obey the law and to follow reason to struggle against the “enemy”?

From the 1950's to the 1980's China's international relations were full of extreme leftist feelings and policies. China was skeptical towards foreigners and paranoid towards dissimilar views. All these culminated in the Cultural Revolution, in which foreigners residing in China had to hold up the "Little Red Book," or else be called "Anti-China elements."

All these mistakes had a great effect on China's international image, and were obstacles to normal relations between China and other nations. Now one rarely sees the phrase "anti-China forces" in secular newspapers and magazines, but it is still used indiscriminately in articles by the Christian Church. The so-called religious "anti-China forces" do not refer to governments or nations; rather they always refer to religious organizations, bodies or persons. If someone disagrees with them, then the hat of "anti-China force" is put on that person or organization.

So-called "religious infiltration" is the same as "religious invasion"; both are fabrications. This is because such phrases take religious propagation to be political "infiltration." In the past people exaggerated religion's political role. Those who are "sick" themselves suspect that everyone has wicked intentions towards them.

"Infiltration" is an unclear word. Religion is a kind of culture. Religious exchange between different countries and among different races of people is very natural. Ever since Matteo Ricci, foreign missionaries have brought religion, theology and even technological knowledge to China. In spite of this, some people consider all Catholic missionaries in the Ming and Qing dynasties to be "pioneers of colonialism." However, this outmoded subjective assertion about religion has been abandoned a long time ago. Even regarding the foreign missionaries who came to China after the Opium War, most recent scholars have gradually broken old taboos, and affirmed their contributions to cultural exchange. Missionary cultural exchange has promoted understanding among peoples. However, strangely, and what sometimes causes regret, is that religious personages more violently criticize "cultural imperialism" than do the scholars.

After entering the new millennium, do not friendly relations among peoples of different countries also include religious exchange? Does evangelization across international boundaries

violate the “heavenly mandate”? Must foreigners who come to China to do missionary work absolutely need to get permission from the Three-Self? Can religious believers from abroad (although Hong Kong has returned to the motherland, it is still considered “outside the boundaries”) send books to China? If we say that when China was feudalistic and strongly fortified, religious activities were still allowed, then in these days of the rule of law, religious exchange is perfectly justified. This is because religion has already changed from being a national public matter into a private matter for each citizen. Nowadays religious freedom ought to be more widespread than at any other time in history. Freedom of information and of religious belief is a matter of basic human rights. To confiscate religious books is trampling on basic human rights. Preventing religious exchange also violates the Constitution.

Lenin thought that, in regard to the nation, religion is “a personal matter.” He pointed out that religion and the State should be completely “separated” from one another. In the West, religion is not under the jurisdiction of a national or government department. Religion is not responsible for any political or military mission. It plays a purely evangelistic role in human society. Sometimes a foreign religious organization or person has private exchanges with Chinese citizens, from a missionary motive, for friendship, for mutual understanding, or for cultural exchange. At times they may mail books, magazines or evangelistic material to them. This should absolutely not be considered as carrying out subversive acts of “infiltration” towards our country. Some of our government departments as a rule ban all religious material mailed to any private citizen. They consider religious material “a great enemy.” This not only violates the lawful rights of that citizen, but it also blocks international cultural exchange. This shows a disdain for basic human rights and a disregard for the law.

“Forty Years” says that infiltration by “anti-China forces” has changed from smuggling Bibles to smuggling religious books. But the article does not state clearly why shipping Bibles from abroad is classified as “smuggling” and “infiltration.” Although people are permitted to read the Bible, why can’t they receive a foreign language Bible from abroad? The libraries of research institutes and universities contain many foreign religious books. These books are not restricted, but may be read by anyone. If

people are allowed to read foreign scientific, cultural, philosophical, literary and artistic books, why are they not permitted to come into contact with foreign religious works?

Perhaps someone will say: religious exchange should be an “official” and not a “popular” matter. Or that exchange must be organized, and not privately arranged among persons. My opinion is that official and popular exchanges are equally important, and that organizational and private exchanges can both take place. Ordinary believers should also share the rights that religious leaders enjoy. Private interchange and personal rights are broad; otherwise, some people could lord it over other people. International cultural exchange naturally includes private exchange. Private exchange is definitely not “unlawful.”

“Forty Years” writes: “If any plots are allowed to proceed, then the Chinese Christian Church will change color, and China’s socialist system will be threatened.” I am not sure how the reader will take this sentence. It is like a call to arms, as in the days of Liu Xiaogi and Lin Biao. What is the political color of the Chinese Church? Can it so easily “change color”? Will Chinese Christians become red guards, attacking the great enterprise of China’s socialist system? Has China a national Church? In all likelihood, our Chinese Christian Church is a “red church” in the vanguard of the proletarian revolution, right?

“Forty Years” also mentions “religious sovereignty.” It should be pointed out that sovereignty refers to the highest authority in a country, that is, to national sovereignty. A nation’s sovereignty does not include religion because the Church is not a part of a country’s political authority. The Church has already been separated from the state.

From observing the history of the development of the Christian Church, we must admit that the newly born Christian religion could not get a foothold throughout the length and breadth of the Roman Empire. For that matter, even in Judea, it had no right to exist. How can we apply “sovereignty” to its missionary expansion throughout the world? If we admit to a “sovereignty of religion,” and “religion is determined by the state,” then how are we supposed to understand the missionary history of the Church throughout the world? The preaching of the Christian religion in China had to break through the obstinacy of the emperors before it

could succeed. Really, to speak of a “religious sovereignty” is to return to feudalistic times.

The most sensitive problem in speaking about “religious sovereignty” is the question of the relationship of the Catholic Church and the Roman Curia¹. This thorny question gives people headaches. Many people think that if the Chinese Catholic Church recognizes the Roman Curia, this will harm China’s religious sovereignty. But everyone knows that the Catholic Church in every country throughout the world without exception accepts the Vatican’s guidance in religious affairs. This is a common characteristic of the Catholic Church. During the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, the English Church retained all the rituals and structures of the Catholic Church. The only change they made was that they did not recognize the primacy of the Pope over the English Church. Because of this they were no longer called the “Catholic Church.” Rather, they became a denomination of “Protestantism.” It is understandable if China’s Catholic Church does not recognize the primacy of the Pope, but must they not then also consider changing their name to something which does not have “Catholic Church” in the title? To change the name is both logical and understandable, but it is also very daring. If it does not do this, then the Chinese Catholic Church should recognize the Vatican, and accept the Vatican’s guidance in religious matters.

Some people are worried that this would be harmful to “national sovereignty.” The Catholic Church in every country throughout the world obeys the Holy See and accepts the Holy See’s appointments. The sovereignty of those nations is not weakened in the least.

This reminds me of an extraordinary affair. When the Holy See “canonized the saints,” it followed its own religious standards in doing this. However, they received the following criticism from a secular government: those foreign missionaries should have been killed. The judgment to be killed or not to be killed must come from a court of law, and not from an arbitrary decision of the masses.

¹ Editor’s note: The author uses the term Roman Curia when others might use Vatican instead. In some instances, the term has been changed to Vatican or Holy See by the editor, as the case may be.

If the “anti-religious agitation” was just, then undoubtedly the killings that took place during the “Cultural Revolution” were likewise noble, because they came from “revolutionary” anger. To say that the foreign missionaries committed “unspeakable crimes,” and that they should have been punished by the masses, depresses me. I also think that they suffered many hardships to come to China to do missionary work, and their merits cannot be overlooked. How can people in the 21st century look upon them as “aggressors”? Is it possible that defenseless missionaries in China’s poor, out of the way villages were “aggressors”? I challenge China’s high officials to go “to work” in such places!

The “Roman Curia” [Holy See] and the “Vatican State” are two different things. To obey the Vatican and to accept its appointment of bishops does not mean that one becomes a citizen of the Vatican State. To have the Pope as the head of one’s religion does not mean refusal to accept the instructions of the government of one’s own country. Although Chinese translates “Pope” as “religion’s emperor,” the word “Pope” originally does not contain that meaning. It did cause the Chinese emperor some annoyance because he thought that the “Catholics” had another “emperor-father.” Today we Chinese are not minions of the emperor. Regarding relations with the Roman Curia, I suggest that our government choose a more lively and adaptive policy. Such a policy would change the tense situation, which exists between the Chinese Catholic Church and the Roman Curia. It would also resolve the tense situation that exists within the Chinese Catholic Church itself, and take into account the feelings of all China’s Catholics.

In recent years our country’s religious researchers have gradually discarded a rigid and dogmatic attitude. However, some people, who oppose “rigidity” and “dogmatism” in others, stubbornly maintain a rigid and dogmatic attitude themselves. Many religious researchers (including clergy and church scholars) actually possess a large amount of foreign research material. However, on the surface they conscientiously display an attitude of rejection of foreign religious materials. It is as if not to do this would mean that they are not “patriotic” or “revolutionary” enough. Those who oppose foreign “infiltration” actually reside in places where there is a great amount of Western religious material. The famous leaders of

the Chinese Church are always going abroad to visit, and are always meeting foreign religious personnel. Why is it when ordinary believers meet foreign missionaries, they are considered to be “bound closely to foreigners”? Why are “underground” Christians, who receive visits from foreign believers, considered to be committing treason and heresy?

Because of well-known historical reasons, the Chinese Protestant and Catholic Churches have set up closed church structures. Feelings of fear and of anti-foreignism are widespread. The leaders restrict and protect the ordinary Christians too much. Those who oppose the Three-Self and the Patriotic Association are looked upon unfavorably. The level of democracy in the Church is not high, and the degree of autonomy is too low. Therefore the Church abroad thinks that there are all kinds of restrictions in China.

The Three-Self Movement of the 1950's completely cut the Church off from all foreign contacts. Economically, Church assets were frozen, and Church property was confiscated. All financial help from abroad was forbidden, and the emphasis was on “self-reliance.” Everyone knows that in the hearts of the Christian believers the Catholic Church is one big family, and an organic whole. Christianity entered China through the preaching of Christian missionaries. Chinese and foreign Christians have similar feelings. Absolutely cutting off all foreign contact, and expelling all the missionary priests, Brothers and Sisters from China placed the Chinese Church in a narrow space. From the 1950's on, the Chinese Church had no means of financial support. It could only rely on government help. This led to too much interference and to many limitations for the Church in the areas of administration and religious faith.

I hope the new generation of church and theological workers will be clear-headed. They should not be infatuated with obtaining positions, like “committee member,” “representative,” and “chairman.” They should study the history of the Church, make a self-examination, dissolve pent-up anger, wipe out all mental barriers, accommodate the feelings of all the believers, and cause Chinese Christianity to present a more colorful, fresh and vibrant appearance.

Christianity is a religion, which preaches universal love. However, under the influence of the line of class struggle, and

affected by the struggle sessions in society, the struggle and “cleansing” within the Chinese Church was often worse than that of society at large. It was as if the political struggles and attachment to authority within the Church far outweighed the political rivalries in society. One cannot but feel sad at such a turn of events. In the future, rather than hate, I hope that the Church can show forth its love for others.



These two photos show seven new priests ordained for the Jilin Diocese on August 28, 2003. It is hoped that the new generation of church and theological leaders can cause Chinese Christianity to present a more colorful, fresh and vibrant appearance.