

Christian Studies in China

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In this essay, Gianni Criveller describes the views of Christianity of five scholars in Mainland China.

Between Marxism and Christianity: Francis Liu

“I am translating some of Simone Weil’s¹ works because I find her personal experience fascinating. Her story made up of ideology and faith, struggles and failures, delight, joy and death, touches and speaks to the heart of many intellectuals like me. She had ideals, illusions and suffering like us intellectuals. She discovered Christianity after passing through Communism and oriental religions. Hers is a Christianity without a church; hers is an incarnated and mystical faith, which seems closer to our pain,” the professor said.

In April 2000, I spent an afternoon talking with Professor Francis Liu (not his real name), in a Shanghai cafe near Fudan University. Fudan University (1905), originally a Catholic university, is among the most prestigious in China, and it can boast of a most exciting history. In 1996, Professor Zhang Qingxiong² established the Center for Christian Studies within the Department of Philosophy. There are now about a dozen such centers³ of

¹ A French person of Jewish origin, Simone Weil (1909-1944), famous social activist and author of philosophical, theological and spiritual works, was a believer who did not formally enter the Catholic Church. She was averse to giving assent to statements of dogma and of condemnation.

² Professor Zhang Qingxiong’s area of research is phenomenology and Christian theology. He was educated at Fribourg University.

³ These centers are generally affiliated to the university’s departments of philosophy or religious science. The voice of these intellectuals is heard through the production of a significant quantity of books, periodicals,

Christian Studies, developed during the 1990s, located in some of China's most renowned universities or academic centers.

My interlocutor, Francis Liu, is a teacher of Marxism with a passion for Christianity. His approach is philosophical in character. He has read Thomism and Neo-Thomism; he knows Jacques Maritain, and is translating a number of Simone Weil's writings into Chinese. She is a figure that fascinates both of us and is the subject of our conversation. I am telling my friend about an episode in Weil's life that has touched me deeply.

One evening in Portugal, where she had gone for health reasons, Simone took part in a religious procession in a fishermen's village. The songs of grief and anguish of the poor women, widows and wives of the fishermen on the high seas profoundly touched Simone Weil's sensitive and broken heart. She felt "Christianity is indeed the religion of the oppressed." That touches me because this is the exact opposite of Marxism's "religion is the opium of the people." Liu's answer to my remark surprised me. "I would say more," he commented, "in line with Simone Weil's thinking, we must add that Marxism is the opium of the oppressed, in that it offers them an illusory hope." "You are a teacher of Marxism," I responded perplexed, "how can you reconcile these reflections with what you teach?" "Teaching Marxism is my work. I have to live! Very few want to teach it, but since courses in Marxism are obligatory for the students of all departments, a great number of teachers are needed, and so it is relatively easy to find a teaching post for Marxism. But my interest lies in Christian thought."

Culture Christians? Liu Xiaofeng

The anti-establishment, irregular, and anti-institutional elements of Simone Weil's Christian faith, and her existence as a

seminars and conferences. These studies keep a strictly cultural character. They also meet with difficulties, such as the strict control of the authorities, the scarcity of materials and instruments for analysis. In some cases there is an insufficient knowledge of the modern and classical languages of theology and of the history of Christianity. These difficulties are overcome by the special involvement of various international academic institutions that support these centers.

Christian without baptism, have also attracted the interest of Liu Xiaofeng. He singles her out as the prototype of the "Cultural Christian."⁴ Liu Xiaofeng, an intellectual and a native of Mainland China, studied theology in Switzerland during the 1980s. In the 1990s, he directed the Center for Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong. He is considered the "father" of Cultural Christians,⁵ a description that has made him famous, but that has also occasioned lively debate and polemics among intellectuals in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.⁶

Demonstrating a tendency to have clear and precise boundary lines, the critics of the concept of "cultural Christian" maintain that, "One is either Christian or is not. The term 'Cultural Christian,'" they claim, "is an abusive invention." Some China scholars prefer not to be given that title, so as not to arouse the suspicion of the political authorities. The latter permit Christian studies, provided they remain in the realm of exclusively academic activities, without any religious overtones. Many of them prefer the title, "Scholars in Mainland China Studying Christianity (SMCSC)." Although the definition for "Cultural Christians" is a bit vague and ambiguous, it has nonetheless had remarkable success. I am using the term in this short study because it is still unknown to many, and because I find it stimulating and apt for representing a transitional, and not too clearly delineated, complex phenomenon.

"Cultural Christians" are those scholars who approach Christian studies, starting from an interest which is cultural in nature. They involve themselves not only academically, but also

⁴ In 1988 and 1989 Liu Xiaofeng wrote a series of ten articles on the theology of the 20th century for the Chinese monthly journal *Reading (Dushu)*. Toward the end of the series, Liu mentioned the concept of Culture Christian and makes a reference to Simone Weil.

⁵ Liu Xiaofeng, with his enormous output and lively thought, has played a central role in the debate on Christian studies in China. Since 2001 he has been teaching at Zhongshan University, Guangzhou, where he developed his new academic interest: Political Philosophy.

⁶ The most notable interventions in this debate, that has given rise to some twenty studies in Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, have been gathered in a volume published in Hong Kong in 1997: *Cultural Christians: Phenomenon and Argument*, Institute of Sino-Christian Studies (in Chinese).

personally. Christianity becomes for them a kind of orientation for their personal and moral life, and for some, even for their spiritual life. For a number of them the Christian faith becomes something personal, something to which they adhere conscientiously. We know that this does not mean that they enter the Church, either Protestant or Catholic, or seek baptism. Fascinated by the mystical dimension of the faith, or influenced by liberal literature, some end up thinking of the Church as a product of history, an institution that kills the spirit. Thus they disregard the value of the church's tradition. But there are also other reasons why they remain "cultural" rather than "ecclesial Christians." On the one hand, they know that the official churches, controlled by the Patriotic Associations and the government (Religious Affairs Bureau), do not have an authentic religious spirit. On the other hand, to join the underground community, or the "house churches," and to continue their academic activities would simply be impossible.

A New Moral Foundation: Yang Huilin

Although Simone Weil was not herself a direct victim of the Holocaust, her experience recalls the trauma of the extermination of the Jews, and the theology that follows from it. Profound questions regarding God's silence and on the very possibility of doing theology after Auschwitz, have marked European theological reflection after the Second World War. According to Yang Huilin,⁷ director of the Culture Christian Centre of Renmin University, Beijing, the Cultural Revolution was for Chinese intellectuals what the Holocaust was for European believers and theologians. How could two such similar tragedies occur? How could the Holocaust happen in a Europe imbued with two thousand years of Christianity? How could the Cultural Revolution happen in the five thousand year old Chinese civilization, imbued with Confucian humanism?

⁷ Yang Huilin has been one of the main curators of the *Cultural Christian Encyclopedia*, published in 1991 by the Jinan Publishing House. In 1999 Yang Huilin published a book, *Seeking for God, A Debate between Faith and Reason*, (Beijing Education Publishing Company). The reflection that follows is taken from this book.

“Wound Literature,” which appeared in the early 1980s, eloquently illustrates the frustration and pain experienced by Chinese intellectuals, who were a category especially victimized during the so-called Cultural Revolution. It is perhaps good to remember that the Cultural Revolution was essentially an anti-cultural revolution, which devastated much of China’s cultural patrimony. Today it is officially considered a “national tragedy” and is referred to as “The Ten Disastrous Years.”

The root of contemporary interest in Christian thought in China might be precisely here. According to Yang Huilin, the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution that he himself experienced pinpointed the need for a new ethical order, and for a new relation between conscience and authority. Yang affirms that the greatest contribution that Christianity can offer to China today is “an absolute morality.” The absoluteness of the moral good, radically opposed to evil, is postulated only with the existence of a transcendent God, and with the total “otherness” of God in respect to human events. In the Chinese tradition, instead, according to Yang, the human and the divine, politics and religion, action and norms have always been profoundly intermingled, so that moral judgment could easily be distorted and controlled by secular interests. Confronted with the ideological ends of Marxism and the crisis of Classical Thought, only Christianity can offer, according to Yang, the solid ethical foundation that modern China desperately needs.

It is interesting to note how, as a consequence of all this, Yang Huilin so emphatically stresses the “difference,” the “otherness,” and the “newness” of Christianity in respect to Chinese thought. In a counter-current way, Yang is critical regarding Christianity’s attempts at inculturation, including those of Matteo Ricci. He fears that in some way inculturation might lessen the novelty of Christianity; Yang wants Christian thought to safeguard and to promote its “difference.”

Yang Huilin, a professor of Chinese literature, was attracted to Christianity through his interest in literature. When he read Shakespeare, he understood that the works of Shakespeare are filled with biblical citations, that it would be impossible to understand Western literature without knowing the religious foundation of the civilization that has produced this literature.

Professor Yang then decided to promote Christian studies in a systematic way in his university, where in 1995 he founded the Institute for the Study of Christian Culture. Since 1998, Yang has been publishing an important semi-annual periodical entitled *Christian Culture Study Journal*, in which Chinese and international authors publish numerous, in-depth Christian studies.

Christianity as the “Spirit” of the West: Li Pingye

Li Pingye⁸, a scholar of Christianity who is a member of the United Front of the Communist Party, has shown a significant intellectual sympathy for and a remarkable closeness to “Cultural Christians.” The collapse of Marxist ideology and the spectacular introduction of the market economy seem to have damaged China’s ethical foundations. Li Pingye, together with Yang Huilin, belong to those who detect in Christian thought a moral resource for the country. Li Pingye describes, almost painfully, the devastating consequences of China’s frenzied modernization: “Worship of money, hedonism, extreme individualism, covetousness, corruption, drugs, prostitution, crime...We have become lone souls, that wander in an endless spiritual void. The future is to be feared: what will become of the Chinese people?”⁹ In a society where the market is paramount, a number of intellectuals, marginalized by the logic of the market, find in Christian thought and faith a moral and spiritual way out.

Li Pingye also noted that when the policy of openness began (1979), Chinese intellectuals looked with dismay at the gaps between the material and spiritual progress of Western civilization, and China’s cultural and material backwardness. Seized with nationalistic pride, the intellectuals, physically and psychologically, went to the West to study the reason for the West’s success in order to transplant it back to China. They discovered that “Christianity is

⁸ Her thought is expressed in “The Attitude of Contemporary Chinese Intellectuals Toward Christianity,” in Philip L. Wickeri, Lois Cole, ed. *Christianity and Modernization, a Chinese Debate*. Daga Press, Hong Kong, 1995.

⁹ Li Pingye, “The Attitude of Contemporary Chinese Intellectuals Toward Christianity,” pp. 59-77.

at the source of human values and ethical norms.” In a word, the scholars noted how much Christianity had positively influenced every aspect of the Western world. They thus realized that to understand the West one must know Christianity.¹⁰

Many scholars desire to introduce those cultural foundations into China that have enabled the “Christian West” to develop science and technology, the arts, education, democracy and human rights, in a word: modernization. This approach to Christianity seems a bit pragmatic, in service to the “salvation of the nation,” the historical mission to which the intellectuals feel called since the May 4 Movement (1919). It is certainly more than a simple coincidence that on that occasion also, the Chinese intellectuals asked for the introduction of the two pillars of Western civilization: democracy and science into China, for its salvation. According to official ideology today China’s salvation lies in the country’s modernization program.

Li Pingye is also noted for having studied the phenomenon of “Christian fever.”¹¹ The latter is a vast movement of conversions to Christianity that took place in the 1990s. It is more than a simple coincidence that both “Christianity fever” and “Christian Studies” have developed in China during the same period.

The Humanism and Universality of Christianity: He Guanghu

He Guanghu,¹² one of the most admired scholars of Christianity on the international scene, and also alarmed at the moral collapse in the country, sees in Christianity “a hope for a better China.” He is a former researcher at the Academy of Social

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 59-64.

¹¹ See No. 83 of the journal *Tripod*, of the Holy Spirit Study Centre of Hong Kong, which is entirely dedicated to “Christian fever.”

¹² He Guanghu has published various studies: *With Heart, Without Problems*, Sanlian Publishing Company, Beijing, 1997. “Religious Studies and Their Connection with Political and Social Circumstances; Some Causes and Features of the ‘Christian Upsurge’ Among Chinese Intellectuals;” “A Religious Spirit: The Hope for Transnationalism in China Today,” published in *Christian Theology and Intellectuals in China*, Center for Multireligious Studies, University of Aarhus, 2003.

Sciences in Beijing. Now he is a member of the important project of religious studies at the People's University of China in Beijing. He Guanghu takes into account, perhaps with more perception than others, that the ethical principles of Christianity cannot be separated from their spiritual source. Christianity cannot be reduced to an instrument of modernization. It must rather be known and appreciated for its religious character. Christianity is a spiritual message that speaks to the heart of the person, and touches their humanity. He Guanghu, furthermore, having experienced the moral crisis and the suffering of the Chinese people, does not let himself fall into pessimism. He continues to believe in the human spirit, and maintains that modernization must, above all, be a work of humanization, reaching to the center of the heart, that is, it involves human persons and their values, including spiritual ones.¹³

He Guanghu maintains that Christianity cannot be reduced to a "spirit of Western civilization." It is rather a religion with a strong humanistic and universal character. As such, Christianity has the innate capacity for dialogue with all cultures, and can be considered in continuity with the best of China's cultural and religious traditions.

Distancing himself from Yang Huilin's idea of the "difference," the "otherness" and radical "newness" of Christianity, He Guanghu sees instead the inculturation of Christianity in China, the dialogue between Christianity and the great classical Chinese thought. He considers the continuity between these two great traditions as possible, useful, and also necessary. In a vision, perhaps a bit too optimistic, and that recalls the thought of the great Christian thinker John Wu Jingxiong,¹⁴ He Guanghu sees in

¹³ "I believe that the heart suffices to minimize many problems. If there were a little more altruism in the world, a little more patience, generosity, love and trust, if there were a little more sense of communion, responsibility, tolerance, sentiment, justice and benevolence, how many problems would be resolved."

¹⁴ John Wu Jingxiong (1899-1986) attempts to make a synthesis between Christian humanism and that of Confucius, between Christian spirituality and Taoist "mysticism." In his small masterpiece, *The Science of Love*, written in Hong Kong in 1943, John Wu, with deep spiritual emotion, interprets the experience and writings of St. Terese of Lisieux in terms of Confucian humanism and Taoist spirituality. His stimulating thought can

Christianity the supreme synthesis of Chinese wisdom. "When Confucianism's adoration of heaven is separated from the idolatry and the cult of fortune telling; when Buddhism's aspiration for perfection is separated from the flight from and contempt for the world; when Taoism's respect for life is separated from the practice of superstition, then we come very close to pure Christianity."¹⁵

Conclusion: Towards a New Stage of Humanism

While the contributions of other important scholars, among whom are Zuo Xiping,¹⁶ Gao Shining,¹⁷ You Xilin,¹⁸ Chen Cunfu,¹⁹ etc. are not represented in this study, I sincerely hope that these scholars will help the Chinese authorities and the people of culture to understand Christianity in a more positive way. Hopefully this remarkable academic phenomenon will prompt the regime and public opinion to overcome the ideological prejudice,

also be found in the collection of his studies: *Beyond East and West*, Sheed & Ward, 1951.

¹⁵ Leo Leeb, "Nach spirituellen Freiraumen suchen. Ein Interview mit He Guanghu," in *China Heute*, 96-97 (1998), 57.

¹⁶ Zhuo Xiping is perhaps the best-known researcher on Christianity in China. He is, in fact, the director of the Institute of World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in Beijing. He is the author of a number of publications, in which he has explored the theme of the Theory of Religions in China and in the West, the relation between culture and religion, and the importance of Christianity for Chinese culture and society.

¹⁷ Gao Shining is a professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. She has translated numerous classics of Western theology into Chinese. She is the author of numerous studies, in particular on the theme of Marxism and Christianity, and New Religions.

¹⁸ You Xilin is the director of the Centre for the Study of Culture Christianity at the Normal University of Shaanxi (Xi'an). An author of depth but still little known, he sees in Christianity the new spiritual strength that alone can give soul to the process of modernization.

¹⁹ A leader in Christian Studies, Chen Cunfu founded and directed the first center for Christian Studies in any Chinese university: the Centre for Research on Christianity, founded in 1991 at the University of Hangzhou (now Zhejiang University). Since 1995 Prof. Chen has been publishing *Religion and Culture*, a series of volumes where numerous Chinese and non-Chinese authors write on Christian subjects.

which regards religion as a pre- and non-scientific interpretation of reality. I especially hope that the in-depth research on Christianity, and on the history of Christianity in China, will help the regime overcome a second ideological prejudice: that Christianity is a foreign religion, an instrument of the West to affirm its own interests in China.²⁰ Although the governing authorities impose restrictions and exercise control over every reality that does not belong to them, they still seek advice on religious matters from some of these centers. For years now, through conferences, publications, research, scholarships, etc., there has been considerable cultural exchange between centers for Christian Studies in China and cultural institutions outside of China.

For my part, I believe that those scholars who fully appreciate the essential religious nature of Christianity, and do not approach Christianity instrumentally, will make a valuable contribution not only to the progress of their great country, but also to the progress of Christian thought in the world. Furthermore, I believe that a new season of Chinese humanism could be the central element in the dialogue. An encounter between Chinese and Christian humanism might very well be the common ground between the exigencies of a “new morality” aimed at by Chinese intellectuals on the one hand, and on the other, Christian thought, founded on the spiritual message of the Gospel.

²⁰ This judgment is supported, at least in part, also in the *White Paper on Religious Freedom* published by the Chinese government in October 1997.