

Christians and Freedom of Religion in the Early Republic of China

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On March 11, 1912, the legislature of the newly established Republic of China promulgated the Provisional Constitution. It contained 56 articles. Item 7 of Article 6 on Freedoms (自由) of the People (人民) specified that "Citizens have the freedom of religion" (七、人民有信教之自由).

The decision to put all religions on an equal footing was appreciated by the majority of the people. Christians, also, rejoiced in this decision, and, in the light of this freedom, they renewed their commitment to evangelization.

However, since the new Republic officially terminated all the imperial sacrifices to Heaven, and the rites in honor of Confucius, the traditionalists in China, still quite strong, were not happy. They still continued to offer the sacrifices to Confucius. A few years earlier, in 1906, the Manchu rulers raised the status of the ceremonies to Confucius from a second grade to the first grade, putting them on the same level as the sacrifice to Heaven. In fact, Confucius was made an 'Assessor of Heaven'.¹

During the Yuan Shikai period (1912-1916), the controversy on this issue became increasingly intense.

In 1912, Chen Huan-Chang (1881-1931), a graduate from Columbia University, founded the Confucian Society (Kongjiaohui 孔教會) in Shanghai. In 1913, he opened a branch in Beijing, and later one in Qufu, with the famous intellectual Kang Youwei (1858-1927) as president, and Chen himself as executive secretary. Within a short time, the society grew to include 130 chapters in China,

¹ Wing-Tsit Chen, "What is Living and What is Dead in Confucianism", in *Religious Trends in Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press 1953), pp. 4-5.

Japan, Hong Kong and Macau. In 1913 Chen also began to publish the Confucian Society Magazine, which made use of a new calendar starting with the year of Confucius' birth. In the same year, the Society submitted a petition to the Government of the Republic to adopt Confucianism as the state religion.

Prominent intellectuals, like Yen Fu (1853-1921) and Hsia Tseng-Yu (1865-1924), became leaders of the movement when they signed the petition. Other scholars supported it, on the basis that Confucianism was the crystallization of several thousand years of Chinese civilization. Foreign scholars, like Reginald F. Johnston (1874-1938), also joined the Confucian Society. Piles of telegrams from almost every province poured into the capital in support of the movement. President Yuan Shikai (1859-1916), due to his monarchical ambitions, was also fully in favor of it.

A permanent Constitution was just in the process of being drafted.

"In July 1913 when the Constitutional Commission of Parliament started to draw up a draft constitution for the Republic of China, known as the 'Temple of Heaven Draft', an article providing for the establishment of Confucianism as a state religion was proposed by members of the Jinbudang [進步黨 Progressive Party]. It was opposed by the members of the Kuomintang [國民黨 Nationalist Party] and soon became a heated debating point throughout the country."²

However, from the very outset, the general sentiment of ordinary people was overwhelmingly against the establishment of a state religion. One of the earliest to oppose it was Kang's outstanding pupil, Liang Qichao (1873-1929), who declared that "those who want to preserve the Confucian religion merely put modern thought in Confucian terms and say that Confucius knew all about it... They love Confucius; they do not love truth..." Chang Tai-yen (1868-1936), the 'Great Master of Chinese Studies', whose scholarship and opinions were respected by radical and conservative alike, condemned the movement as backward, because

² Tse-tung Chow, *The May Fourth Movement*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1960, pp. 291-292.

“China has never had a state religion”. Cai Yuanpei (1867-1940), soon to emerge as the dean of Chinese intellectuals, likewise strongly opposed making Confucianism the state religion. For him Confucianism was not a religion at all. So, many intellectuals, even from the Confucian tradition, raised their voices in protest, and, indeed, they played a major role in defeating the proposal to make Confucianism the state religion.

The Draft Constitution Committee, meeting at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing on 13 October 1913, declined to legalize Confucianism as the state religion. Finally they came to a compromise and stated in Article 19, Line 2 that “in national education, the doctrine (dao) of Confucius should be the basis for the moral cultivation of the citizens.”

The role played by Christians

Christians, though a small minority, played a secondary but active role in the debate to prevent Confucianism from being declared the state religion.

Chen Wing-Tsit wrote: “We must not forget that in the opposition to the state religion, Christians played a noble part. The Society for Religious Liberty, organized by Protestants and joined by Roman Catholics, Moslems, Taoists and Buddhists, sent many telegrams to the Parliament protesting against making Confucianism the state religion... But Christians were then not influential enough to play a decisive role.”³

An article, published in *Le Missioni Cattoliche* in 1914,⁴ provides a slightly different version of the events:

“The situation was quite serious. Protestants and Buddhists raised the alarm, but in a short time their enthusiasm quieted down. The Buddhists, reassured of the benevolent intentions of the Government concerning

³ Wing-Tsit Chen, *Religious Trends in Modern China*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1953, p. 13.

⁴ “Un bel trionfo del Cattolicesimo in Cina”, in *Le Missioni Cattoliche* 1914, pp. 15-17.

their daily food allowance, ceased the protest. The Protestants very soon found an accommodation. The courageous Catholics of Tianjin did not get discouraged; they renewed their efforts and looked for all and every possible means to achieve their aims. First of all, they made their voice heard through the press. The Catholic publication of Tianjin, *Guangyilu* (廣益錄⁵), the organ of the Union of Catholic Action of the provinces in North China, played a very substantial role with its articles and its lively debates, and certainly without its valuable contributions, they could not succeed...”

A booklet, with the title “Notes on the fight against a state religion — the whole story” published by ‘Chinese Catholic Action’ in 1914,⁶ provides further details and an explanation about the course of events and the role of Catholic laymen in the issue.

“Just a glimpse at the newspapers for the years 1913-17 gives the impression of an ongoing fight of the Chinese Catholics for freedom of religion. Every two or three days, petitions or appeals of Catholics from different places appeared in the press, addressed to the President and to members of the Senate or the Parliament. Regularly, we come across announcements or reports of meetings of Catholic Action on the issue. Whenever the campaign for religious freedom gained some success, we would find an echo a few days later in the newspapers. But rarely were we informed about the individuals who organized the campaign or about the people fighting behind the curtain ...”

The booklet also provides the names and initiatives of the main participants.

⁵ Later, it changed the name in *Guangyibao* (廣義報).

⁶ P. Van Haelemeersch, «La liberté religieuse et la Religion d'Etat sous l'ancienne République Chinoise: 'L'Action Catholique Chinoise en action'», in *Courrier Verbiest*, XX, décembre 2008, p. 2.

Beginnings in Tianjin

At the turn of the 20th century, the Catholic Church in Tianjin was in the vanguard of making the Catholic Church's voice known in China. On May 12, 1902 a Catholic intellectual, Ying Lianzhi (英斂之 1867-1926) founded the *Dagongbao* (大公報). Its purpose was to answer slanderous statements against the Church published in the non-Christian press. On January 22, 1912, the first Catholic weekly, *Guanyilu*, saw the light of day under the editorship of the same Ying Lianzhi. However, the impetus behind the project was the Belgian Lazarist missionary, Fr. Vincent Lebbe (雷遠明 1877-1940). After two months the weekly was selling seven hundred copies, and not long afterwards it reached two thousand copies, spreading even beyond Tianjin. At about the same time Fr. Lebbe started to organize lay Catholics into groups for the 'Propagation of the Faith' and for 'Catholic Action'. The first Catholic Action group was formed in Tianjin in the summer months of 1913, and it soon became involved in the fight against making Confucianism the state religion.

It was to the credit of a few Tianjin lay Catholics that action was taken. On the evening of September 23, 1913, a first meeting was summoned at the Wanghailou Catholic Church. The speaker, Liu Shourong (劉守榮), recalled episodes from the Boxer persecution, which happened right in that church. The church itself was burnt to the ground at that time. Liu warned that if Confucianism became the state religion, the freedom of the other religions would be in danger. There was also the possibility of another oppression of Christian believers. This might force foreign powers to intervene, as happened in the past. This in turn could provoke another strong wave of xenophobia, making Christians once again victims, like in 1900.

Prompt action was required. Three eminent Catholics agreed to set up a task force: Liu Shourong, Xing Shifu, and Li Denghua. They took as a priority the opening of a fighting front in the capital Beijing. Others were invited to join forces with them, and to issue hand-outs to spread knowledge of the movement. The clear message for all Catholics was: this problem is urgent. Meanwhile, the president of Catholic Action in Beijing and member of the

Parliament, Wei Pizhi, arrived in Tianjin. Liu explained to him the strategy of the task force, and convinced him to join it. On September 27, the four took the train for Beijing to start their work. They took up residence in Ma Xiangbo (1840-1939)'s home. He was another prominent Catholic and a retired civil servant. Being a jurist, he gave them some practical advice: he proposed that they work in the name of Catholic Action, to avoid being identified and involved with the Catholic Hierarchy, which at that time consisted wholly of foreign bishops. Ma suggested that they avoid arousing suspicions of any foreign influence. There was however another practical problem: in order to submit a petition to the Parliament, the signature of at least five persons was required. Soon another outstanding Catholic from Beijing, and a member of the Republican Party, Ai Zhiming, agreed to join the movement.

The group tried to meet the Commission for Drafting the Constitution, but was unsuccessful. Their request to meet the president of Parliament was also rejected. They decided to approach one by one the members of Parliament, who were invited to a press conference in the Chang'an Hotel on Monday October 6, 1913. Participation in the press conference was good. For the first time, the Catholic task force could communicate their message to people directly involved in the decision making process about Confucianism.

On October 13, as has already been stated, the article related to Confucianism as the state religion was cancelled. But a compromise concerning a national education based upon Confucian doctrine (the Article 19.2) was settled upon.

Second stage of the fight

Catholics in Tianjin, meanwhile, although rejoicing that a danger had been avoided, still considered the situation serious. So, the Catholic task force, back from Beijing, called an extraordinary meeting. They took turns in explaining to a well attended assembly the bad consequences of the above-mentioned compromise for Catholics and for members of other religions. The Catholic campaign began anew with even greater intensity, and several fronts were opened up. First, the Catholic task force contacted the

Protestants. In Tianjin contact was made with the Protestant organization, the International Reform Bureau, which was mainly engaged in the fight against opium. From them they received several letters of recommendation for contacting Protestant personalities in Beijing.

On November 1, the Tianjin Catholic and Protestant groups of supporters officially united at a meeting in a Protestant church. Everyone agreed to work together for a common purpose. At the same time, someone proposed contacting the Muslims, Buddhists and Taoists. The result was the decision to organize an 'Association of the Five Religions'. The Muslim Ma Longbiao, the former military commander of Shandong province, gave orders to the Muslim League of Tianjin to stand with the Catholics and Protestants on this issue.

Meanwhile, in Beijing, Li Denghua contacted one by one the members of the Parliament and Senate, who belonged to both the Nationalist Party and the Progressive Party, winning to the cause about 230 members. Liu Shourong, with the help of Ai Zhiming, also succeeded in speaking to a meeting of the Republican Party.

The Catholic task force, at last, managed to obtain an audience with the vice-president of the Senate, Wang Zhenting, who agreed to listen to their opinion. Being himself a Christian, his reaction was positive. Everyone was encouraged. But their joy was short-lived. It lasted only until early November 1913, when President Yuan Shikai outlawed the Kuomintang, the Nationalist Party, the major party in the two Chambers of the legislature.

The movement stalled, and the Christians took advantage of the delay. The November issue of the *Chinese Recorder* published a protest against making Confucianism the state religion, which was widely spread among the authorities in Beijing. A committee in Beijing representing all the Christian Churches asked for full religious liberty in accordance with the Provisional Constitution.

The Association of the Five Religions also met again. Its members strengthened their links, and formed the association into a solid coalition (early December 1913). It was formally established under the name of 'Petition Group of the United Religions.' Appointed interim president was the Protestant Cheng Yingyi, and

two other Protestants, Liang Yayi and Du Zhuxuan, were assigned to be in charge of drafting the statutes.

*The National Review*⁷ in its November 1913 issue published the text of the main articles:

Liberty of Worship.

Negotiations have been and are going on amongst various religions to form an association of all religions to preserve the liberty of worship stipulated in the Provisional Constitution of the Chinese Republic...

Article 2. — The object of this association shall be to petition for liberty of worship, to object to fixing any State Religion, and to prevent the passage of laws tending to impair the equality of various religions.

Article 7. — All religions shall combine together to petition the National Assembly during the time of the discussion of the combined session for passing the National Constitution, to keep carefully to the provision made in the Provisional Constitution for religious liberty, so that all religions shall be equal, not allowing any particular religion to have any preference in the Constitution. They will also petition the Government not to show any difference amongst the religions in the administration and the judiciary.

Article 8. — After the organization of this association, each religion shall appoint lecturers to every place to give lectures, and to write articles for publication in various places to arouse the same opinion amongst the citizens of this country.

Article 9. — This association shall confine itself within the law, and no violent measures will be adopted.

The statutes clearly stated the means to take if one of the Religions should receive a privileged status in the Constitution,

⁷ Quoted in *The Chinese Recorder*. For all quotations from *The Chinese Recorder*, see http://www.archive.org/stream/chineserecorder45lodwuoft/chineserecorder45lodwuoft_djvu.txt

including a full boycott of that Religion. Extremism, however, was to be avoided.

A few days later, the work of writing the Draft Constitution restarted. However, on January 10, 1914, President Yuan formally dissolved the Parliament, annulling the 1912 Provisional Constitution. On January 14, a long document proposing the establishment of Confucianism as the state religion was handed to the Administrative Committee for consideration.

In response to a request from the Confucian Society that the schools be ordered to include the study of the Confucian Classics in their curricula, President Yuan officially replied that such studies must never be abolished. On February 9, an official mandate ordered that the Republic should continue to honor Confucius according to traditional custom.

Due to Yuan's objections, the Temple of Heaven Draft Constitution was abandoned on May 1, 1914, and a new Constitution, the Constitutional Compact (中華民國約法 *Zhonghua minguo yuefa*), which became known as the Yuan Shikai Constitution, was promulgated.

The interest in Confucianism appeared to be on the increase especially in South China, based upon its emphasis on patriotism. The Sichuan provincial assembly voted to make Confucianism a state religion, although some protest to such a move was registered in Chengdu.

In the meantime, the political scene was worsening with each passing day. On November 7, 1914, Japanese troops occupied Qingdao. On January 18, 1915, Japan submitted the 21 Demands to the Chinese Government, and on May 25, with the signing of the Sino-Japanese Treaty, forced China to accept them.

“In October 1914 the first National Congress of Catholic Action took place in Tianjin, with Fr. Lebbe presiding. The lay leaders present at the Congress were sufficiently aware of the real interests of their country to protest against the government plans for imposing Confucianism as the state religion. In 1915, when China was being humiliated by the ‘twenty-one demands’ imposed by the Japanese, the patriotic committee in Tianjin invited Fr. Lebbe to make a speech on the love of one’s country. He

electrified an audience of 6,000 by what he said. On October 10, 1915, the fourth anniversary of the proclamation of the Chinese Republic, a Catholic daily was launched in Tianjin, *Yishibao* (益世報 The Social Welfare). It was objective, independent and rapidly became the daily with the largest readership in North China.”⁸

The initiative for publishing *Yishibao* came from Fr. Lebbe, but with the cooperation of lay leaders, such as Liu Shourong (劉守榮), Du Zhuxuan (杜竹萱), the brothers Liu Junqing and Liu Huoxuan (劉浚卿、劉豁軒), Yang Shaoqing (楊紹清), and others.

Through the newspaper, they continued their battle against the attempt to set up a state religion.

But the situation only seemed to get worse. Yuan Shikai, with his monarchical ambitions, leaned heavily on the propagation of Confucian orthodoxy. On December 12, 1915, he abolished the Republic and declared himself Emperor. In preparing for his ‘coronation’, he was careful to sacrifice to Confucius. On January 1, 1916, he bestowed the title ‘Prince’ on Kong Lingyi, who claimed direct descent from Confucius, granting him a yearly pension. A yearly sum of \$12,000 was also granted for performing sacrifices to Confucius. The government gave a silver seal to forty religious practitioners in its employ at the temple in Qufu, while \$4,000 per year was provided for the upkeep of this temple to Confucius. A few societies and periodicals, specializing in Confucianism, were also established to support the monarchical system, which lasted however only until March 22, 1916.

After the death of Yuan on June 6, 1916, Parliament reconvened and resurrected the 1912 Provisional Constitution. Article 19 of the Temple of Heaven Draft Constitution became again a crucial issue. Moreover, some parliament members resumed their efforts to establish Confucianism as the state religion. Kang Youwei wrote a letter to President Li Yuanhong and Premier Duan Qirui making the same proposal. He even produced his own draft constitution embodying the same idea, but not many members of

⁸ Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, *Christians in China*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2007, p. 389.

parliament supported him. In August 1916, Parliament again discussed the issue of declaring Confucianism as the state religion in the Draft Constitution.

The proposal obtained strong support from the conservatives. However, the new reformers furiously opposed them. The Petition Group of the United Religions also took up again the battle against the proposal, standing solidly on the side of the reformers.

Parliament was again dissolved on June 12, 1917. After Chang Hsun's brief attempt to restore the empire, from July 1 to 13, 1917, Parliament met in extraordinary session in Canton, on August 25, 1917. By September 1918, Parliament had begun holding normal sessions, and it resumed deliberations on the unfinished constitution. However its work went on very slowly due to internal dissent.

However, in recent years, the 'new reformers' had taken up the main roles in the debate. Their attacks no longer consisted only of opposing Confucianism as a state religion, but they were against the entire Confucian tradition itself. They were members of the New Culture Movement, intellectuals and students led by outstanding personalities. Examples were Chen Duxiu, with his magazine *Xinqingnian* (新青年 New Youth, *La Jeunesse*, from September 15, 1915 onwards), Cai Yuanpei (1867-1940), chancellor of Beijing University from the end of 1916, Wu Yu (1872-1949) and Hu Shi (1891-1962), who published the first book in the Chinese vernacular language, *Outlines of the History of Chinese Philosophy* (1919). This work dismissed the traditional sacred image of Confucianism. Chen Duxiu and Wu Yu, in particular, criticized Confucian doctrine as a whole, presenting very strong arguments. Wu Yu, the most critical, even wrote: "Filial piety has turned China into a big factory for the manufacturing of obedient subjects."

Although the critique was strong, a certain compromise still was maintained. On October 10, 1923, when the Constitution was promulgated, its Article 12 read: "A citizen of the Republic of China shall be free to honor Confucius and to profess any religion; such freedom shall not be restricted except in accordance with law."

'Honoring Confucius' was explained to mean simply 'respect' without any religious connotations. However, the traditional

mindset of the people still prevented many of them from understanding the full legal meaning of 'equality of religions' and 'freedom of religion'.

The two objectives in the Christian struggle

During the whole argument, Christians, and particularly Catholics, aimed constantly to achieve the two following objectives: a) to clarify the true meaning of religion and freedom of religion, and b) to defend the proper autonomy of Religion / Church from any government's 'patronage'.

First of all, the Christians wanted to make clear that the main aim of their struggle was not against the Confucian tradition or doctrine as such, but just against the plan to set it up as the state religion. They felt that this could jeopardize the right understanding of the nature of religion and of true freedom of religious worship for everybody.

The editorial in the January 1914 issue of *The Chinese Recorder* explained:

"The protest, published in our November issue, against making Confucianism a State Religion has been widely scattered amongst those in authority in Beijing. That the movement against making Confucianism a State Religion is not due to opposition to Confucianism as such seems to be well understood. There is still, however, doubt as to what the nation at large desires..."⁹

In fact, Christians continued to appreciate the doctrine and the moral principles of the Confucian tradition. Just two examples will suffice to demonstrate this.

"Even more amazing is the fact that one of the first to offer a revaluation [of Confucianism] was a person with no training in the Confucian Classics, a Christian, and a revolutionary — Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925). At the time when rebels of the Intellectual Renaissance were crying 'Take down the Confucian sign-board', Sun Yat-sen had

⁹ See Note 7.

the courage to turn to Confucian tradition for the psychological basis of his political doctrines...”¹⁰

In fact, while he was attempting to modernize political institutions, Sun made the traditional Chinese virtues the ethical basis of his reconstruction. He wished to revive them. He appreciated the Chinese traditional virtue of *ren*, and his Three Principles of the People's Livelihood (三民主義 *Sanmin Zhuyi*) echo the ideal of *Datong*, the universal commonwealth of Confucian tradition.

The second example is the rationale two Catholics, Ying Lianzhi and Ma Xiangbo, gave for wanting to set up a Catholic university in China:

“In 1912, Vincent Ying Lianzhi [1867-1926] and Ma Xiangbo [1840-1939] wrote to Rome to inform Pope Pius X of the urgent need for developing Catholic university education in China. They pointed out the new challenges of the times; under the Government of the new Republic the rites in honor of Confucius were no longer compulsory in schools. Protestants — American, English and German — were founding many institutions for higher studies; Catholics should be better prepared to take part in the political life of their country and to contribute to its modernization...

In 1913 Vincent Ying Lianzhi founded a small academy for some forty young Catholics in Xiangshan, ‘the scented hills’, in the west of Beijing. This modest foundation took the name of Furen Xueshe 輔仁學社, which means ‘to foster ren’, the Confucian virtue of humanity as the perfection of all virtues...”¹¹

¹⁰ W.T. Chen, o.c., p. 21. However his Three Principles of the People, according to Sun Yat-sen himself, is “the crystallization of the ancient and modern, Chinese and Western thought, adjusted to the modern circumstances”. He was influenced by Lincoln’s “government of the people, by the people and for the people”.

¹¹ Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, *Christians in China*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2007, p. 393.

The Meaning of Religion and of Freedom of Religion

More difficult to comprehend was the concept of 'Religion' and, consequently, the term 'Freedom of Religion'. People had different understandings of these terms.

At that time, the general understanding of the majority of Chinese people, both common citizens and of Christians, concerning 'Religion' was derived from the model of the Christian Churches, and was understood as 'membership in an institutionalized and hierarchical body, a church, with doctrines, moral rules and rites, as well as with educational, social or charitable services'. Both parties debating about whether Confucianism was a religion or not argued from this concept of Religion, with all the abovementioned elements. This is clearly seen in the attitude of the strongest supporter of Confucianism as a state religion, Kang Youwei:

"In spite of his traditionalism, Kang's enthusiasm for religion may well have been influenced by his observations of spiritual life in the West during his tours of Europe and America. Order and peace in the West, he observed, were maintained not by legalism, but by religion, which 'rules people as an unseen force'. Kang's plan to organize Confucianism in a hierarchical order followed the pattern of the Roman Catholic Church. In grafting organized religion onto Confucianism, Kang was inspired less by his belief in the supernatural than by fear of the developing political and social chaos. He tried to use Confucianism as a cure for China's moral laxity, and he thought this could be done by establishing Confucianism as the national religion and equipping it with an elaborate organization. He hoped that Confucianism as a religion would strengthen the social and moral bonds and keep the country in good order."¹²

Kang's attitude clearly shows his understanding of Religion or Church as a strong institution, with its own activities and social commitments, but also as an instrument for social order, a tool in

¹² Chester C. Tan, *Chinese Political Thought in the Twenty Century* (New York: Anchor Books 1971) p. 28.

the hands of the state for the benefit of society. For him, the traditionalists' petition to make Confucianism the state religion seemed to have been based more on the need for nationalistic and moralistic purposes, rather than on a genuine conviction in the intrinsic value of Confucianism as a religion. In other words, Kang and the traditionalists understood 'Religion' as an institution with religious and social activities, but only for utilitarian and social objectives. Consequently, due to such a myopic view of religion, they misunderstood the true sense of 'Freedom of Religion'.¹³

Some Chinese intellectuals not only opposed Confucianism becoming a state religion, they also opposed it becoming an ideology with a religious dimension. However, they did agree with part of Kang Youwei's concept of Religion, namely that it is an instrument for social welfare, but under the full control of the civil authorities. They adopted the concepts of 'Religion' and 'Religious Freedom' from the French understanding of *laïcité* (laicity). That is, they reduced Religion to simply an internal and private belief of individuals. To express religion publicly, these intellectuals held, religious believers should get the permission of, and submit to the control of the civil authorities.

Consequently, religious freedom both for Kang Youwei and the liberal intellectuals was understood simply as individual freedom to have internal religious convictions, and 'freedom of religion' was reduced to just 'freedom of conscience'. The public expressions of religion, no matter when or how, should be kept under the strict control of the civil authorities in order to preserve social order.

"The rector, Cai Yuanpei argued the case from the typically French concept of *laïcité*, the notion that religion is a matter of individual private choice and should have no public place or influence in society; he went on to defend the idea that aesthetic values should be

¹³ See T.T. Chow, "Anti-Confucian Movement", in Feuerwerker, Murphy, and Wright, eds. *Approaches to Modern Chinese History* (University of California Press 1967), p. 291 ff.

substituted for religious beliefs, since these beliefs were but the dreams of suffering humanity...”¹⁴

By 1922, with the Anti-Christian Movement, Religion was considered as an outdated concept by many intellectuals, especially by those with leftist leanings. In a best case scenario religion was considered as a personal conviction and a private internal choice. This opinion became predominant in China and is still predominant there today.¹⁵

The Proper Autonomy of Religion

Christians, including Catholics, shared the same concept of Religion, namely that believers had membership in an institutionalized church. However, they understood freedom of religion in a larger context, which would include public worship, other religious activities, and the social outreach of their Churches.

They shared the conviction that Religion and all the Church's activities, both religious and social, were beneficial to society. In

¹⁴ J. Charbonnier, o.c., pp. 394-95.

¹⁵ However, at present, the traditional concept of 'laicity' and consequently the concept of 'religious freedom' appear to be in conflict. "First of all, *laïcité* pursues the privatization of religion, while true religious freedom admits public dignity to the religious institutions. In *laïcité* the 'separation wall' between politics and religion runs along the line between public space and private space, confining religion within the latter. In the pattern of religious freedom, the same 'wall' runs through the public space. In this way *laïcité* reveals itself as an organic element of a 'monarchical' concept of the social order achieved by the State, as full control of the entire public space. On the contrary, true 'religious freedom' shows itself to be an organic element of a 'poliarchical' concept of social order. In the public space many different institutions (political, economic, familiar, scientific, religious, etc.), which complete and limit one another, operate, thus allowing for personal freedom and responsibility..." See Saveria Manelli, *Una alternativa alla laicità* [An Alternative to Laicity] (Rubettino 2010). The writer, in the context of the separation of state and religion, political powers and religious rights, emphasizes that the two should not be considered as reciprocally irreducible as *laïcité*, which originated with the French Revolution would have it, but rather as diverse, autonomous and complementary.

order to carry them out, the Church must maintain its autonomy. Although they can cooperate with the state, they should not be under the full control of the state. Therefore, they sought to keep their churches (this was particularly true of the Catholic Church) free from undue interference from any civil government. In other words, they desired a separation between church and state. There could be cooperation on common issues, but each should enjoy its proper autonomy.

In fact, Chinese Catholics, in general, were against the patronage imposed upon the Christian Churches by Western governments. In the past, even several foreign bishops complained about the religious patronage, which Portugal and France, as well as other governments (Spain, Italy and Germany), wanted to exercise over the Churches. The Holy See tried several times to establish direct contact with the Chinese authorities, but they always met with failure, due to opposition mainly from the French government.

When in 1916 the French Consul wanted to extend the French Concession in Tianjin against the will of the Chinese authorities, the Catholic daily *Yishibao* published an article against it. Father Vincent Lebbe sent a protest letter to the French Consul in Beijing. This angered the French authorities, who tried through various means to have Fr. Lebbe sent away, and to have his supporters disbanded. This event gave a strong impetus to the so-called 'Tianjin Movement' of the local Chinese Catholics. They advocated not only the abolition of the patronage of France and other foreign governments over the Chinese Church, they also promoted an increase in the roles of Chinese clergy and laypeople in the church, a true sense of patriotism, a renewal of missionary methods, and positive initiatives toward greater localization and autonomy. However, the Movement, for several reasons, did not receive the wholehearted support of the foreign bishops.

Meanwhile, on the universal level, Pope Benedict XIV (1914-1922), in his efforts to launch a comprehensive reorientation of mission work, was determined to weaken the close ties between civil Governments and their national missionaries (Encyclical Letter *Maximun Illud*, 1919). The same line was followed by Pope Pius XI (1922-1939), who emphasized the supra-national character of the Christian faith. The appointment of the Apostolic Delegation

to China in 1922, with Msgr. Celso Costantini (1876-1958) as its head, had, among its aims, the elimination of the patronage of foreign civil governments over the Catholic Missions. In February 1924, the participants at a meeting of the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith denounced the French patronage as a 'scandal', and as a 'political instrument of the French Government'.

Finally, Pius XI with the Apostolic Letter *Ab Ipsis* (June 15, 1926) abolished the civil protectorate over the Catholic missions:

"The Holy See, in accepting such a protection, only intended that the work of the Missions would be guaranteed, and not that the political objectives, which various Governments would eventually nourish, should be favoured, by taking advantage of such a privileged condition."

Conclusion

Consequently, the Christian struggle over the issue aimed not only at clarifying the concept of 'Religion' and 'Religious Freedom', but also at achieving the true autonomy of Religion and Church, the full recognition of their religious institutions, of their public worship and social commitments, in the name of a proper separation between state and religion, and an authentic Freedom of Religion. Autonomy, in those days was understood in the proper and complete sense of the term, that is as an autonomy both from foreign and local civil authorities. Such an expanded concept was adopted by Article 18 of 'The Universal Declaration of Human Rights' in 1948:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

Christians also counteracted the anti-religious movement and agnostic trends, which were influencing China in those days. But their voice, due to their minority status, was not powerful enough to receive due attention. So the debate could not fully clarify the true

concepts of 'Religion', 'Superstition', and 'Religious Freedom'. Consequently, the understanding of Religion as mere superstition in the name of 'Mr. Science', or as a private moral affair of individuals in their consciences, just a personal interior belief, prevailed among the intellectuals. Freedom of Religion was thus reduced simply to freedom of conscience. Religious institutions or churches, therefore, were considered simply as places for spiritual 'comradeship', deprived of any social rights, and whose public expression of worship and social commitment should be under the full control of the civil authorities. Unfortunately, such a limited understanding of 'Religion' and 'Religious Freedom' has continued in circulation to this day, and is still dominant among the Chinese authorities and many Chinese intellectuals today. For them 'Freedom of Religion' is defined in only a very restricted way, meaning simply "believing in Religion", or *freedom of religious belief* (宗教信仰的自由), as is stated in Article 36 of the Constitution of the PRC.