

Higher Education in China and Young People's Faith

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In December 1977, after the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government decided to resume the National College Entrance Examination. The total number of student candidates, who sat for the examination in 1977, was 5.7 million. 270,000 students were admitted to university. My teacher was one of those lucky candidates. In 2013, there were 9.12 million student candidates for the exam, with 7.02 million being admitted to university. The total number of students, who graduated from university in 2014, reached 7.27 million.

From the above data we can roughly perceive the drastic changes and the reforms that have taken place in the higher education system in recent years. My own experience of study in the university has seen a similar series of educational reforms and experiments. Just like millions of young believers in the university, my life of faith has inevitably been affected by this series of changes.

Government Policy Requires the Separation of Education and Religion

In accordance with the Education Law statutes, the state is in charge of education, and there is a separation between education and religion. No organization or individual may use religion to obstruct the activities of the state education system. In the colleges and universities, the free and public profession of one's religious faith is strictly prohibited. One has to practice his/her faith in secret. Many young people dare not identify themselves as believers. Otherwise, they will be inexplicably hampered when applying for

scholarships or honorary titles, joining the Communist Party and Youth League, as well as getting promotions in the future.

However, these restrictions cannot entirely prevent the elements of faith from developing on campus. This is possible because expressions of faith are more personal and private than public religious activities, and therefore are more free. At the same time, since teachers and businessmen try to promote (either intentionally or unintentionally) western festivals, millions of university students know whom Christmas and Easter are about; the origin of Thanksgiving Day and Halloween, and from Valentine's Day they even learn the legend of a priest named Valentine. Non-believers are increasingly interested in these elements of faith! In this writer's environment, more and more young people want to take their wedding photos in churches, and at the most important moments in their lives, like their wedding day, they want to go to church to receive God's blessings.

At the same time, the Education Law states that the administrators of schools and institutions of different types and levels should respect the freedom of religious belief enjoyed by all citizens. They should not violate the basic rights of citizens to enjoy religious freedom, and they should not discriminate against students or other educators, who have a religious faith.

We notice that there are halal canteens in all colleges and universities. If there are Muslim students in the class, pork will be excluded at class gatherings. Students do not bring non-halal food to the halal restaurants either. The attitude of respecting religious beliefs has a great impact on the students, even though they do not understand the doctrines of the religion. This is a change from the past. In the past, there was lack of respect for religion in society, especially after the Cultural Revolution. At the same time, recent Popes have reaffirmed that respect for other religions is the foundation for interreligious dialogue.

Spreading the Faith Informally

On campus, what is beneficial to the germination and growth of faith is the aim of education itself, which is the pursuit of truth. This happens even though the "truth" is often restricted to the scope

of natural law, and is limited to ideology. Since the May Fourth Movement, colleges and universities have been holding high the banner of scientism only. This has penetrated the categories of good and evil, beauty and ugliness. However, the pursuit of truth is the cornerstone and the motivation of the promotion of science. This can be seen from many school mottos. In May 2014, the Chinese Academy of Science, the largest think tank in China, published an article about the pursuit of excellence in science, declaring in the first sentence: "Science is the enterprise of human beings in the search for truth."

Just as the "Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association" is often placed before the "Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China," "to love the motherland and school" is placed before the "pursuit of truth." However, it is difficult to restrict people from searching for the truth and coming to know God. On the contrary, scholars always stand up for the "pursuit of truth", and many excellent scholars dedicate their lives to it.

Similarly, intellectuals in modern times seek truth untiringly, and this untiring effort has its formative influence on the values of students. Many students know that the "Great Universal Geographic Map" -- with China at the centre of the known world -- was actually compiled by Matteo Ricci at the request of the Ming Dynasty emperor. The map was crucial in expanding China's knowledge of the world. Fr. Johann Adam Schall von Bell, S.J. reformed the Chinese calendar at the request of Emperor Kangxi. The calendar was used as a guide to grow seasonal vegetables. Jesuit Giuseppe Castiglione, S.J. designed the Twelve Bronze Chinese Zodiac sculptures in the Old Summer Palace. These sculptures are frequently everyone's focus of attention. Xu Guangqi experimented with the cultivation of sweet potatoes, a starchy vegetable from Central America, rich in carbohydrates, easy to grow, high-yielding and drought-enduring. Xu presented the "Sweet Potato Memorial" to the Emperor, in order to promote the cultivation of sweet potatoes. It saved a large number of people from starvation during a famine. Subsequently the population grew from 50 million in the late Ming Dynasty to 250 million in the middle of the Qing Dynasty.

The above-mentioned scientific and cultural exchanges between China and the West aroused the students' interest in the

religious faith of those scientists. They asked: what was the driving force behind their research and study? How could these scientists—who believed in God—and even clergy, make great contributions to the human and natural sciences? It seemed that faith was not a bad thing, but was rather a kind of motivation. In the pursuit of truth, such questions lead many students to know God the Creator and to believe in Jesus Christ, because “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1). Jesus Christ also said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). Ultimately all truth points to God.

Young People in Search of Truth, Goodness and Beauty

Cui Jian, a Chinese rock star, wrote the lyrics: “On this land, our students were covered by a red cloth since childhood, covering our eyes and covering the sky.” This was the political and ideological education of atheism, materialism and communism, deeply embedded in the education system, from primary school to the university level. The competition between thought control and the Chinese traditional way of Great Learning also promoted the reform of the higher education system. One day, at the school where I studied as a pupil and taught as a teacher, I saw these words on the wall of the playground: “The way of great learning consists in manifesting one's bright virtue, consists in loving the people, and consists in living in perfect goodness.” This is the first sentence of the Confucian Classics’ “Great Learning”, and is also the aim of education. However, it is totally different from the direction of the present educational ideology. Fortunately, the contrast between the ancient “educational ideology”—“bright virtue, loving the people and perfect goodness”—and the “ideological education” of Marxism—“atheistic, materialistic and communist—left a gap, through which young students could think independently about education, science and even truth.

In recent years, seeing that more and more students and scholars have joined Christian communities, some government departments jointly distribute official documents, forbidding people to spread their religious beliefs in universities and colleges. They attributed this phenomenon to the infiltration of western ideology. However, I clearly know that it is not the infiltration of any ideology, but rather it is because of our human nature that we are

always attracted by truth, goodness and beauty. In fact, the western ideology that has infiltrated into the traditional Chinese way of higher education is Marxism-Leninism. We can see the tactics used by the present government: on the one hand, it called upon the underground house churches to apply for a license and pledge allegiance to the government; but on the other hand, they demolished church buildings which they claimed to be illegal.

In the meantime, “money” and “power” have appeared in higher education. That is, universities have become commercialized and academic study has become bureaucratized. This has eroded the growth in faith of the young students. Colleges and universities constantly expand admissions to make more profit; elite education has been changed to vocational education; a lack of moral norms is prevalent; all of this is the result of the commercialization of higher education. Although it is described euphemistically as integration with the market economy, this trend has led to widespread criticism among many educational experts. They asked if the aim of higher education was to earn money for the school, and to teach students how to earn money? Is a person who can earn money more important than a person who has noble conduct?

For those young believers who leave their homes and parents to enter colleges and universities, they leave a family environment which was simple and faithful, and enter a commercialized higher educational environment. As their faith is neither mature nor strong, it can easily wither away quickly. We do not even know whether the students can learn a profession by which they can earn money in the future. It is also very sad that possibly they will also lose the faith inherited from their parents, who witnessed to that faith with their very lives.

However, thanks to the grace of God, higher education also gives these students (who are away from their parents) an enthusiasm for seeking the truth. In recent year, more and more youth communities are being established on city campuses. The withered faith can be revived. After being put through the furnace, the faith becomes more pure and strong, just like the prodigal son in the Bible, it “was lost and is found.”

The Integration of Science and Religion

Scientism by itself is not scientific at all. Therefore, it is wrong to misuse science to explain or to solve all the human questions about life, or even the distinctions between good and evil, and beauty and ugliness. I remember that one young believer was asking himself and other young people: "God is the way, and God is the truth. But what is the way? What is the truth? Is it science? How can science be God?" When he was told that "God is Love," he immediately understood that this "Love" is the greatest truth, and that all truth points to God. Although commercialization, the infiltration of bureaucratism into academics and other elements have led to spiritual dryness, the aim of higher education—the pursuit of truth and freedom—can inspire young believers to understand their faith, and become believers again.

Faith starts with knowledge. When one has personally experienced the love of God, when one has experienced the communion, the mutual trust and the giving spirit of the communities (which are free of mutual attack and malicious competition, but are filled with mutual love, peace and joy), the student realizes the meaning of "God is Love". This is the reason why more and more young students come to reflect on the meaning of Christ who was crucified on the Cross. This experience never happened before in campus life or in their social life, but they eagerly long for it from the depth of their hearts.

Moreover, there is an interesting phenomenon taking place in the national universities. Many professors compete for the position of vice rector of the secondary colleges of a university. It seems that the vice rector earns more respect than a mere professor, and can gain more benefits. On various occasions, ministers or supervisors are more popular than professors. Perhaps it is a variation of the old saying: "The student, having completed his studies, should apply himself to be an officer." Just like another old Chinese saying – "if the upper beam is not straight, the lower ones will go awry." (if a leader sets a bad example, it will be followed by his subordinates). Many students will be affected, including believers. We should not neglect these influences, including being impetuous and seeking personal gain, having grandiose aims but puny abilities, seeking nothing but profit, being inattentive to the interests of the unit, ignoring the existence of other people, which one often sees on the

internet. These negative elements can infiltrate into the life of faith, especially the community life of believers.

Truth, Goodness and Beauty Are Lost in the Pursuit of Power

When one spends more time on the pursuit of power than on the faith, some good qualities will be lost. Not only will “bright virtue, loving the people and perfect goodness” be lost, but also the “humility, obedience, spiritual poverty” which are valuable for the salvation of souls and the well-being of society. These valuable qualities will be buried because of a lack of moral education, as well as the commercialization of education and the infiltration of bureaucratism into academics. In the homily at the Mass for the inauguration of his Pontificate, Pope Francis said: “Authentic power is service; serve the poor humbly, and embrace with tender affection the whole of humanity.” However, in the process of pursuing power, people forget that “the nature of power is service”. It is easy for one to become the slave of power. Recently, many high-ranking officials and executives have been dismissed for corruption. Higher education in China is a distorted and changing system. It is both different from the ancient way of “Great Learning” and the western higher education system. With the heightening of political ideological education, higher education in China has become a system with “Chinese characteristics.”

Conclusion

As higher education has been commercialized and infiltrated with the culture of officialdom, it profoundly affects the development of faith of young believers. In this process, our religious beliefs have been restricted, limited, and have even withered away. However, thanks to the grace of the Holy Spirit, there is a force behind all these restrictions and drying up. Sooner or later this accumulated force will tip the balance. The “bright virtue, love of the people and perfect goodness” of the ancient Chinese way of Great Learning and the “pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty” of western higher education have created the space and

vitality for the growth of faith among young believers, which will bear fruit in the future.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI wrote in his 2007 *Letter to the Church in China*: “On the one hand, especially among the young, one can detect a growing interest in the spiritual and transcendent dimension of the human person, with a consequent interest in religion, particularly in Christianity. On the other hand, there are signs, in China too, of the tendency towards materialism and hedonism, which are spreading from the big cities to the entire country.”