

Culture-Christians on the China Mainland

by Tan Xing
translated by Norman R. Walling, S.J.

(Editor's note: Tan Xing is a distinguished Chinese scholar specializing in the field of Chinese and Western literature. He is also especially interested in the dialogue between Chinese culture and Christianity.)

I

Since the middle of the century, Christian missionary activity on mainland China has been severely curtailed. Moreover, an atheistic ideology secured such a firm grip on the legal authority system as to make any public expression of the Christian faith an occasion for promptly arousing people's political sensitivities. During the past decade, however, every level of society has taken note of a lessening of the government's hostility towards Christianity. Also, the number of Christians openly professing their faith continues to grow spontaneously and this in a society which professes atheism as part and parcel of its cultural baggage. Even more worthy of note has been the emergence of intellectuals and scholars who show an increasing interest in and concern for religion in general and Christianity in particular. This awareness of the spiritual import of religion is more

pronounced among intellectuals engaged in the study of culture and such allied disciplines as philosophy, the arts and humanities. While this phenomenon is not yet widespread--indeed its present condition might best be described as delicate and somewhat isolated--it does exist and shows every indication of continuing to grow. Some mainland religious authorities would go so far as to say that Christianity's impact on present day China is even more pronounced outside the Christian churches than it is within them.

Religious authorities call these intellectuals who study and subsequently tend to profess the Christian faith *Culture-Christians*.¹ Could the use of this term signify that *Culture-Christianity* might become one of the forms which Chinese Christianity might take in the future?

Theologians who try to explain this phenomenon merely in terms of "a crisis in faith" or those who become overly enamored of this real but still very fragile group of "Christian Enthusiasts" run the risk of oversimplifying the situation. When we speak here of the existence of *Culture-Christians* or *Culture-Christianity* as a possible option for the Chinese Christian Church of the future, we merely

intend to draw attention to the fact that Chinese theologians are now being confronted with a whole set of theological questions. For example, how is the *Culture-Christianity* defined, and what is the specific nature of its theology? What will be its meaning as the history of Chinese Christian theology develops? What relationship will it have to the mainline Christian churches, what role might it play in the over-all development of Chinese culture?

II

Strictly speaking *Culture-Christianity* as an organized entity does not yet exist in contemporary mainland China. All we are saying at present is that the Christian faith and its theology has become one of the concerns (one among many) which has captured the interest of a significant number of mainland intellectuals. This gives rise to an interesting question. At least some intellectuals and scholars have already adopted a definite ideological position. Since Christian theological thought already admits to a great variety and diversity of stances, what possible directions will the theologies of these intellectuals, who have already adopted a particular theological position, take in the future? At the least, they already provide abundant material for a possible social study on what particular trends in Western theology (*Orientierung*) they could eventually be aligned with.

When Church authorities refer to these intellectuals as *Culture-Christians* they seem to be indicating that since they only accept and defend Christianity as a

cultural ideology, they are not yet to be regarded as *bona fide* Christians, but merely as scholars engaged in research on Christian culture.

The designation *Culture-Christian* is in itself ambiguous. Someone professing a faith in Christianity as a cultural ideology, cannot be properly called a Christian. To be a Christian is to be rooted in faith in the person of Christ and God as His Father. A Christian must have faith in the Christ who died and rose from the dead. He must have experienced this new faith-life within himself, must allow Christ's teachings to become the moral guide of his conduct. Among those intellectuals who have adopted a particular theological position towards Christianity, however, only a few testify to having had this personal experience of a new life in faith.

This matter can be viewed from yet another perspective. If those intellectuals who already profess their faith in Christ but have no relationship with either the public church or house churches (the political climate may account for this, as well as the Church's attitude of indifference toward them) or do not have even the most basic social contact with them (again the reasons may be political and geographical), then, their identity as members of the Christian Church may not be too evident. Perhaps we have to make a distinction between "Christians" and "the Christian Church". It is possible to find some evidence in early Church history of Christians who professed the faith, but who were not necessarily members of an organized Christian community. In any case, when we view this matter from our present perspectives, can the Churches

recognize as Christian those who do not espouse any affiliation with a particular Christian organization or church community?

This question merits our serious consideration. As people in China gradually liberate themselves from the factors that have held Christian thought in isolation for so long, we can easily imagine in the future an increasing number of intellectuals coming forward to profess their faith in Christ. And if and when the time comes that many *Culture-Christians* having membership in no particular church do appear, then the phenomenon of a *Culture-Christianity* will make its presence known. We must not delay in beginning a theological study of this new phenomenon, but such a study will not be easy. One might do well to recall the controversies that flared up over several of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's proposals when they were first proposed.

Even the concept of culture is easily misunderstood. To comprehend or explain what is meant by *Culture-Christians* or *Culture-Christianity*, close attention must be paid to the latent meaning of "culture" as it is used in the political jargon of mainland China. One can obtain a fuller understanding of how this term is actually employed on the China mainland only by seeing it against the background of an atheistic ideological system which autocratically defines the meaning of words to suit its own purposes.

III.

The development of Christianity in China is historically related to the West-

ern missionary enterprise. The two were so closely identified that Christianity in China has always been viewed as a foreign religion. It also gave rise to a conflict between Christian thought and Chinese culture, a conflict which has yet to be resolved. Another consequence of this historical legacy is that the ontological relationship of Christ's nature and human nature has never been fully defined in Chinese theology.

The phenomenon of *Culture-Christianity*, however, has emerged and has had no historical relationship with Western missionary activity; neither has it any connection with the evangelical work of local Christian Churches (such work being, of course, substantially impeded in recent decades). This phenomenon, then, opens up new ground for theological study. All we hope to do here is to propose a few theological questions for consideration.

First and foremost the relationship between Chinese culture and Christianity must be re-studied from an entirely new perspective. The question of culture itself now becomes, in fact, a question of ontological reality. Chinese culture and Christianity can no longer be the fixed points of a dialogue between Chinese and Western cultures, but must proceed from an existential ontology. While Christianity in China may have begun its development under Western influences, it has now begun to develop on its own. It is not only intent on making changes in the overall relationship between Chinese culture and Christianity, but is bent on changing Chinese culture itself ... a culture that is now in the process of evolving

very rapidly. Chinese Christian theology must have its own horizon.

Because the phenomenon of *Culture-Christianity* is happening at a time when Chinese Church activity is curtailed and against a background of an absence of missionary activity, the "Three-Autonomies" policy, which was first proposed by certain Chinese Christians during the May 4 Movement (1919)² has proven itself to be completely out of tune with the times. Chinese theology is currently facing the challenge of what new shape the Chinese Christian Church must and will take in the future. Closely related to this is the fact that *Culture-Christianity* has no historical connection with the Western missionary activity of the past. Yet what some were proposing during the May 4 Movement, i.e. the "sinification of Christian theology", is still being proposed today. This discussion is already out of date. Clearly *Culture-Christianity* is not a phenomenon of Christianity within Chinese culture, but rather it is a Chinese cultural phenomenon within Christianity. With regard to the specific proposal for the establishment of a national or an ethnic church, not only history (consider the German Church during the Nazi period in Germany) but the present situation warns theologians of its perils.

The historical divisions of the Christian Churches--especially what Hans Kung terms the "Classical Conflict"--has no connection with China. It was the missionaries, especially Protestant missionaries, who brought sectarianism to China with them, and thereby a great deal of harm to the development of Christiani-

ty here. To offer but one small example, in the West both Catholics and Protestants used the term "God" to designate the Supreme Being, but in China each used a different term: "Tianzhu" (天主) for Catholics and "Shangdi" (上帝) for Protestants, and even a third term "Shen" (神) was favoured by some. In contrast, we note in the emergence of *Culture-Christianity* that its theological orientation is not sectarian but universal (Okumenisch), which also resonates well with the universalist movement of the present century.

IV.

In his writings Ernst Troeltsch points out that from its beginning the Christian Church has existed in three forms: the "Church" (Kirche), the "Sects" (Sekte) and the "Mystical Church" (Mystik)³.

The "Church" more often than not considered itself as the Kingdom of God on earth and the instrument of his salvation. It actively pursued a policy of adaptation to the world in which it found itself, and sought to become a Church for all peoples. Time and again throughout history it has made efforts to form alliances with the secular powers.

The "Sects" emphasized the small Christian community founded upon the personal experience of "re-birth". They emphasized the letter of the law rather than the spirit, ardently desiring to break with the present world. Much of their membership came from the lower classes. They were generally rejecting of cultural forms, and because of this the "Sects" had developed no theology to speak of.

Also, their communities tended to be highly exclusive.

The "Mystic Church", while also emphasizing personal spiritual experience, tended toward an individualistic style of religious belief, thereby weakening ecclesial community ties. Although its adherents did at times form themselves into communities, such communities maintained a strong spirit of individualism. Such communities also found it difficult to attain any permanent or lasting form. They considered religious insight and commitment to be formative elements in the creation of culture. They put great emphasis on Christian cultural forms and on a theology that was both scientific and reflective. Most adherents of the "Mystic Church" came from the educated classes.

Applying Troeltch's categories to the present situation of the Christian Church in the China mainland today can be a stimulating and enriching exercise. There is no need for me to prove that Troeltsch's religious sociology authentically describes the situation. I only wish to borrow his terminology in order to describe more effectively the various forms and characteristics existing at present in the Christian Church in China.

In my opinion, the "Three-Autonomies" Patriotic Movement or the Patriotic Association seem to fit into Troeltch's category of "Church" as it is found in contemporary China. Their attitude toward society, the country, nationalism and their tendency to side with the incumbent political power all serve to illustrate their identifying traits. If we look at the house churches, from the point of view of their form or their substance,

we could classify them among the "Sects" (sekte), especially the Protestant house churches. Whether or not the Catholic variety might be an exception to this merits further analysis. As *Culture-Christianity* continues to evolve, both in form and substance, it takes on more of the patterns of the "Mystical Church". This is especially noticeable when we keep Troeltsch's definition of "mystic" firmly in mind and do not become sidetracked by what the term meant during Europe's Middle Ages. Three characteristic points merit our attention: (a) its emphasis on individualism, which forms a pattern of religious belief quite distinct from that of the "Church" and the "Sects"; (b) the importance it places on the cultural aspects of Christianity, a Christianity creative of culture within the intellectual class; (c) its intimate inclination towards a scientific and reflective theology.

While the mainland "Church" in contemporary China is willing to give a grudging recognition to the "Mystical Church", the "Sects" continue to ignore it as if it didn't exist. On their part the "Mystics" look upon the faith of the "Sects" as "incomprehensible". A scholar once told me that he had in the past joined a house church only to leave it shortly after, when he could no longer put up with "the many elements of Chinese popular religion they used to express their beliefs." He left vowing never to return, but he did take a Bible with him.

The Chinese Christian Church is impoverished in not having a basic systematic theology. This holds true for the "Church", as well as the "Sects" who have no theology at all. If *Culture-Chris-*

tianity can really take hold in China, and by use of a scientific and reflective methodology promote the establishment of a systematic theology and an authentic Christian philosophy, it could well set the future form and pattern for the entire Chinese Christian Church.

V.

When talking about his personal style of theology, Jurgen Moltmann said that neither the Bible nor the Catechism kindled the first sparks of a living faith within him. As a result, he felt that when he studied theology everything was a completely new discovery. This experience is not unusual for *Culture-Christians* in China today. If the "Mystic Church" continues to evolve and develop a scientific and reflective theology, its shape and form will differ in many ways from the traditional theology of the Chinese Church.

What does Moltmann mean when he says that "everything in theology is a discovery of something completely new"? Obviously, he means that it is our own times and our own existential situation which generate our theological questions, and not the theological thoughts, positions and conclusions of the past. In the same way, the theology of the "Mystic Church" in China will find its theological agenda in the context of its own existential situation.

Two elements of that theological situation must be considered if this kind of theology is to take shape and form; first, its relationship to an atheistic faith-ideology, and second, its relationship to

present church theology. Each element has its own unique set of circumstances.

At the time of the May 4 movement in China, Christian thought was engaged in a fierce conflict with the atheistic scientific world-view of Chinese intellectuals. It ended only when Marxist ideology became the sole arbiter of secular orthodoxy. Chinese Marxists looked upon Christian thought as a rival ideology and set about eliminating it entirely. This brand of atheism, which is, in fact, a quasi-religion, makes the same kind of absolute demands on its adherents as any other faith-ideology and is the primary theological situation of *Culture Christianity*. A vital point, then, in understanding the theological situation now confronting *Culture-Christianity* is to recognize that the dialogue is not between those affirming or denying the existence of God, but rather between two kinds of faith-ideologies. A glance at recent Chinese history points this out quite clearly. Christian thought emerged in the Chinese contemporary culture, and its strongest opposition came not from the official government ideology but from the Marxist humanists, who were themselves the main object of government oppression, also on ideological grounds. It is evident then that the first task of our theological inquiry must be to make a critique of a faith's ideology as well as an ideology's faith.

Culture-Christianity must also consider its relationship to church theology. In the past, the general situation of church theology was characterized by an extreme liberalism on the one hand, and an extreme form of fundamentalism on the

other. This is still true today. In extreme liberalism (as exemplified by Wu Yaozong)⁴ Christian faith becomes an historical and rationalistic faith, while an extreme fundamentalism (as represented by Wang Mingdao and Ni Tuosheng)⁵, makes Christian faith into a private matter of individual salvation. The danger of the first position lies in its tendency to merge with an atheistic quasi-religious faith-ideology, while the danger of the second is to lose sight of the prophetic and universal nature of the Church. It is, then, our all important task to formulate a theological critique of Christian socialist thought while at the same time also developing a social critique of Christian theology itself.

Up to now, Chinese Christianity has had to make do with only a theology of the church. It has always lacked a systematic theology that is both scientific and reflective. This is a serious obstacle to Christianity's further progress in China--a fact that becomes even more evident when we consider the atheistic faith-ideology which lies at the heart of our present historical situation. Given these present existential and cultural circumstances, if the Christian faith has nothing of meaning to offer other world-views, be they secular or religious, then its existence and its faith will be limited to the narrow confines of its own pious conventions where, cut off from the rest of the world, it will be walled up within a prison of its own making.

Today on mainland China the "Mystical Church" is sending forth new buds within an existential atheistic environment and is taking root within this environ-

ment. But while remaining just where it is, it must also reach out to this environment. It must not leave this territory and search for some "Holy Land" of its own, where it can be fenced in by an atheistic ideology to live in isolation.

If this expression of Christianity is to develop a situational theology, it must also relate itself to contemporary trends in Western theology, both in Europe and America. It cannot stand alone as if it were some unique, original creation. This is because humanity's fundamental existential situation, ontologically speaking, is one and the same for all.

It follows from the above that our Chinese situational theology must have the following characteristics.

- 1) It must be a critical theology and its criticism bi-directional. This is to say that it looks inward to critique itself and even the church, and at the same time reaches out to critique the atheistic ideologies and beliefs of the world outside it. It is to be, then, both self-critical and critical of the larger social and ideological environment (Hans Kung and J. B. Metz). The norm for this criticism is the cross of Christ and the Word of God as found in the Scriptures. The crucified God is, then, at once the critical point and the foundation stone on which this theology is to be built (J. Moltmann).
- 2) It must be liberating and not despotic. At the core of this theology is a dialogue: man with God and man with man. The language

of theology is human language not God's language. Theology, being the product of human persons, can make no pretence of possessing its own divine power nor seek to establish its own claim on orthodoxy. It must be a theology that is always on the move, always seeking out the Word of God (Karl Barth).

- 3) It must be a scientific theology. This not only means that it adopts a scientific methodology in its dialogue with natural and applied sciences but that it also points to the scientific nature of theology itself (T. F. Torrance, P. L. Berger, W. Pannenberg).
- 4) It must be existential and a priori. This means that theology must penetrate the relationship between existentialism and apriorism moving toward the Word of God being within the world. It must cut through the entanglement of Chinese theology which is caught up in an antagonistic dualism that sets the Western world over against the Chinese world. It must bring Chinese theologians to see that theology is not based on nationalism but on an existing relationship between God and humankind (R. Bultmann, K. Rahner).
- 5) It must be an incarnational theology. This underscores the importance of theology existing in the here and now situation. It also gives direction to a theology of culture that emerges from its own

national tradition. This theology is, therefore, situational;--a theology that incarnates the Spirit of Jesus in the existing situation (D. Bonhoeffer and D. Sölle). It is also a theology that unfolds outward from within a culture. Culture is its body and form; God's Word is its soul and its substance. Christ's Spirit emerges then as the ground and pattern of culture (R. Guardini, H. U. von Balthasar, P. Tillich).

Chinese theology is not a borrowed theology that has now become Chinese, but a theology already existing in and emerging from the Chinese language and environment. There is, in the end, no substantial distinction to be made between Western and Chinese theology.

VI

If we compare the historical development of Christianity in China with that of Buddhism we find much rich food for thought.

First of all, we cannot speak about the translation into Chinese of the Christian classics in the same breath as those of Buddhism. This still remains a major problem impeding the progress and development of Christianity on the mainland. A systematic and complete translation of Christian classical writings has yet to appear in China. The only thing close to it is the *Christian Classic Library*, which is far from complete and part of which survives only in damaged form. Also, the quality of the translation is uneven and often questionable (especially

in its choice of Chinese idioms). Even so, this ambitious and worthy project was only made possible because of the promotion and support of Western missionaries in its early stages. If Chinese theologians continue to fail to give importance to the systematic translation of the Christian classics into the vernacular, then it does not augur well for a bright future for the Church. It will be instructive to compare the development of Christianity in Korea with that of China now that the Koreans have completed their magnificent work of translating the major Christian classics into the Korean language. What, in my opinion, seems most regrettable in all of this is that these translation projects never see the light of day solely because of the lack of financial support.

With the arrival of Buddhism in China, Chinese Buddhist schools of thought representing a wide variety and range of doctrines began to flourish. There was the Qing Tu (Pure Land) School which taught a popular form of Buddhism to those unlettered in the classics. At the other end of the spectrum was the Zen School which taught both a practical and theoretical Buddhism and the Idealist School which emphasized dialectics. Each of these schools created their own separate traditions. When it came to making progress in China, Christianity was no match for Buddhism. What is particularly noteworthy here is the striking similarity in the direction taken by both Christianity and the Qing Tu School. Both became popular movements focusing much of their efforts on the uneducated classes. If such popular religious movements do not also take into serious ac-

count the direction in which fundamental doctrine and systematic theology are taking, then it will be very difficult in the long run for Christianity to meet the challenges of modern Chinese society.

The history of Chinese theology is still comparatively young. But during the last decade its most important development has been in the transformation of its profession of a Christian faith received from abroad into a spontaneous search for meaning. This marks a turning point in the history of Chinese theology, and is key to its further development. The significance of what *Culture-Christianity* has to offer the Chinese Church in this particular area should not be underestimated.

Notes

1. Culture-Christians is used here to differentiate the meaning from Cultural Christian. The latter generally refers to a person who is a Christian more because of birth in a Christian culture than by commitment. Tr.
2. The May 4 Movement of 1919 was a movement of intellectuals against foreign aggression. Tr.
3. The author translated "Kirche" as the "Large Church", (大教會), "Sekte" as the "Small Church" (小教會), and "Mystik" as "Mysticism" (神秘教會). This English translation uses "Church", "Sects" and "Mystic Church" or "Mystics" always within quotations and capitalized. Tr.
4. Wu Yaozong was the founder of the Protestant Patriotic Association, and past Secretary of the Y.M.C.A. Tr.
5. Both Wang Mingdao and Ni Tuosheng are leaders in the Protestant house church movement. Tr.