

A New Vision for China

An Analysis of Liu Xiaofeng's Thinking

by Arnold Sprenger

The following article is an account of the major issues raised at a meeting of scholars in Beijing, in April, 1989. It is taken from the bulletin of SEDOS, the Mission Documentation Centre, Rome, and published here with the permission of the author and SEDOS. The footnotes and references can be found at the end of the Chinese edition of the article in this issue of Tripod.

I. Introduction

It is April 27, 1989. Troops of the Chinese Liberation Army have moved into Beijing to prevent students from staging another massive demonstration. At 9.00 a.m. scholars from such diverse fields as literature, philosophy, religion, sociology, etc. have assembled in the Academy of Social Sciences to hold one of their regular discussions.



In spite of the tense situation about twenty people have answered the invitation to the meeting of the Academy's Institute of Literature. The topic of this morning's discussion is the book **Salvation and Leisure** by Liu Xiaofeng.

Soon the scholars are engaged in lively discussion. They do not always agree with the theses of the young author, but they admire him for his rich knowledge and his courage to discuss religious questions about China and the West that have been taboo for many Chinese scholars. It soon becomes apparent that quite a few participants do not really feel at home in matters of religion. They are ready to admit this and are surprised to see how deeply issues in their own fields of study are connected with religious questions.

The discussion begins to focus on the issue of values in China and on questions of ultimate concern. In view of the student demonstrations and the 70th Anniversary of the May 4th

Movement the question arises: What may have been missing in China during the last seventy years? Could it be that Science and Democracy should have been joined by Religion?

Participants in the discussion know that Liu Xiaofeng has been writing a series of articles on Christian theology for the monthly *Du Shu*. They know too that these articles are especially well received by young intellectuals who are beginning to discover entirely new values in the realm of religion. Should this not be taken as a signal to Chinese intellectual circles? Such are some of the issues raised in this unique discussion.

II. Some Preliminary Discussions

1. Questionable Views of Modern Chinese Intellectuals

In the introductory passage to this book, Liu Xiaofeng confronts what he considers misconceptions on the part of Chinese intellectuals. He disagrees that the basic elements of Chinese cultural tradition are social ethics and aesthetics, whereas the West has almost exclusively concentrated on such phenomena as rational analysis, social changes, rationalization of the natural world, scientific methodology and scientific achievements.

He accepts the view that the web of Confucian and Taoistic thinking has permeated Chinese history, provided the morals for social life and supplied Chinese culture with a transcending aesthetics. He is also aware that rational analysis, logical thinking and a scientific spirit are very important aspects of Western culture. It is obvious to him, however, that these aspects are but part of Western tradition. The Greeks excelled in rational and scientific thinking but at the same time they cherished deeply their spiritual world. The Hebrews and Christians put even greater emphasis on spiritual values. Rationality and religion are thus the two forces that have been instrumental in the development of Western culture.

The Spiritual-Religious Tradition of the West

It is deplorable, he states, that modern Chinese thinkers have not, or have only superficially, looked at this phenomenon. Since the May 4th Movement they have concentrated on the study of Western science and technology but ignored or even

rejected the spiritual-religious tradition of the West. Certain Confucianists have even proposed an exchange between China and the West in which China accepts the scientific-technological knowledge and know-how of the West and offers to the West the Chinese ethical and aesthetical values which may save Western culture from disintegration and what they consider to be its present nihilistic tendencies. The author scoffs at such ideas and asks pointedly how Confucianists can offer to "save" the West when China finds herself presently in total cultural disarray. With its 5000 years of cultural heritage China appears unable to stand the test of modernization.

He seems to agree that the problems of our present technological age can only be solved at the place where they originated. A solution and much needed reforms can only be expected through serious consideration of the European cultural heritage.

Judaeo-Christian Ethics

Liu thinks it was a grave error that after the May 4th Movement China gave little or no consideration to the spirit of Judaism and Christianity contained in Western cultural tradition. This was all the more deplorable since in Judaeo-Christian ethics and religion the value of salvation has played such an important role. In the Judaeo-Christian spiritual tradition people equipped with free will may embrace evil; they may exchange darkness for light; the angel may become a devil. But people may likewise turn from darkness to light, they may long for the salvation that is promised to them.

Through his suffering in love, Jesus Christ established the basis for salvation, for the defeat of evil and of all dark powers by rejecting an absolute foundation for human values based only on society and on human thinking. What makes the post 1919 error even much graver is that it prevented Chinese scholars from establishing a sound basis for comparing Chinese and Western cultures.

2. Conditions for a Dialogue with Traditional Culture and between Different Cultures.

A dialogue with a traditional culture or between various cultural traditions is different from a study of cultural history which is concerned with facts and the interpretation of facts. In a dia-

logue with traditional culture(s), we accept historical facts. We then enter into a question-and-answer process, preferably with historical personalities on the basis of our present-day consciousness. We accept, for example, Hamlet and Qu Yuan and their works as facts. But we then begin to ask them questions which are our common concern and we try to answer the questions raised by them. In other words, we face the facts of cultural history and shun wishful (ideological) thinking. However, we do not treat these facts as dead relics but bring them back to life in a meaningful exchange of experiences and ideas.

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for dialoguing with cultural history
and among different traditional cultures.***

Such a dialogue with cultural history or between different traditional cultures will result in meaning for the future. Tradition moves in front of us; we inherit it but we also produce it by dialoguing with its philosophers and sages. However, all this presupposes that there are generally or commonly recognized meanings of cultural values. It also presupposes an attitude where neither the cultural history is condemned in its entirety nor criticism of any kind is flatly rejected.

A common language has to be established for dialoguing with cultural history and among different traditional cultures. What do expressions such as culture, democracy, religion, heaven, hell, faith, etc. mean for Chinese and for Westerners? When talking about Christian salvation, a common language, i.e. a common understanding of the questions involved is needed. We are not dealing here with preference for either the Chinese or Western languages; neither will mere translation from one language into the other be of much help.

Christianity's Dialogue with Cultural Heritage

Liu Xiaofeng suggests that Christianity has time and again entered into a dialogue with its cultural heritage in the course of its long history. Because of the many and often rapid changes in cultural consciousness and because of the growth of scientific thinking in the West, Christianity had to re-examine and to reclarify again and again traditional concepts and values, and

their linguistic expressions. This process is still continuing in our own time. Bultman's "demythologization" is a fitting example and is discussed at length by the author.

The various anti-tradition campaigns of the 20th century in China have scared many Chinese. Bultman's work shows that many more and much more dangerous anti-tradition campaigns were launched in the West especially against Christianity which is an essential part of Western culture. He refers to such movements as the Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, Historical Criticism, 19th century Historical Relativity and others which threatened to destroy the basis for religious as well as for general values.

A Common Language

Liu Xiaofeng suggests that life itself provides the common language for a dialogue between different cultural traditions. Common experiences such as deep joy and suffering, hope and despair, good and evil, love and hate, and basic human relationships such as between man and man, male and female, humans and nature, or sinful humanity and God, provide the basis for a language that is understood by people of all times and all cultures. Also people of different cultural epochs may differ considerably in their assessment of certain cultural phenomena. When it comes to basic values, however, they will readily understand each other across cultures and epochs if they are dealing with "ultimate concerns".

3. China and Alien Cultures

Liu Xiaofeng turns our attention to yet another question important for a dialogue between the cultures of China and those of the West. He asks whether culture is so bound to race, place and time that it could only be appreciated in that context. In other words, is it reasonable to accept a foreign culture, to accept Christian values in particular, in China? Liu's answer to the question is that reason cannot judge values such as love, happiness, freedom, justice, salvation. We cannot reject the love of the Christian God just because he is not part of our local national culture. The author finds himself in disagreement with the many Chinese intellectuals who at the beginning of the 20th century were occupied with the study of Western culture. They

derived from this study an anti-Christian bias which would only confirm them in their own anti-religious attitude.

The question that should determine the acceptance of elements of an alien culture is: are they valuable or not? In a special article on Rahner's theology, Liu deals with this question in greater detail. The concept of God, of the father of all humankind, is of great appeal to him. God is not the God of some particular race, place, and time. He is the father of all human beings and thus the absolute basis of truth and of democratic values. Jesus is not the Messiah of a particular race or nation; he has wrought salvation for all humankind.

For many Chinese, the Christian religion is still an alien religion and the Christian God is still an alien God. Chinese tradition is at odds with these Christian phenomena. Many Chinese are still occupied with their race, geography and tradition rather than with the question of the highest truth. The mandate their culture has bestowed on them is not to become more human but rather to become Chinese! What the Chinese lack - so Liu Xiaofeng maintains - is a deeper understanding of general social and anthropological realities and relationships.

III. Questions of Ultimate Concern

1. Chinese Tradition and Absolute Values

The question arises whether the individual person truly has the power (almighty power?) to solve his or her own problems and those of social history. What is meant by the Chinese "perfecting one's self", which leads to perfecting one's country, and finally to achieving world peace? Is there any objective standard to judge the situation? They are faced here, Liu points out, with the real danger that such historical problems as suffering, injustice, and evil may be side-stepped or overlooked by this ideal rationalistic ethics. It seems that no road is leading from the Confucian world of values to the real world of humankind; the two are separated by a vast abyss. Natural science had no chance to develop in China since Confucian personal ethics did not distinguish between its philosophy of life, its view of nature, and its view of history. The West, however, always distinguished clearly between such fields as science and theolo-

gy; religious knowledge was never lumped together with historical and scientific knowledge.

Confucian Principles

Liu questions three basic Confucian principles:

1. every individual person is one with history;
2. every individual is one with the social order;
3. every individual is one with the heavenly principles.

Confucianists may call history the Road of Humanism traveled by the sage kings. This road (Way of the King, wang tao) was revealed to them by Heaven (the objective laws of history). Individual persons have to conform to this Way of History, have to follow the sage kings if they want to become perfect. Liu cannot but pose the following questions:

How can it be proved that the old kings received revelation? How can we say that there is only one royal road and that each individual must unconditionally follow it? Is it permissible to make of history a rationalized ethics? Should we welcome the prospect of seeing every individual person's will in conformity with the Way of History or should we reject it as a terrifying prospect?

The Confucian virtues were meant to make the individual person one with society in intention and result. Individual persons had to follow the established rules of etiquette, had to be one with their family clan, their country and their king. They could never step outside these given frameworks to determine their own lifestyles. Questions that arise under such circumstances are:

What about the values of the individual, notably his or her freedom? How could one be sure that the values of the country and the will of the king were a sound basis for mankind's happiness and ideals?

The role of the individual amounted thus to little more than to serve as an instrument in the hands of the king and in the grip of the country. Wars of liberation and revolutions have turned again and again into nightmares for individual persons without ever liberating them. How many poets and philosophers were killed by the kings? How many soldiers were used to kill people for the king?

Chinese humanism turns out to be an ambiguous term. It sounds beautiful, but what constitutes the foundation on which

the values of the individual are based? If the will of the individual person is not to succumb to evil inclinations, it must be guided on a legal basis. But respective laws ought to be grounded on absolutely reliable principles. Can the king and/or the country provide such a basis?

The Biblical God

China never had anything in its literature like the Old Testament where the relationship between mankind and God is described in most intimate terms. For Confucianism in the Han period, *Tian* had become the universe. The concept of a personal spiritual being was no longer alive and it has never since been re-captured. Only the ancient Chinese knew a spiritual, personal God but his influence in Chinese spirituality has been weak and is in no way comparable to the powerful impact the biblical God had, and still has, on the Western world.

With the influence of a spiritual, personal God on the wane, Confucianists began soon to emphasize the will of man as the realization of God's will. That is why men's will became extremely powerful, almost almighty, in no need of anything from outside elements or factors. In many discussions, the strength of the human will and the greatness of the ethical person were glorified. Liu Xiaofeng feels compelled again to raise some pointed questions: Does the will-power of such an ethical person make that person peace-loving? What are the ethical values of that person? Are they reliable? The will of the Christian ethical person is grounded in God. Man can never replace God. However, in Chinese literature we find many expressions claiming that man has virtually replaced God. God does not speak. All power, all decisions have been entrusted to the king or the country.

Limits to Knowledge and Enquiry

Another problem resulting from the Confucian view of man (personal ethics) is the limits it imposes on the domain of inquiry and knowledge. Complacency with the individual person's knowledge prevented many scholars from searching for further knowledge, from raising questions, from delving into such problems as first principles as the Greeks and Christian philosophers did. They later discovered that men/women are contingent, open-ended; that they are not absolute masters of

themselves and their lives; that their doubts lead to new insights and new knowledge. The Chinese sages did not appreciate this approach. They saw little value in doubting any given knowledge and in analyzing new situations. They preferred to acquire and pass on knowledge handed down by the authorities of history and society. Thus they thought they knew all that there was to know concerning heaven and earth and fate.

2. Chinese Tradition and the Phenomena of Suffering, Fear, Evil, Sin

Liu Xiaofeng deplored the fact that in the Confucian ethical system there is little or no concern for suffering, man's weaknesses, temptation, despair, death and the like as there is in Christianity where God has sent his own son to save people. In China there is no God who hears the cries of the suffering people. None of the three hundred poems in the Book of Odes deals with suffering and death. What do they really have to say about man? Why does Confucianism show so little interest in tears and blood? And why is there so much talk about joy and serenity?

Taoism does not accept the present world as it exists. According to Zhuangzi, man is without the concept of sin, but is full of suffering and unable to escape death. By rejecting history, culture and established values, man can overcome these products of cultural history. Once he has freed himself from all these phenomena and has achieved harmony with nature, he will enjoy peace and happiness. In this state of mind he is beyond time and place, good and evil, love and hate, life and death.

Salvation

Christianity accepts the world as it is, but not unconditionally. For Christianity the world is beset by sin, evil, and suffering. Liu puts special emphasis on the concept of original sin. People cannot free themselves from sin; they are in need of grace. The Taoist relies on himself to escape from misery and suffering. Christians do not rely on themselves and therefore turn to a spiritual power--God. Without God, people cannot be saved, they do not even know what they are to be; reason and nature can provide only vague ideas and impressions.

God's love and salvation through Christ are the absolute

conditions of the Christian to accept this world - not just the beauty of life but also all happenings, people's sinfulness, all kinds of suffering, even death. Salvation through Christ encourages us to face sin, evil, and suffering; to identify with the "useless", the "weak", the "sick", the "outcast" of society; to look at the woes of an unhappy society and lead beyond. In an article on the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Liu shows how the theology of God's redemptive power and love is applied to modern politics, history, ethics, and business.

3. The Christian Virtues of Love, Hope, and Joy

Liu's reflections on religious values culminate in his praise of Christian love. God is love and this love is creative. God has given us a share in his creative love. This is evidenced in the incarnation of Christ and in his crucifixion and death for humankind. The cross of Jesus Christ has become the symbol of God's love for humanity and is therefore the sign of hope for all humankind.

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In an article on Deitrich Bonhoeffer, Liu castigates the "wisdom of secular man" which despises Christianity for its preoccupation with suffering and sin, and which ridicules the Christian "Way to Heaven" as an escape from the realities of this world. Liu feels that this "secular wisdom" with its emphasis on happiness in this world, is little concerned about suffering and despair in this world. Such wisdom can never reach a height where it would sing the praise of suffering, where it would look at love as something truly great. God has given us Christ who came into this world to suffer and thereby destroy and reject everything that endangers the values of human life. God has suffered and is still suffering in Christ. It is not a glorious suffering! - but a suffering for our freedom, peace, and happiness and therefore a suffering that deserves the highest praise. What distinguishes Christianity from all other religions

and certainly from all secular wisdoms is that God has come in Christ not in his power but rather in weakness and suffering to help us, to be with us. He has come in love. That is the message of Christ's suffering.

The Problem of Suffering

No rational ethical system will ever face up to the problem of suffering, emptiness, absurdity, despair, and death. Neither will it find an answer to the phenomena of evil and sin in human nature. God sent his Son into the world so that we could be redeemed and share in his redemptive love. In this context Liu raises some important questions: Why did the Chinese fail to develop the concept of personal sin? Why do we find in Chinese poetry hardly any traces of the evil in human beings, of human failures and human sinfulness? Did the Chinese poets never realize that the evil in cultural history is man-made? Why is there so little praise of the holy in Chinese poetry and so much praise of personal achievements?

In a discourse on love, Liu Xiaofeng projects a new vision for man/woman. Love is creative, it transcends everything, it destroys evil in us. God's gift of love liberates us from our sinfulness (selfishness), creates a new world in us. God forgives us our sins; we in turn learn to forgive. Love is compassionate, it endeavors to enhance life and love in suffering. Love creates joy which finds its culmination in the joy of the Holy Spirit given to the lover and the beloved.

IV. Conclusion

Liu Xiaofeng's publications suggest that many of his ideas coincide with those of a Christian. His understanding of the Christian God has set him on a road to new vistas, has provided him with an intellectual and spiritual foundation on which he projects his new vision for China. His religious ideas help to explain why, in discussing many cultural and traditional issues, he sides with the Christian West against his own cultural traditions. At times it seems to make him prone to partiality and over-simplification with regard to certain problems. His writings are not free of sweeping statements. They reveal a certain impatience with his own people and traditions. They tend to

overlook or at least underrate certain values in the Chinese heritage and the religious seeds which the Chinese soil contains.

Questions for the Chinese Heritage

Looking back at developments in China during the last century, one feels compelled to ask whether Liu Xiaofeng is not justified in being impatient with his people and taking a critical look at the Chinese heritage. How far has China advanced beyond the manifests and slogans of the May 4th Movement seventy years ago? Why is it that after decades of revolutions and blood-letting China is still in the tight grip of a socio-political system that promises peace and prosperity but produces horrible cultural revolutions instead, and employs tanks to "quell" peaceful demonstrations? Why is it that values such as human rights, freedom of the press and freedom of speech are so difficult to establish in China? Does the traditional Chinese value system lack basic elements conducive to successfully coping with problems of our modern society?

No matter how we judge Liu's analysis and discussion of certain phenomena of the Chinese cultural heritage, he should be credited with directing our attention to basic questions that have been overlooked or were taboo for too long in Chinese intellectual circles. This young writer certainly deserves to be supported in his basic thrusts.

Questions for the Western Heritage

For those familiar with the intellectual and educational scene on mainland China as well as in Taiwan, it is rather obvious that the concept "European Cultural History" has been shaped mainly by the scientific and positivistic-materialistic thinking of the 19th and 20th centuries. Expressions such as the dark, backward, superstitious and/or dogmatic Middle Ages are still making the rounds in China. It seems to have escaped the consciousness of the intelligentsia in China - possibly under pressure from the country's leadership - that a wealth of information is available not only in such fields as medieval art, literature, music, law, the universities, rational philosophy and science, but also on ideas such as bi-polarity of power (temporal vs. religious); of progress (moving towards a goal, a phenome-

non which underlies Western technological civilization, the sciences and many political movements); conscience and the value of the individual person (an element of unrest which transforms the history of the world); a new "work ethos" *ora et labora*, the town as a juridical, autonomous entity where the guilds or corporations came into existence and developed an ethics of work and wages, established rationality in finances, business and accounting and set up special centers for culture and learning. Thus were laid the foundations for our modern Western society.

The so-called "dogmatic" medieval world was, in fact, a pluralistic world in which the diverse entities and mutual relationships were directed towards a transcendent/divine origin. This pluralism is the basis of the enormous dynamism and vitality of European developments. It made possible the searching mind and the freedom needed for the searching mind to operate.

Liu Xiaofeng is not only familiar with the cultural richness, pluralism, and fertility of the European Middle Ages; but he also knows about the religious metaphysical roots of these phenomena. He is aware that it was not so much the Renaissance and Humanism which established modern subjectivity and dynamism, but rather religious ideas such as the medieval problem of sin and grace, of human sinfulness and the omnipotence of God, of the individual human being standing before almighty God. Liu holds that an absolute value-system can only be established if it is founded on belief in the Christian God. Human nature cannot be based on natural/practical phenomena such as rationalism (Descartes, Kant), creation of tools (Marx), biological powers and processes (Darwin), strength of will (Nietzsche), psychological abilities (Freud), or any other features extolled by humanisms, old and new.

The true value of the human person will only be revealed if men/women, are seen in their relation to God, who is love and the origin of all love. Only the love between God and us makes us radically different from all other animals. For Liu Xiaofeng it is this love of God, so concretely revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ, that illuminates our earthly life and re-evaluates all our values and value systems. It amounts to a new vision for China, provided it comes to a dialogue between China and the Christian West where language is based on common experiences of ultimate realities.