

Christian Education in China: 1921-1991

by Michael Saso

Introduction

In recent years, the study of Christian education has caught the interest of more than a few members of China's academic community. During the past decade, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) has been quietly researching the subject. In 1989 it sponsored a symposium in Wuhan and followed it up in 1990 with a conference on the Yale University campus in Hartford, Connecticut dealing with the development of Christian Education during the decades before the founding of the People's Republic. The Academy's Christian studies department is now in the process of preparing a conference on inter-faith dialogue--a popular topic among Christian educationalists in Western ecumenical circles.

Results of Survey on Religion in China

The rather sudden reawakening of interest in Christianity among China's intellectuals has been given greater impetus by the current religious revival now taking place in that country. The CASS centre in Shanghai conducted two nationwide surveys, the first in 1989 and the second a year later, indicating a 400% increase in the growth rate of the major religions, i.e. Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. Such studies tend to move religion out of the realm of the purely theoretical and into the world of practical concerns.¹ The popularity of the CASS reports (the first, and to date the only printing of 8,000 copies sold out within a month) only serves to underline further the pragmatic turn research studies of religion have taken in recent years. What is most interesting to note about the CASS surveys is that within various government agencies, including the Religious Affairs Bureau and the United Front Department, there is general concurrence with their find-

ings, which give evidence of the fact that where religion, be it Christian or non-Christian is practised, the government is well-served. The reports show in such areas a higher rate of productivity, a lower crime rate, stronger family and communal ties, and a deeper sense of loyalty in carrying out government social policies. This leaves little doubt about religious education's practical value to a government keen on increasing productivity, maintaining law and order, and raising the social and intellectual standards of the people.

The surveys point out another area where the relation of government and religion has been of benefit to state interests. The schools run by religious institutions prior to 1949 (China no longer has schools managed by religious groups) have produced a disproportionately large number of graduates who are still active in a wide variety of professions, such as medical, social and educational. The Academy need look no further than its own ranks for examples of skilled linguists who received their training in Christian universities either at home or abroad during the years leading up to 1949.²

Influence of Christian Education

None of this is meant to prove, however, that Christian education exerted a major influence on the Chinese intellectual class prior to the establishment of the People's Republic. On the contrary, historical evidence has shown that such an influence was merely on the surface and minimal. This is not to deny, however, that the influence of Christian education on pre- and post-Revolutionary China was not present. The purpose of this paper is to offer evidence that its influence was, and continues to be up to the present, very real, if somewhat more subtle and more complex than is generally recognized. In order to do this, we will first study its history, taking special note of the period of the 1920's and 1930's when Christian educators in China were articulating Christian education's basic goals. We shall then compare our findings with two recent studies made by Chinese scholars from the Academy. From this, I hope that the reader will glean not only some insights into the subject at hand, but also some assistance in understanding the condition of religious belief in a Socialist state.

Any study of Christian education in China ought to include

all levels of learning, but I shall confine myself here to colleges and universities. During the period immediately prior to 1949, China had a total of fifteen such schools, many of them with long and distinguished histories.³ Their collective influence on the nation's educational system, especially in the general areas of organization and curriculum content, could hardly be called peripheral or insignificant.⁴

<i>School Name pre-1949</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Present University Name and Status</i>
1. Aurora (Zhendan, Catholic)	Shanghai	Fudan
2. Furen (Catholic)	Beijing	Political-Legal Studies.
3. Cheeloo (Protestant)	Shandong	Shandong
4. Fukien Christian	Fuzhou	Fujian Normal
5. Ginling Christian	Nanjing	Nanjing
6. Ginling Women's Univ.	Nanjing	Nanjing Normal
7. Hangchow Univ.	Hangzhou	Hangzhou
8. Huachung Univ.	Wuchang	Huazhong Normal
9. Hua Nan Univ.	Fuzhou	Fuzhou Normal
10. Lingnan Univ.	Guangzhou	Zhongshan
11. Hu-chiang Shanghai Univ.	Shanghai	E. China Normal
12. Tung Wu (Soochow) Univ.	Suzhou	Suzhou
13. St. John's Univ.	Shanghai	2nd Medical
14. West China Union Uni.	Chengdu	Sichuan Medical
15. Yenching Univ.	Beijing,	Beijing and Qinghua

When the Communist government came to power, many of these graduates left the mainland to take up residence in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau where they contributed their talents and skills to the economic, social and educational development of these territories. The majority remained at home, and still can be found working as doctors, engineers, teachers, social workers and in other professions vital to their country's growth and prosperity. Since few of the graduates of Christian universities who remained in China claim membership in any specific Christian body nor do they attend formal religious services, it can be said that Christian education failed in achieving its primary goal of converting this educated elite to Christianity, and made little or no headway in penetrating to the core of Chinese culture. Reasons for this have been discussed at great length elsewhere; it is enough to note here in passing that attempts by the Jesuit missionaries in the 16th and 17th century to accommodate Christianity to the Neo-Confucian culture of the

imperial court ended in failure. This was largely due to extraneous circumstances. Misunderstandings with Rome and rivalries among the missionaries themselves brought on the Rites Controversy, which led to Rome's ban on Chinese Christians participating in traditional ancestral rituals, and subsequently to Imperial edicts forbidding the practice of Christianity in the Middle Kingdom.⁵

While the early history of Christianity in China was fraught with failure, the efforts of Buddhism were crowned with success. Buddhism had been introduced in the 2nd century A.D., and by the 9th century had achieved a position of high esteem not only among the common people but also among the literati as well. There were many reasons for this, not the least among them being its appeal as a philosophy among intellectuals, the guarantee of universal salvation it held out to the masses, and its usefulness as a political tool among emperors of China's Middle Ages.⁶ It is a sad commentary on Christian education in China that, after 360 years of effort, all it was able to leave behind were its buildings, which, after its departure, were quickly filled by educators and students propounding the materialistic and atheistic doctrines of Marxist-Leninism. However, it is part of the irony of the present situation that Christianity today finds itself in a more eminent place in China than ever before in its history. To see how this was made possible, and how Christian education has contributed to a renewal of interest in Christianity itself among China's graduate level educators, we must go back to the period between the two World Wars.

A report was published in 1935 by a commission set up by the Board of Founders of Nanjing Theological Seminary on the state of Christian education in China on the eve of the Japanese invasion.⁷ It noted with satisfaction that the lamentable conditions described in the Boone report 13 years earlier had been corrected. The Boone study reported that the number of Chinese nationals preparing for Christian ministry was woefully small, and the amount of money spent on their theological education was hardly adequate.⁸ By 1935, however, the number of theological schools had risen from 8 to 14, and student enrollment had increased to the extent that it was now possible to demand a high school diploma as a condition for acceptance. Also, two of the larger theological schools, Nanjing and Yanking, had in the interim been empowered to grant recog-

nized graduate degrees in theology.

Among the changes that had taken place in theological education, the report singles out with satisfaction the movement towards interdenominational cooperation and collaboration. This was something unique to Chinese theological education, and not part of the Western patrimony. While regional seminaries continued to be sectarian, the spirit of unity forged by the denominations on the higher levels of theological training were impressively evident. This would later become a special characteristic of Chinese Protestantism. The Nanjing Theological Seminary *still* provides graduate training for seminarians in China and trains candidates from a large number of Christian bodies for ministry in local churches throughout the country. Bishop K.H. Ting (himself an Anglican) and his interdenominational faculty of theologians and scripture scholars are quick to point out how effective this system has been in serving the Christian churches throughout their long struggle for survival. It also illustrates how earlier policies of Christian educators have borne much fruit with the passage of time, and have proven to be even more relevant and successful during the Post-1949 period.

Catholic missionaries on the other hand, did not concentrate as much effort on graduate education as did the Protestant churches. They focused their attention on making converts, whom they educated in basic Christian doctrine, and on providing seminaries for the training of a native clergy. Seminary training for the priesthood followed Roman Catholic tradition, emphasizing philosophy and theology, both of which were studied in the Latin language.⁹ On the university level, only two of the 15 schools mentioned earlier were Catholic. After 1949, the Catholic Church continued to maintain its earlier traditions, forming Christians in the kind of Christian spirituality prevalent in Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries, and retaining the Catholic tradition of the Latin liturgy. Maintaining and nurturing earlier traditions has become a special characteristic of the Chinese Catholic Church under the aegis of the Catholic Patriotic Association.

It is interesting to note that the distinctive features of Chinese Protestantism and Chinese Catholicism, that is, the former's stress on unity amid diversity and the latter's basic traditional conservatism, are precisely what gives Christianity its

appeal in China at this time. Both elements also happen to resonate with Confucian values, where much emphasis is placed on close-knit family relationships, loyalty to friends and associates, and respect for civil authority. This has led one member of the Academy to observe that Christianity could be considered as a new form of Neo-Confucianism, especially since these values which previously were a part of the government structure have long since been abrogated by the present regime.

Additional Early Studies on Christian Education

Two other studies done during the 1920's also have direct bearing on Christian education in China. The Christian Education Commission Report of 1922¹⁰ and Earl Herbert Cressey's Report on the Survey Commission of Shanghai in 1926. Both are important for understanding the development of Christian education in the years that were to follow.

The Commission Report of 1922 outlined the direction Christian education must take if it was to have any hope of future success in China. First, it took to task the policy of foreign missionaries of isolating prospective converts from their neighbourhood communities during their formation period. It went on to criticise the missionaries for their failure to provide the kind of Christian education that would allow their converts to command influential places in Chinese society. Finally, it reprimanded the missionaries for their failure to establish a self-propagating and self-perpetuating Christian church.¹¹ To remedy the situation, the report called for the establishment of Christian schools that would open their doors to Christian and non-Christian alike. While continuing to nurture the faith communities, Christian schools should also offer the kind of education that would benefit the nation as well. The Report found little acceptance among missionaries either at home or abroad, but it was to prove prophetic in light of the events that were to overtake China in the not too distant future.¹²

Principles to Govern Christian Education

The Commission Report set down six basic principles which should govern Christian education: 1. It should act in accord with government policies; 2. It should meet the educational

needs of society; 3. It should develop student potential and encourage freedom of choice; 4. It should be aware of the people's financial ability to meet expenses; 5. It should remain flexible in the face of changing local conditions; 6. It should promote universal education, especially among the common people.

The groundwork for closer collaboration among the many Christian denominations in China was also laid by the Commission Report in early 1922.¹³ It recommended that the centralization and coordination of support for all Christian missionary groups should be placed under Chinese administration. Finally, the Report recommended that the curriculum of Christian schools operating in China should be expanded to include such subjects of secular education as medicine, law, engineering, agriculture, political science.

By 1926, Cressey's Report of the Survey Commission of Shanghai showed how far Christian education had advanced in only 4 years. Eleven more universities were added to the list, including the Yale-in-China campus at Changsha, Hunan, and 6 new medical schools. This period of rapid expansion will be singled out much later in the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences paper in 1986-87 for the impact it is still having on education today, and it also serves to show how the effects of the Commission Report policies of 1922, which were finally adopted after initial resistance, are still being felt in post-1949 China.

After the signing of the Unequal Treaties in the middle of the 19th century, Protestant and Catholic missionaries moved into China's interior in great numbers. Because they were supported and protected by the foreign powers, Christianity came to be identified among many Chinese with the unwanted colonial presence. At the same time that far-reaching plans for the development of Christian education were being drawn up in the 1920's, Christian missions, destroyed during the Boxer uprising, were being rebuilt from indemnity funds. This, along with the legal protection granted to missionaries and their converts by foreign legations left, in the words of Professor Tang, "a chronic trauma on the Chinese mentality".¹⁴

In April of 1922, twenty-two years after the Boxer uprising, this mentality found an occasion to assert itself. When the World Council of Christian Students was about to convene its

11th session, the students of Peking University formed an Anti-religion Union, which singled out Christianity in particular for attack.

As the student movement spread throughout the country, it became the occasion for increased efforts by the missionaries to indigenize and solidify the various Christian movements in China. The Protestant "Three-self Movement" and the Catholic Patriotic Association, Professor Tang Yi points out, can trace their historical origin, at least in part, to native resentment of the foreign missionaries engendered at this time. This view is also held by Yue Feng, as we shall see later. It was in the 1920's and 1930's, under such social conditions, that both Protestant and Catholic educational circles began the movement towards a more autonomous Chinese church.¹⁵

Their major objectives were to achieve sinicization of organized structures, financial independence and self-support, a sinozied liturgy, contextualized theology, independent evangelization and unification of the Chinese Church.

Tang agrees that it would be a mistake to identify the movement towards the indigenization of Christianity in China with the "Three-self" and "Patriotic" movements established later by the government, whose motives were purely to gain political control over the churches rather than foster their spontaneous growth.¹⁶

It was ironic that not very long after the Chinese churches established themselves as patriotic ecclesial entities in order to accommodate themselves to the new socio-political pattern, the pattern itself collapsed from within due to the Cultural Revolution; and the churches were driven not underground but out of existence.

It is also ironic, as Tang Yi points out, that the Patriotic Association during the 1950's sought to work out an independent status with Rome on theological grounds, while after the Cultural Revolution in the 1980's the Patriotic Association seems to be operating off a more praxical model, a *modus operandi* based more on political realities. The Taoist philosophy of survival, the dialectics of Yin and Yang, submission to a monolithic administration, above all, a loyalty to the ruling political system ("Render to Caesar what is Caesar's") have offered solutions to many Catholics and Protestants, but others remain still caught in the dilemma. "The intrinsic tension and

irreconcilability contained in the present Chinese ecclesiology" need to be worked out in theological terms. Also, the Chinese Catholic Church must "catch up" with post-Vatican II church teachings and its commitment to inter-faith dialogue.

Professor Tang Yi notes that Chinese Protestant theologians have dealt with this problem from the perspective of what he calls the "Yin-Yang Dialectic":

...all good works made by man are in the service of God; and as the a Socialist cause in New China is honoured by the people, it is in perfect harmony to love God, to serve the State and to follow Christ to be a patriot and to be Christian.¹⁷

Along with the Protestant and Catholic thinkers who are attempting to reconcile the political realities with the practice of religious faith within the given legal framework of the post-1980 period, there is another group of scholars who are "deeply concerned with the future of Christianity in China". Professor Tang finds this group among scholars working in the humanities and social sciences. While they are not Christians, they are attracted by the "beauty of Christian values through their study of Western culture, or through personal contact with ordinary Christians." It is these scholars who are responsible for researching all aspects of Western civilization--not merely the scientific, technological and political, but the philosophic and religious as well--for whom Western Christian education as it affects China today is of great interest. In a sense, it is they who must grapple with, in the words of Professor Tang, "a civilization that has disturbed Chinese tranquility for so long."¹⁸

It is precisely here, Professor Tang feels, that Christian ideas have had, and continue to have profound influence in China, an effect that cannot be measured in terms of the number of converts or of people attending church service on any given Sunday. He contends that in the Confucian ethical-moral system, the state approved rites and festivals, the gentleman-scholar class, the religious role of Taoism and Buddhism, the public example of civic virtue traditionally expected of the Confucian scholar, all in harmony with the traditional legal system, have been challenged and overthrown by the Cultural Revolution and the educational system that has preceded and followed it. Christianity appears, then, as a new and valid form of an ethical, moral and educational system which seems capable of filling the vacuum left by the decade of disruption. It will be able to do

this, however, only insofar as it is in harmony with Chinese social and political life, and it will surely fail if it is seen as being dominated in any way by foreign political and religious interests.

Tang Yi conducted his own brief survey among people living in six provinces scattered throughout China on their attitudes towards religion. He found that the topic brought out an overwhelming affirmation of Buddhist and Taoist values, and only a slight mention of Christianity. This is one of the reasons why Professor Tang is pessimistic about Christianity playing any large role in China's future cultural development. Like Yue Feng, whom we will discuss below, he sees the popularity of Christianity as linked to the temporary religious desolation found throughout China at this time.

In his article in the Beijing University *Journal of Scholarly Studies* (May: 1989), Professor Yue Feng examines three aspects of religion in contemporary China.¹⁹ He finds that religious goals have not changed substantially since 1949, but certain accidental changes of organization and activity have taken place during the post 1980 era which have brought both Protestantism and Catholicism more into conformity with political reality there. While its native clergy, its seminary formation and financial independence from abroad have brought Christianity more in line with the cultural needs of China, such modifications have in no way resolved the basic contradiction between Christianity and the atheistic materialism of the Marxist-socialist state.

Professor Yue points out that the dual aspect of Chinese Christian religion, i.e. the negative side that condemns much that is found in the world, and the positive side that has supported education on all levels from kindergartens to graduate institutes of learning, has left a good and lasting impression on the public mind. Christianity is seen as a kind of "pure" moral system in a world too often tainted by corruption and favoritism. It is, in the eyes of the public, a positive force for modernization, a fact confirmed by the statistical studies of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.

When it comes to the large numbers of Chinese now flocking to the religious centers of Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, Professor Yue views this as a temporary phenomenon. He sees it as a sign of a "society not keeping up with industrial and

technological progress." He draws upon the example of the far more modern and developed West where the number of religious believers is now diminishing. Yue concludes that religion is, for the present, a way of compensating for the frustrations brought about by the slow growth of the economy delaying the advance of the consumer society. When China finally catches up with the West, religion will decline as it has done in other consumer-centered societies.

Strength of Religion in China Today

While both Tang and Yue end on a pessimistic note, there is no question in their minds as to the present strength of religion in contemporary Chinese society. That this is due in large part to Christian education in the period from 1920-1949 is undisputed. Since the publication of Tang's and Yue's studies, there is another phenomenon and that is the proliferation of printed literature having to do with Christianity which now can be found on the shelves of most Chinese bookstores. Many come from the Academy of Social Sciences and other research oriented institutes. Titles, popular and profitable in the West, are also being translated and reproduced by local commercial presses and publishing houses. Many of these books are also used as texts for university courses. Among these are the *Christian Culture Review* from the Guizhou People's Press. The second issue contains articles such as Peter Han's *On Prophets*, Tang Yi's *Anselm's Theory on Truth*, Lei Yongmong's *Philosophy and Religion in New Testament Times*, An Ximeng's *On the Nature of Primitive Christianity*, He Guanghu's *On the Death of God*, and a translation of Hans Kung's *Wittgenstein und Das Problem des Gottes*.

The Religious Culture Series, under the editorship of Wang Zhiyuan, now has more than fifty titles to its credit. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Press also has an impressive list of titles in Christian Studies.

This interest in Christianity found in the popular press is more than matched by the enthusiasm found among Chinese university students. The larger universities include religious studies as a sub-division of their Departments of Philosophy, and most often the teachers come from the Academy of Social Sciences. The average number of graduate students majoring in

religious studies on this level would be about a dozen. Following Tang Yi's lead, I myself conducted a modest survey among college students in nine Chinese universities. I found the results quite interesting and pass them on to the reader certainly not as a conclusive study of religious attitudes among college students throughout China, but as one small indication of how the topic is viewed by these students who come not from the intellectual class but rather from the grassroots level.

The survey asked: "Of four religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam and Christianity, which one would be your preferential choice, and why?" Responses varied according to ethnic origins. Minority nationalities invariably chose the religion most closely identified with their own cultures. Thus Hui, Uighur, Kazhaki and Mongolian students chose Islam, and for reasons of cultural and ethnic loyalty. Yao, Miao, Buyi and other Guizhou-Yunnan students expressed a concern to preserve their ancient cultural customs, religion being for many non-Han minority peoples closely linked and deeply rooted in celebration of religious festivals rather than in dogmatic theological systems. Tibetans, chose Buddhism in its Tantric-Madhyamika form. All these groups were fervently committed to their religious beliefs and practices as an expression of their ethnic identity. Among Han Chinese, the majority expressed the greatest interest in Christianity. When asked for their reasons, their responses showed no great variation from the findings of Yue Feng and Tang Yi, i.e. the "purity" of Christian religious belief in a world of political and economic anomie, its high sense of morality, the importance it places on higher education and freedom of thought. While some Western commentators have suggested the appeal of Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism, lies in its "authoritarian" attitude, Chinese intellectuals and students indicate quite the opposite view, i.e. freedom of thought and intellectual openness were perceived to be the strongest drawing points of Christianity.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude this article with a word of gratitude to the Academy of Social Sciences. The work of the Academy is indeed impressive and is reflected in the excellence of the work produced by its many scholars presently researching the

Buddhist, Taoist, Islamic, Shaman, and Christian religions. I have learned much from their studies and from the spirit of sincerity and dedication with which they go about their most important task.

Notes

1. The Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences report, *The Religious Question in China Today* Chinese and English editions, 1986, 1987, summarized in my recent study *Blue Dragon White Tiger* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, Ch. 8, "Religion in China Today"
2. op. cit., pp. 193-212.
3. The Chinese University of Hong Kong, "A Proposal for the Establishment of the Christian Education Research Center at the University of Hong Kong", Sept. 13, 1990, p. 5.
4. op. cit., p. 1.
5. It should be noted that the indigenous Presbyterian church of Taiwan also adapted a form of ancestor ritual, and achieved most success in the period preceding the industrial boom. It has been noted that religion seems to be growing more quickly in modern socialist China than in present day capitalist Taiwan. See Professor Yue Feng's assessment of this phenomenon later in this article.
6. See Du Jiwen, "National Minorities and the spread of Buddhism," *CASS*, Fall, 1991, for a discussion of Buddhism's success in China.
7. *Education for Service in the Christian Church in China*, with a supplementary chapter by C. Stanley Smith, New York: 1935. Copy found in the Center for the Study of World Religions library, eighth floor, *CASS*.
8. op. cit., pp. 12-13. the report complained that a great amount of money was being put into higher education, with no importance given to the higher education of ministers.
9. There are cases in the 1920-1930 history of the Catholic missions in North China, of whole villages in Hebei and Shandong being taught Latin during elementary and high school, so that village boys who chose to go on for the priesthood would be able to attend the theology lectures in Latin. The present day emphasis of the Catholic Patriotic Association on Latin as a requisite for Chinese seminarians is a partial reflection of this attitude to theological conservatism that typified the Chinese Catholic Church.
10. *Christian Education in China*, New York: Foreign Missions Council, 1922
11. op. cit., p. 46.
12. op. cit. p. ii, copyright page notice.
13. op. cit., pp. 56-57.
14. Tang Yi, "The Career of Christianity in China: A Personal Perspective." A paper presented at the International Conference on the History of Christianity in China, Louvain: 1990, p. 3. Quoted with author's permission.
15. op. cit., pp. 3-4.
16. Ibid. p. 4
17. op. cit., p. 7
18. op. cit., p. 8, summation.
19. Yue Feng, "An Examination of Some Religious Questions in Contemporary China," *Beijing Daxue Xuebao*, Zhexue Shehui Kexue Ban, 1989, pp. 100-104.
20. *Jidu Jiao Wenhua Pinglun*, Guiyang: Guizhou People's Press, First edition, 1990.