

Christian Mission and Modern Chinese Culture

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Introduction

Among the major religions of China, Buddhism and Taoism have the longer history and have exerted the greater influence on Chinese culture. The influence of Islam is widespread among the minority nationalities. Christianity, which arrived on the scene relatively late, has had a strong impact on China's culture, customs, politics, modern science and technology. As a result, Christianity has found a place in the Chinese cultural tradition and is no longer a stranger to Chinese intellectuals nor to the ordinary people.

We can date the coming of Christianity to China from the Nestorian stele uncovered in Xian in 1625. The inscription states that representatives of this form of Christianity were received by officials of the Tang dynasty and given a place in the capital city in the year 635. It was known as Jing Jiao, the "Illustrious Teaching" and patronized by succeeding emperors of the Tang. By the time of the Song, however, Nestorian Christianity had disappeared.

The Jesuits came to China at the end of the 16th century. The influence they exercised at the court was due more to their scientific knowledge than their religion. Their accomplishments in the areas of astronomy and mathematics were much more significant than those in the religious field. They associated more with upper classes, the educated elite, than with the common people. They adapted quickly to Chinese customs and manners, neither criticizing them nor attempting to convert people to their own ways. They accommodated themselves to a very high degree to the traditional rites and rituals of China.

After the Opium War in 1840, the Qing was compelled to lift its ban on missionary activity. From then on, foreign missionaries had a free hand to proselytize and establish their churches not only in the large cities but in the interior as well. Protestantism came into China in the early part of the 19th century, and after the Boxer Uprising of

1900 placed much emphasis on the establishment of schools, hospitals and other social services. This wider cultural concern was of great benefit to our country and its people. In fact, it could be said that at this time in our history Christianity served as a beacon of hope for a weak and afflicted nation.

Missionary Work in China

Education

Christian missionaries did much to benefit China, especially in the educational, social and medical fields. The revival of traditional schools and the adoption of modern educational methods were brought about largely through missionary initiatives. Before the turn of the century, the natural sciences and foreign languages were taught only in missionary schools. Most of the professors and teachers of science and language of the newly established state universities and schools were either foreign missionaries or graduates of missionary schools.

Education for women was a new concept for China and was introduced by missionaries. Missionaries from Great Britain established the first public school for girls in Macao in 1890. Such schools spread rapidly to cities and towns along the Yangtze river and northward along the China coast. Canton in the south, Shanghai and Ningbo in central China and Tianjin in the north became centres for women's education. Modern state education in general and women's education in particular are indebted to the work of Christian missionaries. We must not forget that education of the deaf and blind were also introduced by the missionaries.

Social Reform

Another important contribution Christianity made to our country has been the reinforcing of Chinese ethical standards and traditional morality. It has also served to sensitize and quicken the Chinese social conscience. Missionaries took an active part in the fight against such social ills as opium addiction, concubinage, prostitution, foot-binding and gambling. They worked to alleviate starvation during times of famine, championed better conditions for workers, and gave care and shelter to abandoned infants. They frowned on arranged marriages for the young, and in other ways

promoted respect for the individual. They taught that before God we are all equal, for all of us, no matter how lowly or bereft, possess an immortal soul. Protestants laid great emphasis on democracy, respecting the right of every person to voice his or her own opinion. This helped to promote democratic aspirations and tendencies in China. Today many Chinese scholars are in agreement that missionary activity was, indeed, a primary force in the elimination of many harmful habits and destructive customs among the people.

Medical Works

The importance of Christian medical and other works of charity is not to be underestimated. Missionaries were the first to open modern hospitals and dispensaries. They served the poor out of charity, freely and without charge. They advocated for sanitation and hygiene, for clean and healthy living. The missionaries employed both educational and medical activities as means to approach the Chinese people and attract them to convert to Christianity.

Missionaries also trained in their hospitals and medical schools China's first modern physicians, including in this number our great revolutionary forerunner, Dr. Sun Yat Sen.

Communications and Science and Law

Another method used to disseminate modern scientific knowledge throughout China was by the printed word. By the end of the 19th century there were over a dozen missionary presses turning out books and magazines in religious and in many secular subjects as well. This served to make Western sciences readily available to a wide audience of Chinese scholars. Protestant missionaries took the lead in this. By the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, they had produced more books on science and mathematics than their entire output of all other non-religious materials together. Missionary publications that also had a particularly strong influence on Chinese intellectuals and scholars were those dealing with history and international law.

All missionary activity in China could be regarded as directed towards reform. It did indeed have a great impact on social reform in China. The secular learning taught in Protestant schools and knowledge of the West imparted through Protestant publications

helped to feed an atmosphere for reform. The missionaries set up living models for Chinese reformers to emulate in terms of learning the methodologies, attitudes and political techniques of social reform.

Among the more famous Protestant missionaries were Timothy Richard, founder of Shanxi University, and the vigorous proponents of social reform, J. Allen Young and Gilbert Reid. While these men were also on good terms with the great Chinese reformers of this period, it was their writings rather than their personal contacts that exerted the greater influence. This is especially marked after 1880 when reformist literature began to grow rapidly and reach an even wider audience.

The Feminist Cause

The missionaries also advocated the emancipation of Chinese women. They were deeply committed to the feminist cause and fought with determination for equal rights for all Chinese women. Missionaries made every effort to spread the growth of literacy among them on every level. They tutored Chinese wives in matters of home economics, and even trained some to become medical doctors. Many of the early Chinese women progressives were either Christians themselves or were indebted to Christian missionaries for their modern ideas and points of view. The missionary impact on social change reached its summit between 1895 and 1898. During this period Christian missionaries helped to shape the concepts, world view, and even many of the specific social strategies of the Chinese reform movement.

Agriculture

Missionaries also worked to improve agricultural methods in order to counteract disease and famine, and to increase food production. They brought to many thousands of people a new kind of courage, a faith, hope and unselfish devotion to face up to adversities, overcome hardships and distress and move on.

Missionaries introduce China to the West

Another contribution of the missionaries was the way they introduced China to the West. They educated the West to the ways of Chinese tradition, culture and history. They were good teachers. They

were sympathetic and appreciative interpreters, who passed on their love and devotion for China to the people of the lands from which they came. They championed Chinese causes and played an active part in establishing organizations that mediated mutual understanding between East and West. In this they did great service for the Chinese people, promoting better understanding and fostering respect for them.

One of their foremost endeavours was to bring China out of isolation and into contact with the Western world. The primary motivation of the missionaries was not selfish; they did not have as their purpose the aggrandizement of the power and glory of the Western nations. Their dominant motivation was a religious sense of obligation to share with the Chinese people a message of salvation and a way of life which they believed to be important. The missionaries came to China and laboured among an alien people, often at the cost of their own lives. In so doing they added a glorious page of altruistic heroism to human history.

I feel that on the mainland today there are many promising opportunities for Chinese Christians to promote political democracy and human rights, and the Church in China should be ready and willing to play this most important role. Unfortunately, the Three-Self Movement among Protestants and the Catholic Patriotic Association among Catholics are seen as too closely related to the Communist Party, and the majority of Christians do not put their trust in them. They seem to advocate a narrow-minded patriotism that is somewhat insular and exclusive. And so the persecution of believers who belong to the non-official church continues. The Chinese church must separate itself from the state and also make a break from Party control. Church leaders must become the protectors and advocates of the rights of believers. They should serve to stimulate and encourage movements of political freedom and reform. They should defend fundamental human rights, while at the same time condemning traditional feudalism in all its forms. In this, the foreign missionaries of the past may serve as helpful role models for the present. We can learn from them.

Conclusion

In summary, foreign missionaries, especially the Protestants, indeed made a major contribution to our nation, both in theory and in

practice, by transmitting Western knowledge and modern sciences. To accept Christianity was to move in the direction of modernization and Westernization. The progressives among the Chinese in the past did not reject Christianity on these grounds. In fact, a leader of the New Culture Movement, Chen Duxiu, at one period advocated the adoption of a moral education based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

During the last century, however, the vast majority of Chinese identified themselves with the traditional *status quo*. They saw Christianity as a great menace, and offered strong resistance to it. One reason for this was doctrinal differences between Christianity and Confucianism. Some contemporary scholars linked this to a chauvinism that fed upon their national pride and caused great indignation. This attitude became quite wide-spread. The discord that arose between foreign missionaries and these Chinese was not, then, that of imperialism versus China. It was rather a clash of religions, a conflict between a religion that advocated internationalism and one grounded in nationalism. Mao Xedong's assertion that the missionary enterprise was a form of imperialistic cultural invasion was utterly groundless.

In Chinese society, the gentry served as the elite. This class had a deep and abiding respect for Chinese tradition. The gentry resented missionary attacks on Confucian teachings. When the missionaries called Chinese rites superstition, the Chinese responded in turn with a skeptical attitude towards Christian beliefs. Each relegated the ideology of the other to a lower order. Christians added insult to injury by demanding to be accepted as social equals to the mandarins. This was viewed as an unwarranted invasion of the gentry's privileged preserve. The anti-Christian disturbances of the last decade of the 19th century were often fomented by the gentry, who often took advantage of the innate racial biases of the Chinese populace towards the missionaries. However, Christian opposition to ancestor worship was indeed a direct challenge to Chinese traditional values. As a result, Christianity was often misunderstood and hated by the Chinese in general. Local people also resented the complete disregard missionaries had for the traditional principles of native geomancy (*feng shui*) when erecting their structures, which "brought bad luck" to the areas in which they were built. Anti-Christian literature of the day created an atmosphere of revulsion and hatred that

was volatile and explosive. Many government officials resented them because they presented a challenge to their own prestige and authority, and frequently went out of their way to disassociate themselves from them publicly and ally themselves with the anti-foreign elements among the populace, especially the masses of poor. They did this to protect themselves from the poor turning their anger around and making the officials the target of their hatred and resentment. Under no circumstances should we confuse this kind of behaviour on the part of officials with "patriotism," nor should we be so quick to judge missionaries as belonging to the colonial and imperial groups.

In today's China, it is common to hear that government officials and Chinese church leaders, both Protestant and Catholic, are united in their opposition to foreigners doing missionary work here. They are said to regard such people as "enemies from abroad". Yet, we must not forget that Christianity is essentially a missionary religion. Christianity without a mission is no longer Christianity. And Chinese Christians and their churches have much to gain from the foreign missionary. Some colleges have now been established to give the kind of theological training in evangelization that will help to meet the needs of Chinese Christians. However, all Christian churches are to be seen as united into one family, and no distinctions should be made between foreign and domestic. There is but one God, a God without class, colour or social distinction. Since God does not play favourites among nations, he can never be the cause of or incite resentment among any of his true children.

