

# *Relations between Christianity and Intellectuals since Liberation (1949)*

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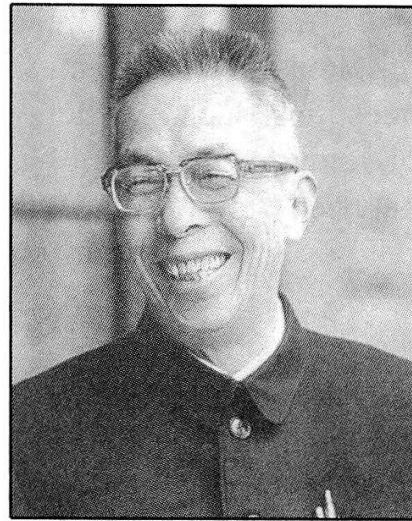
*The following is an extract from a speech reprinted with permission from the April 1999 issue of **China Talk**, the Newsletter of the United Methodist Church China Program.*

In order to erase the despised reputation it had earned as a “tool of Western cultural aggression,” Christianity in China in the 1950's sought to build up an identity of its own through the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Through this process, Christianity started to earn the people's understanding and acceptance.

After the start of the 1960's, especially during the time of the Cultural Revolution, a wave of extreme leftist thinking brought attacks, which not only succeeded in almost totally wiping out Christianity (and other religions), but also led to intellectuals being viewed as the “Stinking Nine Category” (along with landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements, rightists, enemy agents, renegades, and capitalist roaders), experiencing adversity the like of which had never been seen before.

During those times, therefore, the question of how to relate to intellectuals did not matter so much. There is a Chinese saying: “Those who have the same misfortunes sympathize with each other naturally; there is no need for such people to meet in order to become acquaintances.” In the late 1970's, when order was restored from the chaos, various policies were brought into effect.

Churches began to be restored and also grew very quickly. However, the average educational level of believers was very low, and they thus tended to be backward and conservative in their



outlook. At this time a group of intellectuals also emerged from within religious circles. They and intellectuals from other areas within society embarked on a process of getting to know each other. In the beginning of this process, many people were influenced by the Marxist "Religion is the opium of the masses" theory about religion, and thus saw religion as out of bounds. Some lifted up the banner "Looking into religion only in order to criticize theology," which thus placed religious circles outside the realm of academic research and learning.

Between 1979-86 there was even a so-called "Third Opium War" in academic circles (including some academics from within religious circles). This opened a debate on certain fundamental questions, such as whether or not the inherent and fixed significance of religion was that of a mere opiate, the question of the relation between religion and ethics and morals, and also whether or not religion and socialism could co-exist in harmony. Another Chinese saying goes, "From an exchange of blows, friendship grows" or "No discord, no concord."

Through debate and dialogue, religious circles and academic circles developed a common language, made friends, and mutually understood and respected each other.

This heralded a new stage of good relations between Christianity and intellectual circles (see note 1).

In the past decade or so, under the general situation of openness and reform, intellectual and academic circles opened their minds, and research into religion made considerable progress. Separate religious departments or religious studies centers have been set up, such as the Research Institute on World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Religious Research Institute at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, the Religious Research Center of the State Council Religious Affairs Bureau, and religion departments in certain institutes of higher education such as Nanjing University, Sichuan University, Fudan University (Shanghai), Beijing University, and Hangzhou University.

Some of these publish various academic journals on religious research. Altogether, there seems to be a new "religious research craze." A group of open-minded, deeply knowledgeable religious scholars has sprung up; the vast majority of whom are not themselves

religious believers. They have managed to break through the previous confines of "sticking to the text" and "following accepted educational guidelines." From an academic perspective they are examining and researching religion quite objectively and scientifically from the viewpoint of an historical, social and cultural phenomenon, and they publish a great number of specialized works on religion. These include both translations and original works, at the very least over 1,000 different works already as far as I am aware. Among these works on religion, the vast majority are introductions to or research into Christianity.

The "Opium of the masses" theory of religion of 15 years ago, and the tendency toward criticizing foreign religion, are now already dying down and rarely raised, and there are quite a few academics showing their sympathy and understanding for Christianity. This has led to the publication of some theological introductions and explanations of a very high standard (see note 2). Only around 30 of the church's own publications could be compared to these publications in terms of academic level and quality! This presents the church in China not only with a serious challenge but also with an excellent opportunity such as never before seen in its history.

If we look at the situation within the Church, religion was no longer banned after the Cultural Revolution, and the rate of development of Christianity has far surpassed that of any other religion. The number of Christian believers has now already reached more than 10 million, ten times more than before Liberation (in 1949). There are over 50,000 church meeting points, mostly scattered over rural areas. The educational level of believers is low and, with a lack of pastoral guidance, these believers easily fall prey to the corrosive influences of "heresy" and "unorthodoxy," mixing up faith with superstitious folk customs and practices. Intellectual circles despise the resultant unhealthy influence, which this has on society.

Turning to the situation in the so-called "normalized" churches in the towns and cities (those churches which have connections with local Christian Councils and Three-Self Patriotic Committees, or which have been recognized through the process of registration), most believers and pastoral workers in these churches have come under the influence of "fundamentalist" and "evangelical" thinking.

Their faith leans heavily toward the conservative, and their theological outlook is narrow. They stress “orthodoxy” and “being in the Spirit” (they only care for a person’s “spiritual experiences” and whether the person has been “saved” through being “born again”). Alternatively, many churches also practice a form of “utilitarianism,” making Christianity into a kind of “charm” through which one asks for blessings and avoids misfortunes. Such believers tend to be out of step with social reality, remaining deeply suspicious of such things as systems of ethics and morals, academic scholarship, modernization and “Sinicism.” Most church pulpits cater to this kind of backward thinking and thus have very little appeal for intellectuals. Some intellectuals start off by occasionally setting foot in the church out of curiosity, but after a short period of contact, slip away again.

The number of intellectuals lost by the church is far greater than the number of those won over. In short, the average educational level of church believers, although raised slightly in the space of the last decade or so, is still light years away from that of intellectuals.

As a result of the factors mentioned above, a certain delicate relationship has emerged between the church and intellectual circles outside of the church. On the one hand, there are some intellectuals who have developed an interest in Christianity, seek to understand it, and express acceptance of it. But, at the same time, the church is moving toward the conservative and the backward, cherishing the outmoded and preserving the outworn and maintaining lukewarm relations with intellectuals. One thing worth noting during the past decade is the emergence of a group of so-called “culture Christians” within society.

They have a fairly deep understanding of Christianity through scholarship and research, and even go so far in their thinking and feelings as to identify with or even be converted to Christianity, with some also receiving baptism.

However, they are not interested in church groups or activities, drifting outside of the church but still personally confessing themselves to be believers. They do a lot of research and publicity work for the Christian faith, increasing the spread and influence of Christianity among intellectual circles. In reality, they have taken on the function of a bridge between Christianity and intellectual circles within society (see note 3).

Learning how to understand China's intellectual circles today is an important new task. As mentioned elsewhere, the three religions of Buddhism, Taoism and Islam had mutual exchanges with Confucianism, combined with traditional Chinese culture and became truly Chinese religions. Although it is worth drawing some lessons from this, the situation for Christianity is different. Today, China finds itself in a period of reform and opening. Society is going through radical changes. After the "cleansing" processes of first the May Fourth Movement, then the "Smash Confucius and Lao Tze" movement, and then the "Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius" movement of the Cultural Revolution, Confucian thought has now already lost its "central" position within society.

Whatever traditional cultural influences intellectuals have taken on board, these are already gradually dying down with each new day, and perhaps now only faintly discernable. There is a big market among Mainland intellectual circles for the so-called "New Confucianism," and this is also a big controversy. Current intellectual circles, swept along by the powerful current of reform and openness, come under the influence, with each passing day, of the many varied and changing scholarly trends in the West, which carry far greater weight today than original Confucian thinking. The vast number of special publications and essays concerning Christianity over the past decade or so bear witness to this fact.

## **Reflections on Theology**

### ***1. Changes in Theological Direction***

The history of Christian theology has followed two different paths: taking atonement as central or taking creation as central. The former path often leads to narrow exclusiveness whereas the latter is relatively open and easily accommodates all kinds of progressive trends of thought. For a hundred years or more, Chinese Christianity has come under the influence of Western missionaries who took atonement as central. They stressed the fall of man and his sinful nature, understanding Christ as the "Savior Lord" and subscribing to the "punished on our behalf" theory of redemption. It was also

believed that there was “no salvation outside of the church,” and belief and unbelief were used as the dividing line to differentiate between “saved” and the “lost.” There was a tendency to eagerly await the Second Coming (eschatology) and thus pay little attention to the concerns of this world, both ignoring the development of and placing restrictions on relationships, morality and ethics and behavior. The “Gospel of Christ” was equated with Western culture and everything created by other peoples was rejected as belonging to “secular cultures” etc. This caused the church to close itself off, hampered by its narrow-minded sense of superiority and thus far removed from intellectual circles.

As mentioned, the other theological direction is to explain the meaning of Christianity by putting creation in the center. This by no means signifies a departure from Scripture or the adoption of some radical new idea just for the sake of it. This view also has its basis in Biblical revelation and draws upon the rich legacy of theological history. For example, this view takes love as the intrinsic quality of God. God is the one who decided to create the heavens and the earth and all within them. God sanctifies the work of creation, preservation and redemption. This becomes a continuous, uninterrupted process of development down to its completion at the very end. The "Cosmic Christ" has a part in this whole process, revealing God's love. All that is true and good and beautiful in all the cultures of the world comes from God and the Cosmic Christ.

The Holy Spirit is the link, which brings all created things together with the wisdom and abilities of God (Father) and Christ (Son). People are created in God's image. Our free will, and our ability to accumulate knowledge, distinguishes us from other creatures. But people are still only half-complete, not having attained perfection yet. We work together with God in the whole of creation, taking part in the creative work, but we have our weaknesses and shortcomings. Going against God's will is “sin,” and we need the redemption and sanctification of Christ. Through this, we progressively become new people, full of the stature and holy goodness of Christ. This understanding breaks through the limitations of “belief versus unbelief.” It casts the meaning of “belief” in a new light. All who act in accordance with God's will,

putting into practice kindheartedness and righteousness (goodness), are looked upon with favor by God. This is only a rough outline and does not yet represent a complete system of thought (see note 4). However, this direction is more open and able to assimilate the advances and positive elements from within different kinds of cultures. Moreover, most intellectual circles can readily accept this direction.

## **2. Pluralism and Dialogue Modernization**

Modernization is an inevitability of history, and the whole of China is currently in the process of modernization. Intellectuals have taken on the role of the vanguards of this process. Resistance to modernization inevitably means falling under the wheels of history. The other special theme of this paper is "Christianity and Modernization." I have discussed this topic before in another essay (see note 5), pointing out that as far as the Chinese Christian church is concerned, now is not yet the time to be prattling on about what kind of contribution Christianity can make to modernization. Rather, we should be learning how to "adapt to the times" (*aggiornamento* - see note 6), which is an issue which has been raised in the Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church. Pluralism is an indisputable fact. Taken from a world perspective, Christianity (including Catholicism) is currently the single largest religion but, as far as China is concerned, the number of believers among the total population only amounts to less than 2%. Therefore an important theological question for discussion is how to come to terms with the broad majority of people who believe either in another religion or in no religion at all.

Now, the theology of evangelism has already entered a new phase of changing its pattern (paradigm shift) from an approach where "the church is the center" to an approach where "Christ is the center" or "God is the center," and the church has entered into "dialogue" with those outside (see note 7). But within the church many people look on this dialogue as dangerous and hesitate to move forward because they fear a dilution of the Christian message or the loss of Christianity's "uniqueness." This is an important reason for the church and intellectual circles not coming together.

### ***3. The Indigenization of Theology and the Composing of a "Chinese Theology"***

The indigenization of theology ("contextualization" or "inculturation") has been a popular topic within theological research for the past 20 years. Over 70 years ago, China already had some church intellectuals, for example Xie Honglai, Wang Zhixin, Xie Fuya, Zhao Zichen, etc. who raised the thought of "indigenization" and worked hard at it with very good results. But now times have changed. We need to have a new understanding of how to comprehend the circumstances within Chinese society today during this time of reform and openness. We also need to understand just what "Chinese culture" is (including "high" culture and folk culture). These areas still require a lot of research by intellectual circles both inside and outside the church. We shouldn't rush in demanding the building up of a systematic, structured Chinese theology too quickly.

### ***4. Building up the Body of the Church Itself***

Today, with Chinese Christianity already having entered a "post-denominational" phase, our understanding of what constitutes a "church" is a weak point. Whether from the point of view of theological theory or practice, neither a system of bishops, nor a system of elders, nor a congregational model of running the church fits our situation at the moment. The China Christian Council is still not a "church" in the traditional sense. In order to preserve unity, a principle of mutual respect has been adopted in the areas of faith, liturgy and church management. This may be an expedient measure. As the church develops and grows, a dissenting voice among some "small denominations" has gradually made itself known. We need to find a new way and a new strategy to deal with this situation. The question is whether or not we can liberate our thinking, casting off traditional western models of what a church is and how it should be structured, and making bold reforms.

Actually, although the three models of church management mentioned above each has its roots in the Bible, none of them in fact came down from heaven. The early church provided the "outline" but the influence of all kinds of social systems down through history gradually filled in that outline to make the church as we know it today. The church represents the organization of the mass of

believers into a certain form. Its function lies in bringing together the tasks of preserving the faith and the practice of religious life, both maintaining stability now and handing it down for later generations.

Theological theories on how such a church should be structured came later. If we see the church as containing “the elect” (*ekklesia*) then it is easy to become separated from those outside the church and pay attention to one's own moral uplifting without any thought for others. On the other hand, if we see the church as a “covenant” (*koinonia*), a “communion of the saints” (*sanctorum communio*) the “Body of Christ,” this lays the emphasis on blending together in harmony, cooperation and mutual support. The Council of Nicea put forward the “Fourfold nature of the Church” (namely, One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic) which is quite an accommodating and flexible understanding. As for such things as holy offices (church hierarchy), Sacraments and liturgical worship, more of these areas have fallen under the influence and evolution of historical culture, taking on a sacred aura and a mystical hue, and therefore not easy for the average intellectual outside of the church to comprehend.

The church needs to break out of the confining, traditional western framework of what exactly constitutes a church, and instead develop a view of the church suited to the current situation in China and the Chinese church. (In the 16th and 17th centuries, this is just what Western churches did for themselves.) Fifty years ago someone said: “Use a heart of love to set up a community.” As mentioned above, if we take creation as the central content of our theology, liberating our thinking and expanding our field of vision, and if we show concern for the church, and join together with everyone around the whole country in building a new China and a new world, then we will surely achieve the understanding and respect of the vast majority of intellectuals.

## Endnotes

- 1 See "Breakthroughs In Religious Research In Recent Years," by K.H.Ting and Wang Weifan (co-authors), and K .H. Ting's "Introduction to 'The Religious Question In The Age Of Chinese Socialism,'" 1988, in the forthcoming "Selected Writings of K.H. Ting", Xilin Publishing House, Nanjing, 1998
- 2 As examples: The "Religions and The World" series, published by Sichuan People's Publishing House, which has already published ten titles in this series, the majority of which are translations of famous Western texts; "Commentary on Christian Culture" published by Guizhou People's Publishing House (already in its 6th edition); and "Chinese Journal of Theology," published by the Hong Kong Tao Fung Shan Chinese Christian Cultural Research Institute.
- 3 There is currently still a debate going on about "Culture Christians." Some are intellectually sympathetic toward Christianity but, although they have published many articles, which publicize and interpret Christianity, they don't publicly "confess" their beliefs. They are not willing to call themselves "Christians." There are also some figures within the Church who say that those who do not take part in the traditions, organizations and activities of the Church, regardless of whether they personally confess the faith or not, cannot be counted as "Christian." Two years ago, the debate among Hong Kong religious circles "'Chinese Apollo" shows that the Church still harbors a suspicious attitude toward intellectual circles. See "Culture Christians—the phenomena and the debate," edited by the Hong Kong Chinese Christian Cultural Research Institute 1998.
- 4 The "Selected Works of K.H. Ting" (see note 1), contains many essays which discuss this theological trend of putting the creation in the center.
- 5 See "Modernization's Challenge to Chinese Christianity," pp. 149-155, in "Collected Works from the 'Christianity And Modernization' International Academic Symposium," Chinese Institute of Social Sciences, Beijing, 1995.
- 6 There are many materials on this. See Huang Lingyu's "Catholicism After The Second World War," pp.24-44 in "Religion and The World," edited and printed by the State Council Religious Affairs Bureau Religious Research Center (12th edition), 1997.
- 7 See David Bosch, "Transforming Mission," Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y., 1985; and Mojzes/Swidler, ed., "Christian Mission and Interreligious Dialogue," Edwin Mellen Press, 1990.