

Christian Studies in Mainland China (1)

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(This article is the first in a series on the subject of Christian studies in contemporary China.)

Ding Guangxun, the Protestant Bishop of Nanjing and acknowledged leader of the Protestants in Mainland China, maintains that Christianity is now enjoying a better receptivity from Chinese intellectuals than at any time since it first arrived in China in 635.¹

The London-based China watcher, Edmond Tang, writes in the same line:

It is my conviction that never before in recent Chinese history, since the time of Matteo Ricci, has Chinese society been as open to Christianity as today. (...) In 1987 the China government called this 'Christianity fever.'²



These affirmations are all the more remarkable, or even startling, when compared with the disconcerting reports on the widespread persecution of religion in China in recent decades and even today.

It is impossible to develop all the issues related to the phenomenon of Christian Studies among China's intellectuals in this brief study. I will, therefore, limit myself to situating the topic within the following context:

- I. The historical development of the intellectuals' reaction to Christianity in China;

- II. The religious policy of the Chinese government in the era of Deng Xiaoping;
- III. The ideological interpretation of religions and Christianity inculcated in the education system;
- IV. The intellectual movement in China after the Cultural Revolution and June 4th 1989;
- V. The phenomenon of "Christianity fever" currently affecting China.

I. The historical development of the intellectuals' reaction to Christianity in China

Although some "experts" blinded by an ideological reluctance to understand history claim that Christianity entered China by force in the 19th century, it is well known and documented in authentic historical records that Christianity entered China 1400 years ago. This was before St. Boniface (d. 755) began his evangelization of the German tribes in central Europe, before Sts. Cyril and Methodius evangelized the Slavic nations in Eastern Europe, and before the Christian faith was brought to some of the countries in northern Europe, let alone America.

Christianity was first introduced in 635 during the Tang Dynasty by missionaries of the Eastern Syriac Church (mistakenly called Nestorians). In China it was called the "Luminous Religion." It lasted until the end of Yuan Dynasty (1368). In spite of being persecuted in the 9th century (along with Buddhism), it enjoyed remarkable success. Its terminology and doctrine influenced and were influenced by Chinese Buddhism and Taoism. The Christian message of the Xi'an Tablet and 20 other remarkable writings known as the Jesus sutras, are marked by the use of dozens of Confucian and Buddhist terms and concepts. The mutual influence among the Chinese intellectuals of the leading religions, namely Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism is a significant example, although not a lasting one, of cultural exchange and of inculturation itself.

Roman Catholicism once again entered China in 1294. It enjoyed the advantages of the open-door policy of the Mongol rulers of the Yuan Dynasty (1260-1368), who were quite tolerant towards all religions. There is little known about this period of Christianity except that it enjoyed remarkable success, not only in Beijing, but also in many other places such as Yangzhou (Jiangsu) and Quanz-

hou (Fujian), which, at the time, was a fascinating cosmopolitan city. Christianity found favor among many of the educated folks. It enjoyed some privileges. Furthermore, many of the converts were from the nobility, ruling class, and imperial family. This was something of a phenomenon in Chinese history: This success was also its weakness, since few among the Chinese Han entered the Church. At the change of dynasty, from the cosmopolitan Yuan to the nationalistic Ming (1368-1664), all the Christians of noble stock were dispersed.

Two major episodes in the historical development of the intellectuals' reaction to Christianity in China

First major episode

The effort of Matteo Ricci and fellow Jesuits to "accommodate" Christian faith in the Late Ming Confucian-Imperial culture is one of the single most investigated subjects in China-Western historical relationships. Less known is the valuable contribution of a significant group of Chinese converts, who were able to embody in their own lives and works two identities: the Christian and Confucian one. Paul Xu Guangqi (1562-1673), Leo Li Zhizao (1565-1630), and Michael Yang Tingyun (1562-1627), known as the "Pillars of the Chinese Church," are possibly the most important, but, by no means the only intellectuals who embraced the Christian faith producing a dynamic integration between Confucianism and Christianity. Among other Late Ming Early Qing Christian-Confucian scholars were Ju Rukei, Feng Yingjing, Wang Zheng, Sun Yuanhua, Huang Mingqiao, Li Jubiao, Yan Mo, Zhu Zongyuan, Han Lin, Wu Li, Zhang Xingyao, Shang Huqing.

Among these, Michael Yang Tingyun well deserves to be considered the first Chinese theologian. Michael Yang was a former Buddhist sympathizer. This enhanced the complexity and value of his experience and personality. Let me mention here just two examples of his contribution to a Chinese theology.

Yang shows a perceptive grasp of three different aspects of Revelation: 'natural teaching (*xing jiao*),' revealed to everyone, "written teaching (*shujiao*)," revealed through Moses; and "teaching by grace (*enjiao*)," revealed through Jesus Christ. This schema was certainly important in responding to thorny questions in the evangelization of China: Why was Jesus not born in China? Why did the

Gospel arrive in China so late? Why was Christ unknown to the ancient Chinese saints and sages? In his numerous writings Yang proposed a clear theological understanding of the uniqueness of Christ, wholeheartedly accepting the "teaching by grace." However, since there is a continuity between "teaching by grace" and "natural teaching", Christ's Incarnation was related to God's revelation in history. Therefore, Yang posited that the ancient Chinese saints and sages such as Yao, Shun, the Duke of Zhou and Confucius figured in that "natural teaching." "These," as Standaert points out, "were viewed as the transmitters of an orthodoxy which was the same as the one newly proclaimed by the Western missionaries."³ Early Christian writers and the Fathers of the Church offered a similar interpretation of the classic philosophers and sages of Greece and Rome.

Another important and original feature of Yang's theology is the concept of God as "Great Father and Mother" (*Dafumu*), a term that was employed by several Jesuits and converts, especially Giulio Aleni (1582-1649). Yang Tingyun explained the meaning of the expression in terms of interrelation between Confucianism and Christianity. In Confucian thought, the term, which may indicate local and central authorities, is connected with Chinese cosmogony, based on the concept of *yang* (the male element) and *yin* (the female element).

According to Michael Yang, regarding the universe as one's own Father and Mother implies the ethical consequence of regarding all human beings in the world as one's own brothers and sisters. The term suggests another dimension: the relationship between the parents and a child also expresses the relationship of God towards humankind. The same relationship expresses the comforting notion of the intimate closeness of God to human beings.

The concept of God as "Great Father and Mother" could have played an important role in the inculturation process of Christianity in China. Developing this idea Yang was able to overcome his difficulty in understanding God's closeness to human beings. This enhances the notion of God as a person in Chinese culture. In addition this term has a valid Christological implication: Jesus is the greatest expression of the Great Father-Mother's closeness to us. Jesus himself could be considered, in such a context, as the first of many brothers, which is a very important concept in Chinese mentality and life. Unfortunately, the forsaking of the "Great Father

Mother" term was one of the factors that prevented Chinese Christians from developing an original interpretation of Christ.

Michael Yang, together with others, initiated a process that could have led to a Chinese Christianity. The Chinese Christians of Late Ming and Early Qing had the intellectual and moral preparation to do that. They could have united in a harmonious synthesis the "genius" of their people with the Good News of Salvation through Christ.

Besides those literati who, like Michael Yang Tingyun, believed that the traditional Chinese spirit and Christian faith could become one harmonious combination, there were two other types of reactions by intellectuals during the Late Ming-Early Qing period. Some intellectuals, e.g., Ye Xianggao and Zuo Guangxian who, while appreciating some aspects of Christian culture, remained convinced that the Christian faith was not necessary for China, because of China's superiority and preeminence in traditions of thought and faith. A third group of intellectuals resisted and completely rejected Christian presence in China. They, together with Confucian officials and Buddhist monks, initiated the anti-Christian reaction that I have described in chapter 24 of my book.

Preaching Christ in Late Ming China.

It is well known that the notorious Chinese Rites Controversy alienated the sympathies of the Confucian world toward Christianity, especially those of the Emperor Kangxi (1655-1723). After the prohibition of the Rites, no Catholic could play a prominent role in society. Since Confucianism was at the center of Chinese traditional teaching, and access to the administrative examinations—the door to advance in any official career—was denied to Catholics, even academic education was off limits to believers. The number of Catholics dropped, and those who remained believers were mostly farmers and fishermen, isolated and despised by the intellectual world.

Modern and contemporary historiography has largely blamed the Roman Catholic Church for the disastrous Rites conflict. In one speech, Shanghai official Bishop Jin Luxian, probably the most learned leader of the official church in China, reiterated the widely held opinion that the Roman authorities were entirely responsible for the incident. But recently there are new approaches that indicate that the question was very complex and the Chinese

imperial attitude toward religion was also to blame. Yves Raguin has suggested that the outcome of the Chinese Rites Controversy might in fact have saved Christianity from becoming a sub-branch of the Confucianist-imperial culture.⁴ An Ximeng, a scholar from the Department of Philosophy of Shanxi University who writes extensively in Protestant periodicals, has also expressed a counter current opinion. According to him, the Emperor Kangxi belittled himself by arbitrating religious quarrels and interfering in missionary matters. He concludes that the Rites Controversy ended in

the seeming triumph of the Chinese feudal empire, but it resulted in something lamentable, as it further isolated this already isolated poor kingdom, making it lag farther behind the world civilization with fewer common interests with the developed countries in the world.⁵

Second major episode

Since the "Unequal Treaties" of 1842, Chinese intellectuals have looked upon Protestant Christianity and Catholicism with suspicion, and even with hostility. Unfortunately, Christian missionaries who, for the most part, were generously committed to the welfare of the Chinese people, enjoyed the official protection of the European superpowers, thereby stigmatizing the Christian religion with imperialism.

Towards the end of 19th century and during the first decades of the 20th century, Chinese intellectuals searched for a "new culture" able to save the country from humiliation and collapse. Reformers such as Kang Youwei (1858-1927), Ling Qichao (1837-1929), and Yan Fu (1853-1921) thought that the West was the cultural, institutional and political model for China to follow. Obviously, intellectuals acknowledged that Christianity was a part of Western culture; however, only a small number of them were ready to credit Christianity as the inspirational force behind the cultural and scientific progress of the Western world. The majority of intellectuals, in perfect line with modern thought, were convinced that Christians had played no part whatsoever in enabling modern Western civilization to reach the highest point of its power.

The quest for a radical change reached its climax with the May Fourth Movement of 1919. This movement was a very important and significant moment in the process of China's modernization. Perhaps it was even its beginning. On that occasion the students of

Peking University advocated scientific progress and democracy as indispensable means to save the country in disarray. The students took it upon themselves to be the critical consciousness of the political powers and the patriotic vanguard of the people. At a time when intellectuals advocated the abolition of the past, sharply criticized Confucianism as an obsolete tradition, and championed the massive importation of Western ideas, Christianity did not appeal to them. Again, the great majority of students condemned Christianity as an obstacle to progress and an instrument of imperialism. Many Chinese intellectuals considered that to be "anti foreign religions" was a main means of opposing imperialism and imperialist cultural aggression.

Moreover, modern Chinese intellectuals, like their Western counterparts, were of the mind that the Christian faith was "useful for the ignorant" (Zhou Zuoren) and something that "has caused many evils, and has persecuted thinkers and science" (Hu Shi). Of the same opinion were other known thinkers such as Gao Yihan and Chen Duxiu. It is not really surprising then that the nth anti-Christian movement broke out in 1922, often transforming adversity into open hostility or even hatred. The growing number of Marxists was a result of that social climate.

The Churches, for their part, were actively contributing to changes in society, to China's progress, and to raising the intellectual awareness of many young folks through the establishment of numerous universities and schools, the education of women, and the dissemination of Western advanced learning in medicine, science and other fields. The anti-Christian movement provoked heated discussions in intellectual circles, with Chinese intellectuals vigorously defending their faith. Catholic missionaries such as the Apostolic Delegate Celso Costantini (1876-1958) and Belgian Vincent Lebbe (1877-1940) saw the urgency of inculturating Christianity in Chinese culture to respond to the dramatic challenge of the times. Important Catholic thinkers such as John Wu Jingxiong, Ma Xiangbo (1840-1939) etc... took upon themselves the difficult task that Yang Tingyun, Xu Guangqi, and Li Zhizao had undertaken in their era of expressing the Christian faith in a manner understandable to Chinese intellectuals.

The heated debate on Christianity between the hostile majority and the sympathetic minority is well expressed in this passage

of an article published in the periodical *Shuntian shibao* on April 4, 1922:

If you refute Christianity and its validity because of some secondary effects, to a greater extent, and with greater reason you should refute, if you want to remain coherent, also science, in spite of its utility. The bankrupt of science is much more sensational than the losses suffered by Christianity. You should at least keep the *spirit of Christianity*, which is at the very foundation of the society, while we wait for the conclusion of the ongoing conflict between science and Christianity. In fact it is not at all sure that the conflict will end up with a definite break down. It might very well end up with reconciliation and a brotherly collaboration.⁶

These words sound particularly prophetic. In the postmodern world Christianity and science are not in conflict. In China scholars are dismayed by the official educational system, which promotes a divorce of science and technology from their cultural and intellectual background. A leading researcher from the Academy of Social Sciences is said to have come to the conclusion that Christianity is one of the few religions, if not the only one, that is not in conflict with modern science.

Many Chinese intellectuals are rediscovering that [Christian] religion has been an enormous spiritual and intellectual force in the Christian West, a force that was crucial to the many movements leading to modernization. They are beginning to understand that even modern science and democracy are closely linked to a religious belief in a rational God, the Creator of the Universe and Lord of all humankind and of History.⁷

II. The religious policy of the Chinese government in the era of Deng Xiaoping

Mao Zedong, an intellectual himself, crystallized the negative assessment of Christianity in an article, *The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party*, published in 1939. In it, Mao described Christianity as nothing but a tool of imperialists for cultural aggression against China. The purpose behind the Christian policy to foster higher education, according to Mao, is to develop "intellectual cadres who will obey imperialists and deceive the Chinese people."⁸

In 1950-1951 foreign missionaries and pastors were given a time limit to leave the country. In 1952 all universities and seminaries run by the churches were closed, the departments of religion in universities ceased to exist, and all research in Christianity came to a halt. From 1957, anyone who attended church was considered a right-winger, against the Party and against communist ideology.

In 1964, on the vigil of the Cultural Revolution, two Chinese scholars, reiterated the classic Marxist statement that religion is the opium of the people:

Religion is a kind of absurd explanation of natural and social phenomena, particularly to class oppression and class exploitation. Its function is to poison the working classes' thoughts and to destroy the working classes' fighting will. It is the spiritual weapon of the exploiting class to control the working class. Religion is opium to poison people. Religion prevents people from understanding the objective world correctly, and from practicing productive struggle, class struggle, and scientific experimentation. Thus, religion hampers the development of society.⁹

During the Cultural Revolution the revolutionaries renamed the Research Institute of Religion that was established in 1964 at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences as the "combat force for the annihilation of religion." During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, the attempt to annihilate religion was on a scale larger than ever before. However, religion was not eradicated. On the contrary the Cultural Revolution unwittingly paved the way for a religious awakening.

Since the open policy of the late 70s, and in line with Deng Xiaoping's pragmatist attitude, the government modified its stand, and adopted a more moderate attitude towards religion. This new attitude undoubtedly generated some practical progress following the dark years of the violent political campaigns. But the on-going arbitrary restrictions seem unjustifiable when set against the backdrop of China's search for modernization, and the freedom that religions enjoy throughout most of the world. These campaigns only confirm that the basic ideological interpretation of religious and Christian phenomena has not really changed in the last 50 years. Once again, the growing intellectual interest in Christianity contradicts and challenges the theoretical basis of the religious policy of the Chinese communist regime.

Article 36 of the new and fourth Constitution of the People's Republic of China, promulgated on April 27, 1982, reiterates the concept of *freedom of religious belief* already stated in Article 88 of the first Constitution of the PRC in 1954. It is important not to miss the fundamental distinction between *freedom of religious belief*, and *freedom of religion*. A believer can think whatever he or she wants, but certainly cannot freely practice his or her belief in freedom. Article 36 of the fourth Constitution, while not a novelty in itself, must be read in parallel with Document 19 published a few weeks earlier on March 31, 1982. This document, which remains the basic text of the religious policy of the Deng Xiaoping era, does not concede any value to religion. The government has made a concession toward it simply because it realized that it had failed to abolish religion with decrees and force. Religion must be tolerated as part of the present reality, since the priority at the moment is "the common goal of building a modernized powerful Socialist State." It is a fact, according to Document 19, that religion will naturally disappear when the people are sufficiently educated and understand the secrets of science. It is useless, therefore, to forcibly eliminate religion as was attempted during the Cultural Revolution.

The religious policy put in practice by the State, gives the approved religions—Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism—something of a legal status and protects the *normal activities* of their religious leaders and believers. The term *normal activities* has never been clearly defined, and it can well be surmised it is whatever the government decides will not adversely affect its programs.

Dual attitude during the Deng era: pragmatist and leftist

During the Deng era the Chinese regime presented two basic positions: one pragmatist or moderate on the one hand, and radical or leftist, on the other.

Pragmatism: Christianity as a tool of modernization in China

In the late 70s in line with Deng Xiaoping's pragmatist attitude reflected in the open policy, a moderate approach partially modified the traditional negative religious stand. The pragmatists adopted the following line: 1) distinction between religion and su-

perstition; 2) criticism of the simplistic formula that equates religion and the opium of the people; 3) religion should be treated as part of human culture and as a contribution to its enrichment; 4) religion can adapt itself to socialism; 5) Christianity being the "*spirit of the West*" can contribute to the modernization of China; 6) theology is a branch of Western philosophy.

The anti-Christian attitude of the radical leftists

The leftists, faithful to the radical anti-religious policy adopted during the Cultural Revolution, can be well represented by Jiang Ping, the deputy minister of the United Front, who wrote in the department's official journal in September 1986:

Our classic and famous Marxist dictum, 'religion is the opium of the people,' is still not out of date... the negative role of religion can never be eliminated... After the liberation of our country... the religious situation changed considerably... These changes indicate that religious organizations have only changed in appearance, but they have not changed one iota in their social ideology (or world outlook) or their idealism... We have no choice but to limit the degree and extent of religious activities.¹⁰

The leftists are diehards. Although Deng Xiaoping silenced them for a while, they are in fact, at least according to Mi Cheng-feng of the Department of History of Renmin University in Beijing, in the majority among the officials. In 1996, Mi published an insightful study of "five obstacles" to Sino-Vatican relations (originally in *Tripod*, and later reproduced in various periodicals). They are, in order: atheism, Marxism, underestimation of the Vatican's international status, fear of Vatican control, and the election of bishops. Prof. Mi's article sheds light on the extent that the Marxist ideology defines the attitude of the regime. Very much in the same line is the intervention Liu Peng, a researcher of the Academy of Social Sciences, made at a conference at the University of Hong Kong in 1994. He gave one of the most candid and clear descriptions of the rationale behind China's religious policy, which is nothing more than an exercise of control and manipulation on the part of the communist regime.

Religion is accepted by the state on the supposition that it recognizes the state's political authority, accepts its leadership in all social spheres, and carries out its policies. The state administration manages religious organizations that are not involved in government administration, the judiciary, or education. The role of religion in society is strictly limited... Every patriotic organization must accept the leadership of the Communist Party and the government. The official pronouncements indicate clearly that the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party, State, and religious organizations is that of leading and being led... These religious groups are managed by the government and must carry out Party and government policies. While the religious groups are independent in terms of administrative and organizational relationships, they are no different politically from those institutions under the direct leadership of the government... This means that religions in China are proscribed from involvement in administration, judicial affairs, and all forms of education, whether in schools, in correspondence courses, or in the media... According to the analysis above, church and state relations in China fit under *state dominance over religion*... Obviously, this policy of the freedom of religious belief is based not on any awareness of theism or a concept of religious values, but rather on the realistic and pragmatic consideration that religion can serve the political goal of the Party and State.¹¹

In the 90s, following the tragedy of Tiananmen, numerous documents and speeches of the top leaders were devoted to religion and Christianity in particular. In these, they repeatedly accuse Christianity of being one of the West's main means to launch the peaceful evolution of China, to snatch away Chinese youth from Communism for the Christian faith, and to divide China. Even a sympathetic scholar like Li Pingye writes that

Political forces in the West that are hostile to China continue to use religion as a means to split and sabotage China's socialist revolution and socialist construction.¹²

Christianity is a system which is different from Marxism and able to contend with it.

Some foreign students who are in China actively seek to attract converts to Christianity, and under the pretext of teaching, other

foreigners secretly organize religious activities at our universities.¹³

The long-term goal of the government regarding religion remains, according to Ye Shaowen, Director of the Religious Affairs Bureau, to eliminate the impact of religion in China.¹⁴

There are many dozens of open and secret documents and policy speeches that have been issued in the last 20 years, especially in the 90s. Surely, very few governments if any, anywhere in the world, have ever issued so many documents on religion in so short a period of time.

Religious organizations are integrated into the United Front, which is an organ of the Party made up of people from all walks of life united to support Communism. Its slogan "Seek unity while maintaining the differences" is a development of Lenin's more blatant program: "We must unite the little enemies in order to fight the bigger enemy."

Today in China there is less persecution but a great deal of discrimination against believers. When it becomes known that a person is Christian, that person automatically forfeits certain rights. Christians find it more difficult to obtain work, to get a good education, to travel abroad, etc. because the Communist Party and its ideology essentially control society. In the university, for example, especially in those more sensitive departments, it is difficult for a Christian successfully to pursue an academic career. This point will be mentioned again when describing "Mainland scholars studying Christianity and the Culture Christians."

III. The ideological interpretation of Religions and Christianity inculcated in the education system

The development of the Communist Cultural System can be divided, according to Liu Xiaofeng, into three periods:¹⁵

1. *From the beginning of the 1940s to the beginning of the 1950s.* This was the period for building up the Communist Cultural System. Marxism was seen as the major factor in Western culture and the catalyst able to re-structure Chinese culture into a new communist culture. This new Chinese communist culture could overtake the capitalist world and create a strong, powerful, modern, nationalistic country able to compete in the international arena.

2. *From the beginning of the 1950s to the end of the 1970s.* After the Communist Party had secured power over the whole country, the means of developing and spreading culture changed: all levels of education from primary through university level were used as a tool for spreading communist culture. The same was true for art, publications, etc. Any agency able to compete against communist ideology was simply eliminated.

3. *From the end of the 1970s to the present.* During this time, the Communist Cultural System underwent a period of transition. Communist authorities today still seek to control the increasing "public sphere" of intellectual discussion. However, the new and more liberal economic system has weakened that control. The Communist ideology has also weakened among the ever increasing number of intellectuals, while their individual consciousness has intensified. Furthermore, by means of publications, research and higher education, Christian Studies have developed within the Chinese educational system. Although Christian thought remains a fragile intellectual force, it is viewed by the Communist Cultural System as a branch of cultural thought.

Researchers encounter various difficulties in their studies of Christianity. The most serious are, in my opinion, two: the ideological framework that encompasses all intellectual activities in China, and the scarcity of materials.

Often these scholars have to repeat the "party line," whether they agree with it or not. An important scholar in Christian Studies suggested, "When you read our articles, ignore what is written at the beginning and the end: look for what we try to say in the middle." The position of the intellectuals studying Christianity is quite sensitive and closely monitored by the authorities. There are several reasons for such strict supervision: they are located in the most renewed cultural institutions in China; they have relationships with foreign institutions and scholars; and they deal with Christianity, which is still perceived with great suspicion by the authorities. The Office of Foreign Affairs of these same universities must first approve the visiting professors. Authorities have demanded that priests and pastors not be allowed to give lectures.

Given this particular ambience, the Centers of Christian Studies, where the researchers on Christianity are generally located, must operate judiciously to realize the purpose of Christian studies. They must preserve the delicate balance among the following ele-

ments: the desire to research freely, the necessity of maintaining a qualified cultural exchange with foreign institutions, while abiding by the rules of the university, and safeguarding Marxist thought, which is the politically correct justification for every initiative.

The academic plans of these centers are not very advanced. Their seminars and lectures must not interfere with the school's official academic program, since these activities are considered extra-curricula. One has the impression that much of the program remains on paper, or encounters restrictions, difficulties and delays. Still one admires what they are able to achieve in terms of contacts, research, and publications.

In spite of Bishop Ding's enthusiastic statement that Christianity is enjoying a better receptivity from Chinese intellectuals than at any time before, and the frequent reports on *Christianity Fever* in China, I still maintain that we should not be overly optimistic. We must remember that of the millions of students in China's universities, only a very small number are interested in Christian topics. I believe that the majority of young people are affected by a rapidly growing consumerism. Many have difficulty in understanding Christianity as something autonomous from Western culture and in the case of Catholicism, from the Vatican State. The communist ideology is still enforced in the academic curriculum, contributing to a *forma mentis* contrary to Christianity. The majority of professors and students profess atheism, and Christianity is still perceived as a foreign, Western religion.

IV. The intellectual movement in China after the Cultural Revolution and June 4th 1989

Intellectuals have always been an important segment in Chinese society. Since the May Fourth Movement, they have assumed a leading role in the process of modernization. During the political campaigns of the 50s, 60s, and 70s, intellectuals were notoriously out of favor. From 1950-1989 there had been 17 political campaigns in China, 11 of these were directed against intellectuals. Intellectuals regain a significant role in Chinese society with the end of the Cultural Revolution. Through the "literature of the wound" a number of them have expressed the frustration and pain they suffered under Maoism's systematic humiliations and persecutions.

They began a process of self-questioning which extended to the entire history of the Chinese people. They began to doubt the meaning and the value of everything they had been involved in, and they questioned everything they themselves had previously supported and criticized.¹⁶

After the Cultural Revolution intellectuals began to investigate the areas of Western thought and religion that had formerly been taboo, and that they had previously rejected.

"Intellectuals' fever" and the call of intellectuals for reform that swept over China in the 1980s had its apex and most dramatic moment during the movement of May-June 1989. The famed television series *He Shang* (June 1988) depicts a significant episode of the intellectuals' quest for reform.

Liu Xiaofeng defines intellectuals as PRC scholars in the humanities and social sciences.¹⁷ They publish series of books and periodicals that have a circulation of 5000 to 10000 copies. The readers of this literature are university students, other scholars and officials from relevant government agencies. Intellectuals are organized in groups, generally concentrated in major cities. They suffer from lack of funds, power struggles internal disagreements, and disunity.

Beijing has six or seven such groups: The Culture Academy School. Its aim is to preserve traditional culture, giving special attention to Taoism. The Toward the Future School. Its aim is to introduce Western culture to China and reform Chinese society. The Beijing Youth Political Academy. Its aim is to employ media to reform society. The television series "*River Elegy*" has been produced by leaders of this group. The Beijing Social and Economic Development Research Institute School. Its aim is social reform. This group includes members of the think-tank around Zhao Ziyang. The Culture: China and the World Committee. Its aim is to establish the foundational base for Chinese culture. The group is based around the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Department of Philosophy of Beijing University and is very influential. The Transcendentalist Group. Its aim is to distinguish between culture and transcendence. This group is interested in philosophy, aesthetics and theology.

In Shanghai, the Study of Culture School boasts of a large concentration of intellectuals. Its aim is to study the relations be-

tween Chinese and Western Culture. In Wuhan a group of intellectuals call themselves the "Spiritualists." Their aim is to study transcendence. In Chengdu a group of intellectuals study the foundation of human nature. In Guangzhou, the intellectuals are not well organized.

After the June 4th crackdown, many Chinese intellectuals went underground in China; others went into exile, particularly in the United States and France. Many of those who remained in China have had a difficult time (housing, injustices, and harassment), and have stopped writing, translating, and publishing. They have suffered an existential drama which has drawn a number of them to Christian thought and teaching. We will return later to this specific aspect.

V. The phenomenon of "Christianity fever" currently affecting China

Newsweek of May 23, 1994 reported that

Christian conversions [are] sweeping China. This swelling tide has become a major spiritual force, rushing to fill the moral vacuum left by disillusion with Communism and enlarged by the recent vogue for rampant moneymaking.

In the same year the Holy Spirit Study Centre of Hong Kong devoted an issue of *Tripod* to "Christianity Fever", a term employed also, in *China and the Church*, by Bi Ming of the China Church Research Center in Hong Kong:

In recent years, there has also been a conspicuous growth in the number of Christian publications. Most of these are translations of Western works, including the recent *Selected Readings in Western Philosophy of Religion*, a two-volume work with more than 1800 pages. The various essays in these volumes are mostly from recent and contemporary Protestant theologians, such as Kierkegaard, Barth, Tillich, etc. The amazing fact is that in less than two months after the publication more than 3000 copies had been sold. This is evident testimony to the "fever" Chinese intellectuals have for Christian thought.¹⁸

Again in 1994 Li Pingye, a researcher from the Chinese Association of Religious Studies (Beijing), did a valuable analysis on the attitude of contemporary Chinese intellectuals toward Christianity. She also mentioned a "so-called 'Christianity fever'" which emerged in China's academic world after the Cultural Revolution.¹⁹

In 1993 Wu Yin, a researcher from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Beijing) did an interesting interview among Christians in the various churches of Beijing, both Protestant and Catholic. Her aim was to meet and talk to Chinese Christians in order to understand how and why a growing number of people have come to believe in Christianity. Wu Yin also acknowledged the existence of a

"Christian cultural phenomenon," a group of scholars who are not Christians but who recognize the value of Christianity and believe that such a value will be able to play a positive role in helping the formation and development of a pluralist culture in modern China.²⁰

This seems to me to be one of Mainland China's earliest descriptions of the "Culture Christians". I will develop this phenomenon further later. Wu Yin concludes her research with a very sympathetic statement, in which she says,

[There is] good reason to feel optimistic about the future of Christianity in China. At a time of transition and breakdown of values, it provides people with a point of reference in their reflections. As a modern religion it also serves as a bridge between a more open China and the modern world. I am sure that it will become an important part of a pluri-cultural China and provide it with new vitality and nourishment.²¹

I cannot but underline here how different Wu Yin's understanding of Christianity is from that of the young thinkers of the 1920s and 1930s mentioned above. Christianity is not an anti-modern religion, but rather a door to modernity; it is not any kind of deceitful opium for the oppressed classes and backward folks, but rather a source of inspiration and meaning; it is not a phenomenon destined for certain and early death, but rather a brilliant part of the future China!

Years later He Guanghu of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Beijing), probably the most internationally respected Mainland scholar on Christianity, echoed and deepened the words of Wu Yin. In a talk he gave at a European Symposium in 1998 and published in the same year in *China Study Journal*, He Guanghu gave some statistics on the "rapid growth of Christianity." He acknowledged that the official figures were "incomplete." According to him the Christians (both Catholics and Protestants) number 20 million (the government says 14 million). But even his figures might be conservative, since other sources estimate that today at least 50 million people believe in Christianity.²² The number can be even higher, according to enthusiastic evangelical groups. He Guanghu mentions other incontrovertible numbers: 20 million Bibles have been printed in China; more than 8 million copies of a hymn book published by the China Christian Council have been distributed; and millions of copies of other books such as *The Stories from the Bible* have been sold.

He Guanghu then expresses his alarm at "some serious moral and spiritual crisis in Chinese society." Then, he continues, "where there is life there is hope." And the "miraculous revival of religion in China" is a cause for "hope for a better China."²³ The "key to a better China" is "some political reform, whereas the foundation for it is some spiritual improvement." Then, He concludes,

Since the transformation of religion in China, though weak, is improving the people's morale, it is indeed bringing us a hope of resisting the cynicism and egocentrism, a hope of spreading the love of neighbor, a hope of strengthening the concern with public welfare. And all these mean a hope of improving the social system. ... A hope of avoiding social explosion; ... A hope for exalting social spirituality."²⁴

Prof. Zhu Weijing published a book, *Christianity and Modern Culture*, (Shanghai, 1994) in which he listed books and articles on Christianity published in China between 1949-1993. Of the nearly 1800 titles, the great majority were published after 1980. In 1997 in *Christian Culture Review*, n. 6 (in Chinese) Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu carried out a survey of scholarship on Christianity in the mid-1990s. As Daniel Bays pointed out "there is a great deal of scholarly activity in this field in China, more than most would have suspected."²⁵

Chinese scholars from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, as Liu Peng, confirm the "fever" speaking of the "mania for Christianity being without precedent in China."

Many watchers, both in and outside China, agree that "Christian Fever" has broken out all over China. On Sunday morning worshipers, Catholics and Protestants, in large and small cities, in towns and villages, make their way to Church. Some of these churches can hold as many as 1,000 to 2,000 worshipers, but long before the service begins, the churches are packed to capacity. The phenomenon is not restricted to Christianity alone, but Christianity does show the fastest and greatest increase in the number of believers of all classes and ages.²⁶

Again the phenomenon unexpectedly challenges and defeats the political campaigns of the regime, aimed to build a "socialist spiritual civilization." How is the expansion of religions and the resurgence of traditional superstitious beliefs possible after fifty years of communist rule? The number of Christians is increasing, above all, among the educated youth. For the generation that was convinced that religion had all but been eradicated, this resurgence comes as an embarrassment. Moreover the number of believers is growing faster than the membership of the Party. Why is religion, and Christianity in particular, so attractive to so many Chinese at this time?

Religion has been developing rapidly since the promulgation of Document 19 in 1982. Different groups give different reasons for the rise in the number of believers. Some believe that enthusiasm for religion has come about because a number of people have been healed of illnesses or for the emotional support and strength that Christian celebration and communities offer to the believers.

Others maintain that the increase in Christian believers is the direct result of years of leftist policies that heavily suppressed religion, that human beings by nature tend to be rebellious, and that such rebellion is part of the human psyche. The more people are oppressed, the more they rebel. Repression, which touches so intimately the very core of the human self, is most likely to spur the development of religion than to obliterate it.

Moreover, according to famous phenomenologists and philosophers of religion, there is a primordial and radical religious

sense in the human being. The instinctive appeal to the supernatural dimension of life cannot be dismissed ideologically as a dark, evil, wicked, nonsensical and ridiculous element of humankind. Mircea Eliade called this individual and collective search for a spiritual world, that the Communist Party failed to destroyed, the "anthropological constant."

As a result, although the regime forbids adults from instilling any religious beliefs among children and youth under the age of 18, today thousands of young people crowd the churches. Young people as well as many intellectuals, have become believers as a result of societal factors: inflation, deterioration of the social atmosphere, the rush for money, and the gradual loss of feelings and spirituality. Many also of all ages have lost their faith in Communism and are searching for meaning in their lives.

China's new openness may also be a factor in the growth of the number of religious believers. Although Christianity began in the East, it developed most extensively and rapidly in the West. It is generally regarded as a Western "product." There is a general interest in China today in just about everything Western and so it is not surprising that Christianity, "the religion of the West," should stimulate interest. Obviously, the soil for religion to grow in China is very fertile today, and it cannot be denied that thousands, finding heart in Christianity, also find the realization of their deepest aspirations.

Christianity, and the Catholic Church in particular, is especially feared because the Party cannot tolerate anything that is not perfectly integrated into the one Party system, or not in function to it. The Catholic Church, a society with an internal and international organization, is feared in terms of both organization and ultimate aim. A Catholic cannot hold an undivided loyalty to the Party or to the government. The fear, therefore, is that Christian faith takes away the believers' loyalty to the Party. We must remember that the Party cadres who still control China have been reared in a Marxist and atheistic ideology, often in the Soviet Union in the 1940s and 1950s, where religion was considered an aberration.

The Communist Party is trying to legitimize its own power while being confronted with serious and unprecedented difficulties. Among them are the collapse of faith in communist ideology following the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen massacre, the crisis of truth in the Party caused by corruption and abuse of power

on the part of the officials, and the return of students who have studied abroad.

The Chinese Communist Party fears Christianity because it gives evidence of being able to fill the present void and to challenge the authority of the Party's teaching.

Endnotes

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- ³ Nicolas Standaert, *Yang Tingyun, Confucian and Christian in Late Ming China. His Life and His Thought*. Leiden, 1988, p. 200.
- ⁴ See Gianni Criveller, *In Memoriam: Father Yves Raguin, S.J.*, in *Tripod*, No.109, 1999, pp. 36-38.
- ⁵ An Ximeng, *A Cultural Reflection on the Controversies about Rites*, in *Regent Chinese Journal*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1994, p. 44.
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- ⁸ Quoted by Wang Zhongxin, *The Chinese Attitude Toward Christianity in Socialist China (1949-1978)*. *Regent Chinese Journal*, vol. VI, n. 1, p. 45.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- ¹⁰ Quoted by Michael Mi Chenfeng, *Five Obstacles to Sino-Vatican Reconciliation*, in *Tripod*, No. 95, 1996, p. 12.
- ¹¹ *Tripod*, No. 88, 1995, pp. 5-18.
- ¹² Li Pingye, *The Attitude of Contemporary Chinese Intellectuals Toward Christianity*, (Eds) Philip L. Wickeri, Lois Cole, in *Christianity and Modernization, a Chinese Debate*. Daga Press, Hong Kong, 1995, p. 74.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Internal document, translated by Beatrice Leung, *The Sino-Vatican Negotiations: Old Problems in a New Age*, in *The China Quarterly*, No. 153, 1998, p. 131.
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- ¹⁶ Li Pingye, *The Attitude of Contemporary Intellectuals towards Christianity*, op. cit. p. 61.
- ¹⁷ Liu Xiaofeng, *From Enlightenment to Exile: Issues and Trends among Chinese Intellectuals Today*, in *China Study Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1992, pp. 8-12.
- ¹⁸ Bi Ming, *Christianity Fever in Mainland China*, in *Tripod*, No. 83, 1994, p. 8.
- ¹⁹ Li Pingye, *A Preliminary Analysis on the Attitude of Contemporary Chinese*

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- ²⁰ Wu Yi, *The Faith and Life of Christians in Beijing. Interviews and Reflections*, in *China Study Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1993, p. 9.
- ²¹ Ibid. p. 16.
- ²² See *Tripod*, No. 83, 1994. p. 3.
- ²³ He Guanghu, *Religion and Hope. A Perspective from Today's China*, in *China Study Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1998, pp. 9-10.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Daniel H. Bays, *Christianity in China, from the Eighteen Century to the Present*. Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1996. Also quoted in *Western Missionary Influence on the People's Republic of China: A Survey of Chinese Scholarly Between 1980 and 1990*, in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, October 1998, p. 154.
- ²⁶ *Tripod*, 83, 1994, Editorial, p. 3.

