

## *Research on the Catholic Church in Mainland China: Trends and Objectives*

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Recently, I have become deeply interested in the research that Mainland Chinese scholars have been doing on the West and Christianity. In this article I would like to give a brief summary of the trends emerging in these studies limiting my remarks, however, to the Catholic Church.

Ching Xiao, a professor at the People's University in Beijing, maintains that the trend today is to study the history of Christianity from sociological perspectives:<sup>1</sup>



If we recall the conditions of the recent research on the history of the evangelization of Christianity in China, we will easily find that after the foundation of the People's Republic, scholars made every effort to prove that Christianity was a tool of Western imperialism. This kind of research is necessary, but, unfortunately, it reduces significantly the multiple aspects of the history of the spreading of the Christian religion to one historical line only: to the political conflicts with the series of *jiao-an*, juridical ecclesiastical cases, as the center of concern. After the 1980s, the focus of attention of many researchers shifted from the polemics against the Christian Churches to the debate between Chinese and Western culture, thus enlarging the sphere and the methods of their historical research. Then, some scholars took a further step. They dealt with Christianity as a type of social institution, and as a life style for groups of persons, making use of the methodologies and approaches of religious sociology. Every given religion thus has been located and researched in the vast context of the life of society, especially in its social relationships

and links; consequently, from the sociology of religion they have at least obtained a deeper knowledge of a sector of society itself. The trends of the research on the history of religions during these years have seen the historians engaged in a process of exploration, shifts and reflection: their perspectives have been enlarged from political history to cultural history, to become, finally an integral part of sociological history.

The original position, however, was different. In fact, after the launch of the liberalization policy at the end of the 1970s, some scholars resumed their studies on the Catholic Church. These, however, once again offered only the narrow and official position of the Marxist interpretation of Christianity as a historical phenomenon. Following the traditional line of the Chinese Communist Party some authors tried to explain the history of Christianity in China according to the official ideological categories. An example of this orientation is *Zhongguo Tongshi Gangyao (Summary of the History of China)*, published in 1981, which makes a totally negative judgment on the Jesuits and their mission in China from the XVI century onward:<sup>2</sup>

The Jesuits have been praised as importers of Western science into China, but they do not deserve such praise. We know that modern science developed as a result of the liberation of the human mind from theology and that the Catholic Church has been an implacable enemy of modern science as well as a brutal persecutor of scientists. Naturally, the Society of Jesus put itself on the first line against science and scientists, and it is unthinkable that its members should have brought science to China. In fact, they tried their best to prevent Chinese scholars from knowing the latest scientific developments, carried out by persons such as Nicolas Copernicus, John Kepler, Galileo Galilei and Isaac Newton....<sup>3</sup>

From time to time, such a position still appears when the official publications aim simply at political and propagandistic targets. However, the trend of interpreting Christian history along Marxist lines has also recently been criticized, and this criticism has been upheld by the efforts of the following serious historians and

scholars to correct the extreme left's mistaken interpretation of the past.

The first signal of this change in judgment within the intellectual circle was signaled by the *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*), on November 4, 1979, in its article on Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), entitled "A pioneer of the cultural exchanges between China and the West," giving a positive valuation of Ricci's role.

Another positive sign appeared in Gu Changsheng's, *Chuanjiaoshi yu Jindai Zhongguo* (*Missionaries and Modern China*).<sup>4</sup> In this work Gu admitted that towards the end of the Ming dynasty, a certain amount of scientific knowledge had been brought to China by the Jesuits although he could not agree with their religious motivations, and reproached them for not having given sufficient attention to the introduction of the most advanced scientific knowledge. However, according to him, for a considerably long time, the Catholic missionaries formed a bridge of cultural exchanges between China and the West.

In 1981, on the occasion of the birth centenary of the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), the famous paleontologist who spent 20 years in China and had been involved in the discovery of the "Homo Pekinensis," the academic publication *Daziran* (*Nature*), published an article signed by Zhen Shuonan and Huang Weiwen, who did not hide their appreciation for the work and the personality of the scientist:

Today, while we are advancing toward modern science, we should provide a correct evaluation of Teilhard de Chardin, as well as the origin of human history. Treating a friend as an enemy is obviously harmful; but falsely accusing a friend to be an enemy is equally harmful.... And about Teilhard, a good teacher and a useful friend, we should always think of him with affection for his kindness and merits".<sup>5</sup>

Since then, there has been a more accurate and objective evaluation of the history of Christianity and of missionary personalities in the social context of China. Now serious scholars and historians no longer support the previous stereotyped negative statements made against the Catholic Church. Representative of this

new approach is *Zhongguo Shehuizhuyi Shiqide Zongjiao Wenti* (*The Issue of Religion in the Socialist Period of China*).<sup>6</sup>

This more objective research on the history of the Christian faith in China has resulted in the discovery of the positive contribution the Church has made not only in the past but also in the present to China's modernization efforts. The main contributions can be summarized as follows:

- in the economic field, emphasizing spiritual values, in order to keep the balance between the "two civilizations" (material and spiritual), and providing truly 'idealistic' values against the present trends towards money-worshipping, materialism and consumerism;
- in the political field, giving foundation to the concept of equality, democracy, participation and checking on the exercise of authority;
- in the cultural field, challenging the traditional Chinese narrow humanism and down-to-earth concern, as well as fostering efficient services and practical answers to the educational, social and medical needs of people;
- in the spiritual field, focusing on the way to true freedom and the source of true 'humanity' and human virtues, that is the love of God in Christ.

Bao Limin, in the article "The Intellectual Influence of Christianity in a Changing Maoist Society",<sup>7</sup> provides documentation about some of these contributions:

Few people thought about religion at first, since to many people 'Enlightenment' equals democracy plus science, which eliminates all religions. However, more and more scholars soon recognized the deeper foundations of Western democracy in Christian thought... As for the idea of participation or the sovereignty of people, scholars have been contemplating why this principle could be developed in the West but not in the East. Many relate it to the Christian belief that everyone is equal before God... To mystify secular activity, to sanctify secular power, to worship political leaders is exactly the source of the crisis and disaster of



the twentieth century... Zu Xueqian remarked: 'through the thought pattern of the opposition of God and human, through the idea of God as the absolute 'other' or absolute challenger, Christianity has spread the democratic seed of depreciating the power of monarchy... Gan Yuan attacked the value of monism of 'our tradition'. As he understands it, Christianity, too, is a value monism, but the crucial difference is that its unity exists in God, not as the Chinese would think, on the earth, since, on earth, all people are fallen, according to Christianity... To many Chinese, religion is irrelevant, if not detrimental, to economic consciousness. Nonetheless, when the discussion does deepen, attention is called more and more to the non-obvious connection between economics, modernization and religion... Economic viability requires a serious moral ethos, more than just hedonistic consumerism and dishonest strategy... This trend was further reinforced by the secularization of commercialism in the 1990s. All these have been counteracted by Christian adversaries who still remain firmly attached to idealism, an idealism different from the old one though, an idealism which sides with the suffering and finds hope in the cross. Liu Xiaofeng has tirelessly criticized the heart-hardening vanity of existentialism, contrasting it to Christian love. Scholars like Zhao Dunhua and Su Jiling write on the inner problems of postmodernism and suggest that a 'sacred culture' is indispensable to the emerging new paradigm.

A further concern and trend in these studies has been to update the understanding and to introduce the new positions of the Church brought in by the Second Vatican Council. On this point, Professor. Fu Lean, a former member of the Philosophy Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences of Beijing, together with other colleagues, Professors Ren Yanli, Shi Liubin and Feng Jiafang, in 1996, after years of research, published the volume *Dandai Tianzhujiao, (The Contemporary Catholic Church,)* in whose introduction he wrote:

The main objective of this volume is, through an evaluation of the situation of the present reforms of the Catholic Church, to introduce to all researchers in the religious field of our country and to all people concerned with religious matters some original documentation and to provide some elements and guidelines for their studies. However, due to the universal nature and complicated character of the Catholic Church, the situation of the

reforms in the various local Churches are not similar and uniform; so to try to present the contents of all the reforms within the Catholic Church in a complete and exhaustive way is evidently impossible. Therefore we have just sketched a careful but general outline, which inevitably presents numerous shortcomings...”<sup>8</sup>

In a speech given in Italy in 1998, the same author provided more information about the purposes and the functions of the book:<sup>9</sup>

Considering that the prevailing knowledge in China is quite different from the actual situation of the Church abroad, some scholars have felt the need to make this problem known in China and have decided to write a volume about the contemporary Catholic Church. When the concerned state organs were informed, the authorities too considered the project quite important even for official scientific research ... This is the first book about the contemporary Catholic Church published in our country and it was meant to be an academic work (...) 10,000 copies have been published and it has been much appreciated by the public. Books of this kind are very rare and precious in China. Indeed, the Church, too, is allowed to print books on different topics related to doctrine and Christian life, but only for the internal use within Catholic communities...

After this work was introduced to the readers, young intellectuals especially were able to admire the new face of the Catholic religion today, and their views and horizons opened up. So, many have felt the necessity to confront the objective reality, that is, to reconsider statements and judgments of the past. Therefore, when speaking about the Catholic Church, no one can any longer state, as in the past, that the Church is ignorant and conservative, and draw the conclusion that it is anti-revolutionary and outdated, and therefore, refusing it a priori. Now, many people have overcome their prejudices and are beginning to reassess the Church, and to know it better, through the analysis and the evaluation of its present concrete reality”.

The above quotation speaks about publications of Catholic writers mainly for the internal use of the Church. These writers usually have other specific aims, such as answering the practical needs of the believers in the fields of liturgy, homiletics and catechesis, introducing updated teachings of the Universal Church,

reporting main events from the other Churches, etc. They also have just started to foster a better contextualization and inculturation of the Christian faith and of the Gospel.

Such a process that aims at bringing the Catholic doctrinal and theological vocabulary into tune with the language used by ordinary people, in secular speech and in other religious traditions is both important and meaningful. It should help Catholic believers to express and to explain their faith in ways more easily intelligible to the majority of their compatriots. There is also the converse of this work: to insert Christian values into the public arena and into the consciousness of the majority, in order to complete the process of cross inculturation.

But such a work is just beginning. Therefore, there is an urgent need for Chinese Catholic intellectuals to work in close cooperation with other scholars and historians in this complex process. This cooperation would enable Catholic scholars to play a more decisive role in laying the foundations for new value structures in the Chinese society of the future and in contributing to the cultural transformation of the value shift China is presently undergoing.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Ching Xiao, "Cong shehuishide jiaodu shenhua jindai Jidujiao yanjiu" (From the perspective of sociology, deepen the contemporary research on Christianity), in *Wenshizhe* (Culture, History, Philosophy), 1996, n. 2, pp. 32-33.
- <sup>2</sup> *Zhongguo Tongshi Gangyao*, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1981, translated in English, *Outline History of China*, Beijing, Foreign Language Press, 1982, p. 427.
- <sup>3</sup> To prove that it does not derive from an objective evaluation of the historical context but from an approach, prejudiced by the modern mental categories and political interests, it seems enough to remember the position of Ruan Yuan, who, also blinded by the prejudices of his times, in XVIII century had attacked the Jesuits starting from just the opposite arguments. Let us quote the words of a famous Chinese historian, Wing-Tsit Chan, in his regard: "Juan Yuan (Ruan Yuan, 1764-1849), a prodigious scholar as well as a leading official of his time, testified to the new interest in mathematics and astronomy in his biographies of notable contributors to these sciences, including even Westerners like Ptolemy. Yet, his Sino-centric point of view is evident. He contends that, because the knowledge of astronomy attributed to Ptolemy by

the Jesuits was so far in advance of the Chinese at his time (the Han dynasty), the Jesuits must have deliberately exaggerated it in order to deceive the Chinese concerning the accomplishments of the West. Another contention of his is that the revolution of the earth around the sun must be a fallacious theory since it 'departs from the Classics and is contrary to the Way'" (W.T. de Bary, W.T. Chan, B. Watson, compilers, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1, New York -London, Columbia University Press, 1960, p. 562).

<sup>4</sup> Published in Shanghai, by People's Publishing House, 1981.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in *Theology Annual* 1984, Hong Kong, Holy Spirit Seminary, pp. 92-109.

<sup>6</sup> Edited by Luo Zhufeng (Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Science Press, 1987) translated by D.E.MacInnis and Zheng Xi'an, *Religion under Socialism in China*, New York- London, M.E.Sharp, Inc., 1991. This work includes a report on the Catholic community in Qingpu, near Shanghai.

<sup>7</sup> The article appeared in *Theology Today*, Princeton, Vol. 55, Issue 4, January 1999, pp.532-546.

<sup>8</sup> Fu Lean (ed.), *Dangdai Tianzhujiao* (The Contemporary Catholic Church), Dongfang Publishing House, Beijing, 1996, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Fu Lean, "Lo spirito del Concilio Vaticano II in Cina", in *Asia News*, Supplement to *Mondo e Missione*, No.4 (April 1998), pp. 55-58.

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### Correction/Comment

In my article "Christianity's First Arrival in China," *Tripod*, No.123, there is a mistake on p. 45 in the last paragraph. The synopsis of the Gospel written by Titian is entitled *Diatessaron* (as I mention on p. 49) and not *The Teaching of the Apostles*, (which is an anonymous book). The mistake had already been corrected in the last draft of my article, but it mysteriously resurfaced in the final printed version. The same mistake is also found in Palmer's book, *The Jesus Sutras*, and I have informed the author.

I read the final draft of Palmer's book before its publication (as I stated on p. 43). The publication by the Ballantine Publishing Group presents the book as an example of syncretism, as indicated by the subtitle *A Taoist Christianity* (which I dispute). This idea is reinforced by other references and quotations that appear on the cover. This was not evident in the draft. This new twist seems to me a little too commercially oriented, and almost in line with the present day New Age atmosphere. I would like to dissociate myself from that perspective.

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