

Chen Duxiu's Views on Christianity during the May Fourth Period

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Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀 1879-1942), advocate of the New Culture Movement, proposed new thinking that would prompt intellectuals to reflect on the traditional culture. He hoped to reconstruct Chinese culture, reform the spirit of the Chinese people, and so make the country strong and prosperous.

Chen also commented on Christianity which is one of the tenets of Western culture. His views on Christianity are representative of many of the intellectuals at the time. This article outlines Chen's views on Christianity in the May Fourth period according to some of his essays on religion or Christianity.

I. The repudiation of religions

Chen Duxiu founded the "New Youth" magazine, promoting democracy and science as two main ideas of the New Culture Movement. He stated that religion controls the mind; clericalism and rites/codes of proper behaviour restrain human freedom, thus contradicting the spirit of democracy.

In addition, religions transcend objective phenomena. Gods and spirits cannot be proved, thus contradicting the spirit of science. Therefore, one must repudiate religion in order to develop a new culture. He said, "In order to advocate Mr. Democracy, we are obliged to oppose Confucianism, the codes of rituals, chastity, traditional ethics, and old-fashioned politics; in order to advocate Mr. Science, we are compelled to oppose the ancient arts, traditional religions..."¹

¹ Duxiu wencun [Collected works of (Chen) Duxiu]. Vol. 1 of 2 vols. (Shanghai: Yadong tushuguan, 1934), p. 362.

Chen stated that religions arose because our ancestors lacked knowledge. All things inexplicable were attributed to gods and spirits. Products of the age of imagination cannot solve problems. "The teachings of Christianity especially are fabrications and cannot be proved. If God can create the human race, who created God? Since God's existence or nonexistence cannot be proved, then Christian views on life are not credible."² Once human beings know science and understand the principle of all things, religion is no longer necessary. "The way religion liberates man is through self-deception. So it is not true liberation. Only science can give the answer. Therefore, I suggest that science should replace religion in order to develop the true belief. Though it is a slow process, we will eventually achieve the goal." He also said, "In the future, the true belief, interpretation, action and realisation should follow science as the right track. All religions should be abandoned."³ And he said, "Religion is essentially dependence on another, with God's will as the supreme command; ethics is the consciousness of self-dependence, with conscience as the supreme command. It is the difference between the past and the future civilization, i.e. the new and old ideals."⁴ Therefore, human beings should follow their own conscience, abandon religion and replace it with science.

Chen Duxiu stated that the disadvantages of religion outweigh the advantages. Religion suppresses freedom of thinking, obstructs the progress of civilization. Dictators often use religion as a tool to exploit the people, leading to the country's ruin. "For the peoples who are religious, such as Jews and Indians, religion is the main cause of the weakness of their country. Also, the French people are persecuted by the old religion, something that their scholars loathe. The philosopher Henri Bergson and the Catholic Church are like enemies. This is the disadvantage of religion, which

² Ibid, p. 182.

³ Ibid, p. 129

⁴ Duxiu wencun [Collected works of (Chen) Duxiu]. Vol. 2 of 2 vols. (Shanghai: Yadong tushuguan, 1934), p. 67.

is obvious and indisputable.”⁵ Since the Opium Wars, Christianity followed the troops of the Western powers into China; it was seen as the herald of imperialism. Christians are seen as “rice Christians,”⁶ bullying their compatriots. Many Chinese, including Chen Duxiu, thought that the command “love your neighbor as yourself” was no more than a hypocritical slogan.⁷

For Chen Duxiu, religion is good for nothing. Both God and the Daoist Jade Emperor are man-made idols. Preachers use religion to earn a living. It is a hoax. Chen satirised these idols in this way: “they cannot speak, they cannot see, they cannot eat, they have no strength, they have neither senses nor relatives, they understand nothing, they have a magnificent appearance but they cannot move, they are just useless.”⁸

Obviously, at the beginning of the New Culture Movement, Chen was totally anti-religious, including anti-Christian.

II. The turn to appreciation

However, when anti-tradition and anti-authority movements became a trend, especially after the fierce clashes of the May Fourth Movement, Chen reflected deeply on religion. He began to appreciate its value. He recognised that emotions are as important as knowledge, and religion could more effectively channel emotions: “Sometimes even with external stimuli, whether or not one reacts, and how one reacts can be guided by intermediate means, i.e. knowledge; however, they are mainly guided by emotional impulses. Art, music and religion are more powerful than reason, and morals.” Religions therefore played a significant role in the old culture. Likewise they have a place in the new culture. He even turned around to criticise those who were anti-religious, “For

⁵ Ibid, p. 98.

⁶ The term, used in Asian countries, refers to those who profess their faith for material benefits rather than for religious reasons.

⁷ Op. cit., p. 62.

⁸ Duxiu wencun [Collected works of (Chen) Duxiu]. Vol. 1 of 2 vols. (Shanghai: Yadong tushuguan, 1934), p. 227.

those who advocate the New Culture Movement, they pay no attention to art and music, and they oppose religion. They are turning human life into a mechanical condition. This is because they do not understand the origin of the activities of our daily lives. This is a big mistake. I am the first to confess my fault.”⁹

As society needs religion, it is useless to oppose it. Rather, it is better to advocate a better religion. In Chen's eyes, Christianity is the most suitable religion. He pointed out that Christianity is a founding element in different European cultures. No doubt Christianity is conducive to the development of civilization. Above all, Jesus had a great character: 1. the noble spirit of sacrifice, 2. the generous spirit of forgiveness, and 3. the spirit of equality and fraternity. Chen believed that these were the doctrines of Christianity, which scientists did not, and would not break. He even suggested: “Let us cultivate the noble and great character of Jesus, as well as his strong compassion deep in our bloodstream [character]. That will save us from the cold, dark and filthy pit.” This would completely transform the callousness of Chinese society. To those who question: Why has Christianity, with so many benefits and a long history in China, still not taken root in China? Why has it generated so many problems? Chen gave the following answers: there are more “rice Christians” than devoted Christians; the Chinese are xenophobic; they look down on foreigners and their religion; the Chinese like to slander and spread rumours; the Western powers use Christianity as a pretext for invasion. But the Chinese actually have more faults than the foreigners. Therefore, he suggested that the Chinese, including the politicians, make a determined effort to understand Christianity, strictly observe the teachings of Jesus, treat one another sincerely, discipline oneself and love others.¹⁰

However, it should be noted that Chen did not believe in God. In fact he questioned the axioms that “God is omnipotent” and “God is benevolent,” and deemed them contradictory. He argued that if God were all good, then there would be no sin in our society.

⁹ “Xin wenhua yundong shì shenme? [〈新文化運動是什麼?〉] Retrieved 10 July, 2019 from <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/6652.html/>.

¹⁰ Op. cit, pp. 417-430.

Otherwise, God was incapable of preventing sin. “We can see that God is ‘not all good’, or He is ‘not all mighty.’ We cannot believe that God, who is almighty and all good, created such a sinful world.”¹¹ He only praised the character of Jesus. He did not agree with the doctrines and dogma, such as creation, the Trinity, etc. He considered all these ancient myths. History and science have proved that all these doctrines are false, so they should be abandoned. We do not need to rely on theology, dogmas or sects. We have only to “knock on Jesus’ door”, to learn from Him directly.¹²

Compared with the “blemish” of Christian doctrines, what Chen could not tolerate was the “Christian Church.” He cited historical examples: the Inquisition killed heretics; the Church was hostile to science, etc. Now the Church “fawns on capitalists” to get financial assistance; on the other hand, it uses money to draw Chinese converts; that is why most of them are “rice Christians.” With regard to politics, the Christian countries in Europe drain all their coffers to build up their military power, and suppress the weaker countries in the Far East. Instead of standing with the weak, the Church even acted as the guide of the colonial governments. “The Christian Church’s past violence and present corruption cause great anguish and trepidation. The Church is hardly solemn or holy.”¹³

III. A pragmatic approach towards religion

Chen Duxiu had spared no effort to deny the value of religions, but he came to appreciate Jesus, so much so that he recommended that the Chinese absorb the character and spirit of Jesus. At the same time, he denounced the flaws of the Church. It seems that his views were inconsistent and contradictory, but in fact, his views of Christianity were consistent. They were based on pragmatism.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 659.

¹² Ibid, pp. 424-5.

¹³ Ibid, p.661.

At first, Chen advocated the abolition of religion, because it did not conform to the scientific spirit, and it was incapable of solving human problems. Later he no longer denied religion, because he understood that religion had its own values, especially with regard to the guidance of emotions. As society has a need for religion, he would not repudiate religion altogether. He even recommended a more appropriate religion. Chen remained an atheist, so the Christian faith which he praised was different from the faith of the Church. Divine creation, the holy Trinity, the virginity of Mary—all these basic beliefs of the Church could not be proved by history and science. These were only legends, and should be abandoned. As a matter of fact, this so-called Christianity was a new religion constructed by Chen, a religion without theology and the Church. Chen's version of Christianity only needed Jesus, who was just a human being, but a great human person.