The Intellectual Influence of Christianity in a Modern Chinese Society

Can Christian thought influence some of the dramatic changes that are taking place in China today? Focusing on two key areas – economics and culture – Bao Li Min shows that Christian ideas are having some impact in the emerging pluralistic public discourse.

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China has been undergoing a drastic paradigm shift. People realise that fundamental and critical changes are taking place in China. Schools of thought compete for the right to lay down foundations for the blueprint of a future value structure of the country. Representatives of different value heritage are excited to offer their particular insights to contribute to the transformation. As we are in a global age, the success of the paradigm shift in China will certainly concern not only the Chinese people, but also people around the world. Could Chinese Christianity play some role in this change?

At first sight, the answer is not encouraging. In fact, Christian scholars in Hong Kong and Taiwan seem to give a generally pessimistic assessment of the Christian impact upon the public life of the country as a whole. For example, Peter Lee laments that 'few are the professed Christian men and women in Hong Kong, mainland China, and Taiwan who could participate in high-level discussion with economists and other social scientists ... As in economics, so in social philosophy, are there Christian people who can rise up and be counted on what they have to say in public? In Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, Christians well trained in social philosophy and political theology are scarce.'[1] However, I believe that with a change of perspective and a more involved introspection, a different picture may appear. While one should not exaggerate Christian influence on today's Chinese scene, I believe it would be an equally unfortunate underestimation to say there is little sign of Christian ideas at work on many facets of Chinese mainline value reform discourse, because there are intellectuals, both Christian and non-Christian (there are many scholars who do not declare themselves Christian but are devoted to the intensive study of the Christian value resource in analyzing and constructing value paradigms) who have been active in making the Christian voice heard in public discussions of major change.[2]

Chinese reformers face a twofold task. First they must evaluate the old value paradigms (Confucianism-Taoism-Buddhism; Maoist socialism; Chinese communism) critically so as to push them to make fundamental change; second, they must seek to create a new paradigm with the capacity of solving the pressing problems of Chinese modernisation and moral revival. There has been a powerful trend, rooted in the radical response to the fierce result of the strong moralism of Maoist practice, to reject all efforts at establishing a value paradigm. This widespread mentality is understandable, given the general failure of mainstream moral life and the awareness of the authentic self in front of moral oppression and moral hypocrisy. However, its skepticism is regarded by the new idealists as harmful to the social ecology. These new idealists seek to form new value constellations and Christian ideas are contributing to the discussion.

In this article I will focus on two domains – economics and culture – where Christian concepts are engaged to give some indication of the influence of Christianity in China today.

The Chinese Economy

The drastic change in China today is not in the domain of politics but in economics. For over two decades the economy has been waking from ideological

enchantment. It is becoming the most important domain of society in the twenty-first century. In the past, though the official Marxist doctrine was to put the economy first, the moralist paradigm tended to ignore its significance and tried to subject the economy to political teleology. The healthy development of a market economy hence will not only better feed the people, but also help the reform of the whole paradigm. It will help break down the hegemony of the monistic political power. It will build a middle class and a civil society that will limit the power of the state. Moreover, it will create a property system that supports the independent economic status. This will be the foundation of independent rights and dignity.

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In the early stages of economic reform, people have turned more to utilitarianism to look for moral legitimation. They like the idea of the 'invisible hand' that will eventually distribute a large share of the cake to everyone. To many Chinese, religion is irrelevant, if not detrimental, to economic consciousness. Nonetheless, when the discussion goes deeper, more and more is attention called to the non-obvious connections between economic modernisation and religion. Max Weber's insightful work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is widely read and discussed. Within a short period, it has become the consensus that the successful development of modern economy has a religious–moral background. Economic viability requires a serious moral ethos, more than just hedonistic consumerism and dishonest strategy. It is pertinent to note that Weber's theory not only helps people to think about the modern West and its internal relation with Christianity, but has stimulated many scholars, including almost all leading scholars of contemporary Neoconfucianism, to reflect on Chinese culture to see if there is a similar religious background for economic modernisation, the key question being: how much of a bearing does religious-moral vision have on economic and social development?

I think Chinese Christianity will not only focus on the establishment of a modern market economy, but also concern itself with the particular problems a market economy could bring about, namely, those who lose in the war of competition. Two problems demand immediate attention: how to prevent economic polarisation (relative poverty) and how to help the jobless (absolute poverty). There are few works that have been developed by Christian intellectuals so far, but it is an area where Christians could make an important contribution to Chinese culture.

Chinese Culture

During the fervent 'debate of culture' that began in the 1980s over the merits and defects of Chinese culture in some Chinese Christians modernisation, claimed that it would help the reconstruction of the Chinese mind to bring Christianity into China. The reason was that Christianity provides something important that Chinese culture lacks, namely, the absolute value of *agape* – the love of Jesus Christ who died for human beings on the cross. The suffering of God highlights the dignity and value of each single individual. Each individual encounters God in faith. Many intellectuals are attracted by this existentialist concept of Christianity. Though this direction is generally labeled as the 'mysterious' or 'individualistic' tendency of Christians, aiming at the filling of the void of the inner, unsettled heart of the lost generation, it has had various impacts on the public discourse of value paradigm. First, this absolute love becomes the point of reference in the self-reflection and self-criticism of Chinese culture. In this criticism, some scholars like Liu Xiaofeng took a position of direct confrontation with Chinese culture. They complained about the 'superficialness' of Chinese culture, about its lack of a sacred dimension or the transcendental other, about its being complacent and easy to compromise with the evil powers. Others, such as Yang Shi, unlike ardent promoters of Christianity, identified the similarities of Chinese culture and Christianity, but pointed out the uniqueness of Christianity, namely, *agape*. Still others, like He Guanghu, resorted to the insights of Paul Tillich and John Hick to emphasise the affinity between Christianity and Chinese culture, in that they all share some kind of ultimate concern: love, Tao, human-heartedness. Centered on this affinity, they can fuse with each other eventually.[3] Open-mindedness in dialogue instead of narrow-minded intolerance is what we need today.

Neoconfucian thinkers have responded to the challenge of Christianity. Li Zehou, a leading philosopher in contemporary China, would claim that it is both impossible and unnecessary for Chinese culture to receive Christianity. Chinese culture already has its transcendent dimension: Tao. This transcendent element will be comprehended by human beings in attaining sagehood in their daily life work. Therefore, it satisfies the spiritual need and does so in a practical way. Unlike Western culture, whether the Greek type or the Judeo-Christian type, the Chinese mind does not go to the extreme, does not lead to dualism, and does not fall into desperate anxiety and anguish. This is a psychologically healthy culture full of joy. It might even prove to be a good therapy for the postmodern West.[4]

Some scholars with a Christian background, however, are sharply critical of the Neoconfucian proposal and the superiority of 'Chinese wisdom'. They are very conscious of the dividing line, and argue that it is not a virtue but rather a defect for the Chinese to reduce the distance between God and the world, as expressed in the Confucian ideal: the unity of heaven and humanity. Their rejoinder can be formulated like this: Yes, in reducing the distance one may feel joy, but is it too early to enjoy the joy? When so many innocent people died in Auschwitz and the Cultural Revolution, and we are still alive, we feel that justifying our living has become a problem,

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1. See PKH Lee, 'Barren Rock, Central Plains, Island across the Strait: The Hong Kong Mainland China-Taiwan Connection', *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 18 (1997).

2. To trace the influence of the Christian value resource on Chinese intellectuals, one has to look at those famous scholars who do not focus on the study of Christianity, yet refer to basic Christian ideas in their social criticisms, such as the active Shanghai scholars Su Jilin and Zhu Xueqing.

3. See He Guanghu, 'What This World Needs Most is Love', *Dushu* 6 (1989).

4. Li Zehou, 'A Revaluation of Confucius', and 'On Chinese Wisdom', in *Anthology of Li Zehou* (Heilongjiang: Heilongjiang Education Publishing House, 1988), esp. pp. 15, 33, 101 and 510.

5. Liu Xiaofeng, 'Memoria Passionis', *Dushu* 9 (1990).

6. A McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), ch 3.

much less joyful. As is said, after Auschwitz, it is savage to write poems. And one does find that in China, many new idealists have turned from aesthetics to theology. The elements that Chinese culture has consistently failed to comprehend are precisely the memory of suffering, the sense of confession, the awareness of the sinfulness in the ontological structure of every human being.[5]

Moreover, the highlighting of absolute values is also a criticism of the 'deconstruction-playfulness' trend that has been prevalent among the Chinese intellectuals. Value relativism is the mainstream ethical thinking permeating the contemporary West (see McIntyre on emotivism).[6] The young Chinese generation has been celebrating its liberation from the dominance of the huge, collective, 'great uni-teleology'. (The so-called fashion of aesthetics in the 1980s could be seen as a jubilee, an explosion of the newly freed subjectivity or sensitivity.) The vanguard intellectuals, in catching up with the latest vogue of the West, embraced postmodernism with ecstatic pleasure. They called for a total abandonment of all norms, a denouncement of enlightenment and idealism, a rejection of any criterion of making value judgment. This trend has been further reinforced by the 'secularisation' of commercialism in the 1990s. All these have been counteracted by Christian adversaries who still remain firmly attached to idealism, but an idealism different from the old one though because it sides with those who suffer and finds hope in the cross. Liu Xiaofeng has tirelessly criticised the heart-hardening vanity of existentialism, contrasting it to Christian love. Scholars like Zhao Dunhua and Sujiling write on the inner problems of postmodernism and suggest that a 'sacred culture' is indispensable to the emerging new paradigm.[7]

Finally, the assertion of the absolute value of *agape* is a criticism of traditional teleology and the new utilitarianism. Teleology does not entertain the value of individuals. It sees everything in its function to another end, without its own intrinsic worth. This implies the danger of justifying the infringement of human rights, for it tends to view human sacrifice as the necessary cost. Both Maoist teleology and Neomarxist utilitarianism share this outlook. They can be traced to the Hegelian idea of historical reason, which claimed that reason will actualise itself in history. However, on its way, the flowers and grass will be trampled down. Perhaps this mentality partly explains why many intellectuals, not to say the masses, tolerate injustice today. History will lead to a better end, and the movement of the wheel of history is powerful. Morality should give up when it conflicts with history. Deontological thinking disagrees with this consequentialism. After the Cultural Revolution, philosopher Li Zehou called for the return from Hegel to Kant.[8] However, his voice was neither comprehended by many, nor perhaps by himself, for he also firmly insisted on historical reason that does not show high regard for individual worth. Deontolology presupposes the sacred value of each person. This conviction is difficult to affirm if there is no God who dies for human beings. It needs to be borne in mind that in the Christian religion, the love of God is revealed in God's suffering together with the meek and poor and hungry, with those nonpersons who for generations have been dehumanised and marginalised. Joining the anti-Hegelian movement, Liu Xiaofeng argued first that history and nature do not show "rationality" themselves, so they should not be deified. Second, no matter what benefits history will get, the suffering and death of individual persons should not be cast away as a necessary cost. Each person is unique. He or she encounters God by himself or herself. God died on the cross to save him or her. Christianity does not save nations but persons.[9]

Christianity provides something important that Chinese culture lacks, namely, the absolute value of *agape*

Conclusion

This article has sought to provide a glimpse into the way intellectual controversy is carried on in China today and some indication of the range of Christian ideas at work. The channels of their work are diversified and often unpredictable, including sometimes the indirect impact on the liberals or even the feedback response from Neoconfucians to Christian thought in the early times. Their influence on the mainline discourse of paradigm shift is beyond question. It has brought Christian value resource into the emerging pluralistic public discourse. Of course, there is a multiplicity of cultural booms. Other value resources, such as Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, are also surfacing, both in the form of intellectual study and the popular practice of *Qi Gong* (breathing control).

So what about the future of Christian thought? If one notices that the active promoters of Chinese Christian scholarship started to work only about ten years ago, their participants are very energetic, and since large-scale translation projects are now underway, one could imagine that they will exert more influence if they develop well. That future development depends on several things, including sound training of more scholars in this field. Communication between intellectual Christians and churches is also important. Elsewhere, I have discussed a strange phenomenon that the two types of Christians (intellectuals and common people) tend to be prejudiced against each other and rarely notice what the other side is doing. In fact, they can learn a lot from each other. For instance, the intellectuals can think about the development of churches as models of volunteer communities, which will form a civil society necessary to any democratic system (Tocqueville). On the other hand, the churches and seminaries may start dialogue with the humanity-oriented theologians and develop their intellectual dimensions, changing their habit of remaining out-of-step with the dominant mood of the country and having little, if any. appreciable effect upon the life of the country as a whole.

7. See Zhao Dunhua, 'Secular Culture and Sacred Culture', *Philosophical Research* 7 (1996).

8. Li Zehou, 'Kantian Philosophy and an Outline of Establishing Subjectivity', in *Anthology of Li Zehou* (Hilonjiang: Hilongjiang Education Publishing House, 1988), ch 1.

9. Liu Xiaofeng, 'Participating in the Suffering of God', *Dushu* 2 (1989), p. 2.