

CHRISTIAN STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

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Abstract

Although Christian Studies is a comparatively new discipline in Mainland China, it has a long history in global academia. Thus, while promoting this discipline in China, we are also bringing Chinese scholars to the international arena and exposing international scholars to the Chinese situation. Given that we are all living in a globalized (or glocalized) context, this exchange allows people a better understanding of different religious traditions so as to avoid a clash of civilizations, especially for those living in a multi-religious context like Asia. In this paper I explain how this special phenomenon has emerged in the rapidly changing Chinese situation in the last few decades and to articulate the interesting characteristics of Christian studies and related theology in this context, namely *extra ecclesiam* (outside of the church).

บทคัดย่อ

ถึงแม้คริสต์ศึกษาอาจจะเป็นสาขาวิชาที่ค่อนข้างใหม่สำหรับประเทศจีนแผ่นดินใหญ่ แต่การศึกษาวิชานี้ก็มีประวัติอันยาวนานในโลกวิชาการ ดังนั้น การส่งเสริมการศึกษาวิชานี้ในประเทศจีนจึง เปรียบเสมือนกับการนำพานักวิชาการชาวจีนไปสู่เวทีนานาชาติ ในขณะที่เดียวกันก็เป็นการเปิดโอกาสให้นักวิชาการนานาชาติได้มีโอกาสสัมผัสและเรียนรู้สถานการณ์ของจีนมากยิ่งขึ้น ในเมื่อเราทุกคนต่างมีชีวิตอยู่ในบริบทของโลกาภิวัตน์ด้วยกัน การแลกเปลี่ยนนี้จึงเปิดโอกาสให้ผู้คนมีความเข้าใจต่อขนบของศาสนาต่าง ๆ ดีขึ้น เพื่อหลีกเลี่ยงการปะทะกันของอารยธรรม โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่ง สำหรับผู้ที่อยู่ในสังคมหลากหลายศาสนา เช่น เอเชีย บทความนี้ข้าพเจ้าจะอธิบายถึงปรากฏการณ์ที่ไม่ธรรมดาที่น่าเกิดขึ้นมาได้อย่างไรในประเทศจีนที่มี

การเปลี่ยนแปลงอย่างรวดเร็วในช่วงสองสามทศวรรษที่ผ่านมา ในขณะที่ด้วยกัน
ข้าพเจ้าก็จะชี้ให้เห็นคุณลักษณะที่น่าสนใจของคริสตศึกษาและเทววิทยาที่สัมพันธ์
กันในบริบทนี้ นั่นก็คือ *extra ecclesiam* (นอกพระศาสนจักร)

The study of Christianity in universities and research institutes is nothing unusual. It is rather remarkable, however, that Christian studies have become established in the cultural and educational system of communist China and have been developing rapidly since the late 1980s. A considerable number of scholars are now pursuing the serious academic study of Christianity and publishing their findings, and are doing so not in seminaries or other ecclesiastical settings but in institutions of the social and human sciences run and financed by the state.

The Institute of Sino-Christian Studies (hereafter abbreviated as ISCS), in which the author is presently working, is established in order to promote Christian studies (and even develop Sino-Christian theology) in the above-described situation. Our objective is to make Christian Studies a constituent of the contemporary Chinese academic tradition, just like Buddhism had done for some centuries ago, so that the Chinese culture can be enriched. Because of this special mission and the situation described above, our major working partners are not churches and seminaries in Mainland China but Chinese humanities scholars and their related institutions including universities, research institutes, and so on. Although Christian studies is a comparatively new discipline in Mainland China, it has a long history in global academia. Thus at the same time of promoting this discipline in China, we are also bringing Chinese scholars to the international arena and international scholars to understand the Chinese situation. Given that we are all living in a globalized (or better glocalized) context, it should be considered a meaningful activity for letting people have a better understanding of different religious traditions so as to avoid a clash of civilizations, especially for those living in a multi-religious context like Asia.

In this paper I am going to explain how this special phenomenon has emerged in the rapidly changing Chinese situation in the last few decades and to articulate the interesting characteristics of Christian studies

and related theology in this context, namely *extra ecclesiam* (outside of the church). This may be so special that it has never happened in the history of Asian and even global Christianity, but it may also be an indigenized or contextualized form appropriate to the Chinese religio-cultural tradition. And we hope that this model may also provide some clues to developing a non-confrontational approach for a public dialogue in the multi-traditional Asian and even global context.

A Historical Description of the Phenomenon¹

After the communist government was established in Mainland China in 1949, and especially during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, the Christian churches were forced to surrender all their educational institutions, including schools, universities and seminaries, to the state. Subsequently they had to struggle for their existence and accommodate themselves to the new situation under an atheist socialist government. The general repression of religion ceased over 30 years ago and religious freedom is now enshrined in the constitution. However, since the churches' academic resources were completely abolished for such a long time the seminaries in Mainland China have until recently been struggling to produce clergy to meet the needs of the churches. They have therefore had little resources to devote to research and not been able to produce much high quality academic studies.

A humanities faculty is not complete without the study of religions. Even during the Cultural Revolution the study of philosophy, history and other subjects in secular universities included the study of religions (although they were presented in a critical manner). Once ideological control was relaxed, however, this material began to attract the interest of scholars in its own right.² Despite the atheist stance of the communists and their eagerness to impose their ideology on every area of the cultural and educational system, it was an undeniable fact that communism was a product of the history of western thought. Its origin therefore had to be studied in that context; and one of the essential constituents of Western thought is Christianity. Indeed, the writings of Marx, Engels and even Lenin include discussions of creation, original sin, the Trinity and

other elements of the Christian faith. As early as 1956, therefore, the communist government was already planning to translate 1630 western philosophical works over a period of 30 years. This was the beginning of the process of introducing a vast amount of western thought into the Chinese cultural and educational system. Some older-generation Chinese scholars learned about Christianity in this way. The more important point, however, is that it prepared the human resources and experience needed for studying Christianity and even developing theology in recent years.³

Because of the above historical development, through the communist cultural and educational system, Christian thought has silently participated in the making of modern thought in this ancient country. Once the control of an autocratic ideology was relaxed in the academic realm a wide variety of types of thinking had a chance of developing and gaining popularity among intellectuals. This has been the scene since 1978, when Deng Xiaoping came to the political foreground and began gradually implementing his policy of “reform and openness”. In the last thirty years we have been witnessing the rise of modern China in the international arena. In the eyes of Chinese humanities scholars, this country was then and is still pursuing modernization in a dramatically rapid pace. Most Asian countries are running on a similar track and we are still seeking for an appropriate model suiting our own needs. Undeniably, however, from the very beginning all of us are tracing a Western type of Enlightenment model before we found that some elements might not be most relevant to our traditions. China is no exception. Chinese humanities scholars since the 1980s were eager to study this modernization model and from their training they found very quickly that Christianity was one key element in the background of Western culture. At the same time, the limitation of Chinese academic tradition was also reexamined so as to respond to the social challenges. Therefore Christian studies has been pursued in the public realm of humanities for the sake of searching for a new way of development and a new identity for this ancient country in contemporary era.

Characteristics of Doing Theology *extra ecclesiam*

The first thing to be noticed from this unique phenomenon is that when the church finds it difficult to produce her voice in the public realm, academic Christian studies has emerged to let Chinese people have a better understanding of this comparatively minor religious tradition. In addition, even Christian scholars in the Western world find it hard to attract public attention nowadays, Christian studies in China is shaping a type of “public theology” in academia through the help of scholars trained in various disciplines. Liu Xiaofeng, once a prominent figure of this group, pointed out the significance of this phenomenon as evangelization without missionaries.⁴ I would add that, analogically they in turn become missionaries and preach the Christian message to intellectuals without the aids of the institutional churches. That means it is a *self-initiated process* by the Chinese scholars themselves without the interference or influence of foreign missionaries. Their writings are transmitted in the human and social sciences among Chinese intellectuals while the churches in Mainland China play very little part in this process. Undoubtedly it is filled of theological significance. Even from the surface, this is a very special phenomenon in the history of Christianity, especially in the modern history of Christianity in Asia, and it directly affects the nature of the “theology” these people have produced.

From the above background information, nevertheless, it is quite understandable that from the very outset the proponents of Christian studies in Mainland China do not aim at constructing a Christian “theology” in the (Western) traditional sense. They are primarily scholars from different academic disciplines researching into the study of Christianity rather than “Christian theologians” in the usual sense. In other words, they are scholars of Christian culture trained in philosophy, history, literature, sociology and so on rather than believers or practitioners of Christianity as a religion. They are interested in the academic study of Christianity, rather than believing in Christianity, though a few of them do take Christianity as their personal faith. The emergence of this group of scholars is already a significant cultural as well as theological phenomenon because before that there had been very rare serious studies of Christian theology in Chinese academia.

The second thing to be observed from this cultural qua theological phenomenon is that, as we have mentioned above, is that these scholars are searching for a new way of cultural development and a new identity for a modern China. Therefore because of this aim and the platform on which they are standing Christian studies has become a constituent in the contemporary Chinese academic arena, shaping the modern face of Chinese culture in the process of modernization and globalization. It has achieved to some degree what the Christian church and missionaries have aimed at for centuries but never succeeded. But it is a self-initiated process by Chinese scholars themselves such that it has attracted attentions from academics inside and outside of the churches in China and other areas.

Nonetheless, since Christian studies and the related theology (Sino-Christian theology)⁵ emerged in the university context and have made use of the language of humanities and social sciences, some adaptations have to be made. The advantage of this transformation is that even non-believing scholars can in a high degree understand and even appreciate the approaches and contents of different forms of theology. But the tradeoff is that it is not easy to produce traditional or confessional type of theological discourse in this multi-religious context, especially when most humanities scholars involved are not believers and have no such intention. This makes some church leaders, especially those who had received the traditional theological training in theological seminaries, rather skeptical and even critical to the “theological studies” produced. Nevertheless, for the sake of becoming a constituent of and contributing to the making of modern Chinese culture, many scholars including some with confessional stance welcome this emerging phenomenon.⁶

Lastly, given that this “theological studies” is researched in the universities run by the state, and it is unlikely that a theology department (in the traditional or confessional sense) will be established in the near future, Sino-Christian theology from the very beginning has been a kind of interdisciplinary studies dispersed in different disciplines. The disadvantage of this is obvious: theology and even Christian studies will find difficulties to become a holistic discipline and to develop its own research methodology and approaches like Christian theology has been doing in the traditional “Western” settings. In most modern Chinese societies, how-

ever, there is a long tradition of the study of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, in university departments of philosophy, history, literature, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, religious studies, etc. In such departments these religions are also studied differently from the way they are studied in institutions run by the respective religious communities. This does not provide a condition convenient for teaching and transmitting the major elements of Chinese culture in the modern educational system. Nevertheless, they have never lost their identities of being major constituents of this tradition with a history of several thousand years. If Christian studies and theology could transform successfully into a kind of encyclopaedic discipline in a similar fashion, then it would have very good opportunities to meet different cultural and religious traditions and get into genuine dialogues in the public platform of academia. This is not merely the hope of the Christian church and missionaries, but also fulfill the hope of many modern Chinese scholars wanting to absorb elements of other cultures to enrich one's own tradition in the age of modernization and globalization.

Ending Remarks

In the long history of China, her religio-cultural tradition has mostly shown hospitality to foreigners and is thus non-exclusive in nature. In addition, we find that whenever new elements were introduced in the course of development, both the Chinese and the foreign cultural traditions were enriched. Buddhism is one such example. When it came from India to China and was transformed by the indigenous traditions and gradually became a major constituent of Chinese culture. We are now living in an age where the different religio-cultural traditions constantly encounter each other in many ways. So we need to ask: do we want a clash of civilizations or a non-confrontational encounter and even a mutual enrichment? Although Christian studies and Sino-Christian theology is still in the infancy stage compared with the long history of Chinese and Christian cultures, the phenomenon which has appeared during the last three decades may be revealing to us some direction for an age searching for a new cultural identity.

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Endnotes

¹A fuller explanation can be seen from my earlier article “The Emergence of Scholars Studying Christianity in Mainland China”, in Pan-chiu Lai & Jason Lam eds., *Sino-Christian Theology: a theological qua cultural movement in contemporary China* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 23-29.

²Chen Cunfu, “Wenhua jidutu xianxiang de zonglan yu fansi” [Review of and Reflection on the Phenomenon of the “Cultural Christian”], in Institute of Sino-Christian Studies ed., *Wenhua Jidutu: Xianxiang yu Lunzheng [Cultural Christian: Phenomenon and Argument]* (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 1997), 22-25.

³Liu Xiaofeng, “Academic Studies of Christianity in the Cultural System of the Communist Party”, in *Cultural Christian*, 67-68.

⁴Liu Xiaofeng, *Hanyu Shenxue yu Lishi Zhexue [The Sino-Christian Theology and Philosophy of History]* (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2000).

⁵For a brief introduction of Sino-Christian theology emerged in this context, please refer to Lai & Lam, “Retrospect and Prospect of Sino-Christian Theology: an introduction”, in *Sino-Christian Theology*, pp.1-17.

⁶For a brief analysis please my earlier article “The Emergence of Scholars Studying Christianity in Mainland China”, in *Sino-Christian Theology*, pp.29-33; deeper discussions can be found in the same volume such as Peter K. H. Lee, “The ‘Cultural Christians’ Phenomenon in China: a Hong Kong Discussion” and Chan Shun-hing, “Conceptual Differences between Hong Kong and Chinese Theologians: a study of the ‘Cultural Christians’ Controversy”.