



MRI FORUM 2

Chinese Religious Traditions in Contemporary China

by **Michael Saso**

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It is indeed an honour and a privilege to be invited to address the assembly of friends, scholars, directors, and supporters of the Macau Ricci Institute, on the occasion of the launching of *Chinese Cross Currents (Shenzhou Jiaoliu)*. After receiving the invitation to give this lecture, and reading the first issue from cover-to-cover, I have chosen to comment on the contents of the first two articles (see below), with the hope of continuing the dialogue in future issues. My conclusions, based on personal research and experience in China, are complementary and (I purport) "scientific," i.e., containing evidence verifiable by you, and others' independent research and field experience. That is to say, I would like to suggest that the same methods used to interpret Christianity in China today, may also be employed to understand the growth and direction of the other great religious traditions of China, that is, Taoism, Buddhism (especially its Tantric form), Islam, and folk-religion, and their interpretation in contemporary China.

Christianity and its role in modern China

Two of the essays in Vol. 1, No. 1 of *Chinese Cross Currents*, You Xilin's "Christianity's Dual Meaning in the Modernisation of China," and Wang Xiaochao's "Raising Civic Morality Among Chinese Citizens in the New Century," treat of a role of Christianity in China that has gone almost unnoticed in the 1st World Press, until the very recent publication of David Aikman *Jesus in Beijing*, (2003, press notices in 2004). The first two articles published in CCC bear witness to a long standing policy within the government of China, to promote modernisation through the proper control

and monitoring of religion. The government of China, in behind-the-scenes policy making, sees an important role that Christianity can play in the economic and scientific Modernisation, vs. the prevention of such progress, in the traditional forms of belief in China, such as Buddhism, Daoism, Chinese folk customs, and Islam.

This behind-the-scenes hidden approval, contradicting the all-too-real controls harshly imposed on freedom of religious expression in the Marxist-Socialist state, actually goes back to the very founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the establishing of the United Front Association (UFA, Chn.: *Tongjanbu*), and the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB, Chn. *Zongjiao Shiwuju*), the Party and State appointed control bodies (respectively) for religious expression in China.

The theoretical basis for UFA and RAB activity is clear and unequivocal. The Party and State approve of, and use all concrete means that will eventually foster the Modernisation and well being of China, with a theoretical focus on the proletariat, agricultural poor, dispossessed, and outcaste. The post 1980, Deng Xiaoping induced "Socialism with a peculiar Chinese flavour," which has come to mean the introduction of CCP fostered capitalist enterprise, favouring the wealthy, Party elite, and successful entrepreneurs (whether of HK, Taiwan, Singapore or other Chinese origin, or capitalist investment from any profit-minded foreign enterprise), has been accomplished with a monumental neglect and "sitting in forgetfulness" (to quote Chuang-tzu Ch. 4) of the poor, the outcaste, and the agricultural proletariat. But in accomplishing this high speed Modernisation, the CCP and the State have not forgotten the historical methods whereby scientific and economic change are best induced. The use of Christianity as an inducement to the modernizing process (noticed by anthropologists, and identified in other parts of Asia and the South Pacific as "Cargo Cult"), is therefore of long standing importance, brought to the notice of scholars and State appointed researchers in articles published as early as 1985-86.

One of the more important early studies of Christianity's perceived role in China's economic, legal, and educational Modernisation appeared in the 1986 Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences report, published in both Chinese and English (Xiao Zhitian, "Religion and Socialist Society in China," Shanghai: SASS Annual Report, 1986, pp 369-398 ff.) In this report, a survey of factual evidence taken from surveys done by the SASS staff, showed that in communities where Christianity was dominant, (the social as well as educational effects of Christian presence), production was higher, observance of state and local laws carefully observed, the family was healthy (low crime and divorce rate), and education was highly valued.

The truly inspired article of Wang Xiaochao in CCC 1.1 not only confirms the findings of the 1986 SASS publication, but adds to the well known data a new and even more startling insight: China's intellectuals, and the CCP itself, are aware that the Roman Church, in 18th and 19th century Europe, after introducing humanistic values in education (the revitalizing of Greek and Latin classics, arts, and sciences), was actually a main factor in the secularization and fall from religion now evident in Europe and the U.S.

Northern Protestant Europe, as seen especially in the writing of Max Weber, further identified capitalist wealth, the creation of the protestant entrepreneurial class, with belief and education in the Protestant form of Christian values. Catholic Humanist education and Protestant Capitalist values were and are crucial elements in the precocious Modernisation and scientific progress of 19th and 20th century Europe and America. The same values are now seen to be working within modern China, and, unbeknownst to western scholarship and journalism, even favoured and promoted by CCP inner circles. All of this is allowed by the CCP, because, history has shown, religion is eventually destroyed or replaced by the God of science and the values of material acquisition. The same educational system that eventually destroyed or secularized Christianity as a dominant social factor in western society, can likewise bring economic success, and in the process secularize and destroy the quickly growing Christian presence in China.

Jesus in Beijing (Aikman: 2003) predicts that by the year 2050, (or before) China will be the largest Christian nation in the world. If indeed China does become predominantly Christian, I would suggest that such a development need not secularize or destroy religion in China, just as it did in Europe and America. The Christian message in China is no longer dominated by the Caucasian or other presence, i.e., the verbalizing, dogmatizing power of western language based belief, (what one must "believe" rather than what one must do and how one must live) Thus, religion in China has become a Chinese phenomenon, not ruled or even influenced by gnostic protestant or agnostic Roman Catholic dominance. By gnostic I mean the belief that the body is somehow fallen, or evil, and by agnostic the denial of all forms of "difference"/ difference, Latin, Germanic, or other western language word meanings, that differ from a Roman perceived meaning. For instance, the differences between Eastern European and Western Roman declared interpretations of the meaning of "Trinity" can be solved by using the Apostle's Creed, instead of the Nicene Creed, in all ecumenic dialogue. The Chinese, meanwhile, would insist that compassion and non-judgment are signs of the true Christian, rather than how the notion of Trinity is defined in Greek or Latin words.

But there is another and deeper reason why I think that Christianity in China will not follow the path of separation from real life and practice that it has taken in Europe and America. This is because the very definition of religion

(*Zongjiao*) in China is quite different from the role given to the equivalent term (re-ligio, to "bind", or bring into a faith/belief community) that it has in the three scripture based religions of the "book", i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Religion in China, I would propose, is practice, not faith oriented. It is meditative/contemplative, rather than canonical or legal. Thus the Christian in China will still have built into its DNA and gene structure the care for the after-life, wholeness of the human condition within nature, and compassion or sensitivity to human feelings, rather than verbal assent to a creed. Religion in China, and in all of Asia, is always defined by the Rites of Passage (birthing, puberty, marriage, healing, burial, ancestor memorial), and the annual cycle of agricultural and social festivals.

Thus there is a real and observable rebirth of religion in all of its forms, in China today. Not just Christianity, but Buddhism, Daoism, and the rites of passage/annual festivals that define "folk religion," are also increasing at a 400% annual growth rate, when not obstructed by RAB and UFA activities. Furthermore, Islam in China is developing in a manner quite unlike the Jihad and other radical movements seen in post-colonial (English-French, and US dominated colonial interests in near and middle east oil). There are mosques in China with women Imam, and a rebirth of Sufi prayer and contemplation along the old "silk road," in Chinese Turkestan, the Gobi and Taklimakan desert oases. It is very important, I feel, for CCC to keep up with and report on the development of religion in China, in all of its forms.

In closing, I would like to suggest another topic for research and timely presentation. The very core of religious activity in China is based on a form of meditative contemplation that is called "apophatic" (kenosis), "sitting in forgetfulness and heart-fasting" (*xinzhai zuo wang*, Chuang-tzu Ch. 4), and the "Three precious things" (Lao-tzu (Ch. 67) "compassion, simplicity, and 'not putting self over others'." It is unrealistic to think that western religions can succeed in China without being truly religious, in the Chinese sense of that word. It also seems unrealistic, if one examines the studies of western scholars on Buddhism or Daoism in Asia, or Chinese intellectuals trained in agnostic western inspired scholarship, (Marxism included), to even be aware of these currents within religious practice in China. There is, if I might suggest, another whole field of religious scholarship unnoticed, the Daoists and Buddhists (Tibetan Tantric included) who practice and write about these things, though not in "religious studies" publications in or outside of China.

