

# RELIGION AND HOPE

## — A PERSPECTIVE FROM TODAY'S CHINA

by He Guanghu<sup>\*</sup>

### *Foreword: Darkness from Without to Within*

It has not been a secret that there is emerging some serious moral and spiritual crisis in the Chinese society today. And this crisis is becoming the focus of worry for many people who are concerned about the future of China that is, to some degree, the future of the world.

And it has been very clear that the key to a better future of China is some thorough political reform, whereas the foundation for a better future of China is some spiritual improvement. For only some constitutional politics is able to bring about a relatively just and responsibly free society, whereas only a people with exalted or inspired morale is able to bring about or promote a more thorough political reform.

However, the moral condition in the Chinese society is driving many observers to despair more and more people are turning from some basic behavior norms in their seeking for their own temporal and material benefits, giving less and less attention to the public welfare, not to mention the well-being beyond this world.

In my observation, such a condition is an outcome of the influence of the socio-political systems and events in the past decades. If we call the social circumstance which can be characterized as some pseudo-deification (having idolatry as its essence) and some pseudo-nomos (having totalitarianism as its essence) the darkness without, we can call the social mentality which can be characterized as some extreme secularism (having materialism as its essence) and some anomie or chaos (having cynicism as its essence) the darkness within. Compared with the former, the latter is much more fatal and undermining to the Chinese society and much more difficult to overcome.

On the other hand, however, in the Chinese society since 1980's, we can see some other striking and important phenomenon, that is the appearing or emerging of religion from »underground« or, I prefer saying, from the hearts of the people.

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<sup>\*</sup> Prof. Dr. He Guanghu von der Akademie für Sozialwissenschaften in Peking lehrt z.Zt. im Rahmen einer Gastprofessur in Harvard. Der Beitrag basiert auf einem Vortrag, den er im Sommer d.J. anlässlich einer europäischen kirchlichen China-Konsultation in Stavanger gehalten hat. Der Vortragsstil wurde nicht verändert.



## I. The Transformation of Religion in the Last 20 Years

Since the early 1980's when the so-called »5 Major Religions« (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism) were allowed to restore their religious activities, religion in China has experienced some important transformation in general. Focusing Buddhism and Christianity, I can characterize the transformation as following.

### 1. From Revival to Growth

According to the official statistics of the Chinese government in 1997, »there are over 100 million followers of various religious faiths, more than 85,000 sites for religious activities, some 300,000 clergy and over 3,000 religious organizations throughout China«. <sup>1</sup> And it is generally believed that the number of religious people and organizations in today's China is larger than that given by this »incomplete statistics«. <sup>2</sup>

Although it is difficult to estimate the number of lay Buddhists because of the lack of membership enrollment, we can see the evident growth of Buddhism through many other signs. Putting aside such impressive numbers as »13,000-some Buddhist temples and about 200,000 Buddhist monks and nuns«, <sup>3</sup> we can see more and more people on pilgrimages to the more and more temples, more and more people involved in more and more Buddhist activities, celebrations and practice, and more and more people reading the more and more published Buddhist scriptures, writings and periodicals.

As for Christianity, the Chinese Government's White Book says that there are 4 million Catholics in China in 1997, <sup>4</sup> whereas there were only 3 millions in 1949. And the Protestant establishment church <sup>5</sup> says its membership grew from 3 million to 10 million in the period between 1979–1994, <sup>6</sup> whereas there were just 700,000 in 1949!

Furthermore, many people outside China believe that there are 20–30 millions of Christians in today's China who have less or no affiliations with the establishment churches. <sup>7</sup> On the one hand, some estimation is not based on strict statistics and may be exaggerative, on the other hand, even the White Book also says »there are more than

<sup>1</sup> *Freedom of Religious Belief in China*, Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, October 1997, Beijing, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The term »establishment church«, referring to one of the two types of Protestant churches in China which has some hierarchical institution and official sanction from the government, is taken from FRANCIS CHING-WAH YIP's *Chinese Theology in State-Church Context: A Preliminary Study*, Hong Kong, 1997, pp. 15–27.

<sup>6</sup> XU RU-LEI, »Chinese Protestantism's 15 years of Reform and Openness«, in: GAO SHINING and HE GUANGHU (eds), *Christianity and Modernization*, Beijing, 1996, p. 157.

<sup>7</sup> I think the term »establishment church« applies to the type of Catholic church sanctioned by the government in China as well as to her Protestant counterpart.



12,000 churches and 25,000-some meeting places throughout China»,<sup>8</sup> and as well known, many »meeting places« or house assembly movement members<sup>9</sup> are not included in the official statistics. So I think the truth is somewhere between the two extremes, that is to say, the number of Christians in China grew from 6 million (including Catholics and Protestants) to nearly 20 million at least in the past 20 years!

In addition to these striking numbers, we can also see the rapid growth of Christianity from the following facts: »Since the 1980s, approximately 600 Protestant churches have been reopened or rebuilt each year in China. By the end of 1996 more than 18 million copies of the Bible had been printed, more than eight million copies of a hymn book published by the China Christian Council in 1983 have been distributed.«<sup>10</sup> And although there appeared more and more churches and »meeting places« or »house assembly« spots, they are getting more and more crowded for the Sunday service.<sup>11</sup> As the Bible are just allowed to be distributed within Church and people outside Church can just get the stories from Bible and the like, such books have been published and re-printed up to millions of copies in various versions for many times in different cities!

## 2. From Closeness to Openness

From 1950s to 1970s, all the religions in China closed their doors and windows to the outside world, as the country did. Furthermore, from 1958 to the »Cultural Revolution« (1966–1976), they even had to close their doors to the Chinese society. And while the temples and churches were closing their doors and were occupied by factories, schools, stores, police stations and other institutions, thousands of believers, monks and clergymen closed their heart doors and their mind were occupied by various unreligious thoughts.

In the early years after the revival of religion in China, most believers, monks and clergymen still remained in the closed mentality. They were very prudential in everything. They spoke little even to their fellow believers, not to mention to the people outside their own religious group and to the people from overseas. In fact, they had very few chances to contact people from outside their own religious group and from abroad in those years. All this can be seen in the number and contents of the publication of all the religious establishment organizations.

However, the situation changed very rapidly.<sup>12</sup> From 1980s to 1990s, as a strong reaction to the powerful suppression and forced closeness before, there arose a great current in the whole Chinese society that is sometimes called »Thought Liberation

<sup>8</sup> *Freedom of Religious Belief in China*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. MARTINSON, PAUL VARO, »The Protestant Church in Post-Mao China: Two Paradigms«, in: *Ching Feng* 31.1.(1988, 3), pp. 3-23, Hong Kong.

<sup>10</sup> *Freedom of Religious Belief in China*, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> »More than 3,000 Protestants attend the Sunday service at Chongwenmen church in Beijing each week. The Beijing Nan Tang Catholic Cathedral observes Mass four times each week with an attendance of more than 2,000.« (*Freedom of Religious Belief in China*)

<sup>12</sup> Such as »Religion«, »Tian Feng«, »Fa Yin« and others.



Movement«. The anti-ideological trend of the current brought about a wide-spreading interest in religion. And it was natural that such a current had some influence upon the religious circles in turn.

As a result of the reactions between the religion and the whole society, nearly all the forms of religion in China swiftly started their journey from closeness to openness. Monks and clergymen began speaking and writing about more topics, not only at home or in their own circles, but also on some public occasions. On the one hand, the establishment and non-establishment churches, Protestant and Catholic, started and developed their relationship to their fellow believers abroad as well as to their fellow churches at home. On the other hand, the establishment churches began to show some tolerance to different opinions and let in some fresh air different discourses on various topics, such as the introductions of Western theologies, the reflections upon the China's tragedy and Chinese culture, the presentations of the prophetic tradition, the affirmation of the social responsibility of Church, some socio-political critiques and some challenges to the dominant theological discourses.<sup>13</sup> It is interesting and important that some of these discourses different from the dominant discourses are from intellectuals independent of any church in China. This fact leads us to another evident signs for the shift to openness of Christianity in today's China, that is the friendly or cooperative relationship between the christian churches and the academic institutions<sup>14</sup> and some individual intellectuals outside the Church.

But in the early 1980s, any cooperative relationship between the two parties was simply unimaginable.

The similar shift from closeness to openness is also beginning in Buddhism. We can see the signs not only in the increase of its international activities and relations, like Christianity, but also in some changes in the publications of the Buddhist »establishment church« – the Buddhist Association of China. As some young scholars from outside the Buddhist circle took over the edition work of its periodicals<sup>15</sup> and entered some of its institutions,<sup>16</sup> some new ideas and open discourses began to appear within the Buddhist circle and in its publications,<sup>17</sup> though not without obstacles.<sup>18</sup> Like in Christianity, such discourses advocating openness are often from the scholars outside the official Buddhist circle.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Chinese Theology in State-Church Context*, pp. 129–159.

<sup>14</sup> An important sign is the »International Conference on Christian Culture and Modernization«, held in Beijing, 1994, sponsored by Amity Foundation and Institute of World Religions of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

<sup>15</sup> The most popular of them is *Buddhist Culture* published monthly in Beijing.

<sup>16</sup> A significant and influential institution is the Institute for Study of Buddhist Culture in Beijing.

<sup>17</sup> Just two years ago, I personally experienced the closeness of some Buddhist authority in China: some other non-Buddhist scholars and I were invited to teach in a Buddhist school in Beijing but the invitations were withdrawn before we began our lectures. However, while preparing this speech, I read a Chinese monk, back from Britain, speaking very strongly for inviting non-Buddhist scholars to teach monks and for reforming the Chinese Buddhist education system to meet the social needs, at a Buddhist meeting in Beijing (»An Interview with Mastetr Jin Yin«, in: *Da Dao*, Issue 5, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> As I know, the publication of some open ideas in the Buddhist magazines aroused some severe criticism from the Buddhist officials.



### 3. From Uniformity to Variety

As for Christianity, the variety means, above all, the formation of such a Triplex – a unique outcome of the modern history of China. The first part of the triplex is the establishment church (Catholic and Protestant), the second is the non-establishment church, and the third is the »cultural Christianity«.

Of course, what the variety means is much more than this. For example, there is appearing some trend within the establishment church to restore denominations and sects and various missionary traditions. Such a trend, to a greater degree, characterizes the non-establishment church because it has never been an united church, neither in tradition nor at present. Many of the non-establishment churches or »meeting places« are just the restorations of the various independent Christian organizations of the past. And some of them are mixed with elements of various folk beliefs or popular religions.<sup>19</sup> And in the present social situation it is very difficult, if not impossible, for the non-establishment churches to overcome their divergence.<sup>20</sup> By the term »Cultural Christianity«, I mean the Christian knowledge, understanding, ideas, doctrines, meanings, life view, world view and the faith itself spread through various cultural means by individual intellectuals. In today's China, most of these intellectuals are scholars who are active in academic circle and independent of any church, and most of them are not Christians. They have been promoting the »cultural Christianity« through their research in the field of religious study, through their writing, editing and translating.

They also set up some research centers, institutes, and even college departments for researching and teaching in the field of Christian study or religious study. (The newest of them are the Department of Religion at Wuhan University, the Institute for Religious Study at Shanxi Normal University, the Institute for Religious Study at Suzhou University and the Center for Christian Study at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.) All these works of the scholars are playing an increasingly great role in the Christian religious life<sup>21</sup> as well as in spreading and promoting Christianity in the Chinese society. Of course, however, all the scholars are different from each other in their attitude to Christianity, varying from faith through sympathy to neutrality.

In Buddhism, we can see the similar phenomenon. Although we cannot say there is any so-called Buddhist »non-establishment church« in China, we can find some intellectual groups for Buddhist discussion in some big cities. And there are more intellectuals and scholars who are not Buddhists in strict sense, but are engaged in research in the field of Buddhist study and in writing, editing and translating Buddhist publications. So, they are

<sup>19</sup> Cf. SUN SHANLIN, »The Popular Christianity in China«, in: GAO SHINING and HE GUANGHU (Eds.): *Christianity and Modernization*.

<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in the words of Prof. CHEN ZE-MING, a representative observer and theologian of the establishment church, »in the past ten years, the developments of some independent sects increasingly threatened the united Church«. (»The Challenge of Modernization Facing the Protestantism in China«, in: *Christianity and Modernization*, p. 152, translated from the Chinese version of the article.)

<sup>21</sup> Cf. SUN LI: »The Present Christian Situation in China. A Study of the Young Christians in Shanghai«, in: *Christianity and Modernization*, p. 229.



making something like »cultural Buddhism«. And owing to their higher level of learning and greater influence among intellectuals, it is clear that their role in spreading and promoting Buddhism is even more important than the monks in today's China.

What makes the religious scenery more diversified is the revival and prosperity of various folk cults, some of which are mixed with Taoism, others are stimulated by the long lasting wave of Qi Gong. The last but not the least is the rediscovery of the religious nature of Confucianism. The discussion about the religiousness of Confucianism, together with »cultural Buddhism« and »cultural Christianity« (which are called »Buddhist culture« and »Christian culture« in the academic language of scholars and students), make the »religious cultures« and the »religions« a more and more popular topic in talks and writings of intellectuals and students.

## *II. How Has This Changed the Society?*

Of course, all the religions in China have their influences on the Chinese society, in different ways and to different degree. But the transformations of them described as above have given them more influencing power, so that we can say this has changed the society to some extent.

1. In the beginning of my speech, I mentioned the moral crisis in today's China. Many intellectuals call it as »the collapse of morality« and worry about its threatening disastrous consequences. In fact, the past 10 years have witnessed some kind of moral collapse in the society. Such a society, like the Chinese society in the Mainland, which has lost its ethically bonding power of old tradition but has not yet built up its legal order, would fall into a miserable condition if there is nothing to stop or, at least, to slow down the collapse of morality.

Fortunately, in such a crisis in the Chinese society, some religions, which have become stronger through the shifts mentioned above, could exert their positive influence upon it. Although they do this just through the examples set by some believers and effectively just to some degree, they have really been counteracting the moral collapse.

In the case of Buddhism, the slogan »honor the country and benefit the people« put forward by its »establishment« and the teaching »do all goods and do no evil« passed from its tradition could exert greater influence on its followers' behavior after its transformation. And as we know, Buddhism has influenced many Chinese people to some extent, even they are not Buddhists.

In the case of Christianity, the slogan »glorify God and benefit the people« put forward by the establishment church could have the similar influence upon the believers.

However, it is the numerous good actions of Christians that are playing much greater role in counteracting the moral collapse in China. Against the general background of moral collapse, such a role is so striking that there have been appearing many articles reporting or mentioning the moral examples or good moral influence of Christians in journals for



religious studies, even in the government's publications. And some of the authors are themselves government officials, which is unusual in the social situation in China.<sup>22</sup> Of course, we have to point out that the counteraction of Christians' moral examples to the moral collapse seem much more effective and evident in the countryside than in the cities.

2. In traditional China, Buddhism (and Taoism, to a smaller extent) provided an alternative way to the people in their spiritual life, which was dominated by Confucianism. But since the Song Dynasty, all the three Chinese religions (Sanjiao) have begun a secularization process and declined.

From 1950s to the »Cultural Revolution« (1966–1976), religions had gradually been swept away from the Chinese society and some kind of communist ideology had been deified or idolatrized. So, after the »Cultural Revolution«, with the disillusion in the pseudo-deification, there is spreading the extreme secularism and materialism, just as with the disillusion in the pseudo-nomos, there is spreading the cynicism and egocentrism, the two trends converged to make a kind of vast wilderness for spiritual life in China.

In such a situation, the revival and development of religion has indeed pointed to a way out, though the religious people are not more than 10% of the whole population, and the Chinese religions have their own problems and abuses. In any case, hearing of the praise to God in the quiet countryside, watching of the Cross on churches in the noisy cities, reading of the books on religion and thinking of the teachings of scriptures, all these signify that millions of Chinese people have not given up their efforts in seeking for a way out in the spiritual wilderness and they have been given some road signs.

In fact, though not yet very popular, religion in China is showing to the society a possibility of some spiritual life in contrast with the extremely secularist or materialist life. And with the help of their religious faith, numerous Chinese people have their lives anchored, in the teeth of storm of anomie which may be the unprecedented in the history of humankind.<sup>23</sup>

3. As you see, in all the modern history of China, most of Chinese scholars and intellectuals considered the Chinese society as a non-religious one, and they thought the non-religious nature was a blessing to the society. Their argument is that the Chinese society was dominated by Confucianism but Confucianism is a comprehensive philosophy and a cultivating power which is higher than or much more superior to any religion. During the Anti-Religious Movement and the Anti-Christian Movement (1922–1927),

<sup>22</sup> Of such articles at hand, during my preparing the speech, from »Zongjia (Religion)« (Nanjing), »Dangdai Zongjiao Yanjiu (Study of Contemporary Religions)« (Shanghai) and »Zhongguo Zongjiao (Religions in China)« (Beijing, edited and published by the Religious Affairs Bureau of the State Council), 50% are written by government officials.

<sup>23</sup> All this can be seen especially in some recent literature works of such writers as CHEN CUN, SHI TIE-SHENG and others. As the official press, generally speaking, are not willing to publish the articles in favor of religion, what we can read in them (e.g. in the periodicals published by the Religious Affairs Bureau) confirming the spiritual influence of religion on the society, though not very much, is really a very clear pointer. This looks even clearer if we found some of the articles written by some officials in the United Front Department of the Communist Party of China as Li Pingye and Tian Hongmei's (»Christianity and Modernization«, pp. 259–270, »Religions in China«, Beijing, 1998, pp. 13–20).



especially from 1950s to 1970s, all religions were attacked and dismissed as superstitions related to the evil, wicked, dark, nonsensical and ridiculous elements of the humankind throughout the world history. So, in the early years after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), such an idea became nearly a monopoly theory in Mainland China that Chinese culture is non-religious because Confucianism is not a religion. Even Prof. Ren Jiyu, the first of the few scholars in the post-Mao China who argued for religiousness of Confucianism, at that time, took the idea as his theory background that Confucianism existed as a ruling tool of the oppressing class, and his opponents denied the religiousness of Confucianism because they feared that the major Chinese cultural tradition would be attacked and dismissed as »people's opium«, the drug notorious to the Chinese people. Such a denial, with a nationalist pride, help to spread the idea that non-religiousness is just the major merit or advantage of the Chinese culture.

However, with the revival and transformation of religion in China, more and more scholars and intellectuals began to re-think the issue of religiousness of Chinese culture, especially of Confucianism, while being attracted by the influence of religion and its positive function. In the recent years, the re-thinking has begun to appear in some publications. And it is clear that the number of the scholars who advocating the religiousness of Confucianism is steadily increasing.<sup>24</sup> And it is more significant that most of them not only recognize the religiousness of Confucianism, but also give a positive evaluation to it and to religion in general.<sup>25</sup>

Although it can be said that such a change is partly due to the influence of the contemporary neo-Confucianists outside China, it should be noted that this change did happen in the context of the revival and development of religion in China, so the stimulation from transformation of religion cannot be ignored. And, beyond all doubt, such a change is significant and beneficial to the Chinese society because it could remind the people of the religiousness of their cultural tradition, hence the recognition of their finitude and of the being of the Infinite.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Professor Li Sheng and the present author are the first two of them after professor Ren Jiyu, though they have different approaches and ideas (Cf. HE GUANGHU, »The Root and Blossom of the Chinese Culture«, in: *Yuan Dao*, 2, 1995, Beijing, and »A Thesis on the Reformation of Chinese Religions«, in: *The Orient*, 4, 1994, Beijing).

The latest development can be seen in the latest issue of a humanities journal very influential in China *Wen Shi Zhe* (Literature, History and Philosophy), which published a discussion about the religiousness of Confucianism held by a group of the most famous scholars in this field such as ZHANG DAI-NIAN, JI XIAN-LIN and others. In the discussion, most of the younger scholars recognize the religiousness of Confucianism. (Cf. »A Written Discussion About Whether Confucianism Is a Religion«, 3, 1998.)

<sup>25</sup> Of course, in some discussions, there are many scholars who still deny the religiousness of Confucianism and of Chinese culture, but some of them point out, at the same time, that the non-religiousness is just the major demerit or disadvantage of the Chinese culture.

<sup>26</sup> According to CHARLES KRAFT'S *Factors Influencing Acceptance/Rejection of New Idea*, the similarity between the basic premises of source and the receptor culture will help acceptance of new ideas. (Cf. RALPH R. COVELL, *The Liberating Gospel in China*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1995, p. 272.) The theory can be applied to relationship between the acceptance of Christianity and the religious nature of the Chinese culture.



### *III. How Has This Given Some Hope to the Society?*

Where there is life, there is hope. Since there are so many lives in China and so miraculous revival of religion in China, there are of course some hope for a better China.

#### *1. A Hope for Improving the Social System*

As it was mentioned at the beginning of my speech, the key to a better future of Chinese society is some thorough political reform, whereas the foundation for it is some spiritual improvement. Only a people with exalted or inspired morale is able to improving their own socio-political system.

Since the transformation of religion in China, though weakly, is improving the people's morale, it is indeed bringing us a hope for resisting the cynicism and egocentrism, a hope for spreading the love of neighbors, a hope for strengthening the concern with public welfare. And all these mean a hope for improving the social system.

#### *2. A Hope for Avoiding the Social Explosion*

As the numerous social contradictions, which today's Chinese society inherited from the old system, have been covered and expanded with the various newly-produced problems, the Chinese society is facing some danger of social explosion, if it will not thoroughly reform its overall system.

Since the transformation of religion in China, though slowly, is improving the people's morale, hence the opportunity for a thorough reform, and is pointing to a way out in the wilderness for spiritual life, hence the relative nature of the temporal life, it is indeed bringing us a hope for reducing social problems and relieving the social conflicts. And all these mean a hope for avoiding the social explosion.

#### *3. A Hope for Exalting the Social Spirituality*

The decline of the spirituality of Chinese society can be looked at, in a perspective, as an outcome of the forgetting and dismiss of the religious spirit. The secularization of the Chinese culture caused the spreading of materialism, cynicism, egocentrism and the anomie.

Since the transformation of religion in China, though implicitly, is stimulating the intellectuals to rethink about and rediscover the religiousness of the Chinese culture, hence helpful for enhancing the religious consciousness of the public, it is indeed bringing us a hope for counteracting the materialism and anomie, a hope for resisting the extreme



secularization of the Chinese culture, and a hope for recalling its religious spirit. And all these mean a hope for exalting the social spirituality.

### *Epilogue: A Temporal Candle with an Eternal Wick*

Of course, there are many problems and abuses in the religions in today's China, which should be removed as much as possible through some religious reformations.<sup>27</sup> All the abuses reveal the human dimension of the religions. They are just like the impurities in a candle.

Nevertheless, however, the candle is still bringing light to the people walking in the darkness within a tunnel. And as we know, what is essential to the candle is not its impure wax, but its wick. »When the candle is burning, who looks at the wick? When the candle is out, who needs it?«<sup>28</sup> The wick is the Holy, is the Spirit, who is burning itself to bring light to the people, even though the people ignore it.

As for my hope for my people and my thank to the Holy, I will conclude the speech with the following quotations:

»I will call them ›my people‹ who are not my people;  
and I will call her ›my loved one‹ who is not my loved one.«<sup>29</sup>  
and

»Unless the Lord Almighty  
had left us descendants,  
we would have become like Sodom,  
we would have been like Gomorrah.«<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Discussion of this issue is beyond the limit that this speech set down for itself. Cf. HE GUANGHU, »A Thesis on the Reformation of Chinese Religions«, in: *The Orient*, 4, 1994.

<sup>28</sup> The words from ANNIE DILLARD is taken from the flyleaf of issue 1 of *Wick* (The Harvard Divinity School Student Journal of Literature and Religion, Spring, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> Romans, 9:25.

<sup>30</sup> Romans, 9:29.