

Yang Huilin and His View of Christian Culture

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Prof. Yang Huilin (楊慧林) could be ranked alongside such well known scholars Liu Xiaofeng, Zhuo Xinping and He Guanghu as one of the few independent minds in China Mainland capable of developing a unique view of Christianity, its cultural impact and its significance for China.

Back in 1991, Prof. Yang Huilin was one of the chief editors of the “Encyclopedia of Christian Culture” (*Jidujiao Wenhua baikequanshu*, Jinan Publishing House, 667 pages), a remarkable one volume dictionary covering the history of Christianity, Christian Institutions, fine arts and Christianity, music and Christianity, Western literature and Christianity. Prof. Yang also adopts a similar broad approach to Christianity in seeking to understand “Christian Culture”. A Professor at the department of Chinese literature at the People’s University in Beijing, Dr. Yang is also very interested in world literature and he even plays the violin, something quite extraordinary for a man who experienced the Cultural Revolution in his youth.

When Prof. Yang first encountered Shakespeare’s plays, he found them brimming with quotations from the Bible. Concluding that it would be hard to understand Western literature without knowing the religious background and tradition of this literature, Prof. Yang decided to study Christianity in order to grasp the meaning of Western literature and culture. He has been promoting the study of Christian culture at this university since then. In 1995 he established the Institute of Christian Culture Studies at the Renmin University, and since 1998 this institute edits the periodical “Christian Culture Study Journal” (*Jidujiao Wenhua Xuekan*), which appears twice a year.

In 1995 Prof. Yang Huilin published his book “Sin and Salvation — a theory of the Spirit of Christian Culture” (*Zui’e yu Jiushu - Jidujiao wenhua jingshen lun*, 210 pp. Dongfang, Beijing), which is a very creative synopsis and interpretation of Greek and Jewish tradition, Biblical themes, medieval history and modern theology.

In January 1991 Yang's book "Asking for 'God' - a debate between faith and reason" (*Zhuwen Shangdi - xinyangyu lixing de bianman*, Beijing Education Publishing House, 229 pp.) appeared, and again, it contains very interesting essays on various topics concerning Christianity and China. Prof. Yang opens up new horizons and has the courage to raise questions where others would remain silent.

The "change" that the Christian faith underwent in China is one of the questions that not many Chinese scholars would consider or discuss. Prof. Yang has already published articles like "Christianity eliminated by Chinese Culture" (*Zhongguo wenhua dui Jidujiao de xiaojie*), and in his latest book "Asking for 'God'" he again elaborates on his view on this issue (see chapter 3, pp. 49 to 62).

Prof. Yang states that Christianity introduces absolute goodness (God) as a standard; this differs greatly from the 288 types of "goodness" that the Roman writer Varro enumerates (p. 50). The Christian idea of the supreme good is radically opposed to evil, and for Prof. Yang this has two important consequences: first, this absolute standard can overcome the relativity of worldly standards like success and failure. For "once an evil system would establish itself and social disorder would be resettled by this evil system, then the 'evil' would turn into 'good' and this would mean that success is the measure of goodness" (p. 51). Secondly, the existence of absolute goodness (God) relativizes any human act, be it a morally good or evil act. This absoluteness of the moral standard makes it possible to see human action in its limitedness and frailty, makes it possible to honestly acknowledge the fact of sin and on the other side, offers a radical opposition to this world.

Prof. Yang repeatedly emphasizes that this Christian faith is "essentially different" from Chinese tradition and culture, and once this faith enters the Chinese context, it would inevitably be distorted by any effort of "integration" (*huitong* 會通). Prof. Yang thinks that this distortion was exactly what happened to the Christian message from the beginnings of Christian missions in China right up until the "inculturation" (*bensihua*) movements of the 20th century.

Prof. Yang believes that Matteo Ricci's method of inculturation eliminated Christian characteristics even more than the sinicised expressions of the Nestorian missions in the Tang Dynasty. Based on the texts of several steles of the Ming and Qing dynasties, Prof. Yang shows that the sinicized presentations of the Christian faith were not very different from Confucianist texts. In fact, some texts inspired by Jesuit missionaries repeatedly

emphasized that Christianity was very similar to Confucianism. Prof. Yang states that because Christianity in China had to concentrate so much on conforming to Confucian morality, it gave up its own characteristics. Moral standards—like the issue of monogamy—became the central message or the central problem in accepting Christianity for scholars like Yang Tingyun (楊廷筠) or Wang Zheng (王征).

“Of course there was the hope that Christianity could spread with the help of Confucianism, but after the moralization of Christianity, it became apparent that, in the moral realm, Christianity was not superior to the object of missionary activity., and therefore the legitimacy of the existence of Christianity [in China] became a problem... the compliance to the literary framework [of Confucianism] on the one hand removed some obstacles for the propagation of Christianity, but in fact it suppressed the content of the message to a very high extent” (p. 56). Prof. Yang expects Christianity to be a “radical challenge,” and on the basis of this assumption he criticises some historical developments: “The amazing capacity of Chinese culture and language to reject elements from outside forced Christianity to adopt the [inferior] position of the weaker one and to ‘unite with Confucianism.’ The strong capacity [of Chinese culture] to eliminate new elements made Christianity give up its radical criticism of the secular world. Therefore the Christian assertion of a ‘supreme goodness’ (zhi shan) gave way to a kind of secular ethics; the original ‘critical tension’ gave way to an arrangement with the authorities...” (pp. 56-57).

Prof. Yang observes that modern scholars like Zhao Zichen, Wang Zhixin, Xie Fuya, the Catholics Zhang Chunshen, Fang Zhirong, Luo Guang and the Protestant scholar Zhou Lianhua again made the same old mistake and tried to interpret Christianity in the moralizing terms of Chinese tradition. “The ‘moralization’ of Christianity in the labyrinth of the Chinese context has not found an exit yet” (p. 60). And this is Prof. Yang’s conclusion to the topic: “The ‘moralization’ of Christianity in the Chinese context may have its own gains and losses, but if this position of being the inferior becomes a habit of adaptation, then it will not satisfy anybody. Because the question that follows this kind of adaptation is evident: What reason should be given to explain the existence of Christianity in China? This question cannot be answered on the level of ‘moralization’.” (p. 62).

It is remarkable that Prof. Yang dares to present this theory so directly to the reader. One can observe that he has several assumptions underlying his thoughts. First he states that Christianity and Chinese culture are

“essentially” different; he says that Christianity radically criticises and “denies” the secular world, whereas Confucianism and Chinese tradition lack this transcendent perspective and the “absolute good” (God). Prof. Yang is more than likely influenced by Jacques Gernet’s theory that the Chinese friends of M. Ricci basically misunderstood or distorted the Christian message. Maybe it would be helpful for Prof. Yang to analyze more Christian literature of the late Qing Dynasty, where Catholic and Protestant missionaries and Chinese scholars (like Li Wenyu or Ma Xiangbo) tried to present a very sinicised version of Christianity that went far beyond moral issues and was capable of offering “radical criticism” of the Chinese tradition. Their writings represented a solid and thoroughly Christian philosophy and world view, including metaphysics, as well as the “absolute good” that Prof. Yang is interested in and raises questions about.

Another very interesting and courageous part of Prof. Yang’s book is chapter 5 (pp. 92-123), in which he compares Auschwitz and the “Cultural Revolution” (1966 to 76) in China. He first presents an essay by Didier Pollefeyt which discusses the different attitudes of “diabolicisation”, “banalization” and the “apology for evil” in the case of Auschwitz. Now Prof. Yang applies these attitudes to Chinese writings about the “Cultural Revolution.” He raises many questions (pp. 115-117): First, how could these young people, the “Red Guards”, in August 1966 turn into monsters overnight? The education campaigns after 1949 certainly had not propagated cruelty or aggression but basically had told the young to “respect teachers” and to “help others”, even if some slogans in the fifties were urging destruction (like for example the *po si jiu*, “smash the four olds”, i.e. “smashing old thinking, old culture, old style, old habits”) But how then to explain this eruption of violence?

Then Prof. Yang asks how we should evaluate the strange criticism that led to the accusation of so many people during the Cultural Revolution? Wall posters accused many of opposing Mao but even more often accused people of “immoral behavior” (like “leading a corrupt life”, “having depraved moral standards”, “betraying friends”, etc.). But what does it mean for “morality” if, in a context of ruthless and unjust violence, “moral criticism” is taking place? Is the existence of an “ideal person” (*lixiang renye*) possible in such an atmosphere?

Third, Prof. Yang observes that even before the “Cultural Revolution” many campaigns were launched, maybe on a more limited scale but also very ruthless. Is Mao Zedong alone to be blamed for the “Cultural Revolution” and not also those who participated in the earlier campaigns and

profited from them? And if the scale of the “Cultural Revolution” had been smaller, would it be seen as just one campaign among many others or would it still be called a “disaster” (*zainan*)?

Fourth, the role of Chinese intellectuals also raises many questions. Some said that “the Chinese intellectuals have been raped for the past 40 years”; but on the other hand there were many intellectuals who only too willingly followed the mainstream and did not dare to speak the truth. “How many dared to say ‘it hurts’ when it hurt?” There were countless examples at that time of collective hypocrisy (*jiti xuwei*); now those who willingly ran with the mainstream just excuse themselves saying they were “raped”. Can they shake off their responsibility in this way?

Fifth, the “Cultural Revolution” was like a huge theatre that turned everybody into a puppet, drawn and pushed in any direction by invisible strings. Even Mao himself lost control of the situation. Prof. Yang then asks if even Mao himself became a puppet to some extent, and if so, then who was it that pulled the strings moving this “giant wheel” of the disastrous “Cultural Revolution”?

For Prof. Yang, the conclusion of all this is that Auschwitz and the “Cultural Revolution” both signify the force of a collective unconscious, and both imply the “limitedness and contingency of ideals and values in this world. The reason why ‘evil’ had its hour and why the ‘devil’ could be victorious is precisely because every one of us, in a sense, participated. In the last analysis, there is almost no pure ‘victim’ in this lasting, giant evil event. Those who participated in the evil sin can only evade the critique of their own selves because the conflicting value concepts of the secular world can perfectly well offer a legitimation for any kind of action or choice” (p. 117).

Prof. Yang sees in modern Chinese literature many examples of “diabolicisation”. This tendency towards “diabolicisation” can be seen in the “scar-literature” (*shanghen wenxue*) of the 70’s, in many autobiographies written by Chinese women—Yang mentions Zhang Hong’s *Wild Swans* and books like *Life and Death in Shanghai*—and all kinds of memoirs published in the last 20 years. On the one hand they accuse the “devils” and on the other hand they depict a hero who is aware of things, who is rational and resists the “evil forces”. These protagonists are described as ideal personalities who have clean hands and do not join the turmoil, and they often have the sympathy of the majority of the other people who are not “devils” (i.e. Red Guards). Prof. Yang Huilin states that this kind of description is basically not representative of what really happened. Otherwise how could the frenzy and often “sincere frenzy” (*zhencheng de fengkuang*)

be explained? Prof. Yang exposes this kind of diabolicisation in modern Chinese literature.

As to the attitude of “banalization”, Prof. Yang points to the fact that in China, intellectuals in particular easily see themselves as “victims of history” and deny their personal responsibility. The historical determinism present in many Chinese minds avoids the questions of freedom, truth and responsibility. This makes it difficult to have a constructive discussion on the “Cultural Revolution” in China.

In terms of “apology for evil”, Prof. Yang also notes that many people, both in China and outside, saw or see positive sides to the “Cultural Revolution”; he mentions the movement of 1968 in the West, the Neo-marxists Sartre, Marcuse, Derrida and even Liberation Theology in this context. Today, many people in China readily criticise the corruption of the present political system and yet retain nostalgic feelings for the time of the “Cultural Revolution”. Prof. Yang observes that “Mao is raised to the pantheon (*shentan*) again, adorned with new myths”. (p. 119). All this could be seen as an “apology for evil”.

The thoughts and considerations of Prof. Yang concerning the issue of forgiveness are quite enlightening as well. Prof. Yang mentions how difficult the problem in China is, as there is often an “official judgment” of events and an authoritative decision on who is guilty and to what degree. (As everyone in China knows, Mao was pronounced of having 70% merits and 30% faults, since he was seen partly responsible for the “mistake” of the “Cultural Revolution”. The amazing thing is how few people dare to challenge this official judgment even today.) Prof. Yang thinks that the “*priori* forgiveness” and the different strategies of self-justification present in China’s tradition were not shaken at all by the “Cultural Revolution”, and this is another factor that makes real forgiveness hard if not impossible (p. 120). It is a pity that Prof. Yang does not further explain the term “*priori* forgiveness”, but in the context it is clear that it means to forgive oneself everything and to try to lay the guilt on others.

The last part of Prof. Yang’s analysis of Auschwitz and the “Cultural Revolution” is again leading back to his basic message: the unique contribution of Christianity has to be preserved and understood. He emphasizes that Christian love and forgiveness are based on the eternal “Other” (God), who is always beyond man and transcends all worldly human relations. In Chinese tradition on the other hand, the human and the divine, reason and faith, politics and religion, action and norm have always been mixed together; but in the area of ethics, it would be important to clearly separate all these elements, otherwise moral judgment is always dis-

torted and controlled by secular interests. Prof. Yang Huilin warns that if we drift away from the premise of the “Other” (God), then absolute love and forgiveness will not only fail the test of reason, but they will also lose their binding force just like any other secular norm (p. 112).

“Therefore, the experience of both Auschwitz and the ‘Cultural Revolution’ should not be wiped away by ‘forgiving’, but it rather needs ongoing questioning. This questioning (*zhuijiu* 追究) does not exclude forgiving; its aim is not to catch individual ‘sinners’ but to question man as man. This questioning does not inquire into a single moral norm but into morality itself. Only in this questioning can the ‘ethics of faith’ which responds to an ‘ethics of responsibility’ unfold its meaning” (p. 123).

Maybe some statements and overly critical passages in Prof. Yang’s book were eliminated by censors before publication, but nevertheless, the observations and thoughts of Prof. Yang Huilin in his latest book are remarkable and doubtless very courageous, applying as they do the concepts of sin and responsibility to the “Cultural Revolution”. They might be a first step to a new type of “Chinese Theology”. Maybe one can see them as being in line with the observations of Ma Xiangbo in 1933, who applied the question of truthfulness to another “disaster” of modern Chinese history, namely the Boxer rebellion of 1900 (see his essay “The relationship between the Bible and the Chinese masses”). Will future Chinese theologians dare to fully apply the concepts of “sin”, “responsibility”, “truth” and “collective hypocrisy” to their own history, a history pretended and believed by many to be one of “harmony and peace”, but in reality a history that was often enough one of blood and tears. Will they apply these moral standards to the pride of Qianlong and Hong Xiuquan, to the hypocrisy of Empress Dowager Cixi and to the shrewd silence of Zhou Enlai? And what would Prof. Yang write about these topics?