

Christianity and the Development of China's Civil Society: A Comparative and Prospective Analysis

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Christian churches in China are still under state supervision. When they try to escape this supervision, they have to face an array of repressive measures. Religion in China is considered to be a "private matter." However, religious groups are supposed to contribute to social development, but they have to do so in strict compliance with the directives given by the state and the imperatives of Socialist construction. In such circumstances, can Christianity still be relevant for China's future?

This paper will not directly focus on the relationships between Christianity and the State. I will rather concentrate on the present and possible future contribution of Christianity to the building-up of a genuine Chinese civil society, and I will do so in a comparative perspective. In the triangular relationship between State, Society and Religion, there is room for creativity and new openings. This paper pays special attention to such openings. I will first put the relationship between Christianity and Chinese society in its historical framework. Afterwards, I will investigate whether the Catholic Church contributes to the building-up of civil society in China today. As a way to enlarge our perspective, I will contrast this analysis with the one that can be done on other religious movements. Finally I will propose an agenda on the way Christians can contribute to the building-up of civil society in China. This part will concentrate on "peacemaking" as a way to define the specificity of the Christian contribution.

1. CHINA AND CHRISTIANITY: AN OVERVIEW

In 1601, the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci was granted permission to settle permanently in Beijing, where he would stay until his death, in 1610.

He had been trying to secure this approval since the year 1583, when he first arrived in China. The contacts and friendships he developed during the years he spent at the Chinese capital were going to set the basis of the Christian mission in China for the next 120 years. These friendships would also launch an in-depth dialogue between China and the West in the cultural as well as in the scientific field.

Firm on his objectives, flexible in his methods, always respectful of Chinese laws and ways of proceeding, Matteo Ricci succeeded in dealing with the Chinese State. This is to be contrasted with the tragedies that followed. First, the Chinese Rites controversy, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, was about the legitimacy of the ceremonies held for Confucius and the ancestors. The internal strife crushed the development of the Chinese Catholic Church. Second, Christianity was reintroduced to China as a direct outcome of the Opium War. It would be most unfair to evaluate the subsequent missionary efforts only in the light of the “original sin” that the link between imperialism and Christian preaching somehow was, but it would also be unwise not to understand the anti-Christian feelings sometimes manifested in China by forgetting this historical background.

In the “White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief” released by the Chinese government in October 1997, the name of Matteo Ricci is not mentioned, nor is this very active period of cultural intercourse of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries. An historical conjuring trick allows the authorities to jump directly from the seventh century, when a few Syrian monks brought Christian teachings to China for the first time, to 1840, when missionaries came back with opium and canons. However, the very fact that this fundamental experience of contacts between China and Christianity is not mentioned can be interpreted in a positive light. The Chinese government has not come with a definite judgment on this period yet, and could be ready to give it a positive significance, thus enhancing a similar model for a renewed interpretation of the role of Christianity in China.

Is this only wishful thinking? Several elements plead for a more optimistic interpretation. First, Matteo Ricci and his companions were observing the laws of China at this time, making opportunity of the openings that they met in this limited framework. Today, Chinese authorities are less concerned with religion than with public security, and could certainly tolerate a more active religious presence from abroad as far as

the commitment to work within a given legal framework (whatever the judgement one can extend on that framework) is seen as serious. Second, the cultural exchange opened by the first generations of Jesuits in China was taking place under the auspices of reciprocity and equality, before the time of imperialism. In the speech that he delivered at Harvard University in November 1997, Jiang Zemin has sketched the outlines of what he calls a “culture of co-operation.” Although the humanistic outlook of this culture on the making remain very rough indeed, Chinese leaders certainly feel the need to find a rationale behind the growth of exchanges based on confidence, equality, search for shared interests and values.

This is where Christianity can contribute even more to China than Ricci did in his time. For centuries, Christianity came with Western learning. The Gospel and Euclidean Geometry (the *Elements* of Euclid being translated by Ricci himself) were conjointly challenging the Chinese worldview. Nowadays, Western learning is an integral part of the Chinese soul. The issue is no more to bring the West to China, or even to bring in the Gospel. The issue is to present the Gospel as a living interlocutor, as a force able to contribute to the redefinition of Chinese culture itself. Christianity has to engage with others in the gigantic task of reinterpretation through which Chinese people will finally get rid from the ghosts of the past and will invent their own future rather than to resign themselves to fate and indisputable authority. A renewed dialogue between Chinese culture and Christianity is to be seen as a creative process, an ongoing invention of values, categories, interpretative models through which making sense of the past, finding common ground for the present and giving common meaning to the building-up of the times to come can be achieved. In other words, a better cultural interaction between Christianity and China, and a new cultural relevance of Christianity should eventually bring social and political benefits.

2. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Let us now concentrate on present day China and the dilemmas faced by the Catholic Church in this context. A recent book by Richard Madsen offers new perspectives on the uneasy relationships between the Catholic Church, the Communist state and Chinese society. I will not deal here with the historical perspectives developed in the book or

with the fieldwork done by Madsen in the Tianjin diocese. More to the point in the framework of this paper is the difference drawn by the author between two conceptions of what civil society is about. “The first, an Anglo-American vision based on thinkers like John Locke, Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith, mistrusts the power of the state and emphasizes the needs of citizens to form associations that are independent of the state. The second, a Continental European vision based on thinkers like Montesquieu and Hegel, has a much more positive view of the state. Only the state can reconcile particular interests in a common, public interest. The state itself must organize and empower the association of civil society and give them the moral education, the sense of community, and the security necessary for responsible participation in public affairs.”¹ When envisioning civil society in terms of its independence from the state, Madsen notes, one sees the Church as contributing to the build up of Chinese civil society. And the underground Church, more independent from the state, will be considered as even more likely to lead China in a democratic direction.

However, Madsen continues, “in the rural hinterlands, where the Church is strongest, this independently organized social activity does not necessarily lead towards social self-governance in a pluralistic society. It sometimes leads to fragmentation and, potentially, anarchy. All too often, Catholics belonging to self-governing organizations on different sides of the conflict between the official Church and underground Church show little capacity to resolve their differences.”²

Madsen is right in pointing out that the Catholic Church in China often lacks the qualities of civility attached to pluralism and self-governance. At such, although it offers resistance to the omnipotence of the state it does not contribute to the emergence of a Western-like civil society. As Madsen also points out, civil society presupposes a differentiation between economy, polity and society. All too often, “Christian villages” do not offer any kind of separation between these realms. Local economics, politics, society and faith are intertwined. However, emerging urban Catholicism and reforms within the Church offer hope for a more positive role in the future.

Madsen’s analysis offers food for thought. It needs however a few correctives that a recent article by Anthony Lam can help us to spell out. First, the official and the unofficial Church structures are to be seen “as two faces of the same coin.(...) Underground phenomena

originate from the needs of the members at the lower levels of society that are not met by the official structure. During periods of tightening, the government controls or represses these demands. Nothing more is heard from the dissatisfied group. They have not disappeared, however. They are merely dormant. When the government controls and eases the forces of suppression somewhat, the lower levels of society rise up once again to take matters into their own hands.”³ Second, the very existence of an underground Church serves the needs of the official Church as it puts pressure on the government and helps the church to evolve. For instance, “faced with the ever-growing popularity of the underground Church liturgies, the government was compelled to grant its approval to the open church’s request for greater freedom in liturgical matters.”⁴ Third, the toleration of underground phenomena is often a way of releasing tension within society and of offering space for legal and social experimentation. Summing up, underground groups contribute to the making of a civic culture even when they themselves lack civility. Besides, in the apprenticeship process, they often grow in maturity and sophistication.

By its very existence, and, curiously enough by the coexistence of an underground and an open structure, the Catholic Church somehow contributes to the emergence of a civic culture in China. It is not alone in doing so. Examples taken from other religious groupings should enable us to get a richer understanding of the interaction between the state, civil society and religious creeds and practices in the Chinese context today. Such interaction is a multifaceted one, and thus requires to be approached from different angles.

3. RELIGION AND SOCIETY: THE FALUN GONG CASE.

On April 25, more than 10,000 members of a movement mixing healing practices with a creed inspired by traditional Chinese religions gathered in front of China’s central government headquarters in Beijing, asking that their association be legally recognized. It may seem strange that the protesters taking to the street of Beijing 10 years after the students democracy movement were middle-aged and elderly men and women. Most China-watchers were caught off guard, because they have been focusing on the mood of students, intellectuals and workers—the groups that have spawned unrest in the past.

In fact, the April 25th incident gives one a good overview of the

evolutions taking place in China's social fabric. The older generations are often resentful that, after dedicating their working lives to China's development and suffering through periods of political upheaval, the state and sometimes even their own families are neglecting them. They take refuge in groupings that combine health practices, social gatherings and semi-religious rituals. This quest for social bonding and spiritual meaning has also fuelled an interest in Christian churches, Buddhist associations and all kinds of unofficial "new religions" in China.

At the root of Falun gong is qigong, an array of breathing, healing and meditation techniques inspired by Taoism. These techniques are interpreted and practiced in various ways by an ever-increasing number of schools and sects throughout China. They are often, but not always, mixed with religious beliefs and rituals coming from the syncretistic world of Chinese religions. The Falun gong movement has indeed become a semi-religious organization. The authorities are troubled by it, not least by the group's incredible growth in the seven years since its founding (although media reports of a membership between 70 million and 100 million are greatly exaggerated). But if the government acts on its concerns and tries to dismantle the Falun gong movement, it will not solve anything. The plasticity of such movements is remarkable. Mere repression would most likely reinforce the group's religious outlook and appeal.

In China at the moment, civil society and the state are positioned in an uneasy stand-off. Consider the members of China's "lost generation." The worker who is 45-or 50-years-old today knew hunger and even starvation when he was a child. He was thrown out of school by the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. He probably married and started a family around the time the one-child policy began to be enforced. Today he is being thrown out of work by state-enterprise reform. Such circumstances could indeed crystallize into social unrest. The Chinese state still maintains tight control over political life but allows organizations outside its formal control to run certain parts of people's lives. As a result, there is more intellectual debate now and a greater number of publications; social organizations, too, are asserting a role. Incidents like Sunday's protest, however, suggest that tensions lie just beneath the surface.

The difficulty of maintaining an equilibrium between state and society is heightened in China this year by the coincidence of several sig-

nificant political anniversaries. For many, there seems to be something decisive in such a conjunction, a threshold to be crossed before China enters the new millennium. All of this only compounds the problems the leadership is already facing: rising unemployment, growing public concern about corruption, and rural troubles linked to an excessive tax burden. However, holding China together is the shared hope that a course of “natural development” will transform the country during the next 20 years as much as it has been transformed since December 1978, when the “reform and opening” era began. “Harmony” has become a central value in the Chinese psyche and is seen as the cultural foundation for engineering more changes than conflict would ever do. Conflict, however, often strikes unannounced. Religious and semi-religious movements often stress “harmony” as a central component of their worldview, but their interaction with the State has a conflict dimension that neither side knows how to deal with.

4. RELIGION AND THE STATE: CHINESE BUDDHISM

Studying how Buddhism interacts with society can give us another frame of reference. It is obvious that Buddhism in China is experiencing a renewal. However, we lack documents and fieldwork on this renewal. In order to compensate for the lack of information from Mainland China we might instead have a glance at Taiwan. Although the political and social situation in Taiwan is altogether very different from the one encountered in Mainland China, both country’s religious contexts present more similarities than seems to be the case at the first glance. In many respects, Taiwan is a kind of laboratory in which Chinese religions freely adapt to contemporary realities. Looking at Buddhism in Taiwan today is a way to understand, on the one hand what the Mainland China religious landscape might look like later on, on the other hand the kind of challenges that Christianity has to deal with in this part of the world.

Originally, Buddhism in Taiwan was divided between institutional sects imported by the ruling class from the Mainland and various forms of lay Buddhism. The Japanese occupation promoted orthodox Buddhist sects and a “beyond this world” attitude. After 1947, the influx of monks who had left the Mainland was the cause of a vigorous power struggle. One has here to note the influence of the disciples of Tai Xu (1890-1947), a monk who, during the 1930s, had advocated an *aggiorna-*

mento of Buddhist doctrines and institutions. In Taiwan, Yin-shun is the main promoter of this current and gives it solid intellectual and spiritual foundations. A reaction followed the creation of the official Buddhist association in 1952, and, in 1954, the writings of Yin-shun were severely criticized. The KMT-controlled associations were content with maintaining the status quo, almost unchallenged until the beginning of the 1980s. However, around this time, several masters started attracting the public attention. Such is the case of Hsing-yun, founder of the monastic and cultural centre of Fokuangshan, Cheng-yan, a leading intellectual and spiritual figure, or Ch'eng-yan who promotes the idea of a socially engaged Buddhism. The Tzu-chi Association that she created in 1966 has today four million members committed to the development of social, medical, educational and cultural projects. In less than ten years, four Buddhist universities have been founded in Taiwan and a fifth one will open its doors in the year 2000.

One striking feature is the success encountered by what are known as Chan sessions. Each year, thousands of persons follow one of the many three-day or seven-day spiritual retreats directed by Chan masters. Student Buddhist associations are especially active in promoting such activities. This is certainly the main channel for nurturing vocations.

Indeed, in the secularized and consumerist climate of Taiwan, more than one thousand young people per year are ordained. In 1998, as in 1997, the figure is reportedly about 1,200. In general, monks and nuns receiving ordination do this within a few months of their entering the monastery. To some observers, especially if they are used to the slow process of entering religious life now followed in the Catholic Church, this seems to be rather hasty. However, until now, most ordained monks do stay in the monastic condition. Monks who are not yet twenty years old need a written approval from their parents. This is also the case for monks being married and thus entering a new way of life who need also a written approval from their legal spouse.

It is especially worth noting that seventy-five to eighty per cent of those choosing monastic life are women. It is actually quite plausible that nuns feel that they can develop their creativity and potential more than marriage (with the burden of extended family obligations) would allow them to do. And they are indeed at the root of most of the charitable or cultural initiatives undertaken by Buddhist monasteries. The

development of Buddhist feminine monastic life in Taiwan is a fascinating topic that requires an in-depth study. In February 1998, the Fokuangshan monastery organized an ordination ceremony in India, for reestablishing the ordination lineage for nuns in such countries as India, Sri Lanka and Nepal. On this occasion, Ven. Yi-fa presented the Fokuangshan nuns order as an example for the promotion of Asian women as a whole: “Over half of the nuns at Fokuangshan have received university or higher education. About three-fifths of the nuns are between 20 and 40 years of age. Therefore this monastic Order is a young and energetic one –which makes it very attractive to young lay women. (...) Another aspect of our monastic life that appeals to young Asian women is its objective fairness. (...) In this system, all monastic, monks and nuns are given equal opportunities. This system is operated by a collective leadership assembly of monks and nuns known as the Religious Affairs Committee. The chairperson of this committee can be male or female, and is elected by secret ballot.”⁵

Monasteries are not only centres of monastic activities, they remain the backbone institution of Buddhism. The prestige of a master and his/her social influence are expressed through the size, reputation and range of activities that his/her monastery will be able to convey. Although lay associations play their role in Buddhist expansion, they heavily rely on a master and a community of disciples organized as a monastic community.

In this respect, monasteries can be studied as key elements in the framing of the Taiwanese social and cultural landscape. They answer “consumerist” religious needs as they offer ritual practices, religious goods and affiliation networks, and they do so in a way that is much less linked to “localism” than is the case with popular religion. The monastery also works as a haven of quietness and certainty that may dispel social and individual anxiety, the more so because of the imposing figure of the Master at its centre. At the same time, religious life always works as a protest (be it verbally expressed or not) against the dominant social model. The austerity of many monasteries in Taiwan as well as the time devoted to meditation and charitable pursuits indeed transcend and challenge Taiwan’s consumerism and social restlessness. Different schools express this challenge in different ways (Pure Land Buddhism and Chan tradition do not interfere in the same way with the secular world), but they all channel their answer through the monastic matrix. The fact that Taiwan claims the greatest number of Buddhist nuns in

the world cannot but lead one to wonder what are the underlying trends working in contemporary Taiwan's culture and society.

It would be a mistake to idealize Taiwanese Buddhism. Because of political and social circumstances, it would be also a mistake to equate the Taiwanese and Mainland China scenarios. But the previous analysis shows that Buddhism has indeed the potential of influencing deeply the building-up of China's civil society. Moreover, it can do so through an institution that has already proven to be deeply influential throughout Chinese history—the Buddhist monastery.

5. THE CHRISTIAN CONTRIBUTION

Keeping in mind the previous analyses and the various perspectives they offer, I now would like to sketch out what could be the specific contribution of Chinese Christians to the building up of civil society. I will restrict my reflection to one dimension of such a task –i.e. the “peacemaking” dimension. The following theses will clarify my purpose.

(i) First of all, if there is one mission shared by all Christian communities, not only in China but also in the whole of East Asia today, it is indeed that these communities have to be communities of peacemakers. Taking seriously the challenge to become communities of peacemakers might change the order of priorities that most Christian communities harbour at present. When it comes to China, the evidence is of course that as long as these communities remain divided their skills in the field of peacemaking will not seem very convincing. On the other hand, the path to reconciliation that they hopefully will undergo might have a true social impact if Christians realize that reconciliation among themselves has a meaning that goes far beyond the boundaries of the Churches.

(ii) My second conviction is that Christians can be peacemakers because they have the potential of crafting a culture of peace that could be of immeasurable value for China. They can do so because they have within their tradition tools and values that can be used for redefining the style of human and social relationships. Here, I am going to specify what I mean by “culture of peace”:

Broadly speaking, China is in the midst of a cultural crisis and does not know how to confront it. China was living under a culture of war

(including internal warfare as during the Cultural Revolution) and has now to invent a culture of peace. A culture of war emphasizes short-term perspectives, while confidence building measures, the strengthening of a genuine civic culture, and the opening of minds to creative thinking are all objectives that require one to assess long-term perspectives and to take into account values often disregarded.

What would be the values that a culture of peace would emphasize? Five of them can be mentioned:

- Words matter: Leaders are too quick in trading promises or abuses. In any society, as in the international arena, the respect for the given word and the refusal to manipulate the language are the basis for dialogue and confidence.

- Forgiveness shows more inner strength than revenge. Most features in contemporary Taiwan, Hong-Kong or Mainland China culture, especially movies, make one think that taking revenge is the ultimate proof of manhood. That individuals and societies need to experience forgiveness for healing and for renewal might sound almost trivial for us, even if Western societies have huge blind spots in this area too. In any case, it still remains an almost revolutionary message in the Chinese context.

- Public discussion takes everyone's voice into account...

- Inter-religious dialogue is conducive of peace. The religious wealth of China is a wonderful asset for building a culture of peace. When religious communities learn to know and appreciate each other, they slowly develop the capacity to engineer common actions for social reform.

- Peace is a creative process. Peace requires more inventiveness than war does. I stressed this point in my introduction. China needs to pause and reflect on its achievements and failures, it needs to be reconciled with itself in order to be reconciled with others.

(iii) Christians have to be peacemakers, and this requires that they develop and enhance a culture of peace within the present Chinese context. My third conviction is that, for fulfilling this task, we all have to strike a balance between pragmatic compromise and prophetic protest. We first have to strike a balance within our Church organizations: some people have the gift of prophetic charisma, others are called to be caretakers, and each generally have difficulty to appreciate the specific contribution brought by the other. Nonetheless, they have to learn to en-

gage into a dialogue of truth. As a matter of fact, enhancing a culture of peace goes through this discernment and dialogue ad extra and ad intra.

(iv) My fourth conviction is that Christians will be agents of peace and justice if they value and support grass-root initiatives that flourish in the soil of Chinese civil society. Most of the time, they cannot start such initiatives, they are called to listen and discern in order to support what is most creative, what enhances China's diversity and pluralism. Quality programs, programs with a focus on peace and justice issues, can be conceived and implemented, provided one works with the right partners and accepts the constraints and the language specific to the Chinese system.

(v) And, finally: Peace and Justice are not abstract notions, their flourishing is part of a narrative that needs to be expressed and written down. Peace and Justice happen in space and time. Interpreting anew the quest for harmony typical of Chinese culture, recalling the sufferings endured during the last fifty years as the ones that led to the victory of the post-Maoist regime, listening to the voices of the Christians that suffered for their faith during this ordeal, recalling the diversity of the Chinese world and paying special attention to the minorities largely deprived of their own identity, recalling innumerable stories of hardships, traumas, forgiveness, failures, survival and hopes... all of this contributes to the writing down of the narrative. Within the narrative, peace and justice take the form of blood and flesh, through the images and the words that come to the surface the body of the New China slowly takes shape.

I have studied the interaction between Christianity and China's civil society not from a political or sociological viewpoint, but rather from a cultural one, also taking into account the spiritual resources specific to Christianity. Such perspective does not do justice to all aspects of the problem, but it allows us to be sensitive to the dynamic dimension of this interaction. Christianity in China is still in the making. The tragedies of the last fifty years make reconciliation and social inventiveness an even more difficult task, but not an impossible one. Broadly speaking, religions as a whole are bringing new insights and resources to the contemporary Chinese cultural landscape, and they are already changing in a very perceivable way China's politics and society. The state might still control religious groups, but religious groups can now

claim a cultural and social power of their own. The making of a New China is a pluralistic endeavour. Christianity, as is also the case for other religions, will participate in this task.

NOTES

This essay heavily relies on previous papers that I wrote, especially:

- “China can learn from Christianity”, *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, April 9 1998, p.10.
- “China’s Masses Seek a Creed, Not a Revolution”, *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, April 28 1999, p.10
- “Christianity and the Taiwanese Religious Landscape”, *The Way*, April 1999. pp.129-139.
- “Blessed are the peacemakers: the search for a Chinese reading”, *Memorial Lecture in Honor of Fr Edward Malatesta University of San Francisco*, February 1999.

FOOTNOTES

1. Richard Madsen, *China’s Catholics, Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998, p.126.
2. *ibid.*, p.127.
3. Anthony Lam, “China’s Underground Movements: Meaning and Resolution”, *Tripod*, n. 110, March-April 1999, pp.8-9.
4. *Ibid.*,p.9.
5. Venerable YI Fa, ‘The Bikksuni Sangha in Taiwan’, *Bodhagay International Full Ordination 1998, Commemorative Magazine*. p.196.