

## Report on the Conference “Christianity and the 21st century”

Leopold Leeb

The conference “Christianity and the 21st century” (*Jiduzongjiao yu 21 shiji*) took place at the Hademen Hotel in Beijing. The participants arrived on the evening of September 18 and left in the afternoon of September 21. The two and a half days were packed with reports and discussions, and similar to the conference in November last year, it was again organized by Dr. Zhuo Xinping (卓新平). He is the director of the Center for the Study of Christianity which belongs to the Institute of World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) Beijing. The conference was supported by money from the Misereor foundation (Germany). The head of the Institute of World Religions, Dr. Zhuo Xinping, had again invited around 60 scholars from China and Hong Kong who are specifically doing research in the area of “Christian studies”. This time the renowned historian, Prof. Lin Zhiping (林志平) from Taipei and the philosopher Li Jianqiu (黎建球) from Fu Jen University were official participants from Taiwan.

In comparison to the meeting of last November, there were more members of the Churches present at this meeting. For example there were three pastors from Beijing and for the first time also Fr. Zhang Shijiang (張士江), the editor of Faith Press in Shijiazhuang. One of the editors of Guangqi Press, Shanghai, Mrs. Tao Peiling (陶培玲), was also present at the conference. Among the other scholars who attended a meeting like this for the first time were Prof. Pan Zhihui (樊志輝) from Harbin, Heilongjiang, Prof. Dong Xiaochuan (董小川) from Changchun, Prof. Du Xian’an (杜小安) from Hanzhong, Shenxi (張憲), and Prof. Zhang Xian from Canton, all younger professors who teach philosophy or history of thought at their respective universities.

The formal framework of the conference was made up by short 20-minute reports and discussions after the reports. All in all some 30 papers were discussed. Among the topics discussed were “criteria for the plausibil-

ity of a book of revelation”; “dialog of the Chinese Church with international theology”; “the contribution of Christianity to morality in present day China”; “the importance of Christianity for the overcoming of ethnocentrism”; “faith in God as the key to the success of the USA”; “the threat of Chinese folk religion to Christianity in China”; “the historical development and meaning of the celebration of the Holy Mass”; “Neo-Confucianism and Christianity”; “aesthetic theology”; and “looking at the inculturation of Christianity from the perspective of the inculturation of Buddhism in China”. The overall theme was the “21st century”, and therefore many scholars debated possible future developments of Christianity in China.

Some topics came up several times and attracted much attention: the issue of ethics, the development of Christianity in the Chinese countryside, and the inculturation problem.

First, Prof. You Xilin (尤西林) from the institute of Christian Culture (*Jidujiao wenhuasuo*) at Shenxi Normal University, brought up the problem of moral decay and corruption in present day China. The corruption case of Xiamen that led to the execution recently of the high official Chen Kejie forms the background of Prof. You’s considerations: The environment is so corrupt that the individual can hardly evade the bad influences of the milieu, but in a cultural tradition where the individual relied so much on the ethical standards and models of the community like in China, this has devastating effects: both personal virtue and common ethical norms are lacking. Prof. You sees that the “absolute good” (God) of Christianity and an ethics that transcends utilitarian and mere earthly concerns would be very necessary to rebuild the moral culture of China. Prof. You emphasized that scholars studying Christianity in China should not simply “elaborate on symbols and signs” but should be in sincere dialogue with the facts. The following discussion led to the questions: How to introduce Christian ethics to China? How to interpret Christianity in a meaningful way without reducing it to mere morality? What is ethical education?

A second very stimulating input came from Ms. Gao Shining (高師寧), who is a researcher at the CASS Beijing and the wife of Prof. He Guanghu. She made a realistic assessment of the situation of Christianity in China, the marginalisation of Christianity, the problem of the association of Christianity with a “foreign Church” (*yangjiao* 洋教, foreign religion) and the “three many” (*san duo* 三多, i.e. “many women, many old people, many uneducated and poor”) in the Christian Churches in China. Ms. Gao stated that Christianity in China is still forced into a very passive role:

political participation, use of mass media or the use of non-Church buildings and institutions are very restricted. The cultural conflict is still unresolved: original sin, creation, monotheism and the idea of equality before the same God are simply alien to Chinese culture. Mrs. Gao brought up the question of the folk religions in rural China which recovered rapidly since the 1980's, and which are "ubiquitous". On the one hand these folk religions satisfy the religious needs of the masses to some extent, but on the other hand they are also a strong "competitor" and a real danger for Christianity in China. They "transform" the Christian faith of believers in rural areas, who then mix together Christian worship and folk religion, superstition and Christian practices. In this way, the old Chinese folk religions, which are basically "superstitious, backwards, regressive and without much positive contribution" use and distort Christianity, said Ms. Gao. She sees the main deficiencies of the "vulgar Christians" in their disinterest: the believers in the rural areas do not have a modern worldview, they are not concerned about society or politics, and they do not participate much in social work; but Christianity "should be involved, and the more participation there is, the more hope there is."

The paper of Ms. Gao evoked the question whether the "vulgarization" (*minjianhua* 民間化) of Christianity has to be seen only as a negative phenomenon. Was not Buddhism also misunderstood as Daoist magic in the first centuries when it came to China? Some scholars would see it as rather positive if Christianity could somehow take roots in China's countryside and in the hinterland, since "China's problem basically is still a problem of the peasants", as one participant put it. Others are rather worried about phenomena like the alleged syncretistic worship of Jesus and Guanyin (觀音) or Christians carrying the Bible with themselves as a protective talisman but not reading it.

The third very inspiring topic was the issue of the inculturation of Christianity in China. The discussion was triggered by a paper given by Prof. He Jianming (何建明) from the "Center for the study of the History of Christian Universities in China" at Wuhan Huazhong Normal University. Prof. He suggested that Christianity should learn from the inculturation process of Buddhism in China and made critical remarks on Chinese clergymen who allegedly try to somehow imitate Westerners or the Western style. In this way, Christianity would never be able to escape the label "Western religion". The historian Gu Weimin (顧衛民) from Shanghai strongly supported this view, basing his interpretation of "westernized Christianity" on some critical remarks of Ma Xiangbo (馬相伯) and Celso

Constantini, who voiced their discontent with an all too Western style of Christianity some 80 or 90 years ago. In this context, Prof. Gu even professed himself a “Neo-Confucianist”, emphasizing that Chinese tradition still has an appeal for modern Chinese people. But it turned out that most scholars in the audience were rather discontented with the claims of the two historians from the south of China. Prof. Yang Huilin (楊慧林) from the People’s University in Beijing made the suggestion that besides the “traditional Chinese” and the “western” interpretation of Christianity, there might be a third way of understanding Christianity in China: an interpretation based on the present life experience of the Chinese people. Prof. Wen Weiyao (溫佛耀) from the Chinese University Hong Kong said that during the three periods when Christianity was attractive for Chinese intellectuals (1580-1650, 1900-1950 and after 1980), Christianity was appealing exactly because it was Western and foreign. Fr. Zhang Shijiang (張士江) from Shijiazhuang observed that most Catholics would find it unnatural to revive old Chinese “inculturated” practices like burning incense at Catholic ceremonies. Almost everybody in the audience agreed that China has become a society where the majority of the people would like to drink Coca Cola and coffee if they had the choice. Of course, the question to what extent “modernization” implies “westernization” will remain a topic of heated discussions.

Generally it could be observed that although only very few people at the conference openly said that they were believers, the interest and the commitment of the scholars was sincere. The atmosphere mirrored a genuine concern not only for Christianity and studies on Christianity in China, but also for the spread of Christianity in Chinese society. (Some papers given even revealed a sense of urgency and mission.) There was a universal sympathy for the cause of Christianity in China, and convictions like “China needs the spirit and the ethical values of Christianity”; “there should be a Chinese theology”; “the leaders of the Chinese Churches should have a good education”; “it is important to help the Chinese people to better understand Christianity”; “the vulgarization of Christianity in China is a danger”; and “the inculturation of Christianity in China is important” would be accepted by most of the participants. When Prof. Liang Gong (梁工), one of the very few Bible experts in Mainland China, said that the academic world should urge the legalization of selling Bibles in public bookshops, he earned spontaneous applause. (It is still forbidden to sell Bibles at public bookshops in China.)

For some of the participants this conference was a unique and very important opportunity to get to know the other scholars and researchers in the field, to exchange thoughts and hopes and to encourage each other. I personally witnessed how a younger professor expressed his reverence for Dr. He Guanghu (何光滄) whose articles and books had deeply influenced his attitude towards Christianity. Ten years ago he had come across one of Dr. He's articles and was profoundly moved, but only now had his first opportunity to talk to Dr. He personally and to express his gratefulness.

Congratulations to Dr. Zhuo Xinping (卓新平) and his team from the Institute of World Religions of the CASS. They were very efficient again in preparing and organizing the meeting. They published the papers given at the conference November 1999 and distributed these collections of articles to the participants, together with four new books of Dr. Zhuo's series *Christianity and Chinese Culture*. The whole conference was a smooth and enjoyable, with an atmosphere of friendship and dialogue. Hopefully there will be a similar conference next year, maybe with a better focus in the topics, as some participants suggested.