

**“Who Am I”:
Identity Tensions Among Chinese Intellectual Christians**

*A paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, San Francisco, California,
August 14, 2004*

Jianbo Huang
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
Building 6, 27 Zhongguancun South Street
Haidian, Beijing
PR China
8610—88218477
jbhmhuang@hotmail.com

Since the Reform and Opening Up policy was implemented in 1978, a so-called tide of “Christianity Fever” has swept across the intellectual and academic circle. The concern and zeal they have for Christianity are reflected in the research, comments and translation of its history, theories, doctrines and persons, as well as stimulating the formation of the openness of recognizing Christianity afresh (or correctly). In this rising tide of Christianity in China, some intellectuals have accepted the “cross” and entered the hall of Christian belief including university students, teachers, writers, painters, scholars and scientists. Some overseas Chinese students had converted even earlier (Li, 1996). Obviously, Christianity has a special attraction for them. They were attracted by the doctrines and teachings, and /or personal exposure to Christian fellowships, then converted and were baptized.

Looking back on the beginning of the 20th century, it was also the intellectuals who started a vigorous “anti-Christian movement”, taking the chance of the May Fourth Movement in 1919 and the New Culture Movement, holding up the banners of “Mr. D” (democracy) and “Mr. S” (science). Generally speaking, they wanted to thrust Christianity aside because they assumed that religion equals superstition and was incompatible with science. They reasoned that science was a necessity if the life of the Chinese people was to be improved and China’s international status be promoted (Li, 1994:195-222). If we put the anti-Christian movement 70 years ago and the recent “Christianity Fever” together, we would find that history seems to have played a joke on the Chinese intellectuals.

This article is based on several years of sociological surveys, as well as anthropological interviews and participant observations. Most of my informants are from Beijing and Shanghai, though they may go to different churches. They include participants from Three Self churches (official churches) and House Churches (underground churches). The detailed information about the informants, such as church location and intellectual believer’s names, are changed for protection in accordance with anthropological research ethics.

I also have to acknowledge that in this article I seldom adopt any existed social theories, nor write in a standard sociological approach, a proposition- argumentation-theorization pattern. Instead, I went to the churches and Christians as a culturally ignorant student, to hear from the informants “what they say” about their situation and feelings. And in the article you could hear “the native’s voice”, as well as the author’s reflection and comments. It is rather a faithful and detailed account and description of the informants’ narratives, than a believed “objective” theorization. In fact, I deliberately choose the title as “Who Am I”, trying to convey the idea that this is a question asked by the Chinese intellectual Christians themselves, and to show their true struggles. Therefore the article itself is a dialogue between “what I think they are experiencing and thinking” and “what they express in their own words their experience and feelings”. This juxtaposition of at least two “voices” together reaches a better understanding of the identity tensions experienced by the Chinese intellectual Christians.

An Overview of the Intellectual Christians

Since the Reform, Christianity has developed rapidly in China (mainly in the countryside). There were about 700 thousand to 1 million believers in 1949, while the number has increased drastically to over 10 million in 1996, according to the official statistic issued by the State Council. The number of Christians is still increasing. Many scholars estimate that now there are over 40 million Protestant Christians[i], or even up to 100 million (Aikman 2003). Accompanied with the growth of believers is the greater interest in Christianity by Chinese intellectuals. Since the 1990s, there have been an ever-increasing number of intellectuals converting to Christianity[ii]. A clear example is Haidian Church in Beijing[iii]. More and more students from nearby universities are coming to the church. In fact, besides the usual Sunday worship each week, there is a fellowship for young students every Friday evening in the church. Those who attend the fellowship meetings include the fresh graduates who have just got a job, as well as undergraduates, postgraduates, PhDs, and even young teachers from prestigious universities like Peking University, Tsinghua University, and People’s University. In other churches in Beijing like Chongwenmen Church and Gangwashi

Church, it is the same situation only the scale is not quite as large as that of Haidian church. In Shanghai, there is a very similar trend of strong Christian growth (Sun, 1996).

According to a special survey on Christians in Shanghai in 1997, there were 682 people who had been baptized among the 814 that were inquired, taking up 85% out of the total number. Amongst them, 57 were baptized before 1949, which is 8.3% of the total. During 1949 to 1966, it is 55, which is 7.9%. During the Cultural Revolution, there were only 5 people, which is 5.7%. In the 1980s, it is 194, which is 28%. In the 1990s, it is 341, which is 49.2%, almost a half. In the International Church of Shanghai, there was an average of over 200 being baptized each year. While from 1990 to 1996, it was over 300.

The record of the ages of the believers has also showed a clear downward curve. According to a survey on Mu'en Church of Shanghai, there were 440 new believers receiving further teachings in 1996. Among those who yearned for the Word, there were 96 who had a college degree, which was about 22%, and most of them were young people. And amongst those who were baptized in the first six months of the year 1997, one third of them were under 35 years of age, all of them having received higher education (Yu, 1998). In the process of growth, Christianity has taken on a trend of more and more young people converts. From the "popular" style, it has marched towards the "intellectual" style. Believers that are young and those who have a higher education background have become dynamic forces in the church (Liu, Luo and Yan, 1999). These newly formed forces are gradually transforming the "three mostly" situation in the church (mostly women, mostly aged people, mostly uneducated), bringing forth changes in terms of the structure and quality of the believers.

In 1999, I delivered a questionnaire survey in a non-official young Christian's fellowship in Shanghai. This fellowship started around 1998 with just a handful of people; while one year later there were about 40 members. From this survey, 35 valid sheets came back. Amongst them, 1 person was 18 years old, 4 were 19, 3 were 20, 12 were 21, 4 were 22, 3 were 23, 2 were 24, 3 were 25, 1 was 27, 1 was 28, and 1 was 31. There were 31 in total who were between 19 and 25. The gender proportion was relatively balanced. There were 17 males and 18 female. As for the time when they accepted the Christian belief, there were 5 who started to believe when they were little (born into a Christian family). Except for them, almost all the others accepted the Christian belief after the 1990s. As for their careers, students were the majority; there were 26 of them. There were also 5 company employees, 2 teachers, and 2 civil servants. As for their educational level, most people had a university degree; there were 29 of them. And 2 had a vocational school degree or under, 4 had a postgraduate degree or higher.

The research that I carried out during 1997 and 1999 on a non-official church in Beijing also shows a similar situation. This fellowship started in early 1995, when there were only 4 members. However, there are 20 to 25 believers who come to Sunday worship by 1999 [iv]. About 15 of them come regularly as the core group, while the rest are somewhat mobile. So it is difficult to say how many believers they actually have. Because of obvious reasons, they have to keep their Sunday gathering at a reasonable scale, so they have a kind of rotating system for new believers. There are different people coming each time. An informant from the fellowship told me that at least 20 hadn't attended the meetings for a long time, so I couldn't get their responses. Besides, over 10 student believers left each year after graduation.

I received 68 valid questionnaire sheets back from this group. These questionnaires show that: there were 19 males, compared to 49 females (there were only two couples; the gender proportion was obviously skewed.). As for the educational level, there were 54 college graduates; only 5 were under vocational school level, 7 postgraduates, and 2 PhDs. As for when they accepted Christianity: 2 in 1992, 1 in 1993, 3 in 1995, 3 in 1996, 5 in 1997, 9 in 1998, 21 in 1999, and 3 in 2000. 4 were born into Christian families. 14 made no response. As for age, there were only 8 above the age of 30, 6 under 20, and the rest 54 were between 20 and 30. As for their careers, 8 were civil servants in government departments, 6 were in the educational field, 7 were company employees, 6 were free-lancers, and the rest 41 were undergraduates, postgraduates or PhDs.

All these statistics show the rapid increase in the 1990s. In fact, the year of 1989 is a distinct point in terms of Christian growth. In the 1980s, there were only few intellectuals truly converted, and most of them were just interested in Christian culture. But after 1990, more and more intellectuals became believers, esp. after 1993, 4 years of rethinking of life and meaning after the Tiananmen Movement. From 1997 to about 2000, there is a very distinct increase of intellectual conversion movement. And since 2001, more and more intellectual fellowships began to institutionalize as churches, or at least take it into their agenda, given the fact that they have sufficient members and the more favorable political and social environment.

During this period of time, with the relatively favorable political situation within the country and naturalization of the international relationships, there were more and more opportunities for the intellectuals to reach out into Christianity. Many research institutions and organizations were established in the country, official, semi-official or non-official. On Jan 1st, 1979, the teaching staff of the former Jinling Xiehe Theological Seminary formed the Religion Institute of Nanjing University, which was unprecedented in the state-owned universities. Later on, colleges and institutes all over China started to restore or establish the Religion Department or Religion major. Research on Christian doctrines, history, philosophy, cultural significance, naturalization, etc. were carried out.

Recently, organizations having significant influence are the Research Center on Christianity of the Chinese Social Science Academy, Research Center on Religion of the Shanghai Social Science Academy, the Religion Department of Peking University, the Institute of Religion of the People's University, the Philosophy Department of Fudan University, Research Center on Religion of Shanghai College of Education, Research Institute of Christian Culture in the Chinese Language of Hong Kong, etc. Amongst the research people, there were hardly any Christians except Liu Xiaofeng. Most of them define themselves as interested in the Christian phenomenon, doctrines and history. Liu Xiaofeng himself doesn't regard himself a Christian in terms of a member of the Three-self Church or family church, but one who "accepts a kind of Christian stand". This kind of Christian mainly exists in the urban intellectual society, detached from the Three-self Church and house churches, and hardly participates in the traditional Christian fellowship. Thus they have formed a "tribe" with loose structure and diversified thinking.

The Identity Dilemma of the Intellectual Christians

The intellectuals who, after serious reflection, decided to convert to Christianity are finally satisfied, having obtained what they "need". But, at the same time, they are facing a series of new challenges and difficulties. One of their primary problems is of identity. The intellectuals as they become Christians struggle to define themselves and demarcate the relationship with others in the present Chinese society.

As far as identity is concerned, Charles Taylor states it this way:

(Identity) is often expressed with this sentence: Who am I? But when you answer this question, you can't just give out your name and family genealogy. To answer this question means to understand what's the most important to us. To know who I am is to understand where I take my stand. My identity is determined by commitment and identification. These commitments and identifications provide a kind of frame and vision, within which I can try in every situation and decide what is good, what is valuable, what should be done, what I support or what I go against. In other words, this is a vision in which I can take a stand (Taylor, 1997).

Identity is associated with the basis of existence of an individual or a group. It is a standard of right or wrong, good or evil, a measurement to determine one's identity. When an acknowledgement of self is established, one can have a specific orientation when dealing with the surrounding environment and the world. The symptom of an identity crisis is a loss of this orientation. If a person does not know their identity, it leads to a feeling of not knowing what to do, which is "a miserable and terrifying experience".

The culture identity of an individual is closely related to that of the collective or ethnic group they belong to as well as the cultural traditions; therefore, it can have great multiplicity and perplexity [v]. A person's identity, to a great degree, is formed by their social groups he or she is in or hope to join. However, a person may not belong to only one group. For example, one person could be a feminist feeling the differences between men and women are extremely important. She might also embrace bachelorism and shows contempt to those who are married. She might also feel young thus different from the aged generation. She might deem herself an intellectual and is reluctant to stay with the common folks. She might consider herself a Han thus different from those from the minority groups. Although an individual's cultural identity is multidimensional, which is a co-existence of many kinds of social faithfulness, all these elements of identity in one person must reach a basic coordination instead of divergence, or an identity crisis would emerge. When a person is perplexed in the oppositions and clashes of different cultural traditions, he or she has been trapped with identity crisis.

In this sense, although a person can in theory be a Christian, and at the same time a traditional Chinese and an intellectual conducting scientific researches, the relationships between religion and science, belief and reason, China and the West, Chinese traditional culture and Christian culture are still too incompatible with each other within one particular person. What's more, in the special situation that involves China, there have been violent clashes and misunderstandings in the history and even in present as well. Therefore the Chinese Christian intellectuals would unavoidably face the identity crisis.

1. 1. Belief Vs. Reason: Do the Intellectual Christians Still Have a Scientific Spirit?

Since the 1950s, religion in the leading discourse of China is equated to superstition, and a Christian is one who blindly follows Jesus the "foreigner" or "foreign god". In many people's eyes, the word Christian (including any believer of any other religions) is the synonym of powerless, illiterate, uneducated, ignorant, anti-reason, negative, escapist, etc. A university student from a remote village was among the few "intellectuals" of that area. When he became a Christian, he was upset because of what the others thought of him. He said, "My family was very unhappy when they learned that I became a Christian, feeling that I caused them to lose face. My father even said that I read more and more books just to become worse and worse. Every time I go home and mention this topic to my former classmates from my old middle school, they were full of scorn and contempt. It was the same situation at school. My classmates would try every way they can to ridicule me. Some teacher would also ask me sarcastically, 'How come this God of yours doesn't come to your rescue?' when I couldn't answer their questions." This kind of social circumstance, propaganda of mainstream public opinion and the accepted education background upholding science, all force the Christian intellectuals to reconsider, "Being a person who has reason and knowledge; can I still continue to think

rationally and do scientific research after I accept the Christian belief?" The real issue of this question becomes: Is belief irrational, or rather anti-rational? Does religion have to be contradictory to science?

To this question, most people follow Russell and say yes (Russell, 1982). But there are also some people (not necessarily Christians) who say no, holding that "religion and science are two aspects that are parallel to each other in the spiritual scope." (An, 1997) A postgraduate student of physics says, "I struggled for a long time after I became a Christian. On one hand, I knew what I chose was the truth; on the other hand, I didn't want to put aside my major study and scientific research. My heart was greatly troubled. It was when I found at the library a book in which it says that outstanding scientists like Newton and Einstein were all Christians when I felt relieved." (Larson, 1998; Eastbrook, 1998) He also quoted Bacon's word as a support to the legitimacy of his choice, "It is true, that a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion. For while the mind of man looketh upon second causes scattered, it may sometimes rest in them, and go no further; but when it beholdeth the chain of them, confederate and linked together, it must fly to Providence and Deity."

I have participated in Sunday worship of a non-official fellowship. This fellowship is small in size, there being less than 20 people. All of them are college students or even with a higher education background. All of them are young people, the eldest being only 35 of age. Their style of worship is very different from that of churches, with no special preachers or even a specific host. They are just a group of people getting together to pick up some hymns randomly to sing and a passage of Bible verses to read and discuss according to the verses. When it was about time to wrap up, they would call it to a stop and go home separately. The time I went, they picked up 1 Corinthians 1: 16-31 with the main idea of the power and wisdom of the cross. This kind of topic is a favorite of the intellectuals. Most everybody voiced an opinion. I'll record one section as a glimpse of the whole discussion:

"I have a question. Just now everybody was emphasizing on God's wisdom. Besides, here it says, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.' and 'hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?' Does it mean that we don't need to study anything anymore, since these turn out to be nothing but 'principles of the world', and there's no meaning to study them?" asked a newly admitted postgraduate student, confused.

"I don't feel there's any problem with that," the eldest, a teacher of a university responded, "actually, the more we have learned, there more we realize that we know too little, and thus can better appreciate the superiority of God's wisdom. That's why not only do we have to study these 'principles of the world', but also to study it well."

"Besides," says another PhD student, "Don't think that reason is a really evil thing. It is just neutral like money.

Whether it is good or evil depends on people's heart. If the reasoning power is well used, God is honored. Only when it is used to interrogate and judge God would it be 'destroyed' and 'brought to nothing'."

"Yes, this is also what I feel. But the churches back in my hometown always hold that children don't need any schooling. All they need to do is to read the Bible. Many children have devoted themselves to the cause of evangelizing when they were less than 20 years old." The student who just now raised the question gave out his true doubt. It seemed he was from a village church.

"I really don't feel this is good. It is better for the children to read more books." Another college English teacher said, "However, I think different people have different missions from God. Since we have the opportunity to further our study, we should cherish it and do our duty. I think this is the responsibility of us intellectuals."

"That's right. I also feel that God doesn't intend to make us abandon our study and thinking. On the contrary, we should present excellent grades in our studies of particular fields." A Chinese language major student stated, "See it says here 'But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise.' I feel that it means although we are foolish, we shouldn't be content being so. Instead, we should keep studying hard and make those who think highly of themselves feel ashamed.

From this conversation about wisdom and reason, we can obviously see that the Christian intellectuals are facing quite a few problems they struggle with their identity. Some people might continue in the painful process of pondering, while others move beyond it and it doesn't bother them any more. The intellectual Christians overall continue to struggle with these issues.

1. **2. Christian Faith Vs. Traditional Culture: Are the Intellectual Christians Still Chinese in the Traditional Sense?**

From the late 1800s to the early 2000s, Chinese Christians have been censured with statements like "one more Christian is one less Chinese". Today, the wording has changed, but the essence is still the same. After learning that his son, a PhD student of a prestigious university became a Christian, the father telephoned him immediately, criticizing his muddle-headed decision. Even if he had to believe in a god, the father said, wouldn't a Chinese one be good enough, there being so many of them? Why would he turn to a "foreign religion"? It was something really wrong for a Chinese to do, a betrayal to the "ancestors". This reflects the first impression and common reaction to Christianity and Christians: a foreign religion, something "not our kind". A young teacher of philosophy in a university said, "On the one hand, I am very proud of China's profound and brilliant culture, being a Chinese person. On the other hand, I know that some stuff in the Chinese culture doesn't agree with the Bible teachings and my belief, being a Christian.

Every time I face this, I feel troubled, not knowing whether to position myself as a Chinese or a Christian.” In fact, when these intellectuals made their decision to convert to Christianity, they have decided to become “marginalized” in terms of culture (Li, 1995). They are still Chinese, but not Chinese in the traditional sense, at least they no longer belong to the mainstream culture. In a country where Confucianism and Materialism are in the lead, they are marginalized either by being deprived of the right of speech, or by actively making the very choice themselves [vi]. In an anthropological sense, they have “walked out” of their “own” culture, thus obtaining a special angle to observe and comment on their own culture [vii].

The core of this problem is faithfulness to the culture. That is, as a Chinese Christian, should one be faithful to God that he believes in, or continues to be faithful to his traditional culture? To the Chinese people, the most irreconcilable conflict is the attitude to the ancestors. The Chinese claim proudly that they are “descendants of the Huaxia nation”, or “offspring of the dragon”. Let’s put aside the implication of these statements, that the Han people are the center and the other nationalities are ignored. “Dragon”, this very image and symbol have put the Chinese Christians in an extremely difficult situation: In the Bible, the Book of Revelations describes the dragon, which the Chinese regard as their ancestor, as Satan himself, the ruler of the dark forces, whom was finally defeated by God and thrown into a “the lake of fire and sulfur” (Revelations 12, 20). Although some Christians hold that the evil dragon in the Bible is not the holy dragon in our culture, this explanation doesn’t relieve the confusion and anxiety of the majority of the believers. A PhD student of philosophy said,

“I love reading Revelations. But every time I get to chapter 12 and chapter 20 I feel upset. It’s a feeling I can’t describe. Actually I belong to the Tujia nationality, and it’s not certain if I am part of the ‘descendants of the dragon’ category. But all these years I’ve been receiving the Han style education, and have identified the dragon as my ancestor. But I am also a Christian. I really don’t know what I should do.”

We can say that his heart-felt situation truly reflects that of most Christians. Almost all the intellectuals that I have contact with have the same feeling. Also, there are some Christians who totally stand by the biblical definition, maintaining that they are the same dragon, and that they shouldn’t claim themselves “descendants of the dragon” (Yuan, 1998).

Another subject of conflicts concerning the ancestors is sacrifice-offering. The focus of this contention of etiquette, which lasted for over 100 years from the late Ming Dynasty to the early Qing Dynasty, is none other than could or should the Christians continue their participation in offering sacrifices to the ancestors. This contention ended up with the arbitrary negation of the Holy See of the legality of offering sacrificing to the ancestors, and Emperors Kangxi and Yongzheng’s “prohibition of the Christian belief”. This did not end the problem for Chinese Christians today. To the Chinese, offering sacrifices to the ancestors is a common ideal both of the officials and the ordinary people, a ceremony as a link to tradition. If no sacrifices were offered to the ancestors, “the intimate relationship between fathers and sons would be cut off, the faithfulness between the emperor and the courtiers will disappear, and the heritage of the nation and the state would be lost.” Therefore not offering sacrifices turned out to be an alien action, which could break the ongoing of the harmony in the family and blood lineage, which is part of the Chinese tradition. Such would definitely be viewed as a threat from an alien culture.

However, as for the Christians, they only believe in one God, who is a “jealous God” (Ten Commandments, Exodus 20). No other spirits are allowed to be worshipped, which would definitely include those of the ancestors’. Obviously, these two contradicting attitudes have put the Chinese Christians into a very difficult situation, struggling to decide which one to choose or abandon. Some believers regard offering sacrifices to the ancestors as a “respectful ceremony” with no implication of worship in it, in order to get out of this dilemma, thus legalizing in a biblical sense the participation of the Christians to the rituals in which they pay homage to their ancestors. However, it is still a problem in the rural areas where the power of clans is strong and sacrificial ceremonies are frequently held. Especially in the South, the situation is yet waiting for a solution.

1. 3. Traditional Values and Ethics Vs. Modern Society: Do the Intellectual Christians fit in the Modern Society?

As the society undergoes continuous changes, the concept of value and beauty also change. The intellectuals, pioneers of the social trends as they are, could also be totally alienated from the popular ideology in terms of behavior, once they accept the Christian belief. For example, the view of marriage, “if we don’t get along, we file for divorce” is well accepted in the modern society. But to the traditional Christians, it is immoral, improper, or at least should be avoided. Most young people and intellectuals still bear in mind that the image of Christians are still that of the middle age Europe: priests in long robes, backward, conservative, mal-nurtured, pretentious and hypocritical. This has formed a special dilemma for the modern Christians (especially for the Christian intellectuals): Can they still catch up with the times?

A young girl who has just accepted the Christian belief complained to a more mature Christian who was giving her guidance, “It is so dull to become a Christian. When I went for disco, some people would say, ‘Christians comes for disco too?’ When I went to an exhibition of the modern artistic paintings of human bodies, some people would say, ‘Christians comes for this too?’ It is so hard to be a Christian!” Her complaint reflects to some degree the difficult

situation of many Christian intellectuals. On the one hand, they don't want to give up their faith for some fashionable ideas contradicting to the Bible teachings. On the other hand, they don't want to be disconnected with the world and the times. Therefore, they try to seek a balance between the two, and live a life "in the world yet stand aloof" (to live a worldly life with otherworldly ideals). This practice has been severely criticized upon by the conservative Fundamentalists as an act of secularization.

Many people have asked this question: Does the modern society with such advanced technology still need "ancient" religions such as Christianity? Ever since the enlightenment, many have predicted the perishing of religions. Voltaire (1694-1778), the forerunner of Enlightenment asserted that in 100 years after his death, Christianity would no longer exist. Dewey the educator also holds that the Christian doctrine of salvation is a thought to fool the people, and that religion is the biggest obstacle to social progress; what's more, all religions will be winnowed as science develops. Nietzsche the philosopher openly declared that "God is dead." Christianity that only the mediocre people with a weak will or mind would believe in had lost attraction in a more and more rational and modern society, and that the outstanding people with iron will wouldn't need a God at all. Conte the sociologist believes that the human history has three stages: theological (with religions), metaphysical (with philosophies) and science (proof). Now the era of theology had departed and the era of proof had arrived. It could well be said that during the entire past century, the prevalent Western sociological theories all hold that religion is an ever-weakening social and historical force. The arguments of the Western thinkers and the recent illustrations of the domestic scholars have greatly affected the confidence of the modern Christian intellectuals towards the value of their faith in terms of the present situation. Besides, the mainstream public opinion and value orientation, represented by "scientific technology is the first productivity", have forced these Christians to face the plight and think about it with a serious attitude.

As a response to the challenges posed by the unbelievers, some Christians have pointed out, "50 years after Voltaire's death, the Geneva Bible Society used his very printing machines and offices to make thousands of copies of the Bible" regarding this as an irony to the bold assertion Voltaire had said. Some other people have also pointed out that religion has never perished; what's more, in many places and fields it even enjoys revivals and developments. One of the evidences is that recently the Christian population in China has experienced a drastic increase. What's more, Christianity didn't disappear at all from Movements such as the Cultural Revolution. To the contrary, after the implementing of the Reform policy, it has become a tide sweeping over China. Although these arguments and apologetic actions are present, there is still some doubt and wonders left in the hearts of most believers.

1. **4. Individual Belief Vs. Traditional Church System: Are the Intellectual Christians Still Christians in the Traditional Sense?**

A German theologian, Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) points out that there have been 3 kinds of existence modes of the Christian church ever since the day of its establishment: the universal church, sects, and mystic sects. The universal church always deem itself the kingdom of God on earth and the organization of salvation, showing an attitude which actively adapts to the present world as well as an inclination to reconcile with the state power. Sects are small groups of believers who emphasize on the experience of being "reborn" and have a strong desire to be separated from the present society. The members are mostly from the lower strata of the society, so they lack theological knowledge storages and are very self-inclusive. The mystic sects emphasize each individual's spiritual experience too, but they have a tendency for the existence mode of "religion of the individuals", which could undermine the established church structure. Even if some of them have fellowships based on the individuals, there is no permanent and fixed structural mode. They regard religious piety as the stimulus of initiating cultural activities. The theologies that focus on the Christian cultural form, the humanities and confessional behaviors mostly belong to the stratum of the intellectuals(Quoted from Liu, 1996).

If we define the demarcation of Troeltsch as an analysis mode of religious sociology, we can effectively describe all the existence modes of Christianity in Mainland China. The Three-self (self-administrative, self-supported and self-evangelizing) Patriotic Church can be viewed as the universal church. Its attitude towards society, state and nation all indicates its characteristics. The non-official house churches take up the mode of sects. As for the "tribe of cultural Christians" that have gradually being formed, they tend to fit into the mystic sect category. The contemporary mystic sects in china have shown these following characteristics:

1. Obviously they have the mode of "religion of the individual".
2. They put an emphasis on enriching the cultural descriptions of Christianity and Christian descriptions of cultures.
3. They have a tendency for the scientific and reflective theology (Liu, 1997)[viii].

Generally speaking, the Three-self churches have basically the same nature, with the same theology, doctrines, and rituals all over the country, in spite of some internal dissensions. But the non-official house churches have taken on various and complicated characteristics. Basically they don't have a unified voice or organization (although in some areas like Henan, Zhejiang and Shandong, church organizations are being established, they are still far from a system, unlike those of the Three-self churches.) As for doctrines, each could have their own emphasis. Their sect theologies are also varied. Some are even heresies or cults from abroad pretending to be Christians, such as the Mormons and

the Unification Church. There are even more local heresies, like the Disciple's Gathering, Three Classes of Servants, Eastern Lighting, Spiritual Union, All-scale Church, Shouters, the Anointed King Sect, New Apostles, etc. The established or official church of the contemporary China is somewhat tolerant towards the mystic sects, while the family churches generally hold a negative attitude towards them. The mystic sects also regard the ways of spiritual expression and doctrines that put reason down in the family churches as "incomprehensible". However, the Christian intellectuals are still far from the possibility of forming their own sects. On the one hand, they feel that the established Three-self Church cannot satisfy their spiritual need (especially the providing of knowledge and rational thinking), therefore gradually they go away from the established church. On the other hand, they don't have ability to set up their own fellowships (due to a lack of energy, economy and experience). As for the relationship with the family churches, it could pose a threat to their comfortable jobs and life because the other is "underground" and illegal. Thus they just maintain a very subtle and loose relationship with the family churches. In this way, these believers don't take part in the Three-self Churches' activities at all, or just attend family churches, which are smaller in size and more flexible.

According to a survey I carried out on a family church in a college area in Haidian District, Beijing, the members there often are met with such a situation: for every worship gathering about 20 would come, only 6 to 8 of whom are on a regular basis; most of the others would be present once every several weeks. Thus, giving them spiritual guidance and carry out administrative work would be very difficult. In the November of 1999, this fellowship held a Thanksgiving Party. They were expecting a maximum of 30 people, but all of a sudden over 90 people swarmed in, causing the hosts great troubles. Some of them had almost never been seen; most of them were no more than a vague impression and would only appear in the time of a festival gathering like this. At Christmas that year, the hosts learned from the previous time and doubled the number up to 60. But totally unexpectedly, almost 200 people came. The hosts gave us a bitter what-can-you-do smile and said, "Nobody knows where these people were hiding, but now they have popped out of rocks or something."

Of course, there are also a few Christian intellectuals who identify with the traditional church and participate actively. Several even became influential figures because of their superiority in knowledge and reason. They have stood onto the pulpit to be leaders or preachers of the gatherings. From this, we can see that the Christian intellectuals are marginalized not only in terms of the mainstream culture, but also the traditional church.

1. **5. Loyal to the State Vs. Love for God: Should Christians be Faithful to God they believe in, and the same time loyal to the Secular State Power under Which They Live?**

Totally different from their European counterpart, in the Chinese history the authoritative power of the emperors had always been higher than that of religions. There had never been an official religion like Christianity in the Western countries. All the governments throughout Chinese history held a general attitude of tolerance, restraint and utilization towards the religions, especially foreign ones (Mo, 1999). Traditional Chinese culture is interested in a practical life, instead of an ontological discussion of abstract argumentative reflection. It can well be said that there has never been concepts of consciousness for absolute belief and absolute truth. Therefore, all kinds of beliefs can co-exist and penetrate into another in China. When dealing with religions from the outside, each of the Chinese dynasties would mostly consider their practical functions in the society instead of the doctrines. As long as the beliefs couldn't threaten their reign, all could be accepted. Tolerance and diversity are two special characteristics of the Chinese culture. But tolerance doesn't mean a lack of control. China doesn't have a tradition of being exclusive to foreign religions, but it has a habit of controlling and utilizing them (and the local ones). Whether or not a religion can take a foot stand in China depends on if it can accept the ultimate authority of the Chinese state power, stay in the functional and activity scope defined by the state, and be "helpful to the reign of the king" meaning to cooperate with the state power. In the official analysis in terms of "good or bad", the political standard always takes the first place. Believing in an absolute truth yet at the same time being obedient to the secular state power has been a difficulty faced throughout history by Christianity. The Chinese Christians can't stay exempt from this dilemma: to obey the God they believe in, or the state power under which they live? According to the gospels, this challenge has been there since Jesus' time. The Jewish leaders tried to trap Jesus by asking him whether the Jews, the chosen people, should pay taxes to the Roman emperors in the ruling position. Jesus answered, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22: 15-22) This answer didn't leave the Jewish leaders any evidence against him, but leaves a difficult problem for the generations to come. To solve this problem, the Three-self Church quotes Paul's words "be subject unto the higher powers" (Romans 13: 1-7) and comes up with a slogan "love our country, love our faith; glorify God, benefit people." Archbishop Ding Guangxun, the former chairman of the National Three-self and Christian Churches Association, has brought up his idea, "establish a theology adapted to Socialism".

However, the prevalent opinion that House Churches have is different. They don't accept the action of putting "love our country" in front of "love our faith" (in fact, they are even unwilling to accept the slogan "love our faith" but would rather say "love our God"). At the same time of accepting Paul's words, they have also put forward Peter's "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5: 29), to achieve a balance. In other words, they think that when the

government's request of faith doesn't have direct conflict with the core of their belief, they can submit to the government, like paying taxes, enrolling in the army, permanent residence certificate administration, marriage registration, etc. Once there is conflict, God should be obeyed, although it would be regarded as a violation of the state regulations. This is their "biblical basis" and the reason why the family churches frequently disobey the government's order that no religious activities should be held outside of churches. They believe that it is an order and mission for them to "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season" (2 Timothy 4:2), while the government's ban contradicts with it directly. Therefore it is "a must" to "obey God" and to go spread the good news instead of "obeying men". This is the very reason why the government shows great distrust towards the family churches and strikes down their so called "illegal religious activities" (including the cross-area evangelizing conducted by the self-recognized evangelists, evangelizing to children under 18, evangelize outside of the churches, house gathering without registering to the places appointed by the government, etc.) and require the Three-self churches to provide related information. This makes the family churches loathe the Three-self churches all the more, censoring them that they are not real churches but "assistants" and "followers" of the government. Thus, the conflict between the Three-self churches and the family churches has worsened.

As theists in a basically atheist country, the Chinese Christians face another special challenge. Should or can they become Communist Party members after they have become Christians? Since the present government holds an atheist ideology, a conflict with the Christian faith is unavoidable. According to a survey I carried out on a family church in Shanghai, among the 35 answering sheets, 4 said it didn't matter if they joined the Party or not, 29 said they shouldn't, and only 2 said it was OK. I have also asked many Christians specifically if a Communist Party member becomes a Christian, should he withdraw from the party? The common answer I received is that it is different before one faces the choice between being a Party member or a Christian. He doesn't have to make this request to withdraw from the Party by then. However, once the either/ or choice has been made, he should withdraw from the Party or the Church. On the other hand, the government side is also concerned with the activities of the Christian intellectuals, especially the organized ones.

In 1999, the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia was bombed by NATO. This incident posed a difficult question for the Christian intellectuals in the family churches. As far as their emotion for the nation is concerned, they feel enraged at what NATO did and support the Chinese government's standpoint. However, as far as their emotion for the faith is concerned, they have received support, aid and identification from the countries where Christianity has greater voices, therefore it is very hard to openly go against and censor their "allies" of the same faith. Thus, different responses came up inside the believer groups. Some of them published articles openly, representing all the believers, accusing NATO of their barbaric behavior. Some showed their regret towards the Americans nearby who could be regarded as friends, and gradually withdrew from the intimate relationship.

I have seen an enlarged picture on the bulletin board of a university in Beijing. The caption said "The Chinese will be bullied by no one; Americans, get out of here!" A young man stood out in the picture with a red band tied around his head, shouting some slogans. As far as I knew, he was a Christian, and had a close relationship with some foreign teachers and students. In fact, when the students went on a demonstration, it was the teams of Beijing Foreign Studies University and Beijing Second Foreign Studies University who had had an intimate relationship with countries like America and Britain that first claimed violently to "strike down the American Imperialists" and came up with notions of boycotting American merchandise. Among them, many were Christians. Meanwhile, some believers kept silent and made no comment. They felt that they were more interested in "heavenly" subjects than the "worldly" ones. But they were often criticized as unpatriotic and cold-blooded. All these problems have reflected the conflicts that the Christians experience in terms of loyalty. A deep internal crisis is also reflected in terms of their problem of identification.

Seeking for a way out

Facing all the disjointed and complicated identification choices, the Christian intellectuals in China have adopted three different ways of adjustments and standings. The first one is fragmentary integration, which means that in the premise of retaining a major identity, they also accept some elements of other identities. The second one is fusive integration, which means to merge 2 or 3 identities together and delete their distinctive characteristics altogether. However, most people have willingly adopted the third adjustment, adhesive integration, which means while 2 or 3 identities are concentrated in one person; the distinctive features of each one are still retained (Yang, 1999). They hope that with this kind of adjustment, they can have their faith and at the same time uphold science; be a Chinese and at the same time a Christian; keep the value stand of the faith and at the same time go along the trend; maintain the "mystic" theology and liberty to attendance to the churches and at the same time have no conflicts with the established church and the house churches; be loyal to the secular state power and at the same time loyal to God.

However, it is only their subjective wish. In the realistic life, conflicts between all kinds of identities still exist. The efforts for adjustment can give them neither peace in their heart, nor total understanding and trust from other people. What's more, although double identity in culture and ethics is quite possible and worthy of encouraging and

promoting, double identity in terms of faith or spiritual belonging is absolutely not permitted in the major world religions (especially Christianity), which emphasize the absolute truth (Qin and Kung, 1990). A question has thus been posed: What is the way out? The Christian intellectuals are still in the process of searching for their identity solution.

References:

1. Aikman, David. 2003. *Jesus in Beijing*.
2. An, Ximeng. 1997. Science and Religion: two parallel dimensions. In Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu, eds. *Christianity Culture Review*, Vol. 5. Guiyang: Guizhou People's Press.
3. Eastbrook, Greg. 1998. Is Science and God Getting Closer? In *World Religious Cultures*, Vol.2, 1998.
4. Larson, Edward. 1998. Reflections on a Survey of Scientists' Religious Beliefs. In *World Religious Cultures*, Vol.1, 1998.
5. Li, Liang. 1995. Review on the Current Chinese Christianity. In *Oriental*, Vol.2, 1995.
6. Li, Pingye. 1996. An Analysis of Chinese Intellectuals' Conversion to Christianity. In Gao Shining and He Guanghu, eds. *Christian Culture and Modernization*. Beijing: Chinese Social Sciences Press.
7. Li, Zhigang. 1994. *Articles on Christianity and Modern Chinese Culture*. Vol.2. Taipei: Light of the Universe Press.
8. Liu, Xiaofeng. 1996. *The Fear and Love of this Generation*. Beijing: San Lian Publishers.
9. Liu, Xiaofeng. 1997. Understanding of Modernity and Theology. In Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanghu, eds. *Christianity Culture Review*, Vol. 6. Guiyang: Guizhou People's Press.
10. Liu, Jian, Luo Weihong, and Yan Kejia. 1999. Belief and Behavior of Christians: an analysis of Christianity in Shanghai. In *Contemporary Religious Studies*, Vol.1, 1999.
11. Mo, Fayou. 1999. Localization of Christianity in China: History and Reality. In *Contemporary Religious Studies*, Vol.3, 1999.
12. Qin, Jiayi and Hans Kung. 1990. *Chinese Religions and Christianity*. Beijing: San Lian Publishers.
13. Russell, Bertrand. 1982. *Religion and Science*. Beijing: Commercial Press.
14. Sun, Li. 1996. An Overview of Contemporary Chinese Christianity from the Young Believers: the case of Shanghai. In Gao Shining and He Guanghu, eds. *Christian Culture and Modernization*. Beijing: Chinese Social Sciences Press.
15. Taylor, Charles. 1997. Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity. Quoted from Wang Hui, *Selected Articles by Wang Hui*. Guangxi Normal Univ. Press.
16. Yang, Fenggang. 1999. *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities*. Pen. State Univ. Press.
17. Yu, Jiang. 1998. Taking Care of Intellectual Believers' Needs: thoughts on improve believers' education. In *Tianfeng*, Vol.1, 1998.
18. Yuan, Zhiming. 1998. *Repentance of God's Soil: God and China in Five Thousand Years*. Taipei: Campus Bookstore Publishers.

[i] According to the same White Paper on Religious Freedom in China issued by the Information Office of the State Council, there are about 4 million Catholics by 1996, while many scholars estimate that there are about 10 to 12 million instead now. I'd like to point out here that this article mainly talks about Protestant Christianity.

[ii] The year of 1989 is a distinct point in terms of Christian growth. In the 1980s, there were only few intellectuals truly converted, and most of them were just interested in Christian culture. But after 1990, more and more intellectuals became believers, esp. after 1993, 4 years of rethinking of life and meaning after the Tian'an Men Movement.

[iii] Haidian District is known as the University Area of Beijing, where about 30 prestigious universities are located. And Zhongguancun, central part of Haidian, is known as the Chinese Silicon Valley.

[iv] In fact, according to my informants, there are about 300 believers in their church by 2003, though they do not have Sunday service all together because of security issues. They have about 12 small groups or fellowships, each one with about 20 to 40 believers.

[v] Some people suggest that multi-identities is one of the distinctive of East Asia Culture, including China, Korea and Japan. Their argument is based on the statistics that the religious population is about 220 million, while the total population is only 120 million in Japan. But this is not sufficient as to draw such a conclusion. In fact, multi-identities is true to all human being, not just for East Asians.

[vi] Zhang Haiyang suggests that they choose to marginalize themselves as to identify with the much stronger western Christian culture, though they are marginalized by the internal mainstream culture and state power.

[vii] Fei Xiaotong said that if you want to study a culture, you need not only know how to "get in", but also how to "get out".

[viii] This is often criticized by the traditional evangelicals as "liberal theology" and "the unbelieving type").