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Knowing and Being Known: Chinese Society and Christianity[①]

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Abstract: Chinese Christianity has been known in contemporary society through three stages. In the years 1949-1979 Christianity was known negatively through Chinese official media. 1980-2000 Christianity developed fast and was accepted as a part of social culture and received a certain amount of sympathy and support from society. From 2000 till today, the house church has been developing very quickly, and both government and society have gradually come to know the positive sides of Christianity. Through a combination of field work and case study, the present article argues that the ways of knowing Christianity and the means of Christian self-expression are different in the above three stages, and the partial functions of Christianity as part of a civil society have become visible during the process. For the present author, the functions of religions very much depend on the social context of their existence, and Christianity should play a more important role in the fast developing process of civil society in the contemporary China.

Keywords: Christianity, house church, civil society

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Since the reform and opening-up of China in the late 1970s, Christianity has been developing very fast. This has become the focus for the academics of religious studies and has drawn much attention from society. The Chinese society has undergone great changes in the process of recognizing Christianity since 1949. For 30 years Christianity had been seen as the opposite to the mainstream of values, and Christianity had been described to most Chinese people as something negative and called 'yangjiao' (foreign religion), cultural invader, and so on. On the one hand, there was some strong tension between Christianity and Chinese society for a long time; and on the other hand, owing to the limitation of places for Christian activities, Christian influence on society was very small. In recent years, more and more Chinese have changed their views of Christianity, but their perspectives, generally speaking, are very limited. And Christianity has also undergone great changes in the process of exposing itself to step by step. Of course, there has been some interaction between the knowing and the known which

① This article was presented at the Nordic Workshop: Religion, faith, state and society, in Lidingö, Stockholm, on June 8th, 2011. And it was responsed by Knud Jorgensen, Adjunct Professor, Norwegian School of Theology, Oslo.

is worth thinking and reflecting on.

I. The Past and Present Reality

As a foreign religion, after entering China, Christianity faced all kinds of misunderstandings and even distortions, so its development was never smooth. However, the Christian churches, especially from the late 19th century to 1949, still carried out many activities beneficial to the Chinese society, including introducing western science and technology, setting up different kinds of schools, founding modern hospitals and training doctors, propagating public health care, establishing Chinese enterprise of modern press and the enterprises of charity, relieving suffering in disasters and advocating the modern ways of life such as weekly work-days system and monogamy, and even the abolishment of women's feet-binding. In summary, at the beginning stage of the transformation of China from a traditional society to a modern one, Christianity played an active and important role.

From these activities, we note two important characteristics: firstly, Christianity has played many kinds of positive social roles; secondly, the church was the sponsor, organizer and actor in all these activities, through which Christianity exerted its positive and impressive social influence. So, naturally, the activities of the Church became the main channel though which many Chinese came to know and understand Christianity.

So, although there have been some tensions between Christianity and Chinese society, to a higher or lower degree, a very important thing for Chinese is to increase their knowledge and understanding of Christianity. And although it is a long way, we can make it shorter through knowing and understanding the positive roles played by Christian churches and their beneficial influence on Chinese society. Thus, through the achievement of the Church activities for the improvement of the society, more and more Chinese have got a positive impression of Christianity. In this sense, we can say that the influence of the activities mentioned above is an important cause for the development of Christianity inChina. Although by 1949 when the People's Republic of China (P. R. C) was founded there were only 3.2 million Catholics and 1 million Protestant Christians, their impact was much greater than their percentage of the population.

After 1949, because of the radical change in the ideological and political situation, the tension between Chinese society and Christianity became much higher and came to a peak dur-

ing the Culture Revolution (1966-1976) when Christianity was swept out of society. After the reform and opening-up, the tension between the two began to decrease. Nowadays the tension still exists and has in some ways become more complex, but on the whole it has been reduced to the lowest level in many aspects since 1949.

Linked with the tension since 1949, the process for the Chinese society to know and understand Christianity could be divided into three phases.

The first phase was from 1949 to the late 1970s when all the ways of knowing and understanding Christianity were derived from the propaganda and criticism by the Party and the official media, and even from the self-criticism of the Christian church itself. It is very natural that all the knowledge and understanding not only were negative, and even offensive: Christianity, together with other religions, was criticized and attacked as an ideology in opposition to socialism, as backward superstition and as reactionary thought and a running-dog of western imperialism. These influences have been so deep and vast that some people still hold this view of Christianity today.

The second phase was from the early 1980s whenChina began the reform and opening-up, to the end of the last century. The feature of this phase is very clear: with the development of Christianity especially in the countryside, the growth of Christian studies, the increase of publications about Christianity, and the policy of 'leading religion to adapt to the society' by the government, the negative knowledge and understanding of Christianity slowly but clearly decreased. The idea of Christianity and religion as opium has been changed into the idea of religion as part of culture. And more and more people have been willing to know and understand Christianity. Some of them gradually began to take a neutral or even sympathetic attitude to it; some even came to accept it and became Christians.

The third phase began at the turn of the 21st century. In the recent 10 years the so-called house-churches have been growing quickly like bamboo shoots after a spring rain. ②With this and other developments, the more positive knowledge and understanding of Christianity have become apparent in Chinese society. President Hu Jintao could tell the 17th National Congress of Communist Party 'to give full play to the positive role of religious personages and the mass of believers in accelerating economic and social development'. The situation has given Christi-

② In 1998, some house churches published two announcements: *The Attitudes towards the Religious Policy of The Government and Three Self Church by the House Church*, *Confession of Faith from the House Church*. The two announcements show that the family-church exists in Chinese society as an independent power. Henceforth, the family-churches developed fast.

anity a larger room for activity, and at the same time Chinese society has had more ways to understand Christianity.

This changing process throughout the 60 years since 1949 has a very important trait, that is, the Church, as one side of the tension had almost been totally passive for the first 30 years. And for the second 30 years, the subjective consciousness of the Church has awaked to some degree, but as a result of limitations by the religious administration, the established church (so-called Three Self-Church) cannot arrange any activities anywhere except within sites approved by the government. This means that it cannot play its role in the public life of society. This is also true for the so-called 'house-churches' which have been flourishing during the recent 10 years. Having been constrained to some kind of illegal status, they have often lived in unsafe, unstable and half open or half secret situations. Since the Church cannot take an active part in the social life as it did before 1949 and cannot display itself to the public, by what kind of ways does the Chinese society know and understand Christianity?

II. Displaying itself—from the Perspective of Sociological Investigation

The process of Christianity's display to Chinese society, corresponding to the process of society's knowing and understanding Christianity may also be divided into three phases.

The first can be called the phase of being criticised and attacked. Except for being criticised, all the churches and all the Christians had no way to display themselves. For the Church, survival was the first task, and then constant self-criticism became an expedient for self-protection.

In the second phase, Christianity (especially in the countryside) developed very fast, but the churches lived in a much closed situation. The 20 years from 1980s to the end of 20the century was the period of reconstructing and rebuilding Chinese churches. During the period, Christian churches in the countryside focused on the struggle for 'being spiritual or not' on the one hand, and on the struggle for their legal status on the other hand. At the same time, the three-self churches were occupied with their own reconstruction and could not spare time for considering other things; as for the new churches or house churches in the urban area, they had no legal status, so they had to take care of their situation and had to put aside all the problems of society.

The third phase began at the beginning of the new century when theChristian Church

grew strongly and had more chances and space to display its faith and its impact. This display is a process from an individual level to a collective level, and a process in which churches began to enter the social stage. For the sake of their own development and to alleviate the suppressive situation, house churches began to take care of their own rights, social image and social role; and as for the believers, when their Christian identities could be open to the public, their role as 'light and salt' could also be displayed.

There is much evidence from the sociological investigation that can support the observations above.

In 2003, I issued a questionnaire to 500 Christians in Beijing, in order to know what the main approach is for the common people to understand Christianity. In the questionnaire I listed a variety of possible factors which might affect their knowing and understanding of Christianity. In the 464 valid questionnaires received, 56.6% of Christians said they approached Christianity for the first time through the example of Christians' behaviour; 47.9% through Christians' missionary work; 23% through electronic and other audio-visual products; 14.3% through books and teachers' introduction. In 2009, when I did the same thing in Guiyang city, the percentage of the first and second kind of people was much higher, up to 76.2%.

From these statistics we can clearly see that among the various ways by which people know and understand Christianity, the one with the greatest impact is through the behavior of individual Christians.

This investigation is a Hi-fi reflection of the situation of Chinese society today as regards this aspect. Though the official ideology of Chinese society has weakened greatly, there is still very little knowledge about Christianity taught in schools, and there are only a few universities which have departments of religious studies. There is very little concerning Christianity in the programs of television, radio, magazines, and Christianity is not allowed to be propagated through mass media. The publications about Christian knowledge and study have increased since the reform and opening-up, but they are still under the constrains and censorship imposed by the Party's propaganda department, and relatively speaking, only a minority of people can read and understand these books which are quite academic.

In the absence of the church in the public life, the behaviors of individual Christians, with their character, morality, responsibility for work and love for neighbors, are naturally standing out. In the investigation we have found that after becoming Christian, many believers have changed greatly and become different persons.

In fact, when Jesuit missionaries came intoChina in the 16th and 17the centuries, they spread the Christian faith through their own examples, which became their missionary policy. "They did not talk anything about the faith in public when they appeared in the mass at first in order not to make the Chinese doubtful of this new religion". ③What they did was "just to build up themselves and their holy life as an example to others in everyday with the purpose to win the local peoples' favour". ④In today's China, it is common for Christians to present good examples, and many live according to their faith without any other purpose. In such a society with the decline of social ethos and the "collapse" of ethics, the good behaviors of most Christians recognized by more and more people are very prominent and have become a main window through which the Chinese society has known and understood Christianity.

In addition the influence of the Christians' enthusiasm for mission should not be ignored. According to my survey in Beijing, more than half(55.8%) of the Christian recipients think that missionary work is so important that they always participate in it. No doubt, this enthusiasm let more people to have more opportunities to know Christianity.

It is worth mentioning that the traditional forms of missionary work are changing, from the way of 'face to face' into E-mediaincluding Internet and mobile-phone. And in fact, in recent years, many young people, especially the students at universities, have come to know and understand Christianity from the E-media. In some cases, E-media have become the main gateway for them, and we have reason to say that in the near future E-media will become one of the most important ways to get to know Christianity. ⑤

In recent years, the good behaviours of collective Christians have begun to appear, which has made the window of knowing larger and larger for Chinese society. Let me mention some behaviours of a group of Christian enterprisers as an example.

On 24-26th of April, 2009, there was a conference of national Christian-businessmen held atTaihu Lake. More than 280 Christian businessmen joined and all of them voluntarily signed an agreement consisting of three articles: 1) do no tax-dodging or tax-evasion, 2) be just and kind to the employees, 3) have no concubines. When I told about this agreement to a friend who is a businessman, he said: "It's not easy, especially for businessmen. I dare not

③ 利瑪竇 Li Madou【Matteo Ricci】:《利瑪竇中國書札》*Li Madou Zhongguo shuzha*【Matteo Ricci's letters in China】,(北京 Beijing:宗教文化出版社 Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe【Religion and Culture Press】,2006),176—168.

④ *Ibid*,168.

⑤ This kind of study has just begun and the investigative information still needs to collect. So, my paper is limited to it.

sign it, though I have not done such bad things".

In other words, with the development of social economy, many Christian enterprisers began to pay attention to paying back to society. Such kind of stories can be heard very often in my investigations.

When the government and the people have come to realize the contributions and effects of NGOs and NPOs, the church would have more opportunity to appear in the public life.

Let us take an example in Yunnan Province. For historical and geographical reasons, Yunnan has been heavily afflicted with drug crimes since 1980's. The official statistics show that at the beginning of the 1990s, the number of drug addicts rose to a historic record of 57.000; at the end of 2002, the number was still high (over 48000). The central and local governments have used considerable resources on therapy of drug addicts, but it is very difficult to control the situation. From the 1990s to 2006, clinical statistics show the number of drug abstainers is much less than 10% of addicts, that is to say, it is very hard to get the abusers rehabilitated, and still harder to keep them clean. Under such circumstances, the idea of Christian spiritual therapy for drug rehabilitation came out with the basic philosophy: Do not rely on medicines or yourself; rely solely on God. In Yunnan, many Christian communities set up a Christian Rehabilitation Tutoring Station for this purpose and attained great achievements: in Taocheng (a small town of Yunnan) for example, from 1999—2006, a total number of 82 drug users received assistance from the Christian Rehabilitation Tutoring Station; at the end of 2006, the statistics of recovery are as follow: 62 of them have stayed clean; 4 of them stayed clean until their deaths; 3 of them have relapsed; 5 of them have relapsed and were placed in compulsory rehabilitation centres; 8 of them have no information. The integrity rate is 80%. ⑥The church's success has been recognized by the government, and the interaction between the two began then.

It is after the earthquake in Sichuan Province, on May 12, 2008 that the church began openly to take part in public activities. Since the huge disaster began, various religious organizations have been silently, yet actively contributing to the rescuing work in all kinds of specific ways. Among them, Christian churches, whether large or small, contributed a lot from financial donations (a house-church with nearly 800 members donated 200,000 RMB in one day!)

⑥ Wang Aiguo, "Christian Spiritual Therapy for Drug Rehabilitation——Explorations and Experiments of Yunnan Christian Community in Social Services", presented in "Religion & Rule of Law: The Legal System and Religion in a Harmonious Society", (Beijing, 2008).

to sending volunteers more than 50% of them are Christians, 80% of Christians came from house-churches), from organizing large-scale prayer meetings, to the mental help in disaster areas, from saving lives at the beginning of the earthquake, to the home-reconstruction one year after. In May last year, when I visited one of the most severely destroyed towns, Beicuan, I found there were still many Christian volunteers, supported by their churches. Christians appeared in the public activities during that disaster more frequently than ever before. More and more people, especially those from the earthquake areas, began to feel personally the role played by churches. Some investigations after the earthquake show that many common people have changed their idea of Christianity, and the number of believers has been increasing in the local churches: *e. g.* in Mianzhu County, before the earthquake, there were 483 Christians and only less than 100 took part in the church activities; two years after earthquake, there are 292 persons baptized and 700-800 people taking part in the church activities. In An County, there were just 30 and some Christians for many years before, but more than 100 now. ⑦

The church's involvement is not only in the social services. The year from 2008 to 2009 can be called the 'year of churches' events', because many house churches, such as Qiuyuzhifu in Chengdu, Wanbang in Shanghai, Linfen in Shanxi, Shouwang in Beijing, Liangren in Guangzhou and so on, were attacked in different ways by local government. The tensions between the house churches and the government were clearly growing. In this situation, these churches no longer insisted on the policy of retreat, conceding and concealment, but have begun to maintain their right of religious freedom through the use of reasonable and peaceful ways. Some of them went into public places for arranging worship services after having lost their meeting houses. This kind of action of exposing themselves, even threatening the existence of the churches, has made a deep impression on many people; some people began to know that there is such a religion as Christianity, and some of them wanted to know more about it.

I can give another example: In my home townGuiyang city (capital of Guizhou Province), a city with nearly 20 thousand Christians, there is only one church house capable of holding 800 persons. What is worse is that the house has been in a dangerous condition for many years. So you can imagine how crowded it is every Sunday and Christmas. The worshipping people outside the house make traffic jam for the whole day. This spectacle draws and at-

⑦ Gao Yanting: *The rescuing work in / after earthquake in Wencuan County by Chinese Church*.

tracts crowds of people. They have become interested in Christianity, from hearing to watching, from questioning to knowing. In my investigation, the percentage of believers who began knowing Christianity in this way is up to 25%.

The main way to get to know Christianity for urban citizens is different from the way for the people in rural areas. While the way people get to know Christianity in cities is mainly through individual Christians' behaviours, in the countryside, it is through the power of miracles appearing after conversion to the Christian faith. The role of Christianity in ethical and moral life still has a great effect on the mass in the countryside. Some scholars of sociology of religion have observed that in today's rural area, such traditional values as filial piety have declined with the development of urbanization and the dismissal of the kindred relationship. It is Christians who practise those traditional values of Confucianism. ⑧

III. Further Reflections

During the last century, the status of Christianity in China has undergone very dramatic changes: from the beginning of the 20th century to 1949, the Christian church was active in society, taking part in public affairs and exerting huge influence on the transformation of Chinese society; from 1949 to the late 1970s, all the churches had lost their activity under increasing pressure and severe attacks, having no impact on society but just caring about their own existence; from the early 1980s onwards, the growth of the church has brought about the change in the Chinese society's knowledge of Christianity and the increase of Christian influence on the society. Remembering their role as 'Light and Salt', Chinese Christians have taken an active part in churches' charities and social service. Furthermore, their activities for defending rights of their own and of the underprivileged have made contributions to the democratic course in Chinese society.

Based on these developments, we can proceed to some reflections:

1. The realization of religion's social function has a lot to do with the social circumstances, that is to say, the attitude of the society in which religion exists, especially the attitude of the government toward the religion decides to great degree whether and how the religion may realize its social function. The function is different from the role-playing. What a role Christi-

⑧ Cf. the presentation of Li Huawei, a Ph. D. candidate of Peking University, in 'Religion and Cultural Diversity in a Global World international Conference' (Wuxi: July 10—12, 2009).

anity could play in contemporary Chinese society, in sum, mainly depends on its relationship to the state in the social system.

2. Judging from the present development, on the one hand, Christians' potential is very great even though their role in and effect on society is still small nowadays, and on the other hand, the church's involvement in public affairs is very significant even though it is just beginning.

As the Christian faith has deep and positive effects on the lives of numerous Christians in today's China, and its influence upon individuals' morality and ethics is especially notable, such effect and influence may gradually spread to the whole society through the role of 'Light and Salt' of scores of millions of Christians. That would be a great impact.

On the other hand, in contrast to her great contribution to the public life before 1949, the church has done very little, but she has now many more human resources (scores of times) than before. In other words, she should and could make a much greater contribution, if the channel for her to go into social public life was opened. She should and could become an important and effective non-governmental and not-profit organization, which is the necessary factor of a modern and sound society as the 'third sector' and the actual means to an autonomic society.

3. Christian church's organizations could play a very important role in the reconstruction of civil society in China. American scholar of religion, Max Stackhouse, points out that the church is the institution which existed in popular culture prior to civil society; therefore, religion is the main source of civil society's independent of political institutional system. Although Christianity's involvement in social affairs is still very limited, we can see that the Christian church is the largest non-governmental organization today in terms of the number of her members and the degree of organization. So, her actions for defending her own rights, her activities of serving the grassroots, her members' consciousness of taking part in the churches' affair, etc., should and could make significant contributions to the formation of civil society in China.

4. The Chinese society between 1949 and late 1970s is called by some academics a 'totalitarian society' or a unitary society. In that society, the state held the power of controlling and distributing nearly all the resources, and individual persons were provided with their basic existence through the institutional arrangement by the state. Between the state and the individual, there were no social institutions as a bridge or any kind of mediation. Nowadays the situation has greatly changed. While there are emerging many social organizations, be they

GONGO(Government organized NGO) or not, more and more people have begun to recognize the importance of social organization and civil society. We can therefore expect that, with the increase of Chinese people's knowledge of Christianity, more and more people will realize the significance and contribution of theChristian church as an important organization that is beneficial to Chinese society.

中文题目:

认识与被认识:中国社会与基督教

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提要: 中国基督教被当代社会认知的过程大抵可按时间顺序划为三个阶段:一,1949 至1979,人们通过官方媒体的不断批判认识了负面的基督教;二,1980 至 2000,基督教快速发展,被承认为社会文化的一部分并逐渐获得部分人的同情与支持;三,2000 年至今,家庭教会发展势如破竹,同时政府与社会逐渐认识到基督教的积极方面。本文通过问卷调查与个案研究相结合,认为人们认识基督教的方式与基督教自我展现的手段都在以上三个阶段各有不同,在这一过程中基督教作为"公民社会"(Civil Society)一部分的作用逐渐彰显。笔者认为,宗教的作用在很大程度上取决于其所处社会环境,而基督教应当在当前中国市民社会剧烈变化的过程中发挥更重要作用。

关键词: 基督教、家庭教会、公民社会