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Abstract

Christianity in China is known to have been influenced by Chinese popular religion. Yet it is less known how much Christianity has influenced other religions in China. This article examines the syncretic trend of the early years of Republican China, which aimed at reinventing Chinese religions. I argue that as early as the 1920s, followers of Chinese religious traditions were appropriating various aspects of Christianity – from its symbols and institutions to its values – for their own ends. This trend was crucial for Christianity to become a part of Chinese religion and society.

Keywords: Christianity, syncretism, Chinese religion, eclectic societies, Buddhism

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Making Christianity a Chinese religion has long concerned Chinese Christian leaders. To many of them, Christianity's inherent foreignness was what obstructed its adoption in China. The genesis of Christianity and its doctrines such as original sin, resurrection, and redemption by proxy were very foreign to most Chinese. By the time Christianity came to China it had accrued a large mass of personalities, icons, rites, and political notions that were distinctly un-Chinese. Its missionary enterprise had become so closely tied to the agendas of foreign governments (particularly in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century) that many believed Christianity did not serve the interests of the Chinese people. Thus, the expansion of Christianity encountered violent resistance in many local societies in China in the late nineteenth century. During the antireligion movement of the 1920s, many Chinese intelligentsia also criticized churches, amid rising nationalism. Christian churches were denounced as agents of imperialism that sought to pull China apart.¹ While scholars outside China have tried to understand this anti-Christian movement from the perspective of modernization,² Chinese scholars have interpreted it as a kind of resistance against cultural imperialism.³ However, they all basically agree that many Chinese at that time saw Christianity as a threat to China as a modern nation-state and to Chinese identity.

But this speaks to only some of the facts. The anti-Christian or antireligion movement of the 1920s was mostly an intellectual trend among students inspired and loosely organized by some radical intellectuals. It included only part of the Chinese intelligentsia and never developed into a full-fledged political movement. As Jessie Lutz has pointed out, "The movement languished for lack of effective political allies and specific goals."⁴ It is true that people attacked Christianity because of its alleged ties to Western imperialism, capitalism, and the objectionable treaties that came along with them. But the criticism that those intellectuals voiced "does not show itself in strictly anti-Christian or anti-missionary moods. It is rather anti those aspects of 'Christian' and western civilization which as seen do not accord with either Chinese or Christian ethical standards."⁵

The antireligion movement was curiously paralleled by a syncretic movement, an alternative stream of thought that revealed the "returning tide of China's religious

1 Yamamoto and Yamamoto 1953, 143-46.

2 Yamamoto and Yamamoto 1953; Lutz 1976; Yip 1980.

3 Ye 1992; Yang 2005.

4 Lutz 1976, 416.

5 Rawlinson 1927, 116.

experience.”⁶ It welcomed all forms of religious truth, regardless of their source. This movement intended to draw inspiration from all religions, and it treated Christianity as equal to other religions in China, a stance that many Chinese accepted but which was at odds, ironically, with Christianity’s own claim of being the universal faith for all people at all times. To some Chinese in the early twentieth century, this alternative trend seemed to be a logically sound solution to the issue of Christianity. In retrospect, it was an important stream, geared toward the acceptance of Christianity in Chinese society and culture. This stream has borne fruit today, as the explosive growth of Christianity in China demonstrates.

This article examines the trend of religious syncretism in China in the 1920s, which tended to accept Christianity as a Chinese religion.⁷ It existed in many aspects of social life, but I have confined my study to the role of Christianity in reforms of Confucianism, Buddhism, and eclectic religious movements.⁸ The sources I have used are research reports on Chinese religions published in mission journals (mainly *the Chinese Recorder*), church yearbooks, and some other mission publications from China in the 1920s. Most of them are in English. I first introduce the syncretic tradition in Chinese religion and the rise of eclectic religious societies in the early twentieth century. I then illustrate various ways that other religions in China have borrowed from Christianity and that Christian churches have engaged with other Chinese religions. I conclude by arguing that the syncretic religious trend was concurrent with those anti-Christianity currents of the 1920s. Both were vital for Christianity to become a Chinese religion.

The Syncretic Tradition in Chinese Religion

It is true that Christian churches met resistance and were under attack in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Yet it is equally true that Chinese society has tended to assimilate thoughts and practices from whatever faiths or intellectual traditions it has come into contact with. Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and

6 Ibid., 40.

7 For appropriation of Christianity in Chinese religious sects in the early twentieth century, see Richard Young’s study of Tao Yüan (Young 1989) and Philip Clart’s study of I-Kuan Tao (Clart 2006).

8 It is interesting that the discussions of pro-Christian movements in articles by missionaries intentionally exclude Taoism. The missionary Frank Rawlinson even considered that “in its deteriorated form [Taoism] seems to be content to die” (1927, 45).

popular cults have all borrowed heavily from other religions while maintaining their own boundaries. It is also common for Chinese people to switch from one belief to another or to attend activities of several religions concurrently. This type of religious tolerance is a crucial feature of Chinese society. Dwight W. Edwards, the general secretary of the Peking YMCA, offered an explanation of this phenomenon in his 1926 article "The Syncretic Mind in Chinese Religions." He wrote, "The tolerance shown between them is due in large part to the fact of this general belief in their underlying unity of principle and belief. The attitude of the Chinese people towards these religions is in a sense paralleled by the present day attitude of the Christian layman towards differences in denominations within Christianity."⁹ It is not too much to say that this syncretic tendency is a prominent underlying feature of Chinese religion, leaving the society open to many different religious ideas.

Nevertheless, the scale of the syncretic movement in modern China, especially in the 1920s, was unusual. The tendency to incorporate most of the religious traditions existing in China at the time, regardless of whether they were of foreign origin, had never been seen before. The principles of religious liberty and equality expressed by the constitution of 1923 encouraged this tendency but were probably not its main reason. More important was a historical progression from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century. Confucianism had been the orthodox state ideology since the Han dynasty. However, by the early Republican period, it had fallen from its once prominent position. The influence of Buddhism and Taoism in general also declined in the early twentieth century. With the dominant status of the traditional Three Religions (三教) seriously weakened, Christianity eventually penetrated into the interior of China, beginning in the mid-to-late nineteenth century.

The changing structure of the religious field conspired with the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, the establishment of the Chinese Republic, and the chaos of the republic's early years to facilitate the upsurge of a syncretic movement. At the time, religious Taoism and other popular beliefs were indiscriminately discarded as crass superstition and thus tended to be entirely wiped out. For a time, even Confucianism and Buddhism were denounced by radical intellectuals and seemed out of date. China's past was no longer the only origin of authoritative moral force on which people could rely. In this atmosphere, the formation of a new ideology through the syncretization of available beliefs seemed natural because, as Dwight indicated, "the Chinese people as a whole have not been concerned with basing their religious

9 Edwards 1926, 403.

practices upon a consistent system of thought but are ready to choose what seems good and practical without worrying about philosophic consistency.”¹⁰

It was under these circumstances that numerous eclectic societies claiming to mingle all kinds of religious thought came forth. The missionary Paul De Witt Twinem, later a professor at the private University of Nanking, compared the modern syncretic movement in China to the Renaissance in Europe. He wrote, “There is no doubt a subconscious sense of the growing victory of the Christian church; hence an adoption of its Lord, and imitations, conscious or unconscious, of some of its ideas and methods. Some of the [Chinese] people are like those in Athens who were fascinated by ‘every new thing,’ including Christianity.”¹¹

The modern syncretic movement underscores a psychological fact: some Chinese people had eventually come to terms with the idea that Christianity and Chinese religions need not be mutually exclusive. On the one hand, the flourishing of the Christian Church, especially its effective social work, improved its image in the Chinese mind. On the other hand, Chinese also started to reflect on how best to open themselves to the modern world, which required them to change dramatically. This psychological fact was a result of rethinking Christianity, a tendency that was shared by the general populace and thus resulted in the syncretic movement.

Christianity as a Theological Source of Eclectic Religious Societies

The 1920s witnessed the rise of numerous eclectic societies in China. Some had a tremendous influence, for example the Goodness Association (同善社), the Ethical Society (道院), the Society for Moral Instruction (道德學社), and the Universal Association for the Unity of Religion (世界宗教大同會, aka the International Union of Religions), to name a few. The challenge of scientific rationalism and the presence of Christianity in China inspired them on a large scale. Most had connections to older heterodox sects. The most prominent feature of these societies was their mingling of Buddhism and Confucianism, and all emphasized ethical living. Their main religious practices were meditation and charity work.

The nature of religious syncretism in the 1920s becomes clear when this trend is compared with the antireligion movements of the same period. The key figures in

¹⁰ Ibid., 413.

¹¹ Twinem 1925b, 606.

the latter were a group of radical intellectuals informed by nationalism and scientific rationalism. They appealed to those who wanted to clean out whatever unscientific or irrational traditions that China still had and to establish a modern China that would run according to the rules of science and rational thought. The trend of religious syncretism was conservative in contrast, but only in the sense that it was not iconoclastic. In essence, it may be seen as the “response of China’s historical experience to the impact of the West in general and Christianity in particular.” The membership of these societies was “made up of the people.” Thus, as Frank Rawlinson pointed out, “the answer of China’s historical experience to Christianity is largely an answer by the general populace.”¹²

Although Confucianism and Buddhism constituted the core of those syncretic religious associations, most of their principles and practices also recognized the three other major religions in China: Taoism, Christianity, and Islam. For instance, the God that the Ethical Society worshiped was “the Primeval Father (先天老祖) together with the Founders of the Five Great Religions – Christianity, Mohammedanism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.”¹³ On the statue of the Primeval Father was a sign for Christianity, a triangle symbolizing the Trinity. The influential Association for Advancing Goodness (悟善社) combined five religions – Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and Christianity – and claimed to put equal emphasis on each.¹⁴ The Society for the Unification of the True Way of the Six Sages (六聖真道統一會) not only combined the five religions of the Ethical Society and the Association for Advancing Goodness but also added Judaism, with Moses as its sixth sage. Interestingly, Jesus was ranked highest among the six, simply because “Christ came from heaven.”¹⁵ Tao Yuan also worshiped Jesus Christ as one of its five founders.¹⁶ The Society for Purifying the Heart (洗心社) was tolerant of Christianity and invited Christians to address its congregation at meetings.¹⁷ Some of the founders of these associations, such as Wang Jiashu of the World Association for Unity in the Holy Religion (全球聖教大同會), were acquainted with the scriptures of the five major religions in China.¹⁸

12 Rawlinson, 50, 112.

13 Drake 1923, 135.

14 Twinem 1925a, 467.

15 Twinem 1925b, 595-96.

16 Young 1989.

17 Hodous 1979, 29.

18 Reid 1924, 65.

Christianity influenced all of these societies, and they even borrowed many basic tenets from it. For instance, the True Way of the Six Sages society adopted both the practice of fasting and hope in the Second Coming directly from the Bible: “The standard time for fasting is forty days, because Jesus fasted forty days and also said he was the True Bread.”¹⁹ The International Union of Religions “took over the Christian prayer and the way of praying of other religions and remade them for [its] own use.”²⁰ Members of these societies also quoted passages from the Bible to testify to their faith. Regarding membership, these societies welcomed votaries of every religion. Quite a few Christians converted to the International Union of Religions.²¹ Even some leaders of syncretic religious societies were Christians – for example, Hou Xuefang, one of the leading figures of the Ethical Society. He was also a Confucian scholar with a *jinshi* degree under the Qing and had held high rank in both the Qing and the Republican governments. In his private life he was a Confucian, then a Buddhist, then an atheist, and finally a Christian. He was recruited into the Ethical Society in the autumn of 1921.²² The leader of the Universal Morality Association (萬國道德會) was a student in a Christian school and was enrolled as a catechumen in the Methodist Church.²³ In the Nanjing branch of the Apprehension of Goodness Society, one of the secretaries had two sons in Christian school, and one member was a Christian teacher in a language school for foreigners.²⁴

The Institutional Influence of Christianity on Chinese Religions

The aforementioned instances of interfaith communication are direct evidence that Christianity and its values were accepted in circles that we might fairly describe as representing Chinese religion. These are overt examples. But Christianity also influenced indigenous religious organizations (even Confucian institutions) and Buddhist organizations in more implicit ways. Indigenous organizations looked to Christian institutions as models for their political and social structures, sources of practices, manners of preaching, and so on.

19 Twinem 1925b, 601, 597.

20 Fay 1924, 157.

21 Fay 1924, 158; Twinem 1925a, 463; Twinem 1925b, 595.

22 Drake 1923, 141.

23 Reid 1924, 61.

24 Twinem 1925a, 467.

The endeavor to renew Chinese religion and put it in the service of building a modern nation can be traced back to the Hundred Days' Reform of 1898. The seizure of temples for schools and an attempt to establish Confucianism as a state religion characterized this movement.²⁵ The promotion of Confucianism did not succeed, however. The advocates and organizers of the 1898 reform, such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, were in close communication with famous missionaries such as Timothy Richard and Gilbert Reid. Kang and Liang had gathered information about Christianity and achieved a better understanding of Western political systems through their contacts with such Westerners. Kang and his disciples adopted many institutions and ideas of Christianity through their personal contact with missionaries and their reading of mission publications. Among the ideas that they borrowed, the most important was the notion of a unified religion with an established hierarchy. That is why Kang advocated the cult of Confucius as the exclusive state religion and Confucius as its head. Kang's idea was still influential among Confucians and state officials in the 1920s, although "the political and autocratic significance of Confucianism [had] vanished and its religious significance also had considerably dwindled."²⁶

Buddhists in the 1920s also looked to Christianity in their reinvention efforts. Their reform was a reaction to Buddhism's declining influence in society, but more specifically it was a direct response to the antireligion movement at the time, which questioned the unscientific character of religion in general and religion's role in modern Chinese society.

Rawlinson observed in the 1920s, "In a general sense Buddhism has never had a social program."²⁷ He was right. Between the Ming dynasty and the early Republican period, Buddhist associations were not major organizers of charitable social programs, though Buddhist monasteries previously had a long history of engaging in philanthropy.²⁸ Most of the then-active social and religious societies were organized around local cults.²⁹ Moreover, Buddhist scriptures were limited in circulation and dissemination to a small circle of initiates and literati. They were passed down

25 Goossaert 2006.

26 Rawlinson 1927, 45.

27 *Ibid.*, 46.

28 Lai 1992.

29 Confucianism did not concern itself at all with social work among the laity until the 1910s. Throughout its earlier history, it was part of elite culture. The focus of its teachings is devotion to an abstract moral philosophy and submission to the state's control over the lives of its subjects.

through a lineage of masters and disciples associated with specific Buddhist monasteries. Publicizing the ideas and values of the dharma to the populace through the use of vernacular languages was never a major concern of its system of thought. As the missionary Frank Millican pointed out, “In the past practically all of the research and translation work in Buddhist literature in China had been done by foreign scholars.”³⁰

Therefore, the challenge of making Buddhist thought, heretofore hidden in cryptic books accessible to an elite few, known to the public at large was the greatest task for Buddhists after the Revolution of 1911. Christian institutions were the only religious organizations whose propaganda aimed at the instruction of the people, and they became what Chinese religious institutions had to compete with. That is why Buddhism (and, indeed, Confucianism and the eclectic societies) drew on – or, more accurately, copied – the model of Christian social work.

The famous monk Taixu (太虛) led the reform of Buddhism in China in the 1920s. He and its other modern devotees realized that for Buddhism to survive in modern society, Buddhists must reform their institutions and make their scriptures comprehensible and familiar to the modern mind. Taixu was inspired by Japanese Buddhist movements and Christianity, which he considered models to emulate. He had studied in Japan for a while. However, his knowledge of Christianity was likely gained through reading the works of Kang and Liang, both of whom Richard happened to have tutored.³¹

One main area where Buddhists progressed greatly in the modern era was education. Numerous Western-style academic institutions sprang up: for example, the Buddhist Institute of Wuchang (武昌佛學院) and Avatamsaka University in Hankou [Hankow] (漢口華嚴大學). They offered courses that corresponded to the grade levels set by the government for both college and secondary schools. The only difference was that their courses focused on Buddhism. According to a Buddhist tract, “The curriculum includes all necessary science subjects: English, Sanskrit, music and physical education, along with the Buddhist precepts and scriptures as the mainstay [of the students’ education].”³² One critic suggested, however, that “like [the curricula] of the Christian [academies] its [the Buddhist academic institution’s] educational aim was mainly propagandistic. Institutes for the clerical members were planned for every

30 Millican 1923, 326.

31 Jan 1990.

32 Tai 1925, 92.

large monastery.”³³ A number of Buddhist magazines were published to expound the dharma to the public, such as *Sound of the Tide* (海潮音) and *Buddhist Civilization* (佛化). Numerous circulation centers were established in practically all the provinces to distribute Buddhist literature. Some even had libraries for the public. Buddhist organizations also offered lectures, especially on the Buddhist scriptures, as a means of approaching the public.³⁴ Their missionary efforts began to be devoted to social work too. There were benevolent associations for famine relief and orphanages that provided education and training to prepare their charges for life.³⁵

In sum, Buddhism after Taixu’s reform was reorganized “on lines similar to the Christian church, with church membership, a priesthood free to marry and living amongst the people, and with orphanages, hospitals, and other such expressional activities as carried on by the church.”³⁶ On a social level, Buddhism had evolved from being a religion that emphasized practice and symbolism to being a religion of direct propaganda. It had also moved its center of gravity, from monastic life to the laity and the world. Building schools, hospitals, and factories, giving public lectures, translating scriptures into modern languages, and disseminating them among the people – these became central activities for Chinese Buddhists.

Eclectic religious societies also institutionally benefited from Christianity. For instance, the Ethical Society was established to preach the moral life and to carry on philanthropic work. But the way that it conducted its charitable endeavors was “modern” – or, to be more precise, closely modeled on Christian institutions. It provided accommodations for the homeless and gave medicine to the sick but also started small savings banks so that the poor could conserve and invest the meager holdings that they had. The Ethical Society also had a branch titled the Universal Swastika Society (世界紅卍會), which was an imitation of the Red Cross.³⁷ As in Christian churches, members of the Ethical Society preached “continuously to the ordinary people in the crowded market, and had prepared tracts for this work. They published a monthly magazine, *The Ethical Miscellany* (道德雜紙) and a weekly paper, *The Philosopher* (哲報).”³⁸

33 Rawlinson 1927, 47.

34 Ibid., 47; Tai 1925, 92-93.

35 Millican 1923, 328-29.

36 Ibid., 328.

37 Reid 1924, 62, 64.

38 Drake 1923, 141. “The Ethical Miscellany,” as noted in the quote, is a translation of 道德雜紙, a Chinese journal title that later became 道德雜誌.

The manner of congregating in some eclectic societies might also be compared with that in Christianity. The Society for Moral Instruction's popular lectures, for instance, were sometimes called preaching services and were held on Sundays. Its meetings on Wednesday and Saturday nights were for members only and emphasized meditation. These meetings easily remind us of the prayer meetings in Christian churches.³⁹ Also, unlike most other religious groups in China, these eclectic societies had a strong desire to proselytize: in other words, they were keen to go beyond the boundaries of China and spread their message of compassion to other lands. The Ethical Society, for instance, started a branch in Japan.

These eclectic societies, whether newly emerged or long established, had connections with underground political or social groups, some of which the imperial government had previously banned. They built up their image as "modern religion" by embracing the outward trappings of Christian institutions and, to varying degrees, the spirit of charitable institutions. This disguise of "modern religion" then helped legitimize their status. The bottom line was that these eclectic societies could exist as at least outwardly moral groups, which, many at the time believed, Chinese people needed.

If we can say that Christianity – or, more accurately, Protestantism – is a "modern" religion, then the presence of Christianity in non-Christian countries was both a challenge to traditional religion and a model for emulation. In China, the presence of Christianity accelerated the crisis that rocked the status of traditional religion (i. e., the iconoclasm of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) because as Christianity spread so did the dissemination of post-Enlightenment concepts of religion and rationalist ideas grounded in the scientific process, those who kept their faith in the traditional gods and forms of worship could succeed in responding to this challenge and reformulating themselves into the modern world only by learning from Christianity, the only "modern" religion. In this regard, the modern fate of Chinese religion was always connected to Christianity. The eclectic or syncretic trend reflects not a conservative temperament but a tendency for religious reformists to find the position of tradition in modernity – in other words, to attempt to conserve the essence but transform the body to fit in the modern world. By emulating Christianity, Chinese religions tried to reinvent themselves for modern society. Whether these reforms were successful or not and whether Christians considered their understandings of Christianity correct or not, one thing is clear: Chinese religion implicitly

39 Twinem 1925b, 602.

admitted the value of Christianity and the value of its presence on Chinese soil. As we shall see below, this acknowledgment contributed to the dialogue between Christian churches and other religious groups, which promoted the localization of Christianity in China.

The Dialogue between Christianity and Other Religions in China

Whalen Lai, in his comparative study of Chinese Buddhist and Chinese Christian charities, determines that “there is no Buddhist-Christian dialogue in modern China.”⁴⁰ However, a great deal of evidence suggests otherwise – that not only Buddhists but other religious groups as well were willing to communicate with Christians on a whole range of ideas and values. Most of these groups, in fact, collaborated with one another in their social work. The dialogue between other religions and Christianity was another way to welcome the presence of Christianity in China.

The modern reform of Buddhism was to a great extent a response to Christianity; therefore, in magazines, exegetical writings, and lectures, Buddhists often criticized Christianity, but their criticism rarely focused on its foreignness or connections with imperialism. Most of the criticism we may better interpret as critiques of certain Christian theological proclivities. In this regard, the Buddhists recognized Christianity as being on an equal footing with the other religions of China. They attempted to understand Christianity through “a mind permeated with Buddhist thought.” When replying to the statement “God chose to reveal His true nature through Jesus Christ so that we mortals who cannot see God might know His true nature,” one Buddhist said, “Then, the God that you worship is not God, the Universally Present Spirit, but Jesus, the Jew.” He then asked “whether all Christians could become Christ,” as Jesus had.⁴¹ Venerable Master Taixu even wrote an article titled “There Is No Need to Either Destroy or Reform the Christian Church,” obviously advocating a tolerant stance. According to him, Christianity had run its course and was dead because a savior was no longer needed, since human life was now understood (through science). He argued that the establishment of modern hospitals, schools, institutional reforms,

40 Lai 1992, 5.

41 Millican 1923, 331.

and the like might have begun as a uniquely Christian enterprise but was in essence common to all religions.⁴²

Taixu had a several-decades-long friendship with the missionary Gilbert Reid. In the 1910s and the 1920s, Taixu was often invited to give lectures on Buddhist scriptures and modern forms of Buddhism at the International Institute of China (尚賢堂), which Reid ran. He once gave a lecture on “how to spread the dharma in the contemporary world” (Fofa ying ruhe puji jinshi 佛法應如何普及今世), which Reid translated into English and published in the *North-China Daily News* (字林西報). They even talked about the origin of the antireligion movement in Taixu’s lecture “The Worship of Love” (愛之崇拜) at the institute. Reid considered the movement a result of the failure to understand and embrace the concept of love. Taixu replied that love could also be the origin of war. He asserted that people should worship the great mercy evoked by enlightenment (the illumination that gives rise to bodhisattva-like or Christian compassion).⁴³

On their side, Christian missionaries made efforts to preach to Buddhists. The Norwegian missionary Karl Ludvig Reichelt regarded Taixu as one of his close friends and may have influenced the monk’s reform of the Buddhist faith. One scholar remarked that it was “with his dialogical approach” that Reichelt was able to get in contact with Buddhist communities all over China.⁴⁴ Reichelt even outlined a plan of action: “to establish a Christian Brotherhood among Chinese Buddhists for the purpose of leading the followers of Sakyamuni to understand that Jesus Christ is the greatest Savior of the world, who in His Person completes the deepest aims and ideals of Higher Buddhism.”⁴⁵ This eventually resulted in the establishment of the Christian Mission to Buddhists in China (中華基督教道友會). It started its work in Nanjing in the 1920s and turned its focus to Hong Kong in the 1930s. It then renamed itself the Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre (道風山) and continues its work to the present day.

Similar dialogues were carried out between Christians and members of the eclectic societies. The Ethical Society, a Shandong-based religious organization, often invited Christians to give lectures at its meetings. On one such occasion a staff member of the Arts and Theological School of the Shandong Christian University was

42 Ibid., 333-34.

43 Yinshun (1950) 1992, 104, 163, 229-30, 232.

44 Thelle 2016. This is more like a research proposal than an article but is nevertheless inspiring.

45 Hodous 1979, 31.

invited to discuss matters of common interest and was even permitted to witness the “planchette” (*fuqi* 扶箕) at work.⁴⁶ It has been observed as well that the Association for Advancing Goodness had Reichelt preach from the Christian scriptures to its members at their meetings.⁴⁷

There is also evidence of collaboration between Christians and members of other religions in social work. Studies of the YMCA in Fuzhou in the 1910s and of the East-West Collaborative Association for Compassion and Goodness (中西組合慈善會) in Chengdu in the 1920s and 1930s indicate that at least a few Buddhists joined the activities of Protestant charitable associations.⁴⁸ Hou Xuefang was the leader of the Ethical Society, but he also served the YMCA as an honorary secretary for some time.⁴⁹ Data on such collaborative efforts is limited at the present. Further discussion will be occur when more information is gathered.

Christianity as an Ethical Source for the Modern Chinese Nation

Another reason for Christianity’s acceptance among other religions in early twentieth-century China was that its ideas on morality and its social work could be used in the service of nation building, fitting the temper of the times. In other words, Christianity was appealing because it promoted a new morality that would be useful for transforming China into a modern nation-state. Chinese people were then living in a period when the old moral standards were under fierce criticism but a new standard had not yet come into being. People were in search of moral teachings that could satisfy the needs of a new China. The new moral principles would serve as the basis on which modern China would return to the rank of world powers. They also had to form a useful ideology that could mobilize the nation. As Ryan Dunch puts it, “In essence, patriotism at this time was seen as a moral duty, and the transformation of people into citizens, without which China could not become a strong, prosperous, and modern nation, was a problem of moral education.”⁵⁰

46 Drake 1923, 139. Planchette writing, also called fuluan 扶鸞 or jiangbi 降筆, is a Chinese method of spirit writing. Its operation requires one or two people to hold a stylet, of whom one uses it to create words or pictures on a prepared sand plate (the planchette), and another to provide explanations.

47 Twinem 1925a, 470.

48 Dunch 2001, 153; Tan 2003, 124-25.

49 Drake 1923, 141.

50 Dunch 2001, 121.

In this regard, Chinese people in the early twentieth century shared similar concerns, whether they were reformists of the late Qing period; leaders of Confucianism, Buddhism, or eclectic religious societies; modernized intellectuals; or Christian leaders. The reformist Liang Qichao in his influential essay “A Few Words Regarding the Renewal of the People” (Xinmin shuo 新民說) criticized the Chinese for lacking public virtue and likewise an interest in participating in national affairs. In other words, the Chinese had failed to create a civil society. Liang called for the renewal of the Chinese people and equated this to the rejuvenation of the nation.⁵¹ Similarly, during the May Fourth Movement, radical intellectuals vigorously attacked the Confucian program of “the three guidelines and the five constants” (sangang wuchang 三綱五常) and advocated that people “oppose the old morality and call for a new morality” (fandui jiu daode, tichang xin daode 反對舊道德, 提倡新道德). They welcomed Western-style individual freedom, science, democracy, and the emancipation of women. In the revival of China’s indigenous religions and eclectic societies, most religious groups concerned themselves exclusively with China’s indigenous religious tradition and ethical culture. Belief in the tao was common among the eclectic societies. The tao was “the moral order of the universe and living in conformity with it is for family, state or individual the perfect state-of-being.”⁵²

The effort to draw from China’s historical system of values and culture in the moral education of the people might be regarded as an effort to resist “full-scale Westernization” (全盤西化). But China’s historical values and culture were not the only options in pursuing moral prescriptions for fixing the nation’s ills. Western ideals and values, especially Christian morality, had also become viable sources from which people wanted to draw inspiration for the formation of a new morality. Chinese Protestants saw the moral elevation of the people as at the core of the church’s mission. They certainly took Christian ethics as the only way to save the Chinese from moral crisis. But the large non-Christian populace had also manifested its interest in Protestant Christianity. According to Dunch, several tens of thousands of people, many of them officials, attended the lectures that Sherwood Eddy gave during his evangelistic tour of Fujian in 1913 and 1914. These officials were eager for new moral standards. One of them told a missionary, “Confucianism alone cannot save China. We need the moral dynamic and principle of progress which Christianity can give.”⁵³

51 Ibid., 122.

52 Edwards 1926, 401.

53 Dunch 2001, 121.

These words were not just the articulation of a brief and singular sentiment; they represented a widespread phenomenon.

China's eclectic religious associations also drew on Christian ideas and concepts. In his study of these eclectic movements, Rawlinson found that few were interested in the millennial aspects of Christianity: "Their interest in Christianity centers in its ethico-spiritual aspects. Their chief response to Christianity is to the ethical significance of the personality of Christ, with here and there runts of a recognition of his divine status."⁵⁴ In the same way, Buddhists emphasized the ethical significance of the death of Jesus Christ. They equated the death of Jesus the man to Sakyamuni's giving up of his kingship and choice to disseminate the universal dharma instead; they even took Christ as an incarnation of the Buddha.⁵⁵ Chen Duxiu, a leading figure of the antireligion movement, expressed his admiration for the personality of Jesus Christ. He considered that the qualities and sentiments that "Jesus teaches us were the sublime spirit of sacrifice, the greatness of mercy, and the equalizing nature of fraternity. Jesus carried out these morals. These morals are the essence of Christianity, which are just what our land and our nationality, in danger, starve for."⁵⁶ Other leading intellectuals also showed their appreciation of Christianity's ethical aspects. Hu Shi esteemed Jesus's moral teachings as a social reformer and prophet. Christianity's spirit of humanitarianism likewise heavily influenced Zhou Zuoren's works.⁵⁷

Christianity did become a target of the antireligious fervor of the 1920s, but its most vigorous opponents represented only a small group of "modernized" intellectuals, who mainly criticized its contact with imperialism. Christian ethics, on the other hand, which Chinese intellectuals saw as the basis of Western culture, was what China's modern religious and ethical culture should consist of. For this reason, Christianity became a frame of reference or *sui generis* source for the moralism that Chinese religions sought to re-create. In some sense, it was through a comparison with Christianity that each religious group gained its reputation as a dynamic example of modern China's new moral society. Many eclectic societies adopted their doctrines directly from Christianity. Buddhists claimed that Buddhism had always contained the ideas of Christianity and was even better than it because Buddhism advocated "salvation by one's own efforts."⁵⁸ Their identification with Christian values was really a manifestation of their own historical identity.

54 Rawlinson 1927, 114.

55 Li 1996, 115.

56 Chen (1939) 1989, 420, 425-29.

57 Chen, Hu, and Zhou 1922, 3-4.

58 Millican 1923, 331.

What made followers of other Chinese religions adopt or at least concede the validity of certain aspects of Christian moralism was not belief in its intrinsic superiority. It was, rather, the efficiency with which Christians were able to implement this moralism through useful social programs that other Chinese religionists appreciated. Chinese people saw private-sector social programs as essential to the construction of a modern state. As one example, “the YMCA became very popular in Fuzhou between 1912 and 1922, and its popularity was largely due to the fact that, both socially and physically, the YMCA was unique among the public institutions of the city until the 1920s.”⁵⁹

Conclusion

Many Western missionaries who arrived in China in late imperial times were hired by the court or even became imperial teachers. The massive expansion of Christianity in China after the Western powers defeated the Qing Empire in the late nineteenth century seemingly saw a turn of missionaries from imperial teachers to agents of imperialism. Yet this is only partly true. As this article demonstrates, as early as the 1920s, when Christian churches came under the fire of antireligious intellectuals, the concurrent trend of a syncretic religious movement was geared toward accepting Christianity in the ranks of Chinese religion. This movement belongs to the Chinese tradition of religious syncretism and was enabled by the efforts of long-established Chinese religions to reinvent themselves in order to cope with the needs of a modern society. It considered Christianity a model of modern religion, though not necessarily superior to other religions. Various Chinese religious traditions drew inspiration from many aspects of the Christian Church, from institutions and structures to symbolism and evangelical techniques. They were also engaged in dialogue with Christians via participation in one another’s activities.

The acceptance of Christianity among other religions is an aspect of its localization in Chinese society as important as the movement to indigenize it (*bendihua* 本土化). It is only from the perspective of mutual acceptance – that is, the Sinicization of Christianity and the Christianization of Chinese religions – that we can fully understand Christianity as a Chinese religion.

59 Dunch 2001, 150. For the YMCA and its work in Fuzhou, see *ibid.*, ch. 5, “The YMCA and Public Life in Fuzhou,” 150-56. It must be pointed out that the YMCA is still a Protestant institution, though many of its members have not been church members.

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