

# CULTURAL CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA

BY KA LUN LEUNG

While the authorities continue to arrest and imprison priests and evangelists involved in China's unsanctioned churches, academics have become the social spokesmen for a faith they do not personally profess. Ka Lun Leung describes the social background of this phenomenon.

In the mid-1990s, a debate arose in Hong Kong's religious circles over "Cultural Christians." The debate focused on whether or not this mainland group of so-called or self-proclaimed "Cultural Christians" were authentic Christians, and over the difference between the Christianity they expounded and the Christianity handed down through history.

What are "Cultural Christians?" What kind of social phenomenon does their existence reflect, and what does it indicate about Christianity's future development in China?

Before drawing any conclusions about "Cultural Christians," we need to examine the origins and development of the phenomenon.

## **The development of Christianity**

"Cultural Christians" as a social phenomenon first appeared during the 1980s, a golden age of growth for Christianity in China during which the number of followers exploded to more than ten million within a decade. The impetus was the end of the Cultural Revolution, when the Chinese Communist government implemented its Open Door policy, allowing Christians and three other religions to once again spread their teachings to a limited extent, and allowing the reopening of churches that had been closed for more than ten years. Many people disappointed with social conditions turned to religious faith, and many young people were drawn to churches out of curiosity and worship of the West. Urban churches were unable to accommodate the masses of worshippers.

As for rural areas, the development of Christianity was even more astonishing. One of the reasons was that traditional Chinese religions were still banned under the government's policy of "overthrowing feudal superstition," but peasants had



**Worshippers at a state-sanctioned Catholic church in Beijing.**  
Photo: Reuters.

strong religious needs, and Christianity was one of the options legally available to them. Throughout the 1980s and up to the mid-90s, Christianity took over the role of folk religion in the rural areas, which means that it also developed in a way similar to folk religion. Christianity's spread in rural areas exceeded that in urban areas, with rural Christians constituting up to 80 percent of the total Christian population in China.

## **Interest in Christian culture**

During this same period some intellectuals also became interested in Christianity. They were people who cared about social and cultural development, and hoped through a comparison of Chinese and Western culture to determine the reasons for China's backward development and explore possible directions for the future. The questions they raised included: Why did the feudal period last so long in China? Why did cruel and anti-intellectual movements such as the Cultural Revolution occur in China? This concern for global cultural trends and comparisons between East and West became common in intellectual circles, to the point of becoming a new intellectual movement referred to as "cultural fever."

Because these intellectuals possessed only a basic understanding of Western culture, they reductively referred to Chinese culture as Confucian culture, and to Western culture as Christian culture. They saw China's feudal backwardness originating in Confucianism, and the West's openness and affluence as attributable to Christianity. In their view, Christianity was the spiritual pillar of Western civilization and the progenitor of the democracy, science, human rights and rule of law so coveted by Chinese people. One intellectual, Liu Xiaobo, believed that Chinese people's lack of a transcendent God made them unable to prevent someone setting himself up as a god.

The interest these intellectuals developed toward Christianity stemmed from their concerns about China's cultural development. For that reason, they based their understanding on Christianity as the root of Western culture, and were less interested in the religious aspects. They were pragmatists who asked the question, "Can Christianity be of any use to China?" They focused on Christian culture rather than on pure Christianity, and saw Christianity as the essence and embodiment of Western culture. Eventually discussion of Christianity became a new intellectual cultural trend referred to as "Christian fever."

#### **Scholarly research on Christianity**

At the end of the 1980s, the scholarly community's interest in Christianity began to increase markedly, and a growing number of scholars joined in on the discourse over Christianity. But their main concern was not on the cultural side (the future direction of Chinese culture), but rather arose from scholarly needs and interest. During this period the traditional topics covered in university philosophy and history departments, such as Marxist research, had lost much of their market value. On the other hand religion, having long been banned, was a vast, uncharted territory, and research on Christianity had particular market value. Because Christians in the West (including Taiwan and Hong Kong) exhibited tremendous interest in the revival of Christian studies in China, they were willing to provide enormous financial aid; universities and theological seminaries in Europe and North America offered free resources and research subsidies, took the initiative to cooperate with mainland research centers in developing research plans, and gave Chinese researchers opportunities to travel overseas, among other advantages. In the 1990s the number of universities and research organizations opening religious studies courses and religious research centers, and even stand-alone Christian research centers, multiplied to more than thirty.

These academic religious researchers were clearly different from the intellectuals who embraced Christianity in the 1980s out of a concern for the future of Chinese culture. They might still have a significant degree of concern for culture, and hope through their research to help establish Chinese society's spiritual civilization, but it was quite clear that this concern was not the primary goal of their research into Christianity. In fact, they tended to carry out fragmentary rather than comprehensive research on Christianity and routinely neglected its historical and practical aspects, focusing instead on its philosophical and theological aspects. In addition, the content of their dis-

cussions was for the most part bound by Western theological thought, with little study of local conditions and even less grasp of local topics. They claimed no aspiration for proposing comprehensive answers for Chinese society and culture. Because of these differences, most of these academic researchers regarded Christian studies as a profession and a job. In their work at universities or research institutes, purely conceptual research was safer than on-the-ground research; and research of the West was safer than research of local conditions, with less risk of blundering into a political no-man's-land.

Here we have examined two kinds of people: the first is the intellectual who studies Christianity out of a concern for Chinese society and culture, and the second is the scholar who carries out pure research of Western religion as a profession. There was considerable overlap between these two kinds of people in the early stages, but they became more clearly differentiated over time, and at present there are many more people of the second type than of the first type.

The turning of academics toward religious studies did not escape political pressure at the beginning; but due to the major drive toward open reforms, from the 1990s academics were given increasingly greater room for movement, and whether in terms of exchanges with overseas academics, or in writing and publication within China, their ambit was not greatly limited. During this period bookstores carried more and more books relating to religion, both philosophical and for general readers, and most were the products of academics engaged in religious studies. Since the government's controls of religious believers remained relatively strict, books published by Christian organizations could not be bought in ordinary book stores, and religious believers were not allowed to introduce their beliefs in public places (whether in public forums or in newspapers or the broadcast media), but academics faced no such bans and controls; for that reason academics increasingly assumed the public role of religious spokespersons. In other words, apart from going to church, the public's knowledge of Christianity could only be obtained through the words and pens of these scholars.

#### **Underground Christian converts**

We cannot neglect mentioning a third kind of person: that is those people who through their contact and study of Christian teachings have gradually developed an interest in Christianity and have even converted to the faith. Whether we talk about intellectuals concerned about culture, or academics engaged in pure research, both kinds include people who have become genuine Christians. In some cases faith came about as a result of personal feelings and convictions, and in other cases it was influenced by contact with overseas Christians, especially among scholars on overseas study or exchange programs who had an opportunity to take part in church activities.

Under China's current political circumstances, these scholars cannot easily openly identify themselves as believers. First of all, if many were good students in their youth, they might have been accepted as members of the Communist Party, and Party members are not allowed to have religious beliefs.

Secondly, as believers it would be difficult for them to continue their research and study of Christianity at the university or research institute, because in the view of the government only atheists can teach religion without bias; as a person with religious faith would automatically be regarded as biased, he would probably lose his position. Thirdly, the mass of China's Christians still come from the grass roots levels, and include disproportionate numbers of women, elderly and illiterates, and doctrinal standards in churches are generally poor; many intellectuals are not willing to join such a church, and maintain their distance out of embarrassment at being associated with such people.

A minority of intellectual Christians conduct their own small fellowship and study groups, but the majority simply cultivate their faith privately, avoid participating in any church-related social organizations, and are not willing to lose their social position for the sake of their beliefs.

pose of the faith is to acquire an ontological identity, at most to improve one's character, and has no relation to one's cultural or social role or work. This relegation of religious faith to the purely private sphere is in fact a throwback to the attitude of traditional Chinese scholars toward religion - those who moved from Confucianism into Daoism, and in the public sphere performed their Confucian role, while only in their private life practicing Daoism.

The interesting thing is that in spite of the title of "Cultural Christian," these believers actually in a sense go against both culture and society; that is to say, they suppress their religious beliefs into a purely personal and internal concern, with no relation to their public life. Religious faith becomes nothing more than a set of life views and values, and creates no conflict with mainstream political ideology. This writer knows quite a few of these Christians; they are not willing to openly admit their beliefs to others, nor do they withdraw from the Party.



Worshippers at an unidentified housechurch. Source: [www.chinahousechurch.org](http://www.chinahousechurch.org).

### What is a "Cultural Christian"?

With the above historical background, it is easier to determine what a "Cultural Christian" actually is.

First of all, a Cultural Christian mainly refers to someone who has accepted Christian beliefs, but who for a number of practical reasons is unwilling to join a church, and who feels uncomfortable among self-organized Christian groups. In order to rationalize their religious choice, and in order to maintain distance from ordinary Christians, such people refer to themselves as "Cultural Christians," as opposed to "Church Christians."

These Cultural Christians take their genuine religious faith and make it entirely a matter of personal conscience, with no relationship to their public life and activities. The main pur-

They continue to maintain their positions and every kind of political advantage, and they say, "After I retire I'll start going to church."

Secondly, there are some scholars who focus on Christianity as a research topic who refer to themselves as "Cultural Christians." They do not have a concealed Christian faith, but they consider themselves "associates" of Christianity because of their interest in the philosophy and theology of Christianity and acceptance of a certain amount of Christian thought, such as the worldview and teachings of Jesus. Why do they consider themselves "associates"? What benefit do they derive from it? The main reason is that they can present themselves publicly as spokespersons for Christianity.

As noted before, because of political prejudice, and because of the relatively low intellectual standards of the average Christian pastor and believer, in public life church members have few avenues of expression, and as a result the views of society at large regarding Christianity are formed by these scholars. It is quite a rare phenomenon for a person who is not a church member or believer to become a spokesperson for Christianity. Quite a few overseas Christians have expressed puzzlement over why such people have become representatives of Christianity, and the reply they receive is that these also are "Christians," but "Christians from the educated class" as opposed to traditional "Church Christians." These scholars see the difference between the two in that the former do not have to accept the historical Christianity expounded by the West, and can accept the portions of Christian philosophy that are appropriate. They proclaim nationalism and stress that Chinese have the right to define Christianity for themselves without referring to what has come down through Western history.

These "Christians" for the most part reject Christianity's supernatural content and see Christianity as only a social phenomenon. Their designation of themselves as "Cultural Christians" arises from their equating Christianity with Christian culture.

In summation, the first and second type of "Cultural Christian" are differentiated from each other in that the first assiduously privatizes his faith and removes religion's cultural and social relevance, while the second shrinks religion into nothing more than a social or cultural phenomenon and rejects its supernatural aspects.

This writer is a traditional Christian believer, and cannot accept that researchers of Christianity who are not believers have the right to represent Christianity.

### **"Cultural Christians" and the future of Christianity in China**

The appearance of "Cultural Christians," in the form of either the first or the second type, reflects the circumstance of Christianity in modern China.

The first type of Cultural Christian is composed of people who do not dare to openly proclaim their religious faith. They take Christianity's original character as a positive religion and shrink it into a mystical religion in order to prevent their faith from coming into direct conflict with their public life and affecting their work or their political privileges. From this we can see that Christianity is still subject to considerable discrimination in China, and that what Christians face today is not so much direct persecution but rather open and subtle prejudice in many forms. Although China's constitution guarantees the political and social rights of religious believers, because China is ruled by a single party, and Christians are not allowed to join that party, they are bound to face discrimination in various spheres (including academia), for example hitting a glass ceiling in promotions. A person who openly proclaims his faith will pay social costs in many respects.

China's constitution prohibits the involvement of religion in politics and education, and in practical terms religion has been eradicated from all spheres of public life, not just politics and education. Apart from expressing their support for gov-

ernment policies, religious believers cannot use religious criteria to criticize the government's policies. For example, Christians cannot voice opposition to the official one-child policy or the practice of forced abortions. China's Christians have no voice in social ethics.

The second type of Cultural Christian does not belong to a church but acts as a spokesperson for the church. In China it is overwhelmingly the case that Christians are not allowed to speak or act for themselves. In fact, the government appoints non-Christians to every level of the hierarchy of the official Three Self Church, especially posts that hold real power such as secretary general. Likewise it is widely known that deputy provosts of theological seminaries are non-Christians. Under these circumstances, in which Christians are not allowed to express their views in public life, it is not surprising that academics who study Christianity take up the role of spokespersons.

In a country with atheism as one of its founding principles, religion will be marginalized as a matter of course. Consequently, religion for the most part is only able to attract people who are already marginalized, such as peasants. Since believers are unable to participate significantly in society, it is difficult for them to develop any influence in culture and society.

For a very long time nationalism has served as a source of spiritual strength to Chinese in opposing Western imperialism and colonialism. But today nationalism has become the main force within China for fighting off outside interference in the government's continued unreasonable suppression of marginalized groups. Nationalism is no longer a tool for staving off foreign hegemony, but for rationalizing internal hegemony. We can see today that the official Three Self Church uses nationalism to prevent foreign intervention in its persecution of dissident voices. Likewise scholars use nationalism as a reason to ignore the existence of tens of millions of Chinese Christians and claim the right to declare a Chinese version of Christianity. In this way nationalism has become a tool of suppression for the powerful against the powerless.

Translated by Stacy Mosher