

Christianity and the Taiwanese religious landscape

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CHRISTIANS IN TAIWAN ACCOUNT FOR LESS than 5 per cent of the population. The same is true of Mainland China. However, in Taiwan as in the Mainland, the cultural influence of Christianity goes far beyond the limits of the institutional churches. The appeal of Christian values and concepts goes with westernization, and this also explains the difficulties encountered when trying to inculcate the Gospel. Liturgy, theological thinking and spiritual methods still directly derive from the western mould. Christianity as a whole somehow contributes to shape modern Chinese culture, but Chinese culture is still hardly relevant for defining the specificity and the future of the Chinese Christian churches.

However, some Christians are now conscious that their faith will become a living reality in today's China only if Christian communities interact with other cultural and religious communities, learning to appreciate their experience and concerns while sharing with them what makes the core of their life. For Christianity, increased exchanges are the road towards spiritual renewal as well as towards social relevance. In the Chinese world, the tiny numbers make the Christians always at risk of becoming mere marginals. When they dare to situate their faith within the wealth of spiritual experiences encountered in the Chinese context, these 'marginals' may indeed fulfil a prophetic mission.

What is the religious landscape in which Chinese Christians have first to situate themselves? I intend to concentrate here on religions in Taiwan today. Although the political and social situation in Taiwan is altogether very different from the one encountered in Mainland China, both countries' religious contexts present more similarities than seems to be the case at first glance. In many respects, Taiwan is a kind of laboratory in which Chinese religions freely adapt to contemporary realities. Looking at religions in Taiwan today is a way to understand, on the one hand, what the Mainland China religious landscape as a whole might look like later on; and, on the other hand, the kind of challenges that Christianity has to deal with in this part of the world. I intend to describe the 'objective realities' of the Taiwanese religious

landscape. The contact with such realities shapes the consciousness of the Chinese Christian often in a deeper way than they themselves realize. Besides, these realities largely define an agenda for a deeper inculturation of the faith, and it is just such an agenda that I will try to spell out in conclusion.

Taiwan's religious landscape

In the Chinese context, determining the boundaries of religious affiliations is always a risky process and, to a certain extent, a meaningless one. The concept of 'diffused religion' is widely used when observers seek to describe the unique intertwining of social and religious rites, as well as the intermingling of different religious traditions and practices that has taken place throughout Chinese history. Studies have shown that nearly half of the people of Taiwan define themselves as Buddhists when they are asked about their religious affiliation. However, some surveys that include more detailed questions about observance of Buddhist beliefs and practices have indicated that only 7 to 15 per cent of Taiwanese are Buddhist believers *stricto sensu*, the lower figure of this estimate being probably more accurate. It is generally estimated that folk religion constitutes the religious system of at least 65 per cent of the population. It should be stressed that the beliefs held by followers of new religious movements are not easily distinguished from those pervading folk religion. The 'folk-religion' label applies to believers belonging to the traditional social and ritual network as well as members of small-scale organizations with a strong sense of identity.

Taoism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Baha'i faith, Tenrikyo, Li-ism, Tiandejiao, Yiguandao, Xuanyuanjiao and Tiandijiao are the twelve 'religions' officially recognized as such by the government. However, recently some 'churches' and new religious movements have also been 'recognized' in one way or another by the government. Their official status is often ambiguous. Such is the case of the Unification Church, which the government has accepted as a Protestant organization, despite the protests of most churches.

A 1996 report of the Interior Ministry offers very accurate information. The faithful registering with the various Buddhist associations totals 4.8 million people. The number of temples affiliated under the Taoist association's banner, and home for most folk religious practices, amounts to 8,292, with registered persons numbering 3.8 million. Among the recognized new religions, Yiguandao (see p 133) claims a

membership of 942,000 persons. It is followed by Tiandejiao (200,000 followers) and Tiandijiao (roughly the same figure). Tiandejiao was founded in the Mainland in 1923 and legalized as a religion in Taiwan in 1989. Tiandijiao, founded by Li Yu-chieh in 1980, may be the fastest growing new religion in Taiwan. According to the same report, Catholic membership is 304,000 and the membership of the various Protestant denominations is 402,000. The Catholic Church and the main Protestant denominations have remained at a standstill in growth, or may even have experienced a slight decline, over the last twenty-five years. The above-mentioned figures cover only the religious movements legally recognized, and thus partly ignore the flourishing of movements and masters outside these official associations.

Religious consumerism in Taiwan

Creeds, religious practices and spiritual methods are also 'goods' to be bought and consumed and, in Taiwan, this consumption occurs within a very competitive market. Such a way of looking at religion and spirituality might sound shocking, but it well describes the context within which Chinese Christians access their faith, attempt to spread it and understand their specificity vis-à-vis other religious groupings. A look at religious consumerism in Taiwan today might help us to get a more down-to-earth view of the spiritual quest in the Chinese world.

Roughly speaking, it can be estimated that Taiwan had around 4,000 temples in 1960 and has well over 15,000 today. The accumulation of wealth has made places of worship bigger and even more richly adorned. The building of temples and their ornamentation now represents huge business. Generally speaking, the amount of money going into religious activities, as well as the appropriateness (or otherwise) of its use gives rise to a growing concern. Some religious leaders, such as the respected Master Cheng-yan, have openly expressed their fear that this may generate a moral and cultural crisis within the various religious communities.

Everything, it seems, induces Taiwanese people to invest more and more in religious practices, goods and proselytizing activities. Religious affiliation is about networking, starting from the level of neighbourhood. Preserving one's 'face', securing moral leadership or asserting the strength and position of a community are all factors that encourage one to invest in temple construction, ornamentation or ceremonies. The religious 'supply' in Taiwan is extremely competitive: after 1947, many religious leaders took refuge in the island (Buddhist

masters, Catholic missionaries), starting a process that has utterly changed Taiwan's religious landscape. Hence the desire of many believers to strengthen the visibility of their own community of faith. This also accounts for the intense competition between rival Buddhist organizations. Recently, this quest for visibility has prompted investment in the media. For instance, the Buddhist Compassion Tzu Chi Association has started the 'Da Ai' TV channel, and Catholic lay people have created a support group for financing religious programmes.

In time of economic boom, especially at the beginning of the 1990s, religious 'investment' was often seen as a way to enhance one's opportunities in life, to take one's share of profits generated by the stock market, the lottery or land speculation. Now that Taiwan has entered sober times, the trend seemingly continues but the stress is not so much on 'opportunities' as on 'security'.

Recently, the astonishing growth and multiplication of Tibetan Buddhist groups have drawn concern and sometimes criticisms from other denominations. Most of the criticisms may be biased. However, they make a common point. They all relate the growth of Tibetan Buddhist practices to the consumerist attitude of Taiwanese people towards religious phenomena. The 'religious goods' offered in this case are: esoteric knowledge supposedly deeper than that possessed by other Buddhist schools, practices leading to enlightenment and salvation that can be learned in a quick and safe way and, finally, religious exoticism. In fact, one can overhear Tibetan masters expressing the same kind of concern.

New religions and millenarianism

In Taiwan, small-scale religious movements presently emphasize individual spiritual needs and provide psychological support which can sometimes supplement that offered by the village community, especially when it comes to movements aiming at simple people. Such is the case for the 'Church of Compassion', Cihuitang, which is very much an association of local chapters. They may offer a religious world-view tainted with millenarianism, but in fact their impact on millenarian thought in Taiwan remains limited. Likewise, it would be interesting to know exactly how many new religions are of Japanese origin, and, of those that are, if they display clearer apocalyptic features. But the small scale and secrecy of such organizations make any evaluation problematic. Experts believe that 'at least twenty religious

movements' come from Japan, though they are not specific about which ones. Actually, considering how close links generally are between Japan and Taiwan, it seems that the impact of the Japanese 'doomsday cults' has been rather limited. I prefer here to focus on two 'new religions' that give us an interesting glimpse of the way traditional Chinese religions adapt to changing social circumstances.

Yiguandao or 'Unity Sect' shows certain affinities with the White Lotus Society (Bailianjiao), although this assertion has been recently challenged by the organization itself. The history of its foundation is obscure. It was active on the Mainland during the 1920s and 1930s and banned by the Communist regime in 1949 as a result of accusations of collusion with the Nanjing puppet government. Some of its leaders began arriving in Taiwan in 1945. Internal rivalries within the organization, its tradition of secrecy, and the constraints imposed by political prohibitions divided the movement into a large number of small associations, organized around family altars. The proselytic character of the religion, whose main target now seems to be overseas Chinese communities, is certainly a sign of its initial millennial focus, as the increase in numbers of faithful and places of worship is seen as the means for bringing *xitian*, the 'Western Paradise', to earth. Yiguandao, therefore, is partially of millennial origin and has a tradition of secrecy which has influenced its earlier development in Taiwan. However, its success has coincided with the social promotion of the kind of people it was aiming to proselytize, such as (for example) native Taiwanese who are small entrepreneurs, and who are able to bring their employees into the church. This has made the religion something of a success story and, on the whole, a firm supporter of Li Teng-hui's government.

Li Yu-chieh (1901–1994), the founder of Tiandijiao, has related his original spiritual experience to the Sino-Japanese war, when, secluded in Mount Hua, he received a message from Tiandi, 'the Lord on High', a message which was at the same time about personal enlightenment and collective salvation in these times of hardship for the Chinese nation. Tiandijiao became an established religion only in 1980, after a split with Tiandejiao. The teachings of the religion stress the necessity for its followers to pray and strive night and day in order to delay or avert a global nuclear holocaust, to maintain world peace and to safeguard Taiwan as a base for the peaceful unification of China under the Three Peoples' Principles. The prayer of the Tiandijiao's evening worship states:

May the tide of fate be turned and imminent cataclysm be averted in the non-physical realm. May there be faith without confusion, to clear away the miasma of brutal power, bring rescue to the vulnerable beings under heaven, dispel the threat of nuclear holocaust and let this great earth be reborn!

In the beginning, this stress on the nuclear threat reinforced the millennial outlook of the teachings of the movement. Recently, however, personal healing has been emphasized more than collective issues. As is the case for so many new religions, there is a strong belief in the healing powers of Qi (i.e. cosmic energy) and a cultivation of these powers. It may be the case, however, that the tension arising between Taiwan and Mainland China (where Tiandijiao is very active and has obviously high-level contacts) might lead the movement to emphasize its specific message on millenarian matters.

The millennial movement has always been in some way linked to the struggle conducted by Taiwanese people to assert their own identity, and is also connected to the fear that the Taiwanese autonomy and specific character might eventually disappear. The vegetarian cults uniting villages and guilds outside the religious cults promoted by the rulers, the devotion surrounding the god of war, Guandi, when Japanese were trying to assert their authority, and the spreading out of Yiguandao religion in the south of Taiwan in the first period of the Kuomintang regime are all examples of this permanent trend.

Although some fundamentalist Christian movements are active in Taiwan, their audience remains a very limited one. Millennial phenomena observable in Taiwan presently relate much more to classic Chinese millenarianism than to any Christian influence. Taoist overtones are especially obvious. Taiwanese people spontaneously draw a link between any crisis of cosmic nature, such as an earthquake, and the accumulation of social evil or the general disorder of the society. The world is viewed as a global equilibrium, and a dysfunction in some part of the system automatically affects the other parts. Too strong a disequilibrium might bring irreversible damage. The renowned Taoist scholar Li Fung-mao has recently written several papers about Taoist eschatology, stressing its importance in today's context and the role played by Taoist liturgy for putting in order social mechanisms. He believes that the Taoist tradition can provide Taiwanese with an eschatology that allows them to cope better with the tensions provoked by their present situation and to reduce the impact of internal and external conflicts.

The meaning of monasticism

Chinese religions, in their traditional or contemporary garb, are not the only partners with which Christianity has to relate in today's Taiwan. I now want to draw special attention to the growth of the various Buddhist movements, which is the most notable phenomenon in the Taiwanese religious landscape during the last fifteen years or so. I also want to go beyond a purely 'external' or 'objective' view of Taiwanese religion and, somehow, pay respect to the spiritual quest that is also at the root of Taiwan's religious vitality.

Before speaking specifically about the significance of Buddhist monasticism today, a word has to be said about Buddhism in Taiwan as a whole. Originally, Buddhism in Taiwan was divided between institutional sects imported by the ruling class from the Mainland and various forms of lay Buddhism. The Japanese occupation promoted orthodox Buddhist sects and a 'beyond this world' attitude. After 1947, the influx of monks who had left the Mainland was the cause of a vigorous power struggle. One has here to note the influence of the disciples of Tai Xu (1890–1947), a monk who, during the 1930s, had advocated an *aggiornamento* of Buddhist doctrines and institutions. In Taiwan, Yin-shun is the main promoter of this current, and gives it solid intellectual and spiritual foundations. A reaction followed the creation of the official Buddhist association in 1952 and, in 1954, the writings of Yin-shun were severely criticized. The KMT-controlled associations were content with maintaining the status quo, almost unchallenged, until the beginning of the 1980s. However, around this time several masters started attracting the public attention. Such is the case of Hsing-yun, founder of the monastic and cultural centre of Fokuangshan, Cheng-yan, a leading intellectual and spiritual figure, or Ch'eng-yan who promotes the idea of a socially engaged Buddhism. The Tzu-chi Association that she created in 1966 has today four million members committed to the development of social, medical, educational and cultural projects. In less than ten years, four Buddhist universities have been founded in Taiwan and a fifth one will open its doors in the year 2000.

One striking feature is the success encountered by Chan sessions. Each year, thousands of persons follow one of the many three-day or seven-day spiritual retreats directed by Chan masters. Student Buddhist associations are especially active in promoting such activities. This is certainly the main channel for nurturing vocations. Indeed, in the secularized and consumerist climate of Taiwan, more than one thou-

sand young people per year are ordained. In 1998, as in 1997, the figure is reportedly about 1,200. In size, the biggest organizations are Fokuangshan and Ch'ung-tai shan. Their two main monasteries have more than one thousand nuns and monks each, while all the other monasteries are home for 400 monks and nuns at most (often far fewer than this). In general, monks and nuns receiving ordination do this within a few months of their entering the monastery. To some observers, especially if they are used to the slow process of entering religious life now followed in the Catholic Church, this seems to be rather hasty. However, until now, most ordained monks do stay in the monastic condition. Monks who are not yet twenty years old need a written approval from their parents. This is also the case for monks who are married and thus entering a new way of life – they also need written approval from their legal spouse.

In 1998, three ordination ceremonies occurred in Taiwan, all in December. Such ceremonies last about one month, with three ordaining monks officiating together. For a long period of time, there was only one ordaining ceremony in Taiwan each year, this under the influence of the respected Master Pai-sheng. The fact that there are again several ceremonies might be due to the growing number of monks, but it can also indicate a renewed fragmentation of Taiwanese Buddhism. Will the accession to notoriety of what Venerable Hui-kong calls 'the third generation of Taiwanese Buddhist leaders' accentuate this fragmentation or lead to a more unified outlook of Buddhism in the island? This third generation, gathering young Masters all born after 1950, has known the democratization process, and economic development, and has a strong international perspective. It has firm educational links with Japan and the US, and dreams of making Taiwan the leading force for Buddhist development in America, Africa and Europe. Noteworthy is its involvement in Mainland China, even though this generation stresses its Taiwanese identity; Taiwan has a leading role to play when it comes to Buddhist education and reform in China. The more plausible scenario is that each school and its monasteries will retain its autonomy while developing exchanges with others. This may result in periodic friction between traditions differing very much in focus, such as Pure Land and Tibetan Buddhism.

It is especially worth noting that 75 to 80 per cent of those choosing monastic life are women. It is actually quite plausible that women feel that they can develop their creativity and potential as nuns more than marriage (with the burden of extended family obligations) would allow them to do. And they are indeed at the root of most of the charitable or

cultural initiatives undertaken by Buddhist monasteries. The development of Buddhist feminine monastic life in Taiwan is a fascinating topic that requires an in-depth study. In February 1998, the Fokuangshan monastery organized an ordination ceremony in India to re-establish the ordination lineage for nuns in such countries as India, Sri Lanka and Nepal. On this occasion, Ven. Yi-fa presented the Fokuangshan nuns' order as an example for the promotion of Asian women as a whole:

Over half of the nuns at Fokuangshan have received university or higher education. About three-fifths of the nuns are between 20 and 40 years of age. Therefore this monastic Order is a young and energetic one – which makes it very attractive to young lay women. Another aspect of our monastic life that appeals to young Asian women is its objective fairness. In this system, all monastic, monks and nuns are given equal opportunities. This system is operated by a collective leadership assembly of monks and nuns known as the Religious Affairs Committee. The chairperson of this committee can be male or female, and is elected by secret ballot.

Monasteries are not only centres of monastic activity, they remain the backbone institution of Buddhism. The prestige of a master and his or her social influence are expressed through the size, reputation and range of activities that his or her monastery is able to convey. Although lay associations play their role in Buddhist expansion, they rely heavily on a master and a community of disciples organized as a monastic community.

In this respect, monasteries can be studied as key elements in the framing of the Taiwanese social and cultural landscape. They answer 'consumerist' needs listed below as they offer ritual practices, religious goods and affiliation networks, and they do so in a way that is much less linked to 'localism' than is the case with popular religion. The monastery also works as a haven of quietness and certainty that may dispel social and individual anxiety, the more so because of the imposing figure of the Master at its centre. At the same time, religious life always works as a protest (be it verbally expressed or not) against the dominant social model. The austerity of many monasteries in Taiwan as well as the time devoted to meditation and charitable pursuits indeed transcends and challenges Taiwan's consumerism and social restlessness. Different schools express this challenge in different ways (Pure Land Buddhism and Chan tradition do not interfere in the same way with the

secular world), but they all channel their answer through the monastic matrix. The fact that Taiwan claims the greatest number of Buddhist nuns in the world cannot but lead one to wonder what are the underlying trends working in contemporary Taiwan's culture and society.

The mission of Christianity in today's China

I have not presented the relationship between Christianity and other religions in Taiwan in terms of direct spiritual encounter because such encounters actually occur rarely, and only on an individual basis. That communities of believers almost never interact and associate for common goals is one of the sad realities of inter-religious co-operation today. However, this rather objectifying presentation of the 'religious market' in Taiwan teaches us in its own fashion a few interesting things about what the Christian agenda in Taiwan and China might look like.

Chinese Christians live in a world where, traditionally, religious belonging is lived and interpreted in a rather fluid way with affiliations connected along a continuum rather than being strictly separated. In this context, Christians must at the same time stress the specificity of their own belief system and do justice to the flexibility and relativity of organizational belonging.

There is in the Chinese world an underlying but potent concern for eschatology. Christians have to articulate an eschatological perspective that fully develops the cosmic vision enriched by the various Chinese traditions throughout the ages. Theology of creation and eschatology have certainly to be developed as a whole, using a vocabulary and an imagery proper to the Chinese tradition while relying on the cosmic eschatology found in the Letter to the Ephesians, for instance.

Taiwanese and Chinese people feel the need for prayer and meditation, and this within a community framework. They see Buddhism as fulfilling this dimension and rarely credit Christianity with having developed a rich spiritual tradition. In their view, Christianity has a system of beliefs, welfare institutions, a kind of 'religious efficiency' proper to the western world-view, but has little to offer when it comes to interior life. In that respect, the building up of an inculturated spirituality might be the greatest challenge encountered by Chinese Christians.

Finally, as I have just stressed, spiritual practice is strongly linked to a community model (the Buddhist monastery) which also works as a social innovative institution. In this respect, Christian communities have to strive in order to propose new ways of living together that will

have a true social impact. My own interpretation of such a challenge is to say that Chinese Christians are confronted with the task of building 'communities of peacemakers', giving relevance to the Beatitude on peacemakers within their own social, religious and cultural context. 'Peace' is an all-important concern in a Chinese world that remains politically divided. Peace is also an eschatological concept, goes with community-building, and is strongly linked to the enrichment of inter-religious dialogue. The challenge for Chinese Christians is indeed to become prophetic, not just marginal, and this requires a 'spirituality of peacemakers' that takes into account their own inheritance, social realities and religious diversity. The task seems disproportionate to the means, but Christians after all have a story in which they can find some comfort:

'A man throws seed on the land. Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing, how, he does not know. Of its own accord the land produces first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the crop is ready, he loses no time: he starts to reap because the harvest has come.'
(Mk 4, 26-29)

And this is just the kind of story that a Chinese sage can also recall to their mind whenever they feel discouraged.

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