

A Christian Looks at Chinese Religion

Historians of Chinese church history find resistance to Christianity among Chinese people. The main source of conflict is the difference between Chinese culture and Christian beliefs. Chinese culture has no faith, no religious spirit. We know that faith is the central value of a culture, and is also the value system of the culture. Faith is the foundation of a culture. This foundation is the purpose and meaning of human life. “Because I live, therefore I live” – this is an animal’s state of existence. As human beings, we should know the meaning of life. Faith gives meaning to a person’s life, therefore faith is very important. This is why Jesus stated this as the greatest commandment: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment” (Matthew 22:37-38). That is, Jesus clearly proclaimed to the world that the most important thing is faith, that faith is the relationship we with God. Chinese philosophy does not reach that deep level of relating to God; in fact, Chinese culture has no faith.

But some Chinese will say, “In China we have Taoism!” Yes, Taoism has the label “Made in China,” but Daoism was not “naturally born” in China. Daoism came about as a reaction to Buddhism, a foreign religion that came to China from India. Daoism is like the malformed child of the collision between Chinese culture and foreign culture.

More than 140 years after Buddhism came to China during the Eastern Han Dynasty (AD 25-220), Zhang Daoling (张道陵) established Daoism. Daoism is a man-made religion with no original doctrine. Daoism began by looking to Confucianism for support, but Confucianism rejected it. The *Analects* of Confucius says: “Confucius is not concerned about the spiritual world” (子不语怪力神乱). Therefore Zhang Daoling had no alternative but to look to the philosophy of Laozi (老子) and Zhuangzi (庄子) for support.¹ Thus, Daoism gave Laozi the title “Supreme Sage,” and called Zhuangzi the “Sage of Southern China.” It also took the mythological Jade Emperor and his wife Empress Liangliang as its gods. Because Daoism has borrowed everything, it is a complete mixture of beliefs. The Eight Immortals of Daoism were taken from legends of historical people of various dynasties of China. Unlike other religions, Daoism has no concept of the afterlife; it is merely a pragmatistic culture without faith, and only focuses on materialism in this life. Take these Daoist Chinese idioms for example: “feel rejuvenated” (鹤发童颜), “achieve immortality” (长生不老). Also, Daoism does not have the goal of inner spiritual peace, but its practice consists of alchemy, traditional medicine, and even sex with virgins. In fact, Daoism is a native Chinese religion, but never had a standard teaching. Therefore it is clearly a counterfeit product, with no resemblance to true religion.

When Buddhism came to China, a land of no religious belief, it underwent a long process of rejection and adaptation – like a transplanted organ overcoming rejection by the body’s immune system. This process lasted from the early Eastern Han Dynasty (AD 25-220) to the Song Dynasty (AD 960-1279), a period of about one thousand years. From this we can see the extremely strong resistance of the Chinese culture against Buddhism. As a result of this thousand-year process of rejection and adaptation, Buddhism was gradually integrated with the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi, and finally became a Chinese-characteristic dialectical

¹ cf. *The History of China* by Fan Wennan.

religion: Chan (禪) Buddhism.² After that, Chan Buddhism came to live in harmony with Chinese culture. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*,³ we find this quotation: “A Buddhist monk and a Daoist monk can walk together side by side as good friends” (一僧一道，茫茫大士，渺渺真人，并肩而行，成伙伴了). At this time, Buddhism became transformed to a Chinese contextualized religion and lost its original characteristics. Chan Buddhism, frankly speaking, is “Buddhism with Chinese characteristics.” Chan Buddhism is an adaptation of Buddhism to Chinese tastes, just like a Chinese restaurant in America adapts Chinese cuisine to Western tastes.

Do Chinese people really believe in the Jade Emperor? Do Chinese people really believe in Guanyin Buddha? From outward appearances, Chinese people sincerely believe Buddhism. In many places, there are a lot of worshippers in the temples, and many shops have small shrines to Buddhist idols. But this kind of belief is a kind of Chinese-characteristic belief. People pray for peace, health, wealth, promotion, good luck, and to give birth to sons.⁴ If they hear reports of idols in a certain temple giving blessings, that temple will be very crowded with worshipers. Their worship consists of making promises to the idol and then fulfilling those promises if the prayer is answered. This typical utilitarian attitude is just like a business transaction. This is not really faith, but is more like making a trade with idols. The worshippers only want good things, and want to receive them immediately. It is a kind of failsafe investment. This displays the people’s bare utilitarian attitude and pragmatism. Every word of their prayers consists of selfish desires. Each stick of incense represents their selfish worldly desires. Buddha becomes like a corrupt government official whom they must bribe, and is merely a temporary helper. From this we can see Chinese culture is one of worldly culture. Sinful human beings whether Chinese or American, produce nothing useful. We and a world of sinners have done many things wrong.

Now let’s compare this to the true faith as revealed in the Bible. Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Heavenly Father, not as I will, but as you will.... May your will be done” (Matthew 26:39, 42). This prayer is totally without selfish desires. Jesus’ prayer is to fulfill God’s good will, according to God’s guidance. This is totally God-centered, not self-centered; totally seeking for heavenly value, not for earthly things which soon pass away, and not according to self. The Lord’s Prayer says (to God): “Hallowed be *your* name, *your* kingdom come, *your* will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9-10).

Christian faith is not like a business transaction. God reveals to us in the Bible that he has already given us every good thing (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:7). He gave us his Son, Jesus Christ, to be the mediator for us. Jesus took away the shame and guilt of our sins when he died on the cross. He has restored us to a harmonious relationship with our heavenly Father. In Jesus, we are now dearly loved children of God. God promises to take care of all our needs (cf. Matthew 6:25-34), and to be with us in every circumstance in this life (cf. Matthew 28:20). The prayers we offer and the obedience we show to God are not to earn his favor, but to thank him for his great love to us through Jesus. And so, we pray for God’s will to be done, rather than our own. This is the faith as revealed in the Bible. True faith seeks first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, then all that we need will be given to us naturally (cf. Matthew 6:33). This is the Christian faith.

² Chan Buddhism, a school of Mahayana Buddhism, in Japan known as Zen Buddhism.

³ One of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature.

⁴ It is especially because of the promise of sons that many people worship Guanyin, the bodhisattva of mercy.