

## **Christianity and China's Modernization**

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### **Introduction**

For the Chinese people, “modernization” is an extremely appealing statement full of hope. In making up their minds to realize the modernization of China at an early date, the people yearn for progress in science and technology, mighty national strength, an enlightened society, a fair system and cultural prosperity. However, China’s modernization process is not a self-secluded path. China’s accession to the WTO and active participation in international exchanges and cooperation demonstrate to the world the openness and transparency of its modernization and its determination of and confidence in integrating itself into the international community, bringing itself in line with international practices and meeting the challenges of globalization. From such a global perspective and in the absorption in global contacts, the booming cause of China’s modernization is meeting and having contacts with various trends of thought, including doubting, reflecting on and criticism of the concept and practice of “modernization” and “modernity”. Therefore, China’s modernization has not only a vertical historical comparison with the unique process of its march into the modern era, but also a horizontal comparison with the experiences and lessons of other countries in the development of world modernization. China’s modernization is carried out and developed in the complex intertwining of such historical accumulation and international impact.

In view of the above reference in timing and space, China’s modernization is witnessing and even experiencing the coexistence in the same structure of “pre-modern” remains, probing of “modernity” and “post-modern” criticism. To solve the problems cropping up in the modernization process and avert unnecessary zigzags, it is both important and realistically significant that the Chinese people assimilate outstanding spiritual heritage of human civilizations and draw on the successful experiences of other countries and ethnic groups in achieving modernization. In this respect, the connection and relationship between Christianity and China’s modernization may provide us with some food for thought and enlightenment.

### **1. The Relationship between Christianity and the Western Modernization Process**

In the Chinese academic circles, there was a prevalent view that Western modernization was able to rise and develop only after breaking through the “darkness of millennium” of the Middle Ages. This view, however, was basically reversed thanks to the continued deepening of the

study on the history of Western society and culture. In fact, the “darkness” in Europe during the Middle Ages did not last as long as a “millennium”. It mainly referred to the history of 300 to 400 years from the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century to the time around the rise of the Carolingian dynasty in the ninth century. After that, civilization in Europe of the Middle Ages featuring mainly Christianity witnessed a rapid development and its multiple cultural renaissance created conditions and provided a hotbed for the rise of Western modernization in the fields of ideology, material resources and social system. Yu Yingshi summed this up in the following: “Since the religious and scientific revolution in the West, God and reason, the two concepts of the highest value, developed new directions through new understanding and opened up a new horizon. The understanding of human diligence as the call of God once contributed to the rise of the capitalist spirit; the understanding of academic work as vocation of Christianity promoted the development of modern humanities and education in them in the West. The universe created by God had its laws and order and human duty was to find the order and laws of the universe through reason. This was a basic belief accepted by many great scientists in modern times including Newton and Einstein... In political and social fields, values such as freedom, human rights, tolerance and fairness could not detach themselves from God and reason to possess true meaning. The external and transcending value system in the West not only did not disintegrate owing to modernization, but also constituted an extremely important spiritual source for modernization.” (1)

In the early stage of China’s reform and opening up, economists and sociologists discussed extensively the well-known work of Max Weber *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which stirred up a “Weber fever” in contemporary China. The focus of the discussion was the decisive role played by the Protestant ethic in the birth of the spirit of capitalism in the West and the promotion of the modern development of an ethnic group and the support of its “sustainable development” by “a potential spiritual force”. It revealed from an important aspect the major spiritual enlightenment, ideological motive power and guarantee of value provided by Christianity to the rise of the European modern society. From a perspective of history, this theory pointed out the historical fact that Christianity played a crucial role in and made significant contributions to the modernization development of the West.

Naturally, as an important vehicle and core representative of the Western traditional culture, Christianity has numerous “pre-modern” ideological elements and structural forms. This traditional accumulation once constituted obstacles and continually brought about various crises to Christianity in the process of Western modernization. Likewise, The Western society produced some contradictions in its own development and gave rise to various crises which erupted in a concentrated way in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the form of “world wars” and “economic depression” and dealt heavy blows to the entire Western society and its Christian religious and cultural system. Some contemporary Western ideologues, however, appreciate

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(1) Yu Yingshi: *The Contemporary Significance of the Chinese Culture from the Perspective of Value System, Culture: China and the World*, Volume 1, Sanlian Bookstore, Beijing, 1987, page 89.

very highly the composition of characters and definition of the word “crisis” in the Chinese language: “Crisis” refers not only to “danger” or “dire peril” which is brought about, but also offers a “chance” and “opportunities” for renewal and development. Overall, it should be said that Western modernization has survived the above crises to a great degree and seized some opportunities for development. And Christianity was able to adapt itself and witness development in overcoming the above crises.

In view of its lagging behind in the process of Western modernization, Christianity enhanced its awareness of modernity and advanced corresponding reforms and innovation which reflected “modernity”. For example, in the 60s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic Church convened the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council which implemented its overall reform to suit modernization development. Pope John XXIII, the first initiator and organizer of the reform, put forward the famous slogan “keep abreast of the times” (aggiornamento), displaying the spirit of “keeping pace with the times” from the perspective of his faith. That Second Vatican Council enabled the Catholic Church to integrate itself into the modern society in an all-round way, directly participate in and supervise the process of Western modernization and directly caution against and criticize the problems that cropped up in the process.

Besides, when there appeared “post-modern” challenges in Western modernization and the structural, destructive and negative “post-modern” trends of thought were to sweep away, negate and destroy everything and offer no new concepts and thinking after their destruction, Christianity participated in the restructuring of Western “post-modern” ideology with its faith and spirit, advanced a “constructive post-modernity” and discarded as much as possible the defeatist and nihilist mood in the radical “post-modern” trend of thought to bring about a hopeful, optimistic, positive and active temperament. The aim was to provide ideological support and guarantee in faith for the Western society in the development or transition from “modernity” to “post-modernity” and guard against social crisis and spiritual collapse. From the above various aspects, it may be said that Christianity participated substantially in the process of Western modernization and constantly provided a “potential spiritual force” for its “sustainable development”.

## **2. The Relationship between Christianity and China's Modernization Process**

In its prime feudal period, China once had a self-confident, bold and unconstrained mindset of the “Middle Kingdom”. And in such a “condescending” posture, it displayed all-inclusive open-mindedness and great magnanimity through the Silk Road and the sending of envoys overseas. The process of China’s “modernization”, however, was a historical period of “humiliation” and “passive resignation” in modern history. The Chinese people’s spiritual trauma and economic pressures from the “unequal treaty” and “five trading ports” brought about by the Opium War left them an extremely complicated mentality and feelings for “modernization”. In this process, Christianity was introduced substantially into China and witnessed an extensive development. But its historical connection with the “colonization” and “aggression” of the Western powers, the role of Christianity in the modernization process of

China has become very complicated and subtle. Such subtlety is still deeply felt up till now.

In fact, the impact of Christianity on the process of China's modernization may be traced to the time around the late Ming Dynasty and early Qing Dynasty before the Opium War when "Western learning gradually spread to the East" and "Oriental learning was introduced to the West". Since the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, Catholic missionaries, with Jesuits as their mainstay, traveled east to China and, for the purpose of spreading their religion, brought along with them the then Western scientific and technical knowledge and introduced indirectly the fruit and information of the early stage of Western modernization. Although some Chinese scholars held that the scientific and technical knowledge and theories introduced by the missionaries were not the newest and most advanced at the time in the West, they offered enlightenment, quite a shock and something completely new to the ear and eye for the Chinese people who still wandered in the vicious circle of feudal concepts and knowledge structure at that time. For example, the theory of the earth being round and the surveying of world map introduced by the missionaries rectified the long-held concept by the Chinese that the sky was round and earth square. Since then, in a scientific sense, China was no longer the "Middle Kingdom" or "Central Kingdom, which provided them with a world-wide perspective and vision. For the Chinese people, such scientific common knowledge, simple and evident nowadays, was of deep and far-reaching significance and played a major role of enlightenment in conceptual renewal, breaking up feudalism, having the world in view and entering into modernization in terms of concept. In accordance with the traditional interpretation, the Chinese character *zhong* ("middle") in the word "China" means "inscribed bamboo slips in a pot", indicating "a state with written language" or "a civilized state". But in history, there was still the understanding of the "center" of the earth, which was limited in the perspective of cognition of the world. It may be said that though the Western scientific and technical knowledge, spiritual values and system concepts brought along by the missionaries did not achieve substantial success in the forming of the concept of the Chinese people on "modernity", they constituted a significant public rehearsal for the awareness of "modernity" of the Chinese people.

After the Opium War, Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox missionaries came to China one after another to preach their faiths in the country and brought along with them some Western modern concepts, experiences and practices. They made undeniable contributions in culture to the shaping of China's modern scientific and technical concepts, its educational system, modern medical and healthcare system, modern information and publication industry and the development of thinking on modern management and business operation. Besides, to different degrees, the missionaries were involved in then China's reform of political system and promoted the abolition of corrupt customs such as the traditional imperial examination and women's foot-binding. However, as stated above, due to the background of the times and political conditions of the missionaries' activities, their publicity activities as a whole were not confirmed positively in the eyes of the Chinese people but relegated to the sphere of "cultural aggression" of the Western powers. As a result, its connection and significance for the development of China's modernization died out owing to its political characterization. For the meeting between China's modernization and Christianity, this should be deemed deep "historical regret".

From 1949 to 1976, China remained in a state of “seclusion” or “being under an embargo”, so the separation between Western Christianity and the Chinese society kept up this “regret” and deepened misunderstanding between them. In this period, while China’s Christian Church kept its “separation” from the Western missionary societies, it was gradually integrated into the Chinese society and participated in the construction of the Chinese modern society through the practice of its “Three-Self Patriotic Movement” (self-administration, self-support and self-propagation). But in overall terms, due to its small number of members and limited impact, it was still on the margin of the development of China’s modernization.

Since the 70s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, China has pursued reform and opening up, returned to the international community and actively taken part in international affairs and “modernization” has become one of its most conspicuous symbols. Under the new circumstances and in the new ambience of mutual “communication” and “dialogue”, Christianity, as the biggest religion in the environment of globalization, has again met with the Chinese society and its modernization process. It may be said that this meeting offers an important “chance” or “opportunity” for Christianity to eliminate its misunderstanding in cognition and remedy its “historical regret”. But in the past more than 20 years of multi-layer contacts, though the Christian Church put up an active performance and made corresponding contributions in the process of China’s modernization, the prospect of this “meeting” still remains vague and its outcome is hard to forecast. Currently, the relationship between Christianity and China’s modernization hinges on two aspects: One is that as a mainstream or the biggest religion of the Western society, this relationship is determined by the relations between the entire Western world and China and by the former’s attitude toward China’s modernization. Christianity may play a role of active reconciliation and guidance in its mother’s body, the Western society, to make the latter take a fair attitude toward and react constructively to China’s modernization process. It is the most crucial point for the elimination of misunderstanding between Christianity and China and abandonment of the historical regret, which will be a major contribution that Christianity is able to make. Two is the self-consciousness and social role of Christianity in the Chinese society. As a value system and a social structure, Christianity should participate in the reconstruction and modernization of the Chinese society with the core spirit in its faith of “not using others as servants, but serving as servants and ransom of others”. It may not want to face up to the world with a condescending and arrogant attitude or display the “prophetic spirit” and “critical spirit” which are hardly acceptable. China’s modernization cannot be “total Westernization” or “capitalization”, so the basic coexistent posture of the believers in religions or other faiths from different social and cultural backgrounds should be one of “dialogue” and “communication”. This “dialogue” in the ambience of globalization and modernization process is a “trans-cultural”, “trans-religious” and “trans-faith” dialogue in which the interlocutors may exchange and compare their spirits and their social and economic and other ideological sources. They may “seek common ground while reserving differences” or attain “harmony without sameness” with the aim of building up a “harmonious society”. Such “harmony” should be Chinese and belong to the world. And the implementation and success of modernization is an important guarantee of this “harmonious society”. If Christianity may offer spiritual, opinion, environmental or substantial support for China’s modernization with its deep-seated historical

resources and robust material resources, it will be its contribution of precious wealth to a modern and harmonious society and thus help realize its ideal of “peace and tranquility on Earth”.