

# The Self-Identity of Chinese Christians

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In late July 2010, when being interviewed by the Lingnan Daily, University of Purdue professor Dr. Yang Genggang, revealed the results of a survey: in modern China, only 3.2% of the population self identifies as being Christian (including both Protestants and Catholics), at most 33 million people.<sup>1</sup> A few days later in mid August, a Institute of World Religions Chinese Academy of Social Sciences task group also released their own statistics: currently, the number of Christians in China (not including Catholics) makes up 1.8% of the population, totaling 23.05 million people.<sup>2</sup>

The research methods of the two organizations were different: the former used a mainland Chinese business organization to conduct telephone interviews, while the latter used door to door survey questionnaires. No matter how much one disputes the above mentioned results, what is important to note here is something else, namely that, according to the results of these two surveys, China currently has at least 23.05 million people who identify themselves as being Christian. This number illustrates that there has been a tremendous improvement amongst the Chinese people's religious self-identity.

When Christianity was first introduced into China, it was identified as “the foreign religion”, and because its grand scale entrance followed on the heels of the West's strong invasion into China, it was labeled with the stigma of “the cultural invader”. During that time period, Christians held an order of religious self-identity that was: Chinese – Christian – Chinese Christian. The meaning of this order of identity was that, I am both a Chinese, and a Chinese Christian, and that my “identity as a believer of the foreign religion” does not at all conflict with my Chinese identity. At that time, a Chinese, who believed in Christianity, had to pay a price. This price was not only to endure being called a “fake foreign devil”, “a second Westerner”, but also possibly considered a betrayer of your family, or even a “Sinner” who betrays the country. Therefore a person had no choice but to “give up on many original rights” and “endure various types of negative results”, such as being restricted from partaking in various clan sacrificial rituals, or even being kicked out of the home etc... The prices paid were all “earthly, bodily, and immediately settled”.<sup>3</sup> The great amount of pressure that having a religious identity created for a believer was extremely evident.

After 1949, and in several historic movements of the past, all regions including Christianity encountered criticism and were classified as being incompatible, backwards thinking, feudal superstition, etc. with conventional ideology. All believers encountered bitter attacks, especially during the Cultural Revolution, where a religious identity was often the only offence and proof of one's guilt. It was so bad that even after the Cultural Revolution was over for some years, many believers still had lingering fears and would not dare to openly profess their religious identity and were concerned about various types of people trying to “settle old accounts”. However, with the profoundness of China's opening up and reform, this type of situation is changing.

In 1998, a survey conducted on the state of religion (the five major religions) in Beijing listed the following questions: When outside the home, are you willing to reveal to other people

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<sup>1</sup> See Dr. Yang Genggang's “Zhongguo Jidutu Daodi You Duoshao” (“How many Christians really are there in China”), [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_502310b20100ko5n.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_502310b20100ko5n.html).

<sup>2</sup> Institute of World Religions, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences task group. “Zhongguo Jidujiao Ruhui Wenquan Baogao” (“China's Christians Door to Door Survey Questionnaire Report”), Translated by Jin Ze, Edited by Qiu Yonghui, Annual Report on China's Religions (2010), Social Sciences Academic Press, 2010, pp. 190 – 212.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to Liang Jialin. “Cong HUaren Jiaohui Kanzuo Zhumentu de Yiyi” (“The Significance of Chinese Church's View of the Main Disciples”), *Chinese Churches Today*, 1998, 7th Volume, pg. 23.

that you are a religious person?<sup>4</sup> 42% of the interviewees said that they were “very willing”, 24% said they were “fairly willing”, those that choose “indifferent” were 32%, and only 2% choose “not willing”. From 2002-2003, I asked a similar question in a questionnaire in Beijing: “are you willing to let others know that you are a Christian?” Of the 544 valid questionnaires, those that choose “yes” were 83.1%, those that choose “indifferent” were 13.6%, and “no” were 3.3%. In comparison to the survey conducted on the state of religion in Beijing, the author’s investigation sample was around ten times more, and the questionnaire was restricted to just Christians in Beijing, with those selecting “yes” being much more than those in the previous survey. What is interesting is that, when the author was setting the five age groups for the survey, the number of people surveyed in the fourth group, ages 45 – 54 years old, who selected “yes” was clearly lower than those of any other group. Once projected, the people of this age group during the Cultural Revolution thirty years ago were in their teens, which is the time period when their perspectives on the world and on life were formed. Looking at it from a psychological perspective, at this stage of life, an individual’s personal experience is most impressionable which can influence a person’s future life, and this age group is now probably at the peak of their work achievements. According to the numbers and analysis, I can explain the reason why the number of people in this age group who choose “yes” were relatively low. This is because of the great assault that the Cultural Revolution had on religion, where the people growing up during that time period still feel its negative effects, causing them, even today, to still harbor misgivings and unwillingness to risk the revealing of their religious identity. In comparison, the fifth group of people, 55 years old and older, had the highest ratio of people willing to openly reveal their religious identity. The reasons for their response are also quite evident, in today’s China, people who are 55 years old and older are already in the retired group and therefore many people believe “there is nothing left to fear.” Moreover there are quite a few people who have transitioned from the past ways of “completely relying on the group” to “completely relying on a religion”, and after retiring the identity of being a Christian has become their main symbol of self identity.<sup>5</sup>

Even though these numbers have differences, however, what cannot be denied is that the Chinese Christian’s self-identity has already become a fairly normal status. What is important to emphasize here is that the changing of a person’s self-identity follows in step with the outside world’s acceptance of religious identity.

For a relatively long time, Chinese society has held a negative attitude towards Christians and the view that, “with one more Christian there is one less Chinese”, is very widespread. First, this type of negative attitude originates from the high degree of political unity of the Chinese society. This method of “political correctness” or “singular ideology”, when speaking about Christianity, naturally emphasizes the stigma of the “cultural invader” and will even include talk about the Western powers and its invasion and threat to China. Secondly, because of the banning of religious knowledge classes in all levels of education, no publications or forms of propaganda were allowed to introduce religion (except to be critical), thus, people were uninformed about Christianity, equated it with the West, and made the West the complete antagonist of China. Furthermore, extending as long as 30 years after 1949, religious belief almost had no standing in China and it was impossible for it to have any kind of influence on the lives of the broad masses of people. Moreover, in the end these reasons all interpret religious beliefs from an ideological or political perspective. They not only neglect that religion is one form of culture, that it is even more like the essence of culture, and that the development of human culture is always mutual

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<sup>4</sup> Refer to Unpublished manuscript. “Beijing Zongjiao Xiankuang Yanjiu”, (“Study of the Current Situation of Religion in Beijing”), 1998, The Institute of World Religions Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ “Beijing Zongjiao Yu Minjian Xinyang Yanjiu Ketizu” (“The Beijing Religion and Belief Research Task Group”).

<sup>5</sup> For specific date and analysis refer to Gao Shining. “Dangdai Beijing De Jidujiao Yu Jidutu – Zongjiao Shehuixue Gean Yanjiu” (“Modern Beijing’s Christianity and Christians – A Case Study of Religious Sociology”), Hong Kong’s Institute of Sino-Christian Religious Studies, 2005, Chapter 5.

transmission and mutual infiltration, but also ignore the basic human characteristics that are the need for spiritual pursuit and need for beliefs, thus as a result, religion will always exist in human society.

Today, Chinese society has already largely accepted the Christian identity and many non-Christians admit the kindheartedness and conscientiousness of Christians. The questionnaire that we gave to the non believer youth in the Beijing region (college students, bank employees, and procurators, 200 copies), revealed that 97.5% of them would not adopt an attitude of alienation or ostracization towards believers, 70.8% believed that they would be able to accept the fact that their family member or close friend held a religious belief. These two numbers demonstrate that in today's China, with the opening up of society and people's understanding of religion, religious discrimination is gradually being eliminated and there are more and more people who look upon religious believers with an acceptable attitude.

When Chinese Christians are able to openly express their self-identity, they have a very strong religious sense, which is first illustrated in their enthusiasm for proselytization. When I was in Beijing conducting this survey, the majority of Christians believed that proselytization was extremely important and something of which they should partake. Because if this, they promote their beliefs, dedication and passion on all occasions, even giving some non-believers pressure and making them feel uncomfortable. Secondly, since those with a religious belief seldom need to bare any burden for their religious identity, therefore many house churches go from being so called underground to being famous, from being hidden to going public. This transformation will help the development of Christianity in China.

However, even though this short essay speaks on "religious self identity", I must point out that, in reality, in today's China, the religious identity of Christians is not completely void of burden (because the above survies were all anonymous). From 2008 to 2009, there were a series of "religious incidents" involving a few thousand Christians. It could not be helped that the occurrence of this incidence once again gave pressure to Christians. In this context, the shadows of history accompanied with the realities of the past and naturally raised wariness towards a "door to door, real name survey " and the reliability and validity of its results. From the many years of survey experience that I have, it is impossible for any form of "belief" survey to avoid this type of situation: non-Christians will never say that they are a Christian, however it is not certain that all Christians will admit to being Christian. In this context, with regards to the number of Chinese Christians from various surveys, all of these numbers can only be taken as a point of reference.

We hope that this day arrives soon; that a religious identity does not bring with it any shape or form of pressure. Choosing a religious belief is one of the greatest basic and fundamental freedoms, and deserves respect.

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