

“Current and Coming China-US Exchanges in Christianity”

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An exclusive interview with Prof. Xu Yihua, Fudan University

At the China-US Protestant Church Leaders Forum held in Washington D.C. near the end of September, 2011, Prof. Xu Yihua impressed both Chinese and American participants with his ardent acts and sagacious speech. The following is an exclusive interview of Prof. Xu, who now works as a senior researcher at the Center for American Studies at Shanghai-based Fudan University. This interview is conducted by the Rev. Shan Weixiang, Editor-in-Chief of the Chinese Christian journal *Heavenly Wind*.

Shan: As a scholar specializing in the study of Sino-US relations, is it necessary at all, Prof. Xu, for Chinese and American Christians to carry out exchanges like the one we've just had? What will be the role of this type of exchange in promoting contacts and friendship between the peoples of these two countries? What is the major barrier, as you've seen, that may block this exchange in the future? What should Chinese and American churches do to remove this barrier? Is there any other potential for exchanges between Chinese and American Christians to be tapped, and how?

Xu: Chinese and American Christians have kept in contact for a fairly long period of time. As a matter of fact, Christianity once served as a cultural bridge and emotional bond between China and the US, with China being the biggest receiver of missionary funds and services from American churches. It was only after the founding of the PRC that China turned from “the largest mission field” into a “forbidden zone” for American missionaries for various reasons, especially for the intricate tie between Christianity and the Western powers. As a result, exchanges between Chinese and American Protestant churches have entered a so-called “post-missionary period.” Nevertheless, these exchanges have never come to a full stop.

On the contrary, currently the religious exchanges between China and the US have come to cover a wider range of contents, take place in a bigger variety of forms, and involve more religions than those during the missionary era. Moreover, they have developed from unidirectional preaching and instruction into bidirectional interactions. This signifies the openness of the Chinese society and the diversification of the US religious pattern. The Sino-US exchange in religion, including exchange between Protestant churches, is a type of interaction between the two countries at the ideological, cultural, and emotional levels, and as such is much more basic and profound than their economic and trade relations and cooperation. As for the chief barrier currently blocking the exchanges between Chinese and American churches, I'd like to name the channels for such exchanges. The majority of American church goes,

for instance, have little knowledge about the development of Christianity in China, a situation that can be easily exploited by politicians.

As alleged in missiology, there are always “unreached” lands and people in this world. So far as the exchanges between Chinese and American Christians are concerned, there are still lots of areas and people in the US that have not gained any real knowledge about religious development in China. Given this reality, there lies ahead a huge amount of work for Chinese and American churches to accomplish before religion truly comes to serve as the vehicle for Sino-US spiritual communication and play a key role in bridging the cognitive gap distancing the two countries in the field of religion. In my speech at the just concluded Sino-US Protestant Church Leaders Forum, I quoted Dr. Timothy Tingfang Lew, an early Chinese Christian leader, who delivered a speech at the 1922 National Christian Conference in China calling for unity with such powerful words like “we agree to differ, but resolve to love.” What I meant by the quotation was to echo the wishes for mutual respect and the readiness to seek common ground while reserving differences as expressed by both Chinese and American Protestant leaders at the forum.

Religion used to serve as a major carrier of cultural exchanges for China, as exemplified by Monk Tang’s going to India for Buddhist scriptures and Monk Jianzheng’s journal to Japan for preaching Buddhism during the Tang Dynasty (A. D. 618~907). It is my ardent wish, therefore, that this forum, which provided a platform for Chinese and American churches to gain a better knowledge about each other, will be kept as a permanent venue for regular exchanges between the Protestant churches in the two countries.

Shan: In American political, academic as well as religious circles, there are always some people who love to find fault with China’s policy toward religion. Do you see any political, cultural or psychological element in their addiction? What’s your opinion about the involvement in international affairs by American Protestant churches, and the evangelical churches in particular?

Xu: Like other major religions in the world, Christianity is universal in terms of religious beliefs and transnational in terms of geographical distribution. It preaches charity and social justice. It is only too natural, therefore, for Christian churches and Christian believers to care about national and international affairs and get concerned with their Christian brothers and sisters abroad.

Christianity differs from the traditional religions in China in terms of its approaches of active proselytizing and outlook on salvation. “There lies in this field a wide cultural gap between the East and the West,” as was once pointed out by Wang Zuo’an, Director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs. But this gap does not really matter at all. What really matters is the attempt by the US government and some US politicians to “privatize” the international cause for human rights, put their own standards on human rights and religious freedom above pertinent international

conventions and manifestos, and examine the current religious development in a country either without taking its historical conditions into consideration or from a static instead of dynamical perspective. Apart from sermonizing from a high horse, they would rather denounce and sanction than sit down and talk with others on an equal footing. They may even instrumentalize issues concerning human rights and freedom of religion to serve their political purposes back at home, such as political elections. We will absolutely say no to these attempts, of course.

In the US, the evangelical Christians used to care little about international affairs, while the religious liberals kept a fairly keen interest in matters concerning the country's foreign policy. During the recent 30 years, however, the evangelical Christians have woken up politically and grown from traditional 'isolationists' into avant-garde 'internationalists' in matters concerning the country's foreign affairs. Just like their own makeup, the evangelical Christians have played an intricate role in international affairs, and won both praises and criticisms at the same time. It should be admitted that as a new force in international relations, the majority of the transnational Evangelical organizations have played a very positive role in promoting economic development, social reform, cognitive liberation, religious freedom, cross-border rescue mission, international exchange, global governance, and world peace regardless of locality, race, skin colour and culture. On the other hand, however, there have been some evangelicals known as 'humanitarian fundamentalists' that have been keen to trumpet 'humanitarian intervention' and 'human rights before sovereignty.' Some have even gone so far as to justify any means they employed by their self-claimed good purposes. They have served, in an indirect fashion, as the non-official implementers of the US foreign policy. Faith-based organizations are not subject to the same international obligations for their participation in transnational affairs as the traditional international actors, and it is therefore more important for them to abide by the laws of the countries where they operate and exercise self-discipline. According to my personal experience, most American Christians are fairly understanding and reasonable, and believe what they have seen by their own eyes, while politicians and those church leaders and academicians with certain political agenda are always harder to reason with.

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