

Fourth Forum on Catholic Studies for Young Chinese Scholars

Eamonn O'Brien

December 8th, 2011

The **Fourth Forum for Young Chinese Scholars** was held December 5th- 8th 2011 in Beijing with 65 participants – 15 more than the 2010 Forum. 78 scholars applied. The China Formation Committee of the Missionary society of St Columban is happy to be associated with this forum.

According to the organizers, " the Beijing Institute for the Study of Christianity and Culture," led by Fr. Peter Zhao Jian Min, Director and Vicar of the Diocese of Beijing, the Forum was the occasion to promote dialogue ,exchange, and reflection on the topic of Catholicism in China.

The opening of the Forum was presided over by Professor He Guangho, Religious Studies Department of Renmin University, Beijing whose theme was 'Christianity and the development of Civilization'

While there are many fora on Christian studies, this one is unique in that it focuses on Catholic studies and aims to attract a young and new generation of Scholars.

Scholars , professors, researchers, academics, and priests with doctorate degrees and licenses obtained abroad - presented papers. They came from many different part of China and represented my academic institutes, particularly institutes for the study of religion, literature and philosophy departments of various universities.

Women and men, priests and sisters, catholic and protestant and scholars of no declared faith were present. The great majority fell into the category of Cultural Christians with a keen interest in theology/ Religious studies.

Academic Scholars in China – the literati – have always played a key role in Chinese society. Catholicism and Christianity have been aided their efforts. This Annual Forum aims to develop collaboration and reflection, especially among young modern day scholars of faith and no professed public faith on

Catholic truth. Among its aims is to promote the study of Catholic theology and culture; to promote dialogue and communication between Christian scholars and Chinese secular scholars; to provide a forum for encouraging and developing scholarship among Catholic clergy, sisters and laity and to engage with overseas institutions in academic reflection on theology and the crucial questions related to the science of Fundamental Theology.

This kind of forum is located in a long tradition of debate and discussion on Christianity and China. He Guangho, who gave the opening address would see a number of phases in this history – the very lively debate that took place between 1845 and 1919 where there were rational and disinterested positions, affirmation and appreciation and fierce disapproval and assault on Christian religion. The period from the 1950's to 1970's was one “where Christian studies almost disappeared and when other humanities and social sciences also withered..... This was a clear indication of the general climate of ideas and social upheavals and political background that mainland China experienced”. He refers especially to the Cultural Revolution

He Guangho comments: “It was really extraordinary that Christian Studies should survive the horrible political, social and spiritual situation of the previous period. A handful of scholars Christian and non-Christian kept their interest in Christianity in these hopeless and miserable years and carried out their research with unbelievable courage in and after the Cultural Revolution.”

The post cultural revolution for many led to clearly seeing that the West was not as totally bad as it had been made out to be and similarly that all Chinese history could not be simply discarded as useless, so a new impetus was given to theological reflection and a seeking of truth in a very fundamental way.

He Guangho goes on to elaborate that under the influence of this general change in thinking “a small circle of scholars came conscious again of the importance of Christianity as a western mainstream tradition and started investigating in to this area”. He goes on to say that the research was not without its “flaws and limitations”, but adds “we have to take into account the fact that their research work carried out in a time when there were many difficulties and restrictions that are unimaginable to scholars today”

From the 1980's to the late 90's a new generation of reserachers of Chrstian studies emerged. Guangho describes this; “ the majoryity of this generation were in their twenties and thirties in the 1980's. Some of them (and I am

one of them) graduated from the only two legitimate institution of research at that time – the Institute For World Religions , at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Institute of Religion at Nanjing University.

The journey for these scholars went through different phases and even though initially critically opposed to religion, according to Guangho “they later began to acquire objective knowledge about it and finally reached sympathetic understanding of it. Such an evolution of attitudes might vary from person to person in details, but it undoubtedly has happened to almost every one of the researchers”

These scholars went after truth in an unbiased way and gave their full scholarship to this quest. The outcome is described by Guangho as follows: “generally speaking their quest was for the way out for themselves as individuals and for the whole nation and ended up with far better achievements than previous generations of scholars of Christianity. Among them, a small group of scholars who are called ‘Cultural Christians’ deserve more attention. Their quest and harvest is particularly meaningful, because they quested for truth and gained Christian faith as their harvest”

The young scholars which I met at the forum bear out this on-going search today. There were many very widely different topics presented - from purgatory to the thoughts of Newman - but in my discussions with these young people, there was clearly an underlying thread, very well articulated by Jiang a student of philosophy who was taken on a service trip to the poor in Jinan province by Catholic friends. She said: “ arising from this visit , I’m interested in Catholic thought, in the relation between Catholic and other religions, and especially in the Catholic spirit.” She went on to say: “my philosophy studies are calling me to go for a deeper truth, I am on a search and I’m here at this forum to listen”.

This view was echoed by Yang and Wang, both from the North of China, now studying architecture and Art in the far South in Guangzho, who came all the way to Beijing in the cold. I asked them why they came: “ we are attracted by Catholic art and architecture, it points to something more and its calling us on a journey we know not where. We came here to learn more about other aspects of catholicism”

Most Chinese scholars known to me to not underestimate the consumerist challenges facing Chinese Society today nor those being encountered by studies

in “theology” and Christianity and the process of seeking the truth in China today. But beyond the glitz, quest for wealth and all the negative images with which the western media portrays Chinese society, there is also a profound and sincere core of deep search for truth in a way that I have never experienced in any country I have worked in. I see it in the conversations with young Chinese I meet on trains or in the street, where within a very brief time we are focusing on the most fundamental matters; and having mingled with the participants of this forum I am convinced that this forum of young scholars being promoted by Fr Peter Zhao has a unique role in promoting a reflection and dialogue that will also have in time a bountiful harvest ‘pressed down and flowing over’.

End