

GENERAL LIU YAZHOU DISCUSSES THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN
CHRISTIANITY AND BUDDHISM: EXCITING!

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[Liu Yazhou, last known position Chief Political Commissar of the National Defense University, is three-star general in the PLA Air Force and perhaps China's most prominent "military intellectual." He is said to be close to Xi Jinping, like Xi coming from an elite family background. He is generally considered a hardline nationalist, although his views also show a certain amount of complexity. Thus, while strongly opposed to (or suspicious of) American policies toward China, he nonetheless seems to admire American institutions. For example, in an article largely advocating that China seek to consolidate influence in Central Asia rather than challenge American supremacy in the Pacific, Liu cited a lack of democracy as one of China's major weaknesses: democracy advocated not for its role in promoting responsible government but as a method of mobilizing the force of the entire people behind the goals of the state. In the essay below Liu discusses religion, comparing Christianity favorably with Chinese religious traditions. Again, the interest is less on the truth claims of the various sets of belief or how they deal with the relationship between human beings and the supernatural but, rather, on their efficacy in promoting civic strength. This in itself is interesting, in that earlier in 2014 Liu had been associated with a documentary produced by the PLA exposing America's insidious plots against the People's Republic, with Christianity, along with pornography and the ideas of constitutional democracy, being instruments whereby the CIA undermines the moral fiber of the Chinese people (and, indeed, at the time this essay appeared there was an ongoing campaign of persecution of the

burgeoning Christian movement in China). Liu finds the strength of Christianity is in its notion of a God who actually suffers, taking himself, and thus relieving, all the sins and weaknesses of humanity. This encourages westerners to be humble, self-sacrificing, public spirited, to think of the well-being of others—completely unlike, Liu says, Buddhism and Confucianism. Liu no doubt unduly idealizes at least the actual behavior of Christians, and his comments about the Chinese traditions seem perverse: thus, he claims that Christians are always encouraged to examine their consciences and “cultivate” their moral character, while there is nothing like this in the Chinese heritage: but in fact such self-cultivation is a major aspect of Confucian moral training. The essay is a late example of a recurring theme in east Asian thinking over the past couple of centuries: the need to sacrifice the cultural heritage and take on the ways of the west in order to resist and overcome the power of the west.]

Westerners go to church in order to repent; Chinese go to temples to offer bribes. Goodness is not a matter of will but of capacity. It's a person's moral character. Maybe it isn't important whether an individual's morals are high or low, but it's very important whether the morals of a ruling group are high or low. Good people may make use of bad people, but bad people absolutely will not make use of good people. Our cadres undergo all sorts of examinations; but if you open up a cadre's dossier you will not find a single examination of the state of his personal morality.

All systemic problems point toward culture and all cultural problems point toward religion. Morality is culture. Is morality one form of the manifestation of religion?

I've thought about this. The Chinese national character perhaps has some things about it worth talking over and improving. National character is morality. Religion

determines culture and culture determines the character of a nation. The character of a nation determines the nation's fate. Take the anti-corruption campaign as an example. Punishing corruption will not eliminate the roots of corruption. One way is to set up a good social system, but the basic method still requires putting one's hand to culture. There are three main religions in China: Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism (I'm treating Confucianism as a kind of religion). These bear an unshakable responsibility for the current condition of Chinese psychology and morality. History proves that these three religions are unable to bring about the revival of China. Let me compare Western Christianity with Chinese religion. Chinese culture teaches us that "At his beginning, man's nature is basically good."¹ Western religion is just the opposite. It believes people are bad from birth; human nature is at its base evil. Therefore they want to impose limits, make you reflect.

Western culture believes that man has original sin. The human heart is dark. Quite a few people went through the Cultural Revolution—where were the darkest things? The darkest things were in people's hearts; every human soul has its filthy side. Western culture brings this to light and displays it. It is subject to criticism and to control. Eastern culture keeps it wrapped up, nourishing it. Western churches have confessionals. When you go to church you acknowledge to God the things that are in your soul, confessing to God all those things that are twisted and dirty. After that you feel relaxed. Your soul has been cleansed. When I was in America I'd sometimes spend a whole day sitting outside a church and I discovered something very interesting: people always entered the church

¹ This is the famous first line from the Three Character Classic, a children's primer from imperial times: 人之初，性本善: at a person's beginning, his nature is basically good—a central tenet in the moral philosophy of Mencius.

with a frown on their face, but came out feeling very light-hearted. I was gradually able to figure out the mystery.

As time goes by, one develops into a healthy person, an especially healthy person with a sound mind and soul. People have appetites, but must learn to overcome their own appetites: we ourselves (this can't come from someone else) have to overcome our own appetites. Chinese people cannot control themselves; they cannot undertake an examination of their hearts and souls. They are able to control only other people, to give them the third degree. It's painful to flog oneself and give oneself the third degree. Only if there is lasting faith in one's heart, faith in an everlasting God, is it possible to do this. Lots of people have gone to church in the west. There God is represented as all bloodied, as undergoing torment and punishment. Jesus was nailed to a cross. The Blessed Mother did not shed her blood, but she did shed tears. These are actually avatars for humanity, avatars of humanity's suffering and thought. By his death Jesus has accomplished his transformation from God to man: it's only man who can die.

But the gods in Chinese temples are gods. Look at their images: big bellied, no worries, smiling faces, enjoying the incense people burn to them. Every one of them has eaten to his full. Westerners go to church in order to repent. Chinese go to temples to offer bribes. Isn't this so? You go to the temple because you want something. You pray to the god, spend some money to buy incense, make offerings of melons or other things we humans like to eat, and make your wishes known. Doesn't this amount to bribery? Westerners go to church in order to rid themselves of their spiritual difficulties. Chinese go to temples to resolve the actual problems of their lives. In western religion the suffering of God relieves the suffering of man. In eastern religion the gods enjoy life

while man continues to suffer. This is a major difference between eastern and western religions.

Western churches are always built in the city centers, close to the people. Chinese temples are always deep in the mountains or in ancient woods, far away from the people.

I once said that the Chinese nation was a nation without faith. To say without faith does not mean lacking the forms of faith. Exactly the contrary—Chinese people believe in a whole slew of things, including Qigong masters.² To believe everything is actually to believe nothing. There is no room in Chinese hearts for an eternal God. To put it more deeply, there is no quest for the ultimate spirit in the culture. People like that are unable to extend their personal concerns to concern for the family,³ or anything beyond themselves as individuals. If they do try to extend themselves, it is in order to harm others.

In western countries, if there is a car in trouble beside the road it seems as if all the other vehicles will stop and ask if any help is needed. In China, most of the cars will keep speeding by. If by chance someone should stop, I might have my suspicions: what are you up to? What do you want? A drop of water is very small, but that drop of water can contain the entire sun.

For the past thousand years there has been competition between east and west and the west has won. In the competition between eastern and western religions, the western

² Probably a reference to the Falun Gong, a spiritual movement outlawed and severely persecuted since 1999.

³ The allusion is presumably to the *Great Learning*, a Warring States-era Confucian classic that also epitomizes the Mencian version of Confucian teaching. A person begins by setting straight his will, then cultivates his character, brings order to the family, good governance to the state, peace to everything under Heaven. The allusion in itself would seem to falsify Liu's claim about the substance of at least Confucian teaching, if not necessarily his slurs on the Chinese national character.

religion has won. What kind of victory is this religious victory? I think it is a kind of spiritual victory.

Without faith there is no spiritual strength. What the Chinese people lack is precisely what westerners have.

Weixin, October 23 2014