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## Mandate of Heaven: Religious Studies Return to China

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# Mandate of Heaven

Religious studies return to China.

BY THOMAS P. RAUSCH

‘A Jesuit professor? Very dangerous for China!’ When a student made this exclamation at the beginning of my seminar, I thought some rough waters might be ahead. But I need not have worried. The young man often played the role of class clown and was just trying to be provocative. I never expected to teach a course on Christology in a secular university in China, but when I had the chance to do so at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou during a sabbatical in the spring of 2009, I thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

Founded in 214 B.C. and long known as Canton, the city

of Guangzhou is situated on the Pearl River about 75 miles from Hong Kong. The Italian Jesuit Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607), who is often considered the founder of the Jesuits’ mission to China and may have been the first Jesuit to master Mandarin, visited Guangzhou in 1580. Today it is a city of nine million people, one of the largest in China.

About 20 graduate students, all in the department of philosophy, took the seminar. They had a wide variety of interests and academic backgrounds, including Eastern and Western philosophy, the philosophy of science, religious studies and Marxism—the study of which is mandatory in Chinese schools. Since the students were competent in basic English, I was able to use my own text, reproduced in the Chinese fashion, as well as articles by the scholars Jacques

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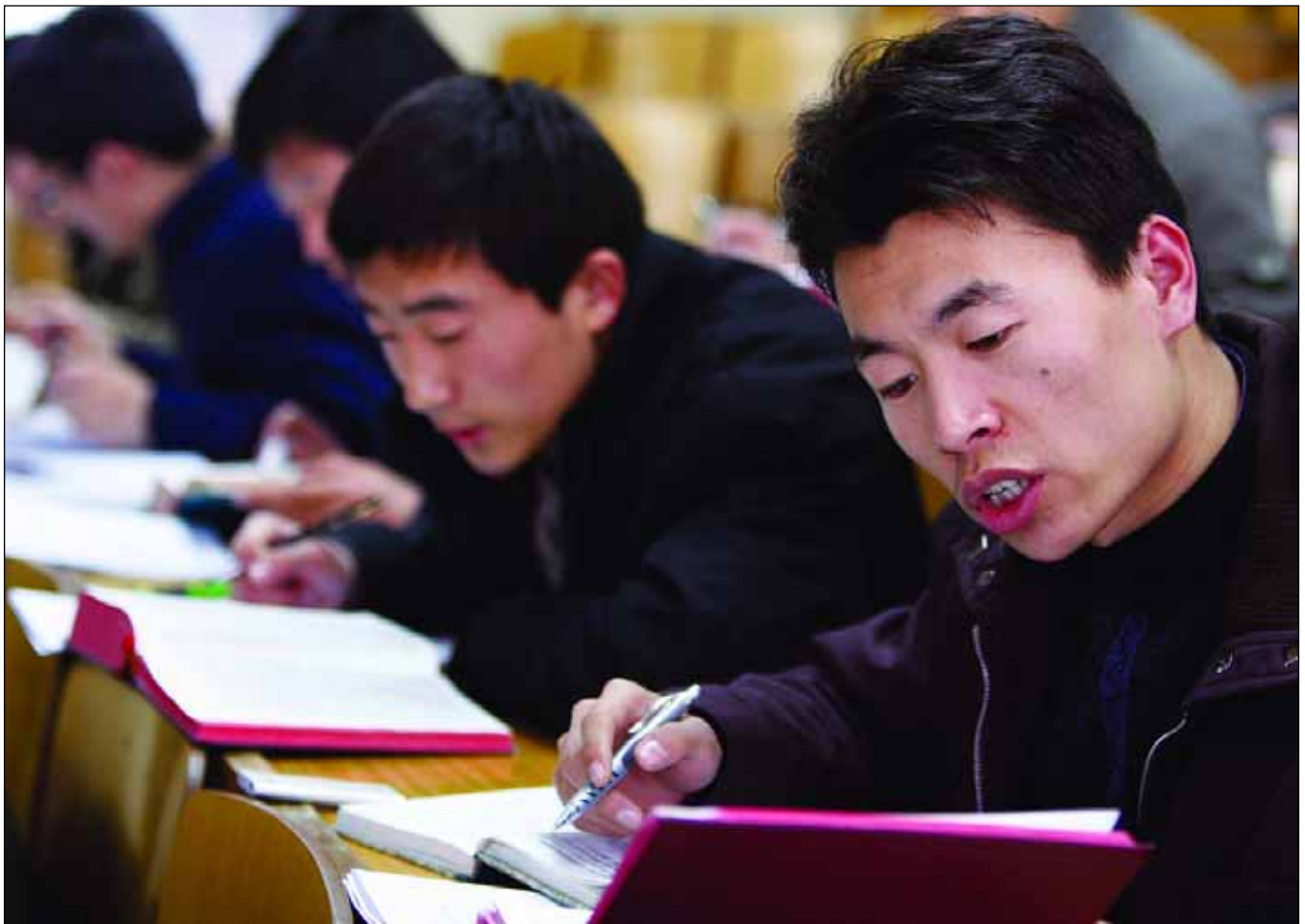


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Dupuis, Elizabeth Johnson, Peter Phan and Terrence Tilley, available online or on electronic reserve at my library at home. Some of the students had no practical knowledge of the story of Jesus, while several others were from independent house or “family” churches. Two were Catholics and another was among the 80 enrolled in the diocesan Christian initiation program for adults. At least one seminar member had studied abroad. Most were younger and more reserved than I had expected. They were very polite, reluctant to question the professor, hesitant about using English and more concerned with the university-sponsored exams at the end of their studies than with their assignment for the next class.

### New Interest in Religious Studies

I was surprised by the extent of the new interest in China today in the study of religion, particularly Christianity, even though I knew that many of China’s modern comprehensive universities were originally Christian schools, founded in the late 19th or early 20th century by foreign missionaries or Chinese Christian scholars. Fudan University in Shanghai, for example, which is one of the most prestigious universities in China, was founded in 1905 by Ma Xiangbo, who remained a faithful Catholic after leaving the Jesuits after his ordination. The establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and particularly during the difficult years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), the study of religion was largely dismissed as superstition or outdated ideology and replaced by courses in Marxist materialism.

Religious studies in China underwent a revival in the 1980s, however, as part of a general reform of higher education based on a new openness to the world encouraged at the time by Deng Xiaoping, the leader of the Communist Party. Professors from several departments offered courses that investigated various aspects of religion, and scholars began to travel abroad for courses or conferences. Centers or institutes for the study of religion were re-established and new ones founded. It is estimated that there are some 50 to 60 such institutes today at Chinese universities or

academies for social science.

In the 1990s religious studies were formally incorporated into the academic structure of Chinese universities. Between 1995 and 2000, the ministry of education established subdepartments of religious studies—usually within the department or school of philosophy—at Peking University, Wuhan University, Beijing’s People’s University and Nanjing University. The ministry’s aim was to separate the secular study of religion from theology. Most of these programs were aimed at serving graduate students in degree programs (both M.A. and Ph.D.), but Peking, People’s, Sichuan and Fudan began to offer religion courses for undergraduates, and some now offer undergraduate majors in religion. In 2009 at least five Chinese universities maintain religious studies departments, and they have graduated a first generation of students specializing in religious studies. Their list of courses looks very much like one in an American university.

Although other religions can be studied in Chinese universities, the government of China recognizes only five: Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism and Islam. Today there is a special interest in Christianity. Even though most Chinese still see Christianity as a foreign religion, consumerism brought on by the new economic prosperity, materialism and the loss of traditional values, particularly after the Cultural Revolution, have left many Chinese hungry for something deeper. Thus many Chinese scholars are interested in Christianity for its potential to influence Chinese culture in the areas of values, morality and social justice. They are eager for a dialogue between Christianity and their culture and recognize that many of the international conflicts today have their origins in religious fundamentalism.

### Future Prospects

In March I joined representatives from four Jesuit institutions in California (the University of San Francisco, the University of Santa Clara, the Jesuit School of Theology—now part of Santa Clara—and Loyola Marymount University) for a consultation with the religious studies faculty at Fudhan. We were graciously

received, and the consultation was very informative.

The subdepartments and newly emerging departments of religious studies in China’s universities are still small and have few resources. Their faculties are overextended—a small number of professors are teaching many courses. Faculty members acknowledge lacunae in their programs. They seek access to good theological library collections and professors able to teach medieval theol-

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ogy, Islam, church history, spirituality, theological anthropology, sociology of religion, even Latin and Greek. They are beginning to establish cooperative relations with other institutions in Hong Kong, Macau and outside China. Serious about the professionalization of religious studies, the faculty members want to develop first-class departments that will be internationally recognized. They are eager for more contact with scholars in other countries, ready to welcome them to their universities as visiting and sometimes permanent faculty members (another new development in China) and are interested in academic exchanges for their graduate students. Primary concerns include recruiting and forming the next generation of religious scholars.

One of the challenges still to be overcome is the tension between the churches and the academy—that is, between an “ecclesiastical” theology and the more humanistic theology of the universities. It is not the theologians from the churches or seminaries but rather the university intellectuals who are responsible for the new prominence of Christian theology (or the “philosophy of Christianity” as it is called) as a subject of study and debate in China. These intellectuals often are referred to as “cultural Christians,” because many of them are not formally church members. In the long run an estrangement between the academy and the church will

not contribute to the integrity of Christian theology in China.

Pastoral theology, another underdeveloped area, could help to bridge the divide. There have been efforts to move beyond the strictly academic subjects to pastoral courses available to broader communities, temples and churches. Since 1985, one university has offered brief courses for government officials dealing with religious issues. In the 1990s it offered a special course for Buddhist monks and for officials of the Protestant Three-Self Movement, and in 2003 it offered a two-year training program for Protestant pastors. Courses in pastoral psychology, church management and faith and culture are other possibilities.

China is a fascinating country, full of energy and self-confidence. Its people are both intelligent and creative. But beneath the material prosperity lies a spiritual vacuum. David Aikman’s estimate that within the next 30 years 20 percent to 30 percent of China’s population could be Christian is probably an exaggeration, yet the new interest among the Chinese in Christianity and Christian theology is undeniable. Without reducing Christianity to ethics, a perennial temptation in China, this new interest in Christianity has great potential for informing Chinese culture in a positive, even transformative way. Yet in order to accomplish that, as Chinese scholars themselves acknowledge, they need help. 

#### ON THE WEB

From the archives,  
“The People’s Republic at 50.”  
[americamagazine.org/pages](http://americamagazine.org/pages)

