

# Is God a Social Construct?

## Liberalization in East Asia and the Theistic Anomaly

*Five of the seven periods of interaction between Christianity and Chinese or Japanese cultures have been marked by two distinct but interrelated phenomena: (1) An attempt on the part of a number of gifted East Asians to relate the Christian God to the ancient and politically-charged rites of loyalty to Tian (天) or Shang Di (上帝) (Creating a transcendent level to the concept of loyalty (忠孝) or bushido (武士道).) (2) A strongly liberalizing influence of the resulting Christian-Confucian synthesis on government and civil society as an. It is the purpose of this paper to consider the history and origin of theism in East Asia, and its effect on political freedom.*

French sociologist Emile Durkheim argued that "The objective, universal, and eternal" source of all religious experience is "society." Basing his thesis on studies of Australian aborigines, Durkheim argued that religious belief arises from social experience and the public rituals that join a community. "It is through common action that society becomes conscious of and affirms itself."(Durkheim, 421) In his view, religion should neither be reduced to sub-rational impulses, as anthropologist Edward Tylor had attempted, nor should scientific study of man be allowed to appeal to transcendent, non-human causes of religious belief:

"Merely because there exists a 'religious experience,' if you will, that is grounded in some manner . . . it by no means follows that the reality which grounds it should conform objectively with the idea believers have of it. The very fact that the way in which this reality has been conceived has varied infinitely in different times is enough to prove that none of these conceptions express it adequately."

(Durkheim, 420)

Oddly, however, Durkheim found that the concept of God did not "vary infinitely" among the scattered tribes of Australia, though the name by which they called Him seemed to. In fact, he admitted that while far-flung tribes knew God by

many different names, (Bunjil, Daramulun, Baiame, Nuralie, Kohin, Mungan-ngana, Altjira) the concepts they had of Him were strikingly similar.

C. K. Yang applied Durkheim's explanation of religion to the idea of *Tian*(天) or *Shang Di* (上帝) that played a central role in Chinese civilization. Yang was more critical: sacrifice to *Tian* and the Mandate of Heaven (天命), were instruments of the ruling classes to maintain power. During periods of crisis, such as the Taiping Rebellion (太平天国), emperors made repeated sacrifices to demonstrate that, as the Dao Guang (道光) emperor put it, "I rule the people as the representative of Heaven." By claiming the Mandate of Heaven, "The Confucian orthodoxy inculcated moral meaning into political power, power that had generally been acquired through ethically unmotivated channels of violence and coercion." (138) Popular belief in Heaven was a "universalizing" force, transcending local cults of local deities to unify a diverse nation.

While such critiques do shed light on religion in general, I will argue that the evidence in regard to theism could more easily be interpreted in a very different manner. I will argue that faith in God is not created by culture. Further, in the Confucian-Christian tradition, it has been a politically liberating influence. While every strong government may require some accepted public myth to unify society, the Mandate of Heaven seems to have served as least as much to restrain as to empower imperial ambition. Across vast eras of ideological innovation and variety, from the ancient Shang to post-war Japan and post-Maoist China, the idea of God has repeatedly appeared in surprisingly coherent forms, and has played a consistently liberating role.

### **Confucian Theism and the Fading of Despotism**

China's rulers have fallen under a remarkable variety of philosophical influences: raised from the ranks of Buddhist monks, studied Zen and Tantrism, mandated Lao Zi, read Legalists and contending interpretations of Confucius, or even (in the case of Kublai Khan) raised by a Nestorian mother. It has been said Americans look for leaders inclined towards a vague religion, strongly held. The concept of *Tian* was in a similar way vague enough to meet the needs of rulers from all points of China's religious spectrum.

Every year the Son of Heaven ritually sacrificed to *Tian* at the Temple of Heaven. (天壇) But the ultimate expression of loyalty (忠孝) was the less frequent

sacrifice to Heaven on Mount Tai, (泰山) "the first mountain under Heaven," (天下名山第一) as an inscription on a cliff part way up boasts. Emperor Guang Wu Di (光武帝) was told this ceremony was a way of telling Heaven of his accomplishments and of forging a dynastic link with Heaven.

Of course rulers hoped subjects would get the message: here is a True Son of Heaven, worthy of obedience. But emperors who, over the centuries, found time, energy, and peace to climb Tai and forge that link do come off in the records as favored. Of the fourteen emperors whom local chronicles list as having climbed Mount Tai in modern history, nine were among the most successful of China's emperors. The Han (漢朝; 206 B.C. – 220 A.D.) reached its first glory under Wu Di, (武帝) whose rule also established Confucian orthodoxy, and was restored under Guang Wu Di. Buddhism came to China under Ming Di. (明帝) The Tang (唐: 618 – 907 A.D.) reached new peaks of power and influence under the rule of Gao Zong (高宗) and Xuan Zong. (玄宗) The reign of Yong Le, (永樂) who also built the Temple of Heaven, marked the greatest glory of the Ming (明朝 1368-1644), when China received tribute from Japan. The energetic and confident Kang Xi (康熙) and Qian Long (乾隆) emperors of the Qing (清朝 1644-1911) enjoyed the longest and among the most successful reigns of any emperors. Both climbed Mount Tai twice, fairly early in their reigns. Sacrifice to Heaven, by symbolizing and manifesting the emperor's humility and harmony with the cosmos, may have served to plant the good of the people at the center of government policy, in theory if not always in practice.

Raised by a Buddhist nun, and married to a devout but equally temperamental and strong-willed wife, the hot-tempered founder of the Sui dynasty (隋朝 581-618), Yang Jian (楊堅 --文帝 Wen Di), was the first emperor to climb Tai in 150 years. Impatient with Confucian moralism, Wen Di had to admit his own fits of rage were unworthy of a "Son of Heaven." Arthur Wright hinted that Wen's "pathology of supreme power" sought a cure in worship of Heaven: "His sudden and violent rise to power left him wracked throughout his life by feelings of insecurity," which led him to search for "every form of reassurance and every sign of Heaven's favor." Psychologist Ernest Becker, in *Denial of Death*, argued that great success is troubling to the soul: "The more you develop as a distinctive free and critical human being, the more guilt you have." Success is "ephemeral, potentially meaningless . . . unless justified from outside himself and from outside itself." (Becker, 171) Han Wudi, the effective but

ruthless shaper of the Han, also climbed Tai to seek forgiveness: "Henceforth I will do away with everything that is injurious to the common people, and wastes the resources of the country." (Legge, 173-4)

What would happen if the concept of *Tian* disappeared from China? It is possible to supply historical, rather than hypothetical, answers to this question. On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong stood on the rostrum of the Gate of Heavenly Peace, faced south across the Road of Everlasting Peace, and announced that China had "stood up." The emperors had marched through that very gate on their way to present offerings at the Temple of Heaven, on the horizon. Mao created a radical discontinuity with the traditions of his ancestors; a sweepingly iconoclastic attempt to rationalize leadership of the nation in terms other than fidelity to Heaven. One could argue the change from Mandate of Heaven to Four Principles of the People, then to a mandate laid on the proletariat by history, involved a national religious conversion, or only a switch in terminology. But as in the cases of the Qin, early Han, and Tai Ping Heavenly Kingdom, it would be hard to argue the change involved enfeeblement of the state. On the contrary, available examples make one wonder if China's most tyrannical rulers didn't find the traditional concept of *Tian confining*.

Ritual theism seemed to serve as a unifying act (as Durkheim predicted and Yang argued) -- but also as a limiting, and sometimes self-censoring act. Although worship of Heaven was the exclusive prerogative of the emperor, and the formal ritual constituted a claim to that office, the mandate concept was politically useful in part because the interest of *Tian* in the affairs of all was widely accepted. The acceptance of this concept can be seen by references not only in classical literature, but also in works like the *Water Margin* and *Dream of Red Mansions*, and by the large body of popular proverbs about the benevolence and power of *Tian*.

When I climbed Mount Tai, I found at the top a blank stone obelisk, erected I was told by Han Wudi. This rock, reminiscent of the "uncarved block" of Daoism, was perhaps a statement not only of Han's inability to translate his experience of the ultimate essence of things into words, (as explained to me) but also an acknowledgment of ignorance. The worship of Heaven, unlike that of common gods, was never represented by idols. While envisioned in later stages as everything from an old figure in a dragon robe, to a local chieftain under the Bodhisattva, there yet remained something indefinable about a god for whom the only proper symbol was an empty sky.

The offering to the unseen and only distantly recognized Ruler on High seemed to represent some psychological middle ground in Chinese belief, with a hint of Confucius' gentle caution, and Bodhidharma's iconoclastic simplicity. The Chinese made of this act a test of a healthy humility -- not only to God, but also to the traditions of their ancestors -- a bow to an unseen Master greater than one's own idols and ideologies. There were some rulers who could not abide this act of humility on its own terms: Qin Shihuang, (秦始皇) who expropriated the name *Di* for his title, Song Huizong (宋徽宗 960-1279), who entertained the idea that he was younger son to the Jade Emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, who reverted to the Shang practice of worshipping his ancestors with Heaven, Hong Xiuquan, (洪秀全) who claimed to be younger brother of Jesus, or Mao Zedong, (毛沢東) abolisher of Heaven and the gods. They tended to be flamboyant and gifted, but with faults Chinese history has magnified at the expense of their virtues. But even for some of the most tyrannical Chinese leaders, the idea of God seemed to act as a check on baser impulses.

Sacrifice to Heaven fulfilled a vital function in the minds even of skeptical Confucianists as the ultimate expression of *ritual* (礼). "If the lord acts as a lord, the vassal will act as a vassal. If a father acts as a father, the son will act as a son." In *A World Waiting to be Born: Civility Rediscovered*, M. Scott Peck argues, that even more than through policy, actions, or office structuring, the power of a leader lies in setting a tone for a group's moral culture.

Were the Confucianists "rationalists" who "cynically manipulated the masses" by the Mandate of Heaven? This ritual can as well be regarded as a device by which literati manipulated rulers. Confucianists told Han, Mongol and Manchu emperors, in effect, "We serve you because that is our duty to the Son of Heaven. It is your duty, in turn, to listen to ministers, and be compassionate to subjects." Sacrifice to Heaven, in effect, sealed the bargain.

## **God in Traditional Japan**

The history of non-Christian theism in Japan is less prominent, but also interesting. By exclusive focus on the *Lotus Sutra*, Nichiren created a Buddhism that verged on theism. (Kasahara, 158) Its doctrines and reformist character: the compassion of Kannon, salvation for evil-doers through faith, and a higher status for

women than usual -- suggest comparisons with Christianity. Later, Shintoists invented (or transmitted) a theistic belief in *Amenominaka no nushi*. (The God of the Center of Heaven.) Anthropologist David Lewis also claimed a surprisingly high proportion of persons in his survey of modern Japanese affirmed belief in "God" in some sense:

"In fact, many Japanese do believe in some kind of 'Being above man and nature' who might be analogous to a conception of a Supreme Being. Such a belief was asserted by 63.3 % of the 651 people who answered my question on this topic. Only 20.7 % expressed a definite disbelief in such a concept, and these were mainly those whose wartime experiences seem to have made them generally more cynical." (Lewis, 242-3)

I surveyed students at Nagasaki and Siebold Universities about their religious beliefs. Given five choices, ("There is no God," "God is a part of everything," "There are many gods," "There are many gods, but one God made everything and is greater than the others" and "There is only one God, who made everything"), pantheistic and animistic replies were the most frequent. Far more students gave theistic replies than Japanese education and religion would seem to predict, however. About a fifth of the students marked "There are many gods, but one God made everything," or (more frequently) "There is only one God, who made everything." The presence of theism among students answering the survey exceeded the percentage of Christians by a factor of twenty or so. In addition, one may speculate that animistic or pantheistic replies may sometimes disguise henotheism or practical reliance upon one supreme god.

Olivera Petrovich, a psychologist at Oxford University, found that a plurality of Japanese children ascribed the ultimate origin of things to God. Her Japanese colleagues expressed surprise: "We Japanese don't think about God as Creator--it's just not a part of Japanese philosophy." She concluded that "spirituality" (apparently in the sense of belief in a Creator) was not a learned idea, but a "universal act of cognition." Far from "socially constructed," such belief has, however, been vigorously discouraged.

## **Christianity and Political Development in the West**

The theory and institutions of government by constitutional law, separation of powers, and checks and balances in the West developed not only from Greco-Roman democracy, as is usually recognized, but also from the Jewish prophetic tradition, as interpreted by Christianity. University of Washington historian Donald Treadgold noted, "Hebrew society was unique in the ancient near East in managing to avoid the techniques, devices, and institutions of despotism." (Treadgold, 32) Much of the Old Testament is billed as a contest between "true" prophets, often from the margins of society, and "false" prophets, who took syncophantic, crypto-official positions. As representatives of God, rebuking kings was not merely the right, but the duty of those who spoke for God. Prophets defended the poor, women, orphans, and foreigners, who like themselves lived on the margins, but were unable to speak for themselves.

Jesus should be seen in part as a traditional Jewish prophet of the margins. "My kingdom is not of this world," he said, explaining why, despite the latent military potential of his following, he would not make a bid for political power. "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God." Jesus said little directly about politics, but what he did say had a tremendous effect on Western thought. In the second century, Justin Martyr wrote an open letter to Emperor Antonius Pius. "You can kill us, but you cannot harm us," he boldly warned, paraphrasing another of Jesus' sayings. Bishop Ambrose, in the 3rd Century, took the radical step of excommunicating Emperor Theodosius for a massacre. "Where matters of faith are concerned it is the custom for bishops to judge Christian emperors, nor for Emperors to judge bishops," he explained. (Tierney, 9) Pluralism thus found expression in practice even before Ambrose's brilliant protege, Augustine of Hippo, further limited human authority and created an independent, international social sphere:

"(God) did not wish the rational being, made in his own image, to have

dominion over any but irrational creatures, not man over man, but man over beasts." (Augustine, 874)

While this Heavenly City, therefore, is on pilgrimage in this world, she calls out citizens from all." (Ibid, 878)

The tension and maneuvering between church and state over the Medieval period slowly allowed development of a complex society with uniquely free and independent, but mutually-correcting, institutions. (Tierny, 1964) St. John anticipated the themes of 1984 by canonically demonizing the total state, making absolutism a heresy. Jacobins, Nazis, and Communists confirmed the link between heresy and tyranny in the minds of Christian thinkers like Burke and Toqueville. Western democracy was formed over three thousand years of theological tinkering, tied at critical junctures to faith: "All men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. "

The Nestorians (景教) arrived in Chang An (長安) in 635 A. D. While they enjoyed patronage, there is little sign that they influenced political events in China. They creatively described God as the "Mysterious Three in One," "True Lord without Origin," and the "One Sacred Spirit." Judging by the writings they left behind, the Nestorians appear to have put into practice the reformist intuitions that had already appeared in the West (Stark, 95-128; Pelikan, 148; Cahill, 109-112) by refusing to keep slaves, and by granting women a higher position than was common. The Nestorian writings appear obsequious towards Chinese power, however -- perhaps not surprising, since most of what we know about the church comes from writings sponsored by the state. In return, Emperor Tai Zong wrote an inscription to praise the Nestorian faith. While what he wrote suggests he may have been vague on the details of Christian thought -- the church had after all just begun its work of translation -- it also suggests he felt the idea of a Creator God translated well into the Chinese context. "The Way (道) cannot be called by one single unchangeable name, nor do sages appear only in one form . . . (The Nestorian) teachings are mysterious and wonderful beyond



understanding, telling how things originated and were established . . ." (景浄, 781)

### **Christian and Anti-Christian literati in the 17th Century**

Fabian Fucan was a Japanese who converted to Catholicism in his youth, before breaking with the church and authoring a tract called *Destroying Deus*. While many Chinese and Japanese literati attacked Christianity, Fucan's work stands out by his position as a former Christian apologist, the depth of his bitterness, and by the influence a concept he may have originated, "the body of the nation" (国体), had later.

Addressing himself with deference to "our ruler" who "possesses perspicuity and sagacity, so that he need hear but one part in ten to understand the whole ten," Fucan noted with disgust that the Christians refused (in theory) to obey their lord and recant even on pain of death. "Whence does this flagrant wickedness arise? . . . (From) the first *mandamento*." The message the Jesuits brought seemed to Fucan to carry an implicit, and unacceptable, challenge to absolutism:

"The first *mandamento* urges disobedience to the orders of the sovereign or father if compliance would mean denial of (God's) will; it entreats one to hold life itself cheap in such a situation. In this precept lurks the intention to subvert and usurp the country, to extinguish Buddha's Law and Royal Sway. Quick, quick! Put this gang in stocks and shackles!" (Elison)

Fucan mocked the foreign terminology of the priests: "*Deus is infititus . . . spiritulis substantia . . . omnipotens . . . sapientissimus . . . justissimus . . .*" "So much Chinaman's gibberish it is, crooked twaddle to dupe idle fools!" The perversity and strangeness of the defendants implied the need to throw the book at them. "The wise ruler has decided to stamp out your doctrine, and the people also hate it and inform on it and denounce its followers, so that they are beheaded or crucified or burnt at the stake. "

The showpiece of Fucan's case, linguistically speaking, was the Latin word *Deus*. He taunted Christians with the alien term. "So it took all of five thousand years after

heaven and earth were opened up for *Deus* to enter the world! Was the atonement so late in coming because heaven and earth are so far apart?" He accused the Jesuits of plotting to "usurp the country," do away with Japanese customs, and "extinguish Buddha's Law and Royal Sway." The foreign nature of the term was *prima facia* evidence in favor of his fears.

In China, too, critic Xingqian described the Jesuits as an "ugly class of barbarians" and "mean devils" who would "diminish our emperors and officials." He denigrated the writings of Chinese converts not only as "the buzz of mosquitoes or the cry of frogs" but as "songs of a fisherman or a shepherd." (Standaert, 181) Although his opponents were literati, his taunts imply that they advocated a social leveling that Fucan found unacceptable.

The 16th and 17th Century Jesuits and their Chinese colleagues, however, unlike the Catholics who worked in Japan, appealed over the heads of contemporary literati to ancient Chinese theistic tradition. Ricci noted that he had "assiduously studied the ancient records of China" and found the ancient sages worshipped the same God. Ironically rather like Martin Luther, European missionaries and Christian literati called their fellows back to the essential texts of their own tradition, against the accumulated debris of later additions. Ricci argued that, obscured as it had been by sin, "The Way of the Lord of Heaven is in the heart of man." (天主教在人心。)

Ricci's approach is often, but inaccurately, described as "accommodation" or even "syncretism." If Ricci and the Chinese Christians were accommodating themselves to anything, it was to their own Scriptures. The New Testament predicts that people around the world are aware of the Creator (Romans 1:20-21), Augustine expected this to be found so. (Augustine, 311) Confucius also made a case for cross-cultural missions (*Analects*, I, 1, IX, 13), precisely because the Way was universal. The Tai Zong and Kang Xi emperors explicitly applied this traditional Chinese dogma to Christian theism.

Ricci's most illustrious disciple, scientist and official Xu Guangqi, saw himself as the faithful heir of theistic ancestors: "We believe there is a God (*Tian Zhu*) who is the Supreme Lord, just as in the Confucian classics." In striking contrast to Fucan,

Xu introduced few foreign terms into his apologetic writings. Showing the same linguistic flexibility (and, one might add, sophistication) that Durkheim noted among Australian aborigines, he spoke of God as *Di*, (帝) Lord (主), Ruler (主宰, 真宰) and Sovereign, (皇). Words were less important to the early Chinese Christians than the reality to which they pointed, precisely because, despite the popularity of Zhu Xi's monism, theism did seem the most natural interpretation of Confucius. Mungello writes that Zhang Xingyao, a literati Christian of a slightly later period, acted "not only as a social critic of the China of his time, but also as a Confucian prophet who spoke for God and called the Chinese people back to morality." (Mungello, 124) Literati critics like Yang Guangxin, relied on complex expositions to prove that *Shang Di* could only refer to the impersonal "Supreme Ultimate." Not only literati converts to Christianity, but even the Kang Xi emperor agreed with the Christian view, however. The worship of *Tian*, he noted, "actually originated in the traditional respect for the Master-of-Tien." (Young, 121) Even critical scholars admit, in a roundabout and grudging manner, that the Jesuits were right in claiming *Tian* to be personal, and their critics wrong. (see Yang, 1961, Ames and Hall, 1987, 21; 1998) Chinese converts overlooked variety of cultures that so confuses post-modern thinkers, to perceive a continuity between East and West, and between their ancient sages and personal experience of God. To both Australian aborigines and Chinese theists, God "had no invariable name." (無常名)

Another literati Christian, Yang Tingyun, drew upon reformist Confucian writings such as the *Xi Ming* (西銘) *The Homilies of Confucius* (孔子家語), and the philosopher Zhang Zai, to link Confucian and Christian social advocacy. "The Master of Heaven regards men as sons, without any distinction of noble or mean, wise or stupid . . . He is the Great Father and Mother." "Therefore, to feed the hungry, to quench the thirst y, to dress the naked, to house the travellers, to cure the sick, to take care of prisoners, to ransom prisoners, and to bury the dead, these are all deeds of loving persons." (Mungello)

In both Biblical and Confucian traditions, a prophet was called to speak hard truths to political power, even in the face of danger. Yang Tingyun had the chance to witness that danger when Jesuits took refuge in his home. Whether because of the

politically-charged nature of the new teaching, the need for religious harmony, or with an eye to new geopolitical dangers, government in both China and Japan came to see theism as a threat. Thus, as Christians in late Ming and early Qing China experienced it, faith in God would become not a socially-constructed, but a socially-repressed belief. In Japan, the repression would last 270 years.

From the late 19th Century to the mid 20th Century, China and Japan were visited by a series of radical changes, in which theists played a revolutionary role. James Legge was a 19<sup>th</sup> Century China scholar whose translations of the Chinese Classics are still standard. He summarized the theism he found in those classics in a tone very like that of Ricci: "*Ti (Di)* was to the Chinese fathers, I believe, exactly what God was to our fathers." (Legge, 11) One of Legge's Chinese friends was a young man named Hong Rengan, who wrote the first radical reformist program for China.

### **The Tai Ping Heresy**

During the middle of the 19th Century, a young school teacher who lived a short distance from the city of Canton read a Christian tract written by the first Protestant Chinese convert. After failing a civil exam and suffering a nervous breakdown, the young man had a vision of an old man with a white beard, whom he identified as God. Founding a Worship God Society (拜上帝会), Hong came to believe he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ, with a mission to "kill demons" (the Manchus) and establish a Chinese dynasty, the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace. (太平天国) Incredibly, he almost succeeded, conquering much of China and establishing a rebel dynasty at Nanjing (南京 where the Ming, the previous purely Chinese dynasty had been established 500 years before).

Hong Xiuquan's God was not orthodox either by Christian or traditional Confucian standards, more resembling the popular Taoist Jade Emperor. However, the Tai Pings exhibited strict monotheism, blending Christian and Confucian theism, and began to reform southern China.

In the restored presidential palace in Nanjing built on the site of the Tai Ping

government, there stands a replica of Hong Xiuquan's study. On a pillar to the right of Hong's reading desk are written, in flowing script: "The tiger runs a thousand *li* and returns to the land of the swallow." On a pillar to the left, "The dragon flies to the ninth heaven and revives the dynasty of Yao and Shun." ( 舜: The legendary ideal emperors of ancient China.) These inscriptions reflect the fact that Hong saw his mission as reviving Chinese religion and fulfilling ancient tradition, rather than acquiescing to a foreign belief system. Like the dragon, he would ascend to the throne of God, and come home to restore the ancient Confucian ideal. He avoided the title *Di* (帝) by which emperors since Qin Shi Huang had used, out of respect for God. Like Ricci and Xu, he appealed over the heads of recent rulers to ancient Confucianism. (Even while unfairly castigating Confucius himself.) Despite the totalitarian tendencies of his reign, Hong could to some degree separate God as ultimate authority from himself as human agent, thus allowing him to retain human qualities.

Hong's cousin, Hong Rengan, made his way to Nanjing late in the movement. Being close to his somewhat mad cousin, and the only man in town with much understanding of the outside world, Rengan was appointed head of state. He drafted wide-ranging proposals for radical reform. Scholar Jen Yu-wen argues, largely on the basis of this document, (along with social reforms that the Taipings had begun, such as an end to footbinding and opium use, and their plans for land redistribution) that not only liberation from the Manchus, but also the modernization of China, would likely have followed from a Tai Ping victory. (Jen, 12) Vincent Shih pointed out that it was Hong Rengan, alone among the Tai Pings to have a good understanding of Christianity, who took it upon himself to defend the Confucian classics. It seems reasonable to assume he was encouraged in this by his close friendship with James Legge.

### **Nationalist Revolution**

Considering their small numbers, it is astonishing how many later East Asian reformers have identified themselves as Christians: Sun Yat-sen, founder of post-Imperial China, Jiang Jieshi, Li Denghui; Japanese social reformers or opponents of militarism

Uchimura Kanzo, Kitamura Tokoku, Abe Isoo, Kagawa Toyohiko, and Yanaihara Tadao; Korean democratic reformers Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam, and Martin Lee in Hong Kong. Historian Gu Weiming counts 30% of those who took part in Sun's Huizhou revolt, and "more than sixty" representatives to the early nationalist government, as Christians. (Gu, 355) Sun saw his own Christian faith as being in sync with the beliefs of the ancient Chinese:

"China has a systematic understanding of the spirit of the Word which began with Emperors Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, and Zhougong . . . My own body of thought has been developed on the essence of this understanding of the Word." (Ling, 40)

It is remarkable the effect Leroy Jane and William Clark had in the brief time the two educators were in Japan. Clark taught at Sapporo Agricultural College for less than a year, leaving behind an entire class dedicated to following Jesus, who even press-ganged Uchimura Kanzo into faith. How did Jesus inspire such impassioned devotion among such outstanding and patriotic young men? It would seem odd if they found faith in God an entirely foreign concept. Historian Irwin Scheimer ascribes their conversion to the missionaries' love of their students and commitment to Japan, and the way in which Christian faith fulfilled Confucian and Samurai values. Many converted through reading W.A.P. Martin's *Seeking the Source of the Way of Heaven* (天道遡源), a text I believe is much in the Ricci-Legge tradition. Scheimer notes that through Martin they found a "personalized Creator" in Confucian texts. (Scheimer,61) ("Personalized," like "anthropomorphic," rather begs the question, however, as in both Christ and Confucius it is Heaven that give personality to man, not the other way around. “天生我: Heaven gave me birth.”) At least one convert found encouragement in the Confucian philosopher, Yokoi Shonan, who said Christianity "comes from God."

"Heaven, Yokoi Shonan had said, was something more than reason, it possessed a personal character. More than one convert suggested a similar idea. Matsumura Kaisuke, for example, wrote in (信仰五十年) 'Isn't the so-called God of

Christianity called *tentei* or *jotei*? (上帝) Therefore I must have believed in the existence of God since childhood." (Scheimer, 90/91)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail the social implications that Christian samurai found in this ancient yet new faith in God, the reforms they attempted, or the opposition their faith provoked. (see Scheimer, 1970, Bamba & Howes, Miura, etc.) What is important to note is that theism appeared to these young men not as a foreign or a political construct, but as a universal, self-evidencing belief, that would serve as the basis for radical social involvement: labor unions, freeing prostitutes, helping the poor, creating independent civil institutions. The Powers-That-Be would react to such insidious theology by recreating an absolutist state headed by a transcendent leader, a *kokutai*, as would later be formed in Germany.

### **After the Deluge: Political Ambitions of a Resurrected Church**

Both emperor cult in Japan and cult of Mao in China represented a totalitarian reaction to theistic-inspired reform. Transition to democracy in Japan was nursed by an allied commander who believed strongly in the link between Christian thought and the institutions of democracy.

A number of prominent Chinese intellectuals have recently become attracted to Christianity partly for its perceived influence on the development of democratic institutions. Labor activist Han Dongfang has argued "The future of Chinese society and its development depend on Christianity." (Lambert, 101) Democracy movement philosopher Yuan Zhiming, having traced "profound thinking in Western democracy" to the Bible, has become a Christian evangelist. Yuan has come to believe that reform of Chinese culture requires a return to China's spiritual roots (paradoxically) by embracing Christianity. (Yuan, 1997)

On a grass-roots level, the growth of house church networks creates grass-roots civil society. On August, 1998, leaders of ten illegal networks issued a public statement much in the style of Justin Martyr's address to the Roman emperor. They

challenged the state to release prisoners, "begin a dialogue" and "end attacks" on house churches, among other things:

" If it were not the work of God, why have so many churches and Christians been raised up in China? Therefore the judicial system and the United Front should readjust their policies on religion lest they violate God's will to their own detriment." (Lambert, 55-57)

Three months later four house church networks, mostly in Central China, wrote a joint confession of faith, explicitly calling for separation of church and state. Tens of millions of Christians in China form an independent civil society that commits to "world affirming" pluralism both in theory and in practice. Simultaneously they expressed fundamental loyalty to the Chinese state.

Throughout East Asian history, one finds evidence of a positive link between theism and liberty. Furthermore, belief in God appears to the first believers as culturally transcendent, rather than a product of a given social structure.

Indeed, even a careful reading of Durkheim implicitly suggests the trans-cultural nature of theism. Durkheim argued that religious reality "has varied infinitely." From this premise, he argued that religious belief must be socially constructed, rather than based on reality. Yet he noted that Australian tribes shared a faith in God that was "fundamentally the same everywhere." According to dozens of widely-separated peoples, God was immortal, controlled stars and weather, originated mankind, animals, and trees, was "benefactor of humanity," communicated with people, guarded, punished, and judged mankind after death. Nor was he confined by geographical or cultural boundaries. "The authority each of these high gods has is not restricted to a single tribe but is recognized as well by a number of neighboring tribes." (Durkheim, 292) In startling contrast to the "infinite variety" of belief Durkheim found in religion in general, here he admitted a highly specific pattern of convergence.

John Mbiti provides an even more consistent and detailed list of characteristics



of the supreme God as known "without a single exception" in the native beliefs of nearly three hundred Africa tribes. (Mbiti, 29-57) These characteristics are much the same as in Australia, in the West, and in China.

What could it mean to say a belief that is common to such diverse societies as Shang China, Australian and African tribes, Medieval Europe, and modern Silicon valley or Sao Paulo, is "socially constructed?"

In East Asia, belief in God has often been the target of intense deconstruction instead. In Japan and China, the religion in which the "sky god" played the most prominent role was at least socially discouraged, more often persecuted. (Even under the KMT, belief in the Christian God was seen as a liability to the task of creating a modern, unified China.) Sometimes this persecution was explicitly justified by what was seen as the dangerously liberalizing effect of theism, the threat belief in God posed to political absolutism. (Though of course, the threat of Western imperial powers also greatly concentrated the minds of some East Asian rulers.) The notion of God appeared troubling to many who would hold absolute power, and therefore deconstructed. For the poor, weak, and marginalized, however, faith in God often brought a softening effect to society, and self-limitation to government, both in the Confucian and Christian traditions, and when the two joined and reinforced one another.

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