

Christianity as Model and Analogue in the Formation of the ‘Humanistic’ Buddhism of Tàì Xū and Hsīng Yún¹

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This article examines how modern Chinese Buddhism has been influenced by Christianity. For our purposes ‘modern Chinese Buddhism’ refers to a form of what has become known in the West as ‘Engaged Buddhism’, but in Chinese is known by titles which can be translated ‘Humanistic Buddhism’ or ‘Buddhism for Human Life’. This tradition was initiated on the Chinese mainland between the two World Wars by the monk Tàì Xū, and Part one of the article is devoted to him. Since the communist conquest of China, its main branches have flourished in Taiwan, whence two of them have spread worldwide. The most successful, at least in numerical terms, has been Fo Guang Shan (‘Buddha’s Light Mountain’), founded by a personal disciple of Tàì Xū, Hsing Yun, now very old, and it is on this movement that we concentrate in Parts two and three. We differentiate between conscious imitation and analogous development due to similar social circumstances, and show how Protestant Christianity and Roman Catholicism have had different effects. In Part four, we examine Fo Guang Shan as a missionary religion.

If one observes contemporary Buddhism across the globe, at first sight it appears bewilderingly varied. Nevertheless, we wish to argue in this article that there is one major tradition which originated less than a hundred years ago and is quite distinctive — even though by now it has diversified and can already be seen as a set of traditions. In most of the world it is best known as ‘Engaged Buddhism’, a term coined in 1967 by the Vietnamese Zen monk Thích Nhất Hạnh (b. 1926); but in China, where it began, its English name is ‘Humanistic Buddhism’. Thích Nhất Hạnh himself said that his ‘Engaged Buddhism’ — the ‘engagement’ being with life in society — was the same as ‘humanistic Buddhism’.² That said, the term ‘Humanistic Buddhism’ is

1. In this article we mostly use Pinyin spelling, but do not attempt complete consistency, because we cite from various sources. In Pinyin, Hsing Yun would be Xīngyún, but he himself prefers to use the old (Wade Giles) spelling, and without diacritics, so we follow his preference. In Wade Giles, Tàì Xū is T’ai-hsü.
2. See *Wikipedia* article ‘Engaged Buddhism’ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Engaged_Buddhism

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generally a term applied specifically to a form of modern Chinese Buddhism, and this is how we use it here.

By now it would probably not be possible to characterize or discuss Engaged Buddhism as a whole within the confines of one article: its practice is so widespread and diverse. Despite this, we shall suggest that to analyse the relations of Chinese Humanistic Buddhism with Christianity³ can contribute to our understanding of its development, and form a useful background for understanding the development of Engaged Buddhism as a whole. In this article we shall use both a historical and a sociological approach.

Part 1: Tàì Xū

'Humanistic Buddhism' owes its origin to the Chinese monk Tàì Xū (1890–1947); but he did not merely coin a term (originally 'Buddhism for human life'; Chinese: *rén shēng fó jiào*): he supplied the movement's leading ideas. He was a man of amazing energy and fearless originality. He was bursting with ideas, and undertook a vast range of activities. He probably made more enemies than friends, but through a few devoted followers he came to have an enormous impact on Buddhism, an impact which has spread to most of the world. His importance has so far been seriously underestimated, at least outside China; very few of his works have been translated from the Chinese. His collected works (*Tàixū dàshī quánshū*) were first published in Hong Kong in 1950 in 64 volumes, but the subsequent publishing history is tangled and hard to penetrate.⁴

In a short account such as this, which does not focus exclusively on Tàì Xū, it is impossible to give even a summary of Tàì Xū's many important ideas. For our purposes it will suffice to say that Tàì Xū found the Buddhism which surrounded him in China dreary and moribund, preoccupied with rituals for the dead, and offering nothing to help or guide people living in the world outside monasteries. His determination to reverse this decay centred on two main ideas, which overlapped. One was that it was the vocation of a Mahāyāna Buddhist — and of course the Chinese considered themselves Mahāyānists — to do good to others, finding their own spiritual benefit in benefitting society. The other was that what Chinese Buddhism lacked first and foremost was organization and efficient administration. At first, in the 1920s, early in the Republican period, he thought that Japanese Buddhism offered a model of practical efficiency. Later, in the face of Japanese aggression (which culminated in their invasion of China), he became more impressed by Christianity. Although his collected works contain relatively few passages about Christianity, what he has to say is extremely significant.

and Bingenheimer 2007, 142.

3. In much of Asia, including Taiwan, 'Christian' is widely understood to refer only to Protestant Christianity. We use the term, as Christians do in the rest of the world, to include Roman Catholicism.
4. The text of Tàì Xū's works which we are using is to be found at *Tàì Xū Collected Works (Tàixūdàshīquánshū)* (CD-ROM) published by Yin Shun Foundation, 2005, Xinzhu, Taiwan. We refer to this simply as 'Tàì Xū'

Tài Xū’s overarching vision was global. ‘His attitudes towards interfaith dialogue were sincere and constant. ... [I]n a letter to a meeting of world religious leaders in Shanghai, he expressed his sincere wishes for the unity of all religions. He hoped that each sect would learn from others’ strengths and overcome their weaknesses.’⁵

Closer to home, as it were, he tried hard to promote a world Buddhist organization. He founded the first World Buddhist Federation, and held its first formal conference in Lú Shān in 1924, having obtained the approval of the Chinese and Japanese governments (Welch 1968, 56). Its next conference was held in Tokyo in November 1925. Though that was very small, Holmes Welch writes: ‘This was perhaps the first international Buddhist conference of modern times.’ (Welch 1968, 166). Though Tài Xū’s aims were not realized at that time, or indeed during his lifetime, when the Sinhalese scholar Dr G.P.Malalasekera founded the World Buddhist Federation in 1950, he declared that he was inspired to do so by Tài Xū.⁶

After the Second World War, Tài Xū wrote:

The oriental medicine of compassion, forbearance, benevolence and righteousness can be the medicine for wildness. First, it is necessary to establish an international Buddhist organization that transcends all the states in the world. When the westerners are convinced of the essential wisdom of Buddhist compassion, they will overcome their arrogance and taste for fighting. They will join the international organization and make it a world of paradise for all mankind.⁷

The vision of this world as a Buddhist paradise has, we shall see, often been equated with the Buddhist Pure Land. Tài Xū himself was of course familiar with that concept and used it, but he wanted Buddhists to do their best to produce such a ‘Pure Land’ in the secular world of today (Long 2000a, 173).

Learning from the Christians

In broaching the topic of Tài Xū’s reaction to Christianity,⁸ we must first say that he had no respect whatever for Christian theology, and his work contains trenchant

5. Tài Xū part 18, p.18. Long 2000a, 175.

6. Welch 1968, 64. ‘Thus the ecumenical impulse that had originated with Dharmapala [on his visit to Shanghai] in 1893 and had been transmitted from Yang Wen-hui to T’ai-hsü to Dr Malalasekera, returned to reach its fulfillment in Ceylon half century after it began there.’

7. Tài Xū part 15 p.84. Long, 2000a, 180. These sources do not give the exact date, but the original appeared in Tài Xū’s journal *Hài Cháo Yīn*, vol.29 no.5.

8. For our knowledge of this topic we are almost entirely indebted to Darui Long 2000a: ‘An Interfaith Dialogue between the Chinese Buddhist Leader Taixu and Christians’.

While Long’s information is invaluable, the article is not easy to use: some references are missing or incomplete; some beyond our means to check; and those to Tài Xū’s writings use a system which he does not explain and which it took us a long time to understand. Where we could trace the quotations from Tài Xū we have found them generally accurate, but preferred mostly to re-translate them. In order to help any scholars who may wish to follow in our footsteps, our understanding of Long’s references is as follows:

Long uses the ‘early edition in 64 slim volumes’ (Eric Goodell, personal communication, for which we thank him) and its arrangement into 20 parts. We have a digital version in 20 parts with no indication of how it relates to any edition in volumes. Most of these parts, but not all, are spread over more than one of the 64 volumes — one part (no.7) covers 12 volumes; two other parts cover 6 vols each. Where a part contains more than one volume,

criticism of Christian doctrines. It is exclusively Christian practice that he praised and admired, and this alone is our topic.

One might expect that a man as busy as Tàì Xū would have no time to acquire more than a very superficial acquaintance with a philosophical or religious system completely alien to his own — but one would be wrong. In his article Darui Long writes: ‘Taixu met with Chinese Christians at least seven times’, and they range from 1926 to 1943 (Long 2000a, 176). All seem to be official encounters. Surely most important, however, is that in August 1928 he went on a world tour with official backing from Chiang Kai-Shek’s government; in nearly 9 months he visited France, England, Germany, the USA and Japan (Welch 1968, 59). Though he was severely hampered by his ignorance of foreign languages, he evidently saw and understood a good deal.

Perhaps the most telling single quotation from Tàì Xū concerning Christianity comes from a speech entitled ‘The Chinese need Christianity, whereas the West needs Buddhism’, which he delivered in June 1938 at Huá Xī University, also known as the West Chinese Union University, in Chéngdū:

Christianity and Buddhism are very similar in their views on religion. In the past twenty or thirty years, my great efforts to reform Buddhism in China have been inspired by the influence of Christianity. Christianity has had a tremendous impact on modern Chinese cultural activities, social welfare and spiritual beliefs. By contrast, Chinese Buddhism, though it has a long history and has been pervasive in China, with profound religious teachings, has been of little benefit to society. Therefore there is a need to borrow from Christianity to improve Buddhism. Further, there is a need for Chinese society in general to be improved by a Christian spirit. When I visited Europe, I observed European society and thought that its advantages lay in its organizational skills ... Modern Europe and America have made much progress, not all of which is due to Christianity; some is due to scientific invention and developed industry. But the fundamental cause of their organizational skills comes from the spread of Christianity in the Middle Ages. Christians believe in one God, which has unified them in their thoughts, which in turn are in conformity with their actions. Since Christianity has long been the universal creed of Europe, people have in thought and habit cultivated orderliness and decorum. On Sundays, regardless of class or profession, everyone takes a day off and gathers in churches to attend services; they all worship with the same music and rituals, and this uniformity has a profound impact on their families. Thus the harmonic music and solemn rites mould family life and develop organizational ability.⁹

It is typical of Tàì Xū’s originality that he ascribes Christians’ organizational skills not merely to their monotheism — which he elsewhere compares unfavour-

this is indicated by roman numerals. The beginnings and ends of parts always coincide with the beginnings and ends of volumes, but of course not vice versa. Pagination begins afresh every few volumes and often at the beginning of a part, but this is not yet clear to us. Thus Long ‘vol 55, part 18, II, p.433’ is vol 55, which is the second section (of 3 sections) of part 18, and we think that the pagination is counted from the beginning of vol 54, which is the first section of part 18.

9. part 13, pp.26–27. Quoted by Long (with different wording), 2000a, 178–179.

ably to Buddhism — but to two fundamental features of their music, both alien to Chinese music: choral singing and the use of harmony.¹⁰

The above quotation can be set beside another from a speech Tàì Xū had given at the same venue in 1920, eighteen years earlier; here the emphasis is not on organization but on organization’s primary utility, namely for social service:

Buddhist theory is very advanced, standing between philosophy and science. Implementation is of two kinds: one is to promote self-cultivation; the other is to serve social needs. Mahāyāna originally focused on the second, Theravāda on the first, ignoring the second. In the former category are aspects of Christianity; the sincerity, righteousness and cultivation of Confucianism; and Buddhism, which has more methods of self-cultivation. Moreover, American and European Christians are enthusiastic in their social activities, and in this respect Chinese Buddhism and other religions fall far behind Christianity. The Christians in Europe and America all contribute to society and serve others; their social activity is very advanced. Some Chinese who have studied abroad have claimed that in Europe and America people no longer believe in religion. In fact, however, apart from a few who study philosophy and science, very few people there do not believe in religion. This is why Christians dedicate themselves to social service. If Buddhists can be Bodhisattvas and follow the six Perfections [*pāramitā*], putting theory into practice, Buddhism could become the new faith of the world. That is why for the past twenty years I have been promoting Mahāyāna Buddhism and have been urging Buddhists to promote the welfare of others as their own. This is the spirit of the Buddhas and the fulfilment of each individual.¹¹

In a discussion with Christians held in 1931, Tàì Xū said: ‘The altruism of the Bodhisattvas of Mahāyāna Buddhism can save and enlighten all sentient beings, sacrificing their own welfare for the public good, just as Jesus Christ sacrificed himself to save the world and act as the ideal model.’¹²

Education

Tàì Xū particularly admired and tried to emulate the Christian attention to education. Buddhists had begun to set up schools which provided secular education only near the end of the nineteenth century. The Buddhists were slow to realize what they had been missing and these schools were almost invariably short-lived, lack of interest being reflected in lack of funds. Even Buddhist seminaries tended to meet the same fate.

10. For Tàì Xū’s creation and use of Buddhist songs in imitation of Christian hymns, see Tarocco 2007. He wrote, late in the 1920s, the lyrics of what became probably the most popular Buddhist song of all, *The Song of the Three Jewels (Sanbao Ge)* (Tarocco 2007, 19, 117, 126).

11. Tàì Xū part 18, p.88. Mostly quoted (with different wording) by Long 2000a, 179. On p.177, in paragraph 2, Long quotes another forceful statement by Tàì Xū that ‘Christians devote themselves to advancing general social welfare; they propagate their teachings by practicing altruism’, and Buddhists should do the same; but the reference he gives in his fn.34 is inaccessible to us.

12. Tàì Xū part 17-02, p.46. Long (with different wording), 2000a, 176.

Taixu himself set up his Wuchang Seminary in 1922.¹³ The aim of this seminary was to encourage students to revive Buddhism and preach the 'law of salvation' in such a way that they could meet the needs of the new China. The students were also urged to study Christianity, which was thought to have some very good and helpful ideas, especially with regard to true compassion and self-denial. On the other hand, it was always pointed out that, in regard to the solution of the great metaphysical questions, Christianity was very much inferior to Buddhism.

Tài Xū became the Proctor of the Mǐn Nán Seminary in the summer of 1927.¹⁴ 'He imitated the courses offered by Christian missionaries. A variety of courses was offered, including Western philosophies, ethics, psychology and an introduction to various religions of the world.'¹⁵

In 1937, writing about the recent history of Buddhism in China, Tài Xū said that at the Wú Chāng Seminary he pioneered education for the Saṅgha, and thus not only influenced young monastics but also had a great impact on academic, political and social culture. The seminary continued as the World Buddhist College Library and Research Centre; it was also the model for further seminaries, including a Tibetan one.¹⁶

According to Welch, Tài Xū borrowed the syllabus at Wú Chāng from a Japanese Buddhist university. It included many of the best known sutras. Later, however, Tài Xū shifted his emphasis 'from Buddhism as a religion to Buddhism as a philosophy.' (Welch 1968, 113). More important were the radical changes Tài Xū made when he took over at Mǐn Nán.¹⁷

He instituted written examinations, diplomas, and a regular marking system in which 60 per cent was the passing grade. Lectures were given by an instructor (*chiao shih*), as they would have been in a Western classroom, not by a lecturer seated on a dais in a red robe ... The instructor walked around and used a blackboard, while the students sat taking notes. Although sometimes the instructor would ask them questions about their reading, they were expected to answer briefly in their own words, not to repeat mechanically what they had heard the day before. Most young monks found that they learned much faster this way. The use of the blackboard was particularly important: the Chinese language has so many homophones and Buddhism has so many technical terms that verbal instruction was at best inefficient and often incomprehensible.

For 18 hours a week they studied secular subjects: traditional literature, Japanese, history, geography and psychology — but no mathematics (Welch 1968, 111). Some of the instructors were laymen. The students 'did not take part in any program of meditation or reciting the Buddha's name. The goal was to stimulate, not to still,

13. Tài Xū part 19, II, p.8.

14. Tài Xū part 21 pp.55–56. 'Proctor' seems to mean something like headmaster.

15. Tài Xū part 9, I, p.78; Long, 2000a, 176. Long here gives references to Tài Xū part 9, II which we cannot trace. Nor can we trace in Tài Xū's text the allusions to Christianity in the above paragraph, but we assume that Long must have got them from somewhere.

16. Tài Xū part 19, I, p.8.

17. Mǐn Nán was the name that Tài Xū gave to a pre-existing seminary in South Fukien when he took it over.

their minds.’ (Welch 1968, 112). This illustrates that in reforming Buddhist seminaries on a partly Christian model, Tàì Xū was also introducing Western secular features.

The many ways in which Tàì Xū tried to turn Chinese Buddhism into a ‘religion for this life’ cannot but remind one of Christianity. Tàì Xū criticized the Buddhist Saṅgha for serving the laity only by performing funerals, and even there they contrasted with Christians, for the Christian minister performs rites for the dead as an obligation of his role, whereas the Buddhist monk has each time to be paid for his services (Long 2000a, 177–178). Tàì Xū argued that in other Buddhist countries the Saṅgha offered the living such services as opening children’s schools (kindergartens?), celebrating birthdays and weddings, and offering biscuits to children.¹⁸

Activism in public life

Moving still further into the public sphere, Tàì Xū noted how Christians set up hospitals and medical schools and took great interest in the care of the sick. He established orphanages (Long, 2000a, 184). He also imitated Christians by instituting a programme of prison visiting (Long 2000a, 179–180). He gave a fascinating talk at a prison in 1934¹⁹ in which he compared the discipline one can acquire as a prisoner with the training of a monk, concluding: ‘It is like taking a medicine to heal a sickness; after recovery, the medicine is no longer needed. So following the rules here is just like a Buddhist training in the precepts, and can lead to becoming a Buddha.’

Finally, though the influence of Christianity may not be explicit here, Tàì Xū broke important new ground in his relatively positive attitude to political involvement. Buddhists should ‘show concern for politics but not interfere with them.’ He was a member of the Nationalist Party (Guó Mín Dǎng). All this was controversial even among his supporters (Long 2000b, 60–61). He insisted — as most Christians but very few Buddhists would have done — that Buddhists, and particularly the Saṅgha, should play an active part in the defence of their nation. Buddhists were citizens too and thus obliged to serve their country. At the same time, they should preach their doctrines. ‘He organized Buddhist rescue teams for soldiers who had been wounded by the Japanese invaders’, and ‘urged the authorities to allow the Buddhist rescue members to wear their cassocks’ to make their identity conspicuous (Long 2000a, 173).

In contrast with what happened in Japan and Korea, Tàì Xū was not prepared to go so far as to allow Saṅgha members to be conscripted. When the Sino-Japanese War began, ‘the Military Commission of the Chinese government issued an order that all young monks and nuns old enough to join the army be subject to conscription. Tàì Xū called on the Nationalist Party and requested that all monks and nuns in the prime of life be trained to take care of soldiers wounded at the front, in conformity with the spirit of Buddhism.’ In the end he won his case (Long 2000a, 178). Long suggests that his participation in the fight against the Japanese greatly contributed to the respect in which he was held after his death.

18. Long 2000a, 177. Unfortunately he gives no reference for the biscuits.

19. Tàì Xū part 18, p.107. Long mentions this with no reference, and does not quote the talk.

We conclude this Part with a vivid summary by Francesca Tarocco (2007, 121):

The late 1920s and early 1930s were years of intense public activity for some Buddhist clerics — Taixu more than anyone — and of growth in lay Buddhist involvement with novel practices that were more ‘congregational’ in nature. Taixu and his followers organized countless meetings and gave lectures all over China, meetings that often led to the opening of new Buddhist associations, not only in Jiangnan but all over China, in Sichuan, Guangdong, Fujian, and so on. New Buddhist periodicals appeared every day, twenty-one being launched between 1929 and 1939 in Shanghai alone. In fact, contrary to the still too common perception of a declining religion, 1930s Buddhists were regarded as ‘so well advanced in their activities’ that the editor of the popular missionary journal *Chinese Recorder* encouraged all Christian missionaries to ‘learn from them’ (*Chinese Recorder* 1933, 12: 797).

Part 2: Venerable Master Hsīng Yún and Fó Guāng Shān

Hsīng Yún and Tàì Xū

Several of Tàì Xū’s pupils became Buddhist masters, but the most successful of all has been Hsīng Yún (b.1927). Hsing Yun founded the movement Fó Guāng Shān (FGS) (‘Buddha’s Light Mountain’) in Taiwan in 1967, and since then has been commonly referred to as Master — or, latterly, Grand Master — Hsing Yun. FGS has grown, flourished and diversified not only in Taiwan (where it is still based) but in many parts of the world. Here we shall mainly deal with FGS in Taiwan, with Part 4 dealing with its international aspects.

Pittman writes that Hsing Yun’s ‘loyal followers have typically concluded that “in China the Venerable Master Taixu advocated the ideal of a Buddhism for human life. This was only an ideal for half a century until Xingyun put it into practice. In Christianity there are the reforms of Martin Luther, but Xingyun is the great master of Buddhist reform.”’²⁰

When writing of Tàì Xū, we have produced evidence that he saw Christianity as a model in certain respects, and wanted Chinese Buddhism to emulate it. As a devoted and effective disciple of Tàì Xū, Hsing Yun took over and in many cases further developed features of Buddhism which we have shown to have their roots in Tàì Xū’s policy of *emulation*. He too has directly emulated Christianity, but in the course of his long life his inclinations became more conservative and the more relevant Christian influence has been Roman Catholicism rather than Protestantism.

In other ways FGS developed *analogously* to Christianity, and these developments probably owe less to conscious emulation than to changes in the wider society — or one could say, in the modern world. One example of such an analogy is the comparison of Hsing Yun with Martin Luther which we have just quoted; but it is the work of his followers, not of Hsing Yun. We would not emphasize its importance, though one might say that Hsing Yun began his career somewhat as a Martin Luther, but gradually became more like a Pope.

20. Pittman 2001, 277. The citation is from the Chinese of an article by Lu Keng in Lu Keng, ed., *Renjian fojiao de Xingyun*, p.29. [publication data not given].

It is often said that in contemporary Taiwan the Buddhist scene is dominated by humanistic Buddhism. This is not an unreasonable assessment, in that the three largest and best known Buddhist movements, FGS, Dharma Drum and Tzu Chi (Cí Jì), all stress Buddhist activity in this world and clearly show ‘humanistic’ influence. But Hsing Yun is the Master who has made by far the most of his connection with Tàì Xū, and can best claim to be his successor. The fact that he has chosen to adopt a slightly changed form of the name of the movement,²¹ *rén jiān fó jiào* (*jiān* means ‘world’) rather than *rén shēn fó jiào*, is not important; both are usually called ‘humanistic Buddhism’ or ‘Buddhism for human life’ in English.

In the Christian world, a new religious movement is often referred to as a ‘sect’, and a sect is defined first and foremost by its doctrines. Though he ranked Buddhist doctrines,²² Tàì Xū was little concerned to promote or denigrate any particular Buddhist soteriological practice. His focus was on an ethos, the ethos of altruism, and beyond that he did not wish to particularize too much. Since Fó Guāng Shān is obviously a new movement with its own founder (who is still its leader), its own hierarchy, and clearly defined legal boundaries in terms of personnel, possessions, etc., it is natural for an observer from a monotheistic background to assume that it also has the kind of ideological boundaries that one expects of a sect. But that is not the case with FGS: it is what Christians term a ‘broad church’ and accepts a wide range of doctrinal belief, which makes it much more like a denomination than a sect.²³

Early life

As Fu Zhi Yin says:²⁴

Hsing Yun spent 6 years at Qi Xiá [a Buddhist temple in Jiān Sū province], an experience which made him decide to dedicate his whole life to Buddhism. In 1945, when he began to study in Jiao Shan seminary [in the same province] he changed from being a boy to a young adult. Jiāo Shān can be considered the Buddhist equivalent to Beijing University in terms of the quality of its teaching staff and its students. Most of Hsing Yun’s teachers had been pupils of Tàì Xū, and Hsing Yun himself read Tàì Xū’s books and articles. Tàì Xū proclaimed that every person was responsible for the survival of the nation, and every monk was responsible for the advancement of Buddhism. This so inspired Hsing Yun that he responded by denouncing the view that Buddhism was pessimistic and espousing the this-worldly orientation of Tàì Xū. He defended the right of Buddhism to own property and proposed that Buddhists should radically overhaul both their organization and their theoretical approach. Monks should

21. The change is widely thought to have originated with the Ven. Yin Shùn, but Bingenheimer (2007, 145) has refuted this; ‘*renjian fojiao* was not only used by Taixu, but almost certainly pre-dates him.’

22. He put Tathāgatagarbha top, then Yogācāra, then Madhyamaka. We are indebted to the Ven Huifeng for this point.

23. We have explored at length how FGS fits the Weberian definition of a denomination surprisingly well, but since this has little bearing on the issue of Christian influence we have put this analysis in a separate article, ‘Max Weber’s Work and the Study of Buddhism today’, which will appear in the journal *Max Weber Studies*.

24. Fu Zhi Yin 1995, chap.4: ‘The Survival of Buddhism is my personal Responsibility’.

preach and teach the dharma, nuns should teach and take nurturing roles. Monks should stress that human life was valuable and to be enjoyed. They should not depend for their livelihood on temple property but earn their living by their own labours; temple property should belong not to individuals but to Buddhism as a whole.

According to Hsing Yun, Tàì Xū founded Mǐn Nán Buddhist seminary to promulgate his views, but for some reason it did not survive long. The same fate befell other seminaries founded by Tàì Xū's pupils in this period. Tàì Xū held it to be the duty of every monk to support the country by resisting the Japanese invasion. Thus nation, society and Buddhism had common goals and interests. Tàì Xū exhorted his followers to ask not what Buddhism could do for them, but what they could do for Buddhism.

In the second year after the end of the war, Hsing Yun had an opportunity to visit his home, but instead attended a training programme given by Tàì Xū on how Chinese Buddhism should be administered. Tàì Xū died in the following year. Before dying he said that his whole life had been a failure to revolutionize Buddhism. But when Hsing Yun soon thereafter came to Taiwan and stood before the world as a representative of Buddhism, he fulfilled what Tàì Xū could only aspire to, and made a reality of Tàì Xū's dreams.

Hsing Yun has written: '[E]ver since I started propagating the Dharma, I have been following the teachings of Master Taixu. ... Buddhism is not a religion of empty talk. We have to start by improving people's lives.'²⁵

Fó Guāng Shān: A brief factual introduction

Hsing Yun has been so prolific and so innovative that painting a recognizable picture of FGS for a new audience requires many words. Indeed, we are planning a longer publication about FGS, into which we hope to distil much of the factual material which is available in abundance, especially from the FGS headquarters in Kaohsiung. Almost all of this, however, is in Chinese, and thus inaccessible to most of our readers. The large monograph by Stuart Chandler is more accessible, and is a mine of information, even if that information, gathered in 1996–1999 (2004, xv), naturally requires updating. The most perceptive source available is the short book by Richard Madsen (2007); one cannot but admire how much he has managed to convey about FGS in a mere 34 pages. The account by Don Pittman (2007) is even far briefer but commendably places Hsing Yun in historical context, relating him to Tàì Xū.

Hsing Yun came to Taiwan from China in 1949, the same year as Chiang Kai Shek and his Nationalist (GMD) government, with about 2 million other refugees from the mainland.

Buddhism was already widespread in Taiwan, but was scattered in many different and uncoordinated institutions, as it had been on the mainland.²⁶ The GMD government brought over from the mainland, and re-created as a state body in Taiwan, the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (BAROC). The antecedents of BAROC go all the way back to the Revolution of 1911, and in the next two decades such associations proliferated; many of them were either set up by Tàì

25. Hsing Yun 1987, 30, quoted in Pittman 2001, 273.

26. For the position of Buddhism in Taiwan during this period see Yao 2012, chapter 1, and Yao 2014.

Xū or quarreled with him. The first which lasted was set up in Shanghai in 1929, initially by Tàì Xū’s enemies, and he finally won control of it in 1945 (Welch 1968, 62–65). Until the end of the dictatorship in 1989 all ordinations in Taiwan had to be performed by and registered with BAROC. Thus for the first 20 years of its existence, FGS was allowed to grow beside BAROC, and can be said to have gradually infringed the state’s monopoly of control.

Hsing Yun was born in Jiāngsū province in SE China and has always spoken Chinese with that regional accent; for public speeches to a Taiwanese audience he commonly uses an interpreter into Hokkien. Like Tàì Xū, he knows no English — though he has visited America very many times. He is extremely articulate and has produced innumerable writings and speeches. In 1972 he began to have his own daily TV programme, using Mandarin subtitles for his own speech; it lasted for a generation and won a national award for social education. He has kept a diary, which he began to publish on the internet in 1989. He has written on many aspects of Buddhism, both practical and theoretical, Buddhist plays and songs, calligraphy, some autobiographical works, and a range of religious speeches, especially for large public ceremonies. He also writes letters to the press on public affairs.

Career in Taiwan

Hsing Yun’s career in Taiwan began in Yīlán province in NE Taiwan, when he became abbot of a temple there in 1954 (Chandler 2004, 307). In 1967 he founded Fó Guāng Shān in southern Taiwan, and it acquired a constitution in 1972. Up to now, it has tonsured about three thousand monastics, and there are about 1300 currently in robes (these figures may be on the low side).²⁷ In 1978 he founded a branch temple in Los Angeles, which in 1988 became the Hsī Lái temple, the largest Buddhist temple in America. 1991 he attached a monastery to the temple, and founded the University of the West (Hsī Lái). In 1989 he arranged for his mother to emigrate to the USA and she lived there until her death in 2006; naturally, he too spent a lot of time in the States during this period.

In 1992 Hsing Yun founded and headed the Buddhist Light International Association (BLIA) (Guó Jì Fó Guāng Huì) as a global extension of FGS for the laity. (Before that, the laity had no formal organization.) He resigned as abbot of the FGS monastery, but this did not diminish his paramount status in FGS. By 2010 he had established branches in the five continents, over 260 branches in all. There is nowadays no formal term which includes both the FGS Saṅgha and the BLIA, but there exist such informal terms as ‘the Fo Guang people’. Their number is estimated at about 6 million worldwide.²⁸

Hsing Yun is a great traveller and encourages others to travel, particularly on pilgrimage to see Buddhist sites. Since 1989, and especially since 2000, he has paid

27. To get precise figures is difficult, partly because there are problems of definition. However, there is no need to try to unravel this here.

28. The lay missionary organization was originally called the International Buddhist Progress Society (IBPS), a name still retained by some overseas branches. We thank the Ven. Hui Feng for clarifying all this.

increasingly frequent visits to mainland China. In 2014 he was invited to meet General Secretary Xi Jinping, who told him that he had read all his writings.

Hsing Yun enthusiastically uses and promotes modern technology and modern forms of communication and entertainment. Richard Madsen writes: 'Buddha's Light Mountain is not simply about reviving (and perhaps partly reinventing) traditional Buddhist ritual practices. It is also about publicizing those practices in ways that will teach and inspire people around the modern world.'²⁹

FGS has its own newspaper and its own TV station, which Hsing Yun inaugurated in 1997. It also has its own art galleries and its own basketball team. While many of his public activities have serious traditional religious and intellectual content, he is undoubtedly also a great popularizer and showman. He likes to convey his message by writing plays and encouraging dance and music, and organising public events and spectacles. Already when he was a young monk in Yílán he organized a festival of lamps which drew record crowds, and in 1957 produced his first record album of Buddhist music. He has appeared on stage with the FGS choir at London's Royal Festival Hall.³⁰ Most spectacular of all has been Hsing Yun's creation of the 'Buddha Memorial Center', a kind of Buddhist Disneyland, right next to the FGS monastery. We were told that when it opened for the (Chinese) New Year in 2011 it attracted about 2 million visitors in the first three days, and that this record has been repeated every year since. Scrutiny of the transport possibilities, however, convince us that 2 million must be a mistake; we estimate the number of visitors were between 500 to 600 thousands.

In 1999 Hsing Yun persuaded the government of Taiwan to make the Buddha's birthday a national holiday.

Gender in FGS

Even the most cursory introduction to FGS cannot fail to mention the first thing that most people notice about it: the preponderance of nuns in its Saṅgha, with women constituting about 90% of Saṅgha members. Nearly all the branch temples within Taiwan are staffed only by nuns. Probably women also constitute well over half the lay members (no statistics available), but this is true of many religions the world over. If one follows its fortunes abroad, one is also struck by its intimate connection with the development of the recent worldwide movement to ordain Buddhist women. Tàì Xū did much to support the advance of women in Buddhism, and in particular founded Buddhist institutions for women's education.³¹ In our article on Japanese influence we mention (Yao 2014, 147) that Tàì Xū may have had a tenuous connection with the first ordination of Buddhist nuns in Tàìwan, but by and large this is *not*, in our view, something which arose because of Christian influence.

It is not entirely clear or generally agreed why in Taiwan nowadays nuns so greatly outnumber monks, but in the same article we have suggested that the most important reason may simply be the shortage of male vocations. This in turn may be

29. Madsen 2007, 54. On pp.53–56 he gives an admirably vivid account of FGS public ceremonies.

30. This was on 4 Sept 1999. See Buddha Light International Association 2000, 162.

31. Tàì Xū, part 19, II, p.9.

due to the decline in the size of families, which by tradition require a male head, and to the compulsory military service for males over 20. On the other hand, the career of Buddhist nun offers a chance to an unmarried woman to contribute to society.³²

Direct influence of Tàì Xū

In 1957, Hsing Yun published an article to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Tàì Xū's death: 'The Master is Still Alive.' In 1969, he commemorated what would have been his 80th birthday (Mǎn Gēn 2006, 187 and 189). In 1958 Hsing Yun published an article in the journal *Awakening (Júei Shi)* in which he declared his ambition to missionize the world, saying the top priority was to train missionaries fluent in English. In uttering this call he echoed Tàì Xū, who tried to have a formidable range of languages taught at the seminaries he organized in the 1920s and 1930s; sad to say, in neither case has the aspiration been matched by achievement.

In the first part of this article we have documented several areas in which Tàì Xū wished to emulate Christians. Hsing Yun has followed his master in every one of these areas, and in most of them has been able to achieve far more. First and foremost, he has paid an enormous amount of attention to education, and has achieved so much that a proper record would fill a book by itself. In terms of age range, he has founded every kind of school from kindergarten (the first one already when he was in Yílán) to university. At the time of writing there are five FGS universities, two in Taiwan, Hsī Lái (now renamed University of the West) in Los Angeles, one near Sydney, and one in the Philippines.³³ He has attended equally to clerical and lay education. When he acquired the land to build FGS monastery, the first building he erected was a seminary, 'the Eastern Buddhist Academy ... for the Master has always regarded a systematized, comprehensive education, especially of the Sangha, to be the key to the regeneration of society and the revival of Buddhism.'³⁴ The normal age at which a prospective monastic would expect to study for ordination ranges between 18 and 35, but there exist both younger and older pupils.

Other institutions which FGS has founded to prolong and extend the reformist vision of Tàì Xū include orphanages, old age homes, clinics, chaplaincies to such institutions as hospitals and the armed forces, prison visiting, welfare and recreational organizations such as the scouts, publishing of various kinds (books, magazines, videos, music recordings, etc.), and even a certain amount of political activity, particularly where it is felt to be helpful to the government. All of these, we suggest, have some Christian antecedents. We recall that Tàì Xū was impressed by choral singing in Christian churches, something hitherto unknown in China, and himself wrote Buddhist songs/hymns. Hsing Yun has had FGS form choirs to sing Buddhist music, some of it composed by him. He has even interspersed his lectures with singing and invited the audience to sing along with him.³⁵

32. We are grateful to the Ven, Huifeng for offering these suggestions.

33. The latter two are pending certification.

34. Chandler 2004, 118. Chandler devotes the whole of chapter 5 to the work of FGS in education.

35. <http://fgs.webgo.com.tw/download72.php> We thank the Ven. Huifeng for this reference. Excel-

We are not claiming that all this is simply due to influence mediated through Tàì Xū. The cultural influence of the USA is pervasive in modern Taiwan, and in some cases the features Hsing Yun has chosen to adopt, be they choral singing or basketball, are distinctly those of Christian America. As Madsen observes of a ceremony he attended: 'The form of the ritual was more similar to a Billy Graham rally than a traditional Buddhist ceremony' (Madsen 2007, 56) — though of course the content was completely different.

We come here to the very heart of the Buddhism which Hsing Yun has made it his life's work to institutionalize in FGS. Chandler has aptly named his book *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth*. We have seen that for Tàì Xū too, this was the ultimate goal. But in his environment, turning our secular world into an earthly paradise, a 'Buddha field' (Sanskrit: *buddha-kṣetra*), though unrealistically ambitious, was a vague vision in entire harmony with traditional religious goals; we may be sure that it had nothing to do with the colour coordination or choreography on which Madsen remarks in the article cited just above. We recall that while studying in China in 1945, Hsing Yun was so inspired by Tàì Xū that 'he responded by denouncing the view that Buddhism was pessimistic and espousing [his] this-worldly orientation.' Hsing Yun enjoys a sunny temperament, vast pragmatic ability, and a social environment where his wish for people to enjoy life does not seem a goal beyond reach. It is in this light that one must see the specifics. The Four Noble Truths of suffering and its causes are not completely forgotten, but they are no longer permitted to set the mood.

Part 3: Varieties of Christian influence

In this part of our article we shall provide further narrative and analysis of developments in modern Chinese Buddhism under the leadership of Tàì Xū and of his follower Hsing Yun. To ground our narrative, we first give a brief account of traditional Buddhist society, both seen in its own terms, and how that society may relate to the wider society in which it finds itself. We then draw a distinction between developments in Buddhism influenced by or analogous to Protestant Christianity (mostly due to Tàì Xū) and those more influenced by or analogous to Roman Catholicism (mostly due to Hsing Yun). We also draw attention to modernization and, in the case of Hsing Yun, to the pervasive influence of the Chinese Buddhist tradition centred on Confucianism, which results in a striking amalgam of innovation and conservatism.

The relation between clerical and lay status in Buddhism

Christianity is the religion which Weber and his followers have chiefly had in mind in forming their categories and the theories in which they put those categories to work. This means that it is essential to explain, at least briefly, major features of Buddhism which radically differ from Christianity.

Like Christianity, Buddhism divides its adherents into full-time committed professionals (in Christianity called 'clergy') and laity. By Buddhist tradition, the

lent material on Hsing Yun's singing and enthusiastic use of recording and video in Tarocco 2007, 134–136. She makes clear the influence of Tàì Xū.

Buddhism which can and should be regulated and administered consists only of the Saṅgha. Though the original meaning of this word is ‘Community’, in a comparative study such as this one it is more convenient to render the term ‘the Order’. This consists of the ordained clergy, both men (monks) and women (nuns), with novices of both sexes. Their original basic functions are to preserve Buddhism and to provide role models for all Buddhists by constantly striving for Enlightenment. There is clear demarcation between the ordained and the unordained, and in most Buddhist societies the state is expected to help enforce this.

Buddhist norms were so constructed that the Saṅgha, whether as a body or as individuals, lacked the means to wield political power, and depended for their place in society on the government, typically the king. Like Hindu Brahmins, the Saṅgha thus often formed a diarchy with the king: they legitimated his rule, while he gave them authority (and often a great deal more than that).

Membership of the Saṅgha has to be achieved by ordination. In most circumstances there are two levels of ordination. The first or ‘lower’ is preparatory and creates novices. The second or ‘higher’ (called *upasampadā* in Pali) is crucial and hence may simply be referred to as ‘ordination’. One enters the lineage of the monk who presides at one’s ordination ceremony, and this lineage is analogous to a patrilineage in lay society. The situation for women/nuns is almost the same as that for men/monks, though for them there may be two preparatory stages.

Where Buddhism dominates in a society, so that the Saṅgha is closely allied with the state and secular powers, members of the society are for the most part born as Buddhists, so that being Buddhist is a status ascribed to one by the government: in Weberian terms, Buddhism functions as a ‘church’, as does a Christian denomination in predominantly Christian societies, e.g., Roman Catholicism in Italy, Lutheranism in Sweden.

Buddhism itself, however, sees this differently. In some societies there has been no social demarcation among the local lay population between who is a Buddhist and who is not; it is mainly a matter of self-ascription and can vary and even oscillate. In this respect Buddhism in China has generally borne a striking resemblance to its social presence in ancient India. However, the Saṅgha, bypassing this secular fact, offers stricter criteria: one becomes a lay Buddhist³⁶ (for which there is a pair of technical terms, masculine and feminine, Pali: *upāsaka/upāsikā*) through some action, such as making a donation to the Order, or declaring that one ‘takes refuge’ in the Buddha, his teaching, and the Order. (‘Taking refuge’ means relying on them for spiritual guidance.) Even here, individual belief rarely leads to social demarcation, and whether a lay Buddhist also entertains non-Buddhist beliefs, or worships non-Buddhist sacralia, is not thought to be socially relevant.

Orthopraxy is emphasized but not orthodoxy

In all the major religions born in India — not only Buddhism but also Jainism, and all members of that amazingly varied cluster of religions which we try to bundle

36. The definition of a lay Buddhist in early Buddhism and in Theravāda is explained in detail in Gombrich 2006, 77–78.

together under the name of Hinduism — doctrine is extremely important, and yet it plays a very different role from that which it plays in the great monotheistic religions. True, in the latter also, when they have become embedded in societies, ritual and customs have permeated the lives of adherents more than has theology; but even in such cases, membership of the religion has been determined by assent to credal statements such as ‘There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet.’ The fundamental requirement is thus orthodoxy, rather than orthopraxy.

The Buddha preached that those who accepted his teaching could only do so fully if they accepted a certain lifestyle: they had to enter (take ordination in) the community (Saṅgha) of monks and nuns which he established, and punctiliously follow the code of conduct he laid down. The distinction between conduct and doctrinal belief was — and remains — absolute, and there was no such thing as heresy, even though the ordained were strongly advised not to follow other teachers if their views differed from the Buddha’s. Creating schism in the Saṅgha was a heinous offense but could only arise through disagreement over a matter of behaviour.

However, things are not quite so simple. Buddhism is centrally a soteriology, i.e., a doctrine of how one may obtain salvation, which ultimately means escape from rebirth into this world. Life is seen as a trap in which suffering normally preponderates. This suffering is primarily due to the frustration of our desires, and may thus be evaded by not having desires. Many areas of life thus have no religious value for Buddhism. In theistic religions, it is normal to ask God or gods for goods and welfare, and this is called petitionary prayer: ‘Give us this day our daily bread.’ Buddhists do not deny that there exist spirits who can give us bread, and where Buddhism is a church, they generally accept that people make such requests, which may or may not be answered. Ideally, however, the ordained, i.e., monks and nuns, are not supposed to have worldly desires or make requests for their fulfilment. (Naturally, practice does not always reflect theory.)

Where Buddhism is a church (e.g. in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan), lay beliefs and practices which are not Buddhist are widely tolerated. Thus a lay person who is otherwise Buddhist may make any request, from winning the lottery to the birth of a son, to a non-Buddhist deity, whether the deity be a local spirit, a saint, or the god of some other religion, and non-Buddhist beliefs and practices which some regard as superstitious, such as fortune-telling, are likewise tolerated. However, Buddhist reformists tend to take a stricter line in this regard, and condemn recourse to other belief systems. In this they resemble the leaders of the Protestant Reformation who regarded parts of Roman Catholicism as idolatry.

In Buddhist ideology, the Saṅgha and the laity have complementary roles, which are held to be hierarchically related. The laity are to supply the Saṅgha with the necessities of physical existence (food, clothing and shelter), and in return the Saṅgha preserve the Buddha’s teaching and convey it to the laity (as well as trying to follow it themselves). Thus Saṅgha and laity are two moieties which are interdependent. The Saṅgha has the monopoly of supramundane (Sanskrit: *lokot-tara*) matters, while the laity are allowed, even sometimes encouraged, to follow practices which we might consider ‘religious’ but deal with happiness and success

in this world (Sanskrit: *laukika*); the only restriction is that they must not infringe Buddhist norms (e.g., by involving blood sacrifices).

We have shown that the Order and the laity are treated in Buddhist social thought in entirely different ways, to such an extent that it is only a slight exaggeration to say that in traditional Buddhism it is only the ordained (the Saṅgha) who are considered the true Buddhists. For Buddhists, the history of Buddhism is the history of the Saṅgha. A large part of the earliest scriptures concerns only the Order, and indeed in many traditions was not divulged to the laity.³⁷

Protestantization in Buddhism

We have shown that for the history of Buddhism the relationship between the Saṅgha and the laity is of the greatest significance. It is comparable to the issue of the status difference between clergy and lay Christians in the Reformation.

In the nineteenth century, when Sri Lanka was under British rule, the arrival of Protestant missionaries (including some from the Church of England) had a dramatic effect on local Buddhism in Colombo and other places where English was used by the educated classes. In their chapter entitled ‘Protestant Buddhism’, Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988, 202–240) argue that while the foundations of this novel strain of Buddhism were laid by interaction between Sinhalese Buddhists and missionaries between 1860 and 1885, ‘the more general causes were the results of close contact with the West: the arrival of modern knowledge and Western-type education, printing and increased use of literacy, and the rise of a Sinhala middle class and the embourgeoisement of Sinhala society.’ (1988, 203). This dual causation fits the theme of this article: on the one hand, the contact with Christians provoked emulation and imitation — in the Sri Lankan case, ‘rivalry’ might be the best word for it; on the other hand, the socioeconomic shifts in society made the movement more basic and longlasting. It was Obeyesekere who first gave a name to the movement, and by calling it ‘Protestant’ implied a double meaning: that it imitated the (mainly British) Protestants, and that it was a protest movement against them and the colonial power.

The essence of Protestantism as we understand it lies in the individual’s seeking his or her ultimate goal without intermediaries. ... The hallmark of Protestant Buddhism is its view that the layman should permeate his life with his religion; that he should strive to make Buddhism permeate his whole society; and that he can and should try to reach nirvāṇa. As a corollary, the lay Buddhist is critical of the traditional norms of the monastic role; he may not be positively anticlerical but his respect, if any, is for the particular monk, not for the yellow robe as such.

(Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 215–216)

37. By chance, while writing this we came into possession of a copy of the legal code (Sanskrit: *prātimokṣa*) for future nuns (in Chinese), and inside the front cover is printed that if a lay person, including a novice, gets hold of the book, would they please not read it, but worship it and then return it to someone who has been ordained. *Precepts for Śikṣamāṇā*, ed. Guan Hua, senior Dhamma Master, pub. Gin Xin Tang printers, Tai Chung, Taiwan, 1997. The rank *śikṣamāṇā* comes above novice (*sāmaṇerī*) and below fully ordained nun (*bhikṣuṇī*); there is no male equivalent.

Comparison between the ‘Protestant Buddhism’ of Sri Lanka and the Buddhism of Tàì Xū and Hsing Yun is complicated by the fact that the former was Theravāda and the latter Mahāyāna. The religious goal of the former was attaining *nirvāṇa*, a private individual achievement. Though one could argue that the Mahāyāna parallel to this is the attainment of Buddhahood, the goal of a good Chinese Buddhist, whether clerical or lay, is in fact to become a *bodhisattva*. There is a useful ambiguity about this attainment, because taking the vow to be a *bodhisattva* is already to be one. In spiritual, as against social, terms, Mahāyāna is thus more egalitarian than Theravāda, and in that narrow sense is already Protestantized.

How does all this apply to Tàì Xū and Hsing Yun? In answering, one must bear in mind the contrast between the societies in which Tàì Xū and Hsing Yun have lived. During Tàì Xū’s life, China was desperately poor, constantly ravaged by war and social turmoil, and largely unaffected by the advances of modernity. Taiwan, smaller than one per cent of mainland China, has for the past half century been dominated by the United States, especially in its material culture but also increasingly in its social and political ethos. This means that the most important social prerequisites for what we venture to call ‘Protestantization’, namely the general increase of prosperity and literacy which accompany the rise of a middle class and of individual aspirations to carve out one’s own life, were almost totally absent in Tàì Xū’s surroundings, and extremely prominent during Hsing Yun’s career — increasingly so as time went on.

Despite its ancient history and wide diffusion in China, the Buddhism which Tàì Xū struggled to reform was a minority religion. As he was constantly complaining, Buddhism in China was extremely disorganized, decentralized, and correspondingly varied. In modern times the communist state has taken over and officially there exists only one central organization, an organ of the government which wields total control. (Probably in this respect it reflects the ancient Chinese norm.) But it is not surprising that in the years before this centralization Tàì Xū took a Protestant line against superstitious practices and the worship of folk deities, also against the widespread syncretism of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. In this respect, as in many others, he was emulating the Christians, though we have not found evidence of his saying so.

As Madsen writes of Tàì Xū’s determination to modernize Buddhism:

Modernization was in part conceived of as Westernization. For Tai Xu this entailed adaptation of some of the social gospel approach of contemporary Protestant missionaries, and a purge of ‘superstitious’ folk religious practices, together with an emphasis on the systematic philosophical articulation of religious beliefs sought by European scholars of religion.³⁸

Tàì Xū did care very much about raising the educational standards of all Chinese Buddhists, but he naturally concentrated his efforts on educating the Saṅgha, in the hope that they would in turn educate the rest of the Buddhist population. Moreover,

38. Madsen 2007, 62–63. In the latter respect, Tàì Xū would have been resisting not so much folk religion as syncretism with Daoism and Confucianism.

conditions were so bad that he always had the greatest trouble in raising money. Hsing Yun, while he began his career amidst poverty and hardship, after a few years was working in a peaceful and relatively stable society, which enabled him to found educational institutions of all kinds. Thus one might well expect Hsing Yun to have followed the Protestant model. But in fact the opposite seems to have happened! Why? We shall answer this question below, when we have given more information about him and the FGS.

The feature of Protestantism which Tàì Xū was able to take to heart was its universalism.³⁹ The injunctions of Buddhism were ‘to apply to everyone at all times’. When he thought of the world, this was (alas) an idle dream. But when the aspiration was aimed at China, it was more influential. We have recorded above that Hsing Yun as a very young man was inspired by Tàì Xū’s teaching ‘that every person was responsible for the survival of the nation, and every monk was responsible for the advancement of Buddhism.’ We have quoted above the basic Protestant assumption that the lay adherent ‘should strive to make Buddhism permeate his whole society’; but here we find the Chinese reformers applying it only to monks. The history of FGS shows that by this they did not mean to exclude nuns, but were laying the responsibility for Buddhism squarely on the shoulders of the Saṅgha.

When Hsing Yun came to Taiwan from China in 1949, the government of Chiang Kai Shek vested monopolistic control over Buddhism in BAROC (see Part 2 above). Madsen records that early in his career Hsing Yun

did not confine himself to preaching at the temple, but went on preaching missions further and further from Ilan The emphasis on itinerant preaching was in part stimulated by the need to compete with the methods of Christian missionaries, who came to Taiwan in large numbers after their expulsion from the PRC and had relatively abundant resources.⁴⁰

The founding and growth of FGS could take place only because Hsing Yun was extremely skilful in maintaining good relations with the secular powers, and even rose to become a member of the GMD’s central committee (Madsen 2007, 69). He never ran for political office, but he did sometimes openly support the government side in elections. That he took bureaucratic control of his lay membership (see below) may well have helped to consolidate his position in the eyes of the government.

After the introduction of democracy in 1989, rapid political and social change brought true religious pluralism to Taiwan, even within the Buddhist fold. Since then, the state has held no control over ordinations, and (unlike the governments of most countries where Buddhism is entrenched) does not even register them, so many more Buddhist movements and institutions have sprung up. Hsing Yun has always followed his eirenic policy of being on good terms with everyone. We believe

39. One can argue that ‘universalism’ is a feature of Mahāyāna too, or indeed of all Buddhism. But Buddhist universalism is conceived on the moral and spiritual level, while the universalism of Protestantism aspires also to change economic and political conditions in this world.

40. Madsen 2007, 64. Ilan is the area in NE Taiwan where Hsing Yun had his first monastery.

that, as is true of Anglicans in Britain, FGS chaplains are happy to offer consolation etc. to members of other religions.

The cultural affinities of Hsing Yun's FGS

In the rest of this part of our article we shall consider three major aspects of the FGS: lifestyle (both clerical and lay); ideology; and institutional form. We shall argue that there are three major cultural influences at play: modernism; Roman Catholicism (where Hsing Yun can be contrasted with what we have written above about Tai Xu); and Chinese tradition, particularly Confucianism.

Hsing Yun's modernism: great organizer, great innovator

In 1991–1992, Hsing Yun made a major innovation: he formalized and bureaucratized his lay following as the Buddha Light International Association (BLIA). As the name indicates, at the same time he extended it not just beyond Taiwan, but worldwide — initially to the USA, but soon all round the globe.

A member completes a form, and pledges an annual yearly subscription. Obviously, this is of great financial benefit to the movement. FGS lay supporters also give the movement a vast amount of labour; occasionally they are paid, but at low rates. To complicate matters, both FGS and the BLIA employ a small number of paid lay staff. In some Buddhist societies, such as Japan, lay Buddhist formal membership has long existed, but it has been compulsory and controlled by the state. Membership of the BLIA, on the other hand, is voluntary, and we think that this kind of voluntary but formal membership, so reminiscent of many institutions in Western society, may be unprecedented in Buddhism.⁴¹

In the main historical traditions, members of the Saṅgha take a vow not to 'accept gold and silver'. The precise scope of this rule has been argued over down the centuries, and no consensus reached. Chinese monks, like those in other Mahāyāna countries, regularly charge fees for performing ceremonies; Theravādin monks never do. Recent fieldwork among Buddhist nuns in Taiwan and on the Chinese mainland has shown a great variety in both theory and practice even within such a restricted sample (Chiu 2014). FGS monastics do not perform religious services for fees, but BLIA members may request a service and in return offer a contribution to the monastery (not to the individual officiants).

FGS may however be unique in that not only does every monk and nun receive a 'small monthly wage': the amount varies 'with an individual's rank and post' (Chiu 2014, 25). This remains a sensitive issue and wording is important. The wage being very small, some prefer to call it 'pocket money'. Certainly, the role that money plays in the lives of monastics is restricted.

[T]he monastery is not against members having monetary savings individually, provided they are not for one's own benefit: in principle, at least, money must be used for Buddhist causes and the general good of society, and saved on Foguangshan's account. [Monastics] are not allowed to save money privately, invest in a secular busi-

41. Ven. Hui Feng points out that it may also exist among the Japanese new religions such as Soka Gakkai.

ness, commit usury, or leave money for use by secular members of their families.⁴²

In the religious freedom of Taiwan since 1989, Hsing Yun, as unquestioned leader, has had a free hand in moulding his Saṅgha according to his own ideas. And some of those ideas are novel — or, shall we say, modern. We have quoted above Madsen on aspects of modernization relevant to Protestantization and Tai Xu; here we are dealing with a very different cluster of features.

Modernity does not seem to play much part in matters of gender. Visitors from Theravāda countries may be astonished to find that monks and nuns share FGS monasteries; of course, they have separate dormitories, but they mingle throughout their daily lives. This is unheard of in the Theravādin Saṅgha, and indeed in Thailand monks go to extraordinary lengths to avoid any physical contact with women; but in Chinese tradition the separation is often far less rigorous. At Kaohsiung, the Ci’an Nunnery is for nuns and the Dajue Monastery for monks; most departments are run by either monks or nuns, seldom if ever by both. Except for a couple of large temples, the branch temples contain only nuns.⁴³

In some other ways FGS is far more innovative. We have mentioned that Hsing Yun has always gone to great lengths to favour the arts, including the performing arts; he uses them for religious propaganda, but also for sheer entertainment (though this is defined as ‘Buddhist purposes’). There are precedents in most (or all?) Mahāyāna countries for monks and nuns cultivating the visual arts, though probably not on such a scale as FGS, which has its own art galleries and film studios. But acting, dancing and music (notably singing) would seem *prima facie* to go against the vow, taken by every member of the Saṅgha, to abstain from dancing (which probably should include acting), music both vocal and instrumental, and other kinds of shows and spectacles; the vow’s wording suggests not just participation but even witnessing. FGS monastics are still forbidden to act or dance themselves, and not all sports are allowed to them. But Hsing Yun encourages FGS members both clerical and lay to take part both in sport and in the performing arts. The tradition by which Saṅgha members are not supposed to be audiences for such entertainments, let alone perform themselves, is a dead letter.

We do not see the above innovations as Protestantization, but rather as daring steps taken in order to harmonize with modern society.

Roman Catholic influence on Hsing Yun

At this point, let us introduce the Roman Catholic dimension. Hsing Yun has cultivated relations with the Roman Catholic church, and he sees his monastic disciples as comparable to Roman Catholic priests and nuns, whose calling should bring them into constant involvement with the laity. He records a conversation he had with a Catholic priest, who says, ‘If you had been born in America you would have become a Catholic priest; if I had been born here in Taiwan I would have become a Buddhist

42. Chiu 2014, 25. For much more detail on this topic see Chandler 2004, 171–173; he also covers fund-raising (pp.220, 224–235).

43. We owe the information in the last two sentences to the Ven. Hui Feng.

monk';⁴⁴ and also (with approval) that his friend the Archbishop (see below) told him that Buddhism and Catholicism were extremely similar.⁴⁵

The following series of events is quite suggestive.⁴⁶ In 1970 a party of 80 Dominican monks and nuns visited the new FGS headquarters at Kaohsiung, and were much impressed.⁴⁷ In 1980 the Archbishop of Taiwan Stanislaus Lo Kuang (1911–2004) visited Hsing Yun,⁴⁸ and this in the end led in 1989 to the two of them having a public 'spiritual' dialogue.⁴⁹ Later in the same year, at the Vatican's suggestion, Hsing Yun and the FGS hosted the first international conference of the Roman Catholic church and Buddhism.⁵⁰ Next year Hsing Yun visited Pope John Paul II.⁵¹ For about 40 years he cultivated a relationship, both in public and in private, with the next Roman Catholic Archbishop of Taiwan, the late Paul Shan Kuo-Hsi, S.J. (1923–2012: see Figure 1, opposite page). He donated five million NT dollars from his personal trust to the Archbishop for his theological college, and a million to a Catholic hospital. He accepted an honorary degree from Fu-Zen, a Roman Catholic university in Taiwan, in 2006.⁵²

Hsing Yun has even more complete control over his church than the Pope has over Roman Catholics. This cuts both ways: on the one hand he has used his leadership to emphasize the pre-eminence of the clergy, while in the other hand he has made full use of his scope for a latitudinarian attitude to religious content.

He has always laid enormous emphasis on the training and certification of his Saṅgha. The mere fact that the first thing he set up when founding FGS was not a shrine but a seminary speaks volumes. This illustrates on the one hand how Tàì Xū moulded Hsing Yun's views, and on the other how FGS (in our broad sense) contrasts with those Buddhist movements which promote lay leadership.

On the other hand he has always displayed an easy tolerance of a range of diversity in doctrine and practice. This reaches a point at which it may well puzzle a Westerner, but it follows a strong Chinese tradition. Buddhism is of course an ideology, and in particular holds strong views on some ethical matters; but at the same time it often finds room for very different lifestyles and religious practices. This comes across strikingly in the FGS combination of Chan and Pure Land Buddhism. While these two traditions superficially seem to be in strong contrast, they have

44. <http://www.blia.org/global-view/world-congress/keynote-speech/71-2008-%E8%8F%A9%E8%96%A9%E8%88%87%E7%BE%A9%E5%B7%A5>

45. <http://www.blia.org/global-view/world-congress/keynote-speech/71-2008-%E8%8F%A9%E8%96%A9%E8%88%87%E7%BE%A9%E5%B7%A5>

46. We believe that further research might well produce more.

47. FGS Yearbook 20 for 1987, p.456.

48. FGS Yearbook 20 for 1987, p.589.

49. FGS Yearbook 30 for 1997, p.47.

50. FGS Yearbook 30 for 1997, p.47.

51. FGS Yearbook 30 for 1997, p.48.

52. <http://www.masterhsingyun.org/article/article.jsp?index=1&item=10&bookid=2c907d494b3ecd70014b42f6d8a60000&ch=2&se=0&f=1>



Figure 1. Master Hsing Yun and Taiwan Cardinal Bishop Shan Kuo-Hsi at a series of lectures held by them.

long been combined in many temples on the Chinese mainland.⁵³ However, simply to say that FGS combines Chan with Pure Land Buddhism seriously understates its catholicity. As Hsing Yun has said in an FGS promotional video, FGS is like a ‘department store that sells many things.’⁵⁴ Madsen continues (2007, 58):

Buddha’s Light Mountain also intends to unify the eight major lineages of Chinese Buddhism. Almost any kind of Buddhist practice can be engaged in at the temple ... Since most people in Taiwan engage in some form of Buddhist practice at some phase of their lives, the complex of symbols offered by [FGS] contains something that can speak to almost everyone. Its symbolic net is wide enough ... even to include non-believers. ‘This isn’t a religion,’ said one of the [FGS] nuns ‘... It is our cultural tradition.’

Although he has always deprecated certain customs such as fortune-telling, Hsing Yun has not tried to stop people from practising folk religion by worship-

53. In Japan Zen is held to be typical of *jiriki*, literally ‘own power’, meaning that one has to reach Enlightenment by one’s own efforts, while Pure Land Buddhism is typical of *tariki*, literally ‘other power’, according to which Enlightenment can only come through the help of Amida Buddha. For the combination in practice, see Welch 1967, 398–399.

54. Quoted by Madsen 2007, 58.

ping folk deities (an attitude towards the laity which we have shown to be common in Buddhism). According to Darui Long, he has said:

Folk religions are based on desire. The aims of the followers of folk religions are just to gain the Bodhisattvas' or gods' protection and assistance in becoming rich. They seek security, good family life, longevity, and good fortune. Therefore their starting point is desire. We should establish our beliefs and actions on the basis of giving all things to others. Religious belief implies devotion, sacrifice, and altruism.⁵⁵

Thus Hsing Yun's tolerance of folk religion concerns mainly beliefs about this-worldly reality, but does not necessarily extend to concomitant practices.⁵⁶ He has written that 'idolatry' is quite acceptable; but the context shows that by that he means that religious images (as used by Buddhists and Catholics) answer a need felt by many worshippers.⁵⁷

Let us briefly compare the organizational structure of FGS within Taiwan with that of the Roman Catholic church. The latter is strictly regulated by an ecclesiastical hierarchy with just three tiers: the Pope in the Vatican is head of this hierarchy worldwide, and the level below him is the diocese, which is headed by a bishop and has a geographical base. There are nearly three thousand dioceses, and at the level below them over two hundred thousand parishes (local churches). The two salient differences from FGS are that the FGS has many more ranks and offices, and that, as mentioned above, Hsing Yun has total control over his church, needing no intermediaries. Both features are clearly due to the strength of the Chinese tradition. On the one hand, everywhere in Chinese culture 'the Master' has great power and autonomy — here we see this in the latitude in both belief and practice that Hsing Yun grants his followers, for which he has to give no justification but his own say-so. On the other hand, the Chinese are the proud inventors of bureaucracy; to see this principle at work in Buddhism, one can do no better than refer to the first chapter of *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism* (Welch 1967), which takes 44 pages to describe the organization of a large mainland Chinese Buddhist monastery.

Fo Guang Shan as a religion for an entire population

As a monastic religion, Buddhism traditionally is not organized to serve the laity except through the agency of its clergy, the Saṅgha. It has no network of institutions comparable to the parish churches of Christianity, with calendars of regular religious events. In the final part of this article we shall discuss the FGS as an international missionary movement, with FGS temples sustained by the Buddha Light International Association, which was founded in 1991.

The BLIA is based on what Chandler has called a 'cadre' of lay members, who pay annual fees for membership (Chandler 2004, 192–193). The focus of these members within Taiwan is on an FGS institution which is analogous to a Christian parish church, but only at the higher levels is recognizable as a temple. The local unit sup-

55. Long 200b, 69. Long gives no reference for this quotation.

56. See Madsen 2007, 65 for more on this point.

57. <http://www.masterhsingyun.org/article/article.jsp?index=5&item=11&bookid=2c907d49496057d00149bd434079021d&ch=6&se=0&f=1>

ports a ‘preaching office’ (*bu jiao suo*), which is a room in some building large enough to accommodate a small gathering. The room contains a small shrine and has its name on the door. No one lives there but usually someone who acts as caretaker lives next door or close by. Membership is individual, though a preaching office consists of a group of households. The average size of membership is around 50 households, and each household is estimated to contain about 6 members, of whom only one is likely to be active; this gives about 300 (paying but often not active) members per preaching office. A member of the Saṅgha (normally a nun) visits about once a week; occasionally there are two such nuns, who tend to alternate.

The premises above this level are of various types: lecture hall (*jiang tang*), Pure Land Chan centre (*chanjing zhongxin*), vihāra (*dao chang*). Above this (or sometimes at the same level) is the branch temple (*fenyuan*), which is home to five Saṅgha members, one of whom is senior, and is responsible for ten to fifteen preaching offices with 3,000 or more members.⁵⁸ The next level up is the chief temple (*bieyuan*), which should have at least 10,000 members. The headquarters constitute the highest of the five levels.⁵⁹

The hierarchy here represented is reflected in the level and style of activity. We give data for an area in central Taiwan which we investigated. In its literature in English, the local FGS refers to what Christians would call a service as ‘communal cultivation’ (*gong xiu*). Each preaching office has a chair and a treasurer. At the preaching office, there is a ‘service’ every second and fourth Friday of the month from 7 to 9 p.m., while on the other two Fridays the local members visit the branch temple, some 40 minutes’ drive away. The typical service has a sermon from a nun and chanting by the congregation (see Figure 2). These occasions also serve to teach members ritual and etiquette. Naturally, they also further social cohesion, and members may decide on various forms of voluntary work.

At the branch temple, there is a calendar of daily events throughout each month. A service lasts two hours or more, and consists of communal chanting (of sutras), sometimes also some singing, some meditation (on the breath), some news reports (both about the branch and wider), and an informal lecture by the nun. There are exhibitions (e.g., to promote vegetarianism) and such cultural activities as music lessons, yoga, PT, tea ceremony and flower arrangement, with a few activities also for children — notably a summer camp. Some services include rituals at which offerings are made to Buddhas and/or *bodhisattvas*.

Any Buddhist activity, including taking part in ‘communal cultivation’, earns merit, and when merit has been earned it must be ‘transferred’ (some would say ‘shared’). First and foremost it is transferred to one’s dead relatives, though in theory it should be transferred to *all* the dead. Some services, however, are explicitly for the living; again, in theory they are for *all* living beings, but in practice people transfer their merit in particular to living members of their own family. If one transfers merit to one’s own dead parents, there is a feeling that this implies that they are

58. We are aware that there is some inconsistency in the figures, but we report what we were told.

59. Chandler 2004, 220–224 gives a slightly different account of the classes and rankings of temples. Perhaps things have changed since his day.



Figure 2. FGS Yongjing liaison centre: Congregational Buddhist meeting on every other Friday night, mid-2016.

living as hungry ghosts, and people may try to avoid that implication by generalising the transfer; but the underlying spirit of what goes on is certainly focussed on one's dead ancestors. FGS teaches that when one makes and transfers merit, three tenths of the merit goes to the dead and the rest to its living donor.⁶⁰ There is also a belief that those of the dead to whom merit is not transferred, perhaps because they lack living descendants, may revenge themselves on the living. The picture would be incomplete if we failed to mention that mortuary rites involve a steady stream – or rather, avalanche – of money from the descendants to the temples.

Holmes Welch writes of the many doctrines in traditional China concerning the fate of the dead. Their variety has created anxiety about which is right and therefore about what measures would be effective.

It would have been unfilial to suppose that [one's] father had deserved to be reborn as a hungry ghost, but it would have been even more unfilial to neglect the appropriate measures if he were one. This desire to do everything possible for the deceased ... fostered the development of an extraordinarily rich assortment of posthumous rites in China. ... [T]hey eventually became the most conspicuous feature of Chinese Buddhism. (Welch, 1967, 183–184)

The FGS Buddhist calendar, like a Christian calendar, has some annual festivals, occasions for heightened religious observance – though nothing comparable to the Catholic calendar of saints' days. For example, there is an annual celebration of Avalokiteśvara's Enlightenment. By far the most important annual festival is the Chanting of the Great Repentance of the Emperor Liang, which is held in the sum-

60. Interview with incumbent nun at FGS Hualien temple.

mer and takes nine days. Participants make financial contributions at set rates to pay for the offerings and feasts; the highest rate may be as much as ten thousand NT dollars. The story behind the festival (which is not canonical) may be read in the Wikipedia.⁶¹ This festival is perhaps more widely known as the feast of the Hungry Ghosts; it is practised throughout Chinese Buddhism, and this alternative title indicates that it focuses on those dead who are hungry because no living descendant is caring for them.

The content of the festivals is much like that of normal services writ large, and similarly the congregation make merit both by chanting and by financial contribution, and share the merit, most often with their dead relatives. None of this is innovative: it is all typical of Chinese Buddhism. What is innovative is the social aspect, i.e., the fostering of lay congregations, who do all kinds of voluntary work, organize routines and group activities (including pilgrimages), keep accounts of the local finances of preaching offices, and feel themselves part of a larger movement. An important innovation, which we suspect has been learnt from Roman Catholicism (or possibly from Christianity in general), is that it is considered important that the atmosphere be informal and welcoming. Hsing Yun has specified that the offerings should not be too expensive, so that people are not excluded by being unable to afford them; on the other hand, those at meetings should emulate Christian churches by looking respectable.

The modern attitude displayed in this social dimension stands in contrast to the emotional aspect of the religious practices. While Christian services vary enormously and their tone may depend heavily on the local clergy, they tend nowadays to emphasize rejoicing, thanking God for the good things in life, and praying for more of them. The dominant tone in these Buddhist meetings is concerned much more with the fortunes of the family, and all takes place within the ideology which sees filial piety as one’s most important duty in life. However, as we have indicated in Part 2, Hsing Yun also wants people to be cheerful and find their lives enjoyable.

We began with Tàì Xū’s revolt against a Buddhism which he accused of being occupied almost solely with rites for the dead. It is striking that a whole century later, the humanistic Buddhist tradition as interpreted by the positive spirit of Hsing Yun has not shaken off that heritage.

Part 4: Fo Guang Shan as a missionary religion

Buddhism began as a missionary religion, possibly the world’s first. It is recorded — and there is no reason to doubt the record’s accuracy — that as soon as he had collected 60 disciples (at this stage all male), the Buddha told them to set out, each one traveling alone, and to spread his teachings for the benefit of gods and men. In the long run, Buddhist missionary activity led to the conversion, wholly or in part, of most Asian societies east of the Indus, a significant slice of mankind. Simply to ascribe modern Buddhist missionary activity to Christian influence would thus be absurd.

61. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist_legends_about_Emperor_Wu_of_Liang

Nevertheless it is also undeniable that over the centuries the spread of Buddhism proceeded by fits and starts, and one could say that in the second millennium of the Christian era, progress was much less dramatic than in the previous 1500 years. Indeed, after the almost total Muslim conquest of northern India early in the thirteenth century, progress was to some extent counterbalanced by decline.

Only in the late nineteenth century did Asian religions, particularly those of Indian origin, begin to conceive of a missionary counterattack aimed at the West. A pivotal event for the formulation of this ambition was the World Parliament of Religion held in Chicago in 1893. While Islam never ceased to think of itself as a missionary religion and to spread in many parts of the world, it seems to have played no part in this story: the Buddhist, Hindu and Jain attempts to convert Westerners were openly modelled on Christian missionary activities, particularly those undertaken by the colonial powers.

In Part 1, above, we have shown that Tàì Xū had global aspirations for a Buddhist revival. His view of Buddhism was ecumenical. For many years he did differentiate between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna,⁶² accepting the cliché that Theravāda concentrated on 'self-cultivation' and only the Mahāyāna practised true altruism; but he came to change his mind. In December 1939 the Chinese government sent him on a tour of about six months to win sympathy for China's cause in the war. He started in Burma and then visited India and Ceylon. In June 1940, soon after his return to China, he made a speech in which he said:

Buddhists in Ceylon are widely engaged in many causes, such as social welfare, culture, education, and so forth, thus giving benefits to the state, society and even the broad masses in the world. This marks a great spirit of compassionate love in Buddhism. Though Buddhism in Ceylon is generally considered to be Theravada Buddhism, it is indeed the practice of Mahāyāna Buddhism ... (Long 2000b, 63–64)

On the world stage, Tàì Xū himself achieved very little — which is why he is not better known; but it is useful to bear his aspirations in mind when we consider the character of Hsing Yun's successes.

Hsing Yun, the founder and Master of Fo Guang Shan, was impressed and influenced by Tàì Xū's global aspirations, but his missionary activity began within Taiwan. We have seen above (p. 223) that from the outset of his career in NE Taiwan Hsing Yun was active as an itinerant preacher, seeing himself in competition with Christian missionaries.

In due course Hsing Yun put Fo Guang Shan on the world stage. His missionary effort, which by some criteria has enjoyed great success, has been notable for two features: promotion of the ordination of women as Buddhist nuns; and the founding of a Buddhist university in California, with another gradually taking shape in Sydney. These two features were combined in 1988, when he 'decided to offer the Chinese ordination rite to Theravāda as well as Tibetan nuns.'⁶³ The occasion he

62. This is the term he generally used, but it is not entirely clear whether he ever differentiated between Theravāda and Hīnayāna.

63. LeVine and Gellner 2005, 184. Since their chapter has many details of Hsing Yun's ordination of women, and these are not relevant to our main theme, we refrain from discussing this further

chose was the consecration of the Hsi Lái monastery in Los Angeles. 250 candidates, male and female, from 16 countries were ordained. This was the first ordination of Buddhist nuns on American soil (LeVine and Gellner 2005, 185). Soon afterwards, Hsi Lái became the nucleus of a university, the 'University of the West'.

Hsing Yun

resigned as abbot of Fo Guang Shan Monastery ... in order to found a missionary order,⁶⁴ the Buddhist Light International Association (BLIA), with which he planned not only to focus on serving Taiwanese emigrés but also to make converts around the world. In the BLIA he relied primarily on nuns, whom he already knew from Taiwan to be effective fund-raisers and community organizers. He believed they would make better missionaries than monks. By 1997, the BLIA had established ninety-five temples, Pureland meditation centers, and lecture halls from Tokyo to Paris, Sydney to São Paulo.^{65 66}

BLIA/FGS spreads across the world

Together, FGS and BLIA have created centres all over the world. The HQ of BLIA is in America, but this is perhaps not significant: the entire network is in any case centralized, controlled by the Grand Master and his staff. Though the centres are almost all run by nuns, their daily life is mainly oriented towards serving the laity, and they depend heavily on lay support.

Why has FGS been so spectacularly successful at setting up branches in every continent except (until now!) Antarctica? This is the kind of large scale social phenomenon which invites a sociological explanation. We shall soon see that this bears little resemblance to missionary work as traditionally understood by Christianity, for that has conversion as its primary aim. This is, or at least has become, something quite different.

The world is full of migrants, and every modern nation now contains populations from at least one other nation. In most cases, the immigrant population have a markedly different culture from their hosts and speak a different language. It is only natural that they form clubs of various kinds to celebrate or at least to preserve the language and culture into which they were born. In some cases, these have a religion at their heart.

If we look at immigrant groups from traditionally Buddhist countries, we see that Sinhala Buddhists from Sri Lanka, Burmese and other Buddhists from Myanmar,

here. They write that in 1988 Hsing Yun's purpose was for the nuns he ordained to 'establish Fó Guāng Shān ordination lineages in their own countries, thereby extending his own influence, as well as that of his order.' However, the Ven. Hui Feng objects, citing his own conversations with Hsing Yun, that there is no such thing as an FGS ordination lineage, and Hsing Yun's sole intention was to support women's ordination (personal communication).

64. The lay missionary organization was originally called the International Buddhist Progress Society (IBPS), a name still retained by some overseas branches.
65. LeVine and Gellner 2005, 189, citing Chandler. Hui Feng however corrects these scholars, writing to us that the temples are FGS temples, supported by the BLIA; and that the meditation centres are Chan and Pure Land.
66. The figure has by now passed 200.

and Thai Buddhists from Thailand have established ‘temples’ (monasteries) for Theravāda monks in the United States, Canada, Australia, Britain, and some other Western countries. Though there is very little difference between the Buddhist religion of Sinhala, Burmese or Thai people, the lay supporters of temples run by monks from those countries virtually all come from the same countries as do the monks. Thus, for example, when a temple celebrates a *poya*⁶⁷ day at a Sri Lankan temple, over 90% of those present will be Sinhalese, and the rest will not be Buddhists from other Asian countries but members of the indigenous British population, probably people who have been drawn to Buddhism through some connection with Sri Lanka or with Sinhalese people. Moreover, these temples often celebrate holidays which are national rather than religious. The events that they organize will have secular elements, for example dancing and singing in their native languages by schoolchildren, and, above all, they will lavishly provide food cooked in national traditions by proud housewives. What is celebrated when people get together at such temples is mainly ethnicity.

For the Chinese overseas, who have long numbered many millions, the situation has not been so satisfactory. Officially, China now has no state religion. Even before the communists took power, it was not obvious what could function as a state religion. Neither Confucianism nor Daoism has a centralized religious structure comparable to that of, say, a Christian denomination, nor does it have a body of religious professionals comparable to Christian clergy. Although Buddhism was for the best part of two millennia a major presence in China, by the beginning of the twentieth century and the founding of the Chinese Republic its presence on the ground varied greatly in different regions, and monks and monasteries tended very much to live in social worlds of their own. In the 1930s the Japanese invasion, and then the civil wars over the next twenty years, largely destroyed such Buddhist structures as there were, and then in the 1950s Mao began to defrock or kill monks and to close down monasteries.

The eirenic spirit and organizational talent of Hsing Yun have always steered clear of any partisan affiliation. Fó Guāng Shān can at times appear as a somewhat simplified form of Buddhism, but that is because by avoiding particular features of one school or tradition it has managed to find a kind of lowest common denominator of Chinese Buddhism, something acceptable to all except perhaps for a few religious fanatics or specialist scholars. When designing his own temples, Hsing Yun has included features which people will recognize as famous Chinese Buddhist icons, such as Five Platform Mountains, suggesting that ‘the whole of Chinese Buddhism is our heritage’; as mentioned in Part 3 above, this may extend to folk deities. He has carried his Buddhist ecumenism even further when, for example, he held the ordination ceremony at Bodh Gaya which even included Theravādins; though that is unlikely to be relevant to why FGS branches appeal to overseas Chinese, it does strongly indicate which way the wind has been blowing.

These overseas Chinese may be from the mainland or from Taiwan. Hsing Yun and his FGS can appeal to both. Hsing Yun has Taiwanese nationality, but he was

67. A day of heightened Buddhist observance in the lunar calendar.

born on the mainland and has always maintained a strong Chinese identity; he cannot even speak Hokkien, the Taiwanese form of the Chinese language. FGS is of course rooted in Taiwan. But Taiwan has no formal diplomatic relations with any other country. In many countries the Taiwanese government does maintain a cultural centre, but it is low key, for fear of provoking objections from the PRC (= mainland China).

The great majority of overseas Chinese are however of mainland origin, though their families may have migrated several generations ago. Their language, culture and identity remain Chinese, but many of them are not in sympathy with the politics of the PRC. While the Chinese communist government has been rigorously imposing political orthodoxy and eliminating deviance, Hsing Yun is a model of the opposite trend of tolerance and inclusiveness. A further feature of the FGS which suits the needs of a very broad range of Chinese is the fact that Hsing Yun, like Tàì Xū before him, keeps at bay most of the local ideas and customs which we might call superstitious and anthropologists have referred to as ‘little’ (as opposed to ‘great’) traditions,⁶⁸ such things as belief in ghosts and fortune telling. FGS does not deal in matters which educated Chinese may find embarrassing, but in word and deed Hsing Yun emphasizes a pan-Chinese heritage.

A branch of FGS can thus function as a social and cultural centre for almost all the Chinese in an area, and in this respect it really has no rivals. No one is going to ask someone attending whether they are a Buddhist, and in any case they will be welcome whether they are or not. FGS never puts any pressure on people to donate, but custom dictates that if they feel they have received any benefit, whether material, emotional or spiritual, they should make a donation — which can be quite small. Donating itself creates a tie and makes the donor somewhat more likely to return. Large or regular donations are likely to lead to the donor’s name being inscribed in a list on a stone or wooden tablet which is hung on the wall. Popular sites are likely to display thousands of such names, often even carved in black granite, as they are at the Buddha Memorial Hall at Kaohsiung.

Conclusion

Hsing Yun followed the central tradition of Chinese Buddhism in several important respects. The Buddhism he created and led has followed the Confucian tradition of filial piety: for all his benignity, his Saṅgha, and beneath them in the hierarchy the lay followers, treat him as an authoritative father figure, who has followed the ideals of his own father figure, Tàì Xū, and his tonsure master in China. The main avenues for making merit are supporting this spiritual patrilineage, chanting for one’s own natal patrilineage and sharing one’s merit with them. Austerity is in itself of no particular value, but entertainment and enjoyment are to be seen as in harmony with ‘Buddhist purposes’ and thus not in any conflict with the status quo or the powers that be. Activism can generally be left to one’s hierarchic seniors, the Saṅgha; but the modern world, led by America, has shown how this can all be car-

68. For ‘great’ and ‘little’ traditions, see Redfield 1956, and for criticism of the idea see Obeyesekere 1963.

ried out in a democratic and comfortable spirit. Why should anyone feel dissatisfied with such a judicious amalgam of safe conservatism with encouraging optimism?

On the other hand, when we consider the overall ethos promulgated by Hsing Yun, it hardly seems incongruous that branches of FGS should come to resemble social clubs and cultural institutes. FGS does not want to set people apart from society, but encourages them to live full lives by enjoying what this world has to offer and helping others to do likewise. For all the vastly different specifics of doctrine and history, perhaps this is not so very different from what many Christian denominations in the West stand for these days.

Acknowledgement

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