CHAPTER SIX

WHY MODERN CHINESE PHILOSOPHERS HAVE REJECTED CHRISTIANITY: THE CASE OF FENG YOULAN

(中国现代哲学家为何拒绝接受基督教？—以冯友兰为例)*

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Abstract

In the twentieth century, many different types of Western philosophy arrived in China, where they played both a positive and a negative role in the transformation and development of Chinese society. It was not uncommon for Chinese philosophers to accept Western philosophy, but very rare for them to accept Christianity. In view of the influence which philosophers have had on modern society, we need to explore the relationship between modern Chinese philosophers, as a specific social group, and Christian thought, and to examine the Christian faith itself.

Feng Youlan 冯友兰 (Fung Yu-lan) was one of the founders of the Department of Philosophy at Tsinghua University, and one of the most influential philosophers, historians of philosophy, and educators in twentieth-century China. He saw it as his duty to modernize traditional Chinese philosophy, society, and culture, and for this purpose he read widely, assimilating the finer points of both Western and Eastern philosophies, and later established his distinctive New Rational Philosophy (Xin lixue 新理学). He always took an interest in religion, including Christianity. This chapter focuses on Feng as a typical example of a modern Chinese philosopher, and provides a concrete answer to the question of why Chinese philosophers refused to accept Christianity.

Keywords: Christianity; Chinese philosopher; Feng Youlan

In particular contexts, the phrase “to accept Christianity” can have two meanings: one refers to the conversion of personal religious belief, the other to what happens when, through the efforts of certain intellectuals,

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Christian doctrine and thought are absorbed by a social group, nationality or country as a new cultural element (whether dominant or subordinate) in their cultural and spiritual system. Naturally, the intellectual's personal choice of religious belief will have some effect on society, and therefore on the development of national culture, but the acceptance of Christianity in the latter sense of the phrase will have a much greater influence.

The modern Chinese philosophers referred to in this chapter fall into a particular social group. Overall, it was exceptionally rare for any of them to choose Christianity as his personal religion, and acceptance in the cultural sense was also uncommon among them. That being the case, the question arises as to why it was that modern Chinese philosophers rejected Christianity. Due to limitations of time and energy, it is not possible to discuss more than one modern Chinese philosopher here, and this chapter will consist simply of a case study of Feng Youlan (Fung Yu-lan 冯友兰). It does, however, raise some questions which the author hopes might provide a useful basis for further academic inquiry.

**Feng Youlan Sets His Heart on Studying Western Philosophy**

Feng Youlan (1895–1990) was one of the most influential philosophers in twentieth-century China. He believed it was his duty to bring traditional Chinese philosophy up to date and to promote the modernization of Chinese society and culture, and with this in mind he set about absorbing what he considered to be the best features of several different philosophies, and established his own distinctive system of philosophy.

Apart from those who are “born” Christian (i.e. are born into a Christian family), anyone who wants to accept Christianity must first have an opportunity to encounter it, whether through contact with the Christian faithful and the Church, or exposure to Christian classics and thinking. From reading his own writings, as well as biographies and research material on him, we have to conclude, not without regret, that although Feng Youlan had such an opportunity, he let it slip.

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1 Chen Lai 陈来, "Feng Youlan xiansheng zhuan 冯友兰先生传" (Life of Feng Youlan), in Feng Youlan xiansheng bainian danchen jinian wenji 冯友兰先生百年诞辰纪念文集 (Symposium to mark the centennial of Mr. Feng Youlan’s birth) (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1995); Song Zhiming 宋志明 and Mei Liangyong 梅良勇, Feng Youlan xueshu sixiang pingzhuan 冯友兰学术思想评传 (The academic thought of Feng Youlan: A critical biography) (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 1999).