Christianity as Model and Analogue in the Formation of Fo Guang Shan

By Yushuang Yao

Abstract

Hsing Yun (b.1927) founded the movement Fó Guāng Shān (FGS) (“Buddha’s Light Mountain”) in Taiwan in 1967. FGS has grown, flourished and diversified not only in Taiwan (where it is still based) but in many parts of the world. We posit that the important and conspicuous features of FGS which are analogous to Christianity, which are mostly the product of historical circumstance.

Hsing Yun was a disciple of Tài Xū (1890-1947), whose determination to reform Chinese Buddhism was largely inspired by his contact with Christianity.

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, Tài Xū was little concerned to promote or denigrate any particular Buddhist soteriological practice. His overall view of Buddhism as a practical system was that it was far, far too much concerned with otherworldy matters, notably death and the veneration of ancestors, and should redirect it s efforts to helping the living – hence it should become “Buddhism for this Life”.

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.

We come here to the very heart of the Buddhism which Hsing Yun has made it his life’s work to institutionalise in FGS. Chandler has aptly named his book *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth*. We have seen that for Tài 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 colour coordination or choreography. We recall that while studying in China in 1945, Hsing Yun was so inspired by Tài 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 forgotten, but they are no longer permitted to set the mood.

Key words: Fo Guang Shan, Hsing Yun, Chinese Buddhism, Christianity