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Reasons for Joining Church and Social Make-up of Modern Christians in Fujian

By Chen Zhiping and Li Shaoming

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(Translated by Lawrie Breen)

The general view among scholars is that the great majority of Chinese Catholic and Protestant Christians belong to the working masses or are ordinary intellectuals. This is a completely sweeping analysis. In fact, after the Rites controversy occurred in the eighteenth century, the literati and intelligentsia were unable to join the church, and there were virtually no Christians among intellectuals of any social standing, the overwhelming majority of Christians coming from the poor and uneducated sections of society. It is only in the past hundred years, and particularly since the establishment of the Republic, that there were again numbers of intellectuals among both Catholic and Protestant Christians, most of whom were the product of the Christian schools. Here, we shall concentrate mainly on a brief analysis of the relatively large number of low-level "poor" Christians and their reasons for joining the churches.

In order to understand more clearly the social composition of the Protestant and Catholic churches of Fujian, we shall draw on archival material from northern Fujian from the Republican and early Liberation periods and offer an explanation of this.

Let us first look at details of the occupations and ages of Catholics in the counties of the Nanping district on the eve of Liberation:

TABLE 1

County	Nanping	Gutian	Shaxian	Shunchang	Jiangle	Jianning	Taining	Total
Gender								
Male	350	105	162	109	265	55	106	1152
Female	347	163	124	112	227	49	95	1119
Total	697	268	286	221	494	104	201	2271

TABLE 1

County	Nanping	Gutian	Shaxian	Shunchang	Jiangle	Jianning	Taining	Total
Age								
Up to 7	216	34	103	72	122	26	11	564
7-13	123	33	42	26	78	15	15	332
Adult	89	42	37	29	61	6	32	296
Youth	172	96	78	60	141	37	69	651
Aged	97	65	26	34	92	20	74	428
Total	697	268	286	221	494	104	201	2271
Back ground								
Worker	380	43	47	40	25	37	5	577
Peasant	39	132		26	289	12	178	676
Poor	8					9		17
Fishers	32		108	59				199
Boat people	59	68	115					242
Crafts	1			48	14			63
Profess.				1				1
Land owner					17			17
Sm.trader	12		13	6	83	24		138
Religious Business		16		41			4	4
Rich peasant	11	1					12	69
Landlord		8			16		2	76
Office Cap. landlord						13		13
Other	155		3			8		166
Total	697	268	286	221	494	104	201	2271

According to the above table, there are four points worth noting:

(1) So far as the age ratio is concerned, there were 896 persons who were children or young people, making 39.4% of the total Catholic population of Nanping. The Catholic Church insists on infant baptism, and where the parents are Catholics, their children will always be Catholics too. By no means all of this large number of children and young people who joined the church necessarily persevered in the faith, and, as we understand it, there were many young people who were not church members as adults.

(2) As far as the occupations of the Catholics were concerned, the great majority were lower level workers, farmers and small traders; the number of upper class persons such as independent professional people, rich farmers and landlords who were believers was extremely small.

(3) In Nanping, because it was a seat of prefectural government, the proportion of workers was greater, whereas in the remote mountain areas such as Gutian, Taining and Jiangle there was a higher proportion of peasants.

(4) In Shaxian, Nanping and Shunchang, because these places were only accessible via the upper reaches of the Min river, Catholics who were fishermen and boat people were comparatively numerous, and believers from other walks of life were extremely rare. This situation was reflected in the fact that, in the growth of the number of believers in some places, there was a tendency for religion to be handed on in the course of people's occupations. We will make this further observation from the distribution of Catholics on the eve of Liberation, that as the table [below] shows, there was a total of 240 Catholics in Shaxian, of whom as many as 225 followed water-borne occupations, making 94.1% of the total.

TABLE 2

		Water-based believers				Land-based believers					
		Boat people	Crew	Fisher	Sub Total	Trade	Craft	Peasant	Fishers	Boat	Sub Total
Under	M	34	9	18	61	1	1	2		12	16
18	F	24	2	29	55	2		1	3	7	13
Sub. Tot		58	11	47	116	3	1	3	3	19	29
Over	M	18	3	28	49	2		1	3	3	9
18	F	16	1	27	44	3		2	2	1	8
Sub. Tot		34	4	55	93	5	3	5	4	17	

The spread of western religion was affected by occupational factors, and the same sort of thing happened in Jian'ou and Chongan counties, according to *A short history of the Catholic Church in Jian'ou*: "The Catholics of this diocese are almost all poor peasants and boat people and their level of education is very low..... As far as the numbers of Catholics in Jian'ou diocese are concerned, there are many boat people among the Catholics of the Bajiao Catholic Church, and they are from families which have been Catholic for generations. Among the villages where the whole population has been Catholic for generations is the one served by the Guadun chapel..... The Catholics of Guadun are not local people, but were people who had moved from Changding during the Qing dynasty to manufacture paper, and they had brought their Catholicism with them." We know that a substantial number of traditional Chinese secret societies and factional organisations were spread on an occupational basis; this was particularly so among people who lived on the water, such as fishermen, boat people etc., among whom there has been a long tradition of organising secret societies and guilds. In the same way, western religion was also spread through people's occupations, and this is a clear case of the spread of Catholicism and Protestant Christianity being influenced by the traditional Chinese activity of forming societies among the people.

Let us look now at the situation of Protestant Christianity in the Nanping area. Here is a chart showing the situation of the Christians of the Weili church in Nanping in the early period after Liberation:

TABLE 3

Loc. of Church	Name of Church	Believers' Occupations*										Statistics		
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Tot	M	F
Nanping	Gospel Hall	11	7		7	6	1	23	6	71		132	38	94
Xiadao	do	5	15		2	1	2	5	2	14		45	31	14
Xiqin	Church of Peace & Blessing	2	8		2	2	2	3		7		29	15	14
Baozhu Shan	Gospel Hall	1	2				2	2	3	14		24	10	14
Wangtai	do	2	9	1		1		1	2	13		30	15	15
Zhanghuban	Source of Blessing Ch.	6	18	3		1	9	2	1	29	1	61	30	31
Taiping	Gospel Hall	16	3							21		40	18	22
Xiashuangkeng	do		20	1	2			1	2			30	5	30
Shaxian	do	7	5		7	6	2	15	1	6		46	24	22
Yangguang	do	10	3		1			1		7		16	8	8
Nanxia	do		12									20	12	8
Xiamao	do	10	5	2					1	2		19	10	9
Yangkou	True Blessing Ch	8	13	2	20	1	2	1	1	17		67	27	40
Shunchang	World's Salvation Ch.	2	1	1		2	5	2	1	3	2	19	7	12
Xiayang	Gospel Hall	2	9						6	9		26	14	12
Dagan	do	9	1	2	2		1	2	1	17		36	15	21
Yuankeng	True God Church	1	7			1		1		11		22	9	13
Moubu	Save the World Ch		6				2	1		10		17	7	10
Youxi	Evang. Church	4	8	4	3	1	2	3	6	21		53	23	30
Youxi Area 2	Maping Ch	1	22			2			2	7		34	26	26
Area 50	Way of Heaven Ch.		7				1		1	9		18	8	10
Area 28	Return to Source Ch		8				8		1	14		39	16	23
Area 27	Gospel Hall		11							10		31	17	14
Area 12	do	2	14	2	3		5	6	3	14		49	32	17
Area 15	do		8				1			13		22	9	13
Area 18	Spread Blessing Ch		15	1			2			7		25	12	13
Area 20	True Word Church	5								5	2	14	7	7
Area 17	True Worship Ch	1	13	1	4				1	5		36	18	18
Totals		100	255	17	56	24	47	76	35	366	5	1000	463	560

Note: In the original tables, the numbers do not always add up correctly.

* Occupations:

1 – Worker 2 – Peasant 3 - Armed forces 4 – Trader 5 - Religious personnel 6 - Student 7 - Medical personnel 8 - Teacher 9 - Household duties 10 - Other

Where the Protestant churches differed from the Catholic churches lay in the fact that the former did not stress infant baptism, so that all the Christians listed in the above tables were adults, totalling 1,000 persons. So far as their occupations were concerned, they too were mostly poor peasants or workers; there were one hundred workers, forming 10% of the total, with peasants totalling 255 persons, forming 25.5% of the whole. What is of interest is that there were 366 persons, or 36% of the total, who were described as persons with household duties. The great majority of these were housewives without outside occupations. In the old China, women's educational standard and social status were always lower than men's, and the religious motivation of such persons was fairly vague and even childish and bizarre, and their understanding of doctrine was extremely slight (see below).

To get a deeper understanding of the reasons for belief in religion on the part of Christians, and of the social make up of Christianity, we have carried out a direct investigation of some present-day Christians. At the Gospel Hall in Nanping, we distributed questionnaires entitled "An enquiry about the circumstances of Christians" to seventy Christians, of which 23 were eventually returned. The results are given in the following table:

TABLE 4

Surname	M/F	Age	Occupation	Reason for Conversion	Benefits from being a Christian
Huang	F	53	-	Long-term mental illness	Cured of illness, hope in life
Zhang	M	61	Retd. worker	God so loved the world	Joy in life
Lin	M	68	do	The true God, ruler of all things	Hope to go to heaven
Peng	F	65	do	Seeing sisters go to church, went too	Gives me peace and joy
Zhao	F	58	Household duties	Somebody encouraged me to start believing	Peace in the family
Jing (First name?)	M	26	Peasant	Unharmonious family, nothing going right and physical illness	Illness cured, harmony in family
Li	M	?	?	Belief in the Lord	Awareness of becoming a child of God
Tang	F	26	Cadre	Grandfather Christian, influenced by him	Gives one a happy feeling
Huo (First name?)	F	42	Worker	Physical illness	Health and emotional happiness
Bo (First name?)	F	69	Teacher	Parents were pastors	Love others as I love myself
Wang	M	25	Technician	The words of the Bible	Strange change has taken place in life, full of joy
Gao	F	60	Household duties	Believed in God	Received peace and joy, learned a lot of characters through reading Bible
Xu	M	26	Book-keeper	Believed that Christianity had a unique function in the civilisation of humankind	Self-awareness; collective experience of kindheartedness
Lin	F	25	Cadre	Hope that after becoming a believer I would have bounds within which to keep myself	My hot temper improved; my heart became full of love
Gui (First name)	F	75	Household	Family dispersed, no one to rely on	Received peace and joy, and learned some characters
Gao	F	62	Retd. teacher	Read books when small in church school	Peace and joy
Jin	F	39	Shop employee	Believed that God can save humankind	Life became fully as wished it to be, emotionally changed beyond recognition
Jin	F	54	Household duties	Somebody else asked me to go	Received joy
Zhang	F	56	Household duties	Overcome with illness	My sins pardoned, my health has considerably improved
You	F	42	Repair work	Felt that I was sinful	Mutual assistance with Christian brothers & sisters
Lin	F	75	Medical work	The Lord loves our family, the Lord loves the people of the world	Things going smoothly; peace in family
Ying (First name)	F	58	Worker	No peace in family	Peaceful family; things going smoothly
Yang	F	55	Worker	Belief in the Lord and hope for heaven; serving the masses	My spirit is in the Lord's hands

The method of distributing questionnaires to Christians and getting them to fill them in themselves produces anomalies, because those who fill in and return their questionnaires (and 68% of the questionnaires were not returned) are in general those with a certain standard of education. Such people will have a better understanding of church doctrines and commandments than those who are illiterate, and for this reason we can see from the returned questionnaires that a significant number of persons became Christians because they believed in God. Despite this, however, among the 23 Christians mentioned above who returned their questionnaires, there were nevertheless seven believers who had joined the church because of illness or because of family misfortune, and who invariably regarded belief in religion as an effective means of curing illnesses or of procuring good fortune for the family and a bright future.

The Huaxiang Christian Church in Fuzhou is a relatively large church and the church members there have many reasons for their belief. According to an enquiry conducted directly with 50 of these people, their reasons for being Christians could be divided as follows:

- (1) Twelve persons, or 24% of the total, became believers as a result of the influence received through having been brought up in religious homes;
- (2) Sixteen persons, or 32% of the total became believers because of illness, of whom many were cases of mental illness;
- (3) Nine persons, or 18%, became believers because they hoped "to obtain eternal life and the salvation of their souls";
- (4) Thirteen persons, or 26%, became believers for various social reasons, as follows:
 - (a) Four persons, or 8%, became Christians because of "life's worries" or because of "disillusion with life". These people stated that they had felt "pessimistic and without hope", but on hearing Christian teaching they had felt that there was something in which their souls could trust;
 - (b) Three persons, or 6%, said that they had become Christians because they had experienced an unhappy family life as Buddhists, but on switching to belief in Jesus they had come to enjoy peace and happiness. For example, one woman worker, Ms Pan, said that she had been a Buddhist, but that her family life had been disturbed; later, she had decided to believe in Jesus following an introduction by another person; she had thrown away her statue of Buddha and had felt "peace and happiness".
 - (c) Two persons, or 4%, had become Christians because of family fortune or because of the suicide of children. For example, Ms Wang Mouin, a retired official in a hospital in a certain street in Fuzhou, had been prompted to become a Christian when her daughter committed suicide after failing her university entrance examination.
 - (d) Two persons, or 4%, had become Christians after becoming convinced that society could not satisfy their "demands".
 - (e) One person, or 2%, felt that religion "made people better". For example, one young Christian said: "I had not previously been aware of my sins, when in fact there was no wrong I had not committed: fighting, gambling, stealing, drinking and smoking, dancing, and even forming irregular liaisons with both men and women. Now that I am saved, I have been reborn; I have repented and I am a new man."
 - (f) One person, or 2%, had been brought to becoming a Christian after being saved from a disaster. For example, a young factory worker, Ms Lin, had been knocked over by a car while riding her bicycle and nearly lost her life, as a result of which a fellow-student had introduced her to Christianity.

Putting questions directly to church members can produce results which reflect even more accurately their reasons for being Christians. We questioned more than twenty members of the Meishanpo Church in Nanping. Their replies as to their reason for being Christians were as follows:

Surname	M/F	Reason for becoming Christian
Liao	M	Divorce; depression; loneliness.
Liu	F	Family's influence.
Cai	M	Admitted to hospital when taken ill and not witnessing healing for a long time.
Huang	M	As a result of a fight, was jailed for two years and on release was searching for freedom.
Wang	M	Grandmother's influence.
Elderly	F	Lumbago over long period.
Chen	F	Husband has mistress.
Xiong	M	Curiosity.
Chen	M	Converted through Christian neighbour.
Fan	F	Tricked by the devil; suffered illness for 3 years; day after she was converted, was healed.
Li	F	At first a Buddhist, then since no recovery from illness over a long period, converted to Christianity.
Lin	F	Felt that Christianity had a firmer foundation than Buddhism .
Huang	F	As above
Tang	F	As above
Lin	F	As above
		(The above 4 are all fellow factory workers)
Shi	M	Searching for emotional absolution and spiritual sustenance.
Wang	M	As above
Chen	M	As above
		(The above 3 agreed with each other to become Christians)
Pan	F	Originally a Buddhist. Troubles in family; children unable to find work and love to fight; husband had heart trouble; daughter disappointed in love. All this put right after becoming a Christian.
Ren	F	Ill for a long time without getting better.
Elderly	F	Influenced by someone
Lin	F	The Lord admonishes people to do good.
Zhang	M	Seeing that Christians were all very honest.
Youth	M	When a child, ill for a long time, healed by a Christian and believed since then.
Liu	F	Parents' influence
Yang	F	Home near a church, since nothing to do on Sundays would often go and listen to the sermon, and felt that it was good to be a Christian.

Summing up the above papers, archival material and social enquiries, we can appreciate that, as far as Christians in Fujian in recent times are concerned, their reasons for joining their church are very complicated. We must recognise that many Christians are extremely devout with regard to their own faith, but it cannot be denied that a substantial number of Christians, in the early stages of their membership, come to believe in Catholicism or Protestant Christianity with all different kinds of mental attitudes, and, as stated above, those who join a church in order to obtain a cure for physical illness, or to dispel fortune, or to achieve happiness, do so in a deep state of blindness. Naturally, after they have joined, as a result of being constantly under the influence of religion, they do come to a certain understanding of religious commandments and teaching, so that eventually the notion of joining a church to gain some benefit and the religious belief itself become linked together. This is how the distinctive colour of religious faith with Chinese characteristics comes into being.