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China's Intelligentsia: A Strategic Missional Opportunity

D. Keith Campbell

I Introduction

Science has emerged triumphantly in modern China and, as in the West, has left no aspect of society untouched. From the government to the peasant, and from the university to the primary schools, science reigns supreme. China's intelligentsia—a term I use to refer to China's formally educated population, including professors, students, and politicians—reveres and applies science rigorously to all academic disciplines and to everyday life. This benefits China in innumerable ways: in medicine, technology, travel, etc.

Amidst this admirable excitement and reverence for one of the most influential disciplines in history, I explore in this article[1] how China's intelligentsia attributes religion-like characteristics to its science, how this engenders an unhealthy divorce between science and philosophy. I also discuss how addressing these religion-like characteristics affords, especially for certain, qualified missionaries, a strategic and influential missional opportunity that far exceeds China's geographical borders.

Instead of using the phrase 'religion-like characteristics', I could perhaps use the abbreviated term 'scientism' (the philosophical belief that science is the most authoritative worldview to the exclusion of all others) to note this relatively new phenomenon in China (arriving circa 1950).[2] I highlight, however, a nuanced aspect of scientism, namely one possessing religious overtones (perhaps similar to what

1 I am grateful to Dr. Stan Wallace, President of Global Scholars, for commenting on an early draft of this article. I also deeply appreciate insightful input from Brian and Melanie, two colleagues who serve with me in China.

2 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (vol. 7; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 78–79. See also Shiping Hua, *Scientism and Humanism: Two Cultures in Post-Mao China (1978–1989)* (Albany: State University Press, 1995).

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Mikael Stenmark calls 'redemptive scientism').[3]

I intentionally retain the phrase, 'religion-like characteristics', to note the irony of China's official policies that seek to separate science from religion while attributing similar religion-like characteristics to their science. If one disagrees with my use of the phrase, 'religion-like characteristics' or with whether these characteristics are themselves technically religion-like (see below), my argument still stands because whatever one calls these characteristics, they are not scientific within the standard, contemporary understanding of science.

I am not the first to note a divorce between science and philosophy among China's intelligentsia. Xia Li observes something similar in an insightful 2010 article, wherein he summarizes the history of the relationship between the disciplines of the Philosophy of Science and the disciplines of Science, Technology, and Society.[4] He concludes that, although these two disciplines in China interacted well in the 1970s and 1980s, there has, in the last 20 years, been an increasing separation of the two, a separation that Xia Li thinks will ultimately end in divorce. He finds this trend unfortunate and argues for their reunification.

In this article, I substantiate the phenomenon that Li pointed out several years ago. Additionally, in building on his work, I note a trend wherein China's intelligentsia ironically adheres to 'science' in religion-like ways, and I suggest an evangelical, missional response to it. Before examining this phenomenon in China, I first need to define what I mean by 'science' and explain how I use the term 'religion'.

II Science and Religion

In 2009, after a year of research and collaboration, the United Kingdom's Science Council, whose goal is to advance science and its application in the UK, presented this succinct, commonly accepted, definition of science: 'Science is the pursuit and application of knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world following a systematic methodology based on evidence.'[5] Scientific methodology, according to The Science Council, includes the following eight items: objective observation via measurement and data; evidence; experiment and/or observation as benchmarks for testing hypotheses; induction (use of reason to establish general rules or conclusions drawn from facts or examples); repetition; analysis; and verification (including testing, critical exposure to scrutiny, peer review, and assessment).

Although science can refer to a method (as just mentioned), an institution (e.g., the Institution of Environmental Sciences), or a branch of knowledge (e.g., mathematical

3 Mikael Stenmark, 'What is Scientism?' *Religious Studies: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 33 [1997]: 27–29.

4 'Philosophy of Science and STS in China: From Coexistence to Separation', *East Asia Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal* (2010): 57–66.

5 Anonymous, 'What is Science: The Science Council's Definition of Science,' <http://www.sciencecouncil.org/definition> accessed 15 October 2014. Cf. *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary* (2d ed.; USA: William Collins World Publishing Company, Inc., 1975), 1622.

sciences),[6] the method is foundational to the other two. In other words, the institution and branch, generally referred to as science, should flow from the method and not vice versa. As discussed in the next two sections, this method, as beneficial and influential as it is, has its limitations in what it can examine.[7] And, in ignoring these limitations, some among China's intelligentsia have included (perhaps inadvertently) religion-like characteristics with this method.

Religion is more difficult to define than science.[8] If defined too narrowly, it inevitably omits certain beliefs that some scholars find religious. If defined too broadly, then almost anything can be classified as a religion (e.g., a university fraternity). Space here does not permit engaging these debates. Nor is it necessary because I am not arguing, as I reiterate below, that China's science is a religion proper. Furthermore, it is not necessary because I focus here on *characteristics* that are generally perceived as religious. Scholars of religion can easily debate the degree to which some of these characteristics are religious. Entering these debates is unnecessary also because, however one classifies them, they do not, as mentioned above, represent any standard definition of science. These characteristics are my focus in the next section.[9]

III 'Science' with Religion-Like Characteristics among China's Intelligentsia(?)

With science and religion explained, I now turn attention to how I think 'science' manifests itself with certain religion-like characteristics among China's intelligentsia. To preface this discussion, I note three important things about this subtitle. First, notice that I place 'science' in quotation marks. I do this to indicate that to the degree that science assimilates these religion-like characteristics is to the same degree that it fails to meet the criteria of science as defined above.

Second, notice that I place a question mark in parenthesis (?) at the end of this subtitle. This indicates my humble speculation about the degree to which science, indeed, appears in China with certain religion-like characteristics. I hedge this suggestion not because I believe it to be inaccurate, but because I have not conducted a statistical analysis of a large cross-section of China's academic population on this topic. I am aware, in other words, that this suggestion—that science appears among China's intellectuals with religion-like characteristics—represents an initial, personal observation that social scientists, and others in the field more qualified than myself, should verify and quantify more specifically through statistical research.

My contention, though, is not un-

6 See *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, 1622.

7 Cf. Nicholas Rescher, *The Limits of Science* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), esp. 243–51.

8 Cf. Craig Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion* (Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2012), 1–6.

9 For definitions and characteristics of religion, see Niels Nielsen, ed., *Religions of the World* (3d ed.; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 4–17, and Jacob Neusner, ed., *Introduction to World Religions: Communities and Cultures* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), x–xxiii.

founded because it is based on the following experiences: teaching over a thousand students during four years in Chinese classrooms in Shanghai, Beijing, and Harbin (to undergraduates, graduates, and PhD students from three different departments: Philosophy, Humanities, and English), informal interviews with students, professors, and expatriates living in China, and observing Chinese political speeches both in person and in the media.

Aside from my personal observations, it is noteworthy that in 1999 Frank E. Budenholzer briefly alluded to this phenomenon in China;[10] my discussion below further confirms Budenholzer's inclinations. To the degree that the cumulative weight of my observations is accurate, to the same degree my suggested missional response in the next section is appropriate.

The risk of prematurely basing the missional strategies discussed below on my observations prior to conducting statistical analyses will cause no harm. If my observations turn out to be too subjectively founded and/or too narrowly perceived relative to China's broader intelligentsia, the result is harmless because evangelical scholars, who should be adept at rapidly assessing new and changing situations, will, in practice, simply and quickly learn that it is unnecessary to address these observations. But, if my observations are correct, then addressing them quickly, especially in light of China's well-documented rapid change—change that shows no signs of abating—could have a more timely influence.

A final important note about this sub-title is to emphasize 'religion-*like*'. To further highlight a point I mention above, I do not wish to imply that China's science is a religion proper. Nor do I suggest that they *intentionally* attribute religion-like characteristics to certain aspects of their scientific enterprises. Rather, my goal is simply to note a trend among some of China's intelligentsia to implicitly believe (and at times explicitly argue) that science can accomplish more than it actually can. When this happens, that particular view of science inevitably takes on the following religious characteristics.

Aside from noting several issues concerning this sub-title, I should also mention several caveats. First, China's intelligentsia is very complex and far from monolithic. The religious characteristics that I discuss below do not apply pervasively to all of China's intelligentsia but represent general trends. Second, we can assume that Chinese scholars and leaders understand what science is because they remarkably push forward with many scientific advancements. I simply note trends about which the Chinese intelligentsia seems largely unaware, trends that result in misunderstandings about philosophy (including Christianity) and that afford evangelical missionaries strategic opportunities for service.

IV Eight Characteristics

With these issues and caveats in mind, I now turn attention to eight religion-like characteristics that surface in the appropriation of science among some

10 'Religion and Science in a Non-Western Setting', *Mission Studies* 16 (1999): 61.

of China's intelligentsia.[11] *First*, science among China's intelligentsia is often anthropomorphized in ways similar to how religions anthropomorphize their deities. Religions usually ascribe human traits to their gods such as seeing, hearing, walking, touching, thinking, and human motive, personality, and creativity. In my experience, science among China's intelligentsia is repeatedly endowed with motive, personality, and creativity, as if it is a thinking entity and not a benign method.

This anthropomorphism is not used solely with reference to science. In fact, scholars anthropomorphize most disciplines, as evidenced in phrases like 'psychology rescues schizophrenics from the brink of insanity.' Such anthropomorphism is not intrinsically problematic and, when used colloquially, is understandable. It is philosophically problematic because of the degree to which it permeates China's intelligentsia and because it presents in concert with the next eight religion-like characteristics.

Second, there is a pervasive assumption that science is the best or only source for adequately answering life's philosophical questions. My students and colleagues often assume that when scientific education advances far enough, then questions such as 'Why do some people do very evil things?' and 'Does God exist?' will be definitively answered or (philosophically more ill-informed) that it already has answered such questions. These assumptions are similar to those of some religious adherents who view certain texts, leaders, and dogmas as the only sources that address the philosophical questions of life.

There is also, *third*, an assumption that science can provide an objective, ethical framework for life. This usually surfaces in my conversations regarding education. The assumption—an assumption that draws heavily on Confucianism—is that as good, scientific, modern education increases, better morals and ethics will inevitably follow. In light of moral problems among the educated in recent history (e.g., Hitler and Stalin) and among today's academic elites (e.g., corruption among some Chinese political leaders), this is demonstrably inaccurate.

My home country (the USA), for example, is among the most educated in the world; it is among the world's leaders in advancing scientific causes, contributions, and teaching methods. Yet, as is clear from a brief perusal of the daily news, sadly, heinous crimes are frighteningly too common in the United States, even among the formally educated. Scientific advancement alone, as beneficial and admirable as it is, does not, and perhaps cannot, solve the world's ethical problems.

Carrying points two and three (that science answers life's philosophical questions and that science provides ethics) to their logical conclusion, my students and colleagues, *fourth*, frequently assume (and sometimes overtly state) that science one day will, or (philosophically more ill-informed) already does, provide objective meaning to human life, including joy, contentment, and happiness. A firm belief that life has objective meaning is a religious and not a scientific characteristic. This

11 Some see similar trends in the west (Rustrum Roy, 'Scientism and Technology as Religions'. *Zygon* 40 [2005]: 835–44; Hua, *Scientism and Humanism*, esp. 141–56).

meaning is often attached to the notion that as science continually improves people's general quality of life (e.g., air conditioners, running water, indoor plumbing, electricity, and sanitized kitchens), then inevitably life's problems will dissipate. Not only is this notion a *non sequitur*, it also misunderstands the limits of science.

Another religion-like characteristic that, in my experience, manifests itself among China's intelligentsia is that, *fifth*, science is often accepted dogmatically without critical assessment of its purposes (to study the physical universe) and current limitations (cannot directly examine abstract thinking, compose ethics, etc.). This is similar to the way that some religious adherents uncritically, but tenaciously, hold to their beliefs. Although Philosophy of Science is a robust and established discipline in China, it is, as mentioned above, yielding decreasing influence on the field of science. In order to remain aware of methodological purposes, consistency, and limitations, every method should frequently undergo the rigors of philosophical inquiry. Otherwise, dogmatization results.

Sixth, this dogmatization, has made the word 'science' itself into a shibboleth. Examples of shibboleths among religious adherents include how deities are defined, which ethics are normative, and which religious texts are authoritative. The word 'science' is often used as a shibboleth among my students and colleagues to demarcate 'true academic research' from 'substandard academic research' without critical consideration of academic disciplines that explore data that the scientific method currently cannot assess.

A *seventh* religion-like characteristic is the attributing of intrinsic value and uniqueness to humans. Religions almost universally prescribe ontological value to (at least some) human beings. Science, when properly understood, simply cannot ascribe special, ontological worth to humans relative to other life forms. It is simply an unscientific presupposition to objectivize such mantras as 'all people are created equal' or 'it is evil to eat for supper the neighbouring tribe'. Yet, every Chinese student and colleague with whom I have engaged about this issue believes that science demonstrates the ontological value of human beings.

Finally, and by way of summary, just as some religious adherents uncritically venerate their deities, my students and colleagues often venerate science without critical assessment.[12] By mentioning this veneration, I am not criticizing the justifiable admiration for what the scientific method contributes to humanity, a particular sentiment with which I resonate.[13] Rather, I question the veneration of it *without critical assessment*.

There are some differences, of course. Whereas religious adherents often go to a specific location and sometimes erect images to aid in venerating their deities, my Chinese students and colleagues, especially as encapsulated in public slogans embedded in political speeches, venerate the idea of science via the eight characteristics just discussed.

12 Hua hinted at this in 1995 (*Scientism and Humanism*, 143–44, 145). For an earlier era, see also, D. W. Y. Kwok, *Scientism in Chinese Thought* (Biblo-Moser, 1972), 12.

13 Thanks to Steven J. Heatherly, M.D., for pointing this out to me.

V A Missional Response

Ministry in China at the intersection of these eight religion-like characteristics is precisely where an evangelical, missional response can have significant local and global influence—an influence on at least two levels. On one level, responding to these religion-like characteristics is influential whether one is evangelical or not; addressing them is simply good pedagogy and research. Beyond this, on another level, these characteristics philosophically impede a Christian worldview by, in essence, erecting a foundationless philosophy in its place—a philosophy that seeks to address issues that, according to believers, only Christianity can properly and most satisfyingly explain.

Correcting these religion-like characteristics is a particularly strategic way to advance Christ's Kingdom. This will have an influence not only locally in China but, because of China's emerging significance in world politics, economies, and humanitarian views, also more globally. China's intelligentsia, in other words, are no longer geo-political leaders only in China, but they are now influential leaders beyond her borders.

Although missionaries need to address these characteristics in every sector of Chinese society, perhaps the most strategic place to address them is within universities and, to the degree that local law permits, via scholarly publications. Those most qualified to do this are evangelical professors with terminal degrees in their respective fields, especially those in fields related to science and philosophy. Simply put, there is a dire need for evangelical scholars to practise their respective disciplines in China by incrementally (and more aggressively where local restrictions on freedom-of-speech are lax) addressing these eight religion-like characteristics.

In order to avoid hegemonic insinuations, I should pause here and explain who I identify as 'missionaries'. The missional paradigm that Timothy Tennent calls the 'west-reaches-the-rest' died a beneficial death in the twentieth century.[14] Thus, the days should be long past when many westerners see themselves as God's only missionaries to the world. Modern missions, especially in light of Christianity's global shift toward the east and south, should be practised 'from everywhere to everywhere'.[15] This includes missions in mainland China.

With this said, however, there is a continued need, not to mention a biblical command, for cross-cultural missionaries (Mt 28:19–20), including those who travel from the west.[16] The following suggestions, therefore, apply both to academic missionaries who are native to mainland China and to those who are not.

Although these suggestions apply to all evangelicals serving in China, I will direct the conversation toward westerners for at least two reasons. First, it is very unlikely that there are

14 *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 31. On the demise of the west-reaches-the-rest paradigm, see Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, with Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 218–19.

15 Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 21.

16 Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 219–21.

many subscribers to this journal residing in mainland China or a large number in Taiwan or Hong Kong. Thus, it is not so important to address Chinese scholars in this journal. Second, as I have argued elsewhere, evangelical scholars, especially in the west, are vocationally drowning in flooded academic markets. In light of fewer places to lay their academic heads, evangelical scholars in the west, because of Scripture's missional, theological mandate, should prayerfully consider practising their disciplines more globally.[17] An exceptionally strategic place to do this is in Chinese universities.

Credentialed evangelical scholars from disciplines such as science, technology, psychology, and mathematics have unprecedentedly open-doors to teach both short- and long-term in China. One avenue through which to explore such options is Global Scholars (formerly the International Institute for Christian Studies), the only organization in the world that connects evangelical scholars from every discipline to secular universities worldwide.[18] Additionally, Chinese universities are partnering with western universities at a staggering rate, presenting further opportunities to teach in China.[19]

Among the top missional priorities that Christian scholars from these disciplines who serve in China should address are the eight religion-like characteristics mentioned above. Scholars should, of course, address these characteristics as directly as possible through teaching and writing. More indirectly, but perhaps equally influential, are the following four ways to address these characteristics. These form a rudimentary platform upon which other, more specialized, scholars can build, and they, furthermore, address more deeply the erroneous philosophical perspectives that undergird these religion-like characteristics. Sometimes, depending on where one lives in China, these must be addressed only incrementally and/or peripherally due to China's current restrictions on free thought.

VI Four Strategies

First, evangelical scholars in China, while applying the scientific method rigorously to every discipline, should patiently and respectfully teach China's intelligentsia about science's current, and perhaps indefinite, limits in evaluating and explaining certain phenomena.[20] For example, the scientific method is at present simply unable to establish and/or to empirically examine issues like justice, ethics, love, intuition, consciousness, and abstract thinking such as the empirical exist-

17 D. Keith Campbell, 'The American Evangelical Academy and the World: A Challenge to Practice More Globally', *JETS* 56 (2013): 337–53.

18 See www.global-scholars.org.

19 Tamar Lewin, 'U.S. Universities Rush to Set Up Outposts Abroad', <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/10/ education/10global.html?pagewanted=all> accessed 8 October 2013; and Debra Erdley, 'Carnegie Mellon Joins Popular Trend of U.S., China Universities Partnering,' <http://triblive.com/news/allegheny/3786897-74/china-university-engineering#axzz2h6oTKwdN> accessed 3 September 2014.

20 See especially Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001) and Rescher, *The Limits of Science*.

ence of higher mathematics. Whether or not science will one day evolve to the point that it can empirically examine these phenomena is debatable.[21] In the meantime, evangelical scholars would serve China's intelligentsia well by encouraging them to exhibit philosophical and methodological humility concerning these and similar issues.

Consonant with espousing the current limits of the scientific method, scholars in China, as argued in any introduction to philosophy,[22] should, *second*, teach their students and colleagues to submit every research method, including the scientific method, to rigorous philosophical evaluations. Interdisciplinary methodological checks-and-balances, especially amidst today's tendency towards intense vocational specialization, are a must for every field. Without such checks-and-balances, potential research flaws and reductionisms will result. Examples, I suggest, include the religion-like characteristics I address above.

Implied in this suggestion to submit every research method to rigorous philosophical evaluation is, *third*, that evangelical scholars serving in China should nudge her intelligentsia towards interdisciplinary approaches and methods. Especially important is for Chinese students and scholars from every discipline to become more familiar with the prevailing arguments of modern philosophy.

My Chinese students and colleagues generally operate within the philosophy of the 18th and 19th century Enlightenment wherein scholars assumed that complete objectivity was possible (e.g., logical positivism).[23] This runs contrary to, and completely ignores, the consensus of modern philosophical scholarship that no one is completely objective and that everyone is influenced by their culture, worldview, upbringing, etc. Ignoring these arguments of modern philosophy results, at least partially, in scholars inadvertently synchronizing their scientific pursuits with the religion-like characteristics mentioned above.

My purpose in making this suggestion is not to deny the existence of objective truth since I personally believe he exists (Jn 14:6). Neither do I suggest that the Chinese intelligentsia surrender to some intellectual relativism by surrendering the pursuit of truth. They should pursue it, though, through rigorous methods, the best of which for the Chinese intelligentsia, I propose, is something akin to N. T. Wright's and Ben Meyer's 'critical realism'.[24] Critical realism admits the subjectivity of researchers but still suggests that they, with rigorous effort informed by the checks-and-balances of others, can

21 Rescher, *The Limits of Science*, 111–27. Contra Stephen Hawking (see Matt Warman, 'Stephen Hawking tells Google "Philosophy is Dead"', <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/google/8520033/Stephen-Hawking-tells-Google-philosophy-is-dead.html> accessed 13 October 2014).

22 For example, see Alex Rosenberg, *Philosophy of Science: A Contemporary Introduction* (2d ed.; New York: Routledge, 2005), 2–6.

23 An observation also noted by Budenholzer, 'Religion and Science in a Non-Western Setting', 44, and Hua, *Scientism and Humanism*, 143.

24 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 32–37; Ben F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Alison Park: Pickwick, 1989).

speak cogently about their object of research.

Fourth, as implied throughout this article, evangelical scholars practising in China should remind their students that a healthy scientific method needs robust philosophical inquiry. Aside from the innate academic and practical problems that stem from permeating science with the religion-like characteristics addressed earlier, the disciplines of science and philosophy, as I mention several times above, sometimes explore phenomena that the other discipline does not and cannot address. Excluding philosophical voices from any academic conversation (whether it be science, jurisprudence, ethics, etc.) is both academically myopic and, relative to an evangelical worldview and ethic, practically unwise.

VII Conclusion

The Chinese intelligentsia admirably herald science in nearly every political speech and, in my experience, are the mantra of academic disciplines from Zhanjiang to Harbin. This benefits China both politically and academically. Less beneficial for China is my observation of at least eight religion-like characteristics that contravene standard understandings of science and that impede evangelical Christianity. Addressing these religion-like characteristics at the juncture of China's intelligentsia provides a strategic, missional opportunity for evangelical scholars—those who can articulately integrate their faith with their respective disciplines—to reintroduce a philosophical voice to China's scientific claims and endeavours.

Western evangelical scholars who will pay the necessary price of leaving family, familiarity, and, in some cases, promising careers in order to teach in a distant classroom, can play a helpful role in addressing this missional opportunity. Because of China's recent move onto the geo-political world scene, the success of this mission will have influence well beyond her current borders.