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JESUS IN CHINESE POPULAR SECTS

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1. Introduction

In the early twentieth century the traditional Chinese attitude of regarding the Three Teachings (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism) as one (*sanjiao heyi*), i.e., as expressions of a single *Dao*, began to be extended to other major religions. Most commonly Christianity and Islam were added on to the Three Teachings, creating a claim for the unity of the “Five Teachings” (*wujiao heyi*). This new formula was eagerly adopted by a number of new religious movements of the early Republican period, which is why Richard Fox Young in a seminal article (1989) calls them “unity sects.” In this article, Young studied the place of Christianity in one such unity sect, the Daoyuan (“Sanctuary of the *Dao*”), a movement founded in Shandong province in 1921.

The present article will have a narrower focus: rather than looking at the role of the Christian teachings as a whole in popular sects, I shall examine the role and image of Jesus in two of these religious movements. The first will be the Daoyuan studied by Young, the second the “Way of All-Pervading Unity” (Yiguandao), another unity sect originating from early Republican Shandong province. In the third and final section I will summarize my findings and try to sketch a picture of the face of Jesus in modern Chinese syncretic sects. Given the limited accessibility of the sources used, I will provide translated excerpts from the religious literature of these two sects.¹

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Roman Malek for suggesting this study to me in the first place, and to Prof. Daniel L. Overmyer for his useful comments on an earlier draft. – For the Chinese version of this article, “Yesu zai Huaren min-

2. Jesus in the Daoyuan

The altar at a Sanctuary of the *Dao* is dominated by a brass tablet inscribed with the names of the founders of the Five Religions: Confucius' teacher Xiang Xianshi for Confucianism, Laozi for Daoism, Buddha Śākyamuni for Buddhism, Mohammed for Islam, and Jesus for Christianity. Above these five is located the name of the Daoyuan's principal deity, the Most Holy Venerable Patriarch of Primordial Times (Zhisheng Xiantian Laozu).² This arrangement gives us our first clue to the status of Jesus in this religious group: he is one among a group of peers, all of which stand below a higher deity. In fact, the Venerable Patriarch is the highest deity, a conventional designation of the first principle from which all existence flows. All names being conventions, the Venerable Patriarch is equated with the Confucian "Heaven," the Daoist "*Dao*," the Buddhist "Buddha," the Muslim "Allah," and the Christian "God." These five are aspects of the One who is conventionally addressed as Venerable Patriarch by the Daoyuan. As the unitary reality behind the culturally specific conceptions of divinity or perfection, he is the point from which they originate and in which their apparent differences are ultimately dissolved. Therefore the Five Religions are seen as partial expressions of a higher truth, of a unifying reality that only now is made accessible to humanity by means of the revelations received in the Daoyuan. This new dispensation is made necessary by the increasing moral decay of the world which will in the near future lead to a great cataclysm. This decay has also gained hold of the Five Religions whose followers have forgotten the fundamental unity that their founders tried to preach, but that was too often twisted and misunderstood by narrow-minded believers. The Daoyuan tries to reverse this trend by revealing to humanity the single truth hidden behind the diversity of their beliefs and ideas.

These revelations are transmitted by means of spirit-writing (*fujī*), a mediumistic technique similar to the planchette-writing of Western spiritualism. In formal séances, an entranced medium holds a wooden writing implement tracing characters on a sand-strewn surface. These are copied on paper and become intelligible messages from the directing deity. The most important revelation received by the Daoyuan is the "North Pole Perfected Scripture" (*Beiji zhenjing*) composed by the Venerable Patriarch himself in the early years of the movement. Restricted to circulation among the Daoyuan membership this text is said to contain the *Dao*, the truth that uni-

jian zongjiao zhong banyan de juese" 耶穌在華人民間宗教中扮演的角色, see *Taiwan zongjiao yanjiu tongxun* 臺灣宗教研究通訊 No. 5 (2003), pp. 237-258.

² Young 1989, pp. 6-7.

fies the Five Religions, and it can thereby bring peace to the world. This can only happen through the

spiritual regeneration of each and every member of the human family, in his full understanding of the ways and means of returning to the creative source of his life and restoring to its pristine purity his original spiritual nature.³

Besides the Venerable Patriarch, a host of other deities and sages descend during séances to add their voices to the propagation of this new dispensation, creating a corpus of supplemental revelations that circulate more freely than the esoteric first twelve chapters of the *North Pole Perfected Scripture*. Among these writers we find Jesus. Below I provide translations of three such passages to give the reader an impression of the tenor of these revelations. The extracts are taken from the first volume of a collection of revealed texts entitled *Daode jinghua lu* (Record of the Refined Essence of the Dao and Its Virtue). It was published by the Nanjing Daoyuan in 1927. Richard Fox Young only had excerpts from this collection at his disposal,⁴ while I was lucky enough to discover a copy of this important text in a Taiwanese temple.

The *Daode jinghua lu* is a selection of spirit-written essays composed at various Daoyuan across China and presented to the Nanjing Daoyuan on its opening in 1923. It is arranged thematically into six volumes (*juan*) dealing respectively with “Meaning of the Dao” (*dao zhi*), “Cultivation and Meditation” (*xiuzuo*), “Compassion and Love” (*ci'ai*), “Philosophy” (*zhexue*), “Spiritual Studies” (*lingxue*), and “Literature and Arts” (*wenyi*). I only have the first volume at my disposal, which contains a chapter on “The Common Origin of the Five Religions” (“Wujiao tongyuan”). This chapter starts with a lengthy essay by the Venerable Patriarch which is then supplemented by revelations received from various deities and sages. There are six texts by Jesus and one by Mary, written at different Daoyuan branches.

These texts contain the following main themes: affirmation of the unity of all religions, support for the Venerable Patriarch’s mission of teaching the *Dao* to the world, general moral edification, criticism of religious (especially Christian) narrow-mindedness, and admonitions to specific individuals to convert to the true way. The combination of general and personalized homiletics is nicely visible in the following revelation received at the Daoyuan of Juye (Shandong province):⁵

³ Young 1989, p. 10.

⁴ Young 1989, p. 15.

⁵ Interestingly in this particular séance Jesus does not appear in person. Instead his message is reported by an interpreter who translates his words into Chinese. This in-

I was born in a stable. Later I gave my life on the cross to save the world. Without the help of my disciples and friends in all branches [of Christianity], how could [my teachings] have spread across the whole world? Since Matteo Ricci arrived in China, [my] religion became established here, but its pennant could be set up only after believers had suffered many troubles. Today our Master who has nothing above or beyond him, who has no shape and no form, descends to the shrines as the True Lord who has shape and form. The masters of all religions proceed there together with him to open up [salvation for] ten thousand generations without end, to establish the eternal flow of Great Harmony. We all should believe in the True Lord. Master Hui, listen to my instructions: Your brothers have already entered [the Daoyuan]. You also should quickly return to the correct way. [...]⁶

Religious divisions are the main topic of the following text revealed by Jesus at the Daoyuan in Anqing (Anhui province):

All religions are originally one family, how could they be divided into Chinese and foreign ones? The main principle in establishing a religion can be summarized in the one word “goodness.” Like all religions mine seeks to save the world. What is to be abhorred the most are divisions between the founders of religions, the separation of schools, and distinctions between different kinds [of religions]. This makes it hard for people to incline towards them, and causes the ignorant to again and again advance doubtful guesses. In the ensuing confusion no one can distinguish whether a religion is false or true. As my religion reveres the One, it resonates well with the Anqing Daoyuan’s mission of universal salvation. Therefore I descended to give this talk.⁷

Finally, a more extensive example of Daoyuan homiletics from the pen of Jesus Christ. This one was again received at the local Daoyuan in Anqing, as a celebratory message on (lunar) New Year’s day:

[I], the Sage Jesus, have received the order from my Master to come to this shrine and give instructions. These days the customs of the world are low and mean, the ignorant are very many. The Venerable Patriarch wishes to spread the teaching, but the ignorant do not want to accept it. They are just like rotten wood and withered stalks: even if they receive the grace of rain and dew, they will hardly show any growth and are quite beyond help. Our Venerable Patriarch has been descending to shrines and opening transformation for several years, wishing only that

terpreter is none other than “the immortal Xu Guangqi,” i.e., Paul Xu Guangqi (1562–1633), a famous convert of Matteo Ricci.

⁶ *Daode jinghua lu, xia juan*, p. 59.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

the people of the world will make their hearts sincere and move towards the Way and that they will not betray this hope so as to be able to fulfill their potential. This is also what I wish. But in this dusty world full of disturbances, what day ever goes by according to one's wishes? Therefore, I have received order today to come to this shrine and give instructions. I only wish that you members of the Anqing Daoyuan will straighten your minds and cultivate yourselves so that you will always be good people. When one person is good, one family becomes good. When one family is good, one district becomes good. When one district becomes good, then one nation becomes good. Widening out from there the whole world can be made peaceful, a hundred generations can be made eternal. Therefore one says that the Way can make the world good. This is the earnest ambition of all sages, worthies, immortals, and buddhas. This is the earnest wish of the Venerable Patriarch. The Venerable Patriarch reigns over all things in heaven and in the world of humans. All sages, worthies, immortals, and buddhas obey his command and honour Him. As the founder of a religion, my ease and bliss in the heavenly palaces are beyond all comparison with the toils and labours of the people in the world. Not shirking trouble and exertion, the Venerable Patriarch descended into the world to visit shrines. I and my peers visit the profane world in His entourage, like Him not sparing ourselves in busily rushing [from shrine to shrine]. Truly this is [what is meant by] proclaiming the word on behalf of heaven and saving the people for the nation. This is what I speak of [when I say that one should] begin with one person and one family and arrive at the world and one hundred generations. All of you keep practising with all your strength and diligently keep cultivating and creating [this goodness]. Do not betray the kindness of the sages, worthies, immortals, and buddhas. And also do not turn your back on the Venerable Patriarch. Repeat these words three times.⁸

In the first of the three excerpts above, Jesus speaks as a representative of Christianity, clearly identifying himself by reference to the circumstances of his birth and death and by briefly referring to the history of Christianity in China. Having established his authority as the founder (*jiaozhu*) of Christianity, he then goes on to admonish an apparently Christian visitor to the shrine (Mr. Hui) to become a member in the Daoyuan. In fact, the Daoyuan always counted a considerable number of Christians among its faithful. The sect does not require its members to abstain from other religious activities, because it sees itself not as competing with the Five Religions, but as fulfilling them. Membership in the Daoyuan, thus, is seen to add a dimension to a Christian's spiritual experience, giving him or her access to

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

the fullness of the *Dao* which is not available within the limitations of the Christian teaching. Like the first excerpt above, many planchette appearances of Jesus probably were intended primarily for Christian Daoyuan members or members-to-be.

In the second message, Jesus also speaks as a *jiaozhu*, criticizing the tendency of organized religions to set themselves apart from other groups and thus to obstruct our view of the ultimate oneness of all teachings. Here his audience, however, is probably more than just the Christian faction of that particular Daoyuan. Jesus makes a point to be remembered by followers of all religions. In the third text Jesus has lost all Christian specificity and has become one among the “sages, worthies, immortals, and buddhas” who honour the Venerable Patriarch and strive to carry out his mission of proclaiming the *Dao* to the world. The language is inspired by Buddhism and Confucianism and could indeed have been uttered by any of the deities Jesus sees as his peers. It is here that we see most clearly the place of Jesus in the world of the Daoyuan: as one of the sages, one of the perfected who continue to fulfill the mission given them by the Venerable Patriarch. His birth and his death on the cross are part of that mission, as are his planchette communications in the early twentieth century. It all serves to proclaim the *Dao* in an effort to save the world. Jesus never preaches any specifically Christian ideas, because this specificity is exactly what the Daoyuan wants to overcome, reaching for the unity beyond the differences. The Jesus that meets us in the texts of this unity sect comes across as an empty name with few visible links to the Nazarene. As Richard Fox Young had already recognized, Jesus’ messages contribute nothing specifically Christian to the belief system of the Daoyuan; instead they “appear only to stamp an *imprimatur* upon teachings that arise out of Chinese religion itself.”⁹

3. Jesus in the Yiguandao

a. Jesus in the Early History of the Sect

The “Way of All-Pervading Unity” (Yiguandao) was founded in 1930 in the same city that saw the beginnings of the Daoyuan – Ji’nan in the province of Shandong. This sect, however, was more deeply rooted in the old Chinese tradition of popular sectarianism than the Daoyuan. It came into being as an early twentieth century offshoot of the so-called Way of Former Heaven tradition (Xiantian Dao), and its founder Zhang Tianran (1889–1947) was regarded as the eighteenth (and final one) in a long succession of

⁹ Young 1989, pp. 21-22.

sectarian patriarchs.¹⁰ Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that this new/old sect at first stuck to the more traditional “unity of the Three Teachings” formula, as can be seen in the sect’s earliest catechism, the *Yiguandao yiwèn jièdà* (Explanations and Answers to Questions Concerning the Way of All-Pervading Unity).¹¹ However, while the Three Teachings formula clearly predominates in early Yiguandao sources, this does not mean that Christianity and Islam are deliberately excluded. In the first detailed scholarly study of the sect, Li Shiyu stresses the central role of the unity of the Three Teachings, but also mentions a few instances of a broader view of suprarreligious unity.¹² Most significant among these intimations of a Five Teachings view are two texts listed by Li in his overview of Yiguandao literature, the *Wujiao zhèndì* (Truth of the Five Teachings) and the *Hui Ye jiaozhu shèngxùn* (Sagely Instructions by the Masters of Islam and Christianity). Both are slim volumes (twenty and five pages respectively) of spirit-written revelations. Unfortunately, I did not have access to these texts, but Li Shiyu’s description of them gives us some clues as to their nature. The *Wujiao zhèndì* contained seven spirit-written essays, preceded by a preface by the Living Buddha Jigong. One of these was penned by Jesus.¹³ Li provides more detailed information on the *Hui Ye jiaozhu shèngxùn* and I would like to present it here as the most specific piece of evidence of the role and understanding of Jesus in the early Yiguandao. According to Li’s bibliographic entry, this brief, five page booklet was published by the Chonghua Tang in Tianjin in 1941.¹⁴ It contains three spirit-written messages: one from Mohammed given in response to a request by a recently converted Muslim Yiguandao member (dated 24 February 1939), a message from Jesus on the occasion of his birthday (dated 25 December 1938), and another message from Jesus given on 10 April 1941 in Xuzhou.

While I did not have access to the original *Hui Ye jiaozhu shèngxùn*, the Jesus message delivered on Christmas Day of 1938 is fortunately reprinted in a recent collection of Yiguandao sources. As a record of probably the earliest appearance of Jesus Christ in an Yiguandao séance, this text affords us a first view of the image of Jesus in this new religious movement. Below I translate part of this revelation:

¹⁰ Good overviews of the Yiguandao’s history and teachings can be found in Jordan – Overmyer 1986, Ma – Han 1992, Shinohara 1993, and Soo 1997.

¹¹ See entries number 58 and 59 (*Yiguandao yiwèn jièdà*, pp. 43-47). On this text see Jordan – Overmyer 1986, pp. 251-252.

¹² Li 1948, pp. 58-59.

¹³ Li 1948, p. 113.

¹⁴ Li 1948, p. 118.

[...] At this time, the ten thousand ways all return to the Way of Heaven. I, too, have left Heaven above to assist in [the propagation of] the Dao. I see the last day of the world about to arrive, yet my followers' minds are even more darkened than before. As they are born and die, where are they to return to? In the end, what good is it if I forgive sins on your behalf? In vain have I left you the cross, my followers disregard it. Because I do not want to see all of you going to perdition, I am now having the bamboo pen write words of truth. Your sins are truly numerous, and it will be very difficult to rely just on me for your salvation. If your conduct is not in accord with principles, Heaven will not speak of "forgiving sins." You should quickly come to a thorough realization [of this]. Turn back – the road is even and easy. For those lambs who have already lost their way, I have come to guide them onwards. Clearly recognize the timing of Heaven, do not remain attached to ideas of "Hell" and "Heaven." On this joyous occasion of my birthday, do you understand my *Dao*? Does your natural goodness open up and manifest itself? If you become lost in chanting mere words, you truly fail to carry out your duty of saving the world. If at the fork of the road you hesitate to go forward, you will become a homeless outcast without refuge. You are caught up in a great dream and are slow to awaken. Just to rely on me truly is not possible. If you seek Heaven's help with utmost sincerity, you will encounter more spiritual responsiveness than you expected. You must no longer tarry in confusion, but change with time and opportunity. Stubbornly holding on to the old principles will just lead you to perdition!

The world is vast, its crooked roads are many.

One must have a karmic predisposition to understand a timely opportunity.

The Great Harmony of all nations will come about soon.

Without seeking the Great *Dao* it is difficult to return to Heaven.

The founders of all the religions

Together are returning to the true transmission [of the *Dao*].

How more should you useless sons of confusion

Turn back and climb the farther shore. [...] ¹⁵

The key theme of this text is the insufficiency of the Christian Gospel for the attainment of final salvation. Reliance on Jesus Christ as one's saviour does not guarantee forgiveness of sins, return to Heaven, and salvation from final annihilation. This can only be found by turning to the Great *Dao* which is now made available by the Yiguandao. The founders of all religions are availing themselves of this "timely opportunity" by returning to

¹⁵ Fu 1999, p. 582.

the one *Dao*, as should all Christians who at present are still caught in the limitations of their faith. Note the frequent recurrence of the terms “returning” or “turning back”: acceptance of the *Dao* is seen as the realization of one’s own true nature, as a return to the divine home that humanity had lost due to its growing attachment to the world of red dust. The Christian faith is one such attachment that needs to be abandoned for the higher truth of the Great *Dao*, only then can one “return to Heaven” (*fantian*).

The theme of Christian insufficiency is taken up again in another, shorter message from Jesus promulgated in 1940, in which he says that

... my teachings are all part of the Way of Heaven. No one should say that by just believing in and reciting and holding on to this Christian tradition one can attain the ultimate realization. If at this critical juncture you are not willing to turn back, when will you ever return to the garden of your [true] home?¹⁶

The Christian promise of redemption is declared invalid and its seeker is directed to the only source of true salvation available in this final age – the Way bestowed by the Yiguandao. Between these two messages of 1938 and 1940 one can perceive a growing sense of urgency, which reaches a climax in another Jesus revelation received in 1941. This message was delivered at the request of Zhang Tianran’s wife who asked Jesus to send down instructions for Christians. Li Shiyu provides an excerpt from the 1941 revelation, which I translate here:

Jehova is love, he is the light of life; [by comparison] Socrates is only an obscure ray of cultural light lasting for a moment. Save, oh, save my beloved flock! Lord, my face is covered in hot tears! I, Jesus Christ, have received God’s command to come and to give my Christian people a last instruction: you do not need to worship me. [Instead] the Saviour Yuehui is your light in the black darkness, the road sign for those who have lost their way, the sign which allows you to see clearly the direction of the future. The blood and tears of a thousand years have never dried – just feel this heart of mine. Has the last day come? Do you want to see me again? What day is it now? Red water rushes like a river through Germany and the Mediterranean, its waves reaching the oceans of the east, the west, the south, and the north. Yet the great war with its enormous bloodshed does not awaken the drunkards in the inns. I weep – if I could not weep, who could know what is in my heart? What is truth? What is the correct way? My Christians, give me an answer! In the churches the bells call to prayer, but although you may be able to recite by heart the Old and the New Testament, what is it that is written on both of them? Where is the true way, who has seen it? Is it Confu-

¹⁶ Fu 1999, p. 613.

cianism? Is it Buddhism? Is it Daoism? Or is it the imported [teachings of] Jesus and Mohammed? Think again, my disciples ..., take your unquestioned beliefs and examine them again with a clear head, sharp eyes, and a sincere mind. Do you realize something?¹⁷

This example of the appropriation of Jesus by the Yiguandao differs quite significantly in tone and style from the Daoyuan texts we saw before. While the Daoyuan Jesus was a serene sage expounding the *Dao* and Christianity's place within it, the Yiguandao Jesus cries out and weeps in anguish over the suffering of the world. This suffering is not, however, rooted in the inherent sinfulness of humanity, but in its ignorance – its ignorance specifically of the true way. It is the Yiguandao's mission in the unfolding cosmic drama leading up to the imminent end of the world to save humans from annihilation by removing this ignorance. This is done by means of a secret initiation ritual through which the postulant comes to “obtain the *Dao*” (*dedao*). This knowledge of the true *Dao* will provide the answers to the series of harrying questions Jesus poses in his message.

As the transmission of the true and complete Way is the exclusive prerogative of the Yiguandao, it makes sense from the sect's point of view for Jesus to call on his followers to give worship to the “saviour Yuehui” (Yuehui *jiuzhu*) rather than to himself, for only she can dispense salvation in this final age. Yuehui is none other than the wife of Zhang Tianran, Sun Suzhen, who was regarded as an *avatāra* of a bodhisattva named Yuehui.¹⁸ The reader may remember that it was she who requested this particular revelation from Jesus.

Jesus' urgent and anguished tone is in keeping with the immediacy of millenarian expectation that dominated the early Yiguandao, which developed in a period that indeed seemed to portend imminent doom. By the time of the 1941 Jesus revelation, the Second World War had been raging in Europe for one and a half years, and the Sino-Japanese War was already in its fourth year. Things certainly looked bleak and seemed to justify apocalyptic expectations. It was high time for everyone to be awakened from the partial truths of their respective religions and return to the full and true Dao bestowed by the Way of All-Pervading Unity. Jesus is heard here making this call for the benefit of his Christian constituency so as to comply with the sect's call to unify the religions and make them return to their original source, the *Dao*.¹⁹

¹⁷ Li 1948, p. 118.

¹⁸ Jordan – Overmyer 1986, p. 218.

¹⁹ *Yiguandao yiwen jieda*, p. 44.

In the Daoyuan the *jiaozhu* had an active role to play in the Venerable Patriarch's scheme of salvation and hence came to be represented on the sect's altars. In the Yiguandao, on the other hand, the present and highly urgent work of transmitting the *Dao* has been entrusted by the Venerable Mother of the Ultimateless (as the Yiguandao's equivalent to the Daoyuan's Venerable Patriarch) to other deities whose prominence is visible in the arrangements of Yiguandao shrines. The deities typically represented on Yiguandao altars are (in order of precedence) the Venerable Mother, the Buddha Maitreya, Guanyin, the Living Buddha Jigong, Guan Gong, and Lü Zu. Pictures of Zhang Tianran and his wife are hung on the wall to both sides of the altar. While the masters of the Five Religions are briefly honoured in Yiguandao liturgy,²⁰ the fact that they are not usually represented on the altar points to their basically passive role as sages of the past whose principal duty in the present is to refer their followers to the only source of the true *Dao* available in these last days of the world.²¹

The low liturgical profile of Jesus (and the other "founders of the religions") in the Yiguandao continues to the present day, and the doctrinal position of Jesus has also remained essentially the same: he is regarded as the founder of a limited religious tradition that is being superseded by the true *Dao* now made available to all those with the right karmic affinity for its reception. While the general outline has not changed, the Yiguandao's image of Jesus has received some further elaboration. In the following section I will try to trace some of these further elaborations on the basis of a selection of more recent sources.

b. Post-War Developments

Li Shiyu sees the time after 1945 as a period of rapid decline in the sect's fortunes.²² It came under suspicion of collaboration with the Japanese occupation forces and was regarded with disfavour by both the Nationalists and the Communists during the years of civil war. It received a further blow when in 1947 its founder Zhang Tianran died. Subsequently the movement split up into separate organizational entities (branches) that con-

²⁰ Jordan – Overmyer 1986, p. 294.

²¹ The Yiguandao sanctuary described in Jordan – Overmyer 1986 (pp. 227-228) is therefore rather unusual in giving a prominent position to Laozi, Confucius, and Buddha Śākyamuni on its altar. One might speculate that this deviation from standard arrangements may have served to make the shrine less obviously Yiguandao in affiliation – which would have been a wise precaution at a time when the sect was still banned in Taiwan.

²² Li 1948, p. 32.

ducted their affairs without reference to a universally recognized central leadership. Thus, any statements made about Yiguandao beliefs on the basis of texts published after 1947 apply first and foremost to the particular subgroup that produced them, and cannot automatically be taken to represent the Yiguandao as a whole. On the other hand, doctrinal variation among the branches is not very significant, so that at least in its general outlines the following analysis of a number of Yiguandao texts provides an image of Jesus that will be recognized and accepted by all subgroups of the movement.

A little more than a year after Zhang Tianran's death, a new catechism was produced, apparently to reinforce the follower's faith in the chaotic and bloody final months of the Chinese civil war. This work, entitled *Zhenli jiangyi* (Lectures on the Truth), was the result of eight séances held between 26 November and 13 December 1948 at an undisclosed location. During these sessions a deity called Yuanzhang Daren dealt with key issues of doctrine in the same question-and-answer format already employed in the catechism *Yiguandao yiwèn jièdà*.²³ One immediately noticeable change is the formal adoption of the Five Teachings unity formula, together with a more developed rationale for their apparent differences:

XVI.

[Question:] Are the five religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, and Islam the same? Why do their teachings differ?

[Answer:] A poem:

The Five Religions are originally one family.

Their teachings were established according to the requirements of specific regions and people.

Although their forms are different, their principle is one.

[It is only] confused by people who recklessly make distinctions between them.

Heaven is concerned for the life of the people and will always teach them by means of the *Dao*. Only then can people find peace and contentment. Without being taught, even an old man is like a child, without knowledge and of abominable conduct. Therefore the sages and Buddhas regard those under Heaven who are not sages and Buddhas as children, and cherish and love them.

For the thousands of years from ancient to present times, it was the teachings of the sages and Buddhas and the government by a ruler that

²³ According to information in the book, the deity Yuanzhang Daren is head of the Examinations Office in Heaven, with the formal title of "Chief Examiner of the Three Heavens" (*Santian zhukao*). He stands in a special relationship to Zhang Tianran, who was his father in a previous life. See *Tiandao zhenli jiangyi qianzhu*, pp. 21-30, for more information on this deity unique to the Yiguandao.

made society and human life possible. Without being taught, the people would not submit to the government.

Therefore Heaven commanded the Sages of the Five Religions to descend into the world one after the other, each in a different area, and to establish their teachings according to the requirements of their specific regions and people. Confucius of Confucianism, the Tathāgata of Buddhism, Laozi of Daoism, and Mohammed of Islam all descended to be born in the East, while Jesus of Christianity descended to be born in the West. Ever since then they have each established their doctrines and rules, taking it upon themselves to transform the people. Therefore the teachings bequeathed by the sages are still present in our day.

Even though the Five Religions have all received the command of Heaven to transmit the Way, their methods were not the same, but were adapted to the conditions of their regions and the customs of the people. But although their names were different, their principle was the same: Confucianism established its teaching in the formula “preserving the mind and nourishing one’s nature, holding fast to the mean and uniting in a single thread.” It transforms humans by calling for “loyalty and forgiveness.”

Buddhism established its teaching in the formula “illuminating the mind and manifesting one’s nature, making all dharmas return to the One.” It transforms humans by calling for “compassion.”

Daoism established its teaching in the formula “cultivating the mind and refining one’s nature, embracing the primordial and guarding the One.” It transforms humans by calling for “loyalty and forgiveness.”

Jesus of Christianity established his teaching in the formula “cleansing the mind and shifting one’s nature, praying quietly and being close to the One.” It transforms humans by calling for “love without distinction.”

Islam established its teaching in the formula “strengthening the mind and consolidating one’s nature, in clear truth returning to the One.” It transforms humans by calling for “humanity and love.”

Although the words of the Five Religions are not the same, how could their principles ever have been different?

When the sages of the Five Religions had received the command to transmit the *Dao*, it was only for the purpose of establishing teachings and transforming the people. By the time they had completed their mission, their “mind *dharma*” had not yet been widely propagated. Thus, the “mind *dharma*” of Confucianism was transmitted to Mencius, but was lost afterwards. In the case of Daoism, the “wind of the *Dao*” was disrupted after it had been transmitted to Yin Xi. When Jesus had finished establishing his teaching, he originally intended to propagate the “mind-*dharma*” widely, but as the time had not yet come, the secrets of Heaven could not be divulged. Therefore he was nailed to the “cross”

and returned to Heaven. After Mohammed had established his teaching, its heavenly mandate was immediately revoked. Only the Buddhist teachings were transmitted all through the age of Red *Yang* until the present day. However, later followers of the Five Religions, because they had not yet received the “true transmission,” compiled the sages’ scriptures and piously recited them, believing that they had obtained the truth. This is too pitiable!

By now the Five Religions have all already lost their truth! With the advent of the age of White *Yang* the time for the wide propagation of the “correct *dharma*” has come. I hope that the believers will soon awaken and seek the truth. Truly this is a great blessing such as comes only once in three lifetimes.²⁴

To my knowledge, this is the earliest Yiguandao text to develop a coherent formula for the integration of the Five Religions into the One Dao. What we can learn from this text for the Yiguandao’s understanding of Jesus is that he was one of the sages sent by Heaven in the previous world period, the age of Red *Yang*, to establish a religion to suit the needs of a particular people in a particular geographical area, but that he did not have the mandate to spread the full and true *Dao*, as the time for this had not yet come. Interestingly, the text holds that Jesus intended to transmit this “mind *dharma*” even without this mandate. As a result he died on the cross lest the secrets of Heaven be divulged in an untimely manner. With the advent of the current age of White *Yang*, the transmission of the true *Dao* will supersede the by now corrupted teachings of the Five Religions.

The author of this text touches on a key area of doctrine, Jesus’ death on the cross, and gives it a rather curious reading as divine punishment, rather than the act of redemption it represents in the Christian understanding. This reading of the meaning of the cross is a first venture into a specifically Yiguandao approach to Bible exegesis whose most elaborate product so far is a slim, 73 page volume entitled *Shengjing yu Tiandao* (The Bible and the Way of Heaven), written by an anonymous author in 1984 (date of the preface). Composed in the age of Red *Yang*, the Bible of course cannot contain the full transmission of the *Dao*, something that has only become possible in the present age of White *Yang*, but it does contain numerous hints at this *Dao* and its harbingers. It is these hints that an esoteric exegesis seeks to elicit from the text. Here the cross is not read as a divine intervention to forestall the premature transmission of the *Dao*, but as a hidden

²⁴ *Tiandao zhenli jiangyi qianzhu*, pp. 367-381. The Five Teachings formula has been incorporated into a revised version of the *Yiguandao yiwu jieda* catechism under the title *Xingli tishi jujie* which currently enjoys wide circulation in Yiguandao circles in various editions.

reference to the location of the *Dao*, the so-called “mysterious pass” (*xuanguan*) that is pointed out in the secret Yiguandao initiation ritual. Since it is forbidden for an initiate to describe the exact location of this “pass” on the human body, the exegete points out that the two criminals crucified to both sides of Jesus represent the eyes in their Buddhist understanding as one of the “six robbers” (*liuzei*, the six sense organs). If the criminals are the eyes, then the position of Jesus’ cross in the middle between them can be taken as hinting at the location of the mysterious pass.²⁵ Other indirect references to the *xuanguan* are discovered in Jesus’ judgment that “anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:38),²⁶ and in his reply to the Pharisees that “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21).²⁷ The latter passage is rendered in Chinese translation as *shen de guo jiu zai nimen zhongjian* 神的國就在你們中間. The Yiguandao exegete takes *nimen zhongjian* here in its literal meaning as “in your middle, in your center,” which yields another reference to the bodily location of the mysterious pass.

Besides hidden references to the “three treasures” conferred in the Yiguandao initiation ceremony, most significant in this reading of the people is its approach to the central theme of Jesus as the Messiah. Here we encounter a complete revaluation of Jesus. In fact, Jesus is not the Messiah announced by John the Baptist, as an esoteric reading of the Gospel of Matthew shows. In Matthew 3:11-12 John says:

I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

In some Chinese translations the “winnowing fork” is rendered as *boji*, a “winnowing fan.” The Yiguandao exegete interprets this as a reference to the Living Buddha Jigong, who is always depicted holding a ragged fan. The Yiguandao’s founder Zhang Tianran was regarded as an *avatāra* of Jigong. Jigong in turn prepares the coming of the true Messiah of the age of White *Yang*, the Buddha Maitreya. This identification is hinted at in the spelling of the Chinese words for “Messiah” (*Misaiya* and *Maitreya*, *Mile*) both of which start with the same character.²⁸

²⁵ *Shengjing yu Tiandao*, p. 28.

²⁶ *Shengjing yu Tiandao*, p. 27.

²⁷ *Shengjing yu Tiandao*, p. 26.

²⁸ *Shengjing yu Tiandao*, pp. 18-22.

What we find here is a more detailed application of what we can by now recognize as the Yiguandao's approach to Jesus: to regard him as a sage of the age of Red *Yang* who had received a heavenly mandate to establish a religion. A religion is not the *Dao*, but it may serve a positive purpose by transforming people and preparing them for the final dispensation of the true *Dao* in the subsequent age of White *Yang*. Thus, Jesus' teachings were appropriate for their place and age, but are now being superseded by the transmission of the *Dao* made available in the present final days of the world. As preparation for the coming of the true saviour, Jesus' teachings (and the Bible more generally) contain numerous hints at and prophecies of the higher dispensation to come. Thus, even while being superseded, the Christian teachings can still serve a positive purpose in the age of White *Yang* by leading those believers who know how to understand them correctly towards the true *Dao*.²⁹ As ultimate salvational efficacy, however, flows exclusively from the transmission of this *Dao*, the step beyond "the old principles" of Christianity is absolutely necessary and is urged again and again by Jesus himself in his séance appearances.

Above we have only adduced a few Jesus texts composed in the 1930s and 1940s. However, Jesus' séance appearances continued afterwards and perhaps became even more important with the Yiguandao's increasing drive to proselytize overseas – especially in North America, Australia, Southeast Asia, and Europe, areas where the sect's missionaries were likely to frequently encounter Christians as potential converts. The most recent Jesus text available to me is the *Yesu Jidu shengxun*. This lengthy spirit-written text was recorded in Taiwan in 1989 and is circulated in a Chinese-English bilingual edition with the English title "The Revelation of Jesus Christ." While produced by a somewhat controversial subgroup in the Yiguandao movement, this text repeats and reaffirms the key themes of the earlier Jesus texts.³⁰

²⁹ Having said this, I need to point out that there seems to be some disagreement in the sources about the appropriateness of Christianity as a gateway to the *Dao*. The afore-mentioned revised catechism, the *Xingli tishi jujie* states that after the return of Jesus to Heaven, the heavenly mandate for the teachings he established was revoked, so that "it is impossible to find truth by way of the cross" (*Xingli tishi jujie*, p. 79). The 1948 catechism *Tiandao zhenli jiangyi qianzhu* had stipulated a revocation of the mandate for Islam, but not for Christianity (p. 378). This stricture was apparently broadened to include Christianity by the time the *Xingli tishi jujie* was compiled.

³⁰ *Yesu Jidu shengxun / The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. A new and rather unusual feature of this Christmas day séance record is the fact that Jesus' arrival is heralded by that well-known Christian paragon – Santa Claus! The group behind this revelation is the "Buddha Maitreya Court of Celestial Grace" (Tian'en Milefouyan) of the

4. Conclusion

In his article on the place of Christianity in the Daoyuan, Richard Fox Young quotes the opinions of three influential Christian missionaries in the early Republican period that the Five Religions syncretism of sects such as the Daoyuan may provide a foothold for evangelization among their membership. Their integration of Christianity may serve as a *preparatio evangelica*, opening their minds to the Christian gospel.³¹ Young is sceptical of this prospect, stressing that Christianity had made no substantial contributions to the Daoyuan's worldview.³² Our further study of Daoyuan texts and our investigation of the Yiguandao supports Young's conclusion. What we are finding is not an *acceptance* of the Jesus Christ propagated by Christian missionaries, but his *appropriation* on the terms of the sectarian system in question. In both the Daoyuan and the Yiguandao, Jesus is divested of all characteristics central to a Christian understanding of his person, nature, and meaning. Instead of being the Christ, he becomes a sage in the service of a higher *Dao*, an emissary of Heaven sent to fulfill a limited role in a grander scheme of salvation. Jesus' place on a Daoyuan altar or his appearance in Yiguandao spirit-writing séances ultimately serves to affirm the global validity of the sectarian worldview. Jesus is reinterpreted to fit harmoniously into a religious system that owes next to nothing to the Christian gospel. While similar in their broad outlines, the appropriative strategies of the two sects studied here differ in their details due to their doctrinal variations. Thus, in the Daoyuan Jesus is accorded a more active role in the sect's plan for universal salvation, while in the Yiguandao he is relegated to the position of a sage of the past with little active contribution to the grand design of salvation put into practice in the present age by the Venerable Mother and her new emissaries. The Five Teachings and their founders fade into the background as we reach the new age of White *Yang* and its promise of full and final propagation of the *Dao*. Jesus' role here is merely to acknowledge that this *Dao* finishes what he began in a previous, more limited age. Thus, we are not dealing with the same Jesus across different popular sects: each appropriates him in such a way as to fit into its own doctrinal structure. As a result we end up with an Yiguandao Jesus and a Daoyuan Jesus, both of which differ somewhat from each other, and dif-

elder Wang Haode. See Clart 2000, pp. 135-136, for further details on this subject. Elder Wang has given lectures on this Jesus text which have been published by his group (see *Qianren cibe jiangjie Yesu Jidu shengdan cibe zhishi xun / Preaching of Jesus Christ's Revelation by His Holiness, Great Master Wang*).

³¹ Young 1989, pp. 18-21.

³² Young 1989, p. 22.

fer widely from his various appropriations in the multi-faceted world of Christian denominationalism. Any attempt at interreligious dialogue based on shared symbols such as Jesus needs to take this diversity of appropriation and interpretation into account.³³

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³³ A fascinating topic for future study might be a systematic study of non-Christian appropriations of Jesus, comparing the approaches taken by Chinese sects to those of, say, Vaishnavism (Jesus as an *avatāra* of Vishnu) or Umbanda (Jesus as the Orixa Maior).

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