ABSTRACT

Although there are many interpretations of the origin of the Taiping movement (太平天国革命运动 1851-1864), it is unquestionable that the movement was permeated with a religious fervour. It is the aim of this academic exercise to make a clear analysis of the religious thoughts of the movement's paramount leader -- Hong Xiuquan (洪秀全), since his religious thoughts served the key to an understanding of the Taiping movement.

In the year 1837, after his third failure in the imperial civil service examination, Hong fell ill and went into a prolonged trance. He later claimed that during this time he went to heaven and that he was appointed 'the son of Heaven'. His mission then was to exterminate the devils, to regain the paradise lost to the people, to propagate the true 'tao of T'ien' (天道), and to rule the world when the devils had been extinguished.

However, Hong's adoption of Christianity could not entirely eliminate the traditional influences. The ineradicable effects of Confucianism, plus Buddhism and Taoism which permeated the Chinese society, together with the fact that he was unable to acquire enough knowledge of true Christianity, made it impossible for him to understand the true meaning of Christianity. Indeed, the elements of Christianity he accepted seemed to have been only those that he could find connection with Chinese traditional concepts and philosophy.
Hong's nondescript religious ideology also put imprint in his politico-socio-economic ideals which expressed in the document 'Tien-chao tien-mou chih-tu' (天朝田亩制度). It was based on the concept that the society of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was communally equilable either in the land ownership or other social affairs. This 'dream-land' is described by Hong as the 'little paradise on earth' (地上小天堂).

What Hong Xiuquan had adopted was considered 'distorted' Christianity. Many scholars argue that Hong Xiuquan used Christianity solely for political purposes. But this present writer considers that Hong Xiuquan was sincere in adopting his Christianity. Indeed, we can say that Hong had created the 'Taiping Christianity' (太平基督教), and that his faith in the Taiping Christianity had been always unwavering until the day he died.