

# Church Choice of University Student Christians in Beijing and Their Religious Commitment

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**Abstract:** The data analysis of “Survey of Attitude of University Students in Beijing towards Christianity” shows that university students in Beijing convert to Christianity mainly because of the influence from their family and their social network. Moreover, their choices between three-self churches and house churches are largely influenced by these churches’ interpretation of religious doctrines (or the system of meaning) and their geographic proximity. These facts have verified some statements about conversion from the rational choice theory (Rodney Stark and Roger Finke). The fact that Christians, who belong to house churches which are in higher tension with the government, have higher degree of religious commitment than those who belong to three-self churches, has confirmed some statements about religious commitment from the rational choice theory. But another fact that those who belong to unregistered house churches are unable to keep stable participation in church’ s religious practices demonstrates that the rational choice theory cannot be completely applied to a religious market under ideological control.

**Key words:** university student Christians, conversion, religious commitment, rational choice

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May 4th Movement, December 9th Movement, and August 9th Movement all reveal that in modern period of China, social movements launched or participated by university students in Beijing could normally inspire and motivate numerous people and thus make a strong impact on China’ s social, political and cultural development.

The attitude of university students in Beijing towards religion, their choice between the stands of pro-religion and non-religion (even anti-religion), and their choices among different types of church, may be a response to the social trend, and may influence the society as a whole due to their unique autonomy. From this we can conclude that a serious investigation of university student Christians’ choice of denomination has profound meaning both academically and socially.

In fact, there is abundant literature on university students’ religious choices and behaviors both in China and abroad. We have reviewed the literature in another paper and thus would save the space here.

## 1. Questions and Theories

Since the reform and opening-up policy was initiated over 30 years ago, with relatively loose social control, major traditional religions and folk religions have undergone a strong recovery. The recovery and fast spread of Christianity is the most salient phenomenon and has drawn most attention, and the reasons are as follows: Protestantism was introduced to China when China was invaded by imperialist countries, and was regarded as their “cultural weapon” to control Chinese people; the Chinese government worries about that Christian churches would serve as a tool for western countries to conduct “color revolution” in China; the conflicts between three-self churches and house churches have brought challenges to government’ s religious governance; Christian churches’ ‘soul hunting’ (preach) of young people, especially university students, has made the government anxious, etc.

As scholars in sociology of religion, we are mainly focused on value-free and objective academic issues: the difference of proportion of Christians among university students and among the total population, the mechanism of their conversion, their choice between three-self churches and house churches, and their response to the dichotomy of three-self church /house church, whether there exists a “folk wisdom” which blurs the line between three-self churches and house churches<sup>[1]</sup>, their conversion mode, and their attitude towards the relationship between politics and religion which has drawn much attention from various circles of people, etc.

We would analyze the issues mentioned above within the model of rational choice theory. Ever since Warner pointed out the emergence of a new paradigm in sociology of religion in 1993<sup>[2]</sup>, the new paradigm based on rational choice theory has made great strides in sociology of religion in the United States. Stark, the most important figure of this paradigm, has based the rational choice theory on a common rule of human behaviors, that is, human beings all go after benefits and avoid costs.<sup>[3]</sup> Later on, faced with opposition and criticism, he admitted that he “does not mean that every religious behavior is based on rational choice—that’ s why non-religiousness or at least the indifference towards religion is so common—nor does he mean that all religious behaviors are out of deliberate cost/benefit calculations” . But he still firmly believes that “religious decision making are normally governed by costs/benefits calculations, and thus are rational behaviors, exactly the same as human beings’ other behaviors.”<sup>[4]</sup>

As for individual religious decision making (such as conversion), Stark defines “conversion” as the change in religious affiliation, and says that when people convert, they are trying to maintain their social capita formed by interpersonal attachment. If they have deeper attachment with people from another religious affiliation, they would become converts. In other words, compared with more attractive doctrines,

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[1] Cao Nanlai’ s field research of churches in Wenzhou shows that in Wenzhou Christians’ ordinary life, there has already been a church type which transcends the dichotomy of house church/three-self church. This provides useful resources for system renovation and the harmonious development of society. See “Subjectivity and Locality of Chinese Religious Practices” , *Journal of Peking University*, 47(6), November 2010, 22-23, 27.

[2] R. Steven Warner, “Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States” , *American Journal of Sociology* 1993, 98 (5) .

[3] Rodney Stark, *The future of religion: secularization, revival, and cult formation*, University of California Press, 1985, 5-8.

[4] Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith—Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, Translated Version, Translated by Yang Fenggang, Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2004, 69.

the importance of social network in one's conversion is more subtle<sup>[5]</sup>. Though Bourdieu is an opponent to rational choice theory, Stark creates the concept of "religious capita" by utilizing and transforming Bourdieu's concept of cultural capita, and maintains that religious capita is formed by one's mastery of and bonding with a certain religious culture; thus when people convert, they are inclined to maximize their religious capita, so as to optimize their capita and avoid the risk of capita investment. Stark also refers to other scholars' research, showing that in one's conversion, doctrine is "a tiny or even ignorable" factor. People are attracted to and eventually join a new group due to their bonding with members of this group.<sup>[6]</sup>

All in all, in Stark's statement about the rational choice of religion, the image of the sophisticated "economic man" is very vivid and trenchant. This theory has many advocates as well as many opponents in the western academia. However, compared with fervent support or stubborn opposition, we show more appreciation to the mild criticism and constructive advices. For instance, some scholars point out that Stark ignores the collective religious rites and the religious emotion inspired by these rites, while at the same time affirming the rationality of the rational choice theory and try to synthesize the interactive rite theory and rational choice theory.<sup>[7]</sup>

Of course, it needs to be pointed out that the rational choice theory is based on the empirical research of exclusive religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The question is, is it appropriate to use this theory to analyze non-exclusive religions? In fact, some Chinese scholars who once used this theory have turned to challenge the legitimacy to use the religious market theory based on rational choice paradigm to explain phenomena in Chinese society.<sup>[8]</sup> Although many such challenges and criticisms have their merits, the authors argue that we should try to understand the original intention of rational choice theory, that is, to reject and refute the old paradigm which regards all religions as lies, as the result of credulity or ignorance, which thus should be abandoned, and which regards religious behaviors as irrational behaviors or even behaviors caused by mental disorder.<sup>[9]</sup> From this perspective, we can see that rational choice theory is especially appropriate to be used in modern China, where people are deeply influenced by the enlightenment discourse, and where disastrous religious policies have been implemented. Indeed, as what Stark and other scholars have repeatedly proved and emphasized, since we believe human beings' behaviors are generally rational, we have reasons to believe that human beings' religious behaviors are just as rational as other behaviors, although perhaps we should adopt more subjective and limited rational concept, that is, to admit that people seek different benefits or objectives and are faced with many potential costs, and we should know how actors define their situation.<sup>[10]</sup> Moreover, since our object of study is the attitude and behaviors of university student Christians in Beijing, and Christianity is an exclusive religion,

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[5] *Ibid.*, 143, 148-150.

[6] *Ibid.*, 143, 150,154,153.

[7] Joseph O. Baker, "Social Sources of the Spirit: Connecting Rational Choice and Interactive Ritual Theories in the Study of Religion", *Sociology of Religion* 2010, 71:4, 432-456.

[8] Lu Yunfeng, "Beyond the Sociology of Christianity: Probing the applicability of the religious economy model to China", *Sociological Studies*, 2008:5, 81-97.

[9] Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith—Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, Translated Version, Translated by Yang Fenggang, Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2004, 2, 51.

[10] *Ibid.*, 45-46.

it seems that we have no reason to doubt the applicability of rational choice theory in this research. Thus, we seek to examine the rational choice theory in sociology of religion based on the data of our project, and try to modify or complement this theory.

## 2. Data and Survey

The data used in this paper are from the research project “Attitude of University Students in Beijing towards Christianity” launched by Sun Shangyang, the first author of this paper, starting in April, 2011. This project targets at college students (440,030)<sup>[11]</sup> and graduate students (master:143,017<sup>[12]</sup>; PhD:46,514<sup>[13]</sup>) in all 55 universities in Beijing, altogether 629,561 students. We adopted hierarchical ordering of data, multi-phase, proportional probability and scope sampling method. We dispatched 2,000 questionnaires and received 1,877 pieces back, among which 1,876 pieces are valid. This paper’s analysis is based on the data obtained from this survey.

In our questionnaire, there are 26 questions specifically designed for Christians, among which there are some variables related to the topic of this paper: the religious belief of university student Christians’ family members and social network; university student Christians’ church participation; the type of church that university student Christians belong to; the frequency of participation in church activities; amount of donation to the church; leaders of church; the reason for not joining three-self churches; their attitude towards house churches; their attitude towards government’s religious policies. Besides these questions, there are also some questions in other parts of the questionnaire which relate to the topic of this paper. This questionnaire can basically measure the reasons for university student Christians’ conversion and the condition of their religious commitment. The result of this survey can support the standpoint of this paper.

## 3. Basic Findings: Choice of Church and Religious Conversion of University Student Christians

Christians believe that “church is a group of people who belong to God, who are called by God to worship Him, and who are connected to Jesus” .<sup>[14]</sup> Thus, “church” has always referred to a group of people. Christians’ emphasis on collective religious life in the church is perhaps the social origin why Christianity developed faster than other local traditional religions in China.

In fact, the history of house churches can date back to a long time ago, and even to the Apostle period when secret missionary activities were conducted. However, house churches didn’t appear in China until 1949, when Chinese government were trying to transform churches in the Three-self Patriotism Movement. This made some Christians feel unsatisfied with the connection between church and government, so they left three-self churches and organized their own house churches. After the reform and opening-up policy was initiated, house churches restored and developed very fast.<sup>[15]</sup> Zhou Chun-shui classifies house

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[11] Mainly including college students from grade 2007 to grade 2010, as well as some 5-year majors like medicine majors.

[12] Not including part-time Master students.

[13] Not including part-time PhD students.

[14] Zhou Chunshui, *Protestantism in the Lane—The study on House Church Lanzhou City*. Master’s Degree Dissertation of Lanzhou University in 2009, 11.

[15] *Ibid.*, 11.

churches into three types: first, the house churches which are under the jurisdiction of three-self churches<sup>[16]</sup>. Most of these churches are legally registered as a part of a local three-self church. There is no professional priest in these churches. Priests from the local three-self churches would go there to administer the rites and training activities. Second, the semi-independent house churches. Most of these churches are independent but legally registered. Though they might also be affiliated to three-self churches, they are rarely influenced by them. Their leaders naturally come from their followers, and their gathering forms are relatively free. Third, the house churches which are not legally registered and refuse to participate in the three-self churches' activities. This is "house church" in the strict sense. In our research project, "registered house churches" belong to the second type, while "unregistered house churches" belong to the third type.

According to the data, university students in Beijing who claim to be Christian take up to 3.9% of all university students in Beijing, among which the protestants take up to 2.9%, the Catholics 1%.<sup>[17]</sup> "Report of the Door-to-door Survey on Chinese Christians" from the Institute of World Religions of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences shows that in 2009 spring, Chinese protestants take up to 1.8% of the whole population of China, and over 60% of Christians are between the age range from 35 to 64<sup>[18]</sup>. Christians take up below 1.8% of the whole population from 20-year-old to 30-year-old Chinese youths. However, the proportion of Christians among university students in Beijing is well above the national average proportion. This may result from that in recent years Christianity has enjoyed a relatively free and wide transmission among university students: according to our research, it is shown that over half of university students have been preached. This proportion is close to the data from "Survey of Chinese People's Spiritual Life" which was released by Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University in 2010. That survey shows that the self-claimed Protestants in China take up to 2.3% of the whole population<sup>[19]</sup>. However, no matter which date above is adopted, our research can show that Christians among university students in Beijing is above the national average level.

**Chart 1 Baptism of Christians Interviewed ( unit: person)**

<b>Have you been baptized</b>	<b>Protestant</b>	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Eastern Orthodox Christian</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Total</b>
Yes	11	4	1	0	16
No	25	8	0	3	36
Total	36	12	1	3	52

We would first introduce the data about Christians in our research. As stated above, we have received 1876 valid pieces of questionnaire, among which there are 52 questionnaires from self-claimed Christians. Among the 52 Christians, 36 are Protestants, taking up to 72% of the total, and 12 are Catholics, 23%, 1 is Eastern Orthodox Christian. As for their educational background, 36 are undergraduate students, 11 are on

[16] *Ibid.*, 11-12.

[17] Sun Shangyang, Li Ding, "Chinese Culture Fever, Scarcity of Meaning, College Students' Interests towards Religion" , *International Journal of Sino-Western Studies*, 2011,12(1), 63.

[18] The Institute of World Religions of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, *Report of the Door-to-door Survey on Chinese Christians*, Chinese Religion Report(2010), Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2010, 191-192.

[19] Huang Haibo, "Civil Society in Construction—Christianity's Responsibility and Retrospect in China in 2010" , Chinese Religion Report(2011) ,Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2010, 129.

master programs, and 4 are on doctoral programs. As for gender, there are 21 males and 31 females. Their age ranges from 18 to 30. As for the length of their church life, 37% are equal to or shorter than 3 years, 29% are between 4-8 years, 33% are equal to or longer than 9 years. Almost half of them join the church when they are 16 or younger. 27% of them have a father who is Christian, and 42% of them have a mother who is Christian, and at least 25% of them have parents who are both Christians. And 36% of them believe that the most influential factor in their decision to become Christian is their parents, and all of these people (altogether 18 students) have a mother who is a Christian. From this we can safely draw a conclusion that the proportion of early endowed Christians<sup>[20]</sup> is at least 25%, which indicates that family tradition is a very influential factor in people' religious choice. At this point, Stark' s rational choice theory is completely applicable, that is, "when people are making religious choices, they would try to retain their social capita" , and "in normal situations, most people would not change religion or denomination."<sup>[21]</sup> "Early Endowed Christians" are greatly influenced by their family and have a strong tendency to retain their family tradition.

From the length of their church life and their grade at school, about 45% of these Christians converted after entering college. 25% of these Christians claimed that they became Christians mainly because of the influence from their friends, classmates, or teachers. As a result, peers, friends at school, classmates, and teachers are another important way for the spread of Christianity. The two points made above show that social network is an important reason for university students to become Christians. Stark says that the religious capita can be divided into two parts: cultural capita and emotional capita. One need to know about the religious culture in order to follow that religion, and participating in religious practices with their family members would make people devote emotions to that religion, and such emotion would ultimately become innate. "When people are making religious choices, they would try to retain their social capita" .<sup>[22]</sup> Social capita formed through social network is the social foundation of university student Christians' faith.

How about these Christians' participation in church activities? Church is the structural basis for the validity of their faith. With the development of Christianity, the types of church are becoming more diverse. As for the choice of churches, among the 52 Christians, 38% go to a single church regularly. Plus the ones who have changed their church but attend the new regularly, this figure could reach 48%. 30% do not attend regular communion activities, and 17% attend 2 or 3 churches at the same time. From this we can see that nearly half of these college Christians attend a single church regularly, and one third of them have no regular church activities (maybe they are trying to find a satisfactory one), and the remaining ones go to multiple churches.<sup>[23]</sup>

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[20] Early endowed Christians refer to those college students who became Christians due to their parents' influence.

[21] Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith—Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, Translated Version, Translated by Yang Fenggang, Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2004, 148-149.

[22] *Ibid.*, 150-151.

[23] Since this research has not made inquiries of those who attend 2 or 3 churches simultaneously why they do that, thus we have no clue on whether the churches they attend belong to the same denomination. In this respect, we only intended to measure the overall forms of college student Christians participating in churches' ordinary religious activities. Moreover, our data analysis shows that college student Christians who attend 2 or 3 churches at the same time spend more time participating in churches' activities (worship not included) per week than those who attend a certain church regularly and who have no regular church to attend.

**Chart 2 Church Participation of Christians Interviewed**

<b>Church participation</b>	<b>Protestant</b>	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Eastern Orthodox Christian</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Total</b>
Participate in a single church regularly	17	3	0	0	20
Participate in 2 or 3 churches at the same time	3	4	1	1	9
Change to a new church and attend it regularly	4	1	0	0	5
Have no regular communion	10	4	0	2	16
Others	2	0	0	0	2
Total	36	12	1	3	52

As for the frequency of their participation in church activities per month, 36.5% are below three times, 32.7% are over four times( including four times), 17.3% attend church activities only on festivals such as Christmas or Thanks-giving or when there are some special events. Except for the worship, 66% spend less than 2 hours at church, 20% spend 2-5 hours, and 10% 6-8 hours, 4% over 9 hours. Among those Christians, 40.4% read scriptures and pray every day or frequently, 23.1% read scriptures and pray only when they attend worship or bible-study, 19.2% read scriptures and pray only when they are in difficult situations, 13.5% seldom read scriptures and pray, 3.8% never read scriptures and pray. As for the donation to church, 23.1% donate less than 50 yuan to church, 19.3% donate 50-300 yuan, 11.5% donate over 300 yuan, and 46.2% donate nearly zero per month. Over 30% attend church meetings at least once a week, nearly 70% spend less than 2 hours at church except for the worship, 40% read scriptures and pray every day or frequently, 70% donate less than 50 yuan or nearly zero to church per month. Their frequency of church participation and of communion participation, the time and money they devote to the church, and the frequency of reading scriptures and praying show that their religious piety is on a fair level, but the time and money they devote to church is limited due to the limitation of their social and economic status— university student. Research data also shows that 60% of them believe that their faith has influenced over 70% of all the aspects of their life, which indicates their high degree of piety.

The data about which type of church they join shows that they prefer house churches. For protestants, 1/3 participate in three-self churches, 44% participate in house churches, and a limited number of them participate in three-self churches, registered house churches, and unregistered house churches at the same time.

**Chart 3 Type of churches Christians participate in**

<b>Type of churches</b>	<b>Protestant</b>	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Eastern Orthodox Christian</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Total</b>
Three-self churches	10	3	0	0	13
Unregistered house churches	12	7	1	1	21
Registered house churches	4	1	0	0	5
All of the above	3	0	0	0	3
Others	7	1	0	2	10
Total	36	12	1	3	52

Analysis of the questionnaires shows that the reason why some Christians do not participate in three-self churches is mainly because three-self churches are too far away or they don’ t know where they are located. Over 20% of Christians are out of the former reason and over 20% are out of the latter reason. Moreover, 15% of them don’ t agree with the ideas of three-self churches or think there are too many people in three-self churches which makes the interaction inconvenient. There is no obvious influence from family or friends at this point. From this we can see that although the influence from family and

friends is evident in people's conversion, the choices among different types of churches are not relevant to family or friends' influence. It seems more likely that their choice of churches is mainly influenced by practical reasons as well as churches' ideas and activities. In fact, this relatively free choice would result in the popularity of house churches among the believers<sup>[24]</sup>. Thus, we can reach the conclusion that university students convert to Christianity mainly because of their social network, while their choice of churches is mainly influenced by practical reasons and churches' ideas. Three-self churches are limited in number and weak on accessibility, which has in turn promoted the popularity of house churches.<sup>[25]</sup>

Compared with three-self churches, house churches are more welcomed. 75% of Protestants claim that they like or very like house churches. Among those who attend house churches, 70% claim they like the worship and anthem in house churches, 27% claim they like the sermons there, and 38% claim they like the sense of belonging provided by communions. However, among the Christians who attend house churches, 27% indicate that they still cannot find the meaning of life, and 22% think that the churches interfere too much with personal life or the relationship between churches and government is too tense.

**Chart 4 Christians' Attitude Towards House Church**

Attitude towards House Church	Protestant	Catholic	Eastern Orthodox Christian	Others	Total
Very like	8	0	0	0	8
Like	18	9	1	1	29
Moderate	7	3	0	2	12
Total	33	12	1	3	49

Stark believes “religious commitment is the degree to which humans promptly meet the terms of exchange with a god or gods as specified by the explanations of a given religious organization.”<sup>[26]</sup> Religious commitment can be divided into two types: objective commitment (behaviors) and subjective commitment (belief and emotion). Objective commitment refers to all the behaviors which are consistent to the interpretation of doctrines supported by a religious organization, such as various religious participation or practices, donation, and following the rules which control our behaviors. Subjective commitment refers to the belief and understanding of the interpretation of doctrines supported by a religious organization, as well as the emotion of believers towards this religious organization<sup>[27]</sup>. The variables which directly measure the objective commitment in our research are as follows: the frequency of participation in

[24] This survey also has a depth interview part. In this part, we randomly chose 60 students as our interviewees, among whom there are three Christians. As for the attitude towards house churches, a Christian said:

Q: Do you prefer three-self church or house church?

A: House church.

Q: Why?

A: I feel like there is less restraint and more freedom in house churches.

[25] Liu Peng believes that in the last ten years, the number of Christians is increasing fast, while the number of three-self churches is very limited, which makes it inconvenient for Christians to attend church activities. Against this background, the house church has well satisfied people's religious needs with its flexible and convenient form. This is a practical reason for the development of house churches. See Liu Peng, “House Church: Problem and Solution”, *Leaders* (40), 2011, 6.

[26] Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith—Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, Translated Version, Translated by Yang Fenggang, Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2004, 127.

[27] *Ibid.*, 127-128.

communions, the frequency of reading scriptures and praying, the amount of donation, the time spent at church except participating in the worship. We have no variable to directly measure subjective commitment, but we can indirectly measure that from the question of which aspect of church life attracts them most.

According to Stark’ s theory, we can make an analogy of three-self church and house church as “big church” and “small sect” . As the “big church” which has gained government’ s approval, the three-self church is in harmony with the overall social and cultural environment, and in less tension with other social forces. Its religious activities are relatively canonical. However, if we put aside the objective factors which make people not to choose three-self churches, they are less attractive than house churches. As “small sect” , the house church provides its followers more diverse and colorful communion life and more energetic interpretations of doctrines, but it cannot provide completely satisfactory answers to their questions about the meaning of life, and its tension with society and its requirement for its believers make the minority of those university student Christians unsatisfactory.

In fact, the data analysis shows that on the variables of frequency of reading scriptures and praying, amount of monthly donation, time spent at church per month except the time of worship, university student Christians who attend house churches are slightly higher than those who attend three-self churches (see Chart 5 and Chart 6); and there is no notable difference on the frequency of attending church gatherings.

**Chart 5 Frequency of Reading Scriptures and Praying of Christians Who Attend Different Types of Churches**

<b>Frequency of reading scriptures and praying</b>	<b>Three-self church</b>	<b>Unregistered house church</b>	<b>Registered house church</b>	<b>Attend all these churches</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Total</b>
Read scriptures and pray every day or frequently	4	10	2	1	4	21
Only read scriptures and pray at the worship or bible-study	3	6	2	0	1	12
Only read scriptures and pray in difficult situations	5	2	1	1	1	10
Seldom read scriptures and pray	1	3	0	1	2	7
Never read scriptures and pray	0	0	0	0	2	2
Total	13	21	5	3	10	52

**Chart 6 Amount of Monthly Donation to Church of Christians Who Attend Different Types of Churches**

<b>Amount of monthly donation to church</b>	<b>Three-self church</b>	<b>Unregistered house church</b>	<b>Registered house church</b>	<b>Attend all these churches</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Total</b>
Below 50yuan	6	3	1	1	1	12
51-100yuan	1	4	1	0	1	7
101-300yuan	0	2	0	0	1	3
301-500yuan	0	1	1	0	0	2
Over 501yuan	0	3	0	0	1	4
Almost none	6	8	2	2	6	24
Total	13	21	5	3	10	52

Stark believes that if a religious group has higher tension with its environment, it would become more exclusive, and its members’ commitment would be more costly, which, in turn, would lead to a higher

degree of commitment<sup>[28]</sup>. Compared with three-self churches, house churches are in higher tension with the surrounding environment, and university student Christians in house churches indeed have a slightly higher degree of objective commitment, which coheres with Stark's theory. On the other hand, 70% of university student Christians who attend house churches claim that they like the worship and anthem there, and 38% claim they like the sense of belonging which is provided by the communion, and 27% claim they like the preach there. In three-self churches, 77% of university student Christians like the preach there, 54% like the worship and anthem there, and 23% like the sense of belonging provided by the communion. Thus, we can only show that university student Christians who attend house churches are different from those attending three-self churches in the variables measuring the subjective commitment. As a whole, university student Christians who attend house churches have a slightly higher degree of commitment than their counterparts of three-self churches.

Moreover, from Chart 7 we can also see that the majority (69%) of university student Christians of three-self churches attend a single church regularly. There are only three who attend 2 or 3 churches or do not attend communions regularly. But for members of unregistered churches, the situation is different: there are 7 of them who attend a single church, 6 attend 2 or 3 churches, 8 do not attend communions regularly. In other words, two thirds of unregistered church members have no stable commitment to a certain church.<sup>[29]</sup> As a result, though house church followers are twice the number of three-self church followers, the commitment of the former is less stable than the latter. There are many factors contributing to this unstableness, such as the disadvantages of house churches which we mentioned earlier: the tension with the surroundings, the inability to provide satisfactory interpretation of doctrines to satisfy their followers' needs. Although there is only a small portion of house church followers who point out these disadvantages, yet it indicates indirectly that in Chinese society, people are cautious of religious groups which are in high tension with the society, even if they can provide higher religious payoff. And house churches should enhance the attraction of their interpretation of doctrines.

**Chart 7 Church Participation of Christians Who Attend Different Types of Churches**

<b>The participation form of ordinary religious activities</b>	<b>Three-self Church</b>	<b>Unregistered House Church</b>	<b>Registered House Church</b>	<b>Attend all these churches</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Total</b>
Attend a single church regularly	8	6	2	0	4	20
Attend 2 or 3 churches regularly	1	6	0	1	1	9
Having switched churches before, but currently having relatively stable participation	1	1	2	1	0	5
Don't attend church regularly	2	8	1	0	5	16
Others	1	0	0	1	0	2
Total	13	21	5	3	10	52

[28] *Ibid.*, 180-181.

[29] If believers attend two or three churches which belong to the same denomination, then not attending a certain church regularly does not prove anything. However, according to Liu Peng's research, most house churches in China belong to evangelicals, and are rarely influenced by denominational traditions. There is no unified regulations on theoretical training and how to choose priests. Every house church is equal and independent. (See Liu Peng: "House Church: Problem and Solution", *Leaders*(40), 2011,6.) Thus, it is reasonable to believe that currently in China, house churches are loosely connected and relatively independent, seldom subject to the influence of denominational tradition, especially in big cities like Beijing.

Of course, this phenomenon also shows that in current Chinese society, unregistered house churches should be legalized. In fact, religious organization with lower degree of tension with its surroundings and with legal status can better meet the religious needs of Chinese people. And only this kind of religious organizations can remain stable commitment rates and enjoy consistent development. When Stark examines the tension <sup>[30]</sup> between religious groups and their social cultural environment, he does not take the factor of “legitimacy” of religious groups into serious consideration, and this factor plays different roles in different societies. According to Stark, the “illegal” unregistered house church has the strongest tension with its surroundings, and higher-tension denominations have deeper-committed followers<sup>[31]</sup>. However, we can see from our data that unregistered house church followers cannot be regarded as having the highest level of commitment. Actually their commitment is very unstable. It is true that house churches attract more followers, but if they want to continuously attract Chinese people, they have a long way to go. Of course, this conclusion is based on the data obtained from the survey about university student Christians in Beijing, and further analysis and tests are needed to see whether it also applies to other groups.

Combining all the analysis of university student Christians’ choice of church and their religious commitment, we can safely say that for most university student Christians, the difference between house church and three-self church is not so clear-cut, and they make their choices based on their personal needs and practical factors. Moreover, our data also shows that generally the religious commitment of house church followers is slightly higher than three-self churches, and registered house churches have stable membership commitment similar to three-self churches. There are very few Christians who attend both three-self churches and house churches; perhaps this may be the “folk wisdom” to solve the inherent historical conflict between three-self churches and house churches.

These university student Christians maintain that 38% of the churches they attend are led by three-self church priests, over 23% and 28% are led by foreigners and non-three-self church priests respectively. Other data shows that 25% of them attend three-self churches, 40% unregistered house churches, 10% registered churches, 6% attend all the three types of churches. Altogether there are about 40% of university student Christians who attend three-self churches, registered house churches, or attend all three types of churches. Given 38% of the churches they attend are led by three-self church priests, we can see these two figures are consistent. This indicates that currently most Christian churches are led by three-self church priests, followed by non-three-self church priests and foreigners. Taking the objective reasons for the prevalence of house churches into consideration, we can be certain that there is greater need for religious products and services among university students than what three-self churches can provide, and house churches satisfy this need to a certain extent. House church has flexible style, and as “small sect” ,

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[30] Tension refers to the degree of distinctiveness, separation, and antagonism between a religious group and the “outside” world. See Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith—Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, Translated Version, Translated by Yang Fenggang, Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2004, 178. The prerequisite of Stark’ s theory is that only in completely competitive religious market, the tension can be proportional to the degree of commitment. He pointed out that high degree of commitment only exists in highly competitive and unregulated religious market, (Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith—Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, Translated Version, Translated by Yang Fenggang, Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2004, 317.)

[31] Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith—Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, Translated Version, Translated by Yang Fenggang, Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2004, 181.

it can provide sense of belonging (worship, hymn, communion) and interpretation of doctrines (preach), which are important factors to attract followers. Wang Chenli points out that three-self churches' lack of flexibility and communication between followers makes some young Christians more inclined to choose house churches. Wang also analyzes how house churches provide sense of belonging to their followers and stimulate their inclination to participate in church activities so as to deepen their commitment. <sup>[32]</sup>

Our data shows that 22.4% of university students in Beijing agree that Christianity is the tool of foreign countries to manipulate Chinese people, 9.4% agree that the spread of Christianity is detrimental to the stability of China, and 6.2% believe that Christianity is a "foreign religion" which is completely alien to Chinese society and culture. This shows that there are a limited number of students holding that Christianity is related to foreign antagonistic forces which intend to manipulate Chinese people, and its growth would threaten the stability of China, but the majority of them believe that Christianity's development in China is reasonable. Similarly, as for the reason why Christianity developed fast in China, 53.8% believe the reason lies in Chinese people's spiritual sterility and anxiety brought by the social transition in China, 48.5% believe the reason lies in the infiltration of foreign forces into China. Among the sample of 52 Christians, 4 (2 Protestants and 2 Catholics) agree that Christianity is the tool of foreign countries to manipulate China, 2 (1 Protestant and 1 Catholic) agree that Christianity is a "foreign religion" which is completely alien to Chinese society and culture, 5 (3 Protestants and 2 Catholics) agree that the spread of Christianity is detrimental to the stability of China. As for the reason why Christianity developed fast in China, these Christians' answers are different from our last sample. The "infiltration of foreign forces into China" ranks the third (the first is the initiative of Chinese Christians to do missionary work, and the second is the spiritual sterility and anxiety brought by the social transition in China). In general, the development of Christianity and the spread of house churches are indeed influenced by practical needs, but university students in Beijing believe that the infiltration of foreign forces in China should not be ignored. Only about 20% of churches have foreign priests, and nearly 40% of churches are led by three-self church priests. This, on one hand, shows that the practical needs stimulate the development of Christianity; on the other hand, it also indicates that we should pay attention to the role of foreign forces in this process.

Besides that, even if the practical needs contribute to the development of Christianity and the spread of house churches, there are still 27% of university student Christians who attend house churches reporting that they cannot find the meaning of life from the house churches. Our collective data analysis indicates that university students in Beijing have a high frequency of thinking about the meaning and purpose of life, and 40% of them often think about these questions, and less than 5% of them seldom do that. When asked about what they would resort to for help when they are in frustration, pressure or confusion, these students claim that they would first seek help from scientific worldview and non-Marxism philosophies, and then resort to religion, which takes 10.6% of the total. However, for those who have already committed to Christianity, there are still a limited number of them who think that religion cannot completely solve their confusion about the meaning of life. Even though house churches do better in this aspect than three-self churches, and the sense of belonging and the interpretation of doctrines which house churches provide for their followers are among the reasons why their followers are attracted by them, yet it still cannot

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[32] Wang Chenli, *On the Quasi-organization of Youth Christian House Church, quasi-organization—Based on the Observation of Youth Christian House Church in a University in Shanghai*. Master's Degree Dissertation of Fudan University in 2010, 54.

satisfy the need of a limited number of university student Christians to find the meaning of life.

In the above, we mainly talk about some issues on university student Christians' conversion and religious commitment: their participation in church activities, the type of church they attend, the reasons for choosing house churches, their attitude towards house churches, the commitment condition of followers of different types of churches, etc. The house church has been a sensitive issue in the development of Christianity, and even today it still has the "grey identity". Qin Lili, in "Condition and Choice—Case Study of the Conversion of University Students", compares the completely different situation of university education and house church by which students try to build their own identity and realize their selfhood. She points out that the functional structure of university education mainly focuses on meeting students' low-level needs, while the functional structure of house church mainly focuses on their high-level needs; since the functional structure of higher education falls behind of university students' need structure, university students would choose to join illegitimate house churches to realize their selfhood.<sup>[33]</sup> But as we have shown in early pages, the illegitimacy problem has negatively influenced the stability of house church' s followers' religious commitment.

#### **4. University Students' Attitude Towards Politico-Religious Relationship**

The "desensitization" of Christianity is related to government' s religion policies. How do university students in Beijing think about these policies? Our analysis of questionnaires shows that about 40% of university students in Beijing believe that the government should allow religions to freely compete with each other in the "religion market", and the government should not restrain or control the development of Christianity. They believe that the government should learn from Hong Kong and Taiwan to allow religions to freely develop. However, there are also 20% to 25% university students believe that the government should be cautious of the development of Christianity and should take measures to control its development, and they disagree with implementing the free-competition religious policy. Moreover, there are about one third of university students who are ambivalent towards the development of Christianity in China.

Comprehensive analysis shows that when other variables are controlled, CPC members are more inclined to believe that the government should be cautious of and constrain the development of Christianity, and they also oppose the free-competition policy; students growing up in urban areas and students having Christian relatives or Christian friends are in favor of the free-competition policy and oppose the constraining policy. Besides that, students who have greater needs for meaning (having higher pressure and higher frequency of thinking about the meaning of life) approve of the free development of religions, while at the same time approving of the development of folk religions. In general, the issue of whether or not to grant freedom to Christianity is influenced by students' political and cultural stands. Those who believe that Christianity is the tool of foreign countries to control Chinese people and that the development of Christianity would negatively affect the stability of China are more inclined to support constraining the development of Christianity; while those who believe the development of Christianity would promote the democracy of China are more inclined to oppose constraining the development of Christianity.

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[33] Qin Lili, *Condition and Choice—Case Study of the Conversion of College Student*. Master' s Degree Dissertation of Minzu University of China in 2011, 54-55.

**Chart 8 Advices on the Development of Christianity in China**

	Highly Disapprove	Disapprove	Ambiguous	Approve	Highly Approve	Number of Respondents
The free-competition policy of Hong and Taiwan is recommendable for Mainland China	2.9	20.6	34.3	35.9	6.3	1,868
	3.2	20.6	34.0	36.3	5.9	1,868
The competitive strength of Chinese traditional religions as Buddhism, Daosim and folk religions is weak, and thus should be protected. We can't adopt the free-competition policy until these religions become strong enough.	3.8	22.5	34.2	34.5	5.1	1,868
	3.8	20.8	34.5	35.7	5.3	1,868
Chinese government and society should be cautious towards the development of Christianity in China, and should strictly control and constrain it.	6.0	38.4	37.0	17.3	1.4	1,867
	5.9	37.7	36.9	18.1	1.5	1,867
Chinese government should support the development of Chinese local religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, as a way to constrain the development of Christianity.	5.8	39.1	35.7	17.0	2.3	1,866
	5.5	38.4	36.1	17.4	2.6	1,866

**Note :Every first line of data is non-weighted percentage, and every second line of data is weighed percentage.**

As for the relationship between religion and politics, how do university students view that? From the chart below, we can see that over half of university students think that politics and religion should be independent with each other, and over 1/3 of university students believe that politics and religion should cooperate with each other. Only a few university students hold that politics should rule over religion or vice versa. It is also shown that when other factors are controlled, university students who come from economically privileged families are more inclined to support the mutual independence of politics and religion, while those who believe universities' political education is useful or believe the development of Christianity is detrimental to the stability of China do not support the mutual independence of politics and religion.

**Chart 9 The Expectation of Ideal Relationship between Politics and Religion**

<b>You think the ideal relationship between politics and religion should be like</b>	<b>Un-weighed percentage</b>	<b>Weighed percentage</b>
Politics rules over religion	6.2	6.5
Religion rules over politics	1.4	1.6
Mutual independent	54.6	53.4
Cooperate	35.2	36.0
Other	2.6	2.5
Number of interviewees	1,869	1,869

Among the 52 Christians, about half hold that the free-competition religious policy of Hong and Taiwan is recommendable for Mainland China, 17.3% oppose this free-competition mode, and 34.6% hold ambivalent attitude. Over 30% agree with protecting Chinese traditional religions and not adopting the free-competition religious policy until these traditional religions become strong enough, about 40% oppose this, and less than 30% hold ambivalent attitude. Among these Christians, only 5.8% hold that Chinese government and society should be cautious towards the development of Christianity in China and should strictly control and constrain it, 69.2% disagree with this standpoint, and 25% are ambivalent towards it. Thus, the attitude of Christians is basically supporting the free-competition religious policy, opposing protecting Chinese traditional religions before adopting free-competition policy, and disagreeing with government's cautious attitude towards Christianity and with constraining Christianity by supporting local religions. This attitude is in accordance with the overall attitude of university students in Beijing, except that Christians' attitude is more firm, and they also oppose protecting Chinese traditional religions before adopting free-competition policy.

As for the relationship between politics and religion, 44.2% of Christians support the mutual independent relationship, 38.5% support the cooperation relationship, and 11.5% believe that religion should rule over politics, and very few hold that politics should rule over religion.

### **5. Discussion and Summary**

All in all, university students in Beijing convert to Christianity mainly because of their social network. Their conversion is normally influenced by their parents, classmates, friends, or teachers. Christians among university students in Beijing prefer house churches to three-self churches, because house churches have flexible and variable forms and are widespread, their interpretation of doctrine is more attractive, their activities have better effects, and their members can get a sense of belonging more easily. Since house churches are normally smaller in size, people with similar educational background can get together more easily, and the members can better communicate with each other and share similar religious experience. Moreover, over half of Christians among university students in Beijing regularly attend a certain church, and normally have a relatively high degree of piety.

As for religious commitment, university student Christians who attend house churches normally have higher commitment than those who attend three-self churches. The majority of those who attend three-self churches and registered house churches regularly attend activities of a certain church, while the majority of those who attend unregistered churches do not have stable participation of a certain church's activities. According to Stark's rational choice theory, there is a positive correlation between believers' religious

commitment and the tension between the religious group and its social and cultural surroundings, and our analysis of data basically verifies this point. However, there is an exception in China: unregistered house churches have the highest degree of tension with its surroundings, but their members' commitment is the most unstable. We emphasize that in China, the "eligibility" of a religious group may have influence on individual believers' religious commitment, but this conclusion should be further examined in other groups in China. It should be added that Stark' s theory is more applicable to free religious markets. Besides, among university student Christians, just as in other groups, there are some people who attend both three-self churches and house churches. Are these Christians "free-riders" , or just those who try to maximize their religious capita? This question deserves more attention, and our current date is not enough to provide a satisfactory answer to it. Of course, their choice has invisible effects: breaking the dichotomy of house church and three-self church, and blurring the boundary between these two sides.

Among university student Christians in Beijing, although those who attend house churches are twice the number of those who attend three-self churches, yet most of these house churches are led by priests from three-self churches. There are some house churches led by foreign priests or priests of house churches, but this is not the mainstream. Although house churches satisfy university student Christians' religious needs, yet not all of their confusion about life' s meaning can be solved by house churches. And the tension between house churches and the Chinese government also affect their followers' commitment as well as the effect of their religious activities. This information is helpful for a comprehensive and objective examination of the overall current situation of Christianity in China.

In general, as for Chinese government' s religious policy, about 40% of university students in Beijing believe that eventually the government should allow all religions to compete freely with each other, disagree with controlling or constraining the development of Christianity, and also believe that Chinese government should follow Hong Kong and Taiwan' s free-competition religious policy, or the government can firstly assist the development of Chinese traditional religions and then allow all religions to freely compete with each other. Less than 25% hold that the government should be cautious of and control the development of Christianity, and oppose free-competition religious policy. As for university student Christians, besides advocating the free-competition policy, they also oppose firstly assisting the development of Chinese traditional religions and then allowing all religions to freely compete with each other.

In other words, the modern concept of religious freedom is deeply rooted in university students' mind in Beijing, and its influence on the whole society should not be underestimated.

中文题目：

## 对北京市大学生基督徒的教会选择及其宗教委身调查分析

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**提要：**来自“北京市大学生对基督教的态度调查”这一项目所获得的数据表明，大学生基督徒之皈依基督教主要受到家庭与社会网络的影响，而他们在三自教会与家庭教会之间的选择则主要取决于教会所提供的意义系统和教会的空间距离。家庭教会与社会之间的张力较大，但选择家庭教会的大学生基督徒的宗教委身高于选择三自教会的大学生基督徒，这一事实证实了理性选择的某些论断。但选择家庭教会的大学生基督徒却不能像选择三自教会的大学生那样长久稳定地参加某一固定教会的宗教活动，这一事实表明理性选择论不能生搬硬套地应用于一个受到某种意识形态控制的宗教市场之中。

**关键词：**北京市大学生基督徒、皈依、教会选择、宗教委身、理性选择

