

The Church and State Conflict in China (1)

China has emerged as an economic powerhouse. Trade delegations from all over the world flock to Beijing to drum up business. But despite all the appearances of a booming Westernized economy, China is still under the heavy thumb of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party). The communist regime continues to exploit its citizens. Prisoners are used as slave labourers as a means to swallow up competition. Today, China is still cited by groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International as major abusers of human rights, including jailing of political opponents and persecution of religious groups. China's government contemptuously dismisses these charges. Instead it wages an aggressive public-relations campaign to convince the West that there is no religious persecution in China, that whatever incidents of repression occur are either the unauthorized acts of "overzealous cadres" or else necessary measures against dangerous criminals, cultists, and practitioners of "abnormal" religious activities.

What is happening to Christians in China? On the one hand, they suffer from harsh persecution. On the other hand, China is suffering from a spate of Christmas celebrations. In *Their Blood Cries Out: The Untold Story of Persecution Against Christians in the Modern World* Paul Marshall and Lela Gilbert refer to *The South China Morning Post*, which reported in 1994 that at Christmas, the streets of Beijing were decorated in red and green. Many ordinary shops had "Merry Christmas" signs written in their windows, which were also full of Christmas decorations. Meanwhile local Chinese went on a buying spree for Christmas presents. And David Aikman, journalist and former *Time* magazine Beijing bureau chief, argues in his book *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* that China is in the process of becoming Christianized. He observes that this does not mean that all Chinese will become Christian, or even that the majority will. But at the present, with the growth in the number of Christians in the country side, in the cities, and especially within China's social and cultural establishment, it is possible that Christians will constitute 20 to 30 percent of China's population within three decades. Aitkam believes "if that should happen, it is almost certain that a Christian view of the world will be the dominant worldview within China's political and cultural establishment, and possibly also within senior military circles." How can we put these conflicting reports into perspective? The turbulent history of the Chinese church reveals the conflict between Chinese Christianity and the State.

The Origin of the Church in China

The Christian faith was first brought to China in A.D. 635 by Nestorian missionaries who followed the silk trade route from their well-established church base in Syria and Persia. An eighth century Chinese Nestorian church leader even claimed that the Magi, returning from Bethlehem, had brought the first news of the Saviour. The Nestorians translated part of their Bible and other literature into Chinese, often using Taoist and

Buddhist terms to convey their meaning. Although the Nestorian faith spread to several major cities in China and boasted thousands of converts, its greatest growth may have been the foreign trading community. But as a result of a severe persecution under emperor Wu Zung in A.D. 845, it lost its foothold in China proper, but continued to exert a Christian influence among the tribes on the northern frontier of China. Between the ninth and nineteenth centuries various efforts were made by Roman Catholics and Protestants to reach China with the Gospel. But not many converts were gained. It was not until the great advance of the nineteenth century evangelical missionary movement that noticeable progress was made. The missionaries began their ministry of hope when China was in turmoil.

The Opium War

The lucrative opium trade had created many addicts. The Chinese government demanded that the British authorities curtail it. This request was fiercely opposed by British merchants' insistence that China opens its ports for international trade unencumbered by bureaucratic restrictions, and this led to the Opium War of 1839-1842. British troops defeated the Chinese imperial forces sent to expel them. And in 1842 a momentous new treaty was forced upon China, the Treaty of Nanking, that ceded Hong Kong to Britain and opened five coastal ports to foreign trade. It was an economic victory, but hardly a moral one. "We have triumphed," wrote Lord Shaftesbury, "in one of the most lawless, unnecessary and unfair struggles in the records of history, this cruel and debasing war."

Unfortunately, the opium war was also disastrous for the missionaries. It put the stamp of "foreign" upon the Christian faith and caused some Chinese to protest: "You introduced two things to us by force, neither one of which we desired - opium and Christianity." After the war many "missionary incidents" occurred between the Chinese government and missionaries. These culminated in the huge anti-foreign Boxer Rebellion.

The Boxer Rebellion

The Boxer Rebellion of 1899-1900 was a milestone in the history of Christian missions in China, as it was in China's history generally. It also triggered strong anti-Chinese feeling among the Western nations. Contemptuously, the Chinese were called barbarous and China referred to as the "Yellow Peril." Throughout the spring of 1900 the fanatical Boxer Movement agitated the populace by stirring up historic Chinese pride in their nation as the celestial centre of the world. It stirred up hatred against foreign powers for forcing exploitative treaties on their country and sustaining the opium trade which kept millions of Chinese addicted. It also fuelled resentment over jobs lost through foreign building of railroads. It received the open encouragement of the Court, which had grown alarmed at the ever increasing demands of Western traders, diplomats, for special privileges. The government commanded: "By Imperial Command Exterminate the Christian Religion! Death to the Foreign Devils." In June 1900, The Boxer rebels marched under the slogan "Protect our country, drive out foreigners, and

kill Christians." The bare-chested fanatical Boxers brandished long-curving swords and cried out for the heads and hearts of Chinese Christians and missionaries. They rampaged through cities of North China, looting and burning churches and the homes of missionaries and Chinese Christians. Many evangelical Protestant missionaries were killed in the Boxer bloodbath. One hundred and thirty-five missionaries and thirty-five missionary children were brutally murdered, and it was the courageous China Inland Mission (CIM) missionaries of the interior, many of them single women, who suffered the most. Many thousands of Chinese Christians lost all their property to burning and looting mobs who systematically sought out residences of persons listed on church registrations. No Chinese Christian was safe from the Boxer wrath, not even the most highly educated. The massacre by the Boxers was the biggest setback for the Church in China since the persecution of Roman Catholics in the eighteenth century. It was also a prelude of period of growth, particularly on the part of the Protestant missions. After the defeat of the Boxers by an Allied expeditionary force, the rebels scattered. The Ch'ing government was subjected to a humiliating peace treaty and the payment of a vast indemnity to foreign powers. The defeat of the Boxers and their imperial backers marked a turning point in China's history. The feudal Manchu dynasty was soon overthrown and the Chinese republic founded under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen.

Theological Liberalism

In spite of opposition, the proportion of Christians in China rose from one half percent in 1914 to one percent in about 1941. Although Roman Catholics were much longer in China than the Protestants and greatly out-numbered them, the latter exerted far the largest nationwide influence. Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), provisional President of the Republic of China (1911-12) and President of the Southern Chinese Republic (1923-25) was largely inspired by Christianity. He owed most of his formal education to Christian schools in Hawaii, Canton, and Hong Kong. He was a baptized Christian, a Protestant, and one time considered entering the ministry. Although he was not exclusively indebted to the Christian faith in his political convictions, he did confess the importance of his Christian upbringing in forming his views. The overwhelming majority of Christians prominent in the government of the Republic were Protestant.

Missionaries were concerned to educate the Chinese people as well as to make them healthy. They pioneered and developed education for women, lobbied for an end to the practice of foot binding, concubinage and infanticide. They also encouraged the teaching of the English language. Christian institutions of learning pioneered in medicine, nursing, agriculture, and forestry. By 1914 Christianity had an increasingly large share in education. The Mass Education Movement, which began under the auspices of the Young Men's Christian Association, was led by Dr. Yen, a Christian. Chinese Christian evangelicals showed remarkable spiritual vitality. In 1938 a World Missionary Conference was held at Tambaran, near Madras (now Tamil Nadu) in India. Young Chinese Christians were the strongest delegation. Sadly, secularism also reached the hearts and souls of the Chinese. Not all education was Christian.

New philosophies and theologies from the West helped to erode Chinese confidence in

Christianity. A new wave of so-called missionaries from mainline Protestant denominations came teaching evolution and a non-supernatural view of the Bible. In the 1920's, the foundation for communism was laid by the visits of the American educator John Dewey and the atheist British philosopher Bertrand Russell. Protestant liberalism, de-emphasising and demythologizing miracles and Biblical authority, introduced the powerful but crippling secularism into Chinese Christianity. Yale's late distinguished Professor in Missions and Oriental History, Kenneth S. Latourette, considered liberal theology as the most important factor in the reverse suffered by Christianity in Communist China.

The Chinese intelligentsia who had been schooled by orthodox evangelical missionaries were thus softened for the advent of Marxism. The enthusiasm shown in student circles for bland secular philosophies was transferred to the more exciting and demanding version of Marxism taught by Mao Tse Tung (Mao ZeDong), who had developed his own blueprint for the development of China while fighting the Kuomintang. When he and his accomplices were victorious in 1949, they tried to put their ideology into practice. Mao became China's idol and his ideas were canonized. Children were taught to memorize phrases like, "The sun is big, the earth is big, but nothing is bigger than the benevolence of the (communist) Party," and "Mommy's close, Daddy's close, but no one is closer than Chairman Mao." The Party's all-around intrusion into people's lives was totalitarian. Mao didn't only want external discipline, but the total subjection of all thoughts, large or small. To accomplish this goal the CCP used a process known as "thought reform."

Communism

The West's dealing with China is a tale of squandered opportunities through lust for power and greed. In 1923 the United States and Britain refused to give their special rights in China. On the last day of the year President Sun Yat-Sen announced, "We no longer look to the Western Powers. Our faces are turned toward Russia." The door was open for Communist agitation, an infiltration that would inflame feelings against "imperialists" (missionaries and other western nationals) and their "running dogs" (Chinese Christians and employees of Westerners). After CCP's Chairman Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China in 1949 following the victory over the Nationalist Kuomintang, the nature of China's encounter with Christianity was drastically changed. It ended more than a century and a half of continuous Western missionary effort. The CCP got rid of most of the missionaries, not by execution but by cutting ties between East and West. They charged that Christianity as it existed was too closely tied to western imperialism and colonialism. For example, by 1953 CIM, which had served in China for eighty-five years, no longer had a single missionary in the field. The schools, hospitals and all property of the CIM and other foreign missions were confiscated. The schools, colleges, hospitals and other organizations founded, passed into government hands. Many thousands of Chinese Christians stayed behind, telling departing missionaries and fleeing friends, "We ask only that you pray for us as we remain to face the storm." Incredibly, most missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, were caught unawares by the tides of nationalism and revolution which swept through China from the

mid-1920s onward.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) promised to remake the state and the soul; to establish justice in this life and thus end the yearning for it in the next. Its guiding premise is atheism - the belief that there is no God, no afterlife. People don't need to believe in God. The CPP made every effort to control people's minds. It twisted ethics and thus ravaged morality, the country, peace and progress. CCP's principle is simply that Caesar is god: the party and the state are one. In the face of that confession, all genuine religion is viewed as a threat. As early as 1927 Moa Zedong spoke of popular religion as one of the "four bonds" enslaving China's peasants. The CCP attempted to control religious behaviour. It did so because religious belief touched on citizens' loyalty - an important matter for a revolutionary government with an all-encompassing creed. The prevailing intellectual climate was atheistic. CCP said that heaven will come to earth through human efforts. Advocates of religious life were given little quarter. They were prominent among those persecuted in the political campaigns of the 1950s . The Party's atheism was as militant as its opposition to "local tyrants and evil gentry." Its determination to overturn the social order deemed responsible for both was greater still. Godless Marxism, particularly in the form fashioned by Mao, would accomplish this.

Cultural Revolution

To control his minions Mao called for continuation of the class struggle to purify the Party and the nation. He called for a cultural revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976. Mao's death in 1976 largely ended the brutal, mass ideological campaigns that characterized his cruel rule. The Cultural Revolution's chief targets were the "four olds" - old culture, beliefs, customs and habits - each of which found expression in religious life. No one knows exactly how many party members and intellectuals were persecuted and tortured by the Red Guards and radicals. Apparently millions of people were killed and tens of millions more disgraced. In many cases it was sufficient merely for the accused to be labelled "rightists" or "counterrevolutionary." The denounced and their relatives were subjected to beatings, imprisonment, loss of jobs, and banishment to rural areas to do menial labour. In this period, the Red Guards were particularly brutal with Chinese believers of every persuasion. The latter - "official" and "unofficial"; Christian and otherwise - were persecuted. Almost every church was closed, put to other use or pulled down. Christians were hounded, Bibles destroyed. But they kept their faith alive by meeting in small groups at home. *Their Blood Cries Out* notes that the level of atrocity that took place during the epoch is beyond comprehension. In one incident a mother and a son were tortured, buried alive on top of each other in a single grave, then dismembered and eaten by their tormentors. The Cultural Revolution was a disaster that destroyed life and property on a huge scale and constituted a fundamental breach of human rights. And Paul Marshall points out the fact that repression has never changed. Even today, whenever China is criticized of persecution, it replies that people are not punished for their religious beliefs but for breaking the law. In many ways, China is still strictly controlled by the CCP. It has only partially lifted its bamboo curtain.

In its official evaluation of the Cultural Revolution the CCP admitted that its launching by Mao was a serious mistake, in that it was responsible for "the most severe setback"

and "the heaviest losses suffered by the party." Perhaps the gravest indictment levelled against the Cultural Revolution is that the great human suffering was caused by the radicals' witch-hunting escapades and the breakdown of regular party authority. Toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, many observers feared that religion had been entirely removed from the landscape of China life. Mao's radical leftist wife Jiang Qing declared in the 1970s that Christianity in China had now been consigned to the museum. Many foreign observers were ready to believe what the government officials were telling them: "religion no longer exists in China." Since China was during the Cultural Revolution a "closed society," it was difficult for Westerners to report on the horrible evils inflicted on the Chinese population by their own government.

Other than diplomats, very few foreigners of any kind were permitted to reside in China from the mid- 1960s until the 1980s. But God had not forsaken China. Through their missionary work, foreigners had sown the seed of the Gospel but, ultimately they were not responsible for evangelizing China in the last-half of the 20th century. China's remarkable church growth was and is an indigenous Chinese phenomenon.
(To be continued)

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