

The Church and State Conflict in China (2)

The China of the beginning of the 21st century is no longer a "pure Maoist" state. Due to its change to a semi-capitalist economy, it resembles a semi-fascist state. Compared with the West, China still lags miles behind in protecting basic human rights. Chinese citizens lack the democratic means to change their government. China's huge armed forces control the nation and pose a threat to the West. To pacify the West, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government proclaims religious freedom for all. But a careful reading of China's latest constitution, that of 1982, reveals restrictions to religious practices. It says: " Citizens of the PRC enjoy freedom of religious belief. No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may anyone discriminate against citizens who believe in, any religion; nor may anyone discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion." But despite its dramatic turn-around in economic policy, CCP routinely flouts all sorts of international agreements, from human rights codes to trade rules. It uses the judiciary as the tool of state control, and severely restricts freedoms of speech, press, association, and religion. In practice there is no separation between party and state. The CCP holds absolute power, and has imprisoned nearly all active dissidents. It still acts as if Caesar is god. Consequently, in the face of this conviction all genuine religion is seen as a threat. The public security bureau maintains correctional labour camps for those who have committed serious crimes, including political and "religious ones." The public security units are also still involved in "thought reform" through education and hard labour for the incarcerated. The flagrant disregard of the just criminal code procedures indicates to the rest of the world that perhaps China has a long way to go forward to establish a credible legal system.

Population Control

What should lead to protests by Christians in the West is China's policy of population control. The CPP started promoting family planning in 1954, but Mao turned against birth control. He said that if the Americans dropped atomic bombs on China, the Chinese would "just go on reproducing." Mao wanted a big powerful China, based on a large population. But after Mao's death, the pendulum swung to the opposite direction. The post-Mao regime asked: "How can China's population be controlled?" As Marxism does not value either the life of the unborn or the rights of parents to have a family they desire, the CCP took draconic measures to halt the growth of China's population. During the 1970s the much-publicized measure of population control was delayed marriage for the young. In addition, clinics were permitted to provide abortion services. In 1977, the target became one child per family. Women, restricted to the number of children they may bear, must seek state permission before becoming pregnant in a particular year. Newly married couples have to be sterilized or take long-lasting contraceptives if one or both are diagnosed as having a hereditary disease making them "unsuitable for reproduction." This includes "relevant mental disorders." It also forces women to have abortions even in the later stages of pregnancy. Compliance is coerced through steep fines, job loss, demolition of housing, denial of birth certificates, educational opportunities for children, sterilization, and infanticide. The most common complaint in

rural areas of the one-child per family policy is the desire for a son. Exemptions are usually granted from the policy to sparsely populated areas or in cases where the first child is a girl. Women with a son are not allowed to bear more children, whereas mothers whose first child is handicapped or a girl are allowed to have a second baby. Many Chinese object to China's stringent birth-control campaign, designed to achieve zero population control. It is a flagrant abuse of human rights. It is also objectionable on religious grounds to Christians.

Tiananmen Square 1989

After Mao's death many Chinese began to question his ideology. They became disillusioned by the lack of basic freedoms. In the early 1980s critical intellectuals began to demand institutional and legal guarantees of civil rights, freedom of expression and the establishment of some form of representative government in order to check abuses in political leadership. By the end of the 1980s, many youth had rejected the regime's core teachings. They realized that the promised new earth would never come. And so they began to actively search for a new belief system. Students openly and expectantly looked to the West, both as a source for new beliefs and as a potential escape from China still under the control of an aging regime clinging to power. In 1989 students called for change. There was a mass demonstration on Tiananmen Square in Beijing. But on June 3 and 4 this public expression of dissent was brutally suppressed by the army. Demonstrators were attacked, killing perhaps thousands of people. After this massacre, which included Christians, any public dissent was nearly impossible. The Tiananmen Square incident received much publicity abroad, but the regime itself said little about it. It certainly dispelled the belief that the China of the 1990s was on the way to becoming a democracy. Unfortunately, in their haste to establish profitable trade with China, many Western democracies no longer raise their voices to protest the regime's abuse of human rights.

Post-Tiananmen Square

The Tiananmen Square democracy demonstrations as well as the collapse of Soviet communism profoundly shook the leaders in Beijing. In its aftermath of the quelling of the demonstrations, China faces another period of tightening control and emphasis on orthodox ideology. The regime may not have a coherent program, but it still has the power to obstruct and even reverse reforms. In the meantime, many turned to Christianity. Why seek answers in Christianity? One suggestion is that China's traditional Confucian view of man as inherently good was shattered under the tanks that rolled into the Tiananmen Square. For some, Christianity is viewed as a source of morality and eternal values. For others, its very "foreign-ness" is an attraction: it is viewed as a link to a wider, more "modern" world.

In the 1990s China's "bamboo curtain" was partially lifted. As the regime opened the borders for Westerners and their traders, a new generation of missionaries entered the country. No foreign missionaries, of course, are allowed to work in China. But many do so anyway under the guise of teaching English. Many also covertly came as aid workers

and ordinary tourists to preach, dispense funds and deliver religious materials. Their number was small but large enough to worry the government. In 1994 Beijing enacted regulations forbidding foreigners to proselytize in China or appoint Chinese as religious workers.

The Three-Self Patriotic Movement

Throughout the Maoist era, the Christian church didn't disappear. But after 1949 the CCP regime, determined to control every aspect of its citizens' lives, organized Christians into "national" churches, shorn of "foreign influence." The Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) - self-support, self-government, self-propagation - was founded for the Protestants. It is rigidly controlled by the state, which monitors such activities as personnel selection, sermon themes, the dissemination of religious publications and the size of congregations. Its leaders were required to declare their support for the CPP. In 1966 at the height of his personality cult, Mao unleashed his little-red-book-waving Red Guards to destroy the Christian church. TSPM's Protestant Nanking Seminary was closed, along with all churches. The Bureau of Religious Affairs was abolished, public worship outlawed, church buildings confiscated, and Christian pastors and leaders systematically persecuted. Western Christians smuggled Bibles into China. Active persecution of the Chinese Church ended with the death of Mao (1976) and the subsequent fall of the Gang of Four in 1978. After the Cultural Revolution political tensions decreased; individuals began to enjoy more autonomy. Churches reopened, pastors emerged from prison, and the faithful resumed public worship. Although there was some risk involved in practising Christianity, at least it was possible. The state controlled TSPM, which claims to speak for all Protestants, was reestablished. It agreed to be registered with and is not critical of government. The Nanking Seminary also reopened. Six regional seminaries were established to train younger ministers. Students were also sent abroad, some to the Toronto School of Theology, to study contemporary Western religious thought. When the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 the last Anglican bishop K. H. Ting, born in Beijing in 1915, became the head of the TSPM, and later president of the China Christian Council, which worked to re-establish relationships with Christian churches around the world, including Canada. He is a graduate student at Union Theological Seminary. In the 1950s he became principal of Nanjing Theological Studies.

The TSPM legitimized Protestant Christianity even as it struggled to control it. There was widespread resistance to joining the puppet National Christian Church. But the fact that many believers have chosen to worship outside the confines of the TSPM points to its failure to bridge the gulf between church and state.

The House Church Movement

Religious activities are still tightly controlled and are officially limited to the government-sanctioned "patriotic" churches. The government requires that all churches must be registered. But many Christians object to the state control of churches. Registration of a church requires that churches desist from preaching to minors and speaking about the

Second Coming of Christ, the gifts of the Spirit, the story of Creation in Genesis, and the evils of abortion. The unofficial Catholic and Protestant churches, which comprise most of China's Christians, are rendered "illegal churches" which are deprived of the legal protection enjoyed, at least in principle, by the TSPM. The term "house church" refers to those who refuse to join the TSPM and to register with the government. The individual house churches are subject to government crackdowns, arrests and the confiscation of their property. They share certain common evangelical theological convictions. One is obedience to the Word of God even to the point of risking one's life; another is the belief in the absolute separation of church and state, as the movement's adherents are convinced in the light of Scripture that government control is not acceptable. They have no formal fellowship or denominational structures. The most important feature of the house church movement is not a theological system, but a common stand defined by their relationship to TSPM and the Chinese government. House churches show a remarkable flexibility regarding the potentially more controversial issues like the Charismatic experience or the Second Coming of Christ. They do not accept that the gifts of the Holy Spirit (speaking in tongues, for example) died out at the end of the first century. There are also stories of miraculous healing.

Some of the house churches have fallen prey to heresy, a consequence of the rapid spread of their faith, and a much slower development of institutions and trained leaders required to ensure orthodoxy. In rural areas, Christian millenarian sects are active. Some of them have encouraged their members to abandon their farming and prepare for the imminent coming of Christ. The official church and the government are often at one in opposing these groups. Sometimes they cooperate in breaking them up. Since their activities usually have to be kept secret, it is difficult to estimate how many people are involved. But it is clear that they have been growing rapidly. Millions of Chinese Christians worship in unregistered churches.

The vast majority of China's house church Christians are missionary-minded. They have a burden for the lost outside of Christ. Some are even convinced that they are called to proclaim the Gospel to Muslims. There are several small underground missionary-training seminaries in different parts of China that are training Chinese Christians as missionaries to the Muslim world. Some have brought in Arabic-speaking Christians to train a new generation of Chinese missionaries in the Islamic world.

Persecution

Why is the church in China the fastest growing church in the world? It is certainly not due to an American health and wealth type of Gospel preaching. It is growing not by accommodation to Chinese culture or by submitting to government pressure to register to gain some limited freedoms. It is growing in the face of intense persecution. These churches live under the sign of the Cross. The late evangelical Christian leader Jonathan Chao states that "persistent state persecution has turned the Church in China into a church of persistent prayer." He credits the sufferings and persecution of the Chinese Christians for the growth of the Church. And persecution forces Christians into solidarity with one another, leading to a tight but fluid organizational and communication

structure. China has more Christian prisoners and detainees than any other country in the world. Arrests increase around Christian feast days and before national events. The campaign to "eradicate" unregistered groups intensified during the late 1990s. In 1991, the government called for a crackdown against unregistered religious groups and reaffirmed its goal of creating a "materialistic," "scientific," and atheistic society. In 1992 the Chinese state-run press noted that "the church played an important role in the change" in Eastern Europe (the downfall of communism) and warned, "If China does not want such a scene to be repeated in its land, it must strangle the baby while it is still in the manger" (a reference to Herod seeking to kill the Christ child). Repression against underground churches rose again in 1994 after Beijing issued decrees, mandating again the registration of religious groups. Hundreds of local house churches were closed and their leaders fined, imprisoned, tortured for holding prayer meetings, and distributing Bibles without state approval. In April 1996 in Shanghai alone more than three hundred house churches were closed down.

A new anti-cult provision of the Criminal Code was being used by late 1999 to impose long prison sentences on leaders of the Falun Gong and Zhong spiritual movements as well as Protestant house church leaders. In 2001, the Public Security Bureau issued a detailed list of Christian and other groups in China that were to be treated as "cults" and suppressed. The list included, for example The Immortal Real Buddha Sect but also in the Local Church (or Little Flock), which emerged from the teaching and ministry of Watchman Nee (1903-1972) and the Born-Again movement (also known as the Full Scope Church or "Weepers"), Prominent Protestant leaders and their followers were also accused by authorities of leading superstitious "cults."

The question has been raised, "Why is persecution more severe in one area of China than in another? Paul Marshall points out that there are tremendous variations depending on local government officials, so that in several areas, these groups are ignored as long as they maintain a low profile, but when the government finds it convenient, they are subject to brutal attacks. The level of repression of religious organizations in China has varied over the years. But the fact of repression has never changed. When China is criticized, it replies that people are not punished for religious beliefs but for breaking the law. However, this simply disparages the fact that the CCP regime criminalizes peaceful religious acts that are protected in international human rights standards.

By God's grace, the Chinese Church has not been crushed. According to some estimates there are 40 to 50 million Christians. Some even estimate up to 100 million. At any rate, there are more Christians in China than in France or England. Explosive church growth continues. Nobody knows how many practising Christians there are in China. All we do know is that Christianity has grown at a staggering speed since 1979, when China began to relax the fierce restriction on all religious activity that had been imposed during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s.

Conclusion

After the horrors endured during the Cultural Revolution, Marxism and its Maoist version turned out to be bankrupt. Many Chinese citizens had become disillusioned and began looking for answers. In urban areas today many Chinese are enchanted by consumerism. Others, especially in the vast rural areas, are finding their answer in the Gospel. What the future holds for Christianity in China, we don't know. But if the Church continues its rapid growth, it will have an important bearing on the future of China, on the relationship between the state and individual, and on the world. In the meantime we are called to pray for our Chinese brothers and sisters in the Lord who refuse to bend their knees before the CCP's idol - called the state. Hebrews 13:3 calls upon us to "remember the prisoners as if chained with them, and those who are mistreated, since you yourself are in the body also."

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