

The Situation of Christians in China Today

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In his book on *Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China*¹, reviewed in the second issue of this periodical², Dr. Donald E. MacInnis thus described the attitude and effect of the Cultural Revolution in China regarding the practice of religion :

“The opening section of the August, 1966, *Decision of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Concerning the Cultural Revolution* defined the terms and made clear the aims of the campaign which closed the schools, turned against countless Party functionaries, challenged the assumptions and style of the educational and cultural sectors, and called on the people to ‘transform the spiritual aspect’ of society by discarding surviving remnants of tradition and creating an entirely new proletarian culture. While religion is not specified among the ‘four olds’ under attack, it evidently was seen as part of the ‘superstructure which is incompatible with the socialist economic base,’ for all places of religion were forcibly closed by roving bands of Red Guard militants in the fall of 1966. Red Guards also invaded the homes of believers, destroying religious scriptures, art, and literature, and harassing believers. Aside from a single mosque used by foreign Moslem visitors in Peking, until 1971 no evidence pointed to the survival of any public practice of religion throughout China. At the same time no official policy statement either supporting or nullifying the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religious belief has been issued. In fact almost nothing on religion has appeared in the Chinese press since 1966.”³

Dr. MacInnis proceeded to quote in this section of his invaluable work a few of the exceptions to this silence. One was an article entitled “Degeneration of Soviet Revisionist Renegades as Seen from Their Concoction of ‘Communist Christianity’ ”, written by a Mr. Yu Fen in the *Red Flag* for August, 1969. In the course of a bitter attack on the ‘revisionists’ of the USSR, the writer set out Chinese official policy towards religions as follows :

“Chairman Mao, the great leader of all the nationalities of our country, pointed out in his work “On Coalition Government”: ‘All religions are permitted in China’s liberated areas, in accordance with the principle of freedom of religious belief. All believers in Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, and other faiths enjoy the protection of the People’s Government so long as they are abiding by its laws. Everyone is free to believe or not to believe; neither compulsion nor discrimination is permitted.’ We consistently advocate protection of the freedom of religious belief and the freedom of not believing in religion. Communists

¹ Published by Hodder & Stoughton, 1972.

² pp.9-13.

³ *Op. cit.*, p.283.

follow a policy of freedom of religious belief; but towards religious believers 'We can never approve of their idealism or religious doctrines.' We must repudiate idealism, monasticism and all kinds of religious superstition. We are convinced that the time will come when the religious believers will become awakened and cast away the 'gods'.⁴

What, then, in fact is the present situation? The extreme paucity of news makes it difficult not to try to make bricks out of every straw in the wind! Once the churches had been closed, as they were after the attacks of the Red Guards, it became impossible for anyone, whether inside or outside China, to survey the total situation of Christians there. It should moreover be realised that long before the Cultural Revolution, many who had certainly not ceased to regard themselves as Christians had nevertheless given up any open identification of themselves with the Christian religion. This was not only because Chinese by training and temperament regard the courage of patient endurance as far superior in wisdom and practicality to that of brash daring. It was because experience during each of the successive campaigns to eradicate wrong thinking and practice in the People's Republic showed that any evidence of 'backward' behaviour, such as even one attendance at a church service, might be a sufficient factor to call forth criticism during those inexorable processes of rectification.

Last year a British colleague who called on the former head of a Christian college, now honourably retired after government service under the communist regime, and enquired about Christianity in China today, was told that organised practice of the Christian faith was 'suspended'. The word was carefully chosen. It seems very apt – for all that it implies as well as for what it states.

Much has been made of reports of churches now re-opened. Such evidence as is known to the writer will be submitted. But it may be said right away that a careful, instead of a religiously romantic, appraisal of its significance bears out, rather than negates, the accuracy of that selected word. No doubt others could contribute similar items of news.⁵ It is, however, impossible to tell whether these represent the 'exception' or the 'rule', but more probably the former.

By 1971 there had been evidence of the re-surfacing of the Islamic Association of China and of the Tung-szu Mosque in Peking being open⁶. In 1972 the Buddhist Association was mentioned in a New China News Agency release. As with the Islamic Association, the evidence pointed only

⁴ *Idem.*, p.305.

⁵ I shall be very grateful if they will kindly help me by sending such to me. China Study Project, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, B29 6LE.

⁶ *China Notes*, issued by the East Asia Department of the Division of Overseas Ministries, NCC/ USA, Vol. IX, nos. 2-3.

to a role being played in relations with important foreigners professing these faiths. In the summer of that year, two articles in the *Ta Kung Pao* had indicated sensitivity to the question of religious freedom, and it was reported that a group of Moslems from Hong Kong had visited mosques in Peking, Nanking, Shanghai and Canton and found all of them in good repair.

In November 1971, a high-ranking Italian, Vittorio Colombo, visiting China as President of the Italian-Chinese Institute for Economic and Cultural Exchange, asked in Shanghai whether he could see a Catholic church in the city. He was told that they were very distressed to have to report that he could not, as "all the churches of Shanghai were in process of restoration". He repeated his request in Peking and, to the astonishment of Western diplomats there, was told "Certainly, you can attend the Catholic church in Peking. The mass is celebrated at 8.00 in the morning." On Saturday, 20 November Snr. Colombo and five others were welcomed at the Catholic cathedral (dedicated to the Immaculate Virgin) by representatives of the Patriotic Association of Chinese Catholics. Inside were some 30 Chinese at prayer. Mass was celebrated according to the pre-conciliar rite, and Snr. Colombo had the definite impression that "this was the centre of a congregation where mass was regularly celebrated". He was told that the last ordination to the Catholic priesthood had taken place in 1963⁷.

Early the following year, the newly appointed British Consul asked at a dinner party whether the needs of the Protestant community in Peking could not be met. To his surprise, and again to the astonishment of others in the Diplomatic Compound, three weeks later he received a note to say that Protestant services would be available in a certain church in Peking. He and others attended in full force on Easter Sunday. In July both the Catholic and the Protestant churches were crowded with congregations composed mainly of young Africans from Tanzania and Zambia, who had requested to be permitted to attend church throughout their training period in Peking. Later a journalist described in detail in *The Christian Science Monitor*⁸ services in the Protestant church – which is situated in Rice Market Street. Here are a few excerpts :

"Since Easter, foreigners have been free to visit the church at any time. In practice, most of them go only on Sunday, for a 35-minute Communion service conducted by Yin Chi-chen, the minister . . . He begins the service promptly at 9.30 a.m., often with a congregation of ten or less, half of them foreigners . . . One change wrought by the cultural revolution was the abandonment of all

⁷ *China Notes*, Vol. X, no. 1.

⁸ John Burns, in the issue for 12 October 1972.

services other than Communion. Baptisms, weddings, and funerals became a thing of the past – not, says Mr. Yin, because they were proscribed, but ‘because the people no longer had a desire for them’ . . .

What, then, is the future of the church, cut off as it is from new recruits?

Mr. Yin: ‘If people believe in God, then there will continue to be churches. If not, then there won’t be.’ Miss Wang (Peking secretary of the Three-Self Movement): ‘The answer to the question is very clear. Take Mr. Yin, for example. Before liberation, his children were believers. Now they are not. Neither are their children.’

This dire prognostication is uttered without apparent bitterness, nor even any perceptible regret.”

A Reuter telegram from Peking on Christmas Day reported as follows :

“Foreign residents in Peking joined Chinese Christians last night and early today in the first Christmas services here for six years. Carols were sung, some in English and some . . . in Chinese. At midnight mass at Peking’s Catholic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, about 30 Chinese Catholics joined 270 foreigners in a ceremony in Latin. Half the foreigners were Africans, mainly Tanzanians and Zambians studying engineering here for future work on the Chinese-built Tanzam Railway linking their two countries. About 40 people were at an earlier Protestant service, 11 of them Chinese.

It was the first time since the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 that Christmas services had been held in Peking, although church services were resumed last spring.

Official figures now put the number in Peking as 4-5,000 Catholics and 500 Protestants. Today’s attendance of Chinese, however, was far greater than normal, as usually only two or three are in either church at Sunday services.

40 carol singers from ten countries toured embassies in Peking carrying the Christmas message, even to the walls of the Forbidden City.”

In September 1972, the names of some Chinese Christian leaders were given in another New China News Agency release, for the first time since the Cultural Revolution. In this item, Dr. Wu Yi-fang (former president of Ginling College, once chairman of the National Christian Council of China and also vice-chairman of the Three-Self Movement) and Bishop K. H. Ting (still president of Nanking Theological Seminary) were listed among those present at a state funeral. In mid-November Miss Maude Russell, formerly a YWCA secretary in China for 26 years, visited Bishop and Mrs. Ting. She had returned to China for a second time since the setting up of the People’s Republic, this time as an invited guest of the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. She said that her hosts urged her to see old friends, which she did. Bishop Ting told her that his seminary was carrying on, although for the present classes were not being held – as with other institutions which were “open but not operating” in the normal way during a period of rectification following the Cultural Revolution. In response to a question about churches, Bishop

Ting replied that he knew of churches where religious services were well attended. He specifically mentioned Chekiang Province, the diocese of the Sheng Kung Hui to which he was once assigned, saying that some churches "were filled with people". Although he still used the title of Bishop, he said that he is not now functioning as such, but rather as the president of the Seminary.

Dr. John Fleming, lecturer in the University of St. Andrews, reported after a visit to China last year "In several cities I saw former church buildings now used for schools, or government offices, or for storage. Only in Peking was I able to meet Christians of the Catholic and Protestant Patriotic Committees and talked with some priests, pastors and leading laymen . . . The Catholics still had a seminary with about 20 students and six full-time teachers."

There are other less well authenticated reports of Christian practice and progress. For example, a Catholic in Hong Kong is said to have spoken with his brother who came out from China for a visit, and reported that some priests in 'X' Province in some cities are holding mass on Sunday mornings, and that such priests were functioning without episcopal supervision. Bishop Chandu Ray in Singapore relayed a report that a young woman who recently swam out from China said that "she left behind her a group of 15-20 young Christians who met regularly for prayer, and that many of these young people were new believers." From another source came the statement that, in a West China city, Protestant services are held regularly with good attendance. A Mr. David Wang, director of "Asian Outreach", reported after a visit to China last summer "I saw China's living church. Reports of a dynamic, witnessing, worshiping church in China are far from exaggeration. I met them. I talked with them. I prayed with them. Five of my closest childhood friends have been won to Christ in the last two years . . . In a major southern city a group of teenagers are meeting regularly for prayer. How can they do this in a controlled Marxist society? The answer is that the government is so sure of itself that whenever young people gather in groups they assume they are discussing communist ideology."⁹

In the nature of the case, even Christians who do not participate in small groups which meet secretly to maintain Christian fellowship and worship, are unlikely even to know of their existence. And the groups themselves will do everything possible to avoid attracting notice. All that one can say is that groups certainly exist; no one knows how widespread they are. And what of the others? Chinese have a great capacity

⁹ *Asian Report*, by Paul E. Kauffman, report no. 44.

for remaining unshaken within, while outwardly conforming to whatever limitations circumstances impose. The greatest problem remains that of passing on the faith, in spite of all that militates against it in formal education and the thoroughly secular atmosphere everywhere. Nevertheless, if China opens herself to increasing foreign contacts, a judicious and non-aggressive display of interest by Westerners in the question of religious freedom (not of dangerous interest in particular Christians by name) may well ameliorate the situation for those who in their hearts still hold fast to their faith.

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