

# Book review of

## A NEW BEGINNING

by Peter BARRY

One could almost hear the sigh of relief of the editors across miles of land and ocean as A New Beginning came rolling off the press. For, after almost a year and a half in the making, the papers and reports presented at the Montreal Conference (October 2-9, 1981) have finally seen the light of day. Editors Theresa Chu and Christopher Lind can be forgiven the long delay in publication (due no doubt to the need for translation in many cases) for the attractiveness of the final product.

The 186 page book is divided into three chapters: "The People," "Being The Church," and "The Chinese Church in its International Relations." The editors have added a helpful page of introduction before each chapter, and appendices include the list of participants, a list of post-conference reports by participants in other publications, and a selected bibliography about Christianity in China for further reading.

The division of the book into three chapters and fitting each of the conference presentations under one of these headings accurately reflects the dynamics of the conference. For the presentations of the Chinese delegates (7 Protestants and 3 Catholics) interspersed those of First and Third World theologians, Andre Myre, Roger Hutchinson, Sergio Torres, Oh Jae-shik, Louie Hechanova and Tissa Balasuriya. It was against the backdrop of the theological efforts taking place in the context of the countries represented by these theologians that the Chinese Christians offered their theological reflections. The organizers of the conference did not want to single China out, but desired that she be treated as an equal among the other nations.

It is perhaps not out of place at this point to congratulate the officials of the Canada-China Programme of the Canadian Council of Churches, the organizers of the Montreal Conference, on a well-run and successful meeting.

However, as thought provoking as were the presentations of the other theologians, I think that most of the 160 participants (from about

30 countries) were mainly interested in hearing what the Chinese delegates had to say. They heard a variety of speeches, from the weighty theological discourses of Chen Zemin, Shen Yifan and Tu Shihua to the more pastoral presentations of Jiang Peifen and Fu Tieshan. Fully two-thirds of A New Beginning is made up of the Chinese presentations.

Generally, what comes through to the reader is the witness of Chinese Christians who are trying to be at one and the same time fully Chinese and fully Christian. They are attempting to express their faith in the context of a country headed by a Marxist regime which officially professes materialism and atheism, and therefore would not agree with many of the tenets of religion. Like the Third World theologians, identification with the people played a big role in their theological thinking. But unlike the Third World theologians, the Chinese did not consider "liberation" as the response to be made, but rather reconciliation with the people. They pointed out that liberation has already taken place in China. At the same time, they were anxious to forever lay to rest the charge that Christianity is a foreign religion.

However, as a participant myself at the conference, looking back over the time span of a year and a half (and here I switch from criticism of the book to that of the conference itself), I feel that there was a lack of in-depth theological exchange at Montreal. Not enough of Zhao Fusan's "wrestling with my brother" (p.142) took place. Responses were made to some presentations, e.g., those of Andre Myre, Chen Zemin and Roger Hutchinson, but for others which seemed to call for a response, none was made. Bishop Tu Shihua's "To Have An Independent, Self-Ruled and Self-Managed Church is Our Sacred Duty" falls into this category. While it looks as if a lot of work went into Bishop Tu's presentation, I am sure that many Catholics, both Chinese and foreign, would have questions about it. Yet, none were voiced at Montreal.

One of the problems was that many participants who are not native Mandarin Chinese speakers found it difficult to understand what Bishop Tu was saying. Even the English of the professional translator was not very clear because the translator was unfamiliar with ecclesiastical terms. Briefly, Bishop Tu, using scriptural and patristic sources, argues that local churches have the right to nominate and ordain their own bishops, without the need of seeking the approval of Rome. Now that the complete text of Bishop Tu's speech is published and people are clear about what he said, hopefully some Catholic theologian, in a spirit of fraternal dialogue, can take up Bishop Tu's points and make a response to them.

As a Catholic, I feel that many of the past misunderstandings

between the Chinese Catholic Church and the Vatican, and mentioned in the Montreal papers of Bishop Tu, Father Wang Zicheng and Shanghai layman, Lu Weidu (absent from the conference due to illness, but paper distributed), could be ironed out by just such fraternal dialogue. If it did not take place at Montreal, hopefully it will take place at a future conference.

At the same time, it must be said that some Chinese Christian points of view were not represented at Montreal (again, I speak mainly from the Catholic side, as being the one I am more familiar with). One thinks of Jesuit Father Vincent Zhu Hongsheng in this regard. Indeed, like a cloud over the sun, the arrest of Father Zhu and other priests and Catholics in Shanghai in the month following the Montreal conference, casts a shadow over the incipient international relations of the Chinese Catholic Church experienced at Montreal. Also, regarding foreign participation too bad Church China scholars holding various points of view could not have been invited to the conference. Again, it is hoped that a future conference could be more open, and permit a broader spectrum of Chinese and foreign Christians to participate.

Returning to the book itself, defects are of a minor variety. I think A New Beginning would have been enhanced by the inclusion of press conferences and lectures given to groups outside the conference venue. Also, the footnote on p.98 about the "Line of Demarcation" (1493) is incorrect. China and the Orient were not ceded to Spain by the "Line." Spain was given exclusive rights to the region west of the line, i.e., to the Americas, and to Portugal was given everything to the east, i.e., China and the Orient. The Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) adjusted the line further to the west, so that Brazil would fall within the Portuguese sphere of influence. (The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 1974, Micropedia, Vol. X, p.50)

The main shortcoming of A New Beginning - rather of the conference which it reports - is just that: it was a "beginning." Perhaps the most prophetic words spoken at the conference were those of Mr. Douglas Roche, Catholic Member of Parliament in Canada, when he said: "My final message is this: when we leave here, I don't think any of us should feel we have to have a final answer, for it's not given to us." (p.145) So, no final answers were given at Montreal. But a beginning was made, and future conferences will make up for the shortcomings of the Montreal one.

In the same breath, we must affirm what was accomplished at Montreal. Friendships were made (and in the case of old friends, deepened), fellowships shared, and the beginnings of an indigenous Chinese theology were expressed (by the Nanjing theologians). The Montreal conference was



extraordinary in the sense that for the first time in over 30 years Chinese Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, could meet, exchange and pray with their fellow believers from around the globe. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any other communist country allowing ten of its Christian clergy, theologians and lay people to attend such an international conference. So, despite the drawbacks, we can rejoice at the hopes that Montreal holds out for the future of relations between Chinese and foreign churches. It is hoped that future conferences will improve and build on what was begun at Montreal.

But in the last analysis, in this reviewer's estimation, while it can be said that the book, A New Beginning, relates the experiences and thinking of some Christians in China - and for this reason should be on the bookshelves of all who are genuinely concerned about the Chinese Church - at least from the Catholic side, it cannot be said to be telling the whole story of the Church in China.

A NEW BEGINNING  
Edited by Theresa Chu  
Christopher Lind  
Canada China Programme  
Canadian Council of Churches, 1983