

A THEOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN PRESENCE IN A SECULAR SOCIETY

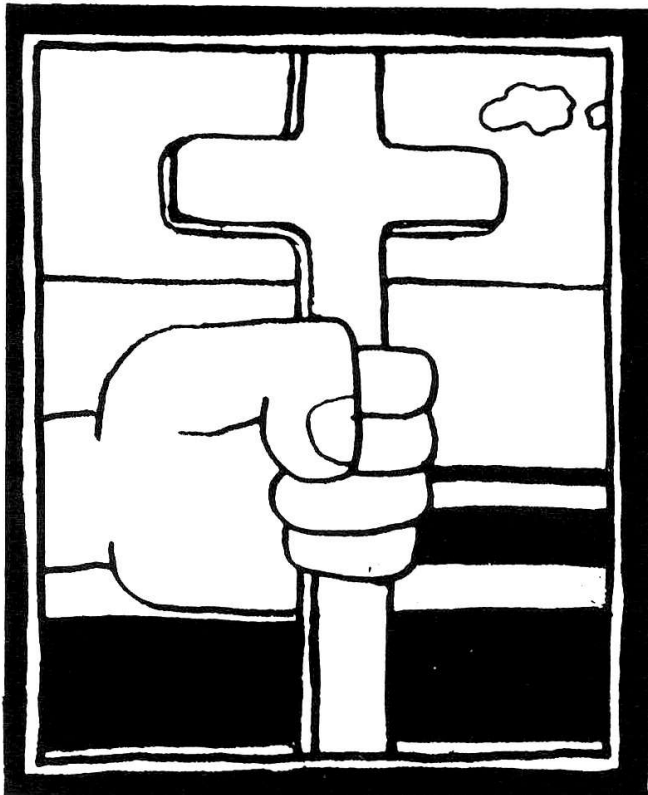
by Robert J. Schreiter

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I have been asked to address the question of developing a theology of Christian presence in a secular society, with special reference to the situation in China. I must say that I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect upon how Christians might provide a presence in the different kinds of secular societies in which they find themselves, be those societies favorable, apathetic, or hostile to religious adherents. It is an issue which has been raised in many places, and is one which deserves more attention than it has received. It seems to me that it is particularly important because it gives us some view of how Christian life and witness get carried out when not supported by a powerful or respected institution. It seems to me that Christians too often rely or fall back upon an exercise of institutional power to make their presence felt in society, and we have much to learn from those situations where power is denied or presence is ignored.

So I have looked forward to having to think about this problem as it affects Christians today, and especially what shape it might take for Christians in China. To be Christian without the power of institutions to back us up can be a purifying experience for those who are accustomed to living

in a society where the majority of the population and the dominant cultural tone are tolerant of Christianity. Chinese Christians have had to face that question since the end of the colonial period of their history. They face the challenge of being both constructive members of Chinese society and faithful members of the Church. They witness to both the building up of China and to a fidelity to the Gospel.



The reflections which follow are intended as an offering to the discussion on how Christian presence is exercised in a secular society. I am not Chinese, nor am I an expert on China, although I have followed developments in the Church in China in the last few years with great interest, since I believe that the experience of Chinese Christians has much to teach the rest of us. The suggestions made here are offered in a spirit of respect, equality and friendship, and need be considered only to the extent that they might prove useful. They are offered as

the experiences from some local churches in the West to their brothers and sisters in faith in a local church of the East. As local churches, we need to share experiences in faith as a way of each living out in fidelity the calling given to us in Christ.

This presentation is in three parts. The first tries to explain what is meant by Christian presence, and especially what Christian presence is not. This is important, since the phrase is used in many different ways, and one must be clear in one's usage of this sometimes ambiguous phrase.

In the second part, two historical models of Christian presence in a secular society will be explored, especially

as to how these models dealt with certain issues pertinent to the needs of China.

In the third part, we will move to giving expression to a theology of Christian presence, not in a completed or rounded-off form, but in a way which leaves some of the parts exposed. It seems to me that this will be more helpful as a contribution; it allows those taking up the suggestion to select what might be most helpful to their situation.

What is Christian Presence?

Calvin E. Shenk has summarized ably the different ways in which the term "Christian presence" has been used in the last three decades.(1) First of all, it has meant a form of Christian witness through action rather than words in de-Christianized situations, such as among the working classes of Northern Europe. This approach had to be taken since the old words were no longer effective, and church people had to re-establish their credibility with the working classes by sharing their lives.

A second use may be found among the World Christian Student Federation members, beginning in the mid-1960's. Here, presence meant going beyond confronting people with the Gospel message in the usual proclamatory fashion, and trying to communicate the message more by being with the people being evangelized. It was intended to emphasize a more holistic approach to the work of evangelization.

Presence has also gained currency as a way of describing the lives of Christians who witness silently in countries where any form of propaganda or direct proselytism is forbidden by law. Muslim theocracies and state socialist countries are examples of these kinds of settings. Here only actions may speak.

A fourth way of understanding presence was put forward by the late Max Warren, whose definition shaped my opening remarks here. Presence can be seen as a response to the opportunity to live the Christian life and engage in Christian witness without depending upon the support of large institutional presence, particularly the institutional power of colonial structures.

Shenk concludes that there is some confusion in the theological literature today about the meaning of presence, and I would have to agree. If one examines these four approaches carefully, they seem all to have emerged from negative criteria; that is to say, they are reactions to previous situations (a Christendom model of the Church, and aggressive propagandism, the instrumentality of colonial power), or an inability to use preferred means of witness (the cases of Muslim theocracies or state socialist systems). Given such criteria, presence begins to look more like a strategy than a response to the Gospel. If Christians had their way, they would not use a presence model in their societies. But given the restrictions prevailing or the historical encumbrances of other ways, presence is simply the best thing available for Christians to carry out their evangelistic purposes.

Such language necessarily makes non-Christians suspicious. It is not unlike the kinds of reactions Christians' use of the word "dialogue" can provoke. When some Christians use that word, they are not really interested in hearing what the other has to say; they are simply resorting to another technique of persuasion.

So how ought we speak of Christian presence? And what should it mean? My own grappling with this concept would lead me to believe that it is hard to come down to a univocal concept. A better way, perhaps, is to confront more directly the dependence of the concept of presence upon negative criteria. I think that can be expressed somewhat by saying what Christian presence is not. There are two important things which Christian presence is not.

First of all, it is not a second-best way to be a Christian, nor should it even be considered as an alternative to proclamation. If Christian presence is resorted to as a kind of fall-back position when direct evangelism is not possible (either because it is forbidden or because it is not understood), presence is not really a being present; it becomes merely a strategem meant to deceive the other. That may sound harsh, but I believe that is how such a move is often perceived. When such a strategy is employed, the implication is always that, once conditions change, the mode of Christian activity will change. It would seem to

me that if others become suspicious of Christians on this account, there is good reason to be so.

What is getting mixed up here is how Christians are part of their environment and certain missionary methods. We tend to canonize the missionary methods of recent centuries as the prime way of living out Christian witness. Lawrence Nemer has pointed out that there have been a variety of ways of living out Christian witness in the world, some more invitational and some more confrontational.(2) To rank them as ways of being Christian in which some are better than others seems, in itself, to be rather strange. Christianity is, of course, a religion of outreach. It has a message it wishes to share. Christians root this sense of outreach in God's activity with us in sending the second person of the Trinity to become one of us. Christians believe they have good news, and that the news should be shared; it is not just news for one tribe or clan. Yet the purpose of being Christian cannot be reduced to church growth. To aim Christian witness at the making of converts and the increasing of the numbers of people who call themselves Christian seems to be confusing marketing techniques with being taken up into the life of God and helping bring about the reign of God. Christian presence is first and foremost about how to live like a Christian, rather than how to make others Christian.

Secondly, Christian presence is not a passive state. Sometimes presence is used as the opposite of activity: when one cannot do something, one simply exists. Actually, Christian presence has to be understood as a very conscious way of being in the world. It is a distinctive spirituality, if you will, a decision to live in a special way within one's context. It usually involves a rejection of any attempt to rely on the church's institutional power to secure one's position. It decides not to depend upon the coercive powers of institutions to make one's point or get one's way. This does not mean that Christian presence is against the idea of an institutional Church. The community of believers is and must be organized. But it rejects the use of the institutional power which the Church can wield like that of any other institution in society.

Christian presence is very much a process of engage-

ment. It grows out of a sense of who Christ is and what one's society is like. It recognizes that Christianity is of its very nature transformative, and so a completely passive or inert Christianity is really a contradiction in terms. A Christian is not just like anyone else. Christians do carry with them commitments about Christ and culture. Those commitments, we shall see, are concerned with the building up of society, with justice, with love, and with

peace. How the Christian becomes engaged is determined to a great extent by how those commitments might best be realized.



A concern with Christian presence is that it is a way of balance: to start from the premise that everything is wrong in a society is a mistake, not unlike a romantic belief that everything is right about a society.

So as we move to look at kinds of Christian presence, these two principles should be kept in mind. Christian presence is not an inferior or alternative form of direct evangelism; it is a way of

being a Christian in its own right and with its own integrity. Nor is it a passive state; it is a consciously arrived at way of living in a specific circumstance. It is a full way to live the Christian life, and what it looks like is what it is - it is not a subterfuge for something else. It is a spirituality, not a strategy.

Now this might still seem like an exercise in the negative criteria spoken of above. But notice that something more positive is beginning to emerge. Presence is a way of life, full and integral of Christian faith. It is sustained by a spirituality that is deeply aware of the transformative nature of the Gospel, and is shaped by a theology of Christ and culture specific to the circumstances in which

Christians find themselves. It is important to emphasize the role of the circumstances in which Christians find themselves as part of the Christian presence. For there are no universal rules on what constitutes Christian presence. Were that the case, Christian presence could indeed be reduced to a strategy. Rather, Christian presence is engaged with the concrete social realities in which and to which it is present.

It is now time to move on to look at some concrete examples of Christian presence along the lines of which I have been describing. With that background we will have a little more secure hold of what Christian presence might look like and how it might be lived out in circumstances like those of China.

Christian Presence: Two Examples

Two examples could be presented which might prove instructive of how a Christian presence might be lived out in a secular society. The Chinese Constitution permits belief in religion, but does not permit proselytism. The two examples which will be presented are not intended to represent circumstances parallel to those in China today. Rather they represent two points in a spectrum of the kind of society where proselytism is not acceptable. In one instance, there is a response of apathy to the Christian message; in the other instance, there is hostility. In a country as large as China, the ways in which religion will be tolerated will understandably not be entirely uniform. So there is an advantage in having more than one point of reference when talking about Christian presence in a society like that of China.

The first example is the worker-priest movement in France in the 1940's and 1950's. Henri Godin's little book, France - Pays de Mission? raised the question whether the working classes of France had not become totally dechristianized.(3) Godin's analysis led him to believe that the traditional forms of exhortation to reform one's life would not reach this broad stratum of French society. The fact that the bourgeoisie clung more tightly to the Church had only deepened workers' conviction that the Church had nothing to say to them. Reaction to the usual forms of renewal

would be either indifference or hostility. The little book was something of a best seller, with more than 100,000 copies sold within a short time.

Godin did not directly found the worker-priest movement, but his work certainly inspired it. The worker-priest movement was characterized by two things in France: a commitment and a spirituality. The commitment was that if the Church wished to have meaning for the workers, it had to be with the workers in all aspects of their existence. It could not restrict itself to what had been defined as the sphere of the sacred. Consequently, priests entered the factories of France alongside the other workers, working alongside them, becoming involved in the issues which were important to the workers. They did not begin by trying to tell the workers which issues were important. They were with the workers entirely on issues such as housing, wages, and trade unions. They worked to attain what we would call now real solidarity with the workers. They saw such solidarity as an embodiment of the Christian message. The old words in many ways no longer made sense; the actions of the worker-priests made new words possible.

Now this being totally with the workers was not a stratagem to get the workers' attention so that the worker-priests could then revert to their traditional roles as priests toward the workers. The worker-priests saw their being with the workers as a life-long commitment, as a way of being Christian in all integrity. The worker-priests were trying to define a new way of giving witness to the presence of Christ in the world. Here it was Christ in the factory. This did not entail always speaking directly of Christ, although it did not entail not answering questions either. It was not a model of Christ against the Church and its commitments to the bourgeoisie; rather, it represented a new way for Christ to be in the Church.

The worker-priest movement was suppressed in France in 1954, although not in Belgium. It has continued to be carried out in many other places, but generally not as a movement on the scale it enjoyed in France. The reasons for its suppression had to do with the political involvements of some of the priests, particularly through the trade unions.

What might this experience suggest to China? When many Chinese speak of the experience of being Christians in China since liberation, they note that the 1950's and 1960's were years when Chinese Christians had to learn to live out their Christian commitments without the support of a massive foreign institution and power. The period of turmoil from 1966-76 was a time when many Christians, both clergy and laypersons, were cast out of their accustomed roles and found themselves involved in hand labor, often of a menial nature. They had to live out their Christian commitments working side by side with many Chinese who were not Christian, often trying simply to survive.(4) While such an experience was usually traumatic and often physically painful, it brought many to a new awareness of what it meant to be a Christian and a Chinese Christian. No longer could they make reference to some powerful foreign reality as they had, often unconsciously. It brought them to a new awareness that has reshaped how they are Christians in the current situation in China, now that the period of turmoil is past.

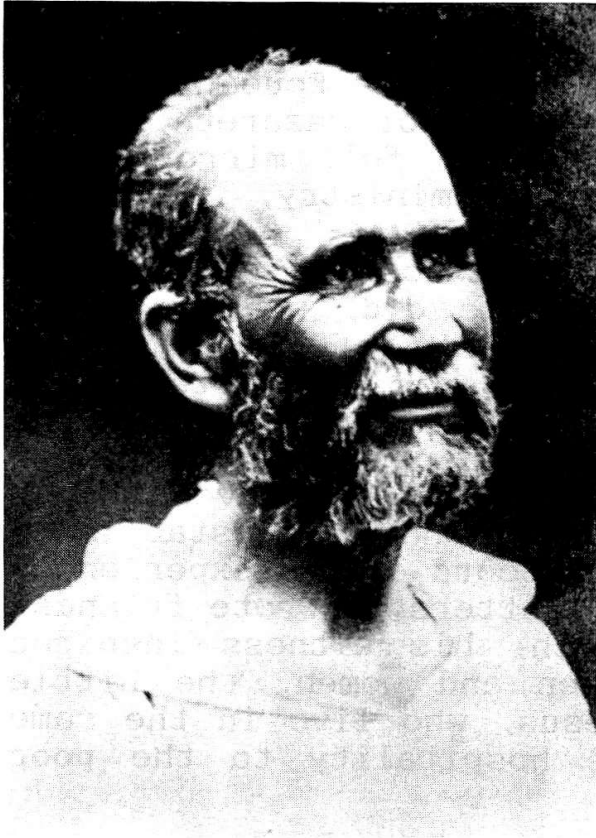
Some of the worker-priests may have started their jobs in factories as a pastoral stratagem, but they soon discovered in it a spirituality, a way to be Christian that made sense in their context. The period of the Cultural Revolution and the Gang of Four was not a matter of choice for Chinese Christians; it was forced upon them. Many Christians learned not only how to survive but how to be Christian and Chinese in a more integral kind of way, a way that did not depend upon the traditional European methods. There are no statistics which can completely reflect the full picture of that tumultuous period, but it would seem that not only did the Church not die, but it grew stronger both in its commitments and in its numbers at a time when traditional methods of church growth were the most completely out of the question.

The second example which might provide suggestions is that of Charles de Foucauld. Foucauld began his life as an army officer in France, but his dissolute living led to his being dismissed from the military service. He experienced a conversion to Christianity and subsequently became a Trappist monk at Nazareth in Palestine. From Palestine he was inspired to move to a hermitage in the Sahara Desert

of Northern Africa. There he lived among the Tuareg people, a semi-nomadic tribe of herders who were hostile to both the colonizing French and to Christianity. Foucauld tried to live what he called the "hidden life of Nazareth," that is, a way of utter simplicity which he felt mirrored the life of Jesus before Jesus began his ministry. Foucauld firmly believed that that "hidden life" was as much part of God's saving plan as was Jesus' preaching, passion and death. He lived as the Tuareg people did, wearing their kind of clothing, eating their food. He offered them the hospitality of his hermitage, where he was most often found at prayer, especially before the Blessed Sacrament. He was killed by a marauding band of raiders in 1916. He is sometimes called the "Apostle to the Tuaregs", even though he never made a single convert among them nor established anything beyond his hermitage. The record of his experiences was not preserved in tracts, but in letters he wrote friends. Some fifteen years after his death, his witness inspired the founding of communities of men and women, the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus, who live in the same spirit of simplicity and provide hospitality to the poor and the stranger.(5)

Foucauld showed the same solidarity with the Tuareg as did the worker-priests, but in a different way. He shared their food, clothing, and hostile climatic conditions, but did not join them in their work. Rather, he provided a rather deliberate presence of Christianity in a hostile Muslim environment. He did not preach. He offered hospitality (an iron law of the Sahara desert, but one done with cheerfulness and grace by Foucauld), and he prayed long hours before the Blessed Sacrament, the center of Catholic spirituality. Prayer was also something esteemed by the Muslim Tuareg, and they came to protect him from others because he was someone of prayer. Yet he did not make a single convert. His was a sense of great presence, with a clear understanding of what the presence of Christ meant in those circumstances.

What might Foucauld mean for Christian presence in China? China is not the North Sahara, nor are the Chinese Tuaregs. That is not the point of the suggestion. The suggestion lies elsewhere, in Foucauld's spirituality of the hidden life of Jesus of Nazareth. Just as Jesus spent



the majority of his years in the day-to-day activities of the life of a carpenter in Nazareth, a way of life that was part of God's saving plan for us all, so, too, many Chinese experience their lives as a day-to-day struggle to secure the essentials of food and housing, living as they do in an overpopulated and underresourced society.(6) Because so many Chinese must struggle to secure the essentials of life, their interest in consumer goods as they become increasingly available is often taken as a sign of a growing materialism. Materialism might be the case in some instances, but might it not also be a sign of their yearning to get beyond the day-to-day struggles for existence

to a better life? Those consumer items, such as the outfitting of a marriage room according to older customs, might be as much a sign of wanting a fuller and more satisfying human existence than current resources available in society can permit.(7) Foucauld's prayer emphasized that there could be something more to life beyond the immediate harsh qualities of the physical environment as well.

What this suggests is that another form of Christian presence in a secular society is as a sign of transcendence, of the possibility of more than what is found in the experiences of day-to-day living. What Christians do to point to that - their prayer, their hospitality and kindness, their continuing care of those around them - has value as a sign which points to what sustains Christians in their joyful carrying out of their prayer and hospitality in the same living conditions as other Chinese. To put this language of sign into the language of theology, especially a Catholic theology, such Christian presence becomes a kind of sacramental presence. Christians become the sacramentum mundi, the sacrament of the world, of which the Second

Vatican Council spoke.

A Theology of Christian Presence

I have made some brief suggestions of how two forms of Christian presence might prove instructive for forms of Christian presence in China today. Let me try to be more specific now about a theology of Christian presence which shapes and directs that style of Christian existence.

In looking at these forms of Christian presence and the theologies which support them, it is important to remember that proselytism came to play no major role in either of these forms of presence. The worker-priests may have begun hoping to win back the disenchanting workers to the Church, but in the process the worker-priests discovered a new way of being Church that eclipsed earlier goals. Foucauld may have wanted to win over converts from Islam, but was never to do so, and came to appreciate how his presence there was an authentic way to be Christian in that society.

Just as Christian presence can only be carried out in concrete, believing Christians, so a theology of presence has to have a certain concreteness. I would suggest that the theology which supports Christian presence, like the believers who live it out, has to have a body and a soul.

The body of Christian presence is the form of concrete engagement which Christian presence takes on. In the case of the worker-priest movement, it was becoming a worker with the workers. For Foucauld, it was living among the Tuareg as one of them, and offering hospitality. Both of the decisions taken here represent a theological stance about creation and about the presence of God in the world, about Christ and culture.

Both decisions affirm - and I believe this to be essential to Christian presence - that God lives in the created world as well as beyond it. For that reason, God can be discovered and engaged within that world. Where God resides is often not the place the Christian would first suspect. The worker-priest might have first thought the move to the factory was but a detour in order to bring workers back

into the Church (where, presumably, God dwells). But God was discovered elsewhere. And when the worker-priest discovered God there, he was transformed by that presence. Foucauld went into the Sahara from Nazareth with a lot of different motivations, and stumbled upon God where he had not expected it. He did not even lead the people around him to the Christian God in the sense of Church membership. But what was it about him that led them to protect him from enemies?

The body of Christian presence finds God in the concrete, day-to-day realities around it. That body is found in engagement with those realities. That engagement is not used merely as an opportunity to get to something else; it is taken with all the seriousness with which God takes creation. It is a reality which leads to questions of redemption: the worker-priests not only put in their hours in the factory, they came to be part of the needs for change which moved the workers.

Might not Chinese Christians find the body of their Christian presence in joining their fellow citizens in a commitment to build up Chinese society? Many in fact have already done so, but perhaps this needs to be identified more clearly as a form of Christian presence. Not everything is perfect or just in Chinese society (or it would need no building up!). But cannot God be discovered at work there too, and might that not lead Chinese Christians to a deeper transformation toward becoming more truly Chinese and more truly Christian?

The soul of Christian presence is the spirituality which sustains the body and gives it shape and direction. In the case of the worker-priest, a spirituality of solidarity in struggle and for better conditions in a more just society came about. It was a spirituality of being with the poor, a forerunner of the theology of the option for the poor of much of Latin American liberation theology today. Foucauld's presence was shaped by a spirituality of the simplicity of life in Nazareth and by the Eucharist as the presence of Christ in the desert. He relied heavily on a sense of sign which would speak louder than any preached words he might deliver.

Both the worker-priest and the Saharan spiritualities suggest strongly, however, the role of sign or a sense of sacrament (in both the broad and the Eucharistic sense) as important for giving the body shape and direction. The sign points beyond the current situation to something greater and more sustaining of a fully human (or the Christian would say: saved) existence. The sign not only points; it also tries to gather into expression the deeply felt values which come from the encounter with a God found in the midst of the world. Many worker-priests could not leave the factory behind, and Foucauld never left the desert. There were mysterious realities in both which needed to be worked out.

Chinese culture is one of the great sign-cultures of the world. Its tradition of art and poetry apply a theory of sign in diverse and subtle ways. A theology of sign, I would think, is not lost on the Chinese. It has been suggested somewhere that Christianity should be present in Chinese society as a fragrance. That fragrance, that distilled essence of a harmonious reality, is a most suggestive definition of what Christianity might be for the Chinese.

In making these suggestions, proselytism is very much in the background. If allowed to be a presence, the presence of Chinese Christians in their society might not only lead to a deeper transformation of those Christians in their communion with Christ through their discovery of Christ in unlikely places, but also provide the rest of us some insight into embodying the message of Christ in our own secular situations. Chinese have already learned much from the last thirty-five years of their experience, experiences they have been sharing with us. They have shown us how to be a Church without power, a Church which can suffer, and a Church which can be deeply loyal to the people and to the nation without compromising the heart of the Gospel. It is hoped that these suggestions might raise some possibilities for the Chinese, so that they might in turn come to continue to teach us as well. Thank you.

NOTES

- (1) Calvin E. Shenk, A Relevant Theology of Presence. (Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Board of Missions Mission

Focus Pamphlet, n.d.), 3-5.

- (2) Lawrence Nemer, "Spirituality and the Missionary Vocation," Missiology 11 (1983) 419-434.
- (3) Maisie Ward's France Pagan? The Mission of Abbe Godin (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1949) contains both the text of Godin's book and an evaluation of Godin's spirituality.
- (4) See for example Tsao Seng-chieh, "Christian Witness in New China," China Notes 19 (1981) 166-169.
- (5) See for Foucauld's life Sergius Losit, Charles de Foucauld: The Silent Witness (Jamaica, New York: New City, 1966); Inner Search: Letters 1899-1916 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979). These are given as examples. The literature on Foucauld is immense.
- (6) David C. Yu, "The Meaning of Religion in Contemporary China," China Notes 21 (1983) 249-250.
- (7) *ibid.*