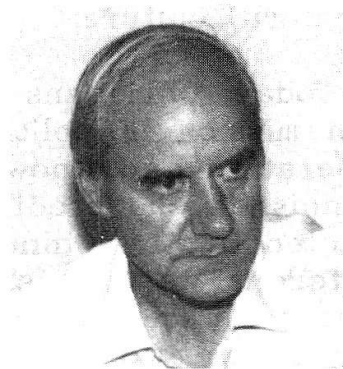


The Relationship between Chinese Christianity and German Protestant Churches

by Winfried M. Glüer

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A delegation of the China Christian Council visited the Federal Republic of Germany in 1982. This visit marked a new era in the relationship between the Chinese and the German churches following the first ecumenical meeting held at Montreal in 1981 under the theme: 'God's Call for a New Beginning'. For more than twenty years there had been virtually no direct contact, but this did not mean that the relationship was broken. Christians on both sides recognized their unity within the Body of Christ despite external separation. The communion of saints continued unimpaired in Christian witness, the celebration of the sacraments and in prayer.



German Protestant missionaries had come to China by the middle of the 19th century. The first German was Karl Friedrich August Gützlaff who travelled along the China coast on clippers smuggling opium. Gützlaff preached the Gospel while serving as interpreter for the opium traders. He did not represent German churches or missions but, as an independent missionary for the later part of his life, he was instrumental in rousing the interest of the German churches in mission to China. It was on his initiative that the Basel Mission and the Rhenish Missionary Society began to send missionaries to south China. They operated in Guangdong for the most part. Later the Berlin Mission and the Brecklum Mission followed. In the 80s, the German East Asia Mission began to work in Shanghai. It moved to Qingdao and Shandong after Jiaozhou was seized by imperial Germany. In Hunan the evangelical Liebenzell Mission started a mission in the first decade of the 20th century in cooperation with the China Inland Mission. Also other groups such as 'Mädchenbibelkreise' (MBK) supported the China Inland Mission. A number of their missionaries worked in Sichuan.

The missionaries were hardly aware of the imperialist implications of their time. But in theological circles a hot debate was held on the effects of colonialism on the credibility of missionary witness. This debate arose in reaction to the Roman Catholic Mission to China, especial-

ly to Bishop Anzer in Shandong who called for state support and indemnities after two German Catholic missionaries had been killed. The German state then took advantage of this incident and seized Jiaozhou. Gustav Warneck, the most influential Protestant missiologist in Germany sharply criticized this reliance of Christian mission on the powerful arm of the state, its alliance with colonialism and imperialism, and warned against a close coalition between the proclamation of the Gospel and (Western) culture.¹

Today, Christians in Germany are aware of the implications of Christian mission in political and economic expansion and aggression before Liberation and know how much this has compromised the Gospel and diminished the credibility of Christian witness in China. It has been pointed out by Chinese Christians that some missionaries operated in a different way. Bishop Wang Shenyin of Jinan in Shandong stated during a recent visit to this country: "In Shandong we know how difficult the relationship between our two nations has been at times, but we have not forgotten the Tong Shan Hui with its foremost representative, Richard Wilhelm. He and his colleagues have worked in a spirit of congeniality with the best of China and her cultural tradition. We appreciate this in our age deeply." The former German-Swiss East Asia Mission had expressed its program by its Chinese name, meaning "common good association", and it is true that this concept of Richard Wilhelm in general was continued also after his departure from China. But it is also true that Wilhelm later did not feel at home any more in his mission and tried to attain the common good of the two nations and their cultural encounter outside of the missionary enterprise of which he had grown increasingly critical.

The new beginning exemplified in 1981 by the visit of the CCC delegation did not obliterate the memory of this past history but called on us to give the mutual relationship between our churches a new quality of equality and true partnership.

Just as European churches were not prepared for socialism which was introduced in Eastern Europe from above in the wake of World War II, churches in Germany, in the atmosphere of the cold war, hardly understood the Chinese revolution. Their reaction to news from China was shock and dismay. The results of hard labor of more than a century seemed to be destroyed.² But already in the mid-fifties other voices were to be heard. Walter Freytag had been invited by the Chinese churches to lecture at theological schools during the year 1957. He refrained from condemning China and her Christians and pointed out instead that churches in the West rather had to change in order to be

the church.³ China was far away and news from the churches scarce. The Cultural Revolution vindicated all those who saw China "between Jesus and Mao"⁴ and, of course, helplessly under Mao Zedong and his communists. This was obviously the prevailing opinion in Germany. Socialism, unwelcomed by the majority of the people, had left its marks in Eastern Europe, particularly in East Germany. By virtue of this experience no difference was seen with socialism in China.

At the beginning of the 70s an ecumenical study group was established by the Protestant Association for World Mission (EMW) and its members in cooperation with the Roman Catholic Mission Council. This group has met regularly since, and occasionally has organized conferences for a wider public. The conference held at Arnoldshain in 1973 drafted an agenda for future work. It has remained relevant for many years afterwards in the work of the study group. Here the need is emphasized for understanding China and her Christians instead of giving room to bias and prejudice rooted in our own traditions. A better understanding of Chinese Christianity can only be gained when the social and political context of China are considered. On the long run, this cannot be achieved by academic analysis alone. Hope, therefore, is expressed that contacts with China and Chinese Christians may soon become possible. "The initiative and decisive role will have to be taken by the Chinese Christians. Their way of Christian existence in a socialist society is the foremost element for witnessing to the Gospel in China." "New China... is a challenge to our existence as Christians and as a church... we are called to self-criticism and to a change of mind, i.e. in biblical language: to repent. The new emphasis in China on the close relationship between theory and praxis poses a central question to us. Does not our praxis often contradict our theory? Do we give room to God's Word to transform our praxis? ... Because of the radical nature of the questions posed to us we cannot evade them. We have to shoulder the risk of dealing with them. Otherwise, we may even fail to be faithful to the legacy of the church."⁵ The study group was small and its achievements remained modest. But contacts were established with others in the ecumenical church who likewise were concerned with learning from the Chinese experience. Under the auspices of the Lutheran World Federation and Pro Mundi Vita, an ecumenical body, the Ecumenical China Study and Liaison Group (ECSLG), was founded which has contributed to a change in attitude towards China. It has helped church leaders and Christian churches to understand that the Chinese church, far from being destroyed or subdued by the communist party, has found a Chinese way for expressing the Gospel while living, suffering with the Chinese people and working together with the people for a new and better society. The importance of the ECSLG cannot be doubted al-

though later it was dissolved.

The German ecumenical study group is still in existence. It is not only a study group now, but it serves as an advisory body of the Protestant Association for World Mission and to the German churches. In recent years direct encounters with the Chinese Christians have been sought in visits to China and in invitations of Chinese Christians to Germany. An atmosphere of mutual trust and a close relationship has developed. Cooperation with Amity Foundation was begun after churches abroad were invited to support the efforts of Christians in China in the modernisation of their country. After 1985, the year Amity Foundation was founded, German language teachers have worked in Chinese institutions of higher learning. Some Chinese students and scholars have been invited to study in Germany on the recommendation of the CCC or Amity Foundation. Also cooperation in Amity Foundation projects has started. But the major emphasis of this mutual relationship is sharing Christian experience and learning to know each other.

In this respect the dialogue between the Chinese Church and the churches in East Germany could be important, as both lived in somewhat similar societies although coming out of a different history. "Real existing socialism" in Eastern Europe has broken down after its real face of dictatorship, misuse of power and corruption had been exposed by the people. This does not mean that the aspirations of a better society have become obsolete. Many in the East German churches are convinced of this and, indeed, the churches have developed their authentic witness in their special context.

To share the common experience and to conduct dialogue on Christian life and witness and to learn from each other may enrich the relationship between Christians in China and Christians in Germany - East and West - in future years.

- Notes:**
1. G. Warneck, *Die gegenseitige Beziehung zwischen der modernen Mission und Cultur*, Gütersloh, 1879.
 2. Ilse Hass, *Die protestantische Christenheit in der Volksrepublik China und die Chinaberichterstattung in der deutschen Evangelischen Missionsliteratur*, diss. Hamburg 1974.
 3. Walter Freytag, *Zur Schließung von Kirchen in China*, 1959, *Reden und Aufsätze*, Teil I, p 65.
 4. Gustav Weth, *Zwischen Mao und Jesus*, Wuppertal 1968.
 5. *China - Herausforderung an die Kirchen*, Bericht und Ergebnisse einer Konsultation, ed. Niels-Peter Moritzen und Bernhard Willeke, Erlangen 1974.