

Response to Charbonnier: China 1993

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Father Charbonnier in his article on the cultural implications of China's policies of openness and reform discusses them in relation to such questions as the effect they have on democracy, civil rights and Christian belief inside mainland Chinese society.

The author displays a solid comprehension of China's culture and modern history, as well as an excellent grasp of how government and social development have influenced the latter. He contends that Marxism took root in China as a result of military aggression by the imperialist powers as they trampled underfoot Chinese sovereignty during the early years of this century. He describes the frantic search by China's intellectuals for a remedy that would be both spiritual and scientific and which would have the power to renew and save their country and restore its national pride. Progressive and revolutionary ideas did indeed hold sway among intellectuals of that day. Later, however, with the onset of the Cultural Revolution, a crisis of faith in Marxism began to develop in the Party itself, not only among the elite but also the rank-and-file. Such doubts also began to proliferate among the masses. This phenomenon has yet to be adequately explained.

In the above critique, there are at least two interpretations that would demand further analysis. The first has to do with faith in Marxism and how it moved in a direct line along the path of Lenin to Stalin and, finally, ended up in totalitarianism, the dictatorship of the Communist Party. According to this view, after a series of twists and turns, one man rule degenerates to a point where nothing is left but the empty husk of an ideological nationalism.¹ The second is obviously the view of the Communist authorities, who believe themselves to be heirs



to Marx, Lenin and Stalin, and whose primary goal is to liberate the forces of production, thereby building up the new, modern and socialistic China. To accelerate economic development, they are even willing to incorporate the capitalist concept of market forces into their plan, aligning it with the socialistic system of government and re-naming it "the socialist market economy". What we see as societal inconsistencies and contradictions among the Chinese Communists today, i.e. the spread of capital investment and private ownership, profit sharing, government interference to direct free market forces, or the profusion of contradictory rules and regulations, all originate from the failure of the socialist system to mesh with the capitalist market economy.

Father Charbonnier is correct in recognizing the Democracy Movement of 1989 as a cry mainly from the intellectuals and students and not the voice of the great peasant masses and workers of China demanding change. This does not mean that the movement found no popular support among workers in the larger cities or peasants in the countryside, but it does pinpoint the intellectuals and students as the prime victims for sacrifice in China's policies of openness and reform.

Father Charbonnier also understands that Chinese intellectuals and others involved in the Democratic Movement do have something in common with loyal Communists; namely, they both share the belief that freedom is not simply a passive or negative element in society but a living ideal that must permeate the whole organism.² But when it comes to defining the exact nature of this living ideal and collective goal, those in the Democratic Movement, I'm afraid, do not seem to be very clear about it either. On the other hand, Chinese Communists continue to raise such arguments in discussions as the need to maintain social stability and an adequate food supply for the people, points that in their hands become intransigent legal weapons with which to pressure and suppress, and sometimes even break, anyone who might harbour a different political point of view. While Charbonnier rightly cites the paternalism of Singapore as an example of how democratic demands can conflict with the existing social order, nowhere does he subject the viewpoint of Communist officials to any kind of analytical scrutiny, which in my opinion is an unfortunate oversight.

On the question of human rights, Charbonnier compares the

Western notion that emphasizes the autonomy of the individual with that of the Chinese Communist officials, who are heirs to the Confucian tradition where stress is placed on the collective over and above the individual. As a result, an objective standard for human rights is seen as all but non-existent among the Communists, and when related problems do arise they are treated merely as an internal matter to be resolved within the confines of the government and without any outside interference. Such an attitude reflects the Communist government's insistence on keeping all power in its own hands, and also underlines Communist political behaviour which refuses to recognize personal integrity and virtue as an ultimate moral imperative.

Turning to the question of democracy and human rights, Charbonnier describes the problem in brief and goes on to discuss its inner contradictions at some length. He does not however give us any personal appraisal of what he finds acceptable or unacceptable, true or false, correct or incorrect, right or wrong in such an important issue. This leaves the reader to wonder about where he himself stands and what possible solutions he might offer which is indeed a pity.

When it comes to freedom of religion and especially the relationship between Christianity and Communist political power, Charbonnier is right on the mark when he says that the basis for granting any freedom is the unconditional acceptance of the Party as the nation's sole administrator and guide. And he is quite positive about the new direction religious researchers have been allowed to take...under the watchful guidance, of course, of Communist officials. The recent investigations show a tendency to dismiss the previous assumption of atheistic Marxism that religion is no longer seen as "the opium of the people". Rather, the studies affirm the independent value and power of religious belief which continues to exist long after the oppressive and exploitative social relationships have been left behind. While this must be seen as a step forward, it is also doubtful whether or not such research will have any effect on the attitudes of Communist officials or alter the official ideology with regard to religion. And, of course, the greatest stumbling block to the development of the Catholic Church in China, namely, the official demand for its total subordination to the Communist government, not only still exists but continues to cast a long shadow on the Chinese Church's future.

Given the above situation, Father Charbonnier quotes the three directions scholars feel the Church might take in China in the future: Chinese culture will become Christianized; or, Christianity will become sinicized; or, Christianity will become a small minority sub-culture living harmoniously within the larger Chinese culture. Of course, it is the third path that seems to the majority of people to be the most reasonable. And it is very much in line with the spirit and teaching of the church since Vatican II. We Catholics must indeed recognize our minority status, and with respect for the many different sub-cultures and religions among which we find ourselves, we must seek to work with them harmoniously and effectively in order to redeem the whole of society, but, I must add, without compromising our prophetic role.

Informed Christians are in full agreement with the direction outlined above. The problem comes when we Christians find ourselves in a China where democratic principles and human rights find neither acceptance nor respect, a China where the ruling power also seeks to control all religious activities and make them part and parcel of its own political objectives. What beliefs and strategies must we bring to such a situation? Unfortunately, Father Charbonnier has nothing to say on this point. In his exposition of the problem, he labours to give the reader an appreciation of the pro's and con's of both sides, but does he not also owe us some suggestion as to a possible resolution?

To make a positive and helpful response to such complex questions demands careful thought and reflection, and calls for strategies that are founded on realistic concerns. What is needed most of all is an evaluation and appraisal of what direction Communism might take in the immediate future. Only then can we work out positive strategies to deal with each situation.

First, the Communist policies of reform and openness to the outside world are in fact increasingly broader in scope. Material progress can indeed lead to the relaxation of government controls and regulations, and it can also bring about the acceptance of a more liberal legal code. We must do what we can to encourage these forces in a positive way, while at the same time through mutual support to work for further government reforms that are reasonable and necessary, and we must continue to champion the cause of right.

Secondly, the Party policies of reform and openness can also

create problems in the near future that will be all but insoluble, such social problems as a widening gap between rich and poor, unjust distribution of power and social status, and increased social instability. We can only prepare ourselves for the worst, resisting any attempt at oppression and strive through personal and cooperative efforts to minimize the harm done to society.

Thirdly, given the fact that there are endless twists and turns along the path of Communist Party development, we must remain united in our struggle and stand firm in our prophetic role as concerned and constructive critics of whatever is evil or unjust in the system.

In the end, we must struggle through positive action to enlarge the role religion can play in an urbanized society. We must hold in high regard ideals of humanism, peace and justice, and not just fall in line with the others, becoming mindless cogs in the machinery of those in power who seek to effect their own will on the people. The Church must assume the role of prophet and speak out as the conscience of society, especially on behalf of the poor and weak. Charbonnier suggests that Christian culture should increase its exchanges with Chinese culture. The problem here is that modern Chinese culture and Chinese Communist ideology have become so interrelated as to be almost inseparable. Of course, we cannot avoid contact with each other, but our coming together must be based on mutual respect. This does not mean that we should compromise our principles or beliefs. But we should become better informed about them. Only when we clearly understand where we actually do stand can we proceed without fear of falling into a dilemma, or, in Biblical language, as blind men into a pit.

Notes

1. This critique was first put forward by Rosa Luxembourge and reached its fullest development in Herbert Marcuse's *Soviet Marxism*, New York, Vintage Press, 1961.
2. The concept of "negative liberty" is taken mainly from the writings of Isaiah Berlin who stressed that happiness in human society is multi-faceted. No one can force another to accept a certain belief or adopt a certain lifestyle. As a result, authentic freedom lies in allowing others to be in a condition where no one commits an act of aggression against another or injures another in any way, and where the State respects the rights and obligations of its citizens in this regard.