

From the Editor

"...Christian conversions [are] sweeping China. This swelling tide has become a major spiritual force, rushing to fill the moral vacuum left by disillusion with Communism and enlarged by the recent vogue for rampant moneymaking" (*Newsweek*, May 23, 1994).

"Christianity fever" has broken out all over China. It is estimated that today at least 50,000,000 people believe in Christianity. On Sunday morning worshipers, Catholics and Protestants, in large and small cities, in towns and villages, make their way to Church. Some of these churches can hold as many as 1,000 to 2,000 worshipers, but long before the service begins, the churches are packed to capacity. Some officials think that things have gone too far. This phenomenon is not restricted to Christianity alone, but Christianity does show the fastest and greatest increase in the number of believers of all classes and ages. Many officials are worried; they are ringing the alarm. Suddenly, they feel, there are too many churches, mosques, temples and meeting points. How is it possible, they ask, to promote the country's "socialist spiritual civilization" if there is a resurgence of these traditional superstitious beliefs, if that "opium of the people" is once again afflicting our country? How is it possible, that the country has come to such a pass after forty-five years of Communist rule? What has happened to the Marxist prophecy that religion would continually decline until all vestiges of religion and superstition would be eradicated? There are few, if any, satisfactory answers to these questions. What is especially deplorable for Party officials is that the number of believers is growing faster than the membership of the Party and, even more disconcerting, is the fact that the number is growing faster than the national population.

Although in two recent editorials, the *People's Daily*, the Party's official publication, made a feeble attempt to distinguish between normal and superstitious religious activities, the message was clear. The paper bemoaned the general situation and called on local cadres to be more vigilant to superstitions and more mindful of their responsibility to propagate atheism. The fact that a very high proportion of Party members them-

selves believe in religion--the figure is estimated at from 50-70% in rural areas--would seem to indicate that the Party officials may be losing both the battle and the war.

Why is religion, and Christianity in particular, so attractive to so many Chinese at this time?

Religion has been developing at a fast pace since the promulgation of Document 19 in 1982. Different groups give different reasons for the rise in the number of believers. Some in authority believe that enthusiasm for religion has come about because a number of people have been healed of illnesses. A number of believers bear witness to this. They speak glibly of miracles and cures. Others maintain that the increase in Christian believers is the direct result of years of leftist policies which heavily suppressed religion; that human beings by nature tend to be rebellious, that such rebellion is part of the human psyche. This, they maintain, is borne out through psychological research. The more people are oppressed, the more they rebel. Repression, which touches so intimately the very core of the human self, is most likely to spur the development of religion rather than obliterate it.

In 1978 the Party Central Committee forbade adults from instilling any religious belief among children and youth under the age of 18. Today, however, thousands of young people crowd the churches. Young people as well as many intellectuals have become believers as a result of societal factors: inflation, deterioration of the social atmosphere, the rush for money and the gradual loss of feelings and spirituality. Many also of all ages have lost their faith in Communism and are searching for meaning in their lives.

China's new openness may also be a factor in the growth of the number of religious believers. Although Christianity began in the East, it developed most extensively and rapidly in the West. It is generally regarded as a Western "product". There is a general interest in China today in just about everything Western and so it is not surprising that Christianity, the religion of the West, should stimulate interest.

All these factors are explored, analyzed and discussed as well as illustrated from real life testimonies in *Tripod's* two articles: '*Christianity Fever*' in *China: An Overview* by Bi Ming and '*Christianity Fever*', excerpts from the reports of two groups of journalists who studied the current phenomenon.

Obviously, the soil for religion to grow in China is very fertile today. Still it would be naive of us to see this growth as a totally positive phenomenon. The rapid increase sometimes leaves little time for new converts to absorb the depth of the faith and the real meaning of the Scriptures. Young people, and other recent converts, especially in the charismatic churches, become preachers and apostles, often without sufficient training and information. There are incidents of aberrations. Still, it cannot be denied that thousands, finding heart in Christianity, also find the realization of their deepest aspirations. The breath of the Spirit is blowing throughout the churches of China and people are responding with enthusiasm.

This issue of *Tripod* also offers our readers through our documentation section an article written by Anthony Lam of the Holy Spirit Study Centre staff. He describes the role, function and power vested in the Neighborhood Committees or Street Offices, (a point that could easily be missed by the reader not completely acquainted with China's multi-levels of local governments) in the implementation of the new *Registration Procedures for Venues of Religious Activities* (cf. *Tripod* No. 82).

The same section also includes the speech given by Zhao Puchu, chairman of the Chinese Buddhist Association, at the inaugural meeting of the Peace Committee of Chinese Religious Circles. The history section features the Catholic Church in the Northeast provinces.

The *China Church and News Update* attempts, as usual, to highlight those religious and human incidents which may have a lasting impact on China's people and China's church history.
