

## *'Christianity Fever' in China: An Overview*

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*What is Christianity Fever? To have a fever is to run a temperature.*

Ever since the policy of religious freedom was restored in 1982, the five principal religions in China have developed rapidly. By the mid-eighties the pace of development in some regions was nothing short of amazing. This is especially true of Protestantism which, in certain areas, outpaced the development of other religions. Fang Litian, a mainland scholar, says that the following places have seen phenomenal increases: Huanyin City in Jiangsu Province, which in 1981 had approximately 20,000 Protestants, had a yearly increase of 20,000 persons up to 1986. By 1990 the yearly increase reached 140,000 persons. In 1982, there were approximately 200,000 Protestants in Wenzhou City in Zhejiang Province. By 1990 there were more than 300,000. In the early fifties, Laian County in Anhui Province had only 11 Protestants. In 1976 there were only 77, but by 1990 there were more than 1000. Mr. Fang notes that: (1) since the fifties, the greatest increase in religious believers in China has taken place during the past 10 years and (2) there is a genuine *fever* whereby more and more people become religious believers.<sup>1</sup>

Although these numbers are striking--and no one denies the increase in the number of religious believers--most religious circles and scholars in China do not really see any "abnormality" in this. Professor Wang Weipan, from Nanjing University's Department of Religion, thinks that although the growth of Protestantism outpaces other religions, the increase is quite normal. It has not yet reached "fever pitch" and so there is no reason to panic.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Wang is implying that some people "are putting

too much emphasis on the growth of Protestantism." When it comes to the question of control, Professor Wang notes that some cadres think there is need "to tackle this religious problem in a comprehensive way." The expression "tackle a problem in a comprehensive way" has always been applied to environmental problems. He maintains that to see religion as a "social environmental problem" is not only abnormal, but violates the spirit underlying the policy of freedom of religious belief.<sup>3</sup> Professor Wang considers that the rapid expansion of Protestantism can be best explained through a sober analysis of its historical and social elements. This will prove that "its growth is quite normal".

From the above comments it is easy to see that *Christianity Fever* is receiving a great deal of attention in China. The ones who speak of normal growth are precisely those who defend the policy of religious freedom and who fear that this "*fever thing*" could cause a change in government policy. To offset this possibility they offer a variety of explanations.

### **Symptoms of 'Christianity Fever'**

The Amity News Service for February 1, 1993, puts the present number of Protestants in China at from six to nine million. Hong Kong and overseas sources estimate the number to be somewhere between twenty to fifty million.

The typical picture of the church in China depicts "women outnumbering men and the old outnumbering the young." Yet the number of young believers is showing a phenomenal increase. In rural areas over half of the total number of believers are illiterate while in urban areas the cultural level of believers is high, and includes professors, well known doctors, etc...<sup>4</sup>

There is nothing unusual about all this. There are many other examples in China that do not fit the stereotype image. As regards the age of believers, some churches in Henan and Shanxi provinces report that 80% of their believers are under 18 years of age.<sup>5</sup> There are also indications that the level of education among young Protestant intellectuals in urban areas is continually rising. In educational circles many young scholars make serious efforts to introduce Christian cultural values. They do not join any church but they are "in sympathy with Christianity".<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, there has also been a conspicuous growth in the number of Christian publications. Most of these are translations of Western works, including the recent *Selected Readings in Western Philosophy of Religion*, a two volume work with more than 1800 pages. The various essays in these volumes are mostly from recent and contemporary Protestant theologians, such as Kierkegaard, Barth, Tillich, etc. The amazing fact is that less than two months after publication more than 3000 copies had been sold. This is evident testimony to the "fever" Chinese intellectuals have for Christian thought.<sup>7</sup>

### Explaining 'Christianity Fever'

The *Religious Fever* or '*Christianity Fever*' is not a product of the Tianamen incident; it began in the middle eighties. Chinese intellectuals and Protestants give four reasons for this phenomenon:

1. *Traditional and historical elements*: Those places where Protestantism has had a long history of evangelization are precisely the areas where, today, Protestantism has spread most rapidly and where there are large numbers of believers. Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province and Fuqing in Fujian Province, which have the highest concentration of Protestants in China, are typical examples of a long history of Protestant evangelism. Furthermore, family beliefs handed down to the young are the main reason young people enter the church. Parents have instructed their children in the faith from their childhood. A statistical report from one Shanghai church notes that more than 20 young people have joined the church choir and "almost all of those are the children of believers".<sup>8</sup>

2. *Social and Economic Elements*: The belief in supernatural beings is still common, especially among poorly educated farmers in those rural areas where the economy is poor and where *transference*, or belief in supernatural beings, has been changing. Farmers who become believers are already accustomed to asking blessings from the spirits. They now hope that God can make their harvests more plentiful. A second factor contributing to the increase in believers in rural areas is the position of women within China's male oriented society.

Women have no economic rights and cannot act independently in family matters. They are very dissatisfied with their daily lot and so enter the church in search of some solace. This accounts for the disproportionate ratio of women to male believers in some villages where women constitute more than 80 percent of believers. In Gaozuo Village in Suining county, Jiangsu province, for instance, 1,185 out of 1,248 believers are women. This is a percentage of 92.8.<sup>9</sup>

3. *Psychological factors*: Several reports point out that many entered the church seeking healing. For example, in 1985 a sample survey was made in Puzhoutang, Longwan district, in Wenzhou. Fifty-seven percent of the believers entered the church because of illness. In the same year a survey carried out in Bengbu, Anhui, revealed that 126 out of 160 persons became believers for this same reason. The same is also true in Guzhen where 1,620 out of 2,500 entered the church. A survey in a farming village in Subei shows that 60 to 70 percent also came to the faith for this reason.<sup>10</sup> Some sought the consolation the church offers after being disappointed in love, or experiencing marriage and family problems, or school and job setbacks.

4. *Other elements*: The complete suppression of religion during the Cultural Revolution might have caused an *inverse reaction* once the church was able to function again. The more Christians were oppressed the more they formed a self-reliant and united community. This was not at all what the advocates of the Cultural Revolution had originally intended. Furthermore, requirements for becoming Protestant Christians are easier than those for other religions. This attracts people to the church. Another enticement, for many of the young especially, is Protestantism's ties with Western culture.

### **'Christianity Fever' Watchers**

There are three types of persons who pay special attention to the 'Christianity fever' phenomenon: (1) cadres from the Party's Religious Affairs Bureaus; (2) Protestants themselves and (3) scholars. The reactions of these three groups to '*Christianity Fever*' are very different owing to their respective aims and perspectives.

## Cadres fear 'Christianity fever'

Some cadres in charge of religious affairs belong to the "frightened" crowd. Their task is to be sure that everything is "normal" and consequently, they strongly oppose any "abnormal religious activities." Any religious activity that has not been registered with the government is considered illegal and abnormal. Recently each locality successively published *Regulations Governing Places for Religious Activities*. Cadres in many localities use administrative means to suppress places for religious worship and limit religious activities.<sup>11</sup> The Religious Affairs Bureaus in some areas even sell Religious ID Cards.<sup>12</sup> This may be a source of income but it also strengthens control over believers, enabling cadres to bully and threaten them. On February 5, 1991, the Central Government through the State Council published Document No. 6. The document emphasizes that "steps must be taken to counteract hostile religious activities infiltrating from abroad." Furthermore, as regards internal policy, administrative measures must be reinforced and "education in patriotism and socialism must be intensified for the mass of religious believers and religious personages." Cadres, in implementing this document during the past two years, have strengthened their control over religion. This has created a suspicion among Protestants that the government is trying to weaken the Three-Self Movement and the China Christian Council.

## Protestants Favor 'Christianity Fever'

Obviously, 'Christianity Fever' is a matter of deep interest for Christians who insist that religion should be judged from its positive aspects and for its contributions to society. They oppose sweeping statements such as "religion is the opium of the people." They consider it unethical "for people to use a simple sentence to make comparative value judgments which generalize entire situations and then hand these down to others as 'prophetic wisdom' taken from antiquity and as unchangeable truth."<sup>13</sup> This open challenge to the Marxist theory of religion is unprecedented. Bolder still is the assertion that the statement, "religion is the opium of the people," is "unscientific", "harmful" and "divisive". They say that in this period of socialism exploitation

of the classes no longer exists and those who still maintain that religion is an opiate for the working classes, having only negative influences are becoming few and far between. Religion must be seen, they insist, as part of a people's cultural and historical heritage. This, they emphasize, is the only way to foster national unity among the people and create friendly international relations.

### **China Allows Scholars to Study Religion**

By the mid-eighties China realized the need to make a thorough analysis of religion. This helped create an open atmosphere for scholars to study religion and for religious circles to demand that the policy of "freedom of religious belief" be fully implemented. This freedom included religious studies, discussions and evaluation. Religious scholars were not excluded from those doing research in religion (implying that they were so excluded in the past). Furthermore, it was generally agreed that the policy on freedom of religious belief should not be used as a strategy to destroy religion.<sup>14</sup>

Owing to the remarkable increase in the number of Protestant Christians, authorities in charge of Religious Affairs turned the spotlight on them. Those who opposed this surveillance made their feelings known. Since the popular uprising of 1989 this development within Protestantism has come under even closer supervision. The government began using the slogans "infiltration by foreign hostile religious forces" and "peaceful evolution" to attack the house churches and limit religious activities. Protestant circles immediately spoke out in protest. They demanded "distinctive treatment", this is to say, they insisted that some distinction be made between overseas religious people who carried on "friendly contacts" and those that had political overtones and between those religious activities that were not registered from illegal movements opposed to the government. The Christians maintained that unless the policies made these distinctions, they were no policies at all.<sup>15</sup>

In their research into '*Christianity Fever*', scholars seem to have gradually turned away from a "strictly leftist" position. This marks a significant breakthrough in religious studies. In the past the direction of these studies was completely determined by the Party's Central Committee. (For example in 1964 the

"Institute of World Religions" was established in Beijing. Its aim under Mao Zedong's direction was to criticize theology.<sup>16)</sup> By the mid-eighties religious studies were no longer bogged down in philosophical discussions on the nature of religion. They focused on practical investigations, with a tendency to combine theoretical and practical elements. Studies centered on Protestantism. They concentrated principally on the following: the numerical increase of believers, age structures, comparisons between male and female believers, reasons for belief, family background of believers, and the influence exercised by religion on family life and social morality. The results of most of these studies appeared in *Religion* and *Modern Religious Studies*, two magazines published bi-annually. As a result of various reports, some 20 articles on present day Protestantism appeared between 1987 and 1992. Although some of these articles contained only very basic information and made use of methods below acceptable scientific methods, yet as far as the Party's attitude toward religion was concerned, they signaled a tremendous breakthrough.

As research in religion continues, the theory that "religion is the opium of the people" no longer holds its former dogmatic position. What has taken its place is the re-development of the "Five Principles" proposed by Zhou Enlai and Li Weihan at the beginning of the fifties. These are concerned with religion's mass character, the ethnic background of religious believers, international relations, religion's long term existence and its complex nature. Those who formerly held the theory that religion was about to disappear from the Socialist society, now are seeking ways to use religion as a means of constructing a superior socialist society, of meeting society's needs, and working towards harmonizing the demands made by socialism and religion. The most difficult change of all has been taking the study of religion out of the realm of philosophical theory, which in the past often led to its being considered an ideology ripe for political struggle. It is now more and more recognized as a study in its own right and branching out into several fields suited for scientific sociological analysis, such a religious phenomenology, religious sociology, religious anthropology and religious psychology.<sup>17</sup>

## Summarizing Scholars' Attitudes

For the most part, scholarly circles are now adopting an open and positive attitude towards the study of religion and the analysis of Christianity. Scholars from both religious and government bodies who deal with religion are joining forces in these studies. However, the general direction and methods of reporting are still very much inclined to follow the Party line and be influenced by the prevailing political climate. Luo Zhufeng chief of the East China Religious Affairs Bureau during the fifties and today a highly respected authority on religious matters, has been, since the eighties, the vice-chairman of and advisor for the Chinese Institute of Religious Studies, the chairman of the Shanghai Institute for Religious Studies and the honorary department head for the Shanghai Social Science Institute, Religious Studies Department.<sup>18</sup> He is also the editor of *Religion under Socialism in China* which is representative of the present day theory on religion in mainland China. The fact that Mr. Luo is a cadre who has been in charge of the Religious Affairs Bureau for a long time, reveals that religious studies are still very much under the control of the Party and government.

## Prognosis for 'Christianity Fever'

The sudden increase in the number of Protestants in recent years has definitely aroused great interest in and acceptance of Christianity at all levels of Chinese society. This phenomenon has also been instrumental in helping local churches and Christian communities win some basic rights and freedoms. The Church by "uniting the large mass of believers" has, since the June 4 incident, been able to withstand the pressures brought against it by government forces. The hope of Christians is that the Church's teaching and life will continue to attract many more Chinese who now have no faith as well as those who have lost their ideals. There are indications that the number of Christians will continue to increase during the coming years. Scholars are of the mind that Christianity and Chinese culture will not exert any great impact on each other. In fact, scholars maintain that Christianity will have a hard time making any real inroads into Chinese culture. They take the Protestant Church on Taiwan as an example. The Church in Taiwan also experienced



a rapid increase in numbers; and although Taiwan enjoys religious freedom, Christians are still only a small minority among the population. There is no question of "Christianizing" the culture and there is little or no probability of Christianity being absorbed by Chinese culture. The history of Christianity's development can in no way be compared to Buddhism and its assimilation into Chinese culture or its ability to unite with local religions. Since Christianity's world view and China's world view clash, most likely '*Christianity fever*' will gradually settle down. At most, Christianity will preserve its own basic distinctiveness intact and perhaps become something of an ornament for the new Chinese society now developing.<sup>19</sup>

### Endnotes:

1. Fang Litian, "Ten Years for Religion in China", *Study in World Religions*, Issue 40, Feb. 1990, p. 90.
2. Wang Weipan, "On Present Day Protestantism", op.cit, Issue #19, p. 66.
3. loc. cit, p. 72.
4. cf., note 1, p. 93.
5. Chen Jianguang, Han De, *A Mighty Current Taking Shape: The Chinese Church in the Nineties*, Hong Kong: The Tian Dao Book Building, 1992, p. 17.
6. cf., note 2, p. 67.
7. Chen Zemin, "These Ten Years", *China Study Journal* 7, April, 1992, p. 11.
8. Jiang Zhimin, Xu Zugen, *Reflections on the Cross*, Zhan Wang, Jan.1989, p. 7.
9. Sha Guangyi, "How to Look at the Development of Protestantism", *Religion*, Issue 14, Feb. 1988, p. 64.
10. cf., Fang Litian: Note 1, p. 94; Sha Guangyi, loc. cit. p. 65.
11. Xiao Zhitian, "Document #19 is a Guide Correctly Assessing the Situation and Offering Directions for Implementation", *Today's Religious Studies*, No. 5, Jan. 1991, p. 19.
12. Jiang Li, "Is It Necessary for Government Cadres to Sell 'Religious ID. Cards?'", *Tian Feng*, Apr. 1993, p. 19.
13. Zhao Fusan, "Religion: A Spiritual Civilization and a Force for Unity", *Tian Feng*, July 1985, p. 3.
14. Yang Zhouhuai, "On Religious Freedom", Yang Theologate Press, edition 2-3, Jan. 1989, pp. 122-124.
15. Wang, op. cit., cf. note 2 above, pp. 68-69.
16. Chen, op cit., cf. note 7 above, p. 8.
17. Xing Dongtian, Li Liang, "A Précis on Recent Religious Studies in China", *Religion*, Issue 21, Jan. 1992, pp. 45-52.
18. Xiao Zhitian, "Ever New and Ever Fresh: Uniting Theory with Practice--A Study on the Scholarly Spirit of Luo Zhufeng's Studies on Religion" *Religion*, Issue 21, Jan. 1992, pp. 13-21.
19. Tang Yi, "Chinese Christianity in Development", *China Study Journal* 6, Feb. 1991, pp. 4-8.