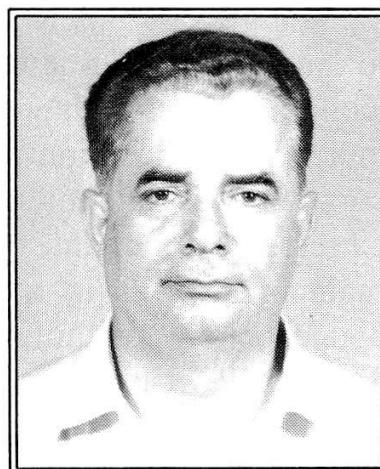


Mainland China's Changing Christianity

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According to the *Guide to the Catholic Church in China*, published in Singapore in March 1997, mainland Catholics number around 10 million and Protestants 14 million. These figures more than double the official government statistics. Chinese authorities are quick to point to the notable increase in the number of Christians since the liberation as evidence of the success of their policy of religious freedom; but they are reluctant to admit to too large an increase, lest it should draw undue attention to the failure of their policy for propagating atheism.



Christian Yeast in the Chinese Dough

Catholic demographers in Hong Kong add to the statistics given by the Chinese government the many Catholics who stay away from the government approved churches lest they be numbered among those belonging to communist and atheistic structures.

The Protestants, for their part, have produced a well-researched province by province analysis of their own membership. According to the results published in the April 1997 issue of the *Christian Conference of Asia News*, they placed the membership figure between a maximum of 13,317,000 and a minimum of 9,155,000. It must be kept in mind, however, that even if the Christians of China number 24 million in all, they still represent a small minority of only 2% of the total population.

Despite their small numbers, China's Christians show great

vitality. The most active are the Evangelical Protestants, who multiply their prayer meetings far beyond the authorized limits. Nor are those communities that are more outwardly submissive to government controls lacking in spirit. Former divisions among Protestant denominations have tended to fade, forming new bonds of unity. A common catechism has been adopted, and a variety of worship services now take place under the same roof. On the national level, the Christian printing press of Nanjing has, since July 1995, published over 10 million Bibles in Chinese.

Progress among Catholics has been slower. With the launching of the new policy of religious freedom in the late 1970's, they took up where their worship and teaching of the faith had left off in the early 1950's. The first books published out of their limited funds were the *Shanghai Catechism*, the traditional question and answer catechism approved in 1924, a book of *Daily Prayers* of former centuries, *The Missale Romanum* (the Latin Missal), the *New Testament*, and the *Imitation of Christ*.

During the following years, mainland bishops and priests welcomed the many new Chinese translations coming from Taiwan and Hong Kong, in particular the *Documents of Vatican II* and the *New Code of Canon Law*. In 1986, theologians gathered to study the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Extracts of these studies and articles, written by overseas theologians, were published in Shanghai through the Guangqi Society.

In September 1992, the representatives at the Fifth National Catholic Congress decided to initiate modern liturgical reforms by allowing Mass to be celebrated in the Chinese language and with the celebrant facing the congregation. It was the Diocese of Shanghai that opened the path to updating the liturgy and the renewal of the theological sciences. Theologians from Hong Kong and Taiwan were invited to teach at Sheshan Major Seminary.

In 1993 alone, five major seminaries invited professors from overseas. In the same year, Chinese seminarians were sent to study in the United States, and in the following year to universities in Europe. To date, about one hundred theological students and a number of young priests have benefited from this program. Their bishops hope that they will receive a solid, traditional theological education, and a deep spiritual formation, and return to China as fully competent seminary professors.

The Catholic Church in China consists, at the present time, of

138 dioceses, with 70 official bishops (recognized by the government) and another 57 having Vatican approval but with no government authorization. Of the approximately 1,500 priests, 800 of them have been ordained within the past ten years. More than a thousand seminarians are currently in formation in 24 official seminaries, with another two to five hundred studying in a variety of clandestine locations of the underground churches. Women religious number over 2,000; one thousand of whom are novices and postulants in approximately 40 novitiates. There are also some 5,000 churches open for worship.

Political Integration

These developments are due to the inner dynamism of the church, but these could not have taken place without some government authorization. The religious policy of the Communists has shown itself to be both practical and flexible, while remaining none the less rigorous in its Marxist principles and orientation.

In the Chinese Empire of the past, religions were under the direct control of the Bureau of Rites. The Confucian ritual had the benefit of imperial support. All other religions had to fulfil the requirements laid down by official Confucianism. Non-conformist religions, whether Buddhist, Taoist, or Christian, could often be declared illegal and thus open to persecution as heresies (*xiejiao*). We no longer speak of Confucian rites, but the traditional Confucian model still makes its presence felt in the current constitution with the phrase "normal religious activity."

Religions are to be tolerated only if they uphold the law and order of their humanist ideals. While the new ritual may not be Confucian, it is still a ritual defined in terms of a "communist morality."

The government's Bureau of Religious Affairs establishes the norms for all "normal religious activity." Its policy is dictated by the United Front of the Chinese Communist Party. Policy directives are transmitted to the religions via the various associations: Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic. These last two are called "patriotic" to underline their independence from any "foreign imperialist" control. From the early 1950's until the Cultural Revolution, the Communist policy towards religion, and towards Christianity especially, had hardened in a concerted effort to

obliterate from Chinese society all vestiges of "feudalism," and any lingering stench of foreign imperialism. The extreme anxiety that political independence be maintained at all cost demanded that Christians cut themselves off from any of their former foreign connections. The restoration of freedom in 1978 was seen as a response to another set of government preoccupations.

Personal skills and the spirit of self-sacrifice on the part of all citizens without exception are required to sustain the common effort to modernize the country. All religions, Christianity in particular, are thus becoming preferential pipelines for pouring foreign currency and investment from developed countries into the Chinese economy. After years of persecution for their overseas ties, Christians are now urged to make use of their foreign connections and put them in service to their country. In some cases, the extent of religious freedom depends on the amount of money raised.

The submission of the Church to government imperatives is not done without danger of putting the integrity of the faith at some risk, and, as a consequence, jeopardizing authentic Christian living. The present entanglement of bishops, priests, and lay leaders in financial matters could represent a more serious threat to the spiritual mission of the Church than the former deprivation of her freedom and rights. The argument made in support of this venture into commerce is the Church's need to become independent and financially self-supporting. However, the acceleration of this process has made the Church less autonomous and more dependent on local authorities and on aid from abroad. Using religions for money and profit, even if only to foster economic growth, can in the long run do them more harm than active persecution. The clergy, in some cases, are liable to become materialistic, blinding themselves to pastoral needs, and even morally corrupt. On a more general level, the entire population becomes less receptive of moral and spiritual values, and left with just one goal of feeding an insatiable appetite for acquiring material possessions.

The Bishop of Shanghai, Jin Luxian, expressed his uneasiness at this state of affairs during an ecumenical conference held in Manila in November of 1993: "Truly, I had no fears 40 years ago when our Catholics were confronted with every kind of challenge to their faith, even intense persecution. The Church and the faith were then the center of their lives. Many were ready and willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for what they believed in. But now, with the

challenge of modernization, the rise of individualism, and the spread of materialism with its worship of money and greed looming up before them, I am indeed very much afraid. To teach our Catholics how to live the Gospel in a Chinese society undergoing such rapid transformation becomes a matter of life and death." These strong words would seem to indicate that the Church could still play a prophetic role in this society, even while it moves towards full integration into the present political structure.

Signs of Christian Prophecy

Christianity can survive in China only by conforming rigorously to the requirements laid down by the political reality. This, however, may stifle the Christian prophetic tradition. While Christians in fact do teach the duty to be good citizens, they also have a clear recognition of the supreme nature of the law of God. They cannot tolerate injustice or mendacity. In the world today, Christians of many countries take strong stands for respecting human rights and they are quick to protest against any form of exploitation. In China, Christians must find a discrete way to work for justice and truth by collaborating with the most honest of the public officials, and avoid all direct confrontation with the populist regime.

Chinese Catholics, like their Protestant brethren, know how to react to political pressure when it puts into question their sense of truth and justice. In the early 1950's, when they were forced to participate in struggle sessions where they were required to denounce landlords, foreigners, and other "exploiters of the people," they often refused to lie when to do so would have resulted in the death of the innocent. This refusal was not politically motivated, but simply because they believed that to tell a lie was to break God's commandment. When urged to act contrary to their conscience by cadres of the "patriotic" movement, they were left with no other option than to go underground and practice their faith in secret. It was in this way that the underground church came into being. Labeled "illegals" and condemned as "traitors," many made the ultimate sacrifice of their lives and died as martyrs. The Evangelical Protestants proclaimed their faith in a transcendent God by refusing to bow down to the "powers of the world." Catholics raised the banner of loyalty to their Pope, remaining faithful to the guardian of the true faith and unity of the Church.

With the inauguration of a more liberal religious policy in 1978, the Christians who were freed from prisons and work camps thought that they would finally be able to live out their faith openly and without fear of persecution. They were quickly disillusioned. The Patriotic Association was reorganized, often under the direction of former cadres who were known and spurned for their previous acts of brutality. Many Christians, therefore, again went underground. Evangelical Christians courageously added to the number of their house churches, where itinerant preachers ministered to small assemblies. Catholics gathered at night in secluded areas to celebrate the Eucharist in private homes. They trained and formed young priests and sisters in the more remote regions of the countryside. They were supported morally and financially by some overseas Chinese Catholics, and in the late 1980's, by many Sisters and priests from Taiwan.

Internal Problems

Many exchanges between foreign visitors and Chinese clergymen took place at this time. Naturally, foreigners were not permitted to associate with underground Christians. To do so would only cause more trouble for all concerned. Because these visits were restricted to members of the official church, which was under the aegis of the Patriotic Association, they seemed to indicate support for the official church over against the underground church. This hurt underground Christians, who had suffered much because of their absolute fidelity to the universal Church. Feeling like the poor relations in the family of the church, they became more aggressive in their attacks on those Christians who frequented the official churches and also towards the young newly ordained priests formed in the official seminaries run by the Patriotic Association. In some regions of China, this attitude of mutual contempt has created an ever-widening gap that only serves to undermine the very heart of the Gospel message.

Foreign visitors often seek, in all good will, to become instruments of reconciliation, but their attempts are fraught with unseen dangers. Underground Christians view the Patriotic Association as the devil's own enterprise. To speak of being reconciled with it is to promote the Communist policy of the unification of all believers under the control of the Association, and.

therefore, to show support for the Communist Party itself.

Some bishops of the official church, anxious to insure that they would be able to carry out their own pastoral ministry, attributed the growth and development of the underground church to the Patriotic Association's mismanagement of religious affairs. This did obtain the desired effect, and the church gained an increase of religious freedoms as the government moved to rally more support from the priests and bishops.

In September 1992, the National Assembly of Catholic Representatives redefined the role of the Association as one of "assisting and helping" the Episcopal Conference in its task of governing the church. But in practice, the phrase "assisting and helping" did not have enough force to put an end to the bullying tactics of many senior Association leaders, who continued to push bishops and priests around, as if they, and not the bishops, were still in charge of church affairs. However, the principle had been established that the Patriotic Association is not to interfere unduly in pastoral questions, and the bishops are to assume more and more authority in their dioceses. The Sixth National Assembly of Catholic Representatives, in December 1997, would show whether the bishops are indeed recognized as the real leaders of the church.

Rome's Response: Prudence and Patience

In Rome, on many occasions, the Holy Father has expressed his love for the Chinese people and his admiration for their great culture. He cannot, however, renounce the role that Jesus himself has conferred upon the successors of the Apostle Peter, which is to confirm the brethren in the faith and attend to the unity of the Church. It is in union with all its bishops that the Pope directs the Church. The primacy of the Bishop of Rome confers on him the duty of assuring that the Gospel is proclaimed in truth and that the Church is governed well in all the countries of the world. Those who assist him in this task, notably the Vatican Secretariat of State and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, must seek out every opportunity for dialogue with the Chinese authorities.

In 1950, the Apostolic Nuncio, Mgr. Riberi, stayed on in China rather than follow the Nanjing government into exile in Taiwan. He was expelled from China in 1951. Later, diplomatic relations were established between the Vatican and the Republic of China in Taipei,

confirming, unfortunately, the break between Rome and Beijing. Since that time, the status of the Holy See's representative in Taipei has been reduced to the lowest possible level; however, there is still a Taiwan ambassador at the Vatican. Contacts between Taiwan and the Mainland since 1987, however, have continued to make progress, and this could well be a major factor in the ultimate resolution of this problem.

If the diplomatic obstacle of relations with Taiwan can be put to one side, there still remains another demand by Beijing that may prove to be even more difficult to surmount, and that is Beijing's insistence that the Pope should not interfere in the internal affairs of the Church in China. The bishops of China are, of course, the successors of the Apostles, and the Church in China has every right to autonomy in the exercise of its responsibility for evangelizing the country. Rome really wishes all bishops of China to remain true leaders of the local Church. Autonomy, however, does not mean independence, which, in fact, would be separation. The universal Church is a communion of local churches and the Holy Father is in service to this communion. His union with the bishops of China must be made manifest in a concrete way. The Pope must be able to give his approval to those nominated as local bishops and to welcome the bishops of China on their *ad limina* visits to Rome. Up to the present time, there have been no official negotiations between the Vatican and Beijing, largely due to Beijing's demand that Rome break off all diplomatic ties with Taiwan and guarantee the total and complete independence of the Chinese Church as pre-conditions for any talks. The visits of cardinals to China and the presence of an official Vatican representative in Hong Kong underline the Holy See's concern for renewing friendly relations with mainland Catholics. Rome approves of and encourages the numerous exchanges now taking place with China's Catholics and the rest of the Catholic world. However, reconciliation moves forward at a very slow and laborious pace. Rome must also take into account the firm resistance of underground Catholics to any dialogue with the Communist authorities. Unity among the mainland Catholics themselves must first be restored before any hope of an authentic union with the universal Church can finally be achieved.

The Gospel Sends Shock Waves in Chinese Society

The present difficulties of Christians in China are merely the reappearance in new guises of the old conflicts that have existed for over 400 years between the Gospel message and the great traditional Chinese culture. Through a very elaborate ritual, ancient Chinese culture pursued harmony between human beings and heaven. First came the conflicts over the foreign religious expressions of Christianity: churches where men and women sat together, buildings with steeples and with bell towers, a questionable liturgy unknown in China, the Latin language and biblical names devoid of any meaning in Chinese, etc. When Chinese converts were prohibited from paying honor to Confucius and to their ancestors during the Rites Controversy in the 17th century, it only served to throw more discredit on Christianity; and their prohibition at the command of the "Western Emperor of Religion" was taken as a patent violation of Chinese sovereignty.

On a deeper level, however, the norms that Chinese wisdom held out for the perfection of the self were often at odds with such Christians notions as sin, human weakness, mercy, forgiveness, salvation by God's grace and not by human endeavor. The doctrine of the incarnation of God's Son seemed to the ordinary Chinese as a humiliating loss of face, and his death on the cross not as a redeeming sacrifice but as the just punishment of a social outlaw. Pardoning offenses in the Sacrament of Confession was judged to be immoral and a dangerous inducement to commit more crimes. Chinese tradition required revenge in certain circumstances as a dutiful expression of the virtue of filial piety.

Matteo Ricci, and later his Jesuit missionary colleagues, presented the Christian message in the framework of the Chinese Confucian tradition. They had hoped that this great moral tradition would serve as the framework that would reach perfect fulfillment in Jesus Christ. But in doing so, they ran the risk of propagating in China a predominantly moral and ethical interpretation of Christianity, which only served to confirm the Chinese intellectuals in their cultural complacency. In fact, it was only outside official circles that the spread of the Gospel took place, especially among the poor peasants, and often against a backdrop of recurring persecution. The mistrust of Catholic peasants for governmental demands dangerous to their faith is hardly a recent phenomenon.

Contemporary Changes

As the year 2000 approaches, the Church in China is writing a new chapter in its history, and it is learning to live to the rhythms of other Christian minorities scattered throughout modern societies in every country of the world. Many of China's Catholic churches are still crowded with old people, but with only a few young people. However, the future belongs to that small number of young people who are searching their way through today's modern world: to the young priests, more free in spirit than those aging Catholic communities who have difficulty in giving them acceptance; to young nuns, liberated from the confinements of the past, and in whom the old nuns do not recognize themselves; and to the Catholic youth, who show little inclination to be tied down to the rituals and devotions of the past, but which their grandparents still cherish.

What spiritual food, then, is to be offered to this new generation? The reading of the Bible, once virtually ignored, can play a key role in deepening their understanding of the Christian message in the Chinese world. While Bible reading is still not all that common in Catholic families, it is studied quite assiduously now in seminaries and convents. Moreover, recent liturgical reforms have authorized the use of Chinese in reading the Scriptures at Mass. However, the faithful still need to understand that the Bible is not merely a guidebook for sound moral conduct, with a few books of wisdom thrown in for good measure, but the recounting of the tragic history of sin and infidelity which sheds light on the whole of human misery. It is also the revelation of God's mercy and the gift of his love in Jesus Christ the Savior.

Young Chinese men and women are going to have to rediscover a devotional ritual, one of an artistic and sapiential nature that is commensurate with their Chinese tradition and will enable them to give full free expression to their Christian faith in a Chinese context. They are going to have to drink deeply from the wellsprings of their own Christian history, and to become more identified with their own saints, their martyrs, their confessors, and holy sages. While the whole of Chinese society swims in an ocean of practical materialism, in a frantic frenzy for money and self-gratification, the new Christian generation of Chinese will, of necessity, have to distance themselves quickly from all of that and learn instead to bear witness to the truths and spiritual values of the Gospel.