

China is not Eastern Europe

By Michael J. Sloboda

For almost 50 years, public proclamation of the Gospel in Mainland China has been the exclusive mission of Chinese Christians. This is not likely to change in the foreseeable future. This may be obvious to readers of *Tripod*, but it is not apparent to many other people. In late 1999 in the USA, someone said to me: “Isn’t it great? Missionaries will soon return China!” His statement sounded unrealistic then, even more so after the episcopal ordinations in Beijing on January 6, 2000. The current Chinese constitution has been in effect since December 1982, longer than any of the previous three. Article 36 on freedom of religious belief, that assures state protection for *normal* religious activities, but tolerates no outside interference, is not likely to be amended. Anyone who is waiting for China to change the way Eastern Europe changed in late 1989 is in for a long wait.



Searching for the similarities and differences

Recently on several occasions, some people in China have tried to equate the situation of the Church in Eastern Europe with the Catholic Church in China. Some Communists have even expressed the fear that with the normalization of Sino-Vatican relationships, the Holy Father might exert the same influence he allegedly exerted before the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. Fear has even been expressed by Chinese authorities that the Falun Gong could be another Solidarity Movement. In this brief article, by analyzing some of the possible similarities and differences, we will try to discover whether these fears have any foundation in fact.

One difference immediately stands out. Christians are a minority in China. In Poland in 1980, Solidarity grew quickly in a nation that was 90% Catholic. It was led by Catholics and used the

vocabulary of Catholic teachings on social justice and human rights. In China, in Beijing, on April 25, 1999, Falun Gong made a dramatic appearance and alarmed the central government. While somewhat eclectic in some of its beliefs and practices, by drawing heavily on a mixture of Buddhist, Taoist, *qigong* and regular gymnastic practices, Falun Gong has neither borrowed Christian vocabulary nor recruited any significant number of Christians. If movements of this type were to find a way to attract Christians, that would worry the clergy as much as the cadres. Unlike the large numbers of Catholics in Eastern Europe, Catholics and Protestants together constitute less than 4% or 5 % of China's population. This tiny minority is not going to be a powerful engine of sudden transformation.

Challenges facing the Church in Eastern Europe

John I. Allen Jr. of the NCR staff in Tmava, Slovakia and Budapest, Hungary in his article "After Cold War, Cold Peace,"¹ pinpointed four challenges facing the Catholic Church in Eastern Europe. Let us examine whether these are relevant to the situation of the Catholic and Protestant Churches in China today:

1) *Accounting for the Church's behavior under the communists* has been a cause of dispute among Christians in Eastern Europe and in China since the 1950's. Readers of *Tripod* are familiar with the division between those in the official and unofficial churches and the pitfalls on the road to reconciliation. Like many priests and Christians in Eastern Europe, many Catholics were put in untenable situations where decisions had to be made following one's conscience. While in both places there might have been some who exploited opportunities without regard to ethics or morals, these were certainly very few in number. Those with a long association with the leaders and Christians of China and Eastern Europe will quickly testify to this. Most did what they did in all sincerity believing they were helping to save the Church, and to provide ministry to the people. In China, this has left the Christians with the difficult problem of trying to resolve what is basically a political, not doctrinal problem. This situation deserves our understanding and prayers.

2) *Striking the right tone on nationalistic passions* is not an issue in China. With the possible exception of the aborigines (high mountain people) in Taiwan, no ethnic group anywhere in China would think of differentiating themselves from the Han majority on

the basis of Christian versus non-Christian. Many families and even whole villages are proud to be Catholic for several generations, but they are also proud to be Chinese. Some Muslims in Xinjiang and Buddhists in Tibet would be happy to split the motherland along religious lines, but this will never become an issue among Christians. Starting in 1991, ultra-nationalist Orthodox, Muslims, and Roman Catholics in Yugoslavia misused religion as an excuse for bloodshed and ethnic cleansing. In contrast, Christians in China will never threaten the territorial integrity of their homeland. Internationally, China has its share of disputes, but religion does not get dragged into the fray. On a positive note, rank and file Christians continue to prove in their everyday lives that they are both good Christians and patriotic Chinese. This is one of the reasons why Christianity is growing on the Mainland.

3) *Coping with pluralism* is an issue everywhere in the world. In Eastern Europe, religious and political pluralism challenge the church. China does not have political pluralism, and only a limited choice of religions. China recognizes five religions: Buddhist, Daoist, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant. All Protestant denominations have to gather under one big tent, which is not big enough for Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. In Eastern Europe the Unification Church or Scientology offer their converts access to Western capital or business networks. Some even offer what Communism used to assure its people—job security. In China the same religious movements including the homegrown Falun Gong, are all prohibited. Insulated from these alternative faiths, Chinese Christians are not being recruited to pray elsewhere. So church and government leaders have one less cause for concern.

In Eastern Europe attendance at Mass has declined considerably since the collapse of Communism. In China, on the other hand, numbers keep increasing at a rapid pace. Like China, however, vocations in Eastern Europe are plentiful with the number six times as great as that in Western Europe or America.

However, a variety of economic choices confront Chinese believers. In the days before TV, disco, internet and karaoke, young Christians stayed home at night, saved their small coins, and prayed. In the eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin in colonial America said: "I know no cure for luxury," while in England Thomas Gray's

Elegy Written in a Church Graveyard contained the couplet:

Ill lies the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates and men decay.

In China and in Eastern Europe, at the start of the Twenty-first century, men rather than women have accumulated most of the wealth, and so men are exposed to more temptations. This condition also leads to a host of family and social problems. Even the legitimate pursuit of profit, followed by the enjoyment of wealth, distracts people from religion everywhere. The Chinese, in their new atmosphere of economic openness, are learning that it takes a lot of energy to get rich quick, and to enjoy the good life as presented on TV. In this spiritual vacuum, a number of people are turning to religion, while others fall for consumerism.

China sees no alternative to joining the global economy. The autarky and intellectual isolation of the Cultural Revolution almost destroyed China. Millions of people are enjoying the consumer society, while many more are working in factories and farms and seeing others get rich first. Unlike Eastern Europe and the former USSR, most people in China live in the countryside. The flow of rural laborers into the cities is a pastoral challenge for the church in China which has parallels in Latin America, India and Africa, but not in the former Soviet bloc.

4) *Balancing institutional self-interest against the pastoral needs of the people* is not an issue. Chinese Catholics are not going to form their own political party, print mass circulation newspapers, or air programs on TV. While the churches lost land and buildings after the Revolution, these holdings were nothing on the scale of church properties in Eastern Europe. The Chinese Church has already reclaimed most of its real estate.

In China, while the economic and social structures are in flux, the political superstructure is changing at a snail's pace. The churches in China are exposed to some of the winds that have blown through Eastern Europe, yet they are sheltered from the most violent gusts. It is ironic that the Communist Party is providing this shelter.

The Church outside Mainland China will continue to play a distinctly subordinate role in the life of the Church inside the country. A few visiting instructors in the seminaries and convents, some books and money, plus prayers, are all helpful and appreciated. But we cannot compare these to the institutional and financial ties

that now link the Church in Eastern Europe and the former USSR to the Western church.

Sociologically speaking, the Christians in China have to build up their church largely through their own efforts. Theologically speaking, the Holy Trinity is present “beneath the ebb and flow of events,”² so the future is full of hope.

Endnotes

¹ “After Cold War, Cold Peace,” John Allen, Jr. *National Catholic Reporter*, October 1, 1999, pp. 14-15.

² “The Glory of the Trinity in History,” John Paul II, General Audience, February 9, 2000, *Zenith News Agency Daily Dispatch*, February 9, 2000, p.2.