

The “Opium of the People” Continues to Seduce

Bernardo Cervellera

Translated from the Italian by Betty Ann Maheu, MM

Pudong, Shanghai's new scintillating zone, is resplendent in all its beauty on the Huangpu River. Just a few short years ago, this was only an agricultural area, where farmers cultivated rice and corn. Today it is a vital part of China's economy. Every foreign company in the world has an office in Pudong. In this “made in China” kind of New York world market, wide tree lined streets appear like pendants to the sky scrapers, designed by the best European, American and Japanese architects. In the midst of all this, there looms an enormous TV tower (468 meters high) shaped like a tripod, giving the impression of a brazier or a vessel for a libation to the Shang gods. The light and slender pagoda-like Jinmao tower, 88 floors of offices and hotels, is no more than about a hundred meters away. These are the only signs that remind us vaguely of religion in the new city, the model of the China of the future. There is not even a corner of space for a church or a temple.

In some other city the faithful of one or other of the religions may succeed in burning incense before some statuette, or attend Mass in a wooden thatched hut, but here, in the glimmer of the steel and aluminum windows, there is no place for the dusty gods of yesterday, but room only for the god of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” The new Shanghai, like the new China, seems to have adapted itself perfectly. It has gone from Marx's dialectical materialism to the materialism of business and consumerism. Definitely, God does not enter here. And yet, according to the statistics of the Protestant Church, in Shanghai itself, and other coastal cities, in the most developed zones in the country, Christian membership increases annually by 10 to 13 percent. Among these, there are a large number of professionals and business managers who ask themselves whether life might not have another meaning, over and above a career and money. Even the new China must render an account for the return of God.

Finally, in examining the 50 years of Communism in China, we must admit that the great failure of Chinese politics is not the Great Leap Forward (when 30 million died of starvation), nor the Cultural Revolution (with its social chaos), but the religious policy. For 52 years, the Communist Party has decreed the imminent demise of religion, yet the number of adherents to whatever religion keeps increasing. If, besides the faithful of the organized religions, we count the Buddhists and Daoists with no affiliation that go to the temple at least once or twice a year, we can say that more than half of the Chinese population has some connection to one or other form of religion. We can also count on hidden adherents among the members of the Party, the army and the bureaucracy.

This is truly extraordinary if we consider that besides the secular aspects of society, people in China are subjected to an ideological bombardment of atheism, indoctrination, social marginalization, anti-religious campaigns, persecutions, torture, and the death penalty. The survival of religion in these 50 years can be attributed to the strength of the Chinese family, with its respect for elders, and its spiritual bond with the unborn. These are a real defense against militant materialism.

The rebirth of religions can also be attributed to the decline of Communist ideals with the inevitable drift into corruption, violence, and the search for privilege. The disillusionment with Marxism, and the emptiness of materialism are among the catalysts of China's religious renewal. Now, it is very common for former Red Guards, frustrated by the present leadership, and harboring guilt feelings about acts of violence they committed in the past, to become interested in traditional religion or in Christianity in order to find "peace and harmony" (the great Daoist ideals). Christianity, especially, with its capacity to forgive wrongs, and to give a meaning to suffering provides a fascinating and unique way, preferable to Buddhist reincarnation, and the optimistic relativism of Daoism.

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Huang Zheyong, born in Henan in 1932, a member of the Party for 30 years, has been able to witness the decline of the

Maoist ideal. He died of cancer in 1988. He had hoped for a few reforms while dedicating himself body and soul to "serving the people." For some ten years he was chosen as a "model worker" helping at the same time to stem the spread of corruption among the members of the Party. In his last days in the hospital, he was visited by a group of Catholics. He mentioned that for the Communists, religion is the "opium of the people" and added, "I need that opium."

The winds of the free market also open up opportunities for religion: the opening of a business or a "joint-venture" includes also a visit to a Daoist temple, to receive the blessing of the god of wealth. At the White Cloud Daoist Temple in Beijing, not one day passes without young people, private business partners, and mothers with their children, coming to seek help for something, like success in an examination, or to find health and wealth.

The unresolved problems of the market economy (unemployment, misery, emigration) provide religions with another opportunity: Buddhist and Christian groups have launched charitable works for the poor, the handicapped, and the elderly, thus eliciting the people's respect, if not adhesion to the diverse faiths. The point is that Marxism like Capitalism attentive to structures and not to the individual. The search for the basis of the value of the human person that is not just guaranteed by an ideology or by an economic power drives intellectuals and students to philosophical research and to a comparison with the West. In that way, they come to discover that at the basis of the ideals of the enlightenment of the French Revolution, there is also the Christian inheritance. This is the reason that university students choose to devote themselves to the study of religion, which does not provide them with any professional openings. This perhaps explains why at Christmas and Easter, the churches in China are full of young people, none of whom are Christians. Curiosity compels them to go into the church.

After the ceremony they begin to ask questions: What is the difference between the birth of Jesus and the birth of Buddha? Some, still not satisfied, begin to study the catechism. The phenomenon of visits to churches is so impressive that President Jiang Zemin some years back warned against the spiritual pollution of the West and ordered the Patriotic Associations to give out tickets so that only Christians, registered as such, would be allowed to enter a church. The unstoppable deluge of people overflowing into the religious sector now rings alarm bells among the Chinese

Communist leaders. In order to link the Party more closely to the society in a state of change, Jiang Zemin, invited not only capitalists but also believers to become members of the Party. In one of his lectures at a convention on religion, in December 2001, he admitted that “religions will [still] exist with Socialism for a long time.” Remembering the atheistic leaders of the Party, he added, “Requesting that religions adapt to socialism does not mean that we are asking religious believers to abandon their faith.” At the same time, Pan Yue, Vice-director of the State Office for Structural Reform, pleaded for the Party to abandon the Marxist view of religion as “the opium of the people.” It is obvious, however, that there is confusion and opposition within the Party. During the following days, Pan Yue was criticized, and Jiang Zemin’s complete discourse was never published. Jiang Zemin, who has admitted having read the Bible and the Koran, has emphasized the importance of religion for art, culture, morality and social altruism. At the same time, however, the government continues to arrest and torture members of evangelical sects, Falun Gong, Muslims, Tibetans, and underground Catholics, for not submitting themselves to the control of the Party, China’s one and only common god.

Failing to safeguard the autonomy of religions, the Party risks ridicule. It continues to set itself up as the “orthodox” instrument entering into the religious dialogue, making rules on the teaching of the Koran, and on the rite to be used to elect the Tibetan lama, etc. And that is all from a leadership that defines itself as “atheist!”