

A Look at the Future of the Chinese Christian Church After the 30 Years of Openness and Reform

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From 1978 to the present, China's economics have undergone a tumultuous change. The policy of openness and reform changed the direction of development, which the country had had since its founding. The change in the world economic picture during the 1980's and 90's created space for China to develop. China was one of the few Third World countries to benefit from the spread of "globalization." For the past 30 years, the Chinese government has steadfastly maintained an independent path of development. It has refused to be manipulated by any ideology. It has also rejected dependence on any international political grouping, and on any model for economic development suggested by them. Actually, China herself does not have its own complete model for economic development. All it has are the clear goals of "the four modernizations" and "the four upholds." For the rest there are only adaptations to the needs and circumstances of the times. The two sayings: "Feeling for the rocks while crossing the river," and "No matter if the cat is black or white, if it catches mice, it is a good cat," sum up the path followed in the 30 years of openness and reform.

Because China has followed the path of pragmatism with its policy of adaptation, development during the last 30 years has been full of errors and changes, which contain many problems and contradictions. Examples of these are the establishment of economic zones and the theory of the early stage of socialism, etc. It is thus hard to grasp what future changes are in store. Foreign

observers say that not only is traditional Chinese culture mysterious, but that China's process of modernization is also mysterious. Actually, foreign observers not only have this feeling of uncertainty, but it is also a real challenge faced by the Chinese authorities. They seem to be feeling their way along thin ice, as they solve the contradictions and straighten out the road ahead by carefully adapting and balancing the needs and benefits of all sorts of forces.

Christianity's Present Development

After passing through the long winter from the 1950's, in 1979, the Chinese Christian Church could once again hold religious activities. The time of the religious revival just coincided with China's period of openness and reform.

Over the past 30 years, the Chinese Church has undergone great change. No matter how we figure the number of Christians today, from 30 million to 100 million, we must all be surprised to be able to admit that the number of Christians has increased ten-fold, and even up to over 100-fold. After churches began to open in the 1980's, every church has been full of Christians and inquirers. Even house churches, originally submerged and hidden from sight, also began to hold services. The 1980's were the golden age of development for the Chinese Christian Church. The number of Christians grew from several hundred thousand to over 10 million. At this time the church made every effort to establish a foundation. This included applying to open more churches, to set up meeting points, to re-open seminaries, and to print Bibles and hymnals. The government positively worked with the church to set up organizations at every level, and to select personnel and train them, and to gather the resources to re-build churches. They facilitated the church's relations with society, and cautiously allowed the churches to establish relations with overseas churches. The thorniest issue was the recovery of church properties, which had been in the hands of the government or public enterprises for many years.

During the 1990's the church continued to grow rapidly.

However, growth gradually slowed during the mid-1990's. The Three-Self Movement positively worked to set up the hardware, while the government, at the same time as it was drafting regulations for the supervision of religion, helped the church to set up the software. They issued regulations and established systems for training successors. They also attempted, to a certain degree, to get the church to change its doctrines and structures, in order that the church could better adapt to socialist society. As for the house churches, besides conscientiously preaching the Gospel, they carried out all kinds of communication and collegiality. With the help of foreign bodies, they set up national and local training programs, and networks for distributing resources. During this time, the most difficult problem to deal with was the internal contradictions within the church. These included differences between the central and local churches, between Three-Self and non-Three-Self, and among different denominations and traditions. The original sharp divisions in the church returned and continued. Actually, the conflicts and divisions in the house churches were more common and more serious than in the Three-Self churches.

Like the direction of the whole policy of openness and reform, the Chinese government's religious policy and practice also followed the pragmatic road of adapting to the times and circumstances. So, over the last 30 years, the religious policy has been full of differences, variations and contradictions, which are difficult to resolve. At the beginning of the reform, the government first explained to society, including to every level of local government, why religion was allowed to exist again, and how this tolerance was both an "advance" and a "retreat." They also dealt with the contradiction of how returning church properties was really beneficial. On one hand, the government re-wrote Article 36 of the Constitution and emphasized the freedom of religion. At the same time it distinguished the three principles of the self-administration of the church, and promoted the policy of the United Front: religion belonged to the category of an internal contradiction, and so at this juncture it was necessary to unite all

elements in society to back the effort to modernize China. A guiding line of thought in those days was the theory of the “five natures of religion” mentioned by United Front director Li Wei-han in the 1950’s (its long-term nature, its mass nature, its ethnic nature, its international nature and its complicated nature). Moreover, the government emphasized the “Four Basic Principles,” which were enshrined in the Constitution, and they also asked religious believers to observe the “Four Supports.” These were: support the people’s benefit, support respect for the law, support unification among the ethnic groups and support the unity of the motherland. To all the government organizations charged with supervision over religious bodies and religious activities, it promoted the “Three Sayings” These were: completely and correctly implement the policy of religious freedom, strengthen supervision over religious affairs, and positively guide religion to adapt to socialist society.

Besides this, the Chinese Communist Party gave a new explanation of the traditional, but now considered unsuitable, theory of “Religion Being the Opium of the People” in order to provide a reason why religion was still present in socialist society. The 1982 promulgated document, entitled “The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question During Our Country’s Socialist Period (simply referred to as ‘Document 19’)” and the 1991 issued document, “Circular on Some Problems Concerning Further Improving Work on Religion (or simply ‘Document 6’)” are a general program of theory and practice. Although foreign observers hopefully exclaim: “The government’s religious policy has changed,” actually from their drafting up to the present day, China’s religious policy follows the directives of these two documents, and there has been no great change. After the 1990’s, the government tried to draft a “religious law,” with the hope of codifying religious supervision and giving it a long-term legal basis.

Today many people are discussing if the Chinese Church has already broken out of the 3-Self Church and the House Church frameworks, and founded “a Third Way,” forming a more pluralistic

development. They are concerned about whether the Chinese Church can turn from being a church made up mostly of farmers to one which contains a number of Christian businessmen or Christian intellectuals. In this way the church would reflect the makeup of society as a whole.

Professor Chen Cunfu, who has carried out research on religion in Wenzhou and other places, has discovered businessmen and intellectuals who have become Christians. They are called “boss Christians” and “intelligentsia Christians” respectively. However, Professor Chen concludes that their numbers are too small to signify a change in the church from an agricultural one to a more pluralistic one.

This writer agrees that the Wenzhou church has plenty of “boss Christians,” and the church along the eastern seaboard is not lacking in Christians who have a place in society, and thus is more pluralistic. However, up to the present time, there is no evidence to prove that the Chinese Church has changed from one made up of mainly poor farmers to one made up of prosperous folks living in big cities.

For a long time now, a common characteristic of the Chinese Church is the “Three Manys” phenomenon, that is, it is made up of many women, many elderly and many uneducated people. This is especially true in the countryside. In recent years, comparatively more young people and intellectuals have joined churches in the cities. So, there is some change taking place. But because the Christians in the countryside are so numerous, one cannot assume that the church is changing into an urban church.

To cite an example: after 30 years of openness, and great efforts made to raise standards, of the 6,802 pastors in Jiangsu Province (acc. to 2006 statistics), only 5.4% have a university degree. The percentage of pastors with an upper or lower middle school education is 64.4%, while the number of pastors with less than a middle school education stands at 30%. The majority of pastors have only an upper middle school education, or less. Nor have they had a formal theological education. If this is the case for

a comparatively prosperous eastern coastal province, conditions in the comparatively poorer western part of the country must definitely be worse.

One commentator has said, "At the present time, a special characteristic of Chinese society is that it still seriously lacks a middle class. In other words, Chinese society is a pyramid, with a broad lower level and a small upper level. It is not "steel wrecking ball," with a large middle section." This is because peasants make up the largest number of people. It is related to the great differences between the economic conditions in the countryside and in the cities.

As country towns become more urbanized, some originally agricultural based churches are gradually changing into non-agricultural based ones. These churches face the problem of uneducated pastors not being able to satisfy the more pluralistic desires of their believers. They also face the problems and challenges of secularism.

Although there have been no structural changes in the Chinese church, there are some phenomena which are a cause for joy. In Beijing and in other large cities, for instance, many intellectuals have formed house churches. At the instigation of foreign evangelistic organizations, the evangelistic work of university students in some cities has produced good results. Finally churches in some cities made up mainly of workers are developing nicely. Whether these phenomena will change the complexion of the Chinese Church as a whole remains to be seen. However, if anyone, because of individual experience, says that the Chinese Church has already changed, this is blind optimism.

The Way Ahead is Difficult for a Half State-Run Enterprise

Here we mainly discuss the situation of the 3-Self Church.

The Academy of Social Sciences scholar Gao Shining quotes a Chinese Christian, who said: "In China, everything is changing; only the Church remains fixed in its original place." This remark is

slightly prejudiced, but it is not too far from the reality. Gao Shining goes on to say, "In the midst of the high tide of social change taking place in China today, the Chinese Christian Church is at a standstill. This standstill is not only reflected in its thinking, but it is also seen in its worship, evangelization and social service." There is no need to look further; just consider that it was only at the end of 2007 that the first group of leaders of the national Protestant Two Committees (*lianghui*) stepped down, and a second group of leaders was elected. This was at the same time as the Chinese government was making the fourth change in its core leadership.

Today, many links between the Protestant *lianghui* and society are coming apart. We can see this from a few clear examples; we do not have to expend much effort to prove it.

The first example is the sudden rise in house churches in large and medium-size cities, in which the members are mostly intellectuals. Intellectuals (middle class and professional), for the most part, support famous persons, or persons who have a position in society. They have many apprehensions, and it is easy for the government and social forces to control them. The social cost they might have to pay is high. For example, if a Christian university lecturer takes a leading role in the church, he may suffer much pressure from the government, and his career might be affected. Some people say that intellectuals know politics and the law. They know how to protect themselves and their civil benefits; so they should be more courageous than ordinary citizens. I believe that this situation exists. But I also believe that, just as intellectuals understand the present political climate, among their number many more choose to protect themselves, and avoid participating in illegal activities, so that their political and social standing will not be affected. Actually, in the 1990's, there was much noise made about the phenomenon of "Cultural Christians" (even today they remain well hidden). This is just like the temerity described in the saying, "The gentleman does not erect dangerous walls." It is what this writer has pointed out in the past: the reason that the Church was able to survive in the 1960's and 70's was not because many

Christian intellectuals were willing to pay a price, including with their lives, but because a group of uneducated Christians, who had no position in society, remained firm in their faith. Thus the church was able to continue to exist. The price the latter had to pay was not too high because they had no position in society.

Although I realize this situation, I still want to point out, even if they are willing to pay a high price, of sacrificing either a political or social position, many intellectuals still attend a small house church in someone's apartment or office. They are unwilling to attend a Gothic style large church belonging to the *lianghui*. This choice clearly shows that, even though the government is open and society is progressing, the open church is not keeping up with the times, and is in the serious situation of becoming separated from the hearts of the people.

Secondly, the educational background and the spirit of service of the pastors of *lianghui* churches in the cities are generally lower than that of the pastors of the house churches in the same areas. There are also low educational standards in the house churches, especially in the countryside, among those church communities, which follow "the Henan model." However, in the house churches in the big cities, we can see in many places university graduates taking up the task of preaching the Gospel. Their standards are generally much higher than the students the *lianghui* seminaries are able to attract. From what we know, a higher percentage of students from the countryside are being accepted into the *lianghui* seminaries. For many years now, the chance to "change from being a peasant" has been an important attraction for applying to study theology. In recent years, as the economy of the countryside has improved, more young people have the opportunity to go to the cities. So, the number of students applying to study theology has been decreasing. The urban house churches cannot offer a bright career path or social position to their preachers. However, they are able to attract a number of intellectuals to give up their original profession and to enter into service of the church. There are also some professionals, who

maintain their profession, but who serve as pastors in their free time. This is one of the reasons that the urban house churches can attract intellectuals and professionals: the type of pastor attracts the same type of believers.

To help us think about the role of Christian *lianghui*, it is necessary to take a look at both the *modus vivendi* and the *modus operandi* of the *lianghui*. They have no space for breaking out, or for developing. This is the special characteristic of an officially supervised-people-managed half state-run organization. It has no capability of transforming itself. It is the same as a state-run enterprise: unless it changes its organization, and completely changes its original concept of running the business, it cannot compete in today's market. The only way out for the *lianghui* is for the government to break the one remaining element (or the remaining few, as the case may be) causing the church to be a half state-run enterprise. The reason the government must intervene is because this half state-run enterprise comes from the government, and because only the government has the power and the authority to do this. As for the method, the government should sell its shares in it, and allow the people to organize and to register their own religious communities. This would allow the church (or the "religious enterprise") to compete in the market place, and allow it to adapt to the economics of the capitalist market. A monopolistic society lacks the strength to reform itself. It is difficult for a state-run enterprise to economize and to be frugal in its use of resources. For the last 30 years, the government and society have fully realized the truth of this doctrine, and this doctrine has been fully applied to the religious enterprise. The marketization of the religious enterprise is the only way out for religion in China.

A state-run enterprise finds it hard to adapt to the competition in the marketplace. A religious state-run enterprise would find it even more difficult. Leaving aside this writer's deep faith in transcendental factors, we can just talk about the social phenomenon that religion belongs to an ideological superstructure, that it is not a basic necessity of life, like eating, drinking, working

and sleeping, and that people can take it or leave it. At the same time, the consciences and emotions of people seeking religion must be free and self-motivating. They cannot be forced. People must always be allowed to choose their own space. If working a job to make a living or going to school to learn and to gain a diploma, lose their flavor, and one does not want to do it anymore, then he can proceed to another position. But it is difficult to say that one will immediately and directly receive a material benefit from going to church. Even if new people are instructed to attend any church, they must always do it freely. The reason people chose to participate is because they receive some spiritual or relational “benefit” from it, such as a direction in life, reform of ethical behavior or a spiritual uplift. If they cannot receive a hopeful or spiritual “benefit” from the church service, then they can choose to leave, and to look for another place which is able to fulfill their spiritual requirements. Therefore, except for perhaps a short period of time, an “officially supervised,” monopolized and half government-run religious enterprise cannot basically and vitally satisfy people’s religious needs. If open church pastors are not able to preach a Gospel which can touch people’s hearts, then they cannot offer suitable and caring pastoral formation. If the legal church market cannot offer the believing masses a pluralistic choice, then the people will turn to the underground market.

The scholar of religion Li Feng has written that after the Cultural Revolution the church arose and developed, first of all, because it fulfilled the religious needs of the faithful. Due to the hard work of the members, and because society and the government presented a relaxed environment, the church became an organization, which offered believers the religious goods and services they were seeking. The basic foundation of the Christian Church was the result of social choice, and was not due to being forcefully arranged by an outside party. Secondly, because all the expenses, including the clergy’s salary, were donated by the believers, the church organization had a completely popular base.

Moreover, because religion calls people to lead spiritual and moral lives, the words and behavior of the religious leaders play a key role. There is a direct relationship between how they live their personal lives and the effectiveness of their sermons. The believers have special hopes and requirements regarding the personal integrity of their religious leaders. If they discover that their leaders' words are not the same as their deeds, they will reject them. News of shameful behavior, such as avarice or adultery, will cause great harm to a religious community. Standards may be different inside and outside of China. However, even in today's comparatively open society, if there is news of bad behavior on the part of a religious leader, then the only way out for such a person is to resign his position. But it is not like this in China. A pastor, who has divorced many times, can still be a national leader; a priest who has fathered a son, can still become a bishop. Both can retain their high positions. What will be the reaction of the believers to such behavior? If they are not satisfied in their own community, the only choice is to move to another community. It needs to be pointed out that the irregular behavior of many *lianghui* church leaders is an important reason for the widespread development of the house churches.

This writer does not mean to imply that all pastors in the 3-Self Church are corrupt. It is just to say that the higher one's position is, the harder it is to maintain one's incorruptibility. If church leadership is in collusion with the political power, it is even more difficult to maintain its purity. It would also be hard for the church to control the bureaucratization of its community.

Moreover, if the church community wants to be "a non-government organization," or "a non-profit seeking organization," the leaders should not personally enter into the pursuit of material benefits, as some government authorities do. Otherwise they enter into a condition of self-contradiction, and are digging their own graves.

The Christian Church in the Foreseeable Future

Two factors will affect the future development of the Christian Church: the passing from the scene of the present leadership, and the problems related to the registration of the house churches. We have to wait and see what transpires after the retirement of the present leadership. As for the registration of the house churches, I have some hopes.

Ye Xiaowen, since 1995 the director of the Religious Affairs Bureau, has told foreign reporters that there are 110,000 religious venues in China, and that only 80,000 are registered. That means 30,000 have not yet been registered. Director Ye went on to say that they do not interfere in the religious activities taking place at those non-registered venues. They only use persuasion to try to get the believers to register.

However, the key question is not whether the religious venues should register, but whether the people, on their own initiative, can organize a religious community, and if this community can exist and hold activities as a legal person in society.

Li Xiangpin, who has written a book, entitled *A Modern Sociological Explanation of Religion in China*, argues that religious bodies ought to have the identity of legal persons in society, so that they may operate lawfully and independently.

If the people themselves can initiate the organization of religious bodies, and register their social organization as a legal person, then they can escape the "mass nature" designation of religion, which the government has always applied to them. This designation implies control and supervision. The government should change its outlook on the church from "a believing mass" understanding to a "civic" (gongmin) understanding. It should consider it as being related to public and civic society. It should change its policy from one of controlling religion by administrative supervision to controlling it by law. Religion in any future Chinese society should exist freely, and with its own civil authority.

The Social Function of the Church in the Future

As for the role and function religion will have in Chinese society in the future, as society becomes more open, and as the government gives religious bodies more space for development, religion's function in society will become more and more pluralistic, and its influence become greater.

Religion has a deep foundation in Chinese society. Government officials always say that there are only 100 million religious believers in China, making up 10% of the population. They also are of the opinion that the function of religion in China, whether of the traditional variety, or that of modern society, is of secondary importance. This opinion is meeting with more and more suspicion and denial. As Li Yiyuan has pointed out, it is hard to say that an individual Chinese person is an "atheist." While he calls himself an "atheist," he most likely means that he does not yet believe in any systematic religion, or that he has no interest in their worship services, and is unwilling to participate in them. So, I suspect that not even 10% of China's citizens are really atheists. Positively speaking, the history of the resurgence and reformation of traditional religions on Taiwan could be repeated in mainland China. In fact, it is already happening in some country villages. From the negative side, it is easy for religious elements to filter into all the contradictions already present in society, e.g., among ethnic groups, and into local, economic and cultural areas, and have a destructive effect on society.

How can the church exercise its social function? We can use a recent popular topic as an example. After the Sichuan earthquake happened, the government and the people organized large rescue teams and delivered great amounts of materials to save the victims of this enormous disaster. The role played by each religious organization was fully affirmed by the local authorities. This one incident is an important indicator to demonstrate the role religion can play in society.

The experience of both the West, and Taiwan and Hong Kong is that religion plays an important role in social welfare.

Among non-governmental organizations, religions provide a large proportion of the welfare. Other organizations (including large financial foundations) cannot compare with the contribution to society made by religions. Therefore, governments at all levels have only to give the green light, especially accepting that religious communities are legal civic organizations, and allowing them to have a function in society, which they can and should have. Thus in the future the welfare role of religious organizations in society could become greater and greater. The Christian Church has a long history of providing social service, and it stands in the forefront of this work. Professor Gao Shining has pointed out that the May 12 earthquake has shown us that a mature civil society must have organizations, which are non-governmental and non-profitable, for rescuing and re-building areas struck by disasters. This is an important sign that China is moving in the direction of establishing a modern society. Religious bodies should have a part in this, according to Professor Gao.

All levels of Chinese society are catching up to world standards. The function of religion in society should become more like the function it has in modern Western society.

To sum up: There is no need to have a sweeping discussion of the Christian Church's future in China. We have only to strive to revive the original nature of the Christian Church, and to restore its basic function. It will then naturally expand that function to all levels of society. Only by letting the church be the church, will she be able to manifest the function she should have in society.