

Historical Background

In China prior to 1949, Christianity had always been associated closely with foreign powers. The permission for Christian missionaries to work in the interior of China had been gained in the first place by the treaties which were forced upon the Chinese government at gunpoint by the British government whose main purpose at the time was to legalize the opium trade. The Christian Missions had done much good in establishing schools, colleges and hospitals as well as churches but the control and financial support for the Christian activities in China came from abroad. Christianity was perceived by the Chinese at large to be a foreign enterprise. There was a popular saying that every Chinese convert to Christianity meant there was one less Chinese!

Around 1950, a movement was started by some Chinese Christians to strengthen the indigenous character of the Chinese churches. It was called the Three-Self Movement and it advocated the principles of self-government, self-support and self-propagation for the Chinese Churches. This movement was to continue and grow stronger up until the present time when it is the major organizing agency for Protestant Christianity in China. Recently, the Three-Self Movement gave birth to a second agency called the China Christian Council whose purpose is to help with the huge job of co-ordinating and organizing the life of all the Protestant congregations in China.

Another relevant part of the historical background is the political, economic and social history of China. China was a kind of feudal society until 1911 when it became a Republic under the leadership of Sun Yat Sen. With an immense population China had always had poverty on a massive scale and there was a lot of social unrest as a result. In the 1940's the Republic government under Chaing Kai Shek proved to be corrupt and unable to cope with the problems of China including the aggression of the Japanese Imperialist forces. The Communist Party under the leadership of Mao Zhi Dong eventually gained the backing of the majority of the population and drove Chaing Kai Shek and his Republican supporters out of China to Taiwan where the Republican government still holds ruling power.

The Communist Party also expelled all foreign missionaries and insisted that both Protestant and Catholic churches should be under the control of Chinese leadership. This proved to be very difficult for the Roman Catholic church whose ties with the Vatican were broken under the protest of many priests and

bishops who subsequently spent years in prison for refusing to accept the government's policies. The Protestant Churches adapted more easily because they already had the concept of independence from foreign influence in the Three-Self Movement which now became the major organizing agency for Protestantism.

In 1966-7 Chairman Mao launched the Cultural Revolution which developed into an extreme ultra-leftist totalitarian government. The churches were all closed. Universities were "purged" of all but those who held the most extremist views. Every cultural, social, political and religious agency in the country was similarly purged, and anyone suspected of holding liberal, democratic or traditionalist views was attacked, humiliated and forced to undergo some kind of re-education process. The era of "witch-hunting" continued for 10 years. During this time the Christians continued to meet in house meetings, at first secretly, but later on increasingly openly.

The Present Context

Finally, in 1977 the ruling Gang of Four, as it came to be known, was overthrown, and a more moderate, democratic-socialist government came to power. Many of the present leaders had been attacked and humiliated during the ultra-leftist era and are determined to establish a "correct line" of political, social and economic policy which will not repeat the mistakes of the ultra-leftist era, but rather, will enable China to develop as a modern, democratic, socialist society in which all sectors of the population including the religious people have a contribution to make toward the up-building and well-being of the society. The principle of Mutual Respect among all Chinese citizens is advocated by the government. This is spelled out in the Constitution in a Policy on Religious Freedom which is implemented and enforced by a Religious Affairs Bureau.

The RAB also works actively to help the various religious communities in China get their places of worship re-opened after the years of closure. Rental charges from the religious buildings confiscated during the Cultural Revolution and used by industry or other social groups for the past 10-13 years are being collected by the RAB and given to the religious groups who are still considered the rightful owners of the buildings. The RAB has also helped the various religions to get the paper and other facilities needed for publishing religious reading materials. The Protestant Church, for example, has already published 50,000

New Testaments and 85,000 complete Bibles as well as a Theological Journal, hymn books, and thousands of copies of a Christian Education publication.

The Constitution also requires all citizens to accept the principle of socialism as the political-economic system for China and requires the acceptance in principle of the leadership of the Communist Party. While this may appear to be totalitarian, in practice the government is developing a kind of participatory democracy. Economic planning is balanced between central planning and "grass roots" initiatives. Farmers and factory workers, for example, have some control over their work situations and are encouraged to be creative in improving their lot. There is a nation-wide network of local political councils in which representatives from all sectors of the society participate and give feed-back or suggestions for improvements in any aspect of life in China. The religious leaders participate in these councils and have actually succeeded in getting the government to revise the Constitution to include a provision whereby any cadres who fail to implement the official Policy on Religious Freedom would be liable to imprisonment of up to two years. Since only about 30 million Chinese citizens out of a population of a billion belong to the Communist Party it is very significant that the vast majority of non-Communist citizens have both political and economic channels for registering their views and influencing the course of events in the country.

Because of the efforts of government to encourage participatory democracy, albeit of the one-party variety, and because of the principle of mutual respect, there appears to be a mood of optimism and united endeavour throughout the country. This is reflected economically in a reported doubling of agricultural production in the last three years and is evident in the vigour and vitality of the major religious communities, including the Protestant and Catholic churches.

The Situation in the Churches

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of the Protestant church is its unity. There is only one Protestant church, the Christian Church in China, which is under the leadership of the China Christian Council and the National Three-Self Movement. The whole spectrum of Protestant denominations from Seventh-Day Adventists to Episcopalians are now merged into one church which is determined to remain ^{united} under the principle of mutual respect. Such unity requires constant effort and will not be easy to maintain. Traditional differences on such matters

as baptism by sprinkling or total immersion are now handled by allowing converts to choose for themselves which method they wish to follow. The countless house congregations across the country present a situation in which local groups can easily develop what might be called heretical or distorted views of the Christian faith. The provincial and national divisions of the China Christian Council are working diligently to provide Christian educational guidelines to help keep house-congregations "on the track" of genuine Christianity.

The Christian church is extremely dynamic and active in China. It is estimated that the number of Protestant Christians may be double the number there were when the missionaries left in 1949. Modest estimates claim at least a million Protestants and at least twice as many Catholics. In 1949 there were an estimated 700,000 Protestants and 3 million Catholics. The Protestant church growth is attributed by church leaders not least to the fact that Christianity is no longer regarded as a foreign religion. The Three-Self Principle appears to be an important principle for evangelism as well as for church organization. The mushrooming of house congregations which happened as a result of the closure of the churches also appears to be a major factor in the growth in the number of Christians.

Now that it is again legal to have public worship services the churches are being re-opened as quickly as possible and they are typically crowded with worshippers at two or more services each Sunday. Some churches hold services on Saturdays or Wednesdays for those who do not have Sunday as their day off work. Services are tape-recorded for sending to house congregations in areas distant from the churches. Worshippers include both old and young, both women and men. In the churches I visited about 1/3 to 1/2 of the people were under 30 years of age and over 1/3 were male.

The re-opened churches all report having relatively large numbers of baptisms. Among Chinese youth in general there is reported a keen interest in spiritual matters which is reflected in secular literature. The government has tried to meet this need by advocating "spiritual socialism." This takes the form of a moralistic campaign advocating "Five Beauties" to be achieved: beauty of speech, thought, environment, appearance and behavior. Young people are attending churches and asking for Bibles to read in order to learn what the Christian faith has to say about the meaning of individual life and destiny. The Catholic

Church appears to be at a considerable disadvantage in this regard since the liturgy is still conducted by the priests in Latin after the style of pre-Vatican II days. The break between the Chinese Catholic Church and the Roman Catholic Church and the isolation of the Chinese church for so long had the regrettable result of excluding the Chinese Catholics from all the modernizing which has taken place elsewhere in the Roman Catholic Church.

The Protestant Churches already re-opened, which number over a hundred, appear to have relatively large staffs of ministers and trained lay workers. Some have as many as five ministers and five or six lay workers. As more and more churches are re-opened the existing "pool" of trained leadership will be spread out thinner and thinner among all the churches. There have been no trained leaders graduated from seminaries since 1966 so the present clergy are all relatively old and there is a deep concern about a shortage of ministers in future when the present leadership dies. The Nanking Union Theological College accepted a first year class of 49 candidates in the spring of 1981 and hopes to continue to recruit more students each year. There were over 1,000 enquirers who sought entry to the first year class and over 300 who were selected by provincial church councils took the entrance exams. The 49 successful applicants both male and female, appear to be very promising candidates for ministry. Amongst them they represent 22 provinces of China. The Catholic Church is reported to be planning on re-opening a seminary in the near future. Besides seminaries, some of the departments of religious studies in the major universities have been re-opened. In the universities of Peking and Nanking in particular the scientific study of religions is very actively underway. The YMCA which was formerly very strong in China has also been officially re-opened.

The Chinese church leaders, both Protestant and Catholic, indicated strongly that they want the rest of the Christian churches in the world to understand their position vis a vis the Communist government of China and vis a vis other Christian agencies outside of China. The Chinese churches call themselves "patriotic," not in the sense often used elsewhere to mean chauvinistic or ethnocentric. The patriotism claimed by the Chinese churches refers, first, to a firm commitment to support the work of the government in China and, second, to maintain indigenous independence of the Chinese churches from undue foreign influence.

To deal with the latter first, the fact that the China Christian Council formally invited the Canadian Council of Churches to send a delegation to China for mutual sharing of insights and information indicates that the Chinese church has no wish to be isolated from or unrelated to the rest of the Christian community in the world. On the contrary, the Chinese churches are once again ready and willing to take their place in the world community of Christians. What the Chinese churches are not ready to accept is the assumption on the part of any Christian agencies outside of China that they can return to the missionary pattern of pre-1949 days in which money, personnel and control in church matters came into China from outside. Self-control, self-support and self-propagation are here to stay in the Chinese churches. That is part of what patriotism means to Chinese Christians.

The other part of patriotism may be harder for many outsiders to understand. It is the firm conviction among Chinese Christians that socialism is the best way for China to deal with its massive population and all the problems that are involved in trying to feed, educate, heal and lead about a billion people. It is, furthermore, the conviction that the Communist Party leadership is the right agency to implement socialism in China. Church leaders stressed that the Communist Party under Chairman Mao was, unlike Communist Parties in many other countries, the first political leadership that ever succeeded in uniting the masses of the ordinary people behind the efforts of the government to improve life for the people in China. Conditions in China are better for the masses of people now, they say, than at any other time in China's history. Many seasoned observers of China agree with this assessment. Thus, the Church leaders are patriotic in their commitment to support and co-operate with the Communist leadership in China. The Communist leadership, in turn, appears willing to respect and co-operate with the religious leaders in the common task of making life better for the masses of people in China.

In view of the commitment to socialism one might expect that the worship and teaching of the Chinese churches would reflect more "social gospel" than "personal gospel." This, however, is not the case. Worship services appear to be very much centred on the personal gospel and on the significance of Jesus Christ for individual life and destiny. When queried about this, church leaders replied that they are in fact concerned that the church should uphold the whole gospel or full gospel which includes both social gospel and personal gospel. The

social gospel is embodied in the goals and programs of socialism which most Christians are working to implement in their daily work six days a week. Christians are encouraged to earn the high designation of "model worker" in their occupations and many have done so, earning great respect from secular colleagues. On Sunday, however, when the church gathers for worship the part of the gospel that needs to receive priority in the liturgy and teaching is the personal gospel. This is what the people feel to be missing in the socialism of their society and this is what they are looking for the Churches to contribute. Hence, the hymns that are sung are often the old familiar gospel hymns of 19th Century evangelical revivals. Personal spirituality which includes repentance, forgiveness, guidance in prayer, and hope for eternity are stressed.

For a church emerging from over a decade of active persecution it is not, perhaps, surprising that the personal spiritual fortitude required to survive under the threat of martyrdom should continue to be celebrated in public worship. Nor is it unrealistic for the Chinese Church to claim that the Spirit works through individuals as well as in the corporate structures of society.