

Reflections on a Fascinating Journey

Langdon GILKEY
University of Chicago

As mentioned in earlier editions of the Inter-Religion bulletin, a number of those who took part in the 1985 trip to china of a delegation of "Scholars of World Religions" agreed to write up their reflections on meetings with scholars of religion and leaders of the various religious communities. Many of the reports have already appeared in these pages. We would like to close the series with the following afterthoughts penned by Langdon Gilkey in haste during the final days of his stay in Japan before returning to the United States.

These are reflections on meetings with the leaders of the major religious groups and institutions of learning in present-day China, Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, Taoist, and Islamic. Although we learned a very great deal about "religion" (or the *organizations* of religion) in present China, we also learned how much we did not know or understand. This is, therefore, not written by an expert; it represents, as its title implies, reflections on a short journey, and that is all. Everywhere at these meetings we were greeted with astounding warmth and courtesy; everywhere we had unexpectedly open discussions. what we heard and learned was worth hearing and absorbing.

Let us begin with their message to us, for each session opened with their own account of their own life and situation. It was very clear that each group we met – Islamic, Taoist, Buddhist, Catholic, and Protestant (Catholicism and Protestantism were universally classified, and so differentiated, along with Islam, Buddhism, and Taoism as "religions," "two of the five religions in China.") wished to tell us something. And, interestingly, much of what they told us about themselves varied little from group to group and religion to religion. Although my description is largely based on the Protestant and Catholic "speeches" that greeted us at each session, the five points I list were emphasized with some enthusiasm by the major representatives of each group.

(1)All stressed the *harmony* of religions with one another in present China. Clearly they felt, with some justification, that this differentiated the Chinese situation from situations elsewhere –and, as one put it, from the situation in China prior to Liberation. But both their modes of classification (referred to above) and their answers to our questions showed that a sense of unity and active cooperation between Protestants and Catholics have not yet appeared on the scene.

(2) Perhaps the point of greatest emphasis in the majority of the speeches was the reality of *freedom of religion*: in socialist Chinese life. It seemed to me they felt this would surprise us – and perhaps it did. The representative of each group told us with justified pride of the recent change in the national constitution, a change that removed the clause granting “freedom of propagation” to atheism; and each pointed out that this removal was the result of *joint* action by the relevant religious groups: Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist. Despite the turmoil and persecution of the recent Cultural Revolution (of which all spoke openly, and all roundly condemned), this freedom, they felt, was now secure; the policy of “Let one hundred schools contend” was now securely that of the established government. For them religious freedom and burgeoning religious groups represent a most important aspect of the new socialism developing in China, a development to which each group heartily wished to contribute.

(3) The third message communicated to us, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, was: “Leave us alone; do not interfere; let us work out this new experiment, this new Chinese creation (a socialism with strong religious components) by ourselves.” Over and over they emphasized that by this they did not mean either alienation or separation or isolation; on the contrary they would welcome frequent and close contacts of all sorts. And several gave warm credit to the past efforts of Western missionary societies to help China and its people. Nevertheless it was perfectly clear that *no* interference, no planning or directing, from abroad would be tolerated. In the new age, Christian work at all levels would (as the Three-Self Movement itself states) be self-initiated and self-directed.

(4) The most fundamental theme of their remarks – to be explicated further below – was that with Liberation (1949–1950) religion in China had entered a New Age. As Chinese society now represented a new reality sharply differentiated from its oppressive feudal, bourgeois, and colonial past, so religion in China represents a new reality different from its missionary past and so genuinely indigenous and not any longer foreign. Thus it is quite natural that religion now show an astounding new vigor. Figures representing astounding growth and vitality were regularly recited to us, whether at the local churches we visited, at organizational headquarters or at the academies studying religion – and these almost certainly valid figures were often contrasted with the lack of growth in the century and a half of colonialism. Religion is now “Chinese” and not foreign; moreover (and most crucial of all) it functions differently in the new social situation. Thus is it healthy and prospering. Only at the Islamic and Buddhist centers was this motif muted; Catholics and especially Protestants felt they were expanding both numerically and with regard to spiritual vitality.

(5) Corresponding to the rapidly growing congregations was the appearance of departments and institutes devoted to the study of religion – in Beijing, Nanjing, and Shanghai. Interestingly (to one used to the American academic scene) but understandably (these represent, after all, *government* establishments) the departments and institutes seemed to present to us a more “orthodox” face (orthodox in the political not the theological sense) than did the churches or

seminaries. Their task, a familiar one to departments of religion in the West, was declared to be the “scientific” or “objective” study of religion; and their long-term goal was through that objective study to develop a creative understanding of the new role of religion in the new society, the “function of religion in Chinese socialism.” Through these studies and reflection, therefore, these inquiries would take their place alongside those of economics, political science, and psychology as providing one of the necessary academic ingredients to the theoretical understanding and practical implementation of socialist China. No wonder they were excited about what was happening – and about the vast possibilities for “serving the people” now opening up to institutes and departments of religious study!

We all reflected on this common message and the facts (statistics, events, and ecclesiastical developments) that accompanied it. We discussed it together in bus and train; and our reflections appeared through our questions to our hosts at each session. (We were always invited to ask freely any questions we could think of.) The following reflections are a kind of personal distillation (for which I alone am responsible) of these discussions and questions, an attempt to sum up on the one hand the common *theory* about religion which seemed to lay behind what they said to us and on the other our main reaction to it. The most clearly articulated statements of the theory were given to us at meetings with the faculty of the Department of Religious Studies at Nanjing University and at the Institute for the Study of Religion at the Academy of the Social Sciences in Shanghai.

The question that oriented their objective study of religion in China, so they said, was the question of the role or function of religion in socialist China. At first this seemed to me to be a quite ordinary sort of question, familiar and even banal in the sociology of religion. As I listened, however, its weighty import – sociological, historical, theological, and even political – became apparent. As they understood this question, they saw this new role in socialist China as directly juxtaposed to and so in conflict with *both* the older, oppressive role of religion in traditional China, in Western capitalist cultures, and in the imperialist, colonial period of pre-liberation China, *and* to the purely negative role assigned to religion by orthodox Marxism. What they wished to uncover, by their inquiries and their conclusions therefrom, was the new, *positive* role of religion in Chinese socialism, a new role where religion served the life of the people and built up the emerging socialist society rather than opposing both. Thus quite consciously they distinguished themselves both from the understanding of religion in the capitalist West and from that of the “leftists” (the Gang of Four and their allies). In the new age religion has or will have a new function – as does everything else. This is, as one said, “authentic Marxism,” the *real* view of religion of true socialism now for the first time uncovered by the Chinese experience. It also means that every previous interpretation of religion, while provisionally helpful in some regards, is now quite out of date. “Our job is to understand this new role as it emerges.

The main principle structuring this new role – and so guiding inquiry into it – is that of *coherence*, the coherence of religion and its society, as Deputy Director Xiao of the Academy in Shanghai put it. The coherence of religion with its social matrix has been a perennial problem, he said. In the past religion was incoherent with the people's interests; it expressed the standards and aims of the ruling classes and thus oppressed the people. When, therefore, the people interests became predominant through revolution, religion then became almost extinct. But now religion can – and must – be adapted to the new socialist reality and express rather than oppose these common interests. Thus has it, as many said, “comedown to earth from heaven” and begun “to serve rather than to oppress the people.” One notes here the key (and new) point that like other major social elements, (politics, customs, trade, etc.) religion changes its role and function in the new age and thus acquires quite new characteristics not present previously; this is the “authentic” Marxist doctrine on religion.

Now, he continued, the conditions are ripe for this new development. On the one hand, religious believers completely support the aspirations and policies of the new government; on the other hand, the government has seen the benefit of freedom of religion and enacted this as its policy. The basis, therefore, for coherence is established. Is this merely provisional? No. The Communists are realists; and they can wait. The natural laws of social development will in the end eliminate religion as human needs are met. It is no use trying to force prematurely this final development by the power of governmental edict and authority; history shows the futility of such attempts. Far better is *unity* (the United Front Policy) in building the new socialism, and using the moral power of religion to help do so. Devoted to the Motherland, religion can contribute to this effort. Here individual differences of ideology (theology) between religions are irrelevant. Most important, wherever incoherence with the culture appears (and it still does), this is, we know, the work of reactionary forces. Part of our task at the institute, therefore, is to investigate and monitor these patterns of coherence and of incoherence, reflecting respectively the religion of the new age and the religion of the old age.

This was a very clearly articulated position, enunciated by one who did not aspire to be either Christian or religious. It appeared in markedly “softer” form from Christians with whom we met, for example in the Religious Studies Department at Nanjing. There too the new role of religion in the new society was emphasized – in fact one sentence was translated “Christianity is now almost a new religion.” The “work” of the Christian (“serving the people”) were described as cooperation in building the new society; and support “for the Chinese people led by their government in international affairs” was unequivocally assumed, taken for granted, as one put it. In sum, full participation in the life of the nation through cooperative work in the society was held to be the decisive sign of Christian love. Thus has, said they, Christianity “come down to earth,” shed its instrumental use by the ruling classes, and arisen a proud and significant part of the New China. In this context the suggestion that religion, and the Christian religion in particular,

could and should be *critical* of the government or of Chinese foreign policy quite literally made no sense to our hosts. Individual citizens or groups of citizens, they said, can discuss policies, and argue about them even critically through the regular political channels for such common debate. But once the policy is decided, then obedience is necessary *amid* implemented. In all such debate about public policy, religion as such, and any religious group *as such*, has no role; religion is an individual matter, a matter of personal worldview and personal conduct; its realm of legitimate concern lies quite outside issues of public policy. It represents something that *differentiates* persons in China, not what binds them together in their common cause. With regard to that common cause, therefore, the sole role for religion is cooperation: “We are called to love our church and our country at the same time.” “The only permanent and universal principle is devotion to the Motherland.”

There seemed *to us* to be evident here a trust that the government represents, and will always represent, the real needs or interests of the people that was quite unwarranted. It was unwarranted both by the sins and follies of governments in general world history and by the recent and openly recognized governmental evil of the Gang of Four and the Cultural Revolution. (An ironic example of this was that in the Catholic cathedral in Nanjing the city *government* *emil* had hidden and so preserved the valuable liturgical objects of the cathedral, thereby preventing the officially inspired Red Guards from destroying them!) But to our hosts the first (the lessons of general history) was irrelevant because of the new reality of the New Age, and the second (the Gang of Four) was resolved by their confidence in the present policies and direction of the New China.

Speaking theologically, it appeared that a powerful *eschatology* was here at work: the New Age has come, the new reality has been realized—not yet in full but surely in promise and in beginning. Traces of the old remain to be sure, but we can look forward with utter confidence to the steadily increasing fulfillment of what is here *in nuce*, a mere seed. It is also no wonder that the symbol of the *Resurrection* is universally mentioned and made central: in Biblical studies, in preaching, in our discussions. What is referred to by means of that symbol is the resurrection of the Church and the churches from their death, first the death in colonial times and now recently the death suffered in the Cultural Revolution. Obviously for them the churches have moved beyond the period of the Cross, the time of suffering and alienation when protest and criticism, even resistance, are relevant. We now live in the age of realized promise, of resurrection – and so cooperation and service to the community represent the sum of Christian obligation. As the professor of New Testament at Nanjing Seminary reminded us: “Paul instructs us in Romans 12 that what is good for the people is what we should do.”

To this individual “reflector” such confidence in the reality of realization, in realized eschatological fulfillment, must always be balanced (or more than balanced) by the recognition of *transcendence*, and so of continuing unfulfillment,

lest the Christian community fail to gauge reality, especially its own reality, adequately. If it thinks that either it or its government, or even its People, are beyond the range of inadequacy and sin, then its understanding of Christian obligation will be askew. The symbols of eschatological fulfillment must be accompanied by those of providential judgment, acceptance, and renewal – but always *approximate at* renewal – lest common, social sin reappear in stronger forms. The conquest of Tibet, much like the attempted conquest of Vietnam by America fails completely to represent the new age; in fact both alike represent the continuation of the old age more than they do the promises of the new. Without this dialectal balance of providential judgment (and grace) with eschatological promise more than theological difficulties threaten. For the political implications of such a realized eschatology, the conviction that the sins and follies of the old aeon are now behind us, seem to me whether in American or in Chinese (or in Russian) symbols extremely menacing.

These were, however, theological and social ruminations strange to present Chinese Christianity (at least as we saw and heard it). They would have been strange to much (and perhaps most) of the pre-liberal Christianity of the Western past; and they are anathema to many “orthodox” Protestant evangelicals in present-day America. The difference is the recent and- severe suffering on the part both of the Chinese people as a whole and of those who welcomed us so warmly on our travels. Personally I have great confidence that the dialectical apprehension of transcendence will reappear within this devoted, serious and perceptive Christian community as the inspiring story of religious rebirth in China unfolds.