

Religion in China: Some Impressions

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What follows is an impression of the religious situation in China as I perceived it during the course of a two-week visit in September of 1985 organized by the Inter-Religio network. I am not myself an expert on China or Religion in China, and it is impossible to get even a reasonably accurate picture of the situation in such a short visit. Moreover, in the present socio-political climate in China it is difficult for outsiders to sort out all the relevant issues or to get the desired discussion going on a number of matters on which clarification is needed. The descriptions in this report are based mainly on conversations held with leaders of various religious communities and others involved with religion in China. These included the Islamic Association of China, Buddhist Association of China, Religious leadership of Taoism, the leadership of the three-self movement, the leadership of the China Christian Council, the leadership of the National Patriotic Catholic Association, Bishops, pastors, lay leaders, and staff of Catholic and Protestant seminaries. In addition, discussions were held with the Bureau of Religious Affairs, the Academies of Social Sciences and the Study of Religion in Beijing and Shanghai. (In Shanghai a full day seminar was held on Religion in China between the visitors and the Institute.) The cities visited were Beijing, Xian, Loyang, Nanjing, and Shanghai. In most cities we had occasion to visit local places of worship, including Catholic and Protestant Churches. In addition to interpreters provided as a tourist service, the party had its own interpreters who were themselves knowledgeable about the religion situation in China. In preparing these remarks I have added brief notes on the history of each of the religions in China. My own more general reflections on the religious situation have been appended as a conclusion.

Islam

A three-hour discussion with the leadership of the Islamic Association centred on the place of Islam in present-day Chinese society. Further information was

supplied in the course of informal conversations with a member of the Mosque committee of the Great Mosque in Xian.

Islam first came to China during the Tang dynasty—by land along the Silk Road and by sea through the south-eastern ports. Although statistical estimates of the membership of Islam are a source of much debate, the Association estimates at least 14 million adherents at present. The Mosque in Beijing, where the meeting was held, was founded in 1447 and houses some of the oldest manuscripts related to Islam in China

Islam in China is the religion of about 10 of the 56 recognized ethnic groups. Because of the special laws that protect the ethnic minorities, Islam is able to enjoy certain privileges not granted to other religious communities. Since most adherents of Islam are looked upon not primarily as members of a religious minority but an ethnic minority, they are able to participate and receive representation in the political structures in China despite their expressed belief in God.

The group pressed the Association on some of the contemporary issues faced by Islam as a religion and how it related to the social realities in China today. It was obvious from the response that, like all other religious groups, Islam also recognizes the need to work within the limitations and possibilities presented by the socialist system. Patriotism and the recognition of their “Chineseness” was emphasized in the conversations. Islam suffered least during the Cultural Revolution, even though the mosques were closed and a Revolutionary Group to abolish Islam forbade the imams and others to practice or promote any form of religion in public.

The mosques are being given back to the Islamic community; to date some 45 places of worship have been reopened. The government has partly financed the renovation. For example, the prayer hall of the Great Mosque in Xian was being renovated with a contribution of 500,000 yuan from the government, the remaining funds coming from the faithful.

What has the social transformation in China meant for Islam in some of the crucial areas such as the application of the Islamic law, the place of women in society, Islamic education, and international contact and exchange? It would appear that the fact the vast majority of the Muslims of China are drawn from the Sunni community has been a factor in the situation. The Shi’ite-Sunni controversies which plague most Islamic countries have not found a significant place within Islam in China. The push towards fundamentalism and the establishment of the Shari’a in one form or another have not received any significant expression. Adjustments are being made to the traditional attitude to women, marriage laws, etc. in order to conform to some of the liberating influences brought about by the socialist revolution.

International links are gradually being fostered, but caution is exercised against over-identification with the outside. Smaller sums of money are being received from abroad for the renovation and reconstruction of Mosques. More and more people are visiting Mecca (the lack of financial resources being the

main impediment). About a thousand visited Mecca last year and it was estimated that another 6,000 would do so this year. Islamic education is given in the mosques, mainly to adults.

The Islamic community appears to be confident in its gradual reestablishment as a minority religion in China. The emphasis now is not on conversion but on gathering the faithful again into its fold. It maintains friendly relationships with leaders of other faith communities. The Chinese Peoples Political Consultative Councils (CPPCC) at both local and national level provides the place where the religious leadership meet together.

Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhism was introduced into China in the first century of our era, during the time of the Eastern Han Dynasty. According to legend, in the year of Yong Ping, (68, C.E.), the Emperor Ming dreamed of a five-meter-tall golden man bathed in a brilliant light and flying about his palace. His minister Fu Yi read the dream as an invitation to the emperor to welcome the message of a "deity" named Buddha from India.

Accordingly the emperor sent two of his ministers Cai Yin and Qin Jing westwards to bring Buddhism to China. The ministers met two Indian monks Matanga and Zhu Falan in what is presently Afghanistan and invited them to come with the message of Buddhism to China. A large number of copies of Buddhist scriptures were also brought by them on two white horses. The famous White Horse Temple in Loyang, where we visited the tombs of the two Indian monks, is the first Buddhist temple and monastery to be built in China. The principal expansion of Buddhism, however, took place during the Tang Dynasty, from 618-906.

Since Buddhism has no institutionalized way of counting its adherents, it is difficult to estimate the number of Buddhist believers. It is estimated that there were 50 to 60 million Buddhists in China before the socialist revolution. Prior to the occupation of Tibet by Chinese troops, the entire population, about one million people, were followers of a particular form of Buddhism called Lamaism of the school of Tantrayana.

We held talks with the leadership of the Chinese Buddhist Association and the abbots of two of the leading monasteries. The Chinese Buddhist Association was started in 1953. We were told how during the Cultural Revolution Buddhism suffered much and lost many of its adherents. Monasteries were closed down; monks were sent home, most forced to return to secular and family life. The temples were shut down and many of them turned into museums.

The revival of Buddhism in China has centred on the revival of the Chinese Buddhist Association at the end of 1972. The President of the Association, Zhao Puchu, the abbot of the Monastery in Beijing, and others present at our discussions appeared confident about the future of Buddhism in China.

The Association has recently printed 400 thousand sets of Buddhist pictures (5 in each set) for distribution among the devotees. (Either a statue or a picture of the Lord Buddha is seen as essential for meditation and veneration by Buddhist laity.) The crisis brought about by the persecutions has helped the three main streams of Buddhism in China (Han, Tibetan, and Pali) to draw closer together. The celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the Buddhist Association in 1980 also helped in this process. Numbers of priests who had earlier belonged to different sects now work side by side in the monasteries that are being opened.

As one gradually absorbs the general social climate of contemporary Chinese society and the remarkable changes that have taken place in it, one cannot help but feel that Buddhism may well be the religion that was most affected by the social transformation of China. For Buddhism functions in society not so much as an organized religion but as the cultural and spiritual backdrop of social life. The temples and monasteries in Buddhist countries have the function of keeping alive the cultural milieu in which people live out their existence day to day. The strong impact of secularization and the socialist cultural transformation of Chinese society appear to have seriously affected Buddhism in China.

There is, however, confidence among the leadership of the Association that Buddhism is reawakening and will flourish once again in China. There is also a recognition that the decline of Buddhism did not begin with the socialist revolution but was already well underway because of its failure to come to terms with the contemporary world. Accordingly the Association is committed to putting new emphasis on "inheriting what is noble in the Buddhist tradition as well as on adopting it to meet contemporary challenges." There is a sober realization that the Buddhist tradition has now to receive expression that will make sense within a socialist society which is in the process of modernization.

As part of this renewal of Buddhism attempts are being made to reopen monasteries and temples, again with the assistance of the government. Four Buddhist monks are currently in Japan undergoing special training, and Japan is planning on sending scholars to carry on and promote research and publications on Buddhism in China. Two of four volumes being prepared on Chinese Buddhism have already appeared. Work is underway on the Buddhist section of the Chinese encyclopedia. Translation of Buddhist scriptures and research on Tibetan Buddhism are also in progress. There are plans to send Chinese Buddhist monks to Southeast Asian countries to learn about Buddhism in these neighboring lands.

The 77 year old abbot of the Buddhist Monastery in Nanjing, however, put more emphasis on training a large number of Buddhist monks to serve local Chinese communities. The 1200 year old monastery, built during the 6th Dynasty, was closed during the cultural revolution. Today 25 monasteries have been reopened in the province of which this was the most important. Those who have passed the first half of the secondary school are qualified to seek admission to the monastery. In 1983-1984, 160 pupils completed the course and

were invested with the robes of the monk. Some university students also come for a weekend to get a taste of monastic life and discipline.

The abbot stressed the importance of sending those invested with the robe back to their home villages to take over the temples and serve the *dhamma* locally. Students who show promise are sent for two years of special course to Beijing, where they are given a deeper grounding on the doctrines. 70% of their time is spent in study of the scriptures, for which they are required to pass a final examination. A number of nunneries are also beginning to open in different parts of the country and there is hope that this will also aid in the re-establishing of Buddhist culture in Chinese life.

Taoism

When the Chinese government decided to recognize and support the major religions of the people, there was some uncertainty about the status of Confucianism and Taoism, both of which are generally taken as folk religions. Ever since the revolution there was concerted attempt to suppress folk religions as "superstitious." Folk religions had elements of ancestor worship and a cult of legendary national heroes, but also included rituals such as divination, magic, fortune-telling, and the like. All these practices, said to be characteristics of feudal times, were to be abolished. Confucianism and Taoism were singled out particularly during the Cultural Revolution as counter-revolutionary forces.

After the Cultural Revolution, however, Taoism was granted recognition by the government as an official religion. A few representatives of the delegation were able to make a short visit to the Tao Monastery and shrine at Shanghai, where the leaders of the monastery welcomed them with open arms. The Taoists, we learned, are also in the process of reopening some of the traditional shrines and the ageing monks are making concerted efforts to train a new generation of successors.

It would appear that Taoism faces an uncertain future in China. The social and cultural transformation of society has understandably done much to diminish Taoist influence in society. On the other hand, folk religions which are enshrined not so much in institutions and leaders but in the hearts and minds of the peoples and in the rituals of the home surrounding marriage, death, etc. are the most difficult to suppress. While Taoism will certainly recover as a vital religious tradition in China, one could not help feeling that its future depends greatly on how much of its ancient traditions the people of modern China will choose to revitalize and celebrate. There was no way for us to judge from so brief a visit. China is a country that has produced too many surprises in our own lifetime to allow for reasoned predictions!

Christianity

Members of the group met both Catholic and Protestant Church representatives and visited churches in the main cities. Among the most significant encounters were extended visits with three Catholic bishops, with the leadership of the Three-Self Movement, and with staff of the Catholic Seminary in Beijing and the Nanjing Theological Seminary. Meetings with the leadership of the local churches provided detailed information on matters learned from other national leaders.

Since a number of colleagues in the World Council of Churches who have visited China have already presented detailed accounts of the situation of the Protestant Churches in China, and their counterparts in the Roman Catholic community have also written extensively on the current Catholic situation, I will make no attempt to elaborate on their reports. A few remarks would, however, seem to be in order to make this account complete.

Christianity first came to China in 635 C.E. when the Nestorian Alopen came from Syria to Xian, then capital of the Tang Dynasty. The Nestorian Monument erected outside of Xian in that year was excavated in 1625 and now stands in the provincial museum among many other ancient stone tablets and edicts. It was for me a rewarding moment to stand beside the famous monument and to have colleagues translate directly from the stone about the “Religion of Light” or the “Luminous Religion” that came into China as early as the seventh century. History tells us that the Nestorian Christianity of 635 did not last long. Nestorian missionaries did return to China in the 13th century, but without the success they enjoyed along the south-western coast of India

The Catholic Church took real root in China with the pioneering work of Matteo Ricci in the 16th century. At the time of the communist take-over, there were over 3 million Catholics in China and numerous institutions of social welfare. The strain in relationships between the Chinese government and the Holy See further deteriorated over the years until it ended in a complete break with the Vatican recognition of Taiwan as its primary reference to the Church in China. The National Patriotic Catholic Association was created in 1957, eventually resulting in the Constitutional Church which had no formal relationship with the Vatican. The bishops ordained by the Constitutional Church are considered by the Vatican *valid* but, in so far as they have not been authorized by the Holy See, *illicit*.

The Catholic Church, which experienced grave losses with the revolution through the nationalization of its educational and service institutions and the expulsion of its missionaries, also suffered adversely under the Cultural Revolution. Most churches were made into factories or storehouses. Priests were forced to return to secular jobs; numbers of them married and settled down in family life.

Today, however, churches and seminaries are reopening in most of the cities, and if things continue the way they are now, the Catholic Church can expect full recovery itself in a few years time. The new Chinese translation of the Jerusalem Bible (New Testament only) was scheduled for publication this past July in an edition of 300,000. Bishop Jin of Shanghai told us, in the course of a long and lively discussion, that the documents of the Second Vatican Council have also been translated and are slated for publication in the near future.

There seems to be little hope of any real formal relationship between the Vatican and the Chinese Catholic Church in the near future. Meantime many attempts are being made to develop links with Catholic Churches at the national level. Three cardinals from the Asian region have visited the Catholic leadership in China during the last few years and Catholic delegations from China are visiting Catholic Churches at various places in Asia

The Protestant Church is also busy reopening churches, regathering the faithful, training new leadership, and attempting to create a new Church of China out of the many Protestant Churches that were planted in the 19th century. It was a rewarding moment to visit the Nanjing Seminary and to speak, if only briefly, to the assembled student body and staff on the current state of interfaith dialogue, on collaborative efforts on the study of religion and culture in Asia, and on current theological trends in Christianity. Subsequent discussion with the staff on questions of on Church-state relations and the role of religion in society was a good experience for both the seminary and the visitors.

What are we to say of the Protestant Churches in China since the revolution? A number of points seem to emerge in clear relief:

1. The time of testing has refined the faith of the people.
2. It has taken them into a post-denominational period with a genuine desire to discover their Chineseness as a Church.
3. There is a renewal of "biblical faith" as opposed to the "doctrinal faith" which in the past had caused much division and perpetuated it through the centuries.
4. There is a new recognition of the need to express the faith in actual discipleship rather than in doctrines.
5. There is a rediscovery of the meaning of witness primarily as bearing the fruit of the gospel in the life of persons and in community.
6. There is a clear recognition that religion should contribute to the discovery of true "values" in national life.
7. There is an awareness of the new possibilities of working with people who live by other faiths and ideological convictions.
8. There is a conviction that faith should arise from actual experience and should speak to the present historical situation taking full account of the political and social realities of the time.

I will spare the reader much of the statistical data on the situation of the Churches, which in any event can be found in numerous other reports.

Let me now turn to some *general reflections* on religion in China based on the encounters referred to above as well as on visits to other places such as the Academy of Social Sciences, seminaries, and the Bureau of Religious Affairs. These reflections are entirely personal and represent only my own tentative attempt at giving voice to the impressions I received.

Policy on Religions

How much religious freedom exists in China today, and just how liberal is the government's attitude to religion? The question is not an easy one to answer. Religious freedom is a relative question; most people's idea of it arises from a particular ideological perspective. Views differ on how much freedom religious persons should have as individuals and as organized communities before one can speak of real religious freedom.

Some factors are clear. After the Revolution religions could openly exist only within the context of "patriotism," a word that meant, among other things, a love of China and its people, a willingness to cut off relationships with opposing foreign powers, and a general eagerness to work within the socio-political system that the nation had chosen. Even though many religious persons and communities in China felt that they could function within such an understanding, there were clearly dissenting voices as well.

During the Cultural Revolution, however, ultra-leftists took a harder line on religion. Religious activity of any kind was looked upon as essentially reactionary, feudal, and superstitious. Since ethics was also interpreted primarily in terms of class relationships, religion was seen to have no role to play in society. The propagation of atheism, reckoned a basic ingredient of the revolution. Clearly, all of China's religious traditions suffered under such an idea

"Pragmatism" is perhaps the word that best describes the present government policy on religion. In the seminar organized for us at the Academy of Social Sciences in Shanghai, the following aspects of the nature of religion were acknowledged as influencing present policy:

1. Relationships between religion and culture.
2. The ethnic nature of some religions.
3. The international dimension of religion.
4. The ability of religious traditions to survive and influence society despite attempts to remove it.

It would be wrong to assume that this represents complete agreement within the government on liberalizing the official attitude to religious communities. There are those who still look on religion as necessarily anti-scientific and counterrevolutionary, who still see it as an opiate of the masses and as a remnant of the feudal cast of mind that belonged to class-society.

The present policy, however, seems to arise from the recognition that re-

ligion cannot be removed by force, indeed that institutionalized attempts to remove religion only reinforce it. The policy seems to arise from the view that if religion is outdated, people should be helped to outgrow it. The attitude of the “ultra-leftists” is now seen as an erroneous tendency that can only result in the alienation of sections of the people from progressive forces without actually removing the influence of religion.

Positively, one can also see in the government’s attitude a real attempt to operate the “united front” policy for the furtherance of the future goals of Chinese society. There is a willingness to bring together all forces committed to the good of the nation within the broad concepts of patriotism, mutual respect, and socialism.

In March of 1982 the Chinese Communist Party issued a policy paper, Document 19, on “The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question During Our Country’s Socialist Period.” The document avoids much of the Marxist rhetoric on religion as the opium of the people. While it retains the view that atheism is an essential component of Marxism, it takes a liberal view on religions, taking the line that the official party policy is “respect for and protection of the freedom of religious belief.” In explaining this policy the document states that every citizen has the freedom to believe in religion and also the freedom not to believe in one religion or the other. A person who was previously a non-believer has the freedom to become a believer, and one who has been a religious believer has the freedom to become a non-believer. The absence of the clause “...and the freedom to propagate atheism” is seen as a significant advance by those who worked to have it removed.

The freedom to practice religion protects all forms of religious practices in homes, in places of worship, and in the form of social festivals. It includes the production and distribution of literature essential to the teaching of the religions concerned. It allows the formation of religious communities in monasteries, seminaries, and religious orders.

The government policy towards religion goes still further to redress the wrongs done during the cultural revolution. The Bureau of Religious Affairs helps in the reclaiming of temples, churches, and mosques, in their renovation, and in ensuring that no religious community is harassed by those who still hold negative views on religion. There is no doubt that the government also values and makes use of the contacts that religious communities have with the outside world. Where carefully exercised, these contacts are seen to be of value both in the promotion of the “open door” policy and in the government’s attempts at the modernization of China

The predominant feeling one gets is that the government is realistic when it comes to religions, that it has seen the need to enlist their cooperation and support for building up the nation. After all, there are only 40 million Communist Party members in a population of about one billion, and the percentage of the population that actually follows religion is rather small in relation to the total; religious communities no longer pose a threat to social order.

More important, it would appear that the government has, as a result of its experience since 1949, come to a sober realization of the complex nature of religion. There are whole ethnic communities in China (Muslims for example) for whom religion and ethnic identity are inseparable. The Tibetans are all Lamaists at birth. It is difficult to repress the religion of these people without appearing to oppress them as an ethnic community. Attacks on Buddhist monasteries and temples during the Cultural Revolution amounted to an attempt to efface the cultural heritage of China itself. Again, it was almost impossible institutionally to remove the folk religions which found expressions in family life, or to deal with communal and noninstitutional forms of religious expressions (like "meeting points") that were part of their nature.

"Mutual respect" has therefore become the key word. It is used within the Church to counter past denominational practices, between religions to signal an end to aggressions, and between religions and the Party. This is seen as essential to the search for unity in the complex nation that China is.

No doubt religious freedom has its limits. To begin with, the religions are expected to function in a patriotic way, which obliges them to approval if not actual support of the present social, political, and economic order. In any case no room is left for religious communities to engage in criticism of the present order. This does not mean that no criticism is possible. There are political structures set up from local to national levels where representation is given to religious leadership to express their views and where necessary, to criticize policy. These channels have been used effectively to bring about some changes. Since the religious communities have been given this possibility, the expectation is that they have no need to set themselves up outside the structures in order to raise a critical voice against the government.

At the same time, it is clear that the government sees religious communities as fundamentally concerned with the spiritual affairs of the people, and therefore as having no significant role to play in political matters.

It is also assumed, at least at present, that all religious communities will function within the concept of the Three-Self principle: self-government, self-support and self-propagation. There would be serious difficulties if religious groups were to become overly dependent on or were to collaborate seriously with outside groups in the international community. All external contacts must take place within the primary context of national patriotism.

Given the history of the religious communities in China, some of these limitations are only to be expected at present. Christianity, for example, had been overly dependent on foreign funds and personnel, used its international weight to interfere politically during the Revolution, and in large measure set itself up as counterrevolutionary and opposed to the state.

Is such a concept of religious freedom adequate? Are present expectations of the role of religion in Chinese society enough? On first impression, the visiting outsider might feel that more is called for, but given the recent history of the Chinese nation it is hard to deny that the religions are in fact once again

free to take their place in society. Of course they will need to find ways and means to function in the present social context. If they hope to play a vital part in the growth of China, they cannot afford to get entangled in definitions and discussions on religious freedom; they must be pragmatic and wise in the given situation. And this is precisely what the religious communities seem to be doing today.

Church and State

Many foreign visitors to China are curious about one important question: What is the relationship between Church and state? or in broader terms, between religion and state?

Here again, perceptions differ. Some would see the religions that are being re-established today as “state-sponsored” religions, as religions that have the tacit approval and support of the government in return for uncritical support on local and international matters. Some simply refuse to believe that a socialist government can engage in a process of re-establishing religious institutions and enabling the opening of the places of worship unless there is “complicity” on the part of religious leadership.

These impressions are easy enough to come by. But the closer one looks at the social realities today and the tremendous revolution that has taken place in China, the more complicated the matter becomes.

First of all, one has to take the Chinese cultural tradition seriously. Before the Western liberal ideas about religion became popular, Asian societies did not consider secular and religious realities as separate entities. The rulers governed the country, while the religions provided the cultural, ethical, and spiritual milieu in which the people lived. Good rulers supported and fostered the spread of religious values among the people, while bad rulers either neglected their “duty” in this regard or actively brought harm to bear on the cause of religion. A ruler may rise against a religious community and suppress it; a ruler may bring in a new religion and support its growth (as former emperors did with Buddhism, Christianity, etc.). Again religious leadership may engage in intrigues to unsettle the rule of a dynasty. But none of this is seen as confrontation between “Church and State.” It is all activity belonging within the total framework of social life. To Asian understanding, a good ruler governs well; a truly religious people live virtuous lives and support the rulers. When the rulers have to be challenged, one does so as a citizen and not as a religious person.

I was able to sense something of this in the present attitude of the religious communities to the rulers. The argument seems to run along these lines:

- It is legitimate and good that the government supports and helps religious communities.

- It is legitimate for the government to expect support from citizens, including those who profess religion.
- It is appropriate and good to support the government in all the good it does for the nation.
- If we differ with government policy, then as Chinese citizens we should use whatever mechanism is available to citizens to register our protest.
- Religions must work to foster social values that will enhance the life of the total community so that the whole of society, the government as well as the governed, can enjoy a healthy life.

The churches and other religious communities, therefore, see no difficulty in participating in the Chinese Peoples Political Consultative Councils (CPPCC) at all levels alongside “secular leadership.” They see no difficulty in relating to the official Bureau of Religious Affairs or in accepting government monies to build and restore religious premises. By Chinese cultural standards this is how things should be. It is the duty of the rulers to ensure that the religious life is maintained. The religious leaders should expect and accept it; they should not confront rulers in the name of religion but as people of the nation.

One could sense a weariness in the eyes of the religious leadership when pressed with the question, “Can you criticize the government?”—a question often taken, particularly by those from Western democracies, as the hallmark of true religious freedom and as the symbol of a necessary separation between Church and state. In some cases, the question also stems from the tacit assumption that “all communist governments are intolerant of serious criticism,” or that terms like “religion” and “state” have the same meaning in all contexts. Of course, the communist government of China, unlike the emperors, have a definite ideology which is atheistic, as well as a recognizable state machinery to support it. To question the means for criticizing the government is not without foundation. Still, one could not help sensing that despite all the years of revolution it is the centuries-old cultural traditions of China that still hold the hearts and minds of the people. It was interesting to watch the expression of total disbelief and anxiety in the face of many a Western visitor when the Chinese leaders proudly express how much assistance the government is now giving to religious communities! In Asian cultural history patronage of the rulers is a legitimate right of the religious communities; there is no need to be embarrassed about it; it does not necessarily mean complicity or compromise.

The Church for its part may be in a situation to make its patriotism more visible than other religious communities. For, before the Revolution the Church was seen to be alien to Chinese culture and an extension of foreign interests. The Churches today have taken conscious decision to make their Chineseness more obvious. In the present situation patriotism seems to be a very important factor in the expression of the Chineseness of the Church.

The Study of Religion

The study of religion in China seems to have two foci. The first has to do with the place of religion in a socialist society; the second with the history and phenomenology of various religions in China

At present it is the first aspect of the study of religion that seems to be predominant. Since the government has accepted the practice of religion in the socialist state, new attempts are being made to understand the role of religion in society. Xiao Zhitian, the Deputy Director of the Institute of World Religions of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, for example, gave five reasons why the socialist system is able to have a tolerant attitude to religion (see *Inter-Religio* 9, Spring 1986):

1. As a result of the historic changes that have taken place in modern China, those who believe in religion and those who do not have learned to work together in the factories and fields with the common objective of social advance.
2. The religious communities have a new awareness of the possibility of combining patriotism and participation in national life with their religious beliefs.
3. Certain religious and moral teachings guide the believers to reject what is evil and do what is good. This is conducive to the stability and unity of society as a whole.
4. The part of human civilization that takes the form of religious belief and activity also belongs to the spiritual and cultural heritage of humankind, and therefore need to be critically inherited and assimilated in building up a socialist society.
5. Religions exhort people to be good in character and encourage them to be engaged in public welfare and charity work. This is also beneficial to the advancement of social culture.

I have quoted the five-point reassessment of religion to show that it is not only religions that have to adjust their attitude to communism, but that in China today socialism is also willing to reassess the value and function of religion in society. There is of course controversy among scholars on the role of religion, some of whom continue to cling to an essentially negative evaluation. But the active interest in the study of religion as a social phenomenon is very evident.

Research into religious traditions proper is also slowly gaining ground. There is much interest in the study of Buddhism in China, as we heard in our discussions with Buddhist leaders and as was later corroborated in the course of a lengthy conversation with a researcher studying Lamaism in Tibet.

The Institute for the Study of World Religions in Beijing also engages in such study. One of the interesting subjects under study is the role of Christian missionaries in China. "We are finding out that it is not all negative; we are

trying also to show the positive contributions they have made,” we were told by one of its representatives. The comment was indicative that the study of religions is able, if only slowly, to enter into research on more controversial areas of the history of China.

Interfaith Relationships

“We are not yet in dialogue, but we are in conversation.” This comment, made by one of the religious leaders, is an apt description of the situation. It was interesting to note that all the religious communities affirmed the need to collaborate with each other more closely. The common suffering of the past has drawn them closer together. There is also the common feeling that they stand together to represent one particular aspect of the life of the people in a predominantly socialist set-up.

One of the important factors that has contributed to this mood has been that all religious leaders meet at local and national levels in the Chinese Peoples’ Political Consultative Councils (CPPCC). Here they have jointly worked to expedite the release of religious places of worship (converted into factories, barns, and museums during the Cultural Revolution). They have gone on joint missions to inspect the religious situation in the provinces. They worked together for the removal of the clause on “propagation of atheism” in the Freedom of Religion document to protect religious communities from harassment by non-believers.

Will this relationship of conversation and cooperation develop into a much more concerted and in-depth dialogue? It is hard to say. Each community is so busy gathering back its own adherents, opening its places of worship, preparing for its next generation of leaders, and producing educational material that there is little time to build relationship with other communities. But there is a clear consciousness of the need to do so, and a willingness as well.

One hopes that this initial contact and conversation will in fact grow into a deeper dialogue. It will be the task of the younger generation of leadership in each community to build on the relationships that have come their way not by choice but by the events of history.

China and the Churches Outside

Even the casual visitor to China cannot fail to notice the character and vitality of city life: bicycles by the hundreds and thousands congesting the traffic during rush hours, row after row of trees lining the streets (40 million of them planted since the Revolution, it was said), parents clinging to the single child as if they would never let go, the construction of high-rise complexes on all sides. All of these things represent aspects of Chinese society that have made the nation

what it is today—the industry, discipline, sacrifice, and determination to enter the modern world.

One cannot help sharing the feeling of some that the “open-door” policy has been carried a bit too far, particularly in relation to tourism and the efforts made to insure the comfort of foreign visitors. In addition to the steady streams of Chinese tourists coming to the cities from the provinces, over 9 million tourists visited China between January and August of last year. Even though it does help in earning the foreign exchange badly needed for modernization, those in our group from other third-world countries could not help but reflect on what unchecked tourism has done to their own cities!

There is criticism within the government itself of the “open door” policy because of the consumerism and change of social values that are taking place in society. The leadership, however, seem to be convinced that some of these effects are inevitable in the search for modernization and that they have only to keep them at a tolerable level. Will there be a sudden return to orthodoxy after the present leadership? Again, it is hard to predict. The present leadership has been replacing the old guards in the party and government machinery with those who believe in what is being done today. Only history can tell what lies in store.

Meantime there are many things that the Churches outside can learn from the experience of the Chinese Christians. Let me only list them briefly in order to keep this report within a reasonable length:

1. *The post-denominational stage of the Church*: Its significance to doctrinal theology and the search for unity; its relation to confessionalism in other parts of the world.
2. *The Roman Catholic situation*: The ecclesiology of the local Church and its teaching authority.
3. *The Three-Self principle*: Partnership in mission and the self-hood of the Church.
4. *The patriotic movements*: The relationship between Church and State in different political situations.
5. *The meeting points and the rise of Protestant membership from 700,000 in 1947 to 3.5 million in 1985*: The methods and meaning of witness and evangelism today.
6. *Amity Foundation*: Christian partnership in nation-building.
7. *Consultative Councils*: The possibility of religions and ideologies working together at different levels.
8. *The experience of the Church since 1947*: The meaning of spirituality today.

There are many lessons that the Churches and the religious communities outside can and should learn from what has happened in China. Unfortunately, it is not impossible for a visitor to go to China with his or her own presupposi

tions, prejudices, and agenda and thus miss the significance of the enormous transformation that has taken place in the Church and in society.

Those who look at China today with nostalgia for the missionary era and see in its “open door” policy only a “great new opportunity for evangelism” do not take sufficient note of the reality before them. But the reality is there—a revolution has taken place in every aspect of life; nothing can be the same again. It would be more appropriate therefore to ask ourselves the questions, “What does this mean for us and what does it do to some of the easy assumptions we make as Churches that have not been “tested by fire”? Perhaps by struggling with the answers to that question we might begin to understand both the suffering and the joy of the Churches and other religious communities in China