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CAN CHINA BECOME A CHRISTIAN COUNTRY?

Christianity and Civil Society in China

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The dream has come true. After the limited success of evangelization in the past centuries, Christianity has now reached the golden age in mainland China. Never before have conversions been so numerous. Some claim that there are 80 million Christians in today's People's Republic of China.[1] Although many experts consider this figure to be overestimated, the more realistic sum of 50 million (15 million Catholics and 35 million Protestants) still represents an impressive increase from the 4 million Christians estimated in 1949 (3 million Catholics and 1 million Protestants).[2] What is even more impressive is that this figure has increased within the last twenty-five years, after the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of reforms in 1978.

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[1]*Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2003), 7.

[2]Jonathan Chao and Rosanna Chong, *A History of Christianity in Socialist China* (Taipei: CMI, 1997), vi-xxix.

In some regions, evangelization has been so widespread—such as in Henan, Zhejiang or Fujian provinces—that some predict these provinces will accommodate a majority of Christians in the next twenty years. Although it would probably be premature to talk of Christianity as becoming the religion of the majority in China, Christians may account for twenty percent of the population (if conversions continue at the same rate) in less than two decades from now, dramatically reshaping the spiritual, cultural and political landscape. Beyond the astonishing figures, this essay reflects on the commitment of Christianity toward civil society as a condition for true evangelization.

Religious Fever Today

Since 1978, with the deconstruction of Marxism, the reform of China has opened an ideological vacuum. Since the political repression in 1989 and the subsequent blockage of political reform, the optimism of the 1980s has turned into a general distrust in politics. The cynical attitude of those in political power, the demise of public morality, and the collapse of traditional values have made the society soulless—a situation that Fr. Guo Shujun, S.J., describes as a "spiritual hunger" in today's China.[3]

Today, most of the people turn their interest into more pragmatic and individualistic pursuits, notably personal economic success. However, such repercussion from economic and social changes fosters a deep spiritual quest for meaning. The effects of modernization may be ambiguous, but they seem to trigger a search for spirituality in many instances. In some cases, religion provides a deep healing for people who feel threatened and marginalized by the economic reforms, especially among the retired, the workers of the state-owned enterprises, and the peasants. In the urban youth context, religion

[3]Guo Shujun, "Responding to the Phenomenon of Spiritual Hunger" (thesis, Ateneo de Manila University, 2002), 104-11.

may give a deeper meaning to modernization and stimulate it. In such case, the spiritual quest is coexistent with the rise of capitalism. Individuals who have acquired some wealth embark on a more personal and spiritual quest while continuing their engagement in the secular world. In fact, "religious fever" concerns all religions in China, mostly Christianity.

More Controls Imposed on Religion

During the Cultural Revolution, as the country was engaged in a political struggle that prohibited the cultural, economic and religious aspects of life, all religious activities were forbidden. In 1979, the churches re-opened, but under the control of the Communist Party. In the 1980s, different religions were allowed in trickles to gain independence. However, following the crackdown on student movements in 1989, the Communist Party has progressively tightened its control, and required the registration of all churches and temples. In 1994, the State Council issued regulations allowing only those religious activities approved by the Religious Affairs Bureau (*zongjiaoju*).[4] One event, however, led to a stricter enforcement of the religious policy, i.e., the prohibition of Falun Gong as an "evil cult" in 1999. For the first time since communist rule in China, the country's leaders realized that religious movements, which have been growing unnoticed in the nineties, could be adequately organized to challenge authority. Stories tell us that one Sunday in April 1999, Chairman Jiang Zemin was shocked at the sight of thousands of Falun Gong practitioners silently encircling Zhongnanhai, the compound of the State officials near the Forbidden City in Beijing. As a result, Jiang Zemin expressed recognition of the importance of religion in the following words, "In religion, there is no small matter." This state-

[4]People's Republic of China, "Document 144: The Administrative Regulations for the Management of Foreigners Participating in Domestic Religious Activities," and "Document 145: Administrative Regulations for the Management of Places of Religious Worship."

ment was a departure from the classical Marxist theory, which holds that religions will progressively disappear with the development of science and society. The communist leaders thought previously that the development of technique, science and economy would destroy all religious beliefs, even more efficiently than any political campaign. After the Falun Gong incident, they somehow woke up from their naïve slumber.

The Party recognizes that since religions are a permanent and important feature of society, political fights on religious control will continue and must therefore be kept under strict control. The tightening of the religious control follows a general reassertion of the central government over the local governments, which are seen as having achieved too much autonomy in the 1980s (in such strategic areas as taxation, justice, religion, etc). For instance, some Party meetings in 2002 dealt with the persons-in-charge of applying religious policies. All over the country, local officials who had been too lax in their application of religious policies or those who had contributed public funds for the construction of churches and temples were punished. The new leadership under Hu Jingtao and Wen Jiaobao has thus far continued this policy established by Jiang Zemin. However, even under Jiang Zemin, conflicts in the different administrations exist, such as the one between the more restrictive Religious Affairs Bureau and the more liberal United Front Work Department (*tongzhanbu*), or the one between the municipalities in Beijing.

With regard to the Catholic Church, the Communist Party looks at discussions on the establishment of diplomatic ties with the Vatican as a way of controlling Catholic activities and negotiating their responsibilities on the establishment of diplomatic ties. It does not necessarily grant an increase in freedom or autonomy to the Catholic Church. After the general move toward negotiation in the 1990s, the year 2000 represents the lowest point of Catholic activities with the unilateral consecration of five bishops in Beijing on January 6 and the canonization in Rome of 120 martyrs on October 1 (feast of St. Thérèse of Lisieux and anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China).

The Fragile Emergence of Civil Society

Despite strict control, the religious fever is sustained by the emergence of a civil society in present-day China. Civil society is composed of self-governed associations through which citizens organize themselves and participate in public affairs. With the disengagement of the State from many sectors of public life, citizens are empowering themselves, creating numerous associations that promote their interests in the fields of economy, culture, religion, etc. These associations, unless they choose to go "underground" and operate illegally, accept a certain degree of political control from the government. Christianity as a faith lived out in organized communities is already contributing its share to the emergence of a civil society in China.

However, it is not enough for Christianity to promote a civil society by its mere existence; there is also a need to check whether Christian groups foster true civic values. After all, an organization promoting its own narrow interests at the expense of the larger society could function in a civil society, but would not necessarily be civic. What then are the civic values we expect from any civilian association? These groups should first be committed to pluralism, i.e., respect of plurality in society. Each group should acknowledge that it does not exclusively represent the legitimate needs of society. Therefore, it should first allow overlapping membership in different associations in order to moderate and expand loyalties and interests. Second, the group, while promoting its own particular interest, should also consider the interests of other people, with a genuine concern for the whole of society. Third, in its internal decision-making, the group should foster horizontal relations over vertical ones, fulfilling the democratic request of cooperation among members.

The Catholic Church and Civil Society

Now let us examine whether the Christian groups in China meet the requirements of civic virtues. First, let us take the case of the

Catholic Church. New studies have been done in the past five years, focusing on rural Northern China (Hebei and Shanxi provinces), which constitutes the bulk of the Catholics. For example, Richard Madsen describes the Catholic religion as an "ethnic religion."[5] For sure, they do not belong to any minority ethnic group but they think and behave like the minority ethnic people. Their Catholic identity is not chosen but determined by the single factor of being born from Catholic parents and ancestors, and raised in a Catholic village. Of course, most of the Catholics in the world received their faith from their parents, but they will one day have to personally stand for their faith.

However, the problem with a religion lived as an ethnic identity is revealed in the difficulties experienced by the Chinese rural Catholics in living their faith meaningfully outside their village. Confronted with the modern lifestyle in the cities, they are usually at a loss. Without the support of their "natural community," many stop attending Sunday mass. In the village, Catholics feel secure but they entertain a fear of the outside world. The communities, therefore, tend to be self-enclosed. Fr. Guo Shujun describes the Church as a "sealed house."[6] It is the center of public life in the village, having assembly meetings twice a day and reciting the rosary without any deep knowledge of the basics of the faith. Mixed marriages are tolerated but strongly discouraged. The ideal village is one that is composed entirely of Catholics, and where the Church takes charge of the main sectors of public life (education, health, etc). They wish that the whole Chinese society follow such model. They tend to consider other beliefs (Protestants), other religions (Islam) or non-beliefs as purely erroneous, and they stay away from their so-called contamination. They also protect the interests of their own group at the expense of society (for example, not abiding by the laws and regulations of the State). Finally, the vertical model of authority exercised in the com-

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[5]Richard Madsen, *China's Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in Emerging Civil Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 53-56.

[6]Shujun, 6.

munity, with the priest as the only legitimate power, tends to annihilate the democratic request for more participation from the faithful.

In terms of the requirements for the promotion of a civil and civic society we have discussed above, the rural Catholic communities in China clearly fall short in many aspects: weak commitment to a pluralistic society, passive collaboration with government officials, and undemocratic internal functioning. All these impediments reflect the difficulty faced by rural communities in keeping up with the pace of modernization and protecting their identity. At the theological level, those communities have not yet adopted the spirit of Vatican II, and are having difficulty in becoming a "participatory church" and in going beyond "ecclesial-centricity" in order to reach out to other Christians and non-Christians.[7]

However, the situation may not be as bleak as it seems. Some factors give reason for hope. First, since many rural Catholics migrate toward the cities, an urban Catholicism overcoming the trap of clannish identity may be underway. Some migrants may reshape their Catholic identity in the modern world. They may find new meanings to their faith while immersed in the secular world, and voluntarily assume an identity received previously by birth. Second, the situation in rural Hebei is not representative of mainland China. For example, in *God Aboveground*, Eriberto Lozada presents a Hakka Catholic village in Guangdong province that is engaging itself with modernity, reshaping a religious identity in the broader context of faithfulness to ancestral traditions and opening itself to social and economic changes.[8] Third, international relations with Catholic communities from abroad may contribute to the opening of the Catholic Church in China. The connections established between the Fujian province

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[7]Aloysius Chang, "The Church in China: Ecclesiological Impasse? A Christological and Trinitarian Approach Towards a Solution," *Tripod* 12 (May-Jun 1992): 65-69.

[8]Eriberto Lozada, *God Aboveground* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 178-96.

and the Catholics of the Philippines promote this opening to the modern world, giving local Catholics more confidence to deal with the larger society. All these factors may contribute to a Catholic Church truly participating in the emergence of a civil society in China and respectful of modern civic values. Beyond the dazzling number of conversions, China could truly become more Christian in such a process.

Of course, it is acknowledged that the Chinese government restrains the emergence of civil society, which is felt as a threat to its rule. However, civil society should not be thought of as totally independent from the government. In fact, the key lies in managing an adequate relationship between civil society and political power. The tradition of the Catholic Church moves toward a kind of contract with the Chinese State, where religious freedoms are included in a political concordat. The political tradition of China also moves toward the same direction since religious practices have always been integrated into the political administration of the State, largely giving freedom to the local level. The strict control imposed by communist rule until today is somehow a departure from traditional practice, which was generally quite liberal in the past. Therefore, it is hoped that the Catholic Church's commitment to the government and to civil society will be reciprocated by the government's commitment toward freer development and greater protection of civil society in China, including all religious organizations.

In this regard, we can see a positive movement from both the Vatican and the Chinese government in trying to find ways of nominating bishops acceptable to both sides. It is said that among the 72 bishops of the Catholic Patriotic Association, two-thirds are also recognized by Rome.[9] It is hoped that this positive evolution will be formalized as a procedure between the government and the Vatican in establishing diplomatic relations in the near future.

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[9]There are 110 official dioceses, but 40 are still vacant, without appointed bishops. Aikman, 5-18, 245-62.

Protestant Churches and Civil Society

The Protestant churches have been growing at a much faster pace than the Catholic Church. While the growth in the number of Catholics can be attributed to a natural growth in population, the increase in the number of Protestants is largely due to recent conversions (by personal decision) of individuals with no previous Christian background. As a result, Protestants (all denominations combined) are twice as many as there are Catholics. It has been recognized that Protestant churches have a more balanced sociological and geographical distribution, as the communities are found in both the poor (Henan, Shandong) and the rich provinces (Zhejiang, Fujian), and in the villages and cities. Their communities are usually wealthier and closer to the modern world than are the Catholic communities. Protestant churches also have a greater flexibility in structure compared to the rigid structure of the Catholic Church. While catechism takes one or two years in the Catholic Church, it may take only a few days to receive baptism in Protestant churches; and the latter do not rely on ordained ministers, but on lay people, to organize communities.

In his book *Jesus in Beijing,* David Aikman shows how Protestants are entering into—not away from—modernity. He explains that believers are not only found among peasants, but also among academicians, businessmen, scientists, artists, musicians, and even inside the Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army. The growth in the number of Protestants comes mainly from the "house churches"—communities not registered with the government. These communities usually meet in their homes, and are united by different evangelical networks covering a province or the whole nation. Among the major networks are the Fengcheng Fellowship, the China Gospel Fellowship (Tanghe Fellowship named after a county), the Born-Again movement ("the weepers"), the Eastern Lightning (movements born in Henan province), and the Little Flock (founded by Watchman Nee).

However, despite their fast progression and positive attitude toward economic and social changes, the house churches face a serious problem of orthodoxy. This problem is not easily solved by their

present structure; it divides their community and isolates them from society. Unlike the Catholic Church, which stands united under the common Magisterium of the universal Church (despite divisions in the legitimacy of power at the theological level), the house churches have differences grounded on the theological level. On one end are the fundamentalists who hold "fundamental beliefs" such as speaking in tongues, the inerrancy of the Bible, the physical resurrection of Jesus, and the second coming of Christ. On the other end are the modernists who view faith from a psychological and social angle, insisting more on the humanity of Christ rather than a strong emphasis on the supernatural dimension of the faith and on the divinity of Christ. Between these two extremes, many movements are developing, proclaiming their own beliefs independently of other groups. Without much theological formation, heterodox teachings can easily grow.

The main difficulty encountered by Protestant churches lies in their lack of institutional regulation to solve their theological differences, unlike the Catholic Church. Without a common ground, the different groups are likely to overemphasize their own theological specificity and anathematize all the groups that do not follow their doctrines. Since many groups follow the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, which was brought to China by nineteenth-century missionaries, they believe that only the people who belong to their own group can be saved, and all other Christians and non-believers will be damned. Most of the house churches hold the belief in millennialism, i.e., the coming of Christ at the end of the millennium. From the house churches, heresies can occur, such as in the case of the Eastern Lightning's teaching that Jesus has already returned as a Chinese woman named Deng, now believed to be in her thirties in Henan province. Therefore, all those religious beliefs unchecked and unregulated by a common belief create more divisions and intolerance among Protestant groups.

Conscious of the cost of divisions, some groups have recently tried to find a common ground. In November 1998, leaders of house churches in Henan and Anhui met secretly and chartered a "Confes-

sion of Faith."[10] The Confession attempts to find an ecumenical ground that clearly states the fundamentals of the faith and other theological statements that may be legitimate options but not binding for all. For example, the Confession does not forbid speaking in tongues, nor does it insist on the claim that speaking in tongues is evidence of salvation. In addition, it does not impose any directive on whether Christ will come before or after the tribulation.

The ecumenical movement inside the Protestant churches has been initiated by the national house church leaders and is still inchoate. How this new spirit of tolerance will be implemented concretely remains to be seen. Most Protestants still have a very negative perception of the Catholic Church and other religions. Since they believe in the imminent second coming of Christ, and that Catholics and believers of other religions are condemned to hell, they feel a strong urgency to evangelize. While this is good, it is not always respectful of and sensitive to the people to whom they preach. For example, some house churches, believing that Jesus Christ is soon to come back to Jerusalem, are reviving the "Back to Jerusalem" movement that was initiated by Jin Dianying in 1921 for the evangelization of Muslims in Xinjiang province and in the Middle East. For this purpose, groups are presently training hundreds of Chinese missionaries to convert Muslims in the Middle East, Hindus in India, and Buddhists in Southeast Asia who live in the "10/40 window" and constitute ninety percent of the world population not yet reached by Christianity. They hope to train 100,000 Chinese missionaries for the year 2007, just two hundred years after the coming of Robert Morrison to China.[11]

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[10]Document translated into English in Aikman, 295-307.

[11]The "10/40 window" targeted by the Chinese "Back to Jerusalem" missionary movement consists of all regions between 10 degrees above the equator and 40 degrees below. Information on this movement is found at: http://www.backtojerusalem.com.

Obviously, the evangelization by these fundamentalist groups is opposed to the values of tolerance and respect held by civil society. They advocate a "new crusade" against the Muslims inside and outside China since the latter's religion is considered to be "the biggest obstacle on the road back to Jerusalem." In effect, they want to "conquer" Muslim lands for Christ. But this kind of evangelization does not seem very Christian, as it is not respectful of cultural diversity and historical lessons. We can easily imagine how this rash evangelization can provoke Muslim countries or India, even if it is conducted by Chinese missionaries, not by Westerners.

Concerning their relation with the government, the house churches are largely influenced by the American evangelical groups and by a tradition whose religious ideals are independent of the State, and therefore refuse any form of control from the State. They hold that the religious identity of their members has priority over their citizenship. The radical attitude of the house churches toward political power and the proliferation of different groups endanger their commitment to the rule of law. Although the house churches do not advocate rebellion against the government, they still show a weak commitment toward the rule of law. For example, they refuse to register the house churches in the Religious Affairs Bureau because they argue that it is contrary to Scriptures, instead of arguing on the ground of freedom of association as a human right provision in the Chinese Constitution. Therefore, they seem to imply that religious activities are outside the scope of law. This was clearly stated when they appealed to the government to "admit God's great power."[12]

Conclusion

The Christian fever in today's China is astonishing. It could be said that the Communist Party of China has facilitated it, since it has eradicated all the traditional religions (popular religion, Buddhism)

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[12]*United Appeal* (22 Aug 1998) in Aikman, 295-96.

and life-meaning philosophy (Confucianism) that could have competed with Christianity. With the demise of Marxism, Christianity has been the first to fill the spiritual vacuum, thanks to its emphasis on individual salvation. However, the rise of Christianity should be checked against the requirements of a true civil and civic society. As we have seen, both Catholics and Protestants are challenged by the emerging civil society, since both boldly regard their faith to be the exclusive model for China. Although Protestants are more integrated in the modern world, they share a common zeal with Catholics: both hold that their faith is the only truth and they are not so interested in knowing about other faiths and in entering into a dialogue with them. Between Catholics and Protestants, ecumenism is nearly non-existent, and they tend to treat each other's faith with disdain. Therefore, ecumenism among the different Protestant groups, between Protestants and Catholics, as well as inter-religious dialogue, are necessary steps toward a fuller access to a civil society holding civic virtues of pluralism.

The aim is not to evangelize China as a country, but the Chinese people who experience the saving power of Christ in their individual lives amid their culture and society. Many Chinese individuals may, with good reason (even if they have adequately been introduced to the Gospel message), decide not to adhere to the Christian faith. This situation, however, does not make them "sinful." On the contrary, religious plurality, and even agnosticism, may be part of God's plan. A healthy development of Christianity in China should go beyond the number of conversions. Christians should show a strong commitment to pluralism in civil society.