

Religion under the Communist Regime in China

Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China: A Documentary History. By Donald E. MacInnis. Hodder & Stoughton, 1972, 392 pp. £3.25.

This documentary history, prepared by the director of the China Program of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., is admirably organized and presented, along the lines adopted. It offers a representative selection of primary source materials, almost all of its 117 documents and excerpts being of Chinese origin, published in China for domestic use. Dr. MacInnis carefully and succinctly introduces not only the three main parts into which the book is divided, but almost all of the 19 sections into which these are further categorized. His laudable aim is to let the documents, thus put into context and perspective, speak for themselves. But in fact a consecutive reading of his introductions affords a more balanced account of developments than the documents on their own are able to present.

The method succeeds better with the subject of policy than with that of practice. The author makes clear the fact that practice has by no means always accorded with theory, and plainly declares his hope that the freedom granted in Article 88 of the State Constitution ("Every citizen of the People's Republic of China shall have freedom of religious belief") will again be protected. But since these documents, as Dr. MacInnis himself notes, were mostly published under a regime which strictly controls the press, they very inadequately bring to light the deviations of practice from policy, and the distinction between 'official policy' and the actual deliberate strategy of the Communist Party. To be sure, Dr. MacInnis mentions in his introduction the "considerable body of literature from the early 1950s, largely subjective accounts by ex-patriate Chinese believers or former missionaries, which relates personal experiences, some of them grim indeed". But the ways, for example, by which the government divested the churches of their educational, medical and welfare institutions, and forced Christians to accuse one another, the methods by which the police subjected prisoners to psychological coercion (as illustrated by *I Was Brainwashed in Peking*, written by a Dutch Catholic Father¹), or

¹ Dries van Coillie, director of the Legion of Mary in the North of China; translated from the original Dutch text: *De Enthousiaste Zelfmoord*, printed in the Netherlands by Nederlandse Boekdruk Industrie n.v., 's-Hertogenbosch, 1969.

the nature of the attacks on religion by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, are all a part of the relevant total record largely missing from the documents in this book.

It is important to remember that Christians in China have never exceeded 1 per cent of the Chinese population (in the 1930s, the population was generally taken to be about 400 million, of whom 3 million were Roman Catholics and about 1 million Protestants). There has never been a 'Christian civilization' in China—no great indigenous Christian literature, art, architecture or music. In general terms Edgar Snow was justified in saying that Christianity's "impact on Chinese society was felt less as a spiritual force than as a political invasion"². It is therefore very unsound to argue, for example, from experience in Russia to that in China, as if the two situations were comparable. Historically speaking, three earlier attempts to persuade China to adopt organized Christianity successively failed. The outcome of the fourth attempt by the missionary movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is very possibly equally doomed to failure—which is by no means to deny the winning of souls for God's Eternal Kingdom, or the possibility of greater success in a fifth and wiser venture in some distant future.

The grounds on which this pessimistic view is based are (i) the extreme difficulty of handing on the faith to a younger generation which, in China's completely secular society, is indoctrinated from kindergarten upwards against any religious belief, as being reactionary, unscientific superstition, and (ii) the sad fact that a Christianity dependent upon the imperialistic West has laboured under a more or less impossible handicap. Nevertheless there is a strain in Chinese temperament, interest and tradition which seeks an outlet in the occult, if religious transcendence is denied. So Chinese secularism has a chink in its armour.

Christianity is, of course, by no means the only faith at issue. Buddhists and Taoists throughout China, Muslims largely in the North-West and Lamaistic Buddhists in Tibet have all been profoundly affected (not to speak of a small number of Jews). Buddhists, being more indigenous, have been treated rather more leniently than Christians, but Taoists were suppressed as representing degenerate superstition. In the earlier years of the communist regime, Muslims and Lamaistic Buddhists were favourably treated as national minorities rather than as religionists; once the Chinese had suppressed opposition and taken over direct control in Tibet, however, the monasteries came under strong attack as institutions of feudal oppression. By and large, Muslims seem to have fared best—but because of their

² Edgar Snow, *The Other Side of the River*, 1961, p. 551.

national minority status and their connections with the Middle East, not because of their religious faith.

Part I of this volume is entitled *Religious Policy: Leaders' Views and Official Statements*. It contains three sections with 34 documents in all. Mao Tse-tung's views are of course highly important, and a sample of the debate on how religious questions should be handled is also interesting. Other statements follow the 'correct' line. As Donald MacInnis remarks, "Religion, for Mao, was a non-antagonistic contradiction *among* the people which the people could handle themselves without recourse to higher authority or naked power".

Here are some key quotations from the documentary evidence given on Mao's position :

"It is the peasants who made the idols, and when the time comes they will cast the idols aside with their own hands; there is no need for anyone else to do it for them prematurely."

"If you had only Lord Kuan and the Goddess of Mercy and no peasant association, could you have overthrown the local tyrants and evil gentry? The gods and goddesses are indeed miserable objects. You have worshipped them for centuries, and they have not overthrown a single one of the local tyrants or evil gentry for you! Now you want to have your rent reduced. Let me ask how will you go about it? Will you believe in the gods or in the peasant association?"

"We cannot abolish religion by administrative decree or force people not to believe in it. We cannot compel people to give up idealism, any more than we can force them to believe in Marxism. The only way to settle questions of an ideological nature or controversial issues among the people is by the democratic method, the method of discussion, of criticism, of persuasion and education, and not by the method of coercion or repression."

"Gods are all right for the rich; the poor have the Eighth Route Army."

Premier Chou En-lai was equally explicit. Speaking to Chinese Christians in 1950, he said :

"So we are going to go on letting you teach, trying to convert the people . . . After all we both believe that truth will prevail; we think your beliefs untrue and false, therefore if we are right, the people will reject them, and your church will decay. If you are right, then the people will believe you, but as we are sure that you are wrong, we are prepared for that risk."

It should be noted, however, that Edgar Snow correctly interpreted the situation when he wrote as early as 1937 : "The communists reserved the right to preach anti-religious propaganda of their own, holding the 'freedom to oppose worship' to be a democratic privilege like the freedom to worship". In practice this virtually meant that Christians were limited to worship inside their churches (provided they toed the political line), whereas the communists could exercise their anti-religious freedom everywhere else !

So much for the theory. Part II is on *Religious Policy and Practice*, and is much the largest of the three, comprising 66 documents classified in twelve sections. A few items may be singled out for attention. The first is the report of an Australian Anglican journalist interviewing in 1956 Mr. Ho Chen-hsiang, then Director of the Bureau of Religious Affairs. Mr. Ho was obviously embarrassed at questions regarding Bishop Kimber Den (a Chinese bishop). "Here is a man of fine character, who has been imprisoned without a trial for five years. Then he is suddenly released, after being kept there all that time without a trial. And now you turn around and free him and say it was all just a mistake." Mr. Ho agreed that that was "not at all satisfactory" (Document 40). It is interesting to compare the Message from Chinese Christians to Mission Boards Abroad, freely written at the end of 1949 (Document 50), with the Christian Manifesto adopted the following May (Document 51). I happen to know the inside story of the latter. It was produced by Mr. Y. T. Wu after he and a few other Christian leaders returned to Shanghai from Peking, where they had seen Chou En-lai; those asked to sign it were dismayed to learn that it had already been seen by the Premier and that it would be highly inadvisable to alter any of its statements. Many did then endorse it as it stood, and a subsequent nation-wide campaign won at least 400,000 signatures!

The most interesting documents, not surprisingly, are those which emanate from the brief period in 1957 when Mao encouraged "a hundred flowers to bloom, and a hundred schools contend". Buddhists, Muslims, Protestants and Catholics, along with many other citizens, accepted the invitation to speak out their criticisms. Notable was the tactful but plain speaking of Pastor Marcus Cheng, a well-known evangelist in West China, whose address to the People's Political Consultative Conference in Peking was reported in full in the 25 March *People's Daily*. The aftermath produced a rash of attacks on religious leaders of all persuasions, and then a crop of statements laudatory of the government's treatment of religion! In 1958 clergy were invited "voluntarily to hand over their hearts to the Party", on realising that they were "second-class exploiters" and "propertied class intellectuals". Nevertheless, this did not save them from savage attack by young Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-68, who insulted religious leaders, wantonly destroyed religious scriptures, art and property, and suppressed religious institutions—along with other manifestations of 'old' culture, customs and ideas—thus driving the Christian churches underground.

The title of Part III is *Ideology and the Maoist Vision: The Religious Analogies*. It offers 17 documents, not all Chinese, dealing with the reform

of old rites and customs, and giving evidence related to the question of whether Maoism is not itself a secular religion, with its own liturgical forms and experience of conversion. What are we to make of the "characteristically Maoist tone of transcendence" to which Robert Lifton draws attention in Document 112?

Here is Donald MacInnis' own summary of the historical record :

"On the one hand, the record of these past twenty years shows a consistent adherence to orthodox Marxist dogma on religion in all theoretical analyses and doctrinal statements, while holding to the equally consistent adherence in official statements and theoretical discussions to the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religious belief; yet in practice, with some ambivalence from period to period, religious believers have suffered increasing constraints on the practice of their faith down to the total suppression of open religious activity by Red Guard militants in 1966-67."

He sees two grounds for hope :

"With the need for renewed collective effort in socialist construction, the present leaders may begin to feel less need for tightly restrictive policies in dealing with minority groups such as religious believers."

"If, as it appears, China is truly more conscious now of world opinion, she will certainly be increasingly alert to the sensitivities of religious elements in the Moslem, Buddhist, and Catholic nations of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East."

There are slight indications that he may be right, at least on the second point. A few churches are definitely open; there may be many more unvisited. But one, or even two, swallows do not make a summer! From the point of view of China's leaders, religion is a quite unimportant matter. Yet they may prove sensitive to outside criticism of the divergence of practice from officially announced policy as regards religion in communist China. Anyway this book, provided the introductions are read as well as the documents, gives the picture up to a year ago.

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