CHRISTIANITY IN RED CHINA:

A MIRACLE OF MILLIONS

H. Paul Santmire

A miracle has happened in the People's Republic of China. I witnessed this story during a recent month-long factfinding trip whose purpose was to visit with church people in that officially atheistic, totalitarian society of one billion people.

Churches are overflowing. Sunday after Sunday, for four weeks, our delegation of 27 North American protestants *observed* people crowding around the windows and in nearby alleys during sabbath services, because there was no room inside. Across China, moreover, in addition to the more than 4000 Protestant congregations that meet in church buildings, some 10,000 Christian groups meet in private homes, courtyards, or open fields, during the week as well as on Sundays.

Membership figures are astounding. When the communists expelled the last missionaries in 1949, there were 700,000 Protestants. Today, after years of steady persecution, and then a reign of terror during the "Cultural Revolution," 1966-1979, there are 4,000,000 Protestants, perhaps as many as 7,000,000. The Catholic community, which numbered some 4,000,000 in 1949 has basically held its own in terms of membership. But that is remarkable by any standards, given the savage persecution that Catholics, like many others, experienced during the Cultural Revolution.

Surprisingly, too, many of the thousands who are flocking to the churches are youth. One-third of the 1500 who regularly attend the Sunday evening service of Grace Church, Shanghai, for example, are young people.

The churches are also finding ways to take care of their basic administrative needs, in addition to the challenge of opening up old church buildings or constructing new ones. In the last eight years, Protestants have opened 12 seminaries, Catholics three. A new top-of-the-line printing press in the city of Nanjing has now begun to turn out the 200,000 Chinese Bibles and other literature that this growing Christian population will need every year.

This is indeed a miracle of millions. I do not use the term lightly, especially in view of the terrible persecution that most Christians experienced during the 13 years of the Cultural Revolution. Unleashed by Mao Zedong in 1966, and implemened at the grass-roots by millions of Mao's youthfully zealous "Red Guards," that radical political upheaval inflicted brutalities and unimagineable indignities on virtually every sector of the

(MORE)

222 Sautmire

Chinese population.

Universities were shut down. Cultural momements from the past were desecrated or destroyed. Thousands were killed. It was an especially trying time for Christians, who were identified as "reactionaries" because of their former connections with Western missionaries.

In the course of the Cultural Revolution every Church building in China was boarded up or turned into a school or a factory. All clergy were sent to do hard labor with the peasants in the country or with the workers in the factories. Families were broken up. Children were encouraged to spy on their parents. Church members were forced to denounce each other. Many died in government detention centers.

But the Christian churches came through that thirteen-year reign of terror much stronger than ever before, with millions of new members, and those churches are still growing! How could this miracle of millions possibly happen in that authoritarian, atheistic land, racked by the onslaughts of such a violent persecution?

The Chinese Christians themselves told us: "It was the work of the Holy Spirit." Everyone in our delegation took that conviction as a given. But we also wanted to fill in the picture with more mundane particulars.

It was helpful for us to have an old China-hand along as our tour leader. Born of missionary parents in China in the twenties, fluent in Chinese, and a former missionary pastor in China himself after World War II, the Rev. Dr. David Vikner is now retired and lives in the Chicago area. Widely known and deeply respected in church circles in China today, he led us into corners of the People's Republic which most Western visitors never see. He also offered us a wealth of missionary anecdotes, as we explored areas which he had frequented as a youth and as a missionary pastor.

The first thing we discovered was that the familiar, sophisticated stereotype of Western missionaries, as the functionaries of imperialism, does not begin to tell the whole truth. Vikner's father, for example, self-consciously chose to go into one of China's poorest regions in 1911, where few Westerners had been before, and self-consciously determined to develop an indigenous Chinese church with strong local lay leadership right from the start. It was no accident, then, that that very congregation, which we visited in the northcentral city of Luoyang, was one of the thousands which had survived the Cultural Revolution, and that it is now thriving.

Many missionaries had sown the faith well, before 1949. Across China, accordingly, during the cataclysmic thirteen years of the Cultural Revolution, Christian lay people as a matter of

(MORE)

course kept the faith alive, even though they were bereft of their pastors and their buildings. They met in small, secretive groups, thousands of them, for Bible study, prayer, and mutual support. Many of them had to recreate biblical texts from memory, in hand-written form, since their Bibles had been confiscated by the Red Guards. But they brought forth the Word of God from their hearts, all the same, and learned from it anew.

Further, it now appears that during the Cultural Revolution many of these Christian lay people suffered in an exemplary fashion, in the eyes of their non-Christian neighbors. Those neighbors saw that the faith of ordinary Christian people was deep-rooted and powerful. That faith did not wither under the searing heat of persecution, as a cosmetic, "foreign" set of convictions from the West might have been expected to do.

Likewise, and perhaps all the more so for the clergy, who suffered as much as anyone, perhaps more. Always publicly suspect, due to their previous ties with the missionaries, the clergy "paid their dues," so to speak, and gained widespread public respect as they, too, were baptized by fire.

Once the terrors of the Cultural Revolution had begun to subside, the spiritual capital that Christians had amassed during those bitter years began to multiply in geometiric proportions, like the loaves and fishes of old. This sudden flourishing of spiritual vitality was signaled throughout China by the flowering of the "Three Self Patriotic Movement" in Protestant circles. Predicated on self-support, self-governance, and self-propagation, this grass-roots movement was at once a champion of the new China. It united Protestants from virtually every denomination as a single spiritual force in the nation, in the name of faithfulness to God and love of country.

a national movement for church unity, called in the Three Self Patriotic Movement

But the miracle of millions in Chinese Christianity would never have become a reality without certain other, more external factors. As the pagan emperor Cyrus once restored the fortunes of ancient Israel, so the atheistic communist government has found its own reasons to offer some support to the churches, including financial aid in the form of "back rents" for buildings occupied during the Cultural Revolution. It has suited the government's interests, in particular, given its longterm commitment to rapprochement with that great "Christian nation," the U.S.A., to show a certain friendliness toward the Christian churches and toward Christian delegations from abroad, such as ours.

Also, the government has actually done studies that show that Christians tend to be "more productive" economically than other groups, which is a commitment near and dear to the hearts of communist leaders. With a mundane irony, therefore, the "Protesant Ethic" seems to be winning the hearts of the pragmatically minded communistic authorities in the People's Republic.

(MORE)

444 Santmire

The government has also unintentionally created new conditions for the flourishing of Christianity, due its own reprehensible record during the Cultural Revolution and due to the shallowness of much Marxist education to which generations of students have been subjected. As a worldview, in other words, the Marxism of Mao Zedong seems to be in trouble in China today.

A group of "atheist" medical students with whom I spoke laughed derisively at the Maoist slogan "Serve the People," when I mentioned it. They had been disallusioned by the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. They had been bored to death by years of classes in Marxism at every educational level. They told me forthrightly that they were chiefly concerned with their own careers. But I detected a deeper spiritual yearning beneath their protestations. No wonder some of their peers have found their way to the churches.

Will this Chinese miracle of millions continue to reduplicate itself? That depends on many variables, of course.

Who knows whether the pendulum of Chinese life might swing toward a time of oppression and persecution of religion once again? Who knows whether Chinese Christians themselves will continue to be able to reach out compellingly to their non-Christians friends, once the generation which was forged by the crucible of the Cultural Revolution has passed? Who knows whether the authenticity of the the churches' witness will survive, if the churches themselves continue to prosper and if their members continue to become more affluent? It may be, as some have observed, that the real enemy of the Christian faith is not persecution but prosperity.

But for now, at least in the eyes of friendly compatriots from abroad, it appears that the forces behind the making of this miracle of millions in Chinese Christianity have not yet run their course.

XXXX

Santmire
527-7792
236-0492