

CHURCH ALIVE IN CHINA!

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China is an incredible country, where so much lies under the surface – quite literally. Here I have in mind not just the great terra-cotta army of more than 7,500 warriors buried just a few miles away from the ancient capital of X'ian, but also the 750'000 creators of the terra-cotta army who were buried alive immediately after they had finished their work! More significantly, millions of tourists make their way around the great sights of China – they visit X'ian and see the terra-cotta army, they take a cruise on the great Yangtse River and see the Three Gorges, and in Beijing they see the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, and go for a drive to the Great Wall of China – and yet they do not see the amazing things that God is doing in China today. My friends, the church is alive in China – it is extraordinarily alive – against all expectations.

Let me give you a history lesson¹. It will take a little while, so please be patient.

If church traditions are to be believed, the Gospel first came to China around 60 AD. Thomas, the Apostle, went to India, and then to China – and then returned to India, where he died. So the story goes – but on the whole people did not believe that Thomas-in-China story, until in 2008 two Frenchmen drew attention to some bas-reliefs in Kongwangshan, which apparently suggest that Thomas went from India to China by sea, because of an outbreak of unrest on the Old Silk Road through central Asia. Whatever the truth, the alleged visit of Thomas is of little relevance to the church in China today.

Further down the path of church history, there have been two other 'false starts' for the implantation of Christianity in China before the Christian presence became permanent.

The first was in 638 AD when a group of Nestorians built the first Christian church in China in Chang'an. At that time there were 21 Nestorian monks in China, probably all Persian. There is a famous Nestorian monument, a copy of which used to be in Spurgeon's College, which tells of the Chinese emperor of the time welcoming these foreign missionaries. In the words of the edict of Emperor Taizong, the message of Bishop Aluoben (or Alopen) "is mysterious and wonderful beyond our understanding. The message is lucid and clear; the teachings will benefit all; and they shall be practiced through the land". Sadly, by the beginning of the 10th century Christianity had died out – and there were no Christians left.

The second was in the 13th century when Pope Innocent IV sent two different Franciscan-led diplomatic-religious missions to the Mongols. At one stage these missionaries had some success. Indeed, there is a report of some 6000 baptisms taking place in 1305. But the

¹ My main source is *A New History of Christianity in China* (Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2012) by Daniel H. Bays

missionary effort collapsed and by the end of the 14th century the church seems to have disappeared.

It was not until the 16th century that the Roman Catholics had more success. Around 1582-1583 the Jesuits gained permission to settle in China – the most famous of these Jesuit missionaries was Matteo Ricci, who died in 1610

Then came the Protestants in the 19th century. The great pioneer Protestant missionary was Robert Morrison of the London Missionary Society. He it was who published the first systematic grammar of Chinese, a three volume Chinese-English dictionary, and most importantly, the Bible in Chinese – this Morrison Bible is still in use. The Baptist Missionary Society were soon on the scene: as a young person I used to be taken out to a Chinese restaurant by Mali Brown, the daughter of the great Baptist missionary to China, Dr Williamson, who produced the best-selling book, *Teach Yourself Chinese*. There were also the independents – people like Hudson Taylor, Mildred Cable and Francesca French, Gladys Aylward, and many others. Very soon China became the largest mission field in the world. Christian schools, Christian universities, and Christian hospitals were established.

It's a great story, and yet a story which eventually appeared to end in failure. For with the creation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and its Marxist dogma that religion was socially retrograde and doomed to extinction, the churches found themselves well and truly out of favour. With the beginning of the Korean War in June 1950, when American and British troops lined up with the South Koreans against the North Koreans and their Chinese allies, things went from bad to worse. All the missionaries were thrown out; and Christians began to be persecuted. The 1950s were not a happy time. What's more, the leaders of the Chinese church seemed not to have it in them to face up to the challenges of the day. So much so, that China watchers began to believe there was no hope for the church. It looked as if the Chinese church could not survive without foreign patronage. The number of open churches was shrinking, all the pastors were aging, and very few new pastors were coming forward. Certainly as far as Protestants were concerned, in the early 1960s there was no sign that the Chinese church could survive. And although there were many more Roman Catholics than Protestants, even the future of the Roman Catholic Church was in doubt. There seemed to be no hope. There seemed to be no way in which the Christian church could adapt itself to Chinese culture and become a genuine Chinese church.

Then came Chairman Mao – and the so-called 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution'. In 1966 at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution were about 800,000 Protestants and perhaps as many as 3 million Roman Catholics. But now all religions were abolished and all houses of worship were shut. The Red Guards run amok, hounding not just the intelligentsia but also Christians. Homes were ransacked, people were beaten, many were sent to prison, some were killed. To be sure, the Cultural Revolution was not aimed primarily at Christians or Christianity. There was the wholesale transportation of the so-called 'bourgeois' into the countryside. During this period some 30 million people are thought to have died – millions more lives were

destroyed. And amongst these millions were Christians. These were ten very dark years for China in general, and for the Christian Church in particular. For the government was intent on eradicating Christianity from China.

But in the words of Tertullian, the 2nd century Christian theologian, ‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church’. And this happened in China. Churches, which all had to go underground, proved to be amazingly innovative – and not only survived, but flourished. At this point I confess I am confused by a bewildering disarray of statistics. According to my friend Terry Calkin, at the end of the cultural revolution which came about because of the death of Mao, there were now 20 million Protestants. A more conservative figure comes from Daniel Bays, who reckons that there were five to six million Protestants. But whatever the figure, the church had grown amazingly – at the very least by a factor of five or six. And since then the church has continued to grow at an amazing rate. Again, there are no agreed statistics. Writing in 2007, the journalist Rob Gifford states: “Even conservative estimates put the total number of Christians at around 75 million (about 15 million Catholics and about 60 million Protestants). That is only about 6% of the population, but is still more than the 70 million members of the Chinese Communist Party”². That was 2007. However, when I recently went online for up-to-date statistics, figures of 120 million were being quoted – indeed, some have even claimed there are 180 million Christians in China.

To quote Rob Gifford again: “The Party has now quietly accepted that it will not be able to get rid of religion. In fact, amazingly, Chinese officials will admit off the record that Chinese people *need* something to believe in”³.

What has brought about this sea-change? According to Terry Calkin, it has been the loss of hope. The Cultural Revolution destroyed all hope. In this situation Christians were able to speak of their hope in Christ. In a dark world, the Chinese Christians shone like stars as they held fast to the word of life (Phil 2.15,16) and their non-Christian neighbours took notice.

Was this what happened? I don’t really know for sure. But one thing for certain, the Cultural Revolution, in getting rid of Confucianism, also destroyed the basic values of Chinese life. As I understand it, Confucianism is about bringing society into harmony with the cosmic order by adhering to certain ethical principles. These ethical principles were to be exemplified in the behaviour of rulers and officials. Confucius said: ‘When a prince’s personal conduct is correct, his government is effective without the issuing of orders. If his personal conduct is not correct, he may issue orders but they will not be followed’. Today however, the Chinese government is corrupt – and so is everybody else.

² Rob Gifford., *China Road: One Man’s Journey into the Heart of Modern China* (Bloomsbury, London 2007) 139

³ Gifford 139

Rob Gifford quotes a Shanghai radio star, Ye Sha, who runs a radio phone-in show called 'Shanghai State of Mind', which goes out from midnight to 1 am every night. She said to him: "People, especially young people... are lost". She spoke of the loss of morality. There was a time when there was an ethical framework. "Now what is right and what is wrong" She went on: "No one knows how to be a person any more. We are training technicians. We are not training people".⁴

But my history lesson is not finished. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, religious belief and activities were largely de-criminalized. During the Christmas season 1978 Protestant churches began to re-open, and Catholic churches soon after. Seminaries also were re-established. But the churches and seminaries were expected to 'register'. Yet not all churches were prepared to register. As a result we now have the division between the registered churches and the so-called house churches.

Let me talk about the registered churches. Together they form the Three Self Patriotic Movement. American right-wing evangelicals in particular have been very critical about the registered churches. They have talked about the leaders of such churches being a bunch of political stooges – and have suggested that the only true Christians are to be found in the house churches. But the reality is that registering a church with the state is not a sin – we do it in this country. As a church, for instance, we are a registered charity; and our building is 'solemnised' for weddings. Furthermore, as good Baptists we should be particularly in favour of the principles underlying the Three Self movement: for the three self movement is about being self-governing, self-funding, and self-propagating. [Incidentally, one reason why the Roman Catholic Church has not grown as fast as the Protestant Church is that their ties with Rome have made it difficult to show the same independency]. As for being patriotic, it is not a sin to love one's country – indeed, surely as churches we should heed Jeremiah's advice and seek the welfare of the city (Jer 29.7), and presumably too the welfare of the country.

The house churches are a mixed bunch. Some are very Pentecostal, and some are not. Many of them are tightly organised and very authoritarian – indeed there is one group where the 'great servant' is able to inflict physical punishment such as lashes on the disobedient!⁵ Many house churches would never fit into a person's home. In Beijing I met a couple who belonged to a 1000-strong house church, which meet on a Sunday in groups of 200! One thing for certain, these house churches should not be described now as 'underground' churches – in today's China nothing is 'underground', everything is known to the State. Indeed, the Beijing couple spoke of how their Sunday meetings were regularly visited by the police. My understanding is that increasingly there is co-operation between the registered and non-registered churches.

⁴ Gifford 22,,23

⁵ 'The Three Grades of Servants': see Bays 196.

I gather that the strength of the Chinese church has been in the countryside. But sometime between the late 1980-s and the late 1990s, Christian growth slowed in the countryside and grew stronger in China's cities. Initially the urban congregation were typically middle or lower-middle class; but within the last 20 years many well-paid professionals can be found in urban churches. However, it apparently remains true that the intellectual level of the registered churches in particular is quite low. Of the 18 Protestant seminaries, only one operates at university level. Yet now amazingly, Chinese intellectuals are interesting themselves in the Christian faith. So much so that there are now more than 20 university-based centres or institutes in China focussed on the study of Christianity!

The Christian churches now experience a good deal of religious toleration. True, they do not enjoy full freedom of religion. In particular, evangelism among children and young people is a non-go area. No proselytism among the under-16s is allowed.

This then is the background to my trip to China in November 2012. At the invitation of Terry Calkin, the recently retired founding pastor of Green Lane Christian Centre, a mega-church in Auckland, New Zealand, I was invited to teach in the seminary in Wuhan. Wuhan is an industrial city of some 10 million people, lying on the river Yangtse, in the central Chinese province of Hubei. We went under the auspices of China Partner, a small German-American evangelical organisation, which seeks to train leaders in the registered churches.

Wuhan Seminary, which is based in the old Wuhan YMCA, is one of 18 seminaries in China. Over recent years it has grown and now has over 300 students, many of whom are women. When I asked my class of 60 students how many of them were from non-Christian homes, almost all put up their hands. When I asked them how many of them came from churches with more than 500 members, most of them put up their hands. Very few of them knew any English, and so I was totally reliant on translators. Fortunately the Principal of the Seminary, Rev Wang Zhenren, was able to speak English – he proved to be a very kind host.

In the week I was there I taught three short courses: the first on the four Gospels; the second on Jesus' approach to the use of power; and the third on Biblical patterns of leadership and their application to today's church. In talking to the principal of the seminary, it is clear that there is a real shortage of teachers with knowledge and experience. I dare to believe that Terry and I were able to make a contribution to the formation of the next generation of Christian leaders in China.

The highlight of my visit was an invitation to preach at the two main morning services at Wuhan's 2000 membership 'Thanksgiving Church'. Incidentally, this is far from being the only church in Wuhan – there are many. If the truth be told, at the beginning of the day I had no expectations of anything special. Indeed, when I realised that the service was being led by the General Secretary of the Three Self Patriotic Movement in Hubei Province, I had even less expectation – for in my ignorance I dismissed her as just an 'ecclesiastical bureaucrat'. But how wrong I was! To my amazement this lady came alive in a way I could never have imagined –

and so too the church. I was, for instance, taken aback by the vibrancy of the prayers: at the end of every sentence of each prayer the congregation shouted out 'Amen'. I was staggered by the passionate way in which the congregation affirmed the Apostles' Creed – it was almost as if it was over against all the principalities and powers they shouted out 'I believe in God, the Father almighty.... I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.... I believe in the Holy Spirit'. Never before had I heard Christian belief so strongly affirmed. The Lord's Prayer too was no mere recitation – the people meant what they said. Interestingly there was nothing special about the sung worship – the preacher with a foreign guest in mind had chosen the Chinese version of "Now thank we all our God," "What a friend we have in Jesus," and "Count your blessings," name them one by one. My role was to preach the sermon. I had chosen to preach on the parable of the Lost Sheep in Luke 15. If I am honest, when I had first written it, I had thought I had done a pretty good job, providing a really fresh way into a well-known story. However as with the help of an interpreter I began to preach it in Wuhan, I was less certain and began to think I had been too clever. As I came toward the end of my sermon I said: "The Good News is that God loves you passionately – indeed, the more outside the Kingdom you are, the more he loves you. And what's more, when we do repent, when we do turn back to God, there is always forgiveness. So turn back to God – come home and discover his love for you". The worship leader took up the appeal and with great passion invited people to come forward to receive Christ – and to my amazement come forward they did. In the first service two, and then in the second service 19 people, came forward in response. They were invited to raise their hand in a sign of allegiance to Christ as the words on their 'decision card' were read out – and then they were led off to begin a series of three months' baptismal preparation. I was enormously humbled at what God had done. What's more, not only was there joy in heaven, but there was also great joy in my heart too, to see these lost sheep found. It was an experience I shall never forget.

For the record, Bibles were everywhere in evidence. With my own eyes I saw them on sale in two church bookshops in Wuhan; and at the church when I preached on Sunday I saw many people with Bibles of their own. While I was there *China Daily*, the government English-language newspaper, had a prominent article highlighting the fact that China is the world's biggest publisher of Bibles. Indeed, in the week I was there the Amity Printing Company in Nanjing was celebrating its 100-millionth Bible. And yet as a quick survey on the web will reveal, there are still evangelical groups in the USA promoting Bible smuggling. It is as if they cannot come to terms with the freedom our Chinese brothers and sisters now enjoy.

True, there are still problems. Indeed, one major problem is the fact that in some of the rural areas of China around 60% of the Christian population is illiterate – most of whom are women. As a result the Bible Society here in Britain is backing an initiative by the Chinese Provincial Christian Councils to raise the literacy level of such Christians. The goal is to have at least 30,000 people in rural areas of China benefiting from the programme each year; each receiving a Bible at the end of the programme to read for themselves. Frankly these American evangelicals would do much better to support these public initiatives, rather than to engage in underhand activities.

In conclusion, the reality is that the church is well and truly alive in China. And this gives me hope – not least for our own country. If the truth be told, the churches of the United Kingdom are for the most part in poor condition – humanly speaking for many of them there is little hope of survival. Furthermore, our country in many ways has lost its moral bearings – as in China people appear to be no longer able to differentiate between right and wrong. And yet for me the lesson of China is that there is hope – hope that God can revive and transform his church, hope that God can work in the lives of many millions who at the moment seem to be beyond our reach. Our God is an amazing God!

Paul Beasley-Murray