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A Brief History of the Church in China

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I. WISE MEN FROM THE WEST

IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 635, A TRADE CARAVAN MADE ITS WAY SLOWLY BE-tween the western border area known as Da Qin and one of the wealthiest kingdoms on earth, the great Tang Empire. These traders from Damascus were growing wealthy themselves from the lucrative commerce with the people of the Middle Kingdom, supplying gold and spices for the even more valuable silks of the Chinese. But one member of the entourage on this particular trip would be remembered long after the spices had lost their flavor and the silks had frayed. Alopen, a young Nestorian monk, had braved the hazards of this two-year journey in order to bring the gospel message of his Lord to the people of the far East; Chang'an, the Tang capital and the eastern terminus of the trade route, was his destination. He would plant his religion among the powerful Buddhist estab-

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The history of the Christian church in China has been as difficult as it has been long. Now no longer a missionary movement, the church has won a place of acceptance in present Chinese society.

lishment, as had those who had preceded him from the west, the Manicheans and Zoroastrians.

Alopen met the Emperor Taicong and not only received an imperial decree to have several theological works translated into Chinese, but secured for his Nestorian faith official recognition as a religion of the empire. Nestorian Christianity had entered China at a propitious moment. Although it might have seemed natural for the Buddhist hierarchy to oppose the establishment of another religion within their domain, in fact the Buddhists had ascended to such a position of prestige and authority within the Tang dynasty that they were extremely tolerant of the small, virtually inconsequential religions that were finding their way into China from the west. Moreover, the influence of Buddhism within society proved to be so strong as to be normative in the formation of these small religious communities. The form taken by Nestorian Christianity in its earliest days in China tended to be monastic, and for this reason fit in well with the monastic traditions of Buddhism. By the eighth century, when a memorial tablet was erected in honor of Alopen's arrival in the Middle Kingdom a century earlier, Nestorian monks were referred to by use of the same Chinese ideogram as were Buddhist monks; and much of their literature that has subsequently been discovered reveals strikingly the degree to which Buddhist terms were used to translate Christian concepts.

Whether or not this process of indigenization might have been considered syncretistic soon became a moot point. Between 841 and 845, the new emperor, a fervent Taoist, initiated a persecution of Buddhism. Hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns were secularized, and thousands of temples and monasteries were destroyed. Nestorian Christianity, by this time closely linked with Buddhism in the popular consciousness, with its presence in society almost completely restricted to monastic communities, suffered accordingly from the indiscriminate suppression of non-Taoist sects. After more than two hundred years, Christianity's initial experiment in China came to an abrupt end.

II. The Middle Ages

It was not until the thirteenth century that the Christian west once again made serious attempts to make contact with China. The Mongols had by this time become the dominant power in central Asia, and were threatening the kingdoms of Europe to the west and China to the east. In an attempt to seek the appeasement, even the conversion, of the Mongols, the Council of Lyons in 1242 resolved to send an embassy to their antagonists. It was totally ineffective. The Franciscan John de Plano Caprini arrived before the Great Khan at Karakorum in 1246 and was dismissed with little more than an indulgent nod of recognition. A further attempt was initiated by Louis IX of France, who sent Franciscan William of Rubruck to the Khan in 1254, with results similar to the earlier embassy. Within twenty-five years, the Mongols had gone on to conquer China and establish the Yuan dynasty.

Apparently, it was the secular allegiances of the Franciscans that the Mongols objected to, and not their religion. Under the Yuan, Nestorian Christianity once again became an officially recognized religion, this time flourishing among groups

such as the Keraits and Uighurs, people of central Asia who acknowledged the suzerainty of the Mongols. Unlike the earlier period, these latter-day Nestorians were largely laity, with strong Asian identities. In fact, they resolutely opposed an attempt by the Franciscans to establish a foothold in China. The friar John of Montecorvino carried a letter from Pope Nicholas IV to Kublai Khan, arriving in the capital of Cambaluc (now Beijing) in 1294. Both Nicholas and Kublai had died during John's long journey, but he was received by the Mongol court and, over the strenuous objections of the Nestorians, allowed to establish a church in the city. Over the years, and with very little assistance, he managed to build up a Christian community of several thousand believers; he also translated the New Testament and Psalms into the Mongolian language. But by the time of his death in 1328, the Yuan dynasty was in decline and within forty years the Mongols had been driven from power by the Chinese, who founded what would be the last of the Chinese dynasties, the Ming. Although Christianity was tolerated, it remained closely associated in the minds of the Ming rulers with the previous foreign dynasty and quickly lost whatever influence it had achieved. In addition, central Asia was conquered by Islam, and the trade routes became less accessible due to the instability of the region. While China under the Ming did not become completely isolationist, it did tend to concentrate its energies on domestic concerns. Christianity is known to have survived in small communities for some time, but during most of the Ming dynasty the church was virtually non-existent in China. Once again the exigencies of history had closed the door on the gospel in the Middle Kingdom.

III. The Jesuits

With the rise of colonial expansionism in the late fifteenth century, emanating initially from the Iberian peninsula, the Roman Catholic church once again recognized the potential for Christian missionary activity in China. The papal bulls of demarcation issued by Alexander VI in 1493 literally divided the world equally between Spain and Portugal, with the obligation imposed upon those maritime powers to promote Christianity in the countries within their hemispheres of influence. So it was that Christians once again made their way to China, this time in the great sailing ships of the Portuguese. Yet, for all their self-assured arrogance and bravado, China remained closed to the Europeans, until in 1550 they were allowed to settle on a small peninsula on the south coast of Guangdong Province known as Macau.

As one contemporary observer complained, "to wish to enter China is to attempt to reach the moon." The Ming dynasty was extremely wary of the pesky foreigners who had come so suddenly knocking on their gate and made it very clear that they wanted nothing to do with either their trade or their religion. During the mid-sixteenth century several futile attempts to enter China were made by Roman Catholic missionaries, not least of all Francis Xavier. He had arrived in Japan in 1549 and achieved considerable success there, but died not far from Macau in 1552, his dream of Chinese conquests unfulfilled. It was not until 1582

that a young Jesuit named Matteo Ricci finally made his way beyond the bamboo curtain and established a long-term Christian presence in China.

From the beginning Ricci and his confreres attempted to adapt their mode of dress and life to their new surroundings, no doubt partly out of a keen sense of survival, but also convinced that the gospel message would only be heard clearly by the Chinese if it were set firmly within the context of their own culture. This was a slow, cumbersome and ultimately divisive process. For almost twelve years the Jesuits in China identified themselves with Buddhism, certain that the Buddhist community represented the religious center in China. Over time, however, they came to realize that their future in China lay not with the declining fortunes of the Buddhists, but with the powerful Confucian scholar-officials. Ricci made it his business to study the Confucian classics and through doing so came to the conclusion that, in its purest form, Confucianism was not a religion but a highly articulated ethical system, and one which in its essence did not conflict with Christian doctrine.

Ricci and the Jesuits who came to work with him over the years made their way slowly toward Beijing, moving from city to city, establishing their credentials as scholars and scientists along the way. They brought with them not only the gospel message, which Ricci had presented through several published works in Chinese, but examples of the finest European technology of the day, including maps, clocks, and lenses. It was this body of knowledge, combined with Ricci's erudition, that finally earned the Jesuits a place in the Ming capital in 1601. There they were successful in establishing a Christian presence and eventually drawing together a rather large and influential Christian community, not only in Beijing but throughout the empire; in addition, they were influential at the Ming court for years to come in the fields of astronomy and map-making.

Ricci was known as a patient man who sought to understand the Chinese culture; and much of the progress he made in being accepted by the Chinese came from his dedication to learning the ways of Chinese social custom and codes of behavior. The more he studied the more he came to believe that the practice of ancestor veneration was not a religious practice, but only a Confucian social ritual. As Paul Xu, perhaps the best known Chinese convert of the time, said, "Christianity...completes Confucianism." As such, the Jesuits declared, these rites should not be disallowed for Chinese converts to Christianity. It was on this point, known as the Rites Controversy, that Ricci and most of the Jesuits came into sharp conflict with other orders, especially the Franciscans and Dominicans, who sought to make their own, more radical, mark on Chinese culture; the latter viewed the rites as pagan rituals and the Jesuits as dangerous syncretists. The Vatican was eventually brought into the fray, and through the shamefully inept handling of the matter by the Pope's emissaries, as well as uncharitable belligerence on all sides, Christianity was suppressed by the emperor in 1722 and denounced as a heterodox sect. Small, struggling Christian communities would survive this debacle, but a robust Christian presence in China had once again succumbed to dynastic politics; and the Christian religion would remain a pariah well into the next century.

IV. The Protestant Era

The protestant impetus for world mission developed rather slowly after the reformation, but once momentum began to build in the late eighteenth century, it was not long before China became a central focus for the whole array of protestant denominations that had developed over the preceding three hundred years. The London Missionary Society (founded 1895) chose Robert Morrison, a young man of twenty-two, to be its first representative to the China field, and consequently the first protestant Christian missionary to enter China. It would have seemed natural for Morrison to have sailed to Canton, the only Chinese port then open to foreign trade, on one of the ships of the East India Company; but this British monopoly had strictly forbidden missionaries to travel on its ships. Morrison was forced to go first to the United States and book passage on an American ship to Canton, where he arrived in 1807. In the early years he found life extremely difficult, especially in securing someone to teach him the language. Still, within less than two years, Morrison had made such progress in learning Chinese that the East India Company hired him as an official translator. This position, far from distracting him from his primary goal of bringing the gospel to China, freed Morrison from the fear of penury and allowed him to concentrate on preparing Christian literature in the Chinese language. Amazingly, by 1819 he had achieved a translation of the entire Bible, along with various Christian pamphlets, portions of the *Book of Common Prayer*, and a Chinese-English dictionary.

Robert Morrison was just the first of hundreds of protestant and Roman Catholic missionaries who would enter China during the period that historian K. S. Latourette has called "the great century" of Christian mission. Although at the outset foreign commercial and government interests in China were uneasy about the presence of Christian missionaries, a close working relationship eventually developed among these groups. Following the First Opium War (1839-42), not only was the island of Hong Kong ceded to Great Britain in perpetuity, but five "treaty ports" were opened, allowing foreign trade and, more important for Christian missionaries, foreign residence. The gospel could now be preached openly in Canton (Guangzhou), Amoy (Xiamen), Foochow (Fuzhou), Ningpo (Ningbo), and Shanghai. Excursions into the vast interior of China were still forbidden to foreigners, but it was only a matter of time before the western powers forced that concession as well upon a weakening Ching government. Through the force of treaties coerced from the Chinese between 1858-60, the earlier treaty port provisions were effectively extended to include all of China. This was a humiliation for the Chinese, but provided Christian missionaries, for the first time in history, virtual carte blanche to evangelize the Chinese people. Progress was often slow and local resistance was at times unyielding and even violent. But foreigners were protected by a section of the treaties known as "extra-territoriality," which exempted them from the effect of Chinese laws, making them subject in most situations only to the laws of their own country. This provided relatively safe havens not only for the missionaries themselves but often for their converts as well. Mission groups were

eager to take advantage of this opportunity provided by the Lord, and over the following fifty years scores of Christian mission groups entered China, including the Berlin Missionary Society, the Rhenish Mission, Northern and Southern Baptists, American and English Presbyterians, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the Church of Scotland, the Dutch Reformed Church in America, the Church Missionary Society, the English Methodists, Lutherans from Scandinavia and North America, and the China Inland Mission.

China was a very large country, but with this many groups vying for a piece of the country to call their own, conflict and discord were bound to develop. In an attempt to reduce this tension to a minimum, a system of comity was developed, which by mutual agreement allowed for the assignment of various parts of China to particular denominational groups. As imperialistic as this may seem in retrospect, it did provide an important impulse toward ecumenical development among the various groups, which might not have taken place otherwise. In addition to agreements on field assignments, the missionaries also cooperated in areas such as theological education, Christian literature publication, medical work, and youth work. By 1895 there were approximately 50,000 Christians in China, served by about 1,300 missionaries, and the numbers continued to grow steadily. There continued to be local and periodic resistance to the spread of the Christian faith, the most dramatic coming in 1900 with the Boxer Rebellion, in which around 200 foreign Christians and 2,000 Chinese Christians were killed. Still, by the time of the fall of the Ching dynasty and the formation of the Republic of China in 1912, the number of Christians had risen to over one million (including protestants and Roman Catholics).

Finally, after more than a millennium, it seemed that Christianity had made a permanent place for itself in the Middle Kingdom. The old dynastic system had been replaced by a more modern leadership that sought innovation and looked to the west for cues on how to enter the twentieth century. Unfortunately, this was not always to the advantage of Christianity. The throes of social change emanating from the revolution were only beginning to be felt and would convulse the nation for decades to come. The church continued to grow, but was ineluctably drawn into the maelstrom of civil and foreign wars and internal controversies that defined China during the republican period.

Anti-Christian movements were symptomatic of this period. Around the time of the formation of the National Christian Council in 1922 (only one year after the founding of the Chinese Communist Party), an influential book was published by the China Continuation Committee: *The Christian Occupation of China*. It was considered the most comprehensive quantitative survey of any mission field up to that time. While the book was hailed by missionaries and Chinese Christians as an invaluable resource for evangelization, it was seen by Chinese nationalists, especially the students, as evidence of a conspiracy to impose mind control on the Chinese populace and ultimately to overthrow the government. Students, incensed at the thought of yet another incursion of foreigners into their motherland, in protest established the Student Anti-Christian Federation. This led to the forma-

tion of sympathetic groups throughout China. The movement quickly escalated into a vehicle for anti-Christian sentiment in general. There was a sharp drop in the number of missionaries in China between 1926 and 1928, but by the 1930s the number of protestant missionaries had risen to a high of over five thousand, with nearly six-hundred thousand protestant believers.

This interval taxed the resources of the Christian community in China to the extreme, but it also compelled the missions to institute progressive measures that otherwise might not have been undertaken, especially in the area of Chinese Christian leadership. By 1929 the National Christian Council had become a body solely represented by Chinese Christian churches rather than mission societies.

V. Modern China

In the midst of a situation of banditry and general deterioration, China was invaded by Japan in July 1937, thus beginning eight years of intense struggle for the existence of the nation. During this time hundreds of thousands of Christians made their way west, fleeing the Japanese invaders. Missionaries either were interned in prisoner-of-war camps, repatriated to their home countries, or joined their Chinese brothers and sisters in safe areas such as Sichuan Province. By the end of the war in 1945 Christianity in China was weak, but looking forward to a new day of growth and expansion. It was assumed that the difficult days were now over and that China could begin to rebuild and rejuvenate. But this was not to be. The war with Japan had only masked a simmering conflict between the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) and the Chinese Communist Party. The post-war period was for the Chinese people a misnomer; open hostilities erupted, prolonging the war situation for another five years. The ultimate victory of the communists was an unexpected and shocking development for Chinese Christians, especially for the missionaries. There were a considerable number of patriotic Chinese Christians during this time who saw the communists as the best hope for a nation that had sunk into warlordism and abject poverty. But the reaction of foreign mission groups to the communist ascendancy ranged from extreme skepticism to outright animosity. After all, they were avowed atheists; and stories from behind the communist lines of treatment of Christians who happened to be landlords was appalling. Although some missionaries remained in China until the early 1950s, most left between 1948 and 1950, finding refuge in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, and southeast Asia. A small number of Chinese Christians left with them, but the vast majority remained to make a life for themselves under the new regime.

In the early years there was a feeling among Christians that accommodation with the communists could be accomplished. Article 88 of the 1954 Constitution of the People's Republic of China gave citizens the right to "enjoy freedom of religious belief." Most mainline protestant denominations encouraged their members to cooperate with the government and to understand the rise of the Chinese Communist Party as a sign of God's providence. But as China entered the war in Korea in 1950 and anti-American sentiment grew, Christians increasingly came

under suspicion for having connections with foreign powers and were increasingly mistrusted throughout society.

It was also in 1950 that Chinese Christian leader Y. T. Wu visited Premier Zhou Enlai and developed the statement that has come to be known as the "Christian Manifesto." The manifesto was an attempt to clarify the position of the Chinese church vis-à-vis the new national reality, to move the church into a more overtly patriotic position, and to secure for the church certain assurances of official good will. Over strenuous objections from certain segments of the church, the manifesto was adopted by the National Christian Conference in October. This was the first substantive move toward establishing a Chinese church totally independent of western missions: a "three-self" church.

The three-self concept (self-supporting, self-governing, self-propagating) was one the missionaries had supported in principle for decades, but which had seldom been put into practice in any comprehensive way. The need for the church to survive within a revolutionary milieu made the immediate and radical adoption of the these principles inescapable. The year following the adoption of the manifesto, 1951, the Protestant Three-Self Reform Movement (later renamed the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement) came into being, with Y. T. Wu as chair. From this time forward, under the direction of the Religious Affairs Bureau of the State Council, pressure was put on the church to conform in thought and deed to the realities of the new China. Imperialistic influences were purged and lengthy study sessions were conducted to inculcate communist ideals. In the mass enthusiasm that resulted, numerous devoted Christian leaders were brought before accusation sessions and charged with being servants of imperialism. Even those who had never maintained a relationship with foreign church bodies and who, indeed, before the revolution had practiced the three selfs, were branded enemies of the state and imprisoned. It is difficult to say to what extent the Three-Self Movement in the early days of the People's Republic aided or encumbered the life of the church. That it was in the beginning a patriotic attempt to place the church in the service of the revolution goes without saying; but like most institutions in China at the time, it was caught up in the shifting crosscurrents of political, economic, and social forces far beyond its control. Subsequent movements such as the Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1956-57, in which intellectuals were encouraged to criticize the government and then severely repressed, and the Great Leap Forward that began in 1958, a disastrous economic experiment that resulted in the starvation of millions of peasants, kept Chinese society in a state of turmoil. The church survived this period, but only barely, and the worst was yet to come.

The year 1966 marked the beginning of what would come to be known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The reasons for the rise of ultra-leftism during this period are complex. The initial cry of the radicals, the so-called Red Guards, was for a repristination of the revolution, which seemingly had entered a period of stagnation. But this noble ardor soon degenerated into anarchy. Schools were closed and millions of young people were sent to the countryside to "learn from the peasants." Religion was one of the "four olds" that was to be uprooted

from society, so churches were closed, sometimes destroyed, and pastors and evangelists put to work in factories. It seemed that once again Christianity in China had succumbed to the vicissitudes of Chinese political history. Observers outside China knew of virtually no Christian activity during this period, and the church was thought to have disappeared.

As with all the major events in China during the first thirty years of the People's Republic, Mao Zedong figured significantly. It was his death in 1976 that finally brought an end to the Cultural Revolution. With the rise of Deng Xiaoping to power, a more moderate course toward economic and social liberalization was undertaken. The new constitution of 1978 once again allowed citizens the right to believe or not believe in a religion. The following year the Religious Affairs Bureau, inactive since the mid-sixties, was reactivated. Under an increasingly tolerant regime, it soon became apparent that the Christian church in China, far from having died out, had actually grown beyond all expectation. Driven underground during the Cultural Revolution, Christians were forced to meet secretly in homes. It was their witness to their Lord in circumstances of severe oppression that caused their numbers to multiply. It is estimated that in 1949 there were 840,000 protestant Christians in China. By 1980, that number had grown to over five million; and although current estimates vary and definitions of membership are sometimes vague, there are now at least thirteen million protestant Christians in China. Roman Catholic membership is said to number about five million.

This enormous increase in the number of Chinese Christians signaled the need for formal guidance and organization. In 1980, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) held its first meeting in more than ten years and organized a meeting later in the year at which a new ecclesiastical organization was formed, the China Christian Council (CCC). One of the chief features of the new protestant church polity is that it is "post-denominational." For the most part, all former denominational loyalties have been laid aside and Chinese Christians have come together as one body in Christ. At least, this is the official position and fervent hope of the China Christian Council. In reality, many Christians in China are not related to the TSPM/CCC organization, for various reasons. Some still have a deep distrust of the official church's close relationship with the communist government; others want to maintain their independence for theological reasons, believing that the true church exists only in the local congregation; still others have less admirable motives. In any case, whether to register with the government or not is no longer an option. In 1994, Ordinance 145 was signed by Premier Li Peng, requiring that all religious venues be registered with the government. Contrary to some interpretations of the ordinance, this does not require churches to join the TSPM or the China Christian Council. While it is true that this regulation places Christians more directly under the control of the state, at the same time the ordinance, and others relating to it, provides Christians with a basis in national law for founding and maintaining places of worship; it offers legal recourse in the face of the arbitrary local persecution that still plagues the church.

A deep commitment to serve society is one of the hallmarks of the resurrected

Chinese church, and this has found official expression through the Amity Foundation, a Christian-initiated social service organization that, in addition to printing millions of Bibles, assists society through rural development projects, public health programs, and an English-teaching program.

As China enters the twenty-first century, it is poised to become one of the most influential nations in the world. The Chinese Christian church finds itself in a position of unparalleled strength and status, ready to take its place as a significant influence in a society hungry for change. Indigenous leadership is developing, and younger leaders are beginning to emerge and assume responsibility for the direction the church will take in the life of the new China.

The Chinese church has much to share. The ongoing struggle to bring about reconciliation within the body of Christ in China is producing a strong self-identity that will allow the Chinese church to take a leading place in the global Christian community in the future. An emphasis on healing, prayer, and theological education (there are now twenty-five official centers of theological study and scores of short-term training courses) is creating a Christian community dedicated to seeking the will of God through both the study of scripture and theological reflection; it finds God's Spirit moving in miraculous ways.

Most of the history of Christianity in China has been a history of Christian mission. Now, although Christianity was known for over thirteen hundred years as a foreign religion, the faithful witness of Christians during the adversities of the past five decades has won for the church a place of acceptance in Chinese society. ⊕

FOR FURTHER READING

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