

Christianity in China: its promise and potential

PERHAPS NEVER HAS A COUNTRY AND A PEOPLE ATTRACTED more interest and fascination than does the People's Republic of China today. The rapid and radical transformation that China's immense population of some 1.3 billion people has endured in the past quarter century is surely without parallel in the modern age, if not throughout recorded history. What many fail to appreciate is the astounding capacity of the Chinese people to endure and absorb change. As one of the world's oldest continuous civilizations, the Chinese people take great pride in their culture and in the unique civic and social infrastructures they have developed over five thousand years of history. China's self-identification as The Middle Kingdom was less a geopolitical conception than a sense of its primacy and centrality within the known world. Therefore, political and economic fortunes and failures notwithstanding, China maintains an indefatigable posture of strength and an unwavering conviction of its destiny as a country and as a people. As we have so often seen in recent years, when its national pride is trampled or challenged, China's response tends to be characterized by a nationalistic fervor which undergirds its very existence as a nation state. Since the mid-nineteenth century, China has harbored a deep resentment over having been thwarted as a nation by the imperial Western powers which ruthlessly exploited its good will and hospitality. In this context, the Chinese perceive any external criticism as interference in their internal affairs. All of these sentiments are compounded by a profound sense of chagrin at having been denied the prestige and influence in world affairs which the Chinese believe commensurate with their status as both a great civilization and the largest population in the world.

christianity in historical perspective

There are several maxims to be born in mind when thinking about China. First and foremost is the importance of an historical perspective. Probably nowhere else is the old saying more true—those who fail to appreciate their history are doomed to repeat it. A second caution is to accept that since China is such a vast reality almost everything you may have heard about it is true, with the caveat that it is true only at one time or in one place. This presents interested observers (the typical American, at least) with the inconvenient fact that there are no short cuts, sound bites, or synoptic syntheses of the issues they seek to under-

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stand. Finally, most efforts to generalize, extrapolate, or predict what may, or may not, happen in China, tend to be wildly off the mark. Even the most astute sinologists often miss the mark, and few, if any, have envisioned some of the most radical and dramatic turns of events that have occurred in China in recent decades.

With these cautions in mind, the effort to learn about, understand, and interpret Christianity in China, especially since the founding of the PRC, can be a rewarding and inspiring endeavor. Obviously, it is necessary to begin with a brief reprise of the early historical development of Christianity in China as a prelude to a consideration of what may be the potential and promise of Christianity among the Chinese peoples in this the third Christian millennium.

SOME OBSERVERS HAVE COME TO TERM THE POST-1980 period as “the fifth era” of evangelization in China. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the previous four eras are understood to have been Nestorian Christianity in the seventh century, the Franciscan Mission to Peking in the thirteenth century, the Jesuits Mission in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the Modern Missionary Era from the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century.

Since the 1980s, many students of Christianity in China hold that for the first time, China's Christians themselves have succeeded in establishing an authentic and truly local Chinese Church, as they continue to assume their rightful role as the primary agents of evangelization of their culture and society. As the well respected China historian Jean Paul Wiest has observed, in one sense, “in the end of the missionary era was the beginning of an authentically Chinese Church.” Startling as it may seem, Wiest wrote in 1988: “Communist intervention might have been providential, because it removed the last signs of western influence from the Church of China, which was then forced to chart its own course.” Mission in China in this fifth era is the prerogative of the Chinese local Church itself. For the first time in their history, Chinese Christians have had to become self-sufficient, employ their own initiatives, and choose their own leadership.

In this new missionary context, expatriate or foreign missionaries will do well to understand themselves as partners in mission, ready and willing to stand in solidarity with

their Chinese sisters and brothers in the faith. As Sister-Churches in service of the Gospel, all are called to cooperate and collaborate with the local Church wherever possible—always from a posture of mutual respect and sensitivity to the direction set by the leadership of the Chinese Church.

As noted above, over the centuries, Christianity attempted on at least four distinct occasions to take root and flourish in China, but each time it met with limited success. Many consider Mateo Ricci and his Jesuit companions to have been the prototype and ideal China missionaries. Ricci and his Jesuits arrived in China in 1583 and successfully indigenized Christianity for the Chinese culture and the social mores of the time. However, their visionary and creative initiatives foundered on the shoals of the exclusivity and sense of superiority common to both Roman Catholicism and China's dynastic rulers of the age. After the infamous Chinese Rites Controversy, Pope Clement XI declared that certain Chinese Confucian practices involving the veneration of ancestors amounted to idolatry and were forbidden of believers. In retribution, the Chinese emperor banned Christian missionaries from China. This incident hung as a shadow over the Christian missionary enterprise in China for nearly two centuries. The papal proscriptions against Chinese ancestor veneration, formally rescinded in 1939, were not effectively removed until after Vatican Council II, when Chinese Christians were permitted to observe these traditional rites so central in family relationships.

the modern missionary era

The century from 1842 to 1949 was marked by many achievements of Christianity in China. Re-entering China under the flag of the imperial powers, Christianity was once again free to propagate throughout the entire country. Devout and faithful Christian communities were to be found everywhere, together with an extensive network of churches and a vast array of charitable and social works, educational programs and medical ministries to meet every need. Yet, the Church's position in China was not secure. Due to its association with the Imperial Powers and the several Unequal Treaties forced upon China by the western powers, Christianity in China remained under a dark cloud of suspicion. Many Chinese, their sense of sovereignty deeply wounded, continued to hinder the Christian missionary enterprise. This animosity continues to present

obstacles today in some quarters in China, especially among certain scholars and governmental authorities. For this reason during the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Mateo Ricci in China, the late Pope John Paul II took the occasion to apologize for the mistakes of the missionaries in this and other eras.

During this period, the seeds of Christian Faith were sown deeply and took root in the hearts and souls of the Chinese converts, as later developments would reveal. However, if one applies the criterion that the ultimate goal

A PROFILE OF THE CHINESE CATHOLIC CHURCH

(Figures are for both the Registered and Unregistered Catholic Communities)

Catholics	12,000,000
Dioceses	138
Churches	5,000+
Bishops	120
Priests	2,740
Sisters	5,200
Seminaries	46
Seminarians	1,380
Novitiates	60
Sisters in Formation	1,600

Source: U.S. Catholic China Bureau

of the missionary enterprise is to generate a truly authentic, local Catholic church with its own indigenous leadership and culturally appropriate expressions of theology and spirituality, the results in China were very much less than satisfactory. How little actually had been achieved in terms of fostering the emergence of a viable local Catholic Church in China became very evident in the late 1940s, when the Communist Revolution triumphed. In 1949, when almost all of the foreign missionaries were expelled from the country, Chinese Christian communities, particularly Catholics (and to a lesser extent Protestants) were left without pastors and experienced leadership, in what was still a largely rural-based Christianity,

comprised for the most part of economically impoverished peasant peoples.

the promise in a renewed Christianity

In the late 1970s, when China initiated its so called Reform and Openness Policy, under Deng Xiao Ping, public exercise of religious beliefs was once again permitted within certain prescribed policies and regulations. Within the Catholic tradition, Christians all over the world discovered to their astonishment that the Church in China, despite having been ruthlessly suppressed along with all other religious expression during the Cultural Revolution of 1960–1976, had not been totally destroyed. On the contrary, the zeal and piety of Chinese Christians had succeeded not only in preserving the Faith, but also in the handing of the faith to succeeding generations. Families in their villages and homes continued to baptize their children, teaching them to pray and imparting the basic tenets of Catholic doctrine. While enduring patiently, with profound trust in God's providence, they managed to increase the numbers of believers. Whereas estimates in the early 1950s were of some three-and-one-half million Roman Catholics and approximately seven hundred thousand Protestants, initial reports in the mid-1980s indicated

there were nearly eight million Catholics and more than one million Protestants in China.

Today, there are conservative estimates of twelve to fifteen million Roman Catholics and even more amazingly, eighteen to twenty million Protestant Christians. These figures are disputable depending on one's criteria for "counting sheep." Perhaps the expression "God Only Knows" is never more applicable than for the question of how many Christians there are in China. But no matter how you are counting, the best kept secret in Christendom until very recently has been the growth and flourishing of Christianity in China, not only during the repression and suffering of some three decades but even, some would say, "because of that repression and suffering." Chinese Christians were tested in the fire and were not found wanting.

growth as a mature Christianity

Although growth in the sheer numbers of baptized Christians is important, this is not the first concern of the Church in China today. In point of fact, given the reality of a population greater than one and a quarter billion people, Chinese Christians of whatever persuasion, together still constitute but a tiny percentage of the population. The historical and cultural mindset alluded to at the beginning of this essay influences the mentality and consciousness of the Chinese people—the vast majority of whom will not likely come to belief in Christianity anytime soon. Charged with the primary task of proclaiming the Gospel in contemporary China, both Chinese Christians and western Christians who would share that mission with them need to be cognizant of the realities in which they seek to witness to the Gospel: a society permeated by rampant materialism and a consumerism unlike anything seen even in China's most opulent dynasties.

There are also the barricades of deeply entrenched Marxist philosophy and fragments of an atheistic ideology which continue to challenge Christian teachings. Facing this reality, China's Christians must develop a capacity for dialogue—not only with their co-religionists, but also with those of a much more antithetical mindset. There are still many Chinese who harbor deep seated animosity and prejudice towards Christianity. Exacerbating this situation, some tenacious fundamentalist sects and quasi-religious movements from abroad continue to give Christianity a bad name by attempting to proselytize in China in violation of local religious law and policy.

church and state in a new era

To fully understand the Church in China and its status within the state apparatus, to say nothing of the vacillating religious policies of the Beijing regime, is well beyond the limitations of this essay. Rather here I prefer to focus on the promise of the Church in China—construed to mean the Church as the People of God—and upon the Church's mission to be a witness, sign, and instrument of the Gospel message in the same full measure as every other local church. Based on my encounters with Christians—especially Catholics—in China over the past fifteen years, the theological concept of the Church as the People of God seems most suitably to portray the irrepressible and largely uncountable millions of Christians living in China today. They are themselves Living Temples, sisters and brothers in the Lord, whose enduring witness to the Gospel sets before us all a model of fidelity and an enduring witness to God's providential love and care for the universal Church. As such, the Church in China has been and remains today an integral and essential component of the still emerging World Church.

In an essay written in 1981, at a time when few believed there was any trace of Christianity left in China, the famous theologian Karl Rahner wrote of the gradual transition then underway in the West towards a World Church, which he observed was "present to a varying extent in all parts of the world and everywhere becoming a genuine element of all cultures and nations." Rahner astutely added the caveat, that we ought "not forget nor assume that we can leave unanswered the obscure question of . . . China," a Nation which, then as now, comprised one fourth of the world's people. At that very time, the Church in

China was on the brink of a virtual "resurrection" as Christians all over the country courageously began the process of recovering and renewing their churches and re-constituting their communities of Faith—earnestly bent on renewing and restoring bonds of communion with the Universal Church.

In the more than two astonishing decades since, Christian believers in China have struggled to re-invigorate and extend these communities of Faith, to restore and rebuild not only churches, but seminaries and programs for formation of religious women and training of new generations of lay leadership, and to establish programs for social and medical ministries. All this has been achieved with only the barest of resources, but with vast stores of enduring courage and commitment

As the Church in China continues its journey in this third Christian millennium, it faces new challenges to move beyond the sanctuary and engage in the public square.

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Chinese Christians have the immense task of giving prophetic witness and service to the rapidly developing and radically changing society that is China. If its present trajectory continues, China certainly will, in due course, come to exercise the global power and leadership it has long sought and is already exercising in the Asian region. Unfortunately, political regimes and the media in the West tend to view China as an adversary or competitor for their own economic and social prestige. It may seem an exaggeration to suggest that Christianity in China has the potential to broker the peaceful emergence of China within the global community of states. But in this regard, Daniel Bays, an historian of Chinese Christianity, some time ago suggested that Chinese Christians could ease China's entry into the global community by making significant contributions to the development of civil society in China. Bays's view is grounded in the potential for Chinese Christians, in particular the new and more educated entrepreneurs in urban settings to broker this transition. Bays cited reports of rapidly growing numbers of Protestant Christians as "a significant sub-set of the emergent middle class" who could become catalysts in the country's transition to a new transnational civilization.

Christianity as prophetic servant

Looking at the Church in China today, and reflecting on its call to prophetic servanthood for the common good and well-being of the Chinese people, there are several possible avenues through which it might fulfill this call. Among these, one could cite the Chinese peoples' desire to live in a world of harmony and peace, to see that justice be mediated to weaker members of society, and to preserve right relationships among peoples that foster mutual respect, tolerance, and accommodation of diversity. With more than fifty-some ethnic minority peoples living within its borders, there is much that could be learned from traditional Chinese social organization.

In the Chinese language, the ideogram for the term Crisis contains two inherently contrasting meanings: one signifying opportunity—the other risk (or danger). This offers a useful paradigm to help us grasp the complexity involved as China weathers the crisis of radically re-structuring its economic, social, and political systems (albeit the latter is as yet held under tight control). It also helps to appreciate implications in the relationship between religion and state in China. In this regard, it is necessary to keep in mind that although the PRC government officially encourages atheism, many millions of Chinese people are permitted to exercise their religious beliefs in one of the five major religions officially sanctioned in China today: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and a bifurcated Christianity that the authorities in China persist in giving two names, Catholicism and [Protestant] Christianity. Officially, seventy million Chinese people are reported to have some religious belief. However these state statistics are belied by

vastly larger numbers of adherents claimed by each of these traditions.

Some historians of Christianity in China make reference to the fact that the genius of Mateo Ricci in dealing with the Qing [Ching] Emperor in the early seventeenth century was to exploit creatively all the opportunities and openings he encountered, albeit doing so within a very limited legal framework and under the strict protocols prevailing in that era. For the first time since the suppression of all foreign missionary activity and engagement with Chinese culture and society in the 1950s, such opportunities are once more open not only to Chinese Christians but to those of us who wish to support and serve with them in this new and challenging missionary moment. More to the point, we must accept that we can support them only in a way radically different from the traditional missionary mode with which most Americans are familiar. The exercise of religious belief in China continues to be circumscribed by rules, regulations, and protocols imposed by the ruling regime, which often hinder the Church's growth and development. But then again, Ricci and the early Jesuits at the Beijing Court were also circumscribed by the protocols and proscriptions of their time, yet they creatively found a viable *modus operandi* that led to the acceptance of and approbation for Christianity by the Emperors themselves.

Benoit Vermander, Director of the Ricci Institute in Taipei, Taiwan, and a contemporary Jesuit scholar who walks in the footsteps of Mateo Ricci, helpfully has elucidated the challenge and opportunity for Christianity in China today in terms of "presenting Christianity as a living interlocutor with Chinese culture." Christianity can contribute to a cultural redefinition that both the Chinese leadership and the people require in order to re-interpret their history and ultimately to rid themselves of the disappointments and disillusionments of their past attempts to become a modern nation state. In this way, the Chinese people will be empowered to assume roles of influence and authority appropriate to their civilization and culture—rich with gifts and insights essential for the achievement of prosperity, justice, and peace for themselves and the global community.

The new China, of the Peoples Republic of China, already on the threshold of the second half of its first century of existence, urgently requires a creative re-invention of its traditional value system and moral categories. In Vermander's terms, it needs to "employ new interpretive models by which to make sense of the past, find common ground in the present, and develop a sense of shared purpose and meaning for the future." On a mutually acceptable basis of equality, reciprocity, and respect, Christianity has much to offer the Chinese people in their quest for a "new spiritual civilization," a term frequently used even by the Chinese regime, as it seeks to galvanize the masses under the rubric of the "United Front." This new spiritual civilization is perhaps another way of

describing Mao's visionary ideal from the early years of the Communist revolution—a vision which the Chinese people tragically failed to realize due to Mao's degeneration into a brutal dictator.

the quest for reconciliation and unity

After some twenty years of the so-called “Reform and Openness” policies, China still stands in need of a second generation of transformation. China can become a vibrant civilization at once consistent with traditional Chinese culture, the best of Confucian virtues and evangelically imbued with Gospel values. In order to achieve this ideal, Chinese Christians, as well as other religious believers are challenged to avoid conflict and confrontation with political power and authorities. In one of his earliest communiqués to the Chinese people, Pope John Paul II stated unequivocally that “there should be no opposition or incompatibility in being at once truly Christian and authentically Chinese.” On numerous other occasions, John Paul expressed this same hope “to overcome all the obstacles and find an appropriate way and adequate structures to resume dialogue and keep it constantly open.”

This remains a formidable challenge while the leaders of the PRC regime continue to have an almost “sacral sense” of themselves as the final arbiters of China's political and legal culture, not unlike the emperors of the dynasties of old. For their part, Chinese Christians must creatively devise new ways to put into practice Christian creeds and teachings which stress forgiveness, reconciliation, harmony, and peace. Stances of confrontation and dissidence, even if justified and grounded in human and natural rights, need to be held in tension with the priority of finding pathways to reconciliation and healing. Bearing in mind the Gospel admonition to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's,” it is imperative to respect relationships and observe rites. In China, rites count every bit as much and more than the rights so dear to Westerners. It will require great patience and perseverance to remain in the dialogue while seeking the common ground, a truly Christian stance proposed in the respected Christian sinologist Phillip Wickeri's book by that title.

Within the Christian Churches in China today, this dynamic of conflict and confrontation plays out both internally and externally. For a myriad of reasons, there are factions and divisions within the churches in China. These sap the vitality and capacity of local Christian communities to witness to the Gospel and share their gifts in prophetic

service to a society sorely in need of every facet of Christian ministry.

Ideals of reconciliation and harmony become ever more elusive when so much focus is on structural divisions caused by external political pressures. By and large much of the divisiveness within the churches in China and between the Church and the state at the present time actually arise from plain old avarice and inordinate human desires for power and control. Much of this is simply a humanly sinful spin off from the natural human quest for material well-being. It is most regrettable when members of the Chinese Diaspora and other Christians who want to be in mission with Christians in China take sides in these conflicts, thereby serving to exacerbate the divisions and further weaken the Body of Christ in China.

The call for forgiveness and reconciliation in no way suggests that the suffering and difficulties endured by Chinese Christians for so many years—and even continuing in various ways and in different places in China today—are to be discounted or forgotten. Rather

what is needed is a new discourse of forgiveness and reconciliation, which, while telling the story of the trials and tribulations, the sufferings and survival, and of the fears and hopes of Chinese Christians for the past fifty years, does so in a narrative of forbearance and compassion that will foster an environment in which Christian charity, love, and unity will flourish. It will require partners willing to listen and discern with sensitivity and respect; partners able to tolerate frustrations and the ambiguities of living with constraints and limitations; partners with a capacity to risk difficulties and misunderstandings—all in the quest to seize and exploit the many opportunities that actually exist to proclaim and witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in China.

partnership in mission

In approaching China, it is always necessary to keep open minds and hearts, freeing ourselves to listen, so as to understand in new ways. It is necessary to go beyond the headlines and sound bites of the media. The lived reality for many Chinese Christians today is a far cry from what is extrapolated from given events or incidents by the media or those with their own agendas for China. Standing in solidarity with China's Christians means embarking on a spiritual voyage into their lives and their faith experiences; risking to share all that they have suffered and continue to suffer with enduring patience, vibrant hope, and courage.

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There are numerous ways to partner with Christians in China in service of the Gospel. The easiest and most important is to pray for the Church in China. For those willing and qualified, there are actually many areas of service open to expatriates—especially in the field of education among China’s very youthful population. For those willing and able to learn the Chinese language, there are opportunities to teach in seminaries and bible schools; material resources are needed to subsidize the education and formation of Chinese clergy, religious and laity. Both human and financial resources are needed to subsidize Church sponsored social and medical ministries in China, an area in the public domain where religiously affiliated groups are increasingly welcomed. HIV/AIDs is a rampant and growing problem in China, one vastly under-acknowledged by the authorities. Many young Sisters currently are being trained and equipped to respond both medically and spiritually to this widespread tragedy already of crisis proportions in China.

In our own country, parishes, faith-based organizations, and institutions can welcome Chinese students and scholars, invite and host exchanges with leadership in local communities, organize visits and study groups to China to meet and engage with Chinese Christians in a myriad of ways that will support their efforts to serve the people and witness to the Gospel in their daily lives. In so doing, however, it is imperative to refrain from judging and criti-

cizing Chinese Christians and their leaders for choices they make to sustain a vibrant Christianity, expressed through a viable local Chinese Church that provides a relevant witness to contemporary Chinese society, despite the difficult and challenging political climate.

To be friends of the Chinese people requires humility and respect. It takes a capacity for living with ambiguity and uncertainty, abiding within the legal framework prescribed for the work of Christian ministry and witness in China today. Those of such good will and courageous and creative imagination will find multiple opportunities to serve and partner with Chinese Christians in an enduring witness to the Gospel—as they find their own prophetic voice to call into being a new China and a renewed people, transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and dedicated to work for justice, prosperity, and peace for the peoples of the earth. ✠

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BETRAYAL

When night opened its black mouth
To swallow me, I thought of Jonah,
And the whale, that liquid dark
Blooming like a Venus Flytrap to suck
Him into the belly of such deep despair:
Death, surely, Jonah must have thought,
Until the whale spit him out, and he saw,
As if for the first time, dawn rising bright
To lick sharp waves. As I, still trapped
In this bleak womb, sometimes glimpse
Through tender teeth, light shimmer
On a seabird’s wing.

Sarah Rossiter