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Item Type	Article
Authors	Beasley-Murray, Paul
Publisher	Baptist Ministers Fellowship
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Download date	2026-11-19 21:56:10
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/159530

Church alive in China!

by Paul Beasley-Murray

Millions of tourists make their way around the great sights of China—they visit X'ian to see the terracotta 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—yet they do not see the amazing things that God is doing in China today. The church is extraordinarily alive in China—against all expectations. I will briefly explore its history.[1]

Tradition says that the gospel first came to China around AD60. 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 the Thomas-in-China story until in 2008 two Frenchmen drew attention to some bas-reliefs in Kongwangshan, suggesting that Thomas went from India to China by sea because 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.

There have been two other 'false starts' for Christianity in China before its presence became permanent. The first was in AD638, when a group of 21 Nestorian monks from Persia built the first Christian church in China in Chang'an. There is a famous Nestorian monument which tells of the Chinese emperor 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 practised through the land'. Sadly, by the beginning of the 10th century Christianity had died out.

God is doing amazing things in China today

The second 'false start' 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—there is a report of some 6000 baptisms taking place in 1305. But the missionary effort collapsed and by the end of the 14th century the church seems to have disappeared.

In the 16th century the Roman Catholics had more success. Around 1582-83 the Jesuits gained permission to settle in China—the most famous Jesuit being Matteo Ricci, who died in 1610.

The Protestants arrived in the 19th century. The great pioneer was Robert Morrison of the London Missionary Society, who published the first systematic grammar of Chinese, a three volume Chinese-English dictionary, and the Bible in Chinese (the Morrison Bible is still in use). The Baptist Missionary Society were soon on the scene: as a young person I used to be taken 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 independents—Hudson Taylor, Mildred Cable and Francesca French, Gladys Aylward, and many others. China became the largest mission field in the world, and Christian schools, universities and hospitals were established.

The People's Republic

It's a great story, which eventually appeared to end in failure. With the creation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and the Marxist dogma that religion was socially retrograde and doomed to extinction, the churches found themselves out of favour. With the beginning of the Korean War in June 1950, when US and British troops joined the South Koreans against the North Koreans and the Chinese, things became worse. All the missionaries were thrown out; and Christians began to be persecuted.

The leaders of the Chinese church seemed to lack fight for the challenge, and it looked as if the Chinese church could not survive without foreign patronage. The number of churches was shrinking and pastors were ageing. 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 they were struggling. There seemed to be no way in which Christians could adapt to Chinese culture and develop a genuine Chinese church.

Then Chairman Mao started the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. In 1966, at its beginning, there were about 800 000 Protestants and perhaps 3 million Roman Catholics. Then all religions were abolished, and all houses of worship were shut. The Red Guards hounded not just the intelligentsia but also Christians. Homes were ransacked, people were beaten, sent to prison and killed. The Cultural Revolution was not aimed primarily at Christianity—there was a wholesale transportation of the so-called 'bourgeois' into the countryside—but during this period some 30 million people are thought to have died and millions more lives were destroyed, including those of Christians.

Tertullian famously said, 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church'—and this happened in China. Churches, which had gone 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, by the end of the Cultural Revolution (when Mao died), there were 20 million Protestants. Other sources give a more conservative figure of 5-6 million. The church had grown by at least a factor of five or six, and since then it has continued to grow.

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, but 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]

Loss of hope

What has brought about this sea-change? According to Terry Calkin, it has been the loss of hope. Hope was destroyed by the Cultural Revolution—but Christians were able to speak of their hope in Christ. Was this what happened? Certainly the Cultural Revolution, in getting rid of Confucianism, also destroyed the basic values of Chinese life. Confucianism is about bringing society into harmony with the cosmic order by adhering to certain ethical principles. These 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.

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 had been 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]

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, religious belief and activities were largely

decriminalised. During the Christmas season in 1978, Protestant churches began to re-open, and Catholic churches soon after. Seminaries were re-established. These churches and seminaries were expected to 'register'—but not all were prepared to do so. As a result, we now have the division between the registered churches and the so-called house churches.

The registered churches together form the Three Self Patriotic Movement. American right-wing evangelicals in particular have been very critical about the registered churches, suggesting that the 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. A church, for instance, is usually a registered charity, and the building is 'solemnised' for weddings. Furthermore, as Baptists we should be in favour of the principles underlying the Three Self movement, which is about being self-governing, self-funding, and self-propagating. 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 (Jeremiah 29.7), and presumably too the welfare of the country.

House church movement

The house churches are mixed—some are very Pentecostal, some not. Many 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 are huge—in Beijing I met a couple who belonged to a 1000-strong house church, which met on a Sunday in groups of 200!

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 cooperation between the registered and non-registered churches.

The Chinese church has been strongest in rural areas, but sometime between the late 1980s and the late 1990s, Christian growth slowed in the countryside and grew stronger in China's cities. Initially the urban congregation was typically middle or lower-middle class; but over the past 20 years many well paid professionals have joined 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 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 focused on the study of Christianity! Christian churches now experience a good deal of religious toleration, although they do not enjoy full freedom of religion. Evangelism among children and young people under 16 is not allowed.

In November 2012 I travelled to China at the invitation of Terry Calkin, the recently retired pastor of Green Lane Christian Centre, a mega-church in Auckland NZ, to teach in the seminary in Wuhan. Wuhan is an industrial city of some 10 million people 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.

Over recent years Wuhan Seminary has grown and now has over 300 students, many of whom are women. Almost all my class of 60 students were from non-Christian homes, and most came from churches with more than 500 members. Very few knew any English and so I was totally reliant on translators—fortunately the Principal of the Seminary, Rev Wang Zhenren, spoke English. 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, it was clear that there is a real shortage of teachers with knowledge and experience.

Worship

The highlight of my visit was an invitation to preach at the two main morning services at Wuhan's 2000 member Thanksgiving Church. I did not know what to expect but I was taken aback by the vibrancy of the prayers: at the end of every sentence, the congregation shouted 'Amen'. I was staggered by the passionate proclamation of the Apostles' Creed—it was almost as if 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: people meant what they said.

Interestingly there was nothing special about the sung worship—the leader, with a foreign guest in mind, had chosen the Chinese versions of *Now thank we all our God*, *What a friend we have in Jesus*, and *Count your blessings*. My role was to preach the sermon, which was on the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15. I had thought I had done a pretty good job, providing a really fresh way into a well known story, but as (with 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 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.

Bibles were everywhere. I saw them on sale in two church bookshops in Wuhan; and at church 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. Also while I was there, Amity Printing Company in Nanjing was celebrating its 100-millionth Bible.

There are still problems—for example, in some of the rural areas of China around 60% of the Christian population is illiterate (most are women). As a result, Bible Society here in the UK 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 and receiving a Bible at the end to read for themselves.

In conclusion, the church is well and truly alive in China, and this gives me hope—not least for our own country. The churches of the UK are for the most part in poor condition—humanly speaking, for many of them there is little hope of survival. Our country has lost its moral bearings—as in China, people no longer seem able to differentiate between right and wrong. The lesson of China 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!

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Notes to text

1. My main source is Daniel H. Bays, *A new history of Christianity in China.* Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

2. Rob Gifford, *China road: one man's journey into the heart of modern China*. London: Bloomsbury, 2007, p139.

3. Gifford, p139.

4. Gifford, pp22,23.