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China's Quest

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“CHINA to-day is passing through four revolutions, the first political, the second economic, the third social, and the fourth spiritual. Of these, the most serious and far-reaching is the spiritual one.” The speaker was a young Chinese lawyer in Hong Kong, as he bade farewell some fifteen years ago to a British friend who was returning home. All that has happened since serves to lend additional weight to his words. But, of course, the spiritual revolution has all this while been taking place in the minds and hearts of individuals, while only its outward and corporate manifestations lend themselves to be observed and recorded. Now, however, we have one who has observed and recorded the spiritual quest of China over the last half-century, Professor Chan Wing-tsit in his book *Religious Trends in Modern China* (Columbia University Press). Himself a product of Christian missionary education, he returned to his country from America in 1948 to collect the materials on which the lectures in this book are based.

He has drawn on the literature of the period to an extent only possible to a Chinese. But he has not neglected what he calls “the religion of the masses”. There we note first *the collapse of Taoism*. This, we are told, indicates the breakdown, not simply of one religion out of several, but of what is for the vast majority of Chinese the day-to-day religion. When the Communists convened the People's Consultative Conference in 1949, its 585 delegates included 7 representatives of religions. Taoism was not among these. The so-called “Heavenly Teacher”, who is one of the heads of the very loose Taoist organization, was expelled by the Communists as long ago as 1927 and his land holdings distributed among the peasants. But in fact Taoism fell by its own weakness and not by attack from without. It had long since forgotten the elevated teachings of Lao Tse and become a mere purveyor of very material blessings, long life, good harvests, and so on. Even the Chinese peasant has begun to look to science rather than to magic for such things, and Communism will complete the process.

There is, however, another side to the religion of the masses and there, in the numerous secret societies that honeycomb China and are particularly powerful in Shantung, considerable vitality is still to be observed. Religion, morality and politics enter in varying proportions into these societies, whose activities are in part overt and in part concealed. The most famous of them all is the White Lotus Society, which contributed not a little to the overthrow of the Manchu régime. One of the intriguing features of these societies is the tendency to religious syncretism. One student of the subject is convinced that Nestorian influence can be traced in some of them, and there is no doubt that with the arrival of Protestant missions, something of Christianity has seeped into them. The Taiping rebellion was a clear

instance of that, and in the present century, so Professor Chan tells us, even Judaism has been drawn upon. I have been told on good authority of one militant sect in Shantung that awaited Christ's second coming there and was prepared to fight for Him on His arrival.

The position of Buddhism in China is very different from that of Taoism. It is true that already under the Nationalists many monasteries were taken over as schools, official premises, or military barracks, while perhaps even more were simply allowed to fall into disrepair and neglect. Communism has been no more favourable to the monasteries, and thousands of monks and nuns have been forced back into secular life and some occupation that can be classed as productive. But at the same time Buddhism has experienced a *lay revival* and, just because its quietism forbids it to interfere in politics, may be able to continue under the present régime. For a long time now, the Buddhist priest and monk have been liabilities to their religion rather than assets. Most of them entered the order for other than religious reasons, have little education, and make a living by saying masses for the dead or by other practices of a superstitious nature. The new impulse given by educated and devout laymen, in association with a small number of vigorous and reforming priests, has made Buddhism again the spiritual quest and consolation of many thousands. It is these people who have promoted the publication of the Buddhist scriptures, entered into relations with Buddhists in other countries, and thrown themselves into social work.

For lay leadership has brought with it a shift of emphasis from the next world to this. Popular Buddhism was of the "escape from hell and fly to heaven" type. The new Buddhism is concerned at one and the same time with peace in the heart and the service of the needy in the world. "Chinese Buddhism has gained a strangely new conviction and has assumed a noble social responsibility." Of course, the example of Christianity has served as a stimulus in this direction. And now it is only as a social service that Buddhism is likely to be allowed to maintain its organizations. We learn of temples that have been converted into factories by their priests, while "in Hangchow 1,800 monks and nuns from 292 monasteries and 267 nunneries opened restaurants, are working in mills or on farms, and have organized a Hangchow Buddhist Association to co-ordinate their enterprises".

Buddhism and Taoism have always been powerful currents within the main stream of Chinese life. That has never been the case with Islam, which has maintained itself as a separate community that in places has even continued to use Arabic as its vernacular. I have myself visited a mosque in Fukien province that was in a state of acute disrepair but was being put into condition again by a grant from a Moslem association in Peking. In the last fifty years, *the awakening of Islam* has brought some considerable changes. On the one hand, the Chinese Moslem community has grown conscious of itself as one member of a world-brotherhood. Several translations of the Koran into Chinese have been made, the number of pilgrims to Mecca has gone up by leaps and bounds, and Moslem students have been sent to Egypt and elsewhere to acquaint themselves with what is moving in the world of Islam. Some of these returned students have made the

attempt to bring the customs of their community into line with those of Moslems outside China, but the older members have usually resisted change.

At the same time, the Moslems of China have become more disposed to claim for themselves a place within the national life. A generation has grown up that considers itself Chinese and declines to think of itself as one of the "five races" within the country. Moslem schools increasingly use Chinese as the medium of instruction, and there are Moslem scholars in the national universities appointed to lecture on Islamic culture. The tradition of military service is strong in the community and of recent years they have been active in politics also. Islam is one of the religions recognized by the Communists and represented on the People's Consultative Conference. We may suppose that its military value and its connections with countries Communism hopes to win will secure for it a considerable measure of official toleration. The fact, too, that Chinese Moslems are not scattered about the country but mainly live in certain areas where they form the majority of the population will help to secure them against undue interference from Peking.

So far nothing has been said of Confucianism. The position here is peculiarly difficult to assess. If Confucianism be regarded as an organized cult, it must be said that it is defunct. "There is neither a Confucian organization nor a Confucian periodical. Save for the national holiday in his honour, there was nothing in 1949 to remind the Chinese people of the twenty-five hundredth anniversary of Confucius' birth. That anniversary was observed in silence. . . . So far as the Chinese people are concerned, except for a few articles by refugee scholars they seem to have forgotten Confucius." The Communist government has abolished the national holiday on the birthday of the sage, and Fung Yu-lan, perhaps the ablest of contemporary Chinese thinkers after Hu Shih and one of the leaders in a Confucian renaissance, has publicly done penance for his errors and gone over to Marxism. To be sure, there was a point earlier in the century when it was seriously proposed to establish Confucianism as the state religion, but that was successfully resisted. Such power as it retains to-day is due entirely to the fact that it has entered so deeply into Chinese culture that it is difficult to see how even Communism will be able to eradicate it entirely. And one of my missionary colleagues used to maintain that the Confucian moral tradition, even if repudiated elsewhere, would live on secure within the Christian Church!

It is to be regretted that Professor Chan's terms of reference did not allow him to deal except in passing with the very considerable impact of Christian missions on China during the last half-century. I have only space here to draw attention to the fact that the present anti-Christian campaign is by no means the first during that period. When Chiang Kai-shek led the Nationalist armies out of Canton in 1925 with the avowed aim of unifying the country by force, he brought with him the ideology known as "Sun Yat Sen's Three Principles". When Sun himself died during the advance northward, the Nationalist Party was not content to elevate his book to the status of a political scripture; it required of all schools that a weekly ceremony be held at which his

portrait was to be displayed. Staff and students were to gather before it, the so-called "will" of the dead leader was to be read, and homage was to be paid to him in the form of bows and two minutes' silence. The *Three Principles* was compulsory in all educational institutions and no teaching was permitted that did not conform to it.

As might have been expected, the Christian Church was gravely divided over this issue, the older members tending to regard the ceremony in question as idolatrous, while for the younger and more politically-minded it was purely secular in character, comparable to the salute given to the flag. On the larger question of the Church's attitude to the Nationalist Party, only a minority was prepared to stand aside from a movement commanding such wide support. I speak, of course, only of the area known to me, in the provinces of Kwangtung and Fukien. The minority was composed principally of persons who were either so old as to be thoroughly disillusioned politically or so close to the missionaries that their attachment to them stood the strain of unpopularity and even of overt persecution. The majority seemed to the missionaries to have surrendered to the régime. Posters appeared in the churches with the words, "Jesus Christ was the Great Revolutionary", and "Christianity is anti-imperialist", and sermons were preached that drew on the *Three Principles* equally with the Bible.

In Swatow, contact between the missionaries and the Chinese Church was virtually broken for eighteen months. The area occupied by the Nationalists was flooded with anti-Christian propaganda put out by the small but vigorous Communist Party, with which Chiang then co-operated. This propaganda concentrated principally on the relation between Christianity and Western imperialism. It was maintained, for example, that missions were deliberately employed by the Western powers to "soften up", as we should now say, the continent of Asia for economic exploitation and military conquest. The missionary preached love and non-resistance so that the Asiatic peoples might fall helpless into the hands of nations that had no intention of practising such virtues themselves. The propaganda was at times of the most unscrupulous character. An American missionary from Hainan island assured me that a poster was displayed there with the words: "Down with Christianity! Jesus Christ was an Englishman". I mention these facts because so many to-day write or speak as though what is happening under Mao Tse-tung were quite new. It is nothing of the kind.

I should be only too happy if it were in my position to give information on the situation of the Chinese Church at the present moment. But even those who have left the country recently can speak only of conditions in their neighbourhood. It is known that certain groups are co-operating with the Communists and are therefore in control of the machinery of the Church. Basil Davidson's *Daybreak Over China* reports his interviews with these official spokesmen. One of the most objective pieces of information to which I have access is an analysis of the March 1953 catalogue of the Christian Literature Society, Shanghai. In the three years previous to that date only nine new titles were added. Three of these are no more than pamphlets, one is a translation of

Leslie Weatherhead, the rest are strongly pro-Communist. By contrast, in 1950 there were forty-three new publications in a single year. It is obvious at once that the society is able to carry on only by accommodating itself to the demands of the régime. "Their 1952 Diary had lavish quotations from Mao and Stalin and other Communist writings and only seven from the Bible."

Let me hasten to add that this is not apostasy; it is the traditional Chinese technique of bowing to the storm. In a country that has been politically insecure for more than half-a-century, few will risk martyrdom when there is always the hope that, if not the régime itself, then its local representatives may be changed at any time. Soon, of course, the Chinese Church will have to reckon with the fact that Communism has come to stay. So long as the Church is content to exist as a worshipping society, using the clichés of the hour and allowing the state to monopolize education and the training of youth, it will enjoy toleration. Whether the Church will long continue on these terms is uncertain. My own view is that, in the light of what has happened on the Continent, the Church will survive and keep faith with her Lord so long as she is permitted to read the Bible and draw on it for her life. Professor Chan is optimistic enough to prophecy that the colourless humanism he calls "the religion of the intellectuals" will win out in the end. I doubt it, but I have faith in the survival-power of a Bible-reading Church.

There is a sense, however, in which we should be concerned, not with the Chinese Church, but with our responsibilities for the mission fields in which we are still able to work. Are there any lessons we can learn from China, so that we may be able to prevent that happening in India, Nigeria, and elsewhere that has come upon us in China? In the first place, we have to face the fact that, rightly or wrongly, the connection between Christian missions and Western imperialism is much closer in the minds of the people of the receiving countries than it is in our own. There have been some ugly and extremely regrettable incidents in the past, noticeably the insertion in treaties exacted by force of arms of clauses favouring missions. When Japan became an imperial power in China, she too favoured missions conducted by her own people, evidently regarding them as politically profitable. I can myself recall with keen regret actions done at the time in complete innocence but now admitting of a most unfortunate interpretation. We have somehow to convince the world that when we speak in the name of Christ we are not merely giving an ideological veneer to the interests and ambitions of our country. The suspicion against us is as serious as that.

In the second place, in spite of all our efforts to encourage an indigenous Church expressing the Gospel in its own language and in terms of its cultural tradition, we now see that we have not advanced as far in that direction as we should have done. A Roman Catholic with experience of work in China has stressed this point in truly remarkable fashion. In his *Vom Wesen und Aufbau katholischer Theologie* Hermann Koester asks whether it was really necessary for the Chinese priesthood to acquire Latin and to take over a Christian theology conditioned at almost every point by Greek theology and

Roman law. It is sheer presumption on our part, he urges, to identify Christian civilization with the social forms and the cultural tradition of Western Europe. We should work for a Christian civilization in China that will take Confucius and Mencius as its substructure as we have taken Aristotle and Cicero. I would say that he tends to overlook one difficulty. The Chinese do not seem theologically interested; their tendencies are practical rather. Yet there is a metaphysical vein in China that has been tapped in the past by Buddhism, and why not by Christianity?

Alas, the opportunity for promoting such a rebirth of Christian theology in China has been taken from us, but we must seize the opportunity elsewhere. My third point is that we need urgently to find some way of conducting mission work without building an economic barrier between the foreign worker and his colleagues. There was nothing that more distressed me during my years in China than the fact that I was required to live in a large house in a huge compound cut off from the people of the town and to maintain a standard of living that put me—for my Chinese colleagues—among the class of the immensely wealthy. What a relief it was, when in the country, to sit down with Chinese preachers at the same table and to share their meal! No doubt, health must be safeguarded and, whatever the immediate advantage of celibacy, it would seriously injure missions were they not allowed to provide examples of Christian family life. Yet one feels that we have sinned by complacency in the past and must find some way by which we can share the life of the people to whom we go, not merely survey it from a privileged position.

The final consideration I would raise is that of the political bearing of missions. Let us take a concrete case, that of a missionary stationed in Singapore. If he remains silent and confines himself to evangelization and formal education, he will be understood by the Chinese to be working in the interests of the government, which is in the hands of his own people. If he dares to express himself on economic exploitation or racial conflict, he will be dubbed a Communist by his fellow-nationals and may incur the displeasure of the authorities. The one thing he is not allowed to do, by the very circumstances in which he is placed, is to remain neutral. Where social changes are taking place, to remain neutral is one form of defending the *status quo*. Is it possible for our missionaries who are working in British colonies to proclaim Christ as Lord over rulers and ruled alike? If not, do they in fact proclaim Him adequately?