

Review

The Church in China: Its Vitality; Its Future? By William H. Clark.
Council Press, New York, 1970, 212 pp. \$4.95.

Dr. Clark—himself a missionary in China for 24 years—clearly presents the story of the Christian movement in China, from its Nestorian beginnings up to the end of the recent Cultural Revolution, when the churches were driven underground. The three earlier attempts to evangelize this great country (roughly speaking, by Syrian Nestorians in the eighth century, by Franciscans in the thirteenth and Jesuits in the seventeenth) are briefly recounted. This is essential to put the fourth attempt, the arrival of Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century and the renewal and expansion of the Catholic Mission, into historical perspective. Three important chapters then follow on the development of a more indigenous Christianity in China in the twentieth century. The eighth chapter—by far the longest in the book—deals with “The Church under Communism, 1949-69”. The book concludes with an appraisal of the Christian Mission in China, and an assessment of its future prospects.

Dr. Clark rightly starts his account of the church under communism by recognizing the appeal to all normal Chinese of the aims, and then the achievements, of the communist regime in restoring China's self-respect after over a century's outrages from Western incursions, depredations and assumptions of superiority. Praise must be given to him for his wise and understanding section entitled “Compromisers?”, followed by one on “Christian Stalwarts”, with several well presented testimonies to the faithfulness of individual Chinese Christians. He carefully narrates the way in which the churches were stripped of their many educational, medical and welfare institutions, and gives a very interesting account of Christian participation in the criticisms of the regime, invited during the “Hundred Flowers” Movement of 1957. He shows how, step by step, repressive measures—often disguised as appeals to good citizenship—reduced the number and the vitality of the churches.

During the period of the “Great Leap Forward” in 1958, when communes were first established, functioning churches had again to close, as previously during the land reform which inaugurated the new regime. Probably many never re-opened. Yet “as late as the early to mid-1960's communist papers reaching Hong Kong made it evident the Party did

not by any means consider religion a dead issue" (p. 143). The Cultural Revolution of 1966-69, of which Dr. Clark writes a very readable succinct account, gave what was intended as the *coup de grâce*. But Dr. Clark believes on historical grounds that, in spite of "intense repression", the church will survive, and suggests, with reason, that "it may soon become possible for the vital continuing core of the Christian Church to reassert itself and reassume the right to religious liberty supposedly guaranteed in the Chinese Constitution". He gives several deeply impressive testimonies to the faithfulness of individual Chinese Christian leaders during the last 45 years. The chief lesson he draws from his survey is that "only vital Christian faith endures", a thesis he supports by listing six typical weaknesses to be found when that vitality of faith is lacking. Faith grounded on any of these will prove to be based on sand: the desire to conform, falling back on the Christian Church as guarantor of our 'Way of Life', using the church as a convenient tool to effect social change, a church dominantly national or racial in outlook, the compartmentalizing of faith and everyday life, and the view that the world is so evil that it is none of the Christian's business. Probably this last weakness has been the most common of the six in China, and one of its particularly weak points vis-à-vis a communist regime.

Dr. Clark's contention that in the long run certain basic Chinese characteristics will modify the communist regime in China, and his belief that the latter is unwittingly preparing the way for a better understanding by the Chinese of the Christian faith, seem sound, in this reviewer's opinion. For the crucial question is whether or not education can replace individualistic ambition by selfless concern for the good of the community. Education in China has already established this as the universal criterion for conduct—an immense achievement. But if in the long run it proves impotent to change the motivation of the heart, China may become ready to understand Christianity not in terms of an ethical teaching, as so largely heretofore, but of a Gospel which goes to the root of the matter.

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