Comment

The Archbishop in China: Reasons of State?

The visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Robert Runcie, to China in December 1983 was of obvious importance for the relations between the Church in Britain and the Church in China. His visit to the China Christian Council was made as the leader of an ecumenical delegation from the British Council of Churches. However, at the same time he was also the guest of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries — an organ related to the Chinese government. It is this aspect of the visit that is the more surprising, although in itself an invitation from the PFA need not reflect a high level of interest by the Chinese government itself. In this instance, however, the government accorded the visit a high status and the Archbishop received a welcome accorded to no other religious leader since 1949 — symbolised in his reception by the President of China, Li Xiannian, and by the widow of the late Chinese Premier, Madame Zhou Enlai.

It is obvious that the Chinese authorities must have made a deliberate and carefully calculated decision to extend an invitation and to accord the visit a high status. Any attempt to assess the reasoning behind such a decision must be highly speculative, but a number of probable factors may perhaps be suggested. The first factor is the general desire of the Chinese government to improve relations with the West, and in particular with Western Europe. A second factor is the probable perception of the Archbishop as of some political importance within Britain (it is possible that more weight was given to this than is justified). A third reason may relate to the stress now being given in China to the "United Front". The policy of the "United Front" is designed on the one hand to ensure that non-party groupings in society are loyal to the Communist Party and also on the other hand to offer in exchange a certain degree of protection to those who join the "United Front". In the context of the drive for economic modernisation the "United Front" has come to reassume an important place. Minority groups, all of whom were persecuted during

the "ten terrible years" of the Cultural Revolution, must be won back and concessions made. This is one reason why religious policy is more liberal now than in the past; and the Archbishop's visit may be seen partly as an attempt to increase the status of the China Christian Council and the associated Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

A further consideration may well have been the desire to demonstrate to the world China's willingness to be friendly with religious groups around the world provided that the "three self principles" are recognised and accepted as valid. The Archbishop had clearly signalled his acceptance of these principles as far as China is concerned when he made a brief private visit to China in January 1982. His attitude was in clear contrast to that of the Pope.

The fact that the Chinese government was able to make use of the Archbishop's visit in order to foster its own external and internal policies has led some observers to conclude that the Archbishop was being used by the Chinese. My own view is that such an interpretation is one-sided. The other side of the story is that the Church was able to use the visit in order to strengthen the Christian Church in China. Given that on balance the objectives of the Chinese government were not unacceptable, then the "trade-off" for the Church was improved relations with the State and a reduction of ultra-leftist pressure. It must be remembered that the struggle against the ultra-left is still continuing and that both religious believers and moderate elements in the CCP and government have a common interest in extending the "United Front". It may be that the fact of the Archbishop's visit lent strength to the moderates and his forthright statements concerning "three self" undermined the "leftist" view of foreign religious leaders and organisations as necessarily "colonialist" in nature.

It can be seen that the matter is far more complex than is allowed for by a simplistic analysis in terms of who is using whom. At this point in time it is not possible to make a final assessment, but in my opinion the decision by the Archbishop and his advisers to accept the invitation from the Chinese government was the right one.

BOB WHYTE

Multilateralism in East and West

On the cover of the Spring 1984 edition of *Religion in Communist Lands*, a picture which I brought back from the German Democratic Republic showing a church peace service was used. I was glad to see this photograph given such prominence. The quotation "we demand an absolute no to the possession and deployment of all weapons of mass destruction" takes up the categorical rejection of weapons of mass destruction at the World Council of Churches' Assembly in Vancouver (Summer 1983).

I was disappointed to read the caption which was substituted for the one I wrote. This suggested that the East German church-based peace movement opposed evenhandedly the weapons of the Warsaw Pact and NATO. So it does. The caption then went on to state that Western peace movements support "one-sided" disarmament and do not oppose Soviet missiles. This is simply not true. To take the most obvious example, CND opposed the deployment of Soviet SS20's as well as the deployment of Cruise and Pershing.

There are many in the Western peace movements and Churches who do argue in favour of unilateral steps to get a multilateral disarmament process going. This is a position which the East German Churches also favour. Both the Western peace movement and the East German Churches do not hesitate to ask their own side to take first steps.

ROGER WILLIAMSON

Editor's note: I am sorry that Roger Williamson should have read our caption to his photograph (which was an amplification of rather than a substitute for his own caption) in a way which I had never intended. Of course I did not intend to imply that all western peace movements are unilateralist. The phrase in question in the caption: ". . . the wider concerns of the peace movement under the aegis of the East German Protestant Churches, which are different from those of unilateralist disarmament groups in western countries . . ." was intended simply to draw a distinction between the unofficial peace movement in East Germany and those peace movements in the West which are unilateralist. The caption also pointed out that the unofficial peace movement in the GDR (like those in some other East European countries) is concerned with wider issues of social justice in its search for peace, and not solely with disarmament: another important distinction between it and western peace movements.

J.E.