Islam in Xinjiang*

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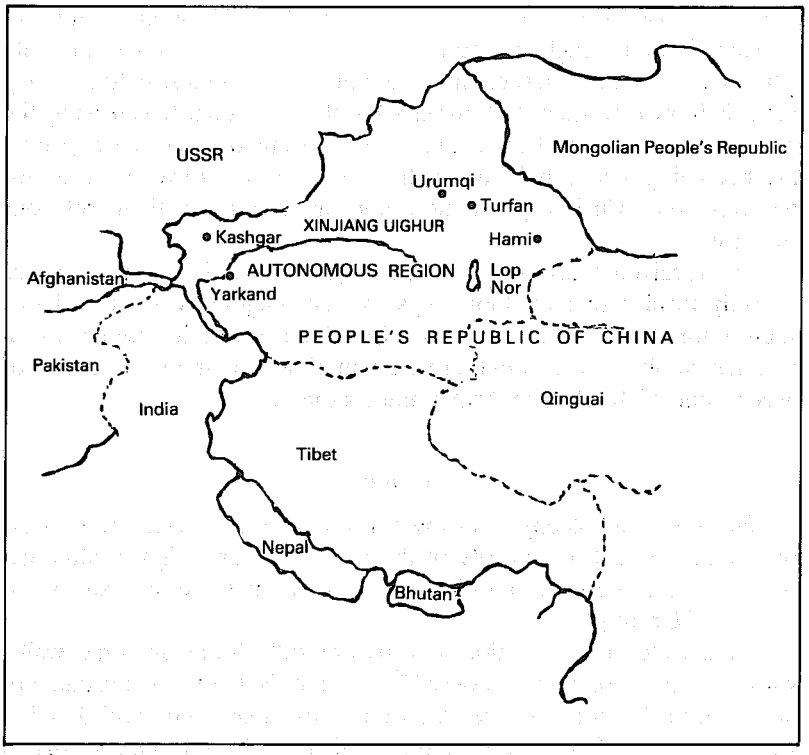
Xinjiang (Sinkiang) in the far north west of China is its largest administrative region, with a total population of over 13 million people. For centuries, merchants, priests and conquerors passed through its oases along the Silk Road, and today Xinjiang is home to 12 different "national minorities", in addition to the Han Chinese immigrants who number more than five million. However, although there is ethnic and linguistic diversity, Islam has long ago replaced Buddhism, Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity as the dominant creed of the nearly six million Uighurs, 900,000 Kazakhs and most of the other smaller national minorities in Xinjiang.

Islam appears to be enjoying a revival in Xinjiang, after the repression of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) when many mosques were closed. In 1981 *China Reconstructs*[1] reported thirty mosques open in the capital, Urumqi. However, a later official news release in 1983 gave a figure of 162, and claimed that there were 14,000 mosques[2] open in the entire autonomous region. These figures, which appear very high, seem quite credible from my personal observation. In Urumqi and Kashgar there are mosques, large and small, in every quarter, often in every street. Some are being renovated and repainted, and Islamic literature is freely available on sale at the doors of major mosques, and even in the bazaars. Compared to conditions in the Soviet Union, Chinese Muslims appear to enjoy a considerable degree of religious liberty, at least to outward appearances.[3]

Urumqi

Urumqi, the provincial capital, with a population approaching one million, is a dusty, nondescript city, largely populated by Han Chinese. However, the Uighur quarters, particularly in the southern section of the

*For background, see the author's article "Islam in China" in the previous issue of *RCL* — *Ed.*



town, are not without charm. Many of the Uighur people live in mud-brick houses in unpaved back lanes, with the minarets and domes of mosques towering here and there above the one-storey dwellings. I was fortunate enough to be in Urumqi during Corban, or Muslim New Year, when the city was at its most festive. The main hotel was decked with a large red banner celebrating Corban, and a large number of Han and Uighur Party dignitaries were invited to an official function in honour of the occasion. Early in the morning of New Year's Day, most of the male Muslim population flocked to the city's mosques for worship. The mosque I attended near the city centre was so packed with worshippers that it was impossible to enter. Worshippers had brought their own prayer-mats and spilled over on to the narrow pavement outside, where they prostrated themselves devoutly, oblivious to the Han Chinese cycling down the street inches behind their backs. The men, many of whom were dressed in their best suits and ties, proceeded home where the family awaited them to celebrate the festival. The Uighurs are a hospitable people and welcome even foreigners into their homes on this occasion. The table is piled high with sweets and cakes. During the morning the fatted lamb is slain in the courtyard outside by the head of the household in accordance with Islamic custom, to commemorate

Abraham's sacrifice. Later in the day the family will feast on the mutton.

Apart from the Uighurs, there are also Hui Muslims, who speak only Chinese, and in general seem more assimilated to Chinese culture. They have their own mosques. In Urumqi it is difficult to judge how fervidly the people are attached to Islam. It may be that some of the younger people are becoming increasingly lax in their observance. However, at major festivals, the Muslim population appear devout in their religious practice.

I was received courteously at the mosques I visited. The interiors are sparsely furnished: mat floor, pegs for the religious leaders' turbans, shelves for the few religious books in evidence, and in one or two, a wooden pulpit. On the walls there are sometimes pictures of the Kaaba in Mecca, and of the Prophet Mahommed's tomb.

Turfan

Turfan is a small, sleepy oasis town in one of the lowest, and hottest, places on earth. The majority of the population are Uighur, although there is a sizeable Han minority. The situation is therefore exactly the reverse of Urumqi.

Faded Cultural Revolution slogans are still visible on some walls, witnessing to a violent past, not so long distant. But now the mosques are open, and a former party headquarters, now abandoned and derelict, with a picture of Mao almost bleached away by the sun, seems to symbolise the failure of revolutionary ideology to capture the hearts of the proud and independent Uighur people. A few miles away the sun-baked ruins of the ancient Uighur capital bear witness to the glories of a thousand-year-old culture which still clings fiercely to its own language, poetry and dance and shows little sign of assimilation to Han Chinese ways. A walk through the cotton fields brings one to the two-hundred-years-old Imin Mosque with its hundred-foot minaret, built entirely of mud-brick, ornamented with lattice-patterns. Inside the building a lone elderly man is kneeling in prayer on the matted floor. On the edge of the town there is a brightly painted mosque, with both Arabic and Chinese inscriptions in blue and green, presumably used by the Chinese-speaking Hui Muslims of whom there are 570,000 in Xinjiang.

Kashgar

The only Chinese feature of Kashgar, at least superficially, is the towering incongruous statue of Mao in the newer part of the town, and the fact that it is on the Chinese side of the Sino-Pakistani border, less than three hundred kilometres distant. Otherwise, the place is more reminiscent of mediaeval Arabia than communist China. Even my Chinese guidebook

made reference to the fact that the Uighurs of Kashgar differ markedly from other Xinjiang Uighurs in their language, culture and customs.

After 35 years of communist rule Kashgar is still an Islamic stronghold. There are mosques in almost every street. The main Id Kah Mosque has been refurbished at government expense, and its open courtyard can contain up to 10,000 worshippers. For Tuesday midday prayers about three hundred men filtered through the tree-lined courtyard. In one corner an elderly *imam* was instructing two young men in koranic teaching. However, it was not until the following Friday noon main weekly service that the strength of Islam in Kashgar was revealed. Well before the time, men began to walk in through each of the three gates. By the time the service was due to commence, the courtyard was nearly full of worshippers. Most had brought their own prayer mats and, after performing their ritual ablutions near the main entrance, unrolled them, and knelt on the grassy areas. Young boys were instructed by their elders in how to perform the proper prostrations. The worship was observed with every sign of reverence and attention. Probably six to seven thousand male worshippers were present. Bearing in mind that there are dozens of other mosques in the city, and that the entire population is only 160,000, it seems likely that on Fridays most of the adult male population turn out to worship. According to official sources the entire Kashgar prefecture, which has a total of 2.4 million people, now has 6,180 mosques, or 260 more than before the Cultural Revolution.[4]

At the entrance to the main mosque there are four Islamic book-stalls. Korans and commentaries of every age and size are on sale, together with Arabic primers and locally mimeographed religious booklets. When questioned, a local Muslim agreed that there was a "comparative" degree of religious freedom, much better than that in the Soviet Union, and stated that Kashgar had emerged relatively unscathed from the Cultural Revolution. "What had the Red Guards done — destroyed any mosques . . .?" I asked. "They didn't dare!" was the laughing reply. And in a city where the few Han Chinese appear almost as foreign as the tourists, it seemed unlikely that the Chinese authorities would have risked insurrection by total suppression of Islam. As it is, in more recent years there has been at least one serious racial clash between the Han and the local Uighurs, and it does seem that, in a sensitive border region only one hundred kilometres from the Soviet border, the Chinese government is treating the local minorities with greater sensitivity.

Han Chinese influence in Kashgar is superficial. The few Chinese-style stores are poorly stocked and little frequented in comparison to the local bazaars where the commercial life of the city is concentrated. One rarely meets a Han Chinese on the streets. In contrast to Urumqi and even Turfan a fair number of women (perhaps ten to twenty percent) wear thick brown veils in public. Younger women, however, sport fashionable shoes

and gaily-coloured skirts. Most are not averse to being photographed, and the people are open and hospitable to foreigners. However, tourism has already started to bring corruption; although many are honest, others will charge foreigners outrageous prices for souvenirs. Even here in Kashgar at the far-flung corners of the People's Republic there is a soaring black market in Foreign Exchange Certificates, which operates with scant regard for the local policemen. These latter, it should be noted, are local Uighurs, and the ones I spoke to knew hardly any Chinese at all. Chinese is very much a second language here, and primary education is largely conducted in Uighur.

The strength of local tradition was further revealed on a visit to the Aba Khoja Tomb outside the city. A short walk leads through the Islamic cemetery — a miniature city of sun-baked brown earth tombs. Here and there a family was kneeling in prayer at the entrance of the family vault while an *imam* intoned prayers. The fine green and blue dome of the tomb soon rises above the trees. Here are buried former Princes of Kashgar, and also the famed "Fragrant Concubine" of the Chinese Emperor Kang Xi. Taken to Peking, no doubt to cement relations between the Manchu court and the local Islamic rulers, she returned only after death, legend says, her body carried the long, dusty miles in a sedan chair which still is on view inside. The reaction of the local people to the tomb was interesting. While we waited for the gate-keeper to open up, one woman reverently kissed the lock on the gate. Once inside the courtyard, another ran her fingers devoutly along the side of the walls. Although it is now a tourist attraction, the local Muslims clearly still regard it as a holy place.

Beneath the monolithic exterior of Islam in Xinjiang there no doubt exists a profusion of traditions and folk practices. Although the Sunni tradition of Islam predominates, I did meet one Hui Muslim who professed to be of the minority Shia group. He expressed guarded, but clear, admiration for the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. A Muslim writer claimed recently that apart from the visible Islamic institutions controlled by the Communist Party-supervised Islamic Association, based in Beijing (Peking), there also exists a whole network of "unofficial" Islamic activities, including Sufi mystical orders who hold prayer and religious training sessions.[5] However, some previously uncompromising Muslim leaders are now prepared to participate on a limited scale in "official" activities.

As in the case of Protestant and Roman Catholic believers in China, much may go on beneath the surface which the tourist or passing visitor never sees. However, that such unofficial activity does continue was confirmed by the Director of the Beijing Islamic Association who in April 1983 attacked "some people who illegally publish and sell religious books, magazines and articles behind the back of the government and the

Islamic Association . . . We must resolutely expose and stop those people who are carrying out illegal activities under the cover of religion."[6]

Future prospects

Islam seems deeply rooted among the minority peoples of Xinjiang. Where the minorities predominate, as in Kashgar, the Muslim faith appears strong. In Urumqi, where the Han predominate, it may be that its hold is not quite so firm. Educated young people among the Uighurs and Kazakhs face pressure not only from their Han peer group. To succeed, they must learn Chinese, and submit, at least outwardly, to Marxist political indoctrination. In the longer term, it may well be that secularisation will prove a more formidable foe than Marxism as Xinjiang opens to tourism and greater economic development. From what I observed, however, Islam is well-placed in Xinjiang to resist even this challenge.

[1] *China Reconstructs*, January 1981, p. 34.
[2] New China News Agency (NCNA), Urumqi, 13 August 1983.
[3] Cf. A. Bennigsen and C. Lemercier-Quelquejay, "Muslim Religious Conservatism and Dissent in the USSR", *RCL*, Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 148-59.
[4] *South China Morning Post*, quoting NCNA report, 12 December 1983.
[5] *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 15 December 1983.
[6] NCNA, 17 April 1983, in *Documentation, Religion in the PRC*, October 1983.