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Editorial

'More people are attending Sunday worship in China than in the whole of Western Europe', assert Paul Marshall and Nina Shea in their article in this issue of *RSS*, '– and the majority are doing so despite the threat of beatings and labour camps.' The communist authorities in China may be presiding over a burgeoning market economy, but in respect of religion their policies are unreconstructed, having indeed hardened steadily since mid-1995. The authorities do not intend that China should go the way of the Soviet Union. 'The church played an important role in the change in the Soviet empire', noted the Chinese press in 1992. 'If China does not want such a scene to be repeated in its land, it must strangle the baby while it is still in the manger.'

It is important that Keston should report frequently on religious life in those countries in the world which are still communist, because Keston's unique experience in monitoring church–state relationships in the communist countries of Europe for more than twenty years means that it is now able to compare and contrast, and help to discern in present events in countries such as China the direction developments there are likely to take in the future. Many features of the Chinese scene are familiar to those who knew the Soviet Union. The Patriotic Church is constrained to compromise and accept all kinds of restrictions, but nevertheless consists overwhelmingly of sincerely believing Christians; at the same time the persecuted underground churches are not gatherings of 'extremists who perversely refuse all government contact and legitimate control', but are the refuge of those who 'simply want to choose their own churches and pastors, and to worship freely according to the dictates of conscience.' The churches in the Soviet Union displayed the same adaptive dual nature; they outlived the hostile system that sought to reduce them to impotence; all the signs are that they are likely to do so in China too.

A little-reported country which is still nominally communist in Laos. Again, much of the recent history of religion there follows familiar patterns. Let us take just one example. In the early years of communism in Laos, reports Lev Morev in his article in this issue of *RSS*, Buddhist theoreticians developed a theology of participation in socialist reconstruction. They argued that 'although Buddhism and Marxism were quite different from a metaphysical point of view, they were very similar as far as their ultimate goals were concerned.' One recalls many analogies from the communist West, from the efforts of the 'Living Church' in the Soviet Union of the 1920s to those of the 'Diakonia' theologians in Kádár's Hungary.

Comparative studies along these lines are likely to be fruitful. They are also vital. The late 1980s saw something that had never happened before: the collapse of established communist systems. The late 1990s see the process in mirror-image. Hong Kong reverted to Chinese control on 1 July 1997; the Portuguese colony of Macau will do so in December 1999. As Beatrice Leung comments in her article in this issue of *RSS*, 'These transfers of highly developed capitalist systems to a communist

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system are unprecedented.' In order to be able to predict the future for the churches in Hong Kong and Macau as they move into communism, it is necessary to be informed about the experience of those churches which are passing them in the other direction.

Leung looks at the recent history of the Catholic churches in Hong Kong and Macau and compares the ways they have prepared for impending reunification with the mainland. She notes that as July 1997 drew nearer the citizens of Hong Kong, and particularly those in the business sector, grew ever more 'docile and submissive ... in the face of Beijing's influence on Hong Kong's affairs.' By contrast, the Catholic community became more outspoken. The new editor of a Catholic weekly, the mouthpiece of the church in Hong Kong, was openly critical of China's policies on human rights and religion. In Macau, the church was much less inclined to controversy, and as a result has developed smoother relations with Beijing. The Chinese authorities are uneasy about the politicisation of Christianity in Hong Kong and they insisted that the Hong Kong Basic Law should stipulate that religion should be separated from politics. The bishop of Macau was invited to help with the drafting of the Macau Basic Law. The same did not happen in Hong Kong.

Leung says that the hardening of the ideological line in China towards religion is 'reinforced by the fact that the Chinese leadership regards Christianity as a means used by western powers to "westernise" and "divide" Chinese society.' Again, Keston's experience from other communist and postcommunist countries can shed light on how this kind of attitude is likely to work itself out in practical consequences. At the same time as the 'New Thinking' in Gorbachev's Soviet Union was leading to 'Perestroika', in Laos 'New Thinking' soon produced the motto 'Renovation' or 'Renewal'. In practice this has meant transition to the market economy. The door has been opened to the wider world. 'Along with goods, capital investment and new technology, mass western culture flooded into Laos.' Morev notes that Buddhism has historically been a symbol of Lao identity and a force helping to consolidate Lao society. As in Russia, the religion which believes itself uniquely to articulate the values of the nation now finds itself adopting a hostile stance to foreign religions coming into the country. Alien denominations are said to be trespassing on traditional Buddhist territory, sowing discord, disparaging the Buddhist faith. Missionaries are accused of 'misusing the resources of international intergovernmental organisations and charitable funds in order to penetrate different areas of the country and distribute gifts and humanitarian aid with the purpose of making conversions.' All this is very familiar. Again, it will be fruitful to compare the dynamics involved here with those potentially at work in China. Will it turn out that one or other religion or church in China will see itself as 'traditional' and adopt the role of spokesman for national values as communism crumbles? Or is the Chinese situation fundamentally different? Comparative studies are vital to the answering of questions like these.

In one particular respect, the Catholic churches in Hong Kong and Macau have had a unique role to play. They

> were designated to be a 'bridge' over the gap between the church on the mainland and the church based in Rome. A triangular church–state relationship has thus developed involving China, the Vatican and Hong Kong/Macau. This fact explains why Catholics in Hong Kong and Macau have found the process of decolonisation more complicated than have the other Christian denominations.

The two churches interpreted the role in rather different ways, however.

> The church of Hong Kong has the tendency to attempt to draw the church in China into the orbit of the Universal Church with its leadership in the Vatican. The bishop of Macau, on the other hand, emphasises nationalism, and suggests that the church in China should keep its special identity as a local church. He also rejects the idea that the growing churches in Asia and Africa should follow foreign models: they are at different stages of development and have different cultural heritages from those of the churches of Europe.

It will be interesting to see how these divergent interpretations of the role of an Asian church are developed in the new ideological environment in which the Hong Kong and Macau churches now find themselves, and whether the authorities in Beijing will find the views of the bishop of Macau congenial as they continue to develop their policies on religion.

Leung believes that the dual role of these churches as 'both local church and international bridge' 'has generated a tremendous impetus ... towards formulating their own policies in the transitional period, and has provided the opportunity for the churches to revitalise their role as "salt" and "light" in their respective situations.' Whether they will be able to continue to add savour and illumination is an open question. Already the Hong Kong Catholics have been advised not to 'interfere' with the Catholic Church in mainland China after the transfer. Financial and other aid hitherto passing through Hong Kong for the Chinese Catholic Church will now have to find other routes. 'Under the gradually increasing political pressure from China', says Leung, 'both the Macau and Hong Kong churches are now trying to distance themselves from socio-political involvement and concentrate their activities within church circles, putting emphasis on traditional pastoral endeavours such as organising Bible study and prayer groups.' As we know from long study of the worldwide encounter between Christianity and institutionalised atheism, however, even this amount of salt and light may prove too much for the establishment to tolerate. As Marshall notes, 'The problem for the Chinese leaders is not simply what the church *does*, but also what it *is*.'

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Notes on Contributors

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Beatrice Leung is a member of the Catholic congregation the Sisters of the Precious Blood in Hong Kong, and also the programme director and associate professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lingnan College, Hong Kong. Her research interest is church–state relations, including China's relations with world religions. Her publications include *Sino–Vatican Relations: Problems in Conflicting Authority* and, as editor, *Church and State Relations in 21st Century Asia.*

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Lev Morev graduated in 1952 from the Chinese Faculty in the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies. After a junior posting in the Soviet Embassy in Bangkok (1952–54) he became the first to teach Thai in the Soviet Union. Since 1959 he has been a research fellow at the Institute of Oriental Studies. His main interests are sociolinguistic, ethnological and religious issues in Laos and Thailand, and he is the author of many books and articles on these subjects.

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0963-7494/98/010009-02

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