

Mao, Marxism and Christianity

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Any discussion about Mao and Marxism must, in my opinion, begin with Li Ta-chao. It is difficult, if not impossible, to state dogmatically how much Mao was influenced by Li, but Dr. Stuart Schramm has argued in his excellent study of Mao's intellectual development that Mao's ideas in his formative years were largely shaped by Li.

Li Ta-chao, now honoured by the Chinese Communist Party as its first true leader and martyr at 39, was the link between the older generation of democratically-oriented and Western-educated intellectuals of the³ early phase of the New Culture movement (1915-19), from which the first Chinese Marxists emerged. Li was the first to undertake the task of adapting Marxism to the Chinese environment, and it is his writings which foreshadowed the most explosive revolutionary ideology of our time – the combination of a voluntaristic interpretation of Marxism and a militant nationalism. His young assistant at the Peking University Library during the crucial period 1918-19 was Mao Tse-tung.

Even before he was won over to the vision of a world-wide revolutionary transformation, promised, it seemed, by the Bolshevik victory in Russia, Li Ta-chao had come to believe profoundly in the ability of the human spirit and human activity to change the circumstances under which men live. "When the young have seen the light," he declared in 1916, "they should break the meshes of past history, destroy the prison of old ideas, and suffer no corpses to restrict their activity."¹ He objected, therefore, to the Marxist belief in the inexorable workings of the economic laws of history for, in his opinion, this meant that China would be condemned to a long and dreary period of capitalist development.

This conflict between determinism and activism raised by Li Ta-chao in 1919 was to be momentous for the future of China, involving such vital issues as the Marxist view of the role of human consciousness and human activity in history, the nature of the theory of class struggle, and the question of the relationship between political and economic forces. Li rejected the "social Darwinism" of the sterile determinist and concluded :

The roots of all forms of socialism are purely ethical. Co-operation and friendship are the general principles of the social life of man . . . We ought to recognize that human social life will always be controlled by those general principles, and it can be discovered that they are always hidden in the premises commonly and generally recognized by socialists at any time and in any place. Not only

utopian but also scientific (socialism) . . . establish their concepts upon these premises.²

Co-operation and friendship, Li's socialist faith was ultimately based not upon confidence in the inexorable and objective laws of social development, but rather upon confidence in the Chinese people and their ability to bring forth the powerful subjective forces latent in the present – the great storehouses of “surplus energy”, which, Li argued, had been accumulating for centuries. The course of Chinese history would in fact be determined by the ideas, the will, and the “self-consciousness” of men.

Mao Tse-tung, in “On People's Democratic Dictatorship” (June 1949), set out the tasks facing the Chinese Communist Party in forging his vision of “a new China” :

1. the strengthening of the people's State apparatus;
2. the elimination of the landlord class and the bureaucratic bourgeoisie;
3. the rebuilding of the national bourgeoisie;
4. the education of the peasantry;
5. the construction of a new democratic society under the leadership of the working class and the Communist Party to prepare for the final phase, a communist society;
6. the socialization of agriculture and industry to advance the economy to the industrial stage.

In 1949 Mao was not concerned with the effect that changes in the social structure might later have upon the course of “his” revolution. It was not until 1956 that Mao made it clear, when he disagreed with Soviet and Chinese “revisionists”, that ideological purification must be continued even *after* the achievement of socialism.³

During the Cultural Revolution many Western “China-watchers” and almost all Soviet polemics ascribed Mao's actions to some form of power-lust⁴, unaware of the strong resentment that Mao had towards those who had removed the “thought of Mao Tse-tung” from the 1956 Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party. This was to emerge later in a variety of statements and not least in the drafting of a new Party Constitution in 1969, when the Maoists insisted on restoring and even increasing the prestige conferred upon Mao's thought by the 1945 Party Constitution.

The structure of “Mao-thought” is based on two ideas of Li Ta-chao : (a) that the human mind is infinitely malleable and able to expand spiritually, (b) that the human will, once rectified, is all-powerful – such that “the subjective creates the objective”.⁵ On these two premises Mao has built a “Maoist” superstructure.

Towards the end of 1970 a renewed study of Marxism began which, it was said, was necessary in order to enable Party members "to distinguish between genuine and sham Marxism". An editorial in the *People's Daily* – and *People's Daily* editorials are very rare – on the philosophy of Mao, declared: "It is necessary to distinguish between true and sham Marxism if we are to get rid of blind thoughtlessness and raise the standard of consciousness."⁶ What this meant in practical terms was not explained, but the editorial claimed that the Marxism of Liu Shao-chi and Yang Hsien-chan was all wrong; that these men gave the impression that philosophy is mysteriously difficult and not suitable for the masses. Yang Hsien-chan "denied the effectiveness of revolutionary theory and of the great subjective capacity of the popular masses". On the other hand, the meaning of Mao's "genuine Marxism" in practical terms was described by Hsames Chieh Hsiung in his book *Ideology and Practice* :

Tremendous importance, to the point of fanaticism, is attached to ideological work in communist China today. The Party believes that the key to China's modernization lies in instilling correct thinking (*szu-hsiang*) in people's minds. The objective of ideological work is to create a uniformity of thought, outlook and psychic commitment. Several patterns for achieving that objective have been developed, including (i) thought reform, primarily administered to cadres and intellectuals; (ii) propaganda (impersonal), indoctrination (personal and face-to-face), and such mass campaigns as the socialist education campaign; and (iii) production-directed mass movements combining psychological appeal ("the Party cares for me"), persuasion ("for the good of the Nation") and rational explanation ("it is good and necessary because –") . . . (pp. 154-5)

When analysed, the similarity between the Chinese Maoist techniques of presentation and Western Christian spiritual indoctrination is astonishing, thought-provoking and – bearing in mind the possibility of a dialogue between Maoism and Christianity at some future date – exciting.

During the Cultural Revolution the Red Guards "gave their testimonies" to the "saving and transforming power of Chairman Mao", both verbally and by means of distributed leaflets. In the old, sinful "pre-liberation" days said one, Tan Hsien-pin, an army driver, "cars were new, but were always breaking down. Now cars are old, but do not break down at all because people are different". By reading Mao's works he and they had learned "to master their vehicles". If a car broke down, the driver "was guilty of not loving State property". The champions of the 28th World Table Tennis Championships were described :

Bubbling with revolutionary zeal, particularly after studying and creatively applying Mao Tse-tung's thinking, they have broadened their vision, enhanced

their far-sightedness, raised their skill by leaps and bounds and greatly fortified their confidence in daring to seize victory.

Mao's China even has its own form of "Sunday Schools" in its "Children's Movement", described in an educational journal, *Instructor* :

Chairman Mao had a series of extremely important writings and directives specifying the children's movement. He taught us thus :

"The Children's Movement is a part of the revolutionary mass movement in which the children are to be rallied and taught to undergo tempering and grow up in the revolutionary struggle; the organizations for the children are schools where they can learn communism, and have to expand in the struggle; the children must pursue study properly, make progress every day, and learn to be new masters of New China . . . Organizations for children must be set up by taking the administrative village as the unit; all children must be organized in the communist spirit . . ."

Following the adoption of the 1969 "new" Party Constitution, collective leadership was repudiated and Chairman Mao was personally acclaimed as the man who led China's great struggle for socialist revolution – an official installation as communist China's Messiah – and although the cult of personality was officially deplored, in practice Maoism took on all the aspects of religious worship in a variety of rituals.

The New China News Agency devoted a great deal of space to reports of how "family study groups" should "use Mao Tse-tung's thought to fight self and repudiate revisionism". Many of these reports included descriptions of combined "family worship", as, for example; "The 13 members of the family stand respectfully in front of Chairman Mao's portrait to wish him a long, long life." And, "Now every day the family stands before the painting of Chairman Mao and sings 'The East Is Red', and 'A Long, Long Life to Chairman Mao'."

Mao is prophet (inspired revelation, plus charisma) priest (official interpreter of the doctrine and representative of the people), and king (the acclaimed and enthroned leader), and takes his place in the communist pantheon alongside Marx, Engels and Lenin. The "Thoughts of Chairman Mao" have established myths as facts and their magical qualities have been increasingly emphasized. James T. Myers, for example, has written :

The Thought of Mao Tse-tung has been expanded to make room for *fa-pao*, supernatural or magical weapons. Now the enemies of the State and the people are "devils", "demons", "monsters", "apparitions", "spectres" and other such supernatural creatures . . . This is no longer the language of sorcerers and magicians, of old Chinese fairy tales which featured all sorts of rare and wonderful magic, swords which fly through the air and fire-eating dragons . . .⁷

Mao himself admitted to Edgar Snow that although the regime had taken steps to avoid having streets and places named after him, "other forms of worship had emerged".⁸ But, despite this disclaimer, the official organization of the rituals of Mao-worship implies high-level approval – and their similarity to Christian forms of ritual would appear to be more than mere coincidence. The huge rallies of the Cultural Revolution resembled Billy Graham Crusades in conception and presentation. Eleven million or so "revolutionary fighters" from all parts of China "shed tears of joy" as they participated in rituals of "mass intoxication and conversion", and were admonished to "convert the masses" and "transform society".⁹ Smaller rallies were held in local areas, more like standard church services, with a processional, reading of scripture, sermon, recessional and benediction. One such, held in Heilunkiang, was described :

After (i) opening ceremonies to the strains of "The East is Red" and (ii) a recital of quotations from Mao Tse-tung, (iii) a directive to hold high the great red banner of Mao Tse-tung's thought, vigorously grasp class struggle, and do a good job on the production of summer-ripening crops . . . was read . . . the rally (iv) ended with the song "Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman".¹⁰

Professor Holmes Welch has described in detail a family ritual performed in the home in front of a table "on which were placed four volumes of Mao's collected works, and above which hung his portrait", and went on :

The first service of the day was called "asking for instructions in the morning". The noon service was conducted before lunch, for which it served as a kind of grace since it was called "thanking Mao for his kindness". The evening service was called "reporting back at night".¹¹

Every day, then, throughout China, a great paean of worship and love flows upward to Mao – Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Helmsman, Great Commander – for the revelation which he has brought; not just revolution, but the revelation behind it. And it is significant that it is as "Teacher" that he expects to be remembered.¹² The Marxist Word made flesh, indeed.

My personal conviction as a Christian student of the Chinese revolutionary scene is that Mao's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism briefly described, together with its methods of indoctrination, present the most exciting challenge to Christianity in centuries. The dynamism of Maoist Marxism – despite its overtly atheistic and anti-ecclesiastical character – opens up the possibility of a dialogue with an equally dynamic and revolutionary Christianity (yet to take place in the West, but with promising

signs in Asia, Africa and South America). But I emphasize that this dialogue will never take place within the framework of the historical Churches as they exist today. This was demonstrated by the ruthless and rapid destruction of the Churches by the Chinese communist authorities in their first years of power. The planned destruction of both Protestant and Catholic Churches' influence in China was conceived and carried out by the Religious Affairs Bureau, working through the puppet structure of the "Three Self Reform Movement" (self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting). A leading member of the Religious Affairs Bureau described to me how this was done.¹⁸ At first church workers were forced to hold meetings of accusation against "imperialists who have carried out aggression against China under the cloak of religion". Under the direction of cadres, each church or sect would conduct its own accusation meeting at which members would study pertinent documents, analyse them and then make criticisms. Afterwards all religious workers were brought together, regardless of denomination, to repeat the same process. When the "aggressive crimes" of the foreign missions had been thoroughly exposed, the religious workers were asked to get up one by one and solemnly declare that their relationships with their home churches would be severed.

After the Second National Conference on Religious Work had been held in Peking in 1954, a new directive was issued which demanded the "infusing of Marxist-Leninist thought into the positive doctrines of religion". When announcing this directive Ho Cheng-hsiang, Director of the Religious Affairs Bureau of the State Council, declared :

The positive values of patriotism should take the place of negative religious propaganda. We communists can accept as reasonable certain parts of the Bible which Christians use, but we must also pay attention to the doctrines that they preach. If we infuse those doctrines with our Marxist-Leninist thought, then they will have positive significance and can serve our cause.

The "parts of the Bible" which communism found reasonable, according to Ho Cheng-hsiang, were the Ten Commandments. He acknowledged that the real purpose of the Bible "was to advocate peace and philanthropy", but added that it had no class standpoint. Finally, he said :

We must oppose sermons on supernatural things, especially subjects like the "Last Supper" in Catholicism, and "Jesus will come again" and "Doomsday" in Protestantism. We must promote propaganda of world peace, patriotism, love of the people, and support for the realistic world.

But this plan to "Mao-ise" Christianity in China only served to precipitate the collapse of the historical Churches, while at the same time infusing

individual Christians with a dynamic dedication. A report by "a Christian layman" described what took place :

Then they began to take action. With their lips they continued to talk about self-government, self-support, self-propagation, while in reality they proceeded to attack the genuine self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating churches which they regarded as "nails in the eyes" to be removed. These church organizations, set up by Chinese Christians, were entirely supported by them, and had no relationship with the churches in foreign countries. They were well-organized, had good fellowship, were well-supported by members who were faithful in attendance and ardent in their piety. In many ways the devotion of Christians in these churches exceeded that of the churches with foreign connections. They adhered unanimously to one principle: the worship of God is the only purpose in religion, not participation in politics. When the Three Self Reform Movement was first launched they were approached many times, but they refused to join because of that principle . . .¹⁴

This emergence of "underground home congregations" or "Roman Empire Christianity", the terms used by Chinese officials, was the main cause behind the "great debate" on religion in the Chinese Press during the 1960s. This was a debate between Marxist theorists, not between communists and Christians. All agreed that religion, which showed no signs of "withering away", was bad and should be eliminated.

A report at the Second Three Self General Conference held in January 1961, called for the rooting out from the Church of reactionary elements which were carrying out "illegal activities in secret".¹⁵ Four years later an editorial headed, "What are our tasks as Christians in the present situation?" outlined a five-point answer, including :

. . . (2) to continue to practise the principle of arranging religious activities with the primary aim of obeying the laws of the government – *religious activities should take place in church*, and should not interfere with production; (3) *to beware of admitting reactionary elements into the church* and of using Christianity for reactionary and subversive activities. We must help the government stop all illegal activities, using the cover of Christianity . . .¹⁶ (*italics mine*).

This was only one of a series of articles on the subject of religion which began to appear in 1963. Between 1963 and 1970 at least fifteen major articles and many lesser ones on religion were published in the national press. How the public debate began has been described by one of the leading protagonists, Ya Han-chang :

Between the years of 1959 and 1964 I had several articles about atheism published in the press . . . Upon the publication of these articles Comrades Yu Hsiang and Liu Chun-wang also had three articles published at various times

between 1963 and 1964, criticizing me on a number of points. Because their criticisms were erroneous I accordingly wrote some counter-criticisms. It was in this way that the debate over religion started . . .

It might well be true that this particular "debate over religion" started in this way, but the reasons behind it went deeper. The *Hong Kong Standard* of 12 March 1962, carried an article by its news editor, Jack Chow, stating :

Although the visible and formal churches are dying out on the mainland, the invisible, formless, non-political and true ones are growing in number in Shanghai, Nanking, Peking and other towns and cities.

Jack Chow gave an example :

One of the arrivals (in Hong Kong), the wife of a former professor at Peking University, belonged to a small prayer group of four Christian women prior to her departure from Shanghai. She says that there are many such small groups, formed by people whose churches have either been shut down or taken over by the communists. They meet irregularly but not infrequently at different homes for prayer-meetings, Bible study and fellowship. They have won many souls, who have found God a great help in time of trouble. When they pray together they do not kneel, and their meetings, which have no form of any sort, are usually short because they do not wish to invite trouble. The communists forbid religious meetings in private homes. If more than two people are found praying together at home, they are liable to prosecution on "counter-revolutionary charges" and to imprisonment.

One of the debate's protagonists, Ya Han-chang, dealt in his article with three categories – deist ideas, religion, and feudal superstitions. He maintained that, while these have much in common, "they are not the same thing". Ya's critics on the ultra-Marxist side disagreed with this conclusion, insisting that all categories came under the same heading of religion. To support their view they quoted Engels' "scientific definitions" of religion : "All religion is none other than an illusory reflection in the mind of man of the external forces that dominate him in his everyday life. In this reflection, human forces take the form of superhuman forces." They pointed out that the three categories are all one when religion is discussed in the classical works of Marxism-Leninism; no parallel mention is made of deist ideas and feudal superstitions. Ya, however, maintained that the latter had been omitted since in the West religion was usually understood to mean Christianity, whilst feudal superstitions such as those in China were almost unknown.¹⁷

At the start of the debate in 1963 religion was officially defined as follows :

Religion and superstition have their similarities. They also have their differences. All religious activities are superstitious activities. This is their similarity. But not all superstitious activities are religious activities. This is their difference.¹⁸

True Chinese communists had to be atheists and work for the elimination of religion and superstition because religious belief was one of the greatest dangers to socialism :

Religious superstitious thoughts constitute a serious threat to socialist revolution and its construction. Socialist revolution aims to exchange the old social system of exploitation and oppression and to destroy classes. On the other hand, religion teaches people to seek happiness, solve the problems of life and reach the happiness of the after-life through prayer. Therefore, belief in religion must make revolutionary ardour fade.¹⁹

This "great debate", however, did not include a real dialogue comparing and revealing the contradictions between the teachings of Christ, the writing of Marx-Engels-Lenin, and the thoughts of Mao. If there had been discussions with articulate spokesmen of the dynamic Christianity, represented by the "underground home congregations" whose faith and practice, unlike those of the sterile ecclesiastical organizations, had not been compromised by political expediency, then something of greater value for China – and the world – might have emerged. Unfortunately, such potential spokesmen – Nee and Wang Ming-tao – chose prison and isolation. Unfortunately, the communist authorities chose harassment and persecution. Thus a promising opportunity for dialogue was missed.

Marx saw communism as the moral solution to an immoral society, as a moral necessity. As a social scientist, however, Marx projected communism not as a moral but as an historical necessity. Mao has restored the moral imperatives in China, insisting on an "other-centredness" – love for the State, love for one's neighbour – to supplement the current "self-centredness". Mao's interpretation of Marxism, and his vision for the Chinese people, is not only exciting and dynamic, but will yet have significant revolutionary implications for the future in other countries as young enthusiasts take up the cause. With an added spiritual dimension inherent in the teachings of Christ – although largely forgotten or ignored in the historical Churches – beyond the Marxist limitations of the State and the rigidities of inexorable historical processes already provided politically in Maoism, a bridge could be built that would have incalculable possibilities for a revitalized Christianity in the twentieth century.

¹ "Spring", Li Ta-chao, pp. 16-17.

² "Class Struggle and Mutual Aid", 6 July 1919.

³ *Ideology and Practice*, James Chieh Hsiung, Pall Mall Press, p. 98.

⁴ Benjamin Schwartz, "The Reign of Virtue: Some Broad Perspectives on Leader and Party in the Cultural Revolution", *The China Quarterly*, No. 35, July-Sept., 1968, p. 3.

⁵ *Revolutionary Immortality*, Robert Jay Lipton, Random House, New York, 1968.

⁶ *People's Daily*, 30 October 1970, p. 1.

⁷ "The Fall of Chairman Mao", *Current Scene*, VI, 10, 15 June 1968.

⁸ "A Conversation with Mao Tse-tung", *LIFE*, 30 April 1971, p. 46.

⁹ *Peking Review*, Nos. 35, 37, 39, 41; 1966.

¹⁰ *Heilunkiang Radio*, 23 May 1968.

¹¹ "The Deification of Mao", *Saturday Review*, 19 Sept., 1970, p. 25.

¹² Edgar Snow, *ibid.*, p. 46.

¹³ For full details see my book, *Christianity in Communist China*, pub. WORD books, USA, 1969.

¹⁴ *Documents of the Three Self Movement*, ed. Francis P. Jones; National Council of Churches, New York, 1963, pp. 14-18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁶ *Tien Feng*, 31 March 1965.

¹⁷ *Kwangming Daily*, 30 June 1965.

¹⁸ *People's Daily*, 8 April 1963.

¹⁹ *Kwangming Daily*, 2 April 1964.



Poem

And you, candle, determined I
must be a holder for your eyes, your wax,
that in the pitch-black everlasting night
your trembling flame alone should gaze into the dark.

But the sill is a frontier to candlelight,
the curtain's swaying is your Boreas,
and where is the fire-worshipper more secure
than in November behind double windows.

I am not a flame, not a candle, but a light,
I am a fire-fly in the damp tangled
grass. The grass flows swiftly after me
and the woodland beast homes on me in silence :

the faintest of brightening fire-flies,
the brightest of failing fire-flies,
by whose light the night skies are not pierced,
yet the stars in their courses are guided.

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