

Review

Buddhism Under Mao, by Holmes Welch, Harvard University Press, 1972. 666 pp., \$16.00.

Mr. Welch's earlier volumes were *The Buddhist Revival in China* and *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism, 1900-1950*. The final volume in this monumental trilogy concludes over a decade of scholarly work based at Harvard University. These are exhaustive studies, drawing heavily on information gathered in field work in Asia, both from original documents and from interviews with Chinese Buddhists and others in the countries on China's rim.

In this final volume the author "attempts to give the fullest answer to the questions: 'What happens to religion in a Communist State?', and 'What happens to the men [and women] of religion who try to accommodate to Communism . . .?'" He relates these questions to broader Chinese issues involving culture, changing values of the "average person", and conflicting perceptions of the religious situation by observers both inside and outside China. As in the first two volumes, the author concentrates largely on the first two questions documenting information and his analysis from a wide range of sources.

This volume traces the development of state policy towards Buddhism after 1949; the stages and nature of change in the interpretation and practice of Buddhism; the relationship of Buddhism to culture; the role of Buddhism in foreign relations; the life of the clergy and laity; and closes with a chapter speculating on the future of Buddhism in China. One chapter presents the scanty information available reflecting the situation for Buddhists during the Cultural Revolution (1966-69); but the book was published too early to include recent reports on the renewed visibility of practising Buddhists in a number of temples and monasteries. There are 270 pages of appended documents and notes, and 59 pages of photographs in this scrupulously researched and documented study.

One wonders how this book will be read and received inside China. Like all social scientists seeking to understand social change in China since 1949, the student of religion is frustrated by the paucity of source material, especially in recent years, and the inability to conduct field research inside China. Can a non-Chinese scholar, writing from outside and dependent on secondary sources, even one as well qualified as Mr. Welch,

adequately report the progressive stages of Buddhism under Mao? Mr. Welch acknowledges the problems : the diminution of Buddhist books and journals since 1949, tapering off to none after 1966; the politically controversial nature of his topic, and the difficulty of maintaining (or convincing readers) of objectivity; the susceptibility to distortion and error of the "case method" (interviews, individual cases, and generalizations from small samples); and the absence of official statistics since the 1950s. But within these limitations he has produced the definitive study on Buddhism in contemporary China, for now.

Under a general policy of freedom of religious belief, stated first in the Common Programme and later in the state Constitution, institutional Buddhism, along with all other religions, came under scrutiny, supervision and regulation through the Bureau of Religious Affairs and its cognate group, the Chinese Buddhist Association. In a series of mobilization campaigns for socialist nation building and military response to the Korean War, Buddhists, like all other sectarian, ethnic and social sub-groups, served national priorities first. "Parasitic" monks and nuns were called into the labour force; excess Buddhist landholdings (like those of all landlords) were redistributed to the tillers and later collectivized; temples and monasteries, many of them already in partial or total disuse, were occupied for secular purposes. Many monks and nuns returned to lay life, while ordinations ceased after 1957.

Monastic life came under other external pressures to reform and conform, while the clergy itself, in many cases, sought ways of accommodation to the new China. Among these were attempts at syncretism with some of the basic doctrines of the new ideology, and reinterpretation of Buddhist ethical dogma. There were solemn attempts to justify hatred (of counter-revolutionaries, imperialists and others) and violence within the Buddhist teachings on compassion, love, and non-violence. For example, one Buddhist theologian argued for "killing the bad to save the good." While individual self-serving and opportunism cannot be ruled out, it cannot be doubted that Buddhists, like all patriotic Chinese, were strongly moved to join in the collective tasks of unifying and building their nation.

As no official statement on religion has been issued since before the Cultural Revolution, one can only guess at current policy. There has been no revocation of the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religious belief, amplified by Mao Tse-tung and other leaders and theoreticians in a number of statements in the 1940s and 1950s. The best-known, often repeated in the Chinese press, was first enunciated by Mao in his 1957 landmark speech, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions*: "All

attempts to use administrative orders or coercive measures to settle ideological questions or questions of right and wrong are not only ineffective but harmful. We cannot abolish religion by administrative decree or force people not to believe in it." For him, religion was sheer superstition that 'would die a natural death as socialism progressed. "It is the peasants who made the idols, and when the time comes they will cast the idols aside with their own hands; there is no need for anyone else to do it for them prematurely."

Nevertheless, whether by administrative decree or otherwise, state policies have aided and hastened the natural attrition that had been eroding the structure and practice of Buddhism in China for years before 1949. Since that date tens of thousands of temples and monasteries have been converted to other uses. By 1957, according to Welch's estimate, 90 per cent of the monks and nuns had left their religious vocations. According to foreign observers, no temples or monasteries remained open during the peak years of the Cultural Revolution.

Since then an American, John Strong and his wife, visited ten monasteries during a six-week visit in 1972, finding active clergy in all of them. Many had been painted and refurbished. "The Chinese government cannot and does not wish to hide China's Buddhist heritage", he wrote. "What the Chinese want to do is to understand their own Buddhism in the light of Marxism, Leninism and Mao Tse-tung's thought; to see its good points, to show its bad points, and to rally what remains of it in support of socialist construction."¹

Six Japanese priests, in the first visit of foreign Buddhists since 1966, visited eleven monasteries in eight cities in 1973. In a report of their visit² Holmes Welch quoted Chao Pu-chu, the leader of China's Buddhist Association: the task of the Association is "uniting Buddhists to study Mao's thought, to beautify the land by socialist construction, and to implement the freedom of religious belief guaranteed by the Constitution." Hsiao Hsien-fa, head of the Religious Affairs Bureau, told the Japanese visitors that the guarantee of freedom of religious belief still holds. Officials have denied in conversations with foreign visitors, writes Welch, that there ever was a policy of eliminating religious activity, even during the Cultural Revolution.

Undoubtedly there are other living monasteries which visitors have not seen. Others, which they have seen, are museums only, preserved for the

¹ *The Atlantic*, January 1973; and *China Notes*, Winter 1973.

² *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 July, 1973.

edification of the Chinese people, object lessons of the human and material waste of past years, built "with the skill and sweat of Chinese workers".

Welch and others speculate on the reasons for the moves toward some open practice and visibility for Chinese Buddhism. It may be part of the cyclical swing that has now moved China back from the peak of political activism and cultural revolution of 1966 and after. It may be to impress foreign visitors, or to augment foreign policy moves with Buddhist nations. More likely it is a minor element, a by-product of the general reopening of Chinese society following the Cultural Revolution, a reflection of the national and ideological self-confidence so impressive to foreign visitors. "Buddhism in China has not died out," wrote John Strong after his visit. As for the future, "the long-range outlook for Chinese Buddhism as a religion is not good". One layman told the Strongs: "I think Sakyamuni himself has already answered your question. Buddhism, like all things, is impermanent. It undergoes birth, growth, abiding, and decay. The first five hundred years after Sakyamuni were the golden years. Today, we have already reached the end of the period of decay."

Although his view of the future for institutional Buddhism in China is not optimistic, Holmes Welch believes that religious needs are part of human nature, and they will be expressed in China, as they are in the current worldwide recrudescence of religion in myriad forms. This "spontaneous religiosity . . . will not necessarily mean a revival of Buddhism in its traditional form, yet elements of Buddhist belief and practice will surface. . . ."

In his view the Cultural Revolution has not eliminated religious needs, like the need for purification, for rebirth, for a saviour. "I am not sure what religion is, but essential to it is an element of the other-worldly. That is why it is difficult to unite it completely with everyday life. . . . The religious goal is for the individual to find himself. Losing himself [in collective involvement in secular tasks] means to escape from the problem of who he is and what his life means: finding himself is to solve that problem."

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