

# Temples in the City of Xian: A Reflection of the Religious Situation in China

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During the past year travellers' reports from China have suggested that a religious revival is occurring in the People's Republic.<sup>1</sup> Buddhist temples have been opened in southern China and mosques in the north-west; and churches are reopening in major cities like Shanghai, Kunming, Chongqing, Amoy and Fuzhou. Some religious groups even claim more followers now than before the persecutions of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Yet there are clear geographical differences: Christianity was strong in Fujian Province, and today it seems to have revived most promisingly there; traditional Chinese folk religion with elements of Buddhism and Taoism was strongest in the south, and today the majority of newly-opened temples are in that area; in the north there is only scant evidence of temples reopening, but mosques are doing so.

I recently conducted a first-hand survey of all the former temples in Xian, the capital city of Shaanxi Province in north-west China. The signs of revival, though they exist, are very few. In the cosmopolitan era of the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618-917), Buddhism and other religions flourished here, but today the only active temple within the city is the Muslim Great Mosque. The 15 temples covered in this survey may conveniently be categorized into several religious groupings — Buddhist, Lamaist, Taoist, Islamic and Confucian. Their present condition reflects the contemporary state of religion in Xian.

## *Buddhism*

The condition of Buddhist temples within the city would suggest that the religion has been wiped out. For example, the temple of the Five Western Terraces has become a factory producing printing machinery. The Eastern Peak Temple is now a primary school. The Sleeping Dragon Temple is also a factory. All religious objects have been removed and the buildings' decorations vandalized and ruined. Local people reported that there are plans to restore the buildings eventually.

This will take a long time, however, for the old masters of temple arts are now very scarce, and the costs involved will be enormous. It is extremely unlikely that these buildings will thereafter be reopened as functioning temples since this would involve rehousing the schools, factories and families now occupying the premises. Some former monks and nuns, derobed in earlier years, still live in the vicinity of most temples, however, and could be recalled if rehabilitation were implemented.

Buddhism seems to be surviving more successfully in the suburbs. The temple of the Great Goose Pagoda is maintained with the images and objects of ceremony still intact. The area is a public park but the temple buildings remain locked to Chinese visitors. A handful of monks still live here and the altar is decked for worship. Still further into the countryside, the Monastery of Flourishing Doctrine affords yet greater hope. This monastery is 1200 years old and houses the pagoda dedicated to the Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang who went to India to collect scriptures in the 7th century A.D. A community of monks still lives here, working the land for themselves, and the temple is clearly used by them. Incense burns before the images. Local lay believers place offerings in the little shrines at the foot of the pagodas, as the incense they leave there testifies. Local people reported that the monks refused state aid on the grounds that donations from the faithful were sufficient.

### *Lamaism*

The Lamaist offshoot of Buddhism suffered an even harsher fate. In Xian this religion has been completely emasculated if not exterminated. The Temple of Great Goodwill, dating from 1705, is neglected and dilapidated. It was closed during the Cultural Revolution and is now inhabited by workers and soldiers' families. Three derobed Lamas live next door in a small courtyard. Over their doorway they have posted the name of the temple. One of them reported that they returned from the countryside last year. They are the only survivors of an original community of 21 Lamas. They are free to worship in their own homes but not to proselytize. The contents of the temple were destroyed by the Red Guards and there is no plan to restore the temple.

The Temple of Great Prosperity was originally a Buddhist temple founded in the 3rd century. In 1956 it was rebuilt to house a community of Lamas and a collection of Tibetan *tankas*.<sup>3</sup> There are currently no signs of either of these. With the Cultural Revolution the temple became a park, and it now accommodates a provincial industrial exhibition.

### Taoism

If Buddhism and Lamaism suffered harsh fates under the Cultural Revolution, Taoism suffered yet more. Taoism had long been associated with local superstitions and sorcery, and Taoists were held to have cheated the people of their money.<sup>4</sup> There are several small Taoist temples in Xian which have become dilapidated factories or dwellings, but the huge and most famous Temple of the Eight Immortals provides the most representative picture. This temple was closed in 1966: half the temple complex was demolished and the other half became a machine tool factory. In the halls today, lathes and other machinery still squat incongruously beside decaying sculptures, the two aspects merging in a statement symbolizing the persecutions of the Cultural Revolution. Workers there reported that there are plans to restore the temple for tourism and even to revive it. The local Cultural Bureau has a complete catalogue and photographs of all the *objets d'art* and artefacts which were removed or destroyed.

In a small courtyard behind the temple a colony of about a dozen Taoist priests live in obscurity. They wear their hair in pigtails, sport goatee beards on weathered faces, and dress in the garb of their sect. One of them received me and answered questions. He said that there were 110 Taoists there before 1966; now only ten or so remain. Some never returned from rural labour. He claimed euphemistically that they went to the countryside to spread the doctrine. However, some Taoists became ordinary workers and renounced their religion, and he acknowledged that others had been killed. He claimed to live satisfactorily and expressed gratitude to the government for providing food, clothing and shelter, and for allowing them to return and reassume their Taoist garb. The eldest remaining priests are in their eighties, the youngest in their fifties. Although they have no hierarchy of priests, the government had them select a leading representative. He confirmed that the temple would be restored to make money for the State and foreign "brethren" would be invited. He then gave a brief speech on international friendship, abounding in political jargon. He had clearly undergone "re-education" during the Cultural Revolution but maintained his evasive Taoist thinking. "We shall recover, but everything in the world has a process, all things must take their time."

### Islam

Islam in Xian presents a totally different picture. Xian has long had a substantial Muslim population, and before the Cultural Revolution there were 14 mosques there. The most important one, the Great Mosque, founded in 747 A.D., is open today. In 1976 the Chinese

authorities often denied its existence, but now it is publicized as a cultural monument and foreigners may visit it. The mosque is in the style of a Chinese temple, but the inscriptions are in both Chinese and Arabic. Parts of it are currently undergoing renovation.

I witnessed a ceremony there and conversed freely with the worshippers. As the imam's voice boomed over the tannoy, about 50 men stood to attention facing the hall of worship. Then they entered, removing their shoes. The men made their prostrations with discipline and rhythm. There were youths among them, and a child of eight years old.

The worshippers claim that the mosque was closed for only one year during the Cultural Revolution. They pray regularly five times a day either in the mosque or elsewhere. At important ceremonies or on holidays the congregation is much larger. There are now 50,000 Muslims in Xian, though there were only 40,000 before the Cultural Revolution. But only eight mosques are now functioning. The imam at the Great Mosque is very old and he is training youngsters to succeed him. The worshippers were proud of being Muslim and keen to converse about religion in general, expressing pleasure at meeting a foreigner who shared with them the freedom of religious belief.

I discovered a second, smaller mosque in a small alley, an ordinary brick building externally unadorned. Its hall is minute but it has a regular congregation of around 40. Again there was a great willingness to converse, and answers to questions confirmed claims made at the Great Mosque. It is an amazing fact that, belying many foreigners' impressions, this small mosque was never closed during the Cultural Revolution and worship continued uninterrupted. Islam clearly stands on a much firmer footing than all other religions in Xian. Perhaps its strength lies in its ethnic character. The Muslims of China are an ethnic minority living in concentrated pockets around the mosques. They organize their communities with strict moral and social discipline, a practice which conforms with the traditional Chinese political demand for collective morality and social order and perhaps even reinforces it. They do not threaten the social order of the State.

### *Confucianism*

Confucianism was one of the oft-cited "big three" philosophies in ancient China. It was essentially a moral system and political ideology, with religious ramifications in the worship of ancestors and the "Emperor of Heaven". Iconoclastic attacks on Confucianism began very early on in this century, and in the Cultural Revolution it was totally condemned. The Confucian Temple in Xian was early converted into a provincial museum, with no religious function. Although in

recent months Confucius has been re-evaluated by the authorities as a great figure in the history of philosophy and culture,<sup>5</sup> there is no prospect yet of Confucian temples being rehabilitated.

### *Christianity*

I searched hard but fruitlessly to find evidence of Christian worship. Christianity never had strong roots in Xian and there appear to be no churches open there today.

### *Conclusion*

This preliminary survey in Xian reflects the status of the various religions there. The blows directed against Confucianism, Taoism and Lamaism were more severe than those against other creeds, and prospects for their revival are remote. Buddhism and Islam, however, present a different picture. They are considered by the government as two of the world's three "real religions" (Christianity, Buddhism and Islam)<sup>6</sup> and as such they are treated more or less in accordance with the constitutional right of freedom of religious belief. Islam was, surprisingly, scarcely damaged at all in Xian during the Cultural Revolution. On the contrary, it continued to gain ground.

Recent reports of a religious revival in China are not completely accurate. "Freedom of belief" is enshrined in Art. 88 of the Constitution, and religious practice has certainly become more open. As Xian testifies, however, religion is only slowly recovering from persecution; and the rate of revival differs in the different religions and in different parts of the country.

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, back issues of *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *South China Morning Post*, *Asahi Evening News* and British journalists' reports from Fujian Province, Easter 1980.

<sup>2</sup>The Cultural Revolution began in 1966 and lasted for about ten years. Generally speaking, religious activity was suppressed throughout this period but in the late '60s, after the initial spate of persecution abated, a certain amount of religious expression became possible, particularly in rural areas.

<sup>3</sup>The Tibetan *tanka* is a linen or cotton banner bearing a religious painting.

<sup>4</sup>Articles in *Wen Hui Bao* and *Gong Ren Ribao*, 17-18 April 1980, suggest that the suppression of "superstitious activities" must continue, and the fate of Taoism remains precarious.

<sup>5</sup>See *Guangming Ribao*, 20 April 1980.

<sup>6</sup>See the article by Bob Whyte in *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 4-5, 6-7.