

Rural Christianity in China after the Cultural Revolution

ARVAN GORDON

Towards the end of the last decade both Protestant and Catholic services resumed in a number of villages. There is not scope here for a full survey, but it appears from the testimony of eye-witnesses that certain situations and problems recur throughout the country and may be said to be symptomatic of contemporary Christianity in the countryside. Needless to say, the names of villages cannot be mentioned, nor even in most cases the provinces in which they are found.

Here are two examples of Protestant¹ worship:

I went to church. It was heavenly. My heart was full of blessings and my eyes full of happy tears. I shamelessly clutched the arm of an old man sitting next to me, my tears wetting his jacket. I was so happy I had a headache. My heart beat faster every time the congregation sang and the piano played.²

In another report the difficulties of a large congregation meeting in a single house are explained. In winter it is possible to squeeze the elderly people inside, while the young people pack the porch. The house-gathering has been joined by quite a few elderly people who were Christians all along. In addition there are a number of middle-aged teachers, rehabilitated after the Cultural Revolution, who are now able to come into the open. The rest appear to be enquirers. A problem caused by this latter group is that they have no understanding of prayer or worship; having behaved in a suitably "spiritual" manner during the service they resume their customary foul language the moment the blessing is given.³

Many accounts of Catholic worship are also available. The following account is given of the work of a priest who had returned to his village after 27 years of "re-education":

Not being able to celebrate Mass during the hours of work, he did so round about 4.30 in the morning, and again at 10.30 or 11.00 in the evening. When it was known that Mass was to be celebrated, Christians would come from distant villages. As not all of them had watches, some would arrive during the night in order to be in

time for Mass. . . . The priest used an old service-book with a Latin text, lit with a single lamp.⁴

The problems of returned priests who have to do manual labour are considerable:

One works in a pigsty; it is one of the most menial tasks available in the whole commune. They all have to do such work in order to earn their daily bread. Another, who also works in a pigsty, goes round visiting believers in spite of an injured leg. He celebrates Mass very early in the day — two or three times on Sundays.⁵

Father Paul Zhang (the pseudonym of a priest, now living overseas, who recently visited his mother in a small Chinese village) gives the following evidence:

Since January 1980, a priest who had spent eighteen years in prison regularly came to say Mass and hear confessions. During my stay, I took over these ministries, always careful to imitate my confrère's discretion. I said Mass on weekdays at my home. The exact time was never previously announced, but it was either late at night or early in the morning so as not to interfere with anyone's work schedule, and thereby, as the official jargon puts it, "disrupt production", a capital sin in the PRC (People's Republic of China — Ed.). People would gather hours in advance. They would just sit around and chat, or go to confession. I always said Mass in Chinese, and I distributed Holy Communion under both species by intinction. I explained that this was now a common way throughout the world. All were glad to conform, "because we feel united with the Pope, the bishops and all the faithful". I reflected that in winter, people, young and old, would kneel for hours in the bitter cold without falling sick. A sturdy generation, indeed!⁶

There are reports of church buildings being renovated and handed back to local religious communities, but the main emphasis is on the poor condition of such buildings and the difficulty of getting possession of them:

We are all worshipping in homes. There are no church premises in adequate condition. The only one left standing has no roof and it is some six kilometres away. I don't see the possibility of erecting a new church. There are no laws, no regulations, no permission. So perhaps we'll just build and worry later.⁷

I have recently decided not to seek the return of the parsonage. Three families are living in there right now. The chapel is in a hopeless state. The roof has long fallen down. All the useable bricks were taken away. We will continue to meet in our home.⁸

Although there is occasional news of Catholic churches being re-opened for worship,⁹ church buildings cannot generally be used by believers, and the use of private houses for the celebration of Mass is widespread. Finance is only occasionally mentioned, as in this Protestant report:

Our church has no money; there is no need. Keeping a full account is troublesome and can cause suspicion. We do not want to be answering questions such as “why the money?” and “where does it come from?” from our comrade cadres. Besides, we don’t know which department to turn to for accountability. Comrade Secretary did not know. He told us nobody has heard of a believers’ audit. So we keep no accounts and take up no regular offering. Whatever and whenever our needs, we ask brothers and sisters to contribute.¹⁰

Shortages of the basic needs for worship are apparent among both communities. Catholics complain repeatedly about the lack of figures of the Madonna, vestments, crucifixes, medals, rosaries, teaching materials for the young — but especially missals and Chinese Bibles.¹¹ On the Protestant side, despite evidence on every hand of Bibles and hymnbooks and crosses having been destroyed by the Red Guards whenever possible, certain religious books appear to have survived. Indeed, there is at least one report of Bibles being found stored in Red Guard quarters at the end of the Cultural Revolution, and being returned to local believers.¹²

In various cases it seems clear that Protestants and Catholics are aware of one another’s presence and worship.

We . . . prepare the altar, two small candles, a wooden cross on a bright red sheet. . . Our form of service is basically Lutheran, but of course nobody in our group would call it that. As a matter of fact, we had two Catholic friends with us for some six months. Now they have found their own meeting group.¹³

A Catholic writer comments that no sacred books or Bibles had been available since the Cultural Revolution. He says however that the local Protestants had written to their radio station in Hong Kong and received copies of the Old and New Testaments in considerable numbers. Evidently the radio station had commissioned various people to visit the faithful and bring them Bibles. The Catholics had received nothing in this way, and were rather jealous of the Protestants because of the blessings they had received. The writer recognizes that the Eucharist is the precious food of the soul — but the Bible, not to speak of other sacred books, is also spiritual food. The message ends with the earnest request in Latin: *da mihi bibere!* (Give me drink!).¹⁴ An overseas Chinese priest, visiting a rural area, had brought with him three copies of the New Testament, printed by the Protestants in simplified characters.¹⁵ He was requested to have more such copies sent in, but understood that most were stopped by the customs authorities.

Evidence of the miraculous element in religion is constantly to be met with. One Catholic source reports the following:

Recently there was a strange case. At the very point where a certain saintly priest was buried a spring appeared. Several sick people were healed by means of water from this spring. Many people joined in processions to the spot, but suddenly the authorities shut off all access to the place.¹⁶

A letter coming from a Catholic priest in China gives an account of devil possession. The account describes a woman who had been to hospital for treatment; she had been told by the doctors that she was not physically ill, but was possessed by an evil spirit. She pleaded with a group of believers to help her to be rid of the evil spirit; they said, "Using the name of Jesus we command the evil spirit to leave her". The evil spirit replied, "I have been in her for eight months and am unwilling to leave her. I am a chief evil spirit, but I am afraid of Jesus". At this point a picture of the Lord was displayed. The believers said, "The blood of Jesus shed on the cross can save us, and reading the Scriptures can strengthen us". The evil spirit said, "Jesus has come and commanded me to return to Hades, and I am terrified". The account concludes by describing the struggle that went on in the woman, revealed in physical manifestations, and her utterances about the devil and hell.¹⁷ Another story of exorcism comes from a Protestant source:

Brother Miu took Grandma to his home and told her Lee's story (Lee was a Red Guard who was not right in her head). So Grandma tried to talk to Lee and fed her porridge. . . According to Brother Miu, the next morning saw Grandma kneeling beside the bunk and praying for Lee. . . When Lee woke up, she was a different person. You could see from her eyes that she was no longer crazy. The demon was gone. She was still weak. Grandma stayed for several more days, looking after her. . . Some time during these days, Brother Miu and his wife secretly became believers. They later testified that they saw an angel hovering over Grandma as she cared for Lee.¹⁸

Another Protestant preacher, pressed on the one hand to be more "positive" about the People's Government and socialist China and on the other by believers to speak more about suffering and the end of the world, sometimes found it very difficult to express himself appropriately.

My previous week's sermon, "God our Comforter" . . . should have been titled "The Holy Spirit our Comforter", but, God forgive me, I hesitated to use the term "Holy Spirit" because I couldn't explain it well to my people, and it is so easy for them to get the Holy Spirit confused with other spirits. Since the downfall

of the Gang of Four, spiritualists, witches, fortune-tellers, what have you, have blossomed on all sides. Most, I believe, are sham, an easy way to make money. But, there is no way of avoiding it, there is power, attraction. People do show an interest. And when they feel despair, they go to them.¹⁹

This experience goes far to confirm reports, such as the following, found in the official press.

Sorcerers and witches as well as people of a superstitious nature have seized the opportunity to fool the populace and engage in activities like rebuilding temples and shrines, promoting the worship of man-made gods, and making false pretences about gods and spirits . . .

For example, there have been cases of sick people refusing to go to the doctor and instead praying to the gods and partaking of whatever "holy medicine" is purported to have come from the gods for their relief, and dying as a result.²⁰

It is clearly an important matter for believers to make a distinction between "religion" and "superstition". For cadres in the rural areas, too, the task of drawing a line between the two is no mean problem.

Many cadres still cannot distinguish the difference between religion and feudal superstition. They think that anything involving the worship of spirits and gods is religion. Thus, they think, incorrectly, that the policy of freedom of belief should apply to feudal superstition and therefore allow the practice of feudal superstitious activities.²¹

In theory, a clear distinction emerges between "religion" and "feudal superstition", and it has recently been clarified in official papers. Feudal superstition, for the Party, is a "means whereby some people practise fraud", or "a disguised form of man exploiting man, and as incompatible with the socialist system as water is with fire".²² "Religion" has officially been defined on various recent occasions as having two major characteristics: firstly, it is law-abiding, supporting the communist leadership and the socialist system and refusing to interfere with politics, education or the economics of production; secondly, it has a legally recognizable structure, which is recognized by the government and accepts the government's control. It is, however, one thing to lay down theoretical distinctions in the national capital, but quite another to get these distinctions observed in the greatly varying conditions of the countryside.

For many Protestants, at least, the problem of deciding what attitude to take toward officialdom has never been an easy one. In the late seventies many local congregations had to make up their minds whether or not to patronize the few newly re-opened churches.

The nine of us talked about the nearby re-opened church. . . . Finally everyone agreed that the next Sunday I should go and take a look. There was apparently some hesitation from the younger people, because they had heard news that people had to be recognized as Christians before being allowed in. I was too old to worry. So I went early; there was no registration. A church worker told me that there had been thoughts of building up a membership roll. She said a worship service is no church. A church is a family of Christians witnessing, serving, and of course worshipping together. Hence the idea of getting worshippers to sign their names and addresses. But the idea was dropped as premature. People were suspicious, and with reason.²³

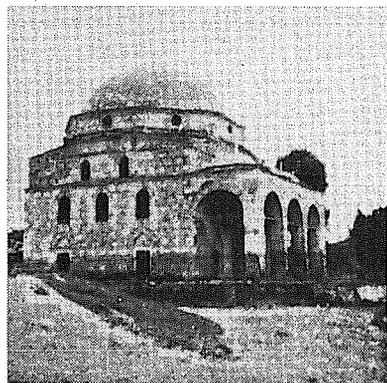
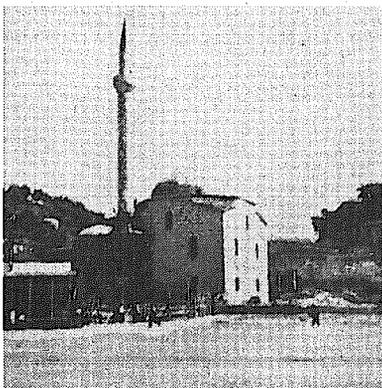
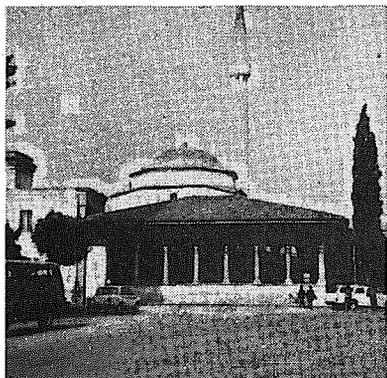
Another circumstance affords Protestant believers a certain degree of confidence in the goodwill of the authorities:

Things have improved in the last couple of years. People began to speak much more freely. . . . We are treated with much respect now. Comrade cadre has been calling me Comrade Pastor and asked if I would prefer to stop being a fishmonger in the co-op market, a job I have held since 1974. I said I wanted to go on. The job isn't too physically demanding. I can, of course, afford to devote more time to being a pastor.²⁴

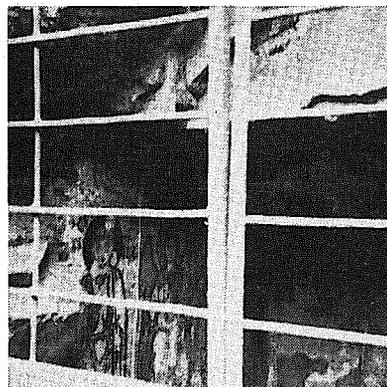
The cadres' interest in religion and avuncular attitude must have impressed some:

Comrade cadre advised us not to kneel. He said bending one's knees is superstitious. Bowing, however, is more part of religion. Everyone has a right to religion. But superstition should be eliminated. I don't think he knows much about spiritual things. But he's all right. Anyway, we agreed not to kneel. . . .²⁵

A distressing schism among Protestants in the province of Henan demonstrates vividly how unpredictable relationships can be between the Church and the provincial authority — an authority which can speak with two totally different voices. A local elder (referred to under the pseudonym of Wang) was arrested before the Cultural Revolution as a Christian; for thirteen years he endured imprisonment without trial; eventually he was released after the fall of the "Gang of Four" and returned home to minister to house-gatherings in his own county. Shortly afterwards, the leader of a local house-gathering was arrested by the security authorities and other Christians were maltreated. Wang decided to go to the provincial capital in order to get the new religious policy clarified. Here he was very warmly received by a high official, who at one time had been involved in persecution of believers, then himself suffered as a "rightist" and was shielded by a pastor whom he



No churches or mosques are open for worship in Albania (see article on pp. 242-55), but buildings remain. There is a mosque in the main square of the capital, Tirana (*above left*) and another being restored in Berat (*above*). A church or mosque in Korça (*left*) is now a "Monument of Culture".



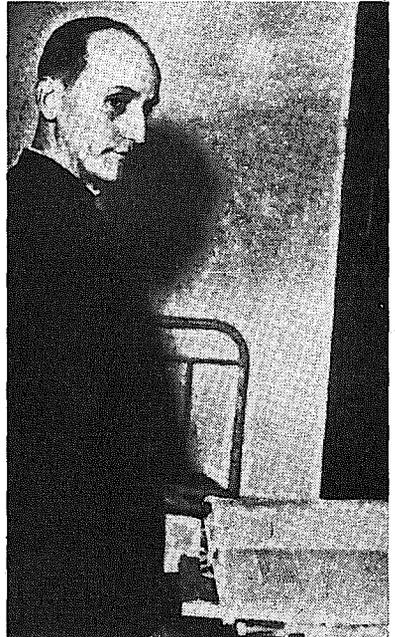
The Museum of Appollonia includes this Byzantine church (*above*) containing icons and murals. The original murals were taken to a museum, but have been copied. A chapel dedicated to St Stephen (*left*) was found during the excavation of the Roman arena at Dürres. (*All photos courtesy Keston College*).



Since January 1982 Hannah Agre, aged 73, (above) has been the last known Jew remaining in China. She lives in a cramped room in Harbin in a house which was formerly a synagogue. See *Chronicle*, pp. 329-31. (Photo courtesy of Peter Humphrey).



Archbishop (later Cardinal) Stepinac of Zagreb at his trial in 1946 (above) and in prison (right). For a detailed account of relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Yugoslav State, see the article "Catholicism and Politics in Socialist Yugoslavia", pp. 256-74. (Photos courtesy of Keston College).



had himself persecuted. This official now had a warm respect for the Church. Secure in the conviction that the authorities would protect believers, Wang ordained a number of elders to look after the many new converts. Suspicion arose, however, that Wang was aiming to safeguard his own position and influence rather than follow the will of the Lord, and a rival church leader ordained his own group of elders — mostly younger people. Thus arose the schism, which appears still to be unresolved. Wang's group were anxious to work within government regulations (and thus have access to Bibles and have the protection of the authorities), and tried to enlist the support of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.²⁶ The rival group, despite an initial reluctance to become involved with the official leadership, appealed to the Three-Self Movement to arbitrate. This effort apparently was unsuccessful.²⁷

A somewhat contradictory picture, therefore, emerges. On the one hand some officials of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement seem to be working in a beneficent way, protecting the Church and championing the interests of believers; on the other hand, there are strong suspicions that certain Three-Self officials are acting as direct agents of government policy, restricting the Church and doing their best to stultify any genuine Christian witness. There are various reports of "guidelines" alleged to have been issued by the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, but such reports are difficult to verify. Some authorities, for example, doubt the accuracy and indeed the genuineness of the "Ten Commandments of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in Henan" reported by a believer from that province.²⁸ If authentic, these "commandments" must be significant. Such instructions as "Except for government approved clergy, nobody should baptize", "Do not travel from commune to commune to spread religion", and "Keep religion to yourself" would naturally awaken the suspicion of rural believers. The "Eight Point Internal Policy on Religion" — more generally accepted as authentic — is more circumspect in its wording.²⁹ Nevertheless, its provisions point to the same conclusion: that a vital function of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement is to act as an arm of government policy.

For members of the Catholic Church the issue seems to be far more clear-cut. The Patriotic Catholic Association's³⁰ demand that Chinese Catholics cut their ties with Rome has undoubtedly met with bitter resistance — not least in the rural areas. Many see the Patriotic Catholics' policy as an effort to put Caesar in place of the Lord. There have, of course, been declarations in favour of the government and the Patriotic Catholics — in many cases, however, a matter of policy rather than conviction. Yet there is a certain ambivalence in the standpoint of many Catholic people. Father Paul Zhang reports as follows:

I have the feeling that, to shrug off the problems which the Patriotic Association might create for them, all Catholics in the village conform to whatever is required by the officials to clear their

status. They intend to behave as conscience dictates. In nonessentials they are free to comply; in matters of importance such as allegiance to the Pope, they are inflexible. Such a spirit of compromise, we all know, is quite Chinese, and every official appreciates it. . . . Many bishops and priests feel that the Patriotic Association with its new structures of last year deserves our attention and respect. Many hope and pray that the bishops who belong to it will be left free to visit Rome and state their case for all the Church to hear.³¹

True, various Catholic correspondents have written words like these:

Under God's providence and through the policy of President Hua, we have attained freedom of religion. . . . Under the enlightened guidance of President Hua, social life is progressing very well. This standard of living was rarely seen before the Liberation; it is truly a blessing of God.³²

Possibly the writer had the Chinese censorship in mind; possibly he was perfectly genuine in his joy about the new conditions. There is no reason to suppose that he is in sympathy with the Patriotic Catholics.

Another Chinese priest, after revisiting his home village, comments as follows:

The Patriotic Catholic Association exists in every diocese and its members are those Christians who are supposed to control the Church for the Party. They are commonly regarded as Judases, because they have betrayed their high calling. The Patriotic Association has two types of members: some are genuinely and passionately devoted to the Party, others are the mediocrities who, while continuing to preach and to hear confessions, are just trying to save their own skins. . . . The Patriotic Association plays no part whatsoever on the pastoral scene; it is simply an agent of the government for the control of the Church.³³

The available evidence supports the above writer. It is clear that the great majority of the Catholic population in the villages look to priests loyal to Rome for leadership and pastoral care. There are few rural Catholics who regard the Patriotic Association as the true heir of the Catholic tradition in China.

¹The terms Catholic and Protestant are used in this essay in accordance with current Chinese custom: "Protestant" covers all the non-Roman Catholic traditions (including Anglicanism) which come under the "Protestant" umbrella.

²"Case Studies from China", *International Review of Missions*, April 1981, pp. 7-8.

³"Case Studies", *IRM*, p. 17.

⁴Piero Gheddo, *Lettere di Cristiani della Cina*, Editrice Missionaria Italiana, Bologna, 1981, p. 72.

⁵ *Lettere di Cristiani*, p. 78.

⁶ *Catholic Life in a Chinese Village*, Joseph J. Spae, CICM, PhD.

⁷ "Case Studies", *IRM*, p. 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁹ *Lettere di Cristiani*, p. 78.

¹⁰ "Case Studies", *IRM*, p. 14.

¹¹ *Lettere di Cristiani*, pp. 69, 85.

¹² "Case Studies", *IRM*, p. 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

¹⁴ *Lettere di Cristiani*, pp. 70-71.

¹⁵ Simplified script made official in the People's Republic of China in 1979. Many younger people find it very difficult to read the older script.

¹⁶ *Lettere di Cristiani*, pp. 80-81.

¹⁷ Based on letter sent from China by a Roman Catholic priest, October 1979.

¹⁸ "Case Studies", *IRM*, p. 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁰ *Southern Daily*, 5 May 1981. Translation published by China Study Project (CSP).

²¹ *Guangming Daily*, 20 April 1981 (CSP).

²² *Ibid.*,

²³ "Case Studies", *IRM*, p. 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁶ The Three-Self Patriotic Movement is the officially-recognized "Protestant" Church structure (self-government; self-support; self-propagation).

²⁷ "Problems in Henan", *China and the Church Today*, 1982, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 2-5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁹ "Religion in the People's Republic of China (CSP)", Documentation No. 7, p. 45.

³⁰ The Patriotic Catholic Association is the officially-recognized "Catholic" Church structure which rejects Vatican authority.

³¹ Spae, *loc. cit.*

³² *Lettere di Cristiani*, p. 53.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.