

Chinese Protestant delegation to Britain 1982

Seven delegates from the China Christian Council visited the United Kingdom from 30 September to 18 October 1982 at the invitation of the British Council of Churches. It was inevitable that the views of the delegates should be sought on the many problems concerning the Chinese Church which trouble British Christians — the relationship between Church and State, the freedom of believers to practise their faith, the growth of the Church, and so forth. It may be helpful to examine two of these issues in some detail, bearing in mind the comments of the delegation and other information available.

Constitutional safeguards for religious believers

For some while the religious clause in the 1978 Constitution has been adversely criticised by Christians; though it promised freedom of belief to both theists and atheists, only the latter were guaranteed freedom to propagate their point of view. The 1982 Constitution (still in draft form at the time of the delegation's visit) contained a much more even-handed guarantee of religious freedom and non-discrimination — against atheists as well as believers — and declared that the State “protects legitimate religious activities”. In contrast, however, to the draft articles which define freedom of speech, the press, assembly, inviolability of the home, etc., without comment, draft article 35 prescribes five specific limits to religious freedom: (i) counter-revolutionary activities; (ii) activities that disrupt public order; (iii) harming the health of citizens; (iv) obstruction of the state education system; (v) domination of religious affairs by a foreign country.

Members of the delegation agreed that they had all supported the draft provisions at the discussion stage and did not feel that there was any implied threat to religion. Indeed, it was argued that if the major illegitimate activities of religious people were defined in this way the legitimate work of the Church would be more effectively protected. The clause banning “domination by a foreign country”, it was said, was not merely a blow against the Vatican, but a public recognition of the “Three-Self” principle (Self-propagation, Self-government and Self-support) applicable to all believers.

Numbers of Christians in China

Another issue brought into prominence by the delegation's visit was the problem of assessing the total numbers of Christians in China. The total of Protestant Christians was estimated by the delegates as “in the region of two million”. At the other end of the scale, however, the Revd Jonathan Chao (Director of the Chinese Church Research Centre in Hong Kong) has declared that the true total may be at least 25 and possibly as many as 50 million. Various other respected observers suggest that the number may amount to several millions, but Fr L. Ladany (Roman Catholic editor of *China News Analysis*, Hong Kong) maintains that in present circumstances it is quite impossible to make an estimate.

Though the analyst may in the end come round to Fr Ladany's point of view, there are various reasons for supposing that the figures given above are not quite as contradictory as they may appear. The delegation spoke of “five million Christian believers” altogether. For want of better evidence of Roman Catholic numbers, the 1949 total of three million was accepted. Clearly, nobody is going to risk making a new estimate of their growth. Delegation members, however, pointed out that the figure of two million Protestants, a threefold increase during a time of quite exceptional difficulty, represented a tremendous triumph of faith and evangelism.

There are a number of reasons why a group of officially-recognised spokesmen of the Church abroad should quote lower numbers than might have been expected:

(a) The Government sees the Church as no more than a minor threat as long as its numbers remain small. The Protestant church leaders, therefore, being anxious to safeguard their interests and freedom of believers as far as possible, prefer to underestimate numbers rather than exaggerate them;

(b) There is evidence that the Protestant church leadership, being very short of administrative staff, is simply not aware of amorphous communities of Christians in remoter areas;

(c) An adequate count of members of the Christian faith depends on the definition of a “Christian”.

It is commonly agreed that in the remoter areas some exceedingly odd versions of the Christian faith are being spread. There is a notorious lack of theologically informed teachers, very few Bibles, and a disastrous shortage of teaching materials. It is not at all clear in what sense converts think of themselves as members of the Church. Many might be described as "semi-Christians". According to recent government and party publications, spiritual faith alone does not entitle a person to be reckoned as a member of a religion; he must belong to an organised body which has identifiable doctrines, accepts the leadership of the Communist Party, and binds its members to obey the law of the land. Spiritual faith alone, without the other qualifications, is defined as "superstition", and members of a superstition are not Christians. Even if there were twenty million or so such people, they would hardly be included in any government "Christian" total. There may be an element of "playing safe" in the Protestant Church's attitude to the question of numbers, but for not dishonourable reasons they wish to distance themselves from those whom many would describe as "semi-Christians".

Many respected observers challenge the validity of the figures suggested by the Revd Jonathan Chao. They are apparently arrived at by making estimates based on certain geographical areas where reasonably certain

information is available. Chao would no doubt agree that the Christian quality of the faith of some of the believers he speaks of is somewhat dubious, though he would not claim that an undertaking to respect the leading role of the Party is an essential feature of the Christian faith. His centre emphasises the great number of converts. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the 25 to 50 million he quotes correspond roughly to the "sixty, or even an hundredfold" in the parable of the Sower (Mark 4).

A further factor which confuses the issue of numbers even more is the fact that there are many secret Christians. They pray, meditate, and perhaps even read Bibles that have been hidden from the Red Guards, but refuse to join any movement, congregation or Church. There is increasing evidence of such people in the ranks of the medical profession, among teachers, university staff, even in the higher ranks of government service. By the very nature of things there can never be a census of such believers as these.

If a conclusion is needed, it is that the two million quoted by the delegation is a basic minimum, almost certainly an underestimate. For the reasons already given, however, no higher figure can be quoted with any confidence.

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CORRECTION

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The article "Catholicism and Politics in Socialist Yugoslavia" stated: "In April 1980, the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, began publishing a Polish edition, the first issue of which appeared on news-stands in Poland on 5 April". In fact, the first issue of the newspaper did not even arrive in Poland.