

Book Reviews

Religion under Socialism in China, edited by Luo Zhufeng. Translated by Donald E. MacInnis and Zheng Xi'an. Armonk, NY and London: M.E. Sharpe Inc, 1991. 254 pp.

Prayers and Thoughts of Chinese Christians, presented by Kim-Kwong Chan and Alan Hunter. London: Mowbray, 1991. Paperback, 105 pp., £5.95.

Religion under Socialism in China is a translation of a book first published in China under a slightly different name (*Religious Questions during the Socialist Period in China*) early in 1987: the date is of some significance since it means that the original publication preceded the Tiananmen Square massacre by more than two years, since when there has been a renewed hardening of the attitude of the Chinese authorities towards religion, as there has been towards other aspects of life in that country. It does nevertheless provide an interesting insight into the ideological basis for the policies on religion implemented by the Chinese government since the founding of the Chinese People's Republic, and especially since the relative liberalisation of those policies following the death of Mao Zedong and the decisions of the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in 1978. The book, which was written by a group of scholars at the Institute for Research on Religion at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, is the first study of religion in contemporary China to be based, in part, on field research by Chinese social scientists.

The contents of the book fall into two parts. The first, and main, part consists of: a historical description of the five officially recognised religions in China (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism); an account of the changes to those religions, and their relationships with the state and society at large, since the communists came to power in China in 1949; an examination of the reasons why – contrary to Marxist prediction – religion has not died out under socialism; an account of the basic policy of the Chinese Communist Party towards religion and a refutation of the Marxist dictum that religion is the opiate of the people. The second, shorter, but in many ways more interesting, part of the book consists of a series of remarkably objective reports on field studies carried out by Chinese social scientists in a number of different urban and rural communities in China in the 1980s.

The Chinese Communist Party's ideological analysis of religion is well known and has not changed basically since the communists came to power in 1949, despite the twists and turns of the party's actual policies during that period. It is, in essence, that all religion is the product of economic forces within society and of a lack of understanding on the part of mankind of the forces of nature. When the forces of oppression produced by the class structure within society are abolished following the advent of socialism, and as man comes to understand more and more about the physical forces at work in the universe, the theory goes, religion will no longer be necessary and will simply wither away. The trouble from the point of view of this kind of assumption is that the class structure in China has in theory long since been

abolished, and yet there are still religious believers in the country. Not only that, but in the world at large mankind has now entered the Space Age, despite which fact, as the editor of the present work acknowledges, some American astronauts 'have felt the awesome creative power of God while in space' and now actually believe in religion more deeply than before. For such reasons as these, what is described as 'the complex phenomenon of religious belief' cannot be *completely* explained by the traditional Marxist theories, the editor says, and therefore it became necessary to look beyond the theories to find out exactly what it is in practice that prompts people to continue to believe in religion. It was with this object in mind, we are told, that a major investigative project was launched to go to the grass roots and discover the facts. The project as a whole took three years and the present book is the outcome.

While the concept itself is laudable enough, and certainly represents an advance on the doctrinaire approach unsupported by facts which had formed the basis for the party's policy on religion in the past, it cannot be said that the authors have freed themselves very successfully from traditional party prejudices. The chapter of the book which deals specifically with the question of the reasons for the survival of religion under socialism leans heavily on quotations from the Marxist classics and it clearly never occurs to the authors that the survival of religion could be due to anything other than purely materialistic factors. Even in matters that are peripheral to the main theme of the book, the old propagandistic assumptions are still apparent, as when, for example, in a passage devoted to the charitable works undertaken by religious organisations in China prior to 'liberation', the authors revive the old canard about the death rate in Catholic orphanages being 'quite high' (the original allegation in the 1950s was less circumspect: according to this, the children were deliberately put to death by the missionary sisters in charge), while a few pages further on one finds the categorical, if unfounded, statement that the war in Korea was started by the American imperialists. While such statements do not necessarily invalidate the conclusions of the researchers, they do tend to undermine one's confidence in their objectivity.

The book chronicles the developments that have taken place in the actual policies towards religion pursued by the Chinese Communist Party over the years. The changes wrought within the different religions under government pressure during the early years of the regime, when, for example, foreign missionaries were expelled and both Catholic and Protestant Christians were 'encouraged' to sever their links with foreign religious bodies and set up independent churches of their own, are held up as a model of a 'correct' policy towards religion under socialism. The excesses of the Cultural Revolution, when all religious observance was prohibited, come in for their now obligatory condemnation, and the restoration of the 'enlightened' earlier approach to religion adopted following the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in the late 1970s is hailed as proof that the party is at last back on the right track as far as its policy towards religion is concerned.

The authors seem to feel themselves under some pressure to justify the greater toleration accorded to religious believers from the early 1980s onwards – presumably to preempt any possible criticism on the part of older, hard-line party members who oppose the new-fangled policy of emphasising the points that believers and non-believers hold in common. They acknowledge that religion, especially as 'reformed' by the party during the 1950s, does inculcate social virtues among its adherents, and that workers, peasants and intellectuals who believe in religion do actually work hard to develop industrial and agricultural production and raise the level of scientific and technological knowledge. At the present stage of social development, the argument

runs, the basic interests of believers and non-believers are identical and any differences between them are of secondary importance. This does not affect the argument that religion will eventually wither away, of course, but the experience of the Cultural Revolution showed that attempts to hasten its demise before the time is ripe can actually be counterproductive. For the time being, the most pressing need is to rally support from all sections of society in the interest of pursuing the modernisation of the country as quickly as possible: all sections of society, therefore, including religious believers, should sink their differences and work in the common cause. Such at any rate, broadly speaking, is the justification for the more tolerant policies introduced in the late 1970s as outlined in the present work.

If the main part of the book is marred for the independent reader by the uncritical acceptance of too many ideological prejudices, the objectivity of the appendices which form the second part of the book comes as a refreshing surprise. There are altogether nine appendices, describing the results of field studies undertaken into religious belief and observance in various communities in different parts of China. Four of these relate to Christian communities of one kind or another: these are a survey of Christian workers in a Shanghai district, a survey of Christianity among the Korean minority people in the north-eastern provinces, a report on the religious faith of (Catholic) fishing people in Jiangsu province and a report reflecting the rapid growth of (Protestant) Christianity in part of Anhui province. Of these, the last two are perhaps the most interesting from the point of view of the outside observer.

The report on the Catholic fisherfolk of Qingpu county presents a sympathetic account of the remarkable piety and steadfastness of these people, who have clung to their faith through many persecutions and vicissitudes since they first received it from foreign missionaries during the reign of the Kangxi emperor in the 18th century. It is particularly revealing, by implication, on the subject of the upheavals which resulted from the communists' attempts to set up an independent Catholic church in the 1950s: at that time, the report says with unconscious irony, there were a number of Catholics who still did not appreciate that the government's real purpose was to protect true religion. They were still dubious about the government's intentions in 1964, and then, the report says, their worst fears were confirmed by the Cultural Revolution which began in 1966. (Now, of course, if the statements of some of the people interviewed are to be taken at their face value, their fears have been completely allayed with the restoration of the 'correct' policies of the 1950s.)

The report on Protestant Christianity in an area of Anhui province presents a picture of astonishing growth. In the early 1970s there were hardly any Christians left in the area after the ravages of the Cultural Revolution and most of those who survived were old women. The situation today is quite different – the writer describes an open air service held on market day which was attended openly by 'hundreds' of believers, who were said to represent only a fraction of those who had been received into the church in the intervening period.

While, then, the basic theoretical attitude of the Chinese Communist Party towards religion had not changed significantly since the 1950s, it was clear that, at the time when the original book was compiled, state policy was probably more tolerant in practice towards religion generally in China than it had been at any time since the Communist Party came to power in 1949. (The exceptions concerned the continued restrictions placed on the Chinese Catholic Church, which was still prohibited from restoring its links with the Holy See, and the appalling treatment meted out to the Buddhists of Tibet, who were seen as the focal point of nationalist resistance to the consolidation of Chinese rule in that country.) The tragedy is that the gradual im-

provement in the climate of relations between the government and the religious bodies generally came to a sudden halt following the crushing of the student and worker demonstrators in Beijing in the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989.

The significance for Chinese Christians, in particular, of the bland assertion in *Religion under Socialism in China* that the party had applied the 'correct' policy towards religion in the 1950s, and that this 'correct' policy had been restored in the late 1970s, is only too evident from the contents of *Prayers and Thoughts of Chinese Christians*, a small but at times very moving anthology of prose and poetry readings by Chinese Christian contributors covering the whole period of the communist regime. One particularly poignant poem by a Protestant pastor, who was arrested in 1951 and imprisoned for his faith for more than 30 years, mourns the death of his beloved wife in prison in 1960, a loss which he was not told about until 13 years after it occurred. One might cite, also, the contributions by a Chinese Jesuit priest and a Jesuit bishop, of whom the former died in custody after 30 years in prison and the latter was released, after 22 years in prison, in 1982. There are other contributors, too, whose stories, recorded in this unassuming volume, provide a salutary corrective to some of the basic assumptions of the supposedly more scholarly work discussed in the preceding paragraphs. The introduction to this second book, summarising the history of religion in China from the earliest times to the present day, with a special emphasis on its relationship with the state, is a remarkably sympathetic and balanced account of the subject, which can be recommended unreservedly to anyone seeking to understand the wider background to the experiences of the Christian churches in China since the advent of the communist regime in 1949.

LAWRIE BREEN

La Tentation de l'Est: Religion, Pouvoir et Nationalismes, by Raphael Aubert.
Postface by Milos Rejchrt. Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1991. 96 pp., Fr55.

This well argued, often provocative little book by a Swiss theologian and journalist provides a stimulating survey of the role of the churches and of Vatican *Ostpolitik* in countries under communist rule, looks at their vital roles as mediators when communism collapsed and there was a risk of bloodshed, and assesses their future. It is Aubert's contention that for most of the period they were reduced to, and to a large extent content with, a ghetto status.

A quotation from Rejchrt, who is very critical of the role of Czech churches under communism, is apposite here. 'The result of this diabolically intelligent state policy. . . is that many church leaders and activists, people devoted to their church work, irreproachable in their morals, people of profound spirituality and proven calibre as theologians, became agents for the secret police.' Nevertheless, as Aubert points out, in some circumstances the very act of attending a church was a courageous act of witness, an open refusal to accept atheist state values.

He reminds us that even the Catholic Church in Poland was slow to assume its crucial role. During the 1968 student demonstrations and the 1970 Baltic shipyard strikes it made no protests. The turning-point was the courageous stand of a few young priests in 1976 following the Radom strikes. In the GDR, he rates Luther Year, 1983, when the state unwittingly played into the hands of the churches, as the key point.

He stresses the potency of religious symbols. In Romania churches became the last

bastions against the enforced assimilation of the Hungarian community. In Bulgaria mosques served the same purpose for the threatened Turks. These peoples became the catalysts in their respective revolutions. Again, John Paul II selected symbols and key themes with such sensitivity that they touched the hearts and united large sectors of populations.

Aubert's central theme is the temptation for churches to ally themselves with secular powers and nationalism. What we are seeing now, he contends, is a reemergence of patterns and problems which have their roots in the inter-war period, or sometimes earlier. These include a persistent tradition of clericalism in politics and the old alliance of throne and altar of the Habsburg and Russian empires, of which Poland today provides a perfect example. It is almost as if the decades of communist rule had never happened. As far as the Catholic Church is concerned, the key word is 'restoration'.

Here, I felt, Aubert might have followed up more explicitly the full implications of the Second Vatican Council for the post-communist world; the tragedy is that the Council's findings seem to have been seriously applied hardly at all. Aubert points out that it is no new type of Christianity that John Paul sees as the only basis for a renewed Europe, but a reversion to an idealised Polish model, that of his vicariate of Niegowic in 1948. This model was exceptional, Aubert argues, rather than typical, and has little relevance for present pluralist societies, either in the West or in the East. Furthermore, it is seen as a threat by both Protestants and Orthodox. Rejchrt provides confirmation of this from his experience in Czechoslovakia. He feels that there the Catholic Church found itself completely overtaken by the speed of events in the Velvet Revolution. It had little idea of how to take advantage of real freedom. Because of its weakness, any attempt the church makes to assume its former role only makes Christians ridiculous in the eyes of the secularised world. The past records of Czech churches, Rejchrt maintains, are very mixed. 'A reconquista is neither desirable nor possible.' Christians should concentrate on being salt in their societies, witnesses to faith and hope, which are in such short supply. The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few.

Aubert points out that the national factor never really disappeared under communism, despite the latter's ostensible commitment to internationalism. Totalitarianism is particularly badly equipped for avoiding attachment to specific national territories. If the combination of nationalism and mysticism provided a powerful defence against communism, it also presents a dangerous theological role model. Already some nationalities are investing themselves with an almost sacred character, equating their experiences with Christ's passion. The links between fascism and religion are only too evident, argues Aubert. He feels that the churches should limit their roles to providing a moral yardstick, to exhibiting genuine values and to constructive criticism wherever it is needed. A year after the book was written, we can see how far short of this ideal most of them, though not all, have fallen.

Despite his criticism of priests who play politics, Aubert rather inconsistently laments Václav Malý's decision to abdicate a glittering political career in order to resume what he saw as his proper role in his church.

Though valuable, this book could have been even more so had several outstanding theologians from different countries and churches been asked to contribute comments from their specific experience. Such a volume could provide a stimulating follow-up.

The Balkans: Minorities and States in Conflict, by Hugh Poulton. London: Minority Rights Publications, 1991. 244 pp., £8.95.

This tragically timely report provides an excellent beginning to a new series of Minority Rights Publications. It brings together material from a number of widely scattered sources and is essential reading for anyone trying to get to the roots of current Balkan problems. It covers all Yugoslav national groups and national minorities in Albania, Bulgaria and Greece. The material is well organised and arranged, and brings some order to a fascinating and complex scene. Paradoxically, the Serbs have to be considered both as victims (as in Croatia) and violators (as in Kosovo). Poulton apologises for appearing to be anti-Serb. The religious dimension, particularly for Orthodox and Muslims, is given due weight, with updated information (Keston College was a major source). The book is worth buying for that alone.

For those who have specialised in the communist countries, it is salutary to discover how badly Greece emerges from the survey. It refuses to recognise any minorities except religious ones, and even so it penalises non-Orthodox Turks, Pomaks and gypsies, who also encounter blatant ethnic and educational discrimination. Muslims are refused permission to repair or build mosques. As far as its treatment of its Macedonian population is concerned it has a far worse record than its communist neighbours. It has systematically practised discrimination and attempted forced assimilation ever since it acquired its northern territories after the Balkan wars. Violations thus took place long before countries were subjected to scrutiny from human rights organisations. It is against this background that we can look afresh at communist treatment of national minorities. Bulgarian government violence against the Turks since the 1950s appeared more intense because it was telescoped into a shorter period.

Many of the prognostications in the conclusion have already come true. It is to be hoped, in view of the rapidity of change in the Balkans, that the Minority Rights Group will publish a reprint, with new material, each year.

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