

7-1-1984

Christianity in the People's Republic of China in October 1983

Gary Nickel

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Nickel, Gary (1984) "Christianity in the People's Republic of China in October 1983," *Consensus*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol10/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

SPECIAL REPORT

CHRISTIANITY IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA IN OCTOBER 1983

Gary Nickel

This title indicates that conditions change very rapidly in the People's Republic of China. What is often seen today may be quite different than what was seen last year. The western visitor to much of China was viewed as someone unusual on the streets just a year or two ago. Today the visitor is someone with whom English can be practiced. My observations come from a visit to northern and central China as part of a Lutheran Church in America/American Lutheran Church study seminar to the People's Republic of China. Our group leader was the Rev. Dr. David Vikner, born in China and former missionary who speaks the language fluently. We visited churches, groups and individuals and were able to go where we wanted and speak with whom we wanted.

Understanding Requires a Little History

To understand what is happening in China today a little history must be considered. In just this century alone the history of Christians in China has seen round after round of instability and chaos. The end of two thousand years of dynasties and a very traditional and institutionalized bureaucracy started the century. What followed was changing governmental forms, the intrusion time and time again of foreign armed forces, the rule and sometimes great excesses of some warlords, the time of the

'nationalists' versus the 'communists', the invasion by Japan, the end of the civil war, and the changes wrought by the communists in 1949 and beyond. This has shaped the government's view of its people and of foreigners. The average citizen of China who has reached retirement age will have experienced most of the above and will have found that each 'period' has affected his or her life quite drastically. There are few lands which have experienced so many major changes, including eastern Europe.

Into this period Christian missionaries from many countries and many denominations came to China and put much effort into their work. China was considered a 'rich mission field'. Denominations set up their own mission fields. As an example, sixteen synods were established within the Lutheran Church of China. Each synod related directly to a mission agency from Europe or North America, even after World War II. In addition to missionaries sent by the churches, there were agencies of the YMCA and YWCA and others working in China. It was also a time of aid and relief work by various agencies and church groups. Some critics of the Church said that the missionaries were making 'rice Christians' who only adopted Christianity in order to receive handouts of food. The church of today estimates that there were about 900,000 Chinese Christians in 1949 when the communists gained control of the whole countryside.

We could expect that there were some people who were not sincere in their faith. However, with the 1949 revolution there was no longer an advantage to being a Christian and sometimes it brought persecution. The early 1950's brought the departure of missionaries and the structures they had supported. The early 1950's also brought increased distrust of anything which was foreign. Even the tenuous relationship with the Soviet Union, which the communists had, continued to slip until Soviet advisors were expelled around 1956. The distrust of the foreign still continues, in partnership with self-reliance, moderated in the last five years by pragmatism and a desire to improve the country.

In the last few years before the communist revolution of 1949 there were a number of forward-thinking church leaders. Indigenous parish leaders and pastors developed. More emphasis was placed upon good seminary training in China. Work was expanded with youth and youth leaders. These efforts were to bear much fruit in the years to come, as hundreds of thousands retained their faith. The leadership of the church of today is mostly the result of the training that was provided by the church before 1949.

From 1949 to 1966, Christians went through ups and downs of special efforts to change or improve China. The communist government gained the support of the people and many improvements were made, such as a stable currency and economy. Yet there were also forced changes for some and a long period of re-education of people and several redistributions of property. There were failures of governmental plans, as in the late 1950's, and redirected efforts to improve agricultural and industrial output.

The church had to prove that it was not aligned with foreigners during that time. They had to be self-reliant, and so a Three Self Movement (TSM) was formed speaking for self-support, self-government and self-propagation. It was one way to relate to the conditions that Christians were experiencing at that time. The TSM provided the Protestant church with a visible sense of unity and independence from foreigners.

Their policy of self-reliance was accepted by the government for its own reasons. Some Christians joined the TSM while some did not. It was a time during which historians suggest the government had enough other concerns to deal with and therefore did not persecute nor greatly disturb religious believers. There were, after all, large numbers of Moslems who were majorities in certain provinces, along with large numbers of Buddhists and others in some parts of China. To go after one group could be seen as a threat to all.

The Roman Catholic Church in China is recognized as a separate religion from Protestant Christians. Thus Catholics and Protestants are seen as two of the five major religions of China today by the government. The Catholic Church had more problems with the government than did the Protestants. There was a recognized allegiance to the Pope, a foreigner. Even within the last five years, when the Pope sought to traditionally recognize a Chinese Catholic priest as a leader in the church there, it was seen by the government as intrusion into their affairs. The Catholic Seminary was opened while we were visiting in China, while the Protestant Seminary in Nanjing has been reopened since 1980. Yet there are numerous Catholic parishes throughout China. We visited the Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception in Beijing. It has ten priests and serves nearly 2,000 people every Sunday. There are about 9,000 at Christmas, and a large service is held every Saturday night which is attended mostly by young people.

The Cultural Revolution of 1966-1979 brought reform and revolution to revitalize the country and instill a sense of struggle and revolution among the young people. Red Guard youth and those out for personal gain took advantage of Chairman Mao's desire for change and soon anarchy and disruption of society, culture, the economy, personal and institutional safety spread. It was eventually checked by the army, sometimes with a great loss of life. Until the death of Chairman Mao and the overthrow of his wife and other influential leaders, this turning upside down of society was a threat to everyone. To be a teacher, manager or church worker was to be subjected to round after round of 'self-examination' before one's neighbourhood committee or 'danwei'. It meant upheaval and being moved hundreds of miles to work on farms or factories, and to be watched by everyone. Some compare it to the effects upon people of the Holocaust or the Great Depression. We spoke with Christians who went through these extremely trying times. The practice of religion was forbidden throughout 1966-79. Many Christians did not talk with or associate with other Christians in order not to burden one another or out of fear. Some Christians saw the local authorities authorize other families to move into their homes to help deal with a housing shortage. One Christian couple we visited were to live with eleven others in their small home for a dozen years. They no longer had any privacy in their home and could not practice their faith privately in their home. A pastor spoke of being moved to a farm and then to an umbrella factory during this period so that he might be 'gainfully employed'. A large group of church leaders were moved to one farming community so that they could be more easily watched.

Thus a change to pragmatism and "that which works" was a welcome relief for all of China except those who lost power. The 'Gang of Four' was imprisoned, new leaders developed, excesses in society were curbed. A new constitution was prepared in 1982 which helped entrench these changes. People, of course, do not want to return to the old ways. Yet we must remember that there is still a potential for

a return of these darker days of control. A struggle continues to take place. In just the last couple of months, pragmatists in power have begun to cleanse the communist party and places of power of those who oppose them. They indicate that it is a two-to-three-year process which will leave the purge of the army political advisors for last.

If you are reading articles or books about China, one key to understanding is to look at the date of printing. Conditions in China change very, very rapidly. This obvious fact is especially important in helping sort out differing reports. Reports on conditions in China need to be seen as reflecting the time of the report and you should allow for changes since then.

The Church Comes Alive Again

The first Christian church reopened for worship in late 1979. Thus the church has been openly functioning for only four years. The new constitution brought official religious freedom. When we worshipped in Beijing, Wuhan and Shanghai, these people had been outwardly practicing their faith for less than four years. They were struggling to re-establish themselves and serve the people around them. Churches generally opened in a similar pattern in all places we visited. At first, Christians gathered together to worship in homes. As numbers grew, leaders requested that former churches be returned to them. The factory or warehouse unit using the church building turned it over to the church representatives and were told by the government to pay a fair rental value for the time they used the building. Rental funds, together with special offerings, paid for repair and refurbishing of the churches. As more Christians gathered, the process repeated itself and more churches opened.

Some churches have pews, some auditorium seats. Some church families took home the pews during the Cultural Revolution and brought them back when the church reopened. Churches which have just been opened have more signs of repair under way, as in Luoyang, where the building had been a Lutheran chapel. It was decorated with a table and potted plant at the front, a cross behind on the wall, and large written Bible references to the sides of the cross. Another church of the Anglican tradition was restored with wood frontals of beautiful workmanship. Most of the churches had room for the choir at the front, and the pulpits were centrally located.

Orders of service generally followed a pattern of: Prelude, Call to Worship from the Bible, hymn, prayer, responsive reading of a Psalm, hymn, prayer and Lord's Prayer, Scripture lessons, hymn, prayer. Two or three services were held each Sunday morning as well as Saturday evening services for those who worked Sundays. Only schools, governmental offices and other offices have Sundays off; factories work seven days a week. Offerings are given near the entranceway of the church in offering boxes, helping support the local work of the church and the seminary, national council and TSM.

Singing is excellent and enthusiastic. Recently printed hymnals are available for sale in the churches we visited. There is a blend of Chinese and other hymns. The hymns of foreign origin have been adopted by the people as theirs in the same way we have adopted "A Mighty Fortress". Piano and organ are used in many churches, along with traditional Chinese instruments. Seminary study for music leaders is being provided from Nanjing Seminary. Bible studies and sometimes worship services are held during midweek.

One sermon was based on the Gospel, Matthew 16:13-18, Peter's confession of

who Jesus is. The pastor provided four points: 1) the Church confesses that Jesus is God's son and is founded on this confession; 2) the unity of the Church is dependent upon this confession; 3) the truth of this confession is revealed to people by the Father; 4) this is the confession we communicate to the world. Illustrations followed each point. The opportunity to express and live our faith was also shared. Sermons are related to Bible passages which we heard (we attended worship at five services). Many people in the congregation refer to their Bibles during the sermon. Bibles which have been printed in China may be purchased in the churches we visited.

Baptisms were reported in each church. Infant baptism is not formally practiced, but we were told of times when it does take place. Many of the churches told of two to three hundred baptisms in the first two to three years after the churches reopened. There were many baptisms of adults shortly after the reopenings, indicating that God had been at work even during the Cultural Revolution, and that some people waited to be baptized in a church. Everyone who joins the church must make public profession of their faith, varying according to the congregation and its traditions. We were told of one baptismal service for twenty-five people of all ages. There was a time for baptism by sprinkling or pouring in the morning for those who preferred that, followed in the afternoon by a baptismal time for those who were immersed. Nearly all attended the two services. There was a pot luck dinner later and all were together, along with members of the congregation. Questions are asked of all who come to be baptized, such as "Do you believe in the Holy Trinity?" The Apostles' Creed is usually used at the times of baptism.

Holy Communion is held monthly in most churches, during an afternoon service. It is announced in advance and the people are reminded that only those who are baptized may come and take Communion. The service is similar to the morning worship services, with the addition of the Communion at the end. The service we attended in Shanghai provided a serving of trays of glasses of wine to the pews and baskets to receive the glasses afterward. Baskets also provided the small pieces of bread. Nearly everyone waited to take the bread and wine at the same time. There were the Words of Institution and a eucharistic prayer. As some services are more formal in some churches and less so in others, my impression is that this was a more formally-leaning church. We were told that some house-gatherings of Christians celebrate Holy Communion in their gatherings, while others come instead to a church for their Communion. Announcements included flowers placed in memory and adult instruction classes on the coming Wednesday. I recognized one hymn as "Break Thou the Bread of Life". The Words of Institution were said facing the congregation. The words, "This is the Body of Christ", and "This is the Blood of Christ, shed for you" were used when the trays or baskets were handed to the ushers who brought them to the pews. The sermon was a communion theme of Christ coming as a sacrifice for us in love, as well as remembering what the Church has done.

Renewed Structures

We were told that sometimes the church representatives need to let governmental officials know who is going to come to church if it is a direct or official visit. It is viewed as a matter of knowledge, since there has been no restriction or interference in these recent years and no approval is required. There are individuals who have the responsibility of noting those who are members of a church and providing that list to the

governmental officials. The development of a religious affairs committee, with both governmental officials and representatives from all religions of the area as members, has provided an opportunity to review future laws and limit discrimination in work or society because of one's religion. Difficulties which cannot be solved locally are forwarded to a regional religious affairs committee for action with a stronger impact.

The Three Self Movement was revived after the Cultural Revolution. The TSM estimates that there are now at least six million Christians of whom they are aware. Some China watchers in the west estimate that there are perhaps ten to twenty million Christians. There are those who meet in homes for worship and Bible study. The TSM prefers the term 'house-gatherings' rather than 'house-churches' which some China watchers prefer to use. We did not visit a house-gathering, but we were able to openly discuss them with church and congregational leaders. As more and more people come to worship openly, either in homes or in churches, the term 'house-church' seems to be becoming one used for those who meet secretly or those who meet who are not in favour of the TSM. 'House-gathering' would then refer to those who are extensions of the churches or where there is presently no church open, as might be the case in a small rural area. We shall have to wait and see. We asked leaders of the TSM about one critic's comments from Hong Kong that the TSM had heard about 'house-churches' and had closed them. They said (at different times in different places), "Why should we do that? We have more to do than that, and we don't have time to respond to all the comments and criticisms."

Varying worship forms in churches are influenced by people's traditions and those of the pastors serving the church. A variety of traditions are being practiced together where possible. The seminary at Nanjing offers a different Communion practice each month when Communion is celebrated.

Leadership training is an acute problem for Chinese Christians at this time. Many of the leaders and pastors are elderly. They are overtaxed serving their people in the cities and towns and are not able to minister to the needs of groups in the countryside. The years 1966-79 saw no new church workers. There is a gap in the generations of leadership which is being met by Nanjing Theological Seminary. Housing is being built for more students. The first class of forty-seven students met in 1980, and there are presently 102 students and fourteen 'field-workers'. Two 2-year junior seminaries are being established with students attending classes at Nanjing for their third year. There are 40,000 subscribers to correspondence programmes of lay leader education. But with "a new church opening every two or three days," there is a great need. "85% of the correspondence course students are from rural areas."

The TSM is attempting to be a 'Post-Denominational Church', one that accepts Christians from all denominational backgrounds. As we in Canada look to Lutheran unity and recognition of ministries of Anglicans and others, the Chinese church has already been forced to work together. They minimize the use of confessional creeds in their regular services for the time being. The people come to worship in large numbers, representing many different denominations and groups. Communion is celebrated together, yet we were told that the church would not be able today to agree officially on what to call Communion! They come together celebrating what they have in common. They see so much that must be done and postpone doctrinal differences for another time. From our visits with Bishop K.H. Ding, the head of the TSM and China Christian Council, to Christians through our visits in five cities and towns and surrounding areas, we found a mood of optimism, dedication, perseverance and determination to meet the needs that are before them.