

Contaminating Confucius: Christianity in China

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Bismarck understood that the meaning of the concept of separation of Church and State was not that the State should have no religion, nor even that it should not discriminate between citizens on the basis of religion. It was that the Church – hitherto the dominant religio-political entity of European life – should be subordinate to the State (government). In other words, the nation-state, as opposed to the trans-national Church, would be the arbiter of all institutions and individuals within its boundaries. And no ruler, particularly no German king, would ever again kneel before a Pope in Rome.

For a Europe that had endured the Christian yoke for at least a millennium, this was doubtless a revolutionary idea. In our part of the world, however, it was Tradition, the fabled Wisdom of the East.

Ancient India's Varna system sought to create a hierarchy of values wherein human beings could order their lives in harmony, by ensuring that power and wealth were not concentrated in a single class. It was enjoined upon Brahmins to preserve the scripture and knowledge; the duty of the king/Kshatriya to uphold and protect Dharma (religion, social order, law). The Vaishya (commercial class) enhanced the prosperity of the realm, and the Shudra (artisans, farmers, etc) provided services. While any individual could be rich, the Vaishya and Shudra enjoyed moral sanction to be wealthy. The Tradition frowned upon the abuse of political or religious power to acquire wealth – a value modern India would do well to revisit.

While diffusion of wealth and power was not so diverse in ancient China, the country always craved for a powerful monarch to maintain peace and order; the Emperor was universally revered as the Son of Heaven, from whom all authority flowed. From this pristine position, the Chinese emperor upheld the Tradition (Confucius, Lao-Tze) and permitted the entry of foreign creeds.

The teachings of Buddha attracted the Chinese, as attested by the heavy inflow of pilgrims, some of whom left behind valuable journals of their stay in India. Buddhism arrived in China 1900 years ago when the Indian monks Kashyapamatanga and Dharmaratna set up the first Buddhist shrine at Loyang. The faith was closely supervised by the Emperor, who decided how many lay citizens could ordain as monks; pilgrimages to India needed royal sanction. Buddhist scriptures acquired by the monks and translated in China augmented the spiritual aura of the ruler, under whose patronage the monks worked and preached to the general populace. It may be mentioned that in the mother country as well, Buddhism was patronised by the royal and mercantile families, and was thus closely associated with the stability and health of the kingdom and society.

Emperor T'ai T'sin permitted Nestorian missionaries from Persia to establish a church in 638

AD in Sian (ancient Chang Ang). The Tang Dynasty (618-907) was noted for its tolerance and interest in foreign faiths. The Church had an uneven history till, in the 14th century, the Ming Dynasty overthrew the Mongols and expelled Christians and other foreign influences. The Nestorians never acquired the status and power of the Buddhists at court.

The Nestorians were branded heretics at the Council of Nicaea (AD 325). But when Jesuit priest-travellers found evidence of churches in Chinese cities they visited in the seventeenth century, they struggled to revive and spread Christianity in the Middle Kingdom.

China's experience with western colonialism opened its eyes to the dangers of Christianity as a tool of imperialism, a fifth column that could undermine its political freedom. Transcending Mao, a politically, militarily and economically ascendant China moved, after the 1989 Tiananmen Square disaster, to encourage revival of its Confucian-Taoist-Buddhist traditions, to revive nationalism. It was doubtless nudged by the warlike invasion of underground evangelicals trained and funded by the West, as part of a cultural assault on the regime.

As part of an effort to stem the underground church, Beijing is funding official churches under the auspices of the China Christian Council (for Protestants) and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (not affiliated to the Vatican). But the 'nationalist church' is being eroded by an insidious campaign that it supports the official establishment, and does not oppose it. The authors of this mischief know that dharma is not revolutionary ideology; its purpose is to maintain the harmony of the individual with the society. Only extreme stress can produce opposition: Kautilya advised the people to overthrow unjust rulers; but with all their shortcomings the Chinese rulers do try to improve the lot of their people. Western infiltration in China can only reproduce the paradise that resulted in the Opium Wars.

It is not as though the People's Republic is unaware of Western attempts to undermine its internal cohesion through the use of faith, the New Age cult Falun Gong (also Falun Dafa) being the most notable example. The cult was founded by Li Hongzhi in 1992, following a period of prosperity. Falun Gong does not have daily prayer rituals like normal faiths, but stress the virtues of Truthfulness, Compassion, and Forbearance, derived from Buddhism and Taoism.

By the end of the 1990s, it had an estimated 70 million practitioners. But its practice of public exercises (Qigong – slow movement and regulated breathing) drew adverse comment from the media and government, which perceived it as a destabilising presence, having a possible martial component. After Falun Gong organised several public protests against criticism of the organisation and its founder in the Chinese media, in several cities, and with participation of several thousand volunteers, the Chinese Communist Party finally banned it in July 1999, designating it as an "evil cult." The authorities were alarmed that many party members were part of the movement and spoke up for it.

Falun Gong was quick to organise an international campaign against the Communist Party of China, lobbying Western Governments and human rights groups with allegations of abuse. Falun Gong set up its own media outlets (Epoch Times and New Tang Dynasty Television) and soon emerged as a vocal and visible critic of the regime. It has been extensively studied by western scholars, and in 1998, Li Hongzhi was invited to lecture on Falun Gong at the UN General Assembly Hall in Geneva, evidence of Western backing for his movement!

Astonishingly, the People's Republic seems not to have learnt the relevant lessons from this episode, though it detests the Falun Gong. Last month, Antonio Weiss wrote an ecstatic article, China: the future of Christianity? (The Guardian, Aug. 28, 2010), which should (hopefully) send warning bells ringing through the Party. The story estimates that there are between 40 million to 100 million Christians in China! The author preened that this was because the Chinese people feel Christianity is a stabilising belief system in the new socio-economic era, and because its Western links make adherence (to a foreign religion) a form of rebellion against the regime, as happened in South Korea in the 1980s.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/aug/28/china-future-christianity>

In my opinion, the People's Republic is making a big mistake if it hopes official patronage of Protestant and Catholic churches and seminaries will avert unrest by bringing those lured to the foreign gospel under the watchful eye of the state. The fact is that unregistered house churches continue to mushroom underground, and by allowing such "covert Christians" a legitimate cover in the form of Official Christianity, the party may well be presiding over the creation of an 'army' (read fifth column) that fragments and destroys China from within.

According to the BBC, a small survey (4,500 people) conducted by professors at the East China Normal University in Shanghai estimated that the number of Christians in the country could be as high as 300 million, far higher than the official estimate of 40 million. [<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6337627.stm>]

This suggests the possibility that Christianity may have made stealthy inroads into the party hierarchy, though the official policy is to disallow Christians from being members of the Communist Party. Whatever the truth, the potentially explosive combination of Official and Secret Christianity could prove deadly for the health of the Middle Kingdom.

The Guardian article observes that while most of the 'house churches' (underground churches) lack a known political agenda, there are some 'revolutionary cults' in rural areas. Antonio Weiss issues a veiled warning that "any violent suppression of Christian groups risks provoking the ire of the west, in particular the US." He adds that the party leadership seems to have been impressed by the suggestion by famous Chinese economist Zhao Xiao that market economies benefit from active religious groups. Naturally Weiss does not tell us that Xiao is a Christian convert; nor are we able to learn how he was converted away from his natal tradition.

What we can see with trepidation, however, is that China has come a long way from 1958 when most churches were shut down. Indeed, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, Chairman Mao's wife, Chiang Ching, closed the foreigners church in Shanghai, and the regime expelled all foreign missionaries. The underground 'house church' movement took root in the decade that followed, and the government restored the native Chinese church in 1979 to check this trend. Then, in 2007, President Hu Jintao announced a policy of harnessing religious (i.e., Christian) people to build a prosperous society - which the West has interpreted as the beginning of an open door to a Christian voluntary sector. This has triggered visions of China as the "future of Christianity."

Interestingly, an overlooked aspect of Chinese society is that it is organised in lineages of clans claiming a common ancestor, similar to Hindu gotras; each clan used to have its own main temple in the Confucian or Buddhist creed. Beijing should consider reviving the family temples as the core around which traditional Chinese values can be transmitted to the

younger generations, rather than permit American NGOs (who always have an evangelical agenda difficult to monitor and control) to preach values to the youth, else its amazing shortsightedness could cost it dearly.

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