

CHARLES STRONG MEMORIAL TRUST

THE STRANGE DEATH OF RELIGION IN CHINA

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Introduction

Relying on my observations during several visits to China since the Cultural Revolution, contact with Chinese religion watchers outside China, and a close reading of Chinese publications, I have been attempting to find some pattern in the persistence and nature of religion in contemporary China. To be sure, since the late 1970s an official policy of unrelenting hostility has been replaced by one of a benign—if grudging—toleration of religion and its institutional expression. The government clearly expected that unregenerate elements of the old society would reappear. What it did not expect was what can only be called a ‘religious revival’, affecting the young as much as—or more than—the old. This has been labeled in official sources as ‘religious fever’¹, implying that it is a disease and catching—but also raging.

During the campaigns in the mid 1980s and another in late 1998, and others in 1998 and 1999 (the last being aimed at the Falun Gong movement) against ‘spiritual pollution’, and promoting ‘socialist spiritual civilization’ (both *prima facie* very curious expressions in a Marxist society), some half-hearted attempts were made to counter this tendency; after the events in Beijing in May/June 1989, some religious activists were arrested and some religious leaders were restrained. These countermeasures have been renewed at intervals since then, including another spate in 1995, one in early 1997, and another in late 1998. In 1996, there was yet another renewal of the ‘spiritual pollution’ theme², but this rhetoric does not appear to be taken seriously except by party zealots who do not need sanctions for their behaviour.

On the other hand, the claims of the October 1997 White Paper on ‘Freedom of religious belief in China’ that ‘[n]o one in China is punished because of his or her religious beliefs’³ rest on a circular argument that only ‘criminal’, not religious, activities are prosecuted.

¹ See, eg, ‘Various manifestations of religious fever of recent years in Southern Xinjiang’, *Xinjiang Social Sciences Research* 2, no. 266, 1991; translated by Xu Xunfeng, and republished in *China Study Journal* 7, no. 1, April 1992, pp. 24–30; and Xiao Zhitian, ‘Reflections on the long-term character of religion: insights from Christianity fever’, *China Study Journal* 6, no. 3, Dec 1991, pp. 20–25.

² This development culminated at the Sixth Plenum of the Fourteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in October 1996; Jiang Zemin gave a speech on the subject.

³ See Information Office of the State Council web site cf analysis in *China Study Journal* 12, no. .3, December 1997, pp. 29–38.

The main concern in recent years appears to be more with 'foreign infiltration' than religion *per se*.⁴ On recent visits to China and Hong Kong, my overwhelming impression, however, was that the government was adopting a hands-off policy and that religion was still flourishing even if religious leaders were a little more wary than they were in the euphoria of the 1980s. The emphasis is now on the official registration of places of religious worship, and penalties for failure to register⁵—a policy which is supported by official religious bodies. The offence of the exercise cult, the Falun Gong, which led President Jiang Zemin to describe it as one of the greatest threats to Chinese security, seems to be its foreign connections and its avoidance of state control rather than its religious teachings and practices *per se*.

It would be unfair to criticise too harshly these sanctioned official religious bodies—the Chinese Christian Three-Self Movement, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, the Chinese Buddhist Association, the Chinese Taoist Association, and so on—for subservience to the government. That is their function; behind them lie vibrant and largely independent religious activities that would be impossible without their sanctioned presence.

Nevertheless, there have been occasions when their public adherence to the official line has been repugnant. For example, in November 1991, a group of religious leaders⁶ praised the government's whitewash white paper on human rights. They said the White Paper was 'an authoritative document on the status of human rights in China; the status of religion declared by the White Paper completely corresponds with the facts; and the citizens of New China really enjoy the basic human right of freedom of religion'.⁷

In this lecture I shall discuss a few symptoms of the revival of interest in, and practice of, religion in China, and contrast them with the official rhetoric that sees religion as inevitably dying in a socialist society. At the very least it must be said that religion in China is dying a very strange death!

⁴ See 'An internal circular on vigilance against infiltration', *Propaganda Monthly*, October 1990, cited in *China News and Church Report*, 15 March 1991, reprinted in *China Study Journal* 6, no. 2, August 1991, pp. 44–46.

⁵ In May 1994, two documents were issued: 'Method of registration of places of religious activities', and 'Regulations on administration and punishment for public security breaches'. Even the underground church is reported to have been divided on the advisability of compliance; v. *China Study Journal* 9, no. 3, December 1994, p. 39.

⁶ The leaders, representing the Religious Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, National Committee, were listed: Zhao Puchu (Buddhist), Zong Huaide (Catholic), Shen Xiayi (Islam), and Li Yuhang (Taoist).

⁷ 'Religious leaders hail white paper on human rights', translated from *Liaowang* overseas edition, Hong Kong, 25 November 1991, reprinted in *China Study Journal*, 7, no. 1, April 1992, p. 35.

Official Policy

The basic framework for the religious policy of the Chinese government is provided by the revised 1982 constitution, which guarantees not only freedom of religious belief, as in the earlier constitutions of the People's Republic, but also qualified freedom of religious practice (Article 36). Furthermore, these rights have been backed up by party directives – the new penal code which, in Section 147, makes the deprivation of religious freedom illegal,⁸ and provincial regulations for the administration of 'places of religious activity'. In January 1994, the State Council issued two important new national regulations governing the religious activities of foreign nationals and the registration of religious venues.⁹

The provincial regulations vary in severity. For example, the Xinjiang November 1990 regulations¹⁰ are much harsher than the Guangdong 1988 regulations.¹¹ This may be due to the Muslim problem in Xinjiang being more politically sensitive, or it may be due simply to the personal disposition of the leading officials in the province. As in other areas of Chinese government and law, the greatest problem remains the arbitrary exercise of power by officials. The Guangdong regulations, predictably – given the constant influx of overseas visitors, Chinese and others – mostly focus on outside economic and ideological influences.

The Xinjiang regulations, on the other hand, include the following:

They shall not preach, propagandise theism, or sell and distribute religious propaganda materials outside temples and churches; they shall not propagate the 'history of holy war' and incite ethnic hatred under any circumstances. (Article 6.5)

They shall not operate schools or classes to teach religious scripture (or train volunteers); and they shall not act as proxy and assume the responsibility of training religious apprentices, or instil religious concepts into young people under 18. (Article 6.6)

⁸ v. 'On the crime of illegally depriving people of the freedom of religious belief', from *Zhongguo Tianshujiao [The Catholic Church in China]*, December 1987, reprinted from Supreme People's Procuratorate Dept., no. 2, *Three hundred cases of procuratorial work in law and discipline*, Beijing (Guangming Ribao Publishing House), 1986, pp. 339–42, translated in *China Study Project Journal* 3, no. 1, April 1988, pp. 49–51.

⁹ Decrees Nos. 144 and 145 of the State Council, 31 January 1994, signed by Premier Li Peng; v. translation in *China Study Journal* 9, no. 1, April 1994, pp. 29–31.

¹⁰ 'Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, provisional regulations for the management of religious personnel', *Xinjiang Ribao*, 16 September 1990, translated in *China Study Project Journal* 5, no. 3, December 1990, pp. 42–4; and 'Provisional regulations on the administration of religious activities', pp. 44–7.

¹¹ 'Circular on promulgating the regulation on administrative management over religious places in Guangdong', (document 44/1988), 23 March 1988, effective 1 May 1988, of Guangdong Provisional Government, translated from the Hong Kong journal *Pai Tsing*, 1 September 1988, reprinted in *China Study Project Journal* 3, no. 3, December 1988, pp. 41–4.

The last provision, while strictly universal in China, is rarely enforced elsewhere, and may not be enforced even in Xinjiang. Frequent reiteration of a prohibition often indicates simply that it is ignored in most areas. There were reports at a conference in Beijing in January 1996 that the Religious Affairs Bureau cadres had to be admonished to enforce the regulations. Perhaps the 'minders' have got too close to the 'minded'! In recent years there have been several indications of tensions between the Religious Affairs Bureau and the related Communist Party United Front Organisation.¹²

A year before the Tiananmen incident, Zhao Puchu, President of the Chinese Buddhist Association, told the plenary session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference that since 'the implementation of religious policies was slow in progress, great in resistance, full of problems and unbalanced in development', the Religious Affairs Bureau was drafting a new law governing relations between religion and the state.¹³ This has not yet appeared, and its absence is constantly deplored by religious leaders. Nevertheless, the spate of detailed regulations enable us to perceive the shifting outlines of government policy.

At the same time, the basic hostility of the Chinese Communist Party towards religion is clearly expressed in party documents. Most tantalising have been quite frequent references to the incompatibility between party membership and religious belief and practice. What is so vehemently condemned must be at least a possibility – party sources admit it is a serious problem. In 1995 a report of the Organisation Department and Discipline Inspection Committee of the Chinese Communist Party complained that 7–9 per cent of party members take part in religious activities. In some areas – Chongqing, Dalian, Fuzhou, Shenzhen, Tianjin, Wuhan, and Xi'an were specified – the report estimated that over 18 per cent of party members, cadres or their families were members of religious organisations or had taken part in religious activities. Among retired intellectuals or professionals, 23.5 per cent had joined religious organisations or had taken part in religious activities.

The response to the ongoing religious involvement of party members was a set of new instructions for dealing with party members and cadres engaged in such activities; the penalties included dismissal from office, transfer, expulsion from the party, and judicial action. The instructions urged particular attention to party cadres who had contacts with foreigners or foreign organisations, or who had made 'political mistakes' in the turmoil of 1989.¹⁴

¹² The Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) is technically under the State Council, that is, is an organ of the government. But, through its party committee, it is also responsible to the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party. It has been reported to me that frequently, in rural areas, the local RAB official is also the local United Front representative.

¹³ Report of a speech delivered on 4 April 1988, in *Zhonglian* (Singapore), July 1988, p. 9.

¹⁴ 'Large number of party members turning to religion', *China News and Church Report*, 2 June 1995 [CNCR2422].

In Muslim areas, the situation—from the point of view of the party—is even worse. The Xinjiang Academy of Sciences reported in 1991 that 50–70 per cent of party members in Xinjiang are believers; in some areas 100 per cent are believers.

The fact that Party members and cadres believe in religion and support religious activities not only adds fuel to the flame of religious fever but also lets the religious forces feel secure in the knowledge that they have strong backing.¹⁵

And even when central government bodies complain, local officials are reluctant to interfere with the revival, or, in some cases, ‘invention’ of local traditions. The custodians of local festivals in parts of China such as Fujian have become almost an alternative government.¹⁶ The greater autonomy of local clans and village associations, which is part of the economic modernization of China, has brought with it changes not foreseen by the government.¹⁷

There is considerable debate about the definition and boundaries of ‘superstition’ vis a vis legitimate religion—an uncertainty that allows much abuse by local officials. The fact that this public debate is being conducted in newspapers is evidence of a new open policy towards the issue.

The key party document on religious policy is the so called ‘Document 19’, emanating from the 1979 Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress, and made public in 1982.¹⁸ As the title—‘The basic viewpoint and policy on the religious question during our country's socialist period’—makes clear, it is as much designed to explain and justify the changes in policy to the party faithful as to ensure conformity. In fact, constant reports of very varied applications of the policy, especially in remote areas, suggest the Communist Party is unable or unwilling to discipline hardliners in relation to the religious question.

Nevertheless, ‘Document 19’ provides a presumably accurate sketch of the government’s view of the facts about religion in China, as well as the rationale for its policies. It claims there are some 10 million Muslims, 3 million Protestants, and the same number of Catholics. (Committed outside observers often claim much higher figures but I think these were substantially accurate for the late 1970s; they must be greatly enlarged—perhaps doubled—for the 1990s).¹⁹ No

¹⁵ ‘Various manifestations of religious fever of recent years in Southern Xinjiang’, *Xinjiang Social Sciences Research* 2, no. 266, 1991, translated by Xu Xunfeng, reprinted in *China Study Journal* 7, no. 1, April 1992, p. 25.

¹⁶ v. K. Dean, *Taoist ritual and popular cults of Southeast China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹⁷ v. I. Wibowo, ‘Politics of memory: peasant clans and the state’, *China News Analysis* 1592, 1 September 1997.

¹⁸ See D.E. MacInnis, ed, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989) pp. 8–26.

¹⁹ For the problems relating to estimating the number of Chinese Catholics, see Anthony Lam ‘How many Catholics are there?’, *Tripod*, September–October 1992, reprinted in *China Study Journal* 7, no. 3, December 1992, pp. 40–43. Estimates vary from 4 million (the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, which counts only those over 18 and known to the Patriotic Association) to

estimates are given for the indigenous religions, but they are admitted to have substantial support, especially amongst ethnic minorities.²⁰

How many religious believers are there in China? It depends how you count them! In part it is an 'Alice-in-Wonderland' game of shifting rules. The variation in the figures rests partly on differing definitions within different traditions: Catholics count all baptised members (a theological position rather than one-upmanship); Protestants count church attendance—but again, how frequently do you have to go to be counted, and how do you count the 'underground' believers? The Hong Kong Protestant China watcher, Jonathan Chao, has often claimed as many as 50 million Protestant Christians. Islam is officially listed as having some 10 million adherents, but here again there is confusion between Islam as a religion, and Islam as a national minority category. Some Muslims, invoking the latter, claim there are up to 100 million Muslims in China. Counting the heads is even more problematic for the indigenous religions. The Chinese admit there are 100 million Buddhists—but how is this number ascertained? And far more difficult is the question of folk religion, most of whose practices are considered by the Chinese authorities no religion at all.

The basic line in dealing with this explosion of religion, spelled out in the introduction to 'Document 19', is that 'religion is a historical phenomenon pertaining to a definite period in the development of human society', and that, with the evolution of society, it will eventually die out. However, the writers of the document also insist that it is not realistic to expect religion to 'die out within a short period', and, even more significantly, that the demise of religious allegiances will not be achieved by 'administrative decrees or other coercive measures'. The context for this statement is, of course, the renunciation of coercive policies such as those that prevailed during the period of the Cultural Revolution, and the need to devise more sensitive and more historically correct alternative ways for dealing with the issue of religious belief in China.

In a series of sections dealing with the following: the general policy of freedom of religion; cooperation with 'religious professionals'; restoration and administration of religious property; the 'patriotic' religious organizations; education of the clergy; relations with ethnic minorities; 'criminal and counter-revolutionary activities under the cover of religion'; and the value of religions in international relations; party members are given a detailed action program. They are shown the practical benefits of these strategies in terms of public order and cooperation in socialist economic development.

10 million (*China News and Church Report*, Hong Kong—notorious for its high estimates for all churches). For Chinese Protestants, the Amity Foundation estimated in 1995 a minimum of 8 550 000 and a maximum of 12 635 000 (*China Study Journal* 10, no. 2, August 1995, pp. 15-18. For a discussion of these issues, see A. Hunter & K.-W. Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²⁰ *The China Daily*, 20 September 1988, estimates that there are over 100 million religious believers in China, 40 000 places of worship, and 80 000 religious professionals.

The document ends with a rhetorical flourish about acquiring a correct Marxist standpoint; criticising idealism, especially theism; and the infallibility of the party in correctly reading the historical situation of religion as well as the Chinese nation. I wonder, however, whether the party activists were altogether satisfied with the document. It was clear what they were expected to do; it was not so clear why they should do it.

Religion under socialism

It seems that, in the early 1980s, key academic organs were directed to devote themselves to evolving a better rationale for what was most probably a policy originally driven by expediency. In late 1982, I was a visitor at the Institute for Research on World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Both from discussions with members of the institute, and from my own analysis of their two journals, *Shijie Zongjiao Ziliao* (*Materials on World Religions*) and *Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiu* (*Research on World Religions*), and other publications on related topics, it was obvious that the section of the institute dealing with the general theory of religion was the reason for government support. In practice, most of the members were academics engaged in textual and historical research—very similar in content and of comparable integrity to the work of most of the participants at this conference! The shrewd director of the Institute, Ren Jiyu, had ‘sold’ the work of the institute, and secured its early reopening in 1978, by emphasising its potential value as a source of information cum policy formation re religion.

I was surprised to find, when I addressed the ‘Christianity’ section on the history of Christianity in China, that they were far from holding the stereotypical ‘imperialist’ interpretation of Christian missions. I found myself answering questions about Vatican politics, notably the reasons for Hans Kung’s removal from his Tübingen Catholic Chair of Theology; the challenges of liberation theology; and so on, that indicated a role of Vatican watching not dissimilar to that of my China-watcher colleagues!

New Religious Studies institutes have now proliferated in China. In 1991 in San Francisco, I met the director and a young professor from the newly established Institute of Religious Studies, currently located within the Philosophy Department of Peking University. This institute has since become a full Department of Religious Studies.²¹ Even East China Normal University where I was an exchange teacher in November-December 1991—a notoriously hardline establishment under central government control, with no religious studies program—had just published a quite passable *General outline history of religions*. In addition to the locally produced materials, many standard Western works on the sociology and philosophy of religion have been translated and published in

²¹ v. ‘China—caution as religious faculty opens’, *The Tablet*, 21 December 1996.

quite large editions. They include, curiously, the writings of Paul Tillich and Christopher Dawson.

The common theme in this endeavour appears to be the role of religion in culture, and the key focus is whether spiritual values necessarily underpin society. It would be impossible to discern where party policy ends and genuine intellectual curiosity begins, but much of this work seems to belong in the second category. This focus is partly due to the (re?)discovery of classical Western sociology of religion at the end of thirty years of proscription.

It also partly reflects the fears of Chinese intellectuals—ambiguously shared by their political masters—that all is not well in the Chinese socialist materialist paradise. Why is financial and administrative corruption ubiquitous? Why do youngsters push old ladies aside when getting on and off buses? Why is political education a joke? Why do the con artists prosper and the teachers and public servants face ever shrinking incomes and loss of status? I believe references to ‘spiritual pollution’ and ‘socialist spiritual civilisation’ are primarily directed towards these aspects of Chinese society.

But a key question remains: what spiritual values are to be taught—and how—in contemporary China?

I was both amused and saddened by the discussions about the school curricula being evolved by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to teach spiritual values I was party to in 1982. It all sounded so much like the worst kind of Religious Education programs in the West: lists of dos and don'ts; no internalisation of values; and recitation of sacred texts in the hope that somehow something would stick. I saw little sign of the success of this policy amongst the students I met in 1991; rather, there were many signs that the values crisis in China had worsened.

In 1988 the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences published the most valuable contribution so far to the debate about the role of religion in Chinese society—a collection, edited by Luo Zhufeng, entitled *Zhongguo Shehui Zhui de Shiqi de Zongjiao Wenti* (*Questions about religion in the period of Chinese socialism*). It has fortunately now been published in English translation in the M.E. Sharpe Inc. series, *Chinese studies on China*, under the more manageable title of *Religion under socialism in China*.²² A little over half the work is theoretical; it represents a somewhat strained attempt to explain how religion can still flourish in China. It can no longer be denied that religion is flourishing as never before in the history of the People's Republic.

The remainder of the text, described as appendices, is in a totally different mode: sensitive case studies of actual religious practices. These case studies

²² (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe) 1991.

demonstrate what even a superficial visit to China makes clear. With growing prosperity the old problems of values, and the meaning of life, have reemerged. Individuals from disparate sectors of Chinese society – retired workers, students, farmers, tribal people – are all seeking, and many are finding in traditional religions, foreign as well as Chinese, some sort of answer to their questions. A problem arises, however, when very large numbers of people find their consolation only in religion. In Shanghai in 1991 I saw the beginnings of Falun Gong among retired workers and academics. To the consternation of the government it today counts its followers in hundreds of thousands, including sophisticated professionals and high army officers. Consolation can lead to commitment to values at odds with those of the state.

The theoretical section, however, is much more problematic. It faces head-on the scandal of the persistence of religion. Religion is not fading away, even though in the long run this must, according to Marx, happen. Why?

Firstly, we are told (although sensibly this is not documented) that Marx taught that religion will wither away only after ‘a long-term preparatory stage’²³ – in fact, only after the disappearance of all class distinctions. Rather than appealing to ‘St Marx’, contemporary Chinese theorists appeal to the Chinese ‘saints’ – Zhou Enlai and others – who at the beginning of national reconstruction proposed the theory of the ‘five natures’ or characteristics of Chinese religion: popular, long-lasting, international, complex, and central to minority cultures. Given these characteristics, it is unreasonable to expect it to wither away since it is sustained by continuing – if not permanent – features of Chinese society.

Later in the argument (in Chapter 4) there is another attempt to analyse the ‘reasons for the persistence of religion’ under three headings: the traditional influence of religion; social conditions that lead to religious belief; and psychological factors. The authors conclude that though both internal and external traditional influences will inevitably decline, the interaction of social and personal emotional needs will continue to generate religious beliefs in China.

The analysis remains fairly crude but it is far from orthodox Marxism. Let me quote a key passage:

People’s emotional needs differ. Attitudes towards the joys and sorrows of life are determined by differing world views. Those who have established a communist world view can actively overcome difficulties. While some may not have attained a lofty realm of thought, they do not seek after happiness based on illusion, so they are not drawn toward religious belief. However, there are always some people who, in their search for emotional stability, become religious believers because of complex social conditions and a variety of cognitive reasons. The need for

²³ *Religion under socialism in China*, p. 11.

religion comes from a variety of psychological needs among these people of different ages, sex, and personal characteristics.²⁴

Some inkling of what is just hinted at here is given in the case-studies included as appendices. For me the most interesting was Appendix Five, 'A survey of Christian retired workers in a Shanghai district', which gives six reasons for older Chinese becoming Christians. Illness, family troubles and 'spiritual trauma from political movements' head the list.²⁵ The other three reasons are more traditionally associated with religious conversion. For example, number four reads: 'seeking peace for one's last years on earth and a "final home" after death', and makes a very important concession. 'Some elderly people', we are told, 'have lived a good life, with things going well even in their latter years. But they have converted to Christianity anyway'.²⁶ The fifth refers to the influence and example of others: 'the testimonies of devout Christians'.²⁷ The final reason is somewhat misnamed as 'physical loneliness'. The explication makes it clear that it refers to 'spiritual loneliness' not 'physical loneliness': 'Spiritual emptiness leads to worry, and worry, in turn, brings on spiritual emptiness ... [Some] attend church services or house meetings to escape from their sense of emptiness and anxiety and to seek spiritual sustenance'.²⁸

A similar analysis is given in an article by Sun Zhenqing on 'The Role of Religion in the Socialist Period'.²⁹ Though Sun rejects religion as an incorrect 'idealist' world view, he also sees it as a positive social force which can be harnessed to support socialist reconstruction and international relations—provided it is carefully kept under surveillance and control. And, like the Shanghai researchers, he sees value in the consolatory function of religion: '[r]eligion as a social ideology can become the repository to which the religious believers can entrust their minds, so as to eliminate emptiness, reduce bitterness and stabilise morale'.

Some literary case studies

Ideally, to study the reasons for religious belief in China, fieldwork would be required, involving in-depth interviews as well as quantitative surveys. I fear we will have to leave these, for the moment at least, to Chinese researchers. Some survey work is underway, but from a report by one such researcher³⁰ that I heard

²⁴ *Religion under socialism in China*, p. 109.

²⁵ *Religion under socialism in China*, pp. 196-7.

²⁶ *Religion under socialism in China*, p. 197.

²⁷ *Religion under socialism in China*, pp. 197-8.

²⁸ *Religion under socialism in China*, p. 198.

²⁹ Reprinted from *Lilun Xinxu Bao*, 25 September 1989, in *Zhongguo Tianzhu Jiao*, December 1989, translated in *China Study Project Journal* 5, no. 1, April 1990, pp. 44-5.

³⁰ A report delivered at the International Conference on the Historiography of the Catholic Church in China, Leuven, September 1990, by Tang Yi, Head of the Christianity section of the Institute for Research on World Religions, based on a ten-year survey analysing the 'talk' of Chinese people as an indicator of values. The published version—'The career of Christianity in China: a personal perspective', in *Historiography of the Chinese Catholic Church: nineteenth and twentieth*

at an international conference in 1990, I do not have high hopes of satisfactory results. He told us that his criterion for genuine Christians was that when they were asked what was the most important thing in their lives, they replied 'salvation'. It has to be suggested that a somewhat more sophisticated technique is required.

I do, of course, have some anecdotal evidence—both from personal experience and reports of other visitors to China—that confirms the general view that young Chinese exhibit widespread interest in things religious. The interest may not always be in religion qua religion. For example, my last lecture at East China Normal University was to a students' club, and, to my surprise, I was asked to speak on 'Christmas in the West' (the lecture was in mid December; I had already been amazed to see Christmas cards on sale in the private market outside the university back-gate). I took the opportunity to talk generally about the Christmas story in the Bible, as well as Western public and family celebrations; my audience were very familiar with many of the practices associated with Christmas in the West through the widespread availability of American television shows and films. But at question time, their real concerns emerged. They were worried about questions of etiquette. To whom do you send Christmas cards? Do you give gifts only to your close family?

More objective, however, is a study of publications—especially those targeted at youngpeople—to be found in bookshops. In all, I found large numbers of publications dealing with religion. In street stalls titles included works on astrology, almanacs, and tales of the supernatural. More serious bookshops had an abundance of Buddhist and Taoist works, Confucian classics, works on self-cultivation, philosophy of life, and most surprisingly, Christianity, on their shelves.

One in particular astonished me: a *Life of Jesus* by Zhao Zichen,³¹ published by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press in 1988. In 1991 it had been reprinted three times, with a total run of 30 000. I thought at first it must be a translation, or version of a European rationalist work, or at least a critical study. Then I examined the cover: a standard European Catholic devotional picture of the Sacred Heart, with the inscription in English, 'Jesus I trust in you'. As I read the preface, I found that it was not a new publication but a new edition of a work originally published in 1935 by a well-known writer of biographies. Later I discovered—although there was no indication of this in the new edition—that the author had, in fact, been head of the School of Religion at Yenching University, and a Vice President of the World Council of Churches in 1948.³² He

centuries (Leuven: Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation, 1994) pp. 129–37—is, I readily concede, a somewhat more sophisticated evaluation of the project.

³¹ Zhao Zichen, *Yesu Zhuan* (Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Science Press, 1988).

³² See 'Chao Tzu-chen (J.C. Chao)', in H.L. Boorman, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*, I (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967) pp. 147–8. Jessie Lutz, in *Chinese Politics and Christian Missions in the Anti-Christian Movement of 1920–28* (Notre Dame: Cross Cultural Publications, 1988), has many passing references to Zhao Zichen's role in the defence of

demonstrates familiarity with Western biblical scholarship, and discusses papyri, and the Q hypothesis. Further, he claims in the introduction to the text to be a believer, and implicitly adopts a 'high' Christology. It may be that there has been some editing of the text, but, if so, it has not been consistent or anti-religious in tenor.

Even more interesting was a series I saw displayed prominently in several bookshops including that of ECNU. The series, known as 'Living—Reading—Learning', is published in Beijing by the popular San Lian publishing and bookselling company. The earliest of the 26 titles available by mid 1991 seems to have been published in 1989. Some of the popular titles had already sold 300 000 copies.

The series belongs to a curious Chinese genre of illustrated popular books, the *lianhuan hua*, somewhat misleadingly referred to as 'comic books'.³³ These books have long been popular in the People's Republic among the young and semi-literate, and have been used for ideological purposes as well as entertainment. During the Cultural Revolution, I saw them in curbside 'libraries' where, for a small coin one could sit and read the book. At that time, their main themes were military and industrial heroics.

The 'Living—Reading—Learning' series, however, might quite appropriately be called 'classic comics' by analogy to a series popular in my youth. Some of the titles will be familiar even to the non specialist: *Lao Zi says* and *Zhuang Zi says* (both now in two volumes); *Confucius Says* and *Lun Yu; Mencius, Lie Zi* and *Han Fei Zi; Da Xue, Zhong Yong, Li Ji*; in other words, the classics of Confucianism and early Taoism. In addition there are early historical and military works: excerpts from the *Shi Ji* and the *Lu Shi Chunqiu* and the *Zhanguo Ce (Stratagems of the warring states)* and *Sun Zi on War*; literary works such as the *Three hundred Tang poems* and several famous collections of ghost stories. And finally, most surprising of all, the *Platform Scripture of the Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism*.

The author-cartoonist of this series is Cai Zhizhong, a Taiwan resident born in 1948. It is not mentioned in any of the introductions, however, that the series is reprinted from an original Taiwan edition. Since 1987 Cai's works have become so popular in Taiwan that they are excluded from the bestseller list because they always come top.³⁴

The Cai phenomenon attests to a pan-Chinese youth culture which is reflected in pop music and dress as well as reading tastes. While young Chinese are also

Christianity against leftist attacks in the 1920s. See also Zhao's essay 'On Creation', in D. Lancashire, trans., *Chinese Essays on Religion and Faith* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1981) pp. 169-96.

³³ See R.F. Price, 'What Chinese Children Read About: Serial Picture Books and Foreigners' (Bundoora: La Trobe University, Centre for Comparative and International Studies in Education: Occasional Paper, 1976).

³⁴ Winnie Chang, 'From knights errant to errant couples', *Free China Review*, January 1992, p. 11.

found in quite large numbers in temples and churches, they are to be found in even larger numbers in those temples of East Asian popular devotion which, in Shanghai at least, carry the sign *kala* (in Chinese characters) followed by 'OK' (in European letters) ie karaoke bars. It is also true that Cai's texts, although including a lot of the original, also involve a humanistic and culturalistic rather than religious interpretation. Nevertheless, they are being read in huge numbers and they do expose young—and perhaps not so young—Chinese to the basic texts of Chinese religion.

Perhaps the most extraordinary and unexpected manifestation of 'religious fever' has been the appearance of 'culture Christianity'.³⁵ A number of young Chinese intellectuals, conspicuously Liu Xiaofeng, have written extensively on Christian theology and propounded the value of Christian ideas for China, notably an overriding teleological narrative, a sense of sin and human weakness, and a care for others. They do not claim to be believers, but impressed by the conclusions of Western sociologists about the religious underpinning of Western society, they see answers to China's problems in the Christian world view.

Recently, there have been indications of a renewed attempt to control religious publications. In February 1995, the Religious Affairs Bureau announced the establishment of their own press, the Religious Culture Press. The first works announced for publication were *An outline on the study of religious policy* and *Anthology of writings on religious works in the new era*. They simultaneously announced a new journal *Zhongguo Zongjiao* (*Chinese Religion*). The churches were fearful that this might result in curbs on their publishing activities and restrictions on the internal circulation of products of their own presses, such as those of the Amity Foundation in Nanjing and the Catholic Guangqi Press in Shanghai.³⁶ But it is the unceasing flood of unofficial and popular publications that the government has most to fear, if indeed, it is more than a few nervous officials in the Religious Affairs Bureau and United Front Department who are concerned. Religious activities do not, on the whole, affect the 'business as usual' policies of the centre. The enormous spread of internet access in China in any case makes control of information all the more difficult, and its use by Falun Gong has alarmed the government into new and probably futile attempts at control which upset commercial users.

Conclusion

There are many other indicators that could be invoked here: letters and articles in popular newspapers and magazines; reports of Western teachers about student opinion; the occasional twitches of that terminally ill but all the more dangerous beast, the Chinese Communist Party. The debate about religion is really part of an even wider one about the future of Chinese culture that reached a peak in the

³⁵ A useful survey is given in Michel Masson, 'China and Christianity: assessing the agenda', *Pacifica*, 7, no. 2 (June 1994), pp. 123–44.

³⁶ 'RAB sets up religious publishing house', *China News and Church Report*, 2 June 1995 [CNCR2423].

media in the television program 'He Shang' and its sequel, and in politics in the streets of Chinese cities in May/June 1989.

What is undeniable, though, is that religious values and other non-Marxist values are far from dead in today's China. The Party's confidence about their eventual and inevitable disappearance seems nothing more than whistling in the dark.