

CHINA, COMMUNISM AND THE CHURCH

By Helen Sigrist

EVEN after the last missionaries left Red China it was still possible to send some Christian literature behind the Bamboo Curtain. Now these shipments have been cut off.

Slowly, slowly the restrictions on the Chinese church are becoming tighter. It is planned that no one may teach or preach Christianity who is not registered with the government-controlled church organization called the Three Self Movement. No classes or prayer meetings may be legally held outside church buildings. More and more churches are being "consolidated." It is reported, for example, that two hundred Shanghai churches have been reduced to twelve. Sunday work cuts church attendance. Surplus pastors are given work in factories or on farms.

All this must be confusing to those who took at face value statements of Chinese religious leaders and some foreign visitors that the church was free and making progress. When brighter news was coming through, some Christians thought the Chinese government had been forced to compromise with the church and hoped that there was a real and permanent change in Communist antireligious policy. They accepted a view that Communists didn't mind having circulated among churchgoers, but which no open Communist would be likely to support.

Red teachings, it is true, are not inflexible. If an economic program will not work, Communists will eventually change it. The heart of Communism, however, is not a purely economic or political theory. That which is basic—and unchangeable—is a philosophy that interprets every phenomenon in the universe—dialectic materialism. Those who explain Communism to Christians usually seem to assume that they understand what this is, or that they are unwilling to try to understand. Perhaps those who know the term will be patient. Perhaps those who usually find such things dull will remember that we cannot afford to be ignorant of the force that threatens our world.

Materialism—in philosophy, not as a way of life—is the teaching that there is nothing but matter, that mind is only a function of matter. Since there is nothing that could have created it, matter must be eternal, ever changing, self-directing. Thus the atheist's "matter" is just as wonderful and as impossible to comprehend as God, but there is nothing to demand obedience and righteousness from him. Though Communist parties may in some countries accept rank-and-file members who believe in God, atheism is basic and essential to Communist theory and would be retained even if other beliefs were changed.

The "dialectic" part means that in life and nature all things are made up of opposite factors, as the positive and negative forces in the atom, and that changes take place because of the conflict of these forces, resolved as something new is formed. History is explained materialistically as a result of man's environment, and dialectically, as the result of conflict, especially between social classes. A new society begins to grow within the old until the living part of the old is consumed and only a shell remains, which must be broken. Each new society is progressive and good until it in turn develops contradictions and class war. Declining feudalism, for instance, produced artisans and moneylenders who took power as manufacturers and finance capitalists. The capitalist system brought with it new political forms suited to its needs for development, and new customs, new art, new religious organizations. It also brought its own problems, or new forms of old ones. Communists accuse capitalism of breeding economic crises and wars for markets and materials, and of fostering crime because of false standards and failure to give opportunity to all. They do not face one fundamental question: Communist and Christian philosophies agree that man made his own society with its problems; is there not then something innate in man—selfishness and sin—that keeps driving him to create evil social relationships?

To a Communist nothing is outside the scope of this philosophy. In this sense art is political and biology is political. How much more, then, anything so important to man as religion? How oddly it strikes one with some understanding of Communism to hear church leaders seriously propose that because the church is nonpolitical from our point of view we can fearlessly explain this to Red leaders and can expect freedom to preach the simple gospel!

It is this "simple gospel" that contradicts dialectic materialism more devastatingly than any economic theory or political philosophy. Because he sees this clearly, a Communist finds it hard to believe that Christians are sincere in calling themselves unpolitical. Only when man accepts materialism can the Communist paradise be built. Hence religion is the ultimate enemy. But the first danger to the revolution may be guns and planes, so the Communist welcomes armed help from anyone. The second foe may be private enterprise production, so he rallies all elements of the population to build socialist production—including the church. He knows that old customs and old religions do not die overnight. He can wait.

During the transition period the Communist Party never for a moment thinks of the church as neutral. Though scheduled for destruction, the church must be made to help build the new society. As Communist Party members work within sports and chess clubs or labor unions so they plan a step-by-step program for the church.

Before the revolution the average Chinese Christian worker had heard little about Communism except for general denunciations. Now, in addition to his job and his "volunteer" projects, he has classes and meetings. He lives under pressure. He wonders whom he can trust, even in the church. He hears of tremendous economic advances, and he may hope that one day Communism may bring good to his country. Or he may remain stubbornly skeptical of the new teaching, and yet not understand its full meaning Or what he ought to do.

It is unlikely that he is asked to renounce Christ. Each choice is small, but there are new ones daily. He is tired and feels himself alone. Besides, many of the things the government asks him to support are not evil—joining in neighborhood improvement, for instance, or an educational campaign. Then there comes a resolution about war, on issues he doesn't understand; but it seems that rich America is causing trouble in the world. He may have loved some American missionary, but it is not hard to remember unlovely Americans. He is Chinese. He must support his country. Is it not true that "the powers that be are ordained of God"?

It is as though the Chinese Christian were on a tiny raft, caught in the swirling floodwaters of collaboration with Communism. Each of us should ask himself, "How easy would it be for me to go against the flood?"

To continue an imperfect figure of speech, we can help by throwing across the waters the ropes of intercessory prayer. We must learn, too, from what happened in China so that we do not repeat in other countries the mistakes we made there. We have no excuse now for underestimating the importance of building local churches, and must not be too easily satisfied by a mechanically administered "party line" on the indigenous church.

Of course God is working in Red China. There is no force of man or devil that can resist the almighty power of God, and there are communities where men and women of prayer have seen many persons brought to salvation. There may have been more revivals in local churches than we can know about, for reports are few and scattered. But if revival is to spread, or even continue, there must be prayer support for the courageous as well as for the weak and wavering.

When concern for believers in Red countries is expressed, some good Christians—the same ones who speak vigorously of America's deep need for revival—react as though concern for the Chinese church were doubt of the power of God.

First we are reminded of the promise that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church. True, but there is no promise that any given section might not be wiped out if it does not remain faithful. Once, for example, there was a church in North Africa. It died. It lost its separation from the world, its zeal to reach the lost, its love for Christ—its reason for being. It had nothing with which to withstand pressure.

Then we are told with pious solemnity, "But persecution builds the church." Such formulas need to be examined. It is not persecution itself, which is of Satan, which builds the church. It is the withstanding of persecution by giving strong and faithful testimony that brings the power of God into action, and He builds the church. We must be careful not to use a platitude as an excuse for lack of prayer support for brothers in mortal combat. We would never have been told to pray for one another if it were not a necessity.

It is one thing, though, to say that we must pray for China and for Chinese Christians. It is quite another to do it. Should we just add "God bless the Christians in China" to a prayer ritual?

This is a hard question, and one that itself requires more prayer than we seem to be giving it. We have prayer reminders and published material on mission fields where we can go freely to preach and teach and where we can distribute Bibles and tracts. We have public prayer—not as much or as often as would be desirable—for those fields where we are working. But the one that can be reached by no means except intercession doesn't seem to be worth as much consideration as the others. It would almost seem that we do not expect much from prayer unless we can be right in there to do something with our hands.

In private prayer we need definiteness, yet most of us who have never been to China cannot uphold individual Christians there by name. Some of us can remember missionary activity of other days and this may help. But any of us could imitate the missionary pioneers who began to pray over maps of a country that God had laid on their hearts. Let us open the atlas. There is China, spread before us. There are the cities, growing ever larger; there are the thousands of towns and villages. We may remember some as having churches or missionary outposts.

We need not know the exact burdens or fears or problems, but God knows. We could bring before Him the Christians in each place, seeking for them wisdom and strength and peace. We could remember how burdened they must be that children and loved ones should not be poisoned by the constant soul-destroying propaganda. We could pray that they may make time to study the Bible; that they may pray more, not less; that their desire to know the Lord may increase. Though we may not know what tactics Satan may be using right now against our brothers in these places, we could claim in their behalf the restraining power of the blood of Christ.

It is much easier to pray for little thing for ourselves or for those close to us. There is less resistance and we may see answers very quickly. If we pray for the church in China we may not see the answer this week or next—or even, for that matter, until we reach heaven. Of one thing we may be sure: we will be tempted every day to think we are wasting our time. Yet we know God hears and answers if we pray 'in faith, nothing wavering.' Out of this experience we might acquire a new understanding of prayer support for missionaries and churches.

Nothing should be undertaken because of human exhortation alone. Nothing will be accomplished by those convinced by reason only. If any of us are quietly impressed by the feeling that prayer for the church, and especially the persecuted church, is in God's will for us, we have a responsibility. Do we dare let that impression be crowded out? Do we dare forget?