

THOUGHTS ON RELIGION INSPIRED BY A CHINA TOUR:

--Earl Willmott

What was most impressive to me on our tour in China (for the month of November 1971) was the spirit of the people. I was prepared to see great developments in industrial and agricultural production and organization, and in the physical welfare of the people. What I had not expected was such a significant change in the spirit of the people. They had so much life, individually and collectively. There was a calm confidence, a deep hopefulness, but also an ebullience and joyfulness that was appealing and infectious. They were acting so freely, not from necessity, or conformity, or coercion. The old concern for "face" was not in evidence; all necessity for wearing a mask--a psychological persona--had dropped away. The women wore no make-up. They didn't need it; their inner spirit of outgoing friendliness made their smiling faces beautiful. There seemed to be no thought of self in their relations with other people, and in their energetic working. These are all attributes, it would seem to me, of what we call the religious life.

I had read that the Cultural Revolution was spoken of officially, probably by Mao Tse-tung himself, as "a great revolution that touches people to their very souls," but I had had no idea how deeply it had reached into souls and how many souls had been touched. Evidence came from everyone who talked with us. People had learned to give criticism without fear of offending, to accept criticism without feeling resentment or shame, to make self-criticism without loss of face. Intellectuals acknowledged that they had formerly regarded education as a stepping stone to affluence or prestige or self-fulfilment, and now after working alongside workers and peasants; saw themselves as human beings, the equals of workers and peasants, deserving no privileges not available to all, and dedicated to serving the people.

The "East is Red" May 7th School outside Peking which we visited, one of many May 7th schools throughout China, demonstrated the essence of the Cultural Revolution. One thousand leading cadres--school teachers, office workers, managerial staff, party secretaries, of ages 25 to 60--studied together, worked together, lived together, in very Spartan conditions, doing all their own work. They studied half-time, and worked half-time--in the fields or machine shops or factories, built and run entirely by themselves. They also learned from working with workers in nearby factories and from peasants in nearby communes. Some of them stayed in the school for two or three years. They said they regarded it as a privilege to come to the school, and those who at first found it rather tough-going, soon were caught up in the wonderful communal spirit of the school. It was abundantly evident that the school was creating persons that had got rid of elitist attitudes and what they called "bourgeois tendencies" of seeking comfort, fearing difficulties, avoiding hard work, lording it over others. They had the spirit of Norman Bethune, which Mao Tse-tung urged the Chinese people to learn: an "utter devotion to others without any thought of self."

One member of the school Revolutionary Committee (which is elected by all the members of the school) had been a chartered accountant in a government office. On arrival at the school he found himself put in charge of the piggery. And as he told us: "I was ashamed and horrified. Pigs! Oh, what dirty creatures! I had never touched one. How could I clean their sties? But I grasped the job, and gradually my attitude changed. My dislike of cleaning their sties and looking after them changed. I began to love the cute little piglets. I liked holding them in my arms. I felt sorry for them when they were sick. I love looking after them now." And his spontaneous, happy laughter left no doubt in our minds that he found deep satisfaction in "serving the people," as he said, by caring for the piggery.

One day in a primary school we sat with several teachers and three young students discussing the Cultural Revolution. They told us how before the Cultural Revolution it was taken for granted that each student would try to do better than others, to get better marks, and on graduation to get a better job than others. And how teachers looked down on manual labor as demeaning. Then workers came to the school and taught them "political" studies, and led them to turn from these self-centred attitudes and follow Mao's urging to "fight self" and to "learn the spirit of absolute selflessness from Norman Bethune."

The heroic old peasant who led his production brigade at Sandstone Hollow to overcome tremendous difficulties and to turn their rock-strewn valley into terraced fields with bumper crops told of his own emancipation at the time of Liberation, and then said, "But if a person thinks only of his own emancipation and happiness, he may perhaps slide down the wrong road." I realized that I had not heard a Chinese speak of seeking happiness. Perhaps a life devoted to serving the people has no need to seek personal goals.

Is not all this like Jesus' teaching? In their dedication to act "for the good of the people" are the Chinese people not committed to "doing the will of God"?--though with no knowledge of Jesus and no use of the name "God." What did Jesus mean by "Not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of God, but only he who does the will of God?" (Mt 7:21) And "Whoever does the will of my Father, the same is my brother." (Mk 3:35) And consider Jesus' parable of the two sons (Mt 21:28-31): When the father asked them to go and work in the fields, the first said, "No!" but he went; the second said, "I go!" but he did not. And Jesus asks, "Which did the will of his father?" In 1950 in Chengtu I heard two different Chinese Christian pastors preach on this parable; both suggested that Christians were so often like the second son, while the leaders of the revolution, who say "No" to "God", are like the first.

And that raises an interesting question: If it is possible to believe in the idea of God and yet not have faith in God, is it not possible to have faith in God and yet not believe in the idea of God? In this connection we might reflect on this quotation from the French Theologian Roger Garaudy: "What gives meaning, beauty and value to life is, for the Marxist as for the Christian, to give oneself without any limit to what the world through our sacrifice can become."

Somehow I cannot help thinking that they have been more successful in China than the Christian Church in the West has been in bringing people into this life-giving experience. Why? I would like to explore two possible reasons for the difficulties of the Church in the West: the confusion and contradictions in the Christian faith, and the effect of our type of society in hindering people from taking that step.

Mao Tse-tung says that everything has within it contradictory aspects and that the struggle between these contradictory aspects is what pushes things forward. And that using the method of "one divides into two" we can recognize and analyze contradictions. It has been applied to ordinary people, as well as by their leaders, throughout China in solving problems and difficulties, from dealing with the situation of a couple who want a divorce to analyzing the world situation today, and working out the best policies to apply.

So let us look at the problem of the Christian faith by applying this principle: the "one faith" divides into two mutually contradictory faiths. This contradiction is seen clearly at least at one point in the gospel records. Jesus' disciples were contending over who of them would be the greatest. Jesus told them that they were not like kings that lorded it over people, but servants of the people. The accounts of Mark (10:42-45) and Luke (22:25-27) (Matthew follows Mark at this point) are similar until the last sentence, and here a great divergence occurs. In Mark Jesus says: "The Son of Man came . . . to give his life a ransom for many;" while in Luke he says: "I am in the midst of you as one that serves." Textual analysis and a comparison with Jesus' teaching throughout his life, it seems to me, points to the Luke record as the original statement by Jesus, the Mark record implying a theological position alien to the thought of Jesus; namely, that some great price had to be paid to God to

change his anger to forgiveness of people's sin. We might call these two religious faiths (just for the sake of convenience in the following discussion) the "ransom religion" and the "serving religion," and compare them on a number of points to reveal the contradictions.

Ransom religion implies a God whose attitude can be changed. How often we read in the Old Testament: "Do (this or that) so that the Lord may turn from his anger and show compassion to us!" (Deut 13:17) Or, "Who knows, God may yet turn away from his fierce anger?" (Jonah 3:9) Prayers such as "Lord, have mercy..." show that today the same idea of God prevails.

Serving religion's God is unchangeable, dependable; ever ready, like the father in the parable of the lost (Prodigal) son, to accept whoever turns to him.

Ransom religion looks to God to act. And when he does not act, it is not easy to explain. Perhaps the only explanation ransom religion can offer is the discouraging one I saw in the Watchtower: "Someone will say, 'If He is almighty and a God of good, why, then, does he not let us today see him doing something?' Well, we have to consider that, as Sovereign, God has the right to act when and how he pleases .... He has a time schedule for the development of His purposes."

Serving religion believes that it is man's responsibility to act--with mind clarified and purpose activated by dedication to "do the will of God."

Ransom religion leads man to try to find some means to persuade God to act on his behalf. Man's concern is to get God on his side. So he uses sacrifices, liturgies, and prayers of petition. To "pray" in the ransom religion so often becomes what is whimsically defined by Ambrose Bierce in his Devil's Dictionary as: "To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled in behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy."

Recently in our church (UCC) we sang hymn 163 in the new Hymn Book--it comes from the 17th Century Scottish Psalter--which contains this stanza, so well illustrating this characteristic of ransom religion:

For he the needy will set free  
when they on him shall call;  
he'll save the poor and those for whom  
there is no help at all.

Can't you just see the pleased satisfaction of the Scottish lairds singing that and thinking: "Of course, God will act for us; we won't have to spare a farthing."

This aspect of ransom religion is humorously illustrated in the film "Nicholas and Alexandra" where Nicholas, wanting to keep Russia out of war, says to his prime minister, "I have ordered prayers for peace to be said in all the churches." The quick reply of his minister was: "God help us, when we have to start praying!"

The ultimate in wanting God to act for man is the oft repeated "Grant that we may hereafter live a ... righteous life." The righteous life has to be bestowed by God--it is up to God to grant it! The petitioners have little faith in God granting it (for 'hereafter') for they repeat it week after week. And if the prayer is not answered, even for a week, is it to be accounted God's responsibility and not man's?

Serving religion: Man's concern is to be on God's side. This means an active concern for other people's good, rather than concern to find means, such as sacrifices, of persuading God to act for man. Jesus said: "Go and learn what this means: 'I require mercy (loving-kindness), not sacrifice'" (whether of a lamb or of the "Lamb of God"?). (Mt 9:13) Jesus advocates serving religion, and opposes ransom religion.

Ransom religion asks obedience to "God's laws," by which is often meant conformity to society's moral codes. But it is impossible to be subservient to external moral codes and to do God's will without unbearable inner conflicts. The Ten Commandments (with the exception of the first, which really overrules the other nine) have been a millstone on Christianity's neck throughout history.

Serving religion asks: "Why of yourselves judge ye not what is right?" (Lk 12:57) The right action is not difficult to determine when self is left behind and the criterion used is "the good of the people." "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." (Mk 2:27-28)--an epigrammatic clarification of the gulf between the ransom religions' institutions dominating over man and serving religion's insistence on man's dominating over institutions.

It is interesting to read in Mao Tse-tung's writings: "Let the masses educate themselves in this great revolutionary movement (the Cultural Revolution), and learn to distinguish between right and wrong." And in the Cultural Revolution Mao Tse-tung encouraged the people to overthrow those powerful Communist Party Committees which tyrannized over the people, and to reorganize them to serve the people.

Ransom religion in our society usually accepts the idea of the sacredness of property. It is backed by the moneyed class because it is seen by them to support their interests.

Serving religion says: "You cannot serve God and mammon!" (Mt 6:24) And "It is easier for a rope (from the Aramaic) to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Mt 10:25) This conviction of Jesus' seems to me to be the very essence of the new spirit in China today. Only they would put it: "You cannot serve the people wholeheartedly and be anxious to make money."

Ransom religion puts up ideals to strive for, but admittedly not to attain, mistakenly derived from Jesus' teaching, such as: "Be perfect!" On the question of this demand to be perfect, which has caused so much feeling of being worthless "miserable sinners ... with no health in us," again we have the option of two records: Matthew (5:48) says: "Be ye perfect, as your Father is perfect." Luke (6:36) says: "Be ye merciful, as your Father is merciful." Does this not show once again the contradiction between ransom religion and serving religion? Introspection and hopeless striving; and the call for outflowing loving-kindness toward all people.

Ransom religion is pessimistic about man; he is inherently sinful; his "human nature" is to be selfish, aggressive against any who thwart him. When faced with the picture of China today, ransom believers say: "It can't last; you can't change human nature."

Serving religion has great faith in man and in his ability to learn and change. It was to the poor and oppressed that Jesus said: "Blessed are you poor; blessed are you persecuted ... you are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world!" Is their blessedness in not being bound to a fixed idea of society, in seeing clearly what change is needed, and in being ready to work to bring it about? Again, we might compare Mao Tse-tung: "Put daring above everything else," he said to cadres in 1966; "boldly arouse the masses ... Trust the masses, rely on them; respect their initiative." And on other occasions: "The people, and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history." "The masses have boundless creative power." "Man has an almost infinite potential for re-education."

Ransom religion approves of the individual's search for personal satisfaction--searching for "selfhood" or "one's identity" or "eternal life." It specially recommends this for the lonely person who is alienated in a competitive society.

Serving religion is living outgoingly, with other people, in utter devotion to the Good, and forgetting about one's little self and its striving for personal satisfactions. Then the finding of meaning and richness in life is a natural outcome. You will remember the incident (Lk 10:25-28): a lawyer comes to Jesus and asks: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus, with pedagogical acumen, enquires, "How about the Pentateuch? What do you find there?" The lawyer, with real insight, quotes two widely-separated "laws," which actually negate all laws and turn inward-searching to outgoingness: "Love God with the whole self, and love your neighbor as you love yourself." And Jesus answers, "Right on! Do that and you will live." And here I would like to quote Garaudy again: "Man becomes a person by his decision to go out of himself and answer the summons of God served on him by his neighbor."

Other points could be set forth to illustrate the contradictions within the "Christian faith." But perhaps these are enough to bring some understanding of the confusion in its faith and teaching. I am, of course, dealing with the ideology of Christianity; I am not categorizing Christians. Members of the Christian Church, as of most other religions, cannot be divided into believers in ransom religion and believers in servicing religion. Some have more of one in their "faith," some more of the other. Very few believe only and entirely in either ransom religion or servicing religion. And this mixture of the two in people's thinking is what makes for confusion.

Now consider how the type of society helps or hinders a person in coming to selflessly serve the people. We saw in China how the situation encourages a person to accept the way of life represented by servicing religion. The Chinese people in the Cultural Revolution, led by Mao Tse-tung and his "Thought," overthrew the influences and the men that kept alive competitive conflict among the people and the striving for personal gain and prestige and power.

What about us in the West? We have a social system whose values and tenets essentially contradict Jesus' way of life and that of servicing religion. Here are some of the features of our society, as I see them:

The possession of wealth and property plays an enormously important role in our lives. Property is "sacred." So many of our laws are more concerned with protecting property than with the good of people. To "make money" is a dominating purpose in life. The assumption is that through the accumulation of wealth men will find success and happiness.

It is generally taken for granted that it is right and natural for one man to employ others and make money from their labor. And the employees are somehow regarded as inferior to the employers, and fit only to exist on very much smaller incomes. Certain whole classes of people--employers in industry, businessmen, professionals, intellectuals--are considered to be superior to others, and therefore worth much larger salaries.

The condemnable features of our social system--poverty, violence, inhumanity, hypocrisy, racism, injustice, lawlessness--are seen as merely defects to be corrected in an otherwise admirable system. People are conditioned to believe that there can't be any preferable alternative to the capitalist social order. Any suggestion for a different social order is constantly made to look most frightening.

Great emphasis is placed on the individual's "freedom" and his inalienable right to the "pursuit of happiness." Society is ever saying: "You've got to put yourself first, otherwise you'll lose out! Of course, serve mammon; that is the way to happiness."

It seems clear to me that the reason many good people, even professed followers of Jesus, have come to accept things as they are and to believe that man is inherently selfish and aggressive is the dead weight of our acquisitive society with its concern for self-preservation, which is supported in great measure by the power of ransom religion. Those who would like to see a basic change and who perhaps look toward China with wistful hope have to reckon with religion in our society. What is desperately needed is a turning from ransom religion to servant religion, to prepare people for the economic and social changes that could lead to a happy future. And to create a new man in a new society.

Some Christian people are already working intelligently, energetically and devotedly to do just that. John W. Foster writes: "The Church, even the Roman Catholic Church ... has been unable to resist the pressure for drastic reconstruction. Among some priests and laity there is developing a new understanding of the language of the Christian faith, a vision of a new society, and a consciousness of the struggle that will be necessary to reach it ... A revolutionary group of priests at work in Colombia ... are struggling to destroy the barriers between a supernatural religious world and the natural world of economic and political society." It seems to me that they are not just "struggling to destroy the barriers," they are rejecting ransom religion in favor of servant religion. Foster goes on to quote these passages from their Golconda Statement, 1969:

"Incarnation ceases to be a mysterious occurrence restricted to Jesus which curiously saves souls; rather it becomes a commitment to the oppressed and to political action which takes seriously the 'anguish and hopes' of the people ...

"Revelation, which means the manifestation of God in history, is not simply what ... occurred in biblical times; it is a vision which sees through the forms of political control and their blessing by the Church, making people aware that human needs in the present historical situation can only be met through liberation from dependency and oppression ...

"Resurrection likewise ceases to be an ancient miracle, and is ... the sign of the 'new man,' who is being born in the commitment and struggle of 'making new the worldly society.' The suffering Jesus is a sign of revolutionary struggle leading through the destruction of an oppressive system, through the establishment of a socialist system of relationships, finally to the 'new man.'"

When I see such developments, people with new ideas such as these about the fundamentals of Christianity--in the Roman Catholic Church, in the Protestant Church, wherever--and especially when I see what is coming about in China, I am tremendously encouraged. What hope there is for mankind!

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\* From Relationships: Robbery, Revolution, and Reconstruction by John W. Foster, Published by the Committee on Education for Mission and Stewardship, the United Church of Canada, 1970--a 9-page pamphlet.