
FIRST PERSON

Religion and Revolution in China

Annemarie Hamlin

I went to China because my grandfather went to China. A recent graduate from medical school and newly married, he and his wife, a nurse, signed up for a seven year term as medical missionaries 55 years ago. They worked in Honan Province and what was then Manchuria. Grandfather's tales of adventure—surviving sickness, bandits, soldiers, opium addicts and wartime bombings—always intrigued me, and he inspired me to want to discover my own adventure in China.

An opportunity came last year when as a recent graduate from Pacific Union College with a B.A. in English I was asked to begin an English language program for Anzhen Hospital in Beijing. My plan was to spend three months teaching and developing a curriculum for the hospital, and then to hand over the program to an American college. Because of the violent suppression of the democracy movement in early June and the threat of civil war, I left five weeks early.

As an English teacher, I felt I had a unique window into the Chinese culture that the average tourist was not able to enjoy. Daily in my classes, my students and I discussed the Chinese culture, people and current political predicament. Though reticent to speak at first, they came to trust me and eventually became very open on many subjects, including

politics and religion. Through my conversations and interactions with these people and their culture, I have come to believe that we as Christians have an important duty in China. Our greatest help will not be directed toward building new churches and baptizing the masses, but toward bringing to them the basic benefits of Christianity, which include social improvement and the development of freedom and human rights.

The predominant religions in China are Buddhism and Islam. Christianity had begun to make a small niche in the culture at the eve of World War II. However, at the time of the 1949 communist take-over, known to the Chinese as

"The Liberation", Mao declared that religion divided the people's allegiance and that they should believe only in communism. My students called this materialism—belief only in the tangible. Religion did not disappear completely after The Liberation, but during the mid-sixties became stigmatized as bourgeois. The Cultural Revolution began as a student uprising, and during this time anything that represented Western culture—including religion—was essentially banned. This self-proclaimed Red Guard demolished all religious symbols, destroyed Bibles, and "criticized" people for their beliefs. (Criticism is a Chinese euphemism for anything from chastisement to torture.)

Most of my students, being between the ages of 30 and 55, had experienced the repression of the Cultural Revolution as teens or young professional adults, and, consequently, knew little or nothing of religion. All were aware of the existence of Western religions, and some knew about Christianity, but none of them had heard of Seventh-day Adventists. Having been brought up in an atheistic culture, where the leader of the country was revered in place of God, they did not understand our concept of God. Some said they had been almost forcibly told to disbelieve in any God. The government was the only body worthy of believing in. With



The author (left), with her English students near Beijing.

the reforms in China during the past ten years, however, and fewer restrictions on religion, Christianity is again entering the lives of the people and awakening their interest.

Christian churches are now al-

the questions began to get more difficult, I realized that their interest was actually more philosophical than theological. They wanted to know what it was about our culture that encouraged people to believe in religion, and how we use

times mistaken for an eagerness to accept new beliefs. The Chinese are eager to learn of many things, but slow to accept new ideas. In many ways, Christianity is a symbol of Western thought, and if a Chinese person professes to believe in God, he is seen as a radical thinker and is immediately under suspicion by the government. My grandparents spoke of "rice-Christians" who became converts only to obtain personal economic benefits. Now the Christian lifestyle does not appear more beneficial to the Chinese than that of any other religion—even atheism. In addition, many people are still wary of governmental scorn about their beliefs. Recent reports, however, indicate that church membership is



Annemarie Hamlin in Tian An Men Square, June 1989.

growing, and that more than 10 million people have joined Christian churches—an impressive figure until you realize that it represents only 1 percent of the population.

lowed to exist in China under the terms of the Three-Self Movement. This requires that a church be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. Therefore, it must be led by Chinese people, financially disconnected from any foreign source, and its growth must result from its appeal to the people—not through the work of missionaries. Proselytizing is strictly illegal. Article 46 of the Chinese constitution adopted in 1978 says, "Citizens enjoy freedom to believe in religion and freedom not to believe in religion and to propagate atheism." Nevertheless, Christian churches from all over the world have eased their way into the country by sending teachers of English, business, and other subjects.

My students were curious about Western religious practices, and began questioning me, starting with relatively simple queries. Do people really pray? How do they pray—out loud, whispering, standing up, on their knees, in church, at home? Do they expect God to respond in some way? What do people do at church? What does the minister say to the people? As

religion to understand some of the world's moral mysteries.

I asked if any of them believed in God, and everyone immediately responded No. When I pushed the question a little farther, asking why, one man responded in almost

I had a unique window into the Chinese culture.

brutal tones, "I don't believe in God. In fact, I think it is stupid. Science is the only explanation for the world and for people, and some day I think science will prove there is not a God." A few people nodded in agreement, and indicated that many Chinese feel this way. One man said that he believed that the only reason young people attended churches was out of mere curiosity.

The Chinese curiosity about Christianity, I believe, is some-

With the increasing curiosity about religion in China, also comes increasing interest in other Western ideas, namely democracy. My own impressions of the events of last spring were obtained both in and outside the classroom—observing the demonstration marches and the massive sit-in at Tian An Men Square, and discussing those events with my students and Chinese friends.

On the night of April 27 I stood under a bridge in Beijing and watched as the crowd surged past in one of the largest marches in China's history. The people were beginning to assert their rights as citizens in ways they had never done before. Protest marches continued almost daily, and the students submitted a list of demands, including their wish for a dialogue between their representatives and the national leaders. My students and I discussed the events daily.

They were concerned, during the hunger strike, about the lack of response from the government. This silence, coupled with the peacefulness and organization of the demonstrations, fostered my hopes and those of many others for the rise of democracy in China.

When the Chinese Premier declared on May 20 that Beijing was under martial law nobody knew what to expect. I sat in my room unsure of what this meant for me and my stay in China; but nothing happened, and the days ticked by with no action.

I went repeatedly to Tian An Men Square and was there on the afternoon of Saturday, June 3, a few hours before the troops moved in. Two days earlier, ignoring the advice of some well-meaning friends, I had ridden my bicycle

*We as Christians
have an
important duty
in China.*

downtown to see the Goddess of Democracy. She was a glorious figure, more symbolic even than our own Statue of Liberty in the harbor of New York. Her brilliant whiteness showed the hope of the Chinese people. Her arms, both uplifted and carrying a torch, showed that all people were working together for democracy. The square was peaceful that afternoon, as strains of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" drifted past the ears of tourists, both Chinese and foreign. I left with the expectation that on Sunday I would return. That night I was aware of the military presence in the city as I returned to my living quarters on the north side of Beijing. But it wasn't until the next morning that

the magnitude of the violence became known.

The crackdown stirred many moods and opinions—all varieties of horror and disbelief. Those of my students who could make it to class the following day spoke in angry tones or wept. They will certainly not forget the violence of June 3 and 4, nor will the billions of people who looked on from other countries, anticipating the move toward freedom and democracy in China.

The Seventh-day Adventist church has a small presence in China. However, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency International (ADRA International) has begun several development projects in remote villages which will provide both food and a source of income for the people of the area. In the city of Suzhou, near Shanghai, Adventists have been asked to establish a medical center that will eventually be operated by the Chinese themselves.

These projects are an excellent way to bring aid to the Chinese people, and because the Chinese nature is to believe actions rather than words, it is the caring and thoughtful Christian who will bring the greatest help to them. Along with our responsibility to improve the quality of life for these people through health care and resource development projects, it is our duty to support the acquisition and preservation of freedom and human rights in China. Freedom means

many things—the right to think, the right to believe, the right to express oneself. When these rights are denied, so is spiritual and mental growth.

Though the struggle for democracy was defeated in 1989, many Chinese are quietly hopeful that the movement will again surface. They believe that freedom will eventually be realized in China. That freedom will also bring a renewed interest in and acceptance of Christianity among the Chinese people.

Annemarie Hanlin, a graduate of Pacific Union College, is currently a graduate student in English literature and political philosophy at the Claremont Graduate School in Claremont, California, U.S.A.

