WATCHMAN NEE AND THE HOUSE CHURCH MOVEMENT IN CHINA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Watchman Nee and the House Church Movement in China

From the time that China was opened to western visitors in 1973 there has been a growing stream of reports increasing in their excitement, about house churches there. At first it was claimed that against all odds, the house church movement was still intact after 25 years of persecution.[1] After several years, however, the reports became more sanguine. Estimates appeared claiming that there were 30 million authentic Christians meeting in house

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[1] Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, "Christian Witness to the Chinese People", in Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader. Ralph D. Winter, Editor, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981) p.670 This source is from the early 1970's.

Similarly, by relying on the Government figures, WCE allows for 1,080,000 Chinese (Roman) Catholics, and 495.000 Protestants, with an additional 1,600,000 admitted "crypto Christians" (secret Christians). Furthermore, only 114,000 Catholics, and 70,000 protestants openly profess church affiliation. This is typical of sources derived from the mid to early 70's.

At the end of the article, the comment is added, "By 1981, evidence was increasing of very rapid church growth in many areas of China, including among tribal peoples, with large numbers of young people everywhere." This comment seems to be tacked onto the end of the article. World Christian Encyclopedia: A comparative study of churches and religions in the modern world AD 1900-2000, David B. Barrett Editor, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) pp.231-234

churches.[2] Later estimates went higher still to 50 million and beyond.[3]

These figures can be appreciated when contrasted to the estimated number of Christians before the revolution of 1949, which is placed by many authorities at less than one

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[2] "There may be as many as 30 million Christians in China today..." Jim Falkenberg, "A Word on the Word", in The Quiet Miracle, Vol.63, No.2 (Mar. 1985) p.2 Compare G. Thompson Brown, Christianity in the People's Republic of China, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983) p.178 Also, "The respected Chinese Church Research Center in Hong Kong claims that house-church members...total to 30 million an more. Privately, some Chinese officials say the figure is closer to 20 million. "A Church in Crisis Weeps and Prays", Time Magazine, Vol.124 No.12 (sept.17,1984) p.74.

[3] "...now even conservative estimates range between 30 and 50 million." C. Peter Wagner, On The Crest of the Wave: Becoming a World Christian, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books A Division of GL Publications, 1983) p.30
"In China the staggering truth is clearer every day: despite intense opposition... Christians have grown from one or two million to easily 50 million." Ralph D. Winter, "About You", (Pasadena, CA: U.S. Center for World Mission, 1983) p.2 One has to suspect that this figure is exaggerated. However, the fact that scholars are making these statements certainly point to breath-taking growth.

million evangelicals, but certainly, no more than 2 million.[4]

The amazing thing about these reports is the fact that the Chinese church during the past 30 years has lived under acute persecution, probably as harsh as that of any church in the world. The estimates of those killed go into

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[4] Bohr says that there were 750,000 Protestant Chinese Christians. This figure is apparently based on formal church membership, which may overlook some converts involved in informal types of fellowship. He also says that there were over 3 million Catholics, although much of this is to be discounted because of the Catholic practice of counting as Catholics all those who have been baptized Catholic. Since no adult decision is implied, the number claimed by the Catholic church is often unrelated to the number actually attending mass with some regularity. Richard Bohr, "State Religion in China Today: Christianity's Future in a Marxist Setting," Missiology: An International Review, Vol. XI, No. 3 (July 1983) p.321,323

WCE allows 1,200,000 Protestants in the year 1900! These figures are impossible to reconcile. World Christian Encyclopedia: A comparative study of churches and religions in the modern world AD 1900-2000, David B. Barrett Editor, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) p.231.

Winter allows 1-2 million true believers in 1949. See note #3 above.

Wagner holds for "fewer than 1 million" authentic believers in 1949. C. Peter Wagner, On The Crest of the Wave p.30

the millions.[5] In addition, virtually the entire evangelical Chinese-Christian intelligentsia was destroyed or silenced.

Therefore, by even the most conservative estimates, the Chinese church must be considered one of the most victorious in the world. At a time when the church in the developed countries has not experienced any significant growth at all, and in many places has decreased in size, the Chinese church has grown at least twenty-fold.

It seems today that most of the ferment of growth in China is occurring, not in the "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" (TSPM) churches, but in less organized and illegal house churches.

Standing at the headwaters of much of this spiritual ferment is a shawdowy figure to western eyes. He is an enigma, and a paradox, but unquestionably one of the great christian workers of this century-- Watchman Nee.

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[5] This figure is even more difficult to ascertain with certainty. We will probably never know how many Christians were killed in this modern holocaust. According to Judith Banister, Chief of the Chinese Branch of the U.S. Bureau of the Census, "More people died in China during the period of the Great Leap forward than in all the battles of First World War, or the holocaust of Europe's Jews, or the Soviet Collectivization and Stalin's terror." Ansley of The National Academy of Sciences and Princeton University says that "about 27 million" died. Both quoted in Carl Lawrence, The Church in China: How It Survives and Prospers Under Communism, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1985) pp. 31ff. It is not known how many of these were Christians, but it is clear that a significant percentage of them were.

BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Watchman Nee was born Ni Shu-tsu or Henry Ni in Swatow, November 4, 1903. He was later renamed Ni Ching-Fu, and finally, after his commitment to Christian work, Ni To-sheng-- that is, Watchman Nee.

His father, Ni Weng-hsiu or Nga Ung-siu of Foochow, born in 1877, was the fourth of nine boys. He served as officer in the Imperial Customs Service and died in Hong Kong in 1941.

Like so many well known servants of God, Watchman Nee had a family heritage of Christian Service. The first school in Foochow offering western-style education was opened in a suburb of the old city in 1853, and it was here that Watchman Nee's grandfather Nga U-cheng heard of Jesus Christ and was won to Him.

Four years later in 1857, the year in which the first Christian church in Foochow came into being, he was one of a group of four pupils baptized in the Min River. He progressed so well that the missionaries trained him as an evangelist, and soon he was proclaiming the gospel in this city of half a million souls. Eventually he was ordained a pastor, the first Chinese to be so honored in the three north Fukien missions. He had a gift for expounding the Scriptures for which, after his death in 1890, he was long to be remembered.'

The strongest influence in Nee's early ideological development seems to have been his mother Lin Huo-ping.[6] Her early experience included being sold as a slave to another couple in Foochow by her parents who could no longer afford to feed her. These in turn sold her to a wealthier merchant as an adopted daughter.

Huo-ping is portrayed by Kinnear as a strong-willed woman who became belatedly, but deeply committed to Christ and the Scriptures. She seems to have been mentally gifted, easily excelling the other students in the western style school in which she studied-- the Chinese Western Girls School in Shanghai. She had been deeply influenced by Huo King-en, who was at that time only the second women in China to have graduated in medicine in the U.S. Huo-ping prevailed on her father to work towards sending her to the U.S. to study medicine as well. Another gifted woman who affected Huo-ping at this time was Dora Yu, who had also been selected to study abroad, but had felt called of God to return from Europe to preach in China instead.

Before Huo-ping could carry out her plans, her mother accepted a marriage contract with Nga Ung-siu (Nee's father, who was later renamed Ni Wheng-hsiu by the civil service). It was inconceivable at that time for her to violate an agreement entered into with full parental

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[6] Lin Huo-ping (Peace Lin) of Foochow, born in 1880, died in 1950. Angus I. Kinnear, Against the Tide: The Story of Watchman Nee, p. x

authority. With bitterness of heart, she submitted to the inevitable.

Her marriage, which seems to have turned out alright after all, issued in nine children. While raising them, Huo-ping became active in patriotic activities associated with Sun Yat-sen. She was a tireless political organizer and agitator, forming the Women's Patriotic Society and often speaking publicly. When Sun Yat-sen came to Foochow in 1913, she was given an official role in the reception. Eventually she was awarded the order of the Second Class for Patriotism by the Kuomintang government.[7]

When in 1919, she committed her life to Christ, she became active in evangelistic preaching, and her political activities diminished.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND: EAST VS. WEST IN THE CHURCH

Thus we find in the early life of Huo-ping as well as her husband's family, the interplay and indeed the clash of Chinese and Western influences, with Christianity confusingly intertwined. In this respect the Nee's are typical of China as a whole at this time.

It is impossible to study the history of the church in China without appreciating the intimate and eventually dangerous interplay between Western culture and the Christian church in China.

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[7] Angus I. Kinnear, Against the Tide: The Story of Watchman Nee, pp. 33, 36

Dr. Ng has pointed out that nationalism came late to China. However, there was a strident form of "culturism" that preceded nationalism as such. As Ng puts it,

> "What lay beyond its (China's) borders was of little value or consequence, and the need to compete with outside forces simply did not exist."[8]

The Manchu Dynasty at this time had a strictly isolationist outlook. Fifty years earlier Emperor Chien Lung had said to George III of England, "As your envoy can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange and ingenious, and have no use for your country's wares."[9]

"The Opium Wars (1939-42) which shocked China out of her complacency could be taken to mark the beginning of nationalism in China."[10] This national humiliation woke the Chinese up to the need to rise up to the challenge of the west.

After 1842, the British and the Dutch were eager to establish trade with China. At that time Hong Kong was ceded to the British and five coastal cities were opened to Western trade. But this concession had been wrung from the Chinese at the barrel of a gun.

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[8] Lee Ming Ng, "Christianity and Nationalism in China," East Asia Journal of Theology, Vol. 1 No. 1 (Spring, 1983): p.71

[9] Angus I. Kinnear, Against the Tide: The Story of Watchman Nee, p.18

[10] Lee Ming Ng, "Christianity and Nationalism in China," East Asia Journal of Theology, Vol. 1 No. 1 (Spring, 1983): p.72

Even after giving trading rights to the British, the Chinese forbade bartering, and would only allow the British to buy Chinese wares with silver. This was hardly what the British had in mind. It was later discovered that the Chinese could be persuaded to pay cash for Indian opium. For this reason the British forced the Manchu Dynasty to legalize the use of opium in the "unequal treaties" signed in 1862.[11]

It was during this period that Protestant missionaries began to arrive in China in great numbers. Hudson Taylor arrived in 1854 and he founded the China inland mission in 1865. Therefore, in many Chinese minds there was an intimate connection between Christianity and the western gunboat diplomats who were humiliating the Chinese at the same time they fostered the opium trade.[12]

From 1851 to 1864 the country suffered terribly from the Tai-ping Rebellion led by an unsuccessful candidate for civil service examination. Hong Xiuquan had been influenced by Christian tracts, and because of a dream, felt that he was called to rid China of idolatry and corruption.

He set out to overthrow the the Manchu Dynasty and replace it with a heavenly kingdom named Tai-ping, meaning "great peace". As the revolution developed, mystical and

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[11] David H. Adeney, China: The Church's Long March, (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 1985) p.38 compare Angus I. Kinnear, Against the Tide: The Story of Watchman Nee, p

[12] p. Richard Bohr, "State Religion in China Today: Christianity's Future in a Marxist Setting," Missiology: An International Review, Vol. XI, No. 3 (July 1983) pp. 323,324

superstitious elements were added, and in time the movement lost any Christian emphasis it may have had. Hong became obsessed with the idea that he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ. He established his capital in Men Ging and for 10 years his armies extended their control over large areas of the country.

When Shanghai was threatened however, the foreign powers organized an army and helped the corrupt imperial Manchu forces to destroy the Tai-pings. It is estimated that some 20 million people were killed during the more than 10 years of that war. The associations between the Taipings and Christianity were not helpful to the developing impression of Christianity in the minds of most Chinese.[13]

By this time the Manchu Dynasty was too weak to resist Western influence. The unequal Beijing Treaty of 1861 allowed missionaries to own land in China's interior and thus led to the building up of large institutions. The Roman Catholic church became a great land owner and later those large institutions attracted strong criticism from Communist and other nationalist leaders.

More and more missionaries arrived to work in schools, colleges and hospitals, introducing western science and technology. Bohr says that the Chinese field had absorbed more effort, money, and human resources than any

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[13] Angus I. Kinnear, Against the Tide: The Story of Watchman Nee, pp

other mission field.[14] Although all authorities agree that Christian missionaries opposed and deplored the opium trade which was being fostered by their own governments, it was impossible for most Chinese to distinguish between white skinned, red-haired missionaries and white skinned, red-haired merchants who has come to exploit.

In 1900 the I Huo Chuan (or Righteous Harmony Fists), whom the foreigners knew as the 'Boxers', were murdering Chinese Christians and spreading anti-foreign madness. The astute and unprincipled Empress Dowager, seeking to harness the dangerous movement to her own ends, had issued an order to destroy all aliens China-wide.[15]

Very much of the fury, both in the Boxer rebellion and in the revolution of Sun Yat-sen in 1911, which finally toppled the corrupt Manchu Dynasty was directed against foreign incursion and exploitation of Chinese society.[16]

In China, therefore, unlike Russia, the poor of the country looked not only to their own government for the blame, but also looked very much to the external foreign element as the cause of their suffering. This outlook

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[14] P. Richard Bohr, "State Religion in China Today: Christianity's Future in a Marxist Setting," Missiology: An International Review, Vol. XI, No. 3 (July 1983) p.321

[15] Angus I. Kinnear, Against the Tide: The Story of Watchman Nee, p.26

[16] "While it failed to usher in a strong and unified country, the 1911 Revolution...created the objective conditions in which nationalism could thrive." Lee Ming Ng, "Christianity and Nationalism in China," East Asia Journal of Theology, Vol. 1 No. 1 (Spring, 1983): p.72

squared well with the tribalistic separatistic attitude of Chinese culture for the past two millenia. Ng summarizes this point when he says,

> "Foreign encroachments on China were not only what set Chinese nationalism in motion, they were in fact its prime moving force. Close at the heels of the Opium Wars were the wars with England and France in 1858 and 1860. Then there was the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. In the treaties signed following China's defeat in each of these military encounters, important concessions were made to different foreign powers. ... Thus one of the characteristics of Chinese nationalism from its very inception was its anti-foreign tendency. This anti-foreign sentiment was manifested again and again after each of the "incidents", in the forms of street demonstrations, boycotts of foreign goods, strikes, and at times attacks on foreign nationals."[17]

The reason that this anti-foreign tendency is important is the close affinity that Christianity had with foreign colonial powers in the Chinese mind. Ng reports on a distinct "anti-Christian" movement during the 1920's, also called the New Thought Movement. This movement was strong among the young intellectuals especially in the north of China. Their attack was not limited to Christianity, because Confucianism was also attacked,

> "for its de-moralizing and de-humanizing effect on the people. The Confucian emphasis on meekness, obedience, respect for age, and the abhorrence of competition was blamed for producing a people that was weak, lacking in

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[17] Lee Ming Ng, "Christianity and Nationalism in China," East Asia Journal of Theology, Vol. 1 No. 1 (Spring, 1983): p.74

> resistance, and in word, unfit for the demands of the modern world."[18]

However, Christianity was held doubly guilty by the growing mass of nationalistic thinkers, not just because its teachings were damaging, but because it was the "vanguard of Western imperialism", and the "tool which imperialists used in the exploitation of weak nations."[19]

One of the resolutions adopted by the Young China Association in its fifth annual conference (August, 1924) read,

> "That we strongly oppose Christian education which destroys the national spirit of our people and carries on a cultural program in order to undermine Chinese civilization."

and again,

> "As the capitalist system must first be abolished before a new and just social order can be established, Christianity, being closely allied with it, must also be summarily dealt with."[20]

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[18] Lee Ming Ng, "Christianity and Nationalism in China," East Asia Journal of Theology, Vol. 1 No. 1 (Spring, 1983): p.76. We will see that Nee possessed some of these same characteristics, and brought them into Christian theology.

[19] "While suspicious of religion generally, the emperors were particularly wary of Christianity, which they viewed as potentially subversive because of its ties to the foreigners." P. Richard Bohr, "State Religion in China Today: Christianity's Future in a Marxist Setting," Missiology: An International Review, Vol. XI, No. 3 (July 1983) p.322

[20] As Wang Ching Wei, one of the leading opponents of Christianity put it, "...it (Christianity) is the wedge of foreign influence driven into our country by foreign money and organization, controlled by foreign personnel and backed by foreign governments." Lee Ming Ng, "Christianity and Nationalism in China," East Asia Journal of Theology, Vol. 1 No. 1 (Spring, 1983): p.80,81