
PART 1

Researches into the Present Circumstances of Protestant Christianity in China - a Sociological Analysis of Christianity in the Nanyang District of Henan Province.

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The Contemporary Religious Research Department of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences began this examination into the current situation of Protestant Christianity in Nanyang district of Henan province in 1989. Although the material in this article deals with the situation in 1989, taken as a whole, it constitutes an accurate source of reference for research and evaluation of the situation of Christianity in China.

I Principal analysis of random samples of responses to our questionnaire.

For our research, we prepared a 'Questionnaire for ordinary Christians' and a 'Questionnaire for clergy and leaders of religious organisations'. Questions and answers were divided in the following way:

(A) 'Questionnaire for ordinary Christians'

This research was conducted principally in rural areas, where we distributed 600 questionnaires, all of which were returned. Analysed on a gender basis, men accounted for 165 of the respondents (27.5%); women 412 (68.7%); people who did not signify their gender 23 (3.8%). In respect of age, those over the age of 50 accounted for 219 of the respondents (36.5%); those in the age range 30-50, 256 (42.7%); those under 30, 105 (17.5%); and those who did not reveal their age, 20 (3.3%). 72.8% of those who returned the questionnaire identified themselves as 'peasants'. 22.3% of respondents were illiterate, 36.5% had graduated from primary school, and the majority of believers were women. Most of the women believers were old.

(i) Attitudes towards 'Reform and Opening':

More than half of religious believers were satisfied with 'Reform and Opening', but it should be noted that there were also 41.4% of respondents who were not happy with the reforms, or who did not care, and that there were even some people who did not approve of them. These results may be connected with the fact that respondents lived in remote and isolated parts of the countryside where the standard of living was quite low. Also, the fact that many respondents were old women who had lived for many years in the countryside may have influenced the results.

Of respondents who replied that 'over the past ten years our standard of living has been greatly improved', 73.7% were very satisfied with the programme of 'Reform and Opening'; of those who replied that their standard of living was 'the same as before', 11.6% were very satisfied with the reforms. From this we can see that the standard of living can influence people's attitudes towards reform and opening.

(ii) Religious believers' standard of living:

The standard of living of those questioned during the research was universally low, of whom 53.7% had an annual income of less than 50 yuan. However, 41.9% of religious believers felt that their lifestyles had improved greatly since the beginning of the reforms, and 40.9% felt that there had been some improvement. This shows that the lives of the great majority of religious believers has improved in during the period of reform and opening.

(iii) Timing of religious belief:

Approximately one half of respondents began to have religious belief during the period 1980-89, of whom 54% had been baptised during this period. This shows that following on the reinstatement of the policy of freedom of religious belief during the ten years following the third plenary session of the Chinese Communist Party, the numbers of Christians in the Nanyang district have increased rapidly. At the same time, this shows that the suppression and persecution of all religion during the Cultural Revolution brought about a situation where all the pent-up religious feeling from this time has been released in a great rush.

(iv) Causes and aims of religious belief:

One third of respondents participated in worship to relieve spiritual troubles; one fifth attended because of difficulties in their lives; in addition, another fifth became believers through the persuasion of other Christians. From analysis of the replies we received, we discovered that the large majority of people became Christians in order to solve problems or difficulties in their lives.

54.3% of Christians believe in order to achieve salvation - that is, to go to heaven after they die; and another fifth of respondents became Christians in order to spread the Gospel and put right the wrong in society.

(v) Lifestyles and use of money by Christians:

51.9% of Christians wanted to 'live in peace and stability' - possibly as a result of the harm which they suffered during the 'ten years of chaos' and the traditional peasant desire for stability and dislike of change. 13.1% wanted to achieve a comfortable standard of living, while only 10.8% wanted to leave home to make their fortune. Close to one fifth wanted to escape poverty.

Almost half of Christians invested any spare savings in business ventures, one fifth put their savings in banks, and another fifth gave their spare money to the church or for use in the public good.

(vi) The extent to which Christians believe in the Bible:

Almost two-thirds of respondents believed that every sentence in the Bible could be taken to be true. 21.8% believed that the majority of the Bible could be believed to be true. Only 3% believed that there were only certain parts of the Bible that should be respected.

The educational and cultural level of many believers is very low, and there were very few who had read the entire Bible from beginning to end.

(vii) Opinions of Christians concerning the Government religious policy

From the questionnaire, one half of Christians believe that at present there is complete freedom of religion. Another third believe that current religious policy is much better than in the past, and only 10% (approximately) believe that there is not yet enough freedom of religion. This shows clearly that most Christians are satisfied with the policy of religious freedom of belief over the past ten years.

(viii) Opinions of Christians regarding the present churches and evangelists:

The great majority of Christians are satisfied with the current situation regarding the preaching of the gospel and believe that most of what the clergy preaches in church gives useful guidance or is of help to their own spiritual lives. Half of all Christians want to go to church to worship. One third of Christians believe that it is equally good to worship either in a church or in a home meeting. Only a small minority desire to worship only in a home meeting. Two thirds of respondents felt that the churches in their local area were either too small, too far away, or that there was no church, and hoped to improve the size and number of the church buildings.

(ix) Christians' views on morality:

The majority of Christians ascribed to 'sincerity, tolerance, and loving other people as they loved themselves' as moral values. At the same time, they felt that Christian morality and socialist morality were either contiguous or mutually complementary. They felt especially that Christian morality and the current 'five precepts and four beautifuls' and other socialist moral values were either parallel to each other or the same thing.

(x) Christians' outlook on life and the issues that most concern them:

56.7% of Christians believed that they should give over their entire lives to God. 28.9% believed that there were issues and concerns worth fighting hard for, and only 1.8% believed that the main purpose of life is to earn money. The great majority believed that there should be good and sincere relations between people and that they should help others.

The most pressing concern for almost half of respondents was freedom of religious belief; 23.8% were concerned with injustices in society; 22% were most concerned with material wealth and income.

(xi) Opinions concerning the reform of the Churches:

The great majority of respondents believed that the different Protestant denominations should join together or unite, which shows that most Christians at the grass-roots level are not too concerned with the complex issues of the different denominations, and that which denomination they worship with is influenced by geographical location or by the surrounding social environment. One half of respondents thought that the Three-Self Movement should either continue to exist or should be strengthened, and approximately one third felt that it should either be reformed or closed down.

(2) 'Questionnaire for clergy and leaders of religious organisations':

(i) The basic situation:

Of the 64 clergy and leaders of religious organisations who filled in questionnaires, 43 were men (66.7%), and 21 were women (33.3%). These included two bishops, eight pastors, and eight elders. 40% had graduated from theological seminary or a church school. 6.2% could speak a foreign language, and 14.1% had medical training. 60.9% entered the church because they were following tradition, 22.3% entered for subjective reasons, and 14.1% became Christians for social reasons.

(ii) Experiences during the Cultural Revolution and the current situation:

During the Cultural Revolution, one fifth of respondents had caused harm to other people, 17.2% had suffered some harm, followed by good times, while the rest had suffered continuously throughout the period.

Now, about one fifth of these people had a comfortable lifestyle, while 3.1% had a poor quality of life;

the others felt that their lifestyles were average. More than one half relied on their own efforts to earn a living, and about one fifth relied on support from the state, while 17.5% relied on support from their families and on offerings to the church.

(iii) Attitudes towards society and 'Reform and Opening':

Three-quarters of respondents were fairly happy with the current direction of the country under the policies of 'Reform and Opening'. There were, however, one quarter who were either uncertain about the reforms, or unhappy with them.

Almost half thought that there were many problems in society, that the social atmosphere was very bad, and only 10% thought that the current social situation was good. This reveals that, although most clergy and leaders of religious organisations feel fairly happy about the reforms, they remain very concerned about the bad social conditions that exist at the present time. Of course, this does not prevent the great majority (85.9%) from feeling that the period since 1982 has seen the situation of the believing masses improve greatly.

(iv) Opinions on the implementation of Religious Policy:

Apart from the quarter of clergy and leaders of religious organisations who think that implementation of religious policy is fairly good, the other three quarters think that in its implementation there remain problems to a lesser or greater extent. Almost half the respondents believe that one of the principal reasons why some aspects of religious policy experience problems in implementation is because the national legal framework is not yet good enough; 15.6% believe that problems arise because the relevant officials and departments do not pay enough attention to this; 14.1% blame people's unbalanced understanding of religious policy; 17.2% blame remnants of 'leftist' thinking etc. etc.. It can be seen that for these people the rule of law is of great importance, and many religious leaders look forward expectantly to the day when they will be able to rely on the law, and only then will religious policy be well implemented.

(v) Attitudes towards church work and the exercise of their duties:

Approximately 80% thought that, in order to carry out the work of religious education well, it would first of all be necessary to resolve problems concerning the training of the next generation of clergy and the return of church property to the churches. Two-thirds of respondents felt that the main problem facing clergy in the exercise of their duties was that they had little or no authority.

II. Close analysis and reflections on the current situation of Christianity in the Nanyang district of Henan.

Below we reflect on certain aspects of the results of our research, and at the same time take forward our reflections and analysis of the specific characteristics and causes for the growth of Christianity in the Nanyang area.

(1) Concerning the analysis and consideration of the intrinsic nature of Christian belief - looking from the angle of the Christian religious attitude and the standpoint of religious practice.

(i) Religious faith and outlook: principally, this directs the believer's attitude towards life as influenced by the scripture and doctrine of his or her religion. Religious problems are primarily problems of faith.

Looking at this in relation to age, people's concern with death increases and grows more important to them as they grow older. Christianity in certain respects answers the question of what happens to

people after death - either they go to heaven or they go to hell. In this way, the significance of the Christian message concerning death gradually becomes more important as believers grow older. Our research proves this. Of reasons for being baptised and entering the Church, for old, middle-aged, and young people, though becoming more prevalent as age increases, the most frequent reason given for becoming a Christian and being baptised is 'to find salvation, and to go to heaven after death'. Because this increases as people grow older, it shows that as people age and they become more concerned with death, the importance of religion to them also increases, as does their piety.

Examining our results on the basis of age, we discovered that old people place most importance on the spiritual significance of religion, while middle-aged and young people emphasise the significance of interaction between religion and society and the effect that each has on the other. According to their way of looking, religious belief is not simply a matter of faith, but is at the same time essential to the reality of life in society. More old people take part in religious worship in order to resolve spiritual troubles than do middle-aged Christians, and a few more middle-aged Christians than others take part in religious activities in order to resolve practical problems in their everyday lives. At the same time, older people, after they have become Christians, have as their main concern the seeking of spiritual and mental solace. The younger people are, the more likely they are to be 'fully content with their lives'. In addition, the younger people are, the more they leave the spiritual side of religion and the more they concentrate on social issues. They are also likely to look to Christianity as a means of economic salvation for the world, and for answers to social issues. For example, the responses to our questionnaire show that the younger people are, the more likely they are to work harder in their jobs after becoming Christians.

Analysed on a gender basis, women made up by far the majority of respondents in our researches. For women, the main reason for becoming Christians is to find solutions to difficulties in their everyday lives - 25.5% as compared to 11.5% of men - and there is the possibility that the instances of women becoming Christians is related to the burdens which women bear in society. In addition, women are more concerned with issues of religious freedom than men are, which might be explained by the fact that women are more deeply pious than men. The reason why women are more devout than men can perhaps be explained in part by the female reliance on spiritual things and their emotional needs.

It appears from our research that differing economic circumstances can affect people's religious outlook greatly. For instance, from our questionnaire, we discovered that: the higher people's economic status was, the more concerned they became with religious freedom; that in households where the average annual income per capita exceeded 500 yuan, the most important concern for 60% of the people was freedom of religious belief, while this fell to 47.6% in households with a per capita annual income of 300-400 yuan, and to 40.2% in households with a per capita income of 50-100 yuan annually. We can analyse these findings in two ways. On the one hand, an abundance of material wealth can cause people to be more concerned with spiritual matters. Since religious concerns should be the most important spiritual food for believers, the question of whether or not they have freedom of belief becomes a primary concern and the better-off Christians become, the more time they have to devote to these concerns. On the other hand, the comfortable lifestyles of most people were not achieved easily, and were reliant on hard work and perseverance. This is particularly true of religious believers; so, if they want to maintain their lifestyles, they must still take risks and put in a lot of hard work. In the same way, religion is not something that causes these richer people to despair, but something which gives them strength, as it can help them to come to terms with events in the future that they cannot determine, foretell or control. We can say that the poor pray to God for blessings and comfort, but the rich pray that God will bless and preserve the stability of their comfortable lives.

(ii) The practice of religion

The practice of religion is the physical expression of faith, and the most important Christian religious practices are Sunday worship and adherence to the 'Ten Commandments'. Responses to our

questionnaire reveal that: the majority of Christians take part in worship, and that more women (39.3%) than men (35.8%) do so; that religious practices are one of the most important tests of religious devotion, and the fact that, according to our findings, a greater percentage of women than of men take part in worship, demonstrates that women are more devout and committed than men.

Regular reading of the Bible is another example of religious practice. Our research shows that more men (25.5%) in our survey had read the entire Bible than women (14.8%). Of course, to read the Bible needs not only piety, but also a higher level of education. In our survey, more women and old people had a low level of education, so reading the Bible would be very difficult for them. The preaching of the pastor could also be a help in understanding the Bible. As we have already noted, more women than men go to church regularly. In addition, our studies reveal that a lower percentage of people over the age of 50 (17.1%) than people between the ages of 30-50 (18.5%) and people under 30 (19%) read the Bible every day, and this is also likely to be linked to questions of older people having a lower educational level than middle-aged or young people.

(2) Examination of the rapid growth of Christianity in Henan - reflections on particular characteristics of the development of Christianity over recent years in the province.

In recent years, the growth of Christianity in Henan has been prominent, and Christians in the province already account for 1/5 of the national total. Moreover, growth of Christianity has outstripped growth of any other religion in the province.

Firstly, we will analyse certain specific circumstances of the growth of Christianity in the Nanyang area of Henan, as reflected in the replies to our questionnaire. Our results show that more than half of respondents became Christians after the 11th Meeting of the 3rd Plenary session of the CCP, and that the majority had taken up their religious work after 1982. The great majority of active Christians think that the period since 1982 has been a relatively easy time for religious believers, and the great majority also think that basic freedom of religion already exists or that there has been much improvement on the past situation, which shows that Christianity has returned to a correct path and has grown in leaps and bounds following the 11th Meeting of the 3rd Plenary session of the CCP.

In this kind of quantitative analysis, general analysis is also needed. From 1949 to 1988, numbers of Christians in Henan increased from 120,000 to approximately 830,000, and places of Protestant Christian activity increased from 2,140 to 3,087. In the same period, numbers of Catholics decreased from 170,000 to 70,000, and places of Catholic worship decreased from 533 to 62. We can see from this that the growth of Protestant Christianity in Henan has been unusually rapid.

Protestant Christianity has not grown explosively in Henan alone, for figures show that the situation all over the country is the same. Between 1949 and 1988, the number of believers of all the major religions has remained practically the same at around 100 million, yet the number of Protestants has increased nationally from 700,000 in 1949 to approximately 4.5 million in 1988. Thus, of all religions, the growth of Protestant Christianity has been the most rapid, and the number of Christians has increased six-fold, while in the same period numbers of Catholics have increased by about 20%, from 2.7 million in 1949 to 3.3 million in 1988.

We look at the various different ways of analysing our statistics as to the circumstances of the very fast growth of Protestant Christianity in Henan and China nationally, and this phenomenon of rapid growth has become a focus of attention. What are the reasons for this incredible growth and development? Many writers have already established that the growth of Christianity is due to external political, economic, historical, and cultural factors, which are a result of the ways in which social and religious development are connected. In this article we are looking at the issue from a number of new angles, such as the 'rebound' effect, social psychology, and the intrinsic values and qualities of Christian faith. From these various new standpoints we can improve and deepen our understanding and knowledge of

the reasons for the growth of Christianity.

Looking for political and social reasons for the growth of Christianity, apart from the fact that religious work at the grass-roots level has not yet been fully and correctly implemented, there still exist problems of the effect of 'rebound' in political and social development. For instance, in the past, incorrect 'leftist' thinking forbade the religious masses from living a normal and legitimate religious life, so that on the surface it appeared that the number of religious believers had greatly decreased. Before the 'Cultural Revolution', there were only 100,000 Christians in Henan, and many more believers who practised their faith in secret, so that religious activities were driven 'underground'. After the overthrow of the 'Gang of Four', and especially after the 11th Meeting of the 3rd Plenary session of the CCP, we have gradually reimplemented the policy of religious freedom of belief, so that the previously 'underground' religion has come into the open. This created a false impression that there were suddenly many new converts to Christianity among people who had not been Christians before. In reality, many of the people who were baptised and entered the Church had in fact been Christians before, but had kept this hidden during the Cultural Revolution. These people's faith had certainly not been destroyed, and after suffering repression sprang back more forceful than before, which accounts for something of the phenomenon of the religious fever. This, then, is what we call the 'rebound' effect in this article.

Religion is human religion, thus reasons for belief must include the following two aspects: the first aspect is the psychological element, and the second the particular elements inherent in religion. The first led people to religious faith and emotional reactions, and the second caused people to believe in one religion and not in another. For this reason, over the past year as we carried out research into the reasons for the rapid growth of Christianity in Henan, we had to take into consideration these two aspects.

People's psychological development is conditioned by life experiences, and particularly by the developing social environment, and because of this we must try to understand these issues from the basis of social psychology. From this angle, people always need to seek psychological stability and balance. Spiritual support is one of the most important prerequisites for psychological health and stability. Religion, by providing certain types of spiritual support, allows people to escape temporarily the concerns and worries of their mundane existence; they become disillusioned with the mortal world and seek illusory comfort to assuage their anxieties. These illusions are created to fill the vacuum left by the emptiness of faith and psychological imbalance. Faith basically signifies the search for spiritual support, and when people's faith emerges in a 'vacuum', this shows that they are completely stupefied mentally and driven to distraction, and psychologically they show imbalances and personality changes. There are two reasons for 'psychological imbalance' and 'spiritual vacuums': the first is physical illness, and the second is the surrounding social environment of great changes and pressures. What we have looked at here is the latter - at the connections between the greater and greater changes in society and psychological change in Christians and questions of spiritual faith. If we wish to examine in greater depth the correlative relationship between the influence of sociological factors on Christians and the circumstances surrounding the development of psychological changes in Christians, we must first of all recognise that this is a two-way process - in that there is interaction between society and psychology - and secondly, we must proceed to make clearer the significance of this type of interaction, so that it will become clear in what kind of social psychology and social action over how long a period of time.

Since the 11th Meeting of the 3rd Plenary session of the CCP central committee, society in China has undergone great changes, especially in the wake of the deepening of the implementation of the policies of reform and opening. During the reform of the economy, we are developing many economic standards in a socialist market economy. With the introduction of systems of competition, the economic risks have increased greatly. The great tide of reform and opening has brought with it great social change, and in the midst of this, some people, because they are not accustomed to the risks that these changes bring nor to the changes to all aspects of their lives, develop psychological unease and imbalances. In the search for spiritual and psychological reassurance and stability, one of the most

frequent means of achieving this is to be baptised and become a Christian.

The rapid growth of Protestant Christianity is also connected with the intrinsic nature of the religion. The form and structure of Protestantism is fairly simple, with the emphasis on spiritual devotion rather than on ritual, so that even if there is no pastor or church building, it is still possible to engage in the religious life. In addition, the educational and cultural level of many peasants in huge areas of the Chinese countryside is very low and the standard of living is very poor, so that it is very easy for evangelists to engage in evangelistic activities. It is possible to say that the basic characteristic of Christianity, the great efforts of these evangelists, is one of the most significant reasons for the rapid development of Christianity in Henan. Also, the people responsible for religious work at the grassroots level have been very strict about not allowing the reopening or building of village temples. Whereas in the past the people would have gone to pray to the Bodhisatvas or Buddha if they were suffering illness, they can no longer do this and on hearing the preaching of evangelists they switch allegiance to Jesus and become Christians.

To sum up, Protestant Christianity in the Nanyang area has in recent years followed a regular and normal path, which is closely connected to a number of factors: to economic, political, ideological and cultural reforms brought about by 'Reform and Opening' and the ensuing social environment; to the historical development of religion in China (and especially to the remarkable growth of Protestantism in Nanyang); and to the inherent special characteristics of Protestant Christianity.