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The uphill journey of Catholicism in China

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 2, 2007 All Things Catholic

If there were any lingering question about whether there's a spiritual boom in China today, it now has a two word answer: Yu Dan.

A 42-year-old female talk show host and pop culture icon, Yu Dan is the author of *Notes on Reading the Analects* -- a sort of Confucian *Chicken Soup for the Soul* -- which has sold somewhere between 3 and 4 million copies, making it one of the biggest best-sellers in China since Mao's "Little Red Book." Dan's success illustrates that China has become, according to writer Zha Jianying, the "largest soul market" in the world. With a population of 1.3 billion, China is trying to fill an ideological void left by the collapse of Communism as anything more than a system of political control, and the dislocations of astonishing but uneven levels of economic growth.

"There are so many wounded, helpless souls that are desperate to find something to believe in and to hold onto after these drastic changes," Jianying told Reuters in May.

Dan's post-modern Confucianism is not the only spiritual option riding this wave. In northwestern China, an estimated 20 to 30 million Muslims are also in the grip of a revival. According to a 2006 report in *Asia Times*, new Muslim schools are opening with a strong accent on Islamic orthodoxy, young Chinese Muslims are studying across the Middle East and bringing new missionary energies home, and rising numbers of Chinese Muslims are making the annual *hajj* to Mecca. China's post- Deng Xiaoping economic opening has expanded opportunities for Muslim nations, especially Saudi Arabia, to fund Islamic enterprises in China.

Perhaps the most remarkable burst of religious energy is in China's Pentecostal Christian population. At the time of the Communist takeover in 1949, there were roughly 900,000 Protestants. Today, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, which puts out the much-consulted World Christian Database, says there are 111 million Christians in China, roughly 90 percent Protestant and mostly Pentecostal. That would make China the third-largest Christian country on earth, following only the United States and Brazil.

The Center projects that by 2050, there will be 218 million Christians in China, 16 percent of the population, enough to make China the world's second-largest Christian nation. According to the Center, there are 10,000 conversions in China every day.

Religious data is notoriously imprecise in an officially atheistic state, and not everyone accepts these eye-

popping estimates. In the 2006 update of his book *Jesus in Beijing*, former *Time* Beijing bureau chief David Aikman put the number of Protestants at 70 million. Richard Madsen, a former Maryknoll missionary and author of *China's Catholics*, told me he would put the number still lower, at 40 million. That's in line with the CIA World Factbook, another widely consulted resource.

Even those conservative estimates, however, would mean that Protestantism in China experienced roughly 4,300 percent growth over the last half-century, most of it since the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s and 1970s. A four-part video series issued in 2003, called "The Cross: Jesus in China," and produced by Chinese documentarian Yuan Zhiming, interviews many of the leaders of this revival, whose evangelical drive is palpable. Notably, Protestantism took off after the expulsion of foreign missionaries, meaning most of the expansion has been home-grown.

Curiously, this booming "soul market" seems largely to have bypassed the Catholic church. In 1949, there were 3.3 million Catholics. The most common estimate today is 12 million. Over that time, China's population increased by a factor of four, which means that Catholicism has done little more than keep pace. A half-century ago, Chinese Protestantism was three and a half times smaller than Catholicism; today, it is at least three and a half times larger.

In a 2003 interview, then-Bishop Joseph Zen of Hong Kong (now a cardinal) said that Protestants are "winning" the contest for the souls of the Chinese.

Of course, given the harsh persecution of Chinese Catholics, the fact that the faith survived at all is in some ways a miracle. Those persecutions continue into the present; just last week, three Catholic priests were arrested in Inner Mongolia for refusing to submit to China's state-sponsored Catholic association. The heroism of Chinese clergy and laity is without a doubt one of the most inspirational chapters in church history.

Yet persecution has not fallen on Catholics alone. Protestants, Buddhists, Daoists, Muslims, the Falungong, and others have similar stories of martyrdom to tell. One Protestant pastor told Aikman, "Chinese prison is my seminary. Police handcuffs and the electric nightstick are our equipment. That is God's special training for the Gospel." Despite similar experiences, Catholicism seemingly has not experienced the same recent surge.

Why not? Veteran China-watchers generally offer four explanations.

(1) Lack of Ecclesial Infrastructure

According to a 2005 analysis by Maryknoll Sr. Betty Ann Maheu, there are 6,000 Catholic churches in China but 3,000 priests, which would mean that roughly half the Catholic churches in the country lack a resident priest. Overall, the priest-to-Catholic ratio in China is about 4,000-to-one, better than Latin America (where it's 7,000-to-one) or the Caribbean (more than 8,300-to-one,) but considerably worse than in Europe (1,100-to-one) or the United States (1,300-to-one). A significant number of Chinese priests are also in jail or placed under other forms of supervision.

Maheu says that in the short term, the priest shortage in China is likely to deepen. There was a vocations boom in the early 1980s, she said, but today numbers are dropping, as expanding economic opportunities makes recruitment and retention more difficult. Madsen says that even in Shanghai, normally held up as the most dynamic urban Catholic community in the country, most seminarians come from rural Catholic villages whose populations are in decline.

China has 110 dioceses and 114 active bishops, which in theory means that most dioceses should have a bishop. At least a dozen bishops, however, are in jail, under house arrest or subjected to severe surveillance. Because of doubts over the legitimacy of bishops who have registered with the government, their leadership is often contested. Given chronic tensions between China and the Vatican, dioceses sometimes remain vacant for extended periods. Some of the youngest bishops in the world today are in China, many appointed in their early 30s, in part out of fear that the opportunity to name another one might not roll around again soon.

Maheu notes that there are more than 5,000 religious women in China, saying the growth of religious life has "great potential" for the church.

(2) The Sociology of Chinese Catholicism

Historically, Catholicism in China was almost entirely a rural phenomenon. Madsen says that despite run-away urbanization, 70-75 percent of Catholics are probably still concentrated in largely homogenous Catholic villages, especially in Hebei and Shanxi provinces in the northeastern area around Beijing. Even the urban footprint of Catholicism, he said, is largely composed of villagers who have relocated to the city, and experience suggests it's sometimes difficult for them to maintain the faith in this new environment.

The tenacity of these Catholic villagers is the stuff of legend. *China's Catholics* tells the story of a village in Shanxi Province where a family planning team arrived in 1985 to try to distribute contraception in accord with the state's "one-child" policy. Villagers surrounded their car, and when the team retreated to their living quarters, the villagers hurled rocks through the windows. Eventually the team had to be rescued by the police, and fled the area.

Yet the rural character of the church also means that it is handicapped in terms of missionary expansion, since preserving Catholic communities is often a higher priority than making new converts. Catholics are under-represented in urban areas, which are creating the most vibrant "growth markets" for new spiritual movements.

The insularity of some rural communities, Madsen says, also means that many reforms triggered by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) never really arrived. Even in cosmopolitan Shanghai, the first Chinese-language Mass wasn't celebrated until 1989. (Ironically, this is one point upon which Chinese Communists and Catholic traditionalists agree. Both prefer Mass in Latin, in the case of the Communists because it means that most people won't understand it.)

(3) Internal Division

Chinese Catholicism is deeply lacerated over the question of cooperation with the Communist regime. For the most part, China-watchers say, Catholics who tolerate state oversight do so not out of enthusiasm for the official project of a "self-governed, self-funded, self-propagated" church, but rather because it seems the best survival strategy. Nonetheless, Catholics who reject this option out of unwavering loyalty to the pope, and who often endure prison, harassment, and discrimination, frequently regard "open" Catholics as compromised.

In their most extreme form, the divisions can turn violent. In 1992, an "open church" priest in Henan was murdered by a disgruntled seminarian who claimed that he had been denied ordination because of his ties to the unofficial church. The priest collapsed and died after drinking from what was literally a poisoned chalice at Mass.

Recent years have seen significant efforts to heal this breach. Conventional estimates are that as many as 90 percent of bishops ordained without the authority of the pope now have received Vatican recognition. Catholics from both the open and the unregistered church often worship together and receive the sacraments from the same clergy; it has become a mantra that "there is only one Catholic church in China."

Yet the bitterness is hardly a museum piece. Pope Benedict XVI released a "Letter to Chinese Catholics" in May, which called for unity and pledged that Catholicism is not an enemy of the state, but also insisted that the church cannot accept interference in its internal life. Notably, Benedict revoked faculties given in 1978 for "underground" bishops to appoint successors and to ordain priests without contact with Rome.

Fierce debates broke out over how to interpret the letter. One testy exchange has been between Belgian missionary Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx, a frequent Vatican advisor on China, and Cardinal Joseph Zen of Hong Kong, an outspoken critic of the Communist regime.

In early July, Heyndrickx published a commentary on the pope's letter with the Union of Catholic Asian News, stressing that it called for dialogue and unity. Among other things, Heyndrickx suggested it would be desirable for unregistered bishops to come out into the open.

Zen published a tough response on July 18, which began by saying that Heyndrickx has lost the "vast consensus and positive regard" he once enjoyed among Chinese Catholics.

"Fr. Heyndrickx's every initiative needs the approval of Mr. Liu Bainian, of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, and has to be carried out according to conditions imposed by him. Mr. Liu's prestige has thus been steadily built up," Zen wrote, referring to the official state regulatory body for Catholic affairs.

Zen went on to argue that there is still a need for the clandestine church in China, and that in many, if not most, cases, bishops should not apply for registration. Those who act without the authority of the pope, he said, should be subject to canonical sanctions.

Heyndrickx shot back on July 20: "I have learned that it does not take much courage to use the media to prove

one's own views and criticize others, while it takes a lot of guts to sit down with those who disagree with you and have long personal dialogues to overcome differences and seek the common ground."

Whatever one makes of this exchange, it illustrates the tensions that course through Chinese Catholicism, making it difficult to exploit new missionary opportunities.

(4) Missionary Strategy

Much Catholic conversation about evangelization in China is usually phrased in the subjunctive: "If China were to open up on religious freedom ?" or "If the Holy See and China were to establish diplomatic relations ?" The implicit assumption is sometimes that structural change is required before Catholicism can truly move into an expansion phase.

Pentecostal talk about mission, on the other hand, is very much phrased in the simple present. Most Pentecostals would obviously welcome being arrested less frequently, but in general they are not waiting for legal or political reform before carrying out aggressive evangelization programs. The most audacious even dream of carrying the gospel beyond the borders of China, along the old Silk Road into the Muslim world, in a campaign known as "Back to Jerusalem." As Aikman explains in *Jesus in Beijing*, some Chinese Evangelicals and Pentecostals believe that the basic movement of the gospel for the last 2,000 years has been westward: from Jerusalem to Antioch, from Antioch to Europe, from Europe to America, and from America to China. Now, they believe, it's their turn to complete the loop by carrying the gospel to Muslim lands, eventually arriving in Jerusalem. Once that happens, they believe, the gospel will have been preached to the entire world.

Most experts regard that prospect as deeply improbable; Madsen said he doubts more than a handful of Protestants in China take the "Back to Jerusalem" vision seriously. Aikman is more sanguine, reporting that as of 2005 two underground Protestant seminaries in China were training believers for work in Islamic nations. In any event, it's revealing as an indication of missionary ferment.

One exception to the general Catholic hesitancy is Bishop Jin Luxian of Shanghai, a controversial figure because of his willingness to register with the government, but someone who enjoys the respect of many senior Catholic leaders internationally. Luxian, the subject of a flattering profile in the current issue of *The Atlantic*, is revamping his cathedral to draw upon traditional Chinese aesthetics, part of a larger program of forging an authentically Chinese expression of the Catholic faith.

"The old church appealed to 3 million Catholics," he said. "I want to appeal to 100 million Catholics."

The Future

By universal consensus, China is an emerging global superpower. Its economy grew at an average annual rate of 9.4 percent over the last 25 years, and today has a GDP of $11 trillion, making it the second-largest economy in the world after the United States. Foreign companies have poured more than $600 billion into China since 1978, far eclipsing what the United States spent rebuilding post-war Europe in the Marshall Plan. China now has a

middle class of 200 million people, 80 million of whom are quite well-off. The country exports more in a single day than it did in all of 1978.

How things shake out religiously, therefore, is of tremendous strategic importance, even for people who don't feel any particular spiritual stake in the result. If Christianity ends up at around 20 percent of the population, for example, China could become an exponentially larger version of South Korea (where Christians are between 25-50 percent of the population, depending upon which count one accepts) -- a more democratic, rule-oriented, basically pro-Western society. On the other hand, if dynamic Muslim movements create an Islamic enclave in the western half of the country, with financial and ideological ties to fundamentalist Wahhabi forms of Islam in Saudi Arabia, at least that part of China could become a wealthier and more influential Afghanistan. If growing religious pluralism in China becomes fractious, it could mean that a well-armed and wealthy superpower is destabilized by internal conflict, posing risks to global peace and security.

Catholicism could potentially offer a positive ingredient in China's new spiritual stew. In part, the church could realize significant numbers of new members, even if mere statistical growth is not an end in itself -- as Benedict XVI said recently, "statistics are not our divinity." Perhaps more importantly, Madsen believes, a dynamic and growing Catholicism could be an important force in building a healthy civil society in China.

For that to happen, however, the four liabilities outlined above would somehow have to be addressed. At present, it's difficult to see that happening. As Maheu said in 2005, "Short of a series of miracles, the journey of Catholicism in China will continue, in my opinion, to be uphill in the foreseeable and even distant future."

One key to Pentecostalism's worldwide expansion, however, is that Pentecostals live in constant expectation of just such a series of miracles. Perhaps rather than waiting for the "one step forward, two steps back" ballet between Rome and Beijing to reach conclusion, Chinese Catholics will steal a page from the Pentecostal playbook, and embrace a vision of "the future is now." It would be fascinating to watch them try.

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