

Book Review

The Resurrection of the Chinese Church by Tony Lambert. London: Hodder and Stoughton and Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1991. 328 pp. £7.99.

Before I discuss the merits of this most praiseworthy book, it would be well to comment on one or two aspects of the Chinese Communist Party's attitude to religion which could be misunderstood. It is not that Tony Lambert fails to deal with church-state relationships; on the other hand, the very extent of his expertise might confuse some readers who are not too familiar with the subject. Following the party jargon, our author speaks of 'leftists' and 'liberals'. There is, possibly, an impression of two rival factions: one that loathes religious believers and another that tolerates or even favours them. Let there be no error. *No* wing of the party tolerates religious faith; all want to get rid of its baleful influence. The dispute is about tactics. The 'leftists' aim crudely to exterminate religion, and in this cause they are prepared to seize church buildings, to outlaw services and meetings, to burn Bibles; if necessary, to imprison, torture and execute believers. The almost inevitable result of their policy is an 'underground church'. The 'liberals' disagree. More flies, they point out, are caught by honey than by vinegar. The influence of an underground church is more of a danger than the influence of one that can be observed and controlled. Give a strictly limited measure of freedom to believers, and pose as their champion against oppression. The very party that claims to be guardian of law and order can punish uncooperative believers for 'breaking the law of the land'. If the situation is handled judiciously, certain church leaders may even be recruited as party agents, and may be persuaded to sing loudly in praise of the party's kindness and generosity. In any case, church members may be relied upon to quarrel among themselves – and thus be less effective. Such is the 'liberal' view.

This picture may be crude and oversimplified (indeed it is, for there are a few party officials – as our author points out – who are kindly disposed to religion). It does, on the other hand, contain a great deal of truth, and helps in explaining the twists and turns of party policy during the past 43 years.

'Freedom of religion' in China (and Lambert has many helpful things to say on this subject) is freedom to believe and practise what the party defines as religion. Chinese law declares that believers may follow 'normal religion', but not 'superstition'. This distinction in a Marxist state is odd indeed. Is not *all* religion supposed to be superstition? 'Normal religion' turns out to be a religion that recognises the authority of the government, and whose teachings can be recognised and supervised by the said government (this definition, note, is an accurate paraphrase of the government regulations). 'Superstition' covers a hotch-potch of different practices, not too clearly defined. The term is probably intended to refer to primitive doings in the villages, to be contrasted with 'respectable' higher religions. Sorcery, witchcraft, geomancy, fortune-telling, divination and the like are quoted as examples in party publications; however, the principle of 'superstition' is distinctly elastic, and can be extended to cover the driving out of devils, divine healing, prophecy and even teaching about the

Second Coming of Christ. The party's distinction is clearly intended, among other things, to put church leaders on the spot. There *is* a difference between religion and superstition, as believers know. Heresy must be combated strenuously. Yet the idea of partnership with a Marxist government in protecting the church against false doctrine is one fraught with danger. Church leaders are sorely tempted to trim their sails to the communist wind, and it would seem that not a few have fallen victim to that temptation. Lambert deals fully with this subject, but it may be helpful to clarify the fundamental issue. The choice between Christ and Caesar is a desperately difficult problem for Chinese church people.

All authors who write about Christianity in China face the problem of what to leave out. Tony Lambert assumes that his readers will have a fair idea of the progress of the church up to the time of the 'Liberation' and the departure of western missionaries. He also assumes a general understanding of the years after 1949, and of the 'Cultural Revolution'. His main aim, as the title implies, is to give reliable information about the astounding resurgence of belief during the past 15 years or so: the term 'resurrection of the church' is no mere figure of speech. A further aim is to deal with the mistaken view that life for believers has been pretty easy during these years: there has been much persecution. Horror stories of this persecution are, however, only hinted at in a work that is soberly written.

The rigid division between Chinese Roman Catholics and 'Protestants' is well known. (Quotation marks are used, as Protestant organisations cover Anglicans – *Sheng gong hui* – as well as native Chinese denominations such as the True Jesus Church and the Little Flock.) Too often western evangelical writers speak of Roman Catholics as if they hailed from some kind of ecclesiastical Mars. To those looking for an adequate account of Roman Catholicism in the 1980s and 1990s, Lambert's single chapter will seem meagre and unsatisfactory, but he copes manfully with his self-imposed task of dealing with this subject in a short space. He makes it clear that both Roman Catholics and Protestants are witnessing to the same Lord, and that the Roman Catholic Church in China has indeed 'risen from the dead'.

Lambert makes no secret of the fact that his main concern is with Protestant believers. There is a good deal of information about the 'official' Protestant Church, that run by the Three-Self Movement, and a great deal about the problems and achievements of the house churches. Letters, eye-witness accounts of services and prayer meetings, interviews with ministers and lay people — from these we gain an excellent impression of the vigour of Protestant Christianity, especially in the house churches. Lambert gets to grips with the vexed question of how many Christians there are in China. Inevitably, he is guarded in his conclusions, though he quotes a number of figures from different towns and provinces. His conclusions point to a total of at least 20 million Protestants, and some ten million Roman Catholics — indeed a formidable body of believers!

Tony Lambert's analysis of the present situation and outlook is well-informed and shrewd. He sums up both the stronger and weaker features of evangelical Christianity. Every chapter is supported by adequate footnotes. His bibliography is impressive; large numbers of Chinese books and articles, both official and unofficial, are cited, as well as recent books in English. There is also an index.

All those who are anxious to learn more about the progress of the church since the Cultural Revolution will do well to study this book with great care.

ARVAN GORDON