

Prospects for Religious Freedoms

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Tonight in Hong Kong is the eve of the lunar New Year, the Year of the Cock or the Rooster or the Chicken (depending on your sensibilities about use of names). In the early evening, the streets will have been (for once in the year) deserted as people return to homes and families for the big new year dinner not unlike your Thanksgiving, here in the U.S. But by now (Hong Kong time) festive crowds will have returned to the streets and the special new year flower-markets to enjoy the atmosphere, buy good-luck flowers and small gifts and usher in the new year, with hopes and wishes for prosperity and good fortune. And they'll be enjoying the bright and colourful lights and lighting that for these two weeks transform many public areas, especially the central waterfront on both sides of the harbour and the main commercial districts of the city. Themes of the new year and spring festival are the lighting motifs on the facades of many commercial buildings. A couple of weeks ago, there were also the same or similar displays of lighting, only the motifs on many buildings have been changed, from the Santa Clauses, reindeers, snoopies, simpsons, gift boxes, ribbons etc. that predominated then, with their greetings of Happy Holidays, season's greetings, happy new year, and the occasional (very occasional) Merry Christmas. [There was one greeting somewhere this past Christmas which said 'happy seasonings'..... perhaps that was meant for the turkeys.]

A few years ago, Hong Kong's Christmas lights often featured many stars or angels or wise men or even a nativity scene or two : not so much now, and even the word 'Christmas' is harder to find. On the other hand, also not so many years ago, in China the lunar new year and spring festival were ordinary working days, not to be celebrated; now, not only has new year returned to the Chinese mainland calendar, but even the recent Christmastime became a big hit in Beijing, though without mention of Bethlehem or Jesus Christ. Things are changing. And not only in China and Hong Kong; for me, one of the most telling recent TV images was of the Bethlehem manger-scene set up for the Orthodox Christmas celebrations earlier this month, in Moscow's Red Square (if that's what they still call it)....there are many places where something like that would still ~~not be allowed~~.
be impossible

These are, perhaps, small parables for the topic of religious freedoms and for what might be happening in Hong Kong, come 1997. As you know, in China today churches are open, and new ones are being built; the number of Christians has been rapidly multiplying, there are more young men and women applying to join seminaries and to become religious sisters than there's room to accommodate, there are bibles and other religious books being published ; altogether, more religious freedom and toleration by the government than there used to be. But as I'm sure you're also aware, this is in some ways merely a surface picture: there's still a so-called 'underground' church and underground Christians, and the national and local government and party authorities do keep control and a very wary eye on what Christians are doing. So, what are the prospects for when China resumes sovereignty over Hong Kong in July 1997 ?

In the process of the Sino-British negotiations over the future of Hong Kong, China took care as much as possible to re-assure Hong Kong people, to "put their hearts at ease" (in the phrase of the day). And came up with a formula of preserving Hong Kong's capitalistic institutions and way of life, for 50 years after 1997, enshrined in the phrases "one country, two systems", and "high degree of autonomy" --- bold concepts; but what do they mean in practical terms, and can they work ? The current impasse and frosty relations between Britain and China don't augur too well.

More specifically, some time after the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 the churches in Hong Kong, Protestant and Catholic alike, sought re-assurances from Beijing about their futures. And the word was that, yes, the churches' work and place in society were appreciated and they could continue as at present: there would be no interference or 'take-over' from the mainland, but by the same token Hong Kong churches would not be allowed to influence or interfere in the mainland Christian situation. Reaction to this standpoint has been quite mixed: from a reassured optimism to a sceptical pessimism. In both Catholic and Protestant circles opinions and attitudes are divided. An important factor in this division is peoples' abiding memory and perception of how the communist party has behaved towards Chinese Christians in the past.

So, among the tens of thousands of Hong Kong people now emigrating every year to 'safer' places like Canada, the U.S. and Australia, there has been a high proportion of Christians, numbers of whom are genuinely fearful about religious and other freedoms. Their proportion is higher than Hong Kong's average religious 'mix' because for historical and educational reasons there have been more Christians among the educated and skilled sectors of society, the kinds of people who are more easily able to obtain immigrant status in foreign countries. Some Protestant churches have already had a big exodus of their Chinese clergy in particular. Symptomatic may be that, for instance, the Canadian Vancouver Oratorio Society (a 100-strong Christian, mainly Protestant, choir) is made up almost entirely of former members of the similar Hong Kong Oratorio Society. Many Catholics, too, are seeking to emigrate; the diocese of Hong Kong has set up a special office to help them make the transition, and has been making arrangements for pastoral care of Cantonese-speaking Catholics in the more 'popular' immigrant destinations.

There is, certainly, a real fear among many about the future; a lack of confidence that China would actually allow the present freedoms to continue, despite what she has said. Others are more optimistic and want to make the very best of what China has said, giving her the benefit of any doubts there may be. Some, who have no prospects of emigrating anyway, ~~are~~ either put a brave face on the situation or are already quietly keeping a low profile. Like in the political arena, there are those who want to please, or at least not upset China, as far as possible; and those who feel the church must not be silenced by political considerations. These tensions sometimes have odd results: like the small congregation of sisters who've been enthusiastic about taking into their organisation a number of novice-nuns in China who've said they want to join them, while at the same time proposing to move out of Hong Kong themselves to work elsewhere because of fears for 1997 and after.

But on a more positive note, the diocese and the various religious groups have publicly affirmed their commitment to remaining at the service of the people of Hong Kong, come what may: the published policy of the diocese is to look forward and to concentrate on laity and clergy formation with a view to future needs. Development of small faith-communities, emphasis on the faith in the family setting, and attention to evangelisation and the religious growth of Catholics in their personal and societal lives are main points in the up-beat document issued by the Cardinal bishop at the beginning of the nineties, titled "Towards the Bright Decade". But it is not accidental that these pastoral directions would also better equip Catholics for having to live their faith much more in private, if need be, and without the services of clergy and religious if it comes to that, whether through diminishing numbers of professional church people or through political constraints.

At this point, perhaps some more concrete information might be useful. The diocese of Hong Kong has the greatest number of Chinese Catholics, about a quarter of a million (in a territory population of just 6 million); the total number of non-Catholic Christians is a little more than the Catholics, making all Christians about 10% of the whole population. The diocese is heavily involved in Hong Kong's education system, running a large number of what you'd call grade schools and middle schools. Unlike the American system, these are mostly in fact public schools, financed

by the government, and thus catering not merely for Catholics but for anybody who qualifies for a place in them (and the qualification rules and procedures are laid down and monitored by the government as well). The diocese's social welfare arm (Caritas Hong Kong) is also very extensive, again working closely with the government (and with government finances) in providing many kinds of social, medical, support and development services, from children's nurseries to homes for the aged, hospitals, rehabilitation, community service, family care, hospitality, youth programmes, work with refugees etc.etc. For quite a number of years now, Caritas has also been involved in running training programmes of various kinds in China itself, not only in nearby Kwangtung province, but much further afield as well. This service is quite open and above-board; it's known to be a Catholic church activity, and seems to be much appreciated and in demand, and there's never been any problem with it. Caritas is, of course, careful to stay within its brief, and does not have anything to do with religious services.

When the question of religious freedom is raised, it's now not so much a matter of being free to worship, pray, go to church; this is officially allowed in China now, and presumably will be in Hong Kong after 1997. But it's also about the limit of what China understands by 'religious freedom'.....and there are Christians content to go along with that, either as a matter of conviction or of political 'prudence'. The freedom to share one's faith, however, to bring the 'good news' of Jesus Christ to others, is a very different matter. Or to be engaged or committed, because of Christian faith, in trying to help with the problems of society, social or peace & justice or environment or any other such issues. These are also the Hong Kong church's work and activity; but will they be able to survive beyond 1997 ? Here's where the doubts and fears come in: education especially, but also social work in general, have always been regarded as very important preserves of their own by communist parties in power, and China's no exception. When China says the churches may continue to do their work, there is also the proviso that applies to other areas of activity too: namely, that it's in "accordance with law". How long before, for example, schools get quite 'lawfully' taken over ? and then what next ? These are common concerns for most of the Christian churches.

There is, however, one very important factor which is specific to the Catholic church. And here we come to the real nub of the problem of religious freedom and of the issue under discussion. In all that China has said and promised, in the Joint Declaration, the Basic Law and elsewhere, about Hong Kong's future autonomy and separate system of government, there is always a clear reservation: matters of defense and of foreign relations will remain in the hands of the central government in Beijing. And in Beijing's eyes, the Vatican is a foreign power. The Catholic Church, therefore, involves foreign policy. In China's eyes, it's a question of sovereignty; and that's a very delicate subject indeed. In China itself the Catholic Church has been 'nationalised', so to speak. But will the Church in Hong Kong be allowed to continue its link with Rome ? (a specific promise to this effect has been made). One of Hong Kong's leading political scientists believes that the real test of the viability of China's "one country, two systems" concept will be what happens to Hong Kong's Catholic Church after 1997: and he is not optimistic, and considers the optimism of some other commentators on this question to be too facile.

Hong Kong's Catholic Church has been wanting to play a role as a 'bridge' church to China: there are in fact many friendly contacts, and good relations with both 'official' and 'underground' Catholics in China, especially in the south. Church assistance in times of flooding and other natural disasters has been both welcomed and appreciated. And there is an optimist, pro-China faction within the Hong Kong church. Will any of this help preserve the wider religious freedoms, after 1997 ? Or will the church itself be the agent of controlling or limiting present freedoms and operations ?

Present mistrust and tensions between Britain and China over Hong Kong may, however, also contribute adversely to the church's situation. It would be

naive, I think, to imagine that China hasn't noted carefully a curious coincidence: the present governor of Hong Kong who has offended China with his (actually very modest) proposals for some more democratisation of local government, and who's been the subject of much abuse in the China-oriented or controlled media; his closest adviser and personal spokesman; the chairman of Hong Kong's most democratic political grouping (which won almost all the available seats up for general election in 1991) and who is anathema to Beijing (he's been dubbed a traitor to China because of his stance on the 1989 Tienanmen affair, and Chinese officials won't even talk to him); and one of most critical and outspoken of the independently-elected members of Hong Kong's legislature..... they all happen to be Catholics, which can't be too good for our 'image'. But who knows what other changes there may be between now and July 1997: some of them certainly will affect the future of Hong Kong, and no doubt its religious situation too.

HK needs stable CH (Lu Piny)
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"Stability" and "prosperity": these have been the words most often used by China to depict how she wants Hong Kong to progress and develop in the last years of British rule, and into the era of being reunited to the motherland. There have been undoubted changes and improvements in the way China looks at religions and at what we would call religious freedoms. Whether internal developments or pressure from outside have had the more influence in this, it's hard to say. But at present it looks as if liberalisation will continue, however cautiously in the non-economic sectors of life. By 1997 Hong Kong's religious freedoms may be less threatened. But will Hong Kong by then have lowered its demands, so to speak, to "accommodate" Chinese government susceptibilities? Moscow's manger-scene may not be about to appear on Tienanmen Square; hopefully it may still be seen, somewhere amid the glittering lights and busy prosperity of Hong Kong at Christmastime in 1997.