

China's insular church

by [Philip L. Wickery](#) in the [February 24, 1999](#) issue

*By Richard Madsen, China's Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society. (University of California Press, 183 pp.)*

Recent reports on Christianity in China have tended to focus on either government repression or religious revival. The most persistent debate has centered on the nature and extent of the persecution. Well-documented cases of the arrest and imprisonment of underground Catholics and of unregistered Protestants have been countered by claims that such situations are local aberrations and that, with China's increasing openness to the outside world, the overall religious situation is improving. But the recent arrest of 140 underground Christians from the house churches in Henan has stirred up the controversy anew.

The story of the revival of religion in China over the past 20 years has also been widely told. Despite questions about the actual number of Christians and about who speaks on their behalf, all reports seem to agree that Christianity has been growing rapidly, and that both Protestant and Catholic church leaders are overwhelmed by trying to keep up with this growth.

The revival of religion in China is part of a much broader search for meaning in a society undergoing rapid social change. As reform and openness move from the economic to the social (but not yet political) spheres, questions about what kind of society China will be in the 21st century are increasing.

For Christians, the question is what the church's role will be in this society. Religious freedom depends not only upon the vicissitudes of government policy, but also on the space available for all citizens in an emerging civil society. Christians must ask to what extent they are prepared to exercise freedom in the space now available, and what price they are willing to pay to win even more space. Religious freedom is not simply and perhaps not primarily granted to a people by a government. Rather, it is developed by individuals and communities who have negotiated for it. When this broader picture is placed alongside a range of relationships between church and state, relationships which vary from cooperation to confrontation and depend upon

the time and region, the religious situation becomes complicated indeed.

The current debate tends to divide Chinese religious communities into "official" and "unofficial" camps. One part of the Chinese Catholic Church has been termed the official or "patriotic" church. It is recognized by the government but has been separated from Rome since the 1950s. The other part, the unofficial or underground church, stubbornly resists the government but also lacks regular channels of communication with Rome.

Since the relationship between the two positions varies from place to place, the actual picture is more complicated than this description suggests. In some parts of the country, the official and underground churches are openly hostile toward one another; in other provinces, the two coexist. In at least one city, the official bishop shares his residence with his underground church counterpart, an arrangement in which the government acquiesces. Negotiations between Rome and Beijing over normalizing relations are mostly shrouded in secrecy, though it is known that the Vatican has recognized many official bishops. To complicate matters further, churches, religious orders and other Catholic groups overseas maintain their own relationships with China's estimated 10 million Catholics.

Richard Madsen sheds considerable light on this complex and changing situation. Madsen, one of the coauthors (with Robert Bellah) of *Habits of the Heart* (1985), is a widely respected China scholar. He begins his account by describing a mass he attended several years ago in the northern coastal city of Tianjin. He was deeply moved by the devotion of the faithful and by the joyfulness of their celebration. But further reflection caused him to feel uneasy about the experience—about the "harsh, perhaps even dangerous competitiveness" of men and women jostling toward the communion rail, and "the coercive framework of power" reflected in the church's Counter-Reformation theology and pre-Vatican II structure of authority.

The issue for Madsen is not sorting out the repression and the revival, but rather identifying the social consequences of the two phenomena on Catholic communities and Chinese society as a whole. Using his extensive fieldwork in and around Tianjin, which included interviews with a wide cross-section of believers, and his familiarity with the range of recent scholarship, he poses large questions: Why does religion continue to be attractive to the Chinese? Does religion foster the development of civil society, or does it contain the seeds of fragmentation and discord? Will religion contribute to the modernization process now under way in China?

Madsen's conclusion will surprise many readers. He believes that the Catholic Church, at least the church in the northern provinces, is by and large an "uncivil society," a community "which frequently lacks the moral qualities of civility." The greatest threat to this church comes not from political pressure but from social openness. Such openness, essential for a civil society, would bring to an end the self-enclosed world of Chinese Catholicism by loosening its grip on the faithful. Existing bonds of loyalty encourage both devotion to the church and rigid particularism, resulting in a Catholic subculture that is unique to rural China.

The Catholic Church has come to function almost like an ethnic minority. Madsen argues that Chinese Catholics are not "alive to the interests of others" because, even though they are gathered in tightly knit rural churches, their primary concern is with a narrowly defined personal salvation and with the afterlife. The hierarchical structure of the church further inhibits relationships of reciprocity and cooperation, which in turn prevent the development of solidarity, trust, tolerance and a respect for pluralism among church members. The Catholic Church in China makes a total claim on believers and demands from them a narrow and particularistic loyalty. Such a loyalty may have been necessary during the hard years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), but it is increasingly difficult to accept in the China of today.

Chinese Catholicism's strong rural base helps to account for its narrowness. Eighty percent of China's Christians, Catholic and Protestant, live in rural areas. In the 19th and 20th centuries Catholic missionaries, unlike their Protestant counterparts, sought to convert whole communities rather than save individual souls. This enabled rural Catholic churches, many of which date back to the 16th century, to become thoroughly Chinese, blending themselves into the premodern social world of Chinese village life. They are Christian counterparts to clan associations or secret societies. Madsen implies that rural Catholicism has in some sense become a Chinese folk religion. In the underground church it is a heterodox religion, frequently at odds with local authorities and disturbing to social order.

Madsen contends that Catholicism in China is more a matter of inherited membership than personal belief. As such, very few Catholics ever really leave the church, with the possible exception of those who join the Communist Party. Even then, the tug of family, village and church loyalty still exerts itself. Sociologically, then, Catholicism functions as much as an ethnic community as a religious one. Combined with the antimodernist authoritarianism of its hierarchy, this creates a "negative social capital that impedes both economic development and democratic

reforms" throughout rural China.

The church's antimodernism is also a result of the Counter-Reformation version of Catholicism brought by missionaries. The reforms of Vatican II were introduced only recently to China, and the mass was said or sung in Latin until the early '90s. The widespread belief in the salvific value of miracles and Marian apparitions represent a "revolt against modernity," as they once did in Europe. Antimodernism has affected middle-class, urban Catholics as well, who in the years before 1949 were introduced to a version of modernity which differed from that of their Protestant counterparts. The universities established by liberal American missionaries encouraged students to think independently and critically, whereas Catholic university students in Shanghai or Beijing were taught a religious orthodoxy designed to protect them from modern secularism.

This revolt against modernity is also reflected in the relationship between the Catholic Church and the political order before and after the Chinese Revolution. No major Catholic leaders supported the communists in the years leading up to '49, and this has continued to affect both the church's political standing and its approach to modernism. The Catholic Church was so dominated by foreign missionaries-it did not become a national church until '46, and even then most of its hierarchy was foreign-that Catholic intellectuals had little sense that they could support the new order. This was compounded by the Vatican's opposition in the '50s to any form of cooperation with the new Chinese government. Even today, the Vatican maintains diplomatic relations with Taipei, not Beijing.

The division between official and underground Catholics grows out of this experience, and, as Madsen observes, the conflict today is more political than theological. Underground bishops claim obedience to the pope, but because they have no regular authoritative instructions from the Vatican they are free to operate independently, and they do so in defiance of government authority. Official bishops and leaders of the Catholic Patriotic Association cooperate with the government, but many people regard them as compromised by this association. For its part, the Vatican, "somewhat like the Chinese Communist Party itself, is a faction-ridden administrative apparatus, as much feudal as bureaucratic," according to Madsen. Various groups within it have different agendas regarding China, as do churches and religious orders in other countries. All this suggests that the church's situation in China is fraught with political problems that cannot easily be resolved.

Consequently, the Chinese government has reason to fear the Catholic Church as a threat to law and order-though this threat in no way justifies the government's harsh attempts to stifle dissent and crush opposition. Madsen challenges as naïve the assumption of Western human rights groups that independently organized religious communities in and of themselves contribute to the formation of a civil society. Like all communist countries, China lacks genuine pluralism and institutional differentiation. Because of this, religious organizations which emerged in the '50s are themselves part of the problem and are in need of change.

Both official and underground churches are now caught in the unstable hybrid of China's "socialist market economy." For a civil society to emerge, what is needed is an independent middle class, and a church with a new vision that would enable Catholics to work with the rest of the Chinese people for the continuing reform of church and society.

Madsen suggests that he might have reached more optimistic conclusions had he studied the church in another part of China-in the more open and affluent south, for example. Perhaps, but his more general argument is convincing. Both official and underground Catholic communities seem so caught up in traditional structures that they are unable to contribute to the social transition now under way in China. Yet Madsen's alternative vision is unsatisfying because it does not grow out of the Catholic experience in China. How can it be made to come true?

I have spent nearly 20 years working with two Protestant groups: the China Christian Council and the Amity Foundation, a church-related development organization. Though we constantly dealt with the kinds of issues Madsen raises, the problems of Chinese Protestants are not the same as those of Catholics. A significant number of Protestant leaders welcomed the new order in the '50s, and they did not have Rome to contend with. Over the past 20 years Protestants have been able to move more quickly than Catholics in restoring churches, setting up theological colleges, and developing communication channels with the government and with churches overseas. During this time, Protestants have grown much more rapidly than Catholics, both in rural and urban areas.

Yet Protestants are also divided among themselves in many parts of the country, and not only over whether or not to register with the government. Some of these divisions are longstanding, while others are more recent. As the church grows, it divides, producing new sects and giving new life to denominational groups. Many

observers now worry that the ideal of a "postdenominational" Chinese Protestantism may yield to a "predenominational" situation, with churches increasingly divided by regional as well as theological differences. However, the China Christian Council has thus far been able to maintain a fragile unity among the various contending groups within Protestantism, based on the principle of mutual respect and comprehensiveness in ecclesiology.

How have Chinese Protestants approached the question of modernity in the emerging civil society? With so many other things to contend with, they have not gone very far in articulating an answer to this question. The leaders of the China Christian Council and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement have encouraged Christians to participate in society and to identify with the government's program of modernization. But they are concerned that most Chinese Protestants have an inadequate understanding of basic Christian beliefs, making them susceptible to a kind of narrow theological particularism similar to that of Chinese Catholics. The challenge, therefore, is to educate church members and expand their vision.

In a different way, urban intellectuals interested in Christianity and some younger theologians have begun wrestling with modernity and the challenges facing the church in contemporary society. They, too, are aware of the problems of rural Christianity, and especially of the growth of fundamentalism. But they are also dissatisfied with the approach of older leaders. Many believe that existing social structures, including church structures, are themselves obstacles to civil society. They want to see the church more actively engaged in determining the role of the church in the society of the future.

In the absence of more detailed research, it is difficult to know how rural Protestants respond to all of this. Most are recent converts, and the concerns of church leaders and Christian intellectuals over their narrow particularism are justified. Yet it is clear that their Christian faith strengthens rural believers as they struggle to make a living in a changing and confusing society, especially when they are under social or political pressure. The churches they have founded and, for the most part, built with their own hands are fragile communities of hope which at least prefigure something of the solidarity, trust and cooperation needed in a civil society.