

Christ and China II

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In the first part of this study of 'Christian theology in a Chinese context' Fr O'Collins considered the suffering of China in terms of the passion of Christ, arguing that we have been too inclined to concentrate in the past on the martyrdom of Christians, neglecting the much vaster sufferings of the Chinese people as a whole.

Closely aligned with the theme of the *passio Christi apud Sinenses* is that of the emulation of heroes. Mao led his nation in an extraordinary struggle to reshape the values, attitudes and ideas of an entire people. James Reston, senior editor of the *New York Times* was astounded by the 'staggering thing that modern China is trying to do. They're not trying merely to revolutionize people, and establish a sense of social conscience, but they're really trying to change the character of these people. The place is one vast school of moral philosophy.'¹ Many methods pour into this enormous programme of thought-reform: preaching, teaching, wide-ranging techniques of persuasion from the outside, and orgies of self-criticism in which people testify to their conversion away from selfishness and incorrect ideas towards an exalted service of the masses in the name of the party. In all this ideological struggle to practise good deeds, overcome selfishness and reach true equality in a new society, the emulation of heroes (and sometimes of heroines) has emerged as a major means used on a nation-wide scale.

I would like to explore this imitation of heroes. It would be silly to speak of it constituting an *imitatio Christi apud Sinenses* (imitation of Christ among the Chinese). Nevertheless, certain interesting Christological implications may emerge.

Both the theatre and literature hold up figures for popular imitation in China. Traditional theatrical forms have disappeared. The Chinese theatre pays honour to war heroes, members of the Long March, and other martyrs who gave their lives for Chairman Mao and the people. *The Red Lantern* celebrates a proletarian

¹*New York Times*, September 1, 1971

hero, Li Yu-ho. A Japanese squad shoots this railway pointsman. In *The Red Detachment of Women* Hong Chang-ching dies on a pyre, a burnt victim in the cause of revolution.

Booklets like *Fear neither Hardship nor Death in Serving the People*, *A Worthy Son of the People* and *A Brave Fighter for Communism* retail heroic stories of young soldiers and other folk heroes. The Tachai production brigade became an example to the whole nation, when they effectively overcame massive agricultural problems. The 1970 *Peking Review* eulogizes Comrade Hsun-hua for dying 'a martyr's death', This young intellectual had volunteered for manual labour in Manchuria. He lost his life trying to save some poles swept away by a flooded river.

Mao himself, of course, towered over all the figures proposed for admiration and imitation. Klaus Mehnert sums up the position this way:

Never has a man been so devotedly, uncritically and enthusiastically honored during his lifetime as Chairman Mao is today. ...The Mao cult is one of the greatest triumphs of publicity in a publicity-conscious age.²

Is there any Christological significance to uncover in all this Chinese praise of 'famous men, the heroes of their nation's history' (Wisdom 44: 1)? Take the encomium which Mao Tse-tung delivered to commemorate a common soldier, Chang Szu-teh, who had died when a kiln collapsed while he was making charcoal for the people:

All men must die, but death can vary in its significance. The ancient Chinese writer Szuma Chien said, 'Though death befalls all men alike, it may be weightier than Mount Tai or lighter than a feather.' To die for the people is weightier than Mount Tai, but to work for the fascists and die for the exploiters and oppressors is lighter than a feather. Comrade Chang Szu-teh died for the people, and his death is indeed weightier than Mount Tai.³

An article by Mary Sheridan ('The Emulation of the Heroes')⁴ can point us in the right direction. Imitating heroes, she reminds us is scarcely a Communist invention. 'It was a mainstay of Confucian education in the form of stories about great emperors, generals, poets, magistrates and filial children.' And—one might add—emulation of heroes has pervaded other cultures and periods, not least Christianity itself which has normally kept popularizing hagiographers fully employed. But what sets the Com-

²*China Today* (London, 1972), p. 209.

³Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, (Peking, 1967), III, pp. 177f.

⁴*China Quarterly* 33-36(1968), pp. 47-72.

munist system apart, Sheridan remarks is:

(1) the careful ideological control of the hero characterisations, action and language by which the ideological 'message' is conveyed; (2) the use of nation-wide campaigns so that all children (and adults) are emulating the same hero at the same time; (3) the degree of intensity and active participation encouraged. (p 47)

Apart from the great leaders of the Communist Party, most of the heroes and martyrs who have been proposed as models come from the lowest ranks: heroic soldiers who fell in the civil war or the Korean war, martyrs of the Japanese invasion, heroic workers from the days when the Communists were confined to Yenan. Among those held up as models for imitation some died sacrificing their lives in accidents. Ouyang Hai pushed a horse loaded with ammunition out of the path of an oncoming train. Wang Chieh threw himself on a defective mine to save the lives of the soldiers he was instructing. Liu Ying-chun died rescuing some children from runaway horses.

The last two heroes left behind diaries. In both cases one notices, peeping over their shoulders, the looming figures of Chairman Mao and the Party. The diaries quote Mao, refer to him often and mention the Party frequently. Wang Chieh records some of his good deeds. Liu Ying-Chun appears thoroughly intent on examining his mistakes, cultivating the revolutionary spirit and establishing correct patterns of thought. They become heroes by applying each day Mao's thought. After death their attitude towards life is mirrored in their diaries. There the motivation for their ultimate self-sacrifice appears. As Sheridan observes:

this point is important to the Maoists that they take every care in the diaries to avoid the accusation that a hero's death might be the result of a 'momentary righteous impulse'. It is the exemplary life and specifically the Maoist education, which alone makes possible the noble death. (p 57)

Do such modern Chinese heroes relate in any way to the crucified figure on Calvary? Many of them resemble Jesus in dying young—in fact often in their early twenties. The moral effect of their lives and deaths encourages others to endorse Mao's thought and the Communist revolution—even to the point of being ready to lose their lives in that cause. The majority of these models of virtue—like Jesus—are male rather than female.

Beyond question, some formal comparisons press themselves on our attention. But we cannot move more than a step or two from this common ground without stumbling over major differ-

ences. Firstly, none of these examples of Communist virtue is truly credited with universal and lasting significance. The story of one heroic life follows the story of another heroic life. Even if nation-wide campaigns do ensure that 'all children (and adults) are emulating the same hero at the same time', no single hero proves to be absolutely satisfying. Somehow his impact remains restricted. If Wang Chieh and others establish a pattern of new persons fashioned by Mao's vision, they are no more than the first representatives of a quick succession of heroes. In effect, no claim is made that any hero's death offers a *uniquely* precious appeal for conversion and self-dedication.

Second, the Communist heroes may die, but success attends their self-sacrifice. The train was saved. The defective mine causes only the death of Wang Chieh. The runaway horses and their wagon do not kill the group of children. The execution on Calvary, however, does not seem to save anyone. To all appearances, that death rescues no one from any danger or evil. The crucifixion can look like an extreme case among pointless atrocities, a disturbing example of meaningless disorder which achieves nothing.

Third, the kind of deaths which the revolutionary heroes of China die seemingly bears little resemblance to Calvary. Take the end of Hai Ouyang. He saves a train, but is fatally crushed beneath its wheels and dies in hospital.

Hai lay quietly on his bed, the blood of class brothers flowing into his body, slowly, drop by drop, through a transfusion tube. He was so calm, so peaceful. On his face there was no trace of pain. It was as if he had just returned from completing some task and was smilingly thinking of taking up another and heavier load for socialist construction. His deep, clear eyes seemed to glow, and several times he moved his lips, trying to speak. He smiled as if he had already discovered the secret of the defence plant.

Suddenly the flow of blood through the tube ceased. Hai's heart had stopped beating. His eyes slowly closed. A short and glorious life of twenty-three years had come to an end. On the hill-tops of Phoenix Village the sun was shining. The pine tree at the Ouyang family door, washed clean by the recent rain, looked especially straight and green. Many pine nuts had sprouted at its foot and healthy saplings were growing in the sunlight.

The pine tree stood like a hero's monument erected on the hill-top, erected in the people's hearts, eternal, for all generations to come.⁵

⁵*Chinese Literature*, November 1966, pp. 103-04; cited Mary Sheridan, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

As Mary Sheridan comments, for such a hero 'death holds neither pain, nor fear, nor disfigurement. Transfixed by inner visions, the hero watches himself pass into immortality. He dies in spiritual certainty' (p 61). All of this may be moving and romantic, but the style of death has little to do with the squalid sadism of Calvary. When he died by that vicious combination of impalement and display practised by the Romans, Jesus cried out: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'

One can go on piling up the contrasts between the execution on Calvary and the self-sacrifice of Communist heroes. Their deaths fail to resemble, let alone match, the death of Jesus—either at the visible level or at the level of what is believed to have been taking place. Does all that rule out any valuable link between the heroes proposed for emulation in the new China and Jesus, the ultimate Hero for Christian faith? Can we advance beyond the general point that in both cases we deal with moral examples, men who gave their lives for others in a spirit of loving disregard of self-interest?

Mary Sheridan suggests a comparison which offers a way in. On the one hand, 'the classical heroes were admired by their contemporaries for their real superiority in natural endowments. Achilles was such a hero "by nature".' On the other hand, 'none of the new Chinese heroes have superior natural endowments.' Wang Chieh, for instance, 'is anything but well endowed'. (p 56)

This brings to mind St. Paul's reflections on Christ's fate and on Christian participation in the crucifixion as revealing *power in weakness*. Looking only at the natural qualifications of the Chinese figures held up for emulation, we might not expect any heroic performance or self-sacrifice. Yet power comes to these heroes and martyrs, despite their limited capacities. Quite ordinary soldiers from the People's Liberation Army prove capable not only of hard work but of utterly selfless patriotism. They become heroic and powerful. The strength to save others (like their comrades or their children) bursts through their weakness. Power comes to these Chinese heroes, because they have reflected on Mao's thought. Simply hearing the words of Chairman Mao can produce powerful effects. At the point of drowning in icy water, one Red Guard 'heard the shouting on the shores: "Be resolute, do not fear sacrifice, overcome every difficulty, be victorious." Suddenly he acquired new energy.'⁶

In brief, the Communists heroes and martyrs exemplify *in their own way* the Pauline principle of power in weakness. The

⁶Cited Sheridan, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

source of their strength is not, of course, the death and resurrection of Christ, but the thought of Chairman Mao. What emerges if we confront the figures of Jesus and Mao? Let us turn to that in the concluding section of this essay.

III

If this piece on 'Christ and China' is not to remain patently incomplete, the relationship between Christ and Mao needs to be tackled. And yet such a theme may leave us feeling like blind men standing around an elephant. They can size it up, but they cannot really take it in.

We can check off easily enough a number of formal contrasts. Firstly, even if Mao's thought sometimes appears to be credited with miraculous results, no one attributes truly divine characteristics to him. Communist belief stops an extremely long way short of viewing him as the Word become flesh who dwelt among us to share his divine glory with us. Second, Jesus never published even a scrap of papyrus, let alone any series of works. In no sense did his influence spread by means of what he wrote. In the case of Chairman Mao, Mehnert can quite confidently assert that 'never before in history have the writings of a single individual been published in such quantities'.⁷ When Mehnert wrote his book in the early 1970s, over seven hundred million copies of the *Little Red Book* were in print. There was a copy for every person in China.

Third, the teaching offered by Mao fails to match in essential ways the gospel of Jesus. Three words, 'self-help', 'violence' and 'utopia' gather together some of the major differences. The *Little Red Book* calls for 'regeneration through our own efforts' (p 194). Mao encourages the will to rise through one's own determination. He comes down on the side of human freedom rather than that of any iron laws of history. Aided by correct education, the decisive efforts of individuals will perfect human existence. Donald MacInnis puts the point this way:

The Maoist modification of Marxist theory lays greater stress on man's capacity for inner-directed change in response to mental stimuli, rather than response only to social, economic and natural forces. Mao believes that conversion to new values can be hastened, that man's value changes are not tied to a rigid historical determinism.⁸

Do-it-yourself Maoism finds its classic expression in the parable

⁷*China Today*, p. 255.

⁸*Bastad*, p. 148.

of the Foolish Old Man Who Removed Mountains. The lesson is clear. The aggressive will of the people triumphs rather than any blind forces of nature and history or any supernatural help from heaven. All of this stress on self-help takes us a long way from Jesus's call to *accept* the kingdom. If his invitation to repent and believe in the good news affirmed the human freedom to say 'yes' or 'no' in the face of divine grace, he was not proclaiming a do-it-yourself salvation.

The best known sentence from the *Little Red Book* announces that 'political power grows out of the barrel of a gun' (p 61). Ninian Smart has recently argued that Mao's greatest achievement lies in his shaping a new spiritual force. Power grows out of the barrel of the spirit.⁹ It may well be so. Nevertheless, granted that Mao never showed himself a paranoid killer like Stalin. He viewed opponents as people to be ruthlessly crushed or forcibly re-educated. Violent class struggles shape his vision. He dismisses love of the oppressors for the oppressed as paternalism, and love of the oppressed for their oppressors as servility. Mao's implicit rejection of that Christian love which transcends class conflict and hostility has been quoted a thousand times. But one more time won't hurt.

There will be a genuine love of humanity after classes are eliminated all over the world. Classes have split society into many antagonistic groupings; there will be love of all humanity when classes are all eliminated, but not now. We cannot love enemies, we cannot love social evils, our aim is to destroy them.¹⁰

Jesus, however, preached love for one's enemies. He did not join the Zealot guerilla forces. In fact he showed himself so uninterested in combating imperialism, that his preaching hardly indicates that he lived in an occupied country under the Roman Empire.

(In parenthesis let me add that to separate Jesus from the nationalist-religious ideology of the Zealots is *not* to deny his political impact both then and later. Pilate crucified him as a threat to the public order and, as Jurgen Moltmann and others have remarked, Jesus was in fact a much more fundamental threat to Roman imperialism than the Zealots.)

Finally, it has become conventional to remark that the Marxist Utopia represents a secularised version of God's kingdom. Mao has turned China into 'one vast school of moral philosophy', because he hopes that the revolutionary struggle will end by bringing a good life to everyone.

We have lined up some major contrasts between Maoism and the Christian faith, which bases itself on the life, death and resur-

⁹*Mao* (London, 1974).

¹⁰*Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, III, pp. 90f.

rection of Jesus. We can also sort out some points of convergence. To begin with, Mao has effectively worked against the subjugation of women. He has destroyed concubinage, given women equal opportunities, and made Chinese women the envy of their sisters in the Western countries. There women still seem condemned in many ways to be little more than sexual objects. Jesus for his part announced a new brotherhood and sisterhood based on doing the will of God: 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, my mother' (Mark 3: 35). St. Paul proclaimed a revolutionary equality of men and women 'in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3: 28). This new life abolished any superiority and inferiority based on sexual difference. The later Christian Church tried in some ways to rescue women from pre-Christian indignities inflicted on them. When Christianity reached East Asia, it did help the position of women there. Nevertheless, both in China and elsewhere the organization of the Catholic Church has clearly asserted a privileged and preferential position for men. It was Mao's rule rather than the Christian missions which allowed women in China to make a huge leap forward in their rights and responsibilities. As Julia Ching observes, 'women are present in the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee, but not in the College of Cardinals.'¹¹

Second. Mao 'finds truth in the dialectical relationship of idea and practice'.¹² True knowledge results from activity and experience—from the shared enterprise of living and studying the Marxist way of life. In his turn Jesus did not offer a system of truths to be understood but called men to discipleship. His truth was not merely an object of intellectual reflection, but a way of life to be followed. Both for Mao and Jesus issues of truth cannot be settled by theoretical deliberation alone.

Third, from the 1920s Mao drew attention to religion as one of the oppressive elements in Chinese society. An examination of the state of the Hunanese peasants led him to identify religious authority (along with political and clan authority) as one of the three systems which dominated the Chinese. It would, of course be monstrously absurd to represent Jesus as opposed to religion and religious authority as such. Nevertheless he realised how crushing the misuse of religious authority could be. He kept his harshest words for those leaders who oppressed the people by their misguided but authoritative interpretations of God's law.

Fourth, Jesus came preaching the presence of God's kingdom—that unique peak of salvation history which offers men opportunities which must be accepted now or lost forever. Mao's essay *On*

¹¹Bastad, p. 31.

¹²W. Gluer, *Bastad*, p. 50.

Practice reflects a somewhat similar sense that human history has reached an unprecedented peak. He speaks of 'the moment for completely banishing darkness from the world and from China and for changing the world into a world of light such as never previously existed.'

I am putting aside scruples here and pulling in themes almost at random. They can serve to illustrate convergences and parallels between the teaching of Mao and the good news brought by Jesus Christ. Julia Ching rightly warns against being content with any 'simple avowal of Christian values in Mao's teachings'.¹³ Where then does the confrontation of Chairman Mao and Jesus leave us? Is there any one major point that we might draw from our attempt to list the likenesses and the differences?

All in all, no one should deny the enormous contrast which exists—between both the persons of Jesus and Mao and their doctrines. Take the external aspect of their lives. Born in 1893, Mao survived imprisonment, the Long March, the Sino-Japanese war and all the stages of the civil war to stand before a huge crowd in Peking and proclaim the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949. He became the idolised leader of eight hundred million people. Jesus, however, did not pass through such a long life of intense activity. At most his ministry lasted three years. During that time he enjoyed some popularity with a few thousand people, but nothing like the obsessive admiration from the most numerous nation the world has ever seen.

Yet we may wonder how long the vast personality cult of Mao will last, now that he has departed from the scene. Has he only a precarious grip on the imagination of the Chinese and mankind? If Jesus's appeal during life remained limited to sections of the Palestinian population and proved insufficient to save him from public execution, his appeal after death has spread throughout the world and shows no sign of decreasing after two thousand years. Quite apart from claims about his ontological status as Son of God and Saviour of mankind, the very external features of his life, impact and teaching falsify any efforts to align Jesus and Mao too closely.

To conclude. This article has tried to take to heart Julia Ching's suggestion about doing 'Christian theology in a Chinese context'.¹⁴ Call it, if you will, 'watching one's Christian language in the presence of China'. If the attempt has contributed just a little to the quest for the right language about Jesus Christ in the second half of the twentieth century—the era of Mao Tse-Tung—I will be grateful.

¹³Bastad, p. 29.

¹⁴'The Christian Way and the Chinese Wall'. *America*, November 9, 1974, p. 278.