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Young in China Being Stirred By an Old-Time Christianity

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF and SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES APRIL 12, 1989

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Her hair still glistening with holy water, her spirit soaring with excitement, Lu Yun, newly baptized, brimmed with the kind of reverent ardor that leaves Communist officials queasy.

"Young people love to come to church," said Miss Lu, a 20-year-old music student. "It is very quiet and spiritual here."

Christianity is stirring in China, particularly among young people. In a nation where a walk in the park is one of the more exciting ways to spend a Sunday morning, millions of young people regard church attendance as thrilling and cosmopolitan, nearly as fashionable as coffee and disco dancing.

And, some church leaders worry, they treat it as lightly, seeming more enthusiastic about the solemn atmosphere and Western ritual than they are about God. Leaders Watch With Dismay

"Maybe I'm not a believer," Peter Zhu, a 34-year-old Beijing travel agent, admitted as he left church. "But this is Western culture, and I want to learn more about it. This is a very famous religion."

China's Communist leaders are presumably watching with dismay. In a nation that has stressed conformity and the unity that comes from a common faith in an encompassing ideology, Christianity threatens with competing values, loyalty and

legitimacy.

In China, far more than in the West, the state for centuries has regarded itself as the wellspring of moral judgment, and so it is particularly alarming to the Government to find a rival faith attracting adherents.

The growth of Christianity troubles many sincere Communists here for other reasons. China never had a very large Christian population, and to some people here Christianity seems an indelibly foreign affront to Chinese nationalism.

The Christian awakening is still at the fringe of China's consciousness, and no one conceives of China's becoming a Christian nation. The official Catholic Church says it has 3.4 million believers, compared with 3 million at the time of the Communist takeover in 1949. The official Protestant Church reports at least 4 million adherents, compared with about 700,000 in 1949.

But these numbers are only the beginning. There is no evidence to support the assertions of some Hong Kong missionaries that China has up to 50 million Protestants, but it is clear that there are hundreds of thousands, and perhaps millions, of believers outside the official church. Some of these are surreptitious Roman Catholics who defy China's official Catholic Church, which cut its ties with the Vatican after the Communists took power.

Sometimes, especially in rural areas, self-appointed preachers mix a vague knowledge of Christianity with folk beliefs to create a powerful and sometimes dangerous combination. Preachers have sometimes urged "collective ascensions" into heaven, by encouraging their congregations to march into nearby rivers - a practice that has resulted in a number of drownings. And unsuccessful exorcisms have also left many people dead, 24 in one county alone, the official Beijing Review reported last month.

The Catholic Church is in an awkward position because of Government suspicions that the Vatican will try to control it. Today the official church goes out of its way to criticize secret Vatican missions to spread the gospel, using priests with tourist visas. Moreover, local Catholic leaders say that while they disapprove of contraception and abortion, they will accept them. Reinterpretations of Teachings

"What we really are against is female infanticide," said Bishop Zong Huaide, chairman of the China Patriotic Catholic Association. "That is a big sin."

Juxtaposed to this reinterpretation of Catholic teachings is a traditionalist view of the liturgy. The Mass, for example, is still in Latin.

Christianity has had a difficult time in China in the last few hundred years. Many nationalists resented it as an imperialistic foreign influence, the spiritual equivalent of opium, and it did not help when in the middle of the last century a Christian cult led the Taiping Rebellion, ravaging much of China and resulting in some 30 million deaths.

In the 1950's Chinese churches were forced to cut off their ties to foreign churches and to identify themselves only as Protestant or Catholic rather than by particular denomination. In the 1960's churches were closed and religious worship was banned. Not until Easter 1979, when a dozen Protestants gathered in Chongwenmen Christian Church in Beijing, did the central Government formally allow Chinese to attend Christian services again.

"Now more than 1,000 people come to church each Sunday," said the Rev. Yin Jizeng, who conducted the 1979 service. He has seen the congregation expand until every seat is taken and people are standing in the aisles for a one-and-a-half-hour service.

China now has more than 7,000 official churches of various sizes, not counting many congregations that simply meet in living rooms. Seven hundred Protestants hoping to be ministers are enrolled in 12 seminaries around the country, along with 600 Catholics training for the priesthood in 12 other seminaries.

"So many people believe, so I thought I should come and take a look," said Pu Yige, a 20-year-old university student who sometimes attends church with a classmate. "The atmosphere is wonderful, and so we'll come back sometimes."

Not only the Government, but many citizens as well have watched the spread of Christianity with the enthusiasm that Americans might have for the propagation of some cult in their neighborhoods.

"Some of my friends don't understand," said Jin Dongxin, a recently baptized university student. "They think coming here is very weird."

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