

THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN EAST ASIA

Some Observations of a Traveler

Thomas Molnar

We are slowly being conditioned to believe that with decolonization in the political sphere, the "third world" is getting rid of the Christian religion which had come to Asia and Africa—so the story goes—as an auxiliary force of white imperialism. This is a biased and false picture, born perhaps not so much of wishful thinking as of an erroneous "logic of history." This logic concludes: if Asians and Africans come once again into their own, they *ought* to reassert their religious personality too.

My own observations as a traveler in Asia and Africa are inevitably personal and partial. Because I had more ready access to Catholic sources of information, for example, my comparisons and references most frequently involve Catholicism, although many of the generalizations would apply to Protestantism as well. In any case I found that, as always, the reality proved to be far more complex than the general assumptions. During my travels in the Far East my own surprise was that the great traditional Eastern religions, Buddhism, Confucianism (a moral doctrine rather than a religion), Shintoism and their variants are exhausted and actually fight for survival. The religions I list are not, of course, religions in the sense in which we speak of Judaism, Christianity and Islam: it is more or less true to say of them that they are sets of moral and behavioral directives, permeated with a mixture of serenity and pessimism, and quite openly materialistic (Buddhism, for example). For thousands of years they served well Asia's static societies; then Christianity appeared, accustomed in the West to social and philosophical conflicts, and to active participation in dynamic environments. Its impact was devastating on these Eastern doctrines, which had hardly known change except in the direction of becoming myths divinizing the figure of the Moral Teacher.

The impact of Christianity on oriental religions is a most interesting topic for study. For example, it brought two things to Asia which were unknown there and unknown particularly as a contribution of

religion to society: dynamism in the social sphere and charity in the spiritual sphere. I had already noted in Africa, whether Islamic or Animist, that the missionary, the priest, the nun are looked upon not as social parasites, as they are in parts of the West, but rather as the most active element of the population. Religions native to Africa and Asia seem to lack the inspiration and the ability to translate their spiritual doctrines into what I might call institutional language: whenever we see schools, universities, hospitals, leprosariums, orphanages, homes for the aged or unwed mothers, vocational education, etc., the majority have been founded by Catholic or Protestant missionaries; when the founders and caretakers depart, the local government only too often fails to carry on with the task; and nobody would dream of suggesting that bonzes or other monks take charge.

Since religion and charity are two very different things in East Asia, the concept of collective, institutionalized aid has never permeated these nations. Democracy and the welfare state are imported concepts used by government officials, but not part of the mores, except, to some extent, where Western influence has been more permanent. In Thailand, for example, it is notorious that family life, consequently social life too, is falling apart: fathers desert their wives and children, the latter are engulfed in misery and crime, the law courts do nothing about it and the legislators remain indifferent. On the Western model some enlightened society ladies have lately tried to instill civic and social duties in the schools, and to set up institutions for giving advice and aid.

In all this they are powerfully assisted by the local priests who themselves run schools and organizations of charity. But only the surface of the malaise is scratched. Nobody dreams of enrolling the help of the Buddhist bonzes, although the latter are numerous on the streets of Bangkok with their saffron-yellow robes and shaved heads. They live in what is wrongly translated as monasteries, and study sacred literature. Their pagodas and burying places, colorful buildings which make the Bangkok "skyline" an enchanting one, do not create the impression of life:

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they are vestiges of ancient luxury and royal endowments.

The Buddhist situation is similar in South Vietnam, or rather it was. Although in the days of President Diem the Buddhist community was presented as a persecuted forty percent of the population, reality was quite different. First, the Buddhists in Vietnam, as elsewhere, are not a united body but consist of dozens of sects connected very loosely or not at all. Before 1954, the year of the partition, they lived their quiet existence. The hundreds of thousands of Catholic refugees from North Vietnam came to disturb this tranquility: wherever they settled, they showed great religious fervor, they were economically active and socially potent. The Catholic community, now a million and a half strong, soon started schools, hospitals, mutual aid groups, and, of course, it was also prominent in the anti-Communist struggle. In fact, I have seen few more fervent Catholic communities anywhere in the world than the ones just outside Saigon.

The Buddhist attitude of contempt and resignation before the vicissitudes of life allows their communities to come easily to terms with any regime, even anti-spiritual and anti-religious ones. They accepted French presence as now they accommodate themselves to Communist regimes. The Red Chinese leaders had an easy task putting Buddhism under government control, particularly since the occupation of Tibet. In a country like South Vietnam, while the Buddhists are neutral as far as Marxist doctrine goes, they are not insensitive to the nationalist disguise under which communism operates. And since under Diem the Catholics thrived and prospered, the Buddhists, although they were not persecuted as the press generally reported (the majority of generals and cabinet ministers were Buddhists), became critical of Catholic successes, evidence of good organization, corporate life, fervor and unity.

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The rest of the story is known. I spoke about the antecedents only to show that Christianity is not a negligible quantity in these parts of the world, but a very real influence creating constructive controversy and capable of galvanizing by its example even moribund sects. Many parents who have some ambition for their children's future, even those who are not Catholic, send them to Catholic schools whether in India, Indochina, Taiwan or Japan. Naturally, there are certain advantages attached to a Catholic or Protestant education: first of these advantages is that graduates more easily obtain scholarships to European and American universities. (The conse-

quence, however, is that very often they do not return to their native land, thus depriving it of their valuable competence.) The second advantage for the graduates is that in the drive for westernization, in which all these countries are engaged, they can be sure of obtaining good, even leading positions: the reputation of a Catholic education is everywhere very high.

In Taiwan (where Catholics number 250,000 out of a total population of eleven million) I attended the inauguration ceremonies of Fu-Yen University, closed down fifteen years ago in Peking by the Chinese Communists and reopened now in the presence of Thomas Cardinal Tien and Archbishop Yu Pin. Officials, Chinese and white priests and nuns, families, lovely girl students and serious-looking boys filled the auditorium while outside, in the crisp March morning, hundreds of others were lining up to go to Mass. Later I had opportunities to meet some of the graduates, now in important positions in the administration of one of the world's best-functioning land reforms.

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It is hard to say whether the Japanese are attracted to Christianity to the same extent as the Chinese. Strictly speaking, the Chinese are non-believers, but permeated with the teachings of Confucius. They are extremely intelligent, shrewd, hard-working and honest people, but with a spiritual vacuum that the best among them aspire to fill. Hence the Christians among them constitute a veritable elite, and this is confirmed by the many stories I heard of their splendid resistance under Communist persecution.

The Japanese, on the other hand, led and still lead an isolated existence on their islands where they developed a national ideology hardly distinguishable from a religion, but dry, without spiritual depth or aspiration. In the past the emperor cult served as a rallying point and unquestioned creed; after 1945 this nucleus suddenly disintegrated and there remained the hard shell of national discipline without any content. The majority of intellectuals, most in opposition to pre-war militarism and post-war American influence, have drifted in the direction of Marxism. Youth remains leaderless, and overpopulation in the cities is now destroying the beautiful family traditions too.

If Japan had a strong spiritual tradition as did China, Christianity could enter the present vacuum. In reality, since the new constitution forbids the emperor cult and has abolished Shintoism as a state religion, new sects have arisen in the last decade. They total some fifteen million adherents, not count-

ing the strongest sect, the Sokka Gakai. These movements, to which the Japanese refer as "new religions," did not turn to communism for they were impressed by the tales of horror that the some seven million prisoners of war, returning from Manchurian camps, spread in the country.

Who joins these movements? Certainly not the lower classes which have little interest in religion and are preoccupied with present prosperity; not the upper classes whose members prefer to make lavish public contributions to Buddhist temples. The recruitment is then predominantly from the middle classes; the moral reason is attachment to some form of Japanese national creed; the financial reason is that many middle-class people have been left out of syndicalist or other organizations, and not being part of a pressure group, they do not automatically benefit by the fantastic boom. The new religions provide them with a sense of solidarity and with organized mutual aid.

As I said, the strongest among the sects is the Sokka Gakai which alone comprises some ten million members. They are openly nationalistic and, counting on their strength, have formulated political ambitions. Although not a party, they had fifteen of their members elected to the Upper House and intend to reach, with the help of sympathizers, a two-thirds majority in the Lower House too. The avowed objective is to change the Constitution and declare the Sokka Gakai as the state religion.

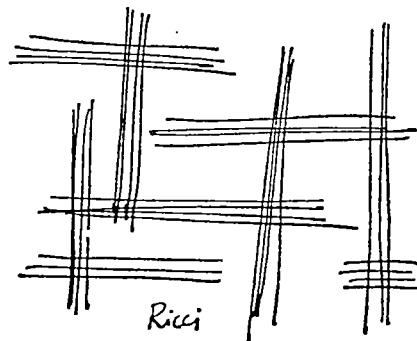
One should, however, use the term "religion" with qualifications, whether in Japan or elsewhere in East Asia. The Japanese are satisfied with a minimum of it; the new sects have a few, easily formulated but rather abstruse dogmas, a few easily kept commandments such as "be friendly to your neighbor," and a set of promises, not more lofty than "success in business." It all reminds one of the Moral Rearmament, including the part that ritual plays in most of these sects. The Richoko Gakai, for example, organizes immense public confession meetings in which members expect to get rid of their Karma, or accumulated evil, and thus reach salvation.

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In spite of the fact that today about one-third of Japan's population are "believers," my interlocutors at the Jesuit Sophia University in Tokyo maintain that Catholicism has a hard time making converts. One reason I was given is that centuries of a moral climate in which religion was irrelevant made them all but impermeable to deep spiritual commitment. Others, however, are of the opinion that the Church in Japan ought to re-think its strategy of conversion.

Instead of an elaborate teaching apparatus of its own, it ought to concentrate its efforts in the national universities where the elite is being educated. The best of Japanese students, I was told, are hungry for spiritual food; small groups in which Christian literature is discussed and personal problems are interpreted in the light of Christian belief would be more effective than educational institutions which are, as other schools too, infiltrated by Communists.

This would be the easier as Buddhism (here in its degenerate form, the Mahayana) remains aloof as elsewhere in Asia and takes no interest in social problems such as, for example, juvenile delinquency. The Buddhist elite despises the masses which, in modern Japan, cannot be attracted to the search for Nirvana. The more educated people, on the other hand, refuse to stoop to the healing sects which promise, like the above-mentioned Richoko Gakai, immediate results. Once again: people live in a moral and spiritual vacuum; from above (university chairs, books by intellectuals) Marxism tries to fill it, from below aggressive and shallow popular movements.



The great burning wound from which Christianity suffers in Asia is, of course, the Communist conquest of China. Maps showing this old country as the geographical center of half of Asia do not even do justice to China's real importance; once one leaves India, the great, pervasive historical, cultural and commercial influence becomes the Chinese. Wherever the Chinese penetrated in the course of the centuries and live today as minorities, they have become the dominant influence, have transformed the environment, and have, through their thousand skills and organizational ability, won the admiration and fear of the autochthonous populations. Missionaries of four centuries understood perfectly that a Christianized China would have decisively shaped the spiritual atmosphere of the continent; missionaries today understand that a Communist China represents a mortal danger to Asian Christianity.

This is not the place to tell the horrible and magnificent story of Christian resistance to conquest in

the past fifteen years. This resistance and this story are very much alive everywhere today on the peripheries of China, from where the expelled priests are watching the death struggle of their brothers in Chinese gaols, camps—and underground. They are watching, but not passively. One of the most encouraging phenomena I witnessed during my travels was the relentless activity of Jesuits and others on behalf of refugees and people still on the mainland. Charity here is a daily work of finding food, shelter, money, jobs and education for the thousands pouring out from Red China, mainly through the double gate of Hong Kong and Macao.

I asked a French Jesuit in Hong Kong what happens to the soul of such individuals. He told me that the soul often hardened in natural self-defense, but in the majority of cases the soul, also in self-defense, developed only an apparent armor behind which it maintains contact with the faith. The example of the refugees shows that in most cases faith has been either only dormant or actually strengthened during the years of persecution and repression. It may, at any rate, be rekindled even in the souls of young people who hate communism perhaps more than their elders do because it has disappointed and cheated them. Yet, most people I talked to are pessimistic in the long run: the decades of vigorous attack, coupled with exacerbated nationalism and teaching of hatred for whites and *their* religion, may, they feel, gradually extinguish Christianity there.

An additional problem is that the heroic priests who lived in China for so many years, loved the people and learned to speak the language, are not easily replaced. Young priests from Europe and America have discovered new missionary fields in Africa and Latin America; Asia is no longer a "popular" choice.

One thing, however, is certain, and I should like to emphasize it as my conclusion: the old civilizations of Asia—of the entire continent—are almost empty shells, existing more by inertia and habit than by vital contribution to people's lives and thoughts. Two dynamic forces compete for people's loyalty: communism, and to a lesser extent, Christianity. The first is adhered to as a way—a detour—towards Westernization, the grand ideal of the entire "third world"; the second has accumulated a reserve of achievements, respect, and seriousness of purpose; it is also a way towards Westernization, a more trustworthy one, appealing to the best elements.

I do not know which one will win. The Communists have the inside track, not because of their economic policies, which everybody in Asia knows are a failure, but because they know how to manipulate a frenzied nationalism. But in the eyes of the Far Eastern populations they are *Chinese* and, I repeat, this fact works against them. If East Asia can be kept out of their grasp, Christianity has a strong chance of remaining present as a factor of social stabilization and economic progress, and as a spiritual prop for Asia's immense yet inert soul.

FACT AND FICTION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

One Attempt to Uncover the Realities in Vietnam

Harold W. Thatcher

Once again we are practicing brinkmanship in a manner that even the late Secretary of State Dulles would have envied. How we have done so and why the American people in the Atomic Age have permitted their government repeatedly to get itself into perilous situations which could escalate into a general nuclear war cannot really be understood without reference to the background of our thinking since World War II. We must separate fact from fiction,

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which means that we must re-examine critically and objectively the premises and conclusions from which our actions have sprung. Such an examination will reveal that many of the premises upon which our conclusions, and therefore our actions, have been based have been false. Senator Fulbright, in a notable speech in the Senate on March 25, tried to dispel some of these "myths" concerning our foreign policy. The purpose of the present article is to try to dispel some further myths, especially those relating to our policies in Southeast Asia.