



Limestone cliffs like those at Dover, scene of the poem “Dover Beach”

The Last Seven Days of Creation

In 1970, Jorg Zink, a popular and prolific German religious writer, wrote a text with this title for an anti-nuclear demonstration in Stuttgart. In 1973, the text was taken up by Bread for the World, the German churches’ agency for combating world hunger, where it found widespread popular reception.

Laurie Chisholm has taken up the task of revising the text in the light of recent developments. Here it is:

In the beginning, God created heaven and earth. But after many millions of years, humans developed an arrogant assumption of supremacy and a willful denial that they are just a small part of a great web of life. So now they were ready for the last seven days of earth.

On the **first** day, they were organized into nation-states always fighting one another. Again and again rational thinking was disrupted by an archaic program of anxiety (designed to help tribal animals cope with danger) leading to war. There was supposed to be no more war after World War 1 and the United Nations was supposed to keep order. However, the big nations kept the veto right for themselves, so the UN was effectively powerless. There was almost always war somewhere on earth. This consumed money and resources and polluted the planet.

On the **second** day, religion was eclipsed by possessions, entertainment, celebrities and social media. But because they had to believe in something, humans believed in wealth and progress, in freedom and self-actualisation.

On the **third** day, they realized that all was not well and they tried to enact measures to limit pollution, extraction of fossil fuels and the spread of plastics. But the super-wealthy had the ear of government and reversed the changes desperately needed to keep warming under 1.5 degrees Celsius. Treaties to limit the spread of nuclear weapons were abandoned, so every country felt they had to have some to protect itself from the others.

On the **fourth** day, runaway climate change took over. Storms, floods, fire and drought ravaged the earth. Millions died of heat stroke when the power failed, as they couldn't survive even 40 degrees at high humidity.

On the **fifth** day, humans were running out of the resources they desperately needed for batteries, EV cars and the many possessions they couldn't do without. Even water was in short supply: nations upstream used nearly all the water in big rivers for irrigation. The Doomsday clock stood alarmingly close to midnight.

On the **sixth** day many nations pressed the red button, as they were desperate for resources. Fire enveloped the earth, the mountains burned, the seas boiled, and the concrete skeletons in the cities stood black and smoking. And the blue planet turned red, then dirty brown and finally ash grey.

On the **seventh** day, there was rest. The earth was without form and void and the ghosts of millions of humans flitted about over the chaos. Deep below, in hell, the demons told the story of how humans took the future into their own hands and peals of derisive laughter rose up and up, right to the choirs of angels.

Laurie Chisholm/Jorg Zink

The Christian Church in China

What happens when religion is banned? No, I am not thinking of Christianity under the Roman Empire before Constantine, but of the People's Republic of China in the years between 1966 and 1979. The result was a great deal of cruelty and suffering at the time, but it also led to secret and unauthorised religious gatherings all over the country since 1980, and endless attempt to bring religion back under control. At present we may observe further tough

measures to keep religion on safe tracks. But judging by previous efforts, success will be limited.

I have long been interested in the Christian churches in China. A combination of conversations, observations and reading have kept me informed, but I will be cautious, as a good historian should be, since China keeps a careful watch on what people say about it, and sometimes it is difficult to interpret through a foreign lens.

It is not altogether surprising that Christianity was unpopular with the incoming Chinese Communist government in 1951. The logic of Marxism, including its Chinese version, leaves little room for religious aspirations. And since the goal of the Communist revolution (in contrast to their Kuomintang predecessors) was to break free of Capitalism, everything western was suspect. Moreover some of the most prominent symbols of western culture were Christian. Ever since the late imperial era the missionary churches were responsible for hospitals, schools and universities as well as churches, with the aim of inculcating Christian values. These institutions were immediately nationalised by the new communist state. (Ironically in that role they continue to develop modernising values to this day.)

Christianity was strongly associated with the European powers, which had made their presence felt in all the coastal ports in China, and were loathed for their imposition on China of the opium trade, let alone very unequal terms of ordinary trade. Any visitor to Hong Kong, Macau or Shanghai will know their imposing presence. The Treaty Ports were imposed upon China by European and American traders. The Treaty of Nanjing at the end of the Opium Wars led to the cession of Hong Kong to Britain and the opening of four treaty ports, including Shanghai. In 1844 the Treaty of Wanghia secured similar rights for the United States and the Treaty of Whampoa the same for France. By the end of the nineteenth century, Britain was the largest trader, followed by the USA, Germany, France and Russia.

Leaving to one side the seventh century visits of missionaries and traders from the Syrian Antiochene Church to the Tang Dynasty as recorded in the X'ian stele, and possibly well beyond that, Christianity in China looks back to the Portuguese Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century. They based themselves in Macau, where they built the well-known St Paul's church of which only the façade remains. Very conscious of how conspicuously foreign they seemed, the Jesuits sought to adapt their Catholicism into Chinese rites, consistent with

Confucianism. The great Matteo Ricci and others made converts, and provided useful services in astronomy, and Christianity gained some respect from the Kangxi emperor, until a decree by Pope Clement XI ruled that the rites of honouring the ancestors were unacceptable as Christian practices, and by 1715, the Jesuits were expelled from China, but remained on its periphery.

The next significant movement came in the treaty ports negotiated by the western powers in the early nineteenth century. Robert Morrison arrived in Macau in 1807, and for the next twelve years he prepared a translation of the Bible. The first British mission associated with the Treaty Port of Guangzhou (Canton) was sponsored by the London Missionary Society. British missionaries were soon joined by others from the United States. The Paris Foreign Mission Society worked very hard to erect Catholic churches in south China, and in some northern provinces.

After the Opium Wars of the 1840s, the Treaty Ports were expanded, and the missions took advantage of this to build churches. These church buildings were in some cases ostentatious symbols of the foreign presence, and were therefore the focus of anti-foreign movements. Over the course of the years 1809 to 1949, some 50,000 foreigners worked for mission agencies. Along the sea coast of China, Christianity became visible with churches, hospitals and colleges erected. Even the New Zealand Presbyterian church was involved in its creation of a hospital and rural health service in the region around Canton.

This connection between foreign powers and foreign missions was seemingly unavoidable. The Qing state was very reluctant to allow missionaries into the country, and so diplomatic pressure was needed and applied to allow missionaries to enter, and to erect churches. Consequently the churches tended to be found around the edge of the treaty ports. The French government took the lead in protecting Catholics, and almost all the missionary clergy were French.

The greatest building growth came at the very end of the imperial era. The cathedrals at Beijing (1887), Nantang, Shanghai Tianjin, Hebei (1903-1906), Shenyang (1910), Xujiahui (1907) Shuangshuzi (1917) and others were built in grand neo-gothic style by western architects in that era. Very few of these churches showed many concessions to Chinese style. No wonder, then, that the destruction of such churches was the first step in popular movements like the Boxers. So, for example, the Maweigou Church where the grave of Matteo Ricci was located, on land given by the Ming dynasty and confirmed by the

Qing dynasty, was destroyed by the Boxers, and the graves desecrated. In response foreign powers forced the Qing to replace the church and build a new one in 1903. This dependence of the churches on foreign protectors brought Christianity into intense disrepute with Chinese opinion.

There were a few more independent movements. Perhaps the most interesting Christian movement in China in the period was the Taiping Rebellion in the 1860s, the leadership of which was taken by Hong Xiquan, who called himself the younger brother of Jesus. Although denounced by European Christians, the movement commanded maybe 30 million supporters before it was suppressed by the Qing with help from French and British troops. Another partial exception to this pattern was Hudson Taylor's China Inland Mission, which took missionaries, some of them not of the western elite, to inland provinces, and required them to identify with Chinese, and not seek the protection of overseas powers. Eventually this mission had some 1000 missionaries at work, and they followed the vision of the best mission theorists in seeking to build a "Three Self movement", a self-supporting, self-propagating and self-governing church.

After the fall of the Qing Dynasty, in the troubled era of the Republican government, the warlords and the Japanese invasion, churches became very active. The Catholic Church began to permit a degree of indigenous adaptation. By 1949 they had 3000 missionaries and 2500 Chinese priests in China. But Protestants were significantly more active. Sun Yat-sen and Madam Chiang had strong Christian connections, and despite the chaos of conflict between warlords and Japanese aggression, Christianity grew significantly during that period. There were many New Zealand missionaries in China in this era.

This progress was abruptly halted in 1949. The Communist Party, once it had taken control of China, arrested and then expelled all foreign nationals involved in religious activities, and forbade foreigners to provide financial support to Chinese churches. All Christian colleges and hospitals were nationalised. The Chinese church was on its own. Would it stand or fall? The former missionaries could only stand back and watch.

In fact, Chinese Christians proved resilient. In 1950 Protestant leaders met with Zhou Enlai and published a manifesto signed by 400,000 Protestants, rejecting imperialism and adopting the three-self themes. Denunciation meetings purged the churches of those who had been too supportive of the Kuomintang. In 1954 the Three Self Movement was formed as a patriotic church interface

with the government. In 1957 the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association was formed and broke links with the Vatican. Clergy who remained loyal to the Vatican were often imprisoned, and some were martyred. But pressures did not reduce. Under the Great Leap Forward in 1958, the churches of China were forced to reduce activities. The state sought to assert control of the remaining churches. Just four Protestant churches were permitted to remain open in Beijing in 1958.

A new intensity came to this campaign during the cultural revolution (1966-1976). There was an intense anti-religious campaign, and churches, like mosques and temples were closed. Vicious cruelty was used against the few remaining churches. Many of the Three Self leaders were denounced and imprisoned. The Red Guards destroyed licensed churches, for example, the Teng Shih K' ou church in Beijing. And no-one really knew what had happened to the Christian believers in that period.

Finally in 1979 the Three Self Movement was allowed to resume worship. Gradually churches were re-opened. The China Christian Council was formed in 1980 (at the same time as four other religious groups, Muslims, Taoists, Catholics and Buddhists also commenced national organisations which were recognised by the government. It was a like a new beginning as the churches that had been closed for thirteen years opened their doors, and found huge crowds waiting to attend.

Since that time the Three Self Churches have been extraordinarily successful, but have never attracted all Christian believers. In my observation, most recognised churches have multiple services and every corner of their buildings are crammed with worshippers. Visitors are generally accommodated in special seats, often with translation earpieces. The services often have the rather unemotional and formal style that many Chinese seem to like. The Amity Press was established by the Bible Society to print bibles and, since 1987, some 90 million copies have been printed. Because the Three Self requirements, the culture is one of self-sufficiency, and the Bible may not be sold in bookshops, but the Amity Press is working to translate the bible into numerous of the minority peoples' languages. Ironically, Bibles are produced for the rest of the world as well, and there is some uncertainty about whether they are going to be a casualty in Trump's trade war with China.

There are very large numbers of young people in churches near universities, often with queues to attend. Many churches have been rebuilt or restored. Some buildings are humble, some quite ostentatious.

But in the period of closure, many Christians seem to have met secretly in homes, and not all of them wanted to return to the approved churches. What has been called the house church movement was a consequence of a closing of the official Three Self Churches under the cultural revolution. The case of Watchman Nee is frequently cited, who maintained a network of house churches, which continued while he was imprisoned for fifteen years. This pattern of independent churches has continued in a kind of competition with the Three Self Churches. In recent years new movements have continued to develop. But religions with any political focus were suppressed. Falun Gong, meanwhile, a form of Buddhism, was suppressed.

With the growing westernisation of society in the 1980s these churches became more public. There were perhaps some 3000 congregations in Beijing, and vast numbers in parts of rural China. They were harassed but continued, often not even permitted to purchase a building. For example, the Shouwang church in Beijing, which had something of an elite membership. One of the best known of these churches, the Early Rain Covenant Church, began as a bible study group in 2005 in Chengdu. By 2010 it had about 200 members, and by 2018, when the government intervened, there were some 700 members. 100 members were arrested and the pastor was sentenced to nine years in prison in that year, although there has been subsequent evidence that the church has continued. There has been a significant impact of Christianity among the Korean minorities in China, many of whom have fled from the once very Christian North Korea, but Korean missionaries are a particular concern for the Chinese government.

From 2011 there was an additional crackdown on the house churches, with leaders arrested, and members harassed. From 2013 the removal of steeples and crosses became a theme in some provinces and counties. Evangelism and children's programmes were curbed. It would only deal with the Three Self Church and deliberately sought to curb the house churches. But in recent years, the Three Self Church has also faced severe pressures. The government adopted a policy that all religions needed to "sinicize" their principles, bringing them explicitly in line with local communist values. This policy, introduced by Xi Jinping in 2017, has borne heavily on Muslims, Catholics and Protestants, since Daoist and Buddhist groups are seen as Chinese in character. Christians have

not experienced the imprisonment of Muslims in the West of China, but new strictures have been introduced.

The Catholic church has sought to protect its flock by seeking to reach an agreement with the Chinese government in 2018 to have appropriate approval from the church for those chosen to be consecrated as bishops, thus unifying the deep rift that had emerged between the China Catholic Patriotic Association and congregations loyal to the Vatican. The policy was deeply desired by Pope Francis, but inflexibility by the government and by the existing pro-Vatican congregations in Hong Kong suggests that there is a long way to go yet. The number of Catholics in total may be about 12 million people with Hebei Province (surrounding Beijing) the place of greatest strength. There are 85 dioceses of the Chinese Patriotic Association, including four in Beijing.

The Three Self Movement is much larger, with many Protestant churches, with some thirty-eight million members recognised by the government. It has thirteen seminaries, and there are a range of theologies, perhaps somewhat reminiscent of the churches brought together in the union. It is relatively easy to distinguish a former Methodist from a former Baptist church for example. It is not quite a denomination. The formal body is the China Christian Council, while government relations are exercised by the Three Self Patriotic Movement. This organisation, which certainly is in effect a government agency, pressures churches into an increasing sinicisation. This has so many aspects. Hymns are required to conform with Chinese values. This could mean, as I have observed, recognising government themed holidays, for example respect for older people and the family. Signs displayed must show respect to the government's values, and these values have become much more emphatic as Xi Jinping's thought has become a mandatory value. In recent years the focus has further shifted to demanding sermons emphasising loyalty to the state and Xi Jin Ping's thought. This has been very tough for churches. Many Three Self Churches have felt very pressured. Many have lower profiles than in the past, and some were dissolved during the covid epidemic.

Even more severe treatment has been meted out to the underground churches, which are extensive in many provinces, notably in Zhejiang and Henan. These churches often have extensive networks among overseas Chinese. The so-called "local church" or Meeting Hall is a split from the Exclusive Brethren, originally led by Watchman Nee in Fuzhou. He died after twenty years of imprisonment in China, but his movement spread to Taiwan and the United States. In New Zealand, this network is very strong. There are

also a variety of sectarian and heterodox groups, and in these circumstances, it is sometimes hard to observe which is which. Eastern Lightning is the most striking of these groups, but there are many others.

Keeping tabs on these developments is challenging. This May, new regulations were announced for foreigners (including visitors) in China, preventing them from any recruitment of Chinese followers to a religion, including use of the internet. It is already a matter of caution visiting Chinese churches, lest we draw attention to the church in the eyes of the state, since all churches will have people present to officially report on anything inappropriate. The large churches in Beijing and Shanghai have translation facilities, so it is appropriate to visit them.

What will we make of this flourishing world of Christianity in China? The first aspect to note is that there is an even greater flourishing of Buddhism in China. Shrines everywhere are full of young and old bringing their offerings, and rotating the prayer wheels, many looking as though this is a new experience for them. In the sinicisation of religion, Buddhism has an advantage, having been at it for about 2000 years. Taoism or Daoism is also being positively promoted, although while it has priests, there are no real words to describe Taoist laypeople. These two religions are not necessarily exclusive, and there seems to be some strong evidence of a spiritual revival in both groups. Confucianism is also being taught in schools although it is more an elite philosophy than a popular religion.

Islam is in a very different place. Although one does see Muslim women on the streets in China, there is also significant evidence of persecution. The Uyghurs of Xinjiang have gained so much notoriety, with perhaps two thirds of their mosques damaged or destroyed, but Human Rights Watch has also noted evidence in any province where Islam is strong of greater control, and the demolition of mosques, notably in Gansu and Ningxia provinces. The policy seeks to combine diverse Muslim groups into a smaller number of “safe” mosques, and the removal of such outward symbols as domes and minarets, which are to be replaced with Chinese styles in their buildings. The position is thus roughly equivalent to that of Christians. In both cases the result has been severe in the years since 2017.

The rapid growth of the number of Christians and Muslims has evidently slowed, even though we are basing this on limited evidence. Islam may have declined. Christianity and Islam sit at about 1% each, and Buddhism 4%

according to government sources, but many other surveys give much higher figures, perhaps up to 4% of the population as Christians, Buddhists as 11% and followers of folk religions as about 32%, leaving a bare majority as atheists. Traditionally Christianity was largely rural especially in South China, but today, upwardly mobile young people, many of whom are struggling to find satisfactory employment, are turning to Christianity.

So it is a most interesting situation. One of the few remaining atheist states is struggling to control its religious minorities, and leaving people of faith in very uncomfortable situations, but at the same time, something significant is happening in China religion, and it is not the result of western influence. It all goes to show that religion meets deep human needs, and formal suppression can have the opposite effect, at least in the long term.

Peter Lineham

As It Was in the Beginning (of the Jesus Way) Part 1

Ian Harris offers a reflection on the path that the Ephesus group in Wellington has taken and could take in the future..

Walking forward looking back . . .

Maori have a proverb *Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua*: *Muri*, backward; *mua*, forward. So "I walk backwards into the future, with my eyes fixed on the past." For Maori, past, present and future are intertwined, so you look to the wisdom of the past as you move into new situations and challenges.

Ideally that's what should also be true of the churches, looking back to gain inspiration to move forwards. But all too often in their institutional life they look back and get stuck there. And they're all too sluggish in recognising that while they are faithfully preserving their institutional traditions the world has changed around them. In the past 400 years a huge expansion of knowledge in physics, geology, astronomy, biology, anthropology, psychology – our whole basic understanding of nature and of life itself – demands a wholesale rethinking of faith and its place in the life of the world.

For 35 years Ephesus has been opening up some of those questions for us to explore, and taken cumulatively it's done a pretty useful job in terms of our left-brain approach – that's the level of rational thought, intellectual analysis and logic. We haven't resolved every question, but we've been open, honest

and for most of the time focused in doing what we set out to do at the beginning, which is:

“to explore new ways of understanding and expressing Christian faith in the increasingly secular world of New Zealand in the new millennium.”

In other words, our question is basically the same as the Jewish exiles asked in Babylon back in the 500s BCE: “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in this new and strange land?”

But let’s always remember that each of us operates within two thought worlds. There’s the world where that rational thinking, intellectual analysis and logic are exactly what we need (loosely summarised as left-brain thinking). But there’s also the unpindownable world of the imagination, creativity, literature, music, art, what we sense as the spiritual, an elusive fifth force beyond the four fundamental forces of physics. That’s the world loosely summarised as right-brain thinking.

Those worlds are not identical. Neither can do the work of the other. But they come together and have equal value in the functioning of our single brain. One tells us heaps about the world as it is, the other stimulates us to think of the world as it could be, as it ought to be. In our journey towards a fuller and more rounded life, we need to engage both.

... right back, after Jesus but before Christianity.

To be continued in the next issue...

About SOFiA

SOFiA (The Sea of Faith in Aotearoa) is a network of people interested in the non-dogmatic discussion of values, meaning and spirituality. We want to explore for ourselves what we can believe and how we can find meaning in our lives. SOFiA is not a church: it is a forum for discussing ideas, experiences and perspectives. SOFiA itself has no creed; its members come from many faiths and from those with no attachment to any religious institution. If you are in sympathy with our aims, you are most welcome to join us; receive our Newsletter, and/or attend a local group. We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from “Sea of Faith”, the 1984 BBC TV series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

Committee

Our national Committee oversees the work of SOFiA.

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Copy deadline for the next Newsletter is 1 December.