The World Community for Christian Meditation

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China

The city of Shen Yeng in north-east China has been settled for seven thousand years. So, there are plenty of ancestors to venerate. It began as a city about 300 BC during the Warring States Period at a time when the Britons had barely learned how to build hill forts. It had a noble history becoming the imperial capital of the Qing dynasty before yielding to Beijing in the 17th century. Its prestige lasted long afterwards. Today it is an important industrial centre and indescribably drab –true at least of what I saw during a short untouristy visit to its seminary.

The cold hand of communism can be felt everywhere and is taking time to warm up. Architectural and urban uniformity is macho, proud of its functionality and no-nonsense which replaced the hubris and elegance of the heroic period occasionally still visible in crumbling buildings or forgotten monuments. The communist style embodied the notional ideal of equality during the Cultural Revolution that, like the perfect society of the medieval church, was proclaimed everywhere and believed nowhere. Yet the people are as irrepressibly and identifiably Chinese as they must always have been. What is it that allows a people to survive its own worst mistakes and rise from the ruins of its humiliations and collapsed ideologies? What restores humour and civility, purpose and drive after a breakdown? Immense energy, perhaps, as expressed in a passionate, compulsive love of commerce especially in family businesses, whether selling fruit on the street or producing cars in numbers that would destroy what is left of the American automobile industry if they complied with its safety standards. Also, basic cultural habits, like food and forms of literacy. The Chinese say they will eat anything with legs including the table. Every meal is a creative event being the topic of conversation before during and after the eating of it. Far from the blandness of meat and two veg, burger and fries or curry and chips, food in China is an art and perhaps even a spirituality for a people who do not waste time with religious metaphysics. The characters of the language, too, have passed unchanged through history and geography though they are pronounced and constructed differently in the many different dialects.

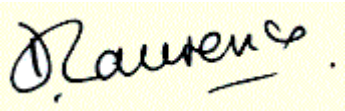
The seminary was housed in a rather dreary business building in the city centre, seven floors of barely furnished rooms and without elevators so, although the aesthetics were dispiriting compared with western norms, the inhabitants and visiting lecturers get plenty of exercise. I

felt great admiration for the resilience and determination of the students, the rector and teachers. Their vocations are sacrificial in ways that the euro-centric Church could benefit from seeing. Religious freedom is curtailed more than is acknowledged, but after many years of repression they can play the system and tend to laugh rather than complain. Material comforts are minimal and communal sharing of what little they have is a reality of life, reminiscent of the communitarianism of the early Christians.

The Chinese church may one day dominate the universal church just as its industry and finance will presumably shape the global economy. Yet today it is struggling to develop a balanced religious consciousness and spiritual formation. It is very aware, to use the western jargon most bishops and rectors used, of a “lack of spirituality”, an as yet undeveloped experience of the contemplative dimension of the gospel and of prayer. But with Chinese determination they intend to fill this lacuna. In Shanghai seminary I spent a stimulating day discussing with articulate fourth year students and teachers ‘why meditation is prayer’. If, as they said after, they now believed it was, I too learned much in the process.

The new young bishop of Shen Yang travels around his vast under-resourced diocese like the provincial governors of the past. We could only visit him late in the evening in the cathedral house. We drove through quiet, unbright streets, then into shabby side roads that led to a neo-gothic church. As we waited for the gates to be opened by the nightwatchman I noticed activity across the street which I assumed was a street person preparing their bed for the night. Then I saw him light a fire and learned he was venerating his ancestors.

At Chinese funerals toothbrushes, combs or computers are often placed on the coffin and credit cards or ‘spirit money’ burned to make the deceased person more comfortable. Veneration of ancestors is most intense during the 49 days of judgment after death but continues long after. The Chinese dead - like Christian souls – live on and can help us so we should remember them. The fire crackled in the dark street as offerings were made. The continuities of history, stronger than the reigns of empires or the passage of beliefs, were being respected and threaded to the present.



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