

## **ADVANCE THROUGH STORM IN ASIA**

The risen Lord commissioned His disciples to go into all the world to preach the Gospel (Matt.28:19-20; Acts 1:8). In obedience to their Lord's command, the apostles traveled far to bring the message of salvation. The book of Acts records the evangelization of a Samaritan city by Philip, the "many Samaritan villages" by the apostles Peter and John, and the great missionary expeditions of the apostle Paul. Tradition claims that the apostle Thomas went to India. When Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese explorer, arrived in India about 1500 AD, he discovered the church of the "Thomas" Christians. In the early centuries of the Christian Church, missionaries were active in Asia. Nestorians planted their crosses right across Asia even as far as Peking. But severe persecutions left only a remnant of believers.

Missionaries went to traditional cultures that almost without exception were opposed to the Gospel. Conversions did not come easily. The people the missionaries tried to reach had their own religions. Temples, shrines, and priests were everywhere. Food may have been scarce, but there was no scarcity of gods and goddesses and incense to burn to them. Yet there were successes. The greatest advance for the Christian church in Asia was in the period from 1789 to 1914. Missionary commitment in the Roman Catholic Church was resumed on a large scale under strong papal leadership. The evangelical awakenings in Protestantism inspired the formation of voluntary missionary societies for the support of recruiting and sending missionaries. When the twentieth century began, Christians (U.N. definition) in Asia numbered 20,770,300 and in mid-1999 they totaled 295,371,000. A survey of the Church in every country in Asia is impossible, of course. Hence I will only focus on India and China.

### **India**

With the arrival of the twentieth century, Queen Victoria still reigned over an empire "where the sun never set." India was her largest domain. Its colonial rulers put a British stamp on its soul. When Malcolm Muggeridge first went to India in 1924, British rule seemed firmly established; the Viceroy was one of the world's great potentates; little Indian boys were taught at school that their country was torn with conflicts and prostrate until the English landed on its shores. A paradoxical effect of British educational policies was the stimulant of a renaissance of Hindu culture as well as spreading of the knowledge of liberal philosophers, providing another source for Indian nationalism. The leaders for nationalist movements were recruited from the Western-educated ranks. Yet before World War II all seemed well. When Winston Churchill was King George VI's Principal Secretary of State, he said that he had no intention of presiding over the dissolution of the Empire. It was also a time of church growth. Between 1911 and 1941, the total number of Christians doubled from about four million to about eight million. The Roman Catholic Church doubled in membership and the indigenous priesthood increased twofold. The proportion of Christians advanced to a little more than 2 percent of the population. Some of the growth was through birth but the largest part from conversions, mainly from the lower castes, the Untouchables, and the animistic tribes in

the hills and jungles. The mass movement into the Church from these underprivileged groups has been one of the striking features in Indian mission work, presenting both a problem and an opportunity. Most of these depressed classes became members of Protestant churches. Efforts were made to improve the lot of these converts who had suffered from age-long servitude and degradation. Christian schools provided intellectual and moral improvement. Another contribution of the Christian faith to India was the enhancement of the condition of women. Yet the Church faced much opposition. Hindu nationalism made a change of religion difficult. The perennial problems of the size of the country, its many languages, its debilitating climate also hindered mission outreach.

On August 15, 1947, India and Pakistan gained their independence. On September 27, 1947, just six weeks after gaining independence, the Church of South India was founded. This new church, a union of former Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational Churches, became eventually a source of inspiration for the World Council of Churches and for union negotiations elsewhere in the world. The Christian Reformed Church sent missionaries to South India in 1950, but the work already folded in 1954. The year 1999 saw a marked increase in persecution. Hindu extremists murdered an Australian Baptist missionary and his two sons. Indian Christians continue to be targeted by Hindu extremists. A recent independent citizens' commission harshly rebuked Indian officials for making no attempt to halt violence against Christians.

## **China**

China's twentieth century history is a story of foreign wars, invasions, and an internal revolution greater than in any other nation. In spite of difficulties, as far as figures were obtainable, the proportion of Christians in China rose from one half percent in 1914 to one percent in about 1941. The Roman Catholic church experienced strong growth. In 1926, six Chinese were consecrated bishops in St. Peter's in Rome by the Pope himself. Although Roman Catholics were in China much longer than the Protestants and greatly outnumbered them, the latter exerted by far the largest nationwide influence. Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), Kuomintang statesman, provisional President of the Republic of China 1911-12 and President of the Southern Chinese Republic, was largely inspired by Christianity. He owed most of his formal education to Christian schools in Hawaii, Canton, and Hong Kong. He was a baptized Christian, a Protestant, and at one time considered entering the Christian ministry. Although he was not exclusively indebted to the Christian faith for his political convictions, he did confess to the importance of his Christian upbringing in forming his views. The overwhelming majority of Christians prominent in the government of the Republic was Protestant. By 1914, Christianity had an increasingly large share in education. Christian institutions of learning pioneered in medicine, nursing, agriculture, and forestry. The Mass Education Movement, which began under the auspices of the Young Men's Christian Association, was led by Dr. Yen, a Christian. Chinese Christian evangelicals showed remarkable spiritual vitality. In 1938, a World Missionary Conference was held at Tambaram, near Madras (now Tamil Nadu) in India. The strongest delegation was young Chinese.

Unfortunately, secular people also reached the hearts and souls of the Chinese. Not all education was Christian. The foundation for communism was laid by the visits of the American educator, John Dewey, and the atheist British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, in the 1920s. The enthusiasm shown in student circles for their bland secular philosophies was transferred to the more exciting and demanding version of Marxism taught by Mao. Mao Tse Tung (Mao ZeDong) developed his own blueprint for the development of China while fighting the Kuomintang. When he and his accomplices were victorious in 1949, they tried to put their ideology into practice. Mao became China's idol and his ideas were canonized. In the 1950s, China established the Catholic Patriotic Association and, for the Protestants, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. In 1966, at the height of his personality cult, he loosed his little-red-book-waving Red Guards to destroy the Christian church. The Protestant Nanking seminary was closed, along with all churches. The Bureau of Religious affairs was abolished, public worship outlawed, church buildings confiscated, and Christian pastors and leaders systematically crushed. Western Christians smuggled Bibles into China. Active persecution of the Church ended with the death of Mao ( 1976) and the subsequent downfall of the Gang of Four in 1978. Religion made a vigorous comeback in the moral vacuum left by Maoism. The state controlled Three-Self church, which claims to speak for all Protestants, was re-established in that year, and two years later the Nanking Seminary was reopened. Six regional seminaries were established to train younger ministers. Students also were sent abroad, some to the Toronto School of Theology, to study contemporary Western religious thought. Millions of Christians worship in unregistered house churches. In 1992, the Chinese state-run press noted that "the church played an important role in the change" in Eastern Europe (the downfall of communism) and warned, "If China does not want such a scene to be repeated in its land, it must strangle the baby while it is still in the manger." (A reference to Herod seeking to kill the Christ child.) Since 1994, hundreds of local house churches have been closed and their leaders fined, imprisoned, and tortured. But the Church in China could not be crushed. According to some estimates there are some 40 to 50 million Christians. Some even estimate up to 100 million. At any rate, there are more Christians in China than in France or England.

The best known mission society in China was the China Inland Mission (CIM), founded by Hudson Taylor in 1865. By 1900, it was already the largest Protestant society working in China, with 600 missionaries. It suffered the heaviest losses in the Boxer rebellion. By 1927, its missionaries numbered 1,200. The Canadian mission work began in 1888 as the first large party to go to China and was escorted in a torch-lit, hymn-singing parade down the main street of Toronto. The mission work ended in 1959, when the last Canadian missionary slipped quietly across the border out of "Red China." In 1920, the Christian Reformed Church sent its first overseas missionaries to China, and for thirty years CRC missionaries accomplished much for the expansion of God's Kingdom. The last CRC missionary left China in 1950.

The Church is advancing in India and China. In Korea, the Philippines, and Indonesia, the Church also shows signs of spiritual vitality. The growth of the small Church in Japan is slow but steady. But wherever the Kingdom of God moved forward in Asia, the advance has been through storms of adversity.

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