

# INTERPRETER

— ∞ —  
A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 2 · 2012 · Pages 35-39

## **Christian Faith in Contemporary China**

Louis C. Midgley

Offprint Series

© 2012 *Interpreter Foundation*



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

The goal of the Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided on this site are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication. Visit us at [MormonInterpreter.com](http://MormonInterpreter.com)

# CHRISTIAN FAITH IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

*Louis C. Midgley*

Review of Lian Xi. *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China*. New Haven: Yale University, 2010. 352 pp., with glossary, bibliography and index. \$45.00 (hardcover).

On 30 August 2010 leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced that “a series of high-level meetings” had taken place in Salt Lake City between representatives of the Church “and an official from the People’s Republic of China” that are eventually “expected to lead to ‘regularized’ operations of the Church in China.”<sup>1</sup> For me this announcement was news that rivaled those unanticipated and providentially dramatic events allowing the building of an LDS temple in what was then East Germany, and later the preaching of the gospel in Eastern Europe and Russia, and the series of events promoting the stunning growth of the Church in sub-Saharan Africa. For those curious, as I am, about Christianity in China, *Redeemed by Fire* is a fine resource, though it is not, however, the only solid account of the stunning growth in Christian religiosity following the dramatic events that changed the face of China after World War II.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. See <http://newsroom.lds.org/article/church-in-talks-to-regularize-activities-in-china>.

2. Some of the literature on the amazing growth in Christian faith in China has been produced by journalists. For example, recently a sympathetic non-Christian Chinese journalist, Liao Yiwu, published a wonderful collection of interviews with those whose faith survived brutal persecution, as well as testimonies of those who, in search of a moral anchor in the emptiness of the

Many years ago I suffered through a dreadfully dull survey course on Chinese history. It was only later when I encountered Chinese graduate students at Brigham Young University that my interest in their immense, diverse, and wonderful homeland was aroused. The climax of this experience was the reaction of some of those students (while we were reading together Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*) to the series of events that took place in and around Tiananmen Square (beginning on 15 April and ending on 4 June 1989). Subsequently I was able to travel to China, where my wife and I saw some evidence of large congregations of thriving Christian communities in cities the name of which I could not even locate on a map. This was my first direct introduction to what was for me an entirely unexpected and quite amazing growth of Christianity in contemporary China.

In *Redeemed*, Lian Xi points out that Christianity first reached China in AD 635 when Alopen (A'huoben), a Syrian monk, reached what is now Xi'an, the capital of the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907), with Nestorian (aka Dyophysite) Christian faith.<sup>3</sup> But the primary focus of Lian's account is

---

affluence found in contemporary China, have become Christians. This remarkable collection of interviews is now available in English under the title *God is Red: The Secret Story of How Christianity Survived and Flourished in Communist China*, trans. by Wenguang Huang (New York: HarperCollins, 2011). See also a solid scholarly study edited by Nikka Rukanen and Paulos Huang, entitled *Christianity and Chinese Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010). This is a collection of nineteen essays on a range of topics, each followed by a valuable response from other scholars. See also David A. Palmer, Glen Shiva and Philip L. Wickeri (eds.), *Chinese Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). For a massive general survey of varieties of religious devotion in contemporary China, see Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011). (There is a brief mention of Latter-day Saints in China on pp. 349–50 of this study of the politics, cultural movements and dramatic events, beginning in 1989, that examines the way in which religion, broadly understood, has challenged secular Chinese ideology.

3. See Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), which is fine historical survey by a distinguished scholar, beginning with the initial arrival of Diophysite Christian faith to China.

the phenomenal growth of Christianity in China after Mao Zedong established the Peoples Republic of China in 1949, and especially when Chairman Mao launched the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). When this massive effort to purge it began in 1966, “Christianity in China was facing a bleak, and uncertain future: having been abruptly weaned from Western missions, it now found itself in the hands of an enraged state” (p. 204). After having survived seasons of “warlordism, banditry, foreign invasion, civil war, and the attending miseries,” Christians in China were faced with “the hostilities of an atheist government” (p. 204)—that is, a regime intent on clamping down on Christian missions and churches. But wide varieties of Christian faith not only survived, they prospered.

Lian estimates that currently there are 17 million Roman Catholics and 50 million Protestants in China (p. 3), while others place the number of Christians in China as high as 108 million.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the real numbers, since some have argued that conservative Protestants have overestimated their numbers,<sup>5</sup> the growth of Christianity, which is believed to have numbered less than a million in 1949, is unparalleled in history, even if we consider Constantine’s transforming of Christianity into the official cult of the Roman Empire. The Christian faith’s stunning growth in China has essentially taken place without foreign management and control, and in very difficult situa-

4. See especially the report entitled “Spotlight on China” prepared by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, which is available at <http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Global-Christianity-china.aspx>, with the estimates of Christians of various stripes found in “Appendix C: Methodology for China,” [http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious\\_Affiliation/Christian/ChristianityAppendixC.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Christian/ChristianityAppendixC.pdf).

5. See Mark Ellis, “China Survey Reveals Fewer Christians than some Evangelicals Want to Believe,” ASSIST News Service (ANS), 1 October 2007, available at <http://www.assistnews.net/STORIES/2007/s07100011.htm>, also Mark Ellis, “New China Survey reveals fewer Christians than most estimates,” *Christian Examiner*, November 2007, available at [http://www.christianexaminer.com/Articles/Articles%20Nov07/Art\\_Nov07\\_17.html](http://www.christianexaminer.com/Articles/Articles%20Nov07/Art_Nov07_17.html)

tions.<sup>6</sup> American tourists in China, if they are not looking for a place to eat a hamburger or souvenirs, may actually see in Chinese cities large churches probably affiliated with either the state-approved and regulated Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement or the Patriotic Catholic Association. And if they ask a few questions, they are likely to learn about the unregulated “house churches” as well.

Lian describes the “evangelistic fervor, biblical literalism, charismatic ecstasies, and fiery eschatology not infrequently tinged with nationalistic exuberance” (p. 3) that are currently found even among the officially recognized and regulated Chinese Christian churches and especially in the house churches. The recent growth of Christianity does not seem to have been the work of, or even managed by, foreigners. It seems to have been, instead, an essentially indigenous movement among the faithful. “Will popular Christianity,” Lian asks at the end of his book, “inspire a violent uprising?” His conclusion: “Given the overwhelming power of the centralized state in contemporary China, there is little likelihood in the near future that a fragmented, however spirited, Christian movement will foment popular revolt” (p. 246). As interesting as his speculation about what he calls “the long run” might be, what interest me the most about his book are his accounts of some truly amazing and quite unanticipated events that have taken place in the last four decades in China.

I have longed to understand the peoples and their ways in that ancient land. I am confident that other Latter-day Saints are also concerned about the future of the covenant people of God in China. I believe that *Redeemed by Fire* provides some

---

6. See older studies by David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2006), and see also Tony Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, updated ed. (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2006). Lambert provides figures (in three appendices, see pp. 255–77) that chart the growth of Christian faith province by province beginning in 1900 through 2002–2005.

useful information on Christian faith in China and, hence, I recommend it to Latter-day Saints anxious, as I am, for a better understanding of the way the winds are blowing.

*Louis Midgley (PhD, Brown University) is an emeritus professor of political science at Brigham Young University. Dr. Midgley has had an abiding interest in the history of Christian theology. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on Paul Tillich, the then-famous German-American Protestant theologian and political theorist/religious-socialist activist. Midgley also studied the writings of other influential Protestant theologians such as Karl Barth. Eventually he took an interest in contemporary Roman Catholic theology, and was also impacted by the work of important Jewish philosophers, including especially Leo Strauss and his disciples.*

