

Christianity's Place in the New Asia

By GARY MacEON

(Gary MacEon has just completed thirteen months of travel around the world. He covered more than 50,000 miles and visited seven countries of Europe, fifteen of Africa, thirteen of Asia and two of Latin America. He returns with material for two books, one on Africa, one on the place of the Christian in today's world. He has summed up his major reactions in a series of five articles of which this is the fifth.)

Asia today differs from Africa in one basic respect. The penetration of Africa by Western culture has, I believe, reached a point of no return. Some African leaders talk of creating a civilization based on indigenous African values. That such exist I do not deny. However, the destruction of the traditional society has been so extensive, and the current dependence on outside sources for education and material development is so complete, that what will emerge can at most be a sub-culture of the West.

In Asia on the contrary, the tide of Western civilization that seemed destined as recently as a generation ago to sweep across the entire globe, has been turned back before it had made more than a dent. Today the native cultures are in full counter-movement. All the new nations, as well as the old ones which have emancipated themselves (like China) from Western tutelage, are canceling the advantages earlier accorded the languages, commerce and customs of the West.

Even Japan, in its calculating way, is withdrawing from the orgy of westernization which marked the Occupation years.

One sees the change on television. A current serial glorifies a group of samurai warriors who waited long years in a secret brotherhood to avenge the defeat of their lord. One can measure it in religion. Christianity leaped forward immediately after the war. Now comes the turn of the "new religions" combining elements from Buddhism, Shintoism and other traditional beliefs.

Our future world society will not be based on a triumphant Western civilization, as our forefathers anticipated. It seems destined for a long time to remain multi-cultural. Unlike the past, however, when different cultures inhabited separate parts of the globe with only minimal inter-penetration, the future promises a relatively open world permitting and encouraging the exchange of people and ideas. The wall of separation around the Soviet empire is already crumbling. That around the Chinese cannot long stand.

The civilization of the West was a product of Christianity. But by the time that the Western powers set out in the nineteenth century to dominate Asia and open it to their commerce, they had officially ceased to be Christian. In addition, Christianity had become so divided as to be in the view of many an embarrassment. They sought to export their trinkets, accordingly, and later their Coca-Cola, as though these were the essential values they had to offer. The missionaries followed on their own account, the Western powers welcoming them only when they could use them to promote their material ends.

It seems to me that in the coming period of relations on a level of equality

between the cultures of East and West, Christianity is destined to play a far more important role. Japan has, for example, more than 15,000 students in 21 Catholic colleges and universities and ten times as many in protestant institutions of higher learning. Christian missionaries made an immense and heroic contribution to the feeding, settlement, education and integration of the refugees from China who more than doubled the population of Hong Kong since 1948. Hong Kong is today the West's main point of contact with China. Its people, educated largely in Christian schools, will be the interpreters of the West to China when dialogue is renewed. The number of converts to Christianity today is not insignificant, especially in Hong Kong and Singapore. But the immediate task of Christians in the new Asia, in India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Japan and elsewhere, is less to make Christians than to make Christianity meaningful to the cultures of Asia. It is a slow, exacting grind, with few visible rewards for the dedicated men and women engaged in it.

In many places it can be conducted only with difficulty. Restrictions on the entry of missionaries are the order of the day. Restrictions on their activities are common. Governments are constantly more inclined to take over mission schools and charitable institutions. Development of nationalistic attitudes reduces the opportunity for contact with the people to whom the missionary seeks to offer the Gospel message.

All of this, nevertheless, calls not for a decrease but for an increase in the number of missionaries. It also compels more specialized and intensive training. Today's missionary in Asia needs increasingly to be a scholar both in his own culture

and in that of his adopted home. Already, all Catholic missionaries to Japan spend two years on arrival in a specialized language school, return frequently for further courses.

On the shelves of a rectory in a mountain town some hundreds of miles north of Tokyo, I found alongside Saint Thomas the words of Maurice Teilhard de Chardin, James Joyce, Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre and Jack Kerouac. "I have to keep up with the people I meet," the French-Canadian pastor explained. "The newest books are translated into Japanese as they appear in the United States and Europe. Not a few equate the Church know of us only through such biased sources."

The specific task of these missionaries is to strengthen and deepen the spiritual life of the tiny Christian minorities, and to develop among them vocations to the religious life and the priesthood. The apostles to non-Christians will be largely indirect, centers of learning to familiarize the East with the culture of the West and the West with that of the East, re-interpretation of the Christian message and Christian worship in terms more meaningful to their people.

Catholic and Protestant missionaries here find themselves with very similar terms of reference. To make their work fruitful, they will have to coordinate it, according to Father Joseph J. Spa, specialist in oriental philosophy and languages and Japan's leading Catholic sociologist. "The attainment of Church unity, at least to a degree that takes away the scandal of division," he says, "is a requisite for the further penetration of the message of Christ."

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Woman's Role in World

Bombay — (NC) — Religious values in secular society and women's contribution to universal solidarity were the subjects of two talks by an American woman here during the sessions of the 38th International Eucharistic Congress.

Alba Zizamia, assistant director of the National Catholic Welfare Conference Office for United Nations Affairs, said "secular society must and does seek an ethic. It accepts religious values if they are expressed in terms it understands. It does so readily when they are not labeled religious but are translated into the current terminology of sociology and

psychology or some other discipline. . . .

"It does not hesitate to enlist the moral influence of religion to further certain of its programs, especially those related to human welfare. And we know that there are many states which, like India, invite the cooperation of all religions in building the common good," she said.

Miss Zizamia also discussed "Women's Contribution to Universal Solidarity in the World Society."

"Women are the pivot on which all economic and social

development turns. In fact, there can be no such development without the active involvement of women at all levels from countryside and village to national ministries and planning boards," she noted.

"The progress made in the past 20 years toward equal recognition of the rights of women and their role in a dynamic world society has a significance, that far outweighs any narrow feminist or anti-feminist concerns. It is demanded by the very nature of the common good."

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Liturgist Resigns Parish

St. Paul — (RNS) — Father Alfred C. Longley, 51, an outspoken leader of liturgical reform, has resigned from the pastorate of St. Jude's Catholic church in suburban Mantoloking and is considering invitations to teach in the field of liturgy at several colleges.

The priest, who instituted changes in worship at two parishes and a hospital of the St. Paul Archdiocese before they were generally accepted elsewhere, said Archbishop Leo Binz has granted him a leave of absence "to evaluate the offers and choose among them."

Last July, Father Longley became embroiled in a controversy with funeral directors and some fellow priests when he proposed use of wooden caskets, no viewing of the body and a Bible vigil service instead of recitation of the rosary at wakes.

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