

China and the Reformed Faith

This is the first of two articles on China.

Having twice taught at the China Reformed Theological Seminary in Taiwan and twice taught week-long classes in mainland China, I can in no way pose as an expert on Chinese Christianity, not by a long shot. Yet I do have some impressions I'd like to share. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, Mao declared that Christianity had been eradicated from China. Today there are reported to be as many as 60 to 100 million mainland Chinese in the "illegal" house churches. According to one of my students from a Shanghai house church, the Reformed movement within the house churches is "huge." By all accounts, the three most popular and influential preachers among the Chinese are all Reformed. Hold that thought.

Jane Dawson, in her biography of *John Knox*, argues that the indigenous Scottish notions of clan loyalty, of bonding and kinship, provided a "conceptual world" which "helped covenant thinking (to) set down deep roots that allowed the flowering of a distinctive Scottish covenanting tradition and identity" (297). Note what is being said. A given culture may have characteristics that facilitate the receiving of certain gospel principles. In the case of Scotland (and North African Semitic peoples in the classical period), it was the concept of covenant. This leads one to wonder, might there be characteristics of Chinese culture that make it particularly receptive to certain biblical ideas? Or even certain distinctives of Reformed Christianity?

The 19th century missionaries found China to be hard soil. Because China, unlike sub-Saharan Africa, had an ancient literary culture and centuries of cultural continuity and cultural memory, the Chinese resisted the first offers of the gospel. Ethnic cultural pride had much to do with this resistance. Ironically, because the Chinese Communists during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960's plowed up the cemeteries throughout China, the grip of ancestral worship was loosened, if not broken. The centuries-old sense of filial obligation to pray for one's departed parents and ancestors in order to facilitate their well-being in the next world was dissipated. By promoting no religion, the Communists opened the door for a new religion. Christianity stepped into the gap. At last the diligent labors of generations of missionaries began to bear fruit. Their converts, now indigenous believers, spread the gospel among their neighbors, resulting in the thriving church that we see today. Still, why is Reformed Christianity flourishing? Let me suggest three reasons that stand out to this novice observer.

Culture of wisdom

Traditional Chinese culture highly esteems wisdom. The Confucian scholar, the teacher, the wise man are all revered. Historic Reformed Christianity is a wisdom religion. It esteems the ministry of the word. It encourages the careful study of God's word as indeed does the biblical wisdom literature (e.g. wisdom psalms such as Pss 1, 8, 19, 119, etc; Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of

Solomon). It says, “O how I love your law” (Ps 119:97). It meditates on God’s word day and night (Ps 1:2). Reformed Christianity is famous for its emphasis on deep theological study, careful expository preaching, and thoughtful biblical content in its songs, prayers, and in its administration of the sacraments. A wisdom culture like China’s is natural soil for the growth of Reformed Christianity.

Love of beauty

Many generations of writing Chinese characters led to the development of a culture of aesthetic nuance, of balance and proportion, of precision and accuracy. Illustrating manuscripts, writing poetry, and other artistic disciplines show a concern for carefulness with respect to beauty. It is no accident that Asians (broadly considered) have embraced the classical music canon with enthusiasm, often dominating recitals everywhere from community parlors to Carnegie Hall. Historic Reformed worship shares a similar concern. The traditional hymnal features the very best of religious lyrics with contributions from the outstanding theologians, ministers, and lay people of the Christian era. Its music includes the compositions of the outstanding composers of the western Christian tradition, including Bach, Handel, Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms, Haydn, Mendelssohn, and so on. Whereas contemporary evangelical worship not infrequently features untried and frankly mediocre lyrics and music, the traditional Presbyterian hymnal is impressive in its aesthetic quality, a feature not lost on beauty-sensitive Chinese.

Emotional discipline

Emotional reserve is characteristic in traditional Chinese culture. Emotions are held in check. Passions are guarded. Respectful and courteous behavior is maintained at all times. One’s feelings are not to be inflicted upon others. So also historic Reformed Christianity encourages emotional discipline. Why? Because emotional upheavals will undermine the ministry of the word. Both plunging despair and euphoric excitement will make focus on the word of God difficult. The deepest emotions are experienced by Calvinists. Yet typically there is reserve in their public expression. Reformed Christianity has resisted the emotional excesses of the fourth century Donatists, the Reformation era Anabaptists and Quakers, and the extreme sectors of the 20th century charismatic movement.

For all these reasons, Reformation Protestantism in Asia generally and China specifically may have a leg up on both other religions (like Islam) and other denominations, especially the Pentecostals and the more emotion-based forms of Christianity. Its “conceptual world” may favor our distinctives. The soil of Latin America and Africa *may* be more hospitable to the Pentecostals than to the Presbyterians. Yet given our “success” in Korea, where Presbyterian numbers are huge, and our growth in China, it may be that missionary efforts of Reformed and Presbyterian churches in China and the greater Asian context, given continuing faithful proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, will bear much fruit in the years ahead.

Terry L. Johnson is the senior minister of Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah, GA. He is author of various books, including *Leading in Worship*, *Worshipping with Calvin*, *Serving with Calvin*, *The Identity and Attributes of God*, and *Who Am I? What the Bible teaches about Christian identity*.

TAGS: Christianity and China, Chinese culture, Reformed faith in China