

REVIEW OF JESUS IN BEIJING BY DAVID AIKMAN

by

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*Jesus in Beijing*¹ is one man's analysis of the historical, cultural, and social impact of Christianity on the modern nation of China. The author, David Aikman, is one of only a few Western individuals that possess the qualifications to attempt such an analysis. He is a professional American journalist who has spent thirty years observing, reporting on, and analyzing China; he has traveled extensively in China and maintained personal contact with many of the figures in China's unofficial church of whom he writes; he is also an evangelical Christian.

The thesis of his book is that after sixty years of repression by communist Chinese authorities, the Church in China has not only survived, but thrived and expanded dramatically in size and influence. He validates this claim with careful research, first-hand interviews with Chinese church leaders and private individuals, and official documentation gleaned from public news and governmental sources. He shows that Christians are now appearing in every strata of Chinese society including business, government, the arts, the military, education, and politics. This grass-roots expansion of Christianity is producing a transformative effect on Chinese society from the inside out.

The author carefully examines the growth of Christianity by chronicling its history, beginning with Nestorian missionaries in the sixth century, Catholic missionaries in the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, and finally by Protestant

¹ David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power*, paperback edition (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2006).

missionaries in the nineteenth century. When communism drove out all foreign missionaries from China in the mid-twentieth century there were less than four million Catholic and Protestant Christians in China. After sixty years, almost entirely through indigenous efforts, Christianity has exploded exponentially; credible estimates place the number of Christians as high as 100 million – nearly one-tenth of China's population.

This is not the only change taking place in China, however. China is experiencing change on many levels and in many ways; the growth of Christianity is closely tied to other transformations that are occurring simultaneously during this tumultuous period of its history. New economic opportunities are appearing for China's masses; as well, there is increasing intellectual openness due to the greater availability of information from the outside world. Although the nation has abandoned its commitment to Mao's vision and version of Marxism-Leninism, the Communist Party still exercises absolute control over government and media. However, the collapse of Maoism has left a moral vacuum that Christianity is beginning to fill. While the government's official opposition to Christianity remains unchanged and there have been sporadic outbreaks of official persecution against Christian leaders right up to the present, these measures have been ineffectual in limiting the growth of Christianity among the people of China.

These facts cause the author to postulate that a new worldview is arising among the peoples of China, which is distinct from the Confucianism and Maoism of its past, a worldview which is distinctly Christian. In a chapter entitled "China's Christian Future?" the author explores exactly what this might mean. Although his opinions on this score are speculative to a certain degree, they are not fanciful. Furthermore, the author shows that regardless of the future

course chosen by China as a nation, the church in China will become a major source of Christian influence as the Western nations rapidly move into a post-Christian era.

Although this book offers us some tantalizing glimpses into the future of Christianity in China, one caution is in order: China does not yield so easily to comprehensive analysis. China is so vast both geographically and demographically, its civilized history is so ancient, its social conditions are so diverse, and its cultural perspective is so foreign to Western thinking that a complete picture of China is almost impossible to obtain. Although *Jesus In Beijing* has made a serious effort to be both objective and comprehensive, it only provides one man's perspective. Attempts by individual Westerners to explain China are often like the three blind men of India attempting to describe the elephant. This should lead us to exercise caution when we evaluate such treatments. Overall, the sane and restrained conclusions of the author are reasonable and worthy of consideration.