

# CATHOLICS AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN CHINA

CECC Roundtable September 17, 2004

Rayburn House 10:00-11:30 a.m.

Testimony of Sister Janet Carroll

Senator Chuck Hagel, at a session of this Committee last June, astutely noted that “China’s future is also important to America’s future. It is in our interest to work broadly and deeply with the Chinese Government using all the bridges and opportunities available to us to help shape and ensure a democratic future for China.” [CECC Hearing – June, 4, 2004]

I would like to key my remarks here this morning to this challenge set before us by Senator Hagel – with the important caveat that I believe we must also work “broadly and deeply” with the Chinese people towards these noble ideals. The efforts in the field of social services and charitable works of compassion and mercy that have been very courageously and patiently initiated by religious believers [including Catholics and Christians of all persuasions in China today] – in the past decade and more, call upon us all to cross many bridges and reach out in solidarity and support.

I have made available to this Committee through the Staff, a packet of materials for anyone here who wishes to have evidence of this development [albeit only a small sample] of Social Services programs and projects which are slowly, but steadily contributing to the emergence in China of a Civil Society – embryonic as it may appear at present.

## **The Contemporary Context for Catholics in China: Serving the People**

In the past decade or so, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of Communism as a credible ideology worldwide, the Openness and Reform Policy pursued by China, has led to spectacular economic growth and development. Some observers [including David Aikman in his new book *Jesus in Beijing*; and the eminent China historian Daniel Bays, at the Bartlett Lecture given at Yale University last spring] - think that Christianity in China, at least Protestant Christianity, may well be on the verge of entering its "golden age." For the first time in their history, Chinese Christians had to find their own self-sufficiency, employ their own initiatives, and choose their own leadership.

However you choose to construe developments in the past quarter century in China, from the perspective of the Churches – [1979 – 2004] - signs of renewed opportunities for service to society and the propagation of Christianity are certainly abundant today. However, a maxim you should always bear in mind when thinking about China goes something like this:

*"Everything you hear about China is true...at some time and in some place;  
but NOT true in another time or another place".*

To fully understand the status of the Catholic Church in China within the State apparatus, to say nothing of the vicissitudes of the way religious policies are implemented by the Beijing Regime [which has recently reverted to stricter enforcement of rules and regulations for religious organizations]- is well beyond the limitations of our time here this morning. In the Q&A period I will be glad to respond to specific questions you may have about these and other issues.

By way of addressing the subject of this Roundtable today, I would like to offer some contextual perspectives on the engagement of Chinese Catholics and Church-sponsored social ministries in recent years. In nearly three astonishing decades since the opening of the Churches, Christian believers in China have struggled to re-invigorate and extend local communities of Faith, to restore and re-build not only churches, but seminaries and convents, to train new generations of leadership, and subsequently to establish centers for social and medical ministries to the society; - all with only the barest of resources – but with vast stores of enduring courage and commitment. As it continues this journey - even greater challenges are before the Church to take its witness out beyond the sanctuary and into the public square. Chinese Christians are challenged to take up the immense task of giving prophetic witness and service to the rapidly developing and radically changing Society that is China today - an economic and political power already playing a major role in the world community.

As cultural and social traditions evolve, Christianity is poised to provide new ethical and moral foundations for the emergence of a modern Civil Society and State. While there is cause for caution and concern among friends of the Chinese people and the Church in China, at the same time, there are unparalleled opportunities for Christianity, to once again offer valuable contributions to the Chinese people, by sponsoring medical and social projects and educational programs (if not yet formal academic institutions) – not on the scale that existed during the modern missionary period [1850 – 1950]; – but commensurate with the material resources and human capabilities of the Chinese Local Church.

When Daniel Bays spoke at Yale last spring he addressed prospects for Chinese Christians, albeit constrained by limited human rights and religious freedoms, to make significant contributions to the up-building of Civil Society in China. In another lecture entitled “China in Transition,” by Roderick MacFarquhar [Professor of History and Political Science at Harvard and one of the world’s most respected China scholars] this topic of civil society was also addressed, thought interestingly, he never mentioned Religion as such. In an otherwise very insightful and creative analysis of “whither China...?” at this juncture in its quest for modernity, MacFarquhar presented a scenario of the crisis China faces in the near term – as it struggles to transition to what he called “a new transnational Chinese civilization”. His remarks pointed to important issues to bear in mind in considering the prospects for Chinese Christians, and indeed all religious believers in China today, to contribute to the emergence of a viable Civil Society.

While MacFarquhar seemed somewhat pessimistic about developments in China in the near term, Dan Bays projected a rather positive view of the potential for Chinese Christians, in particular the new and more educated entrepreneurs in urban settings - [ whom Bays identified as “ a significant sub-set of the emergent middle class”] - to play a catalyzing role in this crucial transition. Looking from the perspective of Catholics in China today, and reflecting on Catholicism’s call to “prophetic servanthood” on behalf of the common good and well-being of the peoples, there are several possibilities that present themselves which just might reconcile these contrasting views.

A contemporary Jesuit China scholar, [Benoit Vermander SJ - Director of the Ricci Institute in Taipei, Taiwan] - has elucidated the challenge and opportunity for Christianity in China today - as presenting Christianity as a living interlocutor with Chinese culture – a force capable of contributing to the redefinition of Chinese Culture, that both the leadership and the people require in order to re-interpret their history – and ultimately rid themselves of the disappointments and disillusionments of their past attempts to make the transition to become a modern Nation State. [The MacFarquhar Lecture also dealt with this issue of a revised understanding of their history by the Chinese themselves]. Only then will they be enabled to assume roles of influence and authority appropriate to a people with a civilization and culture– rich with gifts and insights essential for the achievement of prosperity, justice and peace for themselves and the global community.

New China – the Peoples Republic of China – already in the latter half of its first century of existence – urgently needs a creative re-invention of its traditional value system and moral categories; and to employ new interpretive models by which to make sense of the past, find common ground in the present and develop a sense of shared purpose and meaning for the future. On a mutually acceptable basis of equality, reciprocity and respect, Christianity can offer much to China in its quest for a “new spiritual civilization” - [a term now even used by the Chinese regime to galvanize the masses under the rubric of the United Front.]

This new spiritual civilization is perhaps another way of describing the new transnational civilization”, which MacFarquhar noted was MAO TzeTung’s visionary ideal from the early years of the Communist revolution which the Chinese people tragically failed to realize due to Mao’s turn to brutal dictatorship.

After some twenty years of the Reform and Openness policies – initiated by DENG following Mao’s death in 1976 - China still stands in need of a second generation of transformation ... ideally, one that will be consistent with its culture, virtues and values. Among these harmony and right relationships are central to the Chinese psyche and must bear great weight in structuring a Civil Society in China. .

Regrettably, many Chinese Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, as well as other religious and quasi-religious movements ( like FaLunGong), are often sadly been in conflict with the political authorities - who like the emperors of the Dynastic era - continue to have an almost “sacral sense” of themselves as the final arbiters of China’s political and legal culture. While our Christian creeds and confession stress harmony and peace, sometimes our actions tend too much toward dissidence and confrontation – even if justified in principle and validly grounded in human and natural rights. While bearing in mind the Gospel admonition to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s” - in China we also need to respect relationships and observe Rites – that is the manner and the way things are done; these dynamics and principles count every bit as much as the “Rights”, to which we in the West hold so tenaciously. It takes great patience and perseverance to remain in dialogue – while “seeking the common ground” [to quote the well respected Protestant sinologist Phillip Wickeri in his book by that title.]

### **A New Dialogue Between Religion and Society**

Those seeking to partner with China in pursuit of social goals, must be willing to listen and discern with sensitivity and respect; be able to tolerate frustrations and the ambiguities of living with constraints and limitations; and be people with a capacity to risk difficulties and misunderstandings. Only in this manner, can we seize and exploit the many opportunities that actually exist for religious believers to give witness to their beliefs and share their “good news” with the Chinese people, in a manner wholly appropriate and relevant to the culture and social ethos of the times.

This next point may seem a digression, but I believe it is very relevant to the subject of this discussion this morning. There are two important issues to bear in mind in this dialogue – both of words and actions: one is the need mutual respect between sovereign states; and the other is the moral weight attached to leading by example.

I find it lamentable that (under the present administration, the United States, increasingly tends to be very selective in choosing when to be domestically bound by international law in general, and human rights in particular. In Chinese terms this is known as “resisting intrusion into internal affairs.” Ironically, recent actions of the US Government in this regard have undercut the credibility of this country as the champion of internationally recognized human rights and freedoms.

I refer specifically to the failure of the USA to become signatory to several of the International Covenants and treaties on human rights and freedoms, and more regrettably to withdraw from those previously ascribed to. This seriously undermines confidence other weaker States may accord to the Rule of Law; and signals to the world that powerful leaders can withdraw from such obligations – as different leaders come and go.

This is a penchant that Communist Party leaders in China have been disposed for years - arbitrarily opting for rule by man, as opposed to the ideal of Rule by Law. It is ironic that the USA is now perceived as taking such a reprehensible stance in international affairs. The world stands sorely in need of moral leadership based on example, not on force. We cannot call others to adhere to international laws and covenants which we ourselves selectively disregard.

### **The Need for a New Social Ethic**

Today, the literally tens of millions of religious believers in China – including a growing number of young scholars, who have taken a keen interest in Christianity as a life philosophy and as an ethical and moral code, may succeed in re-imagining and re-creating a new Civil Society in China that can appropriately take up its rightful role in the global family of nations. These challenges towards which Christians in China need to direct their energies and resources, also suggest to those of us who are concerned about China's future and our own future in the global community, possibilities of reaching out in solidarity, supporting those in China who are struggling to rise to the occasion and seize the opportunity to minister to the social well-being of their own people – especially the poor and marginalized.

We all need to get beyond the headlines and sound bytes of the media and the overly simplistic approaches of some agencies in the USA – with their own agendas for China. The lived reality for Chinese people today is a far cry from what is reported or extrapolated from given events or incidents in the Media. There are numerous ways to partner with Christians in China. There are actually many areas of service open to expatriates – both in the fields of education and social and medical work. Both human and financial resources are in demand for supportive services in Church sponsored social and medical ministries, – as well as directly with such programs in the public domain. HIV/AIDs is a rampant and growing problem in China - one vastly under acknowledged by the authorities. Slowly government health ministries are starting to welcome training and assistance to prepare and equip themselves to deal with this pending tragedy of already crisis proportions.

### **Responses from the Church**

Regarding the government's response to initiatives from the Catholic Church in the field of Social Service, I have included in the packet of materials submitted, a brief memo – addressing some of the concerns which may be on the minds of the committee members. [cf. Memo of the Director, Xian CSSC]. In sum, it notes that as long as local governmental policies, procedures, and requirements are carefully complied with, activities and programs of civil service and for the social welfare of the people are welcomed and appreciated by the Chinese authorities.

In so far as there is coordination and/or cooperation with international contacts in these fields, there is usually closer supervision – especially regarding the role of foreign nationals in the projects and regarding use of funds received. Not surprisingly – when there are amenable relations between the authorities on both sides (Church and government) trust is established and things work smoothly.

## **Two areas affecting the integrity of the Church-sponsored programs:**

1. Services provided must be offered on objective and unbiased terms: [i.e. not as a cover for evangelization or other subjective interests] and be without inappropriate requirements or expectations of any reciprocity to the advantage of the service provider.
2. Social Service projects, especially medical services (hospitals and clinics) must comply with standards established by local health authorities: e.g. qualifications of professional staff, use of appropriate procedures and medicines, and adherence to acceptable standards of care, and so forth. Increasingly, especially in rural areas, some small church-run clinics have been closed due to failure to meet these standards.

[Interview with Dr. WU Gui Xian, Hebei/XianXian Catholic Diocese  
MBA Cand. In Hospital Administration at Pace Univ./NYC]

Developments in the Not-for-Profit and Non-Governmental Social Services Sector in China – as an integral part of the emergence of a Civil Society – have come a long way in barely a quarter of a century. This view is further validated if we acknowledge the absence of any semblance of a Civic Society in either the Dynastic or the Republican Eras, nor after the establishment of the Peoples' Republic in 1949. Therefore, little if any foundation exists upon which a Civic Society in China might be built – neither in China's past politico-social structures nor in the socio-cultural traditions of the Chinese people. Rather than decrying what is not yet, we might more generously assess all that has been accomplished by our Chinese brothers and sisters in initiating relevant works of social and civil service in their communities.

## **Challenges in the Near Term**

China's income disparity is worse than that of other Asian countries like South Korea, Japan and India – this despite the fact that under Mao ( between 1950 and 1980) China had achieved one of the most even distributions of wealth - with all boats rising together. For several years running, China has maintain economic growth at about 9 percent per annum. This has brought a level of wealth to urbanites and younger elites never dreamed of before, reflected in their choice housing, style of clothing, and tastes in food; as well as in less material ways such as education, entertainment and travel.

The dark side of China's new wealth really is a widening disparity between rich and poor continuing unabated. Luxury gated communities are surrounded by poorer shanty towns filled with illegal migrant workers and displaced citizens scraping by on US\$50 per month. Millions of Chinese are left unemployed from their abandoned unprofitable state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Rural poor continue to struggle to provide for their families with little more than a sixth grade education. Prostitution in cities has become one of the few ways that women with little or no education can eke out a living.

By contrast, some 70% of China's peoples still live in rural villages, where they are less touched by modern life and increasingly dependent on wealth trickling down from the cities. The average income inland is said to be only a third of that on the coast. This year the threat of 4-5% inflation has prompted authorities to try to damp down the economy, but only enough not to bring on a crash.

So eminent an expert in such matters as the President of the World Bank – at a Conference on Poverty Reduction last in May in Shanghai, warned China that the growing gap between the wealthy and progressive coastal provinces and the still generally poor interior is grist for widespread social instability – and threatens the undoing of all the social and material progress of this past decade. It would be hard to find a more dire and ominous threat to lay in the lap of China's leadership!.

There is a great irony in the fact that in the international market place, many concerns are expressed about China's overheated economy. Frequently, many US corporations and workers, especially those in unions, express fears and frustration with the impact of China's economic growth, not only on the global economy, but on the US domestic economy. We ought not to miss the point however, that the fate of hundreds of millions of ordinary working poor in China is also at issue. As cited in an article in the NY Times many credit China's vast numbers of migrant workers with that country's astonishing and prolonged economic growth. As they increasingly flood into urban regions, migrant workers add value to the economy. [NYT 9-12-04 Week in Review Pg. 5]. That is the good news. At the same time, these millions of migrant workers also add a tremendous burden of demands for social services upon the governmental sector – just when such social safety nets as had existed during the era of the centrally managed economy have been shredded to pieces.

The difficulty facing China's leaders is to provide these millions of migrant workers, and by extension their desperately poor families and dependents, with affordable housing, access to schooling, health care, legal protections and so forth. Obviously, social service agencies and organizations have a major and crucial role to play in helping to construct the social safety net required to meet these demands. As in other developing countries – and even in our own country - government turns to the voluntary and religious sector for assistance. Not unexpectedly, as is our common experience, governmental vis-à-vis non-governmental sector relationships are never as smooth and unambiguous as the situation would seem to warrant.

In sum, China is undergoing unparalleled economic growth bringing with it consequences that could lead to depression and disaster. The values of a structured socialism have receded and the differences between rich and poor, whether one speaks of individuals or of sectors of society, have surged. Westerners generally are concerned with individuals' rights, whereas traditionally, these have been limited in China, where the perceived welfare of the group – family, village, or society in general – has always had priority. Today, however, many observers generally agree that people in general, and the single individual, have never had more freedom in China. A person can be an atheist or a believer. The thing he/she must not do is to participate individually or within a group in activities that may in any way be seen as a threat to the power of the state.

### **Role of Non-profit (NPO) and Non-governmental (NGO) Organizations.**

Long gone is the “Iron Rice Bowl” era (circa 1950-80), when “Big Brother” took care of social welfare needs. China today is tending towards what some term a “small government, big community” system. Traditionally, Chinese normally cared for their family members and those within their “connections network” (guanxi) One rarely helped an acquaintance, let alone a total stranger. Charity and volunteerism were unknown concepts up until the past decade.

The NPO/NGO sector, including equivalent social and civil programs of the churches are increasingly necessary to bridging the socio-economic gaps between haves and have-nots. China rapidly adopted the Western capitalist model without acknowledging the important underpinnings of capitalist society: those Judeo-Christian principles which provided a moral compass and safety net for the weak and disadvantaged. China's materialism - and we should be quick to acknowledge, western and American capitalist and materialist development, is increasingly based on a desire for profit in a moral vacuum, where anything goes. By contrast, corporate social responsibility (CSR) should rather play a key role in helping domestic and multinational for-profit businesses invest in China's social capital... and not just crassly exploit its vast means of production. In this context, China desperately needs to continue to develop its non-profit sector and find ways to encourage citizens to broaden the horizons of their civic responsibilities.

For Christian and other religious believers in China today, the current Chinese milieu may prove to be an opportune time to offer a re-evaluation of Chinese society and to work towards the articulation of a new social ethic and a new morality. While the Constitution of the PRC is a finely worded document espousing many virtuous ideals, and while the Party continually devises idealistic slogans to galvanize the masses for the common good, China's movement towards a "rule of law" and a return to a more equitable distribution of material wealth system has a long way to go. Religiously motivated organizations can make an important contribution.

China's government however, remains particularly sensitive to uncontrolled religious movements, although not without reason. In the nation's history politico-religious movements have more than once brought down a dynasty. Interestingly, many, if not most, Chinese Christians have no quarrel with the idea of government supervision of religion. What they object to is the abuse of this right of oversight. Nonetheless, while repression or harsh mistreatment of unregistered religious group leaders (Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, or Falun Gong) continues to take place, longtime observers find the situation improving. No longer ideologically anti-religious, many Chinese authorities increasingly see the social benefits of religion. But due to historical experiences, they are also sensitive, perhaps overly so, to the dangers real, imagined or imputed ) of unregulated ( even simply unregistered) religious movements,

## **Conclusion**

I'd like to conclude my statement with an challenging reflection by Aldo Caliari, Coordinator of the Rethinking Bretton Woods Project at the Center of Concern here in Washington DC:

"The human rights system envisioned in the mid twentieth century placed on nation-states the ultimate responsibility for the human rights of individuals in their jurisdiction. The system rested on the assumption that states have the power, resources and policy space to fulfill such a mission. Nowadays, while it is true that nation-states continue to bear this responsibility, it is important to recognize the changes in the global political economy that have taken place in the years since. These changes have significantly undermined the ability of nation-states, especially those within the developing world, to fulfill their human rights responsibilities."

We ought not to ignore these realities, as we look to China to develop a viable Civil Society in which the private, volunteer sector, including those of religious motivation, will thrive. Difficult as it is for us as Americans, we need large doses of humility and respect to abide within the legal framework prescribed for the work of Christian ministry and witness in China today – all the while working and praying with the Christians in China for a more favorable time. Those of good will and courageous and creative imagination will already find multiple opportunities to serve. Together all of us can be empowered to work for global justice in economic and social relations; for integrity and harmony with all facets of Creation; and towards a world of Peace and prosperity for God's people everywhere.

To return to Senator Hagel's admonition, cited at the opening of my statement, "It is in our interest to work broadly and deeply with the Chinese Government ( and the Chinese people) using all bridges and opportunities available to us..." I urge this committee to call upon our government to ensure that its actions, both bi-laterally and through its behavior in international finance and trade institutions, respect and support the ability of China, and many other developing countries, to fulfill their commitments under international human rights law.

Again, in Caliari words:

*"A significant forward move would be for the US to incorporate as a key dimension of its foreign policy the notion that international organizations and industrial countries are co-responsible for human rights violations in developing countries on whose domestic policy choices they have had (either by action or omission) an influence."*

David Lampton, President of the US-China Committee sums up my own counsel best:

*"Americans must balance the impulse to treat China as it is – with the foresight to recognize China for what it may become."* National Interest [Fall 2003]