Book Reviews


Gerda Wielander tackles an immense subject in Christian Values in Communist China, covering not only the ideological impact of Christianity on wider society but also its organizational development in charity work, online communities, and church congregations themselves. Writing from the “sinological tradition of text study complemented by data from extensive interviews” (19) in China and the United Kingdom, Wielander provides a very good overview of a sprawling subject, along with insightful perspectives as well as provocative arguments. Her book emphasizes the complexity of the topic and, published in 2013, shows the rapidly evolving terrain of Chinese Christianity as well. It is a wonderful primer on Chinese, specifically Protestant, Christianity.

Unlike American social-scientific analyses that home in on a delimited topic by applying a theoretical framework systematically throughout the argument, Wielander’s sinological approach instead covers far more ground as it seeks to present the “Chinese ‘side’” (20) by summarizing a broad variety of writings by Chinese Christians, most of whom were Protestant, inside and outside of China and by drawing on other scholarship, especially work by Feng Chongyi and Fredrik Fällman. Most chapters depend on secondary sources but also cite interviews with key actors (seventy in all); the majority of the data derive from her wide reading in academic studies, Christian publications, online journals, novels, and scholarly articles from important websites.

The introduction lays out the central themes of the book and provides helpful context for Christianity’s growth in China today. It discusses the legacy of foreign missions, the divisions between official and house churches, influential streams of contemporary theology such as New Calvinism, phenomena such as “cultural Christians,” the role of rationality, and the complex relationship between Christianity and the party. Chapter 2, “Christianity and China’s Moral Reconstruction,” summarizes various hypotheses on the roots of China’s moral
crisis, signified by the widespread sale of fake products and decline in social mores, and argues that Christian values positively influence business ethics and family relations. Citing Nanlai Cao’s work, it claims that a “quiet consensus” (38) has emerged about the reliability of Christians, although it is not clear whether the government or nonbelievers share this view. More controversially, Wielander asserts that “at an official level” (45) Christian ethics are viewed as dovetailing with the party’s “harmonious society” ideology, but it is not clear whether this refers to Christianity promoted by the state-sanctioned Protestant Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) association as love (43), which is unsurprising, or whether it also includes Christianity as faith.

In Chapter 3, “Christian Love and China’s ‘Harmonious Society,’” Wielander draws from a variety of Chinese Christian writings to argue controversially but plausibly that the Christian concept of love (愛) underpinned Hu Jintao’s “harmonious society” ideology (46–47). The parallel usages of 賴 in Chinese Christian writings and in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideology are certainly striking, but without direct evidence of Christian influence on official ideology the hypothesis is not fully proven. The chapter also furnishes an excellent overview of the late bishop and longtime TSPM association leader Ding Guangxun’s theology of love (48–51). Wielander makes a fascinating observation that Christianity improved marriages (61) because headstrong women grew to view husbands as pardonable sinners, and not because it fostered more egalitarian roles in the family.

Chapters 4 (“Charity, Christian Love in Action?”) and 5 (“Protestant and Online”) investigate how Christian values have taken organizational shape in charitable associations and in online communities. Wielander points out a contradictory situation: the party has welcomed religious participation in no area more than in social welfare, yet at the same time state regulations and a pietistic theological orientation limit the extent of Christian charities’ engagement (81). Viewed from 2016, after Xi Jinping’s crackdown on civil society and restrictive NGO regulations ensured that foreign ties and funding are ever more suspect, the situation before 2012, while strict, now appears much better. The call for religious participation in social welfare work is ironic, given that of the two organizations Wielander reviews, Amity Foundation and a small organization serving mentally disabled adults, one has little outward religious character and the other registered as a business rather than a religious welfare organization.

Chapter 5 offers an excellent introduction to the development of Chinese Protestantism online, especially the earliest Chinese Christian websites, some of which posted scholarly articles on law, theology, and other subjects while others aimed to address urgent church problems. Wielander also introduced