

## **Fellowship of the Ring Bearers: Rowan Cantuar's Ascent to Beijing 2006**

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Archbishop Rowan Williams' China trip this October is historic. It marks a critical juncture in both the Anglican Communion and the Church in China.

The likely meeting between Rowan Cantuar and Bishop K H Ting is important. Both bear the episcopal ring, the token of historic Christianity. Both are burdened with the care of the churches, facing crossroads that carry far-reaching implications. Bishop Ting is the surviving bishop of Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui, and indeed the only surviving bishop in the Protestant churches in China. He now leads more by spiritual influence rather than jurisdictional authority. Rowan Cantuar faces an Anglican Communion that is deep in crisis.

Rowan Williams' visit comes in an important time in the history of the Chinese church. The church and nation have become more confident at the turn of the new century. Williams will see firsthand – not only the remarkable growth in the Chinese nation – but also significant advances within the church. In late 2004, the Chinese Government returned the former Trinity Cathedral, former seat of the Diocese in North China to the Chinese church.<sup>1</sup> Over 40 million copies of Bible have been printed in the Amity Press in Nanjing. Just this past April to June, the China Christian Council and the National Three-self Patriotic Movement Committee held a successful Bible Ministries Exhibition in the United States of America. In Nanjing, the new campus of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary will open next year. It will become one of the largest seminary campuses in the world.

At the same time, the coming year marks a turning point in church leadership. China Christian Council and the Three-self Patriotic Movement (hereafter “TSPM”) will hold their quinquennial national meetings next year. Since 1949, “Chinese Anglicans” played a significant role in the post-1949 church. Shen Zigao, Zheng Jianye, Zhao Zichen and K H Ting were among the top national leaders from the early days. K H Ting and Cao Shengjie were among those with Anglican background who guided the church again after churches reopened in 1979. The transition to the new leadership in 2007 will mark this watershed. For the first time, those who grew up in the post-1949 era will take the rein. It is important for Williams to understand and work with these new leaders in China who have little understanding of “Anglicanism”.

It is important to review the spiritual journey of Anglicans in China. Anglicans entered the stage of Christianity in China more than 150 years ago. In 1849 George Smith became the first Bishop of Victoria. Its history however harkened to 1838 when the 19-year-old Vincent Stanton arrived Macao on his own initiative. He later became the first colonial chaplain in Hong Kong and pioneered children education in Hong Kong. At the same time, from the American front, William Boone reached Shanghai in 1845 to launch their mission in China.

The ambiguity over the episcopal jurisdiction of Shanghai dragged on until it was finally resolved in 1908. This again paved the way for the historic meeting of bishops, clergy and laity in Shanghai in 1909. The 1909 meeting decided 'Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui (hereafter "CHSKH", Holy Catholic China in China)' to be the name for the Anglican Church in China. CHSKH was founded in 1912, the year when the new Chinese Republic was born. Yet, Lambeth did not formally recognize the new Church until 1930. The 'mother' churches in America, Britain and Canada were slow to approve the CHSKH constitution.

CHSKH was far from self-supporting and self-governing from the start. Indeed, the dioceses worked independently without a central national office. The road to self-governance came from the Chinese nationals in the first national synod in 1912. It resolved to establish a missionary diocese in China where Anglicans had not yet set foot. The new missionary initiative would be funded and led by Chinese nationals. In the event, Bishop Shen Zigao became the first Bishop of Shanxi in 1934. More importantly, Shanxi was the mainspring of ancient Chinese culture, a cruel land that was ridden with famine, and a hotbed of bandits and rebels. It became the crucible where some of the most able Chinese Anglican clergy received their baptism of fire, and became sympathetic to the Communist cause from the 1930s. Among them were Dong Jianwu, Pu Huaren, Zhong Ketuo and other top graduates from Saint John's University, the elite Anglican university in Shanghai. The stories of their contribution to the birth of the new China are still left untold.<sup>2</sup>

Political events overtook reforms in the church. The Japanese invasion brought the Chinese nation and churches to ruins. After the war, CHSKH became increasingly financially dependent on America and Britain. After the liberation in 1949, CHSKH issued the famous Pastoral Letter at the wake of the Korean War. CHSKH was never officially dissolved. In 1956, the House of Bishops last officially met in Shanghai and issued a pastoral letter. (See my Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui Source Document web site where primary documents I refer above are available: <http://www.ttc.edu.sg/skh/index.html>; mirror site at Project Canterbury: <http://anglicanhistory.org/asia/skh/index.html>).

When we think of CHSKH, what brings to mind is the ordination of Florence Li in 1944. This is unfortunate. There are deeper lessons from China we should well learn. CHSKH was the first attempt for Anglicans to transplant the Anglican ethos to a people that live in vastly different cultural and political context than that of Britain. Can the Anglican Communion in practice become a catholic reality? We can draw important lessons from the journey that I sketched above.

Is the Church in China finished with the Anglican Communion? I think not. For in an ironic way, Bishop Ting would see that the Anglican Church offers insight into an important area that many Anglicans have discarded. I refer of course to the historic form of Christianity – its creeds, traditions, ministerial orders, and sober forms of worship. Despite the rapid numerical growth, Protestant churches in China are still not organized

as one Church in China. Indeed, as Bishop K H Ting puts it: "The Bible unites us"; and sadly there may be little other than that. Yet churches throughout the vast nation are not yet able to identify itself as one institution effective for ministry and social outreach. As I pointed out elsewhere, the emergence of a coherent ministerial order is the urgent task in the Chinese church.<sup>3</sup> I am not suggesting that the Chinese Church should adopt the Anglican orders. I think however the sooner China agrees to a coherent ministerial order, the sooner it will become a more credible church in the nation and beyond.

Is the Anglican Communion able to help China work out such a coherent ministerial order? More pointedly, would Rowan Cantuar recognize the eventual structure China adopts? China insists all along the three-self principle as non-negotiable. Would Canterbury be able to accept it as a Christian principle and not a political one? These are the questions Rowan Cantuar would face in his conversations in China.<sup>4</sup>

At the time of writing, Lambeth and Beijing have not released the places Rowan Cantuar will visit. As Williams traverses that great land in the East, may he remember the bishops who laboured there in the past 170 years.

In Beijing remember Burdon and Schereschewsky, whose Chinese prayer books are still recited by the faithful today.

Remember Xi'an. There Shen Zigao and Logan Roots sided with the poor and the Communists.

Remember Kunming. There R O Hall exercised pastoral ministry to the Chinese intellectuals and offered assistance to the guerrilla in the time of Japanese occupation.

In Shanghai remember of course Boone, Smith, Russell and Graves. But too the bishops who met there in the final House of Bishop's meeting in 1956: Xue Pingxi, K H Ting, Zheng Jianye, Zeng Youshan, Ling Xianyang, Cai Fuchu, Moyong Xian, Wang Shenyin, Liu Yucang, Zhang Haisong, Zhang Guangxu, Shen Zigao, Chen Jianzhen, Gu Heling, Xu Jisong, Mao Kezhong, and Liu Yaochang. Perhaps in the train ride from Shanghai to Nanjing, remember the American and British missionaries who sailed up the Yangtze River to China's interior.

At long last, in Nanjing meet Bishop K H Ting, the final 'ring-bearer': to embrace, weep, give thanks and pray for the future. Surely there are 'accounts' to settle as well.

At the time when the new China was founded in 1949, there were some 300 clergy on record who remained in China. One of them was the scholarly Rev. Cai Yongchun who returned to China from America in 1950 "to share in the suffering of the people". He died misunderstood, expended, and unrecognized in 1983. This was how he summarized his life: "A silkworm gives out silk until it dies; a candle continues to shed its tears of wax until it is exhausted." "Death is at work in us, but life in you (2 Corinthians 4:12)."

Rowan Cantuar, remember them in China.

So we do not lose heart. Maybe when the Anglican Communion finally does not see itself to be united merely by the ring), it will be reborn.

China may well show a way of how Anglicans can be organized.

Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary, August 2006  
Singapore

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<sup>1</sup> The Church of Holy Trinity became the Cathedral of the Diocese of North China on Trinity Sunday, 23 May 1875. See the two sermons preached by Bishop W A Russell on the occasion. *Two Sermons preached in the Church of the Holy Trinity, Shanghai on Trinity Sunday, 1875, on the Occasion of the Election of the Church into the Cathedral of the Diocese* (Shanghai: North China Herald Office, 1875).

<sup>2</sup> See Bishop Shen Yifan, 'Zhongguo Jiaohui yu Zhongguo Gongcandang [=The Chinese Church and Chinese Communists]' and 'Huiyi wo fuqin Shen Zigao zhujiao zai kaguri zhanzheng baofa jianhou de yi xie shiji [=Recollection of my father Bishop Shen Zigao around the time of the war against the Japanese]' in Luntan Xinsheng [=A Public Sharing from the Heart] (Shanghai, China Christian Council, 2000), 63-71, 351-353.

<sup>3</sup> See 'Theological Reconstruction in China in the Light of the Establishing of Ministerial Order: Soundings in the Task of the Church of China in the Twenty-first Century', *Jinling Shenxue Zhi* [=Nanjing Theological Review] 57.4 (2003):157-164.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that Presbyterian Ji Jianhong, Chairman of National TSPM, insists the three-self principle to be the underpinning in 'church construction'. See *Tianfeng*, 291 (August, 2006):28-31.