

A Great Soul in the Making

Han Dongfang understands that China needs reconciliation with God more than democracy.

After a book I wrote two years ago came out, *Great Souls: Six Who Changed the Century* (Word), many people wondered whether there were still any truly great people in the world who embodied such moral virtue that they too might later be seen to have transformed an era. *Great Souls* tells the stories of Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Billy Graham and others. The question was, after these giants passed on, would there be any other heroes even approaching their level?

What a foolish question. To be sure, popes of the moral quality of John Paul II or evangelists with the lifelong integrity of Billy Graham are rare. Similarly, the traumatic global events—World War II, the Cold War and apartheid—that helped shape Elie Wiesel (Jewish survivor of Auschwitz and Nobel laureate for peace), Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Mandela were unique. Great historical epochs usually throw up great leaders.

People wanted to know whether our less epic, more globalized era could still produce men and women of extraordinary character and fortitude.

It obviously can. True greatness of character isn't just a display of courage here and there against life's difficulties or a strong agreement with notions of right and wrong. It is a lifelong commitment to moral virtue combined with the courage to live out that commitment openly, especially in the public arena.

In Christian terms it can be summed up in two biblical exhortations: to have a daily hunger and thirst for righteousness (see Matt. 5:6), and to nurture a consistent willingness to take up one's cross daily (see Mark 8:34).

Obviously, untold numbers of Christians around the world live out these principles in quite hidden ways. But occasionally, you get to meet one who is very much in the public eye yet displays both a deeply moral sense of life and an old-fashioned courage of breathtaking dimension. It's something like watching a great soul in the making. I met one such person in Hong Kong.

I had heard about Han Dongfang for several years. He started out as a simple soldier in China's People's Armed Police, then later became a railroad worker. But it was at Beijing's Tiananmen Square in May 1989 that Han discovered his true calling, a passion for justice and truth.

Over a two-week period, he threw himself into a fledgling free labor union called the Autonomous Workers' Federation, a sort of Chinese version of Lech Walensa's Solidarity movement, which had helped end communism in Poland. When the Tiananmen Massacre and crackdown occurred June 4, 1989, Han innocently turned himself in. After all, he knew according to China's constitution he hadn't done anything wrong.

The authorities didn't think so. They threw him into a cell crammed with prisoners who had tuberculosis, hepatitis and other infectious diseases. In 1992 he was permitted to come for medical treatment and surgery in the United States, where he became a Christian.

Han easily could have acquired U.S. political asylum—after all, the Chinese communist authorities had caused him immense suffering and the loss of one lung. But he chose to return to China to champion the country's beleaguered and defenseless workers.

He entered the country in August 1993 but was immediately expelled to Hong Kong. After one more try, he remained in Hong Kong even after the British returned it to China, risking arrest or expulsion again. Han was determined to tell his people through broadcasts on U.S. government-supported Radio Free Asia just how bad working conditions had become in China.

"I found a reason for life from my faith," he told me in his excellent English. "Before this, I thought that life is about how much you can achieve. But afterward I knew that everything you achieve is because God has prepared it. What you have to do is do the work."

Han understands China needs more than just democracy and justice. It needs, after the ravages of communism, reconciliation and forgiveness. Pray for this great soul in the making and his exciting role in shaping China's future.

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