

Islam and China's Christmas

When two American Christians, Heather Mercer and Dayna Curry, were freed from captivity in Afghanistan just before Thanksgiving, both their own families and Christians throughout the world rejoiced. The former Taliban rulers of Afghanistan had charged them, and six other Western aid workers of Shelter Now International, with trying to convert Afghans to Christianity. Had the Taliban continued in power, a guilty verdict could have led to a death penalty for all.

The peril in which the girls found themselves illustrates only too vividly how daunting seems the task of bringing the gospel into the 10/40 Window—a swath of global nationalities and cultures stretching from Africa to China at 10 degrees to 40 degrees above the equator. Missions experts acknowledge that this region either has not been significantly evangelized or remains militantly hostile to the Christian message.

Precious few Westerners have had the courage to take up evangelistic efforts in those countries that, like Afghanistan, persecute severely those who try to spread Christianity. Among the few Christian communities who have demonstrated an actual willingness to undertake this type of evangelism are the Christians of China. The church in China—the fastest growing in Christian history—has for years dreamed, prayed and preached about the goal of taking the Christian gospel back to Jerusalem.

In one of the more remarkable statements to the U.S. Congress in 2000 during the debate over granting Permanent Normal Trading Relations (PNTR) to China, three house-church leaders—supporting PNTR—made this point: “By keeping China’s

door open, China's Christians can have more dealings with Christians from other countries, thus speeding up the process to preach the gospel back to Jerusalem."

The "Back to Jerusalem" movement among China's Christians began in the 1940s. It was entirely a Chinese idea, but the Chinese church leaders who first developed it had been encouraged in their missionary zeal by workers with the China Inland Mission.

Some Chinese Christians, most of them independent of Western missionary or denominational supervision, even moved with their families to the (mostly Muslim) Western regions of China as Communist and Nationalist Chinese armies struggled for control of the country in the late 1940s.

This step by the Christians was historically appropriate. Long before Westerners brought the gospel into China via its Pacific coast, Christianity had originally entered the Middle Kingdom along the Silk Road, the ancient trading route.

The Communist rise to power in 1949 suppressed Chinese Christianity brutally, but the Back to Jerusalem movement survived underground. When the house churches began their astonishing growth in 1979, the sense of China's Jerusalem mission flourished with it.

One of the most prominent of China's house-church leaders, Zhang Rongliang, who heads the approximately 10-million-strong Fangcheng Fellowship, first mentioned it to me in 2000. Last summer he forthrightly explained in greater detail what he had in mind.

“The Chinese church,” he said, “is getting ready to go into the 10/40 Window. The Chinese are more suitable to go into the Muslim world than Americans. We know that the Muslim nations prefer Chinese to Americans. [Americans] don’t have the experience of persecution. Chinese can adapt themselves to the Muslim world very well.”

What makes Zhang’s comments worth listening to are two things: China’s church is the fastest growing in the history of Christianity (from 4 million in 1950 to 60-80 million today), and it is totally evangelism-oriented.

China’s Christians send missionaries out with one-way tickets. Is it possible that the most populous nation on earth may one day become also the greatest missionary-sending country of all time, not only eclipsing the United States but also reaching areas that hitherto have steadfastly resisted the American missionary presence?

What an exciting idea.