

## CHRISTIANS IN CHINA – EXPANSION AND LIMITATION OF CHURCHES

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Only a decade ago, people could only visit a church in China if they could prove they were Christians. Any sort of religious activities were viewed with suspicion. Ten years on, churches – Buddhist and Taoist temples alike – are now accessible to everybody. Being a Christian in China is no longer a stigma. Nevertheless, Christian communities still have to bow to restrictions in the People's Republic, for reasons of historical experiences and a fundamentally different understanding of religious freedom.

Religious freedom, as it is understood in China, protects all religious activities, which the state deems legitimate and which are practiced by state-recognized religious groups within China. Any religious activities that take place outside this framework are seen as unlawful and are punished accordingly. Furthermore, the Chinese Constitution (art. 36) forbids any foreign domination of religious communities and prohibits any expression of loyalty towards religious leaders abroad, such as the Pope or the Dalai Lama. These restrictions explain the prevalence of underground and house churches, which find popularity across the country. Christian Churches appeal to the young Chinese in particular. In intellectual circles, Christianity is often seen as a holistic cultural system of the Western cultural sphere, and as a factor for the success of Western culture.



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## CHINA'S HISTORICAL EXPERIENCES OF CHRISTIANITY

Christianity has existed in China since at least the seventh century. The so-called Nestorian Stele, which today is in a museum in Xi'an, is a memento of the arrival of Nestorian monks in China during the Tang dynasty. An edict on the Stele tells of how the Tang emperor permitted the monks to build monasteries and churches, and allowed the spread of Nestorianism in China. Nestorianism was, however, only a temporary phenomenon in China's religious history. In the twelfth century, during the Mongol Yuan dynasty, the Franciscan Brothers arrived in the capital city Khanbaliq, which today is Beijing, in order to evangelize the Chinese people. The Franciscan mission ceased with the end of the Yuan dynasty in 1368.

**When proclaiming Christian teaching, the Jesuits sought to establish links with Confucian ethics. Chinese converts were allowed to continue practicing traditional ancestral worship.** The Jesuits restarted this mission in the sixteenth century. Matteo Ricci and his companions worked as mathematicians, astronomers, scientists, and architects in China. Thus, they held sway with Chinese scholars and officials all the way up to the Imperial Court. When proclaiming Christian teaching, the Jesuits sought to establish links with Confucian ethics. Chinese converts were allowed to continue practicing traditional ancestral worship. Critics of this approach, mainly Franciscans and Dominicans, saw these ancestral rites as idolatry. This sparked perpetual debate between 1610 and 1749 about the different approaches to dealing with ancestral worship. Pope Benedict XIV finally put an end to the rites controversy by banning such accommodation.<sup>1</sup> Rejection of ancestral worship struck at the very foundations of Chinese society's core values and was, therefore, much more than just a matter of religion. The Chinese empire reacted by expelling all missionaries. Only in the countryside did a few smaller Catholic communities survive.<sup>2</sup>

1 | Missionary accommodation describes the adaptation of a new religion introduced by missionaries to pre-existing social relationships.

2 | Georg Evers, "Fluss und Kreuz: Chinas Religionen und das Christentum – ein unüberwindliches Gegeneinander?," in: *China heute*, 3/2007, 101-109.

With the violent opening of China as a result of the Opium War and Unequal Treaties, Christian missionaries once again had access to China. The colonial powers portrayed themselves as protectors of the mission in order to gain greater influence. One such example is the occupation of the German colonial territory of Qingdao. Germany used the killing of two German missionaries by the Chinese as an opportunity to send warships of the Imperial Navy and it presented China with an ultimatum to cede the territory.

In the history of modern China, Christianity is linked to two violent events. The first – the bloody Taiping Rebellion, a civil war lasting from 1850 to 1864, – cost the lives of an estimated twenty million people. It was triggered by the sect leader Hong Xiuquan, who had been influenced by Christian missionary literature. The second occurred at the end of the nineteenth century with the Boxer Uprising, a violent conflict aimed at Western imperialism and the special status of Christian missions.

Following the establishment of the People's Republic, the Christian churches came under increasing pressure to disassociate themselves from foreign influence. The Communist regime under Mao described the Christian

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Churches as "instruments of imperialism." In the 1950s, all remaining Christian missionaries were expelled. The Apostolic Nunciature, representation of the Holy See in Beijing, was closed in 1951.<sup>3</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, it was forbidden to practice any religion.

It is only recently that the Christian Churches have experienced renewed popularity.<sup>4</sup> Attendance at services held in churches in the largest cities of the People's Republic is always high. Nevertheless, Catholicism and Protestantism still remain minority religions in China. Estimates of the total number of Chinese Christians range from 40 million to 130 million people.

3 | P. Anton Weber SVD, "Fremdkörper oder Partner? Zum Verhältnis von Christentum und Staat in der Volksrepublik China nach 1949," in: <http://www.china-zentrum.de/Religionspolitik.41.0.html?&L=0>, (accessed September 10, 2010).

4 | Wang Jiangxiu, "Einige Beobachtungen zu Chinas katholischer Kirche," in: Jin Ze, Qiu Yonghui (eds.), *Blue Book of Religions – Annual Report on China's Religions* (2009), (Beijing 2009), 95-110.

## THE CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN CHINA

The Communist government has officially recognized five religions: Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam, along with Catholicism and Protestantism, which are not seen as *one* Christian religion in China. The religions are administered by state-sanctioned “patriotic religious associations,” which may not be subject to any foreign influence. They each send representatives to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, an advisory body within the apparatus of the Chinese state.

Through the umbrella organizations of the Catholic and Protestant Churches, the Chinese state has the ability to manage bishoprics and parishes, and ecclesiastical appointments. The heads of these organizations must regularly take part in training sessions on the Communist ideology.

### The Catholic Church

Following the establishment of the People’s Republic, the Communist government exerted pressure on Christians of all denominations. They were required to participate actively in the establishment of a socialist society, to renounce foreign influence, and to reorganize themselves on a purely Chinese basis. From 1951 onwards, the Christian Churches were only permitted to act publicly under the umbrella of the two Protestant associations, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the China Christian Council, and the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), and even then only to a limited extent. In the case of the Catholic Church, the foundation of the Patriotic Association (CPA) sought to guarantee independence for the Chinese Catholic Church and disassociate it from the Vatican. The CPA does not recognize the primacy of the Roman pontiff. Hence, the division can be seen as a schism.

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The establishment of diplomatic relations by the Holy See with Taiwan and episcopal nominations by Rome triggered conflicts between the Chinese government and the Vatican. Beijing views the appointment of Chinese bishops by the Pope as “interference in the internal affairs of the

People's Republic," something which the Communist Party finds unacceptable. Rome reacted with two encyclicals from Pope Pius XII from 1954 and 1958. These warned Catholics explicitly of the emergence of a state church in China. The tensions, which resulted from this "investiture dispute" between Rome and Beijing, led to the creation of a Catholic underground church in the 1950s, which continues to recognize the primacy of the Vatican.<sup>5</sup>

Priests of the CPA are forced to sermonize on subjects that contradict Vatican doctrine. They must endorse the one-child policy and advise the use of contraception. If High Catholic holy days fall on a weekday, the official churches are often not allowed to celebrate High Mass. Many Catholics are not willing to bow to the forced isolation from the rest of the Roman Catholic Church and so join underground communities. This puts them in danger. Often, priests and believers that are not members of the CPA are forced by the local authorities to join the "official" church. As a means of exerting pressure, the government may impose fines, terminate contracts of employment, exclude children from public schools, and even send people to prison. The underground bishops and priests are spied on and regularly placed under house arrest. There are also reports of bishops and priests of underground churches being imprisoned and tortured.

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Despite the oppression and persecution, Catholic underground churches are growing. The Catholic Patriotic Association states that it has 5.6 million official members. It is suspected that a further twelve million attend mass in Catholic places of worship that are not officially recognized. Officially, the Catholic Patriotic Association had fifty bishops in 2008, twenty less than nine years earlier. Even the number of dioceses has dropped by thirteen to ninety-seven. The number of official Catholic churches across the country rose between 1999 and 2008 from four hundred to six thousand. The Holy Spirit Study Center in Hong Kong declares the number of unofficial bishops – so-called

5 | Georg Evers, "Religionsfreiheit und Menschenrechte im Blick auf die kirchliche Situation in China," in: Georg Evers, Roman Malek and Wolf Notker (eds.), *Christentum und Kirche in der Volksrepublik China*, (Einsdorf 2002), 8-40.

underground bishops – stands at thirty-eight. The number of underground priests is estimated to be one thousand one hundred fifty compared to one thousand eight hundred official priests of the CPA. The number of believers and services is increasing both in officially registered churches and in underground communities. At the same time, the number of official dioceses has been reduced as a result of a restructuring. Although a plethora of church buildings has emerged in recent years, churches are generally overcrowded during masses.

For quite some time now, the Vatican has tried to overcome the tensions between the “official church” and the underground churches. Examples of local reconciliation and cooperation can be observed. In some places, the borders between the communities have become fluid. It is estimated that ninety percent of bishops in the patriotic church are today accepted by the Holy See. However, three episcopal consecrations in 2006, which were forced

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through by the Chinese government but have not been accepted by the Pope, pose a problem for this process of rapprochement. In the Chinese-speaking world, there are some voices stating that a harder line should be taken towards Beijing. For example, the emeritus Archbishop of Hong Kong, Joseph Zen, called on the Vatican to toughen its stance towards the Communist government and resist any compromises. He warned Chinese Catholics against bowing to the will of the Communist government and to resist to the point of martyrdom.<sup>6</sup>

Although China’s Catholic Church has been experiencing a surge in popularity in recent years in spite of all the repressive actions, not all experts view the situation of the Catholic religious community optimistically. A large proportion of Chinese Catholics are poor, uneducated farmers. As a result of increasing industrialization and economic development, many young people from

6 | Nick Squires “Catholics in China told to defend faith even if it means martyrdom,” <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/5559778/Catholics-in-China-told-to-defend-faith-even-if-it-means-martyrdom.html> (accessed October 26, 2010).

predominantly Catholic villages are moving to the large urban metropolises and so often lose contact with their old faith and the Church. The shortage of young people in the People's Republic also poses problems for priesthood in the Catholic Church. Since the one-child policy was first introduced, many young men, who had intended to become priests, find themselves subject to greater pressure from their families. As the only child, they are expected to marry and start a family.

### **Protestantism**

The official umbrella organization of Protestant Christians in China is the China Christian Council. There is also a second Protestant umbrella organization, the "Three-Self Patriotic Movement." "Three-Self" refers to self-governance, self-support and self-propagation. These principles seek to guarantee a Patriotic Chinese Protestant Church free from foreign influence. The two Protestant umbrella organizations report that they have more than 20 million believers in total, who take part in services in over 50,000 registered churches.

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The number of unregistered "house churches" and their followers is harder to determine. Today, a large proportion of unregistered congregations resist joining one of the two Protestant umbrella organizations for fear that the regulations of the Three-Self Movement and the China Christian Council would be opposed to their basic religious views. In particular, this relates to evangelism, rules on baptizing new converts, and foreign influence on parishes and congregations.

Although the government financially supports the construction of new churches, the growth in the number of places of worship lags far behind growth in the number of believers. As a result of the huge throng on High Christian holy days, such as Christmas, churches in Beijing and Shanghai are forced to issue entrance tickets in order to avoid desperate overcrowding. A lack of space in the registered churches is a further reason why believers congregate at unregistered services and prayer meetings. The Communist Party considers house churches a potential threat to its exclusive claim on authority. Services held

by house churches are not authorized by the government and are, therefore, unregulated meetings in a state without a constitutionally protected right of freedom of assembly.

The German embassy in Beijing estimates that the total number of registered and unregistered Protestants is around 45 million. American estimates place the number of followers of Protestant house churches at between seventy and one hundred million.<sup>7</sup> In truth, the Christian religion is highly popular in China. Churches both in large cities and small rural parishes are always full at times of worship. It

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is not just baptized believers that congregate there. Interested on-lookers, mainly young people from the "post-1980s generation," also attend. A large proportion of Chinese people, who were born and grew up after the Cultural Revolution, are searching for spiritual values in today's China – a society heavily oriented towards materialism. Owing to the growing influence of foreign media, such as American and European movies, television series, or novels, they are also coming into contact with Christian symbols and ideas. The idea of a romantic white wedding is the first impetus for many people – and not just the young – to go out and find a church. Following the initial contact, many young and even some older Chinese people are attracted to the community and the idea of Christian love and forgiveness.

### **Underground and House Churches**

House churches first emerged in China during the time of the Cultural Revolution, when any form of religious activity was avenged by the terror of the Red Guards and all houses of God were closed and reconsecrated, if not destroyed completely. Unofficial, unregistered Christian groups have grown in number sharply over the past decade and carry out a variety of work, even in public. They rent rooms for meetings, publish print and Internet material, organize summer camps, or provide social services, such as care for senior citizens. In particular, house church communities, whose community life resembles the lost Chinese extended family, are attracting more and more followers in times of the one-child family and an increasingly material society.

7 | <http://www.china-zentrum.de> (accessed August 6, 2010).



In some regions, there is minimal surveillance of churches and religious meetings. Unregistered communities can practice their religion openly and receive little attention from the government. In other areas, government bodies exert pressure on unregistered churches by strictly monitoring believers and ordering the church administrations to register with the two Protestant umbrella organizations. Community leaders and members are sometimes questioned by the police, and in some cases are taken into custody for several hours or even days at a time.<sup>8</sup> In these instances, community leaders are treated more harshly, interrogated more often, and detained in police custody for longer than churchgoers. At this point, one should also mention Hua Huiqi, the leader of a house church and human rights activist, who was sentenced to six months' imprisonment in 2007.<sup>9</sup> There are even reports of house church activists being punished by the police with "re-education through labor."<sup>10</sup> "Re-education through labor" is a form of administrative sentence, which can be awarded by a police force without the need to apply to the courts for a period of up to four years.

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Shortly before the Olympic Games, the Chinese leadership undertook various measures across the country against unpopular organizations and individuals in order to avoid potential protests or public action during the Games. In so doing, 21 ministers from house church communities, who were attending a training event, were sent to a re-education camp.<sup>11</sup> There were, and still are, reports from various parts of the country of church closures and damage to churches. In December 2009, for example, a Protestant Church in the Shanxi province was closed by the police and

8 | U. S. Department of State: *International Religious Freedom Report 2009*, in: <http://www.state.gov> (accessed October 6, 2010).

9 | Country Report China, <http://www.kirche-in-not.de/was-wir-tun/laenderschwerpunkte/asien> (accessed October 25, 2010)

10 | Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, "China: Whether proselytizing is legal in China", in: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b8631d828.html> (accessed September 9, 2010).

11 | Norbert Sommer, "Chinas Christen vor der Olympiade," in: [www.dradio.de/dkultur/sendungen/religionen](http://www.dradio.de/dkultur/sendungen/religionen) (accessed September 2, 2010).

sustained significant damage during the operation. The forceful police operation was justified because of allegations relating to a lack of planning permission.<sup>12</sup>

There are regular reports of arrests from Catholic underground churches. In March 2009, the underground bishop Jia Zhiguo was interned yet again. Other priests and bishops, such as Bishop Wu Qinjing from Shaanxi and Bishop Yao Liang from the Xiwanzi diocese in the Hebei province, have been arrested in recent years and have disappeared without a trace. They are accused of subversive activities by the government.<sup>13</sup> Victims of the underground church, who have died in prison or in police custody, are venerated as martyrs by believers. Thus, every year, Chinese Catholics go on a pilgrimage to the grave of Bishop Joseph Fan Xueyuan, who was killed in 1992 by a police officer, and pray for him. The pilgrimage attracts a massive police presence and results in several arrests every year.<sup>14</sup>

#### LEGAL REFORM IN 2005

By issuing regulations concerning religious matters in 2005, Beijing aimed to standardize regional differences in the treatment of religious communities. The new regulations protect the rights of registered religious communities with respect to property, publication of faith-related literature, the education of clergy, and collections. However, these rights are denied to any community, which is unregistered. Religious institutions are legally obligated to concentrate solely on religious subjects and the rights associated with these. Thus, the regulations can be considered a control mechanism and a

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12 | "Christian church in China shut down by hundreds of police and armed thugs," <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1235065/Christian-church-China-shut-hundreds-police-armed-thugs.html> (accessed October 11, 2010).

13 | U. S. Department of State: *International Religious Freedom Report 2009*, in: <http://www.state.gov> (accessed October 6, 2010).

14 | Bernardo Cervellera, "Persecution in China as Vatican meeting on China opens," [http://www.catholic.org/international/international\\_story.php?id=32919](http://www.catholic.org/international/international_story.php?id=32919) (accessed October 25, 2010).

limitation on religious communities. They have not done much to expand the freedom of religious activities.<sup>15</sup>

The regulations permit registered communities to produce and print religious materials for their own use. However, the distribution of religious materials remains illegal. The only publishing house allowed to print Bibles in China and sell these to registered communities is the Nanjing Amity Printing Company (Amity Press). It distributes Bibles across the entire country through seventy offices and a mobile network. Bibles may not be sold in the state-owned Xinhua bookstores across China. The growth in popularity, which Christian churches across the country have reported, has led to corresponding rises in interest for the Bible and Christian literature, which can barely be quenched using the publishing capacities currently available.

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Religious texts or Bibles that have not been authorized by the government may be confiscated and unregistered printing works closed. There have been reports that small communities in rural areas face difficulties in ordering Bibles and religious publications. Again and again, the Western media tells of instances of arrests of Catholic or Protestant clergy from underground communities, who have printed and distributed illegal Bibles and Christian material. Against this backdrop, the Internet is becoming an increasingly important source of information for the Chinese in terms of religion.<sup>16</sup>

15 | Eric R. Carlson, "China's New Regulations on Religion: A Small Step, Not a Great Leap, Forward," [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3736/is\\_200501/1](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3736/is_200501/1) (accessed August 2, 2010).

16 | James Reynolds, "Keeping the Faith in China," in: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7150613.stm> (accessed August 10, 2010).

## SUMMARY

Twenty-first century China is no longer the country of the Cultural Revolution. Only a few decades ago, the state used to prescribe what citizens were permitted to think, when they could marry, and when they were entitled to have their first and only child. The beginnings of pluralism have started to develop since the advent of Chinese economic reform. More freedoms have been conceded,

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even in religious communities. However, one cannot talk of religious freedom as understood in terms of being a human right. Only people who show themselves to be loyal to the Communist Party, who bow to its rules, and who only pray in the places of worship affiliated to the umbrella organizations, are entitled to practice their religion without state interference.

The state, though, is not averse to all church activities. Kindergartens and senior citizens' homes, which are sometimes funded with financial support from abroad, are permitted as they remove the burden from the state and serve to establish Hu Jintao's propaganda vision of an "harmonious society." Examples of this can be seen with the Protestant Amity Foundation and the Catholic Jinde charities, which receive money from abroad to finance their projects. In recent years, centers for research into Christianity have been set up at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences – the think tank of the Chinese State Council – as well as various universities across the country.

Meanwhile, under the rule of the Communist Party, a key precept continues to exist: the Party's claim to authority, to which everything else is subject, and the territorial integrity of the country – both may not be questioned. As a result of negative historical experiences, the state is trying to reduce foreign influence on religious communities completely. Thus, disputes concerning non-autochthonic religions, such as Christianity and Islam, are inevitable.