



A New Crackdown on Chinese Christians

While the world watches the migrant/refugee crisis in Europe and the chaos in the Middle East, the one-party government in China has continued its crackdown on Christians and Buddhists in China. Chinese Christians are being persecuted, churches torn down and crosses removed from remaining church buildings. Both Protestant and Catholic churches have come under attack.

Persecution in the Guise of Reform

At a high-level Communist Party meeting in April 2015, Chinese president Xi Jinping declared that “We must manage religious affairs in accordance with law and adhere to the principle of independence to run religious groups on our own accord.” Domestic religions, he said, must be independent from foreign influence. He called for domestic religious groups to pledge loyalty to the state. “Active efforts should be made to incorporate religions into socialist society,” he told party cadres.¹ His speech was widely circulated throughout the Chinese media with the goal of informing party members and the Chinese people that the regime was going to continue its repression of religious groups.

Xi Jinping’s speech gave new impetus for the regime’s repressive actions against Christians in China. Chinese Communist Party religious policy since the 1990s has been based on the premise that hostile foreign religious forces are a threat to the regime. The Communist Party fears that religion, especially Christianity, is winning over the population from the Communist doctrine of atheism.

Party line on foreign missionaries has been clear since the 1990s, following a long history of communist oppression of missionaries. Xi Jinping’s government has been determined to centralize even more party control. This anti-religious campaign against Christian churches, Buddhist sects, Tibetan Buddhism and ethnic Muslims in western China has intensified. Xi Jinping’s campaign against religion should

be seen as only one aspect of his drive to strengthen his government’s control in China. He has sought to eliminate party corruption and oppositional factions within the party. His government remains committed to continuing globalization of the Chinese economy, while maintaining the one-party state. This openness to markets and corporate profit, while suppressing political and religious dissent, makes for an unusual state of affairs, more closely resembling Mussolini’s Italy than Stalin’s Russia. However one characterizes the “New China,” it is still repressive and illiberal by Western standards. Xi Jinping promotes China’s economic renaissance and an unabashed nationalism, which combines neo-Maoism and neo-Confucianism designed to ensure Communist Party supremacy.

Church Destruction in Zhejiang

Christians have felt the blunt force of this repression. In the eastern province of Zhejiang, crosses from more than 400 Christian churches have been destroyed. Protestant pastors and their supporters have been detained and arrested. The government has targeted both “underground” churches and officially sanctioned “patriotic” churches. As one Chinese Christian told Brice Pedroletti, a *Guardian* reporter traveling in the area during the summer of 2014, “They [the government] want to remove every trace” of Christianity in the province.

In the city of Wenzhou, a major city in the province, an estimated 15 percent of the city’s inhabitants are Christian. Located about 350 kilometers south of the booming financial center of China, Shanghai, Wenzhou is referred to by many people as China’s “Jerusalem.” Christians in the city are mostly Protestant. The city has more than 1,500 churches in every architectural form, identified only by their crosses or the Chinese character that means “love.”

Governmental vandalism of churches in the province began with orders to remove crosses from churches. When some church congregations refused, the government forcibly

removed the crosses. In early April 2014 a Catholic church in a rural area near Wenzhou was demolished. Soon afterwards, a dozen other churches received government ultimatums to pull down buildings or crosses in a campaign against what authorities called “illegal structures.” Some churches followed the orders, but Christians in Sanjiang resisted. As one anonymous Chinese Christian told Pedroletti, “We knew that even if we removed the cross it wouldn’t stop there, and therefore we had to stand firm.”

Church officials tried to negotiate and it appeared that an agreement had been reached to remove the top two floors of the church’s annex. “But they [the government] did not keep their word,” one evangelical minister said. When the bulldozers showed up in early April to knock down the entire church, over 1,000 people, many from neighboring congregations, showed up to pray in front of the church. The next day, authorities arrested some 40 church leaders. A few days later riot police intervened to allow the bulldozers to totally destroy the churches. The following month in 2014 other churches were targeted for destruction. By early 2015, more than 60 churches had been destroyed.²

Removing Symbols of Christ

Christians in Wenzhou say they have not seen this kind of persecution since Mao’s Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. So far mostly “underground,” non-government-recognized churches have been targeted. Government officials claim they are targeting only underground churches. The government provides official recognition to “patriotic” churches, authorized through the Protestant Three-Self-Patriotic Movement and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Movement, and officially recognized Protestant and Catholic organizations. Government officials encourage these two organizations to absorb the explosion of Christian conversions in China. Officially there are 24 million Protestant and 6 million Catholics in China today, but a Pew Survey conducted in 2010 estimated that there are 67 million Chinese Christians.³ If this figure is accurate, there are more Christians in China today than there are members of the Chinese Communist Party.

In July 2015 the campaign of church desecration continued unabated. In a village in lower Dafei, 100 security guards showed up to protect workers removing the steel cross from a local Catholic Church. Parishioners showed up to protest, singing hymns and praying. One woman yelled at the police, “Aren’t you ashamed of what you have done?” Another shouted at the security guards who stood with shields and batons, “Doesn’t the government give us the right to religious freedom? Why are they taking down our symbol without any explanation?” One protester told an Associated

Press reporter, “We have violated no law. We do not oppose the government. We have been good, law-abiding citizens.” Meanwhile authorities set deadlines across the Zhejiang province to remove crosses from spires, vaults, roofs and wall arches of the 4,000 or so Christian churches found in the province.⁴

The government’s campaign drew heated protest from the clergy. An 89-year-old bishop led street protests against the actions. The bishop denounced the government’s anti-Christian campaign as “evil.” Authorities claimed that they were attacking illegal building practices, not religion, and the escalation of cross removals accelerated in major cities including Wenzhou, Hangzhou and Lishui. Protesters blamed Xi Jinping for this campaign. The clergy responded in unprecedented public declarations and open letters against these removals. In an open letter, Catholic leaders representing the “official” church objected, “Removing crosses means destroying believers’ faith as well as destroying love and indulging in hatred.” Protestant clergy joined in the protest. One Protestant church letter averred, “Each time they take a cross down, we will put more up. We are even considering making flags and clothes with cross patterns. We will make the cross flourish throughout China.”⁵

In other places protesters became more defiant when the government’s anti-Christian campaign was broadened to include the removal of free-standing crucifixes in all Protestant and Roman Catholic churches across Zhejiang province. Christian protesters have climbed steep spires to shield the crosses. As the *New York Times* reported on August 11, “Some congregations began building small crosses to hang outside the windows of members’ homes or from their car mirrors.”

China’s Fear of Christianity

The anti-Christian campaign initiated by Xi’s government aims to promote traditional Chinese cultural traditions such as Confucianism. The Chinese media gave great attention to Xi’s official visit to Confucius’s birthplace. During the visit Xi called for a national campaign to promote Confucian ethical doctrines combined with fundamentalist socialist values. Party members followed suit by pejoratively referring to Christianity as *yang jiao*, which translates as “foreign teaching.”⁶

Christianity in China has a long history of being seen as a subversive threat to established regimes. Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci in 1601 became the first Westerner to be invited into the imperial court of the Wanli Emperor in Beijing’s “Forbidden City.” While there, he converted a number of important court officials and leading Chinese intellectuals to Christianity. Upon

his death in 1610, he was succeeded by other Jesuit priests, but a backlash occurred when Chinese officials began fearing the spread of this new Western faith. For an engaging read on Ricci's work, see Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (1995), and the more recent scholarly study by R. Po-chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci, 1552-1610* (2010).

In the 19th century, as the West began to penetrate Chinese markets, often through gunboat diplomacy, Protestant and Catholic missionaries built schools, colleges, hospitals and orphanages throughout China. The Christian faith found its way into Chinese culture through Protestant and Christian conversion. Christianity in itself was a subversive force in traditional Chinese culture, but it could also be transformed into revolution. This became all too evident in the Taiping rebellion that swept China from 1850 to 1864.

The Taiping rebellion began when local officials in the southwestern province of Guangxi began persecuting a Christian sect known as the God Worshipping Society led by Hon Xiunquan, who claimed to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ. He organized the Taiping Army which challenged the Manchu-led Qing dynasty. The Taiping Christian millennialists captured the major city of Nanjing and threatened Beijing itself. Taiping soldiers attacked imperial troops as well as foreigners. The Taiping rebellion was finally suppressed in 1866 after years of civil war which left an estimated 20 million-plus dead. The Taiping rebellion inspired other rebellions, including several in northwestern Muslim provinces (Yu-wen Chen, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement* (1973)).

Today's Chinese Communist leaders understand that small religious sects can sow the seeds of dynastic downfall. In their understanding of classical Chinese history, dynasties undergo cycles of rise and fall. The first sign of dynastic decline begins with rebellion in the provinces or religious sects that become armies. The Chinese view of history is cyclical and its leaders give great attention to their history. Mao, for example, spent much more time reading dynastic histories than he did reading Marx or Lenin.

Cults Provide Easy Targets

Chinese Communist leadership, with some justification, sees Christians and Muslims as forces that can get out of control. The rise of contemporary Christian cults such as the Church of Almighty God, also known as Eastern Lightning, is frightening. The cult is organized around Yang Xianghin and her lover, former physics teacher Zhou Weishan. Yang claims to be the "chosen one," insisting that members refer to her as "God Almighty." The cult claims over a million members. In 2014, the cult gained national and international attention when five members of

the cult murdered a 37-year-old woman whom cult leaders denounced as an evil spirit.⁷ The full details of the murder remain unclear, but the cult denounces Communist rule as an incarnation of Satan.

The Church of the Almighty presents an extreme example of Christian cultism that has emerged in China. Such cults provide easy targets for Communist officials to denounce Christianity in China. At the same time, there is more serious political opposition coming from Christians. This is especially the case in Hong Kong, where many dissident leaders are Catholics and Protestants. Joshua Wong, the 17-year-old leader of the group that launched demonstrations against mainland elections, is an evangelical Protestant. Catholics played an important role in these demonstrations as well. As one leading Catholic cleric reported, "Christianity has been a visible element of the demonstrations, with prayer groups, crosses, and protesters reading the Bible in the street."⁸

Muslim and Buddhist Unrest

While Chinese Communist officials worry about the Christian potential for subversion, they face a terrorist threat from Muslim Uighur separatists in the restive province of Xinjiang. In this rugged western province, terrorist attacks have occurred with growing intensity. Tensions between the ethnic Uighurs and Han Chinese have led to riots in which buildings and vehicles have been set on fire. Hundreds of Muslim Uighurs have been arrested. This region has a long and violent history between the indigenous Uighur population and Han Chinese authorities.⁹

Tibet presents another political/religious problem for Chinese authorities in Beijing. Tibetan Buddhist monks continue to be harassed and imprisoned. Buddhism is condemned by Chinese authorities and Buddhist temples have been systematically destroyed.

From Beijing's point of view, these "foreign-influenced" religions offer only cultural discord, potential subversion, and in the case of the Muslim Uighurs terrorism. These religions threaten the one-party state at a time when it is trying to address political corruption and serious economic and social problems in China. The government claims to accept religious liberty, but its actions show a profound insincerity in its proclamation. Just as the party wants complete political control, it wants religious control as well. The party has tried to counter the growing Christian evangelization of its country by offering atheism as the official government-sanctioned "religion." They are learning that atheism might appeal to a few opportunistic party leaders in China and to large numbers of Westerners, but in China there is a religious revival occurring that cannot be controlled by the state.

International Protest

The recent cross removals drew international protest. Swedish scholar Fredrick Fallman, an expert on Christianity in China, stated that “It’s an action out of despair.” Professor Carsten Vala, a political scientist at Loyola University in Maryland, told the press that the destruction of Christian churches, the removal of crosses and the intimidation of Christians is part of a wider pattern of the regime of suppressing civil liberties in China. Republican U.S. presidential candidate Marco Rubio declared that “Without question, religious freedom is under assault in China.” He added that this repression “arguably had the unintended consequence of infusing many of these religious adherents with great vibrancy as evidenced most dramatically by the explosive growth of Christianity in China.”¹⁰

These Western protests appear to have had little effect on the regime’s anti-Christian crusade. What is most remarkable about the China-based protests is that officially sanctioned church leaders, Catholics and Protestants, have stepped forward to denounce the government policy. This is unprecedented. Xi’s government may have underestimated the backlash by Chinese Christians and some within the world press.

The protests against the anti-Christian campaign in China should inspire Christians in the West, where Christian culture

has been under systematic attack in many quarters. In China the anti-Christian campaign is supported by government policy. The Chinese government’s hollow claim that it is only enforcing “zoning codes” has drawn righteous anger by the faithful, leaders and average people who are angered to see the desecration of Christ’s living symbol of His message: the cross. They have courageously stood up for their faith.

Christians throughout the world should join in the Chinese Christians’ courageous stand, which has received only intermittent coverage in the media. Christians can make this commitment to one another as a global community of believers who accept Christ’s message that sacrifice and love for one’s fellow humans can redeem a world in horrific turmoil.

- 1 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/20/china-xi-jinping-religion_n_7342360.html
- 2 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/05/china-christianity-wenzhou-zhejiang-churches>
- 3 <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2011/12/ChristianityAppendixC>
- 4 <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/1f44acbba8f466b91aeecce0fc2875/severe-crackdown-china-church-crosses-draws-backlash>
- 5 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/27/chinas-christians-protest-evil-communist-campaign-to-tear-down-crosses>
- 6 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/05/china-christianity-wenzhou-zhejiang-churches>
- 7 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/11046155/Inside-Chinas-most-radical-cult.html>
- 8 http://www.realclearworld.com/2014/10/06/hong_kongs_christian_revolutionaries_161894.html
- 9 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-26414014>
- 10 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/27/chinas-christians-protest-evil-communist-campaign-to-tear-down-crosses>

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