



## The Church and the Cult of Xi Jinping

Communist China announced last month that it planned to cancel its 2018 agreement with the Vatican, which had allowed recognition of the Church in exchange for government oversight over the appointment of Catholic bishops in China. The 2018 agreement allowed the Vatican to appoint Catholic bishops with the approval of the Chinese government, and was supposed to last two years. In November, the Chinese government issued the ominous Order No. 15 on administrative rules for religious affairs. The order makes no provision for any papal role in the appointment of bishops in the state-approved Catholic church.

The Chinese government appears to have played the Vatican, in the same way China persuaded the United Kingdom to return Hong Kong to the mainland in 1997 with the promise of a “one country, two systems” policy to last for fifty years. Readers old enough may be reminded of the late Dr. Fred Schwarz, who wrote *You Can Trust the Communists (to be Communists)* in 1960. He warned that any agreement with a Communist regime was worth only the paper it was written on.

There were many critics of the 2018 Vatican agreement that allowed Chinese government oversight of episcopal appointments. Critics charged that the agreement opened the way for the Chinese government to resume full control of the state-recognized Patriotic Catholic Church, and that it betrayed the large underground Catholic church in China. Order No. 15 threatens to undermine the one concession made to the Vatican in the 2018 agreement, providing for Vatican involvement in the appointment of bishops.

Critics of the 2018 agreement can now say, “We told you so. We tried to warn you, but you did not listen.” Order No. 15, however, should point to a larger context: the rise of the personality cult of China’s President Xi Jinping and the concurrent suppression of religion in China. Dictatorships in one-party states necessitate a cult of personality centering on a supreme leader in order to survive.

It is not a coincidence that personality cults arise in authoritarian and totalitarian states. The supreme leader needs to be made into a god-like being to legitimize the state. We see this in the cults that developed around Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, Castro and Mao Zedong. Xi Jinping, in his drive to centralize power in China, has launched an official government campaign to make him into a god, all knowing, all wise, and to be obeyed. Xi Jinping’s cult of personality follows the model developed by Mao. The difference is that Mao presented himself as a peasant-like saint, while Xi Jinping represents a new technocrat leading the nation to modernity and world dominance.

### China’s Order No. 15

The new administrative rules for religious affairs found in Order No. 15 form part of a campaign to replace religious values in Chinese society with materialist values inherent in Marxism and the Chinese Communist Party. The specifics of Order No. 15 reinforce an existing rule—accepted by the Vatican in the 2018 agreement—that bishops and priests within the Patriotic Catholic Church must be officially registered and licensed by the government to be ministers. Order No. 15 adds a new requirement that clergy “adhere to the principle of independent and self-administered religion in China.”<sup>1</sup>

*What this means is that clergy must obey the government and remain independent from the Vatican.* In addition, Order No. 15 requires that clergy “support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party” by practicing the core values of socialism. Clergy, the government rule declares, should promote “social harmony”—in other words, conformity of thought. Registration for the ministry is to be tracked by a new government database that lists the names of clergy and provides a system of rewards and punishments to regulate their behavior.

The new impositions on clergy suggest that the Chinese government is renegeing on the spirit of the 2018 agreement.

We don't know this for sure, because the parties to the 2018 agreement decided to keep the full language of the agreement confidential. What is known is that the Vatican agreed not to press the Chinese government on the status of the underground Catholic church, the ban on religion for youth, or the government's destruction of Catholic and Protestant churches and Buddhist temples. The agreement made no mention of human rights violations against Buddhists or Muslims. The Vatican also agreed to lift the prior excommunications of seven government-appointed bishops.

### China's War on Religion

The Chinese government's oppression of all organized religion is extensive. The human rights advocacy group Freedom House estimates that 100 million Chinese people—or about a third of China's religious believers—face a “high” or “very high” level of persecution.<sup>2</sup> These believers include Christians, Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists and Falun Gong. Repression of these groups has worsened in the last few years, coinciding with the rise of Xi Jinping's cult of personality.

In 2016 the regime passed a measure barring the roughly 90 million Communist Party members from having religious beliefs, engaging in “feudal superstitions” or supporting religious extremists. This top-down directive aims to promote materialist philosophy, which is a feature of communism. Materialism, the party proclaimed, is as “incompatible with superstitious ideologies as fire and water.”<sup>3</sup> In this campaign, Chinese officials have burned and destroyed religious books. Falun Gong and Buddhist religious books and publications have been especially targeted, but Christian churches have come under attack as well.

Christian churches have been torn down by government officials in many provinces in the name of urban redevelopment, “illegally occupying farmland” and for other reasons. In the Anhui Province, at least 250 state-sanctioned churches had their crosses removed in spring 2020 on the pretext that the crosses were “too tall, too large, too wide, or too eye-catching.”<sup>4</sup> The government has taken full advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic to prevent actual church services.

Yet even virtual Christian services have come under attack. In the Hunan Province, Pastor Li Juncai received a five and a half year prison sentence for resisting government officials insisting that party propaganda banners be displayed in a virtual service. In the Zhejiang Province, Chen Yu, the owner of an online Christian bookstore, was sentenced to seven years in prison and fined \$29,000 for selling unapproved religious books imported from other countries.

In schools, Chinese students from the earliest ages are subjected to anti-religious propaganda. They learn that religion is a feudal superstition not conducive to modern China. Officially, the Chinese constitution allows for the practice of “normal religious activities”—that is, those practices undertaken and supported by the state. As a consequence, religious groups that abide by government restrictions are allowed to continue their activities, provided they instill patriotic values. This has meant placing portraits of Xi Jinping in the churches, next to images of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Communist cadres in the Yugan Provence have gone further, *demanding that pictures of Jesus Christ and Christian crosses be replaced with pictures of Xi Jinping*. This campaign was part of a poverty-relief program to “transform believers in religion into believers in the party.” The party official in charge of the program said that people need to be convinced they should “no longer rely on Jesus but on the party for help.”<sup>6</sup>

### Making Christianity More Communist

The Chinese Communist Party knows that the number of Christians in China is much higher than the number of members of the Communist Party and is growing. For example, Pew Research estimated in 2010 that there were about 58 million Protestants and 9 million Catholics in China. By 2018, surveys suggest that there are about 100 million Christians in China. There are 90 million members of the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>7</sup>

The government is attempting to counter this growth through repression and trying to make Christianity more Chinese. At the Chinese National People's Congress in 2019, Premier Li Keqiang in his annual report to China's legislature emphasized that the government was committed to “fully implement the Communist Party's fundamental policy on religious affairs and uphold the sinicization of religion in China.”<sup>8</sup> By this, it means that religions in China must become instruments to build the Chinese communist state.

This effort to Sinicize religion began in a speech by Xi Jinping at a National Religious Work Conference in April 2016. In the speech Xi averred that the government needed to “actively guide the adaptation of religions to socialist society.”<sup>9</sup> Following the speech, all five government-sanctioned religious bodies—Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism—have been required to present “sinicization” plans. They were aided in this effort by the China Christian Council and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, official associations overseeing Protestant Christianity, in a document entitled “Outline of the

Five-Year Working Plan for Promoting the Sinicization of Christianity in Our Country (2018-2022).”

This plan outlined how churches could make the transition to promoting Chinese socialism in Christian churches. Religion must conform to party values of socialism. Pastors of churches have been required to attend meetings with local government officials and party officials on how their churches are proceeding to make Christianity compatible with communism.

The Chinese government characterizes the growth of Christianity as a national security problem. As the head of the official Movement of Protest Churches in China, Xu Xiaohong, declared in 2019, “Anti-China forces in the West are trying to influence China’s social stability and even subvert our country’s political power through Christianity.” He warned that “Only by continuously carrying forward and practicing the core values of socialism can our Christianity truly be suited to socialist society.”<sup>10</sup>

For the ruling elite in China, Western ideas mean pluralism, representative government, and people with different views—ideas that have failed in their eyes. They see the United States as fractured by racial division, which has led to riots and disorder. The Chinese fear of disorder runs deep. The Chinese Communist Party reflects a historical Chinese preference for harmony and peace in a homogeneous culture.

China is not in fact a uniform culture. Regional differences are reflected in dialects that people from other regions cannot understand. This is why the government has insisted that all Chinese students learn Mandarin. This is why it insists that Hong Kong and Taiwan may not be independent. The independence of those populations is a sign of potential disorder to come. The Chinese government cannot tolerate ethnic nationalism. Its officials believe the repression of Uyghur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists is necessary to maintain social order. This conviction that order must be maintained at all costs is a deep cultural belief expressed in histories of past dynasties.

### The Power of a Cult

**M**arxist ideology in China is a mask for the corrupt ruling elite to hold onto power. In maintaining one-party rule, a cult of personality is required. The party proclaims itself as the voice of the people, the instrument for advancing society and the tool of historical necessity. The dictatorship, represented by the party, requires a Supreme Leader or Great Helmsman. In centralizing power, Xi seeks to create a cult of personality around himself that is a resurrection of the cult around Mao.

The Western press has been complicit in allowing this cult around Xi to develop, by largely ignoring his persecution of Christians, Buddhists (including Falun Gong) and Muslims. The American press occasionally mentions the concentration camps in western China in which an estimated one million Uyghur Muslims have been placed. The human rights violations occurring in these camps can no longer be ignored. Yet Xi is portrayed in the Western press largely as a technocrat intent on modernizing China. Christian and conservative media have been the biggest critics of Xi.

### A History of Fooling Gullible Westerners

**M**ao understood how easily the Western media are manipulated. In the late 1930s Mao launched a campaign to create an image of himself as a benign revolutionary. Public opinion in China, as well as the West, remained deeply anti-communist at that time. Mao asked the Shanghai communist underground to find a foreign journalist who might be sympathetic to him. They found such a person in Edgar Snow, an American journalist who had come to China in 1931. He had developed a close friendship with journalist Agnes Smedley, a suspected Comintern spy and lover of Soviet spymaster Richard Sorge. Smedley vouched for Snow’s leftist sympathies.

Snow’s book *Red Star Over China* appeared in English in 1937-38. It remained a major source of information on Mao for years to come. *Red Star Over China* cemented Mao’s image as an agrarian reformer. Dozens of other left-wing reporters followed to meet Mao. Their sympathetic portrayals encouraged American and European policymakers to view Mao as a different kind of communist. For example, General Patrick Hurley, appointed by Franklin Roosevelt as a special envoy to China in 1944, returned to the United States to tell the National Press Club in Washington in November 1945 that “the only difference between Chinese Communists and Oklahoma Republicans is that the Oklahoma Republicans are not armed.”<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, Xi does not enjoy the full adulation of the Western press enjoyed by Mao in the 1930s. Still, reports of the atrocities committed against Christians, Buddhists and Muslims, while reported by the press, avoid holding Xi directly responsible for these human rights violations.

The mainstream media in America have given even less attention to the Chinese Communist Party’s campaign to replace Jesus, Buddha and Allah with Xi, and even to change the image of Jesus as a man of peace and tolerance. In a recently published Chinese professional ethics textbook used in vocational training schools across China, Jesus is portrayed as a man resorting to cruelty and

violence to uphold the law—in direct contradiction to how he is depicted in the Gospels. The textbook's lesson is a *brazen alteration of the Gospel of John*.

### No Mercy for the Adulteress!

In the real Gospel, Jesus famously encounters a woman accused of adultery. Those around Jesus ask whether the woman should be stoned to death as prescribed by Mosaic law. Jesus replies that those without sin should throw the first stone. The accusers of the woman realize that no one is without sin and walk away. Jesus then turns to the woman and asks if anyone has condemned her. She replies “No.” Jesus then declares, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”

The Chinese textbook actually changes the ending of this unforgettable account of Jesus's compassionate actions to read, “When everyone left, Jesus stoned the woman to death, saying ‘I am also a sinner. But if the law only be enforced by men without blemish, the law would be dead.’” The textbook then asks the reader, “Through this short story, how do you view the law?” Presumably the expected answer is that the law must be upheld.<sup>12</sup>

In China there can be only one Messiah—Xi. There can be only one religion—communism. Christianity presents a direct threat to the Chinese one-party state. The power of Jesus's message presents a danger to a materialist regime that seeks power only for itself, at the expense of the people, a regime in which God is replaced by Mammon.

Jesus's message threatens all such regimes—whether in China or our own country.

1 Nina Shea, “China Betrays Its Deal with the Vatican,” *National Review*, February 19, 2021.

2 Eva Fu, “Chinese Regime Burns Religious Books, Jails Believers,” *The Epoch Times*, March 3-9, 2021.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 John Powers, “China's Religious Problem: Why the Chinese Communist Party Views Religious Belief as a Threat,” *Asian Dialogue*, October 17, 2019.

6 <https://www.dw.com/en/in-xi-we-trust-is-china-cracking-down-on-christianity/a-42224752>.

7 Ibid.

8 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/march/sinicization-china-wants-christianity-churches-more-chinese.html>.

9 Ibid.

10 [https://world.wng.org/content/the\\_threat\\_of\\_christianity\\_in\\_china](https://world.wng.org/content/the_threat_of_christianity_in_china).

11 Charles B. McLane, *Soviet Policy and the Chinese Communists, 1931-1946* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 3.

12 <https://epochtimes.today/chinese-textbook-alters-bible-passage-says-jesus-stoned-woman-to-death/>; <https://www.frc.org/op-eds/china-to-christians-were-rewriting-the-bible-and-youll-use-it-or-else>.

## The Most Important Person on Earth is a Mother



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— Venerable Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty

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