

The False Religious Freedom of China and its Impact on the Christian Church

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03 December 2022

Literature Review

Main Literature

China is known for its ancestral religion. Most of this religion came from Confucius. I needed a source that was pre-CCP. Therefore, ED Edward's book *Confucius* helped immensely. Written in 1940, Edwards writes a comprehensive study on Confucius such as: his personal life, his book *Analects*, and his political and governmental views. It was written nine years before Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution and is not tainted by the effects of communism. Confucius believed that everyone is good and can achieve the title Sage through social virtue. If a society was virtuous then peace would reign.

The Christian Roots of Religious Freedom was an essay written by Robert Wilken. It gave me a quick rundown on Religious Freedom and how it has advanced throughout time in Western society. In this book, he also links Religious Freedom to the early roots of Christianity.

Another main book was, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*. The author of this book, Fenggang Yang, is a scholar at Purdue University. I ran across his name numerous times throughout my research and realized that I had a pile of gold in my hands and dove headfirst. He outlined extensively what Christianity under communism looks like, how it operates, the modus operandi of the CCP, the design of the bureaucracy of the CCP, and even examined a "market strategy" of religion in China

The *Chinese Constitution* weaves consistently through the ideals of Confucianism. The culture of China seems to be so based on his ideals that the societal pressure is immense. If a woman wants to convert to Christianity in China from Islam, the CCP police would go to her family and friends to coerce her to recant. If this did not work then they would pressure the husband to divorce. It was easy to see that the Constitution was part legal document and part propaganda. The holes in the document were massive when it came to religious freedom. The words that they use have so many different meanings that it was intended to convict those who tread down that pathway.

The Three Self's Patriotic Movement (TSPM) statement of faith was the same way. In the beginning it was great. There were elements in there that, as a Christian, I even agreed with. However, there were some lines in the latter half of the document that were worrying. Throughout the latter half of the text, the statement of faith likens the CCP as an equal to God.

Studies

I primarily used Open Doors USA and the Pew Research Center for my statistics. In my research upon various topics, these two organizations never seem to fail. Unfortunately, Pew Research Center only updates information on an as needed basis. Open Doors USA writes dossiers on various countries, giving out all kinds of relevant data on how many Christians are in certain areas, what kinds of persecution they face, and even how to help in some cases.

Another key asset was China Aid. I have not heard of them until recently, but what they do is crucial to the Church knowing and understanding what is happening in China. They have outlined and documented all types of persecution simply by following some of the churches around. They too have a dossier on what all is happening with these churches outlining anything that one could think of.

Gaps in Research

There were essentially three main gaps in my research. The first gap was the secrecy of the CCP. In their constitution, there were four principles in the preamble: Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, important thought of Three Represents, and Xi Jiaoping thought. The only principle that I could get my hands on was the Deng Xiaoping Theory. There was also a

article that outlines the basis of Chinese regulation on religion called Document no 19. Either it was not translated, or it was not published because it was spoken of but never displayed. The second gap was paywalls. Most of the resources that I saw online with headlines that inclined me to believe they had some good information, had money involved. As a poor college student, this was exceedingly prohibitive. The last gap in my research was the strict regulations of the Chinese. Getting accurate information is impossible when there is fear involved. The population of China know it, the researchers know it, and the consumer knows it as well. I fear nobody will know how diverse China's state of religion is until something awful happens.

Introduction

Historically, Christians have been in the minority party in the global scope of religion. Only in the past few centuries has it become the dominant religion worldwide. Part of this is due to the Roman empire, part to English and French colonizers, and part to missionaries. Whatever one may think of the colonial age, Christianity came out on the other side with a greater following than ever before. To many of the Faith, this is amazing news and glory be to God for it. However, there are a few nations that have purposely cracked down on Christianity as an infiltration of the West.

Hypothesis

History proves that the absence of Religious Freedom has a purifying effect on a religion. The persecution weeds out those who are on the fence, making the fringe believers mainline. In modern times, the Church in places like China have been a testament to this idea. In the past, the Roman persecution of Christians gave the religion a boost so that, once the fire of persecution was quenched, the "spread of the Gospel to all nations" became easy. The greater the religion, the higher the persecution. This persecution is leading up to a revolt. This revolt may not be violent, but it will be effective for the kingdom of God.

The basis of Religious Freedom

Informally, the theory of Religious Freedom begins in roughly 311 A.D. with the Roman emperor Galerius ending his reign. In this year, he ends the persecution of Christians because, "The people were neither offering worship and due religious observance to the gods nor practicing the worship of the god of the Christians." The persecution not only hurt the Christians, but even those who followed the Roman deities ceased their allegiance to them! Atheism was the accidental consequence of persecution. The primitive concept of Religious Freedom began with Roman emperors Licinius and Constantine in 313 A.D. called the Edict of Milan. The Edict was primarily a document of toleration rather than a document on religious freedom. It was of immense impact because it directly referenced the Christians in the empire, granting them clemency, "provided they do not disturb good order."¹ Following this "toleration", Christian apologists were able to freely debate their ideas in the town square. At the time, Jews had already been granted the freedom to observe their rituals and customs, but they never advanced their position in the society. Fortunately to the Christians, they were not viewed as a single ethnic people group that had been dominated by the Romans. Using this advantage, and analyzing this

¹ *On the Deaths of the Persecutors: A Translation of De Mortibus Persecutorum*. MERCHANTVILLE: EVOLUTION PUB AND MANUFAC, 2021.

demographic, Tertullian and Lactantius developed theories utilizing the concept of Religious Freedom through the prism of Christianity.² It was these two Christians that revolutionized the idea that not only could government merely tolerate a religion, but it could even encourage its people to pursue religion.

Fast forward now to the Enlightenment. Instead of a self-righteous government enacting policy wiping out a small religious minority in a province, there are violent uprisings between Catholics and Protestants. When there were Catholic kings and queens, the protestants suffered. When the king was Anglican, the Catholics suffered. A prime example of this was in the times of the Huguenots in the sixteenth century. The fight for theological dominance was in the town square, but this time it was bloody. The Saint Bartholomew's day massacre claimed at least 3,000 souls on that day. This was the direct result of a government-organized religion.³

Later, during the beginning of the American revolution Madison begins to make the shift from Freedom of Religion to Freedom of Conscience.⁴ Freedom of Conscience inherently applies to those who state that they practice no religion, for every man has a conscience. It also deals more closely with whatever man feels is right. (From a Christian perspective, this is dangerous and is reminiscent of "whatever was right in man's eyes." But it is good to have an impartial government.) Also, the concept of freedom of conscience deals with the mind, which a government cannot take away. These phrases will be used interchangeably as it applies.

Confucius: an Intro.

In China, the basis of thought is on Confucius. During his time, Confucius was not widely known. He grew up in a time that would make him the contemporary of Socrates. Unlike Socrates, Confucius taught about how members of society interact and cooperate to form a "well-organized and well-ordered society".⁵ His ideal operated solely on social virtue. If every member of society lived and operated on this idea of social virtue, then it could operate in such a way that utopia could exist. The concept of Confucianism begins with the basis that people are born good, that society corrupts them at a young age, and that goodness may be reached before one dies. As a leader in Chinese thought (though not at that time as he died relatively unknown), Confucius spoke of a concept known as "jen".

In his writing the Analects, jen (pronounced 'rən) unfortunately does not have any direct English translation. The best of the best have no quick answers apart from the combination of benevolence, love, virtue, charity, goodness, and social virtue. Author E.D. Edwards attempts to explain it having, "combining moral qualities with an attitude of mind, and cannot therefore be defined by a single word."⁶ The concept of jen is so complex that it appears to have various stages. The primary stage being inside the home. One needs to be filial towards his family. Then, as one grows older, he enters the second stage which is acting on the training that was instilled inside the family. This procures a society where people will look towards each other as a family

² Wilken, Robert Louis. "Pg 12-14." Essay. In *The Christian Roots of Religious Freedom*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2014.

³ Foxe, John. "Pg 202." Essay. In *Voices of the Martyrs: Ad33 - Today*. Washington, DC: Salem Books, 2019.

⁴ Wilken, Robert Louis. "Pg 39-40." Essay. In *The Christian Roots of Religious Freedom*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2014.

⁵ Edwards, E. D. "Pgs. 26-27." Essay. In *Confucius*. London and: Blackie & Son Ltd, 1940.

⁶ Edwards, *Confucius*, "Pg V"

instead of another citizen. After that, jen should be more complex as relationships and status become more complex.⁷

The interesting part of jen was that it had nothing to do with religion at the start, but it soon became a key concept to the concept of social virtue. However, freedom of religion was widely accepted at the time. The main reason of this was that jen was inherently irreligious. Because the directives were focused in on a man's relationship with society, if he does not disturb the social order. In Confucianism, jen is focused on the society, therefore a man's worth is not placed innately but is placed on him through acceptance in society. His worth is his goodness in society.

Confucianism in Government

According to Confucianism, if a man is good, then he should be counted as worthy to rise in social rankings. Eventually, he may be the head of his family and tasked with leading his family through good and bad times. It is this relationship that the father would have with his son that Confucius envisions the government having with its people. Edwards states that Confucius' view of the government has two goals: "to correct social relationships, and to maintain the welfare of the people." This relationship is intended to be close as families are close. So much so, that the leader of the government needs to be sure that he is of good character because it will rub off on the people.⁸ The concept is that if the ruler finds and maintains jen, then he will treat those he rules with love. Then, as the people learn jen, they will be easier to rule. When responding to a question about capital punishment, Confucius replies,

"Why do you need to depend on capital punishment in your government? If you are good, the people will be good. The moral force of the ruler is the wind; that of the people is grass. When the wind blows, the grass must bend."⁹

If a citizen falls out of alignment, the ruler is not subjected to execute him. Confucius taught that if a citizen loses and does not wish to reacquire his or her jen, they should excommunicate them from ritual. In turn, this cuts the citizen off from burning sacrifices to his or her god, taking part in the ancestral music, and spiritually contacting ancestors who have passed. It is cutting them off from heaven.¹⁰

China's Constitution

Cutting citizens off from heaven seems to be the most powerful form of control. A thing that man fears more than death – is what happens after it. The Jews did this with the tabernacle. If a man "does any of these abominations, those persons who do so shall be cut off from among their people. (Leviticus 18:29)"¹¹ The Catholics did it with the Protestants. And now the Communists are doing this to its people.

⁷ Edwards, Confucius, "Pg 68"

⁸ Edwards, Confucius, "Pg 117-118"

⁹ Edwards, Confucius, "Pg 122-123"

¹⁰ Edwards, Confucius, "Pg 75"

¹¹ *NASB: New American Standard Bible*. Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, publisher for the Lockman Foundation, 2020.

In the Chinese Constitution, Freedom of Religion is clearly outlined in Chapter 2, Article 36. It states this:

Citizens of the People's Republic of China shall enjoy freedom of religious belief. No state organ, social organization or individual shall coerce citizens to believe in or not to believe in any religion, nor shall they discriminate against citizens who believe in or do not believe in any religion. The state shall protect normal religious activities.

No one shall use religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the state's education system. Religious groups and religious affairs shall not be subject to control by foreign forces.¹²

Sounds great, right? The CCP will not coerce citizens on what they should believe in. It will protect the citizens religious adventures inside the country. The danger is in the second half. Many religions like Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism preach values that may go against the party line. This is exactly what these religions do. Therefore, China created various organizations to infiltrate and align. At the forefront of this covert op (though mostly overt), was the Religion Affairs Department (and later, Bureau). Originating in 1950, the Chinese sought to clamp down on religion. Marxism-Leninism was the basis of their foundation, so therefore it could really be referred to as its own "drug war". Like the DEA, the RAB worked primarily towards cutting religion off at the source: internationally first, then they would look internally. The RAB worked tirelessly to cut off international funds to Churches, Mosques, and temples. This included driving out foreign-based missionaries, urging the denominations to cut ties with China, Christian schools and hospitals were shut down. Many religious clergy were prosecuted and tried as United States spies or revolutionary members of the state.¹³ Those that were not prosecuted were publicly harassed, assaulted, or even killed.

As a result of this, the RAB created philosophy called the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). It was founded on the principle of the "three selfs", self-propagation, self-governance, and financial self-support. This was the principle that urged the closing of most of the churches in China. There was one study that Beijing had roughly 60 churches before 1950. After the implementation of this principle there less than five.¹⁴ The TSPM also had a Catholic offshoot that experienced similar regulation and persecution.

Step 1: Infiltration and Litigation¹⁵

The TSPM is deeply heretical as an organization. As the Church, it should center around the 5 Solas: Scripture alone, by faith alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. There should not be legal traps in a churches statement of faith, yet the TSPM statement

¹² "Article 36." Essay. In *The Constitution of the People's Republic of China: Adopted on December 4, 1982 by the Fifth National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China at Its Fifth Session*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Pr., 1983.

¹³ Yang, Fenggang. "Pgs 67-68." Essay. In *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

¹⁴ Carsten T. Vala · Sep 07, 2020 · Topic: Church Structure and Organization · Issue: China Source Quarterly. "The Three-Self Patriotic Movement." *China Source*. Accessed December 2, 2022. <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/the-three-self-patriotic-movement/>.

¹⁵ In this passage, I will point out the holes in the TSPM that are designed to trap Christians in "legalese". I believe that there are Christians in these churches, but that the churches hold to certain ideologies that are anti-Christian.

of faith is littered with legal loopholes designed to trap the unwitting. In it, the statement advises its members “abide by the national Constitution, and the provisions of laws, regulations, and policies, fulfilling its duties, such as legal registration.” The big loophole in this statement is that many of the laws, regulations, and policy are anti-Christian. This church is the government approved version of Christianity. They set up their ministers to be party aligned. The Christian Council runs background checks.¹⁶ Once they pass the check, clergy are then tasked with the responsibility of enacting the traditional practices of the Church, that is teaching and preaching the Gospel, and baptizing new believers.¹⁷ The new responsibilities of the clergy is to report, “Gross acts of misconduct, violation of the church order, heretical preaching or violation of criminal law”. If the district, prefecture, or league deems the misconduct detrimental enough, then the ordinary layman could be caught up in a legal dispute for merely saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.¹⁸ The reaction to this is that the public will lose trust in its clergy. One of the main tenants of Christianity is the concept of burden sharing. If a member of the church is having issues with the government in attempting to grow his business and wants some of the clergy or other believers to pray for peace in the struggle. A clergyman who is too hard of a hardline party member may go report back to the Church Affairs Committee about a disgruntled citizen. The result of this would be that the church member could end up in legal trouble.

Step 2: Publicly shame

Because the community would likely find out that he was in legal trouble due to speaking out, his neighbors, friends, and family may attempt to speak out against him to clear themselves of trouble. This would mean that close ties would be cut, business would become even more difficult, and he would be publicly humiliated. In turn, people see what he goes through, and they may refuse to go to church because they advocate truth, but they only use truth to destroy, not cultivate.

This was exactly what the founder of the CCP wanted. After 1966, Chairman Mao Zedong founded the Red Guard. This force was designed and tasked with cultural reform. They were to sweep away the “Four Olds” culture: old customs, culture, habits, and ideas. This resulted in the remaining religious venues being destroyed. Author Fenggang Yang described it saying, “Many buildings were actually torn apart, statues of gods and religious artifacts smashed, and religious scriptures burned.”¹⁹ This resulted those who hid the symbols of the past to be seen as pariahs in the view of the state. After the Guard shut down the churches that are not fully in line with the state, there are now only a few churches left who can publicly worship. To compound the situation, the only churches left have now been purified to be party-line churches. Those that leave are now seen as apostate.

Vive La resistance!

¹⁶ CCCTSPM. “Article 22” *Church Order of Protestant Churches in China _ Protestant Churches in China, CCCTSPM Official Site*. Accessed December 2, 2022.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140826115514/http://www.ccctspm.org/english/enews/2008/724/08515340.html>

¹⁷ The TSPM believes in both sprinkling and immersion. Leave it to communism to settle a century long dispute between denominations.

¹⁸ CCCTSPM. “Article 25, 26”

¹⁹ Yang, Fenggang. “Pg 73.”

Even through the cultural and political pressure, the true Chinese Church is thriving. It is true that we will likely never know the accurate estimate of how many Christians are active in China. However, the ballpark estimates are miles apart. The Pew Research Center estimated in 2010 that there were 68 million Christians residing in China, acquiring roughly 5% of the religious market. The rate of those converting to Christianity between 1950 and 2010 was roughly 7%. The scholar and author Fenggang Yang estimated that if current trends persisted, the estimate of Christians in China could be as high as 67% of China's whole population²⁰ (Can I get an amen?!).

Unfortunately, this does not mean that growth against a persistent regime will come without growing pains. The Christian human rights group China Aid has followed the church Early Rain Covenant Church, dubbed The Mayflower Church and recorded all that they encounter. In its annual report, The Mayflower Church threats, assault, and in some cases eviction. Within a year, a member and a minister were both locked in their house by authorities and locked out of their houses by authorities. A third member of their church had their lock painted closed, in an attempt to get him to move.²¹

Conclusion

Open Doors USA has recorded China as being the 17th most aggressive country in the world during 2022, a progression of 26 places since 2018. There were over 5000 attacks on churches that were recorded.²² Freedom of Religion is a false concept in the CCPs eyes. They see Christianity as a Western ideal to drug the citizens of China. What they do not realize is that the whole world is watching how both sides act according to one another. Scholar Fenggang Yang sums up the effects of strict regulation as such, "If the restrictive regulation persists in the current form of constraints and suppression, I would not be surprised if the religious policy becomes the last straw that breaks the camel's back."²³

²⁰ Wormald, Benjamin. "Chapter 1: Main Factors Driving Population Growth." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*. Pew Research Center, April 28, 2022. Last modified April 28, 2022. Accessed December 3, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/04/02/main-factors-driving-population-growth/#the-potential-impact-of-religious-switching-in-china>.

²¹The Mayflower Church consists of 29 adults. The link to fully read what they go through in a year is below. Unfortunately, there is not enough time to fully write about it.
https://drive.google.com/file/d/14Iabgsh1_bc1qmLq1umtlfYpQhFGmBBF/view

²² Department, Advocacy. "China's Theology and Persecution." *International Christian Concern*. Last modified March 25, 2020. Accessed December 3, 2022. https://www.persecution.org/2020/03/25/chinas-theology-persecution/#_ftn1.

²³ Yang, Fenggang. "Pg 84."

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