

Religious Liberty in China: The Key to a Stable, Peaceful, and Harmonious Order

By Doug Bandow

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Christianity is thriving in China. Reports that there may be more religious believers than Communist Party members has made Beijing unsure how to respond. Beijing's sensitivities to religion are well known. Government secular ideology sees religion as offering a competitive worldview to the hegemony of the Party, with legitimate fears that many Christians, especially Catholics, have loyalties beyond China's borders. Religion brings people together in ways that might eventually influence politics.

In its early days the People's Republic of China responded harshly to religious activity, but official policy has moderated over time. There is an increasing amount of reluctant toleration of religious belief. However, there isn't one national approach. The treatment of religious believers varies regionally. For instance, lately authorities in Wenzhou, sometimes called the "Jerusalem of China," have enforced more restrictions than have many other cities and provinces.

In contrast, Beijing appears to have a more relaxed policy. Last year I visited a church of around 800 in the capital. It operated openly, attracted many young people, and hosted dozens of baptisms on the Sunday I attended. I saw a car in traffic that sported the traditional Christian "fish." A friend of mine who lives in Beijing talked of hearing Christian Christmas music in malls and seeing people carry Bibles in public.

Ironically, the lesson of the West's experience with religion is that the best way for a government to avoid conflict between religious believers and political authorities is to provide the greatest freedom possible. Left alone, Christians, in particular, are unlikely to challenge the political authorities.

Obviously there have been many strains of Christianity throughout the centuries. However, the faith emphasizes a transcendent commitment to God while accommodating many different political perspectives. Jesus explicitly separated what is owed to God and to Caesar. The Apostle Paul, whose ministry benefited from the order imposed by the Roman Empire, urged submission to the ruling authorities. There were exceptions, however, most obviously when secular rulers sought to impede the exercise of faith.

For instance, when the Jewish leadership in the Sanhedrin instructed the Apostles Peter and John to no longer preach about Jesus' death and resurrection, they responded that they had to obey God rather than men: "we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." The original disciples and their followers persevered despite episodic persecution. Indeed, the violent response by the Jewish authorities encouraged Paul to take his ministry to the Gentiles in the Roman world beyond.

Ironically, the Romans found Christians to be good citizens, with little interest in upsetting the settled order. Indeed, the latter's commitment to better living today and belief in heavenly rewards tomorrow caused Christians to ameliorate some of the social problems evident in the ancient world. Only when more abusive emperors demanded to be worshiped as gods did Christians resist, often at the cost of their lives.

Contra the empire's expectations, persecution did not extinguish religious faith. Rather, Christianity grew under pressure. No one claimed allegiance to Jesus to get ahead. The willingness of believers to endure provided dramatic evidence of the strength of their beliefs.

As Christianity became the majority faith in the West the faithful began to play a much larger political role. But in general they sought to shape, not overturn, the political order. And their greatest concern always was the status of their faith, both individually and communally. The worst battles between religious and civil powers occurred when the latter sought to exercise spiritual authority.

The PRC doesn't easily fit into the Western experience. However, one lesson clearly applies. The best way to minimize political confrontations between church and state is to reduce government restraints on religion. Christians have no unified view of politics, and that is as true in China as in America. But believers everywhere agree on the importance of being allowed to worship God.

Interfering with the ability of people to live their faith guarantees indeed requires resistance. That certainly applies to closure of churches. It also results from lesser restrictions, such as tearing down crosses and steeples. Whatever the government's objectives, the impact will be social conflict. Believers will perceive the state to be challenging their core faith and will feel forced to demonstrate that their primary loyalty is to God rather than government.

It is a battle which the Party cannot win. For years Christianity's growth was concentrated in rural areas, but recently has spread to the cities and reached a better educated population. Based on existing growth rates there could be nearly 250 million Christians in China by 2030. Even if the government successfully suppressed public worship, it could not eliminate private belief. Merely attempting to do so would generate anger and resentment, and possibly resistance.

The Party hopes to make Christianity conform to China. Gu Mengfei of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, which represents legal Protestant churches, explained that Beijing desired to

“encourage more believers to make contributions to the country’s harmonious social progress, cultural prosperity and economic development.”

Such harmony is best achieved by eliminating the greatest source of potential conflict, barriers to religious practice. Chinese Christians with whom I have talked want to make their country a better place, not take political control. They are interested in social peace.

In fact, last year Pope Francis visited East Asia and proposed a dialogue with Beijing. He said that the Catholic Church “only asks to have freedom to do its work. No other conditions.” When its freedom to practice is protected, the Catholic Church is not a revolutionary force. To the contrary, in much of the world it is one of the most important advocates for social stability—or “harmonious social progress.”

China increasingly is influencing Asia and the world. But the PRC in turn will be influenced by developments within. One of those is religion. The government would best respond in a way that uses increased religious faith to encourage peaceful social progress.

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