

Church State Relations in China – Consequences for the Catholic Church

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Church state relations in China are a confusing, unstable mixture of Leninist-Stalinist policy and traditional imperial practice, neither of which adequately fits the realities of contemporary Chinese society and both of which are producing unintended consequences. In this essay, I discuss in turn the Leninist-Stalinist policies and the imperial practices and I analyze their consequences for the health of the Chinese Catholic Church and the long term stability of the Chinese state.

Leninist-Stalinist Policy

Soviet Communist policy toward religion was shaped by the Bolsheviks' struggles with the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church had been established by law as a state church and until 1905 defection from the church was a punishable offense. The liturgy of the church was deeply embedded in the way of life of Russia's peasants and was indispensable for their sense of meaning and community. After the revolution of 1917, the communists saw the church as a dangerous opponent. In 1922, Lenin initiated policies to cripple the church and eliminate its influence on Russian society. Stalin fully institutionalized the policy and it was eventually exported to all other Communist countries that allied themselves with the Soviet Union.¹

The main elements of the policy were: First, proclaim freedom of religious belief in one's constitution. (This served to increase incentives to abandon the mainstream church to seek other faiths.) Second, take away most of the property of the churches, strip them of their educational and welfare activities and restrict them to purely liturgical functions. Third, imprison and even execute the major leaders of the dominant church, not officially on religious grounds, but on grounds that they are attacking the revolution. Fourth, create bodies of pro-regime clergy and laity to help carry out attacks on the church leadership, and encourage leaders of minority religions to join in the attacks as well. Fifth, after hav-

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1 This account is drawn from Richard Madsen, "Religion under Communism," in: S.A. Smith (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism* (Oxford University Press 2014), pp. 585-601.

ing destroyed the leadership of the dominant church, appoint compliant successors. The dominant church will now be a subservient, hollowed out shell. Finally, attack (perhaps now with the aid of the subservient leaders of the dominant church) those minority religions that initially helped join in the attacks on the dominant church. A state organization to control religion was created (similar to the State Administration for Religious Affairs in China). In the Soviet Union in the short term at least the policy was successful. According to Philip Walters,

By 1939 the Orthodox church had virtually ceased to exist as an institution. ... it is probable that no more than one or two hundred churches remained open out of a prerevolutionary total of some 46,000; clergy and laymen were in labor camps; and only four bishops remained at liberty.²

The policy was flexible enough, however, that it could accommodate changes in the national and international context. During World War II, Stalin opened churches to harness their spiritual energy in defense of the Fatherland, and after the War he continued this relatively relaxed policy toward religious practice until his death in 1953. The Church had been weakened and turned into an instrument for supporting government interests, but it was able to carry out some of its public liturgical functions, albeit with greatly diminished membership. Subsequently, Khrushchev implemented the policy in a much harsher way with an attempt to completely destroy the faith. This, however, provoked a backlash in the form of fervent pockets of underground faith. Accordingly, the Brezhnev regime ended the attempts at political suppression and returned to the containment policy of the later Stalin years.

After World War II, a price of belong to the Communist club was adoption of the Lenin-Stalin policies toward religion. Since the policies had been formulated to counter the power of the Russian Orthodox Church, however, they often fit poorly with non-Russian contexts. In Poland, for example, where the Catholic Church had been seen as the essential guardian of national identity, it was clear that a heavy handed approach would provoke a strong nationalistic reaction. So the Polish Communists were forced to compromise far more than Stalin had with the Orthodox Church in Russia. For its part, the leadership of the Polish Catholic Church was also willing to compromise with the government for the sake of institutional survival.

In China, there was a different problem. Imperial China never had a national, hierarchically organized established church. The term “religion” (with its Protestant-derived connotation of a personal faith practiced within congregations) only entered the Chinese vocabulary in the late 19th century, a rendering of the German term for religion, transmitted through Japan. In contrast to this “modern” religion, most of the ritual practices of ordinary Chinese people were defined as “superstition” (another new term in the Chinese vocabulary, originally introduced by Jesuits in the 17th century). These local practices, deeply embedded in the fabric of rural life, drew upon Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions. In the early 20th century, Chinese reformers had tried to purify and modernize

2 Philip Walters, “The Russian Orthodox Church,” in: Pedro Ramet (ed.), *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1988), p. 75.

these traditions by organizing them into five hierarchically structured institutions subordinate to the state – remaking them in the image of Western churches – while attempting to destroy the “superstitious” syncretistic ancestor and local deity worship that brought a sense of meaning and community to the vast majority of the Chinese people.³

In the 1950s, the Chinese Communists deployed the full Stalinist apparatus – the state agency for regulating religious affairs, the various “patriotic associations” of pro-regime clergy, the imprisonment of religious leaders, not explicitly for religious beliefs (the freedom of which was officially protected in the constitution) but for counter-revolutionary activities, the stripping away of educational and welfare functions of the religious organizations. But most of the five religions lacked the well-organized hierarchy the Orthodox Church had in Russia. The centralized organization of Han Chinese Buddhists and Daoists was artificial, having been developed only in the twentieth century. The Protestants were divided into many denominations. Only the Catholic Church fit the model of a centralized, hierarchical organization. Especially since its leader in the 1950s was the uncompromisingly anti-communist Pope Pius XII, the Catholic Church was a perfect target for the Stalinist apparatus for religious control, and the government turned the full force of that apparatus on the Catholics.

Priests were imprisoned, churches destroyed, and a small group of “patriotic” bishops recruited to lead the Church, in defiance of the Vatican. Most Catholics quietly practiced their faith in the privacy of their homes. The overall effect was the virtual destruction of the Catholic hierarchy and a hollowing out of its central institutions. But this mainly affected the Church in the major cities, where it never had been very strong anyway. Though a success for China’s Stalinist religious policy, its over-all effect of this suppression on China’s religious landscape was modest. The Catholic Church, after all, only constituted about one percent of the Chinese population.

Furthermore, the government repression had the unintended consequence of enhancing the power of laypeople in grassroots communities. Because of the way that evangelization had been carried out before 1949, it was a common pattern that whole villages or at least whole lineages were Catholic, Catholic identity was passed on from parents to children, and Catholic life was embedded in every aspect of rural economy and society. In these circumstances it was almost impossible for a person to give up a Catholic identity, because even if the person were a “lukewarm” Catholic who did not follow the commandments and did not pray regularly, the person would at least still have to be buried as a Catholic to maintain contact with familial ancestors. As with non-Christian villages, where traditional folk religion was interwoven with the fabric of life, so was the rural Catholic Church. It was as much local folk religion as hierarchical world religion and the dismantling of the hierarchy could not dislodge Catholic identity. Indeed government persecution of an identity that people could not get rid of even if they wanted to could have the effect of deepening that identity and strengthening the status of those who tried to protect it.

Thus, the dismantling of the Church hierarchy left rural communities to creatively follow their own paths in practicing their faith. In the 1950s, many local communities were cut

3 Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, “Introduction,” in: Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang (ed.), *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2008), pp. 1-40.

off from communication with the Catholic hierarchy. There were relatively few ordained Chinese clergy available to oversee Catholic communities, especially in the hinterlands. And those who had cooperated with the government's Patriotic Association lacked credibility in the minds of most Catholics. Village Catholic communities were therefore left to their own devices. As it had been in the 18th and early 19th centuries after Catholicism had been suppressed in the wake of the rites controversies, the life of the local churches was directed by local community lay leaders. Under these circumstances one could expect an even greater diversity in the ways in which local Catholic practices developed: these included cults of modern martyrs who suffered during the various persecutions culminating in the Cultural Revolution, miraculous healings, exorcisms of demons, and signs from the Virgin Mary about the need to persevere in the path forward. In Henrietta Harrison's book on a Shanxi Catholic village, one gets a picture of the particular ways in which a Shanxi community responded to local apparitions of the Virgin Mary during the Socialist Education Movement.⁴ Other communities must have had similar experiences, but each undoubtedly had its own idiosyncrasies.⁵

Ill-adapted to the Chinese context, the Stalinist policies of the Chinese Communist Party, even when implemented in the harshest possible ways during the Cultural Revolution, thus failed to stamp out Catholicism and for that matter most forms of popular religious practice, and in fact it opened the way to new forms of practice (which might not necessarily be considered orthodox by the magisterium) coming from grass roots initiative.

The Reform era, which began under Deng Xiaoping in 1979, pulled back the Cultural Revolution efforts to obliterate religion but did not abandon the Leninist-Stalinist policy. The basic official policy on religion that guides the Reform era is outlined in Document 19, promulgated in 1982. This is similar to the "lighter" version of the policies issued in the last years of Stalin and revived during the Brezhnev era. True to the premises of Marxist ideology it holds that religion will gradually fade away because of the forces of modernization, but it recognizes that religion cannot be quickly eradicated through political force and that such force may in fact be counterproductive. It the meanwhile it attempts to control religion by restricting its practice to private life and by subordinating all of its leaders under strict government control. The only legitimate function of religion is to serve the socialist state.

But this policy remains ill-adapted to Chinese life and as a result has been a widespread failure. Millions of local temples have been built or re-built in the countryside and there has been an explosion of popular religious practice. Protestant Christianity has undergone exponential growth, from less than a million Protestants in 1949 to perhaps over 50 million today. And the Catholic Church has had a steady growth, from about 3 million Catholics in 1949 to perhaps 14 million today. In all these cases, it is the forms of religion embedded in local community life that have flourished, rather than those controlled by official hierarchies. Locally organized temples and popular sects led by charismatic leaders

4 Henrietta Harrison, *The Missionary's Curse and Other Tales from a Chinese Catholic Village* (University of California Press 2013), pp. 145-171.

5 See also, Richard Madsen, "Anti-Modern Theology and Pre-Modern Practice: Catholic Indigenization from Below in Modern China," in: Vincent Goossaert – Jan Kiely – John Lagerwey (eds.), *Modern Chinese Religion II (1850–2015)* (Brill 2015), pp. 841-866.

are more vigorous than the bureaucratically organized Chinese Buddhist Association and Chinese Daoist Association. Unregistered “house churches” often inspired by lay leaders claiming to receive direct inspiration from the Holy Spirit are growing more vigorously than those controlled by the Three Self Movement. The relatively slow growth of the Catholic Church is probably because of its dependence on an ordained clergy, which can be more subject to control by the Catholic Patriotic Association, but some of the most vigorous growth, especially in the countryside, comes from the unregistered “underground” part of the Church.

As I discovered through conversations with members of the United Front department, it is obvious even to knowledgeable officials that the official religious policy does not work. It is a failure on its own terms. Religious practice continues to grow and attempts to control religious hierarchies have led to metamorphosing new forms of grassroots religious practice that the state cannot easily control.

Up until now, it has not been possible for Party members to officially admit that the old Stalinist policy is unworkable. So officials tasked with maintaining harmonious relations of religion with the state have resorted to a variety of often inconsistent, ad hoc policies – “crossing the river by feeling the stones.” As far as the Catholic Church is concerned, this has led to regional differences in restrictions on Church practice. The cross removals and church demolitions in Wenzhou have not spread to other provinces. The official installation of Bishop Wu Qinjing is not necessarily a harbinger of government acceptance of Bishop Ma Deqin in Shanghai. On paper, the official Party-State policy toward religion seems systematic and rational but because the policy is unworkable, actual government practice is inconsistent, arbitrary, and erratic.

Nonetheless, there is reason to speculate that the disparate forms of local practice may be slowly converging. Xi Jinping seems intent on rationalizing and centralizing the governing apparatus in all realms of life and seeking a way to do so that fits Chinese culture rather than Western theory, toward the goal of a “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation.” As regards religion, this leads to a set of strategies drawing more from Kangxi and Qianlong than from Lenin and Stalin.

The New Imperial Sacral Hegemony

In Ming-Qing China, the Emperor was the Son of Heaven. His primary responsibility was to mediate between Heaven (considered a deity) and Earth. The legitimacy of his rulership was predicated on this sacral role, which of course depended on a Mandate of Heaven that could be lost through imperial malfeasance. The emperor fulfilled his role by carrying out important rituals to Heaven in the capital and elsewhere to secure the blessings of Heaven on his subjects. The emperor combined the Western roles of king and pope.⁶

As part of his role, the emperor distinguished between “true teaching” and “deviant teaching” – and since “teaching” in China was closely amalgamated with ritual and myth, this was a distinction (to use modern Western language) between orthodoxy and hetero-

6 This section is based on Richard Madsen, “The Upsurge of Religion in China,” in: Andrew J. Nathan – Larry Diamond – Marc F. Plattner (eds.), *Will China Democratize?* (Johns Hopkins University Press 2013), pp. 175-188.

doxy. The distinction was not mainly based on doctrines but on the practices of the followers of different teachings. Thus, many Western historians think that “orthodoxy” and “heterodoxy” should be labeled “orthopraxis” and “heteropraxis.”⁷

Although the elites who were the chief advisors to the emperor were schooled in a Confucian tradition that was skeptical about most forms of popular religious practice, the emperors did not usually try to suppress and indeed even encouraged village cults, which usually drew on a hybrid mix of Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian traditions. Such rituals and myths were orthodox “true teachings” if they solidified the proper hierarchical relations within families, helped build strong communities rooted in local agriculture, and thus bolstered social stability under imperial rule. As for large scale Buddhist and Daoist monasteries, the emperors held them in place through imperial patronage, which helped such institutions to thrive while ensuring that their leaders were loyal to the emperor.

However, if sectarian organizations gathered people together from many different communities, contravened gender distinctions by allowing men and women to worship together as equals, preached an immanent end to the present era, and sometimes became the organizational basis for rebellion, such organizations might be labeled heterodox and persecuted strongly.

Often the facts that might justify a distinction were ambiguous. When Catholic Christianity was brought to China in the sixteenth century by Jesuit missionaries, there was considerable debate within the imperial court about whether this “foreign teaching” should be considered orthodox or heterodox. The Jesuits eventually convinced the emperor that their teaching was compatible with the other teachings that sustained imperial rule and the Kangxi emperor in 1692 declared Catholicism to be an “orthodox teaching.” But when the Pope ruled against the interpretation of Christianity that was being proffered by the Jesuits, and thus contradicted the judgment of the emperor, the emperor then declared Christianity to be a heterodox teaching. Designations of orthodoxy and heterodoxy could shift back and forth, but the infallible arbiter of such distinctions was always the emperor.⁸ As noted in an influential paper by Zhuo Xinping, the basic principle of imperial policy toward religion was that “the government is the master, religion the follower (*zhengzhu, jiaocong*).” The history of China’s rulers in protecting and promoting China’s cultural heritage thus becomes a more fundamental basis for religious policy than Marxist theory.

Such discussions point to a policy in which the state tolerates a wide range of religious practices, now under the rubric of a respect for “cultural pluralism.” There is in effect much greater toleration of some forms of religion than during the Mao era, and for that matter during the first two decades of the Reform era. But this is not a liberal toleration, based on a right to freedom of religious association and separation between church and state. It is based on the old imperial principle that the state is the master, religion the follower. The state reserves the prerogative of determining which kind of practice is orthodox “true religion” and which kind a heterodox “evil cult.” The distinction is mainly based on

7 K.C. Liu, *Orthodoxy in late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1990).

8 Richard Madsen, *China’s Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1998). See also: Richard Madsen, “Catholicism as Chinese Folk Religion,” in: Stephen Uhalley, Jr. – Wu Xiaoxin (eds.), *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe 2001), pp. 233-249.

the practical implications of the religion: does it or does it not contribute to a “harmonious society” under the direction of the Party-State. To be fully legitimate, religions need to contribute actively to building the harmonious society. If they are not contributing actively, the state needs to take responsibility to guide the religion so that it does fulfill its obligations. If it will not accept guidance, the state needs to crush it.

In its new incarnation, the supposedly secular Party assumes a sacred aura. It now presents itself as the carrier of a sacred national destiny. It carries out spectacular public rituals like the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics – ceremonies which powerfully evoked the glorious cultural heritage of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism but gave no mention at all to Mao Zedong or even to socialism.

This can lead to new patterns of religious tolerance and repression. In the past, local village temple worship was labeled “feudal superstition” and suppressed in the name of Marxist modernization. In the emerging new policy, local temple worship and popular religious festivals are often renamed “intangible cultural heritage” and are actually encouraged (although educated elites are skeptical about their truth content), as long as they keep villagers happy and perhaps draw in some tourism. Like the imperial government of old, the Communist Ruling Party is partial to polytheism – to a multitude of local cults that keep rural society divided and incapable of mass action. Christian communities are more problematic, because they are based on a foreign religion, not part of the Chinese cultural heritage. But as long as they thoroughly indigenize – which in practice means that they accept the principle that the government is the master, religion the follower – they can be accepted. Even Christian communities that organize as house churches at the local level outside of the framework of the Three Self Movement might be fine as long as their primary function seems to be to help sustain strong families and hard work and they do not confront the police forces of the harmonious society. The encouragement of local folk religion in fact seems to have fulfilled government plans to slow down the growth of evangelical Christianity in the countryside. The Christian God then becomes one part of a pantheon of local gods, which keep the rural population divided.

However, if in practice Xi Jinping’s vision of church state relations is that of the Ming and Qing dynasty Chinese emperors, Catholicism and other forms of Christianity may not fare as well as religions based on Buddhism and Daoism. No form of Christianity can be fully trusted by an absolutist government over the long run. Like Islam, Christians believe in a world transcending God who has established universal moral principles that transcend the boundaries of any particular empire and can be used to call any earthly ruler to account. The Church’s primary value is love and it can be strongly committed to respecting Chinese culture and contributing to a harmonious society. Yet the prophetic dimension can never be completely erased and there is always the possibility that it could be actualized in the face of injustice. Moreover, the local Church will always want to keep in communication with the global Church.

An Incomplete Transition

Chinese state policy toward religion is thus in transition. One might say that the form of the policy is still Leninist-Stalinist but the spirit is imperial. The old Leninist-Stalinist apparatus is still there. The United Front Department and the State Agency for Religious Affairs, along with the various “patriotic associations” still play an important role and they are staffed with bureaucrats who will resist any change. But the officials assigned to these agencies tend to be second rate, relative failures in the meritocratic system of job assignments. Perhaps Xi Jinping will try to reform the agencies of state control to make them more effective. Ling Jihua, the head of the United Front Department (demoted to that position several years ago after his son was involved in a scandal), has now been convicted of corruption and maybe his replacement will be someone more effective and loyal to Xi.

A better organized and more effective United Front Department and State Administration for Religious Affairs may lead to a more generous and accommodating stance toward Buddhism and Daoism – great traditions that Xi Jinping has said represent the genius of the Chinese people. But better run state organizations could actually make life worse for Catholics and other Christians. In July, local officials in Wenzhou sent chanting Buddhist monks to the front of a Protestant church whose congregation was protesting the removal of its cross. This seems to have been an attempt to provoke and intimidate the Christians. Another indication that, in line with traditional imperial policy, the government is privileging indigenous religions (even though Buddhism of course was imported from India) over Christianity is the promotion of Confucianism, which for some of its proponents at least is seen explicitly as a way of countering the spread of Christianity.

The return of an old imperial policy is connected to the state’s attempt to legitimize its rule not by appeals to Marxist ideology but to nationalism, manifest in the recent Party directive forbidding discussion of “universal values,” strengthening of the “great firewall,” restrictions on use of foreign textbooks in universities, and assertive projection of power in the East and South China seas. This is driven by the Chinese people’s justifiable pride in China’s rise to wealth and power, but also by the insecurity of a Chinese Communist Party seeking a new basis for its legitimacy. As long as this propagation of an insecure nationalism persists, the chances are not good, in my opinion, for a normalization of relations between Beijing and the Vatican and the Catholic Church will continue to find itself under onerous political pressure. But eventually, when China becomes more secure about its status in the world, its government may find that there is more to lose than to gain in following the strategies of the Ming and Qing for managing religious life. In a modern globalized world, the effort to be a supreme arbiter of religious life places an unbearable demand on government. One reason is paradoxically the very power of the modern Chinese state; another reason stems from the weakness of any state in an age of globalization.

The modern state has the power to subject society to a much more complete surveillance and control than the imperial state. And to fulfill a sacral ambition to exercise a modern mandate of Heaven it has to attempt to exercise that control. In old imperial China, some religious practices gave people a chance to withdraw from society and retreat to free spaces beyond the reach of the state. But such withdrawal usually made its adherents so marginal as to be harmless to the political order. Now, because of the very success of the

Chinese state in extending its network of power, there are few free spaces, so the attempt to retreat from this world can take on an air of political resistance. Moreover, even events taking place on the margins of society can have an effect on the foundations of state power. Finally, because of the very communications technologies that the modernizing government has built for China, marginalized groups can link up, exchange ideas, and influence one another. This makes the evolution of grassroots religion in China all the more dynamic. The Chinese government is now faced with the burden of deciding which of the churning changes in religious society are orthodox and which heterodox. Chinese scholars and officials concerned with religious affairs are adopting the model proposed by the Chinese American sociologist Yang Fenggang that there are red (completely legitimate), black (illegitimate), and grey markets for religion.⁹ The government's strategy is to sort out the points of grey into clear cut red and black. Yet the grey market is so huge and diversified that this is very hard to do, and in any case it would require a degree of expert effort that is short supply in China. Thus, a strong government actually stimulates the dynamism of religious growth, and perhaps sows the seeds of its own destruction.

A second problem stems from the inability of the Chinese government or any modern government to close its borders and to set the terms of its relationships with the outside world. Economic, social, and cultural flourishing in an age of global interdependence requires open, mutually beneficial inter-communication with the modern ecumene. Pre-modern China's greatest era of cultural flourishing was during the Tang Dynasty, when a secure society was open to the foreign faiths, including Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, that traversed the Silk Road. In looking to the governance models of its great tradition, China may eventually want to bypass the Ming and Qing and embrace the openness of the Tang, and the Catholic Church would indeed have a valued and vital role to play in such a world.

But although we might indeed hope for this, I do not foresee it happening soon. In the meantime, the Catholic Church must be faithful to the Gospel and manifest love for all the Chinese people and respect for all the authentic dimensions of Chinese culture, full of the faith that in the end for those who love God all things work together for good.

9 Yang Fenggang, "Red, Black, and Grey Markets for Religion in China," in: *Sociological Quarterly* 47 (2006) 1, pp. 93-122.