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Feature Article
RELIGIOUS TRENDS IN CHINA AND THEIR SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS
Fenggang Yang

On Easter Sunday 30 years ago (April 8, 1979), a Christian church in the coastal city of Ningbo in Zhejiang was opened for a worship service. That marked the end of the 13-year ban on religion in China. One after another, churches, temples, and mosques that were closed down at the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 were reopened for religious activities.

The reopening of the Ningbo church also marked the beginning of a new era of religious revival. From the 1980s to the 1990s, religions sanctioned by the government steadily revived. Entering the twenty-first century, we see many types of religions thriving. Hundreds of millions of people assert adherence to Buddhism. Daoism-based folk religions have large masses of practitioners. Islam, practiced by 10 of China’s ethnic minorities, has begun to attract converts among the Han people. Tibetan Buddhism is also drawing new converts among Han Chinese in China’s eastern metropolises. Meanwhile, Christianity has been the fastest-growing religion.

The religious diversity in China is greater than many people realize. The central government recognizes only five major religions—Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism—so long as they are under the “patriotic” association of that religion. But underground or unregistered Christian “house churches” and Buddhist “private temples” are common throughout the country. Some local governments have also legalized certain minor religions, including Orthodox Christianity, in the northeastern province of Heilongjiang, Mazu in the southeastern province of Fujian, and Huangdaxian in the southern provinces of Zhejiang and Guangdong. Some ethnic minorities have retained or reclaimed their traditional religions, such as Dongba among the Naxi people in Yunnan and Buluotuo among the Zhuang in Guangxi. Various “new” religions originated in China or abroad, including Yiguanda, Mormonism, the Unification church, and Baha’i, which are officially banned, are nonetheless spreading. I have even run into a Jewish rabbi in a provincial capital in eastern China who had attracted Chinese inquirers and aspired to convert millions of Chinese to Judaism.

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In spite of the continuous increase of various religions, the Chinese authorities have maintained a rigid religious policy with a strong preference for atheism at its base. The tenets of this policy were crafted around 1958 when the economic collectivization was completed and central planning enacted. Its fundamental goal was to reduce religion, including eliminating denominations and limiting the number of religious venues. The transition toward a market economy has brought profound social changes to China, however, crippling the effectiveness of the religious policy.

For example, China’s once seemingly omnipotent danwei (work unit) has weakened its functions of social and political control. The emerging market is exciting and perilous, accompanied by widespread moral corruption, which prompts many individuals to seek a theodicy, or a religious worldview, to put the seemingly chaotic universe into order and seek religious solace. Religion fills the spiritual and social space created by the market economy. Meanwhile, in the increasingly globalized world, international pressures for human rights have significantly tempered the implementation of repressive measures by the control apparatus.

Recently, instead of equally repressing all religions, the regime has taken cautious measures to promote Buddhism, Daoism, folk/popular religions, and Confucianism, in part to counter the rapid increase of Christianity. The China Religious Culture Communication Association (CRCCA), working in the shadow of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), has organized the World Buddhist Forum in 2006, the second one in March 2009, and the International Daodejing Forum in 2007. Yet, neither SARA nor CRCCA has announced any plan to organize or grant permission for similar forums for Christianity or Islam. Equal treatment for legalized religions—a basic concept of the rule of law—does not seem to exist in the minds of Chinese officials. Not surprisingly, many Buddhist and Daoist leaders and believers are not hesitant to sing praises about “the best time of religious freedom in Chinese history.”

As noted above, and despite the application of greater restrictions to its growth, Christianity has been the fastest-rising religion. At the founding of the People’s Republic of China 60 years ago, there were less than 3 million Catholics and less than 1 million Protestants in China. After the Cultural Revolution, Catholics remained about 3 million and Protestants increased to about 3 million. According to the published reports of the Chinese government in the mid-1990s, Catholics increased to 4 million and Protestants to more than 10 million. Today, estimates vary widely, ranging from 50 million to 130 million Protestants and around 12 million Catholics.

Why Christianity? I have argued that the increasingly globalized market economy under political repression is the most important contextual factor for the large-scale conversion to Christianity in China. For many ordinary Chinese, the foreign origin of Christianity is no longer a problem, as the ideological orthodoxy of Marxism-Leninism is also of foreign origin. Instead of perceiving Christianity as traditional, conservative, or restrictive, many Chinese associate Christianity with the wealthy and democratic West and view Christianity as progressive, liberating, modern, and universal. Some observers point to the breakdown of the healthcare system as an important reason for the conversion toward charismatic Christianity, for such Christian beliefs highlight spiritual healing. But it cannot explain why Christianity has grown (continued on pg. 3)
faster than other religions that also offer spiritual healing. A more important factor is that Christianity provides a new form of group belonging. Within the Christian community that congregates weekly, people express love and care to one another and support individuals in crisis, which often keep people in the group even if the physical healing does not happen. For converts, Christianity is a faith that provides peace, certainty, and liberation amid bewildering market forces and a stifling political atmosphere. Without altering the social structures embedded in the market economy, the official favoritism toward some religions against Christianity is unlikely to alter the trends.

The Chinese authorities worry about a Christianity-insti- gated “color revolution” conspired by the Western powers. However, the Chinese Christians that I have interviewed are mostly evangelical, and like their counterparts in the United States, are stereotypically apolitical. They want to live a spiritual life for themselves and are fully occupied by saving individual souls, as long as they are left alone to practice their religion. A small but significant number of Christian lawyers have appeared stubbornly contentious in defending the rights of the marginalized people—unemployed factory workers, farmers who lost their farms and houses to the developers backed by corrupt officials, Falungong followers, and so forth. However, it is evident that they have been working within the existing legal framework instead of joining forces for political opposition to the regime. The Christian churches and groups may become a significant part of the emerging civil society but probably only in the Tocquevillean sense of “moral associations.”

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To send your comments on the feature essay, please e-mail FreemanChair@csis.org.

TRIVIA QUESTION

How many delegates were eligible to participate in the annual meeting of the National People’s Congress in March?

TRIVIA ANSWER

According to the official number, 2,987 delegates were eligible to participate in the second plenary session of the 11th National People’s Congress.

Publications from the Freeman Chair 2008/2009*

*Please visit our Web site to access archived publications dating back to 2002.

2009

March


- **Smart Power in U.S.-China Relations: A Report of the CSIS Commission on China**, cochaired by William S. Cohen and Maurice R. Greenberg; directed by Carola McGiffert, CSIS, March 2009. Charles W. Freeman III, Chairholder, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS, is a commissioner; Bonnie S. Glaser, Senior Associate, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS, and Melissa E. Murphy, Fellow, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS, contributed to the report.

February


January


2008

October


September

Conferences and Events

- **March 12: A Luncheon Honoring H.E. Yang Jiechi, China’s Minister of Foreign Affairs**

CSIS and the U.S.-China Business Council hosted a luncheon for H.E. Yang Jiechi, China’s minister of foreign affairs. Minister Yang discussed a host of security and economic issues in the context of bilateral relations.

- **March 11: China’s Soft Power in the Developing World**

CSIS scholars presented findings from their latest publication, *China’s Soft Power and Implications for the United States: Cooperation and Competition in the Developing World*. Bonnie S. Glaser, senior associate, Freeman Chair of China Studies, and Melissa E. Murphy, fellow, Freeman Chair of China Studies, discussed their chapter in the publication entitled, “Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: The Ongoing Debate.”

- **March 6: A Conversation on U.S.-China Relations**

CSIS hosted a conversation on U.S.-China relations between Dr. Wang Jisi, dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, and Ambassador John D. Negroponte, vice chairman of McLarty Associates. The discussion was moderated by Bonnie S. Glaser, senior associate, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS.

- **March 4: U.S.-China Smart Power Commission Report Rollout**

In the summer of 2008, CSIS president and CEO John J. Hamre asked William Cohen and Maurice (Hank) Greenberg to chair the U.S.-China Smart Power Commission, designed to apply the successful framework developed by the CSIS Commission on Smart Power to the U.S.-China relationship. The bipartisan commission includes national leaders from the government, private sector, nongovernmental organizations, and academia. The commission released a concrete set of policy recommendations for both the Obama administration and the 111th Congress on how the United States can work with China to bring to bear their respective soft power to promote the global public good, while simultaneously ensuring the protection of U.S. interests.

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**FREEMAN FACTS**

**Chinese Defense Spending**

1. On March 4, China announced that its annual defense spending will officially increase by 14.9 percent to $70 billion in 2009.

2. The budget increase is slightly less than previous years. In 2008, the military budget rose by 17.6 percent, and in 2007 it rose by 17.8 percent, the largest increase in a decade.

3. The increase marks the 19th double-digit increase in defense spending in two decades.

4. China’s defense spending equals 1.4 percent of its GDP. U.S. defense spending is about 4 percent of GDP.

5. This year, defense spending accounts for 6.3 percent of China’s overall budget, a slight decrease over last year.

**Source:** Associated Press, Xinhua