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Religious Policies in China and Their Influence on the Church

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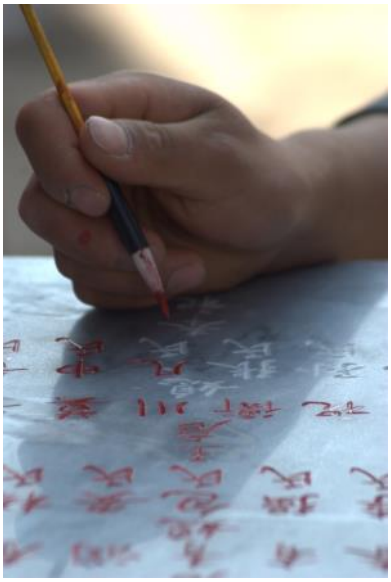
In this edition… Joann Pittman

Editorial
Understanding the Complexity

By Joann Pittman, Guest Editor



Joann Pittman

This past year alone has seen a spate of headlines that purport to show the attitude of the Chinese government towards religious activities. Often, the headlines seem to be contradictory with one reporting the government's plans to eradicate house churches, and another reporting on the government's plan to enlist churches and religious organizations in their efforts to meet China's numerous social needs. Like everything else in China, it can be very confusing.

In this regard, there are two sets of misconceptions. The first is in what is meant by "the Chinese government." We mistakenly view "the Chinese government" as a monolithic entity that not only has a single will but can (and does) impose that will with impunity. This may have been the case under Chairman Mao, but that was because Mao *was* the government and his personal will was supreme.

In fact, "the Chinese government" is a vast and complex network of competing entities and interests at all levels (national to local) that sometimes works together and sometimes works at cross-purposes. The United States Congressional Research Service published a report for Congress in March 2013 titled "Understanding China's Political System" that highlights the diffused, even competitive nature of the bureaucratic system.

> *Today, although the Party is committed to maintaining a permanent monopoly on power and is intolerant of those who question its right to rule, analysts consider the political system to be neither monolithic nor rigidly hierarchical. Jockeying among leaders and institutions representing different sets of interests is common at every level of the system. Sometimes fierce competition exists among the members of the Communist Party's seven-man Politburo Standing Committee and 25-member Politburo, China's highest decision-making bodies. It also exists among ministries; between ministries and provincial governments, which are equals in bureaucratic rank; among provinces; and among the headquarters departments and service branches of the military.**

It is within this context that religious affairs are managed within China today. This means, that when seeking to understand the relationship between church and state or the attitude of the government towards religion in general, and Christianity in particular, we need to have a better understanding of what we mean by "the government." Which department? Which level? Are we talking about a government body or a party body? Or both? What about the police—where do they fit in the mix, not to mention the Ministry of State Security?

The reality is that there is a vast bureaucracy (both government and party) that has the task of overseeing religious activities in Chinese society. This system is largely unknown to outsiders, other than those who study these things.

Secondly, there are numerous misunderstandings and misconceptions regarding what is permissible, and how churches (registered and unregistered) actually relate to government organs. Is personal evangelism allowed? Is the Bible available? Is the Bible "edited"? Are there topics that pastors are not allowed to preach on? Are children allowed to go to church? What is the nature of the relationship between the state and religious organizations?

Many of these questions can be answered by looking at the reality on the ground, but it is also helpful to look at the regulations that govern religious activities. By doing so we see that many of the things we think we know about the church in China are, in fact, no longer accurate.

For those engaged with China and seeking to serve the church, it is important to deepen the understanding of the complexity of the religious regulatory system and the complex (and changing) nature of the relationship between the state and the church. It is our hope that this issue of the *ChinaSource Quarterly* will be a valuable resource toward that end.

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* Susan V. Lawrence and Michael F. Martin, "Understanding China's Political System," Congressional Research Service (March 20, 2013), p.1; http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41007.pdf

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Religious Policy in China: Defining "Normal"

By Joann Pittman

Joann Pittman

The word "normal" is not something that those of us in the West commonly associate with the word religion or religious activities. Religious activities are simply religious activities, and to label one as normal and another as abnormal is, well, abnormal. What is normal for one religion or sect (baptizing people by dunking their heads under water) may seem strange, or even dangerous, to followers of another religion.

This concept of "normal religious activities" is at the heart of the religious regulatory regime in China. In this article, we will look at the government documents that address religion in China, as well as the thinking that undergirds them.

There are three key government documents that touch on religion. The first is the Chinese Constitution, promulgated in 1982, which references religion in Article 36:

> ***Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief***. *No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state. Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.*[1]

While the first half of this article seems to grant some measure of religious freedom, the second half actually places limitations or restrictions. In other words, not only does it not guarantee non-interference in religious affairs by the state, it spells out how and where the state can interfere.

One of the key issues raised in this article is the definition of "normal religious activities." Clearly, the state retains the right to declare that "this" religious activity is considered normal, but "that" is not. It also goes out of its way to stipulate that religion may not engage in certain activities that the state deems harmful.

Unlike the U.S. Constitution, however, the Chinese Constitution is not a legal document that can be appealed to in a court of law. It is not "judicialized."[2] A religious believer who feels that his/her right of religious belief is being infringed upon cannot use the Constitution to argue the case.

The second document that addresses religious issues is "Document No. 19: Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question During Our Country's Socialist Period," issued by the State Council (cabinet) in 1982, which detailed how religion could/could not function in Chinese society. It states:

> *The political power in a socialist state can in no way be used to promote any one religion, nor can it be used to forbid any one religion, as long as it is only a question of normal religious beliefs and practices. At the same time, religion will not be permitted to meddle in the administrative or juridical affairs of state, nor to intervene in the schools or public education. It will be absolutely forbidden to force anyone, particularly people under eighteen years of age, to become a member of a church, to become a Buddhist monk or nun, or to go to temples or monasteries to study Buddhist scripture.* [3]

It reaffirms the protection of "normal" religious activities and that religious activities may not interfere with affairs of state or education. It also sets out to protect young people from being forced to participate in religious activities.

The third document is the Regulations of Religious Affairs, issued by the State Council in 2004, and which came into effect in 2005. This document further explains and clarifies the place of religion in Chinese society and lays down detailed regulations for managing it.

Article 3 states:

> *The State, in accordance with the law, protects normal religious activities, and safeguards the lawful rights and interests of religious bodies, sites for religious activities and religious citizens. Religious bodies, sites for religious activities and religious citizens shall abide by the Constitution, laws, regulations and rules, and safeguard unification of the country, unity of all nationalities and stability of society. No organization or individual may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the State, or in other activities that harm State or public interests, or citizens' lawful rights and interests.*[4]

Further articles deal with issues such as the definition of religious organizations, qualifications of religious personnel, registration of religious venues and management of religious finances.

Underlying Principles
In order to understand the regulations themselves, it is important to understand some of their underlying principles.

Atheism
When the PRC was founded in 1949, the state adopted the Marxist-Leninist view of religion. Atheism was declared to be the official ideology, and religion was considered to be the opiate of the people; therefore, it should be eliminated. Even though the earliest policies did not spell this out, elimination of religion from Chinese society remained the ultimate goal. Genuine attempts were made to achieve this goal during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. Only one belief system was permissible, and that was Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought.

With the economic reform and opening policies of the early 1980s, the restrictions on religious activities were relaxed. Churches and temples were reopened as the government seemed to back away from its goal of eliminating religion, even though atheism remains the official dogma of the Chinese Communist Party and government.

Religious Belief—a Personal Matter
So long as a religion or a religious organization does not challenge them, the government and/or Party are not concerned with the content of religious belief. The religious policies do not comment on specific beliefs or teachings of various religions. In other words, a common perception in the West—that it is illegal to *believe* in Christianity in China—is simply not true.

Religious policies deal with the *practice* of that belief and the regulation (and definition) of "normal religious activities." In other words, the state is saying to religious believers: "You can believe what you want, but we reserve the right to set the boundaries within which you can practice your beliefs."

State Supervision of Religion
This is how the government sets those boundaries. According to Chinese scholar Shi Hua, this means that "religion acknowledges the political leadership of the government and receives guidance from it. The state recognizes religion, but provides supervision through state administrative departments. Religion does not play a role in public administration or justice."[5]

Supervision is exercised through a religious regulatory bureaucracy that includes the State Administration of Religious Affairs, provincial and local level Religious Affairs Departments, and recognized religious organizations such as the China Christian Council / Three-self Patriotic Movement ("Two Committees").

This view of the relationship between religion and the state was not a Communist invention. The Confucian tradition maintained an active role for the state in religious affairs, and the emperor had a semidivine status. The state always had the right to identify those religions it deemed correct or incorrect and limit or ban those that were in the latter category. In other words, the role of the state in religious affairs was (and continues to be) that of a referee.

So it is that the government can designate five approved religions for official recognition (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism) and ban religions and spiritual movements that it deems "evil cults (*Falungong*)."

The goal is to prevent any religion from emerging as a potential threat to state power. This fear does not exist in a vacuum but is rooted in knowledge of the role that the Taiping Rebellion of the 1850s and the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, both quasi-religious movements, played in the eventual downfall of the Qing Dynasty. In 1999 10,000 members of the Falun Gong spiritual movement staged a demonstration outside of Zhongnanhai, the leadership compound in Beijing. Since the government viewed this as a direct threat, the religion was banned.

Rights Are Vested, Not Unalienable
Neither traditional Chinese philosophy nor contemporary political philosophy subscribes to the Western notion that human beings have certain rights that are unalienable; that is, they are granted by a creator and cannot be taken away. Rather, rights are vested, or granted to a citizenry by the government. Thus, any religious freedom, either of belief or practice, is subject to the goodwill (or lack thereof) of the government.

Harmony among Religions
In pursuit of its goal of social stability, the government promotes harmony between religions in China by discouraging religious followers of one religion from seeking converts from other religions. Article 2 of the Regulations on Religious Affairs states:

> *No organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in any religion (hereafter referred to as religious citizens) or citizens who do not believe in religion (hereafter referred to as non-religious citizens). Religious citizens and non-religious citizens shall respect each other and coexist in harmony, and so shall citizens who believe in different religions.*[6]

This helps to explain the government's sensitivities to Christian activities in ethnic minority regions where local religion and culture are intertwined, such as Tibet and Xinjiang. In the case of Tibet, the fear is so strong that it is the only province in China that does not have a registered church.

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How China's Religious Affairs Bureaucracy Works

By Carsten T. Vala

By Flsxx (Own work), via Wikimedia Commons

One way to understand the workings of the religious affairs bureaucracy is to follow the story of an aspiring pastor as he goes from being a lay person, to a seminary student, to serving as a pastor. After approaching an official church pastor, he is encouraged to apply for the entrance exam that decides whether he will attend the national seminary, a regional seminary or a local Bible school, all under government authority. After a successful examination, his application passes from the local official church pastor to the provincial Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) association leaders who then contact the government Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB). If the RAB background investigation does not turn up any links to unregistered (i.e. house) churches or criminal activity, then the aspirant enrolls as a student. Upon graduation, the student typically returns to the sending church where he or she serves an apprenticeship before the provincial TSPM association approves ordination which is dependent on a second background check by the RAB and local authorities.

Clearly, authorities are closely involved with the selection, appointment, ordination and approval of church pastors, and this is even truer for those Protestants who lead the associations.

Another way to grasp how the religious affairs bureaucracy works is to view it historically, which is especially useful as the structure today is a holdover from the 1950s. When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power, it organized all non-communists who wished to cooperate—or collaborate—into a "united front," by which allies could be arrayed against CCP-identified enemies. The CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD) is the most important office overseeing religious affairs because it is a party office and the CCP is more powerful than the state. The UFWD reports directly to the highest level of the CCP and generally sets broad policy directions for religious affairs. (The UFWD also oversees work with overseas Chinese and ethnic minority affairs.)

In the 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party selected a few Protestants to launch a bridge organization to corral Protestants and their churches under party authority and ensure the loyalty of Chinese Protestants. These few Christian elites established this organization to be autonomous of Western "imperialist" control, as it was explained in the ideology of the Mao Zedong era (1949-1976). The name of the organization itself emphasized autonomy—the *Chinese Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement Association* or TSPM. The "Three Selfs" refer to self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting to stress that foreigners no longer control Chinese Protestant Christianity. (Although all five officially recognized religions established similar associations, the party only required Protestants and Catholics to insert "patriotic" into their names, a move that highlighted the CCP's suspicion of where their loyalties lay.) The TSPM has offices at the national, provincial, city and lower levels. TSPM leaders are state employees, receiving state salaries and pensions upon retirement. Although Protestants typically head the associations, a state employee works closely with association leaders and monitors and reports on their activities to the government. This non-Christian is employed by the State Administration of Religious Affairs or SARA (although below the national level it is usually called the RAB), the state's bureaucracy for religious affairs.

The Chinese Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement Association launched with little legitimacy among Protestants until China entered the Korean War in 1951. Mass campaigns then pressured Protestants to demonstrate their patriotism by simultaneously supporting the Korean War and also submitting to the TSPM and the CCP's leadership. Church pastors across all denominations had to choose whether to affiliate with the TSPM, stop worship or face prison.

Fast forwarding to the 1980s, the TSPM association had left a bitter legacy among Protestants because the CCP used it as the tool to attack missionaries, shutter churches and destroy open worship services. So the party-state approved the launch of the China Christian Council (CCC), designed ultimately to replace the TSPM, but the two ended up operating in such close cooperation that the TSPM/CCC is now called the "two committees."

To what degree do the TSPM/CCC associations seek to serve the party-state or the churches? In general, the higher one rises in the TSPM/CCC hierarchy, the more one has to prove loyalty to the CCP. Balancing this trend, however, is that these associations are only effective if lower level church leaders and lay Protestants believe them to be legitimate. So in practice, TSPM/CCC leadership staff often has one devout Protestant seeking to protect and expand church interests while the CCP installs another "loyalist" leader who is a "yes man" to the party-state's interests.

In any case, all Protestant churches operating in the open *legally* have affiliated with the TSPM/CCC, even if no external markings indicate so. (House church leaders refer to these as "Three-Self" churches.) Church pastors and other paid staff are trained by, or at least receive approval of, these Protestant associations and the Religious Affairs Bureau. Hence, the Protestant associations act as bridge organizations composed of Protestants and state bureaucrats to supervise the churches. The highest association leaders typically also head the largest, most important urban churches.

In terms of new policy development and its implementation, the United Front Work Department is most important because it receives direction from the Central Committee of the CCP. (The most consequential documents on religious affairs over the past

30 years have been issued by the party). While the UFWD is a party office, the state offices for religious affairs are the SARA at the national level and are under the State Council. SARA and its local RAB offices are charged with daily monitoring of all religious associations.

Two things complicate the workings of the religious affairs bureaucracy. One might expect the functional specialization of the United Front and RAB offices in religious affairs work to mean that local religious issues are the domain of these party cadres and state officials. However, this is not true because at each level of bureaucracy it is the party secretary and his party committee that hold ultimate responsibility for whatever happens in that (provincial, city, district or village) jurisdiction. So, for example, the vertical line of authority running from Beijing to a city like Shanghai is fragmented by the authority of the Shanghai party secretary and his party committees. Everything that happens within the Shanghai jurisdiction is the responsibility of the party secretary. This is the "fragmented authoritarianism" of the Chinese Communist party-state.

Second, in contrast to the way that government runs through rational, regularized procedures of laws and regulations in Europe and the U.S., Chinese party-state governance operates much more on informal norms of trust and personal connections (*guanxi* in Chinese). This means that policies that are "on the books" may be bent, ignored or violated altogether by Protestant association leaders or pastors who have developed a relationship of trust with their RAB counterparts. This is good to the extent that personal relations enable Protestants to defend and even expand church interests, but it creates instability because when government personnel are rotated, the trust relations no longer exist and must be reestablished. Also, it means that uniform, standardized implementation of policies is unlikely because of the fragmented nature of the state and the personal trust relationships.

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Future Prospects

Even though there have been no changes in religious policies since 2005, the actual practice of religious activities has changed. The most notable change is the growth of religious organizations, particularly house churches, which contain millions of religious citizens who practice their faith outside of the regulatory boundaries, ironically unencumbered by the stifling supervision of the state. How the government chooses to deal with this situation is, of course, something to pay attention to.

It would be nice to think that the government considers dealing with religious issues to be a major priority. Unfortunately, in the only document that would signal such a priority, the Government Work Report issued by Premier Wen Jiaobao in March, 2013, religion only received a passing mention: "We comprehensively carried out the policy on freedom of religious belief and managed religious affairs on a more law- and procedure-based basis." [7] Clearly, religious issues are not a priority for the government at this time.

A growing number of scholars within the country are calling for major reforms of the religious policies, specifically citing the absence of a Law of Religion as the root cause of most religious problems in China today. Without a Law of Religion, religion sits outside the legal system. One scholar, Professor Liu Peng, of the Pushi Institute for Social Sciences[8] has even gone so far as to write a draft Law of Religion which would be based on the principle of separation of religion and the state. It would also grant religious organizations the legal status of "religious legal person," thereby granting it all the civil rights accorded to other legal persons.

The National People's Congress is unlikely to take up such a controversial proposal, but it would go a long way to alleviating many of the underlying problems and getting the government out of the business of defining "normal."

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[2] Liu Peng, The Crux and Solution of Religious Issues in China, Pacific Institute for Social Sciences; http://www.pacilution.com/english/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=3173

[3] Center on Religion and Chinese Society, Purdue University; http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/itemResources/PRCDoc/pdf/Document_no._19_1982.pdf

[4] Center on Religion and Chinese Society, Purdue University; http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/itemResources/PRCDoc/pdf/Regulations_on_Religious_Affairs_no426.pdf

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[6] Center on Religion and Chinese Society, Purdue University; http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/itemResources/PRCDoc/pdf/Regulations_on_Religious_Affairs_no426.pdf

[7] Full Text: Report on the Work of the Government, Xinhua News Agency; http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-03/18/c_132242798_4.htm

[8] "Draft Proposal for a Law of Religion Unveiled," Chinese Church Voices, September 4, 2013; http://chinesechurchvoices.com/2013/09/04/draft-proposal-for-a-law-of-religion-unveiled/

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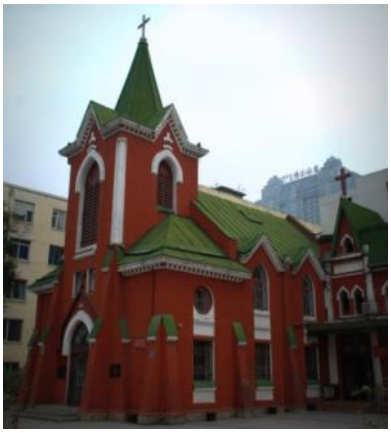
The Present Condition of Christianity and Religious Regulations in China

By Huang Jianbo



Joann Pittman

The development of Christianity in China over the past thirty years has been extraordinary both in terms of number of followers and influence. The official figure for the number of Christians in China is 18 million;* however many scholars believe that this figure is under estimated. Outside of China, the estimated figure is higher with some researchers suggesting 100 million. However, over the past few years, the study of Christianity in China has become more rigorous with the result being a greater understanding of Chinese Christianity, both in China and abroad. While scholars generally agree that the 100 million figure is over estimated and cannot be considered as reliable data, they tend to accept a range of 30 to 60 million Christians in China. According to a survey done by the Lingdian Survey Company, Christians in China are still in the minority accounting for less than three percent of the national population.[1] However, in terms of absolute numbers, this represents the highest number in the history of Christianity in China. Today it is impossible for Christians to go unnoticed in society. Although Christians are not typically thought of in the same way other communities or ethnic groups are, they form a unique community within Chinese society.

It is important to note that, prior to the 1980s, Christianity initially developed in rural areas, but since the 1990s it has entered a new phase of rapid development in urban areas. As a result of urbanization, many Christians have left their villages and moved into cities, substantially altering the distribution of Christians in China. It is also important to note that since the 1990s, many young people and professionals have converted to Christianity and have established churches in cities. Although their numbers are still small, and they are not yet the mainstream of Christianity in China, these believers have a strong voice and have attracted extra attention from society at large. Notable examples would be writers and artists such as Yu Jie and Bei Cun, as well as legal scholars and attorneys such as Fan Yafeng and Wang Yi.

A Brief Evaluation of Current Religious Policies and their Effects

From a sociological perspective, the rapid growth of Christianity and the revival of other religions, such as Buddhism, have taken place within the context of rapid social change. This phenomenon is not the result of ineffective religious policies but rather is typical in societies undergoing transition. Recent religious-sociological research has shown that the demand for religious belief among human beings is constant and exists even where there are attempts to minimize or destroy it. When restrictive policies lose their ability to achieve total control, religion revives. It can be said that religious belief is a human necessity and therefore can never fully be extinguished. One way or another, it will always exist.

We can also see that Christianity has grown rapidly even with policies that restrict religious practices, especially those with foreign roots. In other words, our religious policies have not achieved their intended results. In fact, they occasionally backfire as the policies facilitate faster growth among some religions as opposed to others. For example, under the current certification system, the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) has, in effect, regulatory supervision and guidance over only five major religions. This means that a great many religious groups are outside of their control and are, in fact, probably the fastest growing religious groups in China. As a result, some religious groups do not have the legitimacy that they should have.

A close look at these issues causes us to wonder if it is necessary to re-evaluate our attitudes towards religion and religious policies. The two are intertwined: our basic idea and understanding of religion affects the formulation and execution of religious policies. Up to now, the state's belief has been that religion is a problem although it does not state explicitly what kind of problem.[2] Nevertheless, we can identify three possible categories or ways in which the government might perceive religion to be a problem. These vary, depending on the particular religion and the state's concerns.

First of all there are problems related to national and cultural security, especially for those religions that are considered to have foreign roots (Protestantism and Catholicism). Second, there are problems related to territorial integrity, national unity and social stability with religions associated with certain ethnicities (Tibetan Buddhism and Islam). Third, there are problems related to economics and social stability associated with religions that are rooted in Chinese tradition (Buddhism and Daoism).

It is within this context that the state has formed its attitude towards religion in general and different religions in particular. For instance, an official from the RAB once stated that traditional Chinese religions should be used to counter religions with foreign roots. Yet this understanding is misguided and impractical. Since it is obviously biased, the state should not be the arbiter of relations between various religions. Such efforts would likely backfire and involve high social costs as well as being ineffective and even contradicting the intended objective.

As senior government official, Li Weihan, pointed out some time ago, religion has unique characteristics; however, this does not mean that people with religious beliefs should be treated as a special group. In fact, religious believers are citizens just like anyone else, and their choice of religion should not prevent them from enjoying the same rights and having the same obligations as other religious believers as well as those who have no religious beliefs. Religious policies and regulations are not about personal belief, something which has been confirmed and is protected by the constitution. The freedom of belief is now widely respected and practiced. The key issue is the regulation of religious groups and the manner in which the state treats them. Religious regulations should not confine and limit the internal affairs of religious groups.

Since religious believers are citizens, religious groups should be regarded as civil organizations. Like other civil groups, they have a distinctive focus and agenda. Environmental organizations focus on environmental protection, children's groups focus on the rights of children and poverty relief organizations pay attention to poverty. In the same way, religious groups are concerned with developing more followers (group members) and taking care of their members. This is not only natural, it is essential for their existence and development. To disregard or prohibit these essential functions only leads to unnecessary resistance and deepening mistrust between religious groups and the state.

Current religious policies have not been effective in regulating religious groups. The fundamental reason behind this failure is that the state does not have a proper understanding of the nature of religious groups and attempts to use administrative orders to regulate people's need for and practice of religion. Just as the use of administrative orders is ineffective in regulating economic activities, so, administrative orders are ineffective in regulating religious activities. In both cases the results are unsatisfactory.

Regulation of Religions

Today, everyone acknowledges the failure of the planned economy and the success of the market economy. If, in the sphere of religion, we want to have a "win-win" situation and effectively regulate all religious groups, we need to change our thinking. We should seek to guide religions rather than inhibit them. We should give up planning the "religious market" and allow it to operate according to its own rules.[3]

From the perspective of the state and government, following are three suggestions for altering the thinking and implementing policies.

The first is to adhere to the principle of equal treatment for all religions. The state should not promote any religion nor should it oppress any religion. Rather, different religions should be allowed to operate according to the rules of a market economy; there should be a "religious market." By doing this the state would reduce both administrative and social costs. This would also encourage different religions to live in peace and engage in healthy competition. At the same time, this competition would motivate different religions to provide the best "religious service." This, in turn, would help to prevent the emergence and expansion of evil cults and promote the stable development of society.

The second principle to adopt is that of equal treatment for different sects in any religion. The state should not support any sect nor should it suppress or inhibit any sect. As regards Christianity, the state should allow the current Three-Self churches to exist and develop, and, at the same time, take proper measures to legitimize the churches that exist outside the Three-Self structure. This would benefit both the church and the state. If the churches currently outside the Three-Self structure are given legitimacy, they will no longer need to take measures to evade government regulations in order to protect themselves. They would no longer be closed or secret communities. The state would benefit as it would no longer have to be suspicious of the "secret" activities of the churches and would no longer fear the churches remaining outside of its control.

Third, the state should reclassify religious groups as civil associations and should not set up a dual review process for registration of religious groups. A dual process means that the Civil Affairs Department reviews and accepts qualifications of civil associations with the Religious Affairs Bureau also giving input.[4] In fact, the operation of religious groups should be done according to the civil and criminal legal code. If a religious group breaks the law, it should be prosecuted. This would diminish the capacity for administrative staff to behave arbitrarily—something that has resulted in adverse social impact and clouded the image of China in the international community.

As to the issue of national security, special departments should be given the authority to investigate and safeguard national security. Other government agencies should fulfill their respective responsibilities. In this way, administrative and social costs are reduced, and the problem of religions and religious groups is solved.

These principles cannot be implemented merely by administrative measures which are just more regulations; they need to be implemented by rule of law and flow from the line of governance. The meaning here is rule *of* law, not rule *by* law which is a system where laws are only tools for regulation. We need legislation governing religion, and the legislation needs to answer the following questions: Who makes the law? For whom is the law made? What kind of law?

For their part, Christian churches should have a more realistic view and understanding of the current social environment and religious policies and should adjust their judgments and responses accordingly. One basic thing they need to understand is that, within the whole scheme of the political and regulatory system, the freedom of (Christian) religion is not merely a religious issue. Rather it is part of the broader issue of religious freedom (for all religions) and freedom of assembly, and both of these issues are tied to the fundamental issue of political reform. As a result, they have not yet been dealt with by the government. In other words, Christians and others who advocate religious freedom should not dream that religious freedom (especially American style religious freedom) can be realized in China without a fundamental change of the entire political system.[5]

However, it is not the case that there is no chance for the improvement of Chinese religious policies. In fact, religious policies in China have improved greatly over the past thirty years. For example, it is often mentioned that a pragmatic approach has replaced an ideological approach. In at least some fields, and in some regions, there is more space for the existence and development of religion (Christianity). To be sure, in some regions active and influential religious leaders still face pressure and even the threat of imprisonment; however, in society at large, the space for ordinary religious believers is unprecedented and would have

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View from the Wall
Pastoring in a Registered Church

A ChinaSource interview conducted by Kay Danielson

Joann Pittman

The registered ("Three-self") churches are the ones that actually fall under the religious regulatory regime in China. Because they are under government supervision, and due to historical and political reasons, it is often thought that God is not (and cannot be) at work in these churches. This attitude, however, seeks to put God within political boxes of our own making, and often blinds us to what God ***is*** *doing in many registered Three-Self churches. To find out more,* ChinaSource Quarterly*, recently spoke with a pastor of a Three-Self church in a city in northern China to learn more about the church and its relationship to the local authorities.*

CSQ: Could you tell us something about your church?

Pastor: My church is located in a rural district of my city. There are usually 800 people who attend our morning services. This past year, in an effort to reach younger people, we started a Sunday evening service which has grown from 10 to over 100. Every year I baptize approximately 200 people. We praise God for this growth.

Our pastoral staff is quite small. I am grateful to God for providing an assistant pastor to help lead the church. We rely heavily on lay workers to help care for the members.

In addition to serving the church, I also provide pastoral care for dozens of registered meeting points in the villages and smaller towns in the district. Altogether, there are 5,000 Christians whom we serve. One of my primary responsibilities is to provide training for the lay leaders of these smaller congregations, something I do according to a systematic plan.

CSQ: Is your church a government church?

Pastor: I don't view it as a government church; the church belongs to Jesus Christ. One of the topics in our training program for lay leaders is the doctrine of the church. What I teach clearly is that the church is the body of Christ. It is the bride of Christ. It is the family of God. It is made up of people who have been made new by Christ. Christ is the head and we are in him. God is sovereign. Even though there is supervision from government bodies, the church does not belong to the government; it belongs to Christ. We are not serving the government; we are serving Christ. Once we clearly understand this, then we can know how to have a relationship with the government and help them understand what the church is. We can be salt and light in society.

CSQ: Many people in the West assume that the government supervises what you preach. Is this true?

Pastor: It is the Holy Spirit who directs my preaching. I have never once reported to or needed approval from the government for my preaching.

CSQ: How easy is it for your parishioners to get Bibles and other Christian resources?

Pastor: It is easy for our believers to get Bibles. They can be purchased in our church and at all the meeting points in the district. Audio Bibles are also very popular, especially for some of the older believers who cannot read. These devices come with not only the Bible but also sermons and other study resources. Many churches also have their own web sites where people can learn about the church and about Jesus. We are currently setting up a web site for our church.

I know that many people outside of China have heard that the Bible in China does not include the book of Revelation; I would like to say that this is not the case. There has never been a time when sections were not included in Bibles that we use in China. I'm not sure where this idea came from.

CSQ: What type of interactions do you have with government officials?

Pastor: Since churches are members of society, we must obey the local regulations and customs. Local officials don't like surprises, so I make sure that I inform them when we have large-scale events, such as special Christmas or Easter services. I assure them that we have taken all the necessary measures to make sure the event will be held safely. This may include detailing our fire prevention plan, or even detailing how we will provide toilet facilities for the extra people who will be coming to the church. They are not interested in restricting these events but want to make sure that they are conducted safely.

I am showing them respect by keeping then informed. They are not interested in the content of our teaching, only that we are doing things in order. I believe that God loves the government officials too; treating them with respect is a way to create an opening for sharing the gospel with them.

I also want them to know that what we are doing brings benefit to society; our activities are blessing the community. When they understand this, then they can be supportive of what we are doing.

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Peoples of China
House Church Attitudes towards Government Authorities

By Kay Danielson

China Partners

In a recent conversation with a house church pastor in China, I asked him about the current environment for his church and how its people relate (or do not relate) to the local authorities. "It's simple," he said. "We're illegal, but free!" What he meant of course was that they are operating outside the system that requires all social and religious organizations to register with a government body. Being outside the system means they do not have to operate under the restrictive supervision of those bodies. His point was that as long as they do not cause trouble for the authorities, they are largely left alone.

ChinaSource recently asked six leaders of house churches in various parts of the country to tell us about the current environment in their location as well as their attitude towards the local authorities and the issue of registration.

Church #1: In the Southeast
This church meets in a rented apartment. They have two services on Sundays each averaging 30-40 people in attendance. They describe the current political environment as more closed than open. They try not to have anything to do with the local police or other officials, and they have no intentions of registering under the current policies.

Church #2: In the Southeast
Meeting in rented office space, which is approximately 110 square meters in size, this church has one service on Sunday with nearly 100 people in attendance. In addition, they rent a smaller office in the same building to hold Sunday School classes. Regarding the political environment, this church leader described it as "loose," saying that among six different groups in the city only one is experiencing pressure from the local authorities.

This leader does not feel that the relationship with the local police or other officials is important; rather, it is just one of many relationships they must manage. Asked about registration, he replied that his church has no desire to register. "Registration is not a bad thing, but we are not going to register with the local government if it doesn't change its policy towards religion."

Church #3: In the Northeast
This church meets at two different sites, both of which are rented space. One site has 40 in attendance while the other has 100. Normally they do not have trouble with the local authorities, although recently there have been some problems with the larger group.

The leader feels that it is important to respect the local authorities and talk to them when necessary. "I talk to them," he said, "only when they come to talk to me." The local police want the church to register, but they continue to refuse to do so. "The church belongs to God," said the leader.

Church #4: In Beijing
The 80 to 90 members of this church also meet in a rented apartment, approximately 180 square meters in size. Because of its location in politically sensitive Beijing, they do experience pressure. However, the pastor said, "We have relative freedom." The property management company has recently come by for an inspection of their site, but they have not interfered with their gatherings. The local police did an inspection in 2012, prior to the Party meetings, and they recorded that it was an unregistered church. "Nothing came of that," commented the pastor, "so you can say that we have de facto existence."

The pastor believes that it is important to have a relationship with the relevant agencies, in this case the property management company and the local police who do inspections from time to time. "Regarding registration," he says, "Due to the recent troubles experienced by the Shouwang Church,* there is a consensus among Beijing pastors that registration is not possible under the current religious policies.

Church #5: In Beijing
With a membership of around 50, this church meets in a rented apartment. The pastor describes the environment they experience to be rather loose, saying that the police have never interfered with their meetings.

Regarding relationships with the authorities, this leader said it is important to have a good attitude if they are approached. He told of being visited by the Public Security Bureau one time. They were able to have a good discussion and were told that it was okay to meet as long as there were no problems with the neighbors. "We respect them," he said, "but we have our bottom line."

On the issue of registration, the leader said that they would not consider registration without a guarantee of religious freedom. He noted that they have seen many churches that have registered who are now under strict supervision.

Church #6: In the Southeast

This church, made up of approximately 30 people, meets in a rented apartment building. The local police occasionally make inspection visits to talk with the pastor. They want to get a better understanding of the situation and what religion is being practiced. They often ask about the number of people attending and the meeting times. The overall environment for this church is quite relaxed.

In general, they do not have anything to do with the government so they feel they do not need to work at maintaining a relationship. The church has no plans to register under the current system; however, they are interested in seeking some other kind of official recognition or status that would allow them transparency. As long as they do not appear to be hiding, the government departments take a relaxed attitude.

*In 2011, after the landlord broke their lease, the Shouwang Church in Beijing attempted to conduct their services in an outdoor location in Beijing. This prompted a harsh response by the authorities. Even though the church remains functioning in scattered small groups, the leaders remain under house arrest.

Kay Danielson has lived and worked in China for over 25 years. She currently works in the field of cross-cultural training and consulting.

Pastoring in a Registered Church
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CSQ: What challenges does your church face?

Pastor: The biggest challenge is the call to share the gospel with everyone in our district. We praise God for the 5000 believers in our church, but in a district of close to one million people, this is still a small number. There are still hundreds of thousands of people in our towns, villages, and work places who have never even heard of Christianity or Jesus. It is my passion that everyone, not just in my district or city but in all of China, will hear the gospel and proclaim Jesus as Lord. So as a pastor, I want to help my people build a strong foundation for their faith and train them in evangelism.

We also face the challenge of cults. Those who are not well educated or well grounded in their faith are very susceptible to false teaching, so we must teach them how to discern what teachings are true and what ones are false.

CSQ: Do you have anything else you would like to say to your brothers and sisters?

Pastor: I know that many people, both inside and outside of China, have opinions about the Three-Self churches, but I can clearly see that God has given me this platform to spread the gospel. The most important thing for me is that I have not been called by any person but by God. No matter what I do, it is God, through the Holy Spirit, guiding me and giving me strength. It is not the work of a person. For this, I am grateful to God.

Kay Danielson has lived and worked in China for over 25 years. She currently works in the field of cross-cultural training and consulting. She interviewed this pastor in November, 2013.

The Present Condition of Christianity and Religious Regulations in China
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been unimaginable ten years ago. This improvement is largely due to government reforms and the rapid development of social and civil forces. Civil society, which had been completely destroyed, has recovered, and a normal relationship between the state and individuals has been rebuilt. Religious groups such as Christian churches are increasingly accepted by society as legitimate social associations. Although their development is still slow and limited, they are playing a significant role in community service, charity, and poverty and disaster relief.

Christian churches now need to think about how to build churches that can be rooted in belief and at the same time participate in social development within the context of Chinese culture. On the one hand, Christianity in China should identify with the suffering and struggle of the nation and not be a passive observer. On the other hand, it should offer good advice regarding the improvement of Chinese society and should provide practical service. However, it should not advocate a social gospel that has no basis in sound religious doctrine. A healthy solid church is a foundation for reaching out into the community.

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*The original version of this article was published before the most recent government survey which found that there are 23 million Protestant Christians in China.

[1] This number is obviously under estimated. Yet based on the rigorous sampling and investigation process, it is an important reference.

[2] Liu Peng, Guanyu zongjiao dingwei yu guanli moshi wenti (The position of religion and regulatory models), International Symposium on Religious System and Religious Identity and the Fourth International Symposium on Religious Social Sciences, Shanghai, July 2007.

[3] Liu Peng, Guanyu zongjiao zuzhi de guanli wenti (Regulations of religious associations), http://www.pacilution.com/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=1398

[6]http://www.pacilution.com/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=1461

[5] In this sense, religious issues are political issues to a certain extent. Yet it is necessary for us to depoliticize the religious issues. We shall regard religious belief and religious associations as social life and put them in the framework of rule of law.

This article has been adapted from Zhongguo Jidujiao jiating jiaohui yanjiu *(*Research on Christian house churches in China) *by Liu Peng, et al, posted on November 8, 2012 on the Pacific Institute for Social Science web site, http://www.pacilution.com/english/ShowArticle.asp?articleid=3148. Used with permission.*

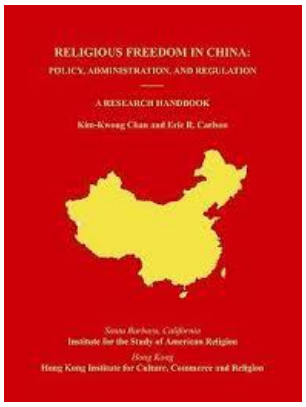
Book Review: Closing a Perception/Reality Gap

Religious Freedom in China: Policy, Administration, and Regulation; A Research Handbook

by Kim-kwong Chan and Eric R. Carlson

Reviewed by Brent Fulton

Amended by addition of final paragraph, January 15, 2014



Chan, Kim-kwong, and Carlson, Eric R. *Religious Freedom in China: Policy, Administration, and Regulation; a Research Handbook*. Santa Barbara, California: Institute for the Study of American Religion, and Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute for Culture, Commerce, and Religion, 2005. ISBN -10: 0915051036; ISBN-13: 978-0915051038; 108 pages, paperback, $9.45 at Amazon.com.

> "To some extent, Western perceptions of the religious situation in China are stuck in a time warp, based on policies and realties that existed during the Cultural Revolution, when Mao closed all places of worship and tried to extinguish religion altogether. While there is in the United States and elsewhere in the West quite a deep understanding and appreciation for the dramatic economic changes that have taken place in China over the past twenty-five years, there is less understanding of the ways in which laws and policies governing religion have also undergone significant transformation."

Writing in 2005, two of the contributors to this volume noted the gap between perception and reality in understanding the state of freedom of religion in China. Eight years later the same statement could still be made with quite some accuracy. The Olympic Games in 2008 and China's continued economic integration with the rest of the world have done much to shine light on the economic and social realities of China. Nonetheless, in discussing matters of religion, outside observers often take as their default position the assumption that the Chinese state is actively seeking to restrict all religious activities.

As pointed out in this volume, this outdated perception is due in large part to the paucity of reliable information about religious policy and its implementation in China. In the absence of such information, those seeking to understand the situation must rely on anecdotal evidence, which, devoid of context, can create widely differing perceptions. Hence the value of this book which combines an analysis of the mechanisms by which religion is regulated in China with an extensive list of religious policy documents, both public and internal (*neibu*), issued by government organs at various levels.

In addition to the difficulty of piecing together from conflicting reports a coherent picture of China's religious policy and its implementation, another obstacle to making sense of the situation is the fact that policy flows largely from the pronouncements of Party officials and from administrative regulations emanating from government organs concerned with religion. Despite China's move toward "rule of law," precious little legislation on religion exists. Outside observers or foreigners living in China who want to see in black and white what is or is not allowed are understandably frustrated by this lack of clarity. The first of three major sections in this volume analyzes the respective of roles of Party and government actors in determining policy. These include the Party's United Front Work Department, responsible for formulating and implementing policy, and the State Administration for Religious Affairs, which has the power to issue binding regulations on religious groups and activities, as well as their corresponding organizations at various levels. This section also looks at the roles of other branches of government such as the various police organs, the judiciary and the military. Brief mention is made of the official organizations representing China's five recognized religions (Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam).

Of particular interest in this section is its coverage of significant portions of society that are effectively exempt from the religion clause in China's constitution. Individuals in these spheres do not enjoy freedom of belief nor can they expect to have access to religious facilities or activities. The Communist Party itself would be the prime example here, as Party members are avowed atheists. Others in this category include those in prisons or labor camps, those serving in the military or in China's security apparatus, those employed in some large state-run industries which have jurisdiction over the communities where they work, and those living in minority areas where a particular religion is accepted as the dominant belief system in the region. Looking at the various administrative divisions in China, this section also makes the point that, even for ordinary Chinese, implementation of policy can vary widely from place to place, depending upon local politics and the sophistication (or lack thereof) and personal agendas of officials. Overall, the authors point out, China's religious policy tilts toward keeping religion from interfering in civil and government affairs as opposed to protecting religion from government interference (which is assumed to be the role of religious policy, to the extent it even exists, in the Western world).

Section Two briefly traces the development of religious policy from the founding of the PRC up through the mid 2000s. Three common themes emerge: the freedom both to believe and not to believe in religion; the state's "neutral" stance in neither promoting nor suppressing any particular religion; and the autonomy of religious affairs in China, which places particular strain on religious groups, such as the Catholic Church, that have international ties. These themes are set forth in Document 19, issued in 1982, which still stands as the authoritative guiding Party document on religion today. In the 1990s, policy was clarified, but not significantly changed, through the issuing of State Council decrees 144 and 145, which dealt with, respectively, religious activities of foreigners and the management of religious venues, and numerous local regulations. Policy statements following China's accession to the World Trade Organization recognized both the role of religion in "cushioning" the effects of social change brought about by China's continued opening to the outside world as well as the need to block the efforts of potentially hostile

foreign religious groups. Subsequent policy pronouncements, such as State Council decree 426, issued in 2004, have been aimed at further standardizing the administration of religious affairs on a nationwide basis.

In Section Three the authors list all published religious regulations through the year 2004. These include national and regional regulations, plus guiding documents by various government entities, internal documents, articles in Chinese periodicals, Party and government publications on religion and public security documents. These are followed by lists of English- and Chinese-language secondary sources and relevant web sites. All of the references to regional regulations include links to web sites where the documents may be accessed.

As a "research handbook," this book is particularly useful in that it provides in one place a guide to accessing disparate documents that follow a common theme but come from a wide variety of sources. The authors have done a great service in tracking down and cataloguing these many documents. The overviews of policy development and of the various government organs involved in setting and enforcing policy bring clarity to the generally opaque process by which religion is governed in China. While these overviews cannot explore this process in detail, the many documents referenced in section three of the book offer ample choices for readers who wish to go deeper.

The religious situation in China is quite fluid. Although policy may not have changed substantially since 2005, there have been significant developments within the various religious communities and in their relationship to the party-state. A revised edition of this volume would be timely. One hopes that the editors will consider taking up this task in order to take into account developments during the past decade.

Brent Fulton, Ph.D., is the president of ChinaSource and the editor of the ChinaSource Quarterly.

Resource Corner

Regulations on Religious Affairs

国家宗教事务局-- Decree of the State Council of the People's Republic of China No. 426

Conversations abound discussing what can and cannot be done in China with regards to expressing and practicing faith. Can a Christian hold a Bible study at home? Do pastors have to be approved by the Religious Affairs Bureau? Is it legal to hold Sunday School classes for children?

While many of these questions will remain, becoming familiar with the Regulations on Religious Affairs will provide an official reference point for informed discussion.

This decree, identifying and explaining the Regulations on Religious Affairs, was adopted at the 57th Executive Meeting of the State Council on July 7, 2004 and became effective March 1, 2005. It includes the following chapters:

Chapter I General Provisions
Chapter II Religious Bodies
Chapter III Sites for Religious Activities
Chapter IV Religious Personnel
Chapter V Religious Property
Chapter IV Religious Personnel
Chapter V Religious Property
Chapter VI Legal Liability
Chapter VII Supplementary Provisions

To read the entire five page document, go to:
http://www.sara.gov.cn/gb/zcfg/20100423-01-37d8114b-0a1c-11da-9f13-93180af1bb1a.html

Intercessory Notes

Please pray

1. That scholars concerned with religious policies would have wisdom and discernment as they draft laws and work to bring them to the attention of the government. Currently, dealing with religious issues does not seem to be a priority for the Chinese government.
2. That pastors, Christian administrators and leaders will have wisdom, grace and discretion to know how to deal with the various government agencies that regulate religious activities.
3. That Christian churches will develop a more realistic view and understanding of the current social environment and religious policies, and that they will be able to adjust their judgments and responses accordingly.
4. For pastors and congregations as they determine whether or not their church should register with the government.
5. Giving thanks for the increased freedom for religious practice that has taken place over the last thirty years.