

INTRODUCTION

The Vatican has always opposed the atheistic philosophy of Marxism. When China became a communist nation in 1949, conflicts and difficulties in Sino-Vatican relations threatened the lives and faith of millions of Chinese Catholics. Persecution of religious believers reached its height during the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命, 1966-76), followed by a more open policy of religious freedom during the time of paramount leader Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平). Of late, due to the rapid expansion of Christianity, which is perceived as a threat by the Chinese Communist Party, a crackdown on churches has begun to intensify. Be that as it may, the modest aim of this work is to show how the Vatican has taken the initiative to start a dialogue with the Chinese authorities, culminating in the recent Provisional Agreement of September 22, 2018.

In view of this Provisional Agreement, this work attempts to trace the tortuous history of Sino-Vatican relations, from denunciation of communism by the Church in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the efforts by recent Pontiffs such as John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis to seek dialogue with the Chinese government. The desire to engage with the Chinese authorities is very much in line with Pope Francis' policy of accommodation and adaptation. In the tradition of the Italian Jesuit, Matteo Ricci (1552-1601), Francis extended a hand of friendship to President Xi Jinping and the people of China.

It is the duty of Marxist governments to eradicate religious beliefs because they think that religion is superstitious, backwards-looking and feudalistic, as well as a tool that is manipulated by the rich and powerful to control the poor and dispossessed. Marxism is essentially a godless ideology that emphasises class warfare and the dictatorship of the proletariat. How this doctrine is interpreted and applied depends on the history of the nation, the attitudes of the communist leaders and the reaction of religious leaders.

The eradication of religion, however, was not part of classical Marxism. Karl Marx taught that religion is the private affair of the individual and it is not necessary to ban it. But religion must remain private. Most East European nations have subscribed to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes the freedom to practise one's religion.

Through education, communist authorities attempt to show young people in schools that religion is superstition, invented by human beings to control and oppress people. The truth of materialistic science and evolution, as well as the supposed bad influence of religion and practices such as the burning of witches and the atrocities of the Catholic Inquisition, are taught in schools to denigrate religion. Somehow this policy of promoting irreligion has not worked. If religion is unimportant, why keep attacking it? Although state authorities insist on it, teachers in most Eastern European countries seldom talk about religion, and it is the teachers, not the government, who are in direct contact with the children.¹

Like all communist countries, China also embarked on a policy of eradicating religion since 1 October 1949, when Mao Zedong (毛澤東) established the People's Republic of China. Yet in spite of restrictions, religion continues to flourish. The Chinese government decided to allow religion to exist under its control through patriotic associations. Through these associations, Chinese authorities attempted to establish an independent Catholic Church. An effective way to establish an independent church is for the government to nominate its own bishops, selecting candidates who are compliant to state policy.

The Chinese government wanted a 'democratic' process in selecting bishops, which was actually practiced in the early Church. It is an undeniable historical fact that during the first three centuries of Christianity, the local community, both clergy and laity, elected their own leaders who were later called bishops. Due to certain historical

1. Owen Chadwick, *The Christian Church in the Cold War* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1992), 23.

developments through the centuries, the popes in the Latin Church acquired the right to freely appoint bishops. This right was formally stated in the 1917 Code of Canon Law.

The Church has been a powerful and influential institution from the time of the Emperor Constantine. As the Church grew bigger, the laity who had the right to elect their own leaders were limited to the rich and powerful. The First Vatican Council (1869-70) defined the doctrine of papal infallibility. A new understanding of the church emerged during the Second Vatican Council (1962-5): local churches, as communities of believers, are equal in status. The churches of Bombay, Beijing (北京) and so on, are no less churches than the Church of Rome. Perhaps it was this new understanding of ecclesiology that encouraged some church leaders to stress the autonomy of the local church.

The Catholic Church in China is multi-faceted and continuously changing, but this always happens according to the dictates of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP 中國共產黨). It is a pluralistic church with members living in tension and anxiety. Wounded and disunited through periodic persecutions and crackdowns, the Chinese church has suffered immensely, especially its underground movement. In spite of all these setbacks, or perhaps because of these persecutions, the church is, ironically, flourishing and moving forward. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the church has witnessed an increase in members through baptism and an increase in priestly and religious vocations. Foreign priests and members of religious orders who have visited Catholics in China are very inspired by their faith and living testimonies.

The chief concern of Pope Francis and his predecessors has always been the unity of the church. Pope John Paul II in his three speeches to the Catholic Church in China in 1981 (Manila), 1989 (Seoul) and 1990 (Rome), made no distinction between members of the underground and official movements. He addressed the Catholics in China as one community. It is wrong to label them as 'official church' and 'underground church' because there is only one church – the Church of Jesus Christ. However, in reality, as Cardinal John Tong (湯漢樞機) points out, divisions and infighting exist due to government policies and mistakes from the past.² The CCP has not succeeded in destroying the Catholic Church, but it has succeeded

2. John Tong, 'The Church from 1949 to 1990', in *The Catholic Church in Modern China: Perspectives*, ed. Edmond Tang and Jean-Paul Wiest (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 26. See also John Tong, 'The future of the Sino-Vatican dialogue from an ecclesiological point of view', *Sunday Examiner*, Saturday, 20 July 2019, <http://sundayex.catholic.org.hk/node/4047>.

very well in dividing it. The spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness is much needed to heal the wounds of the past and the present for the church to be united as one.

We need to emphasise that the Pope's universal jurisdiction was not exercised in the political sense of ruling over all Catholics in the world but in a religious sense. Thus, 'the full sovereignty of the ruler in a State is nowhere contested by Catholics.'³ This declaration by the German bishops to diffuse the fear of the Prussian government of a double loyalty on the part of German Catholics was approved by Pope Pius IX on 15 March 1857. Further, it states that not even in spiritual matters does the Pontiff have absolute authority. In the context of China, there is a need to emphasise that the Catholic Church's link to Rome is purely spiritual, not political. Catholics can be loyal to Rome and to China – there is no contradiction in this double allegiance or dual loyalty, between true patriotism and love for the church.⁴

However, inner healing is difficult to achieve because of deep division between the official church and the underground movement, which involves memories and emotions born from years of bitter sufferings. Only the Chinese themselves can undertake the process of healing of the wounds and division. But reconciliation between Rome and Beijing can be a starting point. There are obstacles to be overcome, but these deal with emotional issues rather than theological or canonical principles.⁵ Healing involves the purification of memory, forgiveness and being willing to move beyond one's own viewpoints, as Pope Benedict XVI has emphasised.

From the West we hear constant complaints about the repressive measures of the Chinese government in dealing with the Church. This work points out that the monarchies in Europe were no less coercive and manipulative in their relationship with the Church throughout history. However, while the Church was more accommodative to communism in Eastern Europe, it generally adopted a hardline policy towards China. As a result, those who suffered most were the local Chinese Catholics who kept the faith and were loyal to the Pope in spite of threats of imprisonment, torture and death. When the Church finally understood that communism is here to stay in China, it began to change its position from denunciation to dialogue with the Chinese government, culminating in the provisional agreement regarding the appointment of bishops.

3. Quoted in Hans Waldenfels 'The Local Church', in Tang and Wiest, *The Catholic Church in Modern China*, 161.

4. Ibid.

5. Geoffrey King, 'A Schismatic Church? – A Canonical Evaluation', in Tang and Wiest, *The Catholic Church in Modern China*, 98.

Outline

Chapter 1 explores the history of Catholic missions in China, emphasising their failure to recruit native clergy as the main cause for the church's inability to survive after the expulsion of missionaries by the communists in 1949. Foreign missionaries were reluctant to hand over leadership to the locals in spite of official decrees from Rome to do so. This reluctance was related to the issues of power and Western national interests.

Chapter 2 traces the evolution of religious policy in China in the 1980s and 1990s. Driven by pragmatic considerations, Chinese authorities adapted religious policy to the changing economic, social and political situations in the nation. When the government realised that it could not totally eliminate religion, it sought to control and contain it.

Chapter 3 highlights the conflicts in Sino-Vatican relations with the creation of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. Attempts by the Chinese government to establish an independent Church posed a threat to the catholicity and unity of the ecclesial community, leading to division between an official church and an underground church.

Chapter 4 focuses on Pope Benedict XVI's 2007 letter to the bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China. This letter highlights issues regarding papal authority, the relation between local churches and the universal church, and the appointment of bishops. While dealing with the Chinese community, Benedict XVI revealed his openness and thoughtfulness regarding engagement with the official church.

Chapter 5 discusses the variety of ways in which a bishop can be selected when a See is vacant. In many countries and since the early days of Catholicism, the nomination of bishops has been a power struggle between the Church and the state. This chapter emphasises that the Provisional Agreement of 2018 is not something new. Civil authorities have always had a say in the nomination of bishops in many Western nations.

Chapter 6 examines the Church's relations with communist regimes in the Eastern European bloc under Soviet domination, with a focus on Poland and Hungary. This chapter attempts to show that Marxist policy towards religion follows a very consistent pattern regarding restrictions placed upon religious activities.

Chapter 7 highlights the types of bishops existing in China, a question complicated by the fact that the Christian community is torn between the official church and the underground movement. The dilemma faced by Catholics is symbolised by the lives of two bishops: Ignatius Gong Pinmei (龔品梅) and Aloysius Jin Luxian (金魯賢).

In the Epilogue, we discuss the reactions of prominent sinologists and churchmen concerning the Provisional Agreement. The author views the agreement as breaking the impasse and moving forward towards normalisation of Sino-Vatican relations in spite of obstacles, misgivings and uncertainties.

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