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China's Persecuted Churches

PAUL MARSHALL & NINA SHEA

China's underground Christians are the target of what they themselves describe as the most brutal repression since the early 1980s when China was just emerging from the terror of the Cultural Revolution. Mindful of the democratisation role played by the various Christian churches within the Soviet Empire, in 1994 Beijing decreed that all Christian worship must occur within government sanctioned associations. Since then, and with increasing intensity, China has set out on an aggressive course to eradicate underground Christian churches within its borders.

If the Chinese government succeeds, it will have struck a mortal blow against freedom. The ramifications of religious persecution in China extend far beyond those Catholics and Protestants who choose to pray independent of government control. These Christians are the last nationwide stronghold of independent thought and expression in China. In a land of 1.2 billion people, there is no *samizdat* press, no Moscow Helsinki-style human rights groups, no Solidarity labour union. According to the US State Department's 1996 Human Rights Report, 'All public dissent against the party and government was effectively silenced by intimidation, exile, the imposition of prison terms, administrative detention, or house arrests. No dissidents were known to be active at year's end.'

The plight of the besieged Christians has finally been noticed by a large segment of American churches. The United States Catholic bishops, who are traditionally opposed to Most Favored Nation status for China, were joined in spring 1997 by the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Campaign for the American Family, among others, in a high-visibility campaign to deny blanket trading privileges to China. For many of these groups it is the first time they have spoken out on an international human rights issue. These groups are not confined to the Christian right – they include *New York Times* columnist A. M. Rosenthal, Democratic minority leader Richard Gephardt and New York City Council speaker Peter Vallone, all of whom seized the theme of the persecuted churches in their efforts to support sanctions against China.

The new human rights lobby has catapulted the religious persecution issue to the forefront of the American foreign policy debate. And they have attracted an unlikely alliance of opposition – free traders, China sympathisers, and churches eager for access. Interestingly, no one argues that religious freedom is not important and should be subordinate to other goals. Rather, the Clinton administration, the business community, Heritage Foundation and much of the foreign policy establishment, among others, try to make the case that freedoms in China will expand under

'constructive engagement', which seems to mean unfettered trade. Some within the Christian community, particularly those connected with the Institute for Chinese Studies in Wheaton, Illinois, express fear that the 'public shaming' of China by the US will backfire on the Chinese churches.

Others have gone so far as to take up Beijing's own defence and argue that in fact there is no religious persecution in China, or else that it is on a minor scale. Rev. Deng Fucun, the general secretary of the Three Self Patriotic Movement, has claimed that there is no such thing as an underground church in China.² His contention is based on the fact that a minority of the Christians in China, in the government-controlled and supported 'Patriotic' Catholic and Protestant Churches, are officially registered with the government and allowed to operate. These churches are now running 17 seminaries, sending seminarians to train in the West, and printing millions of Bibles. These are the churches that most foreigners see when they visit China.

Once a church registers it comes under the control of the Religious Affairs Bureau, headed since July 1995 by hardliner Ye Xiaowen. On 6 June 1997 Ye described unregistered Christian churches as 'evil, illegal organisations that undermine social order'. In 1995 communist party leader and China's president Jiang Zemin declared to the Bureau that 'We are engaged in a secret struggle against the church.' He outlined 'Three Guidelines': 'comprehensive and correct implementation of party religious policy; strict supervision over religious affairs according to the law; active guidance of religion towards adaptation to socialist society'. Under Ye the Religious Affairs Bureau is increasingly zealous. The guiding principle is that since 'only socialism can save China' religion must 'adapt itself to socialism'.³ Members of the patriotic churches must be organised into one non-denominational church body and are restricted in working with people under eighteen. The clergy cannot preach outside their own area or churches, the clergy and venue must be approved by the government, and church services and members are subject to monitoring. The Patriotic Church is forbidden to accept the authority of the pope and its bishops are appointed by the government in defiance of the Vatican. Sermons must stick to approved topics. One of the disapproved topics is the second coming of Christ. Another is abortion and even forced abortion.⁴ This does not mean that these churches are simply 'Potemkin churches', false fronts for duping gullible foreigners. There are priests and bishops in the Patriotic Catholic Church who are also recognised by the Vatican, and some of the official Protestant churches cooperate with underground Christians. Most of their clergy and their growing congregations are sincere Christians. But independent churches they are not.

The members of the underground who refuse to join the 'Patriotic' churches are hence not extremists who perversely refuse all government contact and legitimate control. They simply want to choose their own churches and pastors, and to worship freely according to the dictates of conscience. For this they will worship in caves, be baptised at night in ice-rimmed rivers, and live underground. They are willing to endure crippling fines, imprisonment, labour camps, beatings, torture and death.

After the comparative laxity of the Deng era, in 1994–96 the government intensified its crackdown on unregistered churches. A further intensification began in mid-1996. While there are regional variations in church policy, as in everything in China, and while internationally-known pastors such as Samuel Lamb can operate freely, this new policy is not local or provincial. It is national in scope, systematic in form, brutal in style, and directed by China's highest authorities. Since 1996 members of the Christian underground have noted that the authorities have been adopting harsher

tactics. In particular, they have begun to target underground house-church leaders for arrest and to hand out sentences of three years 'reeducation' in labour camps.⁵

For Protestants, Henan province is one of the areas hardest hit. Protestant leaders report that about 40 per cent of inmates in Henan *laojiao* or labour camps are there for belonging to the Christian underground. In Henan Number One Labour Camp approximately 50 out of 126 inmates were imprisoned for underground church activities. During a visit to China by Freedom House 85 house-church Christians were rounded up and arrested in two dragnet operations on 14 May 1997 in Zhoukou, Henan. On 16 March 1997 Peter Xu Yongze, who heads the enormous 'New Birth Church' network and is perhaps the most important underground Protestant leader in China, was arrested and jailed with seven others in Henan. The Freedom House team received reports that 300 Protestants had been arrested in Luoyang since July 1996; and it was in Henan that Zhang Xiuju, a 36-year-old woman, was beaten to death by police during an arrest for underground Christian activities on 26 May 1996.⁶

The traditional enormous underground Catholic pilgrimage in Donglu, Hebei Province, was again prevented from taking place in May 1997. In Spring 1996, according to the Connecticut-based Cardinal Kung Foundation, 5000 troops supported by armoured cars and helicopters prevented Roman Catholics from attending this annual pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of China. In 1995 tens of thousands had participated in the pilgrimage. The 1996 crackdown resulted in the detention of a number of Roman Catholic priests and laypeople. Others were placed under house arrest or subjected to severe restrictions.⁷ Bishop Su of Baoding wrote in a June 1996 letter to the National People's Congress that Catholics in Dahou, the same area, had been forced to join study groups and report to the police eight times a day, fined, threatened and tortured. He said that after a month more than 4000 Catholics, many of whom were students who could not continue their studies unless they cooperated with the authorities, had been put under pressure to renounce their faith publicly.⁸ Around the same time three Catholic bishops were imprisoned; they were still there a year later, by which time Bishop Su had also been imprisoned.⁹

Public Security Bureau police have tortured a number of underground Christians during interrogation. Underground Christians report brutal beatings that have in some cases resulted in paralysis, coma and even death. Other methods of torture reported include binding detainees in excruciating positions, hanging them by their limbs, tormenting them with electric cattle prods, electric drills and other implements, and crushing their feet and ankles while they are forced to kneel. (Liu Zhenying, one of the eight arrested in Henan in March, apparently had his ankle broken in this way.) On 24 September 1996, in Tanghe, Henan, a raid by security police resulted in the arrest of Elder Feng, Brother Zheng, Brother Xin, Sister Li, and Sister Luo. Brothers Zheng and Xin and Elder Feng were already respected leaders and had been imprisoned previously. This time they were beaten and tortured to get them to reveal the names of other leaders. According to a note smuggled out of prison the authorities bound Sister Luo's arms behind her in an agonising position and she was beaten unconscious. One of the men almost died from being beaten 'for nine days and nights'. Members of the group were also poked with electric cattle prods, often while bound. Since Elder Feng is 72 he cannot perform hard labour but remains in custody indefinitely without a sentence. The others have been sentenced to three years *laojiao* in Luoyang.¹⁰ In Sichuan the police have been arresting and fining Christians once or twice a year, as a form of extortion. If the family are unable to pay, the police beat the detainee, sometimes while he is suspended from the ceiling. Often they will do this in the presence of the family until the family is ready to do anything to pay. After

witnessing such a scene a woman hanged herself because she could not find the money to release her grandson. Xu Yongze was sentenced on 25 September 1997 to 10 years *laojiao*, the longest official sentence for unregistered church activity since 1982. His wife and colleagues were also sentenced at the end of November. On 8 October 1997 Bishop Su Zhemín was rearrested, joining at least five other Catholic bishops in detention.¹¹

How many Christians are there? *Newsweek* reported in its issue of 9 June 1997 that 'Christians represent a tiny portion of China's population of 1.2 billion' and quoted the figure of 0.2 per cent from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. This figure is curious: no intensive investigative effort is required to come up with vastly higher figures. In contrast to the *Newsweek* figure of 2.4 million, the Chinese embassy's press office states there are 4 million Catholics and 6.5 million Protestants. These are the same figures that Beijing's Religious Affairs Bureau gave the United Nations special rapporteur on religious tolerance for 1994. However, former British diplomat Anthony Lambert found that adding up Beijing's own numbers from its provincial bodies produced an official total of 9.2 million Protestants for the same year.¹² At the time of the 1995 Beijing UN Conference on Women the Chinese government was giving figures of 10–12 million Catholics, and that was an estimate of the legal churches only. These legal 'Patriotic' churches have grown spectacularly since 1994. The number of registered church buildings went from 7000 in 1992 to 12,000 in 1997. 'Patriotic' Protestants and Catholics interviewed by the Freedom House team in May 1997 all spoke of a threefold to fourfold growth since 1990 and a greater than tenfold growth since these churches effectively became legal in 1979. Chinese government figures support this picture of growth. How many are there in the underground church? Nobody knows for certain, but some good estimates can be made. Lambert, who has done careful province-by-province and town-by-town analyses, says there was 'strong statistical evidence for at least 17 to 30 million' Protestants, official and underground combined, in mid-1994.¹³ Other analysts of China's house churches say that this figure is too low, and Lambert allows that the figure could be considerably higher, but that evidence is unavailable in China's closed society. If we include Catholics, both legal and illegal, we arrive at a conservative estimate of China's Christians at about 40 million, and every sign is that they are increasing rapidly. More people are attending Sunday worship in China than in the whole of Western Europe – and the majority are doing so despite the threat of beatings and labour camps.

This huge and rapidly growing number of Christians is obviously worrying the Chinese communist authorities. In 1992 the official press noted that 'the church played an important role in the change in the Soviet empire' and warned that 'if China does not want such a scene to be repeated in its land, it must strangle the baby while it is still in the manger.' The Chinese government thus decided to adopt Herod as its role model.¹⁴ The problem for the Chinese leaders is not simply what the church *does*, but also what it *is*. However much it has confused and violated the principle, the Christian church has nevertheless always held that God and Caesar are distinct and that at all times loyalty to God must outweigh loyalty to Caesar. This is a principle that the Chinese leadership cannot accept.

Notes and References

¹ *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1996* (US State Department), p. 617.

² *Washington Times*, 16 July 1997.

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- ⁴ For background see Xuchu Xu, 'To register or not to register: unregistered Christians in China under increasing pressure', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 25, no. 2, June 1997, pp. 201–9.
- ⁵ Interviews with unregistered church leaders, China, May 1997. Findings given in *Persecution of the Christian Underground in China* (Freedom House, Washington), 6 June 1997.
- ⁶ *ibid.*
- ⁷ *Press Release*, Cardinal Kung Foundation, 10 January 1997.
- ⁸ *Appeal Letter to the Government of the People's Republic of China from Bishop Su Zhemín.*
- ⁹ 'China has more Catholics, more repression', *Washington Post*, 6 October 1996.
- ¹⁰ *Persecution of the Christian Underground in China.*
- ¹¹ US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has said that Su has been released, but as of March 1998 sources in China say he is still in detention in Baoding. See also *New York Times*, 21 October 1997.
- ¹² Anthony P. B. Lambert, 'Estimates of fifty million or more Christians are unrealistic', *News Network International Special Report*, 19 September 1994, p. 8.
- ¹³ *ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *China: Religious Freedom Denied* (Puebla Institute, Washington DC, 1994), p. 13; see also *China: Elimination of Underground Churches*, Document no. 4070, 24 October 1997, of International Fides Service.