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Editorial

There is a very large Muslim minority in China. Estimates of numbers range widely, from 11 to 65 million: the most realistic figure is probably in the region of 30–40 million. In this issue of *Religion, State & Society* the article by Chih-yu Shih analyses the elements contributing to the balancing-act which is current Chinese government policy towards its Islamic subjects.

Islam came to China from several directions. To the north-west, Islam expanded rapidly in Central Asia in the seventh century; the Chinese rulers of the Tang dynasty called in Muslim military help, and by 760 there were 4000 Muslim families in Xian, the Tang capital, alone. Islam soon consolidated itself in Chinese Turkestan, the modern provinces of Xinjiang, Gansu and Shaanxi.

The second area of Muslim settlement was in the south-west at the beginning of the ninth century. Again Muslims were called in to provide military help, then settled down in Yunnan and married Chinese wives. (Muslim women do not marry Chinese men).

Meanwhile tens of thousands of Arab and Persian merchants had been visiting south-east China by sea for purposes of trade. The first minaret in China is said to have been built in Canton (Guangzhou) in 627, in the lifetime of Muhammed. It also served as a lighthouse. Unlike the Muslims in the interior, these visitors tended not to settle.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries Muslims spread further across northern China, and Islamic expansion received a further impetus with the start of Mongol incursions, which culminated in 1278 when Kublai Khan completed the conquest of China and founded the Yuan dynasty. The Mongol rulers made great use of Muslims in government, trade and culture, and they spread throughout China. Until the end of the Ming dynasty in 1644, Muslims were prominent in society and enjoyed what is seen in retrospect as a golden age.

China 'proper' runs south of the Great Wall to the northern borders of Vietnam, Laos and Burma. Here Muslim men would marry Han Chinese women, who then became Muslims, and thus the Muslim population became ethnically integrated. These Muslims, who have become virtually indistinguishable from the Han Chinese, are known as Hui. In the north-west, by contrast, and particularly in the province of Xinjiang, Islam was and remains the distinguishing faith of another nine Muslim minorities, who have never been assimilated. These are the Uighur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Sala, Tajik, Uzbek, Tatar, Baoan and Dongxiang. Of these the Uighur are by far the largest single group.

Like Islam elsewhere in the world, Islam in China has nurtured a wide variety of sects and tendencies. As elsewhere, the main division is between Sunni and Shiite.

With the accession of the Manchu (Qing) dynasty (1644–1911) the situation of the Muslims took a sharp turn for the worse. Persecution escalated and amongst those Muslims who had not been assimilated into the Han population the reaction was

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vigorous. In the north-west and south-west there were major and minor conflicts every twenty to thirty years. Some estimate that 12 million Muslims lost their lives during the 268 years of Manchu rule.

After the founding of the Republic in 1911 the Nationalist authorities eventually classed the Muslims officially as the 'Hui minority'. The Muslims in Turkestan, who had retained their national identity and consolidated it over centuries of conflict, were not content; there were rebellions in 1912 and 1930, and an independent Republic of Turkestan was set up briefly (1933–34).

The Nationalists tended to define the minorities in terms of religion; since 1949 the Communists have defined them in terms of national identity. Neither approach has proved adequate.

As far as the Hui are concerned, the way they have expressed their distinctness from the Han, when they have needed to, has been through their religious identity. All Muslims in China have tended to retain a strong religious identity, shunning the eclectic tendencies of other Chinese religions. The Hui maintain both an outward conformity and an inner structural cohesion based on their religious beliefs and institutions. Meanwhile the Han authorities, witnessing the material acculturation of Muslims, have tended to assume that their faith is not something of central importance to them. However, it is precisely if a Hui loses his Islamic identity that he ceases to be a Hui.

For the Muslims in the north-west, national and religious identity are likewise intimately bound up together; and it is in this area, especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union, that the Chinese authorities have been presented with the acutest problems in dealing with their Islamic minorities.

When the Communists came to power their policy was to play down the significance of religion; but they quickly perceived that they also needed to make concessions to the national minorities.

On the eve of the communist takeover in 1949 there were 42 mosques in Peking; by 1953 only three were still functioning, mostly used by foreign diplomats. Meanwhile the authorities tried to infiltrate the Muslim communities and to manipulate their activities. During the early 1950s there were disturbances in many Muslim areas of China; for a short time an 'Independent Islamic State' was proclaimed in Henan. The authorities responded by settling large numbers of Han in Muslim areas in order to achieve heterogeneity, but the result was often more strife.

Heavy-handed action therefore soon gave way to a more nuanced approach. The Muslim minorities live in sensitive border areas, far from the centres of power; there is always the danger that they will look abroad for support. At the same time, Communist China has always needed to preserve good diplomatic relations with Islamic countries throughout the world, and has therefore sought to avoid accusations of religious persecution of Muslims. Many of the areas the Muslim minorities inhabit are also of great potential agricultural value. The communist authorities were therefore soon setting up a number of Autonomous Districts where there was a high proportion of Muslims; Xinjiang for the Uighurs in 1955; Ningxia for the local Hui in 1958. These Districts have minority representatives in government and enjoy certain financial privileges.

The generally cautious policy of the authorities towards Muslim minority issues was nevertheless disastrously reversed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). All religions were violently persecuted. The Red Guards set up a 'Revolutionary Struggle Group for the Abolition of Islam'. Mosques were closed, a-hongs (imams) sent to work in the fields, the Quran was prohibited, Islamic organisations were

closed down. At the height of the Cultural Revolution Muslims in Yunnan attempted to set up an Islamic republic; the Red Guards razed the villages and towns involved to the ground.

From the late 1970s there was relaxation again. Mosques reopened, Muslim leaders were released, pilgrimage to Mecca was permitted. Representative bodies were set up to mediate between the government and the faithful and to facilitate Muslim participation in world gatherings, principally in support of 'peace'.

As economic liberalisation began in China, Muslim commercial initiatives became possible. By 1988 60 per cent of the mosques in Xinjiang were running their own shops, restaurants and other businesses. In the late 1980s mosques in the Ningxia Autonomous Region were setting up their own commercial enterprises; and the Region aimed to acquire the status of a Special Business Zone, with Yinchuan as its centre, in order to attract foreign investors, particularly from Islamic countries.

Meanwhile Muslim aspirations continued to revolve around both religious and national identity: the desire for greater local autonomy, even independence; increasing objections to atheist education; the opening of large numbers of new mosques; increasing observance of Islamic festivals and traditions, including annual pilgrimages to Mecca (more than 2000 Chinese go every year); the training of clergy (the Islamic Theological Institute of China in Beijing was reopened in 1982; today there are nine seminaries and theological institutes); the publishing of religious literature.

For the Chinese authorities, however, the tightrope remains an extremely thin one. With the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1989–91 newly-independent Central Asian Muslim states appeared on China's western borders. From the later 1980s there were demonstrations and upheavals among Muslims, particularly the Uighurs, in favour of human rights and protesting against racial discrimination. Muslim groups took part in the Tiananmen Square demonstration in June 1989.

In March 1990 the authorities launched a campaign against Islamic fundamentalism and 'hostile foreign powers who are engaging in missionary activity with the aim of causing unrest'. In April 1990 there was a clash in Xinjiang between the police and a group belonging to the 'Islamic Party of East Turkestan' calling for the establishment of an independent republic. Fifty people died; up to 6000 arrests followed; mosques and schools were closed, and religious leaders were urged to speak out in opposition to separatist ideas.

In June 1990 new regulations were introduced in Urumchi, the capital of Xinjiang, requiring all mosques, temples and churches to be registered, and forbidding, inter alia, religious activity in military establishments. In September the Xinjiang provincial government introduced laws forbidding religious bodies to maintain contacts abroad or receive money from abroad, or to talk about 'Holy War'.

Problems continue in Xinjiang. The mid-1990s saw attacks by separatists on religious leaders and clergy accused of working with the secular authorities. The authorities responded by introducing restrictions on religious activity, including a ban on the building of new mosques. In April 1996 the Chinese government announced plans for joint action with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan against 'Islamic separatists'. From time to time there are clashes and fatalities. 'Illegal religious literature' entering Xinjiang has been seized by the customs. Restrictions are placed on who can publish religious literature and its content is carefully controlled. The authorities claim that 'foreign terrorist organisations' indoctrinate Chinese Muslim pilgrims to Mecca and imbue them with separatist ideas.

There are of course those in the Muslim establishment who are concerned to

distance themselves from what appears to be increasing instability. At a meeting of the Religious Affairs Bureau on 11 January 2000 Muslim state counsellor Ismail Amat called for measures 'reinforcing the fight against hostile western and local forces which use religion to infiltrate our country'.

For the Chinese authorities, preserving a balance between appeasement and control in the Muslim territories of the north-west is an ever more complex task. In this context, it is instructive to look at current Chinese government policies towards Muslims throughout the country. The district of Ningxia, the subject of the article by Chih-yu Shih, is at the extreme north-west of China 'proper'; its Muslim population are Hui. The problems of integration and the risks of alienation in this area are a timely subject for scrutiny.

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