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In Theory: The U.S. and China's religion policies

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Chinese authorities have arrested 30 members of an evangelical church for trying to hold an Easter service.

According to reports, large numbers of police gathered near the Shouwang Church after its leaders announced they would hold an outdoor ceremony to honor the holy day. The church's senior pastor, Jin Tianming, is under house arrest and others removed by police have been taken to different stations and not been released.

Jin said he knew the risks and added, “[T]his is our uncompromising position and a matter of faith. If they arrest our followers, this is the price we are willing to pay.”

Although China has an official policy stipulating freedom of religion, its atheist government frowns upon worship and imposes strict controls on faith. Religious groups have to have official approval to gather and face the threat of being closed down and evicted from their places of worship. The Shouwang Church is considered “unofficial,” as it has not been recognized by the government despite having sought registration since 2006.

Is there anything American faith leaders can, or should be, doing about this denial of freedom? And given America's close economic relations with China, is there anything you think the U.S. government should be doing?

Answer:

I don't know much about the Shouwang Christian Church in Beijing other than what I have read in the news. What I do know about is the guarantee of religious tolerance here. We are very fortunate in this country to have a constitution and government that insure the rights of our people to practice religion as they see fit, as long as no one is harmed in that action. So I admire those in the church led by Pastor Jin Tianming for their willingness to stand up for what they believe, even in the face of likely arrest.

The question that is raised for me by these events is not what we can do to change the Chinese government's way of dealing with the practice of religion in their country, although we can certainly communicate our concerns to those in our government who have contact with the Chinese through diplomatic channels. The question for me is how strong our religious beliefs really are in this country. Would we be willing to risk arrest for celebrating our religious convictions, or have we become complacent in our undemanding security?

Religion should not just be something that we practice in the safety of our religious services, knowing that our government will not prohibit such worship. It needs to be something that we make a part of our lives. Unless our actions are connected to what we say we believe, they are meaningless. We need to share our compassion and tolerance for all people in every way that we can, here and now. Whatever our faith tradition, we could learn a great deal about how to live our faith from the Chinese Christians in Beijing.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

I don't think China gives two chopsticks about America's opinion with regard to its policies. America is deeply in debt to China, and as such doesn't have a whole lot of leverage. But Christians here are forever objecting and denouncing China's oppression to no avail.

I believe China currently provides three Christian church options. One is to attend officially sanctioned state churches where lots of people assemble. We might consider them theologically milquetoast at best, or politically propagandist at worst. State operatives sit in as observers, ensuring no negative illustrations of corrupt government find their way into the sermons and that Caesar comes off well when Jesus is quoted. Parishioners realize it's censored but they'll acquiesce rather than have to meet their savior in person prematurely.

Another sort of church is that provided for foreigners. These too are monitored, but mostly for attendance. Citizens are not allowed, and papers are checked at the door. Christian tourists who desire a worship experience more than a cultural one will be there, and ministers can generally preach sound doctrine, or so I'm told.

The third group is the one in question. Generally underground, these don't yield to oppressive oversight, so they preach Christ's words with special vigor to spiritually starved listeners. These churches are evangelistic, conservative, and exalt Christ above Hu Jintao and his Communist party atheists. If Shouwang tried to obtain recognized standing with the establishment but was rejected, it only reiterates the state's antipathy to biblical doctrine.

What to do? Perhaps be more zealous. Currently, community churches are funding China missions to bolster such sincere Chinese Christianity. If we can support Christian aid workers and Gospel teachers, perhaps we can strengthen the catacomb believers and get China saved on a slow burn. China needs Jesus. It's got the most people on the planet. God forbid America should ever go to war with China's morally unrestrained godless swarms, but more so, what a holocaust it would be if we say or do nothing and they all go to hell.

The Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church

China is a country in transition. Its economic and political power is growing quickly, but it is struggling with the rule of law and human rights, including the right of religious freedom.

Several years ago, my business firm asked that I go to China to see if we could introduce our consulting practice to that county. I found that there is a market for our services, but we concluded that the lack of uniform laws would preclude us from being successful, at least in the short term. For us, China's legal system needed to mature. So we decided to wait.

Likewise, China needs to mature in how it handles human rights. This maturing will occur both from within, the Chinese people yearning for more freedom; and from without, Western countries putting pressure on China to make necessary reforms. The pace at which this occurs will depend on a number of factors.

Churches are slowly making inroads into China, but, as evidenced by the Shouwang Church, this process is slow and can be violent. The question is, how can this transformation process be accelerated?

I think the answer is multifaceted. Christian churches must continue to work and push the Chinese government to increase religious freedom. Christian groups within China, whether official or not, need to continue to press for religious freedom.

Christians outside China need to pray for divine intervention to soften the hearts of those leading China. In addition, those Christians need to encourage their governments to press for more freedom.

China should remind us that religious freedom is a precious freedom.

Rick Callister

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

La Cañada

The Bible's Book of Acts describes the struggles of the first Christians in a culture of active opposition and repression. They were arrested, beaten, forbidden to tell people about Jesus Christ and some were even murdered. In spite of this persecution, Jesus Christ kept building his church as he promised and Christians prevailed because they kept doing a few simple, and yet powerful, things.

They prayed. "Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God." (Acts 12:5). In response to their prayer, God opened the doors for Peter and he walked out. They kept preaching Christ. When the authorities commanded Peter and John not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus, they answered: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:18-20).

As a result, the church continued to grow and the good news spread. They were faithful and victorious even to the point of death. When they were stoning Stephen to death, "he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55).

Should America defend the rights of persecuted Christians in China? Yes, through diplomatic and economic pressure. But let's never forget that Jesus Christ, risen the first Easter morning, has been quite able to defend his people for thousands of years. He will not stop until he establishes his kingdom over the whole world and his people rule and reign over the nations with him.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

Burbank

The Chinese government officially frowns on all religions, including Buddhism, Taoism and folk practices like ancestor worship. Yet millions do practice their religions legally in registered churches.

Some accounts about Shouwang Church suggest that they would rather not be registered to avoid restrictions on their practices.

China's revolution was the final blow to its long history of oppressive feudalism and colonialism in which religion (local and Western) played a supporting role. This is something to bear in mind when judging their decision to form an atheist government, and when thinking about the low level of religious interest among Chinese.

Estimates of the number of Christians run from 2% to 4% of the Chinese population; for comparison, Buddhism is the most popular belief, at around 8%.

Lack of freedom in China goes far beyond religion; Freedom House (www.freedomhouse.org) pulls no punches in calling China "not free."

I would like our government to bring influence to bear on Chinese human rights abuses broadly, not just on the treatment of some Christians in China.

Unfortunately, our economic relationship with China makes us timid about criticizing them. Close relations is a nice way to put it. I'm no expert, but you don't really have to be to notice that China pretty much owns us.

We are soft on China because China is the top foreign buyer of our government debts and a big investor in our economy, using up some of the U.S. dollars it holds from our massive trade deficit with them.

Much of our debt is from spending to prepare for, conduct, and deal with the aftermath of our wars. Plus the war economy steals money from the training, innovation and infrastructure we need in order to trade more competitively. Not taxing corporate and personal wealth fairly makes the bottom line even worse, as does letting insurance and pharmaceutical companies bleed our health-care dollars.

Absent a more rational approach, our relationship with China will stay subservient, with no pressure on the Chinese to clean up their human rights act.

Truly supporting more religious freedom in China requires also moving the U.S. toward peace and economic justice.

Roberta Medford

Atheist

Montrose

Chinese President Hu was in Washington recently, and I think President Obama said something to him about China's record on human rights violations. And the Chinese officials know how we feel. Still, the more pressure, the better.

Recently I received something from Amnesty International which said that the Chinese absolutely hate embarrassment, and so the more we point out how they are not living up to the standards that other civilized societies have, the better are the chances that they will make some changes.

While it is true that China is an important trading partner, we as a country can't look the other way and pretend that everything is fine. You've seen the bumper sticker that says, "Friends don't let friends drive drunk." Well, friends also don't let friends put religious people in jail for exercising their right to be religious.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman

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