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Religion and the Chinese Government Through Time

The situation I would like to choose is the contemporary case of governmental hostility towards different religions in mainland China. I feel that this illustrates a clash between religion and politics because the political actors that are running the Chinese authoritarian state are placing restrictions, to say the least, on several religions.

Introduction

As many people know from either their general knowledge about China from the media or what they learned in class and as we were taught by Professor Laura Olson in our Religion & World Politics class this semester during our lecture on models of religion with an emphasis on state relations, China is an authoritarian state that has mass surveillance of its citizens and an iron grip on the everyday lives of their citizens and that they as said by the Chinese communist government to have freedom of religious believe as long as one “engages in normal religious activities” (Olson). The practice would have to be permitted by the Chinese government to be considered a regular religious activity. As taught in our course and what will be supported later in this paper, only religious groups belonging to patriotic religious associations representing these regions are permitted to register with the government and hold legal worship services; tolerated religions in China must be Chinese in orientation (Olson). I will provide several examples of

religions that the Chinese government does not tolerate and address how the current and previous Chinese governments have attempted to deal with the religions and religious practices that they do not permit. Finally, I will analyze from that information how the current Chinese government has influenced, or more specifically how the recent Chinese government has reacted to religions they deemed unpermitted in China and how the religions were affected by those treatments and conclude if and how it could have contributed towards religious hostility in comparison to how the Chinese governments of the past have done.

Description of the circumstances of the situation

According to the 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom or China, which includes Hong Kong, Macau, Tibet, and Xinjiang, the United States Department of State, the government recognizes five official religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism (U.S. Department of the state) and as we were taught in class Protestantism highly persecuted in China and must meet in secret (Olson). The circumstance that we emphasized in class was the situation with the Uyghur Muslims. They are an ethnic minority group who comprise close to 1/2 of the population of 11 million in the Xinjiang province in the northwest corner of China (Olson). They are a religious group of people that are being systematically and severely oppressed. I chose to start with them because it shows how the Chinese government has been oppressing a religious group from a well-known standpoint and then go deeper into other oppressed religions in China by the government. The UN estimates that at least 1 million Uyghurs are being detained in intermediate camps today, where they are being re-educated and indoctrinated into official doctrines of the Chinese communist party. (Olson)

In many cases, women are forcibly sterilized and abused, and the former has resulted in birth rates plummeting since 2017 (Olson). 2020, there were 201 reeducation camps and 179

detention centers and prisons (Olson). In a statement, Xi Jinping said that there is a need to eradicate religious extremism, which is interesting because the Chinese government's way of going about doing so is also quite extreme. The situation with the Uyghurs is a highly troubling case. Still, it only scratches the surface of the extent of just how many religions and religious groups the Chinese have oppressed because there are so many more. There are too many to address here, but I will summarize and synthesize the notable situations of the oppression by the Chinese government of the White Lotus, Yi Guandao, and Falun Gong.

Summary and synthesis of the situation

Starting with the White Lotus, from the journal article entitled Religion and the Chinese State: Three Crises and a Solution by Thomas David DuBois, he writes, "... in the fourteenth century, the imperial state banned and actively persecuted a group of religious teachings known to history as the White Lotus. (DuBois 344–358) The Ming Dynasty was drastically different from the current Chinese communist party. Still, for that reason, it will serve as an example of the historical oppression of religious groups by the previous Chinese governments. DuBois continues, "Their reasons for doing so were obvious: White Lotus teachings often dwelt upon matters such as the apocalypse, which made them a genuine threat to public order. In response, the imperial state drew a clear line between 'legitimate' or 'orthodox religions' (Zheng jiao), such as Buddhism or Daoism, and illegitimate ones, such as the White Lotus, which it labeled 'heterodox' (Xie jiao), but which we might more simply label 'heresy.'" (DuBois 344–358) As I stated at the beginning of the situational description, the Chinese government only recognizes five official religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. This situation is where that originates. The Chinese government's decision to deem the White Lotus was the beginning of the oppression of religious groups that they did not see as legitimate or orthodox

religions. As you may recall, the Uyghur situation and the protestant situation are also oppressed by the Chinese government even though Islam and Protestantism are recognized religions in China. This phenomenon could be because the specific teachings and practices were not seen as normal religious activities or Chinese in orientation since the White Lotus was a Buddhist group, also recognized as an official religion. Still, the Chinese government did not agree with its teachings that they saw as a genuine threat to public order due to what aspects their sect focused on the apocalypse, which could have potentially caused panic amongst the Chinese people, which is not in the best interest of the Ming Dynasty and its control over its people the way that the Chinese government at the time saw it.

Moving on to the Yiguan Dao, it is a more recent case of Chinese governmental oppression of a religious group during Mao Zedong's time in power, the Chinese communist party and the People's Republic of China. The book "The Transformation of Yi Guan Dao in Taiwan: Adapting to a Changing Religious Economy," by Yunfeng Lu, touches on the Yiguan Dao in Mainland China from 1930 to 1953. Lu writes, "When the Chinese Communist Party came into power in 1949, the sect suffered a ruthless suppression. Being viewed as the biggest "Reactionary Society, Dao Organization and Community" (Fandong Huidaomen) by the Party, Yi guan Dao became the target of repression' (Lu 39). The Yi Guan Dao was a group that was the target of many campaigns by the Chinese government that were detrimental to the group's survival in mainland China. Lu says later in the chapter, "The anti-Yiguan Dao campaign destroyed the sect's organizational structure in mainland China to a large degree. The propaganda against Yiguan Dao also forced most ordinary followers to quit the sect formally. Although a few faithful followers privately and secretly held on to their belief, Yiguan Dao could not publicly

exist in mainland China" (Lu 41). Similarly to Protestantism, the followers of Yiguan Dao had to meet in secret topractice their religion in China due to persecution from the Chinese government.

The most modern example of religious persecution from the Chinese government is the persecution of the Falun Gong, which was active since the 1990s and is still followed and practiced by some today. In the article "Fa Lun Gong and Religious Freedom," Marion Wyse talks about how similar things happened to them as the Yi guan Dao in terms of persecution from the Chinese government. Wyse wrote, "The whole country on notice against this group. The government has pulled out all the propaganda stops and rounded up national and local leaders. The anti-Fa Lun Gong campaign appears to outsiders as rhetorical overkill. However, it is important to acknowledge that the population of 1.25 billion is semiliterate outside the cities, and it takes time to re-educate minds" (Wyse 281). The extent to which the Chinese government has gone to keep the people of China thinking, behaving, and believing in the ways they want them to is quite immense, and they will do what is required to let groups know that they are unaccepted in their country.

I would also like to look at a series of quotes from each chapter within the book "Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China" to provide more information to help conclude how the recent Chinese government influenced religious hostility from Chinese governments in the past and how the recent Chinese government has reacted to religions they deemed unpermitted in China and how the religions were affected by those treatments and conclude if and how it could have contributed towards religious hostility in comparison to how the Chinese governments of the past have done. The first chapter is "Making Religion, Making the State in Modern China: An Introductory Essay" by Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank. This chapter states, "The categories behind the statistics on religion in China are

part of the process of making religion and making the state that has been ongoing at all levels of the state and people's relationship through the continuous efforts to institutionalize modernity. Every chapter in this volume argues that China is in the throes of this process." (Ashiwa 17-18) The second chapter is "The Politics of Religion: Late-Imperial Origins of the Regulatory State" by Timothy Brook. This chapter states, "Whether that power belongs to the state at the center or its service elites in the locality, the history of Chinese religion after the 1970s, like the history of religion in China after the 1390s, suggests that communities and individuals will continue to create networks of religious activity beyond the framework of state regulation, regardless of the laws of the state or the activism of prohibitionist state elites, and that religion, indifferent to the logic of the state, will continue to have a dynamic presence in local society." (Ashiwa 40-41) The third chapter is "Positioning Religion in Modernity: State and Buddhism in China" by Yoshiko Ashiwa. This chapter states, "The apparatus of the modern state takes shape and is forming by processes of selection and evaluation that institutionalize religion." (Ashiwa 70) The fourth chapter is "The Catholic Pilgrimage to Sheshan" by Richard Madsen and Lizhu Fan. This chapter states, "The Marian cult does not straightforwardly reflect anyone's interests. Foreign political powers, the Vatican, the Catholic Patriotic Association, and the underground all at times tried to control the Marian cult, but the control could never be complete." (Ashiwa 94). The fifth chapter is "Pathways to the Pulpit: Leadership Training in "Patriotic" and Unregistered Chinese Protestant Churches" by Carsten T. Vala. This chapter states that "In a massive upsurge of Protestantism, the Chinese Communist Party supports the training of pastors who will lead their registered congregations in "patriotism," defined in terms of "protecting the Party's leadership" and obeying "national laws above religious laws." However, instead of bolstering Party authority, the process for training "patriotic" pastors appears to weaken its authority, as pastors-

in-training are increasingly likely to reject the TSPM churches as being “false” churches.” (Ashiwa 96). The sixth chapter is “Institutionalizing Modern “Religion” in China’s Buddhism: Political Phases of a Local Revival” by David L. Wank. This chapter states, “The institutionalization of “religion” proceeds through the organizational bureaucratization of multiple actors enacting it. These actors come to constitute religious fields within modern “state” formation,” which, as Max Weber has argued, is an intriguing character of “religion” in modernity.” (Ashiwa 147) The seventh chapter is “Islam in China: State Policing and Identity Politics” by Dru C. Gladney. This chapter states that “In China, as elsewhere, Islam will continue to play an important role in defining the nation, especially when a mix of religion and ethnicity defines nationality.” (Ashiwa 175). The eighth chapter is “Further Partings of the Way: The Chinese State and Daoist Ritual Traditions in Contemporary China” by Kenneth Dean. This chapter states, “In many areas, Daoist rites have already absorbed into public spectacles in mass-mediated events suffused with capital flows. In even more places, Daoist ritual practices have collapsed almost entirely, and only the barest rudiments of collective ritual life persist. However, the Way continues to part—and the pathways continue to trace their way into multiple worlds of local difference.” (Ashiwa 203) The ninth chapter is “Expanding the Space of Popular Religion: Local Temple Activism and the Politics of Legitimation in Contemporary Rural China” by Adam Yuet Chau. This chapter states, “With the registration of thousands of popular religious temples in China, the space of popular religion is rapidly expanding into the space of religion.” (Ashiwa 234). The tenth chapter is “The Creation and Reemergence of Qigong in China” by Utiraruto Otehode. This chapter states that “For Nancy Chen (1995) and Jian Xu (1999), qigong’s reemergence signifies the appearance of private space in urban China, and the declining power of politics and growth of individual power.” (Ashiwa 241)

How has the recent Chinese government influenced religious hostility from Chinese governments in the past?

Considering the quotes from the last part of the previous section, the Chinese government seemingly did everything in its power to institutionalize religion within China, but they are also struggling greatly in doing so. From the pilgrimage of the Marian cult to Sheshan to the resurgence of Qi gong in China, it is proving true that Chinese politics is declining in power, and individual growth is increasing in power. The Chinese government failed in attempting to train patriotic pastors in Three-Self Patriotic Movement Protestant churches and maintaining ritualistic Daoism as orientally Chinese even with the resurgence of it in modern China. The suggestion that communities and individual people of China will continue to create networks of religious activity that are outside of what the outline of state regulation is, regardless of whatever laws the state may create or whatever activism of prohibitionist state elites may perform, seems to be nothing but the truth. Conversely, in the article "Religion and the Chinese State: Three Crises and a Solution," Dubois says, "… if the Chinese state's influence over religion is minimal, its ambitions are clear. Particularly since the late 1970s, the Chinese government has not merely accepted religion; it has in many ways embraced it." (DuBois 344–358). This quote may explain why some of the persecution from the Chinese government has been only aggressive towards the Uyghurs, and the treatment of other illegitimate religious groups in China has been closer to disapproval than persecution. He continues, "Historically, Chinese states have had much to fear from religion, and in exerting strict surveillance and control over the monks, priests and imams within its borders, the current government has achieved the ideal of many of the regimes that preceded it. In exerting control over the religions, privileging ethical elements over theological, and weaving their teachings into a framework of national unity, it has far exceeded them."

(DuBois 344–358) I cannot entirely agree with this, though, from all of the other evidence provided earlier, mainly on the treatment of Yiguan Dao and the Falun Gong, the Chinese government has constantly been pushing back against religious groups that do not align with their ideologies of what religion in China should be and should do like anything else in the county. In an article called "Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China by Pitman B. Potter, Potter says, "During the Maoist period, programs of socialist transformation challenged the social bases for traditional Chinese folk religions, while policies of political monopoly attacked those limited examples of organized religion that could be identified and targeted. In post-Mao China, the regime adopted a somewhat more tolerant perspective on religion." (317) I feel that this is slightly more accurate because they were harsher in the past than they are today, but that still does not mean that those harsh hostilities similar to those of the past are not still around. The Uyghur and Falun Gong situations show the range of how the Chinese government can be more tolerant or at least not actively harshly persecuting than in the past to doing just that. In the book "Religion in China: Survival and Revival Under Communist Rule" by Fenggang Yang, Yang says that in China, religion survived a brutal attempt at eradication during the so-called Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976. Since then, despite continuous Communist rule, many religions have been reviving and thriving. (Yang 3) This is true based on the information presented earlier in this paper. The Chinese government is not more tolerant or is not gaining more control over religious practices in China. It is that the Chinese people who are practicing these religions are more resilient and practicing in secret. He continues to say, "The Chinese Communist Party maintains an atheist ideology; continues to enforce atheist propaganda through the education system, mass media, and numerous party and state organs; and carries out frequent crackdowns on religious groups. (Yang 3) This makes the most sense over the previous two

articles' points of view based on the facts of the situation in China. After looking at those facts, it is clear that this is the case when considering every aspect of the situation. He adds, "Yet religion has been growing by leaps and bounds throughout the country since the late 1970s." (Yang 3). This points towards how even though there is religious persecution and disapproval from the Chinese government, the people of China who are practicing these persecuted religions are continuing to not only practice their religions but even grow within them despite all of the things that are in place in an attempt to stop them.

Why this would be worth studying?

This situation would be worth studying because it can tell us how the current Chinese government affects society compared to previous regimes. It can also help to find a middle ground between the future Chinese government and the religions that the Chinese communist party does not recognize since the religions are still being practiced and will continue to be regardless of whether the government is persecuting them. Lastly, it could not only compare the two regimes to each other but further research could explain why these things happened the way that they did, continue to happen the way that they are, and, if not fixed, predict how things will happen in the future all in a more extensive way then the research that is currently available that is mostly only focused on what happened and why more so than viewing all of the Chinese government's behavior concerning persecuted religions in China. With those conclusions from critical thinking, if it gets back to the Chinese government and, though unlikely, they decide to listen to them, they may see a better, more cooperative future with its citizens.

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