

Why Protestants are more popular than Catholics in China

The Universal Church's strengths are a weakness here



Questions abound over the recent vicious actions of the Chinese government towards Christians in the prosperous Zhejiang Province just south of Shanghai. The actions of the government during the fortnight after Easter against both Protestants and Catholics are unprecedented in recent decades and, justifiably, have received world attention.

As with all actions in a country as vast as China, whose government could never be accused of transparency, it is difficult to discover who is making the decisions and what they hope to achieve. But one issue that has surprised many people outside China is both the size of its Christian population and the ruthlessness, born only of fear, that the government's violence displays.

A recent claim by a US-based Chinese academic to London's Telegraph newspaper – that China would have the largest Christian population in the world by 2030 – was not only exaggerated but also factually wrong. Will Brazil (200 million Christians) and Nigeria (85 million Christians), for example, simply stop producing Christians in the next 15 years?

The reality is that no one knows how many Christians there are in China. In fact, there's good reason why Christians do not declare their growth. Just look at what's happened in Zhejiang in the last fortnight, where the growth of the Christian community has been declared "unsustainable" by the authorities who have command of assessments of the "sustainability" of faith communities.

Put your head up as a Christian in China and it will be cut off. Catholics have maintained a standard figure for their own numbers for three decades. It was 12 million in 1980, 12 million in 1990, 12 million in 2000 and – surprise, surprise – it was 12 million in 2010. No one in any religion declares real figures in China. It only attracts government attention and then persecution.

That there is a massive growth spurt among Christians in China is indisputable. What has not been addressed is what has made the exponential growth among Protestants possible, far outstripping the growth among Catholics.

But it's not something the officials know anything about because they have such a rudimentary and uninformed view of what Christianity is that they are the last to know what's happening. For example, only the Chinese government thinks that Protestants and Catholics are separate religions.

They are two of the five it recognizes along with Buddhism, Islam and its homegrown religion, Daoism. No one else in the world thinks Protestants and Catholics are anything but parts of Christianity.

Whatever one is to make of the uninformed view that the Chinese authorities have, Protestant Christianity is growing far more quickly and extensively than Catholicism. Why?

Maybe the Chinese authorities have something to tell us. After Mao Zedong's victory in 1949, China was established along lines that the Communists learned about from their then friends, the Soviet Union, and the real maker of 20th Century Communism, Vladimir Lenin, the founder and first father of the Soviet Union.

The Chinese Government manages religious groups through the Religious Affairs Bureau, a department of the Communist Party's United Front organization for controlling the country's

disparate movements, groups and institutions such as Protestants and Catholics.

The Catholic Church in China, divided as it remains, is caught: its strength is its weakness. Everywhere in the world and with local variations in China, its universality (with an accepted pattern of worldwide relationships), its institutions (parishes, seminaries, welfare services, publishing houses), its statuses (clergy and religious) and its ceremonies (the sacraments) are visible and remain the continuous and coherent identifications that draw or repel membership and participation.

In a Communist country, they are an easy target for a Leninist administration intent on detailed control. And then, when some comply with government structures while other Catholics see those acting in such a way as cowardly and cooperating with the enemy, many form the view that rather than complicate their lives, they leave the established and regulated Church well alone.

The same applied to Protestant denominations and was institutionalized through the three self-movements (self-government, self-financing and self-propagation; or no foreign missionaries). This approach run through the United Front's Religious Affairs Bureau captured the attention and controlled the practices of Protestant Christians throughout the People's Republic.

But the recent explosion in Protestant Christian numbers has happened outside this rubric. Most of the buildings, churches and Christian gathering points have been built on local initiative without government authorization. And most of the communities around the often triumphalist buildings that have been damaged or demolished in recent times in China began life as small communities of little more than a dozen people – gathering in friend's homes outside the net of government supervision.

Protestant Christianity, in contrast to the institution-based approach to community building familiar to Catholics, has thrived on its nimble, light-footed and adaptable response to local opportunities. In China, it has grown out of small communities sharing prayer, Bible study and videos at home or in a work place. At times, Christian businessmen and manufacturers have workplace Christian groups that form and meet for prayer and Bible study on their business premises.

Meeting all over Eastern China in clusters of no more than 12, groups gather for what Catholics would call primary evangelization. Two-hour Bible study programs conducted over two to three months and often aided by a Chinese version of the Alpha Course provide a neat and compact way to introduce Christianity. The Alpha Course is a 12-part video series first created by an Anglican priest in London,

Nicky Gumble, that has gone worldwide and has a Catholic version.

These groups are unencumbered and unregulated by the Religious Affairs Bureau. Multiply the dozen members of these groups by thousands of such small groups in homes and work places and you reach hundreds of thousands pretty quickly. But when you get to that scale, as China has in the last 20 years, it's not long until you need a larger, dedicated building – a church. That's where these emergent communities have run into the brick wall of the Religious Affairs Bureau and the fear that the entire Chinese political leadership has had of any group, especially a religious one, that it can't control.

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