

The Vatican Accord with China: Riding the Dragon

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Chairman Rubio, Co-chairman Smith and members of the Committee, thank you for holding this important hearing and inviting me to give my views on the Vatican's September Provisional Agreement with China and its effects on the ground.

Introduction

The Sino-Vatican Agreement was negotiated and is being implemented in the midst of the most systematic and brutal attempt to control Chinese religious communities since the Cultural Revolution. President Xi Jinping's policies should be seen as a particularly troubling aspect of the global crisis in religious freedom, one in which over three-quarters of the world's people live in nations where religion is highly, or very highly, restricted.

China is one of those nations. For years it has been on the State Department's list of the most severe violators of religious freedom. President Xi's policies are now putting it in contention for the worst of the worst, along with North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

Xi's actions are intensifying – making even more brutal -- a decades-long government strategy of undermining a major threat to the authority of the Communist state: religion is a source of authority, and an object of fidelity, that is greater than the state. This characteristic of religion has always been anathema to history's totalitarian despots, such as Stalin, Hitler, and Mao, and to brutal authoritarian states such as early 20th century Mexico or Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

The problem for these regimes is that most religions, unless they are co-opted by the state, *by their nature* limit the power of the state. This of course is a major reason why the American Founders put religious freedom at the beginning of our Bill of Rights – to contribute to the checks and balances designed to limit the power of the national government.

President Xi's strategy includes a renewed effort to alter by persecution the fundamental nature of certain religions. One is Islam as practiced by the Uighurs in Xinjiang Province, which the Chinese have recently targeted for genocide-like transformation or elimination. Another is Tibetan Buddhism, the object for decades of a brutal Chinese strategy of persecution and cultural destruction. A third is Roman Catholicism, whose distinctive teachings on human rights and religious freedom pose a particular obstacle to the Chinese state, especially to the impoverished Marxist-Leninist understanding of religion, human nature, and human dignity.

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Today I will focus on the Chinese Catholic minority, and in particular the September 2018 Sino-Vatican Provisional Agreement. I will explore the possible effects of the Agreement, including whether it is likely to achieve its stated ends, that is, to allow the Catholic faithful to have bishops who are in communion with Rome but at the same time recognized by Chinese authorities. This, it is hoped, will help unify the divided Catholic Church in China.

I also want to examine whether a second, implicit goal of the Agreement is likely to be achieved, namely to improve the lot of China's persecuted Catholic minority, and to make Catholicism more attractive to the Chinese population.

To Set the Stage: a Brief Historical Overview of Catholicism in China

Let me begin with a brief historical overview of Catholicism in China. The earliest Christians appeared in China during the 7th century, but the church was not permanently established. A semi-permanent Catholic presence began in the 13th century with the arrival of the first of several Franciscan priests, the building of the first Roman Catholic church, and the installation of the first Catholic bishop.

After three centuries of Catholic growth and retrenchment in China, the Protestant Reformation in Europe led to the creation of the Society of Jesus -- the Jesuits. This new Catholic order evangelized worldwide, and reached China by the late 16th century. In 1601 Matteo Ricci installed a Jesuit mission, which established Catholicism in China for good, notwithstanding periodic, fierce resistance by Chinese emperors and Communist rulers.

In 1724 Christianity was banned by the Qing dynasty, but by the dawn of the 19th century an estimated 200,000 Chinese Catholics remained. With the entry of the Western powers into China, their numbers increased, as did the numbers of Protestant missionaries and conversions to Christianity. During the 19th and 20th centuries Christianity became associated with Western imperialism, a perception that endures to this day and, although the vast majority of Christian clergy and lay adherents are indigenous Chinese citizens, continues to fuel persecution.

Throughout these centuries, Catholics in China encountered versions of what we are seeing today from the Chinese Communist government, that is, the assertion that Catholicism is incompatible with Chinese culture and must either be rooted out or adapted in ways that would change its fundamental nature.

The triumph of Mao and the Communist Revolution in 1949 led to an attempt either to absorb all religion into Communist ideology or to destroy it. The new Peoples' Republic expelled the papal representative and in 1951 broke relations with the Holy See. The next decade witnessed brutal treatment of Catholics, Protestants, and other religious groups.

But by the 1960s, China's policy of taming religion was, like its economic policy, clearly failing. In 1966, Mao proclaimed that Chinese Communism had become too "revisionist," and he initiated the Cultural Revolution. The new revolution would, in his words, "sweep away all the monsters and demons" that opposed his brand of Communism. For the next ten years the Red

Guards mounted a sustained and brutal attack on anyone or any group seen as a threat, and that included the Chinese Catholic Church.

While most of the official records of those devastating years were destroyed by Mao's successors, we know from survivors the terrible contours of what happened to Catholics and other religious groups. Churches were desecrated, looted and turned into factories and storerooms. Priests and nuns were tortured, murdered (some were burned alive), and imprisoned in "reeducation" labor camps. Lay Christians were paraded in their towns and villages with cylindrical hats detailing their "crimes." Millions of Chinese citizens died terrible deaths during the Cultural Revolution, including by starvation. Tens of millions were brutalized, their lives and families destroyed. The clergy and faithful of the Catholic Church were among them.

In the end, the Cultural Revolution merely confirmed what Stalin and Hitler had already proven - religion cannot be destroyed, even by totalitarianism. The powerful need for religion is in the DNA of men, women, and children. Grudgingly acknowledging this reality, Mao's successors condemned the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and adopted a new strategy on religion - one that continues to this day.

The religion policies of Chinese leaders from Deng Xiaoping, who succeeded Mao in the 1970s, to President Xi Jinping today have been variations on a theme: religion is by its nature a threat to the Communist Party and the rule of the Politburo. While Mao proved that a policy of eliminating religion is unrealistic, his successors have constantly experimented in finding the "correct" way to control, co-opt, and absorb religion into the Communist state.

The Context of Contemporary Chinese Religion Policy

Ten years ago I wrote a book on U.S. international religious freedom policy that contained a chapter on China.¹ Re-reading that chapter confirmed for me that not much has changed in the pattern adopted by the Chinese to control religion. If you were to graph China's religion policies since the 1970s, you would see ups and downs as new Chinese leaders adjusted policies to achieve the prime objective of control.

Not all Chinese policy, it is true, involves overt repression of all religions. Since the Cultural Revolution China's leaders have periodically supported religious groups perceived to be capable of consolidating Beijing's power. Former Chinese leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, for example, praised Chinese (non-Tibetan) Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism as the "traditional cultures" of China. Xi Jinping has exhorted adherents of those religions to help reverse China's moral decline.

Clearly those three groups pose a lesser threat to Communist rule than do the Uighur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and Christians. For the moment at least, it is the latter three religious communities that are the objects of continuing repression, especially the Uighurs. The Muslims of Xinjiang province are being subjected to a massive anti-Uighur and anti-Muslim campaign that is staggering in its sweep and totalitarian sophistication, in effect a 21st century version of the Cultural Revolution. Its goal is to destroy a minority religion

¹ Farr, *World of Faith and Freedom*, pp 273-307.

associated with a particular ethnic group. But this time the policy is not being carried out by the open savagery of Red Guards. Rather, the agent is Stalinist-era informers, periodic crackdowns to warn the population, and “reeducation” of Muslims to change their belief. In recent years hundreds of “re-education” camps have been established, run by Chinese officials trained in “transformation” of inmates from adherents of Islam to devotees of Chinese communism. Hundreds of thousands of Uighur Muslims are incarcerated in these camps.

The lesson of China’s anti-Uighur campaign is this: when it discerns a threat to the absolute control of its citizens, as it does with Uighur or Tibetan separatism, Beijing remains capable of the kind of systematic, brutal repression of religious and ethnic minorities exhibited by the 20th century totalitarians, repression that today is routine practice across China’s eastern border in North Korea. We should not deceive ourselves about Beijing’s capacity for reverting to Mao’s policies on religion, nor the negative impact it would have on long-term American interests.

At present, however, Xi’s Uighur policy is merely the most visible and inhumane aspect of his implementation of China’s long-term strategy of manipulating and controlling religion. There are many elements of that strategy, but let me note three. First, Xi is tightening central government control over the national bureaucracy responsible for managing religion. Second, he is returning to and reemphasizing a traditional Communist theme: prevent Chinese youth from being exposed to religion in ways that Beijing cannot monitor. Third, he is refining oppressive policies designed to control the other religions perceived as a threat, namely the Tibetan Buddhists, Protestants, and Catholics.

Making SARA More Accountable to the Politburo. The bureaucracy that has carried out China’s religion policy since the 1950s is the State Administration for Religious Affairs, SARA, and its predecessor, the Religious Affairs Bureau. This huge state agency, staffed in the early years by former members of the Red Army, has long been charged with controlling religion at the local and provincial level. National SARA officials are also given the responsibility of meeting with foreign officials. I met with former SARA director Ye Xiaowen in China, and was present during some of his trips to the United States, where his job was to reassure Americans that religious freedom was protected in China.

President Xi Jinping has decided to bring SARA nearer the Politburo by incorporating it into the United Front Work Department, a Communist bureaucracy historically charged with controlling China’s ethnic minorities. This move is more than an adjustment of the wiring diagram. It is part of an overall tightening of government authority over civil society, especially its growing religious elements. In its latest Report on International Religious Freedom (for 2017), the State Department estimates that there are between 70 and 90 million Christians in China, about 12 million of them Catholics. The growth of Chinese Christianity, especially through conversions to Protestant denominations, is of great concern to the Communist government. Purdue sociologist and China expert Fenggang Yang predicts that within a generation China will have the largest Christian population in the world. Other religions are growing as well. Moving SARA closer to the Politburo ensures increased monitoring and control over the perceived threat posed by religion’s growth in China.

Fear of Religious Education. Like other elements of Xi's intensified policy, religious education has long been under the microscope of the Chinese bureaucracy. One of SARA's responsibilities has been to minimize the risk that religious education might lead to resistance among China's religious citizens. U.S. religious freedom diplomacy has made some attempt to address the resulting violations of parental rights. In 2002, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford reported to Congress an assurance by SARA Director Ye Xiaowen that parents were in fact free to teach religion to their children. There was a half-truth in Ye's assurance: parents could teach their children surreptitiously, but the consequences of being caught conveying, for example, core Catholic doctrine on issues such as religious freedom for all, the equal dignity of all persons created in the image and likeness of God, or the evil of abortion, were severe.

The threat posed by such teachings is one reason for Xi's crackdown on religious education in China, in particular his policy of the "Sinocization" of religious education. Under this policy, no child under 18 may attend religious services, or any kind of religious event. No one under 18 may receive religious education of any kind from anyone. Further, each Chinese religious community is responsible for ensuring its teachings – to the young and to everyone else -- are compatible with "the socialist society," and are supportive of the leadership of the Communist party.

For Chinese Catholics, the government-controlled body charged with carrying out such policies is the government-controlled "Catholic Patriotic Association." Following Xi's instructions, it has drafted a detailed implementation document, which contains the following passage:

"The [Catholic] Church will regard promotion and education on core values of socialism as a basic requirement for adhering to the Sinicization of Catholicism. It will guide clerics and Catholics to foster and maintain correct views on history and the nation and strengthen community awareness."

Of course, the "core values of socialism" as practiced in China are exceedingly difficult to square with the core values of Catholicism. The Jesuit magazine *America* has noted correctly that Xi's religious education policy "strikes at the very heart and future of the Catholic and other Christian churches, as well as that of other religions. It is an issue of utmost concern for Catholics in China who see it as an attempt by the Communist authorities ... to prevent young people from being educated or growing up in the faith."²

Precisely so. It is worth asking how the Vatican's diplomatic rapprochement with the Chinese government will avoid making this problem worse, in part by appearing to abandon those Chinese Catholics, including bishops and priests, who bravely speak out against religious persecution and on behalf of religious freedom and human dignity.

Systematic Government Oppression. Finally, let me catalogue briefly some of the outrages that have afflicted religious groups other than the Uighur Muslims as part of Xi's policy. We are

² Gerard O'Connell, "Pope Francis to Chinese Catholics: the Church is Praying for You in the Midst of Difficulties," *America Magazine*, May 23, 2018; accessed at <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/05/23/pope-francis-chinese-catholics-church-praying-you-midst-difficulties>

seeing increased destruction of houses of worship, including the bulldozing of churches, mosques, and Tibetan Buddhist schools and temples. Chinese officials are increasing their monitoring of the internet, including, and especially, religious content. We are seeing close monitoring and control of contributions to religious groups, the outlawing of proselytism, and the unjust imprisonment of priests, pastors, monks, nuns, and lay religious people.

None of this is new, but it is now occurring as part of a broad and carefully planned national strategy with many moving parts. It is dangerous for the religious minorities of China, and dangerous for American interests.

Vatican Diplomacy and Chinese Catholicism

Against this stark background, let's turn to an assessment of the Provisional Agreement between the Vatican and China. The Vatican's stated goals are to unify Catholics in China by regularizing the appointment of bishops and ensuring their acceptance by the Holy Father. Allied objectives are to induce the Chinese government to stop persecuting Catholics, and – perhaps – to increase the numbers of converts to Catholicism.

These are worthy goals but it is difficult to see how the agreement will achieve them. After its failed attempt to destroy all religion in China during the Cultural Revolution, China's Communist government has spent decades attempting to manipulate and control the Catholic Church. Beijing created the treacherous divide between an official "Catholic Patriotic Association" controlled by the government, and an "underground" Church, that is, those bishops, priests, religious and lay Catholics who remain loyal to the Catholic Magisterium, the Holy Father, and fundamental Catholic teachings on human dignity and human rights. For decades the Chinese government has persecuted those Catholics who refuse to accept Communist control of their religion.

Unfortunately, although the agreement is only two months old, there are already signs that its provisions will exacerbate this divide rather than heal it. Indeed there are ample reasons to fear that, notwithstanding the good intentions of the Vatican, the deal they have brokered could make things much worse for the Church in China.

The text of the agreement has not been made public, but its contours are generally known. Chinese Catholic bishops will now be chosen in a process that begins with local Communist-controlled Catholic Patriotic Associations. When a vacancy occurs in a bishopric, CPAs will present the names of candidates to fill the position. Diocesan priests and lay Catholics will then vote on the candidates for bishop. The winner's name will be sent to the government-controlled Council of Bishops, who will then provide it to the Vatican. There the nominee could either be accepted or rejected by the Pope.

The Vatican apparently hopes that the Pope's veto power will ensure the orthodoxy of new bishops, facilitate reconciliation among China's divided Catholics, and make the Church more attractive to converts.

It is certainly true that all Catholics need bishops, and that disagreements and confusions over who is and who is not a licit bishop are very harmful to the faithful and to the Church. But it is also true that the two-millenia old doctrines of Petrine supremacy and apostolic succession nest the authority for consecrating bishops in one man, the successor of Peter – the Pope.

The Vatican has in the past made practical concessions on the process by which bishops are approved by the Pope in order to safeguard the existence of the Church. But this concession to a Communist government that by its nature seeks to control and, where possible, make fundamental alterations in Catholic doctrine seems untimely and dangerous.

One contemporary comparison is instructive. If the reports about how new Chinese Catholic bishops are to be chosen are correct, the process resembles the way parliamentary candidates are approved in theocratic Iran. There, no one can run for parliament unless he has been vetted by a panel of theologians for fidelity to the regime and the Supreme Leader.

By the same token, it seems highly unlikely that a Chinese-controlled Council of Bishops will forward to the Vatican the name of a bishop candidate who is faithful to the fundamental teachings of the Catholic Church. A man chosen in this process will doubtless not carry out one of the primary duties of a bishop – to be to his flock and to society at large a witness to the truths proclaimed by the Church concerning, for example, the sanctity of life, universal human dignity, and religious freedom. It seems far more likely that the names of candidates sent to Rome will be chosen at a minimum for their acquiescence to the Communist regime, if not for their fidelity to the regime's anti-Catholic purposes.

Of course the Pope can veto such candidates *ad finitum*, but the absence of a bishop does not harm the Chinese government. It hurts only the Catholics in China who need a faithful shepherd.

The insidious effects of this Esau's bargain may already have shown themselves. Two "official" Chinese bishops attended the recent Synod on Youth in Rome, apparently at the invitation of Pope Francis. But these bishops were, and are, Communist apparatchiks. They both are leaders of the aforementioned Council of Bishops controlled by the government. Unaccountably, the two left before the Synod was over. Whatever the cause of their abrupt departure, it was not the act of bishops faithful to the Holy Father or the Catholic Church.

Nor has the persecution of Chinese Catholics decreased. If anything, it has intensified since the signing of the Agreement. Within a month of its signing, two Marian shrines had been destroyed by Communist officials in China. It is difficult to overstate the importance of these shrines to the Catholic faithful, and to their love of the Church. A government would destroy such structures only to threaten and oppress China's Catholics, to damage their faith and the Church itself. This, of course, is what Communist governments, including the Chinese government, do.

To summarize: the procedure for choosing new Catholic bishops established by the Provisional Agreement does not seem likely to yield bishops that are faithful Catholics, or to unify China's 12 million Catholics, most of whom yearn for faithful shepherds, not functionaries. Persecution of Catholics is increasing, as it is for other religious minorities in China. Although persecution has sometimes led to more converts, that is neither the logic nor the intent of the agreement.

Rather, the hope seems to be that a more unified, accepted, orthodox Catholic Church will be more attractive to converts. Again, it is difficult to see how the agreement might lead to such an outcome.

In the face of such pathologies, what explains the Vatican's decision to negotiate and sign this deal? Allowing, again, for the hope that things will change – and I pray that they will -- I would suggest that history provides a possible explanation.

It could be that the Provisional Agreement reflects a return to the Vatican's failed Cold War "realpolitik" diplomacy of the 1960s, before it was changed by Pope John Paul II. That diplomacy failed from a want of realism about the evil of Communism, and deeply wounded the Church in parts of Eastern Europe. The lesson was then, and perhaps should be now, that the Vatican should not see itself as a power player on the world stage capable of changing the behavior of Communist governments by dint of its political diplomacy. We should recall that Vatican diplomacy was instrumental in facilitating America's 2015 restoration of diplomatic relations with the Communist regime in Cuba. Can anyone argue that the results have been good for the Church, or for religious freedom, in Cuba?

On the other hand, the Vatican is arguably the only moral authority in the world constituted precisely to counter the root causes of totalitarian evil, just as Pope John Paul II did in the 1980s in collaboration with President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In my view, the Holy See's role should be now, as it was then, to press for human rights and, especially, for religious freedom for all religious communities, in China and elsewhere.

Given the current vile assaults on the Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, the Vatican should be standing with them by drawing the world's attention to what the Chinese government is doing in Xinjiang Province and in Tibet. As for China's Catholics, the Vatican should demand nothing less than *libertas ecclesiae*, the freedom of the Church to witness to its adherents, to the public, and to the regime its teachings on human dignity and the common good (as those teachings are powerfully expressed in the Catholic document *Dignitatis Humanae*).

I sincerely hope that I am wrong about the Sino-Vatican Provisional Agreement. I hope there are parts of the agreement that will alleviate these concerns, and others that have been expressed by faithful Catholics, in and out of China. But I do not believe the Agreement as I have described it will help the Roman Catholic Church, China's Catholic minority, or the cause of religious freedom in China. The Chinese know what they are doing. The Vatican's charism in China, on the other hand, is not diplomacy, but witness to the truth about God and man.

Thank you for inviting me to address this important topic.