

Vatican Appeasement of Communist China's Atheistic Regime Undercuts Cause of Religious Freedom

The mandarins at Beijing seek to stamp out and usurp the entire spiritual and intuitive function of the human mind



by Conrad Black

The recent announcement that the Vatican has renewed for another two years its understanding with the People's Republic of China over the nomination and installation of Roman

Catholic bishops in China raises important questions about the concepts of freedom of conscience and of association.

China's government, among all of the relatively important countries in the world, is one of the most egregious in its suppression of religious liberty. But almost all of the governments in the western world are more or less diligently constraining or trespassing in areas of traditionally legitimate interest to religious groups and individuals.

There have been much-publicized efforts in the United States to force Roman Catholic orders and institutions to pay for abortions or sterilizations or contraceptive expenses incurred by students or employees of those institutions. There have been some successful legal challenges to these measures and, of course, these are much less repressive actions than the efforts of the Chinese government to suppress or manage all religious activity by making it an arm of the state.

In some measure, though, all governments attempting to restrict the liberty of religious institutions and individual religious communicants are at different points on the same escalator proceeding toward the same destination. The People's Republic of China, from its founding in 1949, has grudgingly adopted a variant of Napoleon's famous assertion that, "Of course the people must have their religion, and of course the state must control it."

The Chinese authorities would rather that they did not have any religion, but they have set up so-called patriotic associations for each major religious group as outright arms of the Chinese government; they simulate the rites of the religions they partially mirror and have senior officials and clergy chosen by, and responsible to, the Chinese government.

This provides an officially acceptable semblance of a religious practice, and the state receives the additional benefit of being informed of any confidences or confessions

confided in the officials of these pseudo-religious organizations by their congregants that could be useful in the Chinese government's totalitarian preoccupation with internal security.

Throughout the western world – including advanced eastern countries such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan – there is a steady recession from the formerly almost universal practice of doffing the secular cap to God, providence or other gestures implying the existence of some spiritual forces or a supernatural intelligence that has always inhabited the human consciousness.

Given the fact that the human mind has no ability to grasp the infinite, some concepts of destiny and even intuition have, for all of known history, aggregated themselves into what might loosely be called religious belief. In the West, from a few centuries after the time of Christ until the authoritative rise of the nation-state at the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, ecclesiastical leaders often challenged secular leaders in the extent of their moral and practical authority.

In 390, the last great Roman emperor, Theodosius, publicly repented before the bishop of Milan, St. Ambrose, his severe response to public disturbances in Salonika. The Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV, famously went to Canossa to kneel in the snow and express his penance to Pope Gregory VII in 1077. Even today, the supreme religious leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran forcefully asserts himself through armed and belligerent police over the entire population and dictates public policy to secular officeholders.

In the West, the division that Jesus Christ commended be made between what is rendered to God and to Caesar gives our secular governments most of our adherence, but even atheists would generally find the Chinese government's oppression of religious practice to be an offensive assault upon freedom of thought, expression and association.

Yet most of our western governments are diligently arrogating ever greater powers to themselves: it is like watching the goalposts move steadily towards one end of the field. The government of Quebec has famously restricted sectarian-connected apparel and religious symbols within the public sector, in part because of the maladjusted response of modern agnostic Quebec to the inconvenient historical fact that French Canada owes its cultural survival as a French society to three centuries of fervent religious practice.

There are anomalies, such as the Canadian court system's full hearing over 20 years of the beliefs of the Ktunaxa First Nation that the development of a ski resort in British Columbia would drive off the spirit of the grizzly bear, which is the core of the band's religion. This is one end of religious toleration and Chinese Communist suppression is the other.

The Roman Catholic Church, as the preeminent ecclesiastical organization in the world, with over a billion practicing members (including your correspondent), is naturally the principal protagonist defending freedom of religion. There is a precedent in Europe for the Roman Catholic Church to accept, as it has in China, a secular role in the selection of bishops, which is the chief operating criterion for the independence of an episcopal church.

Similar concessions were made to Louis XIV of France and his immediate successors, but the kings of France were militant Catholics. More instructive was Pope Paul VI's acceptance of a veto by the communist satellite governments in Hungary and Czechoslovakia over the nomination of bishops, in part to liberate Cardinal József Mindszenty from his confinement to the American Embassy in Budapest after 15 years, in 1971.

Whatever anybody thinks of religion or Catholicism, a permanent majority dissents from the ultimate secular view that there's a finite amount of knowledge in the world and

each day we are proceeding towards a plenitude of knowledge, and that man is capable of self-perfection. And there is an almost universal revulsion to the attempt by any state, even one directed by such a genius as Napoleon (with whom China's Xi Jinping can scarcely be compared), to stamp out or usurp the entire spiritual and intuitive function of the human mind.

The issue in the renewal of the Vatican's understanding with the People's Republic of China is whether, as Pope Francis suggests, this agreement facilitates the expansion of religious freedom and practice in China. The opposite view is eloquently advocated by the 90-year-old cardinal of Hong Kong, Joseph Zen, who has been spuriously charged for administering a fund for assisting conscientious objectors. Cardinal Zen believes that Pope Francis has been duped by the Chinese. It is not for me to judge, though I am skeptical of any appeasement of Communists, and there is something majestic about an organization that in 2022 still regards the regime at Taipei as the government of China.

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