

## Taiwan's Christians should stand up

Written by Hannah Chen 陳漢娜

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China and the Vatican have signed a provisional agreement for the appointment of Catholic bishops in China. The Vatican hopes that facilitating dialogue with Beijing will contribute to improving the lives of Chinese Catholics, the well-being of all Chinese and world peace.

Yet Chinese authorities are investigating and clamping down on family churches and banning minors from entering religious institutions.

Chinese officials have also been demolishing churches and crosses, triggering fears among observers in Taiwan, Hong Kong and in the West that Beijing is intensifying its campaign to suppress freedom of religion.

Meanwhile, Chinese officials have announced a white paper titled “China’s Policy and Practice of Safeguarding Religious Freedoms,” that will reportedly have a lifetime of 30 years.

The paper is being promoted as the Sinicization of religion, designed to irrevocably wed the teachings of religious groups in China to the values of socialism.

It is also being billed as the only way for religious groups to safeguard their religious “freedom;” and as a way to promote dialogue and harmony between religions.

National Chengchi University’s Center for the Study of Chinese Religions last month held a forum, “A Discussion of the Sinicization of Religion and Religious Matters,” and speakers included Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Hebei Province representative Xu Lin (徐林), who stated that there is no “freedom of religion” in China, only the “freedom of religious belief.”

However, these two concepts are quite different.

Xu defined “freedom of religion” as religious teachers abiding by the law, doing what they are

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told, and being creative when teaching and practicing their religion.

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) contempt for freedom of religion is an indelible stain on humanity that has festered for decades. The UN continually raises issues relating to China in reports about the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The UN also continually reminds Beijing that as a signatory nation, it has a duty to protect Tibetan and Uighur ethnic minorities, Falun Gong practitioners and children against the deprivation and suppression of their religious freedoms.

It regularly requests that Beijing releases information on the whereabouts and welfare of the 11th Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, and allows foreign media to conduct a face-to-face interview with him.

Nyima is recognized by the Tibetan government-in-exile as the incarnation of the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, but he was abducted by the authorities and has been hidden from public view since 1995.

What really caught Taiwanese observers and attendees off guard is that China's representative at the forum openly admitted to state-sponsored aggression against religious groups.

This means that China, a member of the UN Security Council, is diverging from and providing its own interpretation of the UN Human Rights Council's findings by unilaterally declaring that the "freedom of religious belief" is not the same as "freedom of religion;" and on this basis justifying the right of the state to use all the means at its disposal to forcefully interfere and even prohibit religious believers from holding public office.

This conforms to Article 36 of the People's Republic of China constitution. As such, when religious leaders and the UN show concern and implore China to guarantee freedom of religion,

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Beijing issues the boilerplate response that that is “foreign interference” in its internal affairs.

However, the situation pales in comparison with Beijing's Sinicization of religion.

Centuries ago, when the world's major religions were spreading out across the globe, linking together disparate cultures into a transnational network of the faithful, there was naturally a period of reflection and a reassessment of the potential threat posed by mass religious movements.

In many countries, patriotic and nationalist movements used top-down authoritarian means to demand that the major religions surrender powers and pledge loyalty to the state.

Today, the suppression of religion continues in a different guise. Under the cover of religious and academic exchanges, representatives of the Chinese government promote Beijing's “united front” campaign by opposing religion and academic learning. The methods employed by Chinese theologians are, if nothing else, extremely creative.

In Taiwan, during the White Terror era, a brand of theology unique to Taiwan's local culture was developed that extended to incorporate the love of one's home town within traditional Taiwanese culture.

It enabled Taiwanese to resist the violent regime by drawing upon folk stories and developing new interpretations to the writings of the Bible and construct a unique Taiwanese version of Christianity, founded upon human rights, that was able to liberate the suppressed.

The US National Endowment for Democracy in December last year published a report, Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World. It was a warning to democratic nations of the threat posed by Beijing and Moscow, which it said have been taking advantage of the openness of democratic systems to conduct asymmetric warfare through seemingly innocuous economic, academic and religious cultural exchanges, producing fake news designed to mislead the public, create social unrest and set groups against one other within societies.

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China and Russia are employing a Trojan horse strategy designed to disrupt the normal democratic process of government. Beijing has long promoted its Confucius Institutes around the world, although a large number of them have recently been forced to close.

No wonder that National Taiwan University assistant professor Huang Ko-hsien (黃科憲) has criticized events organized by the Chinese Christian Cross-strait Exchange Association.

The association's activities "do not discuss many of the matters relating to religion and other subjects that affect Christians at home and abroad, such as theological education, organizational management or even the 'tear down the cross' movements," Huang said, adding that one can already see Chinese elements beginning to appear within Taiwanese Christianity.

"The Chinese government's modus operandi is to use interaction between religious leaders on either side of the Taiwan Strait, in addition to enlisting the cooperation of local religious organizations, to influence Taiwanese society," he said.

According to the The Economist magazine and US academic Joseph Nye, the best prevention strategy against its adoption by a hostile state is to first expose the methods employed by the aggressor nation and, second, to boost the circulation of factually accurate news reportage.

Beijing's propagandists, cloaked in the robes of academia, have dredged up wording from the 1905 French law on the separation of the churches and the state to justify their government's forceful interference into the affairs of Chinese religious groups. One could call it a one-way street separation of powers.

It is a false reasoning that diverts attention from Beijing's program to Sinicize religion on both sides of the Strait, but no amount of semantic subterfuge can obscure the fact that religions in China lack freedom and independence from the state.

Beijing is using its "sharp power" to manipulate religious leaders in Taiwan, who have allowed

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themselves to become willing pawns in China's united front strategy.

Taiwanese religious leaders, appealing to the ideals of liberty and human rights, previously called on Christian congregations around the world to pray for Taiwanese independence advocate Kao Chun-ming (高俊明) when he was imprisoned by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and when Taiwanese's right to self-determination was being brutally crushed by the authoritarian KMT government.

Today, it is time for Taiwan's Christian congregations to return the favor, join their brethren in the global movement against religious oppression and stand up for fellow Christians in China and Hong Kong.

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Translated by Edward Jones

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