Christianity in China

In 1996, the population of Christians in China was around 10 million strong. In 2011, that number reached around 67 million followers, with 10 million of those Christian followers being Catholic Christians (Li). Following this rise in growth, Fenggang Yang, director of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University, suggested that this growth may continue to 247 million followers by 2030 (Phillips). Thus, making China the home of the largest population of Christians in the entire world. However, the rise of Christianity in China has not been steady, as Christianity was banned from China multiple times throughout China’s history.

The first ever documentation of Christianity in China, a stone tablet called the Nestorian Stele, records that Christianity reached Xian, the Tang Dynasty capital, in the year 635. Christianity was accepted and practiced until the year 845, when Emperor Wuzong banned Buddhism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism during the Great Anti-Buddhist Persecution.

Christianity was reintroduced during the Yuan Dynasty, which was established by the Mongolians, in the 13th century. The Mongol Empire was primarily Christian; therefore, it was spread through China at that time. Then, once again, Christianity was banned – this time during the Ming Dynasty. Christianity was illegal and heterodox and was to be completely removed from China. Missionaries attempted to reach China during
the Ming dynasty, but were constantly turned away. One of the missionaries to reach China during the 1800’s was Robert Morrison, a Protestant missionary. He translated the Bible into Chinese and also compiled a Chinese dictionary. This work helped further the missionary work within China. The emperor at the time, Daoguang Emperor was angered by the spread of Christianity and added a law to persecute missionaries and Christian followers. Missionaries could be sentenced to death for preaching to the Han Chinese and Manchus. Followers of Christianity who did not give up their faith would be sent to Xinjiang to be slaves for the Muslim leaders.

Since 1949, when the Communist Party gained power in China, the Vatican and Beijing have had no formal relations. As an official atheist country, China does not recognize the Vatican and the Vatican’s authority over China’s millions of Catholics. Instead, China has its own Catholic governing body, the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. There is also the Three-Self Patriotic Movement for Protestants (Li). All Christian churches must be registered under their auspices and follow specific regulations. Those who wish to meet outside of any churches under the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association or the Three-Self Patriotic Movement join underground churches, also known as house churches. These churches do not register with the government, do not follow regulations, and are considered illegal. Members of underground churches are often harassed by police, arrested, or detained (Li).

As Christianity grows in China, the government has started a demolition campaign against the Christian faith in general, not just Christian underground churches. In April 2014, the Sanjiang Church in Wenzhou was completely torn down. In the following July, public security officials using a crane and blowtorch cut a crucifix off the
top of the Longgang Township Gratitude Church in Wenzhou. A few days later, members of the Wenling Church went up against 4,000 police officers to stop the removal of two of the crucifixes on their church, but failed to stop the demolition. About forty people were detained in the process, simply for standing up for their faith. Since the spring of 2014, more than 100 churches have received demolition notices in the Zhejiang Province. These churches are accused of violating zoning regulations, even though they were state-approved. It is believed that the government leaders are retaliating due to their fear of the future growth of Christianity (Jacobs). The leaders fear that this new growth might overpower the Communist party one day.

In August 2014, our current pope, Pope Francis, tried to reconnect with China and its Christian followers. The pope stated that the church “only asks to have freedom to do its work. No other conditions” (Winfield). While flying over China, he delivered a telegram from over 35,000 feet in the air, saying, “I wish to renew to your excellency and your fellow citizens the assurance of my best wishes, as I invoke divine blessings upon your land.” This moment was historical, because this moment was the first time that a pope was allowed to fly over China (Winfield). However, the Patriotic Catholic Association did not accept this message with open arms. The association warned that China’s religion should not be interfered with and that the pope should respect that (McKenna). Perhaps, some day, China and the Vatican will have formal relations once more.
References


