

Catholics and Civil Society in China

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An overview of the Catholic Church in China

Although faced with severe challenges, the Catholic Church in China is flourishing. It has at least 12 million members (a four fold increase from the three million Catholics in 1949), many of whom exhibit extraordinary amounts of devotion and commitment to their faith. There has been a steady increase in construction of new Church facilities and a steady stream of new candidates for the priesthood and religious life. There are active interchanges between Chinese Catholic leaders and leaders of the worldwide Church. A significant number of newly ordained Chinese priests, seminarians, and sisters have been able to study abroad. Chinese church leaders regularly receive visits from priests, bishops, and even cardinals from abroad, and Chinese churches receive economic help from sister churches around the world. The Chinese Catholic Church is on an upward trajectory of growth in numbers and in the size and quality of its institutions. By some measures, one could argue that it is flourishing to a greater degree than the Church in Europe and the United States.

At the same time, the Catholic Church in China faces severe problems. The most troublesome is the split between "underground" and "official" factions. Catholics in the official Church carry out their religious practices within venues officially registered with the government and subject to government regulation and supervision. Sometimes out of principle, sometimes out of necessity (because of a lack of officially approved Church facilities), underground Catholics practice their religion outside of the officially approved framework. In many places, underground and official Catholics get along quite well. Under some circumstances, however, they become bitterly at odds, with underground Catholics accusing the leaders of the official Church of having fatally compromised their faith by collaborating with a Communist government and betraying their bonds of loyalty to the Holy See.

Apart from these serious and widely publicized problems of conflict, there are more subtle, and perhaps in the long run more difficult to resolve problems. One is the lack of clergy. Although there is a steady stream of new priests, it is not large enough to meet the needs of a church that, because of inability to ordain significant numbers of new priests during the repression of the Mao years, is top heavy with old priests who are rapidly reaching the end of their lives. Another set of problems stems from the difficulty of formulating versions of the faith that would appeal to urban people. The great majority of Catholics are rural and their beliefs and practices reflect the values of a rural lifestyle. This form of faith is less comprehensible and attractive to urban people. The Catholic seminary in Shanghai, for example, has few students who actually come from Shanghai – most come from small villages in the hinterlands. As China becomes increasingly urbanized, it may become harder for the Catholic Church to grow – unless of course it adapts its theology and organization to a modernizing world, which may be difficult for a leadership already stretched thin by the demands of ordinary pastoral care.

The Chinese Catholic Church as Part of Civil Society

In both its strengths and weaknesses, the Catholic Church reflects the overall development of civil society in China during the reform era (i.e., 1979 to the present). By civil society, I simply mean the array of social groups formed by voluntary association, which is made possible by the opportunities for mobility that are the consequence of a modern market economy. The marketization of the Chinese economy has loosened the ties of dependency that bound peasants to their people's communes and workers to their state owned enterprises. People now move around looking for work. They form new groups for economic help and social support. They need such groups because the government no longer has the will nor the way to provide social security through its state controlled institutions. Such voluntary associations form the beginnings of a civil society, which is an almost automatic byproduct of a market economy. But by itself such a civil society does not lead to a stable, just, and peaceful society. Western political philosophies offer various visions for how to make modern civil societies stable and peaceful. These involve the construction of a rule of law that guarantees citizens the right to form free associations while regulating these associations so that they contribute to a common good. But the Chinese government has not yet developed a stable rule of law that would guarantee the right of association while regulating such associations in a way that would seem legitimate to most of their members.

Under these circumstances there has been a great flourishing of new forms of association. But many of these associations exist in a legal limbo. They can be arbitrarily closed down. Because of this lack of security, they have to adopt self-protective measures that may cause negative consequences for society at large. Sometimes they have to conceal their activities. Sometimes they cultivate particularistic relationships (often lubricated with bribes) with powerful people who can protect them. Sometimes they develop paranoid attitudes toward the government and one another. Because of lack of oversight, sometimes their leaders abuse money and power. The Catholic Church is not immune to these problems that afflict Chinese civil society as a whole.

Much of Catholic activity exists in a legal limbo. The government specifies that Church activities must take place under the auspices of the Catholic Patriotic Association, which is supervised by the State Agency for Religious Affairs. But only a few Catholic apparatchiks are fully committed to this institutional framework. Most Catholics, including most bishops and priests, who work within the officially approved framework ignore much of the spirit if not the letter of its regulations. For example, although they are not supposed to have direct relationships with the Vatican, a large majority of bishops within the "official" church have received "apostolic mandates" from the Holy See, that is, they have gotten Vatican approval to be bishops. This would be possible on such a large scale only through informal acquiescence from government officials responsible for regulating and controlling religion. On the other hand, most underground Catholics carry out their activities in a very visible manner, in full view of government officials. This is also possible only because of informal acquiescence from agents of the state.

Since such activities are not protected as rights under the law, however, they can be suddenly suppressed. Thus in recent years we have seen waves of arrests and church demolitions followed by periods of relaxation – all in ways that from the point of view of people in the grass roots must appear unpredictable and arbitrary. This in turn fuels the anxiety and paranoia that lead to factionalism. But such factionalism affects all areas of Chinese civil society, not just the Catholic Church.

The Chinese Catholic Church and Inhibition of Civil Society

Although the Catholic Church reflects many of the characteristics of Chinese civil society in general, the Church has some particular features deriving from its unique history, organization, and theology that place it partially in opposition to the development of a modern civil society.

As modern civil societies develop, they usually produce associations of national and international scope that transcend the interests of particular localities and help solve problems of national importance. Thus, the American Catholic Bishops conference speaks out on problems of national relevance and Catholic Charities distributes aid to people across the world. At present it would be hard to imagine the Chinese Catholic Church producing such organizations. Because the Vatican has not established diplomatic relations with China, it is unable to openly regulate China's Catholics. There is no Vatican nuncio in Beijing to help make sure that Chinese bishops are following papal directives. Communications between the Vatican and China's Catholics have to be indirect and irregular. This gives local Chinese Catholics – especially perhaps those in the underground -- a great deal of practical autonomy, more even than they would have in the United States or Europe. This, in turn, leads to a great many local varieties of Catholic practice. Nowhere in the world does the Catholic Church act as a unified force, but in China it is even less unified than most places. This, of course, fits nicely with a government agenda to block the emergence of large scale organizations that could conceivably challenge Communist Party hegemony.

The fragmentation of Catholic social organization affects not just the standardization of teaching about faith and morals and the mobilization of a Catholic voice on matters of national importance, but the provision of social services. There are some well run Catholic charitable associations in China, particularly Jinde in Shijiazhuang (Hebei Province) and the various associations of the Shanghai diocese. But some of these have ambitions to expand, it is unclear that they will be able to realize these ambitions because they are deeply embedded in their local social ecology. Unless the Sino-Vatican relations were greatly improved, it would be difficult to imagine the development of national charitable institutions like Catholic Charities in the USA – or even organizations like the Three-self Protestant Amity Foundation, which has a wide national reach.

Another important feature of the Chinese Catholic Church is its embedding in traditional institutions of village and family. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Catholic missionaries made great efforts to convert not individuals but whole extended families. They attempted to build little “christendoms”, whole villages where social, economic, and cultural institutions were intertwined with Catholicism. This is indeed the pattern in those parts of China where Catholic practice is strongest: whole lineages, whole villages, and even whole counties are Catholic. The faith is thus identified with and supported by the non-voluntary, traditional institutions of family and community. This familism and localism pull against the mobility and voluntary association that constitute modern civil society. Catholic villages are said to be places with especially strong moral solidarity, where crime is low and mutual cooperation is high. But, if it stays confined to family and neighbors, the spirit of love and solidarity does not really contribute to the building of a civil society. In large cities like Shanghai, places filled with the loose, relatively impersonal relationships that form the building blocks of civil society, the Church seems to be losing ground. Protestant spirituality indeed seems more conducive to such society, which may be one reason why Protestant growth is outstripping Catholic growth in China today.

In some respects, then, the Catholic Church in China does indeed contribute to the constitution of a civil society. In some respects it mirrors both the positive and the negative characteristics of Chinese society in this time of transition. In other respects, however, it stands apart from and even resists the formation of a mature civil society – and is challenged to reform its theology and practice so as to adapt to a modernizing China.