

Has the Vatican-China Accord Really Made a Difference?

In September 2018, the Vatican signed an accord with the Chinese Communist Party in an effort to better the situation of Chinese Catholics and to normalize relations with China. A month later, the Chinese [destroyed two Marian shrines, and prohibited Catholics under the age of 18 from attending Mass](#).

These incidents were only the beginning of a government crackdown on Christianity that has continued over the past eight months. This raises the question: Has the concordat really made a difference, or has it only empowered the Chinese government to make things worse?

The terms of the concordat and the ensuing persecution have resulted in sharp criticism from within the Catholic Church. The critics of the concordat, including [Hong Kong's Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiunn](#), say that the agreement compromises the position of the Church in China and only worsens it.

Others are concerned about the wider implications the concordat may have on religious freedom in China as a whole, especially when China is coming under the increasingly totalitarian rule of Xi Jinping. In [2016](#), Xi Jinping said, "Religious groups...must adhere to the leadership of the Communist Party of China."

In March, Sam Brownback, the American ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom, expressed concern that the agreement sets a [dangerous precedent](#), saying:

We remain concerned about the precedent this deal sets for the Chinese Communist Party's perceived authority in interfering in the selection of other religious leaders, such as preeminent Tibetan Buddhist lamas like His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Brownback's comment about the Dalai Lama brings to light the fact that the concordat could spell the death of religious freedom for all religions in China, not just Christianity. The deal, which recognizes seven state-appointed Chinese bishops previously excommunicated by the Vatican, may give the Communist Party the feeling that it can legitimately interfere in religious affairs, a policy it has often pursued.

In 1995, China [kidnapped a six-year old Tibetan Buddhist monk](#) recently named Panchen Lama, second only to the Dalai Lama in Buddhism. They replaced him with their own Panchen Lama loyal to Beijing. More recently, rumors have emerged that China plans to install its own loyalist Dalai Lama upon the death of the current one, a plan condemned by the Dalai Lama and Tibetans, who refuse to recognize the authority of such a figure.

Could the Vatican-China deal result in the Chinese feeling empowered to take such a measure?

As for Christians of all denominations, they have endured increasing persecution since the signing of the deal. Protestants have seen many of their [churches demolished and their congregations disbanded or arrested](#). Just before Christmas, the Chinese [arrested the pastor of the Early Rain Covenant Church](#) in Sichuan and his wife, later charging them with state subversion.

Meanwhile, the situation for Catholics in China [has hardly improved](#) since the Marian shrines were destroyed in 2018. In May 2019, a group of Catholics in Hebei province occupied the Shengdiliang Shrine in an attempt to prevent government agents from destroying Christian statues. In the same province, the city council of Zhangjiakou summoned 45 Catholic priests to a meeting and forced them to join the government-run Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. The priests were also subjected to indoctrination classes to transform them into loyal communist priests. Meanwhile, the diocese of Handan was

told that the authorities would demolish churches or crosses that had no permit.

Pope Francis continues to reassure his flock that the deal does not undermine the position of the Church in China. He has claimed that while Christians in China will continue to suffer, he, as pope, [will have the final say on the appointment of bishops](#):

It's not that they name. It's a dialogue on possible candidates...The thing is done in dialogue. But Rome names. The pope names. This is clear.

While Pope Francis' words may reassure many, the situation on the ground does not reflect his hope of an improved relationship with China. In fact, the question needs to be asked: Can a religious leader, such as the pope, make any sort of deal with a government whose whole ideology is based around replacing the supernatural benevolent god with the harsh "god" of the state?

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