

God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions, Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamrin (eds) [Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004, c + 200 pp, cloth US\$49.95, paperback US\$19.95], ISBN 0815749368

China's most recent Regulations on the freedom of religion came into force on 1 March 2005. Within a few days the US government announced that it would not be making its usual annual attempt to pass a UN resolution to censure China's human rights record.¹ One of the reasons cited was that the new Regulations would allow "people to worship in 'family churches' in their homes without registering with the government."² Condaleezza Rice, confirming the priority that the US government gives to the issue of freedom of religion, soon afterwards said: "freedom of religion and respect for human rights are part of the foundation of decent and successful societies."³

God and Caesar in China presents an absorbing outline of the vastly different roles played by religion in China and the United States, and the extent to which the divergence has influenced policy in both countries. In seeking "to take initial steps toward a grounded dialogue on advancing religious freedom in China",⁴ the book presents a useful introduction to the historical justifications for China's policy of regulating religious activities. Its weakness lies in its failure to examine the internal imperatives of the Chinese Communist Party's socialist ideology, in particular the relevance of Marxist atheism.

China has controlled religious practice within its borders for close to 1500 years, as Daniel Bays illustrates in his chapter "A Tradition of State Dominance." The fear of sedition or rebellion was a constant justification for this regulation, and was not without basis, according to Bays. He adds that the fear of political challenge is exacerbated by the similarity between the ideological style of religion and that of Chinese rulers. The Chinese state, and in more recent times the Chinese Communist Party, have "religious pretensions and claims. Now as then, in its mode of public discourse, in its sanctification of the existing legal order, and in many other ways the Chinese government behaves as a theocratic organization."⁵ Jason Kindopp, in *Policy dilemmas in China's church-state relations: An Introduction*, summarises the challenges that organised religions are perceived to pose to Chinese rule as being a matter of divided loyalty. He suggests that religion's demand for allegiance

¹ Philip P Pan, "Chinese Release Prominent Dissident: US Won't Seek Rights Resolution", *Washington Post*, 18 Mar 2005.

² US Embassy spokeswoman in Beijing, Camille Purvis, quoted in Philip P Pan, "Chinese Release Prominent Dissident: US Won't Seek Rights Resolution", *Washington Post*, 18 Mar 2005.

³ "Rice tells China to embrace democracy," *South China Morning Post*, 20 Mar 2005, p A1.

⁴ Jason Kindopp, p 12.

⁵ Daniel Bays, p 27.

that transcends political authority presents an obstacle to what he terms “the Communist Party’s enduring imperative ... to eliminate social and ideological competition.”⁶

Jean-Paul Wiest finds that along with threats of internal dissent, the rulers of China have historically been suspicious that foreigners exploited religious teaching to usurp China’s sovereignty: religion has been associated with “military and political expansionism.”⁷ The “unequal treaties”, imposed on China following the British victory of 1842 lifted the prohibition on Christianity. The Chinese government therefore no longer had full authority over Chinese Christians, consolidating the “close association between Christianity and Western imperialism in China.”⁸ As a result, as Peng Liu points out in his excellent analysis of the cultural divide between China and the United States in relation to religion, China’s socialist ideology is founded on “opposition to imperialism, including cultural or religious imperialism.”⁹

God and Caesar does not, however, adequately address the link between this history and the Chinese government’s stated policy of supporting and encouraging religions to “unite the religious believers to actively participate in the construction of the country,” on the basis of a “politico-religious relationship that conforms to China’s national conditions.”¹⁰

In the United States, by contrast, religious ideals “influence not only politics, judicial or legal systems, education, and foreign relations but also personal morality and concepts of marriage, family, and community”¹¹ – this despite a constitutionally mandated separation of church and state.

The assumption that religion ought to be a part of Chinese daily life, as it is for many people in the United States, is implicit throughout *God and Caesar*. Indeed, one of the contributors to *God and Caesar*, Mickey Spiegel, concluded her testimony to a recent CECC Roundtable on the 2005 Regulations by saying, disapprovingly, that “China’s leadership has crafted the Regulations in a way intended to further isolate religious belief and practice from life’s day to day minutiae.”

The book consequently fails to consider the Communist Party’s own agenda for the sustenance of spirituality or a system of values in China. The authors of *God and Caesar* assume that what they perceive to be the benefits of religion, such as potentially assisting in the development of a civil society and the establishment of social welfare services, are unique to religion. There is no

⁶ Kindopp, “Policy Dilemma’s in China’s Church-State Relations: an Introduction”, p 5.

⁷ Jean-Paul Wiest, “Setting roots: the Catholic church in China to 1949”, p 79.

⁸ Bays, p 29.

⁹ Peng Liu, “Unreconciled differences: the staying power of religion”, p 151.

¹⁰ White Paper, *Freedom of Religious Belief*, Oct 1997, Part I.

¹¹ Peng Liu, p 152.

analysis of the Communist Party's expectations for its socialist ideology to provide the basis of a decent and successful society.

I believe that the Regulations may be usefully analysed, for example, in the context of a Notice issued last year by the Department of Propaganda of the Central Committee of the CPC on "Strengthening Marxist Atheism, Research, and Education."¹² The promotion of Marxist atheism to improve "the spiritual, moral, scientific and cultural makings of the whole nation"¹³ can be seen as an attempt to cultivate a system of values that has an equivalent role to religion, particularly Christianity, in the United States. The alternative to "superstition" is rationality:

"we shall lead people in firmly setting up the correct worldview, philosophy of life, and values, and scientific view of nature, universe and life, and strengthen their ability to distinguish materialism from spiritualism, science from superstition, and civilization from fatuity".

The promotion of atheism as state ideology does not directly contradict freedom of religious belief. Indeed, the policy of supporting atheism as a corollary of supporting freedom of religion has been clearly established: "while stressing the protection of freedom of religious belief China pays equal attention to the protection of the freedom not to believe in religion, thus ensuring the freedom of religious belief in a complete sense. This is a more complete and more comprehensive protection of the citizens' basic rights."¹⁴ While the state is prepared to allow religious believers a certain measure of freedom, it is not willing to provide religions with a monopoly on beliefs and values.

The juxtaposition of the Regulations and the Notice is a telling illustration of the political and social purpose behind religious freedom policies in China, perhaps resulting from perceived Western intransigence. The Regulations may be aimed at mollifying foreign regimes, while China continues to work to develop its socialist path. The new Regulations are perhaps symbolic of a move to greater adherence to international human rights norms, but do not reflect the entirety of the policy considerations that form their basis.

To this reviewer, for example, *God and Caesar* suggests that in the debate about freedom of religion, as in relation to many other constitutional and human rights issues, American policy makers – in government and in religious organisations – cannot encompass as a positive result anything less than

¹² Issued 27 May 2004. The China Aid Association claims to have received this document from "a currently high ranking Communist Party official who is very unhappy with the repressive party policy toward religious groups in China." The Notice was tabled by Rev. Bob Fu at a CECC Roundtable on 18 Nov 2004.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, *White Paper – Freedom of Religious Belief in China*, Beijing, Oct 1997.

a mirror image of their own ideologies. This has influenced China's foreign policy making:

“[g]iven the resilience of religion in China and the pervasiveness of religious concerns in international affairs, the only practical thing for China to do is to shape religious practice and diplomacy into vehicles that serve the political purpose of building a socialist China.”¹⁵

Whether or not one is persuaded by the official explanation for regulating religion in China, it is an important component to the debate about freedom of religion. China is in a position to resist the pressures of religious institutions, due to its immense market potential and perhaps its military strength, and to be selective about the norms that it absorbs. This is in distinct contrast to the colonial (or even hegemonistic) model, which could be said to underlie globalisation, where political and economic power plays a greater role in the reception of norms than “the inherent wisdom of the ideas themselves.”¹⁶ China can be, and is, choosy about the foreign norms that are applied and absorbed.

The Western attitude to freedom of religion in China, as espoused in *God and Caesar*, reflects a denial of the possibility that the Chinese government believes that Western religious norms are simply incorrect. Indeed, it could be said that there are many features of religion that China is working to eradicate from its society on the grounds of applying the rule of law: a lack of democratic governance, a sense of moral absoluteness that transcends political and legal authority, a regime that ultimately relies on hierarchical obedience, discipline, and punishment rather than adjudication.

God and Caesar is a stimulating analysis of the declared right to freedom of religion in China, from the point of view of religious organisations. Its failure to engage with the socialist underpinnings of China's policy undermines its message of cooperation and compromise, however. Rather than providing “practical aid to improve the Chinese understanding of the Western attitudes toward freedom of religious expression,”¹⁷ perhaps the United States should establish a Commission on Promoting Atheism, in order to improve Western understanding of Chinese attitudes.

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¹⁵ Peng Liu, p 153.

¹⁶ Wagner, R.H. “Economic Interdependence, Bargaining Power and Political Influence,” (1988) *International Organization*, 42:461, cited in Pitman Potter, “Legal Reform in China: Institutions, Culture, and Selective Adaptation”, (2004) 29 *Law and Social Inquiry* 465.

¹⁷ Hamrin, p 160.

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