

Countering China's Brutal Assault on Christians and Other Religious Minorities

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Co-chairmen Smith and McGovern, members of the Commission, thank you for holding this hearing and inviting me to give my views on the persecution of Christians in China and to provide my recommendations for U.S. policy.

The current assault on China's religious minorities under President Xi Jinping is the most comprehensive attempt to manipulate and control religion in China since the Cultural Revolution. Xi's policy is a major contributor to the global crisis in religious freedom, one in which over three-quarters of the world's people live in nations where religion is highly restricted. Millions of people are subject to violent repression and persecution, and most studies indicate that, numerically, Christians are at the top of the list of the victims.

China's persecution of its huge Christian minority provides one major reason why Chinese Christians number almost 100 million people. More Christians go to church on Sunday in China than in all of Europe. It is all the more tragic that their situation is so fragile and is getting worse. Chinese churches, especially house churches, as well as other religious structures such as Catholic Marian shrines, are increasingly being destroyed or shuttered. Pastors, priests, and worshippers are being arrested and imprisoned. Many Christians – like many Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists – are being targeted for harsh and often violent repression.

Why is this happening now? There are many reasons, all of them centered in the native communist need to control and maintain power. While the increasing violence against houses of worship and Christians is troubling, I would suggest that President Xi's policy is showcasing a major danger signal, one that is getting too little attention. China is trying to cut off the growth of Christianity and other religions by, in effect, cutting off the supply line by stopping the religious education of children.

Under Xi's policy of the "Sinocization" of religious education, no child under 18 may attend religious services, or any kind of religious event. No one under 18 may receive religious education of any kind from anyone. Further, each Chinese religious community is responsible for ensuring its teachings – to the young and to

everyone else -- are compatible with “the socialist society,” and are supportive of the leadership of the Communist party.

Of course, the “core values of socialism” as practiced in China are exceedingly difficult to square with the core values of Christianity. The Jesuit magazine *America* has noted correctly that Xi’s religious education policy ”strikes at the very heart and future of the Catholic and other Christian churches, as well as that of other religions. It is an issue of utmost concern for Catholics in China who see it as an attempt by the communist authorities ... to prevent young people from being educated or growing up in the faith.”

Precisely so. The attempt to stop the transmission of Christianity and other religions to Chinese children is a sign of how deadly serious President Xi is. He has not yet adopted Mao’s brutal policies of mass murder, torture, incarceration and starvation – although his horrific persecution of Uighur Muslims is coming perilously close. What is to me of most concern for Christians is this education policy. Xi understands that the teachings of Christianity about the dignity of every person, the evil of abortion, and the natural right of every person to religious freedom, threaten the rule of the communist party.

Let me turn to a brief set of policy prescriptions for augmenting the growing international outcry against Xi’s policy, led by our own Ambassador Brownback, whose condemnations have been searing.

At the Religious Freedom Institute we argue that if you want to defend the religious freedom of Christians, or Muslims, or Jews, or anyone else, you’ve got to defend the religious freedom of everyone. My written testimony has some practical suggestions about how we might move the communist regime in China toward the idea of greater religious freedom for its Christians, and also its Tibetan Buddhists, its Uighur Muslims, and others.

In brief, I suggest countering the natural communist suspicion of all religion by presenting evidence-based, self-interest arguments that might appeal to the practical strain in Chinese communism.

A self-interest argument to China would include the following verifiable propositions: the growth of religion and religious communities is natural and inevitable in all societies. This is why Mao’s policy failed, and why religious

affiliation is growing in China. Efforts to kill or blunt its growth are futile and counter-productive. Religious persecution will only retard economic development, increase social instability, and feed violent religious extremism. On the other hand, the accommodation of religious groups will benefit China's economy and increase social harmony and stability.

Elements of this argument have been used episodically by some U.S. officials. But the full argument should now be employed consistently by all U.S. officials, supported by empirical research, encouraged by U.S.-funded programs and institutionalized in a permanent U.S.-China bilateral working group on religion that studies the positive economic and social effects of religious communities.

This new strategy of pragmatic argument stands a chance of actually reducing religious persecution in China. Sustained economic growth is a major priority for Chinese policies, both domestic and international. If Chinese authorities become interested in the country's religious communities as an economic asset and a driver of modernization, rather than a source of social and political instability, they will be far more open to arguments against persecution.

Should it succeed, such a policy would not only improve the status of Christians and other persecuted minorities in China. It would also enhance the positive role that religion can play in blunting the totalitarian impulses so evident in the rule of Xi Jinping.

Thank you for having me here today.

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