



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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27 October 2009

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China: Doctrinal and denominational differences between registered and unregistered Protestant churches; whether members who practise in registered Protestant churches must pledge loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

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The United States (US) Congressional Executive Commission on China (CECC) *Annual Report 2008* states the following about registered Protestant churches in China:

China's state-controlled Protestant church continued to interfere in internal church doctrine and to co-opt registered religious communities to meet Party goals. The state-controlled Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), which leads the registered Protestant church in China, suppresses denominational differences among Protestants and imposes a Communist Party-defined theology, called 'theological construction,' on registered seminaries that, according to one TSPM official, will 'weaken those aspects within Christian faith that do not conform with the socialist society.' (84)

In 3 September 2009 correspondence, a professor of history at Calvin College stated that there are no differences between the doctrines taught in both registered and unregistered churches in China; however, he noted that "Pentecostalism, with its exuberant embrace of the of the 'gifts of the spirit,' is found everywhere in unregistered churches and almost never in registered ones."

In 1 September 2009 correspondence, a PhD candidate at Baylor University, who recently completed fieldwork in China that included research on house clergy, similarly indicated that one "can hardly find doctrinal differences between registered and unregistered Protestant churches in China." The PhD Candidate stated that registered Protestant churches are not supposed to teach subjects that are

in conflict with socialist society, such as eschatology, miracles, original sin and judgment. However, many clergy of the registered church also preach about them. It is very hard for the government to monitor and control everyday preaching. (1 Sept. 2009)

The PhD Candidate added that religious policy training that is meant to "guide religions to harmonize with socialist society," such as "neo-theological construction," otherwise understood as "justification by charity," is implemented in recognized seminaries, but that many pastors and theologians have resisted this training (1 Sept. 2009).

The Executive Secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council, in 25 August 2009 correspondence, similarly indicated that the Chinese government suggests that registered churches promote government policy, such as "building a harmonious society." The Executive Secretary, who has preached at and attended many sermons at registered churches in mainland China, also indicated that local preachers can decide whether to insert government policy in sermons (25 Aug. 2009). He indicated that he has preached and heard sermons on eschatology and creationism, which are "contrary to the atheist teachings ascribed by the Chinese government," but that it is "not wise" to deliver sermons that challenge the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

(Executive Secretary 25 Aug. 2009).

According to a 2008 article titled *China's Regulation of Religion in a Changing Context*, published by the East Asia Institute (EAI), "many chose to go underground to avoid the infiltration of state propaganda, the possibility of an ideological clash, and to preserve their own authentic faiths and beliefs" (1 Feb. 2008, Exec. Summary). The article indicates that the patriotic national associations that implement religious regulations "are often laden with strong state propaganda to educate Christians on the importance of national loyalty and the adherence to state-imposed agendas" (EAI 1 Feb. 2008, Sec. 2.8).

The Executive Secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council, in 17 September 2009 correspondence, indicated that "theologically speaking, the China Christian Council has no denominations within its umbrella as all denominations were dissolved in the 1950s." However, he also stated that in some regions, groups are able to maintain their denominational traditions, thus leading to many forms of Protestantism in China (Executive Secretary 17 Sept. 2009). He further noted that there are also "distinct groups" under the umbrella of the China Christian Council, such as the "True Jesus Church, the Seven Day Adventists and the Little Flock," which are not thought of as different denominations, but nonetheless represent different groups of practising Protestants (ibid.).

The PhD Candidate, in 18 September 2009 correspondence, similarly noted that denominational differences were "abolished" in the 1950s in China, and that "scholars as well as officials maintain that China has entered into a post-denominational era," with the TSPM "replacing the denominational hierarchy as the governing body." The PhD Candidate added that "True Jesus Church, Jesus Family (almost extinct) and the Little Flock" still have denominational traits, despite being registered churches, and indicated that it is important to understand that there are unregistered churches that are also called True Jesus Church and Little Flock (18 Sept. 2009). The PhD Candidate stated that unregistered house churches have more denominational differences than registered churches, with several national house church networks having their own hierarchies and theological characteristics, including, but not limited to, Calvinism, Methodism, Presbyterianism and Pentecostalism (18 Sept. 2009).

In 22 September 2009 correspondence, the Professor of history stated that in registered churches "no traditional western denominations are visible, though the practises and customs of some are visible in worship style differences." The Professor of history noted that there are a few exceptions, since indigenous pre-communist churches, such as the True Jesus Church and the Christian Assembly (Little Flock), are quite visible in regions of historical strength (22 Sept. 2009). The Professor of history also indicated that the Seventh Day Adventists are visible, not because they are labelled, but because they attend Saturday services (22 Sept. 2009). Additionally, the Professor of history noted that there is a significant variety of practises found at TSPM churches; for example, he explained that some churches perform immersion baptism, while others use sprinkling; some pastors wear gowns, while others don't; and some have communion by common cup, while others use little cups (22 Sept. 2009).

A July 2008 article in *The Ecumenical Review* states that under the TSPM and the CCC, "Chinese Christians enjoy united worship, and the churches have entered the post-denominational era" (1 July 2008). The article further indicates that within the TSPM and the CCC "[i]nstitutional denominational church organs and systems do not exist any longer," but that there are still "differences between various traditions, theological views and rituals" (*The Ecumenical Review* 1 July 2008). For instance, the article states that denominational traditions are still practised depending on local church traditions, including variations on baptism, as well as different types of communion (ibid.).

When asked in correspondence whether members of Protestant registered churches in China must pledge their loyalty to the CCP, as opposed to God or Jesus, the PhD Candidate and the Professor of history stated that registered churches do not require members to pledge loyalty to the CCP (PhD Candidate 18 Sept. 2009; Professor of history 22 Sept. 2009). The Executive Secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council stated that he is not aware of a policy that requires religious believers "to place the Communist Party above their God or Gods in their religious life," but did state that all citizens of China are "supposed to support the ruling authority of the [CCP] on political matters, such as government policy" (17 Sept. 2009). The Executive Secretary indicated that only Communist Party members and Communist Youth League members pledge their loyalty to the CCP (17 Sept. 2009). The Professor of history noted that "CCP members are prohibited from being religious believers" (22 Sept. 2009).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in

researching this Information Request.

### References

East Asia Institute (EAI). 1 February 2008. Zhao Litao and Tan Soon Heng. *China's Regulation of Religion in a Changing Context*. <<http://www.eai.nus.edu.sg/BB369.pdf>> [Accessed 4 Sept. 2009]

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United States (US). 31 October 2008. Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC). *Congressional-Executive Commission on China - Annual Report 2008* <[http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=110\\_house\\_hearings&docid=f:45233.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=110_house_hearings&docid=f:45233.pdf)> [Accessed 4 Sept. 2009]

### Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** A professor of law at the University of Melbourne and a research fellow at the East Asian Institute (EAI) did not have information for this Response. World Serve Ministries, Human Rights in China (HRIC), a professor of sociology at the University of California and a professor of political science at Baylor University did not respond within the time constraints of this Response.

**Internet sites, including:** Amity News Service, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Centre on Religion and Chinese Society - Purdue University, China Human Rights Lawyers Concern Group, China Ministries International, Christianity Today, Dui Hua Foundation, Forum 18, *The Guardian* [London], Human Rights in China (HRIC), Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, Initiatives for China, Laogai Research Foundation, Lawyers Rights Watch Canada, Radio Free Asia, Social Science Research Network (SSRN), World Serve Ministries, Xinhua News Agency.

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