

# **Similarities Between Early Christianity And Modern China**

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HIS 451

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April 24, 2018

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1-2
<b>Eastern Catholicism vs. Western Catholicism in the days of the Byzantine Empire</b> .....	2-4
<b>The Dilemma of Modern China</b> .....	4-8
<b>Correlation of the Byzantine Empire to Modern China</b> .....	8-10
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	10
<b>Maps and Images</b> .....	11
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	12-13

## Introduction

Ever since the beginning of Christianity when Jesus claimed his leader of the Church to be Peter saying, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,”<sup>1</sup> the Church has functioned under many different regimes throughout history. Some of them have been more favorable to Christianity than others, whether for good or ill. Some of those civilizations that have favored the Church though have brought schismatic strife between the internal workings of the Church. This is the case in early Christianity with Christianity’s relationship to the Byzantine Empire. The Church in the west (Roman Catholic, or Latin Rite) stood as an institution desiring to be free from the rule of state functions. The Church in the east (Eastern Orthodox Catholic Church, or Eastern Rite) wished to spread its dominion over church and state matters. These two sides of the Church would eventually create unique establishments that are similar, but fundamentally different at the core. Other governmental institutions in history have not been so kind to Catholicism’s influence, and have had odds with the church that lead to similar circumstances as a closely tied relationship between church and state, a strong example for this being modern day China. The People’s Republic of China battles a similar issue in regards to church and state functioning in regards to Catholicism. The Underground Catholic Church (the section of Catholicism in union with the Papacy in Rome) is battling for its individuality against a Communist regime in modern day China. The Chinses Patriotic Catholic Association stands as an establishment closely linked to state functions and opposes liberation from the government. What is it about these two situations that is so similar when they both have functioned in very different time periods? What is it about church state relations that makes governments want to

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<sup>1</sup> NRSV, Matt. 16:18-19

control Catholicism in particular? Correlating the similar but not identical situation with early Christianity in the Roman/Byzantine Empire and the situation with modern China can shed light on some of these issues. Particularly this paper will correlate the Western Catholic Church with Cardinal Joseph Zen heading the underground Catholic Church in China compared to the Eastern Catholic Church under the Byzantine Empire with the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association functioning under the People's Republic of China. By doing this, this paper will shed light on the questions of proper church and state relations. This paper will argue that the circumstances of the Catholic Church in China is similar to that of the situation between the Byzantine Empire and the Western Catholic Church in the beginning of Christianity because of government sanctioned religious leader appointments in China and the tensions between the Catholic Church in union with the Papacy in Rome and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association.

### **Eastern Catholicism vs. Western Catholicism in the days of the Byzantine Empire**

Early Christianity with the passing of the Edict of Milan in 313 AD was closely linked to the state of the Byzantine Empire which is popularly known to begin in 330 AD with the founding of Constantinople as the head of the Roman Empire due to the Roman Emperor Constantine's inability to control lands far east of Rome.<sup>2</sup> The map below illustrates why Constantine felt the need to move the capital of the empire farthest east with so much land being controlled. Church and state relations were intrinsically linked to the Roman Empire throughout its long history. In fact there was no difference, as secular matters of the state were interrelated with spiritual matters of its people. "The emperor was the supreme priest"<sup>3</sup> and as such had all power within his sphere of influence on those under Roman rule, that sphere of influence being

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<sup>2</sup> "Byzantine Empire." Livius.org. 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Hugo Rahner, *Church and State in Early Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1992) 7.

both spiritual and governmental. With this power that had been traditionally bestowed upon the Roman leader, it is no surprise then that this control of the Christian Church was also assumed, by many, to be handed over to the emperor when Christianity was the most popular religion as an effect of Constantine being converted and showing his allegiance to Christianity through baptism.

Once Rome fell in the West in 476 AD due to invading Germanic tribes, the separation of the Western Church and the Eastern Church begins.<sup>4</sup> The West fought the oppression of Byzantine Emperors who sought to rule over the church for political gain, and control. Contradictorily, the East's interests were to continue the intertwined governance of religion and law. The West, including Rome still fell under the reign of the Byzantine Empire, but this power was only by name as the West did not attribute themselves to the Byzantine's reign completely, "in cases of conflict of loyalties the Italians, though byzantine subjects, often tended to feel stronger allegiance to the pope than to the emperor."<sup>5</sup> With the pope being favored by those in the West, the emperor felt the need to show his dominance over the pope as he is the supreme ruler of both law and religion within the empire. In order to show this power, many emperors held the law over the pope. "Emperor Constans had Pope Martin I arrested, imprisoned and subjected to extremely harsh treatment until Martin eventually died, Justinian had brought Pope Vigilius to Constantinople as an unwilling guest, Justinian II decided that Pope Sergius must be arrested."<sup>6</sup> These instances show that when the spiritual head of the West was unwilling to bow down to the might of the East, the emperor would take drastic measures to show his superiority. The West was not willing to bow to the Byzantines on spiritual matters though.

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<sup>4</sup> "Roman Legal Tradition and the Compilation of Justinian," law.berkeley.edu, (The Robbins Collection: 2007)

<sup>5</sup> Constance Head, *Justinian II of Byzantium* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1972) 73.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 78.

Much of the issue between the two sides dealt with not only who is in charge of spiritual matters, but also the nature of the doctrines being disputed was a root of much of the problem. The East was favorable to the Monophysite heresy claiming Christ to be only divine or only human, not both fully human and fully divine together.<sup>7</sup> This issue is what forced the popes in the West not to agree with the spiritual teachings of the emperors in the East. Thus much of the conflict between the two sides dealt with spiritual doctrine. This fight over spiritual doctrine, and the nature of who should be the one to figure out the truth of doctrine for the laity eventually led to a split between the two sides.

### **The Dilemma of Modern China**

The Chinese Catholic Church is divided into two different organizations: The Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association and the Underground Catholic Church. The Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association claims its allegiance to the Chinese regime whereas the Underground Catholic Church aligns more with the universal Catholic Church with its head functioning in Rome. These two institutions function with a different background and understanding of who they are.

The Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association was established in 1957 in order for the Chinese state to supervise over the functioning of Catholicism within China.<sup>8</sup> No power was held by the Vatican in China since the National People's Congress of the Republic of China's Constitution states, "Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign

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<sup>7</sup> John W. Barker, *Justinian and the Later Roman Empire* (Madison, Milwaukee, London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966) 105.

<sup>8</sup> Georgetown University, "Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association" in "Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs"

domination.”<sup>9</sup> This still holds today, as the issue between the Catholic Church in Rome and the Catholic Church in China is the fact that the Chinese government does not want to recognize a foreign power as holding any sort of force within their borders. Mao Zedong comments on foreign powers and the history that is held between China and those powers when he says, “The Chinese have always been a great, courageous and industrious nation; it is only in modern times that they have fallen behind. And that was due entirely to oppression and exploitation by foreign imperialism.”<sup>10</sup> This quotation strongly represents the fact that the Communist Party in China does not want interference by any foreign power, including religious institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, the founding of the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association came about to enforce governmental control over the religious sphere. By forming and controlling Catholicism as they want it to be, China ensures that all allegiance; whether it be social, political, religious, or something else, would remain with the Chinese government. “Its (the Patriotic Association's) commitment to manipulate the mass of the Catholic population in order to integrate them into the Socialist revolutionary movement by submitting them to the leadership of the Communist Party in all things.”<sup>11</sup> Thus the attempt is evident on part of the Chinese regime to control Catholicism at the state level. A sort of control which places itself above the Church, and above the desires of both bishops and laity.

The other Catholic organization present in China is the underground Catholic Church that aligns its allegiances to Rome with the rest of the universal Catholic Church. This Church is best

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<sup>9</sup> National People's Congress of the Republic of China, *Constitution* Chapter II Article 36. Amended March 14, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Mao Zedong, “The Chinese People Have Stood Up!,” opening address at the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. Sept 21, 1949 in Steven W. Mosher, *Bully of Asia: Why China's Dream is the New Threat to World Order* (United States of America: Regency 2017) 67

<sup>11</sup> Reverend Matthias Lu, “remark on the pastoral letter on women issued by the Patriotic Association's Bishop's Conference” found in “The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association” *The Cardinal Kung Foundation*. 1996.

described as the, “Chinese Catholics who will not suffer the Church to be profaned by entanglement with the Communist government would be Orthodox. Their zeal for a kind of purity in religion is instinctive.”<sup>12</sup> The underground Catholic Church recognizes the relationship of church and state to be distinct in order for each to flourish correctly. Chinese Catholics do not want to worship their faith as the state requires, but rather as they are willing to do themselves. It is not however an organization that is outright against the Communist party. “‘Underground’ is a misnomer, or at least an exaggeration, say sources who have lived in China and observed the complexity of Catholicism there up close...Catholicism in China is more uniform in practice than Westerners with romantic ideas about an underground Church might imagine”<sup>13</sup> The underground church is not registered with the government, so it therefore is not recognized as legitimate by the communist regime. It does not fall under normal religious functions due to it not being recognized by the state. Normal religious functions are protected by article 36 in the Chinese Constitution.<sup>14</sup> However, even with this protection being claimed, Qianfan and Yingping point out that, “Chinese governments at various levels are particularly nervous about the prospect of social or ethnic agitations created by religious gatherings and often restrict normal religious activities in the name of social stability. This antireligious stance opens doors to local officials’ heedless contempt for, rough treatment of, and misuse of power against religions.”<sup>15</sup> This oppression is what gives rise to the underground feeling the need to continue its loyalty with Rome rather than aligning itself with the Communist government. It is not completely oppressed at every level as it seems to be though as Frankovich says, “though unregistered with the

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<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Frankovich, “Has China Converted the Vatican?,” in *National Review*. April 2018. 17.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 16.

<sup>14</sup> National People’s Congress of the Republic of China, *Constitution* Chapter II Article 36.

<sup>15</sup> Zhang Qianfan and Zhu Yingping, “Religious Freedom and Its Legal Restrictions in China,” (*BYU L. Rev.* 2011) 785.



government, a so-called underground church may be above ground for all practical purposes, especially in regions where Catholicism has been practiced for generations and is a familiar and esteemed feature of the local culture.”<sup>16</sup> Despite this, there is definitely a struggle with the underground since the government refuses to accept Vatican appointed bishops to a diocese. This would violate the idea that foreign religious bodies are not allowed in China as noted above in the Chinese Constitution. Thus the reason that this branch of the Catholic Church is deemed as underground, and wishes to remain with full commitment to the Vatican rather than to their own government on this matter.

With these tensions between the foreign Vatican attempting to operate in Communist China, the Vatican has dealt with many issues such as missing bishops, laity being arrested, and general hostility toward the Church as the Chinese regime attempts to extend its control. Communism in China has had no qualm with violent coercion toward anyone opposing its beliefs and practices. The Vatican is well aware of this fact, and knows that it is not only Catholicism that gets harsh treatment. Mao Zedong shows this as he says, “Emperor Qin Shihuang was not that outstanding. He only buried alive 460 Confucian scholars. We buried 460 *thousand* Confucian scholars.”<sup>17</sup> The underground Catholic Church currently is dealing with much harassment from the government. “Father Yang Jianwei is one of at least five underground Catholic priests in Hebei province who has been picked up by authorities this month [April 2018], although two have since been released”<sup>18</sup> With this tension taking place and manifesting itself physically, the Vatican recently has looked to solve issues with peaceful conflicts as Pope

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<sup>16</sup> Frankovich 16.

<sup>17</sup> Mao Zedong, *Selected Works*, vol. 4, 19; cited in Fu, *Autocratic Tradition and Chinese Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 188. Found in Steven W. Mosher, *Bully of Asia: Why China's Dream is the New Threat to World Order*. 70

<sup>18</sup> ucanews, “Another priest missing in China's Hebei province” ucanews.com April 18, 2018.

Francis has opened the door to diplomatic relations with China as, “Pope Francis has decided to accept the legitimacy of seven Catholic bishops appointed by the Chinese government, a concession that the Holy See hopes will lead Beijing to recognize his authority as head of the Catholic Church in China”<sup>19</sup> Cardinal Joseph Zen in China was so concerned with this alliance that he personally went to Rome to meet with Francis.<sup>20</sup> Cardinal Zen has been the face of the underground church fighting for its freedom within Communist China.

### **Correlation of the Byzantine Empire to Modern China**

The early Eastern Christian Church being led by the Byzantine Empire is similar to the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association since both have interests in running the Catholic faith at the state level by controlling their own bishops and church leaders within their lands of control. The Byzantine Empire had many bishops go along with the rule of the emperor as the Roman Emperor Constantius says, “What I will is the law of the Church. The Syrian bishops do not protest when I speak thus.”<sup>21</sup> Here we see the emperor who holds the head of the law also pushing his influence upon that of religion. Not just religion in general, but he wants the higher authorities within the institution of the church to abide by what he says. Also, as was shown earlier, emperors in the East fought hard to have the pope go along with the doctrine that the emperor deemed correct. The Byzantine Empire sought to control church and state as one with all power falling under the emperor’s control. The regime in modern China is the same in this aspect as was seen earlier. First, it has been mentioned how the appointment of bishops may now fall into the hands of the Chinese government as they want it to. Secondly, the desire to control

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<sup>19</sup> Francis X. Rocca, “Pope Francis to Bow to China With Concession on Bishops” in The Wall Street Journal, wsj.com, February 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Catholic News Agency, “What Cardinal Zen told Pope Francis about the Church in China” catholicnewsagency.com January 2018.

<sup>21</sup> *Historia Arianorum* 34 (PG 25,732d) in Hugo Rahner, *Church and State in Early Christianity* 54.

all aspects of religion within China is a prime example of how the church state relationship in the Byzantine Empire is similar to China's situation. "The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) dictates the policy on regulation of religion and enforces the policy in part through laws and administrative regulations."<sup>22</sup> This quote shows that the practice of religion is enforced by the Chinese government. Both of these regimes practicing, or at least attempting to practice, the appointment of church leaders and the close ties of church and state relations.

The differences between the two regimes of the Byzantine Empire and the Communist Chinese government is that the Byzantine Empire was recognizably Christian. Despite heresy claimed by the West, The Byzantines stood to have Christianity prosper along with the rise of the government. The Chinese government on the other hand wishes to exert its control in order to have a handle on foreign issues stemming from the Catholic Church in Rome. Additionally, China, because of the Communist Party in control there, is officially labeled as an Atheistic religion within the country.

The Western Church fighting for its freedom against its oppressors of the Byzantine Empire is comparable to the current underground Catholic Church of China fighting for its liberties against the Chinese Communist regime. The Western Church under the Byzantines fought for its freedom from an oppressive state that wished to mingle matters of spirituality with matters of law. The Church in Rome believed otherwise though as they saw the matters of the individual's soul as a church matter and not one in which the state should control. A similar instance is that of the underground Chinese Church alive today as they fight for their freedom against an oppressive Chinese regime which wishes to rule over all aspects of human life. So,

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<sup>22</sup> Ping Xiong, "Freedom of Religion in China Under the Current Legal Framework and Foreign Religious Bodies" in *Brigham Young University Law Review*" 2013, 608.

just as the council of Nicaea “broke up into two opposing factions: those loyal to Nicaea united around Rome, those loyal to Constantinople around the emperor,”<sup>23</sup> so too does the underground church in China stay loyal to Rome as the Patriotic Association stays loyal to Beijing.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the battle for control of spiritual matters in early Christianity between the Western Catholic Church headed by the pope and the Eastern Church headed by the Byzantine Empire is similar to the current situation in China where the underground Catholic Church is vying for its freedom from the Communist state. These two instances in history are similar because both deal with a government that looks to control the religious and secular matters of people. We have seen this since the history of the Eastern and Western Christian Church was outlined in the beginning. This history showed the battle for freedom the Western Church opted for rather than allowing themselves to be intrinsically tied to the emperor in the East to rule over all matters. Next, the current dilemma within China was portrayed showing how the Chinese government seeks to govern over religious institutions to keep political and social stability within its borders. The underground Church wants to align their loyalty to the Vatican in Rome, whereas the government has created a Catholic institution called the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. This organization exists to show their allegiance to the Chinese government while maintaining worship practices that are recognizably Catholic. The correlation between the two cases in history was then made as the West and the underground Church are similar in their struggles against the Byzantines and the Communist regimes respectively. Ultimately, these two instances in history shedding light on the proper relationship between church and state.

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<sup>23</sup> Rahner 51.



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<sup>24</sup> Peter Hermes Furian, "The Roman Empire at its greatest extent in 117 AD at the time of Trajan, plus principal provinces Vector illustration" 123rf.com

<sup>25</sup> South China Morning Post, "Vatican rebukes retired Hong Kong cardinal after remarks on 'selling out' of Chinese Catholics" scmp.com January 2018.

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- 4) Frankovich, Nicholas. "Has China Converted the Vatican?." National Review. April 2018. **(Journal Article 1)**
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