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“The Party’s ‘Bulldozer Diplomacy’ with China’s Christians”
By Anthony E. Clark, Ph.D.
(CWR, 23 May 2014)

After the Opium War (1840-42) Britain and other Western powers forced China to legalize the opium trade; menacing British warships lined China’s shores as officials were forced to sign a series of one-sided agreements. China rightly calls this an era of “gunboat diplomacy.” On April 28, 2014, thousands of Protestant Christians watched as local authorities dispatched bulldozers to demolish their massive new church. The Sanjiang church, in Wenzhou, was destroyed after several weeks of staged protests; the pastor reportedly said, “Pray for the Christians in China. The Communist Party sometimes begins with a small act, like tearing down one church, and it becomes a trend that could spread throughout China.” The Party is known for sending bulldozers to demolish Christian churches that it claims are “unregistered” or “unruly.” After twelve years of construction, the Sanjiang church was razed in a single day.

This “bulldozer diplomacy” has grown into an unofficial policy of China’s increasingly hardline Party. A recent article in *The Telegraph*, entitled “China on course to become 'world's most Christian nation' within 15 years,” features an image of Beijing’s famous North Church, packed with Catholic Christians attending Holy Mass (29 April 2014). It quotes Purdue professor, Yang Fenggang: “By my calculations China is destined to become the largest Christian country in the world very soon.” When I met Professor Yang recently in Chicago, he noted his belief that China’s number of Christians will likely grow to around 160 million by 2030, making it the “world’s most Christian nation.” Needless to say, this is an alarming possibility to China’s Communist authorities, who fear that Christianity is eroding Marxist ideology. In an official report identified as the “Blue Book,” Beijing has listed religion as one of the “four greatest challenges to national security.”

The tone of this report is alarming: “Hostile western forces are infiltrating China’s religions in a more diverse way and in a wider range; deploying more subtle means either openly or secretly; and are strongly seditious and deceptive in nature.” It continues, asserting that, “Foreign religious infiltration powers have penetrated all areas of the Chinese society.” The Maoist era rhetoric that identified Christianity as a tool for foreign

imperialism has resurfaced, and China's Christians are again watchful for policies that might affect their freedom to practice their faith. The West's "gunboat diplomacy" of the mid-nineteenth century is being replaced by China's "bulldozer diplomacy" of the present. The former leader of China's State Administration for Religious Affairs said in a 2001 speech at Hong Kong's Chung Chi College, that "there is no conflict between our respect for freedom of religious belief and our advocacy of dialectical materialism." He affirmed the Party's "respect for freedom of religious belief." This apparent respect, however, assumes the ultimate "dialectical victory" of Marxist Communism over religious belief. This victory, it seems, is not coming fast enough; Christianity is quickly gaining numbers while Marxism seems to be buckling under the popularity of Western materialism.

While Wenzhou's majestic Sanjiang church was being bulldozed, Shanghai's Catholic bishop remains under house arrest for refusing affiliation with the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, and new bishops are elected without papal involvement. The situation for Catholics remains complex. But as ever, I write what might seem like distressing news after hearing equally hopeful news from China. This morning I looked at a powerful photo recently taken of a priest friend; he is leaning forward above a kneeling Catholic woman, placing his hands on her head to impart his blessing. Sunlight shines through the beautiful church window behind them, and the elderly woman is smiling, apparently radiant with the grace and peace that only Christ can provide.

Images

001:

Wenzhou's Sanjiang Protestant church before its destruction (credit: Zheng Leguo)

002:

Shanghai bishop, Ma Daqin, still under house arrest (credit: author's collection)