

vs and Current Events :: There are as many Christians in China as there are members of the Communist Party

There are as many Christians in China as there are members of the Communist Party. - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2

Through much of the twentieth century, it was widely believed among Western intellectuals that the Chinese were immune to religion—an immunity that long preceded the communist rise to power. When, in 1934, Edgar Snow quipped that “in China, opium is the religion of the people,” many academic and media experts smiled in agreement and dismissed the million Chinese claimed as converts by Christian missionaries as nothing but “rice Christians”—cynical souls who had frequented the missions for the benefits they provided. Then, in 1949, Mao Zedong came to power. Religion was outlawed, and it was widely agreed among social scientists that China soon would be a model of the fully secularized, post-religious society.

But it wasn't to be. Instead, belief in a coming post-religious China turned out to be the opium of Western intellectuals. The Chinese Christians of 1949—those ridiculed in the West as rice Christians—were so “insincere” that they endured decades of bloody repression during which their numbers grew. And as official repression has weakened, Christianity has been growing at an astonishing rate in China.

Unfortunately, there is a great deal of disagreement over just how astonishing the growth has been: Are there now 16 million or 200 million Christians in China? Both numbers have been asserted with great confidence and with claims of being “official,” but perhaps the most widely accepted claim is that there are 130 million Chinese Christians. That total is often attributed to a survey conducted by the Chinese government. But it seems unlikely that there was such a poll—at least no Chinese scholars and polling agencies know of it—and that total is not supported by any of the known surveys. Some of the confusion may arise from the fact that the Chinese government does keep track of how many people belong to Christian groups officially registered under the terms of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). These groups now enroll about 16 million members. But there are tens of thousands of Christian house churches in China that are not registered with the TSPM. Not surprisingly, there is considerable interest among diverse groups in learning how many members these house churches have. Estimates have been based not on solid data but rather on intuition and anecdotal accounts of largely Western observers.

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