“Cruelly Bound…Or Free Enough?: Competing Images of the Church in China, 1992-2000

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The Problem of Competing Images

It may have been the best of times—or maybe it was the worst of times. Writing for the *Christian Century* in September 1997, Robert Evans claimed that religious and political leaders in the United States exaggerated the extent of persecution in China. He called for a more realistic assessment of religious persecution and praised the state-approved Chinese churches for working toward greater religious liberty.¹ The same month, a *Christianity Today* headline declared “House Church Leaders Flee with American Help.” Chinese house church leaders Bob and Heidi Fu had escaped to the United States after imprisonment for training pastors and evangelists. According to the article “the Fu case indicates that, despite Chinese government denials, house-church Christians face centrally coordinated persecution.”² In the same month, two major Protestant publications depicted vastly different realities for Christians in China.

Why these different pictures of Christian life in China? One might assume that the 1997 articles were anomalies, but they were not. Between 1992 and 2000, Protestant publications consistently divided into two camps regarding Christian persecution in China. The accounts from mainline publications, such as the United Methodist *New World Outlook* or *The Christian Century*, portrayed a government-tolerated, flourishing church. Evangelical publications, *Christianity Today* and Focus on the Family’s *Citizen* for example, painted a darker picture of on-going and often brutal persecution. Why the different images of the church in China? The description of persecution in China reflected the descriptors’ assessments of the freedom necessary for vital, Christian life. The imaging of three entities, the official Protestant church, the unofficial “house churches,” and the underground Catholic church, demonstrate the role that various
understandings of authentic Christian life played in the description of Chinese Christianity.

Some might argue that political, not religious, motivations accounted for the differing images of the Chinese church. Congress had to renew China’s Most Favored Nation (MFN) trading status every year until it passed Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) in 2000. The Clinton administration supported MFN and PNTR. Conservative Christian leaders such as Charles Colson and Gary Bauer opposed both. One might suppose that conservatives used their media outlets in order to drum up opposition to Clinton and China. Conversely, mainline publications might have painted a rosy picture of the Chinese church in order to justify a policy of a Democratic administration. Differing images of China were one more chapter in an ongoing political battle between conservatives and liberals.

Although blessedly simple, this explanation cannot account for the evidence. Not all evangelicals connected religious freedom and free trade. Gary Bauer and Charles Colson wanted favorable trade relations predicated on the abolition of religious persecution, but Pat Robertson and Luis Palau did not. While Focus on the Family’s Citizen downplayed these divisions with evangelicalism, Christianity Today noted them. Evangelical publications were not, therefore, mouthpieces for a particular MFN stance. Mainline publications did not enthusiastically lead any MFN parades in their pages either. The denominational magazines avoided the issue. When it discussed trade relations with China, the Christian Century rather blandly indicated that economic sanctions were blunt tools for a delicate issue. Publications on both sides betrayed too much caution in dealing with the MFN debate to be accused of garnering support for
political agendas. Moreover, the fact that some evangelicals and mainliners could agree on MFN/PNTR and still describe the church in China differently indicates that the images stemmed from something other than political loyalties.

One might also object that my proposal strips the Chinese of agency. Talk of imaging makes Chinese lives putty that Americans shape for their own purposes. Scholars raised similar objections to Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism. Said posited that Westerners constructed the idea of the “Orient” in order to control it. Critics claimed that Said deprived “Orientals” of any role in that construction because he failed to realize that Orientals used and manipulated Western ideas. Following Said’s critics, I assume that Chinese believers played a role in the imaging process. Religious publications relied on the voices of Chinese Christians to authenticate their descriptions. When Americans solicited information the Chinese could give their version of events for purposes of their own. One cannot argue that the Chinese informants and American periodicals possessed the same amount of power—the latter ultimately determined the image—but both groups participated in, and perhaps benefited from, the process.

**Defining the Churches**

Understanding discussions of the church in China requires familiarity with an acronym-heavy group of terms. Unfortunately, defining terms is itself an imaging process. It matters whether we define the official church as “state-approved,” or “state-controlled.” While recognizing the prejudicial nature of defining, a sketch of basic terms will aid navigation.

The first set of terms relates to the official Protestant church. Official congregations register with the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), a government entity not
controlled by Christians. Members of the official church, as well as the clergy, belong to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). The TSPM is an organization led (at least organizationally) by a Protestant Christian. It began in 1954, dissolved during the Cultural Revolution and reconstituted in 1979. The TSPM’s stated goal was to make (and now to keep) Protestant congregations self-propagating, self-supporting and self-governing (hence the “three selfs”). Shortly after the TSPM’s rebirth, the China Christian Council (CCC) formed. This organization operates in a manner similar to the National Council of Churches in America except that it works with multiple congregations rather than multiple denominations (the official church in China is “post-denominational”). For purposes of this paper, the specific differences and tasks of the TSPM and the CCC are unimportant. Together they oversee the official church and it is not uncommon that the same people will hold top positions in both. In 1985, the CCC birthed a third related organization, the Amity Foundation. The Amity Foundation is a social service organization that, among other activities, prints Bibles and administers health care in rural areas.

A second constellation of terms concerns the unofficial Protestant churches. Unofficial churches refuse to register with the RAB and their members do not belong to the TSPM. These churches have varying names: house churches, underground churches, unofficial churches. All are to some extent misnomers. Many unofficial churches are—at least according to some—far too large to meet in any house. Some would also argue that many unofficial churches have no need to go "underground" because their local governments practice toleration. Unofficial might suggest casual or unstructured, which might describe a portion, but certainly not all, of the churches. The publications studied
use all three names for the unofficial churches and, as they are all equally problematic, I will follow the lead of my sources except in one case. To avoid confusion, I will reserve the term “underground” for the unregistered Catholic Church.

The final set of terms involves this underground Catholic Church and its corresponding official church. Catholics willing to register with the government formed the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) in 1954. CPA does not recognize the authority of the pope and consecrates its own bishops. The underground Catholic Church maintains loyalty to the Vatican and considers its priest as the only Chinese priests consecrated in apostolic succession.7

**Areas of Agreement: Not Quite Free to Be Like You and Me**

Although mainline and evangelical publications imaged the church, and persecution of the church, differently during the 1990s, everyone agreed that Chinese Christians did not enjoy full religious freedom. No publication suggested that the church in China had the same ability to operate independently of the government as the church in America. The RAB restricted meeting places and contact with non-Chinese evangelists. The difference between mainline publications and evangelical publications was not, therefore, the difference between those who did not believe any religious repression existed in China and those who believed repression occurred. Discussions of the church in China occurred in a context in which everyone agreed that the government had denied, and still could deny, religious freedom. The question, then, was to what degree repression existed, whom it affected, and whether it prohibited an authentic expression of Christianity.

**Images of the Official Church: Lukewarm Stooges or Christian Servants?**
Flipping through mainline articles on China during the 1990s, the reader encountered pictures of official Chinese Christians openly, and happily, practicing their faith. In the *New World Outlook*, worshipers, with Bibles open on their laps, sat outside an overflowing church on Easter Sunday. A few pages over, a young, cherubic girl’s bright smile and glowing eyes attested to the goodness of CCC Christians who started a school for children with the Hepatitis B. In another periodical, a man stacked new, red Bibles with crisp white pages and gold lettering onto a large pallet. The pictures told a story of a dynamic church allowed to gather, to worship, and to serve.

The assessment of persecution in China and the description of the official church were closely related issues. If the official church provided a viable, religious option for Protestants, then the problems of the unofficial Protestant churches appeared less critical for the health of Christianity in China. If, however, the official church did not offer an authentic spiritual option, the question of persecution took on another cast. Mainline publications described a vital official church. Their articles emphasized the relative freedom enjoyed by the official church, the dynamism of worship, and, most significantly, the ability of official churches to witness through service.

Outlets that viewed the official church as a viable spiritual option for Protestants portrayed the TSPM and CCC as approved, but not controlled, by the Chinese government. Emphasizing the anti-colonial past of the TSPM proved important. Because it appeared after the Communist Revolution and the expulsion of Western missionaries, some might think the TSPM created by Maoists in order to control the church. Outlets sympathetic to the official church focused, instead, on the TSPM’s work to rid the Chinese church of its imperialist taint. In these accounts, the idea of a self-
propagating, self-governing and self-supporting church dated from the 1880s—long before the communist takeover. Post 1954, the TSPM could boast of its anti-imperialist record. According to the *New World Outlook*, the TSPM’s indigenization efforts ended the Chinese resignation “to the old saying: ‘Each time the church in China gains a convert, the country loses a citizen.’”¹¹ Working toward the three-selves was commendably anti-imperialist, not compromisingly pro-Communist.

Mainline publications also described official church leaders as committed to the good of the church, not the will of the government. *Presbyterians Today* declared that, although church officials preferred cooperation with the government to confrontation, “council members still have space to criticize.”¹² Denominational publications noted that official church leaders worked in the 1990s to protect the religious rights even of those who refused to register with the government—as long as the others were indigenous Chinese and not clandestine foreign missionaries. In cases where local authorities made it difficult to practice Christianity, the CCC intervened. Yet not all outlets sympathetic to the official church painted a rosy picture of autonomy. Deborah Brown, writing for the *Christian Century*, suggested that the CCC’s leader during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Bishop K.H. Ting, offered praise of the Tiananmen Square protesters only until it became clear that the government viewed them as traitors. Brown also posited a relationship between Ting’s 1993 resignation as president of TSPM/CCC and his 1992 criticism of the suppression of unofficial religious activity. Brown’s article indicated that the government did not allow the CCC complete autonomy.¹³ Even in this most pessimistic view, however, church leaders did not always march to the party drum and they had sufficient freedom to make criticism a reasonable risk. Ting, after all, resigned
but did not go to jail. Varying assessments of the degree of ecclesial freedom aside, all mainline publications agreed that government stooges did not control the official church.

In addition to committed Christian leadership, the official church boasted authentic Christian worship. Mainline writers spilt much ink describing Sunday services. Lois Cole, writing for *New Outlook*, remembered the crowds spilling out of the official churches.\(^{14}\) An American Baptist teaching English in China recounted the strength of the congregation he attended in Jinan.\(^ {15}\) In the *Christian Century*, musicologist Antoinette Wire described a full day of services at an official church: “I attended the registered church Sunday morning and again in the afternoon, when a young women preacher led us alternately in prayer and singing. We stood for nearly an hour, then sat for her lively sermon.”\(^ {16}\) For these publications, official Christianity in China more than adequately fed its people. No one could imagine leaving the services described malnourished.

Opportunities for service confirmed for mainliners that the official church constituted an authentic expression of Christianity. For mainline Protestantism, service has long been the epitome of Christian witness, the *sine qua non* of Christian faith.\(^ {17}\) And the official church served. Mainline publications accentuated the possibilities for service through the auspices of the CCC and, more particularly, the Amity Foundation. Some of the writers and/or “experts” for *New Outlook*, *InMission* and *Presbyterians Today* worked with Amity and they portrayed their own service as Christian witness. One United Methodist teacher working with Amity acknowledged that foreigners could not openly evangelize in China but asserted that Amity “teachers are expected and are able to live out their faith through their daily Christian presence.”\(^ {18}\) The Amity Foundation also provided opportunities for Chinese Christians to serve fellow citizens through health care,
economic development and Bible publishing. Service was not limited to the Amity Foundation, however. In 1995, the *Christian Century* published an account of an official church in Beiwan retaking control of an elementary school the government had confiscated during the Cultural Revolution. The government returned the school because the church could better educate the children of the poverty-stricken district.\(^{19}\) Although no outlet declared it explicitly, the accumulation of articles on the official church and service strongly implied that to understand the true strength of the church one had to look beyond the question of registering with the government and obeying its rules. The official church had found multiple, appropriate ways to live and to spread the gospel through service. Where two or more gathered to serve, there also was the true church.

Evangelical publications painted a more compromised portrait of the official church. The portrait suggested that the official church was basically inhospitable to true Christian faith. Counter-images of the official church highlighted the control the Chinese government administered over, and through, the TSPM and CCC. Words like “control” and “governed” appeared throughout articles. A subtitle in *Christianity Today* reported that “[f]iercely independent house churches and their government controlled counterparts eye each other with suspicion.”\(^{20}\) The *Christianity Today* article, and that periodical generally, differed from other publications skeptical of the official church in its willingness to acknowledge sincere, Christian laity within TSPM churches even if “government control has penetrated church leadership with its own agents and through senior pastors who are also leaders in the TSPM.”\(^{21}\) *Citizen* paid no attention to the laity and concentrated on the control an atheistic government maintained over the TSPM. In
the Citizen’s narration of the TSPM’s founding, the RAB, run by communist party members, “established” the movement. The official church bowed to Mao.

The “government-controlled” church often appeared, in evangelical outlets, as a threat to the unofficial churches. Occasionally evangelicals suggested that the official church was benign, even benevolent, but the overall picture remained sinister. Christianity Today carried a few reports of reconciliation between the official church and the house churches. In an interview, China scholar Kim-Kwong Chan said of the two churches: “Today the distinctions are breaking down. A number of Three Self clergy also pastor family gatherings.” A 1998 article declared that Han Wenzao, the leader of TSPM, desired to foster a relationship between the official and unofficial churches. Yet articles in both Christianity Today and Citizen also claimed that the TSPM carried out government-mandated persecution of the unofficial churches. If, as a Chinese Christian averred in Citizen, “[t]he government…is using the TSPM to destroy the house church in China,” the degree of government control over the official church would seem irredeemable. Although scattered examples of reconciliation nuanced the TSPM’s sinister description, they never succeeded in changing the basic image. It was indicative that Christianity Today subtitled Han Wenzao’s conciliatory interview “A Bigger Cage?” Evangelicals almost never suggested that the cage around the official church would vanish—or that they could trust the animal inside.

Evangelical publications ultimately found it difficult to separate vital, sincere faith and complete religious autonomy. Again, some writers affirmed the existence of true Christianity within the official church but most implied that the relationship with the government militated against an authentic, religious life. Jonathan Chao, a Christian
from Hong Kong and adjunct professor at Regent University concurred with the house Christians who considered official “government-appointed clergy” as “rascals uninterested in spiritual growth.” Whatever the spirituality of individuals within the official church, the structures were not conducive to a dynamic faith. Unlike mainline publications, which turned to service as a measure of spiritual vitality, the evangelical publications did not seek the Spirit in service opportunities. The Amity Foundation rarely appeared in *Christianity Today, SBC Life or Citizen*. When it did, its function as a source of statistics overshadowed its service work. Ministry through service did not suffice.

**Images of the Unofficial Churches: A Unique Mission or an Unnecessary Stance?**

Two pictures in a 1992 *Christianity Today* article hinted at the differing perceptions evangelicals had, and perpetuated, of the official and unofficial churches. On one side of the page, a stream of people walked away from a large church. With its stain glass windows and large bell tower, it could have been any downtown, mainline church in the United States. The congregants were obviously leaving a service and were doing so in a decorous fashion. On the other side of the page, a group of Chinese worshiped together outside. They had no grand church, but did have closed eyes, lifted hands and bent knees. The power of the worship jumped off the page. Even without the article text, the message was clear: One of these churches is not like the other.

The evangelical media during the 1990s highlighted the plight of unofficial, Protestant churches in China. The treatment of these churches determined, in large part, the image of persecution in China. Because the government prohibited these churches,
reportedly employing everything from intimidation to murder in order to stop them, evangelical outlets portrayed the religious situation in China as dire.

In the evangelical media, the house churches represented the true church in China for a constellation of reasons orbiting around one: house churches in China evangelized. Like service for mainline Protestants, a commitment to personal evangelism has long been a fundamental indicator of Christian faith for American evangelicals. Throughout evangelical discussions of the church situation in China, the gospel-sharing zeal of house church members appeared. One group of women, all from house churches and all recently imprisoned for meeting with an evangelist from Hong Kong, declared to *Christianity Today* that “[t]he only way the church can survive is through evangelism.” The various descriptions of house church leaders and members always resonated with their sentiment. A young house church leader, recently released from labor camp, reported to *Citizen* that “[w]hat we want…is freedom to evangelize.” And when Chinese Christians said “evangelize” they did not mean whispering the gospel to a friend over lunch. House church leaders envisioned national and international evangelism. By one account, “[h]idden Chinese evangelists travel to western China, Vietnam, Myanmar (Burma), Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Outer Mongolia with no visas, passports, or support.” For people so committed to evangelism, no other sort of witness, no social service project could substitute for communicating the gospel.

Evangelical outlets narrated the house churches’ unwillingness to register as a consequence of evangelistic concern. House church leaders’ refusal to register stemmed not from abstract church-state considerations or a desire to make a political statement but from the leaders’ belief that any regulations imposed by the state impeded evangelism.
Jonathan Chao told *Christianity Today* readers that Chinese Christians desired more religious freedom, particularly “freer opportunities to proclaim the Gospel. For this reason, many Christians refuse to join the TSPM church.”

Persecution also related directly to evangelism. Government officials portrayed arrest of house church leaders or the closing of unofficial churches as legal issues. House church leaders broke the law when they met without permission and were arrested as criminals, not Christians.

Evangelical media portrayed these same events as gospel issues. Bob and Wendy Fu, for example, alarmed the government because they “trained hundreds of evangelists, pastors, and lay leaders from many areas of China.”

*Citizen* claimed that “Chinese authorities have stepped up their campaign against unregistered churches, in large part because of those churches’ explosive growth.” The battle between the house churches and the government centered on the center of the gospel. It was a fight between the most faithful of Christians and a government determined to stop them.

Evangelism played another role critical to the imaging of house churches in conservative Christian outlets. Fidelity to the command to evangelize, as the government apparently realized, resulted in phenomenal growth. According to evangelical publications, the vast majority of Chinese Christians belonged to the outreach-oriented house churches. Throwing around numbers did more than witness to the power of the gospel—it asserted normitivity and authoritative voice. Jonathan Chao claimed in *Christianity Today* that the house churches constituted ninety percent of some 60 million Chinese Christians.

*Citizen* claimed that between 20 million and 60 million Chinese met regularly in house churches. *Citizen* reminded its readers that TSPM “represents only about 10 million Chinese.” The rhetorical import of numbers sometimes
demanded ignoring “experts.” In 1994, a news item in *Christianity Today* reported that China expert Anthony Lambert placed the number of Protestants in China at “no more than 30 million.” Subsequent articles in the periodical, with the exception of an interview with another China expert, continued to place the total number of Protestant much higher. Estimating high did not risk exaggerating official church membership because the TSPM released its own membership numbers, normally around 10 million. Any numbers beyond that—and most were well beyond—belonged to the house churches. The house churches were the real church in China because they evangelized and because they boasted the most people.

This logic proved less compelling for mainline publications. The house churches simply did not warrant the focus given them by evangelical media. Numbers again played a central role. United Methodist and American Baptist magazines relied upon the TSPM’s numbers. Philip Wickeri, in *Presbyterians Today*, estimated the numbers of Protestants between 15 and 20 million, a low estimate by evangelical standards. *The Christian Century* acknowledged the broad range of numbers and its contributors rarely offered personal estimates. The writers who did claimed that while the TSPM’s numbers were low, they were more reasonable than the claims of those sympathetic to the house churches. All mainline outlets asserted that the majority of Christians worshiped in the official church. House churches, then, were not numerically normative for discussions of persecution in China.

In mainline, denominational publications, the imaging of house churches was not only a matter of describing them as numerically insignificant. These publications downplayed the problems, even the existence, of the unofficial churches by largely
excluding them from discussions. Unofficial churches made only brief appearances in *Presbyterians Today*. Long-time Amity worker Philip Wickeri dismissed the exceptional cases of churches unwilling to register by claiming “most churches want to be registered and have their legal existence guaranteed.” Other denominational magazines ignored the unofficial churches altogether. Implicitly this exclusion suggested that the unofficial churches mattered little when appraising China’s religious situation. House churches offered nothing distinctive, other than their unwillingness to register, to the ecclesial terrain and warranted no separate attention.

The *Christian Century*’s treatment of house churches differed from that of denominational publications. House churches appeared in the *Century*, although not with the frequency that they did in evangelical outlets. Many of the pieces referring to house churches appeared in the “News” section, not in longer articles. Throughout the 1990s, the *Century* published brief new articles about incidents of house church persecution in China. Readers of the *Century* knew that unofficial churches in China suffered varying degrees of repression.

If the *Century* differed from its fellow mainline colleagues in a consistent acknowledgement of house church persecution, it also differed from evangelical publications in its image of the house churches. The news articles carried relatively dispassionate accounts of arrests, imprisonments, and acts of violence. They did not make claims about the work or value of the house churches. For the *Century*, the problem was not house church persecution particularly but the practice of persecution generally. Not surprisingly, the *Century* reported repression of the Fulan Gong sect in the late 1990s. Persecution of anyone made the news section.
In their longer articles, *Century* writers acknowledged that the government persecuted some house churches because they would not register but did not connect the unofficial churches’ refusal to register with a special concern for evangelism. This disconnection had significant ramifications for the image of the house churches. Without a special concern for evangelism, the house churches had no compelling reason not to register. To compound the situation, the *Century* generally found registration requirements benign. In a 1994 article, Mary-Margaret Patterson quoted Wendell Karsen, of the Hong Kong Christian Council, on church registration. Responding to house church fears that registration would lead to religious repression, Patterson reported that “Karsen doubts that such repression will occur, and points to the notable progress in religious toleration made in the past 15 years.”42 Lacking a special function, and somewhat idiosyncratically obstinate regarding registration, the house churches boasted no strong claim to leadership among China’s Christians. *Century* writers Ann Martin and Myrrl Byler stated that they considered the CCC and TSPM, not the house church leaders and their foreign allies, as the most sensible voice for Chinese Christians.43 Why trust a few people who protested benign regulations obeyed by so many?

The mainline media appeared in general agreement regarding the house churches. The house churches boasted a negligible influence on the situation of Christians in China. Some mainline publications noted their troubles—but did not give them special weight. The unofficial churches had neither the numbers, nor a special function within the Chinese churches, to warrant pride of place in any discussion. Their persecution was not the final word on the church in China.

**Image of the Underground Catholic Church: An Ecclesial Dilemma.**
Protestant periodicals during the 1990s concentrated on the Protestant church in China. Whether sympathetic to the CCC or the house churches, the periodicals chose a Protestant church. Given the Protestant readership of the periodicals, particularly the denominational periodicals, such a focus made sense. The *Christian Century*, however, also paid a significant amount of attention to the underground Catholic Church. The *Century’s* ecumenical spirit, and desire to cultivate a broader readership, explains its concern for Catholics. Yet this attention to the underground Catholic Church complicates any analysis of the *Century’s* imaging of Chinese Christians. Did the portrait of the underground Catholic Church differ from that of the underground Protestant church? If so, why? Answers to these questions, although they demand some conjecture, provide insight into the way the *Century* imaged the church and why it sympathized with some persecuted Christians more than others.

Unlike the house churches, the *Century* portrayed the underground Catholic Church as justified in its refusal to register. Registration demanded cutting ties with Rome. As *Century* articles made clear, this demand contravened the traditional Catholic commitment to a worldwide communion headed by Rome. *Century* writers always reminded readers of the ecclesial issues at stake for underground Catholics. A 1995 article about China reported that “John Paul II is concerned to heal the schism with the Patriotic Association and to unite all of China’s Catholics to the universal church.”

When the pope and the CPA each consecrated their own Chinese bishops in 2000, the centrality of ecclesiology reappeared: “John Paul made no direct reference to the new Chinese bishops, but in his homily he underlined the universality of the 1-billion-members Roman Catholic Church and the doctrine that holds that bishops chosen by the
pope descend in an unbroken line of succession from Christ’s apostles.” If one accepted the traditional understanding of Roman Catholic polity—and nowhere in the Century articles did anyone other than the Chinese government question it—then Chinese Roman Catholics had no real alternative to the underground church.

The Century’s treatment of the underground Catholic Church indicated that it was a different animal from the house churches. While Protestant rationale for remaining unregistered elicited counter-arguments in the Century, writers reported and did not second-guess Catholic reasons. The Century might suggest that house church Christians could witness through service, but it would not tell Catholics that they could be Catholic without the pope. Unofficial Protestants and underground Catholics faced different situations. House church believers could practice authentic Protestantism within the official church. Their persecution, if lamentable, was somewhat self-chosen. On the other hand, as long as registration precluded loyalty to Rome, Catholics could only be truly Catholic underground. It was fitting that one Century writer deplored the treatment of the underground Catholic church, not the house churches, as the definitive proof of Chinese intolerance: “The suppression of the unofficial [Catholic] church reveals the illegitimacy of any claim to religious freedom in China…The government’s treatment of underground Catholics confirms the harshness of the regime, its continuing intolerance of dissent and its belief that independent groups and ideas are dangerous.” The government was, in this case, guilty of persecuting people who had no viable religious option.

The Sanity of Competing Images
During the 1990s, evangelical and mainline publications employed a spiritual calculus when deciding the severity of persecution in China. Beliefs regarding what Christians had to be able to do in order to be Christian determined assessments of persecution. Those who felt that service could be witness tended to find the official church a viable religious option for Protestants. They did not deny the existence of persecution, but would not expend much time on those who had other options and chose not to take them. Other publications believed the government precluded the freedom to evangelize—a freedom absolutely necessary in the Christian life—and did not believe the official church an option for committed true believers. For these publications, the repression of the house churches was the first and last word regarding religion in China. Catholics, for the *Century*, added another wrinkle. The *Century* affirmed that Catholics, in order to be Catholic, needed the freedom to follow Rome. Because the Chinese government forbade loyalty to the Vatican, the situation of underground Catholics warranted sympathy.

Imaging of the church in China did not end after passage of PNTR in 2000. In March 2002 a *Christianity Today* article titled “New China: Same Old Tricks” detailed the continued persecution of house Christians.⁴⁷ Seven months later, another article discussed the cooperation between American evangelicals and the official church. Not surprisingly, one of the evangelicals interviewed affirmed that he “openly evangelizes” in spite of official church strictures.⁴⁸ The *Christian Century* also continued to report incidents of persecution, as well as continuing tensions between the Vatican and the Chinese government. As it seems unlikely that reports of persecution will abate—or that
accounts of a thriving official church will end—understanding the rationale of competing images will continue to be important.

It will also be necessary to know what the competing images do not signify. Arguing that the perception of persecution in China during the 1990s depended on the descriptor’s assessment of the freedom necessary for vital Christian practice does not mean that Christians only care about those with whom they agree. Flipping through any of the publications mentioned above reveals that they all care about someone who is definitely “other.” But Christians, like any group of people, have limited resources, emotionally, financially, and organizationally. No one can care about everything all the time. If most Christians accept Christ’s command in Matthew 25 to heal the sick, feed the hungry and clothe the naked, they undoubtedly hope that he understood the overwhelming nature of the task. Christians must make choices about whom to shelter, feed and clothe. The criteria of these judgments are not always clear—perhaps not even to those making the decisions. Somehow, people must decide whose needs are the greatest and who can live tolerably well in their given situation. The images created of others justify, and perpetuate, varying degrees of concern for struggling people. If images exaggerate, obscure and simply confuse the reality of a situation, they also prove helpful when making determinations about resources and needs. And if the bad news is that everyone neglects someone, maybe the good news is that humans bother to care about others at all.


3 Tony Carnes, “Freer Trade, Freer Faith?” Christianity Today, 10 July 2000, 25.


6 This assumption applies to this specific case, not all instances of imaging. In his book, The Amish in the American Imagination, Daniel Weaver-Zercher explores the imaging of a group much less inclined to dialog with the “outside” world. Such reticence makes for a different relationship between “imager” and “imagee.” See David Weaver-Zercher, The Amish in the American Imagination (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), passim.

7 I based these definitions on the descriptions given by the publications under consideration. Although individuals writers for these publications would want to augment my definitions in various ways, I think they could all acknowledge the basic validity of these definitions. I “double-checked” my definitions with one “scholarly” source, Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, Protestantism in Contemporary China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Even a source such as this presents problems of imaging. One of the articles used in this essay is a review of Protestantism in Contemporary China (Deborah A. Brown, “Protestantism in Contemporary China,” The Christian Century, 19 April 1995, 419). Another article is an interview with one of the book’s authors, Kim-Kwong Chan (“Love and Miracles in China,” Christianity Today, 7 April 1997, 40). As the Christian Century review makes clear, no source is neutral and all sources are potentially subject to imaging.


10 Eva Stimson, “The Church in China,” *Presbyterians Today*, November 1997, 13. The note next to the picture reported that the Amity Foundation had printed its 15 millionth Bible in April 1997 (12).


12 Stimson, 15.

13 Brown, 419.


21 Adeney, 22.


23 “Love and Miracles in China,” 40.


25 Adeney, 22; Aikman, 16.

26 Aikman, 16.

27 Morgan, 36.
28 Thomas F. Taylor, “China’s Cross: Jonathan Chao Reveals the Secret of Chinese Church Growth”


29 Adeney, 21.

30 Warner, 51.


32 Aikman, 17.

33 Morgan, 39.

34 Taylor, 50.

35 Carnes, “House Church Leaders Flee with American Help,” 70.

36 Aikman, 16.

37 Taylor, 49.

38 Aikman, 16.


41 Stimson, 15.


43 Martin and Byler, 833.


46 Brown, 422.
