Sarah Johnson  
**Cruelly Bound…Or Free Enough?: Protestant Images of the Church in China, 1992-2000**

It may have been the best of times—or maybe it was the worst of times. In September 1997, the *Christian Century* claimed that religious and political leaders in the United States exaggerated the extent of Christian persecution in China and praised the state-approved Chinese churches. The same month, a *Christianity Today* headline reported that Chinese house church leaders Bob and Heidi Fu had escaped to the United States after imprisonment for training pastors and evangelists. By this account, the Fu’s case demonstrated China’s continued persecution of Christians.

Why these different pictures of Christian life in China? Between 1992 and 2000, Protestant publications divided into two camps regarding Christian persecution in China. The accounts from mainline publications portrayed a government-tolerated, flourishing Chinese church. Evangelical publications painted a darker picture of on-going and often brutal persecution of Chinese Christians. These competing images of Chinese Christianity 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.

Mainline publications portrayed the official church as sufficient for the practice of authentic Christianity. These publications maintained that the bodies governing the official church were not government stooges and provided ample opportunities for Christian service. Through English schools, economic development projects, and rural health care, the official church enabled witness through Christian service. Such a witness, combined with dynamic worship and a commitment to indigenous leadership, sufficed for an authentic expression of Christianity.
Evangelical publications saw less to celebrate in China. They portrayed the official church as allowing government control in the most important aspect of Christian life: evangelism. The house churches rejected government control precisely because of impediments to evangelism. No amount of service by the official churches could atone for any regulations on evangelism. As the house churches represented the authentic form of Christianity, and because they boasted superior numbers, the government’s prohibition against them signified pervasive persecution of true Christian faith.

Mainline publications downplayed the house churches and their market on evangelization. Nothing the house churches did necessitated their refusal to join the official church. The exception to this sentiment involved the *Christian Century’s* portrayal of the underground Catholic church. The underground church, unlike the official Catholic church, remained loyal to the pope. The *Century* treated this underground church more sympathetically than it did the Protestant house churches. Underground Catholics could not faithfully sacrifice a key component of their ecclesiology. The *Century’s* image of them implicitly recognized this key distinction.

In their imaging of the Christian church in China, mainline and evangelical publications relied upon their own understandings of authentic Christianity in order to evaluate the severity of Chinese repression. While such a calculus might appear to privilege some people’s sufferings over others, or to apply culturally imbedded standards to a foreign situation, the practice of the publications demonstrated larger human realities. Suffering is always more vast than any individual’s, or even any group’s, ability to care and act in meaningful ways. Decisions regarding whom to care about are a practical necessity. That Protestants during the 1990s used their understandings of the Christian life to make such decisions about repression in China was only one example of the assorted ways in which people deal with human finitude.