

A Review of the Development of Christianity in China from the latest edition of Blue Book of Religions (2010)

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The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences published the *Blue Book of Religions (2010)* on August 11, 2010. It includes the statistics on the membership of both the Catholic and Protestant Churches in China. This is rather groundbreaking, so I would like to discuss it with our readers.

This new edition of the *Blue Book of Religions* differs from the way the social science academics talked about the development of religions in the past. This Blue Book has high regard for the “prosperous time” various religions are experiencing now. The website “china.com.cn” reported:

The *Blue Book of Religions* pointed out that at the 60th anniversary of the birth of New China, the major religions in China held ceremonies to pray for China and for the Chinese people. Different religious groups held various types of functions to pray and celebrate, showing the good tradition of these religions for loving their country and their religion. They were united and moving forward, and expressed their sincere feelings of “caring for the nation and the people”. This not only promoted communication and understanding among the religions, it also strengthened the interaction between the religious groups of mainland China with those of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. Furthermore, it has had a significant impact in promoting the discovery and spread of our excellent Chinese culture, of encouraging the healthy development of the religious groups, and of enhancing the social services, which the

religious groups deliver to the people.
(www.news.china.com.cn, 2010-8-11)

Among the five great religions recognized by the Chinese government, Buddhism receives the most acclaim in the *Blue Book of Religions*. It stated: “2009 was the 60th Anniversary of the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. The Buddhist communities organized a variety of celebrations, to pray for the welfare of country, ... 16 temples organized summer camps and meditation programs, together with a variety of special social welfare activities.... Buddhists have achieved a lot of development in many different ways. All this shows that Buddhism is now experiencing its golden age in China.” (*Blue Book*, p. 40)

Buddhism is developing well in mainland China. Religious adherents should all rejoice at this. We also feel happy for our Buddhist friends. However, are construction and activities sufficient to prove that a religion is prosperous? I believe that the political arena and religious circles have different interpretations of this, and we will not discuss that here.

For believers in the Christian faith, and particularly for us Catholics, what draws our attention in the *Blue Book of Religions* is its account of the development of the Christian religion.

The Estimate of the Catholic population is same as the estimate given outside of China

The estimate of the Catholic population in the *Blue Book of Religions* (2010) is basically divided into two parts. The first part used the figures from the latest study of the Faith Institute for Cultural Studies in the Catholic Church of Hebei Province. The figures are as follows:

As of December 10, 2009, there are 3,397 Catholic clergy (bishops, priests, and deacons). Included in the figure are 3,268 priests in residing in about 100 different dioceses. In mainland China, there are 10 major seminaries with 628 major seminarians; 106 convents with 5,451 Sisters, who have taken their vows, and 30 preparatory seminaries

with 630 minor seminarians. There are about 350 members of male religious congregations. There are 5,967 churches or prayer centers throughout the country. According to partial statistics, China has 5,714,853 Catholics. (*Blue Book*, p. 98)

These figures basically coincide with the figures stated in *Faith Online* of December 18, 2009. (*Faith Online* 2009-12-18) However, the *Blue Book of Religions* did not use all the statistics of the Faith Institute for Cultural Studies. The obvious difference is that the topic researchers of the *Blue Book of Religions* “took into consideration some special situations. Therefore the actual number of Catholics in mainland China should be more than 6 million, and it could be as many as between 6 and 12 million.” (*Blue Book*, p. 98)

This gives a brand new perspective. The Book did not state clearly what special situation it was referring to, that made it set the Catholic population to be “between 6 million to 12 million.” It is also the first time that it subtly admitted the possibility of the Catholic population presented in statistics from outside sources (including that of the Holy Spirit Study Centre) might be correct. Holy Spirit Centre has been proposing these since 1999.

A footnote after the sentence: “There are about 350 men belonging to religious congregations,” states “This is the first time that Catholic statistics in China mention male religious congregations and their members. There are some 350 religious men in China, belonging mainly to a few international congregations, such as the Franciscans, SVD and the Jesuits.” (*Blue Book*, p. 98. footnote 2) In the past the religious administrative bodies in China always ignored the existence of religious congregations of men. Now we can say there has been a minor breakthrough. We hope that there will be more significant developments in the future.

What’s more worth noting is that for many years there have been differences in the estimate of the number of Catholics in mainland China between mainland sources and sources outside the mainland. The difference has been caused by the different criteria

used in the estimates. The official figure has always been different from the figures of the Holy Spirit Study Centre, which I have estimated. Interestingly enough, the difference between my estimate and that “acknowledged” by the Chinese government has always remained constant.

In 1988, I proposed for the first time that the Catholic population in mainland China should be about 8 million, while the official “acknowledged” figure was 3.5 million, a discrepancy ratio of 2.3 to 1.

In 2005, I estimated the figure to be 12 million Catholics in mainland China, while the official “acknowledged” figure was 5.3 million¹, a discrepancy ratio also of 2.3 to 1.

Thus we can see that both parties have stuck to their own principles in making their estimates. There is certain degree of “internal validity” in this. Since the difference between them remains stable, it shows that both parties have not compromised in their methods of calculation. The difference in the research methods, to a large extent can be attributed to the “difference between the official church and the underground church”, and to the problem of illegal residents. In many remote Catholic villages that are far away from political hubs, the reported population often exhibits a certain level of discrepancy from the actual population. This has always affected the population statistics of China. This *Blue Book of Religions* accepts the fact that apart from the official figure of 5.7 million Catholics, there can be as many as 6 to 12 million Catholics (i.e., any figure within this range), which is the estimate of the Hebei Faith organization. This means that official organizations are willing to accept the possibility of a larger figure for the number of Catholics, which is indeed praiseworthy.

¹ In June 2004, an official from Beijing told me that their figure was 5.3 million Catholics, while the open part of the Catholic Church in 2004 just said “more than 5 million,” without giving an exact figure. (See “Catholic Church in China, Special Issue on the 7th National Representatives Congress,” 2004), co-edited by the Catholic Patriotic Association and the Chinese Bishops’ Conference, p. 4, p. 5, p. 10.

Even so, this does not mean that the present situation of the Catholic Church in China is optimistic. There are still many problems, which give us cause for reflection.

Some reflection on the issue of the Catholic Population

(1) As the *Blue Book 2010* points out, the total number of Catholics in China does not amount to one percent of the total population. Regarding this the aspect there is no argument. According to Faith Press calculations, Catholics make up just 0.44 percent of the total population of China. Even according to our statistics, the Catholic population is still below one percent. The ratio of Catholics to the total population in China is therefore very minute. Regarding social participation, the impact of Catholic thought on the whole of Chinese society is extremely small. From this point of view, the central government need not focus its attention on the Catholic Church overly much.

(2) Since the turn of this century, growth in the Catholic population has reached a plateau. What is a plateau? By definition, a plateau is a “state of little or no change following a period of rapid growth or development.” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary, 1994) In 2009 I wrote:

Based on the figures available to us in the last decades, I believe that the Catholic Church entered the state of being on a plateau in 1998, or at the latest, 2000. According to various sources, we know that the Catholic population experienced no significant changes in numbers since 2000. (*Tripod*, 2009, Spring Issue, Chinese version pp. 2-3)

(3) The *Blue Book* states that there are 3,397 clerics in China. In comparison with the 12 million Catholics in China, it seems that the human resources are not very abundant. Neither are they too deficient. It means that one clergyman serves some 3000 Catholics. The ratio of priest to the number of Catholics

is slightly higher than that of the worldwide Church, where 400,000 priests serve 1.1 billion Catholics. But the ratio is not too far off either.

The real problem that the Catholic Church is facing is the 1.3 billion non-Catholics among its fellow citizens. This includes about 1 billion non-believers of any religion. They should be the targets of evangelization. Thus the ratio of Catholic clergy to non-believers in China is as much as to 1 to 300,000, far higher than the worldwide ratio (approximately 1 to 5,000 only). This is about 60 times the universal average. From this we can see the difficulties facing the Chinese clergy. The huge population of non-believers is, on the one hand, a big challenge for the Chinese clergy (as well as for the whole Catholic community), but it is also a wonderful opportunity for evangelization.

The numbers of Protestant followers seems deliberately under-estimated

The figures for the Protestant community presented in *Blue Book 2010* seem rather conservative. The Blue Book states: "In China, Protestants make up about 1.8 percent of the total population. The concrete figure is 23.05 million. Among them 15.56 million are baptized, equal to 67.5 percent of all Protestant Christians, while 7.49 million are not yet baptized, accounting for 32.5 percent." (*Blue Book*, p. 191)

In 2007, however, I already pointed out: "Up to 2006, the figures for Protestant Christians varies from source to source. Government estimates put the figure at around 16 million, while the late founder of Chinese Gospel Society, Pastor Zhao Tian'en claimed in 2002 that the figure should be at least 82 million. Based on other sources an objective estimate would be between 34 million and 36 million." (*Tripod*, 2007, Summer Issue, Chinese version, p. 3) Nowadays, the figure should be even higher.

The online *Gospel Herald* queried the figure quoted in the *Blue Book*. It reported,

A leader of Family Churches in Beijing and a former member of the Academy of Social Sciences, Dr. Fan Yafeng responded, "In their message, the figure they cite is very unreliable. The claim of 20 million adherents in Protestant Christianity has absolutely no foundation in reality. This figure is basically a figure of the Three Self Church within the official system only. In a macro sense, the Christian Church should include not only the official Three Self Church, Family Churches as well. Even the most conservative estimate goes way beyond 23 million." (www.gospelherald.com, 2010-8-23)

The discrepancy in the figures has existed for a long time. The *Gospel Herald* quoted various sources and pointed out that the possible figure is between 40 and 100 million. The *Gospel Herald* reported:

Mr. Zhao Xiao, a famous economist from mainland China, said at the Willow Creek Leaders Summit that, even based on a conservative estimate, the number of Christians in China has already reached 80 million, with some rather optimistic estimates even reporting 130 million. In 2009, Erik Burklin, the Chairman of CHINA PARTNER, reported that CHINA PARTNER had carried out a survey covering 31 provinces, metropolises and autonomous regions regarding various social groups and professions. The survey showed that there were about 40 million Protestants and 14 million Catholics in China. Burklin also said a great number of interviewees claimed themselves to be from Family churches. As most Family churches do not register with the government, to arrive at an accurate estimate of the Christian population in China is still an uncertainty. (www.gospelherald.com, 2010-8-23)

Regarding the claim that "68.8 percent of believers have been joining the church for reasons of their own sickness or the sickness of their family members" (*Blue Book*, p. 192), probably this is due to a misleading design of the questionnaire. I myself on many

occasions have exchanged points of view with Protestant friends, and I found their faith to be so strong and active that physical healing could not have been the only reason, nor even the main reason for joining the Church.

Wang Meixiu, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, told UCA News earlier this year that the survey concerning the Protestant Church had been carried out for many years. Researchers collected more than 200,000 copies of questionnaires all over China. "It was one of the most attractive points of the report this year," she said. (UCA News, Chinese website, 2010-8-13)

UCANews also pointed out: "The figure given for the number of Christians in the report of the survey the lowest estimate only. As 'religion' is still a sensitive topic in China, a lot of people still feel uneasy about revealing their religious faith." (UCA News, Chinese website, 2010-8-13)

Conclusive reflection

Obviously the *Blue Book* deals with different religions in different ways. For example, their estimate of the number of members of the Catholic Church has changed from conservative to progressive, while their estimate of Protestant Church members has changed from progressive to conservative. The approach is different, but the basic rationale is the same: to meet the political needs. But this seems to be a violation of the principle of pragmatism.

The *Blue Book* claimed that the Protestant Church faced the challenge of a diminishment in their work in the rural areas, as well as a lack of evangelists. The current situation in rural churches also gives the sects an opportunity to enter in. People should not overlook this. (*Blue Book*, p. 8) Surely such a phenomenon deserves great attention. In reality, however, the Catholic Church also experiences these same problems.

At the same time, the *Blue Book* also admits that with the speeding up of the process of urbanization, the situation of the churches in China is also changing. In the past most of the

Christians lived in the countryside. Following the great emigration in recent years of young peasants from the rural to the urban areas in search of a new career, rural Christians also moved to cities. On the top of this, urban young people and intellectuals keep on joining churches. So churches in quite a number of cities are suffering the problem of overcrowding. It brings new problems to the Church. (*Blue Book*, p. 8)

This situation reflects that the Christian Churches in China are changing from “rural surrounding cities” to modern city churches. Actually this is a normal situation in the process of the China’s globalization. Perhaps the experience of Hong Kong churches can contribute somewhat to the modern challenges our brothers and sisters in China are facing.

Whether we follow the overseas statistics or the official statistics concerning the number of Catholics in China, one thing we should not forget is that the Catholic Church is still the smallest organization amongst the Five Major Religions. We should think over this question deeply. Even if the Catholics and the Protestants join together, they would still be a minority in China. We should all work well together to make the Gospel more well known among our brothers and sisters in China.

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