



Article

When the Gospel meets the China Dream: Religious Freedom and the Golden Rule

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Kin Sheung Chiaretto Yan

Sophia University Institute, Loppiano, Italy, and University of Saint Joseph, Macau

Abstract

The issue of religious freedom affects Sino-Vatican relations, but the Roman Catholic Church shares values with Confucianism, which provides common ground for dialogue. Pope Francis is focusing the church outward by promoting a culture of encounter and by working unceasingly for a fraternal dialogue of peace. Chinese president Xi Jinping urges his people to fulfill the China dream, emphasizing the core values of harmony, friendship, and civilization. Many have believed that the Gospel can contribute to China's spiritual civilization; normalization of relations between China and the Holy See would benefit China and the Catholic Church and contribute to world peace and harmony.

Keywords

China dream, the Golden Rule, inculturation, sinicization, dialectic of harmony, dialogue of fraternity

There are two prevailing attitudes regarding the Sino-Vatican relationship and the situation of the Catholic Church in China: one is to engage actively in dialogue, while the other is skeptical about such efforts. Resistance to dialogue can arise from both the Chinese authorities and the Holy See. Since I am a Catholic scholar, my research emphasizes the Catholic perspective. Those who want to engage actively in dialogue

Corresponding author:

Kin Sheung Chiaretto Yan, Sophia University Institute, Loppiano, Italy, and University of Saint Joseph, Macau.

Email: chiaretto.yan@usj.edu.mo

generally take a step-by-step approach.¹ Those who are skeptical about dialogue reason mainly as follows: unless there is complete freedom of religion in China, there can be no genuine dialogue. We therefore need to ask, What is complete freedom of religion? and What does the Chinese Constitution say about religion?

Dialogue between the Holy See and Chinese authorities

Article 36 of the Chinese Constitution states: “Citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. *The state protects normal religious activities.* No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state. Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination” (emphasis mine).²

In 2018 we celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 of this declaration states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes *freedom* to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, *to manifest his religion* or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance” (emphasis mine).³

If we compare the two articles, we see that both include the freedom to practice and to manifest one’s faith and the freedom to change one’s religious belief (freedom of conversion). We see, however, a difference: the Chinese Constitution emphasizes protection and no foreign domination, while the UN declaration emphasizes the freedom to manifest one’s religious belief. One focuses inward on protection, and the other focuses outward on manifestation. We may trace this divergence to cultural differences between East and West.

These cultural differences are evident in other universal moral teachings, such as the Golden Rule. This maxim refers to the ethics of reciprocity or reciprocal love, as expressed in a positive or a negative form. Variants of the Golden Rule can be found in many religions and cultures. For Western culture, it is mostly inspired by Jesus’ words in the Gospels: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12; Luke 6:31). In China, the Rule reflects the wording Confucius gives it: “Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you.” The way of applying or expressing this concept, however, could vary culturally. In the realm of international affairs, for example, China often insists on a policy of not interfering in the internal affairs of others. In contrast, the foreign policy of the United States has often been that of putting pressure on other countries to accept its values and systems. Some Asians want to assert their cultural identity as a response and propose so-called Asian values. Contrary to what many people may think, modernization in Asia does not necessary mean Westernization.

Another document addresses the meaning of religious freedom: “Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World: Recommendations for Conduct.” This text was signed in 2011 by three major Christian bodies: the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue

(PCID), the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA). Despite the contrast of approaches of the Catholic and other Christian churches regarding evangelization, in this 2011 document they were able to come up with an integral approach balancing proclamation and dialogue. The study and consultation were unprecedented, and the subsequent signing of the document was historic, involving interfaith and intercultural, as well as ecumenical, collaboration. Along with principles of service and love to neighbors as witness in multireligious contexts, principle 7 addresses freedom of religion and belief: “Religious freedom including the right to publicly profess, practice, *propagate* and change one’s religion flows from the very dignity of the human person which is grounded in the creation of all human beings in the image and likeness of God (cf. Genesis 1:26). Thus, all human beings have *equal rights and responsibilities*. Where any religion is *instrumentalized for political ends*, or where religious persecution occurs, Christians are called to engage in a prophetic witness denouncing such actions” (emphasis mine).⁴

In addition to the freedom to practice and to change one’s religion, the principle also includes a third element mentioned in the “Christian Witness” document, namely, the freedom to “propagate” one’s faith. This freedom is a basic human right but is balanced by certain responsibilities. Another important point is that “religion should not be instrumentalized for political ends,” a concern China has also voiced in China-Vatican relations.

While some Christian groups (including, for example, Pentecostals and evangelicals) stress that they have the mission to propagate their faith, the Catholic Church emphasizes that this mission best occurs in interreligious dialogue, that is, when all parties are open and each person or group has the right to manifest and to propagate its faith and culture in a respectful manner. It is interesting to note that the church’s PCID signed this document, together with the WCC Program on Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation.⁵

By clarifying these additional terms crucial for religious dialogue, this joint document not only represents a step forward for the relationship between the Catholic Church and other Christian churches but also provides relevant ground for China-Vatican rapprochement.

Inculturation and/or sinicization

With regard to the two attitudes mentioned earlier (engaging actively in dialogue or skeptical retreat from dialogue), I opt for the former, for the simple reason that dialogue is a useful tool to bridge any gap or resolve any conflict. I do not believe, however, that China is doing enough in religious freedom, even though it is an ongoing process, for China is opening up more and more. Why not facilitate this process through constructive dialogue? In order to define what complete freedom of religion is, we also must listen to the Chinese view and at the same time be open and committed to respectful dialogue. That is, true dialogue is necessary.

The Chinese concept of sinicization (i.e., integrating something to be in conformity with Chinese culture or expressing it with Chinese characteristics) is not

contradictory to the Catholic concept of inculturation (i.e., a continuous process of the church to proclaim the Gospel so that it enters into the cultures of the peoples without compromising the integrity of the Christian faith). Even in evangelization, there is a mutual influence of evangelizing and evangelized cultures (“interculturalization”). The emphasis should be that the Catholic Church sees inculturation from a spiritual and religious perspective, while the Chinese authorities see sinicization of religions from the perspective of administration and politics. Keeping in mind the different cultural perspectives and the separate spheres of competence, I believe that controversies and conflicts of interest can be resolved. I suggest that these two concepts (inculturation/interculturalization and sinicization), if tackled well and effectively, are complementary, inasmuch as Christianity can spread in China without the century-old label of being a foreign religion, and on the side of China, its rise as a world power is welcomed by others while maintaining “socialism with Chinese characteristics in a new era.”⁶

Respectful dialogue means expressing one’s ideas freely and at the same time respecting the views of the other with openness. A related idea in Confucianism is the notion of being “harmonious while diversified,” that is, diversity (distinction) in unity. This concept recognizes that, although people have differences in opinions, interests, preferences, and profiles, they should first maintain peace. People should live in harmony with each other, even as they retain their diversity.

Recently, Chinese president Xi Jinping outlined new policies concerning religions in China today. On May 20, 2016, at the Central United Front Work Conference, he stressed that religious activities should (1) actively guide the respective religions to adapt to socialist society, (2) adhere to the principle of sinicization and promote the rule of law in religious activities, and (3) guide religions to promote economic development, social harmony, cultural prosperity, national unity, and the reunification of the motherland.⁷

What consequences will these policies bring about? This question is of particular interest to the Catholic Church in China, especially for the inculturation of the Christian faith in the Chinese context. China has gone through tremendous changes since its Open Door policy in 1979. The leader of this change, Deng Xiaoping, coined the phrase “building socialism with Chinese characteristics.” By putting this proposal into practice, enormous potential has been unleashed, and China has experienced unparalleled development.

A recent article on the editorial page of the *Global Times*, a major newspaper of the Chinese government, mentioned that there is a simple way to describe China’s recent historical development: while the founding of modern China relied on Marxism, the economic success of China depended to some extent on implementing reforms that opened China to the global economy. In this implementation, China accepted some modern Western ideologies for the sake of the nation, its people, and the revival of Chinese culture. The implementation of new ideas, however, must be verified through praxis. China is now defining the core values of the China dream that the article suggests must be maintained, while still accepting a modern Western influence.⁸ The West and its positive values, in my view, are deeply rooted in Christianity, with the result

that, as China continues to integrate Western and Chinese culture, it will to some extent be taking steps to embrace Christianity.

Among foreigners who have left a mark on Chinese history, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) is recognized for his unique cultural and religious contribution to China. He was a man of knowledge who brought Christianity to China, introduced Chinese culture to the West, promoted cultural exchange, and had great respect for Chinese culture. He valued friendship and became friends with scholar-officials such as Xu Guangqi, Li Zhicao, and Yang Tingyun.⁹ Although Ricci's method of approaching China was not adopted by the church for some time, in recent decades he has been once again put in the limelight. Pope Francis and recent pontiffs have affirmed and praised Ricci's missionary work in China. John Paul II pointed out that Ricci knew how to seek consensus with the Chinese intellectuals of that time. He based his vision of inculturating the Christian faith in China, just as the church fathers had done centuries before in the encounter between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Greco-Roman culture.¹⁰

Ricci, an outstanding representative of the Western culture of his times, inaugurated a fruitful dialogue between Christianity and Confucianism. While the church today affirms the correctness of the attitude and approach of Ricci toward China, it was limited only to Confucianism. Today's dialogue, however, should also take into account Taoism, Chinese Buddhism, and the recent developments of Chinese culture.

When the Gospel meets the China dream

Church fathers such as Augustine of Hippo made great contributions to theology out of their profound experience of God and the encounter between Christianity and Roman culture, which has its roots in Greek philosophy. As part of the effort to inculturate the Gospel in China, attempts could be made to express the unity and mystery of the Trinity using categories of Chinese thought. I find that the Taoist concept of the dialectic of harmony contains many elements helpful for the understanding of the Trinitarian relationship:¹¹ the abiding relationship of chi between the yin and the yang, the relationship between being and nonbeing, the imprints of one and three in all things, and the concept of self-emptying aiming at *wu-wei* (nondoing) as an ultimate goal of a human being in harmony with the Tao.

I also find the traditional values of harmony, humility, intuitive reasoning, and dialectical thinking of Chinese culture and the emphasis on relationship a fitting disposition to approach the mystery of the Trinity, which is so essential to Christianity.¹² An in-depth analysis of Taoism and Christian Trinitarian theology could contribute to the inculturation of the Christian faith in the Chinese context in ways that could contribute to the church and to the positive development of Chinese culture in today's world.

Another comparison is between freedom, equality, and friendship, which are core values of the China dream, and the Christian concepts of freedom, equality, and fraternity. This latter set of values became the motto of the French Revolution. The three are very relevant themes underlying dialogue. On the World Day of Peace 2014, Pope Francis gave an important message entitled "Fraternity, the Foundation and Pathway to Peace"¹³ and instituted a new form of dialogue of fraternity for peace. Other values

of the China dream are “prosperity” and “civilization,” which correspond to the themes of “a healthy and caring economy for happiness” and an “integral ecology and full human development,” as elaborated in Pope Francis’s apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* and his encyclical *Laudato si’*.

Conclusion

The Italian theologian Piero Coda summarizes the vision of Pope Francis for the emerging church in four words: mercy, synodality, poverty, and encounter.

Mercy. In 2016 we celebrated the Jubilee Year of Mercy. It is necessary to have an open heart toward forgiving others, as God forgives each one of us.

Synodality. This characteristic is a way of being in the church, as Pope Francis often repeats to us; it is seeing things and living from the standpoint of communion. “Broadly, it refers to the active participation of all the faithful in the life and mission of the Church.”¹⁴

Poverty. The church should not rely on aspects of wealth, human power, or human instruments but must be based on the power of God.

Encounter. Today’s world presents us with so many opportunities; indeed, Christians will be constantly challenged by the presence of people of other religions and cultures. We need to respond with a strong identity as Christians. We have to open ourselves to dialogue with others.¹⁵

I conclude this article with a few points regarding the situation of the Catholic Church in China and the ongoing dialogue between China and the Holy See. There are three fundamental principles to be upheld. First, both sides want to continue their dialogue. Second, the Holy See wishes to maintain the unity of the church and emphasizes reconciliation of the official and the underground communities of Chinese Catholics. At the same time, the Chinese authorities do not want the abnormal situation of the Catholic Church in China to develop any further. Finally, the Holy See has concerns for the feelings and sentiments of individual Catholics, whether they belong to the official or to the underground community. The Chinese authorities want Catholic believers to practice their faith within the boundary of the laws of the state. In the final analysis, the Holy See and the Chinese authorities may have two different perspectives: one is religious and spiritual, the other, political and administrative. Both sides may have different starting points, but the concrete result could coincide and be beneficial for both sides.

Lest the needed dialogue be threatened, ideological opposition is to be avoided between the official and the underground communities, between the Catholic Church in China and the universal Roman Catholic Church, and between the Catholic Church and the Chinese authorities or the Communist Party. Though at times the other side may seem tough or resolute, still the dialogue must continue. The normalization of relations between the Holy See and the People’s Republic of China would certainly be helpful for the healthy development of the Catholic Church in China, would be

beneficial for mutual enrichment, and would have positive repercussions for the path of humanity toward a better future.

As Christians, our dream is to fulfill the wish of Jesus and be united in our diversity. To achieve this goal, dialogue is necessary. Dialogue is not a means to an end but is a way of being in the world because it is the life of God, the Trinity. Trinity is relationship; it is infinite dialogue and total reciprocity. Not insignificantly, Jesus calls reciprocal love “his new commandment.” Universal brotherhood is the wish of Jesus “that all may be one.”

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Notes

1. See, for example, John Cardinal Tong, “The Future of the Sino-Vatican Dialogue from an Ecclesiological Point of View,” *Hong Kong Sunday Examiner*, February 4, 2017.
2. Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, adopted on December 4, 1982, art. 36.
3. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the UN General Assembly, Paris, December 10, 1948.
4. PCID, WCC, WEA, “Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World: Recommendations for Conduct,” available at www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_20111110_testimonianza-cristiana_en.html, finalized in Bangkok, Thailand, January 2011.
5. Indunil J. Kodithuwakku K., “Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World: Recommendations for Conduct; Thinking Back and Looking Ahead,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 37 (2013): 109–13.
6. The week-long Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) concluded on October 24, 2017, during which the CPC Constitution was amended to include “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” as a new component of the party’s guide for action. See *Xinhua News*, October 24, 2017.
7. President Xi Jinping addressed a conference on religions that was held in Beijing April 22–23, 2016. Xi said that religious affairs carry “special importance” in the work of the CPC and the central government, and he promised to fully implement the party’s policy on religious freedom and help religions adapt to the socialist society (see *Global Times*, April 25, 2016).
8. Chen Ming, “The Return of Confucianism in the Modern Practice of Edification” (in Chinese), *Global Times* (Chinese edition), March 21, 2016, editorial page.
9. They are known as the “Three Great Pillars of Chinese Catholicism.” See Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, *Christians in China, AD 600–2000* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 161.
10. John Paul II, Speech, “Message . . . to the Participants in the International Conference Commemorating the Fourth Centenary of the Arrival in Beijing of Father Matteo Ricci,” October 24, 2001, §3.
11. For discussion of the dialectic of harmony, see Kin Sheung Charetto Yan, “Prolegomenon to Interreligious Dialogue in China: Daoism, the Trinitarian Relationship, and Christian Inculturation,” *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2017): 43–44.
12. *Ibid.*, 40.
13. Pope Francis, “Message . . . for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace: Fraternity, the Foundation and Pathway to Peace,” January 1, 2014.

14. Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, “Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium: Towards a Common Understanding in Service to the Unity of the Church,” September 21, 2016, §3.
15. Radio Vatican, “Giubileo dei nunzi, Becciu: aperti al dialogo, forti nell’identità,” interview with Angelo Becciu, Vatican’s deputy secretary of state, *ANSA News Agency*, September 15, 2016.

Author biography



Kin Sheung Chiaretto Yan lives in Shanghai and is a research fellow at the Sophia University Institute, Loppiano, Italy. He is also a visiting professor at the University of Saint Joseph (Macau), the Hebei Catholic Major Seminary (Shijiazhuang, China), and the Central and South China Seminary (Wuchang, China).