

## Mainland's war against religion

November 2, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

A ban on religious instruction, which today affects families with children in more than 2,000 schools in Xinjiang, China deserves more public attention, I fear, than it is getting. Reasons easily come to mind to explain why international (and local) media are not rushing to cover the story. A brief word first, however, on the news itself.

Fresh orders have dropped down from on high in Xinjiang which forbid parents from sharing their spiritual beliefs with their children in their own homes. And this, mind you, in a country which says it guarantees its people freedom of religion. My wording is probably too simplistic. Anyone who knows anything at all about Xinjiang knows nothing in Xinjiang is simple. This is one reason religious oppression in Xinjiang rarely makes first page headlines.

Media are reporting that state apparatus in Xinjiang, home to some 10 million Muslims, mostly members of the Uighur (sometimes spelled "Uyghur") minority, has strong-armed principals at over 2,000 of its schools to sign a pledge to "defend schools against the infiltration of religion" by encouraging "teachers and underage students . . . not to practice religion either at school or at home" (TT 10-30-14, p. 5). The words that follow are more than merely weird or absurd. They are actually the stuff of comedy colored dark, and the very potential for the type of satire we find in George Orwell's masterpiece "1984" or, on the Chinese side, Lu Xun's fiction of the May 4th Movement, Ch'ien Chung-shu's gem about China in the 1930s, "Fortress Besieged," or Bai Hua's, "The Remote Country of Women" (1988), set in the context of the Great Cultural Revolution.

"The Global Times," a newspaper with ties to the Communist Party, says officials are worried about students in Xinjiang "displaying no religious affiliation at school, but then going home to study it under their parents' guidance."

We have here a horrid social evil stripped naked as a jaybird for all of us to see. Parents actually believe they should be allowed to guide their own offspring in matters of religious belief and to do so, mind you, in the privacy of their own homes?

Xinjiang was of course the scene of recent violent anti-government demonstrations. If the Uighur minority there has felt singled out for persecution in the past, one wonders how its members feel about these new efforts to tell parents how to handle religious values and practices with their children.

The political, historical and religious situation of Xinjiang is as complicated as it is interesting. I am no specialist on the topic, but what China appears to be doing here will do very little to help it to make friends and influence people on the international scene.

While contemplating this latest news about parents and children in Xinjiang, by accident I fell upon an article in "The International New York Times" that trumpets the success of Yinghua Academy, a "total immersion" Mandarin language school for elementary children in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Space limits prevent a full discussion of this intriguing piece here. See "A U.S. school immerses itself in all things Chinese," Jane Peterson, INT 10-27-14, p. 12.

Ms. Peterson's article hit me with its mention of Beijing's financial role in this "educational" effort. Costs for training two of the teachers at Yinghua are covered by "Hanban, an affiliate of China's Ministry of Education," for starters. The article mentions that all 660 of the school's students are "awarded tuition-free places by lottery." Wow. Peterson points out that in general, charter schools in the U.S. rely on local school district funds, and federal grants. Schools such as Yinghua also require "substantial infusions of Chinese government support."

I wonder how many teachers at Yinghua truly dare to teach 20th century Chinese history, the Great Cultural Revolution, Tienanmen in 1989, and so on. How much discussion is happening on the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong or on the rights of parents in certain parts of China (members of a minority or not) to share spiritual and religious values with their children?

Recent news from Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and now Minneapolis is making the world warmer and smaller every day. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

## Talking points :

1. This column focuses on "Xinjiang" in China, and asks us to consider freedom of religious beliefs for the minority group called the "Uighur" people. China's government fears independence among them, partly because they are Muslims. A new law forbids parents to teach their children their spiritual beliefs in their homes. This may seem far away from you. Does your family care much about spiritual beliefs? Do you ever visit a Temple for spiritual reasons?
2. The column also speaks of large amounts of money China invests in Chinese-language classes and schools in the USA and elsewhere so foreigners can study Mandarin. Should people worry about China's generosity with money for these projects? What does "propaganda" mean to you? Should China control what these "classes" teach about Chinese history?
3. What topics close to you would you like to read about and discuss in a future China P - column? Make some suggestions!

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