Chinese Christianity in international perspective: some remarks on ecclesiology and fundamental concepts engaging East and West

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Chinese Christianity in international perspective: some remarks on ecclesiology and fundamental concepts engaging East and West

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ABSTRACT

In Chinese legislation on the Church as well as in the theological debate in China and, the concepts of religion and Christianity predominate, depending, from a historical perspective, on the influence of nineteenth-century philosophical and theological ideas from the West, conveyed by socialist political theory, by the weak ecclesiology in missionary societies operating in China before 1949, and influential theologians setting the scene. The idea of Sinicisation contributed to the perpetuation of the nineteenth-century ideas of religion and Christianity in China. Today, however, there are signs of change. The churches in the accelerating multi-modernity in China wish to clarify what is unique for the Christian Church. Sometimes, however, what is characteristic of the Church in China is also characteristic of the Church in many other places in the world.

KEYWORDS

Communist Party of China; Christianity; Church; religion; ecclesiology; cultural Christians; Sinicisation; sino-theology

When Christopher Hancock guest-edited the previous thematic issue on China published in the International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church (IJSCC), in 2015, he wrote in his Guest editorial article:

The past history and present state of the Church in China have much to teach us; but neither its story nor its form are straightforward. We meet socio-political, cultural and ecclesiastical phenomena that are both compelling and intensively complex. We can do little more here than introduce key themes, suggest possibilities for future research, and join in international celebration of what God has done, and is doing, in China.¹

In what follows below, I shall approach the complexity problem from the perspective of ecclesiology, in order, possibly, to deconstruct the dominating structural concepts mostly used as descriptions of the ‘Church’ in China, namely ‘religion’ and ‘Christianity’. Some time ago I discussed the ecclesiological problem from the perspective of denominationalism.² In this issue of IJSCC, Pan-chiu Lai gives a magisterial overview of the theological exchange between Chinese and Western theologians and proposes, on the bases of a differential outcome of his research, a co-operation built on mutual respect for the respective competences.³ Though well aware of my own shortcomings, that is also my purpose in this article.

¹Hancock, ‘Complexity theory and the Chinese Church’, 261.
²Brodd, ‘Chinese ecclesiology’.
³Lai, ‘Reconsidering Theological Exchange’.

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The complexity of any attempt to describe Christian faith and practice in China from the perspective of international relations is tremendous. There might be various reasons for that, but one, with its own complexity, might be the use of the concept ‘Christianity’ and thereby the concept of ‘religion’.\(^4\)

My thesis is that, insofar as nineteenth-century ideas of the ‘religion of Christianity’ influence not only the self-understanding of the Chinese churches but also the Communist Party in China’s understanding of what the Church is and, therefore, the legislation enacted in China, they give room for misunderstandings and arbitrariness. To the extent that the use of these concepts is not adequately questioned even scholarly analysis and description continues to be problematic. There is a world-wide need to define the difference between what Church and Christianity are, respectively, and the coincidence between them.

What I try to do in this essay is not to solve the complex problem but to bring it to the fore from a very western perspective, which I also, at the same time, mean to be a Chinese perspective. It is, however, very difficult to attach primary ecclesiological meaning to religion, Christianity, Protestantism and Catholicism, not only in China but also elsewhere in the world. I will therefore try to continue to bring them to mind by allusions to the development in the West.

I will structure this article by identifying some fundamental aspects which might indicate the role of international dependence for the Church in China today. First of all that has to do with the import of the nineteenth-century concept of religion that is fundamental for the Communist Party of China’s policy. That leads to some remarks about another nineteenth-century imported concept, that of Christianity, in China as elsewhere used both as a reductive principle and a designation of culture. Then, very much in contrast to religion and culture, I discuss the Church, still another concept, from the perspective of ecclesiology, both as a teaching and practice of the church and as a hermeneutical tool. One of my theses in this essay is that a more precise study and understanding of the Church in the midst of all religions might contribute to the understanding of the essence of the Church and its role in society. I presume that the Communist Party of China is depending on an implicit ecclesiology, inherited in its historical roots. An important element in this is the idea of religion with ‘Chinese characteristics’, which I try to understand from an ecclesiological perspective.

However, I also give some room for the idea that churches with ‘Chinese characteristics’ in some sense, in a world stamped by globalisation and mobility, is not something isolated to Mainland China. Not very many of the problems and themes dealt with in this essay are unique to China. In a second last section titled Christianity *extra ecclesiam*, I return to the question about Christianity in China and elsewhere trying to say something about ‘cultural Christians’ and religious studies. At the end I bring up the West’s most observed utterance on church politics in China, the demolition of churches. But if I have tried earlier to indicate that the Church in China, as well as the Communist Party, cannot be understood in isolation, in this part I indicate how churches in Europe, reminded of their own history by what is happening in China, should review their history.

\(^4\)Wagenhammer, *Das Wesen des Christentums*. 
Religion. A nineteenth-century European invention in China

Religion was, when the Communist Party in China seized power, a nineteenth-century scholarly concept launched by European Christian theologians allowing their conception of what they called Christianity to be normative for the understanding of other religions. Historians of religion found a possibility by means of phenomenology of religions to compare, by means of abstraction, religions and even – by construing commonalities between them – to create the religion. The church, sometimes looked upon as an institutional deviation from Christianity, was no religion. Historians of religion and sociologists of religion, however, used the concepts of ‘church’ and ‘sect’ in their descriptive models of how a religion was constructed. So Taoism and Buddhism were described as ‘churches’ because of their ‘institutional’ and ‘hierarchical’ forms and what was perceived as the ‘means of grace’ in them.\(^5\) This type of ecclesial typology was put forward by Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) in his ‘Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen’ (1911). This played a role in the development of social science in China as well as Max Weber’s (1864–1920) influential work on Religion in China (1915). The background to Troeltsch’s scheme of religious categories was the weak ecclesiology of the German Protestantism at the time.\(^6\)

Later the word ‘religion’, while notoriously difficult to define, is very much debated, sometimes regarded as useless because of the relative lack of consensus about the concept, but still always used. Even if it is a doubtful concept, in the West sometimes understood differently in different academic disciplines, it is also a political term, used in legislation and political debates and sometimes to control cultural and societal movements like churches. The understanding of Christian faith and practice in China, by means of such nineteenth-century concepts is, at least to a certain extent, complicated or even contradicted by the appearance of the Orthodox Church in China.\(^7\) It is not a large church in China but theoretically important for the discussion, since it does not adhere to the pattern of religion and Christianity in China.

As far as I can understand it, the ecclesial system in Communist China is built on originally German ideas of religion, with Christianity, Protestantism, and Catholicism, as it was conceived among most Protestant missionary agencies and even native Chinese church leaders in the beginning of the twentieth-century. One should already here remark that this way of classifying the churches in China was in place already before 1949.

The term ‘religion’ seems to have been imposed on China and imported at the end of the nineteenth-century. Under all circumstances the concept is build on a model represented by ‘Christianity’: it should be universally identifiable, have a doctrine, and an ecclesial structure. All religions were compared with Christianity and from that normative perspective placed on a lower or higher level. The monotheistic religions were thus, in addition to Christianity also Islam and Judaism. In China the institutionalised ‘religions’ were Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, because the criteria in the phenomenology of religion did not fit the Chinese situation. Put into political practice, in 1962, the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee issued ‘The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on

\(^5\)Ström, Religion och gemenskap, 32ff.
\(^6\)Coleman, ‘Church Sect Typology’, 55 ff; and Moberg, ‘Potential uses of the Church-sect typology’, 47 ff.
\(^7\)Lai, ‘Chinese exploration of Orthodox theology’.
the Religious Question during Our Country’s Socialist Period. Then Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism are officially recognised as religions.

In China religion (宗 教) was a neologism for the Western concept used to define beliefs and practices separated from society. In the beginning of the twentieth-century it was, as I mentioned earlier, forwarded by the introduction of social sciences in China. On the political field this became a political tool and the nineteenth-century motifs found in the Western concept of religion, especially its church criticism, would be instrumental in repression and sometimes a brutal and destructive attitude towards Christians. Basically, the concept of religion was structured from the perspective of the then European understanding of the Church and, by abstraction, Christianity.

To these terms could be added the concept of ‘sect’. The adaptation of the early twentieth-century Western notion of religion, has granted relative but controlled freedom to five religions while the Chinese Communist Party actively condemns what is seen as ‘superstitions’. Earlier the term sect had been an identification of a group cut off from the Church not a functional description of a social group. When sociology of religion made religion its main study object, theoretically build on positivism, Christianity became the primary focus, with sect and church becoming ways of describing certain structures and functions within that. The concept of superstition, used in Europe, though in different ways, at least since Medieval times, is here inserted into a new scheme. The idea of superstition is convincingly proved in Chinese history but not in the meaning of sect, i.e. in relation to religion. In China Mao Zedong banned religion until his death in 1976. Thereafter the situation changed and the ban on religions and religious practices was removed. Article 36 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, 1982, maintains freedom of religious belief but also states protection of ‘normal religious activities’ by the state. The recognised religions have government-supported associations as the means of government control. Popular religion and Confucianism, which in the West are both routinely classified as religions, are not officially designated as such in China; popular religion is considered ‘superstition’, and Confucianism is considered an ‘ideology’, although not necessarily any longer a ‘feudal’ ideology. The debate on Confucianism can be complicated if one takes into account the idea that labels it ‘church’.

If there is a debate on whether Confucianism is a world view or a religion, there should be a discussion about the role of world view, culture and religion in Christianity. In the tension between acceptance and rejection through the history of Confucianism and Chinese culture in China and European culture and Christianity in Europe, Christianity does not mean the same thing as the now predominant understanding. That complicates the historical investigation and might lead to anachronistic understanding of the role of the Church in the history of China.

**Christianity: abstraction and culture in an ambivalent Chinese phenomenon**

Christianity means since the nineteenth-century an abstraction of various ecclesial traditions. The earliest recorded use of the term ‘Christianity’ (Χριστιανισμός) was by

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8 Goossaert, ‘The Concept of Religion in China and the West’.
9 Kuo, ‘Christian Civilisation’.
Ignatius of Antioch, in around 100 AD. Since then it has changed meaning several times, probably most fundamentally after the Enlightenment at the end of the eighteenth-century. In some literature on China, it is used as if the concept has the same content before and after the Enlightenment, which, however, it has not. Some hold that the concept of Christianity itself becomes obsolete because it no longer has any meaningful objective definition.

Christianity is an abstraction including several abstract sub-concepts, e.g. Catholicism and Protestantism. In the latter case the abstraction is empirically evident. Catholicism is more complicated. Both Protestantism and Catholicism belong to the same cluster of ideas (of -isms), invented together with other ideologies like communism and liberalism. The concepts of Protestantism and Catholicism gave the words Protestant and Catholic new connotations. Karl Rahner maintains that the concept of Catholicism neither can be made synonymous to catholicity nor be an adequate qualification or description of what the Roman Catholic Church is. ‘Catholicism’ contains cultural, social, and political elements, which are impossible to integrate in any ontological understanding of what the Church of Christ is. Catholicism doesn’t offer the necessary tools to decide what are the historically necessary expressions for the catholicity of the church.\(^\text{10}\)

Because of the idea of ‘foreign religion’ as a negative criterion, the historical presence of Christian faith and practise has become a way of justifying Christianity in China. By abstraction, then, Christianity is identified with the nineteenth-century understanding of the term and becomes associated with all sorts of Christian churches, movements and agencies at any time in history. If there is archaeological evidence of Christianity from the Tang-dynasty (618–907) it is exposing the presence of a Church from Persia, probably in the tradition from the Nestorius (ca 381–451) Patriarch of Constantinople. The Council of Ephesus condemned his Christology and his followers were excommunicated in the Roman Empire. Probably some fled along the Silk Road and landed in China. That is without further elaborations certainly another Christianity than some of the phenomena in China today that are also called Christian. The American historian David Emil Mungello, who has worked extensively on the cultural interaction between Europe and China,\(^\text{11}\) maintains that there has been a shift or even a fundamental reinterpretation in understanding of the history of Christianity in China that has reduced the anti-Christian atmosphere. The understanding of Christianity had by 2012 changed from a failed foreign religion to an indigenous potentiality.

Even if the terms ‘religion’, ‘Protestantism’, ‘Catholicism’ and ‘Christianity’ do not translate into the Chinese language, the fact is that there is an ideology evidently at work behind the terms. Religion, as an expression in modernity, is a foreign term in all languages, taken over because of the lack of concepts describing a new understanding of concepts. It is without question that the understanding of religion is very divers, and that is an understatement. It is notoriously difficult to define. In China the formally instituted difference between Catholicism and Protestantism might allow for interpreting religion as ‘confession’, an equivalence made in Germany since Frederick the Great, but since the two ‘religions’ can be seen as two parallel phenomena, that is questionable.

\(^\text{10}\)Rahner, ‘Katholizismus’, 88f.
\(^\text{11}\)On historiographical changes, see Mungello, The Great Encounter; and Mungello, ‘Reinterpreting the History’. 
In the discussion in China and internationally about the growth of a variety of churches and ecclesial communities, that is described as an expansion of Christianity, but, at large’ Christianity exceeds the borders of these ecclesial bodies. ‘Cultural Christians’ are an example of this. Christianity is in China a religion in the nineteenth-century meaning and thus also a culture, fully associated not with Africa but with Europe and the United States, called the West. I have previously discussed Christianity as an abstraction, not coinciding with any church or ecclesial community, but at the same time offering suitable tools for academic analyses and political control. Maybe one could talk about abstraction from an internal perspective because of the search of the least common denominator in a multitude of diversities and contradictions. Then from an external comparative perspective, Christianity can be described as culture and possibly confronted with other cultures.

One of the problematics with both the self-understanding of the mission agencies in China and the generally seen theology of mission from the nineteenth-century and onwards, is the idea that Christian culture was equivalent to Western culture. Christianity became a civilisation in the modern meaning of the word, which made it possible to compare it with other civilisations but also opened up for competitions with other civilisations. This is especially the case in Protestantism. It was associated with the idea of being the errand to the world and assorted Protestants spread their gospel everywhere. Agents were not the Church but various mission agencies which in one way or the other related to various churches. These agencies were organised as (missionary) societies and in themselves expressions and realisations of the ideology of association and the mere existence of them is an expression of the nineteenth-century Western culture.

One question that remains unanswered in relation to church and Christianity is how to understand missionary slogans such as ‘bringing the Gospel to China’. When many non-Han ethnic groups, during the Republican period, embraced Christianity as a rejection of Sinicisation regarding Christianity as an alternative pathway towards modernisation, this was in accordance with Western missionary ideas to bring to China not just the Christian Gospel, but also the ‘civilisation’ of modern Christian nations, in the form of health and education, science and technology. This is different from an ecclesiological plantatio ecclesiae perspective that, at least in principle, does not imply a foreign cultural implantation. In this case the Church of Christ is integral to the Gospel and the Gospel is embedded in the Church. One could guess that this type of distinctions might be clarifying also in studying Chinese Church history.

Christianity as it encountered the Chinese people in form of missionary societies was a phenomenon of European and North American modernity and often liberal in its theology. The idea of association took form as societies of various kinds, that often married liberal theology, in turn an attempt to adapt Christian faith and practice to the political liberal, bourgeois, and protestant countries in Europe. The process of how these societies could give rise to the establishment of Chinese churches under Chinese leadership already in the beginning of the twentieth-century is rather complicated and differs from the development in, for example, Africa.

\[\text{Lim, ‘To the Peoples’}.\]
It is much easier to define the missionary societies as expressions of Christianity than of Church. Sometimes they are described as ‘movements’. Anyhow, the China Inland Mission involved missionaries from several European countries and North America, originating from dozens of denominations. The China Inland Mission was open to missionaries from ‘all protestant churches’, church order was a pragmatic issue, it practiced ‘no difference between ordained and non-ordained’, equality between men and women, and prescribed that missionaries should identify with Chinese culture. These statutes of the China Inland Mission are a good example of nineteenth-century Protestant ecclesiology which pays very little attention to the form of the Church of Christ. Then the missionary society, which is an association and a non-church organisation, might according to the China Inland Mission’s self-understanding function as a substitute for the Church which is invisible, philosophically in an idealistic sense.

**Church. Ecclesiology in the description and definition of what is not a religion**

The term ‘ecclesiology’ refers in this article both to the teaching on the Church itself, in Greek ekklesia, but also connotes a theological discipline studying what the Church is. Ecclesiology in the meaning of the study of the Church has also an important role to play in exploring what understanding of being Church might be hidden or openly operative behind the avenues taken by Churches, Christian traditions, pastors and theologians.

It is important to remember that in ecclesiology as an academic, theological discipline, ‘Church’ must not exclusively or primarily be identified with certain institutions. Ecclesiology is researching all types of structured communal Christian existence and is not any longer confined to dogmatics, even if it is systematic theological in character. Therefore it takes support from various other disciplines such as political science, history, sociology and others. It is important that ecclesiology studies both theory and practice. What is taught by a Church might be contradicted by its practices.

Thus, the concept of ecclesiology is broad, and it includes both the study of the theoretical (dogmatic), normative and descriptive and ideal conceptualisation of the Church as well as the actual, historical and empirical Church. Fundamentally these cannot be separated from each other even if distinctions must be made. At the end, the theological analysis of the results achieved is the important contribution to the self-understanding of the Church. The Church is not just any organisation, not just a sum of opinions. It has other claims that must be taken seriously by the researcher, because it affects the results of his or her studies.

When Christianity was construed as a concept of modernity, the Church did not fit into this scene and was not seen as a religion but more as an institution or a cluster of dogmatic formulations, not necessarily in contact with ordinary human life. The German Lutheran theologian Edmund Schlink (1903–1984) criticised Protestantism for not making a proper distinction between the visible and the invisible Church but...
a division into two churches, one visible and material and the other invisible and eschatological. He described this phenomenon as a sort of ecclesiological docetism, i.e. the outward forms of communal Christian life are not penetrated by an inner spiritual reality and hence the visible Church becomes not essential and at the end fictitious.\textsuperscript{15}

For some reasons, the Chinese churches appear to be somewhat weak in ecclesiology, traditionally taken to be the theology of the Church.\textsuperscript{16} To a certain extent Schlink’s critique is applicable to the present situation in China. It seems, however, that this is observed also in China, both from the churches acknowledged by the Chinese state and by the ‘underground churches’. I shall give two recent examples:

Two Protestant national committees have formulated the ‘Outline of the Five-year Working Plan for Promoting the Sinicisation of Christianity in our Country (2018–2022)’. They state: ‘Focus on the theoretical discussion of ecclesiology and the establishment of positive and healthy religious relationships to gradually create theoretical self-confidence of the Chinese Church.’\textsuperscript{17}

At the beginning of 2018, after the implementation of the new Religious Affairs Regulations in China, the ‘China Partnership’ presented on its blog an interview with two pastors in the house church movement, Wang Yi in Chengdu and Gao Zhen in Beijing. It was published on-line in China for discussion, in order to ‘provide the house church with material upon which to reflect and pray, so that there might be a unified response to the regulations among the house churches going forward’. The main question was ‘whether house churches should break up into small fellowship groups’ and ‘how ecclesiology influences house church responses to the regulations’.

In the interview the pastors agreed on, the most important task is ‘to think with a proper ecclesiology’ that ‘makes the church distinct from other religions’. A strong ecclesiology comes from the Bible. Doctrine of the Church, doctrine of worship, moving onto the doctrine of God, the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of Scripture and the doctrine of salvation, are all inseparable. Many people’s confusion comes from a lack of unity; they separate these doctrines from one another, leading to pragmatism and confusion in real life applications.” The most important critique of the present situation is, according to the interview, that the house churches put strong emphases on soteriology and evangelism, while not taking into account the relationship with ecclesiology. To ‘separate doctrines from one another’ leads to ‘pragmatism and confusion in real life applications’. Also ‘the Church of Christ’s position on the church-state relationship is shaped by our ecclesiology’ is said in the interview.\textsuperscript{18}

\section*{The ecclesiology of the Communist Party of China}

It could be said that the concept of religion was created to suite the aims of comparability for the phenomenologists of religion and later sociologists and psychologists of

\textsuperscript{15}\textsuperscript{15}Schlink, \textit{Ökumenische Dogmatik}, 687; and Schlink, ‘Das wandernde Gottesvolk’.
\textsuperscript{16}\textsuperscript{16}Peale, \textit{Theology and Ecclesiology}, 141.
\textsuperscript{17}\textsuperscript{17}Protestant five-year plan for Chinese Christianity. Translated document outlining strategy for Sinicisation that will adapt religion to China’s socialist society.’ A ucanews.com translation of the Protestant five-year plan for Chinese Christianity. The original Chinese document was compiled by the national committees of the government-sanctioned China Christian Council and Three-Self Patriotic Movement.
\textsuperscript{18}\textsuperscript{18}Wang, ‘A conversation’ [An interview with two House Church pastors, concentrating on ecclesiology].
religion. But there should also be consideration of its political roots in the European and North American understanding of the liberal society, at the end banishing ‘religion’ to the private sphere, but also using it as a means for fostering the masses to be good citizens. Therefore the politicians also could raise demands on which sort of ‘religion’ they preferred. In state-church systems this became obvious.

Communist régimes all over the world relied in their understanding of religion on Marx and Engels and later, in some cases, Lenin’s understanding of religion, deeply rooted in the nineteenth-century debate, most vivid and dominant in Germany. The atheist culture itself is drenched with the ideas formed by the nineteenth-century Christian European culture which actually gave birth to the ‘Religionskritik’ of its time. Central in this was, of course, Christianity. Sometimes the many-faceted discussion when it became a political reality was reduced to a denunciation of religion because it was considered a hindrance to economic growth. Also Karl Marx provides a type of ecclesiology. For him a person’s primary community is not the family, the Christian church, nation, or state but the economic class. This ‘struggling church’ becomes eventually the redeemed community, when the economic classes together become the ‘church triumphant’.\(^\text{19}\)

The Western nineteenth-century notion of religion is fundamental for the Communist Party’s religious politics, modelled on mainly a discussion involving what Christianity is. One remark on this might be that there are similarities between how an ideology is constructed, a principle accepted by the Communist Party by its adherence to Marxism, and the philosophical comprehension of a religion, that has implications for the clarification of the ecclesiology of the communist party in China. From an, in principle, atheist position defined religion, the really existent religion should be reformed in accordance with modernity, science and a defined nationalism. That has consequences for the understanding of what church is in China.

Communism as a European political theory aimed from the beginning at a perfect and lasting world order. This eschatological system must intrinsically be universal. In Lenin’s theory, imperialism was a factor changing Karl Marx’s order of the process of social transformation, but not altering the universal character of communist theory. This was taken over by the Communist Party in China. When Stalin seized power in Moscow, it presented the Chinese party with a stridently anti-nationalistic ideology, not least through the Communist International (Comintern). Mao had, however, already during the end of the 1920s, presented a distinctively nationalist Chinese form of communism, based on ‘land reform’ and anti-imperialism. This form of nationalism, or rather patriotism, integrates in its system the Maoist understanding of religion intimately associated not only with historical materialism but with the experiences of the semi-colonialisation of China and various military occupations.

After the break with Moscow in 1960 and later Mao’s death, there was an ongoing debate both on China’s role internationally and how to understand Marxism and religion in these settings. Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) talked in 1988 about ‘the ideological line’ as the adherence to Marxism ‘and to integrate it with Chinese realities’. By this, Deng explains, ‘we mean Marxism that is integrated with Chinese conditions,

\(^{19}\)Koyzis, Political Visions & Illusions, 172–3.
and by socialism we mean a socialism that is tailored to Chinese conditions and has a specifically Chinese character.\textsuperscript{20}

Jiang Zemin (1926-) in a speech in 2002 on a ‘New Situation in Building Socialism with Chinese characteristics’ also integrated religion in the building of Chinese society: ‘We will implement the Party’s policy toward the freedom of religious belief, handle religious affairs according to law, encourage the adaptability of religions to the socialist society and uphold the principle of self-administration and running religious affairs independently.’\textsuperscript{21}

During Xi Jinping (1953-) there are strong structuring tendencies in the entire Chinese society which are characterised by a dialectic between vision and implementation of law. In this context Xi has forwarded the concept ‘Sinicisation’ (中国化) regarding religion’s compatibility with ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’.

Sinicisation became policy when Xi cited it in his ‘Political Report to the 19th Party Congress’ in October 2017, in which he noted that the Communist Party must ‘fully implement the Party’s basic policy on religious affairs, uphold the principle that religions in China must be Chinese in orientation and provide active guidance to religions so that they can adapt themselves to the socialist society’.\textsuperscript{22} President Xi has clarified that ‘Sinicisation’ of religions means that they should strictly follow the leadership and directives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Also religions originating in China are ‘heterodox teachings’ (邪教) if they are not ‘sinicised’, fully integrated in the Chinese political system. Laws against ‘heterodox teachings’ exist since the late Ming era, and the Emperor decided on the basis of his own judgement which religions should be listed as such.\textsuperscript{23} Christianity was listed as ‘heterodox teachings’ in 1725, and Christians were routinely tortured and executed until 1842, when Western military threat hindered that.

The Chinese concept of law is politically strengthened after 1982\textsuperscript{24} but is it possible that the Communist legislation based on nineteenth-century ideas of Protestantism, Catholicism, Christianity and religion do not apply to the present situation in China? The more ‘Chinese’ the Christian faith and practice become, the more problematic that legislative basis will become? That the ecclesiology foreseen in political and legislative documents and handled by the Chinese bureaucracy is not the ecclesiologies of the empirically recognisable reality?

The ongoing change in Chinese society shapes new social and religious realities that cannot easily be seized by established philosophical and political theories. This is not unique to China, of course. The focus on the difference between ideal and reality becomes of utmost interest and, for example, the dissonance theory tries to explain how the rapidity of global changes affects the complex relations between different clusters of values. To achieve a complete socio-theoretical analysis in this situation, there is a need to include in the analysis the actual role of the churches, their self-understanding and practices, in their international contexts. This includes the digitalised ways of communication and communions as well as migration and the

\textsuperscript{20}Deng, ‘Building Socialism’.
\textsuperscript{21}Jiang Zemin’s report delivered at the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on 8 November 2002, entitled ‘Build a Well-off Society in an All-Round Way and Create a New Situation in Building Socialism with Chinese characteristics’.
\textsuperscript{22}Xi, ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’.
\textsuperscript{23}Goossaert and Palmer, The Religious Question.
\textsuperscript{24}Blasek, Rule of Law in China.
globalisation of economy. In China, however, it seems as if the Communist Party adheres to the nineteenth-century ideas of how to define and describe ‘religion’.

The idea that a political system or a political party builds on implicit and probably unaware ecclesiology, which is possible to reconstruct and make visible by analysing their writings and practices, is not something exclusive for China and its Communist Party. The Chinese Communist Party has its specific understanding of what it means by being church, its own implicit ecclesiology construed in its understanding of religion and Christianity and realised in its legislation, rules, diplomatic activities and the actions taken in Chinese society and culture. This is in principle not unique to China. The Social Democratic party in Sweden has since the 1930s produced explicit understandings of what Church is, which has to a large extent influenced the development of the national Church of Sweden, a state church whose bishops were, as in the United Kingdom and China today, appointed by the state. It is also possible to approach Joseph Stalin’s ecclesiological incentives and involvement in the relation to the Church. Even an atheistic understanding of the Church is accessible through ecclesiological studies. The political systems are different, but the principle of state intervention is the same.

**Religion with Chinese characteristics from an ecclesiological perspective**

The idea of a Church with Chinese characteristics is not, at least theoretically, unique. The idea of ‘a truly Asian church’ can be found in the Federation of Asian Bishop’s Conferences (FABC). In India there is a longstanding reflection and debate about an Indian ecclesiology.

At the end of the Ming Dynasty Jesuits in China invented what has been labelled ‘the principle of accommodation’, a programme for inculturation. In perspective, one could say that they introduced church with a Chinese character at the time. Mediated by western missionaries and Chinese scholar-officials, it yielded admirable results. Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), wrote the posthumously printed work ‘De christiana expeditione apud Sinas’ (1615). Ricci and the Jesuits practiced an advanced form for inculturation several hundred years before the Communist Party of China invented the idea of religion with ‘Chinese characteristics’ or ‘Sinicisation’. Both have in common the need to take into consideration the Chinese context, being aware that the context affects the text. The difference, however, is the different understanding of religion, Christianity and Church. The Communist point of departure is, as mentioned earlier, religion and Christianity, the Jesuit’s was the Church. One could say that the communist approach sides along with the nineteenth-century European Protestant idea of a Christianity that is conformed to the special character of different peoples. The churches had to accommodate to that.

After the Chinese Communist Party seized power in 1949 and during its consolidation period in the 1950s, the churches in mainland China went through a period of ecclesiological shifts, including the establishment of The Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the Chinese church leaders positions to that. There were actually two main ecclesilogies at stake, one represented by the Communist Party and the other by

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25 Ahlbäck, *Socialdemokratisk kyrkosyn*.  
26 Boer, Sergei and the ‘Divinely Appointed’.  
27 Helle, ‘Towards a Truly Catholic and Truly Asian Church’.  
28 See e.g. Manchala, ‘Re-visioning Ecclesia’; and Samuel, ‘The prospects and the challenges of ecclesiology’. 
Protestant church leaders, such as Y. T. Wu and Wang Mingdao. Even if the ecclesiologies on the fore were different and sometimes conflicting, they contributed to the understanding of the nature of Church in the framework of the ecclesiology established by the Communist party. The political pressures, of course, played a role in this but the role of the theologians involved cannot be reduced to a mere adaptation to the ecclesiology of the Communist Party. The two theologians mentioned are chosen as examples of ecclesiologies that became formative in shaping the Chinese Church internally and externally after 1949 to which the Communist Party had to relate.

Wang Mingdao (1900–1991) refused to accept what he regarded as compromising with the communist and was jailed between 1957 and 1980. Both in China and the West, Wang represents the ecclesiology of the House Church movement. His ecclesiology emphasises a strict membership understanding demanding signs of regeneration and including a two-year period of probation, believer’s baptism by immersion, congregational polity, local church autonomy, and total separation between church and state. There is a complete separation between the Church which is holy and the Bride of Christ, and the world.

Y. T. Wu (Wu Yao-tsung) (1893–1979) represents a quite different ecclesiology. Before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, Wu already during the 1930s, influenced by a sort of liberal theology, not uncommon among the missionaries in China, was struggling with the need for social reform in China and found that Marxism and Christianity were possible to combine. After 1949 he is one of the fathers to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and is one of the authors of ‘The Christian Manifesto’ (1950) and the ‘United Declaration of the Delegates of Chinese Christian Churches and Institutions (1951). As in the West and elsewhere, there are traces of an ecclesiology that makes Christianity the fundamental element in the description of Christian faith and practice, while the Church is reduced to one organisational possibility. On the other hand, separated from the organisational perspective, there is an eschatological perspective where the Church is seen as the Body of Christ or the People of God. In a traditional liberal theological ecclesiological model, these perspectives are kept separately. But these ideas are not sole prevailing.

In an editorial of Tien Fang for March 1958 written at the express direction of the National Committee of the Three-Self Movement, considered so important that it prepared its own official translation into English, is presented an important ecclesiological statement of reform of the Church in China:

> The Church is the Body of Christ, a Creation of God’s own, the People for whose redemption Christ gave His life. How vigilant we ought to be in guarding the Church’s purity from being contaminated and her nature perverted! If there are some who make use of the Christian faith and Church organisations for the purpose of realising unworthy ends, is it not natural that we feel as much indignation as Christ did when He saw the temple desecrated? And is it not natural that we feel impelled to follow His example of cleansing the Temple so as to restore its glory and beauty? In these years, after careful examination of facts, Chinese Christians have come to a clear understanding of the use imperialism makes of Christian missionary activities

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30Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*.
and Christian international organizations for covering up its aggressive undertakings. At the same time we have come to realize in great sorrow that, owing to this imperialist crime, the Church has been blemished and the name of the Lord disparaged. On the basis of this realization, our Churches and Christian organizations have cut off all their ties with imperialism and are promoting the movement for self-government, self-support and self-propagation, with the aim of restoring the purity of our Churches and Christian organizations.33

In a speech ‘On the Use of Christianity by Imperialism’, Kiang Wen-han (1908–1984) at the 10th Committee Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement, did not use the concept of Church in his anti-imperialist and anti-American presentation of how Christianity interacts with politics. Kiang had been National Executive Secretary of YMCA in China and also Executive Secretary of the World Student Relief committee, which works with the World Student Service foundation. He wrote his doctoral thesis at Columbia university, New York in 1948.34 Kiang just on one occasion in his speech refers to the Church, and that in such a way that he gives the impression that even if some Christians are involved in the imperialism which he denounces and that others are against imperialism, in China as well as internationally, they all belong to the Church of Christ, even all those who are ‘slandering us’: ‘They have not shown any sympathy towards us as fellow members of the body of Christ, but instead they have slandered us by saying that we have ‘compromised’ and ‘sold out’, that we have been ‘ungrateful’ and ‘have no [basis in] theology’, ‘that our religious faith has been changed, that we have been “living under the power of pressure”, and that we have been able to enjoy only “conditional freedom”. What they are concerned with is not religion, but politics.’

It is obvious that, in this case, Christianity is not qualifying enough. Christianity is not the Body of Christ, initiated by God. Probably also because it would seem too ardent to talk of the purity of Christianity, which is more likely to apply on the Church. What strikes the reader today is that the statement actually lacks real church criticism but contains a massive denunciation of the imperialistic actions and positions of church organisations and missionaries.

Various sorts of churches with Chinese characteristics. On globalisation and mobility

The project of modernity seems still to dominate the Chinese official scene, while impressions conveyed by economical, political, and religious analyses point to what has been called multiple modernities.35 A new uncertainty has arisen depending on the accelerating global circulation of goods, services, people, and ideas. These global conditions make cultural and religious borders fluent and creates needs for analytical tools enabling a better understanding of the global religions and social landscape that is under reconstruction and renegotiation.

The mobility of people, goods and ideas on the international market, including participation in international organisations affects the understanding of the churches, not least their relations to state and nation. To this can be added various sorts of migration and the borderlines transcending social media. This does not change the

35To the discussion on China, religion, and modernity, see Nedostup, ‘The Transformation of the Concept of Religion’; and Meynard, ‘Religion and its Modern Fate’.
fundamental questions raised about the structure of understanding Christian faith and practice here, about religion, Christianity, Protestantism and Catholicism. On the contrary it stresses the communality between the situation in China and the rest of the world, the common history and understanding of it.

One example is the Chinese churches and ecclesial communities around the World. The conversion of Chinese workers in African countries to Christianity is being attributed to African evangelical churches. There are also in Africa Chinese House Churches. But there are also African migrants in China, which complicates the picture of migration. In various European countries there are active Chinese churches, for example in Germany, United Kingdom and Scandinavia. ‘Chinese church’ seems to be a standard term for some sorts of churches in the USA, Evangelical and Pentecostal, with specific characteristics regarding e.g. their worship.

Another complicating question regarding mobility of persons and ideas on the international market arises when the Peoples Republic of China engages in international trade and business, Christian businessmen are one category of actors on the market. That includes also a necessary exchange of ideas, without which other forms of mobility would be impossible. We also know from recent developments in the United States and in Europe that this mobility provokes reactions, nor least from nationalist movements, parties and ideologies. The history of China, not least during the 19th and 20th centuries gives growth also for that in China. Furthermore, western agencies and individuals provoke domestic political antipathy in China, both with reference to Western imperialism and ecclesial colonialism.

**Roman catholic ecclesiology in China, its international character and local stratification**

Even if Catholicism in China, according to the nineteenth-century system practised, is a religion, that is not in accordance with its present ecclesiological self-understanding. The split in the Roman Catholic Church in China is, however, ecclesiological in nature and is a reminder of the fact that this is also the case with the split between recognised and non-recognised churches and ecclesial communities in Protestantism. The question is how to define the Church of Christ in relation to the state. The situation in the Roman Catholic Church in China reminds us of the fact that, on the one hand, ecclesiology not only makes problems more evident than is possible by means of concepts such as religion and Christianity, but also that ecclesiology creates problems. In this issue of the IJSCC Magdaléna Masláková gives the history of successive popes’ theology and politics regarding China and Ambrose Mong analyses the relation

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37 Grant and Niemand, ‘The Chinese House Church Movement’.
39 Tu, *Die chinesisch-christlichen Gemeinden in Deutschland*.
40 Yu, ‘Church participation as intercultural encounter’.
41 Li and Bin, ‘Information Sharing in a Nordic Chinese Christian Church’.
42 Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*; and Yang, ‘Chinese Conversion to Evangelical Christianity’.
43 Austin, *Kingdom-minded people*.
44 Masláková, ‘The Role of Successive Popes’.
between Benedict XVI’s ecclesiology and his engagement with the split of the Roman Catholic Church in China.\textsuperscript{45}

The Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA) and the specialist functions of the CPCA, the NAC (National Administrative Commission of the Catholic Church) and the CBC (Chinese Bishops’ College) are all confronted with the challenge to retain the Chinese Catholic Church as the self-governing Chinese church within the world-wide Roman Catholic communion. This is in a way the task also for the underground or unregistered Roman Catholic Church that is not adapting to the Chinese communist system. From one perspective there is an abnormity in the Roman Catholic ecclesiology in China, based on the possibility to separate between the spiritual and the political church. The church transcends its organisation in a very peculiar way and that has also led to a situation, similar to that in Protestantism. The concept of Catholicism covers these ecclesiological difficulties.

One example of this dual ecclesiology has to do with the difference between the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic congregations, irrespective of their legal status, and how the Holy See and the official Chinese ecclesiastical authorities interpret the situation. One example is married priests. The congregations seem to be strongly opposed to any marriage of clergy and refuse to accept them as being able to perform valid Masses. The official local church congregations do not regard themselves as schismatic by virtue of sometimes being administered to, by bishops who have been elected within China without the approval of Rome. In some areas, the Pope is regularly prayed for as head of the spiritual but not the political church.\textsuperscript{46} What seems interesting and possible in the post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church in China, is the possibility of taking seriously the immense ecclesiological research done. One example is the suggestion of Stephanie M. Wong of Valparaiso University, who contends that inductive ecclesiological studies of the changes caused by the massive demographic shifts going on and their effect on the understanding of the Roman Catholic Church in China.\textsuperscript{47}

\textbf{Christianity extra ecclesiam. Cultural christians and religious studies in China and beyond}

In the west today, not least in Europe, a large portion of the population may be describable as ‘cultural Christians’, placed in a society based on originally Christian values but not practicing the Christian faith.\textsuperscript{48} What attracts them is a Christianity containing certain ‘values’, productive for them when creating a ‘world view’. They also support Christian charities, an engagement for the poor. They are, however, not interested in the Church. From their perspective, it is about fulfilling an individualistic ‘believing without belonging’.

Since the late 1980s there has been a growing interest in Christianity also among scholars in secular universities in China. Many of them do not identify themselves as Christians, though often described as Cultural Christians. They study Christianity as a

\textsuperscript{45}Mong, ‘Pope Benedict XVI and the Church in China’.
\textsuperscript{46}Chan, Towards a Contextual Ecclesiology.
\textsuperscript{47}Wong, ‘Ecclesiology from Below’.
\textsuperscript{48}Davies, Grace.
source for the modernisation of China. In the 1990s, a network of Chinese academics began developing what they termed Chinese-language theology (mediated in the Chinese language), born out of and addressing the contemporary ‘Chinese life experience’. These scholars, still mostly not confessing Christians, engaged themselves in a theological discourse that was persistently anchored outside the church, ‘extra ecclesiam’. The question then is whether they are studying Christianity or the Church. In the West in Religious Studies both would be possible. In his article in this issue of the IJSCC, David Jasper gives a sharp presentation of some distinctive issues in Sino-Christian theology. Among the issues is the cultural understanding of Christianity, which does not comply with the need for theology in the Chinese Church. The forum is the academia and the aim is to be productive for and in the Chinese culture. One of the intersections of communism and Christianity, Jasper remarks, is their common philosophical European roots. From an ecclesiological perspective, which Jasper hints at, theology in the context of the Church must not, as has been the case in Europe and is the case in China, be expected to support dominant cultural patterns. It might as well be counter-cultural as well.

In a thorough investigation, Naomi Thurston presents the situation for the study of ‘Sino-Christian studies’ in China. I use her results and compare it with the situation in the West. In China there has been an increase in the study of Christianity in academic studies at universities across the country, though still at the margins of Chinese scholarship. As in the West, and for similar reasons, as, for example, low budget priorities and few employment opportunities, the future for religious studies and certainly theology, does not seem to be bright. As in the West, an increasing state control on education will probably affect the study of Christianity negatively. Thurston describes how the number of younger scholars is increasing in Christian studies in China, that they come from a diverse background, probably being believers more often than before. Some young scholars have been trained in theology in the West, which makes it easier to partake in international exchange but also to get access to new research. It does not seem, however, to contribute to the curricula in the universities.

Compared with the discussions in academia in Europe and the debate on religious studies, the question of personal faith remains important within Chinese Christian studies. As in the area of religious studies in Europe, most Christian Studies scholars in China are of the opinion that faith is neither necessary nor helpful.

Religious studies in the West are open to studies of religion in its variety, its role in society more often than in the churches, and to interdisciplinarity. The background for that is, of course, different compared with development in China. The character of the discipline being in conversation with culture and society is, however, something in common. In China the so-called ‘cultural Christian’ scholars are open to that and, as in the West that has also affected theology in the more traditional sense of the word. In this issue of the IJSCC, David Jasper opens a specific entrance to the study of the encounter between Christianity and Chinese culture, that is, modern Chinese literary texts that ‘might offer spaces in which theological reflection can begin anew and in

50 Thurston, Studying Christianity in China.
51 Religious studies?
radical, as yet largely unexplored, ways.\textsuperscript{52} It reminds me to say that everything is, of course, not a question of ecclesiology, if anyone by now has got the impression that I would pursue that. Jaspers article is also a calling to mind that the concept of Christianity is not only a hindrance of thorough analyses, which I maintain, but also in other cases a hermeneutically productive display platform for theology.

Thurstone also reflects on how Chinese Christian studies might and might not contribute to the theological edification of the churches in China. She is rather hesitant to the possibility of that. From the western perspective one could say that religious studies have influenced the more ‘liberal’ mainstream protestant churches by means of sociology of religion and psychology of religion and similar subjects that have achieved a normative role in those churches. Thurston holds that in China scholars within the Chinese universities will not provide constructive theology for the Church and as in religious studies in Europe the understanding is not common that Christian studies have the task to serve the Church.

**Demolition of churches in China as an ultimate reminder to the European churches**

The role of religions in this has been actualised in the question of demolition of churches. Looking into social media and internet demolition of churches in mainland China is a hot topic as is detainment of Christians in some parts of China.\textsuperscript{53} We do not go into that, even if it seems to be a main theme affecting the international scene. We have, though, just a few scholarly studies about these problems, and certainly not many which have taken into account the wide spectrum of questions raised, taking into account the agendas of both parties, Christian churches and ecclesial communities on the one hand and the politics of the Communist party in China, the laws and regulations. It is easy to see that the Christian communities involved are very different indeed, with quite different international affiliations.

It is obvious that the crackdown on Christians, demolition of churches and the violence used in China today is observed in most parts of the world with horror. At the same time it raises questions to the churches in Europe how they deal with their own history. There are so many examples of similar actions that are not accidental but rooted in their own very existence and based in theologies fundamental to them. One example is the Lutheran understanding of the role of the Prince in decisions about the internal structures of the churches and the content of their faith. It is totally foreign to me to reduce the role of martyrdom in the Church in China or elsewhere in the world. From the international perspective, however, the experience of the Church in history and at present, the demolition of churches and monasteries, persecution of people and ideas, was, during the sixteenth-century reformations a standard phenomenon. In England during the regime of Henry VIII and in Sweden during the king Gustav Vasa, churches were made into warehouses and monasteries demolished and stones

\textsuperscript{52}Jasper, ‘Finding Theology in Contemporary Chinese fiction’.

\textsuperscript{53}McLeister, ‘Chinese Protestant Reactions to the Zhejiang’; Zhu, ‘Religious Regulation and Churches’, 344; and Starr, ‘The unlikely rise of “boss Christians”’.
from them used to erect new castles or palaces. That was made possible because of the ideologies presented by the reformers.

When the reformation by a decree of the Danish king was carried out on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea, an old text, written by a Lutheran, describes the situation in 1530. The King’s governor ‘robbed the churches and the monasteries of all gold and silver treasures, used by the idolatrous papal cult, and also liturgical vestments and other things. . . . they destroyed beautiful [church] buildings and monasteries and even those buildings in which people are buried are now turned into stables for pigs, horses or cows, and some churches became ruins. They burned books and letters and destroyed paintings and pictures.54

When the churches universally today condemn violence against Christians in China, they do it together with all ‘people of good will’ and the ground for that is the idea of human rights. For churches in Europe the problem is that this is combined with an understanding of history that is also grounded in Enlightenment and interpreting history in terms of development, from one stage to another, and fundamentally always to the better. Therefore they can claim to have left earlier stages behind. When churches and ecclesial communities engage in what is happening in China, that would actually be more credible if it involved also a reflection on their own history.

Church, religion and Christianity in China: some conclusions

The situation for the religions in China today is basically stamped by nineteenth-century European ideas of ‘religion’ and ‘Christianity’. From the philosophical and political perspective this is maintained by the Communist Party’s essentially Marxist ideology that governs its implicit and explicit ecclesiology. In turn this is also structuring the de facto ecclesiology of the churches and ecclesial communities in China, positively or negatively.

The situation today is also depending on the experiences made from the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century of Western intervention in China by mission agencies and theologians introducing Christianity as a superior ‘religion’. The background is a weak ecclesiology and a strong idea of Christianity both as an abstraction and a Western culture.

From an international perspective the historical basis in the nineteenth-century, does not make the theological in China today unique, even though the sometime occurring persecution and isolation might give that impression. Especially those European churches that during the sixteenth-century Reformations integrated the power of the King into their ecclesiology and developed into state-churches, should, when confronted with the history of the Church in China, reconsider their own history.

It also seems obvious that many of the discussions about theology and ecclesiology in China today, and about churches and ecclesial communities in China, are quite similar from an international perspective. I have given the example religious studies and cultural Christians.

In summary: I line up with those who maintain that there is a need for mutual exchange and for the sharing of theological resources between churches with ‘Chinese characteristics’ and churches with other characteristics, around the world.

54The text is quoted from Siltberg, ‘Reformationstidens första skede på Gotland’.
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