

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

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Symposium on Religion and the Future of China

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CFR symposium on religion in China tackles myth of “low religious interest” in the country

“China is one of the most diverse religious countries in the world, in terms of having significant representation of major world religions,” said **Brian Grim**, senior research fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, at a recent Council symposium on religion and the future of China. He pointed out that in a 2005 Pew Global Attitudes survey six out of ten Chinese said they “hold some religious belief.”

The Chinese constitution allows for freedom of belief but has recognized five official religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. **Fenggang Yang**, director of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University, said that these five religions were picked because they are also practiced in other parts of the globe and provide China with “world connections.” Aside from these religions, China has innumerable local and folk traditions.

One of the most significant facts about religious life in China is the successful integration of Muslims in society, said **Dru C. Gladney**, president of the Pacific Basin Institute at Pomona College. “China does not have an Islam problem. The vast majority of China’s 20 million Muslims are very patriotic. They’re very well integrated into Chinese society and culture.... But it is also true that China has a Xinjiang problem and a Uigher problem.” Gladney explained that China’s economic growth has created great disparity in income in this predominantly-Muslim and mineral-rich region. As a result, the people are dissatisfied with the state. “[Uighers, the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang] are not like Alaskans who benefit from development in their region. The mineral wealth throughout China, whether you’re from Tibet or Xinjiang, belongs to the state and it goes to the state, and then the state redistributes that wealth.”

Other highlights:

- **Robert Barnett**, director of the Modern Tibetan Studies Program at Columbia University commented on China-Tibet relations in light of the current protests on that issue. “China stumbled hugely when it handled the Tibet protests because it decided to attack the Dalai Lama, which means attacking religion. [And China has] not been able to produce any obvious reason for that attack....What it did was to create a gulf between Chinese and Tibetans....That’s undermining the Chinese project of—‘we are a multinational state.’”
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- Barnett also remarked on the lack of religious education in the state bureaucracy of China. “Most of those people came up through a very secularist, atheist educational system....They never had any training on religion, these state bureaucrats. And they’re often very afraid of what they can’t

understand. Why are people so motivated by Tibetan Buddhism? What is the appeal of Christianity? What is the strength of Islam? [These questions] are very threatening to an insecure government. I hope that if China does well with the Olympics—and many gold medals, not just on the playing field—that it will lead to a more open, more secure China that will be good for all Chinese citizens.

- **Mayfair Yang**, director of Asian Studies at the University of Sydney in Australia pointed out that in a move to allow more religious freedom, the government introduced a regulation in 2005 that permits religious schools, religious publications, religious study abroad, and large-scale religious activities outside of religious sites.
- Fenggang Yang analyzed the tension between the state and Christianity—China views advocates of democracy as directly linked to Christianity. Therefore, the state favors traditional religions. Consequently, the Communist state has strained relations with the Vatican, so while China and the Vatican are close to a deal, Beijing has not made it a top priority to reach a resolution.

The event was part of a two-year project on religion and foreign policy funded by the Henry R. Luce Foundation and organized by **Timothy S. Shah**, Council adjunct senior fellow for religion and foreign policy and **Walter Russell Mead**, the Council's Henry A. Kissinger senior fellow for U.S. foreign policy.