

Hearings on Religious Persecution in China: Dr. Kim-Kwong Chan Oral Testimony

March 16, 2000

(Note: These are unedited and uncorrected transcripts)

DR.

CHAN: Honorable Chairman and the Commissioners, I began to be in touch with the Christian community in China as early as 1979, before the emergence of the officially recognized church or Protestant committee. I know since I've been working in China, I've been -- traveled to all the provinces except two, Xinjiang and Tibet, working with Chinese Christian community in more than 50 provinces, and with it preach and teach in more than 400 communities.

And as of now, I am one week in China and one week in Hong Kong with staying with different groups and doing trainings, key things, not only with the government-recognized Christian communities, but also with the nonrecognized ones. Because my religious leaders of the nonrecognized churches, and they have been in and out of jails since the '50's.

And

I also work not only with the Protestants, but the Catholics as well because of my background: Born as a Catholic, raised up in the Protestant tradition, ordained in the evangelical tradition. I have also obtained a political license in Catholic theology. So I was able to be accepted by both communities in China, in both the underground, nonrecognized and also the recognized churches.

My testimony

are basically based on my observations and the facts that I have been observing. That's the categorical differences between the concept of freedom of religious in China, that in China it is basically a freedom of religious belief, not freedom of religion as what we understand in the west. Freedom of religious belief puts religion in the very personal domain; in other words, we are allowed to have religious beliefs, but not necessarily religion as a powerful entity in this society to express your faith.

And what makes China quite different from other countries, is the concept of religious beliefs in which all the religious activities are being defined to operate in a confined framework of reference, including limited or confined space and time. Beyond that parameter is regarded as illegal.

And furthermore, children are not allowed to have religious instruction, because anybody who is under 18 years of age does not have full right citizen. They are not allowed to be subject to religious faith. Therefore, in terms of Christian doctrine, pedobaptism is not allowed to be practiced in China.

And furthermore there's quite a clear definition on state government over religion; in other words, all religious groups are subject, not only to the government of the government, but also under the definition defined by the government.

"What do you serve the most?" It states the government has the total right to define what is a religion and what is not. As it was said here today, there are five religions officially recognized in China. But recently I think the government is beginning to recognize Judaism, as two synagogues are allowed to operate, one in Shanghai, the other one in Beijing; and maybe there are other religions who will be allowed too. But this is not in the hands of the Christian society but in the hands of the government.

And furthermore, all those religions of religious groups in that category may be labeled as "further superstitions" or in some cases as a "cult," but again the definition is also in the hands of the government with no clear guidelines. And although to the government it seems to have very clear policies on religions, but there seems to be a wide diversity on the implementation of the religious policies.

On the one hand, there are many cases that have been expressed by other witnesses and reports of grossly abuse of religious freedoms in many cases. In other cases it seems to be the implementation of the religious policy that is more relaxed than what we have been hearing; for example, there's a county right in the border of Mylan and Burma called Ibuganty pangi (phonetic). Amongst the 85,000 population in those regions, 80 percent of those are Christians; and there were 273 religions and 273 churches there. And whenever the government wants to do anything, they have to consult the church. And this happen in China. And the former government is also an elder of the church. So in that particular county, it seems that the church has a strong domination over the politics, the local

politics.

But in a neighboring county with the same prefecture, I've been there several times, doing a few work studies, and there are several thousand Christians but they were not even allowed to register. Although they offered for the requirement of registration, in spite of the intervention of the government, the local government refuses to recognize the presence of Christians, and even the believers' houses are being burned down regularly.

And it is all happening in China just one next to another. And there seems to be a very overlapping areas being treated as so-called registered and nonregistered groups. And the relationship between these two groups are more than trivial differences on church and state relationship, but also with the local politics, personality pressures, and also formal relations existing among the leadership.

Within the Christian communities, for example, the government recognizes that churches there are more than ten million followers; and it's not very small number, and they are operating more than 25 to 37 seminaries and Bible schools and also operating hundreds of training centers.

But at the same time, within this so-called officially recognized churches, there is the gray areas existing and overlapping with other known registered groups. Some of those groups may be at odds with each other. Others may be fight with each other. The relationship is far from just a black-and-white, yes-and-no, cowboy-and-indian scenario. It is far more complex than that. And I realize that there are many cases of which they grossly abuse of religious freedoms; and many cases, they officially recognized the churches, both the Catholic and Protestant, are working totally on behalf of government to suppress other Christian groups.

But there are also many, many cases especially occur in the new generation of the younger leadership who are fighting for the officially recognized space and time for more freedoms for the believers to express their faith. And the Christian community in general, both the Protestant and Catholic, are still growing. The Bible are still quite very readily available, and there is more Christian literature published than ever before, and published by the local and also central councils. And the community churches are being dedicated almost on a daily basis.

For the past four years alone,

Christian Council have helped to build more than 100 churches in China, and another 20 centers too; and those are being operated quite autonomously by regional Christian groups. Although the essential government policies would curb such a growth, but the local politics, the local situations seem to dictate most of the religious implementation of the policies and especially in the rural areas.

Many churches now operate kindergartens, clinics, old-age hospices for old patients, even hospitals. And I can see that they are gradually opening up in many areas to outsiders, although there are policies that restrict the visitation of foreign groups with the local people. But there again seems to be quite an initiative on behalf of government, especially in the most remote provinces, to open up to have contacts so that they more responsive to recruiting in those -- through those church connections.

However, there seems to be quite clear restrictions on the teachings and preachings. If there's anything on the preachings that seem to be against the government's policy -- in other words, the prophetic role of the church cannot be exercised in this case; otherwise you will be labeled as anti-government, and you will become automatically a political case.

In such a case, the government will interpret it as a political issue, brought up in an issue of religious freedom. And all pastors are confined to the pastorates, and they cannot freely serve in other cases without the government's permission. There are certain restrictions, granted, existing in China, but on the other hand, there are certain rooms to operate in this current situation.

And I would really appeal to the Commission and to the public that the situation in China is rather complicated. It is not a black-and-white issue. And the reports that we are getting are more or less from the areas that are more connected with outside groups, but the vast majority of the Christian corporation of the Christian population in the rural areas, their cases, not heard, not being reported, for better or for worse situations.

And furthermore, there are huge groups of Protestants and Catholics who are operating within the government-recognized framework of references. They do deserve our support, sympathy, because they too are fighting for religious liberties in China. And they may not be necessarily labeled as agents of the Communist Party, although some may, some may not.

Furthermore,
for the unregistered groups, they are not that unified as one entity.
There are lots of factions, split in groups, are kind of personality
differences. And is not just one group, but many groups operating at
the same time with different motive and difference in basics. And that
seems to be a very confusing and complicated part of the China now.

For
the Catholic situation, I had the privilege to be in contact with some
of the newly consecrated bishops and also hearing news of certain
bishops who are being, quote, unquote, "reported arrested," especially
Bishop Jon Burjo. And two days before I came here, I got a confirmation
by the municipal governor of Fuzhou that bishop is actually now in
hospital, not under detention.

And there has been great
pressure from the government to coerce the Catholic communities to be
more distant from Rome and to be more aligned with the government
policy, but it seems that this kind of pressure had been increasing but
with strong resistance even from the government-recognized Catholic
community. For example, recently for the last two months -- there are
more than 15 dioceses in the Catholic Church, they were forced by the
government to elect their bishop ready for consecration.

But
I talked to several of those candidates. They all say that they will
refuse to receive any government-forced consecration, unless it is
approved by the people. And that is a comforting sign, that although
they are operating within a limit area, that they still clearly know
where they stand.

Thank you.