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Why the Catholic Church is right to pursue a deal on bishops with communist China

Tom Plate says the Pope's willingness to see past the institutional interests of the church should be appreciated, rather than criticised. A more open relationship between Beijing and the Vatican would benefit not only Chinese Catholics, but also the overall development of China

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Tom Plate

With retired Hong Kong cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun, I cannot disagree more, as much as it pains me – a poorly practising Catholic – to cross a cardinal. This serious man is fearful and [openly critical](#) of the diplomatic movement between Beijing and the Vatican on the fraught question of an agreed procedure for the appointment of Catholic bishops in mainland China. This is the issue pushing many Catholics underground – and allowing other Catholics to practise above ground only in approved congregations under Beijing-appointed bishops.

By contrast, [Pope Francis](#), acting ex officio for China's 10-million-plus Catholics, is working for the normalisation of church and state.

Zen put his opposition thus: "I acknowledge myself as a pessimist ... but my pessimism has a foundation in my long direct experience of the church in China... So, do I think that the Vatican is selling out the Catholic Church in China? Yes, definitely, if they go in the direction which is obvious from all what they are doing ... Am I the major obstacle in the process of reaching a deal...? If that is a bad deal, I would be more than happy to be the obstacle."

Zen's principled views have integrity and, under ordinary circumstances, that should do it. But these are not ordinary times. The world is enmeshed in the consequential process of making room for China. Wisdom requires compromise. Principles on vital questions sometimes have to be "risen above", as John F. Kennedy memorably put it in noting the functional value of compromise in the US Senate.

In my defence, I offer the similar view of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the former cardinal of Argentina who is now sovereign of Vatican City, and a priest from the estimable Society of Jesus. If he has not been proving himself the perfect pope for our dangerous times, I cannot imagine who else among the current College of Cardinals could do better. This pope, taking his pontifical title from St Francis of Assisi, offers contemporaneous vision: the ability to see reality from multiple perspectives, not just from the institutional interests of the church.



Pope Francis knows that communism provides no intellectual warmth for traditional religions such as Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. He knows that the good communist scoffs at the notion of a heavenly afterlife and so focuses on transforming the material present. And he is well aware of the long Chinese cultural tradition of the emperor as “the son of heaven”. So why worship imagined “holy ghosts” floating around that no one can even see? It’s madness.

“Beijing today, while no choirboy, seems more willing to create space for religious belief”

And condemn not the communists’ view as if it were the ultimate in godlessness: when the nationalists under Sun Yat-sen and then Chiang Kai-shek ran China, they regarded all religions as a mortal threat and carried out vicious campaigns “to destroy superstition”. Beijing today, while no choirboy, seems more willing to create space for religious belief – notwithstanding former president [Jiang Zemin](#)’s notorious intolerance of Falun Gong.

Pope Francis understands that a slide back to nationalist-style persecution is not in the interests of the church. He is also aware of pivotal [Document 19](#), issued after the [Cultural Revolution](#), that criticised extreme leftism for pummelling “normal religious activities”. In his luminous book, *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao*, Ian Johnson shows how this 1982 decree by the Communist Party’s Central Committee was actually nothing less than “the foundation of China’s religious revival”.



Although the outcome of the current negotiations is uncertain, the overall direction is encouraging, except perhaps to Zen. In fact, some mainland bishops not approved by the government have stepped down to make room for new ones that could be jointly

nominated – and installed with the Vatican’s blessing. A new procedure would empower both the communist state and the Catholic Church, with its vetoes on bishopric nominees for the mainland.

Reports continue to leak out that some sort of agreement is near – but so is ever more rancorous criticism of Pope Francis for “dealing with the devil”, as the naysayers have it. To which, two points must be made.

One is that faith or ideology must never become so cemented in doctrine as to be impervious to reason or common-sense amendment. This applies to Beijing, too. Christianity and Islam are not threats to the credibility and viability of the [Chinese Communist Party](#), but over the long run, suffocation of them might well prove just that. Religion of all sorts long preceded the Chinese civil war and will long endure, no matter the shape or secular sharpness of China’s ruling elite. Ignoring a culture’s DNA is no formula for long-term stability.



The other point is that a concordat with the Catholic Church, as it were, would be good for the stature of President [Xi Jinping](#); it would be good for the contemporary culture of China; it would set a kind of minimum floor on what is permissible in China for religious observance, period; and it would be hard to imagine that “a deal” would not find great favour in the [United States](#), whose more than 70 million Catholics comprise America’s largest religious denomination.

Our transformational Pope has the inspired vision to see beyond the Catholic Church without losing sight of how a narrow negativity would erode it. The same goes for Beijing – in fact, the Chinese have a word for it – *tianxia*, or “all under heaven”. Living in

harmonious coexistence is the only formula for a stable new world order. The Confucian notion of “live and let live” deserves worship. Let us render to Caesar that which is Caesar’s, but render to God that which is God’s. It is a formulation that can work miracles.

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