

SUBSCRIBE
12 WEEKS FOR
CNY88
STUDENT OFFERS

Every step you take

More from The Economist

My Subscription

Subscribe

Log in or register

The Economist

World politics

Business & finance

Economics

Science & technology

Culture

Blogs

Debate

Multimedia

Print edition

The Christian church

Render unto Caesar

Comment (36)

Timekeeper reading list

E-mail

Reprints & permissions

Party leaders persecute churches even as they try to co-opt them

Jul 25th 2015 | WENZHOU | From the print edition



Its cross to bear—for now

THE Communist Party is struggling to manage the only cult in China bigger than itself—the Christian church. All down the country’s eastern seaboard it is hard to find a village that does not boast a spire or tower topped with a cross. To some in the party, this is a provocation, especially in the south-eastern province of Zhejiang around the coastal city of Wenzhou. Over the past 18 months, party leaders have ordered the demolition of such crosses. But this month the provincial branches of the Catholic Patriotic Association and the Protestant Christian Council—two of the government bodies that administer the official churches allowed in China—each issued an open letter to provincial officials condemning the demolitions.

The letters accuse the party of violating its own commitment to the rule of law. They add that the incidents have damaged the Communist Party’s image at home and abroad. It is, says Yang Fenggang of Purdue University in Indiana, the first time that leaders of official churches have come out openly on the side of ordinary believers against the Communist Party.

Normally it is “house churches”—unofficial congregations meeting in homes or rented office space—that bear the brunt of official persecution. But, according to the Protestant letter, there are many official churches among the 1,200 it says have had their crosses removed. Some churches have even been demolished.

Zhejiang’s party chief is known for his hostility to Christianity. But Christians wonder whether the onslaught against their churches, which began in earnest in 2014, with a new wave this year, is being directed from Beijing. Xi Jinping, the Communist Party’s general secretary, visited the province in May. “I think it is hard to imagine that this

Add this article to **your reading list** by clicking this button

Rolex values your time

Timekeeper by **ROLEX**



Follow *The Economist*

Next in Middle East and Africa

Africa and America
The prodigal grandson returns

Barack Obama is popular in Africa, but has not paid the continent enough attention

From the print edition Jul 25th 2015



Rights and legislation: Can Congress over-ride a Supreme Court decision?
Democracy in America | 38 mins ago



Libya: Death to Gaddafi
Middle East and Africa | Jul 28th, 20:59



Terror, torture and psychology: How America’s psychologists ended up...
Democracy in America | Jul 28th, 20:20



Money talks: Peaks and valleys
Free exchange | Jul 28th, 17:58



The Northeast rail corridor: America’s rail fail
Gulliver | Jul 28th, 16:36

In this section

Confucius says, Xi does

Render unto Caesar

Reprints

Related topics

Beijing

Wenzhou

Protestantism

China

second wave is happening without his approval," says Mr Yang. A centrally directed campaign would be in step with other attacks on civil society around the country. In recent weeks several hundred human-rights lawyers and other activists have been rounded up.

Mr Xi is well aware of churches' role in the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe. The Presbyterians also played a part in Taiwan's democratisation. In May Mr Xi warned that religion in China should be "independent of foreign influence". He has also reiterated that party members must not be religious believers. The issue of religious freedom is complicated by the fact that Islam and Buddhism are closely linked to two ethnic minorities, the Uighurs and the Tibetans, with restive tendencies and resentment over Han rule.

The party's problem is that it increasingly needs people like the law-abiding Christians in its fight against corruption. It also needs them to play a greater part in the social work it cannot do itself. Most Christians are apolitical. One Wenzhou pastor says when he tells his flock to be more politically engaged, he is met with blank stares. "They don't want to know," he says.

Strangely, the assault on officially sanctioned churches comes as attitudes to house churches appear to be softening. On his first visit to China last month, Britain's Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, was surprised when Yu Zhengsheng, one of Mr Xi's six comrades in the standing committee of the Politburo, the party's highest body, admitted there were as many house-church Protestants as the 38m worshippers in official state Protestant churches. (China might have as many as 100m Christians in total.) To date many officials, not to mention Politburo members, have pretended that house churches do not exist. Senior house-church Christians in Beijing say that the authorities have recently approached them about the possibility of dialogue. They speak of renewed hope that their congregations could be formally recognised by the party.

With official churches less compliant and house churches more ready to talk, the lines are more blurred than ever. The party seems to be groping around with a stick in one hand and a carrot in the other, looking for ways to bully and coax Christians into serving its ends. Archbishop Welby quotes Edward Gibbon, the great historian of the Roman empire: religions in Rome "were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful."

From the print edition: China

Share

16

[View all comments \(36\)](#)

[Add your comment](#)

More from the Economist



The Northeast rail corridor: America's rail fail



Eastward Ho: David Cameron seeks markets in South-East Asia



The Economist explains: Everything you need to know about European

• **Religion and politics in Canada:** Crosses, turbans and maple leaves

• **Terror, torture and psychology:** How America's psychologists ended up endorsing torture

• **Turkey and the Kurds:** The truce between Turkey and Kurdish militants is over

• **The economics of buy-to-let:** Are landlords to blame for Britain's housing crisis?

• **Italian politics:** Binmen and bus drivers test Rome's embattled mayor

• **Sleaze:** Lord Sewel, upholder of standards in public life



Italian politics: Binmen and bus drivers test Rome's embattled mayor

Europe | Jul 28th, 16:13

[More latest updates »](#)

Most commented



1 Politics and deal-making
Donald Trump's brazen genius

2 Turkey and the Kurds: The truce between Turkey and Kurdish militants is over

3 Minimum wages: A reckless wager

4 Greece and the euro: From rage to resignation

5 Inside Silicon Valley: Empire of the geeks

Advertisement



Products and events

Test your EQ

Take our weekly news quiz to stay on top of the headlines

Want more from *The Economist*?

Visit The Economist e-store and you'll find a range of carefully selected products for business and pleasure, Economist books and diaries, and much more

Sponsor Content

Want more? Subscribe to *The Economist* and get the week's most relevant news and analysis.

GE Look ahead, an award-winning multimedia series on global innovation trends and technology breakthroughs



Global Trade Will Be Reshaped



As emerging-market companies seek new markets abroad, their supply chains will evolve and grow. Global trade will be reshaped. Growth Crossings is a series of global events and content, produced by Economist Events and The Economist Intelligence Unit, sponsored by Standard Chartered Bank, exploring emerging-market supply chains.

Advertisement

Classified ads

CHIEF CORPORATE DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

Jobs.economist.com

EAPLA

Associate Director/Director for Pri...

Jobs.economist.com

Van Cleef & Arpels

Conservation International

Senior Vice President, Betty and Go...

Jobs.economist.com

New Board Members

Jobs.economist.com

The Commonwealth Head of Technical Assistance Unit

Jobs.economist.com



Contact us

Help

My account

Subscribe

Print edition

Digital editions

Events

Jobs.Economist.com

Timekeeper saved articles

Sections

- United States
- Britain
- Europe
- China
- Asia
- Americas
- Middle East & Africa
- International
- Business & finance
- Economics
- Markets & data
- Science & technology
- Special reports
- Culture
- Multimedia library

Debate and discussion

- The Economist debates
- Letters to the editor
- The Economist Quiz

Blogs

- Buttonwood's notebook
- Democracy in America
- Erasmus
- Free exchange
- Game theory
- Graphic detail
- Gulliver
- Prospero
- The Economist explains

Research and insights

- Topics
- Economics A-Z
- Style guide
- The World in 2015
- Which MBA?
- MBA Services
- The Economist GMAT Tutor
- Reprints and permissions
- The Economist Group »**
- The Economist Intelligence Unit
- The Economist Intelligence Unit Store
- The Economist Corporate Network
- Ideas People Media
- Intelligent Life
- Roll Call
- CQ
- EuroFinance
- The Economist Store

View complete site index »

