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CHINA: Isolated Xinjiang religious minorities

By Igor Rotar, Forum 18

Three strands of Christianity are officially recognised in China's north-western Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, Forum 18 News Service notes: the Three Self Patriotic Movement (Protestant), the Patriotic Catholic Association, and two state-registered Orthodox communities. The authorities in Xinjiang appear to be eager to isolate these communities, along with Xinjiang's Buddhists, from links with their fellow believers in other countries. Missionary activity that the authorities become aware of, especially by foreign missionaries, is swiftly halted. Orthodox believers have been advised by the authorities not to communicate with foreigners, Forum 18 has been told. No Orthodox priests are permitted to work in Xinjiang, and it does not appear likely that this will change soon, or that Orthodox men from Xinjiang will be permitted to study at a seminary abroad.

Three facets of Christianity are officially recognised in China's north-western Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, Forum 18 News Service notes. These are the state-controlled associations of the Three Self Patriotic Movement (Protestant), the Patriotic Catholic Association, and the two state-registered Orthodox communities in Ghulja and Urumqi. Orthodoxy in China is not recognised as having the same status as the five state-approved 'patriotic' religions - Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism. It is not known for certain why this distinction between Orthodoxy and other faiths has been made, but it is possible that this may change in the future.

The most strictly controlled religion in Xinjiang is the majority religion of Islam, mainly because of the connection between Uighur Muslim religiosity and advocacy of a separate Uighur state (see F18News 15 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=829).

According to Chen Xiaoqing, Chairman of the Urumqi Three Self Patriotic Movement, there are around 10,000 Protestants in Urumqi with 12 churches. The priest of Urumqi's Catholic church, Fr Pol Su, told Forum 18 on 9 August that there are around 3,000 Catholics in Urumqi, with one church. Orthodox Christians in the city number a few dozen, with one church, but there are no Orthodox priests working in parishes in Xinjiang or China. (There are around 3,500 Orthodox in Xinjiang, according to Fr Dionisy Pozdniaev of the Moscow Patriarchate.) On the surface, there is an apparent state tolerance of religious belief alongside tight state controls (see F18News 4 April 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=537).

However, as is the case with Muslims, children under the age of 18 are not officially allowed to attend churches. Both Fr Pol Su and Chen Xiaoqing told Forum 18 that, several years ago, they used to teach children in the churches, but the authorities in Xinjiang have now strictly forbidden this. This prohibition applies throughout the region (see F18News 28 March 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=532) and in other parts of China (see F18News 8 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=740).

Buddhism is also found in Xinjiang, for example in the Bortala-Mongol Autonomous District of Xinjiang's Ili-Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture. This minority is under strict control and isolated from links with their fellow believers in other countries (see F18News 13 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=409).

The authorities in Xinjiang swiftly halt any missionary activity that they become aware of, especially by foreign missionaries. In December 2003 the authorities arrested an Orthodox priest, Fr Viarion Ivanov, for trying to bring religious literature and baptismal crosses into Xinjiang without permission. These were confiscated, and after questioning Fr Ivanov for a week he was deported back to Kazakhstan (see F18News 9 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=406).

Since then, Orthodox believers have been advised by the authorities not to communicate with foreigners, Forum 18 has learnt. This sensitivity about foreign contact extends to the internet, with a wide range of foreign websites being barred throughout China (see F18News 21 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=366). The websites remain barred today, and the government continues its efforts to censor information available from inside and outside China via the world wide web.

Under Chinese law, a foreign cleric may work in the country on a temporary basis only after receiving permission from Beijing. Similarly, Chinese students may study abroad only with permission from the authorities. The government does not appear to be likely to give permission soon for a foreign Orthodox priest to work in Xinjiang, or for any Orthodox men from Xinjiang to study at

a seminary abroad.

Similarly, Fr Pol Su and other Catholic priests in Xinjiang are forbidden from having any contact with the Vatican.

There have been some indications that the situation for Orthodoxy in other parts of China may improve, in part due to the improvement in relations between China and Russia. For example, Beijing's Orthodox community has yet to receive a church (see F18News 18 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=216), but the Chinese government has permitted Chinese Orthodox to study for the priesthood in Russia. However permission has not been given for these Chinese Orthodox to work in China. (see F18News 22 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=416). The Orthodox Church in China remains small, with no priests to celebrate the Divine Liturgy. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Xinjiang religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=414: the previous 2003 Xinjiang religious freedom survey is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=143.

For analyses of other aspects of religious freedom in China, see <http://www.forum18.org/Analyses.php?region=3>

A printer-friendly map of China, including Xinjiang, is available from <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=china>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY