

Ep 30: Religious freedom in China

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0:00:06.560,0:00:10.960

Emma Park, (EP): You're listening to the National Secular Society podcast hosted by Emma Park.

0:00:44.000,0:00:46.960

belief independently of state interference continue to be at risk of

0:00:10.960,0:00:14.719

On the 1st of July this year the Chinese government pushed through a new security

0:00:46.960,0:00:49.840

persecution and the Chinese government is doing its

0:00:14.719,0:00:17.840

law in Hong Kong to greatly restrict citizens rights to

0:00:49.840,0:00:53.600

best to influence the narrative outside its borders as well.

0:00:17.840,0:00:22.000

basic freedoms such as freedom of speech. If you've been following events in China

0:00:53.600,0:00:57.199

But what is actually happening to religious minorities in China?

0:00:22.000,0:00:25.599

in recent years, this most recent crackdown on civil liberties by a very

0:00:57.199,0:01:01.840

What is the outlook for religious freedom there in the future?

0:00:25.599,0:00:28.960

authoritarian regime, will not have come as a surprise. It

0:01:03.120,0:01:07.520

I'm joined now from Washington D.C. by Dr. Sophie Richardson. Sophie Richardson is

0:00:28.960,0:00:32.320

follows on from stories of the mass internment of Uighur muslims in western

0:01:07.520,0:01:11.200

China Director at Human Rights Watch - an international non-profit organization

0:00:32.320,0:00:34.640

China, of the persecution of followers of the

0:01:11.200,0:01:13.840

that investigates and reports on human rights abuses

0:00:34.640,0:00:37.520

Dalai Lama in Tibet and of the massive surveillance

0:01:13.840,0:01:17.920

around the world. Sophie, the Hong Kong national security law has just come into

0:00:37.520,0:00:41.280

technology which the Chinese government is using on its own citizens throughout

0:01:17.920,0:01:21.520

force. I imagine this is keeping you quite occupied at the moment.

0:00:41.280,0:00:44.000

the country. Those who want to follow their religion or

0:01:21.520,0:01:27.920

Dr Sophie Richardson, (SR): Yes, it's an extraordinary law in that it seems boundless

0:01:27.920,0:01:34.960

both in the behavior it criminalizes
but also the people

0:01:34.960,0:01:39.200

to whom it applies - it seems to actually
have been written to apply even to

0:01:39.200,0:01:42.240

people outside
Hong Kong and it really gives the

0:01:42.240,0:01:47.040

authorities
the opportunity to punish all sorts of

0:01:47.040,0:01:50.159

peaceful criticism
or even behavior that's not meant to

0:01:50.159,0:01:52.799

criticize the Hong Kong or the central
government.

0:01:52.799,0:01:58.000

If you take the law at face value and
uh, you know, the language that

0:01:58.000,0:02:03.119

essentially suggests
that any sort of criticism can be

0:02:03.119,0:02:10.000

construed or deemed as subversive
or indicative of secessionist or

0:02:10.000,0:02:13.599

terroristic
impulses, you know, the wording really is

0:02:13.599,0:02:18.080

incredibly vague -
you know, that could include, uh,

0:02:18.080,0:02:22.000

you know, practicing one's faith and I
think some of the people who

0:02:22.000,0:02:29.520

may be targeted under this new law,
you know, are people like Cardinal Zen or

0:02:29.520,0:02:34.319

other figures from different faith
communities who have been critical

0:02:34.319,0:02:37.920

both of the Hong Kong and central
government authorities.

0:02:37.920,0:02:44.239

Uh, you know, the, the goal of this law
in Beijing's mind is to make everyone

0:02:44.239,0:02:48.959

stop and think twice
about any kind of behavior and wonder

0:02:48.959,0:02:53.760

whether it could be construed as
illegal and that will extend, you know, to

0:02:53.760,0:02:58.080

everything
from choosing to run for office,

0:02:58.080,0:03:05.599

to choosing to, uh, go to a protest
and presumably choosing to practice your

0:03:05.599,0:03:07.760

faith.
(EP): So, so is the idea behind the national

0:03:07.760,0:03:10.879

security law that its terms are
sufficiently vague that

0:03:10.879,0:03:15.120

it it just sort of induces an air of
paranoia so people.....

0:03:15.120,0:03:20.640

just a general repression of people's
way they think and the way they act?

0:03:20.640,0:03:24.400
(SR): Precisely and in,
you know, in the 48 hours before the law

0:03:24.400,0:03:27.200
went into effect it probably bears
mention

0:03:27.200,0:03:30.799
that people were not able to see the
text of the law

0:03:30.799,0:03:36.319
until it was going into effect uh, but in
the 48 hours prior to that,

0:03:36.319,0:03:40.879
you know, we were watching all kinds of
activists deleting all of their social

0:03:40.879,0:03:44.799
media accounts,
withdrawing from political parties,

0:03:44.799,0:03:47.120
announcing
that they had changed their mind about

0:03:47.120,0:03:51.200
whether to run for office
precisely because it's not clear that

0:03:51.200,0:03:55.599
those behaviors
won't be prosecuted under the new law.

0:03:55.599,0:03:59.280
(EP): Wow.
So, well, let's turn to um the Chinese

0:03:59.280,0:04:02.319
Communist Party
um and, and mainland China and what's

0:04:02.319,0:04:05.040
been going on there because of course
that's the source of

0:04:05.040,0:04:09.680
this um new direction in Hong Kong. Under
the Chinese constitution,

0:04:09.680,0:04:14.480
is there at least on paper a right to
freedom of religion and belief?

0:04:14.480,0:04:20.720
(SR): On paper, you are allowed
'normal' religious activities and of

0:04:20.720,0:04:23.840
course
a great deal depends on what constitutes

0:04:23.840,0:04:27.199
'normal'
and historically the authorities have

0:04:27.199,0:04:31.400
been reasonably tolerant
of people who are worshiping in

0:04:31.400,0:04:36.320
state-sanctioned
churches or communities but anything

0:04:36.320,0:04:42.800
outside of those is subject to
prosecution and even people who do

0:04:42.800,0:04:46.240
worship within
those state communities have not always

0:04:46.240,0:04:50.560
been protected
by that status. So

0:04:50.560,0:04:54.840
it, again it's, you know, it's just another
example of how the authorities

0:04:54.840,0:04:58.960
reserve, you know, this incredibly
arbitrary power

0:04:58.960,0:05:03.039
to shut down essentially whoever they
don't like, whenever they don't like

0:05:03.039,0:05:07.520
but one of the very disturbing
pathologies under president Xi Jinping

0:05:07.520,0:05:11.840
has
been a push to 'cynacise' religion

0:05:11.840,0:05:17.759
which, you know, essentially means making
religion more of a tool for the Chinese

0:05:17.759,0:05:23.039
Communist Party
rather than truly respecting

0:05:23.039,0:05:27.199
people's rights to believe. The
Chinese Communist party has no

0:05:27.199,0:05:30.479
respect for the idea that, that religious
freedom

0:05:30.479,0:05:34.160
and the freedom of belief are
individually held - they're, they're for

0:05:34.160,0:05:37.199
people to have
or not have, not for a government to give

0:05:37.199,0:05:40.479
or take away.
(EP): What is it that under the Chinese

0:05:40.479,0:05:44.720
Communist party..... Why does it feel so
threatened by religions?

0:05:44.720,0:05:47.759
(SR): Well I think because the party sees
religion

0:05:47.759,0:05:53.520
as not just an alternative ideology
but it's far more concerned about

0:05:53.520,0:05:58.400
religion as an alternative
organizing vehicle uh, and

0:05:58.400,0:06:02.080
it is, it is incredibly neuralgic about
that

0:06:02.080,0:06:04.960
and I mean it's worth pointing out that
it's incredibly neuralgic about

0:06:04.960,0:06:10.400
independent civil society groups
or, you know, people whose ethnic

0:06:10.400,0:06:13.280
identities

0:06:13.440,0:06:18.319
result in as much of a sense of
commonality with for example communities

0:06:18.319,0:06:24.000
in Central Asia as
an identity as a citizen of the P.R.C.

0:06:24.000,0:06:28.400
uh, but I think, you know, historically
religion in particular

0:06:28.400,0:06:34.880
and, and uh, you know, a sense
of, of adherence to a different set of

0:06:34.880,0:06:38.080
principles and
particularly for faiths whose

0:06:38.080,0:06:40.960
leaderships are in different parts of
the world,

0:06:40.960,0:06:44.960

the idea that people inside China are, have a higher loyalty,

0:06:44.960,0:06:49.840

for example, to the Vatican, is not something Beijing likes.

0:06:49.840,0:06:53.680

(EP): Sure, and well, let's move to the most striking example of

0:06:53.680,0:06:57.919

Chinese suspicion of religion at the moment which is its treatment of,

0:06:57.919,0:07:02.080

the CCP's treatment of, the Uighurs in Xinjiang, which is of course in

0:07:02.080,0:07:06.080

the far western part of China in, in Central Asia.

0:07:06.080,0:07:09.840

Um, now of course the Uighurs are distinct historically in terms of their

0:07:09.840,0:07:15.360

culture, religion and ethnicity from the Han Chinese majority. How did it come up

0:07:15.360,0:07:17.919

about that they are part of China in the first place?

0:07:17.919,0:07:22.400

(SR): Well essentially, you know, the P.R.C. says it had

0:07:22.400,0:07:26.240

a claim to that particular piece of territory and it was absorbed into the

0:07:26.240,0:07:30.880

People's Republic uh, in 1949. I think what

0:07:30.880,0:07:34.880

many people or I should say it this way, you know, some people do advocate

0:07:34.880,0:07:38.479

independence - I think what many people would

0:07:38.479,0:07:44.479

accept or find acceptable uh, would be the kind of genuine autonomy

0:07:44.479,0:07:48.879

that Xinjiang and Tibet and Hong Kong

0:07:48.879,0:07:54.160

are meant to enjoy. (EP): Has, has Xinjiang ever enjoyed this autonomy, I mean,

0:07:54.160,0:07:57.440

have the restrictions on it become recent or have they been going on since

0:07:57.440,0:08:00.160

1949?

(SR): You're absolutely correct that Xinjiang

0:08:00.160,0:08:05.440

has never really enjoyed autonomy in any meaningful sense uh,

0:08:05.440,0:08:09.520

and in the last several years we have watched the authorities,

0:08:09.520,0:08:15.360

you know, not just deny, you know, any degree of independent

0:08:15.360,0:08:19.039

representation for example or the ability of local authorities to

0:08:19.039,0:08:22.319

make decisions as they see fit but in fact we've

0:08:22.319,0:08:26.960
watched the state
really launch a wholesale assault on

0:08:26.960,0:08:30.400
Uighur's distinct
identity. (EP): So what are the main ways that

0:08:30.400,0:08:33.680
it's doing that?
(SR): You know, what we've documented in
recent

0:08:33.680,0:08:37.680
years mostly
through mass arbitrary detention of

0:08:37.680,0:08:42.080
Uighurs is,
you know, clearly an effort to reprogram

0:08:42.080,0:08:46.160
people to force them to abolish their
religious faith,

0:08:46.160,0:08:52.480
to force them to speak Chinese
instead of Uighur, to force them to

0:08:52.480,0:08:55.839
swear their loyalty to the central
government and the party

0:08:55.839,0:09:02.720
uh, you know, it's, it's not an accident
that central government officials will

0:09:02.720,0:09:06.320
now refer, for example, to the practice of
Islam

0:09:06.320,0:09:10.480
as a mental illness. (EP): Oh my gosh, that,
that's really extreme.

0:09:10.480,0:09:13.920

(SR): Yeah. (EP): ...and then that is officially
what,
what they're going to say

0:09:13.920,0:09:21.600
about Islam? (SR): Yeah, that, that to be
uh, I mean, you see it regularly that,

0:09:21.600,0:09:26.000
that, you know, to practice Islam is a
form of extremism,

0:09:26.000,0:09:29.920
uh, that it's often conflated with
terrorism or separatism -

0:09:29.920,0:09:34.240
there's, there seems to be a particular
hostility on the party's part

0:09:34.240,0:09:37.600
towards Uighurs . (EP): And, and how many of
the Uighurs

0:09:37.600,0:09:45.680
are likely to be interned at the moment?
(SR): Well, I mean this is the moment when,

0:09:45.680,0:09:50.399
you know, an independent international
investigation ideally under the auspices

0:09:50.399,0:09:53.760
of the United Nations should be able to
visit the region

0:09:53.760,0:09:57.040
and assess that. We have associated
ourselves with the figure

0:09:57.040,0:10:02.160
of approximately a million uh, Uighurs
and other Turkic muslims detained in

0:10:02.160,0:10:06.959
political education centers since
roughly 2017.

0:10:06.959,0:10:11.519

More recent information suggests that some of those people - we don't really

0:10:11.519,0:10:15.279

know how many, have either been shifted into formal prisons

0:10:15.279,0:10:18.160

because of course the political education centers are not

0:10:18.160,0:10:23.519

constituted by any Chinese law. (EP): So they're not um, they're not

0:10:23.519,0:10:26.399

const, within the, within Chinese um constitution, they're not

0:10:26.399,0:10:29.120

technically lawful or is there some sort of exception that

0:10:29.120,0:10:32.320

would allow them? (SR): No. They're making it up - there's no legal basis

0:10:32.320,0:10:36.079

under domestic or international law for Chinese authorities to arbitrarily

0:10:36.079,0:10:39.120

detain or to detain people in this way. Even

0:10:39.120,0:10:42.880

Chinese law dictates that you have to go through some kind of

0:10:42.880,0:10:46.800

legal process, that you're meant to be presented, you know, with,

0:10:46.800,0:10:50.640

with, you know, charges that are clearly constituted and that's obviously not

0:10:50.640,0:10:53.680

what's happening in Xinjiang but it also seems to be the case that

0:10:53.680,0:10:57.800

some people - again, it's hard to tell how many - have been

0:10:57.800,0:11:03.519

quasi-released either into forms of forced or coerced labor or into some

0:11:03.519,0:11:08.240

kind of long-term house arrest but nobody should confuse any of this with

0:11:08.240,0:11:12.800

people actually being free, let alone to worship. (EP): In the forced labor

0:11:12.800,0:11:16.399

camps, there have been reports that they've been using the, the Uighurs

0:11:16.399,0:11:18.800

to make things that have gone into the

0:11:18.800,0:11:20.880

international supply chain and been used by

0:11:20.880,0:11:24.720

international companies. Is there any evidence for that?

0:11:24.720,0:11:29.200

(SR): Well, I think what we know for sure is that companies themselves

0:11:29.200,0:11:35.680

are not able to do the kind of due diligence to

0:11:35.680,0:11:41.760

be confident they aren't using forced or coerced labor uh, in their business

0:11:41.760,0:11:44.720

dealings
in Xinjiang and I think that's an issue

0:11:44.720,0:11:47.760

for governments
and for shareholders and consumers to

0:11:47.760,0:11:52.320

think long and hard about.
(EP): Do we know any stories of particular

0:11:52.320,0:11:54.800

atrocities that are happening within the
um

0:11:54.800,0:11:59.440

political education centers, as they're
called? (SR): Yes, we've documented

0:11:59.440,0:12:02.639

uh, you know, physical torture and ill
treatment, beatings

0:12:02.639,0:12:07.920

uh, uh and sort of that, that realm of
abuses.

0:12:07.920,0:12:13.200

I think it is fair to say that anyone
detained in a political education center

0:12:13.200,0:12:16.800

is being subjected to psychiatric
torture

0:12:16.800,0:12:21.040

because people have no way of knowing
how long they're going to be held there -

0:12:21.040,0:12:24.720

relatively few of them even
know what it was

0:12:24.720,0:12:27.760

that landed them there in the first
place

0:12:27.760,0:12:31.279

uh, you know and.... (EP): They're not told
presumably why they're there?

0:12:31.279,0:12:34.639

(SR): Correct. Correct, you know, and, and
many of
them

0:12:34.639,0:12:38.399

are, as far as we can tell, being
subjected to

0:12:38.399,0:12:43.920

constant humiliation over their faith,
their identity, their language -

0:12:43.920,0:12:47.440

many of them are separated from family
members -

0:12:47.440,0:12:51.600

some of I think the most chilling abuses
we've documented in the region

0:12:51.600,0:12:55.360

as a result of the campaign that drove
the establishment of the political

0:12:55.360,0:12:58.959

education centers is what's happening to
children whose parents have been

0:12:58.959,0:13:01.839

detained.
(EP): Right, what's happened.... so what is

0:13:01.839,0:13:05.680

happening to them? (SR): We've documented
a number of children who were essentially

0:13:05.680,0:13:11.839

placed in state care where they too
are being denied any access

0:13:11.839,0:13:15.680

to the faiths that their families were

raising them in,

0:13:15.680,0:13:19.200

to speak Uighur and they're being taught in Chinese

0:13:19.200,0:13:24.240

uh, it's, some parents have told us they literally don't know where their

0:13:24.240,0:13:27.200

children are.

(EP): Right, so the children have totally been

0:13:27.200,0:13:30.399

cut off from their parents?

(SR): Not just from their parents but really

0:13:30.399,0:13:34.399

from their cultures, their communities and I think we should all be concerned

0:13:34.399,0:13:38.079

longer term about whether this essentially results

0:13:38.079,0:13:44.160

in, you know, the compulsory cynicisation, for lack of a better term,

0:13:44.160,0:13:48.880

of these children. (EP): I mean presumably that's not just becoming Chinese in any

0:13:48.880,0:13:51.760

particular way, it's becoming Chinese according to a particular

0:13:51.760,0:13:56.639

um, idea of what Chinese means. (SR): Precisely and it's the party's idea of what that

0:13:56.639,0:13:58.560

means - you know, being loyal to the party that

0:13:58.560,0:14:03.519

means speaking Chinese, that means, you know, not you're not worshipping

0:14:03.519,0:14:06.800

outside of the state churches, tick on down the list. There's a very

0:14:06.800,0:14:11.199

specific meaning of that term. (EP): Yeah and what is the

0:14:11.199,0:14:14.320

Chinese government's, as far as, um, you can gather, what, what

0:14:14.320,0:14:19.040

appears to be um, it's long-term plan for the Uighurs? (SR): Well, I think it's

0:14:19.040,0:14:22.000

long-term plan for not just the Uighurs but for

0:14:22.000,0:14:28.320

everyone across the country is to, you know, either program or surveille

0:14:28.320,0:14:33.680

people into total obedience - you know, really to generate a dissent

0:14:33.680,0:14:37.519

free society it's, it's a very peculiar phenomenon

0:14:37.519,0:14:41.440

what's happening with ethnic minorities most notably Tibetans

0:14:41.440,0:14:44.079

and Uighurs and other Turkic muslims that

0:14:44.079,0:14:47.199

you know, the idea almost seems to be that, that

0:14:47.199,0:14:50.560

those people will be allowed to exist as, as

0:14:50.560,0:14:57.360
sort of a distinct ethnicity
but all of the substance of

0:14:57.360,0:15:00.480
that distinct identity will be hollowed
out

0:15:00.480,0:15:05.360
and replaced with that which the Chinese
Communist Party finds acceptable. So it's

0:15:05.360,0:15:09.440
okay to be
a Tibetan so long as you're not a

0:15:09.440,0:15:13.279
Buddhist
and that you are not loyal to the Dalai

0:15:13.279,0:15:16.079
Lama, that you speak Chinese and that you're,

0:15:16.079,0:15:19.839
you know, supportive of the party.
(EP): So actually yeah, let's let's turn to

0:15:19.839,0:15:23.519
Tibet, I mean is, is the situation they're
similar to um

0:15:23.519,0:15:28.480
the Uighurs in Xinjiang is it, um.... How
have the Tibetan Buddhists been treated

0:15:28.480,0:15:32.399
by the Chinese Communist party in recent
years? (SR): Yeah, I think that the authorities

0:15:32.399,0:15:36.560
have treated Tibetans
in, a bit differently in that they don't

0:15:36.560,0:15:43.120
seem to see or sense a similar
set of concerns about terrorism or

0:15:43.120,0:15:46.160
violence with Tibetans. The concern seems
to be

0:15:46.160,0:15:50.000
about ongoing adherence not just to
Buddhism but to the Dalai Lama in

0:15:50.000,0:15:54.000
particular
and it's extraordinary when you look at

0:15:54.000,0:15:58.160
the effort the state has made,
the money, the time, the resources that

0:15:58.160,0:16:03.839
have gone into trying to
force people into worshipping only the

0:16:03.839,0:16:06.959
ways that the party finds acceptable and
this comes up

0:16:06.959,0:16:10.720
particularly around issues about the
Dalai Lama's succession.

0:16:10.720,0:16:15.680
(EP): In, within Tibet, how far, I mean, if the
Tibetans are not accepting

0:16:15.680,0:16:20.160
um, the Chinese government's alternative
candidate and presumably this is causing

0:16:20.160,0:16:24.160
tensions between the Tibetans and the
the Chinese authorities?

0:16:24.160,0:16:27.759
(SR): For sure and it's not just tension it is
increasingly harsh

0:16:27.759,0:16:33.440
punishments for people who,
you know, let that lack of loyalty show.

0:16:33.440,0:16:35.600
(EP): Such as what? What sort of punishments have there been?

0:16:35.600,0:16:39.600
(SR): Oh, people getting sentences of 10, 12, 15 years

0:16:39.600,0:16:43.040
on ridiculous charges like quote "stirring up

0:16:43.040,0:16:48.160
troubles" - essentially for having a photograph of the Dalai Lama in their

0:16:48.160,0:16:51.920
homes
or having um, you know, some information

0:16:51.920,0:16:58.160
about him or you know, other people from, from, that faith community found on their

0:16:58.160,0:17:01.839
phones for example.
(EP): So it's, it's really quite um, pervasive

0:17:01.839,0:17:06.319
and intrusive to people's life, lives... (SR): But it's not just that - the, the

0:17:06.319,0:17:09.360
extent
of the Chinese government's tentacles

0:17:09.360,0:17:14.880
into monasteries and nunneries,
into aspects of religious education are

0:17:14.880,0:17:18.559
really
pervasive. (EP): Do they have um, sort of

0:17:18.559,0:17:22.079
their own candidates within these, these

monasteries?

0:17:22.079,0:17:28.559
(SR): Oh absolutely I mean all, all uh, imams and lamas and across, you know, all

0:17:28.559,0:17:32.080
different faiths,
achieving that status requires the

0:17:32.080,0:17:35.840
authorities' permission. (EP): Sure so they're, they're effectively they do what the, the

0:17:35.840,0:17:38.960
authorities want them to do. (SR): But they're also - it's worth pointing out - they're

0:17:38.960,0:17:43.760
also um, party appointed or government appointed

0:17:43.760,0:17:50.320
individuals who are now installed in monasteries ostensibly for the

0:17:50.320,0:17:53.360
purposes
of quote-unquote "management" but they,

0:17:53.360,0:17:56.640
they're there
for surveillance purposes. (EP): I mean, of

0:17:56.640,0:18:01.280
course - Tibet and Xinjiang -
they're quite remote areas compared with

0:18:01.280,0:18:03.280
um
the, the majority of the Chinese

0:18:03.280,0:18:06.080
population here in Central and Eastern China

0:18:06.080,0:18:09.840
but what's happening in, in that part of

China in the

0:18:09.840,0:18:13.360

center and the east? Is there an equal amount of persecution of religious

0:18:13.360,0:18:16.480

minorities um, and is it equally blatant or is it more

0:18:16.480,0:18:20.240

covert?
(SR): It plays out differently for especially

0:18:20.240,0:18:22.799

in, in communities of what are known as house

0:18:22.799,0:18:27.280

churches um you know which, which are uh, you know,

0:18:27.280,0:18:32.720

Christian denominations that don't want to worship inside

0:18:32.720,0:18:36.799

the state institutions, which is understandable. Those communities are

0:18:36.799,0:18:40.720

often subject to things like raids, of

0:18:40.720,0:18:45.120

arbitrary detention but members of that, of those communities have also gotten

0:18:45.120,0:18:48.640

harsh sentences on serious charges. (EP): Do you have any

0:18:48.640,0:18:52.480

specific examples of, of what's been happening to the

0:18:52.480,0:18:56.720

Christians, of particular stories of,

of Christians suffering persecution from

0:18:56.720,0:19:00.240

the authorities?
(SR): Sure, just in the past year or two the

0:19:00.240,0:19:04.320

case of the Early Rain church which is uh one of these

0:19:04.320,0:19:07.360

underground house churches and that has proved very

0:19:07.360,0:19:12.000

uh - popular isn't quite the right word - but it's gained a lot of adherence

0:19:12.000,0:19:16.080

partly because uh they're very involved in providing

0:19:16.080,0:19:19.280

certain kinds of services or support and sort of what you and I might think of as

0:19:19.280,0:19:23.600

pastoral care to other people in the community and that

0:19:23.600,0:19:27.280

really got the authorities' backs up - the idea

0:19:27.280,0:19:29.120

that, that these people weren't just

0:19:29.120,0:19:31.520

congregating for the purpose of worshipping

0:19:31.520,0:19:35.679

but also to provide help to other people in the community. You would think that

0:19:35.679,0:19:38.799

authorities would like that. No. (EP): They

don't really like

0:19:38.799,0:19:43.679

um civil society in general is the impression... (SR): Precisely. Precisely

0:19:43.679,0:19:46.720

uh, and so the pastor of that community was prosecuted and given

0:19:46.720,0:19:52.640

uh, I think an 11-year sentence uh, and I'm now not recalling precisely what

0:19:52.640,0:19:56.160

the charges were. (EP) And what about the Falun Gong group

0:19:56.160,0:19:59.679

because they've been in the news a lot over the last couple of

0:19:59.679,0:20:03.520

decades or so as being sort of..... The chinese government seems to claim

0:20:03.520,0:20:06.720

that they're terrorists. Is there any basis to that?

0:20:06.720,0:20:11.280

(SR): No. I mean this is.... the Chinese government also refers to the Dalai Lama

0:20:11.280,0:20:16.000

as a terrorist and but yeah, the, the Chinese authorities I think have a

0:20:16.000,0:20:20.159

particular hostility towards Falun Gong practitioners across

0:20:20.159,0:20:24.320

China after they had organized and demonstrated very

0:20:24.320,0:20:30.080

visibly, to the authority's surprise, uh years ago and since that time the

0:20:30.080,0:20:34.720

community has really been largely driven underground and it can be

0:20:34.720,0:20:38.320

very hard to get information about particular cases but I see no

0:20:38.320,0:20:42.320

reason to believe why those people might be treated any better now

0:20:42.320,0:20:45.440

than they were in the past. Rather, I think what we've seen

0:20:45.440,0:20:50.720

is, you know, comparable, comparable hostility or suspicion of

0:20:50.720,0:20:54.480

other uh religious or spiritual communities

0:20:54.480,0:21:00.480

fan out across the country. (EP): Um, just you mentioned um that in Xinjiang

0:21:00.480,0:21:04.400

for example Uighurs required to swear an oath of loyalty to

0:21:04.400,0:21:08.400

the party and um, thinking of the numerous monuments to

0:21:08.400,0:21:12.080

Mao Zedong around China um, such as this enormous mausoleum in

0:21:12.080,0:21:14.720

Tiananmen square, do you think citizens are being

0:21:14.720,0:21:17.760

encouraged by um, the Chinese authorities to treat

0:21:17.760,0:21:21.840
Mao worship as a sort of substitute religion? (SR): That's a great question!

0:21:21.840,0:21:26.080
uh, and we could also debate whether they're substituting Xi Jinping worship

0:21:26.080,0:21:28.320
from.... (EP): Sure, I was going to ask that as well, yeah.

0:21:28.320,0:21:34.799
(SR): Um, well, I mean, look - clearly swearing loyalty to the party is uh, is a

0:21:34.799,0:21:39.280
a favorite tool you know, so there, there are clear campaigns going on

0:21:39.280,0:21:43.799
all the time across the country and I think that has to be considered

0:21:43.799,0:21:50.320
alongside very aggressive steps by authorities in parts of the

0:21:50.320,0:21:53.280
country like Tibet and Xinjiang to destroy

0:21:53.280,0:21:57.280
cultural property - the Larung Gar Buddhist community

0:21:57.280,0:22:03.840
uh, you know, the, the numbers of mosques and shrines and even cemeteries

0:22:03.840,0:22:07.440
in Xinjiang that have been torn down

0:22:07.440,0:22:12.080

or paved over is appalling, you know, it's not just the loss

0:22:12.080,0:22:17.440
of, you know, the, the, you know, the history and the

0:22:17.440,0:22:21.679
faith but also it's such an aggressive gesture

0:22:21.679,0:22:25.760
of repudiating whole communities and destroying

0:22:25.760,0:22:29.520
you know sacred spaces - I think that's a very clear marker of,

0:22:29.520,0:22:33.280
of what a government is all about. (EP): Sure so it's literally just

0:22:33.280,0:22:36.880
eliminating their whole identity in a way. (SR): Exactly.

0:22:36.880,0:22:40.240
(EP): But, but what about, if we think of, you know, the

0:22:40.240,0:22:44.799
place of Mao in Chinese society today, do you think he's, he's viewed by people

0:22:44.799,0:22:52.080
um, as a sort of almost like a god? (SR): I honestly don't know, you know,

0:22:52.080,0:22:55.360
it's always hard to answer a question on behalf of 1.4 billion people (EP): Well of

0:22:55.360,0:22:59.520
course, of course, yes. (SR):.....and it's even harder to do when, you know,

0:22:59.520,0:23:02.960
it's,
it's incredibly hard to know, you know,

0:23:02.960,0:23:08.080
people's true feelings
given the state of surveillance um, but

0:23:08.080,0:23:10.480
if implicitly your question is does the
party

0:23:10.480,0:23:16.240
push people to worship
who it says they should worship?

0:23:16.240,0:23:21.200
Absolutely.
Do people buy it? I think that's, that's

0:23:21.200,0:23:25.760
an open question.
(EP): Is there any hope for, for freedom of

0:23:25.760,0:23:28.799
thought in China in the long term do you
think? And if so, where is it going to

0:23:28.799,0:23:33.280
come from?
(SR): Well I think, I think, you know,

0:23:33.280,0:23:40.799
the persistence of people who do
find ways of maintaining their faith

0:23:40.799,0:23:44.720
or their belief in ideas the party
doesn't believe in.

0:23:44.720,0:23:49.039
I think, I think humans are, are quite
resilient especially about,

0:23:49.039,0:23:54.000
you know, their, their most core values
and beliefs. (EP): I guess it's different,

0:23:54.000,0:23:55.840
difficult when you have children who are
being

0:23:55.840,0:23:59.360
educated within the state system who may
not remember or

0:23:59.360,0:24:03.120
share all of their parents views. (SR): For
sure.

0:24:03.120,0:24:06.799
You know, whether people succeed in
transmitting those to their children,

0:24:06.799,0:24:11.039
you know, is an open question. I think
this is precisely the frustration

0:24:11.039,0:24:14.400
in Tibet, you know, that, that for
decades

0:24:14.400,0:24:17.679
the authorities have worked so hard to
wipe out these beliefs

0:24:17.679,0:24:26.480
and, and meaning adherence to Buddhism
and yet that faith is quite resilient.

0:24:26.480,0:24:29.760
I think that, I think the authorities
don't quite know what to do

0:24:29.760,0:24:33.520
about that. (EP): Well what about in terms of
the international community?

0:24:33.520,0:24:36.559
Do you think that the international
community can have a positive

0:24:36.559,0:24:42.720
effect on um, the
suppression of freedoms in China?

0:24:42.720,0:24:47.039

(SR): I think uh, - so it's a very broad statement - but I think

0:24:47.039,0:24:50.960

the uh the governments that claim to care

0:24:50.960,0:24:56.880

about human rights radically underestimated for somewhere between 10

0:24:56.880,0:25:01.919

and 15 years the direction of the Chinese Communist

0:25:01.919,0:25:06.720

party intended to go in and so the current reality really is

0:25:06.720,0:25:13.600

a very powerful Chinese government that is uh, you know very engaged

0:25:13.600,0:25:17.919

in international institutions and economies all over the world

0:25:17.919,0:25:21.520

and the group of governments that are watching, for example ,

0:25:21.520,0:25:24.640

developments in Xinjiang and Hong Kong unfold and they are

0:25:24.640,0:25:28.880

speaking up at forums like the U.N. Human Rights council,

0:25:28.880,0:25:33.039

it's not yet clear though that they are willing to take the kinds of steps

0:25:33.039,0:25:36.400

that might actually change the Chinese government's calculations.

0:25:36.400,0:25:39.760

(EP): What sort of steps might those be? (SR): Right.

Are those governments actually going to

0:25:39.760,0:25:45.120

come together and impose sanctions on senior Chinese leaders in response to

0:25:45.120,0:25:48.159

serious human rights violations? Are they going to,

0:25:48.159,0:25:51.760

you know, either impose visa bans on those people

0:25:51.760,0:25:56.000

or, you know, provide safe haven for example to people from Hong Kong? Are

0:25:56.000,0:25:58.720

they, are they, actually going to try to

0:25:58.720,0:26:01.600

hold senior Chinese government officials

0:26:01.600,0:26:06.240

accountable through U.N. mechanisms the same way that

0:26:06.240,0:26:09.440

you would hold accountable people from other

0:26:09.440,0:26:14.960

governments like, you know, the, the Myanmar military or

0:26:14.960,0:26:18.960

you know other rights abusing regimes held accountable

0:26:18.960,0:26:23.200

for their human rights violations? (EP): Sophie Richardson, you've given us a lot to

0:26:23.200,0:26:27.600

think about. Thank you very much.

(SR): Thank you.

0:26:34.320,0:26:38.080

(EP): I'm now joined by Alastair Lichten, Head of Education at the NSS

0:26:38.080,0:26:42.320

for his expert comment on Dr Sophie Richardson's

0:26:42.320,0:26:49.520

interview. Alastair, hello. Alastair Lichten, (AL): Hi (EP): Do you think that China's treatment of

0:26:49.520,0:26:52.640

religion can in any sense be called secularist?

0:26:52.640,0:26:57.120

because it's certainly not religious.

(AL): This is an issue that we've

0:26:57.120,0:27:02.240

covered and spoken out about but the information has been limited.

0:27:02.240,0:27:06.000

It is clearly one of the most wide-ranging

0:27:06.000,0:27:09.840

and horrific crimes against humanity happening today

0:27:09.840,0:27:13.279

and critics of, critics of secularism might

0:27:13.279,0:27:19.840

want, wish to lay that at secularists' door as it were, so I think there are two

0:27:19.840,0:27:24.399

ways of answering

whether the, the specific, specific

0:27:24.399,0:27:29.440

situation or China's treatment of religion in general is secularist. The

0:27:29.440,0:27:31.360

first

could be just quite a simple thing to

0:27:31.360,0:27:36.159

say - it's clearly not secularism, in fact it's the opposite of secularism but by,

0:27:36.159,0:27:41.039

almost by definition when you have state regulating religion, when you have

0:27:41.039,0:27:44.000

state

mandating how people should practice

0:27:44.000,0:27:49.520

their religious beliefs

and outlawing religious or outlawing

0:27:49.520,0:27:53.679

and persecuting particular religious, religious identities.

0:27:53.679,0:27:58.720

You could also argue that what China, how china are treating a religion is a model of

0:27:58.720,0:28:02.960

secularism

however if you were to buy that argument

0:28:02.960,0:28:06.880

you would have to say that it's such an illiberal model of

0:28:06.880,0:28:11.679

secularism

that it is just completely outside

0:28:11.679,0:28:16.399

of what we are talking about, it's

completely outside the realm of

0:28:16.399,0:28:19.600

liberal secularism, it's so far in that
dire

0:28:19.600,0:28:24.720

direction it's kind of like um, calling a
penguin a dinosaur.

0:28:24.720,0:28:28.799

Under some definitions, you could make
that technical argument but it's just

0:28:28.799,0:28:32.399

completely outside of the realm of
liberal secularism.

0:28:32.399,0:28:35.919

(EP): Absolutely and I mean, I think, one of the
key things about

0:28:35.919,0:28:40.240

secularism as far as I'm concerned is
the fact that it supports pluralism

0:28:40.240,0:28:44.000

and it very much fosters freedom of
religion and belief as well as freedom

0:28:44.000,0:28:47.200

of expression as far as possible and
within

0:28:47.200,0:28:50.480

what is necessary in a democratic
society whereas

0:28:50.480,0:28:53.679

China on the contrary as Dr Richardson
said,

0:28:53.679,0:28:57.919

certainly doesn't do that. It does not
allow any freedom of expression really

0:28:57.919,0:29:00.480

um,

in religious matters except to the very

0:29:00.480,0:29:04.799

very limited extent
in which the state really has total

0:29:04.799,0:29:09.279

control um, over
over people's beliefs. (AL): And in that, in

0:29:09.279,0:29:13.760

that sense it's
structurally and in terms of effect

0:29:13.760,0:29:20.960

very similar to a the, to a theocracy -
theocracies impose, mandate and impose

0:29:20.960,0:29:26.559

their own
their own ideology and how others

0:29:26.559,0:29:29.840

must act and very often are very
concerned

0:29:29.840,0:29:33.120

about identity, even just identities that
they perceive

0:29:33.120,0:29:37.679

as a threat to the identity which they
are seeking to create

0:29:37.679,0:29:41.360

as well as the ideology which they are
seeking to suffuse throughout the

0:29:41.360,0:29:47.120

society through the theocracy.
(EP): Absolutely and I mean, I think, the, the

0:29:47.120,0:29:51.440

very striking thing about China is that
everything which is about the individual -

0:29:51.440,0:29:56.080

individual freedom of belief,

individual independence as um, Sophie Richardson

0:29:56.080,0:29:59.600

was saying is discouraged. What is encouraged is um,

0:29:59.600,0:30:03.679

and, and supported by law, is just following what the state says about

0:30:03.679,0:30:08.480

everything. So in a way, we can sort of, I, I would say, that um, politics

0:30:08.480,0:30:12.000

really, that the love of the communist party as it were, has taken the place of

0:30:12.000,0:30:15.600

religion but it's just as bad as a religion for people who want to be

0:30:15.600,0:30:21.279

different. (AL): And it could be seen as an extreme example of what we see in

0:30:21.279,0:30:24.360

some models of illiberal secularism or some

0:30:24.360,0:30:28.799

anti-secularist models where freedom of religion and

0:30:28.799,0:30:32.240

belief is removed from the, the concern about

0:30:32.240,0:30:37.919

individuals and individuality and placed within a context of groups.

0:30:37.919,0:30:42.000

So if we see secularism as about protecting

0:30:42.000,0:30:46.480

individual's rights to freedom of and from religion,

0:30:46.480,0:30:50.640

some groups which, who wish to seek to impose more religion

0:30:50.640,0:30:55.279

will talk about religious groups' right to freedom of religion

0:30:55.279,0:30:59.200

over above the individual and some groups who wish to

0:30:59.200,0:31:03.039

get rid of religion, will talk about the group's right

0:31:03.039,0:31:07.679

to freedom from religion over and above the individual again.

0:31:07.679,0:31:10.799

(EP): One could argue the whole point of secularism although the western liberal

0:31:10.799,0:31:14.480

tradition and think is like from, from J.S. Mill onwards,

0:31:14.480,0:31:17.679

you know, it's about protecting the individual - that's what

0:31:17.679,0:31:20.559

life is about- it's about individuals. It's not protecting

0:31:20.559,0:31:23.760

some group defined by a particular authority.

0:31:23.760,0:31:28.399

(AL): Because it's up to individuals to define their own identity.

0:31:28.399,0:31:34.799

Individuals can, are able to reconcile their religious identity and	out that Chinese officials have called criticism of what's going on
0:31:34.799,0:31:40.080 their national identity but some nations wish to resolve that in	0:32:24.720,0:32:28.480 blasphemous so that's another way in which the
0:31:40.080,0:31:43.440 the way which they choose for everyone rather than	0:32:28.480,0:32:32.480 theocracies and these state atheist regimes can
0:31:43.440,0:31:47.039 allowing that individual choice. (EP): Exactly and that's, that's what's	0:32:32.480,0:32:36.080 mirror each other. It's partly that illiberal, on the
0:31:47.039,0:31:50.240 anathema to secularism and, and I mean talking, talking of um,	0:32:36.080,0:32:41.679 international stage, illiberal regimes regardless of the
0:31:50.240,0:31:53.440 state control in different ways of individual	0:32:41.679,0:32:44.880 specific ideological wrappings of the regime
0:31:53.440,0:32:00.240 belief and individual manifestation of belief um, I think Sophie Richardson	0:32:44.880,0:32:51.600 tend to stick together, so an atheist authoritarian regime
0:32:00.240,0:32:03.840 mentioned this briefly that um, the international response	0:32:51.600,0:32:58.399 and an Islamic theocracy probably have more in common because the, of the
0:32:03.840,0:32:08.399 so far has been pretty weak I mean, I think including in Islamic majority	0:32:58.399,0:33:01.200 shared uh, the shared authoritarianism, the
0:32:08.399,0:32:12.720 countries. (AL): Yes, uh this actually is a point that our	0:33:01.200,0:33:06.159 shared desire to impose a particular uh, world view than
0:32:12.720,0:32:16.799 honorary associate Nick Cohen made in an important piece in The Guardian	0:33:06.159,0:33:10.080 other states which, you know, which have very different backgrounds
0:32:16.799,0:32:19.919 over the weekend. In that piece he actually also pointed	0:33:10.080,0:33:13.440 but are more towards the liberal democratic secularist
0:32:19.919,0:32:24.720	0:33:13.440,0:33:17.279

end of the spectrum. It also goes to show that

0:33:17.279,0:33:24.000
when theocratic regimes criticize and make and call for

0:33:24.000,0:33:28.559
religious freedom in the West that that's very much...

0:33:28.559,0:33:31.600
they're talking about their freedom, they're talking about, again,

0:33:31.600,0:33:35.760
freedom of specific groups to have specific practices rather than

0:33:35.760,0:33:42.159
any sort of genuine concern for the individual rights. (EP): Absolutely and

0:33:42.159,0:33:46.320
it's always freedom of them but used as a weapon to

0:33:46.320,0:33:49.360
sort of suppress other people's rights to their own freedom

0:33:49.360,0:33:54.080
of speech and of expression. (AL): Absolutely. (EP): I think the conclusion we can draw from

0:33:54.080,0:33:58.320
this whole podcast is that China is definitely not

0:33:58.320,0:34:07.840
secularist in any positive sense of that word.

0:34:12.540,0:34:14.240