

WWL 2018

Church History and Facts - CHINA

How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
1,388,233,000	97,200,000	7.0

Source: Open Doors estimate of number of Christians 2017

Determining the number of Christians in China is very difficult. Estimates range from 40 million to 150 million, depending on the source.

How did the Christians get there?

The first record of Christians in China is written on an 8th century stone stele stating that (Nestorian) Christians reached the city of Xian in 635 AD. Later on, Christianity was banned in the Ming dynasty, but Roman Catholics made new inroads to the country in the 16th century. Protestants arrived in Macau with the missionary Robert Morrison in 1807.

When the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, the Communist Party took over and all religion was viciously fought against, especially religions seen as foreign (like Christianity). Foreign Christian missionaries had to leave the country and for decades, very little was known about how Christians were doing. When the so-called Cultural Revolution took place (1966 – 1976) the whole of society was turned upside down. As a surprise to many, the Christian faith not only survived all efforts to eradicate it, but instead became deeply rooted in Chinese society. Despite all efforts at government control, Christians and churches are still thriving and even though there is still persecution, it is not as intense and as violent as in the times of the Cultural Revolution.

What church networks¹ exist today?

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Source: WCD, May 2017

Chinese Christianity is a patchwork of different church groups with multiple networks. Basically, churches in China can be distinguished as being either state-registered or non-registered. The former are organized into the Three Self Patriotic Movement on the Protestant side – “three self” meaning being self-governance, self-support and self-propagation. There is also the China Christian Council, an umbrella organization for all registered Protestant groups, and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Church. Non-registered churches are independent and organized in multiple informal networks widely known as “underground churches”. This can be misleading however, as they are not necessarily meeting secretly. They represent a wide variety of different denominations some of them may be compared to Baptists, others are strongly influenced by Pentecostal teaching, although they may go by other names. Hong Kong has a special status, especially as there are no state-controlled organizations as the Three Self Patriotic Movement or the Catholic Patriotic Church there. In Hong Kong, around 11% of the population is Christian. Apart from these Christian denominations, there are a few thousand converts among the Muslim minority in the province Xinjiang as well as among the Buddhist communities in Tibet.

Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others ²
OD estimate 97,200,000	23,825,000	18,900	225,861,000	59,497,000	2,800	6,500	531,155,000

Also to note: Chinese folk: 407,772,000; Taoist: 5,778,000; Confucianist: 1,757,000

Source: WCD, May 2017

All kinds of cults are active in China, which may have Christian roots, but seriously deviate from Christian teachings. Maybe one of the best known is “Eastern Lightning” or “Church of the Almighty God”, which believes that the Lord Jesus has been born again in a Chinese woman. This cult is very aggressive and sparked nation-wide outrage when a missionary effort of sect members resulted in the public killing of a woman in a McDonalds restaurant in May 2014. This caused the authorities to

¹ **Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelicals:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in the Pentecostal/Charismatic/Independent Charismatic renewal in the Holy Spirit.

² This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

act much more strongly against such groups. However, the authorities are often neither willing nor able to distinguish between a cult and a genuine Christian group and are hence paying close attention to both.

The Communist government's growing emphasis on Chinese culture being derived from [Confucian values](#) means that Christians can be seen as following non-traditional values and are therefore to be watched with suspicion as they have the potential to create social unrest.

Due to rapid urbanization, the Chinese Church is developing from being basically a rural-style to an urban-style Church with large numbers and all the opportunities and problems that come with that. Apart from long working hours required in modern industry (which challenges the traditional forms of meeting), rising prices also pose difficulties. As the cost of living has risen considerably in recent years, churches have discovered the need to [financially care](#) for pastors and their families.

Notes on the current situation

Since the 1980s China has witnessed an enormous growth in the Christian community and still faces growth, although nobody is able to give exact numbers. What is clear, however, is that it was the pressure of persecution which actually helped the Church to grow. This growth now poses many challenges, especially to house churches, but to Three Self Churches as well:

- Growing materialism and consumerism pose a serious threat. It is also not easy to find and train leaders able to care for the growing congregations.
- The churches need help in developing both a missionary attitude and missionary structures. Church representatives have pledged to send out 20,000 missionaries by 2030. Where missionaries are sent into cross-cultural situations such things as member care, home church contact, children, insurance (illness, family, retirement) etc. are all factors about which Chinese churches have little experience.
- Christians who converted abroad on student exchanges etc. often return and find they do not feel at home in the existing Chinese church structures. This in turn can cause them to be watched with caution, although many blend in after some time.

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