Global categories and local realities

Some thoughts on the WWL Country Dossier on China and its use of WCD-categories

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Abstract

To facilitate significant data for the global advocacy of religious freedom, the annual World Watch List (WWL) relies on the method of global comparison. This article examines indicators that help to discern which kinds of global categories facilitate appropriate pictures of local realities and which ones foster misinterpretations. Their categorization of churches in China shows the WWL's dependence on problematic "one-fits-all" categories of the World Christian Encyclopedia, which rely on a historic Western perspective. The article concludes with suggested criteria for creating alternative categories that better reflect the diversity of Christianity worldwide.

Keywords   Chinese Christianity, World Christian Encyclopedia, World Watch List, independent Christians.

1. Introduction

Anyone seeking to interpret global phenomena must deal with the tension between the need for global applicable categories and sensitivity to unique local realities. This is also true for the World Watch List's (WWL) analysis of the religious freedom situation for Christian believers globally. WWL's sound annual country dossiers on more than 70 countries[2] relate specific data concerning religious freedom to the general situation of the Christian church in the respective country. To do so, WWL relies on the global overview provided by the World Christian Database (WCD) (Johnson and Zurlo 2021),[3] which can be considered a standard.

To produce evidence that can be communicated and applied in worldwide contexts and translated into action priorities, both WCD and WWL apply the method of global comparison. Therefore, they must necessarily work with global categories.

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[2]   World Watch List dossiers are available at: http://opendoorsanalytical.org/country-dossiers/ (password: freedom).

[3]   The third edition of the World Christian Encyclopedia was published in 2020 (Barrett et al. 2020), using WCD's data, methodology and classification system.

This article will not call that approach into question. Comparison has been one of the essential methods of sociology since its early beginnings[4] and the development of meaningful categories has always been one of its basic issues.

However, what about respect for unique local realities? The growing interculturality of socio-political discourses has drawn attention to another truth that has also been observed since the early days of sociology: all categories – or, in Weber's phrasing, 'ideal types' – are no more than preliminary abstractions and instruments to better understand diverse realities,[5] which are subject to constant revision. Furthermore, post-colonial studies have revealed that allegedly 'global' categories often implement a Euro-centric (or US-centric) perspective (Heintz 2010:162-163), leading to constricted or even distorted observations of local realities.

Given the fact that global comparisons always occur amidst this tension between globally appliable categories and unique local realities, a key question arises: How can we identify which kinds of global categories facilitate appropriate pictures of local realities and which ones would lead to misinterpretations? This is not a minor question, because distorted pictures of local realities will obviously reduce the validity of any global comparison.

In this paper, I consider that question by reference to WWL's 2021 country dossier on China and how it applies WCD's categories. Based on the case of categorizing churches in China, I demonstrate that some established global categories are in danger of ignoring the self-understanding of local Christians and may therefore yield a limited picture of the dynamics of persecution. These observations lead to general considerations of how to facilitate more meaningful results in global comparisons.

I appreciate the solid methodologies underlying WWL, its country dossiers and WCD. They all provide for regular review and improvement (Barrett 2020:896-914; World Watch Research 2020:§1.5.1).[6] There are indications in both publications that at least some authors are aware of potential problems akin to those I describe in this article (Johnson and Zurlo 2020).[7] Therefore, my critical comments are

[4]   E.g. the fundamental function of interreligious comparison in Max Weber's sociology of religion, particularly in 'Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus' and 'Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen'; see Weber 1988:12-13.

[5]   Cf. Müller 2007:64-65.

[6]   All online documents by World Watch Research are cited by paragraph instead of page number. Because these documents are continuously updated, page numbers are changing. Additionally, see 'Methodology of the World Christian Database.' Available at: https://bit.ly/3IJ44Ok.

[7]   As for WWL and its dossier on China, I had the opportunity to experience the willingness for critical exchange, a systematized process of methodological improvement and an awareness of potential problems when I was part of the audit process for China in January 2021.

meant as suggestions for the sake of a common cause and an impulse to advance some pending improvements.

2. The categorization of Christians in WWL

WWL's methodology distinguishes, in each country, four categories of Christian communities which often experience persecution in different ways: (1) communities of expatriate Christians, (2) historical Christian communities, (3) converts and (4) non-traditional Christian communities. WWL's definitions of 'expatriate Christians' and 'converts' can easily be applied to China in a meaningful way. On one hand, Christians who hold a foreign passport enjoy some privileges regarding religious liberty compared to Chinese citizens. On the other hand, Chinese converts from Tibetan Buddhist and Muslim ethnic minorities face additional oppression from their families and ethnic community, compared to new Christians from the Han-Chinese majority.

However, the application of the two remaining categories – 'historical Christian communities' and 'non-traditional Christian communities' – to China poses a challenge. According to the WWL methodology's definition, the category of 'historical Christian communities' concerns "historical churches, such as Catholics, Orthodox and traditional Protestant, which have often been part of a country's history for hundreds of years. In many cases, they have held official church registration for years. … In persecution contexts they are often less persecuted than converts and non-traditional churches" (World Watch Research 2020:§1.5.1).

As the authors emphasize with regard to 'historical churches', "their situation and degree of freedom differ from country to country" (World Watch Research 2020:§1.5.1). In other words, a long history in a country is in some contexts – but far from all! – the basis for a legal status that gives some protection against persecution.

Obviously, this kind of church does not exist in China. Except for two short periods around 1300 and 1700, Christianity has never been part of China's history (Bays 2003:186). One reason is that China as a whole – in contrast to, for instance, the Philippines or Indonesia – has never been under the rule of a Western colonial power.

WWL's methodology shows that the authors are aware of the problem of applying the category 'historical Christian communities' to China. The paragraph about such communities in China concludes:

> A parallel phenomenon in this category is formed by so-called government-controlled churches, such as the Three Self Church in China. They have official registration but because they are controlled by the government authorities their status

is different to that of the historical churches mentioned in this category (World Watch Research 2020:§1.5.1).

"Parallel phenomenon" probably refers to the observation that Christians in churches with official registration have a recognized, special relationship to the government akin to the status of some 'historical church' with a long history in certain countries. This special relationship makes them "often less persecuted" than other Christians (World Watch Research 2020:§1.5.1).

However, the example of China shows that the official registration of religious institutions is not necessarily linked with historically accorded privileges. Daniel Bays, historian of the Chinese church, points out that in China since the 7th century some kind of "state registration" of all religious groups, "though irregularly exercised, was an organized reality of religious life." (Bays 2003:186) However, registration has always served the monitoring of religious activity. It was motivated by mistrust and the quest to protect the legitimacy of the state, which in China has always had a "religious dimension" and structures akin to "theocratic organization" (Bays 2003:186). The introduction of a formal, nation-wide system of registration for all churches has been connected to Communist rule. Since the 1950s, churches have been urged to join the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) or the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA). Like other "mass organizations" (such as trade unions), they had to join the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party (Vala 2018:28-31, 55-56). In other words, from the government's perspective, 'registration' in China has nothing to do with granting certain freedoms or privileges because of a particular historic relationship and mutual trust; it is rather a means of domination (Vala 2018:27-48).

For a concise description of the complex reality of religious life in the People's Republic of China (PRC) today, sociologists of religion often resort to Fenggang Yang's division into a 'red,' 'black' and 'gray' market (Yang 2006). According to Yang, the 'red market' consists of religious activities that take place within the framework of registration, while the 'black market' refers to religious activities that are officially banned as 'evil cults' and therefore prosecuted under criminal law.[8] Most Christian activities happen in the 'gray market,' i.e. in a legally ambiguous space created by loopholes in the law, disinterested officials, or unofficial arrangements 'over a cup of tea.'[9] On the believers' side, historical experience plays a

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[8] Introvigne (2020:18-26) provides a thorough explanation of the Chinese government's understanding and treatment of 'evil cults' *(xie jiao)*.

[9] The empirical studies of Vala and Reny describes in detail the complex interaction between government officials and church leadership that creates the this 'gray market' of Christian activities, cf. Vala 2018:63-78, 95-105, 130-149; Reny 2018:86-101.

role in the way they maneuver among the three markets. From the government's perspective, however, the enforcement of state control is the only criterion that determines how it deals with Christian groups.

To sum up, the example of China shows that it can be misleading to assign registered churches to the category of 'historical churches.' The question arises why WWL's methodology does not rename this category according to the one criterion that really unites all elements which are assigned to it. Wouldn't it make more sense to call this category 'Christian communities which enjoy a special legal status' and then present reasons for privileged treatment by the government? In some countries, 'historical churches' would then belong to this category, in others 'registered churches' and in some cases, churches may enjoy a special legal status because of yet another reason.

One practical reason to maintain the category 'historical Christian communities' is probably that it provides the necessary complement to the fourth category, 'non-traditional Christian communities.' This last category is circumscribed in an explanatory parenthesis as "such as Evangelicals, Baptists, Pentecostals and/or Christian communities not included in the above three groups" (World Watch Research 2020:§1.5.1). In other words, the fourth category consists of whatever Christian communities are not included in the other categories. More precisely, the category 'non-traditional Christian communities' is understood in contrast to 'historical communities and government-controlled churches.'

This counterposing of 'historical' and 'non-traditional' Christian communities in WWL's country dossiers probably has a methodological reason as well – namely dependence on the WCD statistics in the general presentation of 'Church information' in each dossier (see the description of China in World Watch Research 2021a).[10]

3. The categorization of churches in WCD

Since WCD has become established as a standard source of information about the status of Christianity in any country, it is only natural that WWL should also adopt its statistics and categorizations. WCD differentiates six categories of Christian churches: Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Independent, unaffiliated and doubly affiliated Christians (cf. Barrett et al. 2020:6). WCD statistics for China do not list 'unaffiliated' or 'doubly-affiliated' Christians in China (Barrett et al. 2020:952). The focus of the following considerations is on the differentiation between 'Protestant Christians' and 'independent Christians' according to WCD and the *World Christian*

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[10] Paragraph "Church Spectrum Today" in Watch Research 2021a refers to WCD data from February 2020, which differ slightly from the numbers published in the World Christian Encyclopedia's third edition (cf. WCE 2020:196).

Encyclopedia (WCE). By extension, some other sub-categories of Christianity are affected by this discussion as well.

In WCD's methodology also, the differentiation between 'Protestant' and 'independent' Christians is entirely based on the existence of historic denominational churches. WCE's glossary defines the category of 'Protestants' as follows: "Christians in churches originating in, or reformulated at the time of, or in communion with, the 16th-century Protestant Reformation" (Barrett et al. 2020:970). In contrast, 'Independents' are "Churches or individual Christians separated from, uninterested in and independent of historic denominationalist. Christianity" (Barrett et al. 2020:969).

Interestingly, the editors of the WCE's third edition point out in their preface the difficulties involved in defining denominations. Because of the "many changes in the nature of World Christianity … traditional denominational structures are much looser than they used to be, with a significant amount of double-affiliation between traditions (e.g., many baptized Catholics are now Pentecostals) and blurrier lines regarding church membership" (Johnson and Zurlo 2020:xi).

The preface goes on to draw our attention to a more general latent flaw in WCE's categorization of Christians: its underlying Western perspective. The inadequacies of these categories will become increasingly apparent as more information about non-Western countries is obtained through local perspectives.[11] This aspect is underscored by Becky Yang Hsu in her foreword to WCE's third edition:

> The categories of world religions that we have used for over a hundred years are increasingly understood as one product of a history of colonialism …. These categories were one way that everyone on earth could be placed into this framework, with Christian Europe at the centre and everyone else an orbital of various distance. (Hsu 2020:xiv)

The same Euro-centric thinking is reflected in the rationale behind the category 'independent Christians.' Here we read, "It soon becomes apparent that there are many large churches and denominations that do not define themselves under any of these three terms [i.e. Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox], and often reject all three" (Barrett et al. 2020:904).

In other words, the only reason to combine these Christians into a single category is their lack of relationship to Western denominational churches. This rationale is methodologically questionable for two reasons. First, it ignores whether these

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[11] Cf. the endeavor in the WCE's third edition to increase "multi-language country-level bibliographic research" (2020:xi). In her critical foreword to the third edition, Hsu (2020:xiv) says regarding the WCE that "gathering data as natively as possible" is its "unique strength."

Christians themselves would really prefer to define themselves as "independent" if they knew with whom they would be sharing the category – namely, "break-offs from Orthodoxy, … and Christians distinguished from mainline Christianity [by] claiming a second or supplementary or ongoing source of divine revelation in addition to the Bible" (Barrett et al. 2020:905).[12]

WCE has already taken initial steps to confront this flaw by including for each country a narrative text on "what is unique to Christianity in that context," so as to convey information that is "more contextualized to the lived experiences of Christians around the world" (Johnson and Zurlo 2020:xi). By doing so, the editorial team shows that it is conscious of the need to address the possibility that certain categories "do not tell us much about how people actually see the world from their own points of view" (Johnson and Zurlo 2020:xi).

Second, it is obviously ironic – if not logically meaningless – to define 'independent Christians' by something that many of them never have been dependent on! Since – as the WCE repeatedly stresses – historic Western denominational churches are continuing to decline in influence, the relationship of a Christian community to historical Western denominational churches is increasingly irrelevant for classifying global Christianity. As time passes, Christian identity is shaped by historic events other than those of interest to Western historiography, including the entanglement of church planting with colonialism. In this regard, China serves as an illustrative example of a global trend, as I will explain further below.

4. The problematic counterposing of historic and non-traditional churches and its application to China

WWL's country dossier on China reveals the problems that result from applying the category of 'historical churches' to China. The respective heading is reformulated 'Historical Christian communities and government-controlled churches' (World Watch Research 2021a). Right at the beginning, the paragraph clarifies that "a unique factor in Chinese Christianity" is the difference between "registered and government-recognized churches" on one hand and "non-registered, independent churches" on the other hand (World Watch Research 2021a). The dossier goes on to give a good, concise explanation of this distinction with regard to both the Protestant TSPM and the Catholic CPA. However, it does not give any explanation of how the term 'historic Christian communities' is used in this context or how it

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[12] The question whether such broad and blurry categories ignore the history and self-understanding of those Christians assigned to them has been a matter of debate for quite a long time with regard to the WCE's sub-category 'independent charismatics'; see e.g. McGee (1994). For the past decade, the subject has increasingly been discussed in relation to China, see the contributions in Yang et al. (2017) and particularly the authors' introduction on pages 1-3.

relates to 'government-controlled churches.' Yet the juxtaposition of both terms in the heading implies that they are used synonymously.

This impression is fortified by the way in which the category 'non-traditional Christian communities' is applied in the country dossier. This category is explicitly identified with 'house churches,' i.e. churches outside TSPM and CPA. The paragraph reads as follows:

> This category is made up of a multitude of Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations under a whole variety of names. On the Protestant side, these (often unregistered) non-traditional churches are also called house-churches or underground churches, sometimes also family churches. These terms, however, are misleading as some congregations consist of hundreds of members and in some provinces they might be meeting openly in commercial buildings and not in secret (World Watch Research 2021a).

We can conclude that WWL's country dossier on China equates 'historic churches' with 'registered churches' in describing TSPM and CPA on one hand, whereas 'non-traditional churches' are those not registered under the TSPM or CPA umbrella. The distinction between registered and unregistered churches undoubtedly makes sense in China, given the different approaches to government control. However, when it is combined with the distinction between historic and non-traditional churches – i.e. with Western denominational thinking – the presentation inevitably misses the reality of Chinese Christianity for numerous reasons.

First, the general definition of 'non-historical Christian communities' in WWL's methodology states:

> The category deals mainly with the great variety of new Protestant expressions, including the independent churches in many countries. … In general, the Christian communities included in this category are often active in reaching out to their communities. This makes them prone to serious hostilities in countries where the context for Christianity is suppressive. Because of this, these Christians are sometimes also forced to gather in 'house churches' or in 'underground churches.' (World Watch Research 2020:§1.5.1)

According to this definition, all Protestant Christian communities could be counted as 'independent,' because no contemporary Protestant church in China has a formal affiliation with an international denomination. This is particularly true for the churches in the TSPM, which has always stressed its 'post-denominational' stance and is eager to maintain its self-image as an independent Chinese church (Starr 2015)! In addition, being "active in reaching out to their community" can cause TSPM-affiliated churches to experience government repression as well.

Second, among those congregations which have registered under the TSPM, some have their origin in classical denominational mission efforts. Others, however, derive from independent, indigenous movements such as the True Jesus Church and Little Flock (Bays 2003:189). At the same time, many Christian communities with the same historic roots as congregations inside TSPM have chosen to stay outside TSPM. In other words, equating 'independent, non-traditional churches' and 'house churches' does not correspond to the historic facts in China.

Third, the equating of 'historical' and 'government controlled' churches is particularly problematic with regard to Catholic Christians.[13] Members of this 'historical Christian community' who have a strong denominational identity generally insist on papal authority, e.g. regarding the ordination of bishops. But this insistence is the very reason why many Catholics have distanced themselves from the CPA and its bishops, who are not ordained by the pope, and prefer to meet as 'underground churches.' This conflict was only partially resolved by the 2018 agreement between the PRC and the Vatican, which provides for an ordination procedure involving the Chinese Religious Affairs Bureau and the Pope (Heyndricks 2019:30-36).

The WWL's country dossier addresses this problem.[14] However, this detail only contributes further to the blurred picture of registered churches which is imparted by the heading 'Historical Christian communities and government-controlled churches.'

Fourth, one widely noticed development in the last decade is the emergence of new, independent churches among urban middle-class Chinese. The most prominent among them hold a firm Reformed theological stance (cf. Kang 2020).[15] They are independent and unregistered, and at the same time they identify with an international, traditional denomination. Yet their Calvinist self-understanding is an independent, conscious choice. It is not due to historical connections to Western missions. Their case demonstrates the inappropriateness of equating 'not being government controlled' with 'not identifying with a historic denomination.'

Fifth, the problem of applying Western denominational categories to China is exemplified in recent academic research on Pentecostalism in China. Several Western researchers on global Pentecostalism classify all Chinese unregistered churches as part of a global Pentecostal-charismatic movement. One prominent example is

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[13] In Chinese, we find a strict distinction between 'Catholics' and 'Protestants.' This distinction has historical reasons and has been solidified in the Chinese language. There is no superordinate term for Christians. The term 'Christians' (literally called 'followers of Christ') refers rather to all Christians who are not Catholic or Orthodox, whereas 'Catholics' are called 'followers of the teachings of the heavenly Lord' in a reference to the translation of 'God' in Catholic Bibles.

[14] See World Watch Research 2021a, paragraph "Christian communities and how they are affected."

[15] See also World Watch Research 2021a, paragraph "Church spectrum today."

Allan H. Anderson's articles (Anderson 2000:18-23, 2017:346-349)[16]. However, some researchers on Christianity in China question such a classification according to categories rooted in the history of US churches and Western revival movements (cf. Kao 2009; Miller 2017; Hu 2017; Liu 2017). For example, Kao (2009:174) highlights the significance of the Cultural Revolution for Chinese Christianity. It brought a sharp disruption to the legacies of Christianity before the time of revolution and was "a time of formation and rebirth" of a new form of Christianity in which the faith survived as an individual religious practice. Therefore, the decisive factors shaping contemporary Chinese churches cannot be derived by reference to the situation before the 1940s, i.e. an opposition between Western denominational legacies and independent, indigenous movements.

Sixth and finally, Daniel Bays, historian of the Chinese church, delivers a fundamental admonition regarding the use of "terms and categories more familiar in the West." Looking beyond legacies of "both missionary-established denominational churches and the several strands of independent church movement," Bays highlights the influence of local factors, such as a pragmatic approach to conversion, experiences of shamanism, and moral ideas about sin. He states, "The most striking feature of contemporary Protestantism is the large number of new converts who come from none of these [Western] traditions, but are products of Chinese popular [religious] culture" (Bays 2003:189). Therefore, Bays demands in his conclusion: "For the near future it may be more useful to view Chinese Protestants as part of that new centre of gravity outside Europe and North America, rather than to discuss it [sic] in terms and categories more familiar in the West but now increasingly distant from Chinese reality." (Bays 2003:197-198)

As Bays makes clear, more is at stake than just the categorization of Chinese Christianity in WWL. Actually, the naming of the categories 'historical' and 'non-traditional' in WWL is only of secondary concern. Although the problematic application of these categories to China has no effect on China's overall rating in WWL, the real question concerns the reasoning behind the choice and persistence of the term 'historical Christian communities.' I believe the picture of Chinese Christian communities may be methodologically limited by the perspective of the 'old churches' which have been the center of Christianity in former centuries. Such a perspective does not match the shift in growth and numbers in global Christianity. In the long run, it hampers a true understanding of other Christians consistent with their self-understandings. This problem particularly affects persecuted Christians because they have limited opportunities to make themselves heard.

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[16] I refer to these two articles, 17 years apart, because they show that Anderson's viewpoint has not changed despite several objections.

5. Alternative categories – phenomenological in nature and focused on the research question

As I stated at the beginning of this article, the common identifier of all Christian communities in China which WWL assigns to the category 'historical' (in WWL's methodology) or 'historical and government controlled' (World Watch Research 2021a)[17] is their special legal status due to registration under the umbrella of TSPM or CPA. Accordingly, the common identifier of all Christian communities in China which WWL assigns to the category 'non-traditional Christian communities' is that they lack the special legal status associated with registration.

I have elaborated above that Chinese Christian communities in both categories have very different and complex relationships with 'historical' or 'traditional' churches and Western denominations. Therefore, the dichotomy between 'historical' and 'non-traditional' Christian communities will inevitably lead to several inconsistencies if applied as an identifier in the categorizing process.

Based on the assumption that for a growing number of churches, worldwide historic relationships to traditional Western denominations are of little significance with regard to their identity and legal status, it may be time to redefine these categories. This redefinition should happen on a more phenomenological basis by generalizing global observations about what really makes a difference with regard to religious oppression. Basically, the WWL methodology functions in this way when it creates the categories 'communities of expatriate Christians' and 'converts.' Also, WWL's contextual specification of the categories 'historical Christian communities' and 'non-traditional Christian communities' with regard to China seems to be guided by factual observations. These factors reinforce the impression that the time for a consistent renaming has come.

Therefore, I suggest replacing the dichotomy between 'historical' and 'non-traditional' Christian communities with two descriptive categories: Christian communities which enjoy a special legal status and those which do not.

My suggestions are based only on the case of China and on general assumptions about the development of global Christianity. Of course, the extent to which WWL's analyses of other countries face similar challenges remains open to further investigation. At least, the analysis of the situation of religious freedom for Christian communities in China indicates that the differentiation between Christian communities with a special legal status and those without one would deliver a more precise picture and more consistent results. Doubtless, in some countries, the difference in legal status is due to the historical status of a church in the respective country. But in other cases, there are other reasons. Country-specific reasons can still be given wherever the category 'churches with a special legal status' applies.

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[17]   See paragraph "Christian communities and how they are affected".

This way of categorizing would have several advantages. First, it is neutral and does not favour any historic or geographic perspective.

Second, its relevance can be objectively proven by official documents and government regulations concerning religious policy. In the case of China, essential differences between the ways in which registered and unregistered churches experience government restriction result from the fact that they are exposed to different government institutions based on their legal status. Because unregistered Christian communities have no legal status, their supervision "falls in large part under the jurisdiction of public security bureaus, particularly … the Domestic Security Brigade," which is "primarily responsible for collecting intelligence … and investigating criminal activities" (Reny 2018:69-70). Consequently, the interaction between unregistered churches and government authorities always happens within the framework of criminal law and under the suspicion of harming public security.[18] In contrast, churches registered under the umbrella of TSPM or CPA have a legal status which gives them the right to exist – though under conditions stipulated by the Communist Party (CPC) and its United Front Work Department. In their interaction with government authorities, these churches enjoy – at least in theory – certain rights. However, according to the CPC's ideology, the admission of a religious group's right to exist is inseparably linked to the government's obligation to "direct" religions (including Christian churches) towards becoming "positive elements" of the socialist society. The task of implementing this religious policy is given to the Religious Affairs Bureau in close cooperation with each religion's "patriotic association," such as TSPM and CPA (Gänssbauer 2004:46-51, 77-80).[19]

Third, the method of differentiating churches according to their legal status corresponds better to how Chinese Christians themselves describe their experiences of repression than denominational categories would. Depending on the legal status of their church, Christians (particularly Christian leaders) must deal either with public security officers and police or with the personnel of Religious Affairs Bureau and the leadership of TSPM or CPA. Consequently, they experience restrictive measures predominantly in one of two forms: either criminalization or surveillance and interference. Even if it is true that both kinds of Christian communities in several areas experience similar oppression,[20] it still makes sense to distinguish them according to their legal status, because different mechanisms are involved.

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[18] For detailed information, see Reny (2018:68-77).

[19] At the risk of oversimplification, it can be said that China's religious policy treats Christians in registered churches like mentally unstable children in need of moral education, while Christians in unregistered churches are approached like potential criminals.

[20] See paragraph "Persecution Dynamics China" in World Watch Research 2021a. On the demolition of church buildings and crosses of registered churches, see Reny 2018:145-147.

This takes us to the last point. Focusing on the distinction between registered and unregistered churches is particularly significant when the topic of discussion is religious freedom and persecution. In contrast, the legal status of a church makes less difference with regard to theology, spiritual life, evangelism or ecclesial structures. There is consensus in current research on China that in these other matters, the difference between urban and rural churches is much more significant than the difference between registered and unregistered churches (cf. Bays 2003:185-186). Restricting the use of legal status as a criterion for categorizing churches to the realm of religious freedom and persecution does not reduce the validity of this criterion. On the contrary, this restriction points rather to a fourth advantage of categories developed phenomenologically, and with reference to the research question at hand. Categories constructed in this way will facilitate a clearer view of the issue at stake than "one-fits-all" categories.

The considerations discussed with reference to China in this paper lead to some general conclusions beyond China regarding the question of which kinds of global categories are helpful or, in contrast, potentially misleading.

6. The need for new categories for the new gravity of global Christianity

At first stance, the situation of the church in China seems unique. On closer examination, however, the problems that arise when we try to apply certain established global categories to Chinese Christians point to a general challenge which we can expect to meet increasingly when analyzing global Christianity.

In a way, China can serve as a paradigm for post-colonial Christianity. The decisive growth and consolidation of the Chinese church happened independently of colonial history. As mentioned above, the historic gap of the Cultural Revolution separates contemporary Chinese Christianity from the golden age of Western mission between 1800 and 1950. In this sense, developments in China illustrate an increasing tendency in global Christianity, according to which the historical and practical influence of Western churches is of diminishing importance for understanding the present situation of non-Western Christian communities. As a methodological consequence, it can be expected that categories grounded in a Western historical perspective will be less and less in line with reality and with the self-understanding of non-Western Christian communities.

As a first indicator of that a category needs revision, we can cite the error of relying on historical groupings that are of little significance for current developments in most Christian churches worldwide. A second, related indicator can be clearly recognized in the example of China: global categories are potentially misleading when they ignore the self-understanding of local Christians.

In these cases, alternative categories are needed. From the considerations above regarding the analysis of religious freedom for Christians in China, we can deduce

two general characteristics of helpful global categories. On one hand, they must be wider than old categories. They must leave behind a Western perspective and must grasp the complex phenomena that result from the new gravity of global Christianity. On the other hand, they must be suitably focused. Meaningful global categories should not aim to be universal in the sense that they fit all research issues. They must rather work well with regard to a specific topic.

Consequently, all categories must be continuously adapted. That is a basic methodological truth to which the WWL and WCD are committed. The bigger challenge is to recognize when old, familiar categories should be abandoned completely, not readjusted. This requires a resolute attentiveness to local realities and resistance of the law of inertia, which naturally maintains established criteria. Hsu voices such a concern in the concluding remark of her preface to WCE. Her words correspond perfectly to WWL's concern for giving voice to the persecuted. Hsu reminds us of the challenge of balancing the methodological necessity of global categories against respect for local realities:

> Broadly, one aspect of the project of classifying all the people in the world "was born from and for empire," but another feature of the project, gathering data from (not simply about) many people, can serve post-colonial purposes. The project can, I believe, serve to give voice to the subaltern – those whose perspectives are usually hidden from sight, blotted out by the louder and more powerful. The best way to move forward for understanding is to continue gathering data as natively as possible. (Hsu 2020:xiv)

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