

Religious challenges and risks to the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

A serious gap exists in research into the religious dimensions of the “new Silk Road,” which stretches from the east coast of China to the heart of Europe. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, is one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects ever conceived. Yet it is more than a commerce and communications corridor. Religious peoples, beliefs, ideas, and practices transverse the BRI, challenging China and the United States as they advance competing visions of religious freedom. This article offers an historical and policy perspective on the religious challenges facing the BRI rather than an advocacy approach.

Keywords Belt and Road Initiative, BRI, religion, religious freedom, FoRB, Xi Jinping, Xu Yihua, Asia-Pacific, Sino-U.S., Sino-American, Vatican.

1. Introduction

On 14 May 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping officially opened the inaugural Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing. His speech anchored the event in the 2,000-year history of the “transcontinental passage connecting Asia, Europe and Africa, known today as the Silk Road.” As the “ancient silk routes spanned the valleys of the Nile, the Tigris and Euphrates, the Indus and Ganges and the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers,” Xi explained, “they connected the birthplaces of the Egyptian, Babylonian, Indian and Chinese civilizations as well as the lands of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam” (Xi Jinping 2017). The ancient Silk Road pulsed with commerce, communications, knowledge, arts, culture, and military forces. It was an artery through which Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, and various folk religions flowed east and west, assimilating sacred beliefs and traditions into diverse cultures along the way.

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“Rooted in the ancient Silk Road,” Xi articulated a vision for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that was future-facing – “an innovation-driven development” incorporating “areas such as digital economy, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology and quantum computing,” as well as “big data, cloud computing and smart cities” creating “a digital silk road of the 21st century” (Xi Jinping 2017). The New York-based Council on Foreign Relations labeled the BRI “one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects ever conceived” (Chatzky and McBride 2020). *The Economist* (2018) calculated that the BRI is easily the most expensive infrastructure project of all time, significantly surpassing the post-World War II Marshall Plan. It reaches from the east coast of China to the heartland of Europe, encompassing almost all of Eurasia, portions of Africa, and the Pacific Islands, as well as partner countries in the Americas.

To date, most scholarly research on the BRI has focused on the implications for trade, transportation, communications, economics, diplomatic relations, and strategic balances of power. However, a serious gap exists in the research on the religious dimensions and challenges of the Belt and Road. This article offers an historical and policy perspective – not an advocacy approach – on the religious challenges and risks facing the BRI, which may impact Sino-American relations. Its goal is to provoke deliberate discussion and debate among scholars, religious practitioners, and government policymakers on the religious ramifications of the BRI.

First, I provide an overview of the BRI – its origins, scope, and purposes. Sadly, China’s BRI plans have too often encountered ignorance and ambivalence in the West, particularly in the United States (Khanna 2019). Second, I examine some of the religious demographics and cultural dynamics along the Belt and Road routes. In this section, the challenges and risks posed by religion become more evident. Third, the religious freedom policy dimensions of the BRI will be considered. Finally, I explore the strategic and security strife that religion may foment.

Questions abound. Will religions along the Belt and Road be a source of peace and harmony, or conflict and discord? Will the great powers of the United States and China use religion policy along the BRI corridors as a pretext for cooperation or confrontation? Will 21st-century believers learn from the religious history of the ancient Silk Road or, as philosopher George Santayana’s prescient aphorism warns, be doomed to repeat its tragedy, pain, and death (Santayana 1905:284)?²

2. Overview of the BRI

The BRI was introduced by President Xi Jinping at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan, on 7 September 2013. Invoking the history of his home province of Shaanxi,

² Santayana’s original quotation was “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

China as the starting point for the ancient Silk Road and Kazakhstan's strategic positioning astride the historic route, Xi proposed that the two "friendly neighbors" – "as close as lips and teeth" – should take the "innovative approach" of jointly building an "economic belt along the Silk Road." Xi declared, "This will be a great undertaking benefitting the people of all countries along the route" (Xi Jinping 2013).

At the time of Xi's announcement, his bold vision was more aspirational than actual. As Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ian Johnson observes in *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao*, "Content always comes slowly to Chinese projects. China is a land of soft openings: projects are first announced to big fanfare, structures erected as declarations of intent, and only then filled with content. . . . If viable, the project goes ahead; if not, backing out is easier" (Johnson 2017:79). Over the next four years, Xi's vision took shape along two geopolitical lines – the overland "Silk Road Economic Belt" (the Belt) and the "21st-Century Maritime Silk Road" (the Road) – collectively referred to at first as the "One Belt, One Road" initiative (OBOR). By 2017, Xi proudly called it the "Belt and Road Initiative," boasting that it "is becoming a reality and bearing rich fruit" (Xi Jinping 2017).

In Xi's 2013 speech, he made clear that the BRI did not arise *ex nihilo*. It is a part of China's strategic long game of building alliances and expanding international influence (Ye 2020:115-143). The origins of the BRI date back to the formation of the Shanghai Five in 1996 (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), which morphed in 2001 into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) with the addition of Uzbekistan. By 2017, India and Pakistan were admitted into the SCO as full members along with four "observer states" and six "dialogue partners" (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation n.d.; United Nations n.d.; Gill 2001).³ In 2010, the SCO gained official status with the United Nations.

On a parallel policy track, China turned outward in the late 1990s with a foreign direct investment (FDI) strategy called "go out," which encouraged Chinese corporate participation in international markets and businesses. "Go out" became much more than a fiscal strategy. It grew into a central tenet of Chinese foreign policy and became a foundational rationale for the BRI (Nash 2012). China's foremost expert on religion and international affairs, Dr. Xu Yihua of Fudan University's Center for American Studies, argued in a 2015 journal article that religion should be central to China's "go out" strategy and the BRI: "During China's implementation of the BRI, religion is one of the most effective means to enhance relations and influence public opinion. . . . If we want to tell a good story about China to the rest of the world, we have to tell a good story about religion." Dr. Xu concluded by wrap-

³ The four "observer states" are Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia. The six "dialogue partners" are Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka.

ping the “going out” strategy in Harvard professor Joseph Nye’s metaphor of soft power: “Promoting Chinese culture to the world and forming a cultural soft power commensurate with China’s international status has become an important part of China’s ‘going out’ diplomatic strategy” (Xu Yihua 2015:1-8; Nye 2004).

According to a 2019 World Bank report, the overland Belt comprises six economic corridors linking China to Central and South Asia, Russia, Turkey, and South-eastern and Central Europe. The maritime Road links China to Southeast Asia, India, the Gulf States, East and North Africa, the Middle East, and Western Europe. As of March 2019, official Chinese sources asserted that 125 countries had signed BRI collaboration agreements, although some of the partner countries are not located along BRI corridors (World Bank 2019:xi, 3).⁴ The World Bank report specifies seventy-one “Belt and Road corridor economies” that are directly impacted by the initiative and lists ninety BRI road, rail, and port investment projects that China has undertaken (World Bank 2019:135-40).

The BRI promises economic and geopolitical benefits to China and its partner countries. It provides much-needed capital investment for infrastructure projects in China and in the seventy-one partner countries, which collectively represent over two-thirds of the world’s population (Chatzky and McBride 2020). It breaks the “bottleneck in Asian connectivity,” according to President Xi, with its railways, highways, energy pipelines, communications networks, and streamlined border crossings (Xi Jinping 2014). It provides a network for the expanded international use of Chinese currency and new markets for Chinese goods. Yet China’s ambitious initiative is not without blowback. BRI projects are funded by low-interest loans rather than grants, creating debt traps for poorer countries and financial pressures for the Chinese economy, particularly in a post-COVID-19 world (Nyabiage 2020). As well, accusations proliferate concerning corruption, opaque bidding processes, price gouging, abandoned half-finished projects, and political backlash. Some speculate that with the BRI “China may be doing more damage to itself than others” (Chatzky and McBride 2020; FP Editors 2019).

3. Religion and the BRI

The countries that span the Belt and Road are some of the most religiously consequential and diverse in the world. A Pew Research study on “Global Religious Diversity” names China as having one of the highest religious diversity scores among the 232 countries in the report. In addition, the Asia-Pacific region overall ranks as the most religiously diverse among the six global regions in the Pew Religious Diversity Index and is the only region rated “very high” on the scale (Pew Research 2014:6-7, 15).

⁴ According to the World Bank, the BRI is an open arrangement that welcomes all countries as participants. To date, an official list of participating countries has not been released.

Moreover, a large number of BRI partner countries have (1) the most restrictive laws and policies towards religion, (2) the highest levels of government harassment of religious groups, and (3) the highest levels of social hostilities related to religious norms. The Pew Research Center's tenth annual report on "How Religious Restrictions Have Risen Around the World" provides persuasive data affirming that many of the seventy-one BRI partner countries rank high on the religious restrictions scale. Indeed, Pew's Government Restrictions Index and its Social Hostilities Index both identify the regions of the Asia-Pacific, Middle East-North Africa, and Europe as highest on their respective lists. These three regions comprise the bulk of the BRI (Pew Research 2019).

The ubiquity of religion along the routes of the Belt and Road is further magnified when one compares the data on religious traditions from Boston University's World Religion Database with the World Bank's list of seventy-one BRI partner countries (Johnson and Grim 2020; World Bank 2019:135-40). A comparison of the data illustrates the influence of the world's great religions in BRI countries. For example, of the six countries with the world's largest Buddhist populations, five are BRI countries (China, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka). The six countries with the largest Hindu populations are all BRI countries (India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan). As the overland and maritime portions of the Belt and Road head west into Central Asia, the Gulf States, the Middle East, and North Africa, the routes cross vast Muslim lands. The BRI includes the five largest Sunni Muslim populations (Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Egypt), as well as the six largest Shi'a Muslim populations (Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, India, Yemen, and Turkey). In the Middle East, the Belt and Road includes the world's largest Jewish nation – Israel. As it moves into Africa and Europe, it penetrates the heartland of the Christian world. The BRI includes five of the six largest Orthodox Christian populations (Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Greece, and Egypt); two of the five largest Roman Catholic Christian countries (the Philippines and Italy); four of the ten largest Protestant Christian populations (China, Kenya, India, and Indonesia); and four of the ten largest Independent Christian communities (China, India, the Philippines, and Kenya). If one overlays a map of the overland and maritime routes of the BRI with a map showing the prevalence of world religions in each country, the diversity and influence of religion along the BRI is striking.

On 8 November 2014, Xi Jinping gave a speech in Beijing on the importance of connectivity between BRI nations. Xi said that the success of the Belt and Road depends on more than roads, bridges, and linear surface connections. "More importantly," he stated, it involves a "three-way combination of infrastructure, institutions and people-to-people exchanges" and a process that includes "understanding among peoples." In the speech, Xi also acknowledged the religious dimension of

the free flow of peoples east and west along the Belt and Road: “China supports inter-civilization and inter-faith dialogue [and] welcomes cultural and people-to-people exchanges among all countries” (Xi Jinping 2014).

Already, the BRI has become a highway for heightened religious interchange and activity. Indigenous Chinese Christians have promoted a “Back to Jerusalem” movement since the 1920s, aspiring to take the gospel into Islamic Central Asia, the Middle East, and back to its origins in Jerusalem. Currently the official “Back to Jerusalem” mission organization has a goal of sending over 100,000 Chinese missionaries to work in fifty-one countries along the Belt and Road. In Africa, Evangelicals are actively and zealously evangelizing Chinese workers sent by Chinese companies to work on projects across the continent, including the construction of many churches. However, conflict between Christians and Muslims along the BRI spilled over in 2017 when two Chinese Christian missionaries were killed by Islamists in Quetta, Pakistan, creating a diplomatic dilemma for the Chinese government (Luedi 2018; Dawes 2019; Masood 2017).

With the increasing flow of peoples facilitated by the BRI, how does China propose to regulate religious expression, mission work, and institutions along the BRI to harmonize partner country practices with its own policies on religion? As religious people – merchants, workers, tourists, and ordinary folk – increasingly cross China’s borders via the Belt and Road, how can China constrain religious beliefs and practices so they do not overpower Chinese Communist Party precepts? The crackdowns on religious practices in Tibet and Xinjiang have precipitated widespread criticisms of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) for using an iron fist to subjugate religious peoples. Such actions and reactions could multiply exponentially with the international growth and advancement of the Belt and Road. Empirically and logically, religion along the BRI poses a challenge and possible threat to China, and illusions of successfully restraining its spread are quixotic.

4. International religious freedom advocacy and the BRI

International religious freedom (IRF) advocacy gained its most vocal champion – the United States – with the adoption of the U.S. International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, later amended and expanded as the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016. The act created the Office of International Religious Freedom in the U.S. Department of State, charged with promoting “religious freedom as a core U.S. foreign policy objective” (U.S. Department of State n.d.). As a result, governmental religious freedom monitoring and advocacy accelerated globally.

In 2000, the UN Commission on Human Rights appointed its first Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). After several years of advocacy and encouragement by the United States, the International Panel of Parliamentar-

ians for FoRB was assembled in June 2014; it now constitutes a network of more than 70 parliamentarians representing over 40 countries. In January 2015, the European Parliament Intergroup on FoRB and Religious Tolerance was created. In June 2015, Canada took the lead in establishing the International Contact Group (ICG) on FoRB, composed of senior government officials from over 19 countries. ICG-FoRB meets annually, often on the margins of the UN Human Rights Council or the UN General Assembly. In 2016, the EU appointed a Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief Outside the EU to advocate internationally on FoRB issues. Moreover, many individual countries have established congressional and parliamentary initiatives, as well as caucuses to advance religious freedom issues within their legislative branches. These include the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Brazil, Norway, Austria, and others.

In recent years, the most influential IRF initiative has been the U.S. State Department–initiated “Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom.” This gathering of over 1,000 civil society and religious leaders, as well as more than 100 government delegations, was held in Washington, D.C. in 2018 and 2019. In November 2020, the Ministerial was held outside the U.S. for the first time – hosted by Poland.⁵ Subsequently, it was announced that the 2021 Ministerial would be hosted by Brazil and the 2022 Ministerial would be hosted by the United Kingdom. U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback announced at the opening of the 2019 Ministerial, “This is not an exercise in trying to achieve some sort of common theology. This is an exercise in protecting a common, unalienable human right. We seek to have all the religions and governments of the world come together around this concept . . . religious freedom for everyone, everywhere, and all the time” (Brownback 2019).⁶

To institutionalize and accelerate religious freedom globally, the 2019 Ministerial took initial steps to create a new international religious freedom alliance, which was named the International Religious Freedom or Belief (IRFOB) Alliance in August 2020. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared, “The formation of the Alliance marks the first time in history an international coalition has come together at the national leadership level to push the issue of religious freedom forward around the world” (Pompeo 2020). The Alliance was officially announced in Washington, D.C. on 5 February 2020 on the margins of the U.S. National Prayer Breakfast, with 27 founding member nations. As of 17 November 2020, membership stood at 32 with approximately six additional

⁵ The 2020 Poland Ministerial had to be held virtually because of the pandemic.

⁶ At the first two Ministerials, “Statements of Concern” were offered on three countries: China, Iran, and Burma. In 2018 and 2019, the China “Statement of Concern” was signed by only four countries – the U.S., U.K., Canada, and Kosovo – with the Marshall Islands joining in 2019. China received the least numbers of signatories in both years. As of the writing of this article, the official statements and signatories from the third Ministerial have not yet been released by Poland.

“friend” or “observer” states.⁷ Ambassador Brownback publicly stated that his goal was to have 100 member nations of the IRFOB Alliance by the 2020 Ministerial in Poland.

Over the last two decades, China has not been invited to participate, even as an observer, in any U.S.-sponsored international religious freedom events. In fact, since 1999 China has been designated by the U.S. Department of State as a “Country of Particular Concern” for its restrictive religious policies, regulations, and practices (U.S. Department of State 2019). The creation of the IRFOB Alliance along with the growth of BRI partnerships may further complicate the superpower relationships. Of the thirty-two member states in the IRFOB Alliance as of 2020, sixteen (50%) are also BRI partner countries.⁸

How will the Alliance advance its global religious freedom agenda in the face of China’s growing influence along the BRI? Will the Alliance be able to advance strong positions critical of Chinese religious policies and actions when half of its membership is entwined with China on the BRI? Will China leverage investments, debt, or BRI projects to compel compliance or muzzle criticisms of partner countries over religious issues? Will U.S. leaders demand, as President George W. Bush did after 9/11, that you are either with us or against us (Bush 2001; cf. Joshua 5:13) in relationship to religious freedom policy? How will countries caught in the middle between the U.S. and China navigate the perilous gulf between IRFOB Alliance initiatives and Chinese religion policy? Whose principles or self-interest will prevail?

Given the current geopolitical dynamics between the U.S. and China, it is likely that the U.S.-backed IRFOB Alliance and the Chinese-backed BRI partnerships are headed for a confrontation over religious norms, policies, and practices. Unless the U.S. and China can establish new levels of trust and engage in meaningful diplomacy on religion policy – both bilaterally and multilaterally all along the Belt and Road – countries caught in the middle between the two great powers may be forced one day to “choose whom they will serve” (Joshua 24:14-15).

5. Religion, security, and the militarization of the BRI

A further challenge confronts the Belt and Road – the confluence of religion, security, and militarization. Chinese officials have consistently asserted that fighting

⁷ IRFOB Alliance member nations include Albania, Austria, Armenia, Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Colombia, Congo, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, The Gambia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Senegal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Togo, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This list was obtained from U.S. State Department’s IRF Office. The identities of the “friend” or “observer” states are not made public.

⁸ Member countries of both the IRFOB Alliance and the BRI are Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, and the Ukraine.

terrorism and separatism has nothing to do with religion. Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized this point in Cairo, Egypt on 8 January 2020: “What happens in Xinjiang is an issue of fighting separatism and terrorism, rather than an issue of human rights or religion” (State Council 2020). Indeed, China’s 2019 *National Defense White Paper* speaks of opposing “Taiwan independence” efforts, as well as cracking down on separatists pushing for “Tibet independence” and “East Turkistan [Xinjiang] independence,” yet there is no mention of religion in this official State Council document (State Council 2019a:4-6). However, separate State Council documents on Tibet and Xinjiang do speak about how religion is connected to security in these two provinces (State Council 2019b:12, 32-34; State Council 2019c:19-25). Another White Paper, “Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief,” pledges to fight resolutely “against the use of terrorist violence and instigation of separatism in the name of religion” (State Council 2018). Clearly, there is a linkage, however understated, between the PRC’s national security strategy and religion policy.

Similarly, the 2017 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (NSS) affirms its own linkage. Under the heading “Champion American Values,” the NSS states that “the United States also remains committed to supporting and advancing religious freedom – America’s first freedom.” This freedom is to be promoted as a “Priority Action” by “protecting” religious minorities from “attacks” and the destruction of their “cultural heritage” (Trump 2017:41-42). Moreover, since 9/11, the U.S. government has taken extensive steps to mitigate religious radicalism and terrorism internally and externally. Thus, both superpowers recognize clear connections between religion and security.

The potential for ethnic, religious, or social hostilities along the Belt and Road is multiplied because the BRI traverses regions with long histories of ethno-religious conflict. Although the PRC proclaims that the BRI is strictly for commercial and civilian purposes, Western military experts are increasingly apprehensive about the militarization of the Belt and Road. As evidence, they cite multiple factors: (1) China’s aggressive efforts to assert sovereignty over the whole South China Sea; (2) the establishment of the PRC’s first overseas military base in Djibouti, Africa, at the mouth of the Red Sea abutting the Suez Canal; (3) China’s development of a large commercial seaport at Gwadar, Pakistan, which some anticipate will become a dual-use overseas military base; (4) China’s recent acquisition of a ninety-nine-year lease on the 15,000-acre Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka; (5) China’s “costly commitment to developing aircraft carriers”; and (6) China’s strategic positioning of its fleet in the Indian Ocean during a political crisis in the Maldives, a BRI partner country. In response to these concerns, the Chinese readily point out that the United States has long intermingled its global economic, commercial, and military interests and has established over 800 military bases around the world (Andresen 2019:122-35; Office of the Secretary of Defense 2020).

Should direct conflict ever erupt between the U.S. and China, it is likely that strategic spots along the Belt and Road will become war zones. If so, it is plausible that international or indigenous religious groups may be recruited by either or both sides as allies or proxies. This strategy is not new; it was employed by various parties in both World Wars and the Cold War. However, should either the U.S. or China attempt to exploit religion in the 21st century, both sides possess consequential vulnerabilities.

China's soldiers have no training in religion in the battlespace. The People's Liberation Army has no specialists in religion comparable to Western military chaplains and world religion specialists. This shortcoming has hampered Chinese UN peacekeeping troops in Africa as they serve in religiously volatile areas.⁹

The United States, in contrast, has tools and training to deal with the religious dimensions of the battlespace: for example, the principles of the Joint Staff publication JG 1-05, "Religious Affairs in Joint Operations";¹⁰ Religious Area Assessment (RAA) tools; and Religious Leader Engagement (RLE) tools. However, the U.S. military faces a potential stumbling block in that religious strategy on the battlefield is at the discretion of the four-star commanders of the regional Combatant Commands (CCMD). The Belt and Road spans four of the six regional CCMDs – INDOPACOM, CENTCOM, AFRICOM, and EUCOM. Each CCMD tends to operate individually and distinctively, particularly with regard to how it strategically operationalizes its religion in the battlespace assets. In the face of war along the Belt and Road, U.S. CCMDs must act with unified action, particularly if facing a supranational, interconnected religious foe. If not, religiously infused proxy wars along the Belt and Road could become a Gordian Knot akin to the U.S. military experiences in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

6. The consequence of inaction

In fall 2018, I met with senior government officials in Washington, D.C. and in Beijing to discuss, among other things, the religious challenges and risks of the Belt and Road. My conversations led me to conclude that neither the U.S. nor China is significantly addressing the religious challenges and risks related to the BRI. Both research and data are lacking, and there is a paucity of policy options. Most significantly, there is a dearth of political foresight and will. I am reminded of the warning of my former colleague, the legendary sociologist Peter Berger: "Those who neglect religion in their analyses of contemporary affairs do so at great peril" (Berger 1999:18).

If the United States and China ignore the potential risks posed by religion along the Belt and Road, dire consequences may result. The possibilities include: (1) an unnecessary escalation in tensions and retaliatory sanctions between the world's two eco-

⁹ This conclusion is based on my multiple conversations with senior U.S. and Canadian military officers who served in Africa.

¹⁰ In 2020, JG 1-05 was incorporated into JP 3-0 – Doctrine for Joint Operations.

conomic superpowers; (2) a struggle over whose values will prevail in the international arena – America’s democratic-cum-Christian values or China’s statist-cum-Confucian-Buddhist values; (3) territorial turf wars between China and the U.S. over economic and political dominance in BRI partner states; and (4) fault-line wars yielding perpetual conflict, which Samuel Huntington (1996:252-54) described as the “stuff of history,” citing 32 different ethno-religious conflicts during the Cold War. Ultimately, key portions of the Belt and Road may become the battleground for future Sino-American showdowns, with religious peoples and ideologies playing a significant role.

Former Chinese paramount leader Deng Xiaoping was known for his famous axiom of cautious pragmatism: “Crossing the river by feeling the stones” (Liu 2018). Now is the time for China and the United States to feel for the stones and cross the river to engage with each other on religion policy issues. Is it possible? Perhaps a visionary religious leader, Pope Francis, is showing the way with his bold efforts to forge an accord with the Chinese government regarding the Catholic faith (Shan and Zhao 2020). The recently renewed Sino-Vatican provisional agreement (“feeling the stones”) may eventually evolve into a permanent formal agreement (“crossing the river”). Will the U.S. and China emulate the example of the Holy Father regarding religion and the Belt and Road? Or will they risk a kinetic clash?

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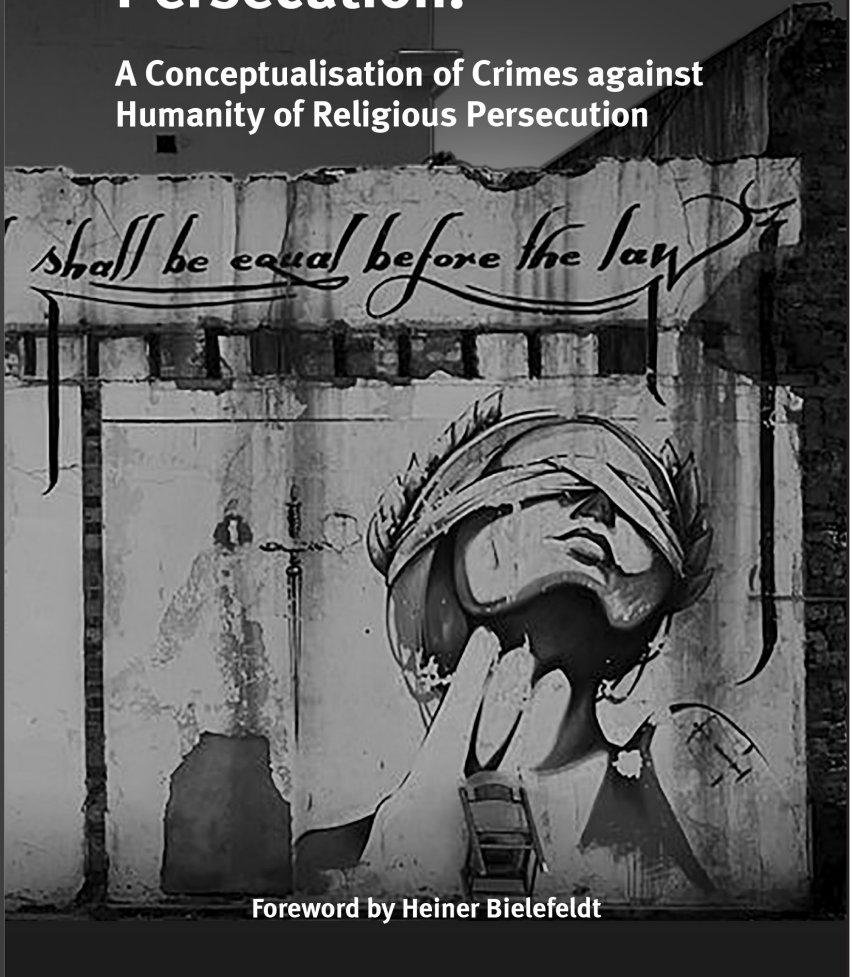
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