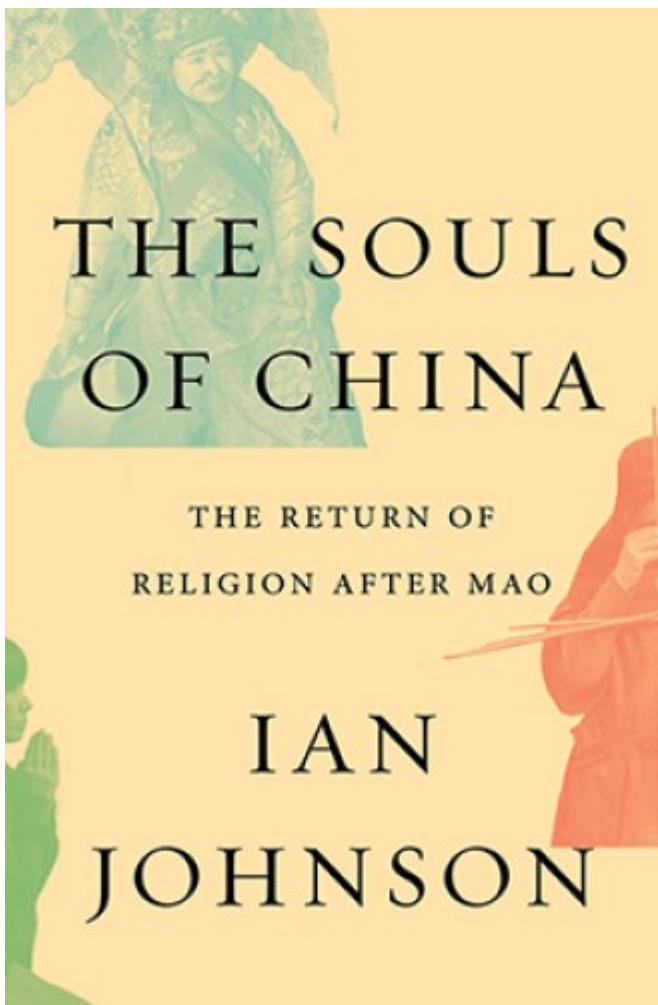


The many resurrections of Chinese Christianity

**For the church in China, dying and rising is not just a doctrine. It's an incontestable fact.**

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [June 21, 2017](#) issue

## In Review



### The Souls of China

The Return of Religion after Mao

By Ian Johnson  
Pantheon Books

Some wide-ranging scholar could write a fine history of the extinctions of Christianity in China. The faith comes into the country afresh, wins widespread support, and briefly seems on the verge of achieving some kind of hegemony. But that very success provokes the government to persecute and eradicate Christianity so thoroughly that it can never rise again.

Since the seventh century, this cycle has recurred four times, with four obliterations, and each time, the faith has come back stronger than ever. We are presently in the fifth wave, as Christians enjoy astonishing success. With perhaps 80 million believers and the numbers growing, China is set to become one of the global powerhouses of Christianity. In Chinese Christian history, resurrection is not only a doctrine: it is an incontestable fact of life.

The most brutal of these cycles of persecution occurred during the hideous communist rule of Mao Zedong (1949–76), whose regime was responsible for tens of millions of fatalities. Mao not only envisaged a utopia but insisted on trying to realize his vision in his lifetime, no matter how devastating the human cost. Among other things, that meant uprooting all religion, including the missionary Christianity that had become so popular. Some religious institutions were tolerated as an interim measure, but even these pallid gestures all but vanished during the worst years. The darkest era was the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76, when the regime mobilized legions of teenage thugs to uproot every vestige of traditional culture and society.

That cultural ground zero provides the background to Ian Johnson's exceptionally valuable and moving study. To oversimplify a very rich account, Johnson shows how Chinese people reconstructed the world after Mao's apocalypse and how religion played a central role in that rebuilding. Faith—and faiths—provided essential ways forward in the moral and intellectual wasteland of postcommunism. Far from merely restoring the institutions and buildings that were lost, believers of all kinds began adventurous revival movements on a numerical scale that staggers Western observers.

While the Christian story is exciting enough, revival also swept the country's other traditions—Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, and Muslim. All told, the country has over 300 million religious believers. Across China, temples and shrines of every kind are

being restored and recreated as new institutions are appearing. Amid a wave of spiritual experiment and enterprise, the country's ancient sacred landscape is being revived.

The interplay of old and new is a central theme of Johnson's inspiring book. Readers will rightly be fascinated by the upsurge of new movements and impulses. But much of the story concerns rebuilding and re-creation, the return to the primal source that was so powerfully advocated in classic texts such as the *Laozi* (the *Tao Te Ching*). Only by appreciating the restoration work of modern-day Daoists and Confucians do we realize how fundamental their spiritual assumptions were to every aspect of life and thought in old China—and how monstrously deluded were Mao's attempts to eliminate them.

As an experienced journalist rather than an academic, Johnson tells his story through a series of close personal observations and captivating vignettes. Readers follow various religious groups in different parts of the vast country over the span of one year. These include a family of Daoist priests in Shanxi who conduct elaborate funerals, other Daoists who prepare shrines for the great annual pilgrimage of Miaofengshan, and Buddhist and Daoist sages teaching meditation and mindfulness.

The Christian exemplar is a Protestant church in Chengdu that was founded by former civil rights lawyer Wang Yi. (A strikingly high number of such lawyers in China are Christian.) Following his conversion in 2005, Wang Yi founded his own fast-growing denomination, the Early Rain Reformed Church, and his widely disseminated sermons have made him a star on social media. The church attracted support for its deep involvement in social activism and humanitarian work, showing how congregations serve as pioneering forms of civil society in a Party-ruled environment.

Early Rain emerges as a distinctly intellectual group. One member explains that the older house churches offered a fairly simple appeal, which fell far short of what the growing urban population demanded. Wang Yi's church, in contrast, preaches strict Calvinist views and Presbyterian doctrine as it works its way through the Heidelberg Catechism. The congregation commits itself to an ambitious study program to master New Testament Greek.

Johnson's portrait reveals a pastor utterly determined to build a mighty Christian presence within a booming China, and specifically in its sprawling cities, its

commercial Babylons. Wang Yi preaches on “Entering the City,” and explains that “the city is the history of humanity’s hope for the future. There’s the city of God and the city of man. In the past it was Babylon, or New York, or Hong Kong, or Chengdu . . . And what are our dreams? We are creating a Jerusalem. This is the city on the hill. For us, Chengdu is this city.”

Johnson makes no attempt to offer comprehensive coverage of Chinese religion, a reasonable decision in what is in any case a substantial work. It would have been fascinating, though, to hear more about China’s thriving Roman Catholic Church. Islam also receives very scant treatment. It is daunting testimony to the sheer scale of China that Johnson can all but ignore its 20-plus million Muslims—more than reside in the whole European Union.

At every stage of Johnson’s story, readers encounter the central role of the state, and beyond that of the Party that is its driving force. Over the past 30 years, state authorities have generally been quite tolerant of religious activity, even of those unregistered Christian congregations and house churches that are technically illegal. The principle of “Don’t ask, don’t tell” has often operated in practice.

Over the years, Chinese governments have not merely permitted the activities of particular religions: they have actively favored some over others. For some years, Christianity enjoyed preferential treatment as the government promoted its presumed values of thrift, hard work, and modernity. But when Christianity boomed a little too much, the Party shifted its favor to other faiths, including Buddhism and Daoism. Today, the Party favors Confucian values.

But no religious group can expect to rely on such easygoing ways, and official attitudes vary enormously from place to place. Some provinces are vastly more accommodating than others. Even in the best of times, any Chinese people with a sense of recent history (which means most of the population) know that attitudes can change overnight. Confrontations with the West might yet prove very damaging to Chinese Christians.

Even so, Johnson’s long history of survival and restoration lets us dare hope that if new persecutions do arise in the future, China’s religions will nonetheless return and flourish.

*A version of this article appears in the June 21 print edition under the title “China’s many revivals.”*