

China bans online purchases of the Bible



Catholic worshippers attend a mass on Holy Saturday, March 31, as part of the Easter celebrations at Beijing's government sanctioned South Cathedral. China has banned the sale of online Bibles, as part of its increasing crackdown on Christianity. (PHOTO: Greg Baker/AFP/Getty Images)

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In its ongoing crackdown on Christianity, the Chinese government has banned sales of the Bible by online retailers including Amazon.

Taoist and Buddhists texts are still available online, as is the Quran.

While Buddhism and Taoism are both encouraged by the Chinese government as traditional Chinese belief systems, other religions not viewed as historically Chinese, including Islam and to a greater extent Christianity, have been targeted.

What's the story?

China had already heavily restricted the in-store sale of Bibles, but the arrival of online ordering created a loophole that has not been closed until now. Searches for Bibles on Amazon or other online retailers like JD.com and Tabao from China now come up empty, according to The New York Times.

This is not the first time that the Chinese government has cracked down on its Christian population.

The New York Times reported in May 2016 that “[f]rom 2014 to 2016, more than 1 500 crosses were removed from churches in one Chinese province with close ties to [Chinese President Xi Jinping].” The government said that the crosses were removed “for the sake of safety and beauty.” In January, the Chinese government demolished a well-known Christian megachurch.

A report by the US-based organisation Freedom House found that: “Since Xi Jinping took the helm of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012, the authorities have intensified many of their restrictions, resulting in an overall increase in religious persecution.”

How many Christians are in China?

The number of Christians living in China is hard to pin down. Reports put the number of Catholics in the country anywhere between 5 million and 12 million, and the number of protestants at around 38 million. Other estimates put the total number of all types of Christians in China as high as 100 million.

The Vatican is currently negotiating to come up with a deal regarding Chinese Catholic bishops. As of now, bishops appointed by the Chinese government have been in conflict with bishops appointed by Rome, who are largely forced underground.

In a statement on Tuesday, Chinese senior official Chen Zongrong said that there was no place for Vatican influence over a church on Chinese soil.

“I think there is no religion in human society that is above the state,” he said. “Foreign forces cannot be allowed to interfere with China’s religious environment and religious affairs.”

What about other religions?

In a 2016 speech, Xi told members of the Communist party that they needed to “resolutely guard against overseas infiltrations via religious means.”

But even Protestant churches with their lack of a foreign authority are targeted by the government. In 2016, senior Pastor Gu Yue-se was arrested on trumped-up charges after he publicly opposed the removal of crosses from churches. The Chinese government sees Protestant Christianity as a “western” value inherently at odds with China.

This persecution has led to the formation of hundreds of underground home churches in the capital city of Beijing alone.

While Islam seems to be viewed more favorably by the government, China has also cracked down on the wearing of long beards or headscarves, and restaurants that don’t serve pork in accordance with Islamic dietary restrictions.