

China Bans Online Bible Sales as It Tightens Religious Controls



Worshippers reading from the Bible in Tianjin, China. The Bible is printed in China but legally available only at certain bookstores. CreditGreg Baker/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

BEIJING — The Chinese government has banned online retailers from selling the Bible, moving in the wake of new rules to control the country's burgeoning religious scene.

The measures to limit Bible sales were announced over the weekend and began taking effect this week. By Thursday, internet searches for the Bible came up empty on leading online Chinese retailers, such as JD.com, Taobao, and Amazon, although some retailers offered analyses of the Bible or illustrated storybooks.

The retailers did not respond to requests for comment, although Thursday is the start of a long holiday weekend in China.

The move aligns with a longstanding effort to limit the influence of Christianity in China. Among China's major religions — which include Buddhism, Taoism, Islam and folk beliefs — Christianity is the only one whose major holy text cannot be sold through normal commercial channels. The Bible is printed in China but legally available only at church bookstores.

The advent of online retailers created a loophole that made the Bible easily available. This was especially important in China given the growing dominance of online shopping.

The closing of that loophole follows new government religious regulations that have effectively tightened rules on Christianity and Islam, while promoting Buddhism, Taoism and folk religion as part of President Xi Jinping's efforts to promote traditional values.

The moves also come as China is engaged in negotiations with the Vatican to end the split between the underground and government-run Catholic church. This would end a nearly 70-year split between the Chinese government and the global church, which Beijing traces to the Vatican's historically strong anti-Communist stance.

Observers said the new measures could be a sign of a broader crackdown. At a news conference on Tuesday outlining Beijing's approach, a government spokesman said the Vatican would never be allowed control over the clergy in China. That came after a recent government reorganization in which a hard-line Communist Party department took over management of religious policy.

"It sounds like the opposition force within the Chinese authorities who oppose the Vatican-China relations have their voice," said Yang Fenggang, head of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University. "It clearly shows that they worry or are concerned about Catholics as well as Protestants."

Texts for other major religions are available online in China: The Taoist classic the Daodejing is for sale on JD, Taobao, and Amazon, and Buddhist sutras are available commercially.

The Quran was also sold online, perhaps reflecting Islam's status as a faith practiced by minorities who sometimes enjoy more privileges than the majority ethnic Chinese population. The Quran is also available commercially in bookstores

and, unlike the Bible, has the Chinese equivalent of an ISBN, a numeric book identifier.

Both Christianity and Islam, however, have come under heavy government pressure.

From 2014 to 2016, more than 1,500 crosses were removed from churches in one Chinese province with close ties to Mr. Xi. At the same time, the government has stepped up measures against what it sees as excessive public displays of the Islamic faith, such as men wearing long beards or women wearing headscarves, as well as shops and restaurants that do not sell pork products, tobacco or alcohol.

At the same time, government policy has encouraged faiths that it sees as more indigenized, for example by subsidizing Taoist music or folk religious pilgrimages. Mr. Xi has also spoken favorably about Buddhism, calling it integral to Chinese people's cultural and spiritual life.

This overall approach to faith was reflected in a report issued Tuesday that shows the extent of the country's religious revival. The previous report, in 1997, showed that China had 100 million followers of all of its officially sanctioned religions. The new report doubles the number.

Although other surveys show higher overall numbers, the new report is significant because it represents official recognition of China's religious boom.

The report shows that most religions in China have been quickly increasing their reach. The number of Buddhist or Taoist believers was not counted because those faiths lack membership rolls, but their growth can be seen in the increasing number of temples — to 33,500 and 9,000 today from 13,000 and 1,500 in 1997.

Christianity presented a more bifurcated picture. Catholicism grew during the same period to six million worshipers from four million, while Protestantism increased to 38 million adherents, from 10 million. Most surveys and experts, however, believe that these figures represent only about half the total number of believers, because each has a strong underground church that roughly matches the number of believers in government-run churches.

In China, Islam is defined as being practiced by most members of 10 non-Chinese

ethnic groups, especially the Hui and Uighurs. Their populations totaled 20 million in 2018 versus 18 million in 1997, according to the report.

Both Christianity and Islam were singled out for contributing to problems in China. According to the report, government-appointed Muslim figures condemned violence, especially in the heavily Muslim region of Xinjiang, which is the site of longstanding unrest against control by Beijing.

Christianity was linked to historic troubles, especially China's decline in the 19th century — the “century of humiliation” that Mr. Xi has vowed to reverse. The report says that Catholicism and Protestantism were “controlled and utilized by colonialists and imperialists.”

The new report stated that Chinese publishers have printed 160 million copies of the Bible, exporting it to more than 100 countries. About half were published in Chinese, according to the report. Assuming none of those were exported, that would roughly mean one Bible for each of the faith's adherents.

Raymond Zhong contributed reporting.

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