

China cracks down on 'chaotic' religious information online

Wednesday 12 September 2018, by [The Guardian](#) (Date first published: 11 September 2018).

All organisations promoting religious messages on the internet will have to apply for licenses

[China](#) has drawn up new draft guidelines to crack down on the “chaotic” and illegal online promotion of religion, the official Global Times reported on Tuesday, part of a tough state campaign to bring religious worship into line.

All organisations engaged in the dissemination of religious information online will be obliged to apply for licenses from provincial religious affairs departments, the paper said, citing a policy document issued on Monday.

While the license will enable them to “preach and offer religious training”, they will not be allowed to live-stream or broadcast religious activities. The dissemination of religious information anywhere other than their own internet platforms is also forbidden, a likely attempt to curb religious material spreading on social media networks.

Chinese citizens are theoretically free to practise any religion as long as it is officially recognised by the government, which limits worship to five faiths: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. Home worship or any activities outside government sanctioned religious institutions carries serious risks.

The guidelines also specifically prohibit online religious services from inciting subversion, opposing the leadership of the communist party and promoting extremism and separatism.

Security forces frequently inspect mobile phones in regions with large Muslim populations, punishing those with religious material not explicitly approved by the state. There have also been efforts to [ban Muslim names being given to newborns](#) and some types of religious dress, such as face veils, have been prohibited. Long beards have also been targeted for bans in the past.

Authorities have repeatedly cracked down on unauthorised religious activity, shutting down a large Protestant church on Monday and confiscating “illegal promotional materials”.

The Zion church had for years operated with relative freedoms, hosting hundreds of worshippers every weekend in an expansive specially renovated hall in north Beijing. But since April, after they rejected requests from authorities to install closed-circuit television cameras in the building, the church has faced growing pressure from the authorities and has been threatened with eviction.

House churches dot most major cities in China but their activities are technically illegal. Small gatherings are usually tolerated but as congregations grow in size police begin crackdowns. A campaign in Zhejiang province in 2015 saw [crosses on dozens of officially sanctioned churches removed](#), with one large church building completely demolished.

Experts estimate China's Christian population is over 100m people, but less than a third worship at official institutions. China could have the world's largest Christian population in the coming decades, although official figures typically underestimate the number of adherents.

China has also been under heavy international scrutiny for its treatment of its mostly Muslim Uighur minority in the northwestern region of Xinjiang.

Human rights groups have accused the [Chinese government of conducting a punitive crackdown](#) that has seen the detention of as many as one million ethnic Uighurs in internment camps.

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