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Negotiating Religion and the State in Contemporary Russia and China

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Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the “Opening and Reform” period in China, both Russia and China have experienced significant religious revivals. These revivals are as diverse as they are impressive, including the resurgence of Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, Islam as well as popular and new religious movements. To put these revivals into perspective, approximately 80 percent of the Russian population now identifies as religious, giving Russia one of the highest rates of belief in Europe. A recent government-sponsored survey in China estimated over 300 million religious believers. Other scholars predict that by 2030 China will become the world’s largest Christian nation. While the Chinese government certainly disputes these predictions, even the more modest figures of religious growth are politically striking in that religious adherents outnumber Chinese Communist Party members roughly four to one.

In my book, *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences*, I explore the nature of religion and state relations in contemporary Russia and China – two countries with long histories of religious

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repression that have also experienced the return of religion – or more accurately of many religions – over the past three decades. I examine the political consequences of growing religiosity in countries where politics is often repressive and religious freedoms have yet to be well defined. I investigate what religious and authoritarian state actors want from one another; how they negotiate the terms of their relationship; and, as a result, how cooperative or conflictual are their interactions.

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Generally speaking, when we think about the nature of religion and state relations across the authoritarian world there are many reasons to expect tense relations between the two. This is because religion and the authoritarian state represent competing centers of authority. Most modern autocracies base their legitimacy on secular principles of delivering stability, economic growth, and political order; whereas religion claims an authority that transcends the state and its rulers. Another reason to expect tension is that autocratic rulers often lack popular legitimacy to rule – perhaps because they come to power through coups or the extensive use of violence – causing them to seek out and coopt religious organizations and leaders to enhance their base of support. Thus, some religious groups might be particularly worried about being co-opted by the ruling elite.

Religions also introduce a number of concerns for the modern dictator. This is because religion is not simply a moral framework, but also a community of believers. Religious communities tend to represent some of the most diverse and robust forms of associational life outside of the authoritarian state. They are voluntary organizations with dense networks that cut domestically across salient cleavages and have transnational ties; they are endowed with resources, places to meet, regular donors, charismatic leaders, and devoted followers. Religious groups, in other words, have a distinct set of resources that make them very good at chipping away at the right and capacity of autocrats to rule. Indeed, there is ample evidence of religious groups doing just that. During the Third Wave (1970-90s) religious leaders played prominent roles in democracy movements across Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Asia. More recently, we find evidence of religious organizations playing a mobilizing role in popular protests ranging from mosques in the Arab Spring to churches supporting the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. This is not to suggest that religious groups never help prop up dictators, but simply that there are many reasons to expect tension, if not outright hostility between religion and the authoritarian state.

The two authoritarian regimes at the center of my study, Russia and China, historically experienced a significant amount of religion-state conflict. Decade-long campaigns promoted scientific atheism at the expense of religion. If we assume that these countries have turned over a new leaf in their treatment of religion – and I would argue that they have, this is neither Mao’s China nor Stalin’s or Khrushchev’s Russia – the fact remains that Russia and China currently represent some of the most restrictive

environments for religious actors. The [Pew Forum](#), for example, ranks Russia and China on par with other highly restrictive autocracies, including Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Algeria, and Syria.

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However, in *Religion and Authoritarianism* I suggest that when we peel back the layers of the Russian and Chinese authoritarian states to the local level – this is where central religious policies are implemented, the day-to-day management of religion takes place, and where the strength of religious groups reside – there is a fair amount of religion-regime cooperation. Across both countries

local government officials and diverse religious communities are actively and openly exchanging a variety of resources and services to achieve their own goals and interests. Religious and local government actors are forging partnerships as a means to govern more efficiently, secure protection in an uncertain political context, and gain access to resources in order to promote both secular and spiritual agendas. This is not to suggest that religion-state conflict does not take place in these countries, but rather that cooperation is far more pervasive than we might think.

To explain how and why religious and political actors have become such strange bedfellows I develop an interests-based theory in *Religion and Authoritarianism*. This framework places a combination of uncertainty, needs, and resources at the center of interactions between religious groups and the state. It sheds light not only patterns of cooperation and conflict between religious groups and the state across Russia and China, but also how and why the two sides are often able to form innovative partnerships that are based on their respective interests and that are anchored in issues of money, power, and prestige.

I offer here two examples of religion-state collaboration to illustrate how the interests of the two sides converge as well as the strategies each side uses to minimize the risk of interaction. These examples both take place on the outskirts of Shanghai; one involves a state-approved Muslim community while the other is with a non-registered popular religion, the Mazu cult.

In the first case of religion-state cooperation a mosque was returned to the local Muslim community in the 1980s, but was in need of significant repair having been badly damaged during the Cultural Revolution. The local government stepped in with an offer to help with the renovations. In return, the mosque would function both as an active mosque and carve out part of its space for a museum. To facilitate this process, the mosque was reinstated as a “cultural relic” under government protection, which came with an annual stipend and national recognition. The mosque was also able to reclaim some of its confiscated property. However, rather than converting it for religious activities, the mosque leadership followed the advice of the local government and decided to use the property for commercial development. Commercial development fills an important financial need for the mosque where the rents are funneled into various

faith-based projects across the city. Moreover, because the local Muslim community is quite small there was no pressing need to expand the mosque to accommodate more worshipers. At the same time, there were other benefits for the religious community. As a museum the mosque is on the tourist map, which means an increase in foot traffic, and allows local Muslims to highlight the long and peaceful history of Islam in China in their small exhibit – something that has become increasingly important in a post-9/11 context and in the presence of escalating ethnic tensions in Xinjiang. For the local government, there are also financial benefits to collaboration. The mosque is one of the oldest in the Shanghai region and located in the center of a historic downtown, an area that the local government has been developing for investment. Thus, the museum brings a cultural dimension to this development project as well as highlights state preservation of local culture.

The second case of religion-state collaboration involves the Mazu cult, a popular religion that centers on the worship of the Chinese goddess Mazu. What is distinctive about this instance of cooperation is that it involves an unofficial religious community. The Chinese government only recognizes five official religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. This means that religious groups falling outside of these five faiths, including the worship of the Mazu goddess, are illegal and open to state suppression. Nevertheless, the same local government that collaborated with the Muslim community above also helped in the construction of a Mazu temple.

Building a temple for a religious group that falls outside of the five state-approved religions can be difficult, even for local authorities. In order to do so, there must be both a significant local demand for the temple as well as a historic presence. However, in this case neither condition was met. There were only a handful of Mazu worshipers in the city and no record of a local Mazu temple. Nevertheless, the local government went ahead with the temple construction. Here, the motivation was partially financial. The Mazu cult is well known along the coast of China, and its temples stretch along former trade routes across Asia. In fact, the largest number of Mazu worshipers are Taiwanese. The local government was hoping that a temple for the Mazu goddess would entice greater Taiwanese investment. The temple looks, smells, and sounds like an active temple – there are decorative statues of the Mazu goddess, incense burning, and chanting piped in through surround sound speakers – but, it is classified (and registered) as a “cultural palace,” not as a religious structure. In shifting from religion to culture local authorities avoid the more restrictive religious bureaucracies and minimize the risks associated with unofficial religious communities.

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I have focused narrowly on two instances of religion-regime cooperation in China, a large and extremely diverse authoritarian political system. I do not mean to suggest that *all* religious communities are cooperating with local governments across China, or that conflict does not occur. Rather, these examples are meant to reveal the dynamic processes of

interaction and how religious and state actors negotiate their relationship locally. Innovative political elites that collaborate with religious groups secure economic and political benefits, and in return religious communities safeguard their own survival and prosperity. Often religion-regime cooperation is strategic where both sides stand to profit. However, such cooperation has important implications beyond the economic realm. As the case of the Mazu temple indicates, religion-state cooperation may also expand the opportunities for religious groups not formally sanctioned by the state. In this sense, cooperation may allow some religious actors to negotiate local pockets of religious freedom within the larger and more authoritarian political context.