The three faces of Guanyin

by Philip Jenkins in the February 20, 2013 issue

The Guanyin of the South Sea of Sanya is a three-faced statue that sits on the south coast of China's Hainan province. Some rights reserved by C Ling Fan.

Any tour of the modern world's Seven Religious Wonders would include a stop on the southern Chinese island of Hainan. Here since 2005 has stood a colossal statue of Guanyin, the Buddhist goddess of compassion. The figure astounds not just by its sheer size—it is 354 feet high—but by the mere fact of its creation: it was commissioned and funded by a Chinese communist government long bitterly opposed to religion of every stripe. The statue of Guanyin is an object lesson in the new China's radically changed attitude to faith—but also a warning to Christians who place their hopes in any future mass conversions in that vast country.

When Westerners study Chinese religion, inevitably they focus on the Christian story. They know about the horrible sufferings of Christians during the Cultural Revolution of the post-1966 decade and the surging national revival that began in the 1980s. Some estimates suggest that China today has over 100 million Christians,

with projections of 150 or 200 million by 2050. Even if those figures are too high—and I believe they are—we are still dealing with an astonishing success story. Visions of national conversion don't seem farfetched.

Missing in such accounts, though, are China's other historic religions, which have also benefited from the milder official approach. Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism were equally suppressed during the horrific Mao Zedong years, when literally a million temples and shrines were smashed and vandalized. Since 1982, these religious systems have revived and even received official support. Many temples have been rebuilt, and new generations of devotees have become priests and monks. China is now officially the world's largest Buddhist nation.

Viewing the different faiths together helps us to make sense of the government's otherwise puzzling religious policies. After all, the country is still ruled by communists for whom power is the absolute imperative. It seems odd that the regime would tolerate the phenomenal growth of Christian churches if they posed the slightest threat of creating institutions and structures that might undermine the authority of the Communist Party. When Chinese leaders lifted the persecution of the churches, what was in it for them?

Actually, they stood to benefit in many ways. In the 1980s and 1990s, senior leaders came to believe that the faith could serve official ends. The churches encouraged values of thrift, hard work, enterprise and mutual support, so Christians could be valuable allies in the process of rapid modernization. And it was far safer for Chinese people to express their spirituality in the churches than in eccentric fringe movements like Falun Gong.

When Christian numbers ran out of control—and more seriously, when Christianity made deep inroads into educated elites and even into the party itself—then it was time to apply the brakes. In earlier eras, such a reaction might have meant a flat-out declaration of renewed war against all religion. But naked repression fitted poorly with the country's new image. Instead, the leaders made determined efforts to support other faiths, partly to counterbalance Christianity, but also to exploit what those religions could offer to the causes of modernization and national security. If Christianity implies good work habits, then an alliance with the older faiths legitimizes the Chinese regime by rooting it in the country's ancient history and traditions.

Such a realignment appeals to traditionally minded Chinese who still retain old loyalties, however much they had pretended to forget them through the darkest years. If a religion is seen as subversive, though, as is the case with Buddhism in Tibet or Islam in Turkestan, then official attitudes remain harsh. All such decisions remain firmly political.

This brings us back to the statue of Guanyin, whose location constitutes a powerful political statement. Guanyin has three faces—one face is turned inland to China, the other two gaze out over the South China Sea. According to official statements, she thus extends blessing and compassion not just over the Chinese motherland, but also over the wider world and the Chinese diaspora.

Viewed more cynically, Guanyin proclaims the strength and glory of Chinese culture over a maritime region that threatens to become one of the most desperately contested on the planet. Chinese demands for sovereignty over the South China Sea conflict with the claims of half a dozen other nations and directly challenge U.S. naval power. As so often in history, religion provides a symbolic assertion of national strategy.

Religion in China is tolerated as far as the state and party believe it to be useful—and no further. Any hopes for further Christian expansion have to take into account this political context.