



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on March 20, 2023

China's "Smart Religion" App Mandates Registration Before Attending Worship Services

SINGAPORE — ChinaAid, a U.S.-based Christian charity, reported March 6 that the religious department of the provincial government of Henan is unveiling a system whereby all believers must make online reservations on a government app before they can attend services in churches, mosques, or Buddhist temples.

These reservations are to be made through an app called "Smart Religion," developed by the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission of Henan Province. According to ChinaAid, applicants must fill in personal information, including their name, phone number, government ID number, permanent residence, occupation, and date of birth, before they can make a reservation. Those who are permitted into a place of worship must also have their temperature taken — hinting the app may be linked in some way to Covid-19 restrictions — and display a reservation code.

However, app users still cannot use religious identification keywords such as "mosque," "temple," "Christianity," or "Catholicism."

In response to questions about how elderly believers or older adults who may not be tech-savvy make reservations, officials said that staff would help them in doing so.

Nonetheless, such troublesome procedures have resulted in fewer believers attending churches.

The Smart Religion online app has been officially introduced in some parts of Henan. In August 2022, the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau of Puyang County in Henan and the Henan Billion Second Electronic Technology Co., Ltd. inked a project contract for the "Construction of an Independent Command Platform for the Management of Smart Religion."

Based on the official website of the Ministry of Ethnic and Religious Affairs of China, various platform projects such as the construction of Smart Religion were inspected as early as July 2020 at a symposium on the construction of a religious "big data" management platform held in Henan. The digital platform was meant to serve as the bedrock of the religious affairs management improvement project, with the China Construction Bank of the Henan Branch offering technical support.

The Smart Religion platform of the State Administration of Religious Affairs relies on technologies such as big data, artificial intelligence, electronic maps, mobile web, and 720-degree VR panoramic mapping. By precise positioning and video surveillance of venues used for religious purposes in Chang'an district,



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the platform purports to use multidimensional data analysis to supposedly optimize the “management” of religious affairs.

Critics have argued that these management measures were not intended to safeguard the rights of religious people, but instead to fulfill the political purposes of the atheistic Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

According to China’s *Henan Daily*, Zhang Leiming, member of the Standing Committee of the Henan Provincial Party Committee and head of the United Front Work Department, told the Provincial Ethnic and Religious Committee that it was vital to stringently regulate religion for the majority of religious believers to follow the CCP.

Based on a 2012 government survey, Henan, situated in the east-central part of China, is home to one of the largest Christian populations in the country — as much as six percent.

The Chinese government technically acknowledges Catholicism as one of five religions in the country. Nonetheless, an underground Catholic Church, which is persecuted by the CCP, remains loyal to Rome and refuses to acknowledge the CCP’s supremacy in the church. [Cardinal Joseph Zen](#) of Hong Kong, one such loyal adherent to Rome, has faced numerous persecutions from the CCP as a result.

State-approved Catholic churches have more freedom of worship, but face pressure from the government to censor parts of Catholic teaching while including a love for the CCP in preaching.

Notably, Henan was the site of the burning down of a Catholic Church in 2017 by government authorities. Several people were also detained in the process. The atheistic government claimed that the church was an “illegal structure” and ordered it to be razed. Worse still, the authorities confiscated church property, as well as that of parishioners and construction workers, on the pretext that the church had failed to pay a “road usage fee.”

In April 2016, Li Jiangong, a pastor in Zhumadian, another city of Henan province, lost his wife when the couple tried to protect their house church from being bulldozed in a government-ordered destruction of the church. He “barely escaped” death, based on the annual report from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

In 2020, USCIRF commissioners pointed out that the CCP had created “an Orwellian surveillance state with an unprecedented ability to gather private information about its citizens,” which it has begun using to target Christians and other religious believers.

As part of “the Chinese government’s use of surveillance and data analytic technology to oppress religious groups,” the USCIRF stated, the CCP had “installed hundreds of millions of surveillance cameras across the country, using facial and voice recognition systems to distinguish and track Uyghurs and Tibetans. In addition, authorities have systematically installed cameras in churches to identify and target anyone who attends services,” the report stated.

“Throughout the country, Chinese authorities have raided underground house churches, arrested Christians who refuse to join the state-run churches, and banned children younger than 18 years old from attending services,” USCIRF’S chairperson, Gayle Manchin, declared.

Manchin added that “the Communist Party is deliberately using technology to undermine religious freedom and other fundamental rights.”

Vice Chairman Tony Perkins asserted that the CCP leverages artificial intelligence systems, combining information from video surveillance, facial and voice recognition, GPS tracking, and other data “in order



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to track certain religious communities. Authorities even installed cameras on the pulpits of churches and other houses of worship, allowing the Party to identify and monitor anyone who attends services.”

Alarming, across the Pacific, a [leaked dossier](#) by former U.S. FBI agent Kyle Seraphin indicated the FBI’s plans to target Catholics interested in the Traditional Latin Mass, claiming they may be related to violent extremist groups.

The document, which was published on the website [UncoverDC](#), was titled “Interest of Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists in Radical-Traditionalist Catholic Ideology Almost Certainly Presents New Mitigation Opportunities.” It was disclosed by Seraphin to the public in February this year.

Labeled “UNCLASSIFIED/FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY,” the document encompassed a list of groups with Catholic ties that were singled out by the left-leaning Southern Poverty Law Center’s (SPLC) list of hate groups.

Among the groups that made the SPLC’s 2021 list of alleged “hate groups” were the conservative and pro-family groups Alliance Defending Freedom, the Family Research Council, ACT for America, the Center for Security Policy, and the American Freedom Law Center.

The groups mentioned in the document as abiding by “radical-traditionalist Catholic ideology” include Tradition in Action, The Remnant, Culture Wars, and The Fatima Crusader. Interestingly, a “warning” attached to the document noted that “potential criminality exhibited by certain members of a group referenced herein does not negate [the group’s or the members’] rights under the First Amendment to the Constitution.”



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