American Public Discourse on the Church in China

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Abstract

Many aspects of the Christian church in China—the historical record of foreign missions, the size and nature of the church today, and other topics, are contested subjects. Foreign observers have widely differing views. There is an extensive public discourse on these questions, but it is contradictory, not very well informed, and contentious, shedding more heat than light. I will analyse that discourse as it occurs in North America, pointing out some of the characteristics of the various points of view in this discourse, including comments on recent books and discussion of the habitual tendency to polarize between pro- and anti—Three Self camps. In sum, the issue of the church in China has been debated by people and groups that really do not know much about China, and the level of the discussion has been very unnuanced and unnecessarily low. But the polarized views are well entrenched, and are resistant to change.

Two hundred years on, it is still difficult to make a definitive evaluation of the story of the growth of modern Chinese Protestantism. The historical record of Christian Protestant missions in China, and the size and

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