

CHINA: On Human Rights and Religious Liberty in China. A Conversation with Journalist Marco Respinti

By Martin Banks

International Policy Digest (24.01.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2FLyAeF> – Marco Respinti is an Italian journalist and lecturer on religious, political and literary issues. He is also the director-in-charge of Bitter Winter, a daily online magazine on religious liberty and human rights in China. On 23 January, he participated in a conference about religious freedom in China organized at the European Parliament in Brussels.

The following is the text of my interview with Marco Respinti.

Bitter Winter covers the massive violations of human rights and religious freedom in China on a daily basis. Was it your idea to launch such a media? What is the origin of Bitter Winter, what makes it unique and how did it develop?

It was not my idea to set up the magazine but I gladly joined in when Prof. Massimo Introvigne, a well-known scholar and one of the leading world expert on religion, asked me to serve as its Director-in-Charge.

Any serious study of religion in China can't be separated from the fact that in China religion is harshly persecuted. Thus, it has been quite natural to combine the academic interest with the defense of human rights. The face of this combination took the shape of an online daily magazine and the name of

Bitter Winter, an original “joint venture” of academic scholars, activists for human rights and journalists, who operate, thanks to the generosity of Chinese exiles of any religious persuasion, with a network of several hundred correspondents in all Chinese provinces.

At high risk for their security, they report daily on what happens in China and how religions are treated or mistreated. This is our peculiarity. We collaborate gladly with other media reporting on the abuses of human rights and religious freedom in China, but our adjunct value is the first-hand reporting that we are constantly able to publish thanks to our network of reporters active on the field.

We have thus published, and we continue publishing, hard to find news, in-depth analysis, original comments, direct chronicles, inside documents from all levels of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or the Chinese administrative system, and exclusive photographs and video. One of our scoops was releasing a video from inside one of the impenetrable and ill-famed “transformation through education” camps in Xinjiang, where at least 1.5 million people are detained, two-thirds of which being Uyghurs imprisoned just because they are believers (Muslim) and an ethnic minority.

What were the main obstacles that you had to overcome when you tried to launch this project?

Bitter Winter was launched in May 2018 and it is now published in eight languages: English, Chinese, Italian, French, German, Spanish, Korean and Japanese. Our greatest obstacles have been the “anonymous” hackers who, more than once, sabotaged our servers, trying then to assault also our personal email accounts, and the CCP who aims at hitting us at the heart trying to dismantle our network of correspondents.

From August to December 2018, 45 of our reporters were arrested for filming incidents of, or gathering news about,

the CCP's persecution of religious freedom and violation of human rights. They have been usually detained and interrogated on the charge of "divulging state secrets" or "involvement in infiltration by foreign forces." Some reporters have been sent to "legal education centers" to undergo mandatory indoctrination, while others have been tortured and abused. The reporter who courageously filmed a "transformation through education" camp in Xinjiang was among the arrested. Some of them have been luckily released since, but they are always under strict surveillance and this paralyzes their work for Bitter Winter. Others are instead still detained, and we know nothing of their fate.

What are the main peculiarities of Bitter Winter that make it a different media outlet?

Our main strength is, again, our "boots on the ground": the precious network of our correspondents in China. It's totally difficult, these days, to have reliable information from inside China. Through our reporters, though, we can bypass censorship, secrecy and the disinformation through which the Chinese Communist regime is treacherously trying to conquer the hearts and minds of the West with a grand cover-up of its crime. One should not imagine, though, that this is an easy task.

Apart from questions of personal security for our correspondents, which remains the primary concern of all us, other difficulties are generated by the need of verifying news and sources. As you can imagine, this is not an easy task, but we try to perform it at our best. Our correspondents are very careful in checking every single piece of news that they gather for publication, then our team of editors and reviewers – a dedicated, hard-working multinational group of skilled professionals – double-check all, putting every little piece of the mosaic in perspective and scrupulously going after every single element of every single report. We have our means of verifying sources (for security reason I won't go into

details on that) and our readers have learned that we will never sacrifice accuracy for the sake of sensationalism.

Behind this difficulty, there is yet another huge one. Letting news go safely outside China. I can't, of course, tell how our reporters manage to do it, but they do it brilliantly and they constantly smuggle in so much important material. The fact that the CCP's police has arrested so many of them means that we are doing the right thing in the right way.

Publishing such good material on a daily basis in eight languages is very complex but gives us a great advantage on many other magazines. Many ask us why we publish also a Korean edition. Well, South Korea is most often the first country that Chinese exiles reach when they flee from persecution at home and it also has a very strict immigration policy. It makes sense to let the South Korean people and institutions receive first-hand accounts of what's terribly going on in red China.

What are the most persecuted religions in China? Does Bitter Winter cover all of them or only some specific ones?

Falun Gong, a Chinese new religious movement first encouraged by the CCP because the CCP believed that its exercises and practices could physically benefit the people, has suffered horrible persecution that has decimated its members when the regime started to fear its huge increase in numbers of members.

The Church of Almighty God is the largest new Chinese Christian religious movement and it is also the most persecuted. Again, the regime fears its rapid growth, its independence from the Party and its impermeability to the Beijing's policy of "sinicization," ie the rhetorical "patriotic" device that, under the guise of harmonizing religion with Chinese customs, tries to distort all faiths conforming them to the state Communist ideology.

In Xinjiang, the ethnic minority of Uyghurs is severely persecuted for its cultural identity and its Muslim faith, alongside other Muslims from other ethnic minorities like the Kazakhs. An interesting case are the Hui. The Chinese government recognizes them as an “ethnic” minority, but they are in fact a religious group, which includes those Muslims who are ethnically Han Chinese and speak various forms of the Chinese language, unlike the Uyghurs and the Ethnic Kazakhs, who are also Muslim Chinese citizens but are not ethnically Chinese and speak languages other than Chinese. They are between 8-10m, distributed all over China, although prevalently in the northwestern part of the country. Hailed for decades by the CCP as the “good” Chinese Muslims, opposed to the “bad” Uyghurs, they have also been victims of the recent crackdown on religion.

Buddhist and Daoist temples, some of them very ancient and of historical value for all mankind, are destroyed almost every other week, and of course, Tibetan Buddhists are always the first in the line of the CCP’s persecution.

Christians are very much persecuted as well. House churches are the independent Chinese protestant churches which refuse to join the official Three-Self Church, established by the government in 1954 and controlled by the CCP in order to keep Protestants under its thumb. This is why they are also persecuted, as well as Catholics.

Your associate editor in Brussels, Willy Fautré from Human Rights without Frontiers, said during the conference that Chinese believers are fleeing from their country in search of a safe haven in EU member states but very few of them are granted political asylum and are at risk of being deported and put back in the hands of their persecutors. What are your feelings about this issue?

Willy Fautré is sadly right. Too many refugees from China are not granted asylum. Germany even repatriated one in August, in

spite of the appeal presented to Angela Merkel by nine NGOs. We all know that the repatriation of Chinese refugees means harassment, violence, and torture. The CCP is fabricating and spreading many fake news on religious groups and churches, and too many Western countries buy them without investigating: the result is the negation of asylum to too many of them. Having said that, something is slowly changing in some countries. Take the example of The Church of Almighty God (CAG). Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, and some jurisdictions in the United States welcome applications for protection of refugees from CAG, and some recent rulings do the same in Italy, while the situation remains very difficult in Japan and South Korea, where CAG asylum seekers are numerous, and so far, none of their applications have been accepted.

What should the EU and its member states do about the persecution of Uyghur Muslims, Protestants, Catholics, Falun Gong practitioners, The Church of Almighty God and other religious people in China?

The world has to call China to fully face its responsibilities in front of history and posterity, and I think that some sort of “ethical tariff” should be imposed on Beijing. As to the EU, I call HR/VP Federica Mogherini and the members of the European Parliament to make full use of their meetings with the Chinese authorities as well as the UN human rights mechanisms to convey their concerns to the Chinese government and urge it to comply with international standards regarding freedom of religion or belief.

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CHINA: Judgement day for China in Geneva



The Universal Periodic Review of the state of human rights in China at the United Nations saw several major countries

publicly denounce the CCP and a major demonstration in front of the Palais des Nations, with Muslim Uyghurs, Tibetan Buddhists, members of The Church of Almighty God, and Bitter Winter, united in exposing the Chinese persecution of all religions.

By Marco Respinti

Bitter Winter (07.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2JNEr2a> – Every five years, the United Nations Human Rights Council holds a Universal Periodic Review of each member state's human rights record. On Tuesday, November 6, it was the turn of China – a world record holder when it comes to the violation of human rights and religious persecution.

As expected, China had a very rough day. Australia, UK, Canada, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, France, Iceland, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States focused on “transformation through education” camps, where one and a half million inmates, two thirds of them Uyghur Muslim where one and a half million inmates – two thirds of which are Uyghur Muslims and the rest are Tibetan Buddhists and members of religions declared illegal or banned – are subject to inhumane treatment and psychological pressure to induce them to abandon their faith.

China had dispatched to Geneva Le Yucheng, the Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs. He offered an arrogant but unconvincing defense of the “transformation through education” camps, claiming that they “free the minds of people affected by extremism.” Mr. Le's speech verged on the ridicule when he

explained that the camps offer “free-of-charge vocational training with a diploma after exams to those who had been coerced or lured by extremist groups.” But the speech was also sinister and threatening, as Mr. Le stated that the alternative to the camps would be “suppressing and wiping out” entirely the “extremists,” which in Chinese jargon means physically eliminating them.

To make Mr. Le and the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) rough day worse, hundreds gathered in front of the Palais des Nations, the second iconic symbol of the United Nations after the New York headquarters, to express their disappointment and anger, and call on international organizations to stop the persecution and slaughter in China.



The event was organized by the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), the largest organization of the Uyghur diaspora. Representatives of other persecuted ethnic groups and

religions were also invited to participate. So, starting at early birds' time from Palais Wilson, on the shore of Lake Lemman, enveloped in the mist and numb of a cold morning, a procession of national flags and photographs of CCP victims set out orderly and peacefully to reach the Palais des Nations. Uyghurs, Tibetans, Inner Mongolians, exiles in Taiwan, human rights activists from Hong Kong, members of The Church of Almighty God, and Catholics shouted slogans against the CCP and President Xi Jinping.

Once at the Palais des Nations, many speakers took turns, representing the communities that crowded the square with their flags and signs, defying cold weather and, after a while, even rain. While banners and signposts wreathed in the wind, after the Uyghur and Tibetan national anthems were played, Mr. Omer Kanat, executive president of the WUC, took the floor.



Sister Sofia
Wu from The
Church of
Almighty God

Then Mr. Dolkun Isa, president of the WUC, followed, among others, by Mr. Jampa Tsering Samdho, a Tibetan parliamentarian in exile; Ms. Kristina Olney of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation in Washington; Sister Sofia Wu from The Church of Almighty God; Mr. René Longet, a former member of

the Swiss Parliament and its group for Tibet; Mr. Dolgion Hatgin, president of the People's Party of Inner Mongolia; and Mr. Vincent Metten of the International Campaign for Tibet.

But, more or less out of the program, several Uyghur speakers, victims who escaped persecution in the "transformation through education" camps, also offered their testimonies. A sign, exhibited by a middle-aged Uyghur woman, composed and dignified in her grief, asked, "Where is my sister?" Adding ironically, "She is a medical doctor, she does not need vocational training." The allusion is to the CCP's claim that the camps where, in fact, people are tortured and die, offer "vocational training" to "victims" of religious extremism.

Sister Sofia Wu reminded the crowd that, just as it happens with Uyghurs and Tibetans, thousands of members of The Church of Almighty God are tortured in the Chinese jails and camps, and dozens have died in custody in highly suspicious circumstances.

Bitter Winter was also invited to attend the event. I traveled to Geneva to offer words of greeting, solidarity, and friendship to the rally. I believe that this Tuesday was a great and memorable day. Walking among Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians, all united and marching together for liberty and human rights is not an experience one has every day. To hear the Uyghurs shouting "Free Tibet!", the Buddhists asking for freedom for the Muslims, and the Christians invoking peace for all faiths was a unique experience. This was not the language of some closet utopian, but a loving experience, forged in the blood shed by all the communities represented at the event.

Many of those marching in Geneva believed the CCP was guilty

of terrorism and genocide. Will they be heard by the U.N.? Now, a troika composed of representatives from Hungary, Kenya, and Saudi Arabia—the three countries selected for the task by the Human Rights Council—will prepare a report with recommendations to China, to be completed on November 9.

Some U.N. diplomats are skeptical about the outcome of the process. But perhaps the final recommendations are not even the most important part of the Universal Periodic Review. The summary by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights composed from the documents submitted by NGOs will remain. It denounced the “transformation through education” camps, the atrocities against the Uyghurs and the Tibetans, and the persecution of the religious groups the regime has banned as xie jiao (“heterodox teachings,”), noting in particular that “during 2014-2018, the Chinese Communist Party’s monitoring, arrest, and persecution had caused at least 500,000 Church of Almighty God (CAG) Christians to flee their home, and several hundred thousand families had been torn apart.”

China can manipulate the information and use its weight to make some documents “disappear” from the U.N. website, as it happened last week. But the Universal Periodic Review has switched on the light, and many crimes the CCP hoped to keep quietly committing in the darkness have now been publicly revealed. I am proud to have been part of this extraordinary day, where Bitter Winter promised to all persecuted minorities in China that it will continue to be a voice for the voiceless and to publish news, documents, and testimonies about the persecution affecting all religions in China.

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