Buddhism, introduced from India, became widely accepted in China in the third century CE but suffered from persecution over the years for various reasons: rejection of Buddhism as a foreign or idolatrous religion, feelings of antireligion in general, or by the desire to redistribute the wealth and land owned by Buddhist temples.

Although Buddhism did not come to China through violent military conquest, its introduction was not easy, and it took centuries before Buddhism was widely accepted. The religion was widely embraced only after the fall of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE), and was adopted by the rulers of smaller kingdoms. This embrace, however, was not universal, and the religion suffered from persecution. Chinese sources mention the “three disasters of Wu,” from the names of the emperors under whom bans against Buddhism were enforced. Persecutions have also occurred in the late dynastic era, during the Republican period, and in the People’s Republic of China.

The First Disaster of Wu

The first disaster occurred in 446 CE, when northern China was under the control of the Toba (or Xianbei) people, during the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534 CE). The Emperor Taiwu (reigned 423–452 CE) prohibited Buddhism, following the urging of his Prime Minister Cui Hao. Cui, who wanted to establish an ideal Confucian state in North China, considered Buddhism to be a foreign religion that had to be eliminated in order to sinicize the Toba people. Decrees designed to weaken the monastic organization were issued beginning in 438 CE; in 444 CE, one decree proclaimed that the penalty for privately supporting monks was death. In 446 CE, believing monks were helping his enemies and finding weapons in temples, Taiwu prohibited the religion throughout the empire. He ordered the slaughter of monks, the destruction of temples, and the burning of sutras (classic Buddhist religious texts). This ban, however, did not affect Buddhists in southern China, ruled by the Liu Song (420–479 CE). The ban in North China was short-lived. The crown prince Huang, himself a devout Buddhist, helped monks to escape or hide, and the ban was formally ended in 452 CE, after Taiwu was assassinated and his grandson Wencheng (reigned 452–465 CE) acceded to the throne.

The Second Disaster of Wu

The second disaster occurred during a period when China was still divided, this time between the two short-lived dynasties of the North and South Dynasties period, Northern Zhou (557–581 CE) and the Chen (557–589 CE) to the south. This second wave of persecutions was carried out by the Zhou Emperor Wu (reigned 560–578 CE) in 574. The Zhou ruling house was not of Chinese origin, and the Emperor sought to demonstrate that he was Chinese...
in his thinking and action. He was initially reluctant to voice his displeasure over Buddhism because of its influence over many of his subjects. He was encouraged to denounce the religion, however, by a memorial written to him in 567 CE by Wei Yuan-song, Wei argued that the religion was wasteful and that it impoverished the country, but that because its main virtue was its teaching of compassion, it should be managed by the state, and the clergy returned to lay life. The Emperor Wu was infuriated by protests from the monks in 574 CE and decreed the suppression of the religion. After his conquest of the Northern Qi in 577 CE, Wu issued another decree extending the proscription over the rest of North China. This persecution, however, was also short-lived and limited in its effects: it stopped after the Emperor Wu’s death in 578 CE. In 581 CE, the Northern Zhou were superseded by the Sui, who proclaimed Buddhism as state religion.

Under the Sui (581–618 CE) and the Tang (618–907 CE) dynasties, Buddhism experienced great prosperity and influence. The memorial of Fu Yi against Buddhism, written in 621 CE, was one of the most important documents written against the religion, but it is a testimony to the status Buddhism enjoyed that for more two centuries no persecution affected the religion. In fact, Buddhism benefited from state patronage under the first decades of the Tang dynasty, most remarkably under the Empress Wu Zetian (reigned 690–705 CE). The state patronage of Buddhism under the Empress, however, represented a turning point. After her rule, Emperor Xuanzong (reigned 712–756 CE) adopted a series of measures to regulate Buddhism, and put the religion on an equal footing with Daoism. The large amount of Buddhist land exempt from taxation and the vast wealth in temples that was unavailable to the state continued to stir objections from Confucian and Daoist men of letters.

The Third Disaster of Wu

The factional strife within the court contributed to the third disaster of Wu. The emperor and scholar-bureaucrats opposed the privileges of the Buddhist religion and the eunuchs approved it; ideological conflicts occurred between Daoism, which was portrayed as a genuine Chinese religion, and Buddhism, which was criticized as foreign; and finally, a great loss of revenue to the state was caused by the exemption granted to temples. This unfolded from 842 to 845 CE, when Tang Emperor Wuzong ordered that Buddhist temples, shrines, and statues be destroyed and that their landed properties be confiscated, forcing the secularization of the clergy. Like the previous two persecutions, it started out as a violent and sudden attack, but it was quickly terminated, this time with the death of Wuzong. This last suppression of Buddhism was much larger in its scope than the two previous ones: it unfolded throughout the empire, and its consequences for the religion were long lasting. Buddhism never recovered fully from this persecution. This last wave of persecution also differed from the previous two persecutions and from the anti-Christian persecutions in ancient Rome and the
religious wars that would divide Europe seven centuries later: Buddhists were not killed because of their beliefs, and monks were simply returned to lay life.

Persecution in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Arguably, three other waves of persecution could be added to this list. The first one, under the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), resulted from the Taiping uprising of 1851–1864. This persecution against Buddhism was not caused by the government, the weak Emperor Xianfeng (reigned 1851–1861), or his successor Tongzhi (reigned 1862–1874), who was a child when he succeeded to the throne. The Taiping Rebellion, motivated by a utopian ideal of land distribution and a messianic belief that borrowed loosely from Christianity, sought to destroy Buddhist and Daoist temples, which were viewed as symbols of idolatry. The leader of the Taiping, Hong Xiuquan, believed he was the younger brother of Jesus and resolved to fight evil in this world to establish a Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace (Taiping Tianguo). He also believed that the Buddhist and Daoist religions were part of the evil on earth, and many temples were destroyed wherever his troops were in control. Only after the rebellion was quelled by the Qing dynasty could Buddhists rebuild their temples.

The second persecution, under the Republican regime (1912–1949), occurred as part of a short-lived antireligionist movement that sought to convert temples into schools between 1923 and 1927. In this period of great political instability and division, many members of the Nationalist Party’s radical wings who sought to modernize China between 1923 and 1927. In this period of great political instability and division, many members of the Nationalist Party’s radical wings who sought to modernize China encountered the transformation of temples into schools. This time the Buddhist clergy and lay people did react. They mobilized and pressed President Jiang Jieshi to stop the campaign. The generalissimo, who also wanted to limit the influence of the radical elements in the Nationalist Party, put an end to that wave of temple expropriation.

Finally, the third persecution of modern times broke out during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). These persecutions were not limited to Buddhists and were antitraditionalist as well as broadly antireligious. During these ten years of disorder monks and nuns had to return to lay life, and some were forced to participate in public self-criticism sessions. Temple properties were sacked and destroyed by the Red Guard, or converted to other use. For example, the Jing’an temple in Shanghai, which was originally built in 446 CE, became a plastic factory during the Cultural Revolution and was reopened only in 1983.

The Chinese government since the beginning of reform has adopted a very different attitude toward Buddhism. It recognizes its value as part of the national cultural heritage and as a resource to help diplomatic relations with many neighboring Asian countries where Buddhism is an important religion. In recent years, the government has encouraged the restoration of temples, the development of pilgrimages, the development of Buddhist associations engaged in publishing and philanthropic activities, and even the organization of major international symposia on Buddhism. Buddhist associations themselves have been eager to show that they support the government by supporting its campaign against “evil cults,” taking charge of orphanages and schools for disabled children, and organizing relief during national disasters such as the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan. The official statistics remain vague but there is agreement that Buddhism is experiencing a revival of its fortune among ethnic Chinese.

Another development of note is the popularity of Tibetan Buddhism among non-Tibetans. However, the Communist Party remains hostile to the idea that the Dalai Lama represents the religious authority for Tibetan Buddhists, despite the anecdotal evidence that shows this is the wish of a majority of Tibetans.

In sum, although diminished politically and culturally as an institution, Buddhism nevertheless survives in China to this day, albeit as a shadow of its former self.

André LALIBERTÉ

Further Reading