

Religion Today
August 13-19, 1999
***FALUN GONG IN CHINA:
AN ATTACK ON AMERICAN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM***
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In my recent column about religions on the World Wide Web, I argued that the Internet is a "godsend" for religious expression. It has opened up new horizons of religious freedom and expression where anyone with a computer and a bit of technical know-how can communicate their religious beliefs. This ease of access, combined with peoples' enduring interest in religious matters, has made religion the second-most common topic on the Web. But in the past few weeks, it has become clear that ease of access also means ease of attack. And that ease of attack hinders a cherished United States ideal, namely, freedom of religion.

A few weeks ago, a religion little known in the West suddenly became front-page news when the government of mainland China decided to outlaw it. The name of the religion is Falun Gong, and the government decided that it was a threat to single-party rule in China. Even though the Chinese authorities disputed Falun Gong's claim to have 70 million followers in China, they still viewed it as large enough to constitute a serious danger. Although the western press has called Falun Gong a "cult," it essentially constitutes a popular form of Buddhism. A visit to one of its Web sites reveals that it emphasizes common Buddhist practices, such as yoga (bodily control) and meditation (mental development).

So what does this have to do with the Internet and American religious freedom? After all, isn't this just a communist government doing what communist governments do, namely, attack religions? But that attack is now reaching into the United States, and that reach is extended through the Web. Falun Gong's founder and other members have fled for their safety to the

United States. Once here they have tried to support those still in China. One aspect of this support is the creation of Web sites with the religion's sacred texts, writings and speeches of its founder, teachings about belief, and discussions of practice and ritual. These sites have now come under electronic attack via the Internet in ways that effectively shut down them. Although the attacks are not sophisticated (an average American teenage hacker could do a more elegant job), they have been traced back to Chinese government sources.

So while the Internet has provided humanity with an unprecedented forum for communicating about religions, it has also provided a new way for carrying out religious controversy. It has given those of us in the United States a new way of expressing our freedom of religion, but it has also facilitated the denial of that freedom to religious believers and practitioners here in the United States by those who do not wish it, whether governments, businesses or individuals.