

The Future of Religion in China

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The status of religion in the People's Republic of China has never been secure and the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) saw the virtual eclipse of all organized religion in China. For a time the lack of reports on religious activities seemed to confirm the Red Guards' claims to have put an end to outdated "superstitious" activities. Yet as the fervour of the Cultural Revolution waned in the 1970s, it became apparent that the Red Guards had been successful only in putting an end to those aspects of religious life that had been officially approved prior to the Cultural Revolution as part of the United Front policy* of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This policy had approved both the activities of the United Front religious patriotic associations set up in the 1950s and the centralized organization of religious life. Although all places of worship had been closed, local religious life evidently continued, albeit under considerable pressure in some places. Little is known of the situation during these years, but the evidence of local Christian activity in, for example, the two coastal provinces of Fujian and Zhejiang during this period is too strong to be dismissed.¹ It can be assumed that wherever a particular religion had been strong in the past, some sort of religious life continued during the Cultural Revolution. This assumption is now being indirectly confirmed by the overt restoration of religious life under China's new leadership. So local religious life appears to have persisted prior to the recent officially approved changes, and it is at the local level that the vitality of religious life is most likely to be found.

The Official View of Religion

Although there has been no change in the Communist Party's view that religion is a form of superstition, there have been some significant shifts in perspective over the past two years. It is now accepted that the major

*This policy goes back to the 1920s when the Communist Party formed an alliance with Dr Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Party. It collapsed in 1927 but was revived during the war against Japan. After 1949 the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference was formed from non-communist parties and other social groups, as a means of uniting as many groups as possible behind the Party programme. It was revived in 1978.

world religions are to be taken seriously on an intellectual level. A distinction has recently been made between these major religions and what may be termed "popular religion",² which is probably far more influential amongst the peasants than Buddhism, Islam or Christianity. The policy of religious freedom is to apply "primarily to these kinds of religions" whereas popular religion is likely to be discouraged, if necessary by the use of direct sanctions.

The setting up in March 1978 of the Institute for the Study of World Religions in Beijing (Peking) was a further indication that the Party now recognized the need to take religion seriously, even if it aimed ultimately at criticizing religion from a Marxist atheist standpoint.³ It is being stressed that such a study of religion must be undertaken as a serious academic exercise.⁴ The long-term implications of this are hard to assess, but there have already been some important developments. While the Institute is under the direction of Ren Jiyu, a noted Marxist expert on Buddhism, one of its deputy directors is Zhao Fusan, a leading member of the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Association and a former Anglican who has clearly indicated that he remains involved in church life. He was able to have informal conversations with representatives of the National Council of Churches during a visit to the USA in April 1979.

Shortly after the Chinese Association for Atheism was established,⁵ a parallel Society for the Study of Religion was set up with its committee consisting largely of well-known religious leaders.⁶ At the inaugural meeting held from 12 to 22 February 1979 in Kunming, Yunnan province, an important series of papers were read which dealt with a variety of religious topics, including, for example, a paper on Liberation Theology, and another on "the beginnings of theological formulation in the primitive Christian community". Without knowing the actual content of the papers it is difficult to assess to what extent this meeting implied that religious issues could be discussed openly in China, at least in an academic setting. There is, however, some evidence that such openness is becoming possible. For example, in its report of the discussions at the founding meeting of the Association for Atheism in late 1978, the official *Guangming Daily* indicated that there had been some disagreement over the role which religious ideology had played in Chinese peasant rebellions. Those who had stated the once standard view that religion had invariably played a negative role were challenged by others, who maintained that, in certain circumstances, religion could have a revolutionary content. While this example may not seem to reveal very much, it does indicate a significant shift in official opinion: the first viewpoint is no longer accepted as the official CCP line.

The Extension of Religious Studies

The Beijing Institute has its provincial equivalents in a number of places. The Xinjiang Institute is to publish histories of Islam and has already

completed the translation of the Uigur *Biography of Muhammad*. Other Muslim works are being translated into Chinese for publication.⁷ It has been reported that a School for the Koran is to be opened in Yunnan and that its first task will be the publication of the Koran in Chinese.⁸

In Beijing a Society for the Study of Tibetan Buddhism has also been established which is to produce a regular journal.⁹ At the same time, the Dege Buddhist scripture publishing house in Sichuan has begun reprinting Buddhist scriptures as well as a whole range of other Tibetan works.¹⁰

A Centre for the Study of Religion has been created at Nanjing University and replaces the former Protestant Theological Seminary. The seminary's former principal, Ding Guangxun (K. H. Ting), once bishop of Zhejiang province, is now Director of the Centre. It is staffed by 24 Christians and is concerned with the study of Christianity. It is undertaking a number of specialized studies, a translation programme of key western Christian documents, some post-graduate work, and is at present completing the revision of the Chinese Bible, which some members of staff at the former seminary began during the Cultural Revolution.¹¹ The New Testament and Psalms are to be printed by one of the state presses next autumn. During a recent conference held at the university, papers were read entitled "On Theism" and "Christianity and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom".¹²

Thus there has clearly been a major shift of emphasis with regard to religious studies within China over the past two years, and particularly within the first half of 1979. This development must be set in the context of increasing freedom of discussion and the restoration to the curriculum of such disciplines as sociology for the first time since 1957.¹³ Whether this new period of "blooming and contending"^{*} will be allowed to continue depends on the outcome of the political struggle in China. On the assumption, however, that the present trend will continue, it nevertheless remains to be seen how far religious freedom will go. To assess this it is necessary to examine how the situation has changed with regard to the practice of religion.

The Legal Status of Religion

The Constitution of the People's Republic of China has always maintained freedom of religious belief, but like so many other constitutions, this stipulation has not been fully observed. It is therefore of particular interest that the new Criminal Law, adopted at the 2nd Session of the 5th National People's Congress on 1 July 1979, contains two articles dealing with religion. Once again a distinction is made between "feudal superstitious beliefs" and the major religions. Article 99 states that "those organizing and utilizing feudal superstitious beliefs and secret societies or sects to

*A classical phrase used by Mao in 1956-57 calling for the blossoming of the hundred flowers. The slogan has recently been revived.

carry out counter-revolutionary activities will be sentenced to fixed-term imprisonment of not less than five years". Here the important point is that such activities must be shown to be "counter-revolutionary"—a term which in spite of some clarification in the Criminal Law remains far too ambiguous. On the other hand, Article 147 states that "a state functionary who unlawfully deprives others of their freedom of religious belief or violates the customs and habits of minority nationalities to a serious extent, will be sentenced to detention or imprisonment for not more than two years".¹⁴ According to the NCNA, this article was included at the suggestion of the Panchen Lama and Zhao Puchu, President of the Chinese Buddhist Association.¹⁵ It remains to be seen whether this article will be invoked in practice, but it is clearly designed to restrain abuses by local officials. Seen in the context of the general restoration of religious life, it does suggest that there may be for the first time some degree of genuine religious freedom in the People's Republic of China.

The article on religion in the Constitution not only stipulates freedom to believe in religion but also freedom not to believe in religion "and to propagate atheism". This latter phrase has come under direct criticism by religious leaders in China who have stated that the article is not balanced and could provide constitutional excuse for future anti-religious excesses. Partly in response to this the *People's Daily* has recently carried a long article on the implementation of religious freedom, in which it was stated that this phrase should not be taken to mean that believers are not free to propagate theism. It is very likely that the National People's Congress will, in fact, revise the whole article at its next meeting.¹⁶

The Religious Affairs Bureau

The Religious Affairs Bureau in Beijing, attached to the State Council, which disappeared during the Cultural Revolution, has recently been restored, with its former Director, Xiao Xianfa, active once again.¹⁷ Reports from a number of localities indicate that such bureaux are being established at lower levels as well. While one of their tasks is to check on the activities of religious minorities, they also provide believers with official channels through which to approach the government. These bureaux may possibly even assume the role of seeking to enforce the provisions of the Criminal Law.

The Patriotic Associations

As one of its tasks before 1966 the Religious Affairs Bureau had to supervise the establishing of the religious Patriotic Associations. The latter have also now been restored, often with their former personnel. The Islamic and Buddhist Associations re-emerged in 1977, but it was not until 1979 that the Protestant Three-Self Movement and the Catholic Patriotic

Association began active work again. The various Associations are responsible for the re-opening of places of worship and for other public activities of religious believers. It seems likely that these bodies will remain the only expression of China's religious minorities at a national level, although there are signs that local church structures may be being restored. The recent election of Fu Tieshan as new Catholic Bishop of Beijing is one indication of this.¹⁸

The importance of the Patriotic Associations in terms of the Party's United Front policy is clear. However, what is less clear at this stage is the importance of such bodies to the life of local believers. Indeed, there is without question a feeling amongst many believers that such bodies have no legitimate religious function (as opposed to their political function). This feeling is the legacy of 30 years' pressure on believers, especially during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, it would not be fair to say that the Patriotic Associations merely served as tools of the Party in the past. The question now remains: how much freedom will these Associations be given in the future to engage in religious activities? To what extent will they be able to represent the interests of ordinary believers? The only opportunity for people outside of China, and in particular for religious organizations, to re-establish regular contact with national religious bodies in China is to develop contacts with the Patriotic Associations. This process is already beginning: Chinese Islamic delegations have visited Libya and Pakistan,¹⁹ and in September 1979 ten religious leaders were able to attend the World Conference on Religion and Peace in Princeton, New Jersey.²⁰

Local Religious Expression

There have been indications for some time that public worship has been allowed in a limited way in some mosques and temples. Recent reports from Tibet reveal that a number of temples have been re-opened and that open expression of religious belief is now tolerated.²¹ Chinese sources in Xinjiang have emphasized in recent months that people are free to practise their faith as they wish, and this has to some extent been confirmed by visitors to the north-west.²² Last August (1979) NCNA reported the re-opening of 158 mosques in Ningxia Hui.²³ Visitors to other parts of China have reported seeing public worship in progress in temples and mosques.²⁴ Until recently, however, such reports generally concerned national minority areas, but in the past month or two public worship has resumed in some of China's major cities. The first official report about the re-opening of places of worship, including Christian churches, came from Canton on 30 July 1979,²⁵ although as far as is known not all have opened yet.

Protestant churches have, however, re-opened in Hangzhou, Amoy and Swatow. Visitors to Shanghai reported that on 2 September 1979 the

Moore Memorial Church re-opened, with 1,200 people present. The following Sunday approximately 1,600 people attended the service and a second church was opened. By 23 September there were about 2,200 present at the Moore Memorial Church and 1,500 at the Purity of Heart Church. On 30 September a third church, the Northern Shanghai church on the Wujing road, was open. The Moore Memorial Church was holding two services, with 1,700 people present at 8 a.m. and 800 at 10 a.m. Thus it seems possible that approximately 5,000 Protestants are attending church services in Shanghai. One source indicates that about one fifth of those present at the Moore Memorial Church are young people, although some were there out of curiosity rather than from conviction.²⁶

Conclusion

At a large meeting held in Shanghai in January 1979, several hundred religious people denounced the "ruthless persecution" of believers during the Cultural Revolution and the authorities announced the restoration of "normal" religious activities in the city.²⁷ This was clearly a signal to the rest of China that religious policy was changing, a fact which subsequent developments have confirmed. For example, former religious leaders have re-emerged, personal contacts with friends in China by religious people in the rest of the world have been renewed, and a number of foreign religious leaders, including an official delegation of Hong Kong Christians in April 1979, have been welcomed in China.

Is it possible to come to any overall conclusions about all these changes? In view of the many surprising developments in China over the past two years it would be foolhardy to attempt any firm conclusion. At the time of writing it would seem that a certain "space" for religion in China is being delimited: this may include the right to public worship, the right to publish some religious literature, including the Bible and the Koran, the right to maintain relations with religious bodies overseas, and possibly the right to train clergy.²⁸ It is also likely that local expressions of religious belief will be tolerated more than in the past, but that the somewhat arbitrary distinction between the major religions and "feudal superstitions" will cause problems. Nevertheless the situation is now more hopeful for believers than at any point since 1949.

²⁶See, for example, the following reports by Dr Jonathan Chao, Director of the Chinese Church Research Center, part of the China Graduate School of Theology, Hong Kong: "Interview with Christian Girl from Chekiang, 1973", *China Study Project (CSP) Bulletin* No. 2, June 1976; "A Glimpse of Christian Community Life in China", *State of the Church in China Documentary Collection* No. 1, 1974; "Christians in Fukien Today", *China and the Church Today* No. 1, 1979.

An interesting interview entitled "Christian Worship in Rural China" was also carried in *China Talk*, Vol. 2, 4/5, December 1977, reproduced in *CSP Bulletin* No. 6, April 1978. (*China Talk* is produced by the China Liaison Office of the United Methodist Church of the USA in Hong Kong.)

⁹Editor's column on religion and superstition in the *People's Daily*, 15 March 1979. Translated in the BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Part 3, The Far East (abbreviated below as FE) 6079, reproduced in *CSP Bulletin* No. 10, July 1979. See also below.

¹⁰New China News Agency (NCNA), 17 March 1978; FE 5775.

¹¹Speech by Zhou Yang, adviser to the Academy of Social Sciences, at a forum for planning scientific research on religion, April 1979; NCNA, 25 April 1979; FE 5800.

¹²Full report on meeting in *Guangming Daily*, January 1979, reproduced in *CSP Bulletin* No. 9, April 1979.

¹³NCNA in English, 27 February 1979.

¹⁴NCNA in English, 19 June 1979.

¹⁵Agence France Presse (AFP), Kunming report, 2 April 1979; FE 6085. Confirmed by NCNA in English, 2 August 1979.

¹⁶NCNA in English, 12 April 1979.

¹⁷NCNA in English, 15 July 1979.

¹⁸Information in personal correspondence with Dr E. H. Johnson and Canon D. M. Paton. Also NCNA in English, 2 August 1979. Supplemented by personal conversation with Bishop Ding by the author, October 1979.

¹⁹NCNA in English, 24 July and 2 August 1979.

²⁰See *Beijing Review* No. 13, 30 March 1979.

²¹*People's Daily*, 7 July 1979.

²²NCNA in English, 8 July 1979.

²³Information given by Bishop Ding during his recent visit to North America. The *People's Daily* article, "Fully Implement the Policy of Freedom of Religion", by Guo Ju was dated 17 October 1979. Translation in FE 6253.

²⁴See, for example, report on discussion meeting called by the Bureau during 5th CPPCC and NPC sessions, NCNA in English, 30 June 1979.

²⁵Elected 25 July to succeed Bishop Joseph Yao Guangyu who died in 1964; NCNA, 10 August 1979; *Xinhua Weekly*, issue 548, 16 August 1979.

²⁶NCNA in English, 15 May 1979; Karachi Home Service, 7 July 1979; FE 6166.

²⁷NCNA in English, 26 July 1979; *Xinhua Weekly*, issue 546, 2 August 1979.

²⁸BBC report on visit to Tibet by Philip Short, BBC correspondent in Beijing.

²⁹See articles in *China Reconstructs*, February and March 1979.

³⁰NCNA in English, 3 August 1979.

³¹For example, in April 1979 the Rev. Geoffrey Senior saw people at worship in both the Bamboo Temple and the Hua Tin Temple in Kunming, Yunnan.

³²NCNA in English, 30 July 1979; *Xinhua Weekly*, issue 546, 2 August 1979.

³³Jonathan Chao, *China Prayer Letter*, No. 5, October-November 1979, Chinese Church Research Center, Hong Kong.

³⁴Shanghai Radio, 11 January 1979; FE 6017.

³⁵The NCNA report of 30 July 1979 contained the sentence: "the religious institutions will use the unfrozen funds to support their clergy and to help some followers out of economic difficulties".

Appendix

Religion and Feudal Superstitions

Bob Whyte in his article (pp. 5, 10) mentions that recently the Chinese newspaper, *The People's Daily* (15 March 1979) printed an article, entitled "Religion and Feudal Superstitions", which distinguished between the major religions and so-called "popular religion". We re-print, with kind permission, a translation of this article from China and the Church Today (*Chinese Church*

Research Center, Hong Kong) No. 3, May-June, 1979.

Recently we have received several letters asking: "What is religion, and what is superstition?" What is China's view of the people's "freedom of belief"; what is the "feudal superstition" that we oppose and should eliminate? Because of this, we

visited several leading religious organizations and interviewed responsible comrades in religious studies. Their views and answers follow. Editor

All worship of supernatural forces can be called superstition. Religions are superstition, but it cannot be said that all superstitions are religions. For example, no kinds of feudal superstitions are religions.

All religions are the vain and erroneous responses of man to his feelings of impotence and fear in the face of natural and social forces. Especially after mankind entered the stage of class society, and experienced the increasing control of the exploiting class and religious professionals, its [i.e. religion's] negative role became obvious. It made most of the workers settle back in the face of natural and class struggle, and "submit to the will of Heaven". Therefore Marxism says, "religion is the opiate that lulls the spirits of people, and is the tool by which the exploiting class controls the people". Marxists all oppose religion in any form.

However, in regard to the broad masses, religion is a problem of worldview which has innumerable connections with idealism. If we want to solve this problem, we must rely on the elimination of classes and on the dissemination and development of culture and science, which are long-term matters. Before people have thoroughly transformed their beliefs in this kind of idealism, we must recognize, permit, and respect the beliefs of the masses of people. This is in order to enable them to adopt the Party and government's propaganda and education during the "Three Revolution Movement," (class struggle, production struggle, and scientific experimentation) which concerns the social realities of the opposites of belief and unbelief, superstition and science, and idealism and materialism. In this way they will arrive at the correct conclusion and will throw off these kinds of spiritual shackles. The whole witness of the 29 years since Liberation is of the effectiveness and complete correctness of the Party's execution of this policy. This is also the basis for the 46th article in the new constitution: "The people have freedom of belief and freedom not to believe in religion and to propagate atheism". From now on, we should staunchly and consistently adhere to this policy.

While we are consistently adhering to this policy, we must distinguish religion from feudal superstition. Religions are mainly Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and other world religions. In general, they have scriptures, doctrines, religious rites, organizational structures, etc. These religions have milleniums of history, and among the masses, especially among a few peoples, have relatively wide influence. The freedom to believe in religion is meant primarily for belief in this kind of religion.

The policy of freedom of religious belief protects the normal religious activities of religious leaders and believers. They must respect the relevant policies and laws of the government. They cannot interfere in other people's freedom of belief (including the freedom not to believe in religion), cannot interfere in politics or education, and cannot restore systems of feudal oppression and exploitation that have been eliminated since the Liberation. Furthermore, they cannot allow class enemies (landlords, capitalists, rightists, etc.), to utilize religion to carry out counter-revolutionary activities and other unlawful activities. Because of this, government offices must increase supervision of religious organizations.

Feudal superstitions generally involve sorcerers, magic potions and drugs, divination and fortune-telling, getting rid of calamities and praying for rain, praying for sons and daughters, controlling demons, healing sickness, practising physiognomy and palm reading, practising geomancy, and other such activities. Originally all these were ridiculous and unfounded matters, which people with only a little culture, science and knowledge would not believe. After Liberation, these kinds of activities were a battlefield that was gradually lost among the masses. But in recent years, due to the disruption and sabotage of Lin Piao and the Gang of Four, these activities reappeared once again in some rural villages which had had relatively heavy "calamities". In isolated places, it even influenced the normal state of the people's work and lives, even damaging the economy and health of some workers. We cannot regard these kinds of activities lightly, but must seriously control them. As for those sorcerers and others who use these activities to carry out political sabotage and indivi-

duals who seek economic advantage, just for themselves, we must educate and criticize them. We must very seriously tackle this and resolutely strike at it. We certainly cannot permit them to mistakenly invoke freedom of religious belief for carrying out feudal, superstitious activities. For those among the working people who have been deceived by feudal, superstitious activities, the main problem is education.

Naturally, real life is much more complex than definitions and concepts. Among the masses, there are still some ancient practices stemming from superstitions, such as ancestor worship, belief in the existence of spirits and ghosts, etc., and certain other related activities, which are

nevertheless types of superstition. But if these don't affect political and productive activities, then most don't need administrative measures forbidding them. Solving them only needs patient persuasion and a long period of cultural, scientific, and atheistic education.

In tackling the problems of religions and feudal superstitions, we must strictly differentiate two kinds of different contradictions: those among the people themselves, and those between enemies and ourselves. At the same time, we must carry out the policy of freedom of religious belief, and unite the religious masses even more, and struggle to achieve socialism and the Four Modernizations.

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