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# RELIGION, STATE & SOCIETY

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## Editorial

The destruction and revival of religious life in the Labrang monastery the north-eastern part of the Tibetan Plateau followed a pattern familiar to religious communities elsewhere in territories controlled by the communist authorities in Beijing. A period of comparative tolerance from 1949 to 1958 was followed by a period of destruction from 1958 to 1962 connected with economic reforms. A certain liberalisation in the early 1960s reflected the fact that the government was now favouring a more pragmatic approach, and was the opportunity for a limited religious revival; then came the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976 with the wholesale destruction of religious life. Finally, following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the easing of persecution has seen a gradually accelerating religious revival.

In his article in this issue of *RSS* Martin Slobodník shows that the current fear of the Chinese authorities with regard to the Labrang monastery is to a large extent political in character. The monks are obliged to accept rules for behaviour which include not only respecting monastic vows and the discipline of the monastery but also safeguarding 'the unity of nationalities and the territorial integrity of the state'. And indeed since the late 1980s there have been political protests in Central Tibet (mainly Lhasa) in favour of Tibetan independence, and monks have been involved. The monks in the Labrang monastery, says Slobodník, have not themselves been involved in overt anti-Chinese protests, but 'most of the monks have repeatedly voiced their support for the activities of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatsho ... and cherish the idea of Tibetan independence'.

Slobodník argues that the politicisation of the religious revival in Tibet poses a dilemma for the Chinese authorities: 'on the one hand the state wants to pursue a policy of limited liberalisation of religious policy in Tibet; but on the other hand the authorities cannot tolerate what they label counterrevolutionary political activities by monks'.

This is arguably the core problem posed by the massive religious revival in China for the central authorities. In his article in this issue of *RSS* Lap-yan Kung describes similar issues arising in Hong Kong and causing tension within the 'one country, two systems' arrangement which officially characterises the relationship between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland. Religious freedom continues in Hong Kong: foreign missionaries enter freely, there is religious education in schools, new churches are opening and the various religious bodies are involved in charitable activity. Tension has arisen, however, in connection with the activities of Falun Gong. Since 1999 the authorities in Beijing have been using every method available to curb Falun Gong on the mainland. Jiang Zemin, who retired as president of the People's Republic of China in March 2003, has even compared Falun Gong to the Polish Solidarity movement and described it as a major threat to Chinese security.

Some politicians and newspapers in mainland China are also expressing their concern about Falun Gong in Hong Kong, viewing it as a political organisation from overseas which is intending to overthrow the Chinese government. The government in Beijing has

not put overt pressure on Hong Kong to take steps against Falun Gong; but one development which many see as a connected symptom was the issuing by the Hong Kong government in September 2002 of a 'Proposal to Implement Article 23 of the Basic Law'. This Article allows the government of Hong Kong to enact laws 'to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government, or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organizations or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region, and to prohibit political organizations or bodies of the Region from establishing ties with foreign organizations or bodies.' In this context the Hong Kong government went on to produce a draft national security bill in 2003 which would allow the government to refuse or cancel the registration of a local body subordinated to an organisation on the China mainland which is prohibited on grounds of national security.

The outspoken Catholic Bishop Joseph Zen Zekiun of Hong Kong evidently voiced the fears of many when in 2001 he expressed the view that 'If the Falun Gong is accused of causing disorder in Hong Kong society just because of peaceful protests, then such a label can easily be applied tomorrow to the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, to the diocese and to many Christian bodies.' In July 2003 Bishop Zen called for a public protest against the proposed national security bill. Unexpectedly, more than a half million people turned out. Eventually, in September, the government withdrew the bill.

'This experience has awoken people to the fact that they can change government policy', says Kung. It is also evident that there is a perception in Hong Kong that freedom is indivisible and that an attack on one religious group creates a climate in which others are vulnerable as well. Kung is encouraged by the recent disagreements in Hong Kong, seeing them as symptoms of a healthy polity.

... it seems to me that the case of Falun Gong is enhancing the development of a social movement in Hong Kong. A 'social movement' may be defined as a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations engaged in political or cultural conflict on the basis of a shared collective identity ...; the controversial status of Falun Gong successfully brings about such interaction. For instance, religious groups (mainly Catholics and Protestants), human rights groups, lawyers, some legislators and others are coming together to defend religious liberty. Although we may not be able to assess right now to what extent such a kind of social networking may promote social change either at the systemic or non-systemic level, it is clear that the issue of Falun Gong is helping to consolidate the development of a social movement.

In Kung's view, moreover, the working out of the concept of 'one country, two systems', may have beneficial consequences in mainland China too. 'In fact, the disharmony brought about by the case of Falun Gong may be helpful in bringing the central government, the Hong Kong government and the people of Hong Kong to a better understanding and assessment of one another.'

## Notes on Contributors

**Walter Comins-Richmond** received his PhD in Slavic languages and literatures in 1994. In 1996 he began studying the Turkic cultures of the former Soviet Union, and his work has since focused on the North Caucasus. He is particularly interested in ethnic relations in the Caucasus region and the role of Islam in the future of the Russian Federation, and he has recently published several articles on the Karachai. He teaches a variety of courses relating to Russian history, culture, politics and literature at Occidental College, Los Angeles.

**Frans Hoppenbrouwers** studied French and theology and specialised in church history at the University of Tilburg, formerly the Catholic University of Brabant. He was a researcher on the project 'Dutch Culture in a European Context' under the auspices of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research. Since 1995 he has worked for the Dutch relief organisation *Communicantes* in Nijmegen which funds projects in the field of pastoral care and education for the Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic Churches in Central and Eastern Europe; he studies current developments in the religious landscape in that area.

**Geoffrey Hosking** is the Leverhulme Research Professor in Russian History at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London. Among his recent publications are *A History of the Soviet Union* (3rd edition, 1992), *Russia: People and Empire* (1997) and a complete history of Russia, *Russia and the Russians* (2001). He is currently working on a history of the Russians as the dominant ethnicity in the USSR.

**Lap-yan Kung** graduated from the Universities of St Andrews and Glasgow and now teaches theology in the Theology Division at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research interests are church-state relations, Christian ethics and contemporary spirituality.

**Helene Sinnreich** is completing her PhD thesis, *The Supply and Distribution of Food to the Łódź Ghetto: A Case Study in Nazi Jewish Policy, 1939–1945* in the Department of History at Brandeis University.

**Martin Slobodník** studied Sinology at the Comenius University in Slovakia and at Beijing University. His postgraduate studies included Tibetology for two years at Bonn University. He is now an assistant professor in the Department of the Languages and Cultures of the Countries of East Asia at the Comenius University. He has published several papers on the history of Sino-Tibetan relations and the revival of Tibetan Buddhism in China.