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Religion and Politics in China

A traveller to China is struck by two things, its size and its antiquity. The sheer physical size of China is emphasized by the difficulty of travel to the interior regions, but the size of the population is immediately evident on the streets of the great cities. A billion people, nearly one quarter of the human race, live in China. It is said that by the end of the century China will add the equivalent of the present population of the United States! As for its antiquity, it is reflected in China's historical treasures, its literature and its art, as even a casual tourist will note in the museums and countless other reminders of the past incorporated into cultural forms. Thus for more than 3,000 years China has developed its perspective on human life and its meaning. During much of this time the country has been divided into a small educated and well-to-do upper class of officials and scholars, and the masses of poor and illiterate peasants and menial workers. This division is reflected in Chinese religious traditions.

Since the time of Confucius the upper classes developed an intellectual philosophy-religion, much more practical than theoretical, not marked by metaphysical dogmas or rational systems of thought so much as by social and ethical concerns. Such patterns of thought are much more easily controlled by the government. The peasants and other poor were left largely to superstition and magical practices, and as a result they were more easily manipulated and exploited. For them, the earth was crowded with gods and spirits: city gods and country gods, earth gods, and river gods, animal gods, insect gods, kitchen gods and of course the spirits of the ancestor. The gods were to be consulted, respected, feared and propitiated. Their reality is attested to by the custom of young boys about to urinate on a dark street, "stand aside, spirits, I am about to urinate!" Folk customs have long histories and considerable influence, and the rulers have, over the years, kept a wary eye on the superstitions and magic practices, well aware that through these masses of people may be manipulated. In

many ways, it is much easier to control the cities and the intellectuals. In passing, it is worth noting that China has no history of religious leaders confronting the political leaders over questions of morality. There has been nothing like the prophets of Israel rebuking the kings in the name of Yahweh, and there has been no penitent Henry standing barefoot in the snow before the Pope at Canossa.

Nevertheless, foreign religions have invaded China. In the turmoil around the breakup of the Han dynasty (220 A.D.), Buddhism came down the Central Asia trade routes and began to take hold. It offered people hope for a life after death, won by good living and faith. The monastic way of life, offering peace and relief from this world's troubles in monasteries beautifully located, reportedly attracted as many as three million monks during the Sung dynasty (960-1127 A.D.), with millions more laymen. At the time China's population in Buddhist sectors, mostly in the north, was only some sixty million. In 1949, at the time of "liberation," Buddhism was the most popular religion, numbering half a million monks and nuns and as many as 100 million laymen. Knowing that Buddhist monasteries had been centres of dissent against governments of the past, the Mao government set out to control them. John Strong wrote:

The Chinese government cannot and does not wish to hide China's Buddhist heritage either from its own people or from foreign visitors. Buddhist pagodas are still landmarks all over the country, and in some places they are models for new architecture. . . . Even Mao Zedong's calligraphy is freely admitted to have been based on that of a Buddhist monk in Hunan. What the Chinese want to do is to understand their own Buddhism in the light of Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong's thought to see its good points, to show its bad points, and to rally what remains of it in support of socialist construction.¹

The government moved to control the Buddhists by means of land reforms, manual labour for monks and nuns, and a requirement that life in this world must be looked at as good and worthy of dedication. The old Buddhist teaching of withdrawal from the world would not be countenanced. Shirob Jaltso, a Buddhist member of the Communist government's National Committee reported in a 1960 speech:

1. John Strong, "Buddhism in China": *China Notes* XI, No. 1.

In the new appearance of Buddhism in China the mentality of the Buddhists has undergone a change, as a result of which customs and habits are different from what they used to be. Since the liberation, under the leadership of the Party... (we) have incessantly increased our patriotism and heightened political consciousness. In this way Buddhists have gotten rid of the 'negative feeling of weariness of this world' which was handed down from the past... the positive feeling of being a part of this world has been induced in them...

At the same time, as a result of political studies and the several movements, the Buddhists have gradually come to think and believe that one should subsist on one's own labour. They have also come to understand that labour is something glorious and noble and beneficial to others. ... Whereas they used to live by exploiting others, they have discarded such a shameful parasitic life. Their view on society has been completely changed.

It is also clear... that freedom of worship for the Buddhists in the new China is fully protected... The enjoyment of this freedom must be strictly distinguished from the reactionary activities of the counter-revolutionaries. While freedom of worship must be protected, the Buddhists must be deprived of all their freedom to engage in counter-revolutionary activities in the name of Buddhism. This is not a contradiction at all. As the sayings go, 'Unless the weed is removed, the crop will not grow well.' And, 'Unless the enemies of Buddhism are exterminated, Buddhists will not be able to go to heaven.'²

The present Chinese government is well aware that Buddhism and Taoism were sources of the rise of secret societies in the past, which sometimes were centres of political opposition. The best known of these in the West was the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists, or Boxers, who rose up against foreigners in 1900. Other societies supported the 1911 revolution which overthrew the Manchu Dynasty. Therefore the government will take care to incorporate religious life into its own programmes, and will firmly control the religious leadership.

2. Donald MacInnis, *Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China* (New York: Macmillan 1972) p. 243.

Since 1949 it may well be that Muslims have been the most active religious group in China. Although they suffered greatly during the Cultural Revolution, along with other religions, they have generally been better treated than most believers. They occupy strategic border areas and have kinsmen across the borders in the much feared Soviet Union. If these Muslims became hostile, they could endanger Chinese security. Besides, many Muslims are nomads who have their own language and culture, who believe in the concept of the *jihad*, the Holy war, and are prepared to fight for their faith. Also, China is anxious to be on good terms with Islamic nations, especially Pakistan and Indonesia. Today the Muslim communities in the northwest provinces evidence great vitality. Services are crowded with worshippers of all ages. Xian city has three mosques open to serve the 30,000 Muslims in that city, and mosques in every city and town in Shaanxi province. A recent New China News Agency report stated that almost 2,000 mosques were open in Xinjiang, China's largest province. The Chinese Islamic Association was re-established in 1970, and a new translation of the Koran is being prepared by the Institute of World Religions in Beijing.

These cursory notes tell us something about religious life in the People's Republic of China. But what attitude really exists at the heart of the government's approach to religion? Chinese Communists are staunchly Marxist in viewing religion as a useless product of primitive or bourgeois society, and even more, a tool used by feudal oppressors, foreign imperialists and counter-revolutionaries to exploit and subvert the people. Nevertheless, the Chinese Communist Party has generally held to a policy of religious freedom, except during the chaotic days of the Cultural Revolution of the sixties. The 1954 constitution states: "Every citizen of the People's Republic of China shall have freedom of religious belief". (Article 88) During the rule of the "Gang of Four" this wording was changed as follows: "All Chinese citizens shall have freedom of religious belief; they shall also have freedom not to believe in religion, and freedom to advocate atheism." In January of 1981, in a meeting in Beijing with the Director of the Religious Affairs Bureau, Xiao Xianfa, I asked him whether or not this language was discriminatory. His reply was that according to Chinese thought, the present wording implicitly recognized the right of believers to advocate theism. It seemed to me a weak response. Later conversations in Shanghai with other leaders disclosed that two proposals were under active consideration by the committee charged to draft the revision of

the constitution. One proposal was already written into the legal code implemented at the beginning of 1980, and provides that any government official who arbitrarily and unlawfully interferes with a citizen's right to practise religious faith will be subject to indictment, and if convicted, to imprisonment for up to two years. The second proposal is to return to the 1954 wording of Article 88 of the constitution, striking out the qualifying clauses and simply reading, "All Chinese citizens shall have freedom of religious belief".

The Party has generally followed Mao's views toward religion. As far back as 1927, he wrote that religion was one of the systems of authority in China, "ranging from the King of Hell down to the town and village gods belonging to the nether world, and from the Emperor of Heaven down to all the various gods and spirits belonging to the celestial world."³ Along with political, clan and masculine authority, religion was one of the four thick ropes binding the Chinese people. But, Mao went on, "it is the peasants who made the idols, and when the time comes they will cast the idols aside with their own hands." In a speech thirty years later he held the same view:

We cannot abolish religion by administrative decree nor force people not to believe The only way to settle questions of an ideological nature. . . is by the democratic method, the method of discussion, criticism, persuasion, and education, and not by the method of coercion or repression.⁴

Mao and his successors maintain that religion will exist during a transition period that may last several generations, until a time of pure communism. Gradually the roots of religion will wither, and until then religion will be dealt with as a non-antagonistic contradiction, with religious believers given the freedom to engage in proper religious activities. In similar vein, Premier Chou En-lai spoke to Chinese Christians in 1950 on their share in the revolution :

So we are going to let you go on teaching, trying to convert the people. . . . After all we both believe that truth will prevail; we think your beliefs untrue and false, therefore if we are right,

3. *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Volume I (Peking: People's Publishing House, 1961), pp. 44-47.

4. *Four Essays on Philosophy* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966), pp. 86-87.

the people will reject them, and your church will decay. If you are right, then the people will believe you, but as we are sure that you are wrong, we are prepared for that risk.⁵

Thus the policy lines were clearly established. That they were not necessarily followed in practice is also clear, but the reasons in each case are difficult to determine and lie beyond the scope of this article. When we turn to the question of Catholic and Protestant churches in China, moreover, they are inextricably linked with western political and economic actions. The Chinese attitude toward Christianity cannot be understood without some sketch of this history.

The European powers of the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth were expansionist. They did not subjugate China by military force and put it under direct political control, as was done with India and large parts of Africa, but by force they did effect Chinese acceptance of one-sided treaties. The treaty of Nanking at the close of the Opium War gave Great Britain and other European nations trading rights and privileges, including the concept of "extra-territoriality," which removed foreigners from the jurisdiction of Chinese law and put them under the protection of the European authorities. Foreign troops were stationed in treaty ports and other zones of influence. Western missionaries, who came under this protection, were allowed to travel freely in the interior, to preach Christianity, to purchase land and buildings, and to enjoy "mandarin status." This not only gave them personal status and protection, but also permitted them to extend their authority over Chinese Christians, and to give them also the benefits of extra-territoriality. China suffered great humiliation when the heretofore despised Japanese defeated it in the first Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95. The Boxer rebellion of 1900 was the last gasp of old China's effort to expel the hated foreigners. In 1910-11 the Manchu dynasty was overthrown, ending 2,000 years of Imperial China, and Dr. Sun Yat-Sen established a republic. By the time of the first World War, however, the nation disintegrated as warlords fought for power and fragmented the country. The 1920's and 30's saw the struggle between the Kuomintang, or Nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-Shek, and the Chinese Communists. The Japanese invaded China, and the country was devastated. Although there were periods of truce during which the Nationalists and Communists formed a United Front against

5. *China Notes*, July 1966, p. 5.

the Japanese, the end of World War II saw renewed civil war. Mao and the Communists prevailed, and on October 1, 1949, proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China while Chiang and the Nationalists fled to Taiwan. Of course, the western powers, especially the United States, had supported Chiang, and the western missionaries generally opposed the communists. It is not surprising, then, that the Chinese have perceived Christianity to be a foreign religion and an instrument of western imperialism.

There is, however, another side to the story. Many Westerners genuinely sympathized with China, and sought to help her. Western Christians showed great generosity and concern for the Chinese people, and the lives of many missionaries were truly heroic. For example, the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America (Maryknoll) clearly recognized from the beginning of their work in China in 1918 the need to keep clear of American or European political and commercial interests in that country. Nevertheless, with the hindsight of history we can see the complex interconnections between western political and economic power and western missionary efforts.⁶ Thus, while deep faith and personal commitment motivated many missionaries, and bolstered truly outstanding contributions to the spiritual and material well-being of the Chinese people, association with Western interests and institutional locuses of power has been perceived by many Chinese as colonialist and imperialist. Incidentally, the same problem is posed by other forms of western efforts to bring the best of western civilization to China.⁷

Sadly, many missionaries were unprepared for the realities of China after World War II. In 1951 the National Council of Churches issued a report on lessons to be learned from the experiences of Christian Missions in China. It summarized replies of 152 American missionaries to a series of questions about their China experiences. The answers for the most part were parochial, focused on the Church as institution, and bereft of any analysis of the social justice issues which convulsed China. As did Rip Van Winkle, they seem to have slept through a revolution.

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6. See "The Christian Mission to China and Western Imperialism," a paper presented by Richard Madsen at the China Conference held at Maryknoll, N.Y. December 6-7, 1979.
 7. See the remarkable article by E. Richard Brown, "Rockefeller Medicine: Professionalism and Imperialism": *China Notes*, Fall 1981, pp. 174 ff.

After 1949, the Chinese government responded to two aspirations of the Chinese people : to free China from a century and a half of foreign domination and humiliation, and to effect the social and political transformation to usher in a new and more just society. The two were closely interrelated.

There have been impressive results. China is now a recognized world power. Bishop K. H. Ting, President of the China Christian Council, recently wrote :

Christians cannot deny that New China has brought many good changes to the Chinese people. For over thirty years the price of our food and other necessities has been basically stable. In the past there were many Chinese people who did not have enough to eat. Now, although special delicacies may be out of reach, our 900 million people have enough to eat, so that there is no longer the need for people to go scrounging for roots and tree bark. Our approximately ten percent of the world's arable land feeds almost twenty-five per cent of the world's people . . . In the past many people were without adequate clothing. On the streets there were rickshawpullers, beggars and other poor people who often went barefoot in the rain and snow. Now there are no more rickshaws or beggars, and everyone has shoes and adequate clothing, even a cotton-padded jacket for the winter. The jacket may be patched, but it is no longer worn by several generations as it was before. People's thinking and mental outlook have also undergone significant changes. Despite the ten-year catastrophe, the level of people's morality and self-respect is much higher than it was before Liberation.⁸

How were the Christian Churches affected by this struggle of more than thirty years? They were first of all forced to cut most ties with their foreign friends and sources of support, to become thoroughly Chinese. The Three-Self rule was established : the Church must be self-governed, self-supported, and self-propagated. That meant that foreign missionaries were expelled. For the Protestant churches this was not as great a problem as it was for the Catholics, who were much more dependent on foreign clergy and, of course, tied to the Vatican by allegiance to the primacy and teaching role of the Pope. Of 120

8 "A Call for Clarity," by Bishop K.H. Ting. *China Notes*, Winter 1980-81, p. 145.

Catholic bishops, only 20 were Chinese! The Churches have had to support the national goals laid down by the government, which today includes the four modernizations of education, industrialization, science and technology, and trade. In the first decade after Liberation, the Christian Churches tried to find new institutional structures to comply with the demand that they be self-governed. The Protestant Three-self movement, as noted above, was set in motion. The Catholics formed a Catholic Patriotic Association in 1957, but it badly divided the Catholic community and has been strongly resisted to this day because of its failure to maintain ties with Rome. The Cultural Revolution, of course, put a stop to all such efforts for ten years, as churches were closed, priests and ministers sent out to work or to prison, and public worship suppressed.

Since the Cultural Revolution ended and the rule of the "Gang of Four" was overthrown, a new religious policy has emerged, which has been a return to the original policy of religious freedom. In March, 1979, a *People's Daily* article distinguished between religion and superstition. Religion had recognized scriptures, doctrines, rites and organizations. Five religions are recognized: Buddhism, Islam, Taoism, Catholicism and Protestantism. All other religious forms from ancestor worship to animistic beliefs are labelled "superstition," and their freedom is not guaranteed by the Constitution.

In October of 1979 a second article clarified the right to practise and propagate religion. It allowed for religious services, festivals, religious organizations, and the propagation of religious creeds in temples, mosques or churches. It is quite clear, however, that the government looks unfavourably on religious revival among youth and on any religious approach to members of the Party or the army.

On the Protestant side there are a number of organizations. There is the National Committee of the Chinese Christian Three-self Patriotic Movement. It was founded by Chinese Christians and relates the Church to the Government. A China Christian Council has also been set up to look to the pastoral needs of the Church. On the Catholic side there are three organizations: The Catholic Patriotic Association is the link between the Government and the Church; the National Church Affairs Commission is charged with the internal and pastoral needs of the Church; the Chinese Bishops' Conference is concerned with matters of doctrine and relations with Catholic Churches outside China.

On the governmental side there is the Religious Affairs Bureau, for handling religious affairs under the State Council. It says that it does not deal with the faith, life and work of the five religions (Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism and Protestantism) but represents the state and the government in carrying out the policy of religious freedom. For example, if Catholics want to establish a church, the RAB negotiates with the parties concerned. (Perhaps the church is being used as a factory).

In conclusion, it is clear that the freedom of citizens to believe in religion and to practise it, as guaranteed by the Constitution, is honoured as the policy of the government. It is, of course, a *limited* freedom, but compared to the years of the Cultural Revolution, it is a great step forward. The structures mentioned above are mostly effective in the cities, and the link between them and the rural areas seems weak. It is also clear that where churches are open, they are filled with worshippers, and in terms of numbers it seems that there are at least as many Christians as there were in 1949, and some say there are many more. National seminaries are open or about to open. The great problem for Catholics is the question of the Papacy, and the division among Chinese Catholics brought about by the refusal of the Chinese government and the Catholic Patriotic Association to resolve this question. Vice-Chairman Deng Xiaoping's recent blunt remark that "I couldn't care less about people's religious belief as long as they observe the law and work hard,"⁹ at least indicates a toleration that is in line with Mao's policy to let history decide whether believers or atheists are right. Believers, of course, put their faith in the Lord of History, and look to the day when the Church is free and active in China, and the Chinese Church in turn plays its rightful role in the world.

9 "The North American Churches and China, 1949-1981," by Donald MacInnis, *International Bulletin*, April 1981, p. 50.