

Religion at the Nineteenth National Party Congress

Among the 74 special guests invited to join the 2,287 delegates at the Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China were seven representing the religious sector; the Buddhist, Taoist and Islamic faiths had one each, while the Protestant and Catholic Churches had two each.

The Catholic delegates were Bishop Joseph Ma Yinglin, the chairperson of the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China; and Bishop Johan Fang Xingyao, the chairperson of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association.

In his opening address, the general secretary of the party and president of China, Xi Jinping, addressed the general guidelines for future work. They centred mainly on developing democracy in different sectors and at various levels of society.

At one point, he used these words, "Carry on with creativity in religious work and work among the ethnic minorities."

Religions were also mentioned on the list of new experiences acquired in different sectors of national life and Xi underlined the need for "providing theoretical analysis and practical guidance" in all sectors in view of strengthening and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Addressing the topic of updating he said that socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era, now officially called *Xi Jinping Thought*, is particularly concerned with national unity.

The general secretary of the party reiterated the official guidelines for all religions:

"Thoroughly implement the basic orientation of the religious work of the Party, maintain the Sinicisation trend of our religions, positively guide the mutual adaptation of religion and socialist society, strengthen the work with intellectuals outside the Party, carry on the good work for people on the new social levels, and favour their important role in the cause of Socialism with Chinese characteristics..."

Then in the context of national security, Xi emphasised the urgency of avoiding and eliminating religious extremism.

However, although he spoke about spiritual civilisation, he made no mention of religion when he was dealing with the issues of culture, education and basic human rights.

In summary, Xi reinforced previous statements that the Party will fully implement its policy on religious work by upholding the principle that religions in China must be Chinese in orientation, while at the same time ensuring that the Party will provide active guidance so that religions can adapt correctly to a socialist society.

Practically, this approach will follow the lines established in 2015 at a meeting of the United Front Work Department and will remain the core of religious theory for socialism with Chinese characteristics.

In a report by Lu Xin published in the *Global Times* on October 21, the executive vice minister of the United Front Work Department, Zhang Yijiong, said during a press conference on the sidelines of the Nineteenth National Party Congress that religions in China must adapt themselves to the social situation of the country and must be Chinese in orientation.

“The United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee has provided active guidance to religions so that they can adapt themselves to socialist society... Religions in China must be Chinese in orientation,” he told reporters, adding that they “need to work hard to use socialist core values to direct their development in our country and Chinese values to nurture religious culture.”

In the meantime, the State Administration for Religious Affairs presented the opinions of the seven religious representatives to the Party Congress on its website.

In general, they congratulated the Congress and underlined the statement that the Party will fully implement its basic policy on religious work, upholding the orientation of the Sinicisation of religions.

On the Catholic side of the fence, Bishop Fang encouraged people to strengthen both love of country and love for the Church by following the spirit of the congress.

He urged people to be united in constantly moving towards the adaptation to Socialism with Chinese characteristics, to contribute to the building up of a stable society and to realise the Chinese dream.

Bishop Ma stressed the need to study the president’s speech and the new spirit of the congress calling for the unification of all ethnic groupings in order to achieve the Chinese dream and to be able to positively celebrate two centenaries, that of the foundation of the Communist Party (1921 to 2021) and of the People’s Republic of China (1949 to 2049).

On October 21, again on the sidelines of the Party Congress, Wang Zuo’an, the director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, gave written replies to questions from *Commercial Radio* in Hong Kong in which he praised the friendly attitude of Pope Francis, who has made no secret of his wish to visit China and has shown a real desire to improve relations between China and the Holy See.

However, Wang reiterated China’s two consistent and clear principles in dealing with the issue of the negotiations, namely: that the Vatican must sever diplomatic relations with Taiwan and should not interfere in China’s internal affairs, including the selection of bishops.

Commercial Radio described the interview as hinting at an extremely positive attitude on the part of the Chinese authorities toward an eventual visit by Pope Francis to China.

But in an update on October 24, while he revealed that the negotiating channels between China and the Vatican continue to operate, Wang indicated that some problems remain, which are not easy to solve, nor can they be resolved in a short time and both parties need to demonstrate a practical sincerity of intention.

However, while Wang did not elaborate on the question of the appointment of bishops, when asked about a future visit to China by Pope Francis, he indicated that there is no such plan, but emphasised that the state of negotiations between China and Holy See is good.

The most common opinion is that, even after the congress, the new leadership is unlikely to bring change to the current situation and will continue to exert full control over all aspects of life in Chinese society and among the general population.

On October 28, *AsiaNews* reported Bao Tong, a former political aide to the late ousted premier, Zhao Ziyang, as saying, “What characterises this new era is the new ideology that the Party must be in charge of everything: Party, state, military, people and intellectuals, and every corner of the country.

“But, that’s not a new idea, it is an old idea that has been around for 50 years and is already in the Party constitution. It is Maoism. You can’t get much older than that. How it has supposedly become a new idea, I have no idea.”

Beginning in February 2018, all religions in China will be subject to the New Regulations for Religious Affairs, which were approved on August 27.

They are stricter and more detailed than the previous ones from 2005, as they were drafted according to the tightened control policy of the present government.

Religious leaders fear that the newly revised regulations could be used to further suppress religious activity under the pretext of national security.

Attention is given to facilitating a more efficient role for national and provincial religious organisations. Official concern over the preparation of patriotic candidates will also see the exercise of greater control over religious schools and formation institutions.

In addition, there is no definition of the basic legal concepts, such as religion, religious belief, religious activity, lawful or unlawful assembly, which gives local authorities leeway to interpret the rules as they wish.

Besides, the specification of fines of fixed amounts for some crimes could become quite dangerous. Once the regulations are printed on paper, local authorities could enforce them in any way they wish.

Since money is involved, this could be imposed for any reason, including personal prestige, vengeance, corruption or greed, and not infrequently local officials could put it their own pockets.

It is not a question of the zeal of the local authorities for law and order, but simply a question of their interest, which in many cases is mainly economic. Consequently, the near future of all religions in China does not look bright. *ST*