

Banning Christian Children from Receiving Religious Education

Document 19, *The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period*,¹ issued by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, on 31 March 1982, states in Part IV: *Nor should anyone under 18 years of age be compelled to believe in religion, to become a monk or nun, or to pray in temples.*

This was a guideline for official practice, not a law.

The Minors Protection Law (September 4, 1991) states:

Article 2: *Minors as used in this Law refer to citizens under the age of eighteen.*

Article 3: *The State, society, schools and families shall educate minors in ideals, morality, culture, discipline and legal system as well as in patriotism, collectivism, internationalism and communism, foster among them the social ethics of loving the motherland, the people, labor, science and socialism, and fight against the corrosive influences of bourgeois, feudal and other decadent ideologies.*

However, the Law does not explicitly mention that minors, who are members of believing families, cannot receive religious education; nor does it mention churches or temples when dealing with unsuitable places for minors; nor does it include religious productions when mentioning unsuitable reading or viewing materials.

The Civil Law of China provides that people above eighteen years old, and those from sixteen to eighteen who make a living on their own (that is holding a job) have full capacity for civil conduct. People aged from ten to eighteen have limited capacity of civil conduct, and may only engage in civil activities appropriate to the age range and intellect. People under ten years old have no capacity for civil conduct.

The Education Law (1995):

Article 3: *In developing the cause of socialist education, the State adheres to taking Marxism, Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and the theory of building socialism with Chinese characteristics as its guidelines and follows the basic principles defined in the Constitution.*

In December 2006, SARA promulgated a set of regulations on the setting up of religious educational institutions entitled "Rules for Establishing Religious Academies and Colleges":

Article 7 of these Regulations stipulates that students at intermediate-level institutions must have completed nine years of compulsory education before attending those institutions. This means that the regulations allow for students to receive formal religious education as early as the age of 14-15, which is the approximate age of a student completing the ninth grade. This fact contradicts the common understanding that Chinese regulations do not permit children under the age of 18 to receive religious education.²

¹ The entire text of the Document 19 is published by Anthony S.K. LAM, *The Catholic Church in Present-Day China* (Hong Kong: Holy Spirit Study Centre - F. Verbiest Foundation 1994).

² See F18News 18 January 2005, http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=491.

Since the reform and opening up policy was launched at the end of 1978 and even after the issuing of Document 19 in 1982, religious communities have provided instruction to children under 18 years of age despite the official regulation. Even at present, in many parts of China, Catholic youths take part in Sunday catechism classes and in religious formation summer camps, while Protestant youths participate in Bible schools.

Why such a ban in some places, one can ask, especially in Henan and Zhejiang? Let us hope that it is only the decision of the local authorities, who are motivated by personal concern or ambition, and not a policy decided by the central government. The current trend to impose restrictions on all sectors of people's life, however, could suggest that it is the latter case.

Unfortunately, now, under the pressure of civil authorities, some provincial Patriotic Associations and Administration Commissions of the official Christian Churches, explicitly ban their members from bringing their children up in the Christian faith, labeling the practice "brainwashing." The right of parents to educate their children according to the values they cherish is trampled upon even by religious authorities! ST