

China: Ideology and Religious Policy in 2019

By Fr. Sergio Ticozzi

On 27 February 2019, the top story on Xinhua News Agency's website, "The Central Committee of the Communist Party's opinions on strengthening the Party's political construction" stated that Marxism is the guiding thought for China and the Party: "Resolutely prevent unbelief in Marx and Lenin and belief in ghosts and spirits... Resolutely oppose all forms of mistaken thought that distorts, misrepresents or negates Marxism."

While the directive does not specifically target religion and superstition, it forbids all forms of deviant political thought and behavior. It outlines the overall requirements for enhancing the political work of the Party. The directive was launched to implement Xi Jinping's Thoughts on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era, as well as to introduce the spirit of the 19th Party Congress to be held in October 2019.

Since 2018, there have been reports that China has been oppressing Uighurs and other Muslim groups, mainly in Xinjiang on a previously unseen scale, by gathering them into re-education camps and brain-washing them. The Communist Party is also targeting Protestant Christians and local religious movements, such as the long-persecuted Falun Gong and the Church of the Almighty God, as part of its widespread effort to consolidate power.

Chinese authorities officially pushed for the registration of religious venues which, starting from 1 April 2019, can apply for legal person status at the local civil affairs department. Application documents include the local religious group's consent, the basic information and identification card of the legal person in charge, and proof of registered funds. The documents must be submitted to, and examined by the local county-level religious affairs departments.

Religious personnel are also forced to register. On 20 March 2019, the Religious Affairs authorities in Guangzhou rolled out an incentive plan (a reward of 1,000-10,000 yuan) for tip-offs on illegal religious activities. Other provinces soon followed suit. Frequently, political cadres put forward suggestions to Church leaders. They propose to improve policies, laws and regulations, to strengthen the Church's self-management, and to utilise the Internet and big data to set up a digital platform for religious affairs management.

On 28 August 2019, the National Administration for Religious Affairs issued the draft of the *Measures for the Administration of Religious Groups*, to solicit comments. The paper outlines various proposals on new management measures according to these new principles: "follow the leadership of the Communist Party of China," "persist in the direction of Sinicisation of religion ... and practise core socialist values." The document is divided into six sections: General Provisions, Organisational Structure of a Religious Group, Functions of a Religious Group, Oversight and Management, Legal Responsibility and Supplementary Provisions. It requires "approval" from the religious authorities and "registration" with the civil affairs departments, and accepting their "guidance, supervision and administration." It also requires the submission of yearly reports, showing that the authorities intend to view religious groups as political bodies rather than civil ones. The final document (41 articles in six chapters) was officially published on 30 December 2019, and will go into effect on 1 February, 2020.

On 27 October 2019, China released the “Outline for the Implementation of the Moral Construction of Citizens in the New Era.” It serves as a guideline for promoting patriotism: it also calls for the formulation of a “national etiquette,” providing new moral guidelines for all citizens. The 4th Plenary session of the 19th Central Committee of the CPC (28-31 October 2019) approved the document declaring: "The system of socialism with Chinese characteristics is a scientific system developed by the Party and the people through their long-term practices and explorations." Its slogan is “Do not forget the Original Heart, and always remember the Mission” (别忘初心，牢记使命).

On 26 November 2019, Chinese political advisors joined a symposium, held by the committee for ethnic and religious affairs of the CPPCC National Committee in Beijing, to discuss how to advance the interpretation of religious doctrines and rules in line with the requirements of the times. Wang Yang, one of the seven Standing Committee members of the Politburo, calling the interpretation of religious doctrines and rules important and fundamental work, stressed gradually forming a religious ideological system with Chinese characteristics, in line with the requirements of the times. This system would reinterpret religious doctrines and rewrite religious texts, so that they would be in accord with the socialist viewpoint.

On 12 December 2019, China's national religious leaders of the official organisations gathered in Beijing to discuss better ways to tell the country's religious stories so as to present a true picture of China to the world. Their final statement blames some forces in the world for not wanting to see the new successful changes that have taken place in China under the Communist Party. These forces smear China, ignore the facts, confuse right and wrong, and label China as a “persecutor of religion” in an attempt to damage China’s international image and undermine religious harmony in the country, the statement said. The religious leaders stressed intensifying efforts to introduce the CPC’s religious theories, principles and policies, to show its achievements in respecting and protecting freedom of religious belief, as well as progress in cracking down on extremist forces and preventing extremism.

Also during December, the authorities launched a kind of “war” against the celebration of Christmas, labelling it an element of ‘western pollution.’