



ATHEISM
AND
THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY
AFTER MAO ZEDONG

by Leo Goodstadt

The policies and programmes of the Chinese Communist Party are an attempt to solve the basic problems of China. The Party rules the nation, controls the government and all mass organizations and activities. The Communist Party's activities must deal with the practical realities of China. At the same time, the Communist Party has to follow the principles of Marxism-Leninism-Maozedong Thought. As a Marxist-Leninist Party, the Chinese Communist Party must oppose, as a matter of principle, a variety of beliefs and activities: capitalism, pacificism, "social democracy" and religion among others.

Since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the Chinese Communist Party has been compelled to relax its ban on adopting economic policies which were derived from capitalist societies. The Chinese economy has faced a serious crisis during the last five years, and the Government has been forced to use every possible means to improve economic efficiency and improve living standards. Official spokesmen have strongly defended on grounds of practical necessity the need to learn from capitalists both at home and abroad. (See, for example, Xue Muqiao Shijie Jingji Daobao 30 October 1980; Yang Min Guangming Ribao 14 October 1978; Jiefang Ribao 8 December 1980). There can be no doubt, nevertheless, that China's Communist Party remains utterly opposed to capitalism as a system and a way of life.

The Communist Party has dealt with religion in a similar way since the death of Mao Zedong. For very practical reasons, the former total ban on religious beliefs has been relaxed. The Communist Party has pointed out that toleration of religion is justified by the continued existence within the nation of significant groups of believers; by the influence of religious philosophies on Chinese culture; and by the importance of religion in world affairs. (Xinhua News Agency 2 August 1979, 9 April 1980). Religion has not been granted exactly the same concessions as economic liberalism. In economic affairs, the Communist Party has given positive encouragement to learning from the best foreign practices, and technical literature of every kind is imported into China for very wide distribution. Spokesmen for official religious organisations in China have given no approval to the importation of Bibles, for example, printed either in Hong Kong or elsewhere. Similarly, China has shown increasing readiness to turn to the United Nations and other sources for economic and technical assistance. So far, no willingness has been shown to receive this sort of help from world religious organisations.

It could be argued that the reluctance to allow overseas assistance to Chinese religious bodies reflects historical experience: that China is afraid that foreigners might dominate Chinese church life or otherwise impair the nationalistic features of China's contemporary religious organisations. This explanation cannot be the whole answer, however. Capitalism was a much more powerful force in China than either Islam or Christianity. The suffering and foreign exploitation which accompanied the entry of capitalism into China were very considerable, yet today the Government is ready to learn from capitalist techniques. Why is religion not treated in the same way? The answer is that, as Lenin argued, it is possible to use the industrial and commercial systems developed by capitalism to establish the material foundations for a socialist economy. (Translation Bureau CCPCC Renmin Ribao 22 April 1980). Religion is very different. It involves not technology or material objects whose use can be controlled by the Chinese Communist Party but ideology and philosophy which cannot be incorporated into a Marxist-Leninist system of ideas.

For many religious believers from the non-communist world, this situation seems strange. There are many Christians and other religious believers who regard themselves as Marxists. In countries which are predominantly Catholic by history and culture, such as Italy and France, the national communist parties have won widespread popular support and live side by side with the Church. The Chinese Communist Party for its part still insists that religions are not simply false but also that they were invented to serve the interests of a particular ruling class (Li Qi Zhexue Yanjiu 5/1979). The language used to describe religion is strong:

For example, religion presents a distorted and illusory picture of the actual world; it is opium which poisons people and, naturally, it is falsehood. Marxism is scientific truth. (Tao Delin Guangming Ribao, 24 October 1979).

There is, in fact, a face-to-face conflict between religion and Marxism in the eyes of the Chinese Communist Party. In the first place, Marxism is a "faith" which inspires virtue and heroic action just as religious beliefs do (Fan Zuogang Jiang-Han Luntan 3/1980). The Communist Party has sought to reassure those worried by talk of a Marxist "crisis of faith" in China by referring to the rehabilitation of Copernicus last year by the Vatican as proof that scientific truth must always prevail in the end (Lin Honglin Renmin Ribao 11 November 1980). The implication is that Marxism must always triumph in the long run over its rivals in the struggle for men's minds. Similarly, it has been stated that "there is, of course, a struggle between Marxism and theism" although this battle is no longer a "quick decisive duel" (Jiefang Ribao 28 February 1980).

Despite this confrontation between a belief in God and orthodox Marxism-Leninism, the Chinese Communist Party has promised that "religious freedom will remain a long-term and fundamental policy of the Chinese Communist Party and

the People's Government for as long as there are believers" (Xiao Xianfa Xinhua News Agency 9 April 1980). The obvious questions are why should the Communist Party engage in serious study of religion and why should it permit religious believers to maintain their ideologies which the Communist Party condemns as a matter of principle.

Study of religion is welcomed for very practical reasons. It is recognised that unless the nature of religious beliefs is understood, they cannot be criticised effectively or eradicated. Nor will it be possible to draw up appropriate policies for dealing with religious believers both domestically and in foreign affairs (Ren Jiyu Zhexue Yanjiu 4/1979).

Toleration of China's own religious believers has been much more difficult for the Chinese Communist Party to explain. The general attitude of officialdom throughout the nation is not very sympathetic towards religion. Special measures have been necessary, for instance, to prevent personnel from a military hospital engaging in offensive behaviour towards Moslems attending a nearby mosque (Xinjiang Radio Service 18 January 1981). The peasants in one Hunan county have been expected to accept without protest the conversion into cattle pens and farm buildings of their newly-erected temples (Renmin Ribao 24 March 1981). Alarm has been expressed that because of the decline in the credibility of the Communist Party, young people have been attracted to religious practices by people who "raise the banner of freedom of religious belief" (Lei Zhenchang Guangming Ribao 25 August 1980). On the international front, the Soviet Union has been savagely attacked for allowing the Russian Orthodox Church to flourish (Xiao Shi Renmin Ribao 17 May 1979).

In other words, the good Party member instinctively wants to curtail religious activities and ought to work - in accordance with current Party policies - for the elimination of religion and its replacement by Marxist atheism. Indeed, the Communist Party has had to warn that a proportion of its members are still unwilling to allow religious believers the amount of toleration which Party policy now concedes and the Party has defended its current religious toleration against

"leftist" critics within its ranks (Contributing Commentator Guangming Ribao 30 November 1980).

The relationship between religions and atheism is still confused. Some Party members have argued that the constitutional right to religious toleration applies only to belief and not to religious practices or worship. In reality, it has been stated officially, as long as such activities "do not hinder production or violate social order," they should be tolerated. An official warning has been given at the same time against seeking to preach atheism "in temples, mosques, churches or other places for religious activities" (Guo Ju Renmin Ribao 17 October 1979). The statement has been made several times that "no citizen will be discriminated against because of his religious beliefs" (Ibid. and Xiao Xianfa Renmin Ribao 14 June 1980.) However, members of the Communist Party are not permitted to retain their religious beliefs. The Party tolerates only atheists in its ranks (Qinghai Ribao 19 May 1980, Zhejiang Ribao 19 June 1980). This prohibition marks an important formal restriction on religious belief and an indication of the privileged position of atheism in China.

Another limit between toleration of religious belief and encouragement of atheism can be found in the treatment of young people. Religious education for those aged less than eighteen is supposed to be restricted (Contributing Commentator Guangming Ribao 30 November 1980, Minzu Tuanjie 5/1980). In contrast, the Communist Party encourages extensive education in atheism. Instruction in atheism should be designed to provide scientific explanations for the emergence of religious beliefs and to develop "scientific" and "revolutionary" attitudes which will counter the attractions of religion (Guangming Ribao 6 January 1979, Minzu Tuanjie 5/1980, Lei Zhenchang Guangming Ribao 25 August 1980). Atheism is part of the official ideology, religion is not.

Toleration of religion should not be interpreted, it has been pointed out officially, as implying that the Communist Party has weakened in any way its hostility towards religion or its support for atheism. "Religions are conservative and back-

ward by nature and are diametrically opposed to science and Marxist thinking," one such official statement declares, "Religion preaches chiefly in abstract phrases to swindle the exploited people into enduring humiliation and suffering in real life." However, religion will wither away and die as material conditions improve (Contributing Commentator Guangming Ribao 30 November 1980). The final victory will belong inevitably to the atheists, the Communist Party believes.

Yet the ability of atheism to meet the nation's long-term ideological needs remains in doubt. In March this year, an important discussion by Lin Wei was published about the nature of morality. The essay made the usual accusation that religious doctrines and standards of behaviour were designed to deceive the masses and support the ruling classes. "Marxism never links pursuit of happiness with moral principles, virtue and law," Lin argued, "It does not believe that the preaching of virtue can solve any problems." For the true Marxist, he continues, happiness comes from the revolutionary struggle to transform the world. Once capitalism has been eliminated, the struggle begins to create an abundance of material goods. The author admits, nonetheless, that revolution and prosperity are not in themselves enough to guarantee human happiness. "It is also proper and permissible to pursue individual happiness," Lin notes, "However, man cannot be the same as an ordinary animal. He should be able to think deeply, know in what direction the world is developing and push forward the wheel of history" (Guangming Ribao 16 March 1981).

At this point in Lin's discussion of morality and human happiness, the door to religious belief is opened, whether the Chinese Communist Party likes it or not. If man has higher aspirations and obligations than the material world in which he lives, religion has a set of spiritual values to offer which will satisfy these needs. Furthermore, Lin Wei implies that as the communist revolution succeeds and as material welfare improves, the question of what ideals men should serve in their search for happiness will become more difficult to answer except in spiritual terms. Despite its privileged position in the official philosophy of the Chinese Communist Party, the triumph of atheism is by no means guaranteed.

CUSTOMS REGULATIONS ON THE PARCELS SENT INTO CHINA
(INCLUDING RELIGIOUS ARTICLES)



According to Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, 27-1-1981, in order to prevent smugglers using the mail for sending in and out of the country valuable articles and engaging in illegal speculative activities, the general customs office of the People's Republic of China prescribes a certain limitation on the value and quantity of articles sent in by mail, forbids and restricts also the sending in of certain kinds of articles.

Imported articles by mail have to be taxed before they can be cleared for entry. The ethnic Chinese of foreign nationality and their relatives residing in China are only allowed each time to send postal parcels whose value may not exceed RMB 100 yuan. For the whole year it may not exceed the amount of RMB 800 yuan per family.

The compatriots of Macau, Hong Kong and their relatives are only allowed each time to send postal parcels not exceeding the amount of RMB 30 yuan, and for the whole year not exceeding the amount of RMB 300 yuan. The customs prescribes that if imported articles by mail are found to be detrimental to Chinese political, economic, cultural, moral, hygienic interests, they will be confiscated.

Printed articles which by name offend the leaders of the party or the country, attack the socialist system, propagate obscenity, pornography, horror and murder, and also missionary activities are all forbidden to be imported.

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