

New Changes in the Religious Situation in Our Country

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Editor's note: This article, originally written in 2008 and published in the third issue that year of the Journal of the Central Socialist Academy, was re-presented on the Chinese Ethnic Minorities and Religions website on November 6, 2014. The lapse of six years between the original appearance of the article and its most recent presentation, shows that the government must consider that the situation of religion, and the problems it faces, are still present in Chinese society. Tripod here re-produces excerpts to give our readers an idea of the government's concerns.

I. The Number of Believers Continues to Grow

There are no accurate figures for the number of religious believers in our country. The most common opinion is that there are about 100 million believers in all of China's religions. This figure is the result of a combination of statistics and a general estimation. Nonetheless, no one has a skeptical attitude regarding the judgment that in the last 20 to 30 years the numbers of religious believers has continued to grow.

According to the statistics of the Chinese Christian Three Self Patriotic Movement and the China Christian Council, the number of Chinese Christians is 16 million. In comparison to the 700,000 in the early years of the People's Republic, the rate of development has been quite rapid. These figures do not include those Christians who do not attend the registered, government-approved open churches (meeting points). Therefore the real number of Christians is even greater. According to some local surveys, Christians who do not attend open churches are fewer than the Christians who do

attend open churches. Some organizations abroad have broadcast the news that China has between 60 and 80 million Christians. But these figures are conjecture, without any basis in reality, or have simply been made up.

According to the statistics reported by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference, our country has 5.5 million Catholics. These figures include those under the influence of the underground Catholic forces. The most important aspect of our Catholic Church is that the faith has been handed down in the family from generation to generation. The stability of the faith is comparatively strong. Although the speed of increase in the number of members of the Catholic Church cannot be put on a par with that of the Protestant Christians, in comparison with the 3 million Catholics at the time of the establishment of the Peoples Republic, there has still been a great range of development.

Our country has ten ethnic minorities that have believers in Islam. The population of those ethnic minorities is approximately 21 million. Given the sensitivity of confirming the number of Muslims among these ethnic minorities, in general the size of the population is taken to be the same as the number of Muslims.

The religion with the greatest influence in our country is Buddhism. We can get statistics for the number of monks, nuns, lay Buddhists and converts, but for the number of believers in households, it is hard to get an accurate figure. Most think that this comprises a large number of people. In comparison to Buddhism, Daoism does not draw so much attention. However, Daoism has a deep basis in traditional culture. It has countless ties to folk religion. It still has a lot of vitality among the ordinary people, and its potential for development cannot be ignored.

II. A Great Change in the Makeup of the Communities of Believers

In the decades after the conclusion of the “Cultural revolution,” the special characteristics of the structures of each community of religious believers can be described as the “five manys.” The communities contained many old people; female believers were in the majority; the standard of education of the

believers was low; in distribution, there were more believers in the countryside than in the big cities; and in districts more believers were found among ethnic minority peoples and among those whose income was not very high. In recent years, surveys have shown that in some areas of our country communities of believers have undergone a great change. The special characteristic of the “5 manys” is gradually diminishing, and things are developing in a more balanced direction. Young and middle-aged believers are becoming more and more numerous, and the percentage of believers continues to rise.

III. Religious Patterns are Facing Assault

Besides the five main religions in our country, some traditional religions, like the Eastern Orthodox and the Jewish religions, as well as some newly developed religions, like the Mormons and the Bahai faith, have announced that they have a strong desire to come to our country. In the last 20 or 30 years, some religions have positively taken the initiative to come to our country to establish organizations, attract believers, and to spread their influence. Although for the time being they have not yet mounted a great assault on our religious structures, in the future their influence may increasingly have an impact.

IV. Foreign Influences are Making Themselves Felt

In order to put obstacles in China’s rapid rise, some Western countries, through limited military and economic means, put added emphasis on, and increase pressure in the fields of politics, human rights, ethnic minorities and religion. In multilateral areas, they dub themselves “defenders of human rights”, and with “universal values” as a weapon, they occupy the moral high ground, and making use of moral commentaries, they criticize our country as suppressing religious freedom and persecuting religious believers. In this way, they damage our country’s international image. In regard to relations between both sides, they take “freedom of religion” as a core content of their policy towards China, and in turn, they continually put pressure on us, to try to force us to change our policy. Over time, they can effectively tie us down.

V. Religious Contradictions are Becoming Increasingly Complicated

Each religion's situation is different. Each has its own specific contradictions.

Regarding the Catholic Church and relations with the Vatican, the political and religious relationships are mixed together. This has a very important influence on the Catholic Church in our country. The idea of the hierarchy has raised its head among the clergy. Great obstacles have been placed in the path of the self-election and self-consecration of bishops. The policy of the independent running of the Church is also facing grave tests. With the support of foreign forces, some clergy and Catholics oppose the Catholic patriotic organizations. The so-called "loyal Church," which does not permit its Catholics to participate in religious activities in open, registered churches, has created an internal split in the Chinese Church, and this restricts the Chinese Church from developing in a healthy way.

On the Protestant Christian side, some Christians do not register with the government in accordance with the law. They unilaterally establish venues for religious activity, and set up unlawful organizations. They have created a challenge to the religious regulations and to the government's supervision of religion in accordance with the law. They have become a serious source of confusion for Christian activities. Some Christians originally belonging to denominations have raised the idea of forming denominations again. They are trying to reinstate denominational religious activities, and set up denominational organizations again. They have linked up with foreign denominations, and joined with them to launch an assault on the solidly established united worship services and the fundamental unity of the Protestant Three-Self Movement. Some Christian groups carry out activities which go beyond what the laws and regulations allow, and which have impacted the normal order of society.

As a result of an increase in believers and the development of religious affairs, religious organizations and religious venues have experienced greater pressure in the area of self-support. For

Catholics and Protestant Christians the most important means of self-support has come from rents and businesses at religious properties. After nearly 30 years of hard work, most of the religious properties have been returned to their religious organizations. However, for a good part of these, what has been implemented is the return of the property right. The problem of the right to the use of the property has not yet been solved. For all kinds of complicated reasons, the difficulties in solving the remaining problems in the implementation of the policy are immense. They have already become longstanding problems.

In recent years the pace of development of the cities in our country has been quite rapid. Because contradictions regarding demolition and removal are continually being raised, and some of these touch upon the demolition and removal of properties belonging to religious organizations and religious venues, so problems with these properties are also on the increase. Because it is difficult to arrive at an agreement regarding compensation in such cases, contradictions happen and arguments take place. These even reach the point where groups of believers take to the streets to voice their opposition publicly to the demolition and removals. At the same time, because many Catholic and Protestant properties were located in old city centers, they are right in the important areas which the city is reconstructing and developing. These kinds of problems are continually taking place, so we must give them our special attention.