

Evaluation of Religious Work in China in the Last Ten Years—From the Four “Musts” to the Four “-ations”

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Since the beginning of the reform and opening up policies, the important documents that concern the religious policy of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee are Document No. 19 in 1982, Document No. 6 in 1991 and Document No. 3 in 2002. All these documents were promulgated after three important National United Front Work and Religious Work Meetings. Document No. 19 was a document in the era of Deng Xiaoping seeking to provide a new understanding of religious work. It spelled out the direction and main focus of the religious work of the Chinese Communist Party after the Cultural Revolution. Documents No. 6 and No. 3 are the products of Jiang Zemin’s era. They reflect the changes in the orientation of the third generation of Chinese Communist leaders concerning the issue of religion. What is worth noting is that, during the ten-year term of office of Hu Jintao, the Twentieth National United Front Meeting was held in July 2006, and it was the only National United Front Meeting held during those ten years. The National Religious Work Meeting, however, was held annually starting from 2007. During this period, the Central Committee has not issued any important and significant documents concerning religious policies.

Looking Back on the Four “Musts”

In 2015, the United Front Meeting met again under the direction of Xi Jinping. The name was changed from “National” to “Central”. From the information we have at hand, although religious work was not the most important point on the agenda of

this United Front Meeting, Xi Jinping did explicate his directions for religious work in his speech. He mentioned the four “musts” when he reiterated the “active guidance of religion and socialism toward mutual adaptation”: (1) the direction of sinicization must be upheld; (2) the standard of rule by law in religious work must be raised; (3) the social utility of religion must be treated dialectically; and (4) the nation must make use of the influence of religious personnel, and direct all religious efforts to serve and promote economic development, social harmony, cultural prosperity, the unity of the nation and the unification of the country. Of these, the concepts of “sinicization” and “dialectics” were expounded for the first time by the leader of the Central Committee on religious issues. There are reports suggesting that, following the opening of this Central United Front Work Meeting, the Central Committee is now preparing for a higher-level National Religious Work Meeting so as to promulgate further the tone set by Xi Jinping regarding religious work.

In recent years, the numerous incidents concerning religion, especially the forced demolition of crosses in Zhejiang Province, raised the concern of many people as to whether there have been some new adjustments in the religious policies of the Chinese Communist Party. Do the four “musts” reflect a brand new mindset in the management of religion? Or do they still maintain some connection with the religious work of the past?

Wang Zuo'an, the current chairperson of State Administration for Religious Affairs, wrote an article in *People's Daily* in 2012 reviewing the “noteworthy achievements” of religious work in China in the last ten years: (1) the nation thoroughly implemented the policy of religious freedom, and steadfastly protected the legitimate rights of the religious sector; (2) strengthened the management of religious affairs according to the law, and constantly improved the standard of the rule by law in religious work; (3) pushed to resolve the main problems, and effectively maintained normal order in the religious sector; (4) heartily supported the religious sector in their self-construction, and actively promoted the healthy development of religion in China; (5) actively guided the religious sector to join in national construction, and brought into full play the positive influence of the religious sector;

(6) reinforced exchanges with the religious sectors in Hong Kong and Macau, and strengthened the connections within the religious sector; (7) actively developed friendly exchanges with overseas religious counterparts, and presented the full extent of the state of religious freedom in China. We can summarise the seven points concluded by Wang Zuo'an into four “-ations”—religious work according to the law (religious legislation), the regularisation of religious development, the harmonisation of religious influence and the liberalisation of religious policies. Based on these four “-ations”, we shall analyse the main points in the religious policies of the Chinese Communist Party from the promulgation of Document No. 3 (2002) to the present day.

Religious Work According to the Law

As early as in the 1990s, the Chinese Communist Party began to explore and implement religious legislation, in particular the regulations on religious affairs which were promulgated in various places in the country. In 2005, the first national comprehensive administrative code, *Regulations on Religious Affairs* came into effect. It was an important milestone in the work of bringing religion under the law. As Wang Zuo'an pointed out, the State Administration for Religious Affairs enacted a series of supporting rules for the implementation of the *Regulations on Religious Affairs*, so there are “laws to rule by” in religious work. In fact, “religious work according to the law” is the application of the Central Government’s principle of “administration according to the law” in the religious sector. It is true that “having laws to follow” is better than the time when there was absolutely no law or when there was only the “rule of man”. However, if such progress is secured only at the technical level of “administration by law,” without a breakthrough in terms of core values, “having laws to follow” will at most be a manifestation of “rule according to law” or, worse still, “rule *by* law”. It is still far behind the real meaning of the “rule *of* law”. To put it bluntly, the improvement in the standard of rule by law in religion, which Xi Jinping has repeatedly emphasised, means in reality the provision of a legal basis for the Party and the State to control and regulate religion, so that there will be laws to follow;

this makes it possible for religion to be ruled “by” law. Whether the legitimate rights of the religious sector are more fully protected by law remains to be determined.

In fact, the Chinese government has, in recent years, apparently played down the “religious” factors and emphasized the “legal” ones in its handling of religious matters. It has declared forcefully that religion should not “break the law” or that religion does not lie outside the scope of law, and used these as the reasons for justifying its regulations over religion. The recent forced demolition of crosses in the churches of Zhejiang province, citing that laws governing the construction of religious buildings had been breached, is a prime example of such a trend. However, the limited understanding and practice of “rule of law” on the part of the government is shown in the following facts: the government itself broke the law when carrying out forced demolitions; the forced demolitions were carried out in a violent way; the legal rights of the religious sector were completely ignored. Religious work according to the law is much more a manifestation of the spirit of the Legalist School of Thought in traditional Chinese culture—the practice of using “laws” to strengthen the “rule” of the government in religious work.

The Regularisation of Religious Development

In his article, Wang Zuo'an mentions that the “problems” in religious work must be resolved, so that a “normal order” in the religious field may be realised. In other words, the “problems” lie in the “abnormal” chaos in the religious sector. What, then, does he refer to as “problems”? These include the phenomena of unrestricted construction of temples and outdoor religious statues; the infiltration and spread of Islamist extremism; overseas influence on Catholicism; Protestants worshipping in private venues and their evangelical activities on campus, etc. Note that the “chaos” is partly connected with “religious infiltration”. Hence it becomes an important task to “defend against religious infiltration from overseas”.

To establish a normal order in the religious sector, besides the regulation by “law” as mentioned above, the other way is to foster

the “healthy development” of religions in China. By “health,” Wang means strengthening patriotic education and a new interpretation of the canons and dogmas of various religions to bring them into line with current social development and the progress of the times. At the same time, they are to strengthen the formation of patriotic religious influences, and increase the number of patriotic religious faculty and staff who will serve as a “backbone”.

In fact, the “problems” in the religious sector have existed for a long time. But the causes of the “problems” are very complicated, and they have to do with the fundamental problem of the regulatory system of religion in China lagging behind new conditions in religious development. It does not help if there is no innovation and reform in the management system itself, and if the government sticks with existing regulations or hastily puts the blame on an “infiltration of foreign influences”. Now Xi Jinping points out that “the direction of sinicization must be upheld” in religious work. It is nothing more than a new interpretation of religious canons and dogmas presented in a new way under the name of “sinicization”. Besides, the injunction to “make use of the influence of religious personnel” also follows the existing direction of patriotic religious forces, but with greater care on how to groom middle-aged and young successors. Whether it is “regularisation” or “healthy development”, these concepts show that the Central Government still sees the religious issue as a form of disorder. Its mindset is that of increasing control and planning anew.

The Harmonisation of Religious Influence

Since 2004, when the Central Government pronounced the slogan and goal of building up a harmonious society, how religion could contribute to a harmonious society became the focus of discussion. On the surface, this reflects the Party’s and the State’s affirmation of the “positive” influence of religion in building up society. This is much better than in the past when the negative impact and reactionary nature of religion were exaggerated. However, when the influence of religion is subsumed under the frame of a “harmonious society”, it still in effect restricts and guards against the value of religion at different levels. It

“harmonises” the critical nature of religion with regard to social problems.

In recent years, although the Central Government encouraged the religious sector to participate in various public charitable activities, its role is limited to the alleviation of poverty, mitigation of pain and suffering, disaster relief, care for the handicapped and the elderly, support for education and the provision of free medical services, etc. All these remain individual and project-based charitable work. There are still many restrictions from the Central Government on the role of non-governmental faith-based organisations. Getting to the root of the problem, non-governmental organisations can only fulfil their charitable role within the areas permitted by the Party and the State. The government is still wary of organisations and societies organised by the people; it is concerned that the independence and autonomy of such organisations may constitute a potential threat to the ruling party. The intention to “nationalise” the non-governmental organisations (i.e. the emergence of Government Owned Non-Government Organization [GONGO]) will only reduce the social function of religion in practice. As a matter of fact, when Xi Jinping stresses that “the social utility of religion must be treated dialectically”, what he means by “dialectically” is that the negative influence of religion must be kept under guard while the positive influence of religion on society is brought into full play. Although the Central Government encourages the religious sector to be involved in charitable services, religion must be regulated in this “dialectic” relationship.

The “Liberalisation” of Religious Policies

The word “liberalised” in “liberalisation” is an adjective rather than a verb. It does not mean the development of religious policies in China towards greater freedom and openness, but attempts by the Party and the State in recent years to build up the image that freedom of religion is sufficiently protected by the policies of China. It is simultaneously a full refutation against all sorts of “slander and assailment” concerning the situation of religious freedom in China.

As the international status and influence of China have been rising in recent years, China's response before the world on human rights and religious matters also shows increasing "confidence" and "strength". The question of how China demonstrates to the international community that religious freedom is fully implemented and realised is now a key point in religious work in China.

In fact, religious work has always had a "united front" role in China, i.e., "religious diplomacy". For this reason, the Central Government has greatly supported and fostered the exchanges of religion with overseas religious bodies in the last ten years, such as China-South Korea-Japan Trilateral Friendly Exchange Conference on Buddhism, the traveling and veneration of the Buddha's relics, the China-Indonesia Islamic Culture Expo and Art show, the Chinese and American Christian Leaders Forum, the China-Turkey Islamic Culture Expo, the World Buddhist Forum, the International Forum on *Daodejing* and the Forum for Christians across the Taiwan Strait, etc. All these showed the new face of Chinese religious diplomacy. They indirectly help China to build a positive image with regard to religious freedom.

Conclusion

As we look back on the religious work of the Chinese Communist Party in the last ten years, under the premise of adhering to the old system of religious administration, we can see the adjustments that the Party has made in response to various problems that originated from that system. Thus we can foresee that the four directions of legislation, regularisation, harmonisation and liberalisation will only be reinforced in religious work in the future. In light of Xi Jinping's preoccupation with national security and ideological struggles, the relationship between religious infiltration and national security will only attract more and more attention. At the same time, the problem of the members of the Chinese Communist Party becoming religious believers will be dealt with more severely. The inculcation of atheism will occupy an even more important role on the ideological horizon.

In this context, it is difficult to be optimistic about having more room for policy-adjustments that would lead to religious freedom in China. However, the Party and the State will have to pay a higher political and social price as they seek to restrict the new religious development. The relations between the government of China and religion will also become more contradictory and unstable. The future development will depend on interactions between the government and religion, and the adjustments they make to one another.

(We did not include the Chinese citations in the English version of Professor Ying's article. Please refer to pages 6-13 in the Chinese version. We realize this may be an inconvenience for English readers.)