

Implications of President Xi Jinping's Speech on Religious Work

Anthony Lam

The Chinese government called a high-profile national religious work meeting on April 22-23 this year (2016). It was the first such meeting since December 2001 when the then President Jiang Zemin called a similar meeting attended by all party and country leaders.

Li Keqiang, a standing committee member of the Communist Political Bureau and the State Premier, chaired the meeting. Other Politburo standing committee members in attendance were Zhang Dejiang, Liu Yunshan, Wang Qishan, and Yu Zhengsheng. Yu also gave the concluding speech. Zhang Gaoli, who was visiting abroad at the time, was the only standing committee member who was absent.

Xi Jinping, the Secretary General of the Communist Party of China, gave the keynote speech “Completely Raise the Level of Religious Work under the New Circumstances” (cited below as “the speech”). He said, “the supervisory work over religions has always been important in Chinese governance. Religious work has a special importance in the the party’s rule over the country.” The speech also emphasized the important task of sinicising religions.

From my standpoint as a Catholic observer, Xi Jinping’s speech contains both positive and negative aspects. Overall, the positive aspects outweigh the negative ones. I say that because the speech’s negative aspects have existed in China for a long time, whereas the positive aspects are brand new. They offer a new ray of hope for the religious sector.

The negative impact on the Catholic Church

The speech reiterated the thrust of “Document 19” (1982). It stresses “doing religious work well, adhering to the basic principles

of the party's religious work and fully implementing the party's policy of religious freedom."

That is understandable. But the speech also covered the "management of religious affairs according to the law, insistence on the principle of independence and autonomy, and the active guidance of religions to adapt to Socialism." This gives the impression that the axe hanging over the head of the Catholic Church has never been removed.

Later in the speech, Xi said, "The basic principle of the party's religious work is to insist on the Marxist view of religion. It is premised on our national reality and the actual religious situation, and takes into account both positive and negative experiences." One cannot help but shudder, as Marxism ultimately believes in the disappearance of religion. Such a statement definitely causes us to worry.

As in the past, the speech also stressed "the need to firmly resist foreign infiltration through the use of religion. [We] should guard against the invasion of religious extremist ideas. [We] should pay close attention to the issue of religion and the Internet. [We] should put greater effort into promoting the party's religious theory and policies on the Internet, to broadcast them in a positive way." Regarding these points, the Catholic Church declares that the Church does not, and will not carry out any form of infiltration. Nor does she harbour any extremist thoughts. Even so, Catholic believers cannot be at ease for fear that when the government addresses a host of issues, it would act indiscriminately, and normal religious activities would also be restricted.

The positive impact on the Catholic Church

One new suggestion in the Speech has to do with "constructing positive and healthy religious relations." The speech designates five kinds of "religious relations":

- The relationship between the party/government and religions
- The relationship between society and religions
- The relationship among different religions inside China

- The relationship between religions in China and religions outside of China
- The relationship between religious believers and non-believers

Of the five, most important for the Catholic Church is “the relationship between religions in China and religions outside of China.” It acknowledges (for the first time since the publication of Document 19 in 1982) the need for healthy relations with religions outside China. It also reflects that the Central government is willing to interact with overseas religious organisations.

As for the adherents of the religions, the speech requested that “religious leaders be reliable politically, proficient in religious understanding, morally credible, and that they can take up important roles at critical moments.” The reference to “moral credibility” perhaps refers to the pandemic corruption among the leaders of the different religions.

The speech also stressed that religious leaders “have the duty to unify and link up with the religious personnel and the faithful on behalf of the party and the government.” This shows that Xi Jinping is affirming the mediating role of religious groups themselves, instead of assigning the mediating task to government departments.

Some neutral aspects

Some areas in the speech that are relatively neutral still deserve our attention. For example, the speech maintains that “in order to guide religions to adapt to socialist society, it is important to support the sinicisation of our country’s religions. We should use socialist core values to guide and educate religious personnel and the believing masses.” However, the concrete meaning of sinicisation is not clearly spelled out. So far the Chinese government has not defined the term or elaborated on it. If we are talking about adapting to traditional Chinese culture, then we should note that since the early 20th century, Chinese Catholic leaders, like Ma Xiangbo and Ying Lianzhi, together with the Lazarist missionary, Fr. Vincent Lebbe, and Archbishop Celso Costantini (Apostolic Delegate, 1922-1933), have put much effort

into localising the Chinese Catholic Church. That was widely regarded as “Sinicisation.”

Xi Jinping continued in his speech: “(We) encourage all religions, as they maintain their basic beliefs, core dogmas and liturgical systems, to also dig deep inside their teaching and doctrine for contents that would be beneficial to social harmony, to the progress of the times, and to the building up of a healthy civilization. Interpret the doctrines and teachings in such a way that they accord with contemporary developments in China, as well as with excellent Chinese traditions.” I sincerely hope that the State fully implements this respect for religion, so that religions and society can co-exist harmoniously for the common good.

As in the past, the Chinese Community Party insists on its atheist identity. In the speech Xi Jinping said, “Communist party members should be firm Marxist atheists, strictly follow the regulations in the party’s constitution, confirm their own ideals, and bear in mind the principles of the party. They should never seek their values through belief in a religion.” On this aspect, I believe that the Catholic Church has always respected the world-view of other religions, and even of atheists. At the same time, we are also open to meaningful exchanges at any time.

Rectifying the religious work cadre system

Looking at the speech as a whole, we should pay attention to one main point: the rectification and realignment of the religious work system within the government. Xi mentioned, “(We) should raise the level of religious work according to the law, and use the law to regulate the government’s management of religions, and make use of the law to moderate all social relations that concern religions.

Afterwards, Li Keqiang said in response, “We have to seriously study the spirit of the speech of General Secretary Xi Jinping, ... and continue to raise the level of religious work according to the law.”

Yu Zhengsheng gave a concluding speech that was quite similar to Li’s. Both stressed the importance of “rule by law” as suggested by Xi. Yu said, “(We should) deeply study the spirit of the important speech of Xi Jinping, ...and understand in depth his

call to raise the level of religious work according to the law. Use the law to correctly resolve all kinds of contradictions and problems in the religious sphere.”

All three national leaders stressed the importance of “the rule of law;” so we can see its importance. To solve problems, Secretary-General Xi offered this programme at the end of his speech:

All levels of party committee members must increase their competence in handling the religious question. They must include religious work in their agenda, study in a timely manner the key issues in religious work, and implement the planning and decisions regarding religious work. All must take to heart the theory and directions of the party’s religious policy, acquire more basic knowledge about religions, incorporate in cadres’ formation programmes the party’s theory and directions regarding religion, so all levels of cadres can grasp them. Build a strong leadership mechanism to guide, regulate, teach, and inspect religious work.

The United Front departments should take the lead in coordinating religious work.

Religious Affairs Bureaus should take up the responsibility of supervision and management according to the law. [Writer’s emphasis]

All relevant departments and civil organizations such as workers’ unions, the Communist Youth League, Women’s Associations, and Scientists’ Associations should grasp and manage religious work together. They should promote the party’s theory and policies on religion, publicise laws and regulations that relate to religions, strengthen the party’s leadership over public opinion regarding religious issues.

Grassroots organizations in the party, especially those in local areas with major religious work, should solidly accomplish their religious work, and strengthen their work with believers.

According to these new arrangements, “all levels of party Committee members ” will coordinate future religious work; and grass-root organizations in the party will put policies into practice. The State Religious Affairs Bureaux and the United Front Departments in the party appear to be marginalized. This reflects the Central government's dissatisfaction with both organs. It seems that the Central government is determined to get rid of the corruption in these two branches.

Conclusion

We can see a certain good will in Xi Jinping's speech. How this translates into good policies remains to be seen. I believe most religious people in China are eager to work with the government to contribute to the country's advancement and social development. If, according to Chairman Xi's speech, the authorities can improve its communication and interaction with religions, then we can expect a brighter time for Chinese society.

Over the last thirty years, I have repeatedly pointed out that the religious work departments have long been manipulating religious work. They enrich themselves at the expense of religious organizations, thus creating many contradictions and tensions between the government and religions. I sincerely hope this national religious work meeting can bring about opportunities for needed reform.