

# *Religion in China: Imperialistic or Socialistic?*

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Recently Chinese authorities have launched a strong appeal for the “politicization” of religious work and religious circles. According to Wang Zuo’an, the director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), the administration must “deal with politics, and keep a vigilant eye on politics,”<sup>1</sup> in order to “build up positive and healthy religious relations.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, all religions are concerned with society and, therefore, with the public life of people, including also the political dimension. Therefore, religious operators must understand clearly the role of politics and the role of religion in society.

However, “politics” can be understood in different ways: in a wider and fuller sense as the dynamic organization and administration of the whole society. But it may also mean, in a

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<sup>1</sup> “Report on the meeting of all religious leaders,” January 9-10, 2017 in *China Religion* (中国宗教) 2017, 1, pp. 16-17: 「做好宗教工作必须讲政治，必须保持政治上的清醒」

<sup>2</sup> Wang Zuo’an, “Build up positive and healthy religious relations” [王作安，《构建积极健康的宗教关系》], *China Religion* [中国宗教], 2017, 3, pp. 6-8.) 「在我国当代，政教关系主要指党和政府与宗教的关系。中国共产党的领导，是中国特色社会主义最本质的特征，因此，处理我国政教关系，就必要牢牢把握坚持党的领导，巩固党的执政地位，强化党的执政基础这个根本。我国实行政教分离，即党和政府尊重宗教信仰自由，保护合法宗教活动。依法对涉及国家利益和社会公共利益的宗教事务进行管理，但不干涉宗教内部事务；宗教必须遵守国家法律法规和宗教政策，接受政府依法管理，依法开展宗教活动，自主办理宗教事务，但不得干预行政，司法，教育等国家职能的实施。政教分离不等于宗教与政治相互隔绝，事实上也不可能完全隔绝。我们党处理同宗教界人士的关系，遵循‘政治上团结合作，信仰上相互尊重’的原则。要引导宗教人士和信教群众拥护中国共产党的领导，拥护社会主义制度，坚持走中国特色社会主义道路」

more limited sense, a direct involvement in, and cooperation with a political party.

What is the real meaning of such an appeal by the Chinese authorities?

Wang Zuo'an provides a clear explanation:

At present in our nation, the relations between religions and the government indicate mainly the relations of religions with the party and the government. The guide of the communist party is the essential characteristic of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Consequently, managing relations between religions and government necessarily requires us to firmly hold to and keep the guidance of the party, solidifying the power-holding position of the party, and strengthening its power-holding foundation... Religions must keep the laws and regulations of the nation, as well as holding to its religious policy. Religions must accept the legal administration of the government, carry on only legal religious activities, and manage religious affairs in an autonomous way. But they cannot in any way interfere in the practice or the function of the government in the administrative sphere, in the judicial sector or in education. The division between the state and religion is not the same as separation; in fact complete separation is impossible. Our party, in supervising relations with religious circles, implements the principle: "on the political level, unity and cooperation, on the faith level, mutual respect." It must guide religious circles and the masses of believers to appreciate the guidance of the Chinese communist party, to cherish the socialist system, to persevere on the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

"Politics" is taken here in the stricter sense, that is involvement with a political party. The present emphasis, prepared since 2015 by the slogan of "the sinicization of religion" (宗教中國化), was explained officially and mainly in the political sense, that is that religions should accept the guidance, and be under the full control of the party and the government. Such an ideological approach was

preceded some time earlier by a debate on the “sinicization of Marxism,” which brought back again the issue first raised by Mao Zedong in his “On the Party” report in 1938.<sup>3</sup> The idea was that all the dimensions of the citizens’ lives, including the ideological and religious sectors, should be under the total control of the political leaders. The Chinese authorities continue the traditional policy and principles of the Chinese Empire on religion, namely “imperial authority is always superior to religious authority” and the slogan “government commands, religion serves.”<sup>4</sup> A new element is added now, namely the presence of the Chinese Communist Party. The role of the latter is to represent and lead the whole nation, to be identified with it, and to be placed at the top. Being atheistic, the policy on religion and on the freedom of religious belief is conceived from, and confined to the political concern. It becomes official, and is imposed upon all the citizens.

Religions are now officially considered an important sector of society, belonging to the social and political structure of the nation. Therefore, religious operators (e.g., Catholic clergy and religious Sisters) of all traditions in China are expected to be strictly connected with the communist party and the government. Their links in the future will most likely be even tighter. Since religions are considered institutions under the control of the civil authorities, they cannot but be seen from the political perspective. Religious leaders thus become “civil servants,” or “state officials.” They must be politicized. Clergy and believers are required not just to stay out of the party’s way, but to actively demonstrate their acceptance of

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<sup>3</sup> See Raymond F. Whyle, “Mao Tse-tung, Chen Po-ta and the ‘Sinification of Marxism,’ 1936-1938,” in *The China Quarterly*, September 1979, n. 78, pp. 447-480. The writer points out: “The fact remains that in China in the 1930s, the need to reconcile foreign ideas (not only Marxism) with what was perceived to be the ‘national essence’ was a major concern of Chinese intellectuals of every political persuasion... The disappearance of the term ‘Sinification’ from the Chinese Communist lexicon in the mid-1940s might well reflect the Party’s later embarrassment over the unmistakable cultural, and hence ‘unscientific’ origins of the concept... However, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the term was very much in vogue...” (p. 448).

<sup>4</sup> Wang Zuo’an, *ibid.*: 「我国历史上没有出现过全国范围的政教合一，而是王权高于教权，是典型的政主教辅。」

its demands and of their loyalty. Candidates to religious leadership should show that they are reliable, and accountable to the party, even if in religious and spiritual aspects, they are not fully qualified. Would they be required even to join the party and become members of it? It is a contradiction to their faith, and a source of real apprehension for true religious believers, in particular for Catholic bishops and priests.

The pressure is carried out both through the direct supervision of those who belong to the leadership sector of official religious communities, and through the forced registration of, and other oppressive measures upon, the unofficial communities. It seems that loyalty to the party and government becomes a prerequisite, and its refusal can even be considered a crime.

With such a mind-set, communist authorities cannot understand, even less appreciate, the spiritual role of the religious clergy. Catholic clergy, in particular, can be involved in “politics” only in the wider and fuller sense of the term, since in this kind of “politics,” all citizens should be involved, actively and responsibly. But the main role of the clergy is religious and spiritual, and, according to Catholic law, Catholic clergy normally cannot engage in party politics. They must keep a certain distance from any political office, unless with special permission.

Canon 285.3 states: “Clerics are forbidden to assume public offices which entail a participation in the exercise of civil power.”

This is the Catholic rule for clergy only. Lay Catholics, on the other hand, can freely play a direct political role.

For communist authorities it is difficult to make the distinction between clergy and lay leaders, and so to avoid the confusion, the Chinese authorities deal with the religious leaders, and in particular with the Catholic bishops, just as if they are “state officials.” They even consider it a privilege for the latter to play a political role. Wang Zuo’an clarifies the point:

[Religious] representatives, through their participation in the National People’s Congress, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference and the democratic associations, can

provide suggestions and proposals and participate in the national and social administration.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, some of the Catholic bishops, who share the same mind-set as the civil authorities, without clearly understanding their specific religious role, show no objection to agreeing with this position, in view of their own personal benefit and for the Church's advantage. They even boast of the material advantages they receive from it.

However, such behaviour shows no respect for the law of the Catholic Church for the clergy, even though Wang Zuo'an stated that "our party takes care of the relations with religious circles, by implementing the principle "on political level, unity and cooperation, and on the faith level, mutual respect."

The present policy of "politicization" seems to follow the same pattern of the 1950s, when under the name "patriotic," any expression considered contrary to it was "unpatriotic," and was a serious offense against the nation, which was identified with the communist party. It was a crime, punishable with detention, imprisonment or re-education through labour.

Consequently, it seems clear that the official policy of the Chinese authorities aims at establishing, under the name of "patriotic," "sinicized," or "politicized" religion, a "national" church, that is a socio-political institution under the full control of the communist party and Chinese government. The refusal, or even the unwillingness to accept it, is going against the official policy and order, and therefore, a punishable crime. One can fear the possibility of a return to the measures of the 1950s.

Such a view shows the negative judgment of religion by atheist leaders, who cannot but consider it hostile, and, therefore, requiring vigilance and control, if not suppression. Moreover, it also expresses a blunt contradiction: Chinese authorities used to blame religion, in particular Christianity, as a "tool of imperialism," but now they openly advocate religion as a tool for their own political objectives, turning religion into a "tool of communism." However, religions should enjoy their own *proper* autonomy.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.: 「宗教界作为社会的一个重要界别，其代表人士 可以通过参加人大，政协等途径，民主协商，建言献策，参与国家和社会治理。」