



Some Observations

on Recent Events in China



By Peter Barry

Reactions by people outside of China to recent events there run the gamut from amazement to anxiety. Amazement - because outsiders were under the impression that China was smoothly on the road to modernization, and they find it hard to understand how a few student protests could lead to the resignation of the Party General-Secretary Hu Yaobang, as well as the loss of job or Party membership by other officials and academicians. After all, student demonstrations are a fact of life in many countries in this modern age and governments should not over-react to them. Anxiety - because many people wonder if the abovementioned disciplinary measures signify the beginning of yet another ideological campaign, like those in the past, in which intellectuals will be "struggled against" because of their ideas.

The sudden removal of Hu Yaobang from office leads to questions in outsiders' minds about the future of the modernization program. Will it become sidetracked? One can appreciate China's efforts to develop a Chinese-style socialism, but such abrupt and unexpected changes as we have witnessed in the past few weeks surprise foreign friends and perhaps even discourage the local populace. For a country to modernize it needs the creative spirit of its intellectuals. But if purges, like the one taking place now happen periodically in China, intellectuals will be afraid to experiment and to express their ideas. Initiative will be stifled and the modernization drive will be in danger of fizzling out. "Once burnt, twice shy," goes the expression. Maybe some Western ideas were introduced into China in recent years, but to the outsider these seemed to have been in the process of being assimilated and adapted to the Chinese situation in a normal manner.

Religious believers wonder what the campaign against "bourgeois liberalism" might mean for the policy of religious freedom. If cultural areas like literature and the arts will be coming under greater supervision, what will be the future of religion, which is often considered as belonging to the cultural realm? Will its activities be curtailed? Will contacts with fellow religious believers abroad be limited?

With 1997 in mind, Hong Kong citizens are even more anxious: Does the change in Party leadership mean a change in policy towards Hong Kong? Party Secretary Hu was known for his liberal outlook. Does his retirement mean that more conservative leaders, who may take a more hardlined approach towards Hong Kong, will rise to power in the Party? Hong Kong citizens wonder whether the rights and freedoms guaranteed in the Agreement on Hong Kong's future, signed by representatives of the Chinese and British governments in September, 1984, will be abrogated or undergo alteration (Annex 1, Section XIII). Will the Basic Law Drafting Committee, now in the midst of writing Hong Kong's future law, receive undue pressure from a more conservative leadership in Beijing? That committee seems to be experiencing some disagreement over definitions of terms even at the present time.

The present problem, then, appears to revolve around the meaning of terms, especially the terms "freedom" and "democracy." Some student protesters said that what they meant by these terms was freedom of the press and more say in the nomination of candidates for local peoples congresses. The Chinese Constitution provides for these rights in Articles 35, 77, 78 and 102. Instead of "bourgeois liberalism," perhaps the students only desired the implementation of what is already guaranteed in the Constitution. Perhaps a better way of dealing with the protests and defusing a potentially explosive situation would have been for the government authorities to sit down with the students and honestly discuss their grievances with them.

But the government authorities countered with measures to stem the tide of "bourgeois liberalism." What is meant by "bourgeois liberalism?" The term seems quite vague, especially to someone who is being disciplined under this rubric. Those accused of "bourgeois liberalism" are also charged with violating the four basic principles, which are also mentioned in the Constitution (Preamble); the leader-

ship of the Communist Party, Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the socialist road.

Thus it would seem that a clearer definition of terms is needed. If the freedoms advocated by the student protesters and the four basic principles are both mentioned in the Constitution, what happens when they come into conflict with one another? Does the right of freedom of the press (Art. 35) or the right to criticize the government (Art. 41) take precedence over the four basic principles, or vice-versa? And who decides which takes precedence? The Party? This would appear to place the Party above the Constitution. Chinese lawmakers will have to resolve this apparent contradiction in the Constitution.

As an antidote to the influence of so-called "bourgeois liberalism" the Chinese authorities are now advocating further education in the four basic principles. But what degree of assent do they expect the Chinese populace to give to these principles? Merely external observance? Perhaps Party members (3-4% of the total population) can give intellectual assent to the four basic principles, in the sense of completely believing in them. But most of the citizenry may not be able to do this. For instance, religious believers cannot give intellectual assent to Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought because aspects of this thought are atheistic. Communists themselves have acknowledged that a person cannot at the same time believe in God and believe in Marxism.

For the Christian, intellectual assent to or denial of a proposition is usually put in terms of "freedom of conscience." Generally, this means that a person has the freedom to believe in any ideology he wishes, provided he has made an effort to form a correct conscience. No state has the power to violate a citizen's freedom of conscience. Indeed, the Chinese Constitution recognizes this freedom when it declares in regard to freedom of religion: "No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion." (Art.36)

However, there may be instances in China when the right of freedom of conscience comes into conflict with

the four basic principles. For instance, Marxist thinkers are permitted to criticize religion in their writings, but a religious believer is not free to criticize Marxism in his/her writings, or else he/she runs the danger of being accused of violating the four basic principles. Who decides whether personal conscience prevails or the four basic principles prevail? So, whereas legislation cannot cover every conceivable case, yet it seems that the question of the possible conflict between personal conscience and the four basic principles is an area requiring some investigation by Chinese lawmakers.

As for the Christian view of freedom, we say we have "the freedom of the sons of God." (Rom. 8:21) However, this freedom is not license, or unbridled freedom, which seeks one's own advantage at the expense of others. Freedom is not to be equated with selfishness. We are under "the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus which has set us free from the law of sin and death." (Rom. 8:2) We have been baptized into the Lord's Spirit, "and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2 Cor. 3:17) In Christ's Spirit we are truly free, but we must still war against selfishness and the temptations of the flesh. St. Paul warns us: "You were called, as you know, to liberty; but be careful, or this liberty will provide an opening for self-indulgence. Serve one another, rather, in works of love, since the whole of the law is summarized in a single command: Love your neighbor as yourself." (Gal. 5:13-14) So, for the Christian, freedom and love of neighbor are closely connected. At the same time, the love we share in Christ's Spirit should do away with our fears and anxieties. For as St. John tells us. "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." (1 John 4:18) Such love can be and should be practiced in all circumstances and under any political system.