

CALL FOR A NEW LOOK AT AN OUTDATED RELIGIOUS POLICY



by Zhao Puchu
translated by Donald MacInnis

Editor's Note: On March 31, Mr. Zhao Puchu, President of the Chinese Buddhist Association and vice-chairman of the Chinese Association for Promoting Democracy, addressed the entire assembly of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference as official spokesman for nearly sixty delegates representing various religious constituencies. Speaking with great candour, he pointed out serious problems still remaining in the implementing of the policy of freedom of religious belief, and called for the drafting of a new law governing religion in China.

Mr. Chairman and Members:

Allow me to speak on behalf of the members [of this body] from religious circles.

We fully agree with Vice-Chairman Qian Xueshen's report on the work of the Standing Committee of the Sixth Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and we fully support Acting Premier Li Peng's report on government work given at the First Session of the Seventh CPPCC.

We are highly encouraged by the great achievements in state and foreign affairs of the Standing Committee of the Sixth CPPCC and of the State Council in the past five years, and in the goals for reforms, tasks and principles set for the next five years. Under the party's

leadership, religious believers among all the national minorities will join together, striving to make further contributions on the basis of past achievements, for the unity of the nation, for the development of the national minorities and for world peace.

The five major religions in our country have millions of believers among many ethnic groups. The entire population of at least a dozen ethnic minorities living in the border areas are religious believers. There are four world religions in China. Two-thirds of the world's people are religious believers. Religion has made great contributions to our nation's history and culture, leaving a rich and brilliant legacy. Religion is related to the fields of politics, economics and culture; it is long-lasting, and has relationships with the masses as well as international relationships.

Practice has proven that, if we are to maintain and develop political stability in China, there is an enduring need for full implementation of the policy of religious freedom, unifying the great majority of religious believers, and inspiring them to love their country and build socialism. This will have great significance and positive effects in deepening and fostering reforms, opening up foreign relations, ensuring a stable development of the national economy, promoting the unity of the nation and in securing world peace.

For these reasons, and because it accords with the basic spirit of the documents of the Thirteenth Party Congress, we believe that there are three main leadership tasks in religious work which must be carried out.

The first major task: Continue to implement the policy on religion

Since the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Party Congress the party and government have taken on a large and difficult task and have achieved great results in carrying out religious policy and making some important policies and regulations. We religious members of the CPPCC, and religious organizations and leaders at all levels, have also done good work in investigating, drafting laws, policy-making and solving actual problems in the course of helping party and government bodies.

But the work of carrying out religious policy has moved slowly and unevenly; it still faces great obstacles and problems when compared with the implementation of other policies. The task of carrying out the

policy on religion is far from completion, with many difficulties and unsolved problems that still must be dealt with.

As we continue to carry out religious policy, the first problem requiring a solution is the need for more places for religious activities. The level must be reached where there are enough such buildings in every place to meet the needs of religious believers, as well as to maintain relationships with foreign religious circles. Places which were closed or were occupied and remodeled for other uses during the "cultural revolution" must be returned. Government leaders should give priority to the needs of religious believers and not to those units which occupy their buildings. There is an urgent need to return and reopen these buildings, and this problem must be solved quickly.

Equally important is the problem of those places which require restoration, clarification of ownership rights and economic compensation. We must properly and carefully deal with the problem of those places that were originally designed for religious activities, such as Buddhist temples and shrines, but where religious activities no longer take place. This happened in some places before the "cultural revolution", but the current problem is primarily the result of the "cultural revolution". On the one hand, those temples which have reopened with the permission of state and local governments are limited in number and are insufficient to meet the religious needs of Chinese and foreign Buddhist visitors. On the other hand, many temples that were closed or occupied by other units during the "cultural revolution" still have not been returned.



Some highly influential temples which were occupied [by other units] before the "cultural revolution" and should be reopened are still occupied. Some have even been remodeled for other purposes. This situation is not normal and is a problem that must be solved. It is both unrealistic and irresponsible to suggest that only those temples already on the list for reopening are needed, while others need not be reopened or can be destroyed.

Before the "cultural revolution", many famous old temples were designated as ancient cultural relics which should be protected, but this did not change their nature as places for religious activities, nor did it change the rights of Buddhist circles to administer them. Temples were originally built as places for religious activities. Only later were they occupied by other units and listed as protected cultural antiquities. But because they were designated as such, the occupying units assumed the rights of administration and ownership. When asked by Buddhist circles to return the temples for their original functions and restore them to their original state, they refused, saying that the temples had been "turned over for their use" because of their status as protected cultural antiquities, and that anyone seeking to recover them would have to get permission from them, the occupying units. Is this reasonable? That's too much!

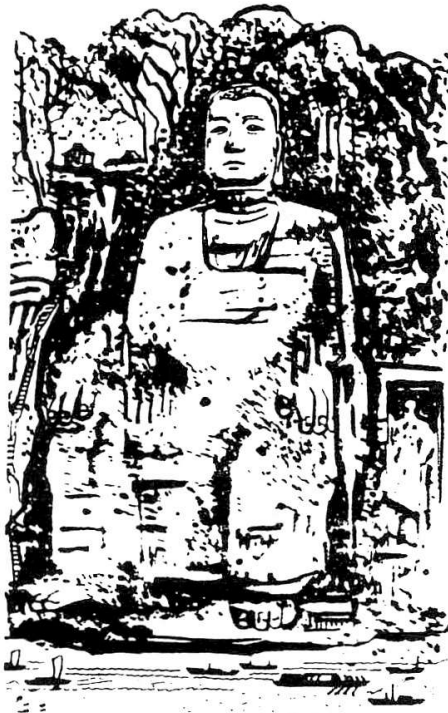
There is one paragraph in Document 101 which talks about the relationship between protected cultural antiquities and places of religious activity. Vice-Chairman Panchen and I think there are many problems with this paragraph, but there are still those who defended this paragraph in the Seventh National People's Congress. So the Panchen and I wrote a letter to Acting Premier Li Peng regarding this problem. The State Council and the party's Central Secretariate have taken notice of this and are investigating the problem.

There are places of religious activity on famous Buddhist and Daoist mountains like Wutai Shan, Emei Shan, Putuo Shan, and Jiuhua Shan. Although these mountains have beautiful scenery, the main attraction which has made them famous at home and abroad for believers and tourists alike is not their scenery but their religious characteristics, the site of the four bodhisattvas. If their religious features were damaged, the scenery of Jiuhua Mountain could not match that of its neighbors Huang Shan and Putuo Shan, for it's just a small island in an archipelago of islands. There are many mountains larger and more splendid than Wutai and Emei, so plans for developing famous Buddhist and Daoist mountains must preserve and protect their religious features and special characteristics, thus benefiting both religion and tourism. If we turn these mountains into nothing but tourist attractions, the tourist business will suffer as well.

Speaking of places of religious activity, there are very large problems in the religious affairs of Henan Province. Their two most famous temples, Baima Temple in Loyang, which was the first temple built after Buddhism came to China, and Shaoling Temple in Dengfeng, belong to the ancient Chan [Zen] sect. There are many problems relating to these

two temples, especially Shaoling. The present situation is very bad. The first monk to arrive from Taiwan in recent years, having made arrangements to stay in Baima Temple, could not bear the present conditions he found in Henan. No matter whether he himself was partially to blame or not, it does point out that great problems exist there that have to do with the work of the local leaders.

In Kaifeng there are two other famous temples, Xiangguo and Tieta, yet these temples have not yet been made available to Buddhists for religious activities. The Venerable [Fashi] Jin Yan of Kaifeng, 96, is chairman of the Henan Buddhist Association and an honorary council member of the Chinese Buddhist Association. For years he has gone around to many places asking for the return of at least one of these two temples, but to date the problem remains unsolved. This religious elder who has a high reputation in Buddhist circles, still lives in a shabby little private house.



There is a Xiangguo sect in Japan which recently sent a group to visit the Xiangguo Temple in Kaifeng. The local government asked Master Jin Yan to accompany them as the acting abbot of the Xiangguo Temple, but this title was given only on a temporary basis.

This year friends from the Xiangguo Temple in Japan also asked to visit the Kaifeng Temple. I heard that after receiving their request, the mayor of Kaifeng gave instructions to inform the Japanese Buddhists that the Xiangguo Temple is not a place for religious activities, and they would be welcome to come simply as sight-seers, but not to worship there. The mayor apparently did not care about the international political implications involved, nor about how his decision would affect hard-won

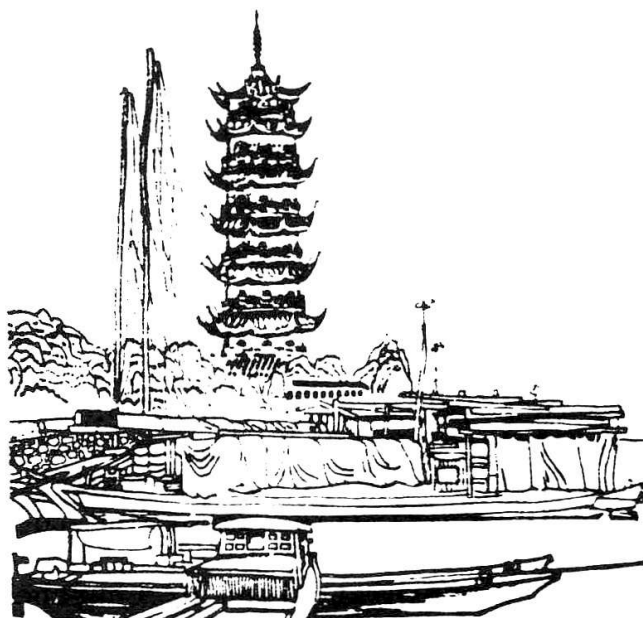
Sino-Japanese ties of friendship, nor did he show any awareness of the important contributions toward the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two nations that Buddhist circles in China and Japan have

made. This shows his ignorance about religion and his political immaturity.

The second problem requiring a solution is the matter of the buildings, their contents, and the property belonging to Buddhist temples. Temples and attached buildings are defined as "social property". There is no regulation for such ownership in the current national constitution, so it is described as "state property". This regulation has become the excuse for arbitrary occupation of temples and their buildings [by other units], therefore, this regulation must be corrected. In some of the temples which have been permitted to reopen, the property line is limited to the eaves-line of the buildings only; their mountain and forest lands have yet to be returned to them. They need to have new, reasonable boundaries drawn up and title deeds to their land given to them. Some cultural relics and other items taken away during the "cultural revolution" have not yet been returned. All must be returned and compensation paid for any that have been lost.

The third problem has to do with the way intellectuals in religious circles are treated. Each religion has a number of intellectuals who are engaged in research, teaching and editing. Some are scholars and experts with high academic and cultural credentials, yet the problems with regard to their professional titles, status and proper treatment have still to be solved. Some religious professionals who work in religious organizations, institutes and cultural units, and even some leaders of these organizations, receive only a small living allowance, but no salaries. They do the same work as non-religious personnel in those units but they do not receive the same pay. This problem must be solved.

There are great difficulties in carrying out religious policy. The main reason for this is that leftist influences in the thinking of some people have not yet been completely wiped out. These people do not yet



understand that during the primary stage of socialism the de facto existence of religion and its development is inevitable, and they do not understand the five natures of religion as it exists in China today, that is; its mass, ethnic, international, complex and long-lasting nature. Nor do they understand that the starting-point for religious work is to respect and protect the religious freedom of believers, to unite religious believers with all the Chinese people to build socialism with Chinese characteristics, and to avoid the use of force aimed at weakening or wiping out religion.

Some new leaders among our comrades know little about religious work, but they do know the leftist line on religion. Some comrades advocate an open economic policy, but they have fossilized thinking when it comes to religious questions. Moreover, the government's system of management and administration of religious work is old and out-dated, and the laws governing religion are incomplete.

The second major task: carry out systematic reforms

For a long time the administrative and management systems for religious work have suffered from malpractice and overcentralized power. The party and government have taken over religious work. This situation is not appropriate for the current policy of reform and openness. The core problem of reform, according to the principles and spirit of party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang's report to the Thirteenth Party Congress, is to separate party from administration, and administration from enterprises, to reform the personnel system of cadres, to clarify the relations between party, administrative organs and mass organizations, and to carry out a policy of the "separation of politics and religion."

"Separation of politics and religion" means separation of the functions of government administrative departments from religious organizations and temples; it does not mean our nation still has a socio-political system in which religion and politics are merged. The key to solving the problem of separating politics and religion lies in clarifying the leadership role of government administrative departments and the role of religious bodies who should carry out independently religious activities according to their own special characteristics.

The administration of churches and temples should be given over to religious believers themselves. We must systematize this policy. The government religious affairs departments provide leadership on religious

questions for all government administrative units to implement the policy of freedom of religious belief, guaranteeing and supervising the implementation of the constitution, laws, regulations and policies, in order to harmonize relationships of religious with other sectors of society. We must change the administrative and management system and the methods which regard religious bodies as administrative units, and turn all religious bodies into true people's organizations which are under the leadership of the party and government but can independently carry out their work according to their own characteristics. They should be able to enjoy the right to administer their own personnel, property and religious affairs according to the constitution, laws and policies of our government. Only in this way can we strengthen and improve the leadership of government administrative departments and at the same time give full play to the functions and vitality of religious organizations.

The third major task: strengthen the law on religion

The problem of drafting a new law on religion is urgent. Only with such a law can the constitutional right of freedom of religious belief for all citizens, with protection under the law, be guaranteed. Only with such a law can problems between religious believers and non-believers, and between the masses and religious professionals be solved according to law, for whoever breaks the law will be punished.

The first step in drafting a good law on religion is to further emancipate our thinking by breaking loose from old bonds, which were once regarded as untouchable. We must demonstrate the basic need for systematic reform of the work of administering religion, to widen our views, and to develop new concepts and move into a new context. The key point is to protect the proper rights of religious believers and religious bodies, their temples and churches. During the process of drafting this law, the lawmakers must consult persons from religious circles and listen to the opinions of religious workers and legal experts. At present the Religious Affairs Bureau under the State Council has already organized a special group to carry out this task, and religious bodies are doing their best to help them. Several religious leaders are preparing a draft proposal of this law for presentation. I believe that a religious law which reflects Chinese characteristics and which can correctly define the relationship between government and religion under socialist conditions will appear in the near future.

Thank you.