

traditions that seemed to have little relevance for or correspond to present political realities. Observing the interchange between these two local churches, each dealing with its own cultural particularities, was most interesting for the Canadians.

We were for most of the trip outside observers. For me, however, this too was also a part of a developing missionary involvement. Quebecois were once missionaries in Brazil and China; now Latin American churches are talking about becoming more mission minded. Throughout our trip, there were many exchanges among us about this new style of missionary spirit. Would missionary work in the future consist primarily in the mutual recognition and acceptance of cultural differences among churches? And after inculturation, acculturation and the incarnation of Christianity was achieved, would there come about a recognition of the need for differences in the cultural expression of Christianity itself? These were our feelings as we introduced Brazilian Catholics to the Chinese Catholic Church.

\*\*\*\*\*by Fleurette Lagacé

## A Dialogue

### Between Liberation Theologians and Chinese Officials



Last October a group of theologians from Canada and Brazil toured China at the invitation of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. The tour had been organized by Canadian diocesan priests who maintain close contacts with their former mission field in Brazil, and with the cooperation of Montreal's Amitié-Chine, who also sent four members along on the trip. What made this group special was the presence of some well-known exponents of liberation theology, who were anxious to study at first-hand the role the church was playing in the building up of China's socialist system. Among these theologians were Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, Frei Betto, Virgilio Uchoa, and Agostino Pretto. They were able to meet and discuss at length with not only members of the CCPA, but also government officials from the national and provincial bureaus of Religious Affairs, as well as prominent lay Catholics. When the group returned from China, it prepared a detailed report of their experiences. The report was in French, and the following excerpts were translated into English by Peter Barry, one of our editors.

While in Beijing, the group received a cordial welcome at the

national headquarters of the Bureau of Religious Affairs. They were received there by the Bureau's Deputy Director, Cao Jinru. After a lengthy introduction in which Madame Cao explained the role and function of the Bureau and its responsibility to unite all religions in the common effort to build up national socialism, **Leonardo Boff** responded by stating the group's purpose and intention for being in China:

We are religious people. The purpose of our visit to China is not only to visit some sister churches, but also to see China for ourselves as a nation and society. We are most interested in the construction of the socialist state in China and in finding out the present role Christianity occupies in this process. In our country, Brazil, the church is actively involved in the promotion of the transformation of society. Some liberation theologians in Brazil are trying to incorporate values from the Marxist tradition into their faith reflection. Many of them would like to know how the local churches here in China go about contributing to the building up of the socialist state.

We have had the opportunity of visiting other socialist countries such as Cuba, the USSR, East Germany and Czechoslovakia, and of carrying on a dialogue with officials from their respective bureaus of Religious Affairs. We are happy to be able to continue this dialogue with the Bureau of Religious Affairs in China. We know that there has been a democratic opening here and that religions are being given the opportunity to develop. Because of this, we hope to profit from this chance to exchange ideas with you about this and the total situation here.

This is my question. At the end of your presentation, you said that religions could now make a contribution to the building up of socialism. I would like to know in more detail how this collaboration takes place, and, in particular, what role the Catholics we are now visiting have in it.

**Deputy Director Cao** answered Boff's question about the Catholic contribution to the building up of socialism in the following way:

Whether we are religious believers or not, we Chinese all have a common desire: to strengthen and develop our country, and to see to it that our people achieve a better livelihood. We think that all the people here accept and support our basic policies concerning the direction our country must take. And everyone wants to participate in the task of making our country

better. Whatever good a believer, peasant, worker or intellectual accomplishes at the level of his own particular work is considered to be useful for our society as a whole.

Specific kinds of services which believers have rendered to the building up of our society might be noted here. For instance, we know that in several areas Catholics have united to form collective enterprises to develop production. While Catholics represent only a small minority of the total population, what they do at their level does contribute to the advancement of socialism as a whole.

During the course of your trip, you will certainly have the opportunity to see how people in the Catholic community, whether individually or collectively, are working for the progress of our nation. For example in Shanghai, you will have the opportunity to meet Dr. Zhu, the chairman of the Association of Catholic Intellectuals, a well known doctor, who has organized a number of social work activities in that city.

At this point, Clodovis Boff raised the question of atheism and whether or not the Chinese Communist Party felt it could be divorced from Marxism:

As members of the Catholic Church, we are deeply concerned about the construction of socialism, to which we believe Catholics have a contribution to make. In Brazil, we are still struggling to transform our society, while here Marxism is already at work. I am happy to hear that in China the policy of religious freedom means in practice the integration of religious belief and socialism.

My question is theoretical: In the Chinese Communist Party is atheism essentially connected with Marxism? I ask this question because we in Latin America are satisfied with a form of Marxism without atheistic materialism. As believers, we want to be integrated in the process of liberation. There exist many forms of Marxism in the world: in Eastern and Western Europe, in Cuba, etc. While Marxism is a social philosophy with an atheistic orientation, is the link between Marxism and atheism something merely historical or explicitly necessary? Is there an essential link between the two or is it merely accidental?

Cao's response indicated the two were in her view inseparable, but

she hastened to add that this did not exclude religions from working in the construction of China's socialist society and the guarantee of religious freedom to all:

Our basic ideology as a Party is Marxist, and we understand this as dialectical and historical materialism. This is the fundamental reference point for us in all our ideological reflections. Since as Marxists we espouse dialectical materialism, we are atheists. We believe in the objective nature of all things, with each having its own internal law of genesis, growth and extinction. This is our philosophy. Religion, which is a part of the whole, is a fact of history and also has its own internal law of genesis, growth and extinction. This is not an affective phenomenon where one might say: "I love it, therefore it exists; I do not love it, therefore it does not."

We, in the Party are atheists, but we cannot require the whole population of China to be atheists also. Nor do we think that we can use administrative measures to destroy something based on subjective factors. The fact that some people do believe in a religion obliges us to have a policy of religious freedom.

In our society, as in all societies, there are three kinds of thinking regarding religious matters: those who adhere to a religious belief, those who do not believe in any religion, and those who attack religion. Since these categories of people exist in our country, there is no other policy to follow but that of mutual respect. We know that despite these differences, all share a common desire: that China become a great, strong and prosperous nation.

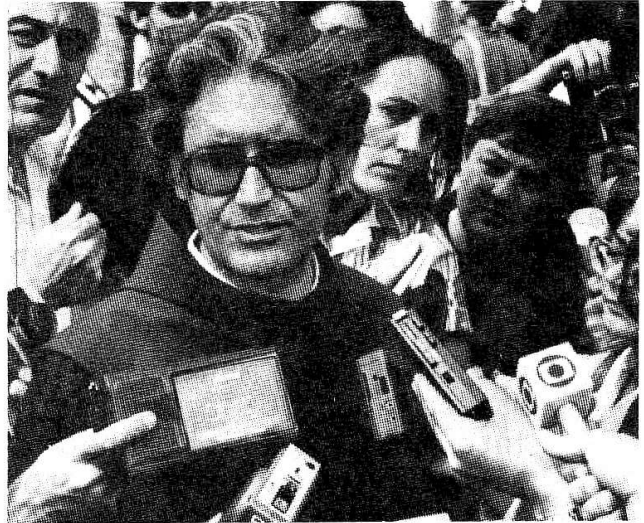
In China we have people who once were believers and are now atheists, and we have atheists who are now fervent believers. On the level of furthering our country's policies and accomplishing the things we hope to accomplish, these differences are not very important. But we do not want violent conflict by contending parties to erupt over these differences. We desire that everyone, in accordance with the spirit of our Constitution, cultivate mutual respect for one another. It is our hope that everyone will unite together to build up our nation.

The nation as a whole, under the kind of Communist party leadership we now have, holds the power to implement this religious policy successfully. This policy is grounded in the

philosophy which I have mentioned earlier. While friends abroad question our capability of putting this policy into practice, we believe it suits our own country. Because of this and because we share a common goal, we are able to maintain a good relationship with religious believers.

Leonardo Boff moved the discussion towards recent changes in China's economic policy. He asked:

What is the relationship between socialism and the economic reforms in China? Financial autonomy and the ownership of private property are mentioned, as well as specific enterprises, such as agriculture, where people are allowed to buy and sell things for their own profit. Some churches even operate factories for the sake of personal gain.



There were a number of intellectuals present at the meeting and Boff's question was answered by one of them:

This question comes from a rigid concept of socialism, which holds that everything must belong to the state.

Here in China three types of ownership coexist: state ownership, collective ownership, and family ownership. In the first phase of socialism, the coexistence of multiple types of ownership is advantageous in moving the nation towards the collective goal which socialism wishes to attain.

If you ask now what percentage of property belongs to the various categories of ownership mentioned, we cannot give you an accurate answer because we do not have those statistics here. But we can assure you the great majority is state owned and this is the standard. For several years now, state ownership has made allowances for collective as well as individual ownership. Whatever has been acquired through the honest work of the individual remains the property of that individual. Some peasants have acquired more than 10,000 yuan worth of property through their own hard work and ingenuity. This ownership is legally

recognized, and protected by our Constitution.

Your question also relates to what is the essence of socialism. We understand socialism to be the forces of production of the entire nation. The aim of socialism is to develop those forces which will help people to gain a better livelihood. When total production increases, the populace will enjoy a more comfortable life, which is in line with the aims of socialism. Inasmuch as these three types of ownership permit us to attain our general goal, they are not in contradiction with our socialistic concepts.

**Frei Betto** now returned to the original question of the group about the place of religion in a socialistic society and asked why believers are excluded from party membership:

There are three ways for government authorities to handle religion: by manipulation to make religion serve them, by maintaining it in a ghetto condition, or by inserting religion into the socialist construction. I think China uses the third method. My question is, then: why cannot a Chinese believer be a Party member? This seems to me to be in contradiction to the position held by Bakonin, by Marx during his London days, and by Lenin himself.

**Deputy Director Cao** answered Betto's question personally, making a distinction between party membership and participation in national movements:

We believe in Marxism. We are materialists and, therefore, atheists. All members of the communist party in China are atheists. But while Party members hold the important positions in the government, they are still a minority: only 40 million out of one billion people.

Religious belief is of secondary consideration. It is a secondary matter calling for neither nourishment by the state nor embitterment on the part of believers. We want to gather all the people to form a united front to build up socialism together. Historically believers, be they Buddhists, Protestants or Catholics, have collaborated and worked together to realize national liberation. There were many examples of collaboration between believers and party members at the time of the Japanese war. It is apparent, also that there are many friendships between

believers and Party members. Religious belief does not of itself prevent believers from participating in movements initiated and directed by the Party.

Leaving Beijing, the group now moved on to the "Southern Capital," Nanjing. The following excerpt is taken from a discussion held in the offices of the Bureau of Religious Affairs of Jiangsu Province between the theologians and Director Zhang Bingduo.

**Frei Betto:**

What happened to the Bureau of Religious Affairs during the Cultural Revolution? Afterwards what was the attitude of people towards those who had actively participated in it?

**Zhang :**

During the Cultural Revolution the bureau closed down. It reopened in 1979. At the time of its closing several of the bureau's personnel were sent to the countryside, some to work in factories, and some to re-education camps.

There has been no purge of those who participated in the Cultural Revolution. We do not wish to repeat the same errors of the Cultural Revolution itself. At that time, many of the young people did not have sufficient knowledge to understand the negative character of their actions. Since then, some have stated that after further education, they realised the inadequacy of their previous formation, and how they did not have the competence required to function in the key positions they assumed during the revolution. Also in the battles that took place among the rival factions, it was often the youth who suffered most.

**Jean Menard:**

There have been historical episodes during the rise of socialism in, for example, such countries as Cuba, Chile and Nicaragua, where churches reacted out of a fear of losing the working class. How would you judge the negative reaction of these different churches in light of your own experience?

**Zhang :**

Our situation is different. Our approach is that of a united front. We share a common ideal. We are a poor, backward,

underdeveloped country. We do not have time for such sectarian quibbling.

In our present phase of development, we have need of everyone's help. It is important that we, believers and non-believers, work together. Why do you think we concern ourselves so much with the church? Why do you think that we are so good to the Catholics? It is because our aim, the Bureau's and my own personal aim as director, is to mobilize and encourage the 170,000 Catholics of Jiangsu Province, along with the other believers, to help overcome the province's poverty, backwardness, and to further its economic and social development. Everyone's help is needed.

This is why we do not quibble about who this school or that institution belongs to. It belongs to all of us. There are more urgent matters to engage our attention.

**Leonardo Boff:**

Several western communist parties have now gone beyond the original conceptions of religion which they held in the past. Has there been any reflection on this in your own Party?

**Zhang :**

Evidently, we are speaking now on the level of theory. Our position is not completely what one might call pragmatic or expedient. The party has studied this question and in 1982 published a document which accurately expressed our current thinking concerning religion. Our previous position was one of extreme leftism, considering religion as having no value. But this document points out that we are more aware we are living now in the first phase of socialism. In this phase our economy, our capacity for production, and our standard of living are still far from the ideal, and we must make efforts to build them up. During this first phase of socialism, religion will continue to exist. Religion reflects something which is in the people. After 40 years of attempting to build up socialism, this phenomenon is still with us. The 'thoughts of the people' are not yet well advanced. Actually, we say that religion exists in the first phase of socialism and that it will continue to exist for a long time. Let me make a small aside here. We have been discussing the length of this phase. Personally, I believe that the Party itself, having constructed a socialist mind and developed



socialism will not continue to exist beyond the length of religion's existence.

If we look at what is written in this document, it speaks of the five characteristics of religion: first, its long duration; second, religion's international character; third, it is a mass phenomenon, which cuts across all classes and ages. These three characteristics of religion are inseparably intertwined. The fourth characteristic of religion is its national character. Although this does not apply to the Catholic religion, you should know that among Muslims and Lamas, race and religious belief are co-extensive. These four elements confirm the durability of religion. That is why our policy at the Bureau consists of a respect for religious belief and protection of its legal right to exist.

Our final excerpt comes from an interview with Zhang Zhiqun, the Deputy Director of Shanghai's Bureau of Religious Affairs. It was the group's final stop on their tour, and Leonardo Boff used the occasion to bring up problems that other communist countries have had in implementing their policies of religious freedom to see if China was experiencing some of the same difficulties.

**Leonardo Boff:**

Among Communist parties in the West and in the Soviet Union there have been changes in religious policy. In conversations with officials of the Bureau of Religious Affairs in the Soviet Union, they told us that the problem was not on the level of the policy itself, but in its application on the secondary level, that is, among local cadres. These cadres are quite conservative and have a harsh attitude regarding religion. It is difficult for them to be re-educated in terms of the new religious policy. Do you have this problem in China also?

Zhang's reply argued that cultural differences and practical necessity have served to minimize China's implementation problems:

Our situation is different from the situation in Russia. We know about the recent reforms they have undertaken, particularly those effecting their religious policy: Even if their ideology is like ours, our history, culture and social contexts differ. It is the existing context which causes changes in the concrete application of the religious policy. As I have said before, at

the Party Congress in 1979 we established the party line of "seeking truth from facts." On the whole, our officials understood the religious policy's orientation. When this policy was communicated to those who had responsibility for the church's authority and direction, they also understood the new policy. Both the religious authorities and the government shared a common understanding of the policy. Since we continue to have the same goal of being united in working together for the modernization of our country, and since differences of belief are of minor importance in this, we find ourselves confronting together the same needs and the same challenges. The Party and the government not only promote this conformity in policy, but also are grateful to the religious authorities for their understanding of this policy and for their collaboration in carrying it out. Our aim is not simply to help the religions, in particular the Catholic Church, to administer their affairs better, we also want people to understand what the true religious policy is and what the true purposes of religion are in order that the religious policy can become a reality and not just words on a page.

There had been much talk throughout the trip about the "first phase of socialism" and the existence of religion during this first phase. Luiz Vasconcella posed the following question:

What do you understand by the first phase of socialism?

Mr. Zhang replied that he thought the road to complete socialism would be very long, and he made a distinction between faith and theology:

We speak in terms of one hundred years. We calculate that around the year 2050, China's economic development will have reached an acceptable level for a socialist country. After the first phase, we will pass from level to level until complete development is achieved. This entails a long historical process. According to Marxism, when the final phase is reached, religion will no longer exist. In the initial phases of the historical process leading to the final stage, religion will continue to exist and even develop. In our own country, we have people who have received a high level of education and who still maintain their religious faith; however, this religious faith is not as sophisticated as that which I have heard described this afternoon, namely, the theology of liberation. For me, there is a difference between theology and faith. Certainly the Brazilian

situation helps us to understand this. If you in Brazil have a theology which has emerged from your particular context and which is called the 'theology of liberation', it seems to me that there ought to emerge from the Chinese context some theological responses which would not be matters of faith alone. Such a theology would start from our Chinese context and would be phrased in categories which respect our specificity. In this first phase of socialism, religious phenomena are still called upon to endure and to develop.

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## The Brazilian-Canadian Trip to China

by Luisa Tan, M.I.C



I was privileged to be a member of the Brazilian-Canadian Catholic delegation which visited China October 3-29, 1988. The group was made up of three Brazilian lay persons, a Sister of Saint Augustin and eleven priests, six of whom were from Canada, Fleurette Lagace and myself. The seventeen of us, with Mr. Liu Bainian, vice-chairman of the Chinese Catholic Church Administrative Commission and organizer of the trip, visited eight cities. Leonardo Boff, as a member of the group, in explaining our trip to the officials at the Bureau of Religious Affairs in Beijing said, "We are here not only to visit churches but also to learn about Chinese society and to see the contribution of the Church to society here."

The presence of Leonardo Boff, a Franciscan well-known for his work in Liberation Theology, his brother, Clodovis Boff, a Servite of Mary, a theologian of the same thought, and Frei Betto, a Dominican brother, a specialist in Marxist-Christian relationships, ensured a high profile for the group and enhanced its opportunities of entering into discussions on church matters, social affairs and government policy on religious freedom.

Many aspects shared with us regarding the Church's functioning