

Catholic Church and the Modern State

Basic Observations

by Peter Hünemann

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I

In its Constitution the People's Republic of China (PRC) grants all citizens religious freedom. This applies also to the Catholic Church in that country. At the same time the Catholic Church, during the past centuries, has been considered as a religious group that was dependent on a foreign political power, the Vatican. This political power - the Vatican - gave the appearance of being closely connected to the European industrialized nations. We can understand this evaluation of the Catholic Church by Chinese politicians and the Chinese government because of this past history. Many events in Chinese history give cause for such a judgement. On the other hand, the Pope, as bishop of Rome and head of the Catholic Church, has on many occasions pointed out, that the Church is not a political power and cannot be placed on the same level as other states.¹ Therefore, the question of the nature of the Catholic Church and its relationship to modern states seems to be of particular interest to China.

This leads to a further question. The China of the 20th century is characterised by efforts to bring about fundamental reforms and modernization in this large nation. During the first half of this century, strong foreign pressure was exerted on China. There is no need to go into details here, as they are well-known... from the Opium War to the Japanese invasion. The second half of this century has brought to China a fundamentally new social order. The old feudal system has been abolished; a new ethos has been proclaimed. This has served as the basis for a campaign of economic modernization which began during the last ten years. A basic principle of this development, since the establishment of the PRC, has been the political independence and autonomy of the Chinese people.... people here is used in the sense of the broad mass of the population. Another basic principle of this policy is, in my

opinion, that China - the Chinese people - in its independence and autonomy is to be an equal, reliable, and peace-loving partner in the dialogue of the nations, a partner who gives and takes, in its exchanges with the many nations which cooperate for the common good of mankind. Now the question arises: Is the Catholic Church a disturbing and hindering factor to this legitimate quest of the Chinese people, or is it, of its own nature, conducive to these two principles and thus to the basic policy of China?

Such questions are not easy to answer. The Catholic Church has a history of 2000 years. Is it at all possible to speak of the nature of the Catholic Church when we consider the many changes this Church has undergone since the time of the late Roman Empire, the Middle Ages or in modern times? Is it true of the Catholic Church as of many other religions, that it consists of nothing but a continuous process of adaptation moving in many different directions? We know the history of Buddhism in China, and also the many transformations which an originally shamanic popular religion has undergone through various influences including Hinduistic in China.² But here we have to point out, that the Catholic Church - as opposed to Christian groups which have separated themselves from the Catholic Church - has from the very beginning developed a magisterium, a teaching authority, which has reflected and monitored the way of Church and consistently defined its profile.

Up to the Middle Ages, i.e. during the first millenium after Christ, the so-called Eastern Churches (or the orthodox Church) participated in this process. But as a result of their separation from Rome, made formal in year 1054, this process was interrupted. Since then, there have been no ecumenical councils in the Eastern Church. The same applies to the churches of the Reformation since the time of Martin Luther. Here, too, there is no common binding teaching authority, which could be compared to a council or the Pope.

Therefore, we have in the Catholic Church an historical religious group, which, through binding decrees in changing historical contexts, has again and again defined and interpreted its own nature and thus possesses a distinct concrete historical profile.³

II

In the history of the Catholic Church of the modern age, the 2nd Vatican Council presents a decisive step. It was the task of the 2nd Vatican Council to define in a fundamental reflection the position of the Church within the modern world and how it has developed. It is inter-

esting to note that the schemes and elaborations which had been prepared by the Roman Curia were, at the very beginning of the Council, rejected by the bishops, as they did not sufficiently take into account modern needs. The documents of the 2nd Vatican Council are the fruit of this large assembly (far more than 2,000 members) of the Catholic bishops.⁴ Let us turn first to the self-characterization of the Church.

In the Constitution on the Church of the 2nd Vatican Council the Catholic Church is called a "spiritual community" (*communitas spiritualis*)⁵, which, as a visible community, is provided with organs of hierarchical leadership. It claims no power (*Potestas*) regarding public communities and political states. It only requests the realm of freedom for giving witness to its faith.

In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the world of today, it is stated: "*The role and competence of the Church being what it is, she must in no way be confused with the political community, nor bound to any political system. For she is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendence of the human person. In their proper spheres, the political community and the Church are mutually independent and self-governing. Yet, by a different title, each serves the personal and social vocation of the same human being. This service can be more effectively rendered for the good of all, if each works better for wholesome mutual cooperation.... For man is not restricted to the temporal sphere. While living in history he fully maintains his eternal vocation. The Church, founded on the Redeemer's love, contributes to the wider application of justice and charity within and between natives. By preaching the truth of the gospel and shedding light on all areas of human activity through her teaching and the example of the faithful, she shows respect for the political freedom and responsibility of citizens and fosters these values.*"⁶

With regard to the means to be used in this work of the Church, it is stated: "*The apostles, their successors, and those who assist these successors have been sent to announce to men Christ, the Savior of the world. Hence in the exercise of their apostolate they must depend on the power of God, who very often reveals the might of the gospel through the weakness of its witnesses. For those who dedicate themselves to the ministry of God's Word should use means and helps proper to the gospel. In many respects these differ from the supports of the earthly city.*" In the following lines, the text speaks clearly about the renunciation of privileges, the renunciation of the exercise of legitimately acquired rights when these rights might raise doubt about the sincerity of the Christian witness. In conclusion the text says: "*But it*

is always and everywhere legitimate for her to preach the faith with true freedom, to teach her social doctrine, and to discharge her duty among men without hindrance. She also has the right to pass moral judgements, even on matters touching the political order, whenever basic personal rights or the salvation of souls make such judgements necessary. In so doing, she may use only those helps which accord with the gospel and with the general welfare as it changes according to time and circumstance." By understanding itself in this way as a spiritual community, the Church alters its public position. This is expressed very clearly in the plea of the 2nd Vatican Council for freedom of religion.⁷ Unlike the liberal argumentation regarding tolerance in the 18th century, the argumentation here is positively theological. The postulate of religious freedom is based on the one hand on the dignity of man and on the other hand on the position that the acceptance of the Christian faith can only result from the freedom of man. Thus the granting of religious freedom and the freedom to propagate the faith is a postulate legitimised by faith and addressed to the public order. In this connection, E.W. Böckenförde remarks rightly that the Church, with this declaration, has accomplished the transition from a "right of truth", which the 1st Vatican Council and Leo XIII still defended, to a "right of the person" in the modern sense.⁸

III

This self-understanding of the Church with regard to the public order corresponds to the development of state and society as we observe it since the 19th century. In the course of the formation of modern democracies, state and society have entered into a mutual relationship which is full of tensions. It belongs to the state to exercise domination and the power of decision. Society, however, on the basis of maintaining the right of freedom for the individual and social groups, has the tendency to strongly limit and condition the power of the state through the formation of cultural, economic and social domains. On the other hand, decisions made by the state also condition social growth. The so-called pluralistic society is clearly recognized in the documents of the 2nd Vatican Council.⁹ In the pluralistic society, a form of concrete human freedom is envisaged which is appropriate to the development of human dignity. In the framework of such a pluralistic society the Church understands itself as an independent society which has its own origin and own rights. It is a spiritual community (*communitas spiritualis*), which, as such, is a public entity and influences public order. Now the emphasis is no longer, as up to the time of Leo XIII, simply on the ecclesiastical office. The Church, rather, as the body of

the faithful, is called in all its members to live according to its mission and to give witness to the truth.

In connection with this Catholic understanding of the relationship between Church and public order, there is another discussion within the Church. It concerns the relationship of the bishops, individual countries, and cultural regions to the bishop of Rome. In its documents, the 2nd Vatican Council has strongly emphasized the responsibility and competence of the respective national or larger regional churches and their episcopal conferences.¹⁰ The documents of the 2nd Vatican Council are based on the position that the Church must be a unity in plurality. Regarding this so-called collegial or synodal structure of the Church, only the principles were formulated in these documents. During the years after the 2nd Vatican Council, these thoughts were first of all translated, step by step, into concrete legal structures. In Rome a synod of bishops with regular meetings was created as an advisory body to the Roman Pope. These episcopal conferences, which existed only since the 19th century in Germany and Austria, were now established all over the world. Immediately after the 2nd Vatican Council, the Church of Latin America was given a modern face by its bishops in the two regional synods of Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979). In view of the class-society which prevails there, a clear option of the Church for the poor and for social transformation was pronounced; this option was derived from principles of faith. In a similar way, regional episcopal conferences were founded in Africa, in Asia, in Europe and in North America. We should add here that with regard to the nomination of bishops in the new *Codex Iuris Canonici*¹¹, a certain deviation from the previous practice of nominating bishops in Latin America, North America, Africa or Asia can be observed. (In Europe, the traditional forms of episcopal nominations, with participation of cathedral chapters, etc. still remain valid.) In the new *Codex Iuris Canonici*, an advisory function of the individual bishops of a country has been provided; however, at the same time, the Roman nuntio has been given a very decisive role in the selection and evaluation of possible candidates.¹²

IV

During the last ten years, it can be observed that these necessary processes of transformation, which the 2nd Vatican Council has indicated, are developing very slowly; it even seems that they are held back by restorative tendencies in Rome.¹³ It will be necessary to see such developments in a larger context but I am convinced that the wheel of history can not be turned back. The statements of theologians and bishops clearly indicate the direction of a cautious further development

of plurality in the Church. This means that a greater autonomy and responsibility has to be ascribed to the individual national and regional churches. In fact, inside the Church of today a process of pluralization is going on. This process is being carried out by the definitions of the 2nd Vatican Council and at the same time corresponds to the necessities of the individual churches of the different countries.

When we consider this development, it becomes clear that there is a visible continuity in the characterization of the Church in relationship to the state and to public institutions. In spite of every variation caused by different ages, the Church has in ever-new forms made real the word of Jesus: *"Yes, I am a king, but my kingdom is not of this world"*. On the one hand, it proclaims the final and definitive reign of God and thus makes relative any claim of absolute power within the world; on the other hand, the Church fully and entirely recognizes the state and the public order, and seeks to serve the development of man and human society by offering a religious and ethic foundation. It seems to me that from such considerations certain convergencies will result between the guiding principles of the present Chinese policies and the basic orientations of the Church. At the beginning, we stated that the establishment of the independence and autonomy of China, which is to be realized with the help of a comprehensive transformation of society, has already been achieved in great part. Then we spoke about the participation of this autonomous China in the great dialogue with the other nations of the world in the sense of a service for peace. There is no contradiction between the two principles and the basic conception which the Catholic Church, especially since the 2nd Vatican Council, has worked out for our time.

Notes

1. On February 18th 1981, on his first pastoral visit to Asia, the Pope declared in an address to a group of Chinese Catholics in Manila: *"When the Church announces Jesus Christ as the eternal son of God and redeemer of the world, it has no other aim than to remain faithful to the mission which it received from its divine founder. It pursues no political or economic aims; it has no temporal mission. It would like to be in China, as in every other country, the herald of the kingdom of God. It asks for no privileges, but only that all Christians may freely and publicly express their faith and live in harmony with their conscience"*(AAS 73, 1981, 348).

2. See HANS KÜNG/JULIA CHING, *Christentum und Chinesische Religion*, Piper GmbH, Munich 1988; Chinese translation: *Zhongguo Zhongjiao yu xifang shenxue*, Lianjing Publishing Company Ltd., Taipei 1989.

3. In two important Constitutions of the 2nd Vatican Council (1962-1965) the Catholic Church has spoken about itself and its relationship to the modern world. In the Constitution "Lumen Gentium" (AAS 58, 1966, 1025-1115) it recognizes the autonomy of the world of today but without neglecting the doctrine that all human beings are called to the communion with God in Christ.

4. The documents are published in the AAS (Acta Apostolicae Sedis) Rome 1964-66, Vol 56-58. The commonly used abbreviations of these documents are LG(Lumen Gentium) for the Constitution on the Church, GS (Gaudium et spes) for the pastoral Constitution and DH (Dignitatis Humanae) for the Constitution on the freedom of religion.

5. See LG 8.

6. See GS 76.

7. See DH 2: *"This Vatican Synod declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. Nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits. The Synod further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person, as this dignity is known through the revealed Word of God and by reason itself."*

8. See E.W. Böckenförde, *Kirchlicher Auftrag und politische Entscheidung* (The Mission of the Church and Political Decision), Freiburg 1973, S. 192.

9. See GS 75 and 76.

10. See the decree on the pastoral task of the bishops CD (Christus Dominus), 37: *"Therefore, this most sacred Synod considers it supremely opportune everywhere that bishops belonging to the same nation or region form an association and meet together at fixed times, thus, when the insights of prudence and experience have been shared and views exchanged, there will emerge a holy union of energies in the service of the common good of the Churches."*

11. The new law of the Church was promulgated in 1983.

12. *"At least every three years, the Bishops of an ecclesiastical province, or, if circumstances suggest it, of an Episcopal Conference, are to draw up, by common accord and in secret, a list of priests, even of members of institutes of consecrated life, who are suitable for the episcopate; they are to send this list to the Apostolic See...."* (Can. 377 n.2)

"Unless it has been lawfully prescribed otherwise, for the appointment of a diocesan Bishop or a coadjutor Bishop, a ternus, as it is

called, is to be proposed to the Apostolic See. In the preparation of this list, it is the responsibility of the papal Legate to seek individually the suggestions of the Metropolitan and of the Suffragans of the province to which the diocese in question belongs or with which it is joined in some grouping, as well as the suggestions of the president of the Episcopal Conference..." (Can. 377 n.3)

13. Thus e.g. Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, does not want to acknowledge a theological status to the Episcopal Conferences, but only a practical one. (See Ratzinger, *Zur Lage des Glaubens* [The situation of the Faith], Munich 1986.)

Asian Approaches to Theology and Theological Formation in China

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Vatican II marks a watershed in theological thinking for the whole Church but in a special way for the Asian Churches. In the aftermath of the new insights opened up by the Council we see the beginning of the development of a number of specific Asian approaches to theology in various Asian regions or countries. What all these attempts have in common is that they start from a specific context and try to respond to the challenges arising from a given situation by way of theological reflection.

Asia is a vast continent where many religions and cultures live side by side. Any general characteristic of Asia taken by itself, therefore, has its limitations. Nevertheless, we can name some common characteristics which determine the overall Asian context:

- Asia is the continent of the great religions;
- Asia is a continent rich in cultural potentiality;
- Asia is a continent of poverty and oppression.

Accordingly, we can find three different types of doing theology in