

The *Bottom Line* of China's Policy on Religion During the Last 10 Years

by John Tong
Translated by Norman Walling

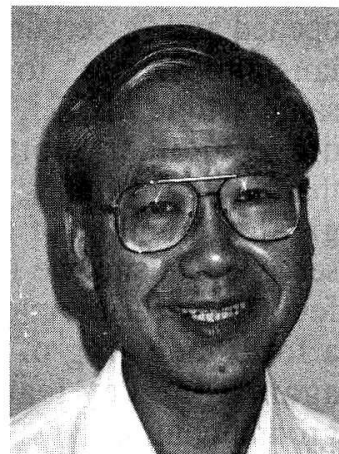
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Article 36 of China's new Constitution (1982) which deals with freedom of religious belief makes a clear distinction between freedom of belief and freedom of religious activity. According to the Constitution all citizens enjoy freedom of religious belief and the country has the duty "to protect normal religious activity." Although the term "normal" has never been clearly defined, we can get a clue to its meaning by searching out what is the "bottom line" of the government's policy on religion. Most likely the "bottom line" is whatever the government allows. What it permits is considered "normal"; what it does not permit is not only considered "not normal", but can even be construed as illegal. The "bottom line" is whatever the dictatorship of the Communist Party decides and what will in no way hinder achieving the Four Modernizations. Whatever conflicts with this is "forbidden territory".

We can discover the "bottom line" for all religious activity in China by examining some important documents published by the Communist Party and the Central Government of the People's Republic.

First, we quote Mr. Li Weihang, the former Chinese Communist Party's Head

of the United Front Department. Some time ago in speaking about the restoration of churches and other places for religious activity and on the training of seminarians and Sisters, Mr. Li said:



In order to safeguard the people's freedom of religious belief, we must not intrude into the normal religious life of believers. Moreover we must allow them to have places for religious activity and a certain number of religious professionals. If we have been remiss in these two matters and people are dissatisfied, we must make the necessary corrections. It is most important for us to train persons within the religious world who are of high caliber, patriotic and who have a profound knowledge of their religion. We need religious intellectuals to collate and study documents on the history of religions and also to implement the policies of the International United Front. Religious leaders of high standing must train successors who will know how to handle themselves in international situations.¹

It is Li's opinion that, before Libera-

tion, the Church had opened too many churches, but that too few were left opened during some of the political campaigns and the Cultural Revolution. By using the principle "avoiding two extremes and keeping the middle way", he has drawn a "bottom line". He allows "a certain number " of churches to be opened and "a certain number of seminarians and Sisters" to be trained. In this same article Mr. Li, though only faintly, draws another "bottom line". He says that while " winning over and uniting the greatest number of religious persons to serve socialism, we must also isolate the few reactionaries among them." This was a foreshadowing of the future pressure against the key leaders of the "underground church".

Secondly, Document #19 (March 1982) entitled "The Basic Standpoint and Policy on the Religious Question in China during this Period of Socialism" provides another "bottom line". This one concerns relationships with foreign churches and the acceptance of foreign funds because foreign and domestic contacts gradually increased with China's open door policy during the past decade.

Religious persons may and should develop mutual relationships with religious persons from other countries. They should maintain good communications with them and promote academic cultural exchanges on religion. However, while carrying out these various exchanges, they must firmly maintain the principle of independent and autonomous administration of church affairs. They must firmly resist all attempts by reactionary forces

within foreign churches which are seeking once again to control the Chinese Church. They must firmly refuse to let any foreign church or religious person meddle in or interfere with the affairs of our Chinese Church. They must absolutely refuse to allow foreign religious organizations (and this includes the agencies which they control) to use any means whatsoever to return to China for missionary purposes, or secretly to send in large quantities of religious propaganda for distribution.²

Consequently, the "bottom line" for the church regarding foreign contacts is that it must adhere to the principle of independent and autonomous administration of its own affairs. It must not permit any foreign religious body to come to China to do missionary work and it must not allow large quantities of religious propaganda to be brought into the country. Regarding funding from abroad Document #19 states:

Religious organizations and individuals (in China) are not allowed to seek funds from any foreign organization or person. All Chinese religious organizations and religious personnel, as well as any other organization or person in China, must not accept any subsidy or financial assistance from any foreign religious organization. If overseas Chinese and our Hong Kong and Macau compatriots, as well as other foreign believers, according to religious custom, wish to make an offering or give alms to temples, mosques or churches in China these religious bodies may accept them. Before ac-

cepting very large offerings or donations, however, a person or organization must first seek the approval of the concerned provincial, city or autonomous district's government or responsible Central department in charge of these affairs. This must be done even if it can be attested that these large sums of money are given out of religious fervor with no strings attached.³

The "bottom line" for accepting foreign funds is clear. Foreign donations must be given without any strings attached. Small sums, may be accepted, but large donations may not be accepted without government approval. It is reported that the government considers "large sums" to be anything in excess of 10,000 RMB.

In 1989, a year marked by global dialogue, Sino-Vatican relations began to move away from confrontation. As China wanted dialogue, it realized that it needed to delineate a new policy towards the Catholic Church. Accordingly, the Party's Central Committee and the State Council promulgated Document #3 (February 1989) entitled "A Report on Intensifying Work on the Catholic Church in the New Situation." Its contents outline four new "bottom lines":

1. Catholics are permitted to "maintain purely religious relationships with the Holy See." This means that Catholics can acknowledge the Pope as head of the Church and can pray for him publicly. However, Catholics cannot have direct contacts with the Holy See and the Chinese Church must continue to choose and consecrate its own bishops.

2. The Document allows for a reor-

ganization of the Patriotic Association giving the Bishops' Conference the highest authority, thus bringing the Conference in line with other such Catholic organizations throughout the world.

3. The Document proposes further steps to implement the policy of returning the church's real estate. The aim is eventually to make the Church completely self-supporting and thereby to eliminate the State's financial liability for it.

4. The Document spells out a "carrot and stick" policy in dealing with the "underground church". The masses must be won over and united while the minority is to be isolated and suppressed.

...those individual underground leaders [must] be dealt with who, despite the many patient efforts on the part of the government, stubbornly cling to their hostility and their tactics of confrontation and who, by stirring up believers, create public disturbances and disrupt public order. Their crime must be clearly determined and fully unmasked before the whole community. The law must deal with them severely.⁴

Newspaper reports state that since the end of 1989 more than 40 underground Catholics have been arrested in North China and in Fujian Province.

The various "bottom lines" mentioned above apply nationwide, but each local government also has its own "bottom lines" regarding religious policy. These differ from the national ones perhaps only in degree. In any case, it is extremely important to be well aware of them. This knowledge will help us to assess the effects of various campaigns on religion

and also make it possible for us to understand better what is being said. We must note, however, that the "bottom lines" established by the Chinese government for each campaign are not irreversible. They can be changed. For example, a few years ago when the mainland government was preparing to organize the drafting committee for Hong Kong's Basic Law, the head of China's Xinhua News Agency office in Hong Kong, Mr. Xu Jiatusun, said: "The Drafting Committee for Hong Kong's Basic Law will not have any citizens from Hong Kong as members." A few days later he said: "Most likely there will be Hong Kong citizens who will take part in the Basic Law Drafting Committee." It is clear from this that China's "bottom line" on religious policy can also change. As a matter of fact, if China would only extend its "bottom line"

in dealing with the Catholic Church and give it greater liberty, allowing it to operate on the same level and to enjoy the same freedoms that Catholics in other places enjoy, China would then not only not lose "face" but it would enable its Catholic citizens to serve their motherland better. They would win friends for their country and help further her stability and prosperity thus China would enjoy ever greater international prestige.

Notes

1. Li Weihau, *The United Front and the Question of Nationalities*, Beijing People's Press, 1980, pp. 508-9, 568-571.
2. *Mainland China Studies*, Taipei, Vol. 25, No. 10, p. 90.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *TRIPOD*, No. 52, pp. 73-76.

Holy Spirit Study Centre: Breakthrough and Response

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The launching of *TRIPOD* magazine ten years ago did not happen by chance. This new bilingual magazine was the result of historical events unfolding in Mainland China, in the Catholic Church and in society at large. Its success in Hong Kong, as well as in China and abroad indicates that *TRIPOD* was born at

the right time and in the proper context.

When Chairman Mao Zedong proclaimed the new republic on 1 October, 1949, he proudly declared that the Chinese People finally could stand up. In many ways that was true.

