

Policy Differentiations Regarding Christianity

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In November 1990, the Institute of World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing held a seminar on the topic "The Situation of Religion in Contemporary China." Among the papers presented was Pastor Wang Weifan's "A Discussion of Present Problems in Christianity." We present here Part III of Pastor Wang's presentation entitled, "Policy Differentiations Concerning Christianity"

For the past 10 years most of the cadres in religious work have carried out the spirit of Document #19, have united the patriotic religious personages and have implemented the policy of religious freedom. This is one of the most important reasons why the religious situation is stable and healthy. But the situation is very complicated, and with the passage of time, new problems regarding differentiations in policy have continually appeared, which must be studied and dealt with with "special care," "extreme caution," and "after careful consideration."

When Chairman Mao was alive he spoke about problems concerning policy. He maintained that policy deals with differentiations. If policy does not deal with differentiations, then it is not worthy of the name policy. But due to the long time influence of "leftist" thought and defects such as an incorrect style of study, a lack of a grasp of reality and of investigation, it is difficult for some comrades to perceive the proper differentiations. In their actions they are accustomed to "cutting down everything at one blow." This tendency must be conscientiously restrained.

The main problems of policy differentiations concerning Christianity which urgently await solution are the following:

(1) The definition and explanation of "infiltration"

The word "infiltration" can be used in many ways. Basically, it is a neutral word. But in speaking about guarding against "infiltration" or opposing "infiltration" in the Chinese Christian Church's dealings with foreigners, the word takes on a political connotation. It points to the propaganda or activities of hostile foreign forces which have as their object the overthrow of our country's sovereignty or of its socialist system. Or it can refer to propaganda or activities aimed at the destruction of the "three self" policy of the Chinese Christian Church, or an attempt to regain control over the Chinese Church. Therefore, the friendly relations between our country's Christian Church and foreign Christian churches cannot be considered activities of infiltration. Normal relations of a religious nature between peoples are also not to be considered as infiltrating activities. Foreign Christians who come to China purely from a religious motive and make a monetary offering with no political strings attached, who donate a few Bibles or religious books containing no anti-China sentiments, or who preach a few words of Christian doctrine free of anti-China content, this likewise should not be considered infiltration. If all of the above, without differentiation, are considered "infiltration," then among the greatest "political infiltrators" were the monk Jian Zhen who brought Buddhism to Japan and Master Damo who came from India.

Summing up, in dealing with those who use religious methods or who make use of religion itself to carry out political infiltration, we must heighten our awareness and not treat the matter lightly. At the same time we must not exaggerate and see enemies behind every bush and tree. The most important thing is to be adept at carrying out scientific analysis, differentiating and implementing policy in dealing with all phenomena. In the matter of resisting infiltration, one should be aware that there are often material considerations. At the beginning of the 1980's foreign hostile forces did use shipments of the Bible to engage in infiltration. This is not to say that the Bible itself can be branded as being anti-China or that its contents are anti-China, nor can we say that, even after the implementation of the religious policy, the Chinese church and the great mass of Christians do not need Bibles. Rather, the organizations which engaged in shipping Bibles to China were anti-China organiza-

tions. In the name of sending Bibles to the Chinese church, they deceived good foreign Christians into donating large sums of money. At the same time they broadcast such rumors as, the Chinese Communist Party does not permit Chinese Christians to possess Bibles nor allow its publication. One such person was "Brother Andrew." During the past 10 years, after the Chinese church had printed many Bibles, the shipment of Bibles has practically dried up. What is lacking at present are religious books and periodicals. Although religious books from abroad do not in themselves contain any anti-China sentiments, nevertheless, they can give rise to the tendency in the Chinese church for people to go their own way and cause people to suspect our Party's policy of religious freedom. Therefore, to support the Chinese church's publication of its own religious books is a significant means of resisting infiltration. In speaking of Christianity, so-called religious activity does not only refer to holding worship services. It also includes individual prayer, the reading of the Bible and the reading of religious books and periodicals. If we cannot satisfy the Christians' desire to read religious books and periodicals, then it will be difficult to contradict the anti-China propaganda which will be forthcoming.

(2) The Problem of Meeting Points

It has been a long-standing special characteristic of Chinese Christianity that it have meeting points in addition to churches. During the ten years of catastrophe, churches were closed, occupied and even destroyed, but worship at meeting points never stopped. They only became more scattered and secretive. Since the 3rd plenum of the 11th Central Committee, the Party's policy of religious freedom has been implemented anew. Churches are continually being returned to the Christian community and are being used once again as places of religious activity. The vast majority of these churches are under the administration of the patriotic Christian organizations, that is, the Three Self Movement or the China Christian Council. At the same time in each place there are still a great number of meeting points. Dealing with these numerous Christian meeting points is an important policy matter which requires careful handling. That is to say, the problem calls for differentiation, and cannot be dealt with by a policy of "felling everything with

one blow of the sword." To consider all the unregistered Christian meeting points as "underground forces" or "illegal," and because of this to seek to wipe out or suppress them, is a method which does not "differentiate" and it is not "policy." The unavoidable result would be the mixing of two different types of contradiction, and the harming of the religious feelings of Christian believers at the grassroots level. To dampen the positive sacrifices such believers are making for the building up of socialism's "two civilizations" would certainly give rise to the unstable factor of doubt and dissatisfaction with both Party and government.

The various situations of religious activities taking place outside of churches at the present time are as follows:

(a) Although churches supervised by the Christian patriotic organizations are opened, some Christians live far away, in the near or more distant suburbs of cities, or the Christians are so numerous that one or two churches are unable to contain them. Or some Christians because of work cannot worship on Sundays, and so they must worship at a certain place and on a certain evening when Christians gather. Others, because of their original denominational background, are not satisfied with the services at the church, and so they gather at another meeting point. All these meeting points maintain contact with the patriotic religious organizations, and accept their leadership and help. Actually, they supplement church activity. Of course one cannot categorize such Christian activity as "illegal" or "underground."

(b) In certain places, because there are no Christians or the Christians are very few, there is no church building. However, given the movement of populations in the last 40 years and the natural spread of the Gospel, the numbers of Christians have increased significantly. Since Christians are present in a certain place, they certainly want to practice their faith and carry out religious activities. From the point of view of thoroughly implementing the policy of religious freedom, "to rationally arrange places for religious activity is an important material prerequisite for implementing the Party's religious policy and for normalizing religious activities." This is the important wording from Document #19 regarding places of religious activity. At the present time in our country between 15,000 and 20,000 churches or meeting points have been

opened. Many are newly built churches; others are church-substitute meeting points because conditions are not yet ripe for building a church. Therefore, meeting points which have "suddenly appeared" in places where no church existed previously cannot automatically be considered "illegal." Now that they have "suddenly appeared," they cannot automatically be considered as belonging to the "underground." Freedom of religion includes "freedom for persons who were previously non-believers to now become believers." Therefore, in regard to implementing the part of the policy concerned with arranging places for religious activity, inevitably there will be places which had no church in the past, where permission for a church should be granted, but where a meeting point temporarily substitutes for the church.

(c) In general it can be said that the faith of Christians everywhere is for the most part the same, with minor differences. Just because these "minor differences" exist, so there are little variations in the explanation of doctrine, in theological outlook, and religious feeling. Therefore some Christians are unwilling to participate in religious activities at the church. To give a small example: most churches like to place a cross on the pulpit, and many Christians are glad to see the cross in the church. However, as soon as some other Christians see a cross on the pulpit they feel uncomfortable because they think that displaying the cross is "worshipping idols," and "the ten commandments" forbids the worship of idols. In 1958, when united worship services began, this kind of "minor difference" was covered up. But after the 3rd plenum of the 11th Central Committee, when people learned that they must rethink everything in a spirit of seeking truth from facts, these Christians were now unwilling to sacrifice their "minor differences" for the sake of the "greater identity." But cherishing and preserving some "minor differences" is not the same as absolutely denying or ignoring the "greater identity." So when these Christians carry out religious activities at a meeting point in accordance with their traditions, the nature of these activities is still purely religious, and they are not "illegal" activities. Their policy for running their church is still "Three Self," and they do not receive any subsidies from abroad, nor are they subject to foreign control. Their social behaviour is good and the local officials have a good opinion of them. This kind of meeting point cannot

be considered illegal just because the Christians attending it do not participate in activities at the church. To simplify the question so is not to understand that from the beginning, whether in doctrine, theology, liturgy or emotion, Christianity has been pluralistic. The "unity" which we emphasize does not mean "conformity" or "unification." The "post-denominational" nature which we emphasize does not deny or obliterate the traditions and backgrounds which have formed in each Christian denomination over the last 400 years. No other choice can be made except to acknowledge the legitimate existence of such meeting points.

(d) Just like in society at large, successive political campaigns took place within Christianity. Some people were mistakenly harmed, and some people belonging to the category of contradictions among the people were attacked. Especially during the "Cultural Revolution," some members of the Three Self organizations were forced to do things harmful to the feelings of the believing masses. A certain estrangement grew up between them. Therefore, after the implementation of the religious policy, some believers have been unwilling to go to church to participate in the religious activities led by these persons. However, the Christians are also reasonable. They understand that in the beginning such persons had no choice, or that they were involuntarily under the influence of "leftist" thought. If those persons only recognize and acknowledge their mistakes, then the Christians are willing to let bygones be bygones. Such persons continue to enjoy prestige among the Christians, and they can do a fairly good job of leading the Christians along the road of love of country and love of church. Such an example is fairly frequent among the Christian churches throughout the whole country. But there are individual cases of persons who refuse to admit their mistakes, and they even apply the same pressure as in the past. When they attack the believers, then it is difficult for the believers to forgive them. Therefore, the solution to the problem must basically come from a desire for unity. On the levels of both politics and religious sentiment, painstaking unity work must be done in order to help individual "Three Self" persons to recognize their mistakes and change their behaviour.

(e) Of course we must admit that a fifth kind of situation exists, namely that some persons who organize or lead meeting

points make use of the legal nature of Christianity to carry out illegal activities. Or they use the opportunity of the open door policy to maintain contact with anti-China forces abroad, and even accept subsidies from them and carry out their instructions. Such persons should be prosecuted in accordance with the law. At the same time it is necessary to differentiate them from the great mass of Christian believers, to differentiate between contradictions between ourselves and the enemy and contradictions among the people, and to differentiate between the illegal, political activities of the bad elements and the religious activities of the Christian masses. In other words, while we are attacking the bad elements, it is not right to bring harm to the masses, nor is it right to prohibit or suppress the meeting points where the masses carry out religious activities. This is the best way for isolating and attacking individual bad elements and the best way for uniting the Christian masses. Also, in attacking the bad elements, real proof must be found and precise evidence presented publically, in order to educate the great mass of Christians. If the job is done perfunctorily or if only a game of "capture and release" is played, then it will have the contrary effect of increasing the prestige of such persons among the Christians. This would cause us to fall into a passive "stupidity," and, speaking of the country as a whole, there are not only one or two examples.

In conclusion, in dealing with the the problem of Christian meeting points, we need a little bit of Lenin's strategy: "Use every opportunity, never mind how small, to obtain the greatest number of allies...whoever does not understand this point, does not in the least understand Marxism nor does he in the least understand common modern scientific socialism." ("Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder, 1920, p. 20 of the Chinese edition)

(3) The Problem of Supervision

With every activity in the world there is the problem of supervision, and religious activity is no exception. But regarding supervision the questions arise: who supervises and how should supervision be carried out? Comrade Deng Xiaoping has said: "Our organizations at every level of leadership supervise matters which they should not supervise; they supervise them

badly, or they are incapable of supervising them. These matters should have their own definite regulations. Delegate these matters to a lower level, or delegate them to an enterprise, professional or social unit. Let the units handle these matters themselves according to the principles of democratic centralism. Originally, such matters could be handled very well. But bringing them all to the leading organizations of the Party and government, or to the departments of Party Central, they become very difficult to deal with. No one has magical powers that they can adequately deal with such complicated and unfamiliar matters." ("Reform of Party and Government Leadership Organs", August 18, 1980, Selections From the Writings of Deng Xiaoping, p. 288). The patriotic religious organizations are "social units." In most cases the departments responsible for them are the United Front Department of the Party or the Religious Affairs Bureau of the government. In a few places they are under the civil administration or other departments. Supervision by Party and government departments over the patriotic religious organizations does not mean that every matter, whether large or small, is subject to their supervision. They "cannot supervise well, nor are they capable of supervising," such complicated matters. Especially those matters which are strictly religious affairs, these are "unfamiliar," and government departments "should not supervise" them. Ideal supervision requires definite "regulations," and everyone expects a "Religious Law" to be forthcoming. Matters concerning the patriotic religious organizations or religion itself should "be delegated to a lower level," and "let those organizations handle them according to the principles of democratic centralism." In this way many matters "difficult to deal with" would be "dealt with very well."

Deng Xiaoping's words definitely cannot be mistaken to mean that the leadership function of the Party and government has become weak. Just the opposite is meant: by a reform of the methods of leadership, leadership is strengthened. In the last 10 years several terms have been used to describe the leadership the Party and government exercises over the patriotic religious organizations. One of these is "administrative leadership." This is Document #19's formulation. However distinctions must be made regarding the understanding and interpretation of this term. Some people understand the term to mean that all administrative affairs of the patriotic religious organizations are sub-

ject to the Party and government's leadership and supervision. They think that permission is needed even for such trifling matters as purchasing a microphone. Furthermore, some people think that officials should supervise everything, even such things as the number of times worship services can be held, who can be baptized, who can be a pastor, and even who should pray at meetings. Such an understanding and interpretation are just contrary to the spirit of Deng Xiaoping's words. The best interpretation of "administrative leadership" is contained in Document #19 itself. The original wording is as follows: "All places of worship are under the administrative leadership of the Bureau of Religious Affairs, but the religious organizations and the religious professionals are responsible for their supervision." Here two things could not be more clearly put: First, "religious organizations and religious professionals are responsible for the supervision of all places of worship," and it is not the officials who are responsible for their supervision; and second, when "religious organizations and religious professionals exercise supervision over places of worship," it is done "under the administrative leadership of the Religious Affairs Bureau." What is meant by "administrative leadership" in the first place is that the Religious Affairs Bureau is one of the many administrative departments of the government. It has a leadership function in matters touching upon religious affairs. Secondly, its leadership is administrative, and not a leadership over religious affairs. The Religious Affairs Bureau does not run religion. It is not the same as other departments, such as the Department of Industry which runs industry, the Department of Agriculture which runs agriculture and the Department of Education which runs schools.

Besides the above mentioned "administrative leadership," some people speak about "supervision in accordance with the law." This point is mentioned in Document #19. When it says "all patriotic religious organizations must accept the leadership of the Party and the government," it also says, "to let them (the patriotic religious organizations - author) take the initiative to develop beneficial works in accordance with the Constitution and laws." It is very clear: the "law" in the phrase "supervision in accordance with the law" is the Constitution and laws. Now the problems which exist in some places are: on the one hand there is no "Religious Law," or "regulations" for supervision to

act in accordance with. On the other hand, in the Religious Affairs Bureau there really are the kinds of persons described by Comrade Deng Xiaoping as "godfather types." Such persons only know "power" and not "law." When "carrying out supervision over religion in accordance with the law" or "strengthening supervision over religion in accordance with the law," they act as if "power is not subject to any limitation; others must do what they are told, even to the extent that others become dependent upon them....they create cat and mouse relationships which were criticized many times in the past by Comrade Mao Zedong; they form the gentry type or factional relationships common to the old society." (cf. "Reform of Party and Government Leadership Organs," in The Writings of Deng Xiaoping, pp. 290-1) Another formulation is "to initiate comprehensive control over religion." But the term "comprehensive control" is always used when referring to natural or public disasters, such comprehensive control over the Yellow River, over environmental pollution or over youthful crime. If one speaks about wanting to exercise "comprehensive control" over religion, this is not less than considering religion to be "a social and public calamity." This essentially runs counter to the conclusion of Document #19: "The status of religion in China has already undergone a fundamental change." It essentially denies the Party and government's basic task in this new historical period, as mentioned in Document #19: "to firmly and thoroughly implement the policy of religious freedom, to consolidate and expand patriotic political alliances with the religious circles of all nationalities, to strengthen education in patriotism and socialism among them, and to bring into play their positive elements in order to build a modern and strong socialist state, to complete the great task of unifying the country, to oppose hegemonism and to strive together to protect and preserve world peace." I ask you: to the targets of "comprehensive control" what "patriotic political alliances" can you speak about? What "positive elements" are you talking about? How can you speak of "striving together?"

(4) Religion and Politics

After the changes in Eastern Europe, some people brought up this question: religion is not only a matter of personal faith,

but it is also a political matter. In regard to religious work, how should we look at the relationship between religion and politics? We should consider it very seriously. We should analyze, differentiate, and have a policy.

Premier Zhou once said: "We affirm now that religious belief is only a matter of thought and faith among the people. It does not touch upon political matters. No matter whether people are atheists or theists, materialists or idealists, all likewise can support the socialist system." (Zhou Enlai, "Problems Concerning the Prosperity of the Nationalities and Social Reform," People's Daily, December 31, 1957). As I understand it, religious faith is not the same as political faith. To believe in a religion is not choosing a political attitude. Since this is the case, a theist and an atheist can both support the socialist system. A believer and a non-believer can both make a contribution to the task of building up socialism. This Marxist outlook of Premier Zhou, as repeated in Document #19, is the basis and premise for beginning and ending all religious work. If there were not this basis and premise, if all religious faith was considered of necessity to be backward and reactionary, then we cannot talk about unity between believers and non-believers. We cannot talk about the will and strength of believers and non-believers being centred on "a common goal." Therefore we cannot mix up world views and political attitudes, as Document #19 has already pointed out to us.

In saying that religion is not only a matter of personal belief, but that it is also a political matter, one should understand the question of the political attitude of the patriotic religious organizations or religious bodies. Including the Chinese Christian Three Self Patriotic Movement and the China Christian Council, Document #19 affirms that China has 8 national religious organizations. And they are affirmed as being "patriotic religious organizations." This is evidence for the political attitude of the 8 religious organizations: they love the new socialist China led by the Chinese Communist Party.

Because the materials are too few it is difficult to make a very accurate assessment about the situation in Eastern Europe. But in general we can say that the factors which brought about the change were many: economic, social, ethnic and religious factors were all present. But the main factor was economic. Even if "a religious overtone was present," this overtone and

what was covered up was still "the vital interests of the masses." This is a basic principle of Marxism. We cannot be like Feuerbach, and only "make use of men's souls and their religious requirements" to explain some religious overtones in the Eastern European situation. (cf. Engels, Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of German Classical Philosophy, found in Selections from Marx and Engels, vol. 4, pp. 250-253). At the same time, because the changes in Eastern Europe contained some religious factors, in our religious work we absolutely must not regard religion as an alien force, which must be increasingly guarded against lest it contend with socialism. Generally speaking, the actual situation of the relationship between religion and politics in China is just the opposite. Starting from the overall concern of maintaining social stability, we should go even further in thoroughly implementing the Party's religious policy, make greater efforts to unite the masses, and do more to bring into play the positive factors of the Christian patriotic personages and the great mass of believers. We should not cause them needless physical and mental suffering.

