

What Is Meant by Adaptation?

by A Special Commentator

The first three issues this year of the *Catholic Church in China*, the publication of the government approved Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference and the Catholic Patriotic Association, report on a series of high level meetings on the topic of religion in Chinese society which took place at the end of 1993 and early 1994. The meetings revealed a new phrase now being applied to the position of religion in society. The phrase is: "Adaptation should take place between religion and socialist society" (*zongjiao yu shehuizhuyi shehui xiang shiying*). The phrase raises questions in the minds of religious believers, both inside and outside of China, about the exact meaning of the term and about its effect on the future practice of religious faith in China.

The phrase has its origin in a speech, excerpts of which are published in *Catholic Church in China*, (1994, #1), given by Communist Party Secretary General Jiang Zemin to a national meeting of United Front Department cadres in November 1993. In his speech, entitled *Minorities and Religions are no Small Matters*, Jiang Zemin said: "The purpose of implementing the policy of religious freedom and of increasing supervision over religion in accordance with the law is to guide religion to adapt to socialist society...This adaptation by no means requires that believers abandon their idealism, theism or religious faith. Rather it requires that in the political realm they fervently love the motherland, and support the socialist system and the leadership of the Communist Party. At the same time they should reform religious organizations and doctrines which do not fit in with socialism, and make use of religious doctrines, disciplines and certain positive factors in religious morality to serve socialism."¹

After the above mentioned meeting of United Front cadres, the question of adaptation between religion and socialist society was the subject of a seminar attended by government religious workers and religious leaders held in Hainan Province, January 18-29 1994. Attending from the Chinese Catholic Church were Bishop Zong Huaide, chairman of both the Chinese Catholic

Bishops Conference and the Catholic Patriotic Association, and Bishops Fu Tieshan and Jin Luxian of Beijing and Shanghai respectively.

During the seminar Bishop Zong pointed out that during the past several decades, in accordance with developments in socialism, the Chinese Catholic Church has carried out some reforms in church structures and ceremonies for the purpose of adapting to socialism. These reforms were not only in conformity with Catholic doctrine and morals, he said, but it was also the common desire of the mass of Catholic believers.² Bishop Zong substituted "ceremonies" for the General Secretary Jiang's "doctrines", however, we can see that this part of Jiang's November 1993, speech about the reform of religious doctrines not in conformity with socialism was a cause of concern to him.

A report on the Hainan meeting was given at the traditional New Year's tea party held by the Party leadership for the leaders of China's five major religions on January 29, 1994. Vice-premier and politburo member Li Ruihuan presided. A United Front Department vice-director reported that the Hainan meeting produced many good suggestions about adaptation between religion and socialist society. Vice-premier Li then pointed out that since China was now in the process of establishing a socialist market economy, religious work faced new circumstances. He stressed that religious believers must strive to find their place in this new situation, bring into play their special role, and continually adapt to the new circumstances of vigorous economic development.³

Since Vice-premier Li did not mention the need for reforming incompatible religious doctrines, Bishop Zong Huaide did not refer to it in his response to Li. Rather, he concentrated on past history, pointing out how Chinese Catholicism has adapted to Chinese socialism at every stage of its development.

In the beginning, Bishop Zong said, the Chinese Catholic Church separated itself from the manipulation and control of imperialism (he did not say from the Vatican), and followed the road of independence. A second example of Catholic adaptation are the more than 3,000 bishops, priests, Brothers, Sisters and lay Catholics who have been cited in recent years as model workers. Some of these, Bishop Zong noted, have helped economic development by acting as go-betweens for attracting foreign investment, technology and personnel to China. Third-

ly, Catholic moral principles, such as the Ten Commandments, are helping to maintain public order. Fourthly, Chinese Catholics have made a contribution to the peaceful reunification of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao with the motherland by warmly welcoming visiting delegations from these territories. Finally, the Chinese Catholic Church's foreign relations have made many friends for China, have expanded China's influence abroad and have been beneficial to China's economic development. All these are examples of Chinese Catholicism's adaptation to socialist society, Bishop Zong concluded.⁴

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We get a further insight into Bishop Zong's thinking on adaptation from his comments on the two sets of regulations governing religious activities (regarding foreigners and venues) issued on January 31, 1994 by the State Council and signed by Premier Li Peng. Bishop Zong said: "In recent years....we have come to a deeper realization that adaptation between religion and socialist society must take place. This means that religion must submit to and serve the process which has economic reconstruction as its core."⁵

The campaign for adaptation between religion and the socialist society raises many questions for religious believers. The first is the question of who adapts to whom? Although the formula contains the Chinese characters *xiang shiying* which has the flavor of mutual adaptation, and although the authorities admit that certain religious doctrines and disciplines are useful to socialist society, the adaptation spoken about for the most part seems to be all one-sided. That is, it is religion which is required to adapt to socialism. One gets this impression from the statement of Party Secretary Jiang that religious structures and doctrines must be reformed if they do not fit in with socialism. In the same sentence Secretary Jiang had said that adaptation does not mean that religious believers must abandon their faith.

But how can believers change one of their doctrines without being accused of abandoning their faith? After all, doctrines are articles of faith.

One wonders if an eventual merger between religion and socialism lies behind the authorities' promotion of adaptation. Such a merger seems to be the thrust of another recent *Catholic Church in China* article. After pointing out how socialism's spiritual civilization can draw lessons from the Ten commandments and other elements of Catholic morality, a writer by the name of Zhang Gang says that the political ideals of socialism can be poured into religious thought, so that believers and non-believers alike will be encouraged to unite to construct a strong socialist nation. This will lead to religion and socialist China being more in harmony with one another, causing religion to become a positive and progressive force for building up socialism, and making the nation and the people recognize the true face and value of religion.⁶

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If merger of the two is envisioned, then there is danger that religion will be swallowed up by socialism. However, if it is not merger but cooperation with the economic development plans of the nation that is meant, then there is danger that religion will become merely a social service agency, raising funds and providing personnel to human development projects like hospitals, kindergartens, orphanages, etc. Religions may be required to contribute some of their financial resources to national construction projects. Perhaps even returned church properties will be taken back again by the government. One wonders if this was the case with the Chengdu Seminary. The 40 seminarians who left the seminary in mid-April 1994 because of the appointment of a Religious Affairs Bureau cadre as vice-rector noted in their letter of protest that the cadre seized the official seal which controlled the finances of the seminary.⁷

With the movement towards adaptation, the authorities

perhaps want the usefulness of religion to be seen as being in the area of economic development and social service. There is the danger that its message of religious belief will then be ignored, played down, or restricted to the worship services of a small community of believers. The movement also seems to involve more government control over religion. As can be seen, the campaign for mutual adaptation raises many questions. At the present time the adaptation spoken about seems to mean religion's support for economic development, rather than a merger between religion and socialism. However the cause of concern for religious believers arises from the fact that the highest authority in the land has stated concerning adaptation that any conflict between religion and socialism must be resolved in favor of socialism, even if it means reforming religious doctrines.

Notes

1. *Xinhua Meiri Tongxun*, November 8, 1993, as quoted in *Catholic Church in China*, 1994, #1, p. 26.
 2. *People's Daily*, February 6, 1994.
 3. *Catholic Church in China*, 1994, #1, p. 27.
 4. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-9.
 5. *Catholic Church in China*, 1994, #3, p. 3.
 6. Zhang Gang, *Catholic Church in China*, 1994, #2, p. 38.
 7. *Union of Catholic Asian News* (UCAN) dispatch, May 5, 1994.
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