

Church and State Relations in China: Characteristics and Trends

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Because there are different cultures, histories and social systems in the world, there are different models of relations between governments and religious groups. Throughout this paper--although I am including all religions--I will refer to all these models as "church-state relations." Basically, these relations or models may be categorized as follows:

Unity between the national religion and the state.

In this model, the supreme religious leader, often concurrently the state president, has supreme authority in national, domestic and international policy making. Religious doctrine and statutes, as set forth in scripture, serve as the criteria for all activities in the country. Administration, judicial affairs and education are all under the guidance and control of religious authority. The power of the church and the power of the state are identical. Other religions are illegal.

Separation of church and state.

In this paradigm, the state does not support, forbid or discriminate against any religion. It does not tax but neither does it provide religion with any financial aid. There is no governmental agency for religious matters and the state does not interfere in the internal affairs of any religious organization. Religions accept no political leadership or guidance from the government and do not participate in state administration, the judiciary or education. Church and state relations are regulated completely by law.

State church.

The state church model endorses a certain religion or denomination as the preeminent belief. The state grants and legitimates privileges for that religion or denomination and supports it financially. There are arrangements within the state administration to deal with religious affairs, but the religious leader does not participate in state affairs and the head of the

state is not responsible to the religious leader. Other religions or denominations are tolerated to different degrees.

State dominance over religion.

In this type of relations, religion is accepted by the state on the supposition that it recognizes the state's political authority, accepts its leadership in all social spheres, and carries out its policies. The state administration manages religious organizations which are not involved in government administration, the judiciary or education. The role of religion in society is strictly limited.

These four categories, with slight internal variations, roughly reflect the main patterns of current church and state relations.

Church and State Relations in China

Which of the above categories most accurately reflects church and state relations in China? The key elements of our analysis include political and economic relations, government function and the relationship between religion and government administration, the judiciary and public education.

Political relations.

In the Chinese Constitution, there is no reference to the relationship between the state and religious organizations. The constitutions of the government-approved religious associations clearly state that they operate under the leadership of the People's Government. The Chinese Communist Party in its programmatic document on religious affairs, No. 19, 1982, proclaimed, "Every patriotic organization must accept the leadership of the Communist Party and the government." The Central Government reiterated this statement in Document No. 6, 1991. These official pronouncements indicate clearly that the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party State and the religious organizations is that of leading and being led.

The dominance of state authority over religious authority is evident in the very fact that the state defines the official religious groups--Buddhism, Daoism, Islam and (separately) Protestantism and Catholicism. These religious groups are managed by the government and must carry out Party and government policies. While the religious groups are independent in terms of

administrative and organizational relationships, they are no different politically from those institutions under the direct leadership of the government.

Economic relations.

Some say that religious organizations in China are run by the government. This statement is not quite accurate since places of religious activity (temples, churches and mosques) are not built with government funds; they are not state property. Furthermore, the religious clergy (ministers, priests, monks, imams) are not government employees. However, neither is it true to say that the economic resources of the religious organizations consist only of rental from their property, donations from the believers, and farm production by the clergy. All national and local religious organizations (provincial, municipal directly under the central government, regional, etc.) and their related institutions (such as seminaries) are listed as authorized government bodies. Their administrative expenses and the quota of officials and staff are included in the total number authorized for organizations belonging to the Party, the Government and the masses. The state budget also provides annual funds for the maintenance of key temples and churches. The leaders of the religious groups enjoy benefits equal to other government cadres. These include salary, housing, health care, retirement, access to cars, etc. Each year, influential religious leaders receive certain amounts of financial aid from the government. Therefore, religion in China is not run by, but it is assisted by the government.

The function of the government.

The government at all levels in China (provincial, municipal and county) has organizational units or individuals to

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manage religious affairs. Document No. 19 states "All places of worship are under the administrative control of the Bureau of Religious Affairs." Through the Bureau the government exercises its legal and administrative management, which involves approving the establishment of places of worship, resolving conflicts among religious groups and giving permission for religious activities. In all aspects of their daily work, the leaders of the religious groups cooperate with the government in the management of religious affairs.

The relationship between religion and government administration, the judiciary and public education.

Document No. 19 states clearly, "It is absolutely forbidden for religion to interfere in the state's administration, the judiciary, school education and public social education." This means that religions in China are proscribed from involvement in administration, judicial affairs, and all forms of education, whether in schools, in correspondence courses, or in the media.

According to the analysis above, church and state relations in China fit under *State dominance over religion*, the last category of the four basic patterns.

Basic Religious Policies of the Chinese Government

The legal existence of religious groups depends on their willingness to accept government leadership. Because the state has the power to choose its partners, the government's religious policy is central to the study of church and state relations. Article No. 36 of the PRC constitution stipulates, "The citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy the freedom of religious belief." According to Document No. 19, 1982, the basic long-term policy is "respect for and protection of the freedom of religious belief." The Communist Party and the government also emphasize the freedom of non-believers and issue anti-superstitious propaganda, which they claim is to protect people's freedom of religious belief. Related regulations include "No one can use religion to interfere in the state administration, judiciary and education", "it is forbidden to force those under 18 years old to believe in religion... it is forbidden to use religion to oppose Party leadership and the socialist system, to undermine the unity of the state and various nationalities."

By implication, the freedom of religious belief has two specific meanings: First, a citizen has alternatives regarding his or her religious belief. "Every citizen has the freedom to believe or not to believe in religion; the freedom to believe in this or that religion. Within a particular religion, s/he has the freedom to believe in this sect or that sect. A person who was previously a non-believer has the freedom to become a religious believer, and one who has been a religious believer has the freedom to become a non-believer." Thus, a citizen has a total of "eight freedoms"! However, the practice of a citizen's religious belief is prescribed by the government. According to Document No. 19, 1982, Document No. 6, 1991 and Document No. 145, 1994, "normal" religious activities which take place in locations registered and approved by the government are under legal protection. Any meeting, preaching or evangelism outside of those places are considered "abnormal" or "illegal".

These are the basic contents of the policy of the freedom of religious belief. What is the purpose and motivation behind all this? In 1961 the late Li Wei-han, founding director in charge of the United Front work for the Chinese Communist Party, including religious affairs, said, "As we uphold the policy of the freedom of religious belief, domestically, we may manage to unite the majority within the various religious fields to serve socialism and to isolate those few reactionaries; internationally, it is helpful to integrate the various religious entities into an anti-imperialist united front and peace movement, thus countering any sabotage by reactionaries." Document 19, 1982, says that the fundamental motivation and purpose "for the implementation of our policy of freedom of religious belief lies in our desire to unite the mass of believers and non-believers and enable them to center all their will and strength on the common goal of building a modernized, powerful socialist state." Party Secretary General Jiang Zemin has said, "the purpose for carrying out the policy of the freedom of religious belief or for legally strengthening the management of religious affairs, is to conform religion to the socialist society."

Obviously, this policy of the freedom of religious belief is based not on any awareness of theism or a concept of religious values but rather on the realistic and pragmatic consideration that religion can serve the political goal of the Party and state.

Regardless of intention, how has the policy actually impact-

ed the development of religion in China? Li Wei-han originally calculated that, "In the final analysis, implementing correctly and properly the policy of the freedom of religious belief under the conditions in our country is more helpful for accelerating the decline of religious belief than for promoting its development." Ironically, the Cultural Revolution discontinued this policy aimed at "accelerating the decline of religious beliefs", and thus after the Cultural Revolution, religion developed nationwide. The policy of the freedom of religious belief was reinstated after 1979. However, it may require some time yet to determine the final effect of the policy.

The Present Situation in Church and State Relations

According to Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin, the relationship between the state and the religious groups is to "cooperate in politics and respect each other's different beliefs." Yet the two have their own special concerns.

The Concerns of the Government.

According to the government, there are various divergencies between the religions and the state that are "not in accordance with the socialist society." The nature of these policies varies with the different religions, but none are considered helpful to the goal of "political stability and economic development." We will talk about the five religions in three groupings.

Buddhism and Daoism.

With regard to the mainstream Buddhism of the Han nationality, problems arise mainly with regard to the management of the temples and monks. Some of the temples are considered to be "under chaotic management." The financial income of the temple often goes into monks' pockets and it is very hard for the government to manage them effectively. In the rural areas, the spontaneous practice of building temples continues nonstop despite repeated warnings. The government is locked in the stalemate of eliminating or approving each one in an endless stream. Nevertheless these problems have not harmed the rather good relationship between the government and the two religions considered part of Chinese traditional culture.

Lamaism and Islam

Lamaism, a division of Buddhism, is also the Buddhism of Tibet. Lamanists include Tibetans and Mongolians. The Muslims are mainly of Hui and Uygur nationalities. All are officially designated minority nationalities. Hence, in dealing with Lamaism and Islam, the government often integrates religious issues with the issues of their nationality. Lamaism is strongly identified with the Dalai Lama and the issue of Tibetan independence; Islam is the religion fully accepted by ten minorities in China. The key frontier provinces where the believers of the two religions live are Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia and Yunnan. These cover a large portion of China's physical territory. It is not surprising then for the Chinese government to emphasize, "It is absolutely forbidden for anyone to use religion to undermine the unity of the country and the various nationalities in China." The separatist demonstrations by Lamanists in Lhasa and the chronic violent protests and infighting among the Muslims and between Muslims and other nationalities since 1989, have roused the attention of society. Aware of the historical relations between Tibet and the central government, between the Han majority and the minorities, the unbalanced economic development between the inland provinces and the coastal areas, and the contact that the two religious peoples have with their fellow believers in neighboring countries and worldwide, the government is vigilant to maintain a stable relationship with the two religions,

Catholicism and Protestantism

These two "foreign religions" from the West have indeed brought real troubles to the government. "Underground churches" have emerged among Catholics loyal to the Vatican. They deny the legitimacy of the government approved "patriotic churches," which in turn do not deal with the Vatican. The power of the underground churches is so strong that the government has to work through organizations like the Trade Union, the Young Pioneers and the Women's Association, as well as the Religious Affairs Bureau and public security sectors, in order to deal with the issue comprehensively. As for Protestantism, numerous private meeting places, known abroad as house churches, have appeared outside of the "Three-Self churches". As a result, the Catholic underground churches have

produced their own "underground priests and bishops", and the Protestant house churches have their "self-proclaimed evangelists." Additionally, the dramatic increase in the number of Christians has accompanied an unprecedented "Christianity craze" in China.

The development of the two autonomous Churches is not only serious competition for the "patriotic" Catholic Church and the Protestant Three-Self Church, but also a big challenge to the government's religious management system. It is very hard for the government to stomach the situation. Therefore, the government mobilizes all possible forces, including the open churches, to impose firm action upon the recalcitrants. This firm action includes arresting and imprisoning both the clergy and lay activists, closing their meeting places, prohibiting "illegal" and imported religious materials, and eliminating underground monasteries and seminaries.

Nevertheless, the large scale effort of the government has not stopped the development of Catholic underground and the Protestant house churches. On the contrary, it has drawn extensive attention from the outside world and evoked intense criticism from some religious and human rights organizations. Yet, China needs very much to maintain and develop friendly relations with the Western countries--even with the Vatican--due to their influence in foreign affairs and international politics. Given these considerations, it has become extremely complicated and difficult for the Chinese government to try to eliminate the autonomous churches and to hold back or slow down the development of Christianity. The policy of the "freedom of religious belief" and the principle of "cooperation and mutual respect" in church-state relations both encounter real tests and challenges.

The Concerns of the Religions.

Due to their differing perspectives and positions, the religious entities have somewhat different attitudes from that of the government regarding current church and state relations. Despite their special problems the religions have shared concerns, especially in the following areas:

The right to keep the initiative.

The religious groups under the leadership of the govern-

ment have never stopped wondering and asking: What is the actual character of religious groups? Are they the subordinates of the responsible institutions of the government, or independent organizations holding the initiative in their own hands? Zhao Puchu, President of the Buddhist Association, said in a speech to a meeting of the Political Consultative Conference: "The long-standing system of dominance over the religions has led to the severe malpractice of over-concentration of power and monopolization. It has to be reformed...so as to put into practice 'the separation between church and state', and enable the religious groups to be nongovernmental groups which enjoy the right to determine their own personnel, financial and religious affairs." The appeal of Zhao Puchu is not to follow the Western pattern of the separation of church and state, but rather for the state to give full rights to the religious groups. However, this would involve the redistribution of power between the church and the state, and the result certainly would be to weaken the leading position of the government relative to religions. Obviously, the government would not be satisfied with this. Instead it reacts by proposing to "strengthen the legal management" of religion. Given that the religious groups are dependent on the government for many of their specific needs, and that without support from the government they would face a crisis of survival, the request for separating church from state ends up as nothing more than an idea.

Full implementation of religious policy.

There are two main issues involved in current disputes over policy. One is the return of property lost during previous political movements (including churches, temples, houses, farm land and mountain forests). The other is the restoration or construction of more places for religious activities. These issues involve the practical interest of many different social elements: religious properties and the government, believers and nonbelievers in society, and different institutions within the government. The situation is complex and very hard to deal with. So progress is very limited. With the increase in prices and loss of government subsidies, some religious circles have urged the government to take some action to enable them to maximize their resources. Nevertheless, it is impossible for the government to ensure the return of all property presently occupied, no

matter how strong the religious groups' appeal.

Legislation for religious affairs.

The problems discussed above demonstrate the absence of legal protection for the interests of religious groups other than those sanctioned by the government. The constitutional provisions relevant to religious issues are very general. The main references for dealing with religious affairs are Party or government regulations. However, the regulations are not law, and therefore cannot be appealed to in court. The demand from the religious groups for legislation on religion is very strong. Their hope is to have a law on religion clarifying the rights and the duties of both the church and the state, applicable to the entire society with a mandatory binding force. This would enable them to protect their own interests with legal means.

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From the perspective of managing religion, the government has stated in documents the new need "to systematize and legitimize the effective policies in dealing with religious affairs." Otherwise, their administrative leadership can hardly be considered "legal management of religion." Based on long term practice, the government has realized that it is not enough to rely on policies for the management of religion. It would be better to transform policies into law with mandatory binding force and then to go ahead and execute the law. For this reason, the Central Government in Document No. 6, 1991, stated its intention "to accelerate the process of legislation of religion." So, both the church and the state favor legislation. Nevertheless, because of their different perspectives and concerns, a law on religion which balances state and religious interests and which is acceptable to the entire society will depend entirely on struggle and compromise. In 1994, the government adopted two administrative regulations on religion. However, religious groups

believe that to have a solid basis, such regulations must come after the basic law on religion and that it will be difficult to have an agreement on any such basic law in the near future.

Besides the above shared concerns, religious groups are very interested in how to increase their resources for self-support and find more opportunities to participate in social services and welfare.

The autonomous religious groups outside of the authorized religious system are still not allowed a voice in Chinese church and state relations. Yet, they are very active and growing. They constitute a silent third group in church and state relationships.

Coordination in Church and State Relationship

In countries where there is a national religion, the relationship is undivided; for those countries where church and state relations are separate, the relationship is regulated by law. The pattern of church and state relations in China has a unique coordinating system, which includes the following:

Legal restraint. The Constitution and other relevant regulations provide very few clear rules on the rights and duties of the church and state. They only provide a framework for the relationship, but they are too general for specific issues.

Administrative management. The governmental institutions manage religious affairs according to the policies of the Party and the government. Religious groups are duty bound to cooperate with the government to carry out the religious policy. This is the basic requirement regulating relations. Most conflicts or disputes in relations are arbitrated through governmental institutions instead of legal procedure.

Political consultation. Each religious group has its representatives in the political Consultative Conference, where it can talk things over and exchange opinions with Party and government representatives. The results of these consultations are not available to the public and have no legal binding force.

Meetings of leaders. The heads of the Party and the government meet with religious leaders periodically. Since 1991,

immediately prior to the Spring Festival, Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin has met with the national religious leaders in Zhongnanhai on several occasions. Local Party and government heads and local religious leaders do likewise. This is the most direct and informal exchange between the church and the state.

The four means explained above form a comprehensive coordinating system. The government often combines several means emphasizing first one means, then another depending on circumstances. Coordination focuses on deciding the areas and means of mutual cooperation, and in balancing their different interests. The ground rule for any coordination is the religious groups' acceptance of the leadership of the government.

Trends in Church and State Relations in China

The church and state relations model in China is determined by China's national conditions. Due to social, political, economic and historical factors, a pattern of state domination over the church has emerged. The pattern assumes that the government will definitely take an interest in religious affairs, that religious affairs will have political overtones, and that religious beliefs are not merely a private matter. With any political change, church and state relations will also inevitably change.

With continuing social and economic development and the gradual introduction of democracy and a legal system, church and state relations will focus more on mutual understanding and the reciprocal observance of each party's rights and duties. The demand from the religious groups for their legal rights and interests as well as for freedom for believers to practice their religious beliefs will become increasingly stronger. This is inevitable. The progress will not be smooth nor will it be separated from the general process of China's social development. Within the next ten years, church and state relations will have the following characteristics:

Three unchanging elements:

The basic pattern of state dominance will not change. China will not develop a unified religious pattern with one national religion nor can it adopt the model of separation of church and state. This would require the separation of the legislative, judicial and executive branches and present day China is

not yet ready for this.

The basic coordinating system will remain in place. The amount of legal coordination within this system will increase and the means and areas of administrative management will undergo major change.

The system for managing religious affairs in the government will remain the same. The function of the institutions, however, will evolve as the Religious Affairs Bureau becomes less the enforcer of state control, and more the mediator between the state and the religious bodies.

Two Uncertainties:

The legislative approach to religion. The controversy in future legislation will continue to be whether legislation is meant to protect the freedom of religious belief or to systematize and legitimize policy for the management of religion. Mutual restraint by conflicting forces as well as other factors will determine the when and how of future legislation.

Religion's role in society. Ongoing economic reform and opening to the outside world provide many opportunities for religion to enter into society and wield influence (for instance, building schools, hospitals, service centers for the elderly and various charity organizations and social services). Neither the government nor religious groups are ready for this, however. Both have their different concerns and interests.

One possibility

Due to their constant and rapid development, autonomous religious groups cannot be eliminated. Furthermore, since the contrast in vitality between these autonomous groups and the authorized groups is so great, the government may begin to communicate to some extent with the underground religious bodies and, under certain conditions for the sake of various domestic and international practical benefits, give them covert authorization to operate. Fundamentally, the government no longer believes that religion is a hostile power to be forcefully combated. Furthermore, it is evident that the struggle thus far to destroy religion has proved ineffective. So the question becomes when, how and to what extent does the government need to accept reality and implement a policy of conciliation?

The trends developing in church and state relations in China

show that relational problems will not disappear automatically, but neither are these the most urgent issues facing the government. Problems in relationship will persist for some time, but they can be mitigated and even resolved if political and economic problems are dealt with wisely. If not, this divisive situation will only exacerbate the unrest in society.

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