

## ***Church and State Relations in China: Characteristics and Trends: A Response***

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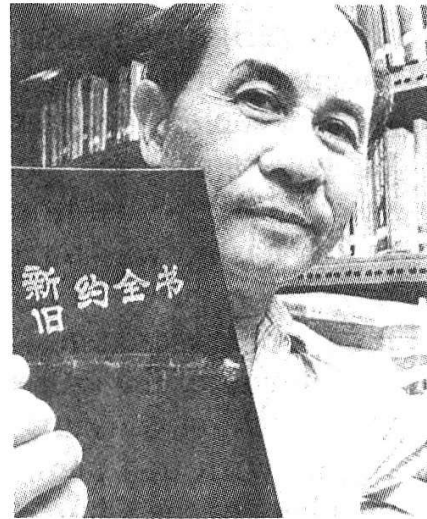
"Church and State Relations in China" by Liu Peng, a research assistant at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has given us much to think about.

For the last several years the policy of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has been one of "seeking the truth from facts," rather than "simply going from general opinion to general opinion, and cutting off discussion with sweeping abstractions".<sup>1</sup>

This article clearly demonstrates that this policy is highly commendable.

In categorizing Church and State relations in China as one of *state dominance over religion*, Liu's essay does indeed "seek the truth from facts," He states clearly that "Religion is accepted by the state on the premise that it admits the state's political authority, accepts its leadership in all social sectors, and carries out its policies. The state administration manages religious organizations...(whose) role in society is strictly limited".

At the same time, the purpose of the policy of so-called "freedom of religious belief" is based not on any acknowledgement of theism or belief in religious values but rather on the realistic and pragmatic considerations that religions can serve the political objectives of the Party and nation. As Lenin said: "When speaking to the nation, we Communists demand that religion be treated as a private matter, but, when speaking among ourselves, in no way can we regard religion as a personal matter."<sup>2</sup> Since Marxism directs the thinking of the Party of the proletariat, a religious worldview is seen as an enemy against which the Party must struggle. This goes without saying.<sup>3</sup> So Liu states in his essay that even the religious policy of the early 1950's, which was highly praised by Bp. Ding Guangxun (K.H.



Ting),<sup>4</sup> was actually seen in this way by Li Weihang, the person in charge of the United Front Works Department: "In the final analysis, to implement correctly and properly the policy of the freedom of religious belief in our country's situation is more helpful for accelerating the decline of religious belief than for promoting its development."

In light of the above, remarks made by Bishop Ding and other religious leaders' such as: "Our Chinese churches are independent not only of foreign churches, but also of the National People's Congress, the Political Consultative Conference, the government and the Party,"<sup>5</sup> are only so many empty words which do not come from seeking the truth from facts. A Church which has no way to control its own "finances, personnel and property rights";<sup>6</sup> a Church whose "leaders (ministers, committee people, secretaries, office managers) are selected according to the will of the cadres; a Church unable to voice any opinion and which, as a result, is led by persons without religious training or with bad reputations, or persons who are not even members of the Church,"<sup>7</sup> can hardly be called independent. A Church where the government accuses a number of religious leaders who love the Church of being trouble makers, and replaces them with a small number of "activists" who do not care much about the Church and who not only cannot unite others, but also have a bad name among Christians, can hardly be called independent. Some cadres even say, "There is 'no one' in the church," so they feel compelled to transfer Party members from the Religious Affairs Bureau into the church and appoint atheists to be leaders in the Church.<sup>8</sup> How can such a Church boast of being a "Three-Self" Church?

Liu considers that, due to the situation in China, the model of *state dominance over religion* will be hard to change. In coordinating the relationship between Church and State, besides looking for the result of struggle and cooperation between both sides, it is also crucial to analyze the trends in China's political developments.

Liu mentions that there is a third factor, one that will probably destroy the previous balance between Church and State. This so-called third factor is the body of believers outside and independent of the patriotic religious associations, such as the Catholic "underground" and the Protestant "house churches". While this third factor does not have any formal right to speak

on Church and State relations in China, yet it is a "vital and growing force".

He is correct. The current balance between Church and State requires that religious bodies follow government orders unconditionally--the Church responding to the State and following it. "A religious body which is neither under government guidance nor cooperating with the government is not a partner but a hostile force to be reckoned with." In order to put an end to this phenomenon of "non-reciprocal adjustment" in socialist society, "the government mobilizes all possible forces, including the Patriotic Associations and the Three-Self Church, to take firm action against the underground churches and the house churches". As Bishop Ding straightforwardly told Jiang Zemin, "Some people who come to such gatherings, at the local level, curse and punch, arrest people and fine them. They not only confiscate religious books and articles but also seize bicycles, watches and other common every day articles." <sup>9</sup> When Wan Weifan questioned why his Christian activity center, which had not yet received official permission, was indicted as being "unlawful, illegal, and an underground power," he received an additional punishment. Isn't this the result of the influence of leftist thinking over the years? Because there is no separation of powers within the government, there are many concrete manifestations of the government's disrespect for government policy.<sup>10</sup> What really happens is that the government, in a burst of administrative fervor, initiates a new, large-scale "Three-anti" campaign: anti-peaceful evolution, anti-subversion, and anti-infiltration. But this is largely done in vain. With strong evidence to support his claims, Bishop Ding has warned repeatedly since 1988: "From what I know, both inside and outside the church, the focus is not on uniting the flock. Rather, cadres make it their personal responsibility to struggle against religion. Religion to them is like a splinter in the eye. Disregarding the experience of the past fourteen years, they try hard to counteract religion with administrative decrees. They exploit religion and deprive believers of their legal rights. The government does not allow many sites for religious activities. Furthermore, it uses every kind of excuse to disallow normal religious activities to take place. It uses unwritten methods to downgrade numerous religious venues to illegal status, leaving believers no choice but to resort to underground places of worship."<sup>11</sup> "Regarding reli-

gion, they supervise, merge, exploit, ban and prohibit to their hearts' content...."<sup>12</sup> "When the adjustment of religion to socialism necessarily implies the adjustment of religion to the desire and benefit of the individual cadre," it naturally follows that "quite a few cadres exceed their functions and meddle in other's affairs under the pretext of fitting religion into socialism. As a result, relations between the Party and the masses are strained. What they are really doing is making religion fit their own intention and interests. Some Christians who are pained by this leave the so-called "official" church and join a privately-run church. This does not broaden unity, but weakens the prestige of the Party and government and the unifying force of the Three-Self. It harms unity and broadens the road of separation."<sup>13</sup>

There are few far-sighted people like Bishop Ding among religious leaders. As early as 1986, during the consecration of two Protestant bishops in Shanghai, he dared to express his own view on the question of mutual adjustment with socialism. On one hand he agreed with the government's pre-determined policy, but at the same time he added: "It is fine for the Church to be in tune with socialism. If we really abide by the teachings of the Bible, there is no questions that the Church is in tune with socialism. But what we do must first of all be in accord with the status of the church, with its nature, the teachings of the Bible and with the wishes of our fellow Christians."<sup>14</sup>

But does the Bible teach the necessity of cooperating with socialism? This may be Bishop Ding's firm belief, and it is perhaps a statement that religion in a socialist society must accept. In any case, the church must pay a price.

There is no need to rehash the 1950s; just consider recent events. Knowledgeable people may hold a lively debate to prove the mutual compatibility of religion and socialism. Some will say, "We choose to stand on the side of the people." Others, "We choose to stand on the side of our national interests, on the side of a new social order more just and more humane than any that the Chinese people have had in over four thousand years." They add, "The People's Republic of China is far from being perfectly good and perfectly beautiful. There are numerous areas for improvement. We still have shortcomings, make mistakes, even produce tragedies. People by their very nature make mistakes. Yet, for over 90% of the people of



China, the historical and contemporary significance of the situation is that this is, in the words of Leibnitz, 'the best of all possible worlds'".<sup>15</sup>

"What is rather ironic," they claim, "is to survey all kinds of historical and contemporary situations, including nations where religious believers hold power, or even espouse the model of unity between the national religion and the State, yet justice is nowhere to be found." These insist that "a reasonable policy of freedom of religious belief is not implemented where this or that religion enjoys special privileges, or where there is discrimination against this or that religion, or where atheists are untouchable." Furthermore, they add, "More than thirty years of experience in New China makes us sense that perhaps it is those distinctively scientific revolutionaries who can manage religious problems more objectively...They are able to guarantee more fairly that all religious faiths and viewpoints will be met with respect, not discrimination. This kind of freedom of religious belief is perhaps the most beneficial to us as we rely upon the truth of the Gospel and go forth to spread the love of Christ."<sup>16</sup> "For us, patriotism is not just the love of an abstract ancient country with a long history. It is first and foremost a love for New China. Our positive attitude towards New China is genuine and based on facts. The clamor of certain persons overseas who say that our patriotism is pretentious, and has no other aim than the survival of the Church, is insulting to us."<sup>17</sup>

"Numerous revolutionaries have an outstanding and high moral character. Their virtue stimulates the public to rise to new heights...By their leadership in government and by the accord of their words and deeds, revolutionaries realize what our ancient sage Confucius and other philosophers praised so highly: teaching and guiding by a life of virtue. They bear hardships as servants, sacrifice themselves for others, are humble and prudent, are strict with themselves and struggle unreservedly against corruption within their own ranks...In short, Communist cadres triumphed over the shameful distortions of old political authorities and won the hearts of the people by their behavior....The Revolution obtained immense, heart-moving results for China, but what did Christians achieve in the way of remaking China? Obviously, their contribution, by comparison, is too small to be worth mentioning. Christians talked a great deal, but the Communist Party matched words

with deeds."<sup>18</sup>

Enough! "Three-Self" has only been a political slogan up until now. As Luo Guanzong correctly said: "Only when we take a clear, distinct political stance will we be able to protect the Church."<sup>19</sup> And yet this is a Church, just as Liu's essay points out, whose "legal existence is determined by whether or not it cooperates with the government and accepts government leadership. Controlling hands in the government determine the power of their companions." Whatever is diametrically opposed to the political objectives of the Party and the nation in theory or in practice is absolutely forbidden. When Bishop Ding and others meet with the brains of the Party and government, at fixed or irregular intervals, they are permitted to carry out their "responsibility by offering advice on public affairs," only within a regulated framework. They cannot possibly go outside this framework. All mutual assistance within this kind of system is the business of the head of the family and totally supervised by the head of the family. The children and grandchildren must not be oversensitive about it.

Many Three-Self people do not have such filial piety. Some of them ought to reflect on why they are Christians. If one is a Christian, then at certain times, such as when the time comes to acknowledge God (*status confessionis*), what should one do? Say: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life," (John 6:68), or reject God and follow Caesar? Yet, when it comes to big issues, they all seem to choose what is good and hold fast to it. They most likely do not know Karl Barth's *Barmen Theological Declaration*, yet, oddly enough, what they firmly support and strive to obtain comes almost straight out of the points stressed in that declaration. The *Barmen Declaration* was formally signed on May 31, 1934, sixty-one years ago. Those believers who agreed with the Declaration called themselves the Confessing Church. They were opposed to the effort by Nazi Germany to turn believers into "German Believers," and the Church into the "German Church". So, first of all, they publicly acknowledged that "Jesus is God's only way," and that the Church could not heed and follow any other dominant influence or truth. Secondly, they stressed that in Christian living, there is no such thing as a part of life being under the dominion of any master other than the Lord Jesus. Thirdly, the Church cannot cast aside Biblical

