

Political-Religious Issues in China Today

by Sergio Ticozzi, P.I.M.E.

Recent Chinese news releases reveal that researchers on religion and religious leaders in China have been and still are engaged in dealing with the relationship between politics and religion in a socialist country. The initiative for the debate and campaign has been taken up by the authorities who are concerned and worried to keep everything, religion included, under their control.



Religious Reform

In its 1993 autumn issue, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences published an article written by Su Zhitian, a research fellow of the Shanghai branch of the same Academy. It was entitled, "Discussion of the Present Stage of the Reform of Religion in Our Country." The first part reads: "In October 1982, during the Sixth Five-Year program and during the national symposium of the Research Institute on Philosophy of our Academy, Comrade Hu Qiaomu mentioned the need to discover the roots of and reasons for the origin, continuation and development of the religious phenomenon in China. Hu asked, "How can religion in China be harmonized/coordinated with socialism and become useful to it?" Under the influence of the ideological opinion then leaning towards the left, this kind of proposal seemed new and original, clear and stimulating, thus encouraging the theoreticians to think on the subject and spur them to do some objective research. The concept of *mutual adjustment* between religions and socialism," according to Su, "had already been put forward by Comrade Li Weihan."

Su continues, "If we follow this train of thought, we have to go back to Zhou Enlai who, in 1950, during a meeting with religious leaders, made a similar statement: He proposed that all

Christian Churches should break off any relationship with imperialism, become fully autonomous, self-administering, self-supporting and self propagating. Zhou Enlai said that religious leaders have to complete their historical mission, "All religious bodies and religious sects should foster unity among themselves, cooperate with each other and search out the best ways to serve the Chinese people, to make religious activities more useful to society in the new situation." Su is convinced that 'serving people and being useful to society' is the same as ways and means to 'harmonize/coordinate' and adjust/adapt.'

Su continues, "The 1982 document of the Central Committee of the Party on *The Basic Viewpoint and Basic Policy on the Religious Question During Our Country's Socialist Period*, pointed out that, after liberation, the religious atmosphere in our nation changed fundamentally. As far as basic political and economic interests are concerned, believers and unbelievers are united and differences in ideological faith are secondary. The basic duty of the Party is to unite both believers and unbelievers alike so that together they can labor to build a modern socialist nation." The author considers these statements to be, "the theoretical foundation for mutual harmony and adjustment between religion and socialism." He goes on to add, "The national conference on religious work, held in December, 1992, clearly pointed out that political guidance regarding religious work, that is, holding on to the political directives and the main directional policy, as well as carrying out the proper work so that religion and socialism can mutually adjust is what is most important for the leadership of the Party."

Su then maintains that: "During the last ten years, the debate on whether religion can become harmonious and adjust to socialism has become a burning issue in the theoretical research on religion. Since this is a debate, there are varieties of opinion. For example, in 1988, during the Second National Meeting on the *Theoretical Work of the United Front*, there were people who insisted that 'Basically, this is a question of the right understanding of the nature of religion. Religion is the opium of the people; this is the most prevalent and objective present reality...therefore, for a society which openly proclaims and advocates atheism to consider that religion is still somehow adaptable, is to have a false view which is not consonant with the real nature of the problem.'"

In a paper presented to the People's Political Consultative Conference, Su stressed that the viewpoint which considers atheism to be of the very nature of a socialist society raises the ideological difference between atheism and theism to the highest possible levels. He maintained that, "This opinion deviates from the spirit of the policy of religious freedom stated in our Constitution and goes against the implementation of its principles of 'unity and cooperation in politics, mutual respect for beliefs,' and for 'building up together our socialist country's modernization.'"

He further explains that there are other people with a similar theoretical orientation, "who believe that for religion to adapt to socialism, it must, under the leadership of the Communist Party, undertake a religious reform which includes a reformation of doctrine." Upon reflection, our author concludes that those who hold the opinions expressed above fall into two groups and approach the matter from two different ideological viewpoints: "the first group consists of those who are unfamiliar with the history of the work of the Party towards religion and who lack the awareness that the Party has already, and on several occasions, rejected this proposal." He maintains that the Party's concepts of reform and liberalization are much broader than those held by many of the comrades. The second group "are those who hope that, through reform, religion can eventually be eradicated. Ever since liberation, these comrades...have strongly reiterated the need to implement 'religious reform'..."

Su continues, "Since the present society determines the social consciousness, adjustments and reforms carried out in different degrees within religions, they are a historically necessary phenomenon. The crux of the question is who has proposed and carried out this 'religious reform'? Through reform and liberalization, our religious authorities, motivated by the love of the motherland and the church and in order to help the masses of believers to participate in this trend of reform and liberalization as well as to assure that religion can continue to exist and develop under socialist conditions, implemented a form of adjustment which was already on-going and related to doctrine, rites, theological thought, religious activities, etc. Since these adaptations foster the progress of society, they should be welcomed by everybody and be a matter for research. However, they cannot be construed as a request for 'religious reform'

proposed by the Party and government departments."¹

This debate also deals with the relationship between religion and the economic modernization of the country, as several articles in the official press clearly demonstrate.

In this debate and, most probably, as a consequence, Chinese authorities have launched efforts to guide all religious bodies to "adapt themselves to the socialist society." These efforts were carried out during 1993 and 1994, especially after Jiang Zemin's appeal: "Adaptation should take place between religion and the socialist society." This topic has already been addressed by *Tripod*.²

Patriotic Education

Within this ideological debate on religious reform and adaptation with socialism, another kind of political concern regarding religion was raised last year: love for the motherland.

Patriotism, understood mainly as indoctrination in Communist ideology and love of the Party and its leaders, has been the rule since the Communists came into power in 1949, albeit with some ups and downs. After the June 4, 1989, Tiananmen tragedy, conservatives blamed student pro-democracy demonstrations on the lack of patriotic education. As a result, the government increased its efforts to create a new generation of loyal citizens. The focus was mainly on youth in their school years and on the masses through movements to "imitate models."

Within this context, since the winter of 1994, all religious organizations have been required to strengthen their patriotic education by fostering a deeper love of the motherland among all their followers.

In a seminar for religious leaders in Beijing, in November 1994, Zhao Puchu, president of the Chinese Buddhist Association said,

Following the "Essentials to Implement Patriotic Education" and to carry out properly the work of socialist education among religious followers, I think that...first, it should be well planned: all national and local religious bodies, during this winter and the following spring, should carefully study the document, absorb its spirit, raise the level of their understanding and, considering both their religion and their situation,

decide on a working plan and devise concrete steps for developing patriotic education so that this important duty can be counted among the greatest concerns of all the religious bodies and be properly carried out."³

This was the main speech given on the first day of the seminar held in Beijing to study the "Essentials for Implementing Patriotic Education," a document issued on August 23, 1994, by the Central Committee of the Party and prepared by its propaganda department. The seminar was called by the Religious Affairs Bureau, whose chief, Zhang Shengzuo, gave the opening speech entitled, "Hold High the Banner of Patriotism and Socialism and Manage the Church Well in Accordance with the Three-Self Principles". Officials of the Religious Committee of the People's Political Consultative Conference and the United Front were present, as well as the highest representatives of the religious organizations. In all there were eighty-nine standing committee members and non-voting delegates.

Zhao Puchu pointed out the importance and the urgency of patriotic education:

The religious believers in China enjoy a glorious tradition of love for the motherland, which is part of the patriotism of the entire Chinese people. Our five great religions during their historical beginnings, their process of growth and development, of adaptation and change, have given birth to a very rich religious culture, whose spirit and essence are a treasure in the treasure house of the entire nation. They also form the basis of the traditional culture of some ethnic minorities in our country. Religion is also an important vehicle and channel of cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries. Religious culture is a very rich cultural heritage, a precious source for any kind of patriotic education, especially for that of the religious organizations. In order to carry out this duty properly, the work for the patriotic and socialist education of religious followers should be well planned, have solid foundations, be provided with tools and materials, as well as with qualified persons and models...⁴

Another important speech of the seminar was given by the Anglican Bishop Ding Guangxun, president of the Protestant Three-Self Movement. He gave a few examples of ways and means to help foster patriotic education in Protestant circles. He saw the correct interpretation of the Bible and following Chris-

tian principles as the basic tools for strengthening patriotic and legal education within the Three-Self Movement. The bishop pointed out that guiding believers towards a correct understanding of the Bible would help increase their love for the motherland. The Bible is replete with examples of patriots who performed many deeds of valor for their country. In strengthening patriotic education, religious organizations are not only being patriotic themselves but are also following biblical directives.

Other speakers at the seminar were An Shiwei, president of the Chinese Islamic Association, Bishop Zong Huaide of the Catholic Patriotic Association, Yan Zhiting of the Taoist Association and Que Xi, the living Buddha of the Superior Institute of Tibetan Studies, etc.

The main message of the seminar is clear:

The circular of the Central Committee and the Essentials point out: Patriotism has always been the banner under which Chinese people have been mobilized and encouraged to unite and struggle together. It has been the great force to push socialism forward in our country, the spiritual supporting pillar to unite the people of all ethnic groups of the entire nation. In the new historical situation, to strengthen patriotic education and to inherit and develop the patriotic tradition has a very important and practical meaning and a long-range historical value towards inspiring the national spirit, strengthening national cohesion, uniting peoples of all nationalities to rely upon themselves to work hard to overcome difficulties and to struggle together for the great cause of building up a socialism with Chinese characteristics. Patriotic education is the basic process for raising the quality of the entire nation and to reinforce the construction of the spiritual socialist civilization, as well as to serve as the common foundation to guide everyone to set up correct ideals, convictions and beliefs, a world view and set of values; therefore, it is an extremely important work of the whole of society.⁵

Therefore, the task for religious believers in 1995 is to deepen their love for the motherland and for the Party. As a circular of the Buddhist Association of China, dated January 26, 1995, suggests, the task is to "organize within the first half of this year special periods of time to study seriously and to grasp deeply the contents and the spirit of the Essentials."⁶

All religious bodies and religious leaders are expected to follow the work plan, devised by the authorities and conscious-

ly to strengthen their work in patriotic education.

Notes

1. Su Zhitian, "Discussion of the Present Stage of the Reform of Religion in Our Country," *Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiu, Research in World Religions*, 1993, No. 3, pp. 107-111.
2. cf., comment in *Tripod*, XIV, 82, p. 47.
3. The entire speech can be found in *Fayin, Voice of the Dharma*, 1995, 1, pp. 4-5.
4. *ibid.*
5. *op. cit.*, *Fayin*, 1995, 5, p. 11.
6. *ibid.*

