Researchers Look at China's Policy of Religious Freedom

by John Tong

In 1987 Luo Zhufeng, a highly respected member of the Institute for Research on Religion at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, edited a book which was obviously the fruit of a long and meticulous investigation by members of the Institute's research staff. It covered many areas, including Eastern and Western philosophies and the social sciences, and the finished product is noted for its systematic approach to the very delicate problem of religious freedom in China. *Religion Under Socialism in China*[1] is of more than passing concern to Hong Kong's Catholic population since it offers a clear and concise commentary on China's religious policy, and, therefore, a forecast of what may lie ahead for us after 1997. Of particular interest, and worthy of detailed comment is chapter six: "The Policy of Freedom of Religious Belief", which is the burden of this short essay.

Freedom of Religious Belief

I find the style of approach in chapter six reminiscent of that of traditional Catholic theology, where the validity of each dogma under consideration is established first by an argument from biblical authority, which is then corroborated by arguments from noted theologians. In this case, Marx provides the sacred scripture, which is followed by a study of Lenin's adaptations of Marxist dogma to the realities of Soviet Russia, and then selected quotations from the speeches by Mao Zedong; finally, there comes a lengthy description of Deng Xiaoping's evolutionary reforms. All these authors are brought into play to lend credence to the authority and value of China's present religious policy. Having established his thesis, the editor moves on to consider the more interesting question of how this policy will be applied

to Hong Kong after 1997.

In addressing the theory and practice of the founding fathers of the Marxist canon, chapter six has this to say about their attitude towards religion:

> They considered religion as an historical category, that is, that religion emerges and develops under specific conditions and will surely perish in the course of historical development when the conditions are ripe (p. 134).

Such talk is a bit dated and expresses nothing of any new import. Yet if we read on, we do come across in a commentary at the end of chapter seven, something new and significant. Here we are told that while Marx once called religion the "opiate of the people", this term is to be understood only as a trope or figure of speech.

> "...a metaphor that can be used to describe the negative function of religion existing under certain conditions in class society; in other words, the functions of historical religions differ because of differences in the times and social conditions. One cannot simply write the word 'opium' to summarize it. Regarding present day China, no one can use 'opium' to describe the function of religion under socialism (pp. 151-153).

While we hesitate to describe the above as an attitudinal breakthrough, it obviously does reveal something of a more open mind on the subject. It was the Anglican clergyman, Charles Kingsley (1819-1875), who originally coined the phrase that Marx was to make famous. He criticised the church of his time, long before Marx did, in the following words: "Not only do some people in the church use religion as an opiate to numb themselves, there are also people who, for their self-interest and self-benefit, use religion as an opiate to numb others."[2]

After citing Lenin on religion and noting that he distinguished friend from foe not primarily on the basis of their religious beliefs, but rather on whether or not their politics differed from his own, the editor goes on to speak of Chairman Mao's view, and how he tried to adapt it to Chinese conditions. Mao, in his youth, was himself a religious believer. He believed in the existence of spirits; and when his mother became ill, he invoked the traditional gods and, as was his custom, worshipped at Buddhist shrines. But as "his thinking matured", he changed.

Later he was to say: "It is the peasants who made the idols with their own hands, and when the time comes it is they, too, who will cast them aside with their own hands; there is no need for anyone else to attempt prematurely to do this for them" (p.135). What this book also points out is the presence of a French missionary priest living with the Red army during the Long March, and from this draws a distinction between serving atheism and serving the atheist, much in the same way that Christians are admonished 'to hate sin but love the sinner'. The distinction between believer and belief is also quite plain, quoting Mao as saying: "Communists may form a united front against imperialism and feudalism with idealists and even religious believers politically, while never agreeing with them on ideology or religious beliefs" (p.136).

Applying the Policy

And what about the government's religious policy during this new era of socialism under Deng? The shift in emphasis that took place after the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December of 1978 is duly noted...a shift which extended the scope and importance of the United Front and which allowed for a significant increase in the number of religious leaders selected to participate in its work. However, here an important distinction is made between Chinese on the mainland and those living abroad in such areas as Taiwan, Macau and Hong Kong.

> (At home) religious believers, just like all those who belong to ethnic nationalities, must also support the socialist system; love their country; maintain national unity; and promote solidarity among the nationalities... These Four Basic Principles form the political basis for the people's solidarity... Grasping them firmly does not mean religious believers have to surrender any of their beliefs (p. 141).

A few pages later we find that the above domestic policy is to be applied differently outside the mainland.

> In consideration of the fact that two different social systems exist in mainland China and Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, and elsewhere, and that under different historical conditions differences exist among the various religions, the religious communities and organizations on the mainland and in Hong Kong

> should observe the principles of nonsubordination, noninterference, and mutual respect (p. 150).

As to how all this is to be applied in practice, the author drops a somewhat ominous hint: "Freedom of religious belief, like other democratic rights, has clear cut contents and definite limits.... Therefore we have to know well the limits of civil rights as applied to freedom of religious belief and hold a dialectical view on the relationship between discipline and freedom" (p. 141).

Hong Kong Christians Seek Clarification

While the team of researchers responsible for this literary work are to be commended for a clear and most helpful exposition of the Chinese government's policy regarding religious freedom we, as Hong Kong Christians, still feel a need to raise certain questions for further clarification. The following areas of concern remain to be addressed in greater detail:

1. Whether it be in the time of Mao or that of Deng, if the sole purpose to unite with religious believers is merely to build a socialist China at home and complete the great task of national unification abroad, is this then just another pragmatic attempt to achieve unity by means of little more than the calculated manipulation of religious believers? In 1993 there appeared from Chinese Communist sources several volumes published in Hong Kong, entitled *Introduction to Hong Kong* which did little to assuage fears concerning the real motives of certain Chinese leaders. Here, Hong Kong was consistently described as "a capitalist society, containing, naturally, people who think only of making a profit and to whom money always comes first" (p. 315). And then the author goes on to say that there are in Hong Kong many poor people being exploited by the many rich people. And since religion is based on loving and caring, it can be put to good use by giving reassurance to the poor and needy, thus helping to harmonize these social contradictions and stabilize the social order. Such notions of the role and purpose of religion in society give Hong Kong people pause to wonder at whether, in the eyes of certain Chinese leaders, religion is anything more than "a useful tool" for alleviating social problems?

2. The demands for patriotism are not the same for those living on the China mainland and those outside it. China's leaders have stated repeatedly to compatriots in Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan that to be patriotic entails only that they promote national reunification. But those on the mainland must also uphold the Four Basic Principles as well. This is due primarily to historical factors and reflects the different conditions that exist in those separated areas. Of course, this liberal policy has also brought about a more relaxed and congenial way of treating the Chinese of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau. The question is: Will the people of Hong Kong continue to be the beneficiaries of this more flexible and less restrictive handling after 1997? And if this is not to be the case, then the aftershock of a more restrictive policy will, no doubt, disrupt mainland China's development, and also send warning signals to Taiwan, possibly delaying even further any plans for a final unification. And when that day finally does come, and the great goal of final unification has been achieved, will our special treatment then give way to a more restrictive and less flexible policy? Early in the process of setting up the Drafting Committee for the Basic Law, Chairman Ji Pengfei reminded the Hong Kong members of the committee that along with a consideration of the "two systems", they were to give even more attention to the principle of "one country".[3] What is obvious here is that the concept of "one country" far outweighs the principle of "two systems" in the hearts of the Chinese leadership. Even more to the point are articles 158 and 159 of the Basic Law, which state that interpretation of the Basic Law rests with the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, while power to revise the Basic Law rests with the National People's Congress. This causes some of us to ask whether such a state of affairs is not tantamount to placing sole power to initiate restrictive or liberal government policy changes in the hands of the Chinese leadership?

3. After 1997 there will be a great increase in the number of contacts between mainland religious personnel and those in Hong Kong. Article 148 of the Basic Law, however, already regulates the relationship, defining the parameters within which ties are allowed to be formed and maintained. "The basic principle," states article 148, "is that there should be non-subordination, non-interference and mutual respect." Now while the first

two are legal terms that can be, and indeed are, clearly defined, the third..."mutual respect" ...is somewhat emotive and not easily explained. Some pose the problem and wonder what would happen if, after 1997, we declined an invitation to a banquet from compatriots on the mainland on the grounds that the money could be better-spent on other things, could our hosts then point a finger at the Basic Law and accuse us of lacking in proper respect?

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The process of tightening or loosening government policy on freedom of religious belief is always situated in the context of restrictive or relaxed political and economic controls. After the Communists established political control over China, they continued the traditional style of state supervision over all religious affairs initiated during the Han dynasty.[4] The current religious policy of Deng Xiaoping is, happily, the most relaxed one since Liberation. Some restrictions, however, have been imposed from time to time in the course of implementing economic reforms and maintaining an open door policy to the outside world. The process tends to run in cycles. First came permission to erect the Democratic Wall, and then a prohibition on posting 'big character' posters. Restrictions on literature and art were lifted, only to be followed by a tightening of controls in the fight against Spiritual Pollution. After Deng toured the southern provinces in 1992, the times became more relaxed. Economic reforms throughout the nation became broader in scope and reached greater depths. Restrictions again soon followed when a great focus was directed towards "macro-level adjustments and controls" and offenders against Party discipline were severely punished. Yet it must be said that, overall, the incidents of loosening control tend to exceed the restrictions.

We sincerely hope that the economic boom currently taking place in our homeland will eventuate in a sound economic system that will, at an early date, integrate itself into the larger global system, thus enabling China to continue its steady economic growth well into the future. It is also our hope that

the authorities entrusted with the development of the central and regional areas will be able to work together and strike a balance that will be mutually advantageous, thereby enhancing national stability and insuring continuing progress. Most of all, we sincerely hope that the ordinary people of China, who at present seem to be living in an ideological vacuum, will find what they need intellectually to attain the high ethical standards required to foster and advance a spiritual civilization in China. This would indeed be a blessing not only for the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan, but also for the entire human race. Professor E.F. Vogel points to the experience of South Korea and Taiwan as most encouraging. When their economic growth and development reached a certain material standard, it resulted in the emergence of a large middle class, which fostered a respect for truth, believed in the dignity of the individual, supported freedom and openness, and felt deeply that the government should be accountable to all the people.[5] China can also make progress by following along this same road, until it finally reaches its destination and is able to take its place as a full member of that great international family of democratic and free nations.

Endnotes

1. Luo Zhufeng, ed. trans. by Donald E. MacInnis and Zheng Xi'an, *Religion under Socialism in China.* Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, Inc. 1990.
2. Xu Mushi, *Bi geng zhe yu (Writings and Sayings).* Taipei, Taiwan, 167. p. 10.
3. He Li, "The Contradiction of One Country, Two Systems," in *The Nineties*, #187 (August 1985), p. 20.
4. John Tong, "New Chinese Regulations Concerning Religious Activities by Foreigners," *Tripod*, #79, (Feb. 1994), pp. 2-5.
5. A noted Harvard professor, E. F. Vogel, said this in 1992 during commencement exercises at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.