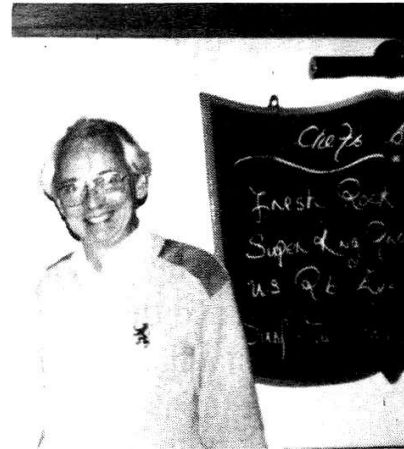


## *Building Up a Spiritual Civilization*

by Peter Barry, M.M.

During January 1996, no doubt in an effort to combat corruption, Chinese President and Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin made repeated calls for the building up of a “spiritual civilization” among the nation’s Party members and ordinary citizens. One example of this is the re-publication in the January 17, 1996 issue of *People’s Daily* of a speech by President Jiang to the 5th plenary session of the 14th Central Committee (Sept. 27, 1995) entitled “Leading Cadres Must Pay Attention to Politics.” In that speech, Jiang urged cadres to have a spirit of sacrifice and to lead exemplary moral lives. What then is meant by this term “spiritual civilization” or “spiritual culture”?



The term “spiritual civilization” can be traced back to the beginning of China’s modernization drive and opening up to the outside world in 1979. The campaign for establishing it received its first impetus from a letter of Li Chang, then vice-president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, to the Party Central Committee which was published in the February 10, 1981 issue of the *People’s Daily*. Li Chang admitted that the term “spiritual civilization” did not originate with him, but with President Ye Jianyin who promoted it in a speech marking the 30th anniversary of the founding of the PRC in October 1979. Both leaders pointed out that along with the drive for modernization and economic development (material civilization) begun by the December 1978 third Plenum of the 11th Party Central Committee, the ethical or moral development of the Chinese populace should not be neglected.

In his letter Li Chang divided spiritual civilization into a practical aspect (education, science, literature and art) and an ideological aspect (social ethics, traditions and customs). The contents were

further spelled out to include “building the socialist motherland...the subordination of personal interests to the overall interests of the people, the moral concepts of democracy and unity, hard work and plain living...the development of science, paying attention to personal and public hygiene and being polite and courteous.”<sup>1</sup>

On February 28, 1981 the Central Propaganda Department issued the “Circular on Promoting the Ethical Movement,” which urged the people to support the establishment a of spiritual civilization. In March a campaign began calling on the people to pay attention to the five standards: behavior, manners, hygiene, public order and morals) and the four beautifications: mind, language, conduct and environment. Another Central Propaganda circular of January 31, 1983 added three loves: the motherland, socialism and the Party to the five standards and four beautifications.<sup>2</sup>

On September 28, 1986, the 6th Plenary Session of the 12th Central Committee adopted a “Resolution on the Guiding Principles for Building a Socialist Spiritual Civilization.” This document, which was the most comprehensive statement on the topic to date, had 8 sections: the importance of building a socialist spiritual civilization, the basic task in building spiritual civilization, unite all China’s nationalities through a common ideal, cultivate and enrich socialist ethics, increase education in socialist democracy, legality and discipline, universalize education and raise the people’s cultural level, the guiding role of Marxism in building socialist spiritual civilization, and the responsibilities of Party organizations and members in building a spiritual civilization.

The 1986 Party document described the relationship between material and spiritual civilizations. It stated that material civilization presents the material conditions and practical experiences for the development of spiritual civilization, whereas spiritual civilization provides the motivating force and the wisdom for the development of material civilization. It offers a strong ideological assurance for the correct direction of material civilization’s development. The duty of spiritual civilization is to train socialist citizens who have ideals, ethics, culture and discipline, and to raise the moral and ideological quality and the scientific knowledge of the Chinese people. Everyone (all nationalities, Party and non-Party members, religious believers and non-believers, etc.) should be united behind the

ideal of establishing a communist society in which all share according to their needs.

The document further promotes the unification of national, communal and individual benefits. All must sacrifice themselves for the common good. People are encouraged to manifest humanism, and to respect and be concerned about others, especially children, women, the elderly, widows, orphans and handicapped persons. Education in ideals, ethics, courtesy, democracy, legality, discipline and the observance of laws should begin in elementary school. Education in science and cultural subjects helps to raise the level of ideological and moral awareness among the people. Students should also be made aware of the harm inflicted by imperialism on the country. Finally, Marxism and Mao Zedong thought are posited as being the basis for building socialist spiritual civilization. The documents states that building idealism, ethics, culture and a democratic legal system is intimately bound up and guided by Marxism and Marxist theory.<sup>3</sup>

The positive campaign of promoting spiritual civilization was sandwiched between two negative campaigns against “spiritual pollution” (October 1983) and “bourgeois liberalization” (end of 1986 and beginning of 1987). In both campaigns warnings were issued against pornography (printed or on film), feudal superstition, and the importation of Western bourgeois ideology.

November 1990 witnessed yet another promotion of spiritual civilization in a speech by Xu Huaicheng, deputy director of the Party Central Committee’s Political Department, entitled “Extensively absorb the masses in advancing the building up of spiritual civilization,” at a national work conference on spiritual civilization. Director Xu called for a strengthening of ideology and morality and for education in the “five loves”:the motherland, the people, labor, science and socialism and the “four haves”: ideals, morals, culture and discipline. Reasons for doing this, he said, were: to promote patriotism, firmly establish the socialist faith, cultivate the concept of collectivism, promote the trend of loving labor and respecting science, establish the thinking of serving the people, and strengthen consciousness of observing discipline and obeying the law.<sup>4</sup>

After this cursory review of spiritual civilization, the question might arise: what is religion's relationship to it? Coincidentally, scholars of religion in the mid-1980's were discussing religion's role in society at the same time as the discussion on spiritual civilization was taking place. For instance, in 1985, Zhang Ji'an, a scholar at the Institute of World Religions of the Academy of Social Sciences, wrote that although religious morality and communist morality have different foundations, there are areas of similarity between the two, certain moral principles that believers in both can agree to. These would go under the name of "public duties" and include protecting the elderly, women and children, obeying laws, protecting public property, observing public order, etc. Fulfilling these general moral principles contributes to social stability and modernization. Persons who observe them should be considered useful persons in society, no matter if they are religious believers or not.<sup>5</sup>

Another scholar, Gong Xuezheng, from the Party's Central School, started from the positive factors found among religious believers. They know medicine and foreign languages, he wrote; they can also exhort foreign believers to invest in China's modernization program. Religious believers also know that their welfare and socialism's are the same, so in a spirit of patriotism they wholeheartedly support the socialist enterprise. Thus under certain conditions religion can adapt to and harmonize with socialism. Religion can become a positive factor in society because the political stance of its adherents has undergone a change. However, this does not change its illusory nature nor its inverted world view. Because of this, the scientific theory of Marx that "religion is the opium of the people" is not outdated. Even though the good moral behavior of religious believers is beneficial to society, and religious ethics makes believers perform good works, we should not think that religious ethics can be completely absorbed into communist ethics. The heart of building socialist spiritual civilization, Gong writes, is still communist theory.<sup>6</sup>

In 1986, a government religious work cadre, Jiang Ping, also wrote that "religion is the opium of the people and that it functions in society as an anesthetic...Socialist society does not need to use religion nor advance the cause of religion...Can we conclude that the

saying ‘religion is the opium of the people’ is outdated? We should deny this.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1987, starting from the historical contributions of religion to culture, Yu Chaoqing, an associate professor in the philosophy department of Suzhou University, took up the issue of the relationship of religion to society. Because religion has influenced Chinese art, literature and culture, it will have a part in building socialist culture, upon which religion historically has had an effect, he writes. Although compared with economics and politics, religion is in a secondary position when it comes to building spiritual civilization, however its influence and function are objective and cannot be ignored or denied. So we cannot just stop with the statement: “It isn’t necessary to develop or make use of religion.” Rather we should treat religion positively and accurately; derive what is beneficial to spiritual civilization from it, Prof. Yu urges. In conclusion, he asks whether continually repeating Marx’s words religion is the opium of the people really grasps the whole of Marx’s outlook on religion? In Prof. Yu’s view, considering the reality of our country’s socialism, we cannot give an unconditional and definite positive answer to this question.<sup>8</sup>

In 1994, Gong Xuezheng, now in charge of the nationalities and religion desk at the Central Party School, returned to the question of religion’s role in society. Prof. Gong pointed to the statement of President Jiang Zemin to a conference of United Front Workers on November 7, 1993 as providing the key to what he thought was the relationship between religion and socialism. According to Gong, President Jiang presented a new theory, namely that religion must be positively guided to adapt to socialist society. This is the core content of thought on the religious question. Past attempts to describe the relationship between religion and socialism were not satisfactory; the words “coordination or harmony” were not accurate enough. Finally, Gong writes, President Jiang came up with the correct formula.<sup>9</sup>

Prof. Gong then took up the definition and content of “xiang shiying” (adaptation, or conformity to). The meaning of adaptation comprises the following different aspects:

1. For religion to adapt to socialist society requires that religion’s own development and progress become one with the object of



socialism's development and progress. This object is to build up a socialism with Chinese characteristics, and to the best of one's ability help to bring about a renewal of the Chinese people.

2. Although both sides in the adaptation possess mutually harmonizing elements, it is not a reciprocal mutual harmonization. Rather there is a differentiation between primary and secondary parts. This means that religion must adapt to the requirements of the development of socialist society, and not that socialist society must adapt to religion.
3. During the process of religion's being guided to adapt to socialist society, the Party and the State play a leading role.
4. In guiding religion to adapt to socialist society, cadres should maintain a sincere, fervent and positive attitude.

Prof. Gong then spells out a little more what it means for religion to adapt to socialist society. It does not require that religious believers abandon their theistic thinking. It only requires that politically they fervently love the motherland, support the socialist system, support the leadership of the Communist Party, and reform religious systems which are not adaptable to, or do not conform to, socialism. However certain positive factors from religious dogmas, regulations and ethics can be used to serve the building up of socialism.<sup>10</sup> Here a slight change will be noted from the published remarks of Jiang Zemin at the previously mentioned November 1993 United Front conference. At that meeting President Jiang had said that believers should reform religious systems and *doctrines* (italics mine) which do not conform to socialism.<sup>11</sup> Now the word *doctrines* has been dropped. For Catholics then *conformity to socialist society* could mean that, while the *doctrine* of papal primacy would not change, the *system* of papal appointment of bishops might, according to this view, be required to change.

We have seen from the above discussion that religion is welcome to make use of its doctrines, laws and morality to help build up socialist spiritual civilization. Its role in this, according to the theorists, is subordinate to the dominant role of communist ethics. More recent commentators urge the Party and the State to guide religion to adapt itself to socialist society. However, abuses ranging from refusals to return church property to suppression of the underground church can now all be carried out in the name of making religion

conform to socialist society. It is hoped that such things will not happen because they seem to violate the policy of religious freedom.

In summation, Professor Lucien Pye of the Political Science Department of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has written recently that China needs a collective vision or a set of ideals to offset the imbalance between political stagnation and economic progress, between China's material and spiritual achievements.<sup>12</sup> It remains to be seen whether the continuous campaign during the last 15 years to build up a socialist spiritual civilization and the debates which took place at the same time on religion's role in the socialist society will provide the Chinese people with such a collective vision and inspire them with the desired set of ideals.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *Beijing Review*, #10, March 9, 1981, pp. 16-17.
- <sup>2</sup> *Glossary of Chinese Terminology*, pp. 101-2
- <sup>3</sup> *Xinhua Yuebao*, 1986, #9, p. 6ff.
- <sup>4</sup> Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, Nov. 12, 1990, as quoted in *China Study Journal*, vol. 6, #1, 1991, p. 24.
- <sup>5</sup> Zhang Ji'an, "A Tentative Discussion of Religion in Our Country's Socialist Period," *Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiu* (Studies in World Religions), 1985, #4, p. 66.
- <sup>6</sup> Gong Xuezheng, "A Few Questions Regarding Religion During Our Country's Socialist Period," *Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiu*, 1986, #1, pp. 137-9.
- <sup>7</sup> Jiang Ping, "Conscientiously Study Marxist Religious Theory and the Party's Religious Policy," *Hongqi* (Red Flag), 1986, #9, p. 27.
- <sup>8</sup> Yu Chaoqing, "A Further Discussion of Religion's Nature and Its Social Function," *Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiu*, 1987, #3, pp. 122-26.
- <sup>9</sup> Gong Xuezheng, "Theoretical Questions about Religion during China's Period of Socialism with Special Characteristics," *Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiu*, 1994, #4, pp. 80-81.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- <sup>11</sup> *Xinhua Meiri Dianxun*, November 8, 1993, as quoted in *Catholic Church in China*, 1994, #1, p. 26.
- <sup>12</sup> Lucien Pye, "Review Essay: Chinese Politics in the Late Deng Era," *The China Quarterly*, June 1995, #142.