

Editorial

Religious leaders in Hong Kong recently welcomed and hosted an important guest, Ye Xiaowen, the head of China's Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), who was accompanied by an eleven member delegation. During his reportedly "private" visit, from June 20 to 29, the RAB director insisted on keeping a low profile. He emphasized the private nature of his visit and his wish not to meet with the media. Even the pro-China *Ta Kung Pao* and the *Wen Wei Po* had no access whatsoever to the Bureau chief.

Ye did meet, however, with a number of business people as well as with all the leaders of Hong Kong's major religions. The director had said that he would not be dealing with religious matters during his visit. The usual Chinese banquet did, however, provide Hong Kong's religious leaders with the opportunity to hear Ye make a number of interesting statements and observations regarding the future of religion in Hong Kong.

Ye's statements reassured many at the dinner. They found comfort in hearing, from the lips of the chief himself, that following the handover on July 1, 1997, religious bodies would have nothing to fear. Beijing would deal with Hong Kong according to the One Country, Two Systems agreement and would respect the Basic Law. (Cf. p. of this issue of *Tripod*)

Others would have preferred that Ye had made such statements publicly and directly to the press.

There are a number of obvious reasons why Ye would be reluctant to speak to the press. The press would surely have required comments on certain sensitive and controversial religious matters presently being discussed in Hong Kong. There is the involvement of religious bodies in the Provisional Legislature or in the Selection Committee for Hong Kong's Chief Executive. These matters are sensitive enough, but surely the international media would have had no reluctance to inquire about China's treatment of Tibet's separatists. This is, after all, also a religious question. It is so sensitive that China has already made it clear that the subject would be taboo following the handover. Then there is the ever present

difficulties with the Muslims, the underground factions of the Catholic Church and the house churches of the Protestants.

Nonetheless, Ye did open up considerably during the dinner reception at which he addressed 60 leaders of the six major religions in Hong Kong. His comments, on this occasion, were considerably more reassuring, than his "Stress Three Matters" report on religion published earlier this year (cf. *Tripod*, No 92, pp.45-50). In this report, he stated categorically: "Our aim is not registration [of places of religious activities] for its own sake, but to use registration as a means to tighten lawful control over places for religious activities as well as on all religious activities....". He added, "This year we intend to inaugurate an important educational campaign on the Marxist concept of religion and on the party's religious policy."

What was most reassuring for Hong Kong religious groups is Ye's statement, that Regulation No. 144, issued by the State Council on administration of religious venues, would not be implemented in Hong Kong post 1997. He also added that "religions [in Hong Kong] would not be required to support the socialist system".

What does Beijing expect of Hong Kong's religious leaders and believers after the change of sovereignty? According to Ye, they "must respect the nation" [this must mean Hong Kong], "the motherland", and here is the rub, "not undermine Hong Kong's stability and prosperity, and love the country, Hong Kong and religion." Even the most casual observer will find the order of things here a bit strange.

Ye also had a word of warning for Hong Kong people in general. They are not to try to reform mainlanders with Hong Kong's ideas and customs. He made the principles of the Hong Kong-China relationship clear: "non-subordination, non-interference and mutual respect as laid down in the Basic Law"

If Protestants, eager to bring the Christian message through open preaching, thought they could take a trip to Guangzhou, Xian or wherever, following the turnover, Bible in hand, singing hymns, and, like St. Paul on the Areopagus, gather the local citizens for a listening session on the Word of God, they are sorely mistaken. In answer to a question posed by one of the Protestant leaders at the forum on June 24, Ye made it clear that Document, No 144, which forbids

foreigners' carrying out unauthorized religious activities in China, applies to Hong Kong people.

Of particular interest to Catholics was Ye's questions regarding Catholic education, especially how seminary education is financed in Hong Kong. Does his inquiry have any implication for the future? Are schools operated by religious groups a sensitive issue for China? Schools form young minds and teach an ideology.

No one had to scratch the surface very hard to find a layer of suspicion. "Were church bodies in Hong Kong linked with the Vatican through the Internet?" he asked. Ye, after all, must be aware that anyone, even in China, with a fairly new computer and the right program, can log into the internet and link up with just about anyone and anywhere in the world.

It is difficult to know whether the historic event which will take place on July 1, 1997, will have any effect on believers in Hong Kong, whether it will, in the long run, make any difference in the practice of religion. Only time will reveal that secret. (BAM)

