

## Commentary

# *Reflections on “Talk Policy, Talk Supervision, Talk Adaptation”*

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In March of this year, the director of the Religious Affairs Bureau under the State Council, Mr. Ye Xiaowen, published an article entitled, “Talk Policy, Talk Supervision, Talk Adaptation.” It discussed three principles in dealing with the religious question. After the article appeared in the *People’s Daily*, it was reprinted in various religious magazines thus showing its importance.



Ye Xiaowen’s article is, as always, well structured with a set train of thought. Besides presenting reflections on specific religious policies, the article also encompasses all pertinent questions that deal with this policy. The style is simple, straightforward and worth a careful reading. However, Ye’s article is not easy to digest, its details and scope make it difficult at times to grasp its real meaning.

Ye’s article states its purpose very clearly at the start. He says, “The management of religious problems is decidedly concerned with politics, government policy and the masses. We need a political, policy and mass outlook”. This is a balanced statement forming the basis of the article. Yet, it would be worthwhile to question whether political elements ever conflict with those of the masses, and if so, how one would go about dealing with and accommodating them.

In the last section of his article, Ye says, “To sum up, religious work is a difficult task involving politics, questions of policy

and masses of people. But the most important of these three is the political one.”

These words lead us to understand clearly the basic principle Ye has in mind. Policy and the mass nature of religion play an ancillary role to politics.

The phrase used in the article, “Talk Policy, Talk Supervision, Talk Adaptation” is taken from a speech of China’s president, Jiang Zemin. In this speech President Jiang outlined a threefold directive:

1. “Comprehensively and correctly implement the party’s religious policy.
2. Strengthen the supervision of religious affairs according to the law, and
3. Positively guide religion to adapt to socialism”.

What we must note here is that President Jiang’s threefold directive originally targeted comrades working in the religious affairs bureaus, directing them to pay attention to policy implementation, administering laws and regulations, and promoting the adaptation of religious personnel to socialist society.

However, in Ye’s article, these directives have been simplified into “Talk Policy, Talk Supervision, Talk Adaptation.” Here, we find that in Jiang’s third point, the subject of the sentence is namely, comrades working in the religious bureaus. This is now facilely changed to religious personnel instead. They become the subject; they are now the ones who must adapt to socialism. It is no longer the religious bureau comrades who must work for this adaptation. Therefore, the three points Jiang Zemin originally made in his talk, have now acquired another meaning: Ye’s “two plus one”. “Talk Policy, Talk Supervision” is written for the cadres in the religious affairs bureaus. “Talk Adaptation” is written for religious people. We need to discover the reason behind this change.

Ye’s “two plus one” in reality expresses the dialectic taking place between opposing forces. More abstruse is what Ye writes in the central section of his article where he states that “one must correctly understand the intimate link among the “Three phrases”.

Ye writes:

There are officials who talk about supervising religious work, but who lack a legal viewpoint, who do not talk about policy, who do

not understand religion, who do not understand the feelings of the people and cannot work with the masses, who do not even distinguish between normal and illegal religious activities, but who have a general attitude of prohibiting and suppressing. Both kinds of officials do serious harm to the party's religious work.

This said, Ye presents this programmatic statement,

Our aim, whether from the viewpoint of totally and correctly implementing religious policy, or from the viewpoint of strengthening control over religious affairs, is always to bring religion into line with socialist society.

The article emphasized the point that "all believers as well as non-believers must be united to focus their entire mental and physical efforts on this one common aim: "to build a strong and modern socialist State." This has been the Chinese government's constant hope.

Ye, in talking of actively bringing about the adaptation of religion to socialist society, says,

Continual progress must be made in bringing the religious world into line with socialist society and not allow any backsliding. Religious people must be guided into developing positive elements and neutralizing any negative elements and unifying the believing masses to participate positively in economic reconstruction.

Ye's words are circumspect yet pregnant with meaning with emphases carefully placed on certain words and phrases. His last comment, "unifying the believing masses to participate positively in economic reconstruction," closely echoes what he wrote in another article, "Three Phrases to Be Firmly Grasped in 96", that appeared in the *People's Consultative Council News* of February 1, 1996. There he wrote:

One meaning that the phrase 'religious work as building socialism with Chinese characteristics' must have is this: we must fully consider achieving this grand blueprint, to put total effort in developing economic prosperity in the coming five to fifteen years.

The meaning of these two paragraphs are indeed quite similar.

The last section of Mr. Ye's article again mentions the "Four Safeguards": safeguard the dignity of the law, safeguard people's interests, safeguard the unity of nationalities and safeguard national unification. This section of the article elaborates on the historical background of the "Four Safeguards". "This expression," he writes,

“originated from the Central Committee’s direction and handling of the ‘Two-sided Banners’ incident in Ningxia Province where two Islamic parties came to blows and from the Central Committee’s handling of the Panchen Lama’s succession and consequent dispute.” These two incidents set the tone for the forceful way in which Ye Xiaowen has reacted to all aspects of the religious question. He speaks of the difficulties in conducting religious affairs. They consist in disturbances where “antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions are frequently interwoven and the masses are not clearly distinguished from bad people with ulterior motives”. Proceeding from this point, he adds,

Practice proves that clearly holding aloft the banner of the “Four Safeguards” makes it easier to educate and win over the majority of the people, to distinguish and attack a small handful of bad characters, and to resolve contradictions at the base level, nipping this state of affairs in the bud.

To be fair we must say that it is right for citizens to respect the “Four Safeguards”. However, what the Party emphasizes as the “Four Basic Principles” carries with it political overtones and is another matter altogether.

Nevertheless, what Ye says in his conclusion; namely, that “this so-called ‘adaptation’ demands that religion conduct its activities within the scope of the “Four Safeguards”, and not come into conflict with them,” gives us much food for thought.

To ask that religious activities not come into conflict with the “Four Safeguards” is fair and reasonable. However, to expand this appeal into wanting religious bodies to become active in the area of the “Four Safeguards” is somewhat difficult to understand. Furthermore, in this line of thinking, religious activities that have no connection with the “Four Safeguards” necessarily become unessential and unimportant matters. This does not bode well for religious and social development in China. This difference in the meaning of the phrase is crucial. Our friends in religious circles and in the religious bureaus must pay close attention to this matter. □