

Religious Freedom in China

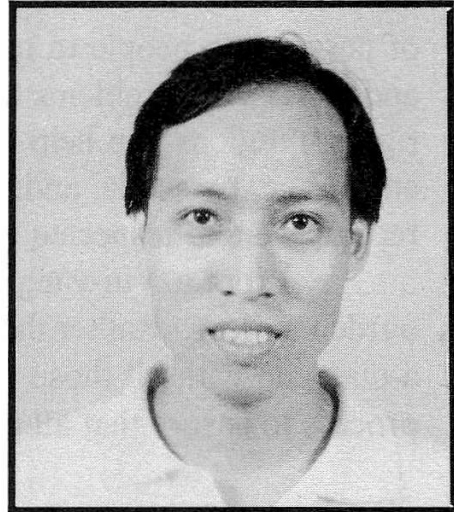
in the Nineties

A Preliminary Appraisal

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Introduction

Researchers into the present religious situation in China have observed contradictory trends in its development during the past two decades. Religious groups are under the government's constant scrutiny and religious activities are everywhere restricted. We even hear of Public Security Officials tyrannizing religious groups in some areas.



However, we also have the heartening news of the rapid increase in numbers of religious believers and growth in religious activities during the past two decades, especially since the liberating reforms of 1979. We have, on the one hand, government officials constantly placing restrictions on religion, leading some observers to believe that religious freedom in China is deteriorating. At the same time there is the phenomenon of rapid development taking place among religious groups that lead other observers to believe that religious freedom in China is improving with each passing day. One might rightly ask: has religious freedom in China during the past two decades been gradually improving or is it in decline? This is the subject that this article purports to address¹

This question of the degree of religious freedom in China must be approached on three levels: government administration and law; social environment; and, personal mentality of believers.

I. Government Administration and Law

From 1949 when Chinese Communist power was established in China, the Communists always declared that they “protect normal religious activities” and proscribe illegal counter revolutionary activities undertaken under the cover of religion. This declaration stating their dominant position was to become an article in their first temporary Constitution. It was called: *A Common Program For the People’s Consultative Conference*.

Article 5 states:

Citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of thought, speech, publishing, assembly, association, migration and religion as well as the right to freely take part in public demonstrations.

Article 53 further states:

Every minority group has the right to develop its own language, preserve and change its own customs and habits and to enjoy the freedom of religion.

This was the first time that the right to religious freedom was mentioned in a legal document having Constitutional style authority. In 1954 the Chinese government ratified the first formal Constitution.

Article 88 states:

Citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy the freedom of religious belief.

In 1975 and again in 1978 China ratified a new Constitution. Both the 1975 and the 1978 Constitutions stipulate the following freedoms

Citizens have the freedom of speech, written correspondence, publishing, assembly, association, travel, demonstrating and the right to strike. They have the right to believe in religion and the right not to believe in religion, and the freedom to propagate atheism.

Both of these Constitutions simply state the “right to propagate atheism” but it does not mention the freedom to propagate religion. This reflected the “leftist” ideology of the Cultural Revolution that had just ended.

In 1982 the Constitution was again revised. Article 36 of this new Constitution abolished the phrase: "the freedom to propagate atheism." This was some improvement on the former two Constitutions. The 1982 Constitution stated:

No government agency, social organization or individual should compel anyone to believe in religion or not to believe in religion. No one should discriminate against citizens who believe in religion or those who do not believe in religion. The government protects normal religious activities. No one should use religion to carry out activities that are harmful to social order, injurious to people's health, or obstruct government educational activities. Religious organizations and concerns must not be under the control of foreign powers.

Chinese law does emphasize the protection of religious freedom. Whether the government can or will implement this policy is another question. From January 1, 1980, since the *Penal Law of the People's Republic of China* came into force, there have been very few cases of cadres accused of infringing the religious rights of any person. On the contrary, many cases of persons who had their rights trampled upon were left without any decision being made to resolve them. On occasions, the government has announced that certain religious persons have been rehabilitated. This means that the judgment on their cases given in the past was "wrong and unjust". However not one cadre ever had to bear the responsibility for these "wrong and unjust" cases (with the possible exception of the Gang of Four). The number of religious persons whose rights were infringed upon but never received a formal sentence of rehabilitation far exceeded the number of those who did. Religious persons along with their fellow citizens in China live in a country where, in name, they enjoy the protection of the law, yet in reality no such protection exists because in China "personal whim replaces the rule of law."

From a Policy Of Suppression to a Policy Of Manipulation

Document Number 19 published in 1982 clearly marked a change in the government's policy on religion.² It states:

Those who think that, with the establishment of the socialist system and the development of a degree of economic culture, religion will

soon disappear are not being realistic. Furthermore, those who think that they can with one blow wipe out religious thinking and practice through use of administrative or even coercive measures are very far from the fundamental Marxist teaching on the religious question. They are completely wrong and can cause much damage.

The promulgation of *Document 19* also points out that during the Cultural Revolution, Lin Biao and the Gang of Four overturned the Party's policy on religion, destroying at the grass roots level the Party's work on minority religions. It went on to say that the use of force in the religious question "will only create ideal conditions for small groups of counter revolutionaries to incite anarchy and counter revolutionary activities under the cover of religion." This is the same as saying that "coercive measures create martyrs and accelerate the spread of religion."

The appearance of *Document 19* proves that the Chinese Communists clearly recognize that high handed measures are useless when applied to religion.

Document 6 appeared towards the end of the eighties. This document also showed that the government had abandoned its main policy of overthrowing religion. Out of practical necessity, it had already changed the main thrust of its religious policy from one of suppression to one of manipulation. At the onset of the nineties the chief agency for dealing with religion within the Chinese government had already refocused its religious policy to one of "adaptation between religion and socialism".³

In principle we can say that the Chinese government has no real policy on religion; it has only a policy of control. In fact, all the policies the Party adopts on various civic groups are focused on strengthening its control over them.

On January 31, 1994, the Chinese government used the form of a State Council decree to publish two sets of regulations that were applicable to all religions in the country. The first one was *Decree 144: Regulations On Supervising Religious Activities of Foreigners in the People's Republic of China*. The second one was *Decree 145: Regulations On Managing Places of Religious Activities*.⁴ Both of these documents extended the scope of Article 36 of the 1982 Constitution. They are a collection of important points collated from

all existing regulations from various provinces. Both of them have a common characteristic: some relax restrictions; others tighten.

In May 1994 the Religious Affairs Bureau, as an implementation of *Decree 145* of the State Council, issued registration procedures for venues of religious activities. The entire text of these procedures shows that the Religious Affairs Bureau wants on the one hand to relax “repression”, yet at the same time continues to enforce “control”. The aim is the same in both cases: to bring all religious activities under government control. The government is now allowing religious organizations who had not obtained previous authorization to register their places for religious activities without the necessity of first joining government sanctioned organizations. For the government had discovered a better way to exercise its control over these unofficial organizations. Article 3 of the registration procedures reads:

When religious organizations apply for registration of their places for religious activities they must provide the following written information:

1. An application form for registration;
2. Documentation and other credentials;
3. The opinion of the village (or township) government or the street neighborhood committees⁵

Once a religious organization was registered the whole range of its activities without exception would fall under the government’s surveillance and control through the street neighborhood committees. For the government, control was the main thing not whether a religious organization was officially sanctioned or not.⁶

II. Social Environment: Pluralism Provides Space For Personal Development

The social aspect of our thesis touches upon two questions: first, the degree of pluralism in a given society and second, the credibility of religion in that society. In principle the more pluralistic a society is the easier it will be for civil groups within it to develop, especially for subcultures outside the main stream of society.

Since the fifties when the Communists came to power Chinese society has been directed towards an ever-increasing and all-embracing uniformity. Private and public enterprises were gradually turned into State-operated ones. Schools, hospitals, orphanages and publishing houses that in the past had been run by churches and other social groups now became State property. Large business corporations were the first to be nationalized followed shortly by the remaining small businesses and self-supporting farms. These were absorbed into the state system during the Land Reform campaign and the time when the People's Communes were established. At the height of these campaigns extolling strict uniformity, that is at that period when the Communes were being set up, everybody in the country became a state employee or belonged to the family of state employees. Everybody lived off the government, eating the same food, wearing the same style clothes, being educated in the same system, receiving assigned jobs from the same source (although individual positions varied), and receiving approximately the same salary. No one escaped the government's strict supervision; no "deviates" were allowed. The individual counted for little or nothing compared with the whole of society. No room was left for individual development or personal achievement.

Compared to the fifties, Chinese society in the eighties was far more open. There was even greater progress in the nineties. Following the economic reforms and social liberalization of 1979 civil society has been moving towards greater pluralism. In fact this is becoming a characteristic of the whole country. Since development towards a pluralistic society weakens pressures put on individuals by the main stream culture; this benefits the emergence of various sub-cultures. Since there is less state interference in the private lives of its citizens, more breathing space is given for these sub-cultures to develop.

We can take as an example communities of Sisters in North China. It would have been impossible for them in the fifties to earn their living by their own work. However in the eighties many dioceses in the North have been sending Sisters to impoverished rural areas to open clinics. They serve the needs of the people in those areas as well as give support to the local churches, especially those churches lacking resident priests. These types of small Sisters' communities begun in the eighties have proliferated in the nineties. Statistics are not

available on the exact number of such communities but we can safely say that there are more than a hundred clinics in operation. That these Sisters (belonging both to the underground and open churches) can freely set up small communities to serve the medical (and pastoral) needs of the people, has certainly done much to liberalize medical services to the people of China.

Respect For Religion: A Change In Former Attitudes

Within the purview of our subject matter, it is important to examine the credibility of religion in China. We have to recognize that throughout Chinese history intellectuals have adopted an equivocal attitude towards religion, wanting to keep it at a respectful distance so to speak. Christianity however, presented a double challenge: intellectuals defined it as barbarian and inimical to Chinese culture and collided with scientific progress. In the beginning of the twenties of the present century there was a strong anti-Christian movement in China. Most main stream intellectuals considered resisting Christianity as their main duty. Even Wu Zhihui, senior statesman of the Nationalist Party, made a statement in 1924 entitled *Christianity At The End Of Its Rope*. It clearly reflected the contempt and antagonism Chinese intellectuals held towards Christianity.⁷

In speaking of the anti-Christian movement in 1927 the Mr. Ye Renchang said:

In brief this anti-Christian movement at its best is essentially political in nature. Its main aim is not against religion in general, but solely against Western religions. Not science and rationalism but anti-imperialism is its main argument. Today's anti-Christian movement is not just a theoretical question or one for academic discussion, but is a political issue.⁸

Communists who advocate atheistic Communism are much more radical in their thinking. According to them religion must be thoroughly eradicated. When Communist power was being established in the mid fifties, Communism became the truth. Communists and most intellectuals believed that atheism was the most scientific of all methods, and the one best able to rescue China from its backward and impoverished condition. Acting out of conscience they devoted themselves to eliminating the last vestiges of religious thought from the hearts of the people.

Nevertheless, after the Cultural Revolution Communism and its allied atheism became completely bankrupt. Religious believers who suffered during the terrible onslaught of the cultural revolution, regained the respect of their fellow citizens.⁹

Once the Cultural Revolution was over China abandoned its former antagonistic attitude towards the world. Instead of wanting to export its own brand of revolution it began to open to the outside wishing to regain its place on the world stage. As China was extending its hands to the outside world it discovered, to its surprise, a fact it had overlooked during the past years: 60 percent of the world's population were religious believers.¹⁰

Since 1979 Chinese scientific and academic circles have started to adopt a "neutral" attitude towards religion. Some even go so far as to understand religion's explanation of life's meaning in a benign way. China's most famous astrophysicist, Fang Lizhi, is the most conspicuous of these interpreters. He openly began to ask why so many non-Chinese scientists often have a deep religious faith.¹¹ Liu Xiaofeng, the Chinese philosopher, has seriously asked whether the Christian faith should supply for deficiencies among Chinese thinkers. From the mid eighties into the nineties Chinese society on all levels has been giving a more positive interpretation to religion. Other philosophers and thinkers, such as Zhang Zhiyang, though not accepting the faith, have nonetheless taken a positive attitude towards the study of Christianity.

Supporters of religion are appearing everywhere in the intellectual world. The famous Chinese thinker, Liu Zaifu, wrote a short article entitled *A Chicken for God*. In it he says: "In fact, God's love is precisely that sacred value that transcends all utilitarianism. God's love is His own perfection and needs no recompense, not even a chicken or a pig".¹² Liu's understanding of God entirely transcends all categories defined by materialistic atheism. For a thinker grown up and educated entirely under Communism to grasp something of the essence of God, is evidence of the vivid conviction of one who has passed through deep and critical distress.

In a country ravaged by the Cultural Revolution, religion (and especially Christianity) is no longer taboo. In 1984 the Chinese Foreign Translation Publishing Company published Tan Zaixi's edition of the well-known translator Eugene Nida's collected works.

Most of the translations (in fact almost all of them) use Biblical phrases as illustrations.¹³ This technique became prevalent for a while in studies on Religion and Literature, Religion and Art and Religion and Social Culture that appeared with a very wide circulation. After 1980 books published both in the vernacular and in translations proliferated in China. Most of these were on Buddhism, but there were also authors writing on Christianity.¹⁴

Communist propaganda publications that began by not denying that religion had some social function ended up affirming that religion has a transcendent aspect that went beyond the understanding of materialism. The Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing began publishing studies on religion, some even appearing quarterly; i.e., *Studies On World Religions* and *Data On World Religions*. Naturally these two quarterlies could not avoid perpetuating stock ideas from a Marxist-Leninist philosophy, but the degree of freedom given to discussion was remarkable and unprecedented under this regime.

In principle, Communists still emphasize that China is an atheistic country. However, the bitter experience of the Cultural Revolution has constrained them to adopt a more moderate attitude towards religion. The experience of deep human suffering has brought about this new awareness. Furthermore the bankruptcy of Communist ideology in the eighties has also created a spiritual vacuum causing the whole of society to change its attitude on religion from one of doubt to respect. The Data Center for Chinese University Publications had published a bi-monthly double sectioned magazine entitled: *Atheism and Religion*. From the beginning of 1994, however, that magazine changed its title simply to *Religion* while remaining a bi-monthly. These changes reveal that Chinese academic circles recognize religion as being an independent social study and no longer consider it only an addendum to studies on atheism.

III. Personal Mentality of Believers

We can delineate two additional levels regarding personal attitudes. The first concerns the way believers judge the external limits placed on the exercise of their religion. In other words, they want to see how the government's position is going to affect them. Will it take action against religious activities occurring outside permitted categories?

During the fifties, the government's position on religion was very much one of control and regulation. The impression the Communists left with the people then was one of strict discipline. They did what they said they would do. If the government wanted to limit religious activities (or any other social activities for that matter) there was not one single area in the whole country that would have the luck to escape. Cadres at all levels made reports to their superiors in a tightly disciplined system. No one dared to disobey a command that came from the central government.

However, after the onslaught of the Cultural Revolution the cadre system was no longer so iron clad. The tightly knit levels binding in one body those below with those on top became the proverbial "Policy from above; tactics from below." The quality of cadres who had experienced the Cultural Revolution dropped drastically as well as their sense of cohesion with the central authority.

By the early eighties some believers, seeing gray areas turning up in government regulations, ventured to overstep restrictions testing to see how far they could go. Generally, those religious bodies who had received government recognition ventured little, whereas those who did not receive recognition dared more.

We have examples of these sort of ventures in Protestant Associations forming ties with overseas groups along with their tacit approval of "family churches" and Catholic authorities inviting overseas teachers to officially sanctioned seminaries to teach. Again there are cases in many places of bishops not waiting for government approval before assuming their office and even of opening their seminaries without official sanction.

The Only Road To Freedom: Mastering Pent Up Fears

The second level on the personal mentality of believers is whether they continue to fear the government reapplying their restrictive measures. In the past the government did actually use such measures to suppress religious activities, but its more important aim was to create an atmosphere of fear. Once believers saw the matter through and discovered that, even though the government's position remained one of repression, it became relatively unimportant as far as they were concerned. All they had to do was to take a bold and fearless position.

In 1981 Bishop Fan Xueyan of Baoding Diocese in Hebei took risks in secretly ordaining underground bishops and these Bishops, in turn, took the same risks in ordaining other bishops. Their example shows how to overcome apprehensions created by an atmosphere of fear.

Local public security officials continued to suppress believers who took such positions wanting to put an end to their activities. Nevertheless, in the eighties local governments faced a high risk of exposure and of creating martyrs that were for them too big a price to pay. This resulted in different methods being applied to repress these un-sanctioned religious activities. Although local police officials did exercise their authority and suppressed these activities, they could only sentence these religious leaders to terms of imprisonment of limited duration. (For a religious leader to be sentenced to life imprisonment during the eighties would have been an unheard of event). However, once they were released from prison they continued to go their own way.

As far as these secretly ordained leaders were concerned, "imprisonment" was equivalent to "approval". Once their identity came to light, their imprisonment and release made a clear statement of their position and they continued to work as before. These clergy witnessed to a truth: once interior fears were overcome, no external force could limit their ministry.

Relationship Between These Three Levels

These three levels manifest the degree of freedom that religious organizations (especially Christian organizations) in China enjoy. According to this writer's observation and understanding, the relationship among these three levels are not cumulative, but set in multiples. This is to say that the sum of the degree of religious freedom in China is not to be considered as three elements to be added, but multiplied. In other words, if we could quantify these 3 elements, then if any one element's change was doubled, the total degree of religious freedom would also be doubled. This factor explains in part why, during the past 15 years, religion in China has made such remarkable progress at such a fast rate. Even if we consider that the degree of religious freedom on the government's level

has not changed since the liberating reforms of 1979, there have been great changes on the social and personal levels. Viewing matters in this way we see why the total degree of religious freedom in society has made great progress.

Obviously in real life these three elements are almost impossible to quantify. All we can do is to find some order and direction this process of change is taking. Nevertheless, the main hope this writer has in proposing this formula of “quantification by multiples” is to help the reader understand that if any one of these elements falls to zero, than no matter how high a degree the other two elements have reached, the degree of religious freedom will also fall to zero. This is the reason why all religious activities came to a halt during the Cultural Revolution.

Conflict Compatible with a High Degree of Religious Freedom

Most overseas observers of religion in China can easily get a mistaken notion. They might think that conflicts between the government and religious bodies signify that religious freedom is on the wane. However, under present conditions, these conflicts are not necessarily a sign that religious freedom is decreasing. On the contrary, they could very well be a sign of a greater degree of freedom.

Before China can enjoy complete freedom of religion the present day phenomenon, where the degree of religious freedom waxes and wanes, is quite relative. As this degree increases religious activities also accelerate and this in turn excites the desire of religious believers for an even greater degree of freedom. This in its turn arouses further conflicts where hopes go beyond set limits. This triggers a whole new series of conflicts.

An absence of conflicts is not necessarily a good thing. During the cultural revolution, there was absolutely no conflict between the government and religious organizations. Religious people did not dare make any claims on the government. On the contrary, in the southern part of Hebei province comprising the dioceses of Baoding, Yixian and Anguo intermittent religious conflicts have taken place recently. These conflicts reflect the increased frequency of religious activities going on in those areas.

These conflicts show up the contradiction between “concrete limitations” and “the unwillingness to observe them”. They also have a reciprocal function in that in the long run they will achieve a balance. □

Endnotes

¹ The present article is taken from notes of a talk given during a course of lectures at the Hong Kong Christian Institute on July 19, 1994. After revision it was published in the bi-monthly magazine *Thought* in May 1995. Additions were made to it for a talk given during a course of lectures at the Hong Kong Justice and Peace Commission in January 1996.

² cf. *Red Flag* Vol, 12, 1993, June 16, pp. 8.

³ Cf. the article of Zhang Gang *A cursory View on Harmonizing and Adapting Religion and Socialism*, The Chinese Catholic Church, 1994 Vol. 2, pp. 36–38.

⁴ The People’s Daily, Beijing, Feb. 6, 1994.

⁵ Cf. *Registration Procedures for Venues for Religious Activities*, Tripod, 1994, Vol. 14, No. 82, pp. 44-46.

⁶ f. *The Neighborhood Committee: An Organ not to Be Underestimated*, Tripod, Vol. 14, No. 83, pp. 31-35.

⁷ Cf. *A Critique of Religion in Today’s China: A Reflection on the Anti-Christian Movement*, Ye Renchang, Taiwan, Canticle Publishing Co., September 1987.

⁸ op. Cit., p. 52.

⁹ Cf. “The Lord of the Church: Through Darkness and Light,” (Chinese version), Chpt. 32, Hong Kong, Holy Spirit Study Centre, March 1995, 2nd edition.

¹⁰ Cf. *General Survey of World Religions*, p. 575, Beijing: Chinese Academy of Sciences Press, Oct. 1984.

¹¹ Cf. *Afterthoughts on Praising God*, Fang Lizhi, Hong Kong: Ming Bao Press, Dec. 1988.

¹² Cf. *Thoughts Scattered Throughout A Dairy*, Liu Zaifu, pp. 162-163, Hong Kong: The Universal Book Company Ltd., 1992.

¹³ Cf. *Translations of Eugene Nida’s Translations*, Beijing: The Chinese Foreign Translations Publishing Company, 1984.

¹⁴ Cf. *Religion in China Today*, Zhi Yueli, pp. 310-389, Beijing: Today’s China Press, 1994.