

Editorial

An article appeared in the Summer 1996 issue of Beijing's Academy of Social Sciences magazine entitled "Religions in Hong Kong Facing 1997". It was not only a carefully researched piece of writing, but timely as well. Its author, Mr. Xue Zheng, is a member of the Institute for the Study of World Religions at the Academy. He came to Hong Kong for three weeks last year to do research on the situation of religion in the Territory. The result is an interesting, thorough and, in the main, objective study of Hong Kong's religions and religious organizations. While his lingering suspicions about religion in general, its goals and motivations, are at times coloured by a predetermined ideological stance now considered passé in most academic circles, his statistics are accurate, his information up-to-date, and his analysis worthy of note. Most important, what he does offer us are some valuable insights into how China views Hong Kong's current religious situation at this key moment in time, on the eve of the transfer of sovereignty.

Mr. Xue expresses his surprise at the sheer numbers of believers he finds in Hong Kong, and by the variety and vitality of its religious organizations. He was also astonished by the vast amount of places set aside for public worship. He cites the total number of formal believers at 1,400,000 or 22.8% of a population of 6.14 million people, of whom 98% are ethnic Chinese.

He also notes that there are large numbers of believers who, though not affiliated with any major religion, carry out the traditional forms of Chinese folk religion. The worship of Chinese deities, the ancient practises of 'fung shui' and ancestor worship, are all alive and well, and even thriving, among the general population. This state of affairs does not please Mr. Xue, and he dismisses such religious activity as revelatory "of the presence of all sorts of superstitions" among the people.

What brings the reader up short is Mr. Xue's comment that the British government is the real reason for the dynamism of Hong Kong's religious life. "Besides historical factors," he writes, "the freedom and vitality of religion in Hong Kong are directly related to the attitude of the British government towards religion." On the surface this might seem laudatory, but in fact it is only the stalking horse for Mr. Xue's main assertion that the colonial government has "used the religious organizations to regulate social contradictions and pacify the social order."

This kind of language hints at a lack of familiarity with the democratic process and the role of religion in a free society. It also infers that ultimately religion's only justifiable use in society is as a well-intentioned pawn in the hands of the political power. On the other hand, he is right on the mark when he says that the government has provided and continues to provide legal, administrative, and financial support to the religious organizations when involved in running social services for society at large.

Mr. Xue alleges that Catholics and Protestants have a privileged status here and wield considerable political clout. And he musters certain facts to back up his argument: while only 10% of the population, Christians occupy 22.5% of the seats in government agencies; Christian churches run 45% of the schools and account for 50% of the entire student population. While he may overestimate the influence schools have on the personal motivations, real values and future choices of their students (many a headmaster or headmistress would be delighted to wield such power), Mr. Xue does understand the key role schools do play in the formation of a society's future. There has been some speculation among Christian churchpersons that the first structures to be affected directly by the changeover might well be the Christian schools.

Mr. Xue is significantly impressed by the contributions Catholic and Protestant churches have made to Hong Kong society, not only in the area of education, but also by their medical and other social services. Yet he also cannot resist repeating the old bromide about the ultimate goal and purpose of all religious institutions is to make converts.

In assessing the views of believers about the return of sovereignty and what they may hope for after July 1, 1997, Mr. Xue acknowledges that Hong Kong believers expect to retain their freedom to believe in, practise, and propagate their religion. They also expect to have the freedom to continue to critique both atheism and communism from a religious perspective. Mr. Xue feels that all these rights are guaranteed in the Basic Law, more specifically in Articles 32, 137, 141, 148 and 149. He maintains that these articles take into account all the *reasonable* demands of believers (*italics mine*).

By way of conclusion, Mr. Xue writes: "Finally, it needs to be pointed out that since the British colonialists have ruled over Hong Kong for over a century, and because Hong Kong continues to have a special economic, political, and geographical position, the socio-political aspects of Hong Kong are extremely complicated." As a result of its unique

situation, Mr. Xue maintains that "every kind of political current passes through Hong Kong and necessarily permeates and influences its religions." From here it is an easy leap to a conclusion that is, to say the least, an unsubstantiated assumption. He says that "religion (in Hong Kong) is influenced by hostile international forces which have constantly exploited Hong Kong and exploited religion as a base from which to penetrate our country (China)." As a consequence, religion in Hong Kong will need "continued long term vigilance." Hong Kong believers have been forewarned. There is nothing of this attitude to be found in the Basic Law. Nor is it in line with Hong Kong people's understanding of what has been promised in regard to freedom of religion by 'One country, two systems'. The fact that we may not agree with Mr. Xue's on this point in no way takes away from the overall excellence of Mr. Xue's most interesting and timely analysis. (BAM)

Hong Kong's religious believers

Protestants	260,000
Catholics	255,000
Daoists	1,000,000
Sikhs	50,000
Hindus	12,000
Others	10,000

The 10,000 others above include Confucianists, Jews, Muslims, Bahais, Parsees, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Salvation Army members, Seventh Day Adventists, etc.)
 (Statistics taken from Xue Zheng's research)