

## ***Freedom to Do What? A Response***

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Religious Freedom is an ambiguous concept that is not easily or often realised. Almost every country in the world promises to protect religious freedom but in the struggle to balance it with the protection of 'public interest' often religious freedom takes a back seat.

The term 'freedom' itself appears open to numerous interpretations. The amount of religious freedom enjoyed can only be measured by the day-to-day experiences of individuals and communities — how much of their faith and religious practices are influenced by the state, national laws or other parties.

The amount of religious freedom can also depend on a religion itself. The Unification Church (Moonies) has argued that it was denied religious freedom when its members were recently expelled from Honduras. There is also widespread concern about the influence of cults and sects such as the suicidal Heaven's Gate cult, or the sex-happy Children of God cult, which have been banned in the US and Europe.

While a religion itself determines whether or not it will enjoy religious freedom, so too will the country in which it is practised. For example, in Nazi Germany Jews were forbidden from practising their religion. So too in many Eastern European countries under Communism, Christians and other mainstream religious groups were harshly persecuted.

China's State Council's publishing of a White Paper on Religious Freedom on October 16 has to be seen in the above context. While its promise to protect religious freedom is praiseworthy,



China's record of dealing with religious groups demands the document be read with a critical eye.

### ***Socialism and religion***

China declares itself to be a Socialist state-in-the-making. As such, its long-term plan is the eradication of all religion from China. Religion is 'tolerated', according to Document 19 issued in 1982 by the Communist Party's Central Committee, because the people need to be educated towards a "conscious scientific viewpoint" when religion will no longer be a crutch used to support a weak people.

Only after the gradual development of the Socialist, economic, cultural, scientific and technological enterprise and of a Socialist civilisation with its own material and spiritual values will the type of society and level of awareness that gave rise to the existence of religion gradually disappear.

(Document 19)

It urges the population of China to "put forth all our best efforts in the struggle to bring about this brilliant future".

One concrete result of this state policy is that no schools in China may be run by religious bodies. The education of the future generations who are to fulfil the 'glorious age', Beijing insists, must not rest in the hands of such a 'misguided' sector of society. Yet, the free and valuable contribution of religious groups to medical and social services is accepted in China, so long as no proselytisation takes place.

### ***The White Paper and dialogue***

A member of the Communist Party may not belong to any religious group or claim any religious belief. In Hong Kong, the newly arrived PLA forces are banned from taking part in any religious activities or even from entering a church.

With this in mind, the State Council's lengthy White Paper on religious freedom comes as a surprise. While it fails to say anything new, it could, however, suggest a possible change in policy and as such offer some hope and some room for dialogue, if dialogue were actually sought.

Closer examination of the White Paper does reveal, however, that before dialogue is possible a lot of ground has to be covered. Published on the eve of President Jiang Zemin's trip to the United States it could be interpreted as an attempt to deflect or preempt protests and criticism of China's human rights record and religious policies.

### ***The concept of Religious Freedom***

China's concept of freedom differs in practice from other countries, although it uses politically correct terminology to outline its stance on human rights. As Beijing has repeatedly pointed out, freedom is qualified according to the national interest rather than individual interest. This has some concrete ramifications for 'minority' religious groups, Catholics among them. If religious behaviour is judged to be 'threatening to the public interest' it will incur the full weight of the state, as the White Paper ratifies.

Document 19, however, admitted that it is useless to attempt to eradicate religion overnight and argues that it should be 'tolerated' because to do otherwise "would only exacerbate the estrangement between the mass of believers and nonbelievers as well as incite and aggravate religious fanaticism, resulting in serious consequences for our Socialist enterprise". The White Paper could also, therefore, be seen as an example of Beijing's tolerant policy aimed at preventing socio-religious unrest, such as in Tibet or the Muslims in Xinjiang province.

The 'freedoms' promised to Chinese Catholics differ in practice from the freedoms enjoyed by their brothers and sisters elsewhere in the universal church. Freedoms even Hong Kong Catholics take for granted, such as organising a prayer meeting at a local school without having to seek government permission, running schools, the work of Justice and Peace and countless social services, cannot be done at all or at least not so easily on the mainland.

Unfortunately, the positive rhetoric of the White Paper does not reflect the reality. Only clouds it and provides politically correct stock statements that can be used to deflect criticism of reported incidents of injustice or religious persecution on the mainland.

It is not enough to claim an overall state of religious freedom and the desire to protect it if the reality proves otherwise. Ac-

According to the White Paper, all religious groups will be tolerated if they fit the profile set out by the atheist state, but that profile, in some cases, comes into conflict with the fundamental nature of certain religious groups. The Catholic Church remains one such group that has had to sever its formal links to the universal church and reject the authority of the papacy.

### ***Statistics and facts***

The paper, while providing interesting religious statistics, does not supply all the facts. Its figures for the number of Catholics in China ignores the reality of a complex situation. Many of the underground Catholics and clergy are in some places affiliated with the Open Church and vice versa. It makes it difficult to collect statistics.

“Religious leaders and leading organs of the various religious bodies are selected and ordained in accordance with their own regulations,” the White Paper claims. This is also not the full story. As far as the appointment of bishops in the Catholic Church is concerned, Beijing has broken Catholic Church regulations by claiming the right to appoint bishops without the pope’s approval.

‘Normal’ clerical activities are protected by law, the White Paper says. Compared to 25 years ago, religious groups today do enjoy considerably more freedom. Churches are open, seminaries can train new priests and some publications are allowed. Yet strict regulations on religious activities, such as forcing all groups to register, for a fee, allows the state to closely monitor the activities of religious personnel. They also prevent religious leaders from taking part in house church services, open-air Masses and religious debates unless permission is granted by a state authority. Those involved in unregistered activities face fines or harsher punishments.

A close eye is even kept on government-approved religious institutions, in some cases religious communities are forced to report to the local Religious Affairs Bureau on their activities. The few religious publications allowed are also carefully censored.

## ***History according to the White Paper***

The White Paper accused the Vatican of playing an 'inglorious role' in modern Chinese history. It says the Vatican was determined to 'sabotage' China's glorious future by 'stirring up hostility against the people's revolution', helping the Kuomintang fight the civil war and 'instigating hatred against the new people's political power among converts'.

These statements are strong and fail to include any recognition of the fact that when the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949, the Vatican's previous experience of Communism was in Eastern Europe where the church was suffering intense persecution.

The paper, also ignored repeated efforts on the part of Pope John XXIII, Paul VI and Pope John Paul II to create an atmosphere of dialogue. Despite his experience of Communism in Poland, John Paul II has praised the "great nation of China", and urged Chinese Catholics to become "better citizens and better Catholics". His repeated efforts to open dialogue, such as in 1991 in Manila and regular 'letters' to Chinese Catholics, have all been ignored by Beijing.

## ***Sino-Vatican relations***

While suggesting that China wishes to improve relations with the Vatican, the White Paper made no concessions that would offer much hope of a thawing of ties. The same conditions remain: The Vatican is told to break diplomatic ties with Taiwan and "not interfere in China's internal affairs on the pretext of religious affairs".

## ***The Past as memory***

If the paper is an olive branch for dialogue, it carries few signs that Beijing is willing to compromise, especially in the light of its constant references to past 'crimes'. The past is a dangerous meeting-point for discussion. The Vatican can provide countless examples of brutality and evil deeds on the part of 'New China'. The past is better left in the past, as Pope John Paul II suggested in 1991. It is true that the spread of Christianity in China was closely associated with imperialism and colonialism and the shame of that needs to be further recognised by Western Christian communities. Accord-

ing to the White Paper, much injustice was perpetuated by missionaries. It claims that missionaries participated “in the opium trade” the “slaughter of Chinese civilians” and other evils. But the one-sided account, aimed at showing what happens when outsiders are allowed to interfere in internal affairs, fails to admit any positive contribution by missionaries, such as Matteo Ricci and Vincent Lebbe who were highly valued in China for their knowledge and skills.

Nor does it recognise the valuable contribution missionaries made to China’s education, health care services, its struggle against feudal injustices and the overall opening up of China to the world. Although Beijing may declare China is self-sufficient it belies the true picture of China’s reliance on international trade and communication.

The truth about the past should not attempt to cloud the harsh reality that today it is Chinese injustice against Chinese that is making the headlines.

### ***China’s religious policy***

The White Paper stresses the protection of religious rights and claims its policy towards religious freedom is based upon international conventions and agreements, such as the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). However, Beijing has always claimed the right to define the meaning of freedom and human rights according to its own “national conditions” -- in China’s case a “socialist state with Chinese characteristics” where eventually religion will play no part.

A religion that promotes social justice and a conscious living out of the morals of one’s faith is not encouraged by the Communist Party, especially if it has political ramifications. The White Paper and Document 19 are strict on defining religion as a “personal matter” which must not infringe on the rights of others “not to believe”.

As a result, if a Christian, Muslim or Buddhist is critical of corrupt behaviour of officials or unjust laws, they are usually accused of interfering in politics or being influenced by foreign groups. While Christians are called upon in the Gospels to obey the law, they are not asked to ignore injustice or corrupt laws. The White Paper claims that some 17,000 religious personnel are partici-

pating in China's affairs of state. But it adds that while this participation involves making suggestions and comments on -- or even criticising -- political and social affairs, it only relates to "motions ... [on] the government's work on religion". All other matters remain out of the religious sphere of influence.

### ***Religion and national security***

One key element of the White Paper is the supposed threat of religion to national security. Almost anything can be considered a threat to national security. Obviously an unregistered shrine to Our Lady constitutes a serious threat to public safety because one such shrine was destroyed by Public Security officers in Donglu village, Hebei province in 1995.

Countless religious activities which other governments do not consider threatening, are punishable offences in China. Records show significant numbers of laity, bishops, priests and nuns who have spent years in jail or been tortured or executed under the pretext of China's national security. If such minor actions, such as holding a prayer meeting in an unregistered house, are a threat to the security of China, it reflects poorly on the government's own sense of safety.

Outside influences are particularly threatening to national security and the formation of a Socialist state with Chinese characteristics, if the White Paper is anything to go by. It cites the threat of groups who have infiltrated China and engage in "criminal activities under the signboard of religion".

These "pseudo-religions... deceive the masses" and "incite people to overthrow the government", the White Paper says. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not unique to China. Many other countries are complaining of similar 'invasions' of sects and cults that have become involved in financial scandals or refused to obey the law, such as the Waco Branch Davidians in the US. But in other countries, the state's methods of dealing with such groups are usually closely monitored by the media and interest groups, and the state is called to account when it is thought it has acted too harshly.

While China may be justified in fearing the influence of such religious groups there remains some concern about the yard-

stick used to judge the size of the threat certain groups pose. One great fear is that religion can be used to "incite people to overthrow the government", as the White Paper stipulates. The crackdown on Muslims in Xinjiang province and Buddhists in Tibet stems from China's fear that religion is being used to promote separatist movements which do not coincide with Beijing's political goals in the areas.

The White Paper also ignores the need for reconciliation between the underground and open churches. If the treatment of the underground church is any thing to go by, it too is considered a threat through its "criminal activities", as underground Masses and seminaries are often described. It is the underground church's recognition of the authority of the pope, the head of an "interfering" foreign "country" in China's view, that also makes it threatening to the New China. The role of religion, especially the Catholic Church, in the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe did not go unnoticed by Beijing.

Yet, many countries enjoy peaceful diplomatic relations with the Vatican which appoints bishops and is involved in the internal affairs of Catholic communities around the world. The appointment of bishops goes further than simply Rome wishing to centralise power, a problem not only Chinese bishops complain about. It also relates to the spread of a unified church teaching, the Vatican's right to reprimand bishops and priests who are thought to have gone outside the magisterium of the church and the full participation of bishops in Synods and church councils.

The Vatican has indicated that it is willing to make concessions regarding the nominating of bishops and even on the Taiwan issue, although it has not specifically said publicly what the concessions could be. Their offers have fallen on deaf ears.

In an atmosphere of fear little freedom can be enjoyed. When the day-to-day practices of mainstream religious groups in China are viewed as less threatening to national security real dialogue on what constitutes religious freedom may be possible. But such dialogue is unlikely in view of China's determination to achieve the dream of a socialist state where religion is no more. ■