

Commentary***The White Paper on Religious Freedom in China: A Response***

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The Information Office of China's State Council published a White Paper on freedom of religious belief in China on 16 October 1997. This document is, above all, written for the occasion. It is a speech in and for China's defense. It is meant to respond, in the area of religion, to a vast international campaign for human rights in China, which preceded and surrounded President Jiang Zemin's visit to the United States (26 October -2 November 1997). Nonetheless it contains a very interesting overture towards the Holy See, one likely to evoke diverse commentaries, but also one which many observers with expertise in religious matters in China did not hesitate to qualify as *a little step forward*.

This overture is found towards the end of the fourth section which is meant to justify the China's religious policy favouring "independence and self-support in religious affairs". Following a very negative description of the role played by Western missionaries in the history of China, the tone changes abruptly to permit a declaration of intention, apparently one of good will. The Chinese government, it says, wants to ameliorate its relations with the Vatican. The two well known prerequisites for the resumption of dialogue are then cited. The first is the recognition of the People's Republic of China, along with a rupture in diplomatic relations with Taiwan. The verbal formulation of the second condition has attracted the attention of certain experts, as for example, Anthony Lam of the Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong. Instead of requiring, as in the

past, “non interference in China’s religious affairs under the pretext of religion” the document used instead, “not to interfere in China’s internal affairs under the pretext of religion.” This formula could make room for Rome to play a certain role in purely religious matters in China. This matter, the document points out cannot be addressed until the issue of the relations between the two States is resolved.

The White Paper makes few other overtures. In most areas especially in the historical version presented, the document offers very little that is new. As with many documents of this type the White Paper emphasizes the “inglorious” role, according to them, played by Protestant and Catholic missionaries. They see them as tools helping to bring about the invasion of China, during the Opium War, during the setting up the unequal treaties, and also during the war of Liberation. There are also historical distortions regarding the role played by the representative of the Holy See in the Catholic mission in Manchuokuo (1932-1945) and in the nature of Pius XII’s encyclicals on China after the inauguration of the Communist regime. Many other areas are also mentioned. The same desire for self-justification is at work in the presentation of the Church in China. The fate of the Catholics who refuse to register with the Patriotic Association is not mentioned. The only statistics mentioned are those of the Religious Affairs Bureau.

Fides News Agency reacted vehemently to the Chinese White Paper. It accused the document of being nothing more than propaganda flaunted on the eve of President Jiang Zemin’s trip to the United States. Fides reproached the authors of the document of having left out of their statistics 6 to 8 million Catholics faithful to Rome in the underground church. Five years ago the Statistical Bureau of Beijing had already mentioned that there were 12 million Catholics in China.

The issue of religious freedom has been dealt with in three White papers which appeared successively in 1991, 1995, 1997. It is the first time, however, that an entire White paper is devoted to religion.■