

Reflections on Religion and Modernization

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How religion relates to China's present modernization policy poses serious questions which have both theoretical and practical implications for the country and for religion. That China's process of industrialization will continue to move forward is an historical certainty; just as it is also inevitable that religion will persist as a reality within Chinese society for many years to come. But during this period religion will also be subject to social forces both from within and without that will result in a profound transformation. One major outside force will be, of course, China's modernization. Nor will this necessarily be a bad thing, for under the all pervading influence of modernization, religion stands to become relevant and useful to Chinese society. It is to our advantage, therefore, to try to cultivate a better understanding of the true nature of religious belief in present day China, not only for research purposes, but also in order to channel in positive ways the energies of the 100,000,000 religious believers to serve the needs of modernization.

1. Religion and Modernization

What is religion? While the question gives rise to many different kinds of answers, in recent years Chinese researchers and scholars, along with people from the United Front and some religious believers, have reached some consensus on what it means. They define religion as a form of ideology, a social entity within society that also incorporates in its teachings a great deal of cultural tradition. In short, religion is a complex social and historical phenomenon, which also serves as an object of faith for large numbers of believers.

What, then, is modernization? Generally speaking, modernization is seen as a process wherein science and technology are mobilized and directed towards using the forces of production to transform China's traditional agricultural society into a modern

industrial state. It is a process effecting profound changes in society wherein industrialization gradually comes to permeate every aspect of its economic, political and cultural thought. Modernization's first requirement is, of course, industrialization, but an industrialization understood as one with Chinese characteristics. And while China's modernization may be measured by the giant strides it has made in recent years in increasing productivity and by its rapid progress in science and technology, it must ultimately be judged by its success, or lack of it, in strengthening the aspirations of Chinese socialism and its support of the resurgence of traditional Chinese cultural values.

In practice, China's modernization includes four basic elements.

■ Firstly, it is a melding of global and national realities; a way of adapting to the modern world and riding the tide of international progress. This manifests the willingness on the part of China to participate actively in the global economy, a commitment that not only insures its greater independence and autonomy, but also the renewal of its national vitality, self-respect and self-confidence.

■ Secondly, China's modernization is an alignment of the new and the old, the blending of the modern with the traditional. It seeks to bring together the exigencies of the present with the strengths of the past. Modernization, in upholding traditional values, rejects historical nihilism in all its forms.

■ Thirdly, modernization advocates, as an essential part of the process, a vigorous commitment to and promotion of socialism. We act to bring to fruition a modernization with socialistic characteristics.

■ Fourthly, China's modernization combines economic growth with social progress. Our ultimate goal, then, is not the growth of the economy alone, but also the actualization of social progress in every phase of human growth and development in our society.

In summary, it is not enough for China's modernization to achieve success in the economic and material spheres, but it must also bring into being a harmonious and balanced society, a society that is particularly sensitive to the process of developing and refining the quality of its inner life. This is what authentic modernization really means.

2. The Impact of Modernization on Religion

What determines the nature of the superstructure is the economic foundation upon which it is built. Any change in the foundation will of necessity bring about a change in the superstructure.

China's modernization, which is based on economic growth, promotes the development of the forces of production. The rapid, and sometimes violent, upswing of the economy effects a realignment of the complex interrelationships governing the forces of production. And it also draws into this highly volatile transforming process the nation's social, political and spiritual life, including religion. We should note here that China's modernization has only just begun, and its impact on religion is also in its initial stages. The history of recent reforms covers only a 20 year span, and only two decades have passed since China reopened itself to the outside world. In terms of its economic and social development, China is still in a state of imbalance. In terms of economic progress, there are huge differences registered from place to place. The impact modernization is having on religion also reflects this imbalance, with variations depending on the social and economic conditions prevalent in each particular area. However, despite individual differences, in the overall picture, six major trends are beginning to emerge.

1. Where economic development is on the increase, there is a corresponding trend towards greater secularization among religious believers. This is especially true of the more economically advanced regions along the east coast, where religious believers seem to have a sharper awareness of how the consumer society works and, therefore, are more focused in their ability to acquire wealth in the newly established market economy.

But it is also noted that their interest and participation in religious activities seem to decrease accordingly, and their faith in God seems to diminish gradually with time. On the other hand, economic activity is definitely on the increase among the religious institutions, with more and more temples and churches engaging in commercial enterprises. Not a few of their religious personnel have become quite adept at reading the daily financial forecasts. These people not only direct their energies towards attaining self-support for their places of worship, but they also have built up strong financial

reserves as a protection for the future. However, many of their young people are swept along by the tidal wave of a market economy. Tempted by worldly ambitions and the desire for personal gain, an increasing number of them are caught up in the pursuit of money and worldly pleasures. This not only weakens their faith, but also their commitment to self-discipline. Utilitarian pragmatism is beginning to replace former religious values. This is especially true among recent converts, and those from old Catholic families who have moved out from their parents' homes in the country and are now on their own in the big cities.

2. The more relaxed application of government policy has created an atmosphere in which religions of every kind can thrive. Their activities increase with each passing day. Many religious groups, formerly dormant, are now making great headway. This kind of spiritual elan catches the public imagination and helps to extend religion's influence within society. In the late '70s, as the Leftist Era came to a close, restrictions on religion were lifted. Oppression gave way to greater freedom. And the original religious policy, as defined in our National Constitution, was restored. Freedom of religion was recognized in practice as a fundamental right of every individual citizen. And those in authority gradually came around to the position that religion was a cultural phenomenon with certain positive features and values. This brought new life to former venerable traditions. Some of the more positive aspects of religious thought and teaching received extensive coverage in the media, which resulted in a reawakening of self-esteem among members of all religions. And believers everywhere began to think that this new era of socialist construction might usher in for religion a new Golden Age of religious growth.

3. Within all mainline religions in our country, there exists an active spirit of genuine patriotism which works to direct political and religious energies towards our country's modernization. They all hold to the principle directives of the Party in implementing a socialist modernization with Chinese characteristics. They also enjoin on their members a spirit of cooperation with the government in its efforts to actualize its religious policy. Their religious thinkers focus on new interpretations of old dogmas, uniting love of country with love of their religion in order to forward the nation's modernization. And they probe important areas of theology, such as the need for inculturation,

to seek ways and means to adapt their theological systems and religious rituals to the realities of contemporary Chinese society.

4. The opening of China to the outside world has encouraged the re-establishment of normal international ties and exchanges with foreign religious organizations in many countries. This is indeed an excellent way to help make the world at large more aware of social conditions in China itself, especially the religious situation. This can also serve the goals of world peace. Unfortunately, a number of outside religious groups have at times tried to take advantage of our nation's openness in order to further their own specific missionary goals and activities here. Outside enemy forces have exploited our government's open door policy and infiltrated our society. Such people exercise a certain negative influence on our nation's social stability, and on our ethnic solidarity, all of which can effect our national unity.

5. Our society is now in a period of transition from an old to a new system. This gives rise to social contradictions and disorders which are also reflected in the religious sphere. On the one hand, we have made great strides in transforming our nation into a democracy that is ruled by law, and have established important standards governing our modern social and political life. Also a good beginning has been made in administering religious affairs objectively and according to law. On the other hand, wherever religion and society interact, there is also no end to internal contradictions. Moreover, the legal system that is to govern religious affairs has not yet been fully set up, and some laws are still not enforced with sufficient vigor. This can cause grave disorders. And especially so when some organizations and private individuals, in their efforts to exploit religion for their own personal benefit, engage in activities that not only obstruct normal religious actions, but also contribute to the spread of superstitious practices as well. Some malicious people raise the banner of religion to establish organizations that are illegal and heretical, and which condone behavior that is both rebellious and criminal. We must keep a close watch on such activities.

6. The intermingling of religious with ethnic problems also gives rise to social contradictions and disorders. This is especially true in those regions where the overwhelming majority of the minority people are religious believers. The huge economic gap separating the minorities from the Han majority in the more developed areas stirs up

negative feelings about economic imbalances among the masses, and also among the ethnic cadres and the intellectuals. While the new openness and reforms have allowed ethnic minorities to move away from their traditional isolation and permitted more interaction with the larger society, still conflicts of interest, of culture and religion serve to emphasize differences and can provoke incidents that have negative influences on inter-ethnic solidarity and social stability. There are among these agitators some who advocate separatism, and there are some extremists who take advantage of each situation to provoke further divisions, all in the name of religion.

3. Modernization and the Role of Religion

In the course of China's modernization, religion must assume a position commensurate with its place within contemporary Chinese society. Its unique traits will determine its basic role and function, and how it is to integrate itself into the superstructure of a vast and complicated social system. Religion depends upon and reacts to society's economic foundation, but it also acts independently as a counterbalance. It operates from the same tandem of economic, political and ideological relationships as the rest of society, but it exerts its own special influence on them, and hopefully, for the good of the whole.

Religion in contemporary China is under a socialist system, which views all religions from one main perspective, that of the national democratic revolution. This factor alone has been enough to bring about the radical transformation of religion in our country. (Perhaps the most graphic example of this has been in the way it has been able to rid itself of the forces of foreign imperialism that had exploited and controlled it in the past.) Religion has now attained a new social usefulness in a new China. And as our country enters a fresh phase in the building up of a socialist state, religion is able to contribute positively in its new social role in promoting the modernization process.

Religion is composed of broad masses of believers who are led by their own religious personnel. They presently number in our country over 100,000,000, and along with nonbelievers make up the labor battalions most involved in the struggle to realize modernization

within the socialist state. They comprise the front line forces of production which are moving China towards becoming an affluent society. Economic activities aimed at self-support have had a positive effect on religion. They have helped to reduce the financial burden of many believers, to rid their communities of the necessity to beg alms from outside sources and delivered them from the need to beg financial support from the government. All this has been good for the economic progress of society as well. The vast majority of religious organizations and their members promote the nation's modernization and they are fervently patriotic. They respect the Constitution, support socialism and the Communist Party, and they uphold the principles of inter-ethnic solidarity and national unity. They actively assist the Party and government in the proper implementation of the national policy of freedom of religious belief, and they promote the rule of law in religious affairs. When it comes to promoting a modern spiritual civilization, religions often give positive new interpretations to traditional teachings and ethical directives which can be used in support of socialism, especially in the area of social morality. Religious believers are taught to do good and avoid evil, and they are also taught to observe scrupulously the rules of civic morality. This ethical stance advances social stability and helps to create a positive and exemplary social atmosphere. Religious scholars also research religious cultures, uncovering and making known their strengths, and thereby preserving the best of their traditions. And this can be most helpful in helping our country to develop its own modern socialist culture. It is obvious, then, from all of the above that the role of religion in society is, in the main, positive and also conducive to promoting China's present program of modernization.

Yet we also must make note of the fact that religion still retains certain negative traits and these are not helpful in developing the modernization of a socialist state. Among believers, there are a handful of those who are actively opposed to the Four Basic Principles, and who have linked themselves to hostile forces outside our country. These engage in activities which have as their goal the destruction of our country's social stability, inter-ethnic solidarity and national unity. There are those among them who are still nostalgic for the return of the days of feudal exploitation and special privilege. They would restore what our religions have already done away with. Some

religious personnel engage in activities that interfere with the legal and administrative branches of local government, in public education and in lawful marriage regulations. While few in number, these people wield considerable political strength. Under certain circumstances, they are able to influence other believers, inciting a kind of religious fanaticism which leads to social instability in certain areas. Also, there is a certain amount of muddled thinking and questionable behavior among some believers which only bring harm on the name of religion in general and which are a source of further social unrest. For example, the rapid expansion of some religions has led in one or two areas to a loss of political control by the central government, thus creating a volatile situation in which a small number from the criminal elements hide behind the cloak of religion to mask their illegal activities. There is no end to the many contradictions and conflicts among religions in general, and serious in-fighting between the various sects in particular. Sometimes such behavior results in violent and fatal confrontation, incidents which have a bad influence and evil effect on local law and order, on production rates, and on life itself in those places where it happens. Finally, the fact remains that large masses of believers continue to be shackled by such religious dogmas as the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, heavenly bliss in the hereafter, the reality of hell, etc., all of which are obstacles to the acceptance of the key concepts of science in pursuit of China's modernization.

The dual role of religion in contemporary Chinese society demands a dual response in terms of the government's religious policy. It must continue to support the positive role religion can play in building up a modernized socialist state, and, where necessary, it must continue to take steps to overcome the negative elements which still exist within religious circles.

Promoting Religion's Adaptation to Modernization

We have looked into the positive and negative elements of the relationship between religion and China's modernization. Our purpose has been to urge religion to take positive steps in mobilizing its special strengths, its religious personnel and its masses of believers that it might enter wholeheartedly into the modernization process. We suggest that the Party and government, by actively promoting

religion's participation in the building up of modern China, is, in effect, providing the necessary leadership for religion's eventual adaptation to and inculturation within the socialist society.

To take an active part in bringing religion into playing a more positive role in modernization will require a common effort pursued with great vigor by all concerned: the Party, the government, the religious personnel, and all other elements of Chinese society.

It is the Party and the government who must shoulder the main burden for providing a concrete and constructive role for religion as well as promoting its adaptation to the building up of modern China. This must be done with the whole society in view. The leading cadres of the Party, who hold the reigns of power and who are thereby more attentive to the ways of governing the nation, must regard the social role of religion as of special importance to the development of stability within society. This is, of course, fundamental and basic. However, the social role of religion itself is extremely complex, and the Party and government must pay close attention to this role as it is expressed in the religious culture. They must become fully aware of the need to propagate the outstanding features of the religious culture as part of their task of developing modern socialism. They must come to understand and to respect the findings of scholarly research into religious questions and issues as they relate directly to China's modernization. Further, they are to take them into consideration whenever they formulate policies that are related to religious activities.

With regard to the social sciences, the media, and those involved in cultural studies, they also need to restudy the Marxist views on religion, and they should familiarize themselves with our country's current religious policy, as well as the true facts of religion. Only then will they be able to comprehend with any degree of accuracy the proper role of religion in society, and out of this new understanding to make intelligent appraisals of religion and religious issues. Only in this way will they be able to function responsibly and fulfill their necessary role as shapers of public opinion. In recent years, a constant stream of books, popular magazines, newspapers, art works, motion pictures and TV programs have appeared which carry a great deal of untruth and misinformation about religion that not only goes against the government's present religious policy, but which are also highly offensive to large numbers of our religious believers,

especially those among our ethnic minorities. This material has provoked much justifiable indignation and protest, and it has also had a negative impact on social stability and inter-ethnic solidarity in many places. And it has also created a bad image of our nation abroad.

On the other hand, some of what has been published in the name of religion and religious culture contains little if anything of cultural value. Instead of cogent analysis or descriptions of the beauty of religion, there is often much idle speculation and propaganda on theism. This, too, gives people cause for worry and concern.

All of these problems mentioned above relate directly to the first phases of China's modernization, and, as such, they are deserving of our immediate attention and resolution. It is up to those whose major area of research is the study of religious history and culture to address seriously and without delay the evolving role of religion in the modernization process. Only they are able to bring the past to bear on the present with any degree of accuracy, and in accomplishing this task they will also be able to place their study at the service of China's modernization.

With regard to religious believers, I feel that the most important element in discovering their rightful role in China's modernization is to allow them to find their own place in the process. This will draw out their best creative forces. We, in our turn, must support the formation of religious personnel of the highest quality, so that they might be able to lead the masses of believers to achieve work of the highest quality in their own right. This will enable both religious personnel and the masses of believers to make an enduring contribution of the highest nature to the building up of our great nation.

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