

Documentation

Religious Freedom

A Report of the U.S. Religious Leaders Delegation to the People's Republic of China, February 1998

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I. INTRODUCTION

For three weeks in February 1998, a delegation of three U.S. religious leaders made an historic visit to the People's Republic of China. Selected by President Clinton, and specially invited by President Jiang Zemin, we undertook a mission to begin a dialogue with top government officials in China on the subject of religious freedom—the first of its kind.

The reports of our delegation's activities within official circles, as well as the Chinese press, indicated that religion is now higher on the agenda in China than ever before. Media coverage in the U.S. is evidence of the importance Americans place on this issue as well. Extensive official Chinese press coverage did not simply present our visit as evidence of complete religious freedom in China, but allowed that there are differences in perception of religious freedom between our two countries and recognized that it is an important consideration in U.S.-China relations.

We met the leaders of all major religious groups. We visited temples, churches, a mosque, monasteries and a nunnery, as well as Catholic and Protestant seminaries. Religious believers, both in registered and nonregistered religious organizations, said repeatedly that our visit had raised the profile of religion in China to a new level and was thus an encouragement to them.

In our exchange with high level Chinese government officials and with religious leaders—lay and clerical—of official religions, we engaged in ground-breaking discussion about religious freedom. (The five officially recognized religions are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism.) Both sides politely but firmly voiced criticisms and concerns. With these discussions we were able to broaden awareness of the issues surrounding religious freedom in sectors of society where such questions had never been raised. We introduced a new perspective on religious freedom to many Chinese officials, and to policy analysts, who have focused on trade, the economy, security, and foreign relations but not

on international concern over the persecution of religious believers in China.

This report outlines what our delegation set out to accomplish, and summarizes the outcome of the visit. Unlike previous missions that focused on fact finding, our delegation sought to begin a process of dialogue, building on existing data on the religious situation in China.

II. MISSION OF OUR DELEGATION

The mission of our delegation was to deepen the dialogue between the United States and China on religious policy and practice in a spirit of mutual respect. We met with government and party officials, religious leaders, scholars and individual religious believers in both countries in an effort to seek frank communication and mutual clarification of basic terms and issues related to freedom of religious belief and practice. Our delegation also addressed specific situations, individuals, and groups requiring special attention, especially religious leaders detained as prisoner of conscience.

III. GOALS

1. To bring issues and matters of concern regarding religious freedom and practice to the attention of President Jiang Zemin and high level Chinese government officials.
2. To deepen the dialogue between the U.S. and the P.R.C. on the policy and practice of religious freedom, and establish conditions favorable to the continuation of that dialogue.
3. To identify to the Chinese government persons and situations in need of special attention because of concerns of religious freedom.

IV. RAISING THE ISSUES

Prior to its departure, our delegation heard concerns related to religious freedom from President Clinton and other leading White House officials, the State Department, members of Congress, scholars, U.S. religious leaders, NGO's and human rights activists. While recognizing that real progress has been made since the institution of economic reforms began in the 1980's, we took the following concerns and issues into meetings with Chinese leaders:

1. The issue of religious freedom can either advance or impede the U.S.-China relationship. Thus there is need for continuing dialogue to resolve concerns about religious freedom in China.

2. Religion plays a positive role in American society. Many American business, government, cultural, scientific, military and community leaders actively practice a religious faith. The majority of religious believers are patriotic, law-abiding citizens.
3. In China, people of faith already play a positive social role in the modernization of their society and could do much more if given the freedom to do so.
4. Americans, accustomed to the separation of church and state, find China's requirement to register religious sites and activities with the Religious Affairs Bureau to be unwarranted government control over religious life. Failure to register should not be dealt with as a matter of criminal law. Many Americans are concerned that believers who choose to practice their religion outside official bounds are subject to harassment and punishment.
5. Religious freedom involves not only freedom of religious belief, but also freedom of religious practice. That includes education and social service. In the People's Republic of China, the concept of religious freedom is limited to worship, which is circumscribed and subject to government control.
6. The faiths of some religious believers in China, including Jews, fall outside the five religions recognized by the government. Government policy towards these groups needs to be made clear.
7. The "administrative procedure" of "education through labor," a common punishment given to religious believers who participate in unauthorized activities, is out of line with international norms.

V. THE DEEPENING OF DIALOGUE

In China we engaged in serious discussions at the highest level, beginning with President Jiang Zemin. We met with Liu Yang, Vice Minister of the Ministry of Justice, with Li Dezhu, Vice Minister of the United Front, the organization that oversees the Party's religious policies, and with Ye Xiaowen, Director of the Religious Affairs Bureau, as well as with other leading government officials. We also exchanged views with scholars, religious leaders and individuals affiliated with official and non-registered churches. Following are some points that came out of these meetings.

1. President Jiang Zemin met with our delegation in Zhongnanhai for over an hour, demonstrating his interest in the issue of religious freedom. We

spoke about the value of religion to society, the positive role of religion in the United States, and the genuine concern of American religious believers about the status of religion in China. Questions were raised about why religion must be regulated and why churches must register with the government. We stressed the need for religious believers, particularly Christians, to relate more fully with international church bodies. We explored the possibility of expanded exchanges of religious leaders, scholars, and others between our two countries. We discussed the possibility of normalizing relations with the Holy See.

The President said he believed a main message of the Bible was that “to purify man’s soul is lofty work.” He observed that the reality of religious practice has not always fulfilled the founders of faiths’ ideals. Foreign powers had bullied China during the 19th century, he noted, and many improper acts were carried out in the name of religion. Nevertheless, President Jiang recognized that religion can play a positive role in China, and he showed interest in expanding religious activities there. “Differences can be gradually narrowed and common ground broadened,” he said. President Jiang said that he and the Chinese government would “carefully consider the proposals and concerns” raised by our delegation.

2. Many Chinese leaders are aware that freedom of religion is an issue that has a major impact on the development of U.S.-China relations. A majority of Americans profess some kind of religious belief and view freedom of religion as a basic human right. Many Americans believe that the Chinese government limits the freedom of the registered church and represses the unregistered church. Chinese officials deny that anyone in China is jailed because of their faith.

3. The progress of religious freedom in China is linked with the progress of the rule of law. Some religious policies are at present implemented unevenly rather than objectively. Like the rule of law, freedom of religion is acknowledged by many Chinese leaders to be a goal that is still in progress.

We welcomed news of current initiatives in the area of judicial independence. The delegation was concerned with the role of China’s security apparatus in regulating religious activities. We sought meetings with officials of the Public Security Bureau, but our requests were not granted.

China’s leaders expressed concern that uncontrolled religious groups and activities could be a destabilizing factor for the Chinese state. Historically the U.S. and China’s experience with the free practice of religion has been very different. Our delegation made every effort to present the case for free religious practice as contributing in a positive way to a nation’s development.

VI. IDENTIFYING SPECIFIC CASES IN NEED OF SPECIAL ATTENTION

1. Individuals

In discussions with the Chinese embassy in Washington prior to our visit, and in numerous meetings with the Ministry of Justice, Bureau of Religious Affairs, and other Party and Government Departments, our delegation raised the cases of Pastor Xu Yongze, Bishop Zeng Jingmu, Bishop Fan Zhongliang, Bishop Su Zhimin, Gao Feng, Peter Xu Guoxing, and Abbot Chadrel Rinpoche and asked for their release. In total, a list of 30 pastors, evangelists, bishops, Buddhist abbots, and others believed to be detained or harassed because of religious activities was presented to the Ministry of Justice and to the Religious Affairs Bureau with our request for further information on their cases.

We were pleased to learn of the release of Gao Feng upon our arrival in China.

We requested specifically to see Pastor Xu Yongze, Bishop Su Zhimin, and Bishop Fan Zhongliang, Gendhun Choekyi Nyima (the 8-year-old Panchen Lama who is recognized by the Dalai Lama), all of whom are believed to be in detention or imprisoned. In all cases our requests were denied. In the latter case, we were offered the possibility of seeing the government approved Panchen Lama only, which we declined. We were told that the Panchen Lama recognized by the Dalai Lama is with his parents and well.

We brought to the attention of the authorities, and expressed our deep concerns about the report we received while in China of Philip Xu Guoxing's family being harassed and transported out of their home in Shanghai, allegedly to prevent them from attempting to meet with our delegation.

2. Government Policy Directives

In conversations with the United Front Work Department and numerous other government and religious officials, our delegation presented documentation of a local government's directive to eliminate unregistered churches. We made many inquiries as to the authenticity and origins of this directive, as well as whether or not such repression represents authorized or unauthorized activity. Government officials indicated they would investigate and supply answers to these questions.

3. Two Catholic Churches

Our delegation continually stressed the existence of a large underground Catholic Church, together with the official Patriotic Catholic Church in China. We pointed out the need to normalize relations between

the Catholic Church in China and the Holy See since that would be essential to the life of the two Chinese Catholic communities.

4. Registration of Religious Sites

The government's insistence that religious sites be registered is problematic. The line between Christian house meetings, which technically should not have to register, and churches meeting in homes, which do, appears to be arbitrary. We pressed for clarification of the critical issue of registration of religious sites. The policy is not clear and there are many reports of irregularities in its enforcement. Although failure to register is said not to constitute a crime yet "setting up illegal organizations" and "holding illegal meetings" are given as reasons why certain religious leaders have been detained or imprisoned.

5. Tibetan Buddhists

In discussions with the Ministry of Justice, United Front Work Department, and the Central Government Religious Affairs Bureau officials, as well as Tibetan Autonomous Region government and religious affairs officials, our delegation—the first of its kind to receive permission to make a visit to Tibet including visiting a Tibetan prison—firmly pursued an inquiry into the role of the Democratic Management Committees, which are unique to Buddhist monasteries. We questioned why leaders of Tibetan monasteries and temples must be selected by these Committees and approved by the Chinese government. We also expressed concern about the Patriotic Education Campaigns to which monks and nuns are subjected. To outside observers, the Democratic Management Committees and Patriotic Education Campaigns seem to be state efforts designed to curtail freedom of religious belief and practice among Tibetan Buddhists. The central government has in recent years granted funds to restore or repair Tibetan temples and monasteries.

Our delegation also inquired into the status of Tibetan prisoners. Government officials in Tibet, like their counterparts elsewhere in China, maintain that religious believers imprisoned in Tibet were imprisoned not for their beliefs but for violations of law such as endangering public security. We questioned this explanation at all official meetings in Tibet.

On visiting the main Lhasa prison, we learned that one out of six prisoners had been monks or nuns. We spoke with two Buddhist nuns in the prison and later sought their release. We also called to the attention of the prison authorities in Tibet the allegations that torture and human rights abuses are present in Tibetan prisons. The warden called these allegations "stories."

On numerous occasions we encouraged the Chinese government to pursue a dialogue with the Dalai Lama

6. Shanghai Synagogues

We spoke to officials about the role of Judaism in China's history. Mayor Xu Kuangdi of Shanghai, in response to our requests, announced that the premises of Ohel Rachel Synagogue (an important synagogue to the Jewish community during World War II) will be vacated by the Education Commission, its current occupants, and the synagogue restored and declared a historic landmark. We were also pleased to learn that the Ohel Moshe Synagogue will be vacated and restored for us as a museum to remember Jews taking refuge in Shanghai during World War II.

7. Orthodox Church

We called to the attention of the senior officials of the Religious Affairs Bureau the existence of an Orthodox community in Beijing, Harbin, and Shanghai, and urged favorable disposition of outstanding issues with the Orthodox Church.

8. Muslim Concerns

Our delegation made repeated efforts to reach out to Muslim communities before and during the trip. We met with Muslim religious leaders in Beijing, Shanghai, Lhasa, and Hong Kong. We sought clarification both with these religious leaders and with government officials on the current religious conditions in Xinjiang, but were informed that full information was not readily available even to them. Recognizing that the Muslim community is seriously fragmented, some Muslim leaders noted that the Muslim community in China is comprised of various different ethnic groups. We believe that the issue of freedom of religion in China's Muslim communities is a matter of concern requiring special attention.

OBSERVATIONS

1. Signs of Growth

Our delegation saw some signs of progress in the rebuilding of houses of worship and increases in activity and membership in all the major religions. Both official and non-registered Christian churches are reported to be growing rapidly. Official figures currently estimate that there are over 10 million Protestants, about 4 million Catholics, some 100 million Buddhists, 18 million Muslims and 2 to 3 million Taoists. We believe that the actual number of believers exceeds these official figures.

2. Perspectives

In discussing China's stance toward religion and specific policy measures, government and religious officials consistently stated that during the past twenty years, China has gone from a Cultural Revolution-era (1966-76) policy of completely banning religious activities to a policy of

allowing many forms of religious belief and of tolerating organized religious activities that take place under the supervision of the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Department via the five recognized religious organizations. This policy shift, officials felt, reflects China's nationwide trend of economic reform, greater social openness, and increasing contacts with the outside world

In all of our discussions, Chinese officials patiently listened and often recognized that despite progress made on religious freedom in the last 20 years, many more problems need to be solved. Most officials insisted that China is working on solving them. However, many still view religion as a potentially destabilizing force in Chinese society, particularly among China's large peasant population.

Some Chinese officials are troubled by the emergence of religious groups that are not affiliated with one of the official religious organizations and by international religious contacts that are not conducted via government approved channels. Dialogue on the topic of religious freedom is often tainted by Chinese officials' resentment that China's internal practices must be held accountable to what they see as an ever-critical American public, U.S. Congress, media and activist groups.

3. Hong Kong

About 43 percent of the 6.3 million population of what is now the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region participate in religious practices, with Buddhism and Taoism having the most adherents. Reflecting the vitality of all the faiths, which work closely together, the religious communities contribute a share of educational, health and welfare programs out of proportion to their size. Although Catholics and Protestants make up less than 10 percent of the population, they provide roughly 60 percent of the territory's social services, and run 40 percent of schools and universities and 25 percent of the territory's hospitals and clinics. Hong Kong government leaders, including Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa, recognize the long-standing contribution of religious groups to the development of Hong Kong and pledge continued government support for church-run educational, medical, and social service organizations.

Local religious leaders in Hong Kong maintain that official attitudes toward religion have not changed since the transition to Chinese rule. Some religious leaders did voice concerns about the Mainland's tightening of religious control in recent years and possible future curtailment of religious freedom in Hong Kong. Hong Kong-based Buddhist and Taoist leaders, however, expressed optimism, saying that they have more opportunities to interact with other parts of China now than before.

1. Looking to the Future.

The fact that officials were willing to hold discussions on the topic of religious freedom indicates hope for narrowing the differences between the two countries' perception of the appropriate role for religion and religious freedom in a modern society.

We were encouraged to find that many of the government leaders and citizens we met, people who are daily struggling to help China modernize, realize that tolerance of religious freedom is an important characteristic of all advanced, industrialized nations. Our delegation was able to further the case for the importance of religious tolerance to the development of a modern society. We believe that with perseverance many of the currently narrow interpretations of religious freedom in China may indeed be broadened.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

We feel that the goals described in our mission statement were largely achieved. Our delegation started a process, and much more needs to be accomplished.

1. We encourage President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to reinforce the concerns we have raised and continue the dialogues we began with President Jiang. In advance of President Clinton's scheduled visit to China, concrete responses should be sought to the individual cases we presented to Chinese officials.

2. The need for a channel to continue the pursuit of our concerns is clear. An organization such as the interfaith Appeal of Conscience Foundation, which has been involved with China since 1981, could help facilitate further discussion and follow-up. The web of mid- to lower-level contacts woven during this visit should be reinforced, the seeds of communication nurtured so that they will flourish. Religious umbrella organizations like the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Council of Churches, and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, as well as concerned organizations from other religious traditions, should be informed of our delegation's goals and outcome. Members of these organizations and other concerned parties may find ways to continue and build on what we have started.

3. We believe that now is an appropriate time for others to initiate "joint ventures" in understanding between the United States and China relating to religious belief and practice. This is a good time for many reasons,

including the current state of U.S.-China relations, China's level of development, and the openness to discussion we encountered during our trip. Although our delegation was only able to visit cities, much of the growth of interest in religion in China is taking place in rural areas. Some initiatives, therefore, should reach out to officials and religious believers in rural areas.

4. At this time the ratio of believers to clergy in China is very high, and the number of believers is growing. Although there are centers for clerical training in China, there remains a need to train more clergy. Specific activities in the area of religious training could include academic and student exchanges between our two countries' theological schools and universities' religious studies departments. In addition, Chinese believers in Hong Kong and other parts of the world could cooperate to supply training centers in China with needed books and materials. Some such activities already exist. We applaud them and would like to encourage further developments.

5. A. We recommend that special attention should be paid to the problems of freedom of religion in Tibet, and to promoting a dialogue between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama.

B. We recommend that a special effort be made to make known the plight of the people of Northern Tibet due to the extreme weather conditions they have experienced this winter. The help of charitable and humanitarian organizations around the world should be sought to supplement what the Chinese national and local governments are doing to relieve suffering and restore the livestock essential to the Northern Tibetans' way of life. We raised this issue at every official meeting in Tibet. Both the Tibetan Autonomous Region officials and the mayor of Lhasa indicate interest in the possibility.

6. While realizing that dialogue is only one part of a multi-faceted approach to dealing with issues of religious freedom and human rights, we recommend that the kind of dialogue we began be continued and expanded. Dialogue is not a substitute for, nor an alternative to, bilateral and multilateral incentives for improvements in religious freedom. In the final analysis, domestic changes in China itself will be the most effective means of expanding religious freedom.

IX. CONCLUSION

Our delegation would like to thank President Clinton and President Jiang for bringing religious freedom into the agenda of their October, 1997

Washington summit and making our trip possible. Its success may be measured in several ways: by the growth and expansion of dialogues we initiated, by the positive response of China's leaders in the coming months to specific concerns we raised, by the development of the web of contacts we began. We note with satisfaction the decision of the Chinese government to sign the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which includes guarantees of freedom of religion and assembly. We sincerely hope that the U.S. and China will build on our mission, so that both countries can reap the benefits of religious freedom.■

Facts about China

- The distance from China's northern extremity to the southern extremity is 5,500 km. and spans 50 degrees of latitude.
- The width of the country exceeds 5,000 km. and spans 62 degrees of longitude.
- China has an area of 9.6 million km. It is the world's third largest country after Russia and Canada. It is almost as large as the whole of Europe and covers 1/15 of the total land area of the earth.
- China shares a boundary with Korea, Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikstan, Afganistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam.
- The Chinese population is the largest in the world. At the end of 1996, the population stood at 1.22389 billion people. The eastern part of the country is densely populated while the western part is sparsely populated.
- The Han population can be found everywhere throughout China. The ethnic minorities live in close knit communities and are concentrated, for the most part, in Southwest, Northwest and Northeast China.
- China has 2,800 different kinds of trees. Some species include living fossils like the ginkgo and China fir.

Information taken from People's Republic of China Year Book 1997/98