

Origin and Development of the Theory of Adaptability of Religion to Socialist Society

Some notes on "Selected Documents on Religious Work in the New Age"

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The following is an abbreviated version of an article taken from Religions in China, autumn 1996, Vol. 3. The theory discussed in this article is directly related to the theme of this issue of Tripod. The original title used the term "mutual adaptability." However, the whole gist of the article concerns the adaptability of religion to the socialist system and not the other way around. Therefore only the one word "adaptability" is used without its modifier, "mutual".

Germination

The first person to mention the necessity of studying the question of the adaptability of religion to a socialist society would seem to have been Comrade Hu Qiaomu. Very early, in October of 1982, he mentioned the issue at the "June Fifth National Planning Seminar on Philosophy and the Social Sciences." He proposed a study of the phenomenon of religion's rise, existence and development in China. He wanted to know how, in a socialist society, religion and socialism can come to mutual terms with religion fulfilling the function it should exercise in a socialist society. Obviously, this was a brand new idea having important theoretical and practical value. However, real insights could only be reached after long research and the pooling of many intellectual resources.

The first person to give an explicit and systematic answer to this question was Comrade Xiao Zhitian of the Shanghai Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Research Institute on World Religions. In 1983, in a talk entitled "The Study of the Religious Question during the Present Stage of Socialism in China" at the annual meeting of the Shanghai Institute on Religion, he analyzed the religious situation in China during the past thirty years and concluded with, "Religion is showing that it can accommodate itself to socialism." He continued to give a detailed exposition of the basis for his statement. Some excerpts from his talk follow:

- ◆ The first reason is that the destruction of an exploitative oppressive system released the pent-up fervent patriotism of the mass of religious adherents.
- ◆ Once their patriotic awareness was raised, and their freedom of religious belief guaranteed, they could throw themselves wholeheartedly into the reconstruction of the social order.
- ◆ Next, under new historical circumstances, some religious rules, systems, and concepts have definitely changed.
- ◆ Patriotic religious persons, beginning from their own religious teachings, have emphasized these slogans: 'love your country and your church; glorify God and benefit mankind.' 'Respect our nation; be happy to help others.' These are expressions of patriotism that also embody religious sentiment. This cannot but have positive results in spurring on religious believers to take part in building our nation's Four Modernizations.
- ◆ The last thirty years of practical experience has proven that ignoring basically identical political and economic interests, and exaggerating their differences with an ideological faith or to consider religion as an enemy of socialism has harmed stability and unity as well as the rebuilding of our country.
- ◆ While religion is being adapted to Chinese Socialism, we must also be on guard against those negative elements, remnants of the old society, again appearing in religious circles and exerting a negative function. Therefore, a long period of ideological education must be carried out.

In 1985, Comrade Xiao wrote another article dealing with mutual harmony. This one was entitled "An Essay on the Question of Harmonizing Religion and Socialism in Socialist Society in China." It was published in the "Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Academic Quarterly" Volume 1, and created quite a stir both at home and abroad with both domestic and foreign publications quoting from it.

Finally, from the "*Selected Documents on Religious Work in the New Age*," we discover that Comrade Yang Jingren, in a talk given on May 8, 1984, commemorating the setting up of the Chinese

Protestant Three-Selfs Patriotic Movement, was the first person on the national level to call for the "Adaptability of Religion to Socialist Society." Obviously, this topic was addressed only to Protestants thereby limiting its scope.

The first to definitely state the principle of the adaptability of religion to socialist society was Comrade Xi Zhongxun, another national leader. On January 16, 1986, in a talk entitled "Implementing the Party's Policy on Religion, Unite the Masses of Religious Believers to Serve the Building of the Four Modernizations," he emphasized that under present social conditions, the Party and Government must implement the policy on freedom of religious belief. Religious leaders and the masses of the faithful on their part must actively serve the Four Modernizations, national unification and world peace. He openly stated:

Religion and socialism can be fully accommodated to each other and to see them as opposed to each other is wrong." Obviously, what Xi Zhongxun was saying about "mutual adaptation" at this point, was still only one stage of a scientific understanding of the relationship between religion and a socialist society. Neither the Party nor the government had yet affirmed this as an important religious policy.

Embryonic form

In 1983, at the "June Fifth National Planning Seminar on Religion," Luo Zhufeng was the first to propose that "The Religious Question during the Period of Socialism in China" be the collective responsibility of the Shanghai Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Research Institute on World Religions, and be approved as the main topic for special study in the field of philosophy and social science on the national level.

These institutes carried out their work in twelve provinces, autonomous regions, the cities directly under the Central Government, and in the villages. They contacted the mass of religious believers, religious officials, and cadres at the level of basic government structures as well as the mass of unbelievers. The findings from their inquiries were published as "The Religious Question during the Period of Socialism in China."

On January 4, 1986, Luo Zhufeng at a study seminar in Shanghai said that after extensive and thorough investigation and

study, the conclusion was that religion could be integrated into China's socialist society. He also systematically analyzed the theory "behind their adaptability." He said:

The government must firmly implement the policy of religious freedom, treating all religions equally for believers as well as non-believers. It must constantly warn believers to be vigilant, to value the present situation of national unity won at such cost. Religious believers must be law-abiding, fervent in their love for the country and their religion, dedicated to social projects, and on their guard against any foreign interference in China's religions.

Maturation: a leap from theory to practice

The theory on the adaptability of religion and socialist society has now reached maturity. The concept of the adaptation of religion and socialist society has been under discussion now for over fourteen years. During this period the issue has progressed from being a topic for discussion, to becoming a theory, then adopted as policy and finally implemented in practice.

Li Ruihuan in his essay *The New Situation Facing the Ethnic Religious Question* says,

This so-called "adaptability" means that religion must observe the laws, regulations and policies of present day socialist society. This, of course, is not a strict definition, but a rather accurate description of the fundamental meaning of "adaptability."

Basic Requirements of "adaptability"

Jiang Zemin in his analysis of the prerequisites for "adaptability" makes the following unequivocal remarks:

This kind of adaptability does not require religious believers to deny their belief in God or their religious faith. It only requires that their political position be one of ardent patriotism, and that they uphold the socialist system and the Party's leadership. At the same time, it means reforming those religious institutions and doctrines ill suited to the socialist system but using positive elements in religious teaching, regulations and beliefs that can serve socialism.

Jiang Zemin also distinguishes between religious circles on the one hand and the Party and government on the other and specifies concrete requirements for both. He says:

Religious people must adamantly uphold the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, support socialism, firmly maintain the principle of independent, autonomous management of their own affairs and carry out their religious activities within the approved framework of the Constitution, laws, regulations and policies.

He also states that the Party and government must establish and fully implement correct religious policies and principles, the chief of them being “to firmly implement respect and protection of the right of citizens to freedom of religious belief, to protect normal religious activities and protect the legal rights and interests of religious groups. These are basic long term policies that must be upheld.”

Jiang Zemin also sets out basic principles concerning handling relationships with religious groups, namely, those concerning “political unity and cooperation and respect for religious ideologies.” He considers that “this is the Party’s way to gain important experience in a practical uniting of Marxist religious theory with religious questions in China.”

The Political Basis of “adaptability”

The main groups of religious believers in China are farmers, urban dwellers, workers and intellectuals. They are not only the masters of society and the nation, but they also have as their common aim the rebuilding of the nation into a strong, democratic, civil and modern socialist society. Therefore, not only is the political aim for believers and non-believers the same, their basic economic welfare is also the same. This is as Jiang Zemin has said:

The greater number of religious believers support the socialist system, and are one in agreement with all citizens on their fundamental interests. This is the political basis enabling religion to adapt to socialist society.

In his *Pay Close Attention to Ethnic and Religious Work*, Jiang Zemin adds:

We Communists have the means and capability to lead patriotic religious communities and the mass of religious believers to see their patriotism and religious devotion are one and bring their religious activities within the scope of the Constitution and laws and adapt themselves to socialist society.

The theory of “adaptability” has also been affirmed as a fundamental theoretical concept of the Party as well as its fundamental policy. This was done in a circular from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on *Strengthening United Front Work* issued on July 14, 1990. The circular states:

Patriotic religious groups and people must be led to see that patriotism and devotion to religion are one and that their religious activities must be brought within the scope of the Constitution and laws, and be adapted to the socialist system.

This has been clearly summarized in a speech of Comrade Ding Guangen entitled *Strive Harder for a Better United Front Work in the Nineties*. He says:

Strengthen political unity and cooperation, respect religious ideology, support religion’s independent and autonomous management of church affairs, unite patriotism and religious devotion, and actively guide religion to adapt to the socialist system.

Comrade Jiang Zemin also summarized “adaptability” and took it a step further by stating that it is the Party’s Three Policies or Three Words on the religious question. On November 7, 1993, in a speech at the meeting of the National United Front he said:

I wish to emphasize three words: one is fully and accurately implement the Party’s religious policy; the second is strengthen supervision over religious affairs according to law; the third is actively guide religion’s adaptation to socialist society.

Doubtless these “Three Words” are to be the Party’s basic thought concerning religion and an accurate summary of its policy.

In the same speech he also gave a penetrating analysis on the demands of “adaptability,” and its political basis. He pointed out that

“whether one implements the policy of freedom of religious faith, or strengthens supervision over religious affairs, the aim is always the same: guide religion in adapting to socialist society.”

This is not only to raise this question of “adaptability” to the level of the Party’s basic policy on religion, but also affirms it as the means for evaluating the Party’s policy on and supervision over religion.

Comrade Li Ruihuan in a talk at a seminar for students discussing ethnic problems and religious questions in the new situation, has clearly summarized the question of “actively guiding religion to adapt to the socialist system” as the Party’s “basic concept and policy.”

After extensive studies on the adaptability of religion to socialist society and the demonstration of its truth, it has been fully accepted not only by the Party and government officials, but also understood and accepted by religious circles.

Religious circles have all sought to legitimize their position by appealing to the objective requirements of this theory of “adaptability.” The former vice chairman of the Chinese Christian Council, Shen Yifan, considers that the adaptability of religion to socialist society

is the necessary direction that the church in China must take. We must not only know its theory, but we must also grasp it on the practical level to fully mobilize the active, voluntary and creative contribution of religious believers for constructing a Chinese socialist society.

The chairman of the Chinese Islamic Association, An Shiwei, said:

Considering the religious aspect of this question, “religious believers must accept the leadership of the Party and government, support the socialist system, carry out religious activities within the scope of the Constitution and laws, be vigilant to resist all illegal activities, and safeguard social stability and ethnic unity.

Bishop Zong Huaide of the Catholic Patriotic Association said:

In the past few years we have implemented some structural and liturgical reforms in line with society's development. Their purpose was to adapt ourselves to socialist society.

Zhao Puchu, chairman of the Chinese Buddhist Association, in a talk given on October 15, 1993, at a meeting commemorating the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Buddhist Association emphasized that Chinese Buddhists not only must, but also can adapt to socialist society with Chinese characteristics.

Development--a new road is opened for implementing theory

Since the concept of religion's adaptation to socialist society first appeared, it has already advanced from theory to policy, and from policy to implementation.

First, all Party and governmental bodies have understood this "theory of adaptability" to be a very "important item" for implementing its religious work.

On February 5, 1991, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council published its document *On Questions Concerning Further Implementing Work on Religion* asked:

Each government body and Party committee at all levels put religious work on its daily agenda, at set times further study and analyze the state of religious work, conscientiously note how it is being implemented, solve problems as they arise, mobilize the entire Party, as well as government and social groups at all levels, to pay stricter attention to and show greater care in implementing this work to adapt religion to socialist society.

Second, implement legal processes in managing religious affairs. If one wishes to strengthen rule by law, there is need to manage religious affairs through legal processes. The meaning, scope, and purpose of supervision mentioned in the following documents, namely, those issued by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council: *On Questions Concerning Further Implementing Work on Religion*, *Regulations on Supervising Places for Religious Activities*, *Measures for Supervising Religious Activities of Foreigners in the People's Republic of China*, and *Methods of Implementing Registration of Religious Bodies* must be thoroughly and fully explained. Obviously, the government in

exercising its supervision over religious affairs acts according to law. This means that it protects the Constitution, regulations and policies in its work of supervision; it does not mean that it interferes in matters intrinsic to religious bodies nor in their normal religious activities.

The starting point of the government's supervising religious affairs according to law is its offering legal protection to citizens' rights to freedom of religious belief and normal religious activities, its maintaining order in religious places and among religious bodies, as well as safeguarding the legal rights of religious leaders. Therefore, to correctly handle religious questions, it is certainly necessary to make religion progress in adapting to socialist society. This is the cardinal point and purpose of supervising religious affairs according to law.

Third, implement counter-infiltration measures against hostile forces. "While actively promoting religion's friendly and normal contacts with foreigners, we must firmly resist all hostile infiltration from abroad. This is our unchangeable policy." By infiltration we mean all reactionary political attempts and propaganda to subvert China's political power and its socialist system as well as disrupt its ethnic unity. It also includes all those activities that set up and develop illegal religious organizations or centers within China. The essential point of such infiltration is political infiltration. Only by adopting effective measures and resisting all infiltration will we finally create a favorable environment for religion to adapt to socialist society as well as, by means of this struggle, accelerate the creation of civilization and social progress.

Conclusion

This "adaptability" is not something set in concrete, nor is it a temporary phenomenon, but is in a state of dialectic progressive development. Socialism must pass through different specific stages during its process of development. Religion itself must also follow this process and undergo constant adjustment and reform.

Elements of "adaptability" and non-adaptability coexist. Total adaptability and partial adaptability coexist. However, total adaptability must hold dominant place. Overcoming elements of non-adaptability will be long process.

To resist and overcome hostile forces behind infiltration and subversion is not a work of a single day; it is a task requiring the constant neutralizing of the process of infiltration and subversion.

Finally, directing religion's adaptation to socialist society is one of the chief elements of building a socialist society with Chinese characteristics. It is the great task of today's Communist Party and its scholars who study religion. Taking this theory as a guiding norm for religious work we will certainly make sure that religion, religious work and our socialist enterprise with Chinese characteristics march harmoniously into the future full of vim and vitality.

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