

Commentary on Ye Xiaowen's: A Review and Reflection on Religious Work at the Turn of the Century

By Anthony Lam

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The head of China's National Religious Affairs Bureau, Ye Xiaowen, published a special article in the *Guang Ming Daily*, on May 17, 2000. The contents dealt with the question of religious work in China. All religious people should take note of this article.



Ye's article, written in Chinese, contains about 8000 characters. It is much longer than any of his previous articles, and the length reflects the importance he attaches to it. It was published in the *Guang Ming Daily*, which clearly indicates its connection with the government's United Front policy.

The main thrust of the article entitled "*A Review and Reflection on Religious Work at the Turn of the Century*," is to present a complete commentary of past religious work. However, the subtitle "*Seriously study and solve major problems that affect the overall situation*", can also be interpreted as outlining the direction the Bureau will take in the future.

Ye's long article is quite revelatory. Readers should carefully reflect on the contents, since many of the matters the article addresses are complex and interlocking. Readers can draw their own conclusions. However, what concerns me most is the many important things the article fails to mention. This indicates that there is much going on behind the scene that needs to be painstakingly uncovered. I offer one or two matters as examples of what I mean.

Ye mentions several policies and legal documents published after Document #19 which appeared in 1981. However, he does not

mention even one word about *Religious Law*, despite repeated fervent appeals for it by religious personnel. Evidently, he finds some areas difficult to put down on paper.

He also elaborates on the support that China has given to Tibet, but he does not say one word on the escape of Karmapa, the living Buddha. Obviously this escape is a sore point with the Chinese Religious Affairs Bureau.

Ye reiterates Jiang Zemin's "Three words" of 1993: "(1) carry out the Party's policy on freedom of religious belief in a full and correct manner, (2) strengthen supervision over religious matters within the law, (3) actively guide religion to adapt to a socialist society."

Ye has his own special interpretation of these words. Jiang's "Three words" were originally meant for cadres in the Religious Affairs Bureau. However, in 1996, Ye ingeniously modified them to: become "emphasize policy, emphasize management, emphasize adaptation." Consequently, at one stroke, Jiang's original "Three words" became Ye's "Two words plus one": "emphasize policy, emphasize management," were aimed at the cadres of the Religious Affairs Bureau; the third, "emphasize adaptation" was now intended for religious personnel. This makes one feel very much ill at ease.

Furthermore, Ye, in his long and ponderous article of May 17 gives a new interpretation, and new meanings to these "Three words" never previously stated

He goes one step beyond the basic meaning of his "Two words plus one more." The "Three words" now become "Emphasize Policy, Strengthen Management, Promote Adaptation." We use Ye's own words to show how he interprets the meaning of these words. He says: "Emphasizing policy, strengthening management, and promoting adaptation" expresses one principle: to implement the Party's policy on the freedom of religious belief in a full and correct manner. These words project one important point: to supervise religious matters according to law as we face existing problems in religion today. They have one aim: to lead religion actively to adapt to socialist society."

With this new change "emphasize policy" becomes the direction; "strengthen management" becomes the means; the third element "promote adaptation" becomes the goal. Now all religious work has as its ultimate goal promoting religion's adaptation to socialism.

Up to now the reader can easily see that this 8000-character long article from the very beginning and throughout its entire contents emphasizes one main point: “promote adaptation.”

Carefully note the three elements of this adaptation. The first is: “benefit society.” The essential words are: “Adapt religious activities so that they conform to and serve the greatest good of the country and all its citizens.” The unspoken words are that religion exists to serve the good of the country.

The second point of “promoting adaptation” is to “consolidate results.” These results are different for each religion. For Catholics the bottom line is: “Continue to encourage and support Catholics to maintain the “independent, and autonomous self-governance of their religious affairs.” This phrase to “maintain an independent and autonomous self-governance of their religious affairs” means that China’s Religious Affairs system has always retained its original position never wanting to make any overall evaluation of its past history or to face its past errors. It persistently blocks the Chinese Catholic Church from achieving full union with the universal church.

The third element of “promoting adaptation” is to “take new steps.” These so-called “new steps” are, on the surface of things, to make “a serious study of religious culture and to explore and respect its valuable elements.” But the important factor is in the next sentence. “With the almost daily tremendous progress made by humankind, religion will gradually come to assimilate some elements from secular morality and rationality putting aside its extremism and fanaticism, and gradually accommodating and adapting to modern society.” However the final accommodation of religion to secular values means “a fundamental change in religious ideology and in its system.”

Ye’s real purpose is now all too clear. In the end religion must be downgraded and turned into a political tool. The consequences of all this is that “religion must change radically.” Readers can readily surmise what this implies.

Ye Xiaowen here reveals the desire of the Religious Affairs system. Whether this desire will work objectively is another matter. Moreover, whether this subjective wish of the Religious Affairs system coincides with the country’s welfare is also another matter. At this time when China’s reform movement is in full vigor, with each area of Chinese society striving to meet international standards, this obstinacy on the part of those who manage religious affairs is really

frustrating and disconcerting. Such a situation is not only disastrous for religion but will also drag the country down into the mire of injustice.

The Religious Affairs Bureau insists on maintaining an independent, autonomous and self-governing church. It makes this a pre-condition for establishing Sino-Vatican relations. In fact this is putting unnecessary obstacles in the way of the normalization of relations. This is a great loss for China in developing its foreign relations.

Furthermore, Ye, in his article, writes about fighting corruption and promoting honesty in practicing good deeds. Recalling the former vice-chairman of the Religious Affairs Bureau, Hu Changqing, who was executed earlier this year, we see the seriousness of the issue.

Social systems today are becoming more and more pluralistic. However, the dominative system that manages religious affairs and continues to control religious persons doubtless gives great power to those in charge. If these powers are not curbed, it will be most difficult to avoid abuse of power for private interests. It is very easy to speak about wanting cadres in the Religious Affairs Bureau to stamp out corruption. This will not change just because Ye Xiaowen says so. Moreover the Chinese government's lack of understanding of religious work causes many to feel there is no way out, and they can only shake their heads and sigh in disbelief and discouragement.

