

Religions and Foreigners: New Rules, More Restrictions

On September 27 “New Rules for Religious Activities of Foreigners” issued by the Chinese government came into force. The rules contained in 22 articles (see *China Daily* 27/9/2000 page 4) curb the religious activity of foreigners as well as their contact with local members of religions.

Articles 5-12 lay down what foreigners may do: “participate in religious activities, preach and expound scripture;” have “friendly contacts and cultural and academic exchanges;” carry religious articles, but all this only in “officially registered sites” and with “recognized and registered Chinese religious personnel” with certificates issued by the Religious Affairs Bureau.

These instructions aim to make it difficult for foreigners to contact organizations not recognized by the government (referred to as underground communities, present in all the religions allowed in China: Catholics, Protestants, Taoists, Buddhists...). According to international human rights groups, quoted by the *South China Morning Post*, Beijing is concerned about the explosion of groups and sects which elude government control, such as the Falun Gong sect with internal estimates of about 80 million members, and Protestants groups with about 30 million, which the Communist Party fears may topple its power.

All contact between Chinese nationals and foreign religious organizations or with foreign individuals must be approved by “Chinese national religious bodies” (the Patriotic Association) and registered with the department for religious affairs. This affects Chinese students wishing to study abroad as well as foreigners anxious to study or teach in religious institutions in China (cf., articles 13 -15).

Articles 16-18 indicate in detail what foreigners may not do: make changes in Chinese religious bodies; “manipulate ... internal affairs of Chinese religious bodies;” engage in the following

missionary activity: appointing religious personnel among Chinese citizens (Catholic bishops, Protestant pastors, Buddhist or Taoist monks, spiritual leaders); preaching at places outside lawfully registered sites; producing or selling religious literature, audio-visuals; distributing religious propaganda materials.

The new rules endorse those issued in 1994 and 1995 signed by Premier Li Peng, but with a significant difference. In the 1994 rules responsibility was given mainly to the official religious bodies (it was they who invited foreigners to China and approved activities). The new rules assign decision-making duties to the government level. The new regulations give absolute weight to the Religious Affairs Bureau regarding permits, contact and sanctions. Protestant personalities in Hong Kong say the new restrictions tend not only to exclude contact with underground communities, but they also clamp down on officially recognized communities which are shaking off government control. The new rules are a confirmation of state hegemony over religious freedom. Article 4 says in fact that the People's Republic of China not only "respects the freedom of religious belief" it also "protects and administrates religious activities." (**Fides**, 10/29/2000).