

EDITORIAL

The Polituro of the Communist Party and the State Council jointly convened the National Religious Work Conference in Beijing on December 10-12, 2001. This meeting is held every ten years and all top leaders attend (See pp. 55-61 for Anthony Lam's article on this topic).

The main speaker, President Jiang Zemin, did not reveal anything startlingly new although some people tried to read new meanings in old phrases. He did, however, emphasize a few points, which are worthy of note. He reiterated what the Communist leadership has already mentioned in some of its documents that religion exerts considerable influence in the political and social spheres. "Religion," he said, "must never be underestimated." In the early 1970s Communist Party leaders were heard to say, "Religion has now been relegated to the museum of history." The government has long given up that attitude. "Religion," Jiang said, "with its deep historical roots will exist in China for many years to come." Although the goal of the Communist State has not changed: the eradication of all religion, Jiang as well as the other leaders are aware that the end is not yet in sight!

The government is always eager to stress that the citizens of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. President Jiang did not miss the opportunity to stress that point again at the December Conference, as he did when he finally answered President George W. Bush's queries on religious freedom in China during the US president's recent visit. "Freedom of religion," he said, "is a basic right of all Chinese according to the constitution." As usual this phrase included safeguarding atheism. A warning to cadres reinforces this interpretation. It is well known that many members of the Communist Party are, in fact, believers. Jiang urged them "to stand firm on their atheistic principles, but also to tread carefully on religion." "Cadres," he added, "must not use administrative means to destroy religion, but neither are they to give it any support."

Although the Chinese government still sees religion as something, which can occasionally be mobilized for national development, this meeting made it quite clear that the powers that be also consider religion to be a destabilizing force in society. As such it must be constantly controlled. Daniel Kwan of the *South China Morning Post* interpreted President Jiang's remarks as a call to strengthen Party leadership and the government's defenses against religion. He based his skepticism on the fact that most of President Jiang's "positive" statements also carried a note of warning.

Jiang was quick to stress the supremacy of the State over religion. He did not miss the opportunity to remind the Holy See that China operates on the principle of independence by repeating once again "foreign interference would not be tolerated." Following September 11, such a statement could equally apply to the Muslim separatists in Xinjiang Province, who indeed may be threatening the unity of the country as they increase their campaign to set up an independent state. This worry is evident in Jiang's comment: "...Nor is religion allowed to destroy national unity and unity among all the ethnic minorities in the country. The gist of supervision over religious affairs is: Protect the legal. Wipe out the illegal. Resist infiltration and attack crime."

Jiang said very clearly that socialism does not require people to give up their beliefs, but he added, "religion must never be used to obstruct Party leadership or the social system" The Chinese leadership asks that people who profess a religion "embrace the socialist system and the leadership of the Communist Party, follow the country's rules and regulations ...and contribute to ethnic and national unity."

As more and more people are discovering the merits of religion, the old adage that "religion is the opium of the people" has been laid to rest, at least in official statements, but it is not so clear whether it has actually been laid to rest in the minds and hearts of certain hard-liners in the Communist Party who still wield a great deal of influence. In any case, the ultimate goal of the Party has not changed: it remains the ultimate eradication of all religions.