

Recent Changes in China's Religious Policy

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At the end of 2001 there were new wrinkles in China's religious policy. While it is worthwhile noting them, we should not be overly enthusiastic or overly concerned.

All the important people in the Chinese Communist Party turned out for a religious work meeting held from December 10-12, 2001. From Jiang Zemin on down, they included Li Peng, Zhu Rongji, Li Ruihuan, Hu Jintao, Wei Jianxing, Li Fengqing, Ding Guangen, Zhang Wannian, Luo Gan, Wen Jiabao, Zeng Qinghong, Zou Jiahua, Tiemuer-Dawamaiti, Simayi-Aimati, Wang Zhongyu, Xiao Yang, Han Chubin, Ren Jianxin, Li Guiyu, etc. While this gave a certain importance to the proceedings, no new ground was broken. But it does give us a picture of the present circumstances.

The *People's Daily* for December 13, 2001 gives a detailed report of the meeting. The whole article under the headline "National Religious Work Meeting Held in Beijing," is about 6,000 words in length. Moreover the editorial for that day enthusiastically discusses the meeting. The whole atmosphere of the meeting was clearly this: Religion is an "unstable" element in society; it is necessary to strengthen our defenses against it.

I will excerpt a few passages from the *People's Daily* report to give the reader a clear picture.

He (Jiang Zemin) emphasized that religious work was an important component of the Party and the nation's work. It occupies an important position in the overall situation of the Party and the nation's development.

Jiang Zemin pointed out that in the present domestic and international circumstances the Party and government can only strengthen their leadership over religious work and their supervision over religious affairs. They cannot allow them to weaken.

Regarding the influence of the religious question in the political and social life of today's world, it is impossible to lower one's guard.

The Chinese government unhesitatingly acknowledges the great influence of religion. It is precisely because the influence of religion is so great that they are so uneasy about it. The *People's Daily* goes on to say:

(Jiang Zemin pointed out) Our country carries out a policy of the separation of politics and religion. If religious matters and activities touch upon national benefit or social public benefit, then it is necessary that they come under the supervision of the law. One cannot use the excuse of religious freedom or the separation of politics and religion; one cannot abandon nor cut oneself off from state supervision over religious affairs. It is absolutely impermissible to resurrect the already abolished feudal privileges of religion, or systems of religious suppression and exploitation. 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.

The last few sentences are enough to show the seriousness of the situation. It is clear that the Chinese government is setting up safeguards against religion everywhere. The conference pointed out that in practice religion must change its nature in order to adapt itself to government rule.

Jiang Zemin pointed out: positively guide religion to adapt to socialist society. We do not require that religious clergy or the mass of believers abandon their religious faith. Rather we...encourage them to strive to expound their religious doctrines in a way, which conforms to social progress.

In other words, the meaning of religious doctrines is changed to conform to political requirements. This is more frightening than to forbid all religious activity. At this point, a chill comes over people's heart.

If we re-read the speech of the Religious Affairs Bureau Director Ye Xiaowen given in the year 2000, we discover that Jiang

Zemin repeats much of the contents of Ye's speech. Ye Xiaowen's speech, entitled "Recalling and Thinking Over Religious Work at the Turn of the Century," can be found in *Tripod*, No. 118, and in the accompanying editorial.

The Religious Affairs Bureau Director, Ye Xiaowen, originally published his essay in the *Guangming Daily* of May 17, 2000. From the sub-title, "Tighten the Relationship between Study of and Solving the Great Problems in the Whole Situation," we can see the outline of the direction to be taken by the Religious Affairs Bureau in its future work.

Director Ye repeated the three phrases brought up by President Jiang Zemin in 1993: "Completely and correctly implement the Party's policy of religious freedom, strengthen supervision over religious affairs in accordance with the law, and positively guide religion to adapt to socialist society."

Director Ye shortened the "three phrases" into "Stress policy, Stress supervision, and Promote adaptation." By way of explanation, he wrote:

Embody one main point, namely completely and accurately implement the Party's policy of religious freedom; highlight one main point, namely, squarely face the present problems in religious work and strengthen supervision over religious affairs in accordance with the law; and aim at one object, namely, positively guide religion to adapt itself to socialist society

Another way of saying it was "to stress policy" is the direction, "to strengthen supervision" is the means, and the "promotion of adaptation" is the object. All religious work has as its final object the promotion of the adaptation of religion to socialist society.

The "promotion of adaptation" itself has three points. The first is "beneficial to society." The core of this point is "guide religious activity to obey and serve the highest national interest and the whole interest of the races." The hidden meaning of this phrase is that religion exists to serve the national interest.

The second point is "solidify the results." The so-called results are not the same for each religion. For the Catholic Church,

the Chinese footnote explains: "One must continue to encourage and support the Catholic Church to follow the path of independence, and to promote the democratic running of the Church." The "independent running of the Church" shows that the Chinese religious affairs system is persistent in not wanting to make a final conclusion regarding past history, and that they are still conservative regarding past mistakes. They still mean to deliberately place an obstacle in the way of complete union between the Chinese Church and the Universal Church.

The third point under the "promotion of adaptation" is "advance towards the future." On the surface, this so-called "advance" points to "discover and respect the worthwhile things within it." However, the core meaning comes later:

Following the ever-greater progress in human society, religions will more and more absorb certain secular moral values and rational elements, and leave behind their fanaticism and fervor, and gradually conform and adapt to real society.

Regarding this yielding to secular values, the "Ye Essay" has the impudence to say: "This cannot but have influence on reform in religious thought and religious systems."

From the above we can see that the original purpose of the "Ye Essay" is abundantly clear. In the final analysis, he wants to make religion a political tool. And the method for doing this is "to bring about a basic change in religion." The reader can certainly see the motive behind this. So, Jiang Zemin's words at the December conference,

We must positively guide religion to adapt to socialist society.... We do not require religious clergy and masses to abandon their religious faith. Rather we encourage them to make an effort to expound their religious doctrines in a way, which is in conformity with the requirements of social progress

can be considered an echo of what Mr. Ye has written in the past.

Zhu Rongji made a few important points at the meeting, which we cannot overlook. Besides repeating what Jiang Zemin said about "protecting what is legal, putting a stop to what is illegal,

resisting infiltration, and attacking crime,” we note that. Zhu Rongji does not consider religion to be a force for stability. On the contrary, he is very worried about “instability” in religious areas. The *People's Daily* report said: “Zhu Rongji emphasized that we must really maintain stability in religious areas.” The method for maintaining stability is the following:

Cadres at every level must untiringly seize every opportunity to enter into the grassroots, to examine and to guide, and to conscientiously analyze new situations and new problems in religious circles. Contradictions must be immediately solved in their sprouting stage, and be dissipated at the local grassroots level. Also, firmly resist foreign religious infiltration.

The *People's Daily* for December 13, 2001 also carried an editorial, entitled “Closely unite the believing masses, make every effort to establish the great enterprise of a socialism with Chinese characteristics.” The content of the editorial basically repeats Jiang Zemin's words, except for one clear extension. The editorial points out:

As circumstances become more open, the more must the principle of independence be unswervingly maintained. And the more must we maintain our vigilance to effectively resist foreigners using religion to carry out infiltration in our country.

This clearly reflects that as China becomes more open to the outside world, the Chinese government subjectively desires to strengthen control over the religious field. Of course, whether such control will be effective is another matter.

We get a clue of the fear the Chinese government has of “infiltration,” from the arrest of the Hong Kong businessman, Lai Kwong-keung, who was accused of smuggling Bibles into Fujian. The charge against him was: “Making use of a cult to break the law.”

To give the readers a clearer picture of this religious conference and a deeper understanding of the Chinese government's religious policy and to help prepare them for any eventuality, I have quoted extensively from the *People's Daily*. Increased government control, of course, is nothing new to religious

believers. In actual practice, because the society is more open, it is questionable whether all the restrictive measures can be effectual.

In the latter half of December 2001, Pan Yue, the vice-director of the Economic Reform Office of China's Department of State, published an essay entitled "What Outlook Should we have Regarding Religion – Marxism's View of Religion Must Keep up with the Times." Some scholars and reporters thought it marked a breakthrough in the explanation of the nature of religion. Of course, observers of religious developments in China over the past several years already know that the theory, "religion is the opium of the people" is already a dead issue in China. Whether one understands the meaning of "opium" in Marx's mind as either good or bad, the most important thing is its market value. Old Marx's theories are not marketable anymore. Thousands of essays on the subject would still be useless. One can read Pan Yue's article for the sake of philosophical discussion, but it does not point to the direction of religious policy.

Last December Premier Zhu Rongji met the visiting American TV evangelist Pat Robertson. Zhu's conversation with Robertson was undoubtedly friendly, but lacking in substance. Without discussing Zhu's intention, whether the general atmosphere allows for such a big change is really doubtful. The political reality in China at present is that even in the economic field Zhu Rongji cannot carry out everything he would like to do. It is even harder to imagine that he could have a say in matters that touch upon ideology.

What Premier Zhu said about giving underground believers the opportunity to register openly had basically already been mentioned in the Chinese government's decree of May 1994, entitled "The Method for Registering Venues for Religious Activity." Actually, since the opening of China in 1979, the government's policy towards religious believers has always been very clear. The emphasis is on shelving for the time being the matter of the "patriotic association" or the "three self," and first require believers to come out into the open to carry out their religious activities. After practicing their religion openly for a while, the believers will then be gradually led into joining the "patriotic association." This strategy has not changed.

Up to today, different local government bureaux still lobby open dioceses to establish the "patriotic association." This is just a matter of before or after in the procedural steps. Permitting underground believers to freely register is not any special treatment. Such registration only "looks good" at the beginning. When overseas commentators say that historically this is the most important change in Chinese religious policy, it only means that they have not been aware of this before.

To speak again of Zhu Rongji's outlook, even if we do not suspect his sincerity, we still wonder how much of Mr. Zhu's open attitude can be implemented. We recall that three years ago, when Premier Zhu met this same Robertson, he made many promises. However, after three years, things are pretty much the same.

On August 26, 1998, when Premier Zhu met Robertson at Zhongnanhai, he talked about the importance of spiritual forces. Premier Zhu pointed out that they have acknowledged the usefulness of religion in the development of society historically. He said, "People must have a spiritual power; regarding this point, there is no difference between theists and atheists." At the time the words of Premier Zhu also gave this writer some hope. But looking back after three years, those words have disappeared without a trace.

This is now Reverend Robertson's fifth trip to China; trips to China seem to have become part of his work schedule. For Premier Zhu to meet a guest and to speak words acceptable to everyone is normal diplomatic procedure. However, to hope that these words will change the whole atmosphere is quite unrealistic.

No matter what, the national religious meeting of December 2001 makes us aware that, as China enters the world, we should not cling to unreal expectations, and things may not be too bad after all. In a society where a totalitarian political authority controls all activities, "a free lunch" for religion is probably an unreasonable hope anyway. Hong Kong Catholics should count their blessings. I advise Catholics and non-Catholics to regard calmly the recent changes taking place in China.