

China and the Catholic Church

The Country Is Changing; but Is the Regime?

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Twenty Years of Religious Policy

In 1982, over 20 years ago, Chinese authorities, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, produced two of China's most important religious policy documents: Document 19 (March 31, 1982) and Article 36 of the New Constitution of the People's Republic of China (April 27, 1982). After these many years, there has been little if any progress whatsoever in that field.



China has changed tremendously in the past years. The economic, cultural and social changes are well known to everyone, but these changes are not without significant counter effects, which are generally overlooked. Many Chinese are suffering from unemployment; lack of safety in the work place (a high number of deaths is registered especially in mines); massive urbanization; a widening gap between rich and poor; growing economic and social disparity throughout different areas of the country; serious deficiencies and abuses in the medical, scholastic and judicial systems (including the abnormal use of the death penalty); widespread corruption and abuse of power; serious pollution; and the AIDS time bomb, and now SARS. China, however, has made no significant improvement in political reforms and on the question of human rights: so far, there is no freedom of expression or of association, and there is no public opinion.

In particular, there is little improvement in the area of religious freedom. I would like to argue that no improvement in over 20 years, in a fast changing world, is, in fact, to go backwards. In the last 20 years the regime's control over religion, and the

Catholic Church in particular, has been fluctuating between periods of relaxation and periods of tightening. The alternate mode always has to do with internal power struggles. The paramount concern of the regime is always total control and submission. Even when it relaxes its grip on religion, the regime does so only to safeguard its control.

China's Freedom of Religious Belief

The principle of freedom of religious belief was already stated in Article 88 of the 1954 Constitution. Article 36 of the 1982 Constitution must be read with Document 19. The latter, which remains the basic text on the religious policy of the Deng Xiaoping era, does not concede any value to religion. The government has made a concession toward it simply because it realized that it had failed to abolish religion with decrees and force. Religion must be tolerated as part of the present reality, since the priority at the moment is “the common goal of building a modernized powerful Socialist State.” It is a given that, according to Document 19, religion will naturally disappear when the people are sufficiently educated and understand the secrets of science. It is useless, therefore, to forcibly eliminate religion as was attempted during the Cultural Revolution.

This is a policy of political expediency, not a policy of religious freedom. In fact, religion within the Chinese Communist regime exists only if it is fully integrated into the one Party system and in service to it. China's government actually has no religious policy in the usual sense. In other words, the government does not see religion as a positive element in society, but as something to be tolerated and controlled. “The long-term goal of the government regarding religion remains,” according to Ye Xiaowen, the Director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA, formerly the Religious Affairs Bureau), “to eliminate the impact of religion in China.” (1998)

From Persecution to Open Discrimination and Hidden Persecution

Religious persecution has lessened considerably since Deng Xiaoping's reforms. Today, there is less open persecution but a

great deal of discrimination. In the university, for example, especially in the more sensitive departments, it is very difficult for a Christian successfully to pursue an academic career.

More than 50ifty documents on religion, published since the fundamental religious documents of 1982, essentially repeat the same standpoint. For the most part, these are internal and secret documents.

From a careful analysis of these documents we can see that while there is one religious policy, there are two levels of implementation: "over the table" and "under the table." In dealing with various non-Communist realities, the Party and the government constantly operate on two levels. The "over the table" level is for the general public and serves as eyewash. The "under the table" level can be glimpsed only with difficulty and after long familiarity with the Party's practices: they are "the real thing."

"Over-the-table" documents (open documents) proclaim religious liberty, the legal protection people enjoy from this right, and the duty of religion to contribute to the stability of the social order. "Under-the-table" documents (internal or secret documents) speak about using strong measures to force believers to follow the government's religious policy, infiltrate the underground church; strike hard at the underground and exacerbate the internal divisions.

Adaptation: Key Concept in the Religious Policy

China's former President Jiang Zemin talking to religious leaders on March 4, 1999 summarized the religious policy in the following three points: 1. Complete and correct implementation of the Party's policy on religious affairs; 2. Strengthen supervision over religious affairs according to the relevant regulations; 3. Lead the religions to adapt to the Socialist society.

"Adaptation" is a central concept of the present religious policy of the Communist Party. The tone and the content of this policy clearly indicate that the believers are considered second-class citizens; they need the exhortations and guidance of the Party's officials; their activities need constant and strict control, correction and supervision.

Very much in the same line is the intervention of Liu Peng, a researcher of the Academy of Social Sciences, in a conference at the University of Hong Kong as early as 1994. He gave one of the

most candid and clearest descriptions of the rationale of China's religious policy, which he sees as nothing more than an exercise of control on the part of the Communist regime.

“Religion is accepted by the State on the supposition that it recognizes the state's political authority, accepts its leadership in all social spheres, and carries out its policies. (...) The role of religion in society is strictly limited. Every patriotic organization must accept the leadership of the Communist Party and the government. The official pronouncements indicate clearly that the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party, State, and religious organizations is that of leading and being led. These religious groups are managed by the government and must carry out Party and government policies. Politically they are no different from those institutions under the direct leadership of the government. Church and State relations in China fit under *State dominance over religion*. Obviously, this policy of the freedom of religious belief is based not on a concept of religious values, but rather on the realistic and pragmatic consideration that religion can serve the political goal of the Party and the State.”

In spite of progress along practical lines since the dark years of the political campaigns, the arbitrary restrictions on religious freedom are unjustifiable when set against the backdrop of China's search for modernization and the modern outlook that Chinese leaders want to project. The fact is that the basic attitude toward the religious and Christian phenomena has changed very little in the last 50 years: the Party must control religion. I also believe that the education that many leaders have received (the older among them in the Soviet Union) exercises a powerful negative influence in the way they perceive the religious phenomenon.

In the year 2002, articles by officials (especially Pan Yue's “Marxist View of Religion Must Keep up with the Times,”) and scholars (e.g., Mou Zhongjian and Li Pingye, “Need for New Understanding of the Religious Question in China,”) and comments by some senior leaders, including Jiang Zemin, have sparked speculation that the Communist regime is redefining religious policy in a more positive fashion.

I am less optimistic. First of all, in 2002, and in the beginning months of 2003, rather than a relaxation, there has been a

tightening of the control over religious activities. Secondly, the “new strategy toward a religious freedom policy” aims at a more sophisticated, but still complete control of the Party over religion. Pan Yue’s unduly praised article does not represent the shift that we need. Yes, he called for abandoning the old fashion ideological interpretation of religion, but only a few ultra-leftists would now ideologically support the theory of “religion as opium.” At the end of the day, in his own words, Pan Yue aims at “the transformation of our Party from a revolutionary party to a party in power, which will be able to apply new forms of administrative ideas and patterns of leadership to the task of running the government, running society, and running religion.”

China Watchers have praised well-known scholars in the field like Mou Zhonjian and Li Pingye (the latter an official of the United Front), for supporting a new approach to the religious question. However, they cannot refrain from affirming that “supporting the patriotic religious organizations, and through them mobilizing and uniting the great mass of religious believers, should be our principal task in religious work.” What a disheartening statement!

Answering the Government’s Objections

For Catholics, the relationship with the Pope is a matter of conscience, and has nothing to do with foreign influence. The unity with the pope symbolizes the unity with the Universal Catholic Church, an essential tenet of Catholic doctrine. Around 170 countries in the world accept the Catholic Church, and some of these countries are no less Communist or nationalist than China.

The Catholic Church in China is under domination. This domination is exercised by the Communist regime through its organizations: the United Front, the State Administration of Religious Affairs, and the Patriotic Associations.

The registration of places of worship, opposed by the underground, is not an administrative act of protection and regulation of religious activities, but rather a means of control, and a limitation of the rights of the Church.

Chinese Catholics are neither political opponents, nor are they lacking in patriotism. The government cannot ask them to give up something that is against their conscience. Their request to be in

communion with the rest of the Universal Church is non-political, rational, and legitimate.

All the ideological, administrative and repressive instruments implemented in the years of anti-religious political campaigns are basically still there: the one-party-ideology, the abuse of power, corruption, torture, illegitimate detention and labor camps. The practices of these extreme measures are not so generalized as before, but they have not disappeared. These abuses are not only a thing of the past, but also a sad contemporary reality.

The Official Church

Where is the official or open Church going? Clouds hover over the open Church. The illegal ordination of five bishops in Beijing (January 6, 2000) is a case in point. This episode augurs badly for the future. Catholic officials seem to be capitulating to the regime, leading Chinese Catholics nowhere. However, 120 seminarians objected to the illegal State-staged ceremony. But official Church authorities did not protect them.

The open Church has seminaries with a significant number of seminarians. But they also are strictly controlled. The curriculum includes political indoctrination. Men to be ordained priests must pass a political examination. The system of reporting to the State Administration of Religious Affairs on happenings, visits, donations, is still in place.

We are also alarmed by many reports on the serious mismanagement of money donated to build or renovate churches and buildings. In more than one case, the need for these construction projects seems questionable. In fact it seems about time for a limitation of donations to questionable projects!

The Role of the State Administration of Religious Affairs

The State Administration of Religious Affairs exercises a particularly negative role. They often put young priests under tremendous pressure to obtain foreign donations. Under the pretext of the new town planning regulations, some young priests are pressured to present to foreign agencies huge projects for renovation or for the construction of new churches and seminaries. These projects are not based on real pastoral needs, and their budgets are just too large.

To have young priests follow their lead and policies, the SARA officials tempt young priests by offering them entertainment, easy traveling and even a political career. Recently, we have received information of officials' attempts to interfere in the ordination of new bishops by imposing the presence of illegitimate bishops as co-consecrators. In some cases SARA officials put the consciences of the best among the priests in confusion by forcing them to accept ordination to the priesthood or the episcopacy against their will.

China watchers relate that the State Administration of Religious Affairs officials are considered very low on the scale of government officials. They are often poorly educated, with little hope for a successful career. Their understanding of religion is often limited to the classical ideological prejudices: religion is an inferior, non-scientific form of knowledge, and Christianity is just another foreign and imperialistic religion. These officials must decide everything about the daily life of bishops, Sisters, priests, seminarians and the faithful.

Priests tell us how they are called at the last minute to attend long meetings, where they must sit and listen to these gentlemen, and accept all kinds of limitations on their activities. Assisting at an ordination of a priest, I witnessed how the two pews in front, usually occupied by relatives of the priest to be ordained, were instead reserved for 24 SARA officials, who arrived late. They remained seated even when standing was required as a sign of respect, and half way through the ceremony they left the Church all together as one man, leaving the pews empty. Right after the ordination, these same officers presided at a meeting where the priest just ordained, his family and friends, had to listen to the admonition of the official on the policy of religious freedom. A priest said recently that the State Administration of Religious Affairs offered him money to inform (read *report*) on anything happening in the church.

An important scholar on religious studies from Beijing said that he told SARA officials that a modern state does not need a SARA, much to their disappointment. In fact until the government decides where to relocate thousands of people working in the SARA, there is no hope for any improvement in religious freedom in China.

Crisis among Young Priests

Some young priests resist the harassment. They offer a splendid example to all of us. But others succumb to the pressure, so that we have a high number of priests leaving the priesthood, and a number of priests rejected by the Catholic communities for known poor moral behavior.

Moreover, modernization and secularization, like anywhere else in the world, are certainly posing a serious challenge and threat to the faith and the practice of the faith of Catholics in China. The vocational crisis is generally one of the first consequences of the process of secularization. I suspect that the vocational crisis has already started in China also. As a consequence, some of the large seminaries recently built or restored might soon have vacancies.

The crisis experienced by a number of priests, seminarians and Sisters is rooted in this universal historical process of transformation toward modernization. The China Church has one more problem to cope with: it has no real freedom of formation, pastoral activity and spiritual growth. The political pressure bishops, priests and Sisters are subjected to, prevent them from properly and serenely dealing with the challenges of a society in rapid transformation.

The Underground Communities

The underground communities, which have not only suffered in the past, but are still suffering at present, are a great hope for the Church in China. They do not oppose the government simply for the sake of opposing it. In fact, they are not political activists. They simply want to live their faith in its total integrity.

The permanence of the underground communities, notwithstanding the "tolerant" religious policy, has made the regime reluctantly aware that they did not solve the Catholic issue: the Catholic Church can never become independent. The underground has prompted the members of the official Church to see the necessity of seeking the approval of Rome in order to command the respect of the faithful. Without the underground, I do not believe that communion with the Pope and the Universal Church would be so prominent an item on the agenda of the Catholic Church in China, and such a worry to the authorities. The

underground must be credited for having prevented the “official” Church from succumbing to the pressure of the regime to distance itself from the Pope and Universal Church.

Since the leadership’s major concern is stability, it is extremely active in suppressing any dissent. Anything that is not under its control must simply be eliminated. Information coming from the Mainland tells us of numerous episodes of harassment, violence, house arrests, disappearances and detentions against faithful, nuns, priests and bishops of the underground. Some authorities when asked about these episodes are embarrassed to the point even of denying the existence of the underground communities. In a recent article in the review of the official Church, Ye Xiaowen (head of State Administration of Religious Affairs), states that the “underground Catholics” (they exist then!) must be persuaded “with patience” that in China there is no alternative to affiliation to the independent Church.

The repressive method used by the authorities to suppress the underground might obtain some short-term results. But it is doomed to fail, as 50 years of resistance has proved. The question raised by the underground is serious and legitimate. Their voice, rather than be suppressed, should be heard.

Reconciliation: the Priority

We China Watchers know very well that the situation of the Church in China, and its division into the underground and open communities cannot be described in black and white. Most of the religious and faithful of both communities are witnesses to their faith in a way that only commands our respect. We always avoid making judgments that will unduly simplify a complex reality and unfairly describe different, legitimate options.

The Holy Spirit Study Centre, following the lead of the Holy See and the Hong Kong bishops, set the unity of the Church in China as their number one priority. We would like very much to see members of both the open and underground communities work together toward reconciliation and unity, fulfilling the call of the Holy Father. The people in both communities that work in this direction are showing a truly Catholic heart. Those who perpetuate or even deepen the division and conflict, regardless of the community to which they belong, are somewhat lacking in a truly

Catholic spirit. Unfortunately, one can notice that in several local situations, the division and conflict are not resolved because of the lack of will on the part of the Catholic religious leaders.

Holy See-Beijing Relations

The October 24, 2001 papal message to the Chinese people is an extraordinary document where the Pope acknowledges that Christians in China have made mistakes, and created misunderstandings and injustices. His expression of regret and his plea for forgiveness must be understood and appreciated as an extraordinary gesture of generosity and affection, a movement toward a future of collaboration and friendship.

This is not a turning point for the Pope. In his long years, he has often spoken to China with openness and affection, and on several occasions has expressed regret and admitted failings.

In reacting, Chinese authorities repeated the same two preconditions: the breaking of the relationship with the Republic of China in Taiwan, and non-interference in China's internal affairs. In fact the Chinese authorities avoided answering the Pope's call!

The Taiwan question is not the real problem, and the Chinese government knows it. It was not the Holy See that chose to leave China after the advent of Communism; the Holy See was forced to leave in 1951. Since 1971 the diplomatic presence of the Holy See in Taipei has been downgraded to the minimum. It was Paul VI's prophetic choice precisely in order to favor dialogue with Beijing. Relevant Chinese authorities have been informed for many years that, with a comprehensive agreement, the Holy See is ready to solve the Taiwan issue in a proper manner. Demanding the break of diplomatic relations as a pre-condition is a diplomatic ploy. The recognition of the Republic of China in Taiwan has never been a stumbling block to Chinese diplomacy. Chinese leaders like Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai warmly received Richard Nixon in 1972, when the United States had full diplomatic relations with Taiwan, not to mention US military assistance and collaboration.

The mission of the Pope is religious. In fact the diplomatic activity of the Holy See is only in function of peace and of the pastoral mission of the Church. The pastoral mission of the Church comes before any diplomatic success. This is why the Church cannot thus far accept the diplomatic pre-conditions imposed by

Beijing. For the Church, diplomacy is simply a tool to promote its legitimate freedom and rights. When the Chinese government is ready to grant the Church those long-awaited rights, the diplomatic dispute will be over.

Nomination of Bishops

The second pre-condition, namely, non-interference in China's internal affairs, relates, first of all, to the appointment of bishops. For the Catholic Church this is essentially an issue of freedom and autonomy. The Church enjoys this right everywhere in the world. Since it is clear that bishops are religious and not political figures, their nomination belongs to the Pope, and to the Church rather than to the government. However, a bishop is also an important authoritative member of the civil society. Therefore, the Holy See is willing to make reasonable and legitimate concessions, as it has done in other countries, e.g., the Cuban and Vietnamese models. The ball remains in the Chinese government's court.

Vatican Diplomatic Activism

In the recent past Vatican diplomats, or people close to Vatican circles, have engaged in a great deal of activism toward Chinese authorities. Some might have hoped that the October 2001 papal message to the Chinese people would open the way for an historical agreement. These hopes have been dashed. I believe that diplomacy and diplomatic relations might be useful but not essential at all to the mission of the Church, which is essentially religious and spiritual. The Chinese Church, like many other Churches in the world in different eras, has survived without diplomatic success, and I do not see why it is necessary now to pursue that at all costs. There will be no breakthrough until the country and the political power have changed. I see other priorities for the Church in China, which is changing significantly. We have to support bishops, priests, Sisters, seminarians and the faithful pastorally and spiritually, in this delicate period when the leadership is shifting from an older to a younger generation. And above all, we have to help the Chinese Church cope with the insidious challenges of modernization and secularization.