

Religious Policy and the Concept of Religion in China

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The concept of religion in China corresponds closely to the behavior of the Chinese in their social life and their cultural identity in relation to religion. In the process of the modernization of China during the twentieth century, religion has been understood by the Chinese in many ways. Today there is no single understanding of religion and it is discussed from various viewpoints. In any case, religion is evaluated in its spiritual, cultural and social structural sense. Spiritually, religion is seen to be a personal or mystical experience. In this sense religion should be a private matter and it is understood to be human spirituality. Seen culturally, religion is understood to be a particular tradition of a people or to be an expression of human civilization. Religion is namely a cultural phenomenon in the history of mankind. Seen from the viewpoint of society's structure, religion is understood as a social organization or a political power. Religion as collective coexistence and a social structure certainly has its function and influence in society. In this case religion is interwoven with the problem complexes of political stability, national unity and continuing social amity. In this context religion is both considered and accepted a highly complex social and cultural phenomenon. For this reason, for most Chinese today religious understanding is a sensitive topic. The religion politics of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the government of China are closely connected to this understanding. Based on the current improvements in religious understanding as a result of China's opening to the outside and recent economic and political reforms, it has become possible for religion politics to develop in China today.

The Historical Background of Religious Understanding in China

In China, the twentieth century began with an unfavorable climate for religion. At the turn of the century, most Chinese had nearly no strong religious self-assurance. The concept of religion was also not particularly clear. The traditional religions such as Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism experienced a decline in China just in this period. After the Opium Wars, Christianity had left a negative impression on most Chinese as being an indivisible part of imperialist aggression and colonization. In the period of social upheaval in which China found itself at the beginning of the twentieth century, resistance developed not only towards the religious traditions of China's past but also towards religious influences from Europe, especially Christianity. In the Revolution of 1911 the demise of the feudal system in China was linked to the weakening of traditional religious influence on Chinese society. The New Culture Movement began shortly afterwards, decisive for the entire process of Chinese modernization in the twentieth century. The unmistakable and direct expression of the New Culture Movement was the May Fourth Movement in the year 1919. Characteristic signs of this movement were the introduction of the concepts of "science" and "democracy" to China and the criticism of imperialism and feudalism. Confucianism, as a feudalistic consciousness and a conservative remnant from the Chinese past, was strongly criticized in this context. The Communist Party of China was founded in the year 1921 in this atmosphere of the new cultural movement. Just after its founding, in 1922, there was an "Anti-Christian Movement" as well as an "Anti-Religion Movement" all over China, especially in the intellectual circles of Beijing and Shanghai. Many Chinese communists took part in these theoretical discussions against religion in general and Christianity in particular. In such movements as well in the beginning of the communist development in China, resistance towards religion was perceptible.

Precisely this trend in the understanding of religion was displayed in the attitude of a group of well-known scholars in China. Emphasis on the difference between religion and philosophy was characteristic, as was the leave-taking of religion in Chinese self-awareness and in the cultural development in China. Some intellectual reformers in China carried out comparisons between philosophy and religion in which they emphasized the special meaning and function of philosophy in Chinese culture. In contrast they regarded religion rather condescending-

ly. In their opinion, the Chinese intellectual tradition held philosophy in high esteem. It contained the principle of philosophical skepticism, which should be the basis for scientific investigation. Philosophy was conscious of formulating questions. Owing to this intention, namely, to investigate these questions, rationality was thoroughly employed in philosophy. An active and curious mind leads to philosophical discoveries and mental development. Since an attitude of faith stands behind every religion, this satisfaction in belief hinders mental exploration and intellectual curiosity and annuls the necessity for rationality. The decision in the past of the traditional Chinese “literati” to be interested in philosophy rather than in religion was therefore praised. Such intellectuals were very happy and content, because the intellectual and cultural tradition in China revealed above all a tradition of philosophy. In this heritage of ideas there should be no place for religion. One representative of this period, Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873–1929) even stated: “What differentiates China from other nations is that we have no religion.”¹ Thus the Chinese intellectuals at the beginning of the twentieth century were united in their belief that the Chinese nation was a-religious and that the Chinese had developed a culture without religion.

Strictly speaking, Confucianism was also considered to be a philosophy and not a religion. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and other Jesuits who had come to China stated for the first time that Confucianism was not a religion but was rather only a set of traditional customs. They said this in order to avoid the Chinese “Rites Controversy”. At the beginning of the twentieth century Liang Qichao also stated that Confucianism was not a religion. However, after the “1911 Revolution” Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858–1927) and some conservative intellectuals in China attempted to see Confucianism as the state religion and to reactivate it along these lines. However, this attempt failed, and in the process Confucianism as a religion was judged negatively and was highly criticized. At that time Buddhism was not considered to be a Chinese tradition but a foreign religious import. Moreover, the typical characteristics of Buddhism were regarded to be a philosophy and not a religion. Daoism was actually the only native religion in China, but it was seen in its connection with folk religions or even with superstitious practices, traditional customs, and habits of the Chinese people. For this reason Chinese intellectuals were very

¹ Cf. Zhuo 1999, p. 67.

proud in their assumption that China was the only nation in the world without a religion.

The Chinese intellectuals of that period realized to a certain degree that China could not be detached from the religious way of life in antiquity. But in this respect religion was understood to be merely a lower or more primitive step in the historical development of Chinese culture. The need for a religious way of life in the contemporary development of China was thus negated. If there was still religion in China, it should be replaced with aesthetic education. For the Chinese the process of enlightenment should be from religion to aesthetics. In August, 1917, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1949), another well-known reformer and the president of Beijing University during the period of the new cultural movements, published his famous talk entitled “Replace Religion with Aesthetic Education.”² Cai understood religion to be an old-fashioned pedagogical method. He admitted that every nation had experienced periods in which education rested wholly in the hands of religious organizations. Earlier, religious education had encompassed the basic elements of intellectual, moral, physical, and aesthetical education. The situation had fundamentally changed through modern scientific developments. Religion played an ever smaller role in the understanding and self-realization of the individual and his environment. Mystical phenomena could now be de-mythologized through human reason and scientific methods. Natural history and social conditions could be explained scientifically. Religious laws, formed thousands of years earlier, were no longer suited to the needs of modern society. Religion had lost its importance in moral, spiritual and physical education. Religion was still of value only in the teaching of aesthetics. But Cai Yuanpei was of the opinion that even here education must depart from religion, because if one held on to religion in the teaching of aesthetics, connections to the intellectual and moral aspects of religion would easily occur. This in turn would stand in the way of pure aesthetic perception. In contrast, this new education in aesthetics should be free, progressive and universal. For Cai, replacing religion with aesthetics education was necessary for the modern development of human society. Religion was only a temporary product of human history, and the era of religion had already passed. Cai Yuanpei, in this anti-religion movement, also criticized Christianity strongly. For him, it did not seem necessary for China to have a religion. In this period most Chinese intellectuals emphasized

² Cai 1917.

that the traditional culture of China should be molded by philosophy. And this culture would be superior to all other cultures that were carried by a religious spirit. Although there were reactions and arguments from the Christian churches, in China the rejection of religion was overriding.

Pointing Out the Social Aspects in the Term Religion in China

Religion is translated into Chinese as “*zongjiao*” 宗教. The term *zongjiao* is actually made up of two words, namely *zong* 宗 and *jiao* 教. Originally *jiao* was used very often for religious forms in Chinese history, as for example the names in Chinese for Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism which are, respectively, *ru-jiao* 儒教, *fo-jiao* 佛教 and *dao-jiao* 道教. *Jiao* is a Chinese word that carries the parallel meanings of religion, preaching, upbringing and instruction. However, in the original concept of *jiao* there was no obvious semantic level that indicated “religion”, but rather *jiao* most commonly meant instruction and upbringing. The following expression for the origin of *jiao* is given in the “Book of Changes” (*Yijing* 易經): “Thus the Saint used the godly path to bestow instruction, and the entire world joined him.” Confucius explained the relationship between *tian* 天 (heaven), *dao* 道 (path) and *jiao* (instruction) in the work “Proportion and Centre” (*Zhongyong* 中庸) as follows: “What heaven determined (for humans) is their being. What leads this being (to righteousness) is the path. What trains the path is the upbringing.” Generally *ru-shi-dao san-jiao* 儒释道三教, namely the three religions Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, can also be translated as “the three teachings of Confucius, Buddha and Dao”. The origin of the combination *zongjiao* is found in the context of Buddhist expressions. Buddhism called that which the Buddha said “*jiao*”, and that which the disciples of Buddha said “*zong*”. *Jiao* is therefore the “teaching” of Buddha, whereas *zong* are the schools resulting from this teaching. To reiterate, in Buddhism *zongjiao* is merely the Buddhist doctrine. In this tradition *jiao* is not normally understood as religion, but rather as the enlightenment of the Chinese.

Only at the beginning of the twentieth century did the European idea of religion enter the Chinese language, by way of Japanese, as *zongjiao*. With this introduction of European theology, the term religion received a complex of meanings in China. In this understanding of religion the Chinese usually emphasized the concrete social existence of religion

in the form of groups of people or social organizations. When speaking of religion, one meant primarily the social structure and the sociological function of religion. It is for this reason that the Chinese religion philosopher and Christian thinker Wang Zhixin 王治心 (1881–1968) at one point said: “When we think of religion we are reminded of tall temples, majestic churches and all the well-structured and well-organized material aspects that are tied to this concept. It is difficult to believe that, in the final analysis, every material aspect of religion results from a supreme spirit. Originally the word ‘religion’ didn’t only mean a system, but also human feelings of devotion and worship. In our translation of the word religion with *zongjiao*, the term has lost some of this original connotation. When we hear the word *zongjiao* we tend to imagine a structured organization with which a certain portion of mankind identifies.”³ With this understanding of religion as a social structure and organization, the Chinese intellectuals considered only a minority of the Chinese population to have a religion. In this, the concepts of “spirituality” and “belief” were clearly separated from that of “religion”. To be more precise, this understanding of religion developed at the expense of humanity’s religious spirit and of the existence of religious interests beyond religious organizations. Another theological philosopher and Christian thinker, Xie Fuya 謝扶雅 (1892–1991), drew the following comparison in this respect: “There are, in fact, large differences between the Western concept of *religio* and our *zongjiao*. If we look for synonyms for the word *religio* in Chinese dictionaries, the word *dao* is possibly suggested. Two connotations are associated with this word simultaneously: substance and function [...]. The image of harmony between the individual and the cosmos resonates in *dao*, but it also includes aspects of activity, and the conforming of the individual to society.”⁴ Until today, the focal point of the understanding of religion of many theoreticians of religion in China has rested primarily with the study of religious organizations or institutions. In China, a faith without a social organization or structure is not recognized as a religion, or as a perfected form of religion. Religion, spirituality, and faith are clearly distinguished from one another here. In this sense, religion is understood to be only a sum of religious ideas (spirituality or faith), religious practices and religious organization.

³ Wang 1988, p. 1.

⁴ Xie 1950, p. 250.

The Religious Politics of the Communist Party of China

The Communist Party of China (CPC) was founded in 1921 in the atmosphere of the new cultural and the anti-religion movements. From its founding, the CPC's understanding of religion was closely tied to the party's political and economic considerations. In addition, its understanding of religion was deeply influenced by Marxist and Leninist religious theories. However, with the founding of the CPC the following principles were very clear and decisive for its relation to religion:

1. There were differences in ideology and world view between communism and religion. However, the CPC would not combat religion directly. Religious phenomena had surely their economic, social, and existential reasons. The CPC should be aware of these reasons, and, at the outset, reform and improve the society that was responsible for religion's emergence. Thus, the political and economic conflict with feudalism and imperialism should replace the battle against theocracy and superstition.
2. In the process of the Chinese revolution it should be possible for communists and religious followers, on the basis of mutual respect, to create a political alliance in the fight against imperialism and feudalism. At the ideological level there was no compromise or similarity between the CPC and religion. At the political and practical level however, there was indeed a consensus between the two and a unified front had to be founded. The communists and religious followers should find a mutual basis for the liberation of China and avoid their ideological conflicts. The theory of the unified front was namely one of the most important secret weapons of the CPC during the Chinese revolution.
3. The freedom of religious belief should be respected and protected. Religious beliefs were namely the private matter of religious followers. The CPC's duty should be the development and reform of society. With the progress and improvement of Chinese society, religious followers will have no further use for their beliefs, and thus will give up their religious beliefs of themselves. In this process of social development and historical progress, religion will gradually disappear from human history. For this reason it is unnecessary and improper for the CPC to fight against religion directly.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, religious freedom was theoretically guaranteed in the new constitution. The principle of a political alliance and unified front with religious followers is, as always, emphasized by the CPC. During this time, the CPC had a theory of the "five characteristics" of religion in this framework, namely that religion had a mass characteristic as well as national, international, complex, and long-term characteristics. At the same time, however, a reform or a conforming of religion itself to the new society should also be called for. All religions in China must shift from their connection to the old Chinese society to conformity with the new socialist society. This means that religion must overcome, on one hand, as in Buddhism and Daoism, its feudalistic elements, and on the other, as in Christianity, its imperialistic pressures. In reality, religion was considered for a short time, especially from 1957 to 1977, to be merely a passive, negative factor in the establishment of Chinese socialism. After the Cultural Revolution, especially since the opening of China to the outside and its economic and political reforms since 1977, freedom of religious beliefs is again valued. In addition to the "five characteristics" of religion, the cultural character of religion has been included. In 1982, *Document 19*, "About the basic viewpoints and basis politics in relation to religion in the socialist period of our nation," was published by the CPC. This document demonstrates a new starting point for religion politics and the understanding of religion through the opening of China to the outside. In the new state of social development of China and its relations abroad, the CPC maintains the standpoint of "extreme care", "absolute seriousness", and "constant reflection" in relation to religious problems. Specifically, the proper treatment of such religious problems by the CPC affects the stability of society, the unity of the nationalities in China as well as the influence or reputation of China in the world.

To elucidate the basic viewpoints of the CPC's religion politics in this period, the following ten points must be noted:

1. Religion has a process of emergence, development and decline. Religion will exist for a long time in socialist society. In socialism, religion may not be abolished or developed by the government.
2. Freedom of religious belief is protected by the constitution. Citizens have not only the freedom to believe in a religion, but also the freedom not to believe in a religion.

3. On one hand, it is important to propagate atheism, but the difference between theism and atheism must not be seen as a political dichotomy. The correct relationship between the two should be solidarity and cooperation in politics and mutual respect of beliefs.
4. The state should supervise the law concerning religious issues, protect normal religious activities and their lawful interests, and prevent and repress unlawful and criminal activities in the use of religion.
5. The discrepancy of the Chinese religions is primarily a discrepancy within the people. However, under certain circumstances it is also possible that antagonistic discrepancies arise. These two dissimilar discrepancies must be rigorously differentiated and dealt with appropriately and carefully.
6. China will adhere to the principle of independence, self-sufficiency, and self-governance in religious matters, and resist any sort of infiltration into religious practices through foreign enemy powers. The interference in China's religious affairs by any religious organization or a public figure from a foreign country is not allowed.
7. The patriotic religious organizations are good bridges between the CPC, the government, and the religious believers in China. Their positive role should unfold to its fullest extent.
8. The priests of patriotic religious organizations should have a systematic education that includes administration.
9. Religion should be positively guided to actively conform to the socialist society. The circle of religion should keep its activities within the lawfully allowed framework.
10. All religious organizations and public figures must uphold the dignity of the law, the interests of the people, the unity of the nationalities, and the unity of the state.

These principles are primarily portrayed on the political and social level. However, some basic theoretical considerations about the existence and function of religion in China are present in the new situation:

1. Concerning the nature and the conception of religion: The first and most fundamental question concerning the understanding of religion is that of the nature of religion. According to Marxist understanding, religion is a "reversed view of the world" that reflects a "reversed world". In this context, Lenin understood the thesis "reli-

gion is the opium of the people” to be “the cornerstone of Marxism’s entire weltanschauung on the question of religion”. However, with this theoretical premise it is very difficult to assess the existence of religion in socialist China today. If religion is a “reversed awareness of the world”, is then our socialist nation a “reversed world”? This is really a dilemma in the discussion about the nature and existence of religion in today’s China. One must either accept this thesis and thus criticize and deny our own social basis, or simply cautiously ignore this topic. At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s this difference of opinion lead to heated debates in Chinese theoretical circles. This debate, called the “opium war between north and south China”, brought the analysis of Marxist statements about religion a step further, and had a positive effect on the understanding of religion in China. In such an analysis, religion is defined as a spiritual belief or ideology. Thus the question stands: Is religion necessarily the unavoidable adversary for the Marxist or socialist ideology and weltanschauung? At this level it is still difficult in China today for the Marxist theory of religion to come to a consensus or compromise, but the principle of “progressive development with time” and “progressive renewal with time” in today’s Marxism with Chinese characteristics brings us new hope. The primary distinguishing feature of the dialectic method in Marxism is the emphasis on the movement, development and continual transformation of all things. Cultural patterns are subject to a continual modification. Every period has its own conditions. Not only ideas and thoughts, but even epistemological norms are continually renewed. In historical development both religion and Marxism can and actually will continually renew themselves and change. In the future, a consensus of the two will be thereby also possible. This can guarantee the ultimate normalization of the relationship between them.

2. Concerning the social function of religion: At the present time there are theoretical, sociological and ideological definitions of religion in China. That is to say, the concept of religion is apprehended either from the viewpoint of its ideological beliefs or judged by its social function and meaning. If one has difficulties with an ideological consensus, one rather examines the meaning and value of religion from the viewpoint of its social function. In this understanding, however, both the positive and negative functions of religion are stressed. Included in religion’s positive functions in socialist China are name-

ly its function of psychological conformity, social integration, the socialization of individuals, and the awareness of equality, culture and good manners. However, the possible negative functions of religion are also not ignored, such as conservatism, fatalism, fanaticism, the psychological repression of reality, the division of society through the emphasis on individual denominations instead of social unity, etc. Here the subjective evaluation or differentiation between correct and incorrect is not mentioned, but rather only an objective description of religion's positive or negative function for society. The active adaptation of religion to Chinese society is namely to develop its positive functions and avoid those that are negative.

3. Concerning the existence of religion in contemporary China: It is clear that religion will long exist in China and will influence the broad masses. In this respect one must answer the question: Is religion a basic part of the social superstructure in China? Are the religious faithful also a part of the broad masses that President Jiang Zemin 江泽民 emphasizes in his theory of the "Three Representatives"?
4. Concerning the relationship between religion and politics: Through religion's "intermediary condition", in modern society the political function of religion is normally indirectly realized as being "a-political". The principle in contemporary society is, for most states, the separation of religion and politics or of religion and government. However, religion in China remains in a very difficult relationship to politics. It should not be entirely clear whether it exists separately from politics or inseparably. On one hand, one stresses the difference between religious world views and the current mainstream of the socialist ideology, and on the other hand, religious organization has a very strong political consciousness. This is a contradiction that does not seem to be in harmony with the present day development in China. At the moment one talks about legislation for religious matters in China. However, such legislation is very difficult without a consensus on the basic concept of religion and religious understanding. To put it clearly, in this state of affairs one does not understand whether such legislation should protect the rights and duties of believers or limit religious activities.

New Developments in Religion Politics and the Understanding of Religion in China

From December 10 to 12, 2001, a national conference about religious matters and religion politics in China was convened. At the conference President Jiang Zemin listed three characteristics of contemporary world religions:

1. The existence of religion has its deep historical and social roots. Religion will exist for a very long time and will have lasting effects. Marxism holds the view that, with the development of social productive resources, the progress of civilization and the increase of reflective awareness of the population, and through these, the gradual reduction of the basis and prerequisites for religious existence, religion will finally vanish. However, the disappearance of religion is a very long-term process that may last longer than the final extinction of classes and states.
2. Religion is closely tied to economic, political, and cultural problems, and therefore has a large influence on the stability of society. The prerequisite for the existence of religion is faith in broad masses of the population. This mass character of religion very often gives rise to tremendous social force. If handled correctly this force can have a very positive role in the development and the stability of society. If not, it can have a negative and even destructive function. This crucial point is dependent on the effective establishment and administration of religion.
3. Religion is also very often involved in international conflicts and real battles and is therefore an important factor in international relations as well as in world politics. Through their expansion, some of the world's large religions are already multi-national religions. In this sense religion is not only an important factor in international relations and in world politics, but is also interwoven with their contradictions and conflicts. For this reason one must not underestimate the influence of religion in contemporary world politics. If not handled correctly, religion can churn up a stormy sea in international affairs, and can give rise to the so-called "clash of civilizations".

This conference made the fundamental tasks needed for the new century in religious matters even clearer. The required work entails these

five aspects: 1) the integral implementation of freedom in religious beliefs in the politics of the CPC, 2) the administration of religious matters in accordance with the law, 3) the active guiding of religion to social conformity, 4) the adherence to the principles of independence, autonomy and self-organization of religions in China, and 5) the establishment and development of a patriotic united front between the CPC and the religious sphere.

Shortly after this conference, on December 16, 2001, a young vice-minister named Pan Yue 潘岳 from the office of State Advisory Board for Economic Structure Reforms published an article entitled "The necessity for the development of Marxist religious theories over time". In this article he described his understanding of the relationship between the Communist Party and religion. He stressed: 1) Religion is no longer "opium for the masses". The significance of religion as a "theory about the hereafter" and as "wisdom for the next life" is that the Communist Party should not treat it as an enemy but rather as a mirror. 2) The function of religion's spiritual recompensation is irreplaceable. One must respect the spiritual world and the religious way of life of the population. 3) Religion has special functions for the population as, for example, psychic, moral, and cultural functions as well functions in the service and well-being of the people. 4) In socialist society it is necessary to create a new scientific and rational relationship between religion and the government as well as between religion and politics. It is namely possible that they work very well with each other. Quoting Lenin, he even implied in his article that religious believers, inasmuch as they are part of the political consensus and work together on the united front, would be allowed to become members of the Communist Party. His opinion immediately set off heated debates and also sharp criticism in China. The differences of opinion regarding religion can once again be clearly observed. It is interesting to note that this article had very positive reactions in religious circles on the Chinese mainland and also received fantastic speculations in Hong Kong and its vicinity.

To conclude we should observe that religious politics and religious understanding in China today stands at a crossroad. The deliberation about religious matters in China is primarily motivated by political and social interests. If religion, both in China and abroad, can contribute positively to Chinese development and transformation, then we certainly have wide possibilities for the active acceptance of religion by the CPC and the

Chinese population, not only in the sense of politics, society and culture, but finally also in the sense of weltanschauung and spirituality.

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