

Adaptation of Religion – A Tool for Control, Fostering or Something Else?

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“Adaptation of religion to socialist society” (*zongjiao yu shehuizhuyi shehui xiang shiying* 宗教与社会主义社会相适应) has been a policy in the PRC at least since the 1990s when Jiang Zemin first formulated what has been called “three sentences on religious work” (1993), later with an added fourth (2001). These four are the above-mentioned adaptation, the implementation of freedom of religious belief, the strengthening of leadership on religious work, and to insist on the principle of independence. It should be noted that “religious work” (*zongjiao gongzuo* 宗教工作) does not mean any activity by a religious group, but is the term for Communist Party (CPC) ideological work on religious issues. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, also under Hu Jintao, there was a stress to promote patriotism, reduce tension between believers and non-believers, play down (*danhua* 淡化) religious teachings that are “not in harmony with the development,” and to promote the “best traditions” (*youliang chuantong* 优良传统) of religions. Hu Jintao in 2007 also stressed the “positive function” (*jiji zuoyong* 积极作用) of religion.

While this may seem to be an adoption of a potentially more positive or at least pragmatic attitude towards religion in the PRC, it can also be interpreted as something else, with a tendency towards control or fostering. The phrase about “adaptation” includes the character *xiang* 相 which points towards a reciprocal relation between party-state and religious group, but cadre training material reveals that this aspect must not be taken literally and is potentially dangerous. This further underlines the “fostering” or “controlling” aspects of adaptation.

In the 1950s, the CPC recognized “five characteristics” of religion in China, mass character, ethnic character, international character, complex character, and long-term character. With the announcement of the plans for “Sinicization” (*Zhongguohua* 中国化) of religion in China in the 2010s, the adaptation process was taken a step further, and the “international character” seems to be forgotten or played down. From 2018, all officially recognized religions in the PRC have been required to adopt five-year plans for “Sinicization,” even Daoism which is inherently Chinese. This shows that it is not primarily about

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“adapting” to Chinese culture but to adapt to the demands of the party-state. The Daoist five year plan for Sinicization 2019–2023 mentions that religion has three dimensions, localism/regionalism (*diyuxing* 地域性), ethnic character (*minzuxing* 民族性), and contemporary character (*shidaixing* 时代性), nothing about international connections, masses or even complexity. Religions now also have “Chinese characteristics” (*Zhongguo tese* 中国特色), however without clear definitions. All terms and concepts are rather vague, making it easier to (re)define the content at the will of the party-state, which also seems to be the purpose. In 2021, Xi Jinping put forth his “Theory of party religious work in the new era” (*xin shidai dang de zongjiao gongzuo lilun* 新时代党的宗教工作理论) where he stresses the importance of religious work for the party-state overall, with continued strong leadership, Sinicization, stress on “uniting the masses” around the party-state, and raising the “rule-of-law-isation” (*fazhihua* 法治化) level of religious work.

Despite the many phrases and ambiguous concepts, there is a clear line and reasoning behind this that could be seen already during the time of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Both stressed how religion could be “useful” (*qi zuoyong* 起作用) and play a role for social harmony, as with Hu Jintao’s concept of “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会). In my analysis this is a kind of “reversed opium theory” in the sense that the CPC reverses original Marxist-Leninist theory. The party becomes the oppressor using religion to numb people into deference (as opposed to what Lenin wrote in 1905), and also seeks the effect traditions may bring, patriotism, harmony, social service, morality, and independence from outside interference. To push the limits, one may perhaps say that religion is seen as a “productive force.”

This is inferred from studying political texts and propaganda slogans, and parallel material to that directly involving religion can reveal further the greater and related process of “Sinicization” and the (re)creation of “excellent traditional Zhonghua culture” (*Zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua* 中华优秀传统文化). The promotion of “socialist core values” (*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan* 社会主义核心价值观) is also a part of this same nationalist tendency that goes through all of the above. From such texts one can see a clear differentiation between what is “best” or “good” (*youliang* 优良) and “excellent” (*youxiu* 优秀), and e.g. religion and ethnic minorities are always at the most “good” or “best” (*youliang*) traditions while anything *Zhonghua* 中华 or of the CPC is “excellent” (*youxiu*). The “socialist core values” are in many cases drawn from religious tradition, but are now requested to be “core” also for religions in China, in their current “adapted” form.

Expressions of adaptation take many forms, and one is how religious leaders regularly praise the CPC, even thanking the party for its “grace” (*gan dang en* 感党恩) and asking fellow believers to “strengthen the sincere feelings of love for the party, love for the country and love for socialism” (*zengqiang ai dang ai guo ai shehuizhuyi de zhenzhi qinghuai* 增强爱党爱国爱社会主义的真挚情怀) (Ma Yinglin 2021). This is a case not only of simply adapting to party demands, but an internalization of the party message on a higher level. Party representatives for their part have been talking about “reducing the burden of religious activity on believers” (*jianqing xinzhong zongjiao huodong fudan* 减轻信众宗教活动负担) (Zhu Weiqun 2015), which is actually a core statement in the whole “adaptation” process. The party seems to aim for less “religious” religions with greater social and

moral responsibility, being “useful” for social harmony and for contributing to the nationalist project of “excellent traditional Zhonghua culture.” The “Cultural Development Plan for the 14th Five-Year Plan” (“*Shisiwu*” *wenhua fazhan guihua* “十四五”文化发展规划) (PRC Government 2022b) argues to “continue to integrate basic Marxist principles with the concrete realities of China and with the excellent traditional Zhonghua culture” (*jianchi ba Makesizhuyi jiben yuanli tong Zhongguo juti shiji xiang jiehe, tong Zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua xiang jiehe* 坚持把马克思主义基本原理同中国具体实际相结合、同中华优秀传统文化相结合). This shows how not only religion is in an adaptation process, but even the cultural and ideological spheres, and there seems to be an interest in “traditionalism” but not really tradition. With the stress on the “usefulness” of religion, and the perceived need to control religion, it is also surprising to see so little mention of religion in other long term plans and campaigns, e.g. the National New-Type Urbanisation Plans (*xinxing chengzhenhua guihua* 新型城镇化规划) of 2014–2020 and 2021–2035 (PRC Government 2014 and 2022a) where there is no mention of religion at all. On the other hand, considering the non-reciprocal nature of the adaptation of religion, it is clear that religion has very little agency in the PRC, and therefore is non-visible except when the party wants it to be seen.

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