

## Relationship between Religion and State in the People's Republic of China

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### Introduction



Prof. Dr. Zhuo Xinping during his lecture on April 11, 2013 in Sankt Augustin. Photo: China-Zentrum.

Chinese society is currently in the midst of a globalizing process that has brought about a major change in relations between China and the rest of the world. The Chinese are now experiencing a tension between opening up to the contemporary world and the preservation of their own traditions. This tension is also felt in the sphere of the understanding of religion. A variety of religions are currently developing very actively in the PRC and there are also differing opinions about religion. Even though in today's China religion is regarded from the viewpoint of globalization and is positively evaluated more often than in former times, the main attention is still focused on its relation to the State. The Chinese observe the relationship between religion and State in the contemporary world, especially in western states, and also speak of different types of relationships such as the

integration of religion and State or the separation of religion and State. Referring to these types, the PRC insists that its principle for this relationship is the separation of religion and State. For religion in China is a private matter and there is no State religion. The mat-

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ter is not that simple, however. If we look at the actual form of this relationship, we realize that according to western standards religion in China is not a private affair after all and that there is something similar to a State religion. The western theory of the relationship between religion and State does not, therefore, adequately explain this relationship in China. We cannot understand the true relationship between religion and State in China by means of the western theory, rather we find ourselves in an impasse.

To work out the actual facts of this relationship in China we ought to take note of the discussions that have been taking place in China on religion, faith, politics and Chinese characteristics. With the opening of China to the outside world it is now also possible to make comparisons and to address new questions. The rapid resurgence of religions in present day China mirrors the interaction between the globalized world and the ongoing reforms in China. Under this influence of globalization, religions in China have become more open and transparent. But this change has, at the same time, brought up questions regarding the concept and position of religion in Chinese society. In this process, there have been efforts to interpret the relationship of religion and State in China anew. According to my analysis the complex relationship between religion and State in China can be examined under four aspects, namely the relationships between politics and religion, law and religion, society and religion, and culture and religion. These four aspects of relationship are not static but affect each other mutually. The relationship between politics and religion, however, is the most important. What role religion should or could play in the PRC, whether religion in China can be accepted as a normal phenomenon among the people and whether there is a possibility for politics to be linked to religion is still a matter of contention in China today. Of course all these problems may be discussed nowadays which shows that there is an open and tolerant atmosphere with regard to this question in Chinese society.

In reality there is a totally different norm underlying the relationship between religion and State in the PRC which cannot be explained by the western theory of religion and State and yet against the background of Chinese tradition is comprehensible and acceptable. This relationship mirrors the continuity of the old Chinese tradition but is also influenced by present developments and the global context. This leads to the possibility and the hope of change and improvement in the present. To understand the relationship between religion and State in the PRC correctly, we have first to take note of this tradition in China and then turn our attention to its development and change in the present.

## I. The System of the Unitary State and Chinese Religions

The principle of the unitary State as a cultural belief is still accepted and supported by the Chinese people in present day China. Even though there are changes in the international setting and also from the influence of political systems such as federalism and power-sharing, State unity and the centralization of political power have remained the basic structure of Chinese society. In comparison to western societies it seems as though the Chinese government is more efficient in the organization of society. Whereas, for instance, the western nations are currently in the midst of an economic crisis, under this structure the economy

in China is still developing rapidly. The system of the unitary State also requires a unified ideology. State unity, therefore, is also closely connected to unity of thought. Social order and stability are very important for this. That is to say they are the precondition for social development and must be assured.

Within this context there has been much thought about the significance and function of religion in society. Religion is by no means a minor matter. That is valid for all Chinese religions. They have their own position in this structure and must, therefore, also play their political, societal, cultural and conceptual role. This means that religion is not a private matter and that all religions belong to the State. Throughout the history of China until today there has never been either an integration of State and religion in which religion played a leading role, or a so-called separation of State and religion. The only relationship between State and religion that ever existed in China was the primacy of the State and the subordination of religion. It was never the other way round. Religion has to be an aid for the State. That is, thus, the secret of the harmony between the State and religion. The religious structure is subordinate to the State structure. In reality there are not two structures but one. The religious structure is part of the State structure. Patriotism and religious freedom in China have to be understood within this structure. Loyalty to the State came and still comes in first place, then only comes loyalty to a specific religion. The religious organizations were, and until today still are, as a matter of course under the control of the State and many religious leaders were and are at the same time State officials. But the Head of State was always a secular sovereign like the Emperor or king and never a religious priest.

State control of religion was and still is exercised today by the competent, supervisory authorities in the State administration such as, for example, the Fanfang 蕃坊 (Bureau for the Administration of Foreigners) in the Tang Dynasty, the Xuanzhengyuan 宣政院 (Office for Buddhism), the Jixianyuan 集賢院 (Office for Daoism), the Chongfusi 崇福司 (Department for Christianity) and the Huihuihadisi 回回哈的司 (Department for Islam) in the Yuan Dynasty, the Libu 禮部 (Rites Ministry for Buddhism and Daoism) and the Siyiguan 四夷館 (Government Office for Minority Religions) in the Ming Dynasty, the Lifanyuan 理藩院 (Government Office for Minority Religions) in the Qing Dynasty, the Meng-Zang weiyuanhui 蒙藏委員會 (Commission for Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs) in the Republic of China and the Zongjiaoju 宗教局 (Bureau for Religious Affairs) in the PR China. Against the background of this political structure and its associated tradition, we can understand why, while the Vatican speaks about freedom of religion in disputes over the appointment of bishops in the Catholic Church in China, the Chinese government claims the appointment of bishops as the sovereign right of the State.

## II. Marxism and Influence of Confucianism

Over the past one hundred years, Marxism has taken over the leading function in Chinese society from Confucianism. Until today Marxism is China's principle ideology. This principle role of Marxism means that Confucianism is no longer the leading political or cultural theory for the Chinese people. At the same time it does not make any difference

to them whether Confucianism is a religion or not. Portraits of Marx and Engels, for example, were displayed for over 60 years at Tian'anmen without causing any problems, but a statue of Confucius in front of the Chinese Historical Museum in the vicinity of Tian'anmen Square disappeared after only 100 days due to strong protests.

In the evaluation of religion, Chinese Communists are still very German and speak a great deal about the Marxist understanding of religion in Europe. But to quote Marx's judgment of religion as the "opium of the people," leads in the Chinese context to a dead end. For that reason, in the 1980's there was a so-called "opium war" in China with regard to the assessment of religion. But Marx was speaking mainly about 19th century European religion. We cannot correctly interpret the phenomenon of religion in present day China in that context. Nowadays, if we speak of the Chinese identity we very often come up against westernization through Marxism. If in the current reform and opening the Chinese Communist Party wishes to assert that it represents the Chinese culture, it has to return to Chinese tradition. This development gives Confucianism a convenient opportunity for its revival. In the discussion about the necessary political theory for China's current development, attention turned to the possibility of dialogue between Marxism and Confucianism in the PR China today. Unlike Confucianism, Marxism did not originate from Chinese culture which is a fundamental disadvantage for Chinese self-esteem.

In order to remain the leading ideology in China, the Chinese Communist Party now speaks of a "sinicization of Marxism." Marxism, however, is fundamentally conceived for the class struggle and is, therefore, by nature a "philosophy for struggle." That brings specific difficulties. According to the Marxist principle religion is a reflection of society. Marx's negative assessment of religion originated from his negative evaluation of the European society of his times. His criticism of religion is by nature criticism of society. Today, if the Chinese criticize their religion while at the same time assessing their society positively that is in Marxist terms a contradiction. And we may also not forget: When Marx was criticizing religion and calling for class struggle, the Communist Party was a party representing opposition to the power of the State and the government. The Chinese Communist Party, however, is now a ruling and governing party itself. This contradiction, arising from the ideological critique of religion in China, has still not been resolved. Consequently there is no other way out: The Chinese must interpret the relationship between religion and society anew. In the process they maintain the principle and method of Marxist analysis of religion and its relation to society: If a society is good, logically its religion must also be good.

The main tendency in China today is the development of a harmonious society. For that a harmonious culture is necessary and there is no longer room for class struggle. A shift from classical Marxism in Europe to a harmonious culture is gradually becoming visible in China. To retain the sanctity of Marxism and Communism, we see first of all a "sinicization of Marxism" and then the emphasis on a "socialist theory with Chinese characteristics." The aim is a harmonious society in China. Consequently, if a "philosophy of harmony" is to form the soul of society, that is, after all, equivalent to a return of Confucianism which strives essentially for harmony. Although the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Government still cling to Marxism as the principle political ideol-

ogy, among the people there is an impressive renaissance of Confucianism. Where are we going? China is currently at a crossroads. Perhaps the best solution is a possible and ideal union of Marxism and Confucianism. That could result in the best harmony for China. Both, however, have to be self-critical enough, to be able to bring forth something new.

### III. Cultural Awareness and Religion

The cultural awareness of the Chinese people today is slowly coming back to life. That inevitably leads to tension between clinging to Marxism and promoting cultural nationalism. To wind its way out of this quandary, China is endeavoring on the one hand to bring about new research into Marxism. It is supporting an extensive Marxism Project with a new translation of the complete works of Marx and Engels from German to Chinese. On the other hand China is also striving to promote the Guoxue (China research) and to establish more than one hundred Confucius Institutes all over the world. These two endeavors do not, however, enjoy the same significance. Whereas the Marxism research has been approved as an academic subject of the first class, the proposal made or supported by a few university presidents and famous professors to recognize Guoxue as an academic subject of the first class was rejected and even criticized as “cultural conservatism.” Nonetheless, Guoxue has a much greater influence on Chinese society because it represents the cultural awareness of the Chinese people. With regard to content, Guoxue essentially covers research into Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, or in other words into the very typical, traditional Chinese religions. All Chinese are, of course, well aware of the cultural significance of these three traditions but the religious significance is to a great extent unclear. Confucianism especially is not yet regarded by most present day Chinese as a religion. If Confucianism were to be accepted in China as a religion, we would have to describe the Chinese people as very religious. Seen historically, the acceptance of Marxism and the rejection of Confucianism occurred almost simultaneously at the beginning of the 20th century through the “New Culture Movement,” especially after the “May Fourth Movement.” With the disappearance of Chinese feudalism, Confucianism lost its position as the principle ideology of China and was no longer regarded as a religion. Several famous intellectuals of that time, such as Liang Qichao, Cai Yuanpei and Liang Shuming, had accepted Matteo Ricci’s assumption that Confucianism was not a religion and they even maintained that China had no religion of its own. Since then many Chinese no longer know their cultural identity and have great problems with their own cultural awareness. In that sense the restoration of Confucianism is highly significant.

### IV. Political Structure and Religion

The political structure in the PR China comprises more or less the following four levels: the Chinese Communist Party as single governing party, the Government, the People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. We can observe the complicated relationship between political structure and religion on these four levels.

Firstly the Chinese Communist Party documents and Party discipline require that its members be atheists and not believe in any religion. However, this is difficult to implement in reality. Theoretically classical Marxism did not require that position. Marx himself was a Christian in the beginning. Lenin showed clearly that the Communist Party could admit religious believers and even their priests into its ranks. These religious believers could still maintain their religion in the Party, on condition they did not contravene the Party program. If the Party could admit and keep such religious believers, it means after all that its members were allowed to be religious. In today's world the Communist Party in Cuba allows its members to believe in Catholicism. And the Communist Party in Vietnam also allows its members to believe in their traditional, national religions. In the past in China, too, several leading personalities of the religions became members of the Chinese Communist Party through the theory and practice of the United Front. In the meantime that is an open secret. In the regions of the national minorities, as for example in Tibet and Xinjiang, it is very difficult for Party members not to believe in their religion because religion there is not simply "the opium of the people" but in reality the "life of the people." This problem is causing heated discussion at present and there are differing opinions. In my view political belief and religious belief should be seen separately because they are different types of belief. One can maintain both beliefs at the same time because they are not necessarily in contradiction or opposition to one another.

Secondly, the Government has the direct task of taking religious affairs into its administration. For that there is the Bureau for Religious Affairs at various levels throughout the whole of China. Interestingly the political and religious administration is sometimes combined. Many government officials responsible for religious affairs have ultimately become religious leaders, for example vice-chairmen or general secretaries of religious associations. They are Party members and now also religious believers. That again is no secret and they find it quite normal. We see here, however, a contradiction between theory and praxis of religious policy.

Thirdly, we discover representatives of the religions also in the People's Congress. For the Catholic Church Bishop Fu Tieshan of Beijing Diocese has to be mentioned especially. He was vice-chairman of the National People's Congress, thus a leading State personality from religious circles. A "Living Buddha" is currently vice-director of the Committee for Nationalities in the People's Congress.

Fourthly, there are numerous representatives from religious circles in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. We find the leaders of the different religious associations especially in its Committee for Ethnic and Religious Affairs. The director of the Committee is a former vice-minister for United Front Work in the Party and almost all vice-directors are leading personalities of Chinese religions. Zhao Puchu, a Buddhist, and Bishop Ting (Ding Guangxun) of the Protestant Church in China were even vice-chairmen of the Political Consultative Conference, thus again leading personalities of the State from religious circles.

In this political structure of the PR China we find the participation of religion. And the other way round we also find the participation of Party and Government in the religious organizations. Since the Chinese Communist Party maintains that it is an atheistic Party,

the relationship between religion and State in the PR China is neither integration nor separation of religion and State. This relationship in China cannot be explained by the western theory of religion and State.

## V. Globalization and Multinational Religions

In the age of globalization, China can no longer avoid foreign influence through religion. As a result there is political tension between the complicated activities of the multinational religions and the basic principle of State administration of religious affairs in China. But in an open society in the age of information it is difficult to administer and control the religions in China without external influence. On the one hand China tries to reject and criticize such influence as “foreign interference in the internal affairs of China” and to stress the independence and autonomy of Chinese religions. On the other hand, however, China has to participate in the international community and engage in dialogue on religious freedom and human rights with other nations. For China it is necessary to have more international cooperation and to play a greater role in the world. At the same time China is showing greater vigilance in protecting itself from a so-called color revolution.

Currently five main religions are recognized by the Chinese Government, namely Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. Of these only Daoism is a native religion. The four other religions have an international background and are world religions or multinational religions. It is clear that adherents of these four religions will seek their own religious identity beyond China's borders and emphasize the international dimension of their religion. This is a major challenge for the Chinese Government. The adherents of such religions are tied to two loyalties. When a conflict of interests arises between their religious authority and the Chinese Government as, for example, between the Vatican and China, it is very difficult for them to make a choice. If they remain loyal to the Government their religion will criticize or even excommunicate them. But if they stand faithfully by their religion they are labeled illegal and can only exist in the underground. This is, for example, the crux of the problem of the so-called “Patriotic” Catholic Church and the Underground Church in China. Against this background the relationship between religion and State in China is also influenced by the international relations between religion and State. A definitive solution to this problem requires active international collaboration, constructive dialogue, mutual understanding and even compromise and reconciliation.

## VI. Civil Society and the Multiple Existence of Religions

In reality religious life in the PR China is at present no longer limited to these five religions. The panorama of religions in China today includes more religions: officially recognized, for example, are the Orthodox Church in Northeast China, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, the Sanyi Religion (unity of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism) and the Mazu Cult (goddess for fishermen) in Fujian. The other religions which have not yet attained their legal position in society also exist in a certain sense. This phenomenon is especially very typical for the new religions and the popular religions. For example, the

existence of the Bahai'i faith, Judaism and the Mormons in China has been an open secret for a long time. The popular religions in China are characterized as folk belief which is sympathetically regarded and tolerated in terms of a preservation of traditional Chinese culture. Very often academic organizations or non-governmental organizations in China Mainland collaborate with Yiguandao (normally under the title of "Society for Confucian and Mencian Morality"), Dejiao (Religion of Virtue) and Tiandijiao (Religion of the Emperor of Heaven). In this connection one often uses the phrase "li shi qiu zhu ye" 礼失求诸野 (when the ritual has been lost by the authority, one can still find it among the people). Many traditional Chinese religions with a Confucian background have indeed been preserved among the people through such popular religions.

In a civil society the existence and manifestations of the religions are subject to certain changes and alienations which have further complicated the relationship between religion and State. A few unlawful religious adherents, for example members of the so-called "house churches," also sought for alternatives and have become very political. They demand "international attention and intervention" for religious freedom and human rights. Their organizations have become mainly political. They are therefore regarded as a danger to the stability of the State. That is to say, striving for harmony does not yet in fact mean being truly harmonious. Due to such political considerations religion in China is "no minor matter."

In the course of the economic development religion was regarded and used by certain persons as an economic undertaking. Some religious adherents and also priests became corrupt. There are numerous reports about the stock market launch or a contracted management of certain temples and monasteries for commercial purposes. All of that was mostly supported or organized by the local government. The catch phrase for that is, "religion sets the stage on which the economy sings its opera." A few monks are secretly or openly married and also have children. If the Government punishes them they protest and deplore this "separating and scattering of the members of their family." Some believers work in religious circles to become functionaries. At New Year in certain temples the first incense sticks and chimes are sold for a very high price. Such actions are criticized and called "cult for the God of wealth (Mammon)." A great danger for the religions in China now is secularization. The Government is already considering new regulations against corruption and alienation in religion.

Some adherents of religions with a foreign cultural background resist the idea of a unified ideology in China. They regard the return to the traditional culture as veiled cultural conservatism and isolated seclusion. They consider the openness and freedom of all religions to be the inexorable trend of our time. They also have reservations regarding the inculturation and sinicization of their religion. To them, religion ought to be universal and pluralistic. They regard the central Chinese religious associations as quasi government organizations. What the Chinese Government actually wants in view of this pluralistic tendency is the adaptation of religion to Chinese socialist society. It needs the centripetal force, not the centrifugal force of religion. It would like to lead all religions in China in this direction. And what it absolutely has to avoid is especially a gradual "victory of the Lamb of God over the Chinese dragon" (as David Aikman expressed it) under western influence.



This expression causes great apprehension with regard to Christianity. Consequently the inculturation and sinification of Christianity is strongly promoted in China.

## Implications

The relationship between religion and State in the PR China is very complicated and differs very greatly from the relations between religion and State in western nations. For the future development of this relationship in China there are in my opinion three possibilities.

The first possibility would be a pessimistic notion. In this possibility the Chinese Government would maintain its categorical criticism of religion and pursue a limited religious policy. It is really not easy to find a way out of this impasse because the negative view of religion has existed for over a hundred years and is deeply rooted in the Chinese people. It would be easy to maintain this traditional attitude toward religion. A change in this attitude in future, however, would take a revolution in the way of thinking.

The second possibility would be an optimistic notion. In this possibility the Chinese Government would give all religions their freedom and strive for and guarantee a real separation of religion and State. If China has more collaboration and consensus with the international community and if the world is committed to a harmonious connection with China, that would without doubt be possible. China is currently striving to build up a harmonious society in China itself and also wishes that a harmonious world be realized in the future. Let us make still greater efforts in this direction.

The third possibility would be a realistic idea. In this possibility the Chinese Government would give religion more freedom and maintain the existence of religion within the current framework. The five main religions would be regarded as State religions and their present significance maintained. That would surely leave new room for theoretical and political reforms and improvements. For this possibility we have to produce new ideas and seize favorable opportunities.

Which way will China go? The coming five to ten years will be decisive.

Sincere thanks!