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Select edited Questions & Answers

RELIGION AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN CHINA

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a seminar convened by

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QUESTION: If I understood the presentation correctly, it was suggested that there was a great upsurge in religious belief and activity starting in the late '70s and going over into the early '80s, but then in the '90s that was replaced by, if you will, the rising “religion” of material acquisition, or wealth. And now in the last few years there's more of a move back to religion or at least more contention.

But ... my impression was, back in the mid '80s, there was already a great sense that the pursuit of wealth was becoming very important, and some concern over social values and social ethics in the pursuit of wealth, and that that certainly continued through the '90s. I hear people in China today also comment that essentially there are no ethics, there is only the pursuit of wealth. Yet you have this being more distinctly a phenomenon of the 1990s than my impression that this is a phenomenon of the last two decades and has not changed dramatically over that period of time. So are you really confident about the substantial changes that you are indicating?

QUESTION: Could I supplement this question? I wonder if the growth of religion is not only a response to materialism, which has gone on for a long time, but also a response to the withdrawal of the state, particularly in rural areas and reduction of the social services that are provided to people, and so they have to turn elsewhere. Is it these two factors working together?

ANSWER: If you mean that not just in the '90s, but starting from the '80s, both normal religion has kept on growing, and also the worship of materialism? I think, yes. To talk of “money worship,” of course is not the usual way of talking in China; it is not considered a “normal religion.” The reason I mentioned this is because before, when people discussed “what do you believe, what do you think, or what is your belief?” such words were only used for religion. But in the 1990s, when the economy was growing so rapidly, many people suddenly felt, “Oh, we really believe something is more important than anything else, which is materialism.” They think that a vehicle, a new apartment or other kinds of nice material products are good, so they began to use the words, “I believe in money.” There is even a saying, “Money is not everything, but if there is no money you can't do anything.” So it's almost like a religion, just the one small step away -- the first thing you must think of is money. This has become the normal way of thinking in most people's daily life. The 1980s can't compare in this regard with the 1990s; material prosperity was not as great then. In the 1990s, after Deng Xiaoping's tour in South China, the economy boomed. It's something very, very visible. So I think this changed people's way of thinking.

Of course, religion still kept growing as well. Honestly speaking, religion was like a volcano in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but by the 1990s, it's growth was more stable.

QUESTION: I have a concern over the situation in China now because of suppression of religious activity and of the philosophy of Confucianism. (I'm from China too.) I feel that now people have a very low level of morality. In a sense they just pursue wealth by any means possible. I'm interested in your opinion about how serious the problem, because in my personal opinion to a certain extent the whole international community is wondering. Especially

when business people go to China, it is very easy for them to get ripped off. And then the Chinese business community loses credibility although they don't really realize that. If you do agree it is a serious problem, what's your proposal to deal with this? I think religion is one way, but what else can the Chinese Government do?

ANSWER: There is a standard answer from the government: Very recently, the government launched a campaign to teach all Communist Party members basic Marxist-Leninist doctrine to uphold the "three represents" as the basis for their performance review. It started from January 1st this year, and at every level there will be a office to provide party member education. Otherwise, the government thinks, most party member forget this ideology. That is the solution we see from the government. Religion comes from another direction. The newspapers never talk about other solutions beside this.

QUESTION: Is this working? I mean that's propaganda

ANSWER: If one of these campaigns works, they won't have another one. If every few years they think they need to have another one, it means the former one didn't work.

QUESTIONER: After the 1999 Falun Gong demonstrations in Beijing, the government worked very hard to try to force government officials who were involved in these sorts of activities to separate themselves clearly from religious activities.

I still remember one of the most striking things when I looked at about those activities was a list by Amnesty International of people who had been arrested for Falun Gong activities, and an enormous number of them were in the People's Liberation Army, Public Security Bureau, the Procuracy, or the courts. Talking about religion generally, I would be interested in hearing your assessment of how successful the government has been in the last five years in trying to decrease the impact of religion, the membership in these sorts of religious groups by party members, particularly in rural areas.

ANSWER: From what I see as an individual, I don't see much open or visible religious activity in the society. Although we know the numbers of Christians still keep growing in the house churches or underground Catholic church, but for other activities as you mentioned, especially Falun Gong, we don't see much. The reason may be that the government has made lots of efforts to focus on that. So if you talk generally about the religions, as I see it, Christianity as a whole still keeps growing, but if you particularly focus on Falun Gong, I have to say it has been reduced a lot.

QUESTION: What is your impression of the percentage of party members who are involved in religious activities of any kind? Are party members at the basic level involved in folk faith?

ANSWER: I don't think anyone in the party will tell people, "I'm a party member; meanwhile I'm a church member." Maybe they are, but if so, they won't tell anyone. So it's very difficult to answer your question honestly. No statistics, no public information available.

However, note that if the Party repeats the rule that Communist Party members shouldn't attend religious activities or join a religion, this means many already do so.

ANSWER: Actually, the situation is very interesting. On the one hand we do have some strict regulations prohibiting party members from practicing any kind of religion or having religious beliefs. But if we look at reality, we see that not very many people -- or even most people -- do not treat the regulations very seriously. Thus they can be a party member and they can also take part in certain kinds of religious activities, especially those folk faiths. For example, if some member of the family passes away, a party member either will attend or feels he has to attend those religious ceremonies commemorating the person who died. It is seen as a cultural issue instead of a purely religious issue. So it's hard to say whether he is a religious believer or follower. He will attend some activities, but it's hard to say whether he'll practice the religious seriously.

QUESTIONER: In the Taiwan press, you read about a Taiwan Buddhist temple with a Buddhist object which they bought in Japan or Paris, and then found out it was stolen during the cultural revolution from Shandong, and so a delegation of Taiwan Buddhists return it. Or you read about people from a Taiwan Mazu temple going to Fujian. If you read the Taiwan press it looks like Taiwan-Mainland religious ties are growing and quite strong, but maybe this is wrong. What is your impression of Mainland-Taiwan religious connections?

ANSWER: I think the ties between Taiwan and China Mainland religious communities are really tight. If we view it from history, we can see that most of the ancestors of most of the Taiwan people are immigrants from the Mainland in the past 300 years. When they went across the Strait they also brought their religions and beliefs together with them, for example, *Yi Guan Dao* [Dr. Bush: the adherents of which moved to Taiwan in 1949]. People speak the same language in certain places in Taiwan and in Fujian Province.

Certain ties between Taiwan and Mainland China are very close, for example, with Buddhism or Taoism, but there are some religions in Taiwan that cannot be found in Mainland China any more.

Followers will attend the religious activities or academic activities organized by their partners across the strait, and sometimes scholars from both sides will attend the same activities in a third place or a third country.

DR. BUSH: It's my impression first of all that in certain Chinese folk faith sects there is a hierarchy of temples, and that most temples in Taiwan can trace their lineage back to temples in Fujian. And one of the things that happened after 1979 when there was a relaxation of tensions was that Taiwan temples were able to reestablish this hierarchical relationship. Some, once they went over and did this, started thinking that maybe our gods are actually better and our temples are better.

Another thing that happened was that it was actually religious believers in Taiwan who provided the funds for the re-establishment or renovation of temples in Fujian, including Mazu temples and others.

QUESTION: Given the growth of Christianity and the resurgence of folk faith in China, do you think that religion or faith is really controllable in the Chinese context, and if it is really not, then do you see the government either trying to tighten controls, given what you just said about the new guidelines for party members, or do you think the government will loosen their controls and possibly allow a more open religious environment? What do you see for the future?

ANSWER: I will just say in simple words, this is a game played from the 1950s until now, never stopping ... always wanting to control, never being controlled.

QUESTION: As an attorney in private practice who is a specialist in religious freedom laws, I note that the new law provides for very complex registration -- of religions, of venues, of professional religious workers, even statues and so forth. And as was indicated in your remarks, the number of unregistered religious organizations is many multiples of the currently registered "patriotic" organizations, and I'm wondering first, is the government considering having the registration administered by the Ministry of Civil Affairs or by the Religious Affairs Bureau?

And second, whoever implements the law is going to require hundreds of new workers for a major effort, and I'm wondering if thought has been given to something like a one-year or two-year implementation period. It's like rebuilding Shanghai in the last 16 years; you just need a lot of workers to enable this to take place. So I'm wondering if at the highest levels this has been discussed or considered?

ANSWER: The government gave it a try in certain places in China, for example, in Fujian Province, to ask all the folk faiths to register with the government. After we did an investigation in the year 2002-03, we gave a written report to the central government, and as a result the government has decided to expand the Ministry of Religious Affairs to add a new office specializing in regulating folk faith. Maybe in some other provinces you can find similar offices, but they are just under construction.

QUESTION: Can you give us specific examples of regulatory plans, including incentives for registration? and the responses?

ANSWER: First, I think the government is doing some investigation to get a clearer picture of the situation of folk faiths, and they are working on the concrete standard criteria for which should be registered, which not. Otherwise, some groups are big, some tiny, and they don't see how they can ask everyone to register. So far they don't have a concrete standard, but are working to set standard conditions for people to register.

Regarding financial management, I'll give you an example. In Fujian, there is a temple that was very prosperous before, with lots of members and donations, but later on something happened and the members left until it was resolved and then came back, so donation are growing again. Here is the issue: The real operation was actually run by one family, and people didn't trust this family, thinking this was not proper to leave all the donations in the hands

of one family. So they brought in people from the government, the community, the villages, the believers, everyone. They created a new committee for running the temple and managing the money.

This is a new system for handling folk faith; it has never been done before. This new committee has to be accountable, to give a report monthly, to release all the financial reports and let people check them. That transparency is good. However, even then, someone still was fighting over this committee because they thought the chairman of the board, who is a businessman and controls the money, spent money to create rapport with the government -- but with some personal designs. So they created more new regulations to improve this committee's operation and make things more fair and transparent. This is just a example of achievements in self-regulation, self-management. But it is pretty new; it's not perfect.

QUESTION: What does the government think is the appropriate relationship between “church and state”?

ANSWER: The government has made its policy pretty clear from the very beginning: Everything regarding religion should be under government-controlled registration and should follow a legal process. All this is openly known; if you want to register a church, first go to the “patriotic” church and get a recommendation. Then you go to the Religious Affairs Bureau. If you follow that process everything will be okay. Otherwise, it's all illegal. For the Buddhists, it's the same. All religions have an association for you to join. That is the government's thinking and they make this very clear. There is no change. They would never say, "Oh, you can do something new yourself, and then we can talk what is appropriate." What is proper actually is already determined and is made clear. You just need to follow. If you don't, if you are not a registered religion group, everything you do is considered an “abnormal” religious activity, and there is no need to talk with you. You are already considered as illegal.

DR. HAMRIN: I would say that the situation seems to be that in principle, these very detailed and fairly tight restrictions should pertain. Flexibility can only come in their application. Often social organizations get the message: “We can't change the policy and the words, but let's talk, let's deal when it comes to how it applies to you.”

I think that government officials are finding it difficult to motivate social groups to actually come forth and register according to the process. There is a lack of trust there, and I don't think the government's found a way to get past that problem. Right now my understanding is that people are just waiting to see what these new regulations really mean, how are they going to be defined, and what implementing guidelines will be produced. Everything takes forever.

The fact that people are hanging back and waiting and debating suggests there's a real lack of confidence that this is any kind of positive move. The pros and cons of registering are not always clear. Certainly, it's very hard to operate, especially on any kind of scale, unless you register, but registering brings you lots of red tape, really arduous procedures and transparency about who you are and what you're doing that may boomerang against you.

There's no strong positive incentive other than maybe some individual conversations where you're told, "If you'll step forward and be the first to register, we'll give you special treatment." But then you don't know how long will that last and what would be the price you would pay.

QUESTION: To what extent does Han chauvinism, Han discrimination against minorities, affect religion in China?

ANSWER: I think that minority religion, for Han people, is not really considered an issue of religion, but is an ethnic minority issue. Religion is viewed as their identity, so if you talk about their religion, you really are discussing everything about them, not just their religion. And if there is a discrimination, it is because of the ethnic minority issue.

Religion among Han people, however, is only a religious issue. If you are Han, you really don't think much about Islam or Lama Buddhism, which are considered religions for the minority groups. No Han people would join them.

QUESTION: I was wondering specifically about the new regulations that require the reporting of any new religious leaders, reincarnate Lamas and also Catholic bishops, to the Religious Affairs Bureau. How would the relationship between the religious organizations and the Religious Affairs Bureau work for that reporting, and where does that put the Religious Affairs Bureau in the hierarchy? Who's making the decision, and what happens if there's a dispute?

DR. HAMRIN: The regulations are vague on a number of key points including endorsement or authorization of leadership for some group that wants to register and operate. In the past the actual practice was that any organization to be registered would have to have a leader who was not only just approved by one of the patriotic religious organizations, but even educated in their religious schools. So, for example, the China Christian Council seminary alums were the only ones who could meet the criteria to become leaders of registered Protestant bodies. But that was never clear in the regulations; it's all between the lines and in the actual implementation. And the same sort of thing would then be the case for Lamas or other Buddhist leaders; they would have to be approved and authorized as part of the Patriotic Buddhist Association.

QUESTIONER: No. It's much more complicated than that, and it's interesting that it's a very specific piece of the new regulations, which spell out that the government has control of who is and who is not a Lama. It's much more political, and it's amazing that that's in there very specifically.

DR. HAMRIN: Now, I understand you're talking about special practices that go back to the Ching Dynasty and so forth. But what I'm saying is that the religious affairs authorities have all along been required in practice to approve religious leaders.

QUESTION: The first question is, is popular religion more popular in one part of China than another? I ask because my friends from the north say they don't see it, and my friends from the south say they see it everywhere. The second question is, regarding the

potential effect of religion upon society, of these various religions, including folk religion, which of them seems to have the most beneficial effect on society.

ANSWER: Folk faith can be seen in every part of the country, but in my mind I think Fujian Province has the most types of folk faith. Actually, according to a recent report, we can find well developed folk faith activities and worship places very close to Beijing, the capital city.

As to the second question, as to which religion can provide the most favorable influence on morality in the society, I think this is more a cultural issue than a pure church-state relationship issue.