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# Religion and the State in China: The Limits of Institutionalization

André Laliberté

For people reading the mainstream media, the recent travails of the Shouwang Church in Beijing – a Protestant congregation whose followers have been forbidden to worship in public since being evicted from the premises they rented – seem emblematic of a confrontational relationship between religion and state in China today (Jacobs 2011a). This impression appears to be confirmed when we also look at the persecution that adherents to Falungong continue to suffer (Richardson and Edelman 2011) and the difficult relations that Muslims in Xinjiang and Buddhists in Tibet experience. However, this is only one side of the story. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), at least since the administration of Jiang Zemin, has looked with approval at the growth of religion. Party documents have extolled the compatibility between religion and social stability, and the CCP has encouraged the construction or rebuilding of temples all over the country (Ren 2007: 195ff). Intellectuals and local governments are now looking back at China's traditional religions, not long ago dismissed as "superstitions", as part of a national heritage worthy of preservation. The dramatic expansion of Confucius Institutes all over the world confirms that the party has completely changed its appreciation of traditional culture and religion, now seen as assets (Paradise 2009).

## The CCP's Changing Views on Religion

This diversity of views and sometimes contradictory attitude with regards to religion is not a paradox; it reflects, rather, a major shift in the way the CCP sees itself, as it celebrates its 90 years of existence. The party is not only the vanguard organization that has successfully steered Chinese society from a centrally planned economy to a market-based one, but it is also the defender of national unity and national identity. In that context, adherents of Christianity, a faith still seen by many as a foreign religion, not only collectively represent a small proportion of the population, but are often seen as a community that seems apart from the rest of the population in ways that Chinese who observe Buddhist or Taoist rituals

do not. Therefore, and before jumping to conclusions about the persecution against religion in China, it is important to note that a large proportion of the population worship, pray, perform rituals and hold certain beliefs with the full support of the CCP. And most of that activity affects people who are not Christians, but subscribe to world views that are sometimes formally acknowledged by the state and are institutionalized, or others that are tacitly approved as customs, folklore or tradition. This reality is now being examined by an increasing number of social scientists and scholars in the humanities, inside and outside China itself (Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Ashiwa and Wank 2009; Yang 2008; Li 2006).

Since it came to power in 1949, the CCP has demonstrated its ability to control religion through relations of cooperation and co-optation, and to use repression only when individuals and groups appear to push the envelope too far. Before the onset of the Cultural Revolution, the CCP favoured the institutionalization of religion in ways unseen before in China's history: It compelled Buddhists, who had never before had a national organization, to join the Chinese Buddhist Association (佛教协会, *fójiao xiéhuì*) in 1953, and in the same year, ignoring the diversity of communities among Muslims, urged the inauguration of the Islamic Association (伊斯兰教协会, *yisilanjiao xiéhuì*) of China. One year later, disregarding the denominational diversity of Christian churches, the party approved the creation of the National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches of China (TSPM, 基督教三自爱国运动委员会, *jīdūjiao sānzì aiguo yundong weiyuanhui*). Three years later, it finally convinced Taoists, who were even less organized, to act likewise and approved the creation of the Chinese Taoist Association (道教协会, *daojiao xiéhuì*). In the same year, Chinese Catholics were asked to join the Patriotic Catholic Association (天主教爱国会, *tiānzhūjiao aiguhui*), thereby severing links with the Vatican. Through the creation of these associations, the party sought to use the United Front Work Department to enforce compliance with its directives. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which saw the destruction of temples and the persecution of religious personnel on a grand scale, emerges in retrospect as an exceptional period.

When Deng Xiaoping emerged as China's paramount leader, the CCP realized that despite repeated attacks on it, not only did religion not disappear, but traditional beliefs actually resurfaced, new ones emerged, and Christianity experienced an unprecedented growth in its member-

ship. The return to a United Front approach to religion was not enough to deal with the situation emerging in the wake of the dismantling of communes and the sweeping social changes that China underwent afterwards. Perhaps most revealing is that as the country has become more prosperous and has industrialized further, the number of believers has increased, in contrast to the predictions offered by mechanistic interpretations of secularization theory. Aware of this development, the party has abandoned its previous view on the inevitable withering away of religion, and the United Front approach resumed, but new documents spelled out the party's policy more clearly. In Document 19, issued in 1982, the CCP recognized that religion would remain influential in Chinese society for "a long time", and therefore the mission of the CCP would be to ensure compatibility between socialism and religion. More recently, the CCP went further and recognized the ability of religion to work for the public interest, thereby opening the door for accepting the intervention of religious institutions outside of the sphere of religious affairs in a strict sense.

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, however, the CCP still faces enduring challenges in its ability to control religion via this mixture of inducement and threat: the role of religion as a marker of identity among non-Chinese national minorities; the difficulty of regulating the inchoate and hard-to-define popular religions (民间宗教, *minjian zongjiao*) and popular beliefs (民间信仰, *minjian xinyang*), which take ever changing forms; and the emergence of associations that are too idiosyncratic to be incorporated as part of the five officially recognized religions. These three issues would require a separate treatment. On the issue of Tibetan Buddhism, I can point to the excellent study by Gray Tuttle (2005); on the non-Hui Muslim ethnic minorities, readers may want to consult works by Christopher Beckwith (2009). With respect to the variety of popular beliefs, I can refer to the groundbreaking writings of Adam Chau (2006) and Rebecca Nedostup (2009). For more specific studies on the intersection of politics and popular religion, I can also point to Ole Bruun's (2003) study of *fengshui*, and to T erence Billeter's (2007) monograph, *The Cult of the Yellow Emperor*. Finally, for works on new religions in China, the works of David Palmer (2005) and David Ownby (2008) on Falungong are essential readings.

The articles in this issue focus on the relations between the state and Catholicism, (Protestant) Christianity and Buddhism, three of the five religions officially approved by the CCP. These religions, termed by Chi-

nese social scientists as “world religions”, have many adherents outside of China, and it is only natural that much scholarship on religion outside of China is devoted to them. Taoism, one of the five religions receiving recognition from the state, stands out as the only Chinese religion that has entirely evolved in China and did not expand outside of Chinese cultural boundaries – that is, the PRC or other societies that can be considered culturally Chinese, such as Taiwan, Singapore, and overseas Chinese communities. Taoism raises a host of interesting and important issues about the boundaries of religion, religion and national identity, and the diffused aspect of religion. However, there is no state outside of China in which Taoists have developed a sufficiently influential pressure group with the ability to sway governments in favour of Taoists in China, in contrast to the other four religions, which can count on support from powerful interest groups such as the Christian right in the United States; political parties, such as the Komeito in Japan; or international organizations, such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

## The Religious Question in China

Commenting on the fate of a Chinese Christian church harassed by the government in Beijing, the site for Christian evangelicals “Christianity Today” noted that China’s “ancient name is, surprisingly, ‘God’s Land’” (Chen 2011). Indeed, before the “Middle Kingdom” (中国, *zhongguo*) emerged as the universally recognized self-identification for China in the twentieth century, China was also known as Shenzhou (神州), which can be translated more accurately as “the divine land”. The conception of religion attached to that name is emblematic of some of the difficulties faced by those who strive to conduct detached analyses of the political dimension of religion in China. Western views on religion have influenced the Chinese interpretation of religious life in China since the last years of the Qing Dynasty, and as a result, a narrow perspective was adopted, one which ignored the religious dimension of governance in China since the beginning of the country’s recorded history. In that self-understanding, only organized religions with a professional clergy, canonical scriptures, and a well-delineated place of worship qualified as “real religions”. As Goossaert and Palmer wrote on these issues in *The Religious Question in Modern China*, China stands out as a society “where the religious, the political, and the social were not clearly distinguished before the twentieth century”, and where there is no single dominant

religion, and as a result, there has been a considerable diversity of religious productions from the twentieth century onwards (Goossaert and Palmer 2011: 2-3).

The official recognition by the CCP of only five religions, therefore, represents only the institutional dimension of relations between state and religion in China – a limited institutionalization at that. At least three issues make the management of religion more complicated than the regulation of the five recognized religions suggests: the traditional forms of religious practices and rituals, the new religious movements, and the status of Confucianism. Each raises specific issues that the CCP is not always well equipped to understand and manage. Many social and cultural phenomena in China have a religious dimension, but they are not recognized as such by the authorities, who use the modernist concept of religion outlined above, which, ironically, has been criticized in the West for its inadequacies in understanding non-Western religiosities (Asad 2003, 1993). The non-organized religions have been dismissed as “superstitions” (迷信, *mixin*, meaning literally “deluded beliefs”) or “licentious sacrifices” (隱私, *yinsi*) (Barrett 2008: 96). The organized religions that the state does not recognize are stigmatized as “heretical teachings” (邪教, *xiejiao*). Both types of religion have presented the CCP with a number of important issues for governance, and now controversies about Confucius have revealed divergences over the core elements of religious policy and their limitations.

Religious practices that have long been dismissed as superstitions by the CCP (but also by most intellectuals until recently) include geomancy (风水, *fengshui*), divination (已经, *yijing*), ancestor worship (拜祖, *baizu* or 敬祖, *jingzu*), along with beliefs in spirits and deities (神, *shen*) and ghosts (鬼, *gui*). These practices, very present in overseas Chinese communities and in Taiwan, are re-emerging in the PRC thanks to official support from local governments; a more positive appreciation from Chinese social scientists, who are interested in the reality of religious belief (Li 2010); and party documents, which now claim that the duty of the CCP is to promote the national tradition. This is a green light to encourage the revival of practices and beliefs that are not associated with the five official religions. Hence, while provincial leaders in Fujian nod to Taoism with their sponsorship of the Mazu Pilgrimage in Southern China, the leaders of Shanxi have gone further with their promotion of worship of the Yellow Emperor (黄帝, *Huangdi*). These actions do not mean that political leaders are becoming religious believers, but they do

reveal that they understand the potential of religion to bind together Chinese all over the world. This is especially clear with respect to Taiwan, whose leaders have been approached in that context, most notably when Lien Chan (Lian Zhan), in his capacity as Kuomintang (KMT) (Guomindang) leader, was invited to join a public ritual paying respect to Huangdi, presented then as the putative ancestor of the entire Chinese people. But from the perspective of the authorities this worship is not without peril, especially when individuals try to institutionalize traditional forms of worship into a more formal religious association.

This was made all the more clear with respect to the “*qigong* fever” of the 1990s, when a number of groups promoting breathing exercises claimed that their practice could improve the bodily and spiritual health of their followers to such an extent that the state health care system would become redundant. Such claims, and the hope expressed by some of these leaders that their spiritual practice could be officially recognized as a sixth religion, generated heated debates until one of the groups, the Falungong, addressed its concerns directly to the CCP and was punished harshly as a result (Tong 2009; Chang 2004). This episode led to a sweeping crackdown, during which other *qigong* groups have been dissolved, and security authorities have stepped up their campaign against a variety of what they call “heretical cults”.

Finally, the remarkable but ambiguous rehabilitation of Confucius suggests that the CCP remains unsure about the best way to approach its promotion of Chinese traditional culture and religion. The religious dimension of Confucianism has been debated for a long while, and this aspect of the tradition is often difficult to separate from popular religion. However, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, the debate has taken a new turn, with the promotion of Confucius Institutes and with leading intellectuals proposing to enhance the status of Confucianism as a sixth religion or as a prominent Chinese tradition. The displaying of a statue of Confucius in Tiananmen Square in the winter of 2011 was interpreted as emblematic evidence of this process of rehabilitation (Chang 2011), but in a dramatic reversal the statue was removed a few months later without any explanation (Jacobs 2011b). This sequence of events suggests that the CCP’s policy and its religious work are in flux. It must be clear by now that the articles in this issue on the relation between the state and four of the five national religious associations do not exhaust the reality of the relationships between religions and the state in China.

They do present, however, an important dimension of that relationship which bears on China's relations with other countries.

## Overview of Individual Papers

Two of the papers presented here discuss the sometimes tense relations between religion and the state: David Schak looks at the sometimes conflicting relationship between the CCP and Protestant Christianity, while Lawrence Reardon examines the relations between the former and Chinese Catholic churches. But as suggested before, the relation between the state and religion can also be one of mutual accommodation, if not outright cooperation, to promote mutual interests. This is the topic of La-liberté's article, which analyses the more harmonious relations between the state and Chinese (but not Tibetan) Buddhists. These contributions do not claim to cover the whole complexity of relations between the state and the specific religious tradition in question, and they all more or less implicitly recognize that a proper understanding of the politics of religion in China, or the religious dimension of Chinese politics, requires more than just a focus on formal relations between state institutions and formal religious institutions. Richard Madsen, who has written extensively on religion in China and whose review article completes this issue, reminds our readers of that fact.

Madsen starts with the observation that China is experiencing not only a multidimensional religious resurgence, including the "revival and re-invention of many traditional forms of Chinese religion", but also the emergence of new religious forms. His article offers a review of the writings by an increasing number of scholars who try to analyse, understand and interpret the meaning of these surprising events. In doing so, Madsen does not limit himself to the writing of scholars who focus on the five official religions, but also looks at the numerous scholars paying attention to popular religions and beliefs, new religious institutions, and the status of Confucianism. He notes a difference in approaches to Chinese religions among those who work in the humanities and those who self-identify as social scientists. Although these differences are real and lead to different interpretations of religion's effect on Chinese society, it is also true that the scholarship Madsen discusses in his essay often bridges disciplinary boundaries. A major problem he sees in the literature in social sciences is its assumptions about secularization, which is seen as a "fundamental pillar of modernization", an assertion that what he calls



the “Chinese religious renaissance” decisively refutes. The survival of religion in China, despite the often brutal efforts to eradicate it by secular modernizers since the later years of the Qing Dynasty, he writes, shows that modernity can evolve in more than one way. Madsen argues that the new mix of economic performance, technological progress and political resilience displayed by Chinese societies challenges politics as we understand it in the West. He sees in that challenge the potential for far-reaching consequences, ranging from a dialogue between civilizations to a source of conflicts.

The possibility of dialogue or conflict across different forms of modernity appears clearly in the difficult relations between the CCP and Catholics, the subject of Lawrence Reardon’s article *Ideational Learning and the Paradox of Chinese Catholic Reconciliation*. Although Catholics, who number one billion people outside of the PRC, are spread among many countries in different areas of the world with different cultural legacies, they share some central tenets, in particular on family planning, which clashes with CCP policies. Reardon looks at the current conflict between the Vatican and Beijing as one case of a policy failure. He notes the paradox that while PRC leaders do not tolerate interference from the Vatican in China’s internal affairs, they have been more tolerant of foreign interference in China’s economy. Reardon unpacks this paradox by arguing that Chinese elites have gone through a process of learning regarding economic policy, and as this process has started to affect other dimensions of Chinese society, CCP leaders have realized that the growth of civil society that ensued has threatened their control. In response to this, Reardon explains, the state has reverted to the revolutionary paradigm that tightly controlled religion in the 1950s, thereby hampering reconciliation between the CCP and Catholics. He concludes that the party-state has to accept playing a lesser role in religious affairs and let foreign religious institutions play a greater role. As long as the state refuses to go that way for fear of facing challenges to its legitimacy, he writes that the

Chinese Catholic Church will continue to be divided internally, estranged from the Chinese Catholic communities in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau, and separated from the universal church.

Another complex relationship, the interaction between the Chinese state and its Protestant population, is the subject of David Schak’s contribution *Protestantism in China: A Dilemma for the Party-State*. Protestants also number over one billion adherents spread over all continents, but they

do not have a unified leadership. Moreover, there are arguably more Christians than Muslims and Catholics in China, and observers agree that this is the fastest-growing religion in China. Schak notes that the CCP sees religion as a positive factor and a moral force supportive of its development strategy, but remains fearful of its potential to mobilize civil society. Schak explains that what makes this dilemma all the more difficult to resolve is the complexity of the relationship between the state and a religious community that is divided between registered and unregistered churches, thereby making a uniform technique of control difficult to apply. His paper presents a number of case studies that show the wide range of approaches used by the state, which are sometimes strict, sometimes more *laissez-faire*. He also sketches out a few hypotheses to help us understand why the state may choose to restrict the activities of churches. Schak concludes that the CCP is going to steer a middle-of-the-road approach in its dealings with Christian churches: On the one hand, it will show great tolerance toward religion, but in exchange it will continue to expect compliance with state control over belief and practice. The state, he argues, is going to take that road despite the increasing strength of the churches and their assertion of independence and, at times, their refusal to submit to state authorities.

Buddhism, another international religion, with most of its adherents in East and Southeast Asia, is the subject of André Laliberté's article *Buddhist Revival under State Watch*. That tradition presents a situation different from Islam and Christianity because there are more Buddhists in China than in any other country, and moreover, there are arguably more Buddhists than adherents of any other religion in China. Buddhism is receiving more attention from the government than other religions and is seen as less of a threat. Laliberté presents the relations between the CCP and Buddhists as evidence of a more benign approach to religion. He writes that the growth of Buddhism is seen positively by the CCP because it has the potential to help it implement three policies: projecting the image of China as a peaceful rising power, achieving the goal of a "harmonious society" in domestic policies, and enhancing cross-Strait relations. Laliberté argues that Buddhist temples and local associations often enhance the legitimacy of authorities at lower levels when they offer social services. This is made possible, he explains, when Buddhist institutions present themselves to outsiders as valuable sources of cultural capital attracting the investment that comes in the wake of tourism and that facilitates the delivery of social services. An additional benefit of

these collaborative relations, he notes, is the improvement of relations between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait, thanks to the activities of Taiwanese Buddhist associations in China. The CCP's lack of opposition to the growth of Buddhism, if not the outright encouragement of that expansion, is not well known outside of China, and yet it may be one of the most important dimensions of its policy on religion.

## The CCP's Exclusion of Religious Believers

In sum, the relation between state and religion in China defies easy generalizations because of the complexity of religious affairs in that country, even if we limit our focus to institutionalized religions. On a formal level, the institutionalization of Catholicism, Islam, Protestant Christianity and Buddhism, by favouring the engagement of Chinese adherents to these religions with co-religionists all over the world, gives China an additional diplomatic instrument. The institutionalization of Taoism can play a similar role with the overseas Chinese communities on all continents. The reference to Confucianism, whose status remains debated, in the promotion all over the world of Mandarin Chinese, can be added to the panoply of instruments used by the PRC to promote Chinese "soft power" abroad. However, despite these signs of state support for religion, the CCP remains an organization that religious believers cannot join. Even though this is sometimes ignored by elderly veterans, low-ranking members, or members of national minorities, this requirement for party membership was spelled out clearly in print by State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) official Wang Zuo'an (Wang 2002: 381-385) and reiterated in a 2008 visit to the US (Brookings Institution 2008: 21) before he was selected to head the SARA in 2009. This requirement for party membership suggests that religious believers are second-class citizens in the PRC who cannot participate fully in the country's public affairs.

This obligation for party members has two far-reaching consequences: First, it does not encourage people to be forthcoming about their beliefs, views or religious practices. The low numbers of religious believers in official statistics should be understood in that context. Moreover, the poor appreciation granted by officials to religious believers – as opposed to the praise for official religions as a stabilizing factor in society – can indirectly encourage the behaviours that the party seeks to discourage in the first place. For example, the celebration of science at

the expense of religion has led enthusiastic practitioners of traditional spiritual practices such as *qigong* to claim that their methods of self-cultivation are not religious practices, but in fact a form of Chinese science superior to Western science, as David Palmer explained in great detail in his study of the *qigong* movement (Palmer 2005). In other words, such misunderstandings make it very difficult for the CCP to have a clear and candid appreciation of religion in the country.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, by excluding people with religious beliefs from effective and meaningful political participation, the party runs the risk of making many of them opponents to the regime *ipso facto*. The management of religious affairs by the state is, in the end, a task that costs more than it delivers, especially if we factor in the criticism the CCP has endured for its handling of religions such as Falungong (Chang 2004). The most devout religious believers in any society tend to have misgivings about secular rulers, and all the more so as the latter tries to exert control over their lives. For a majority of religious believers, who are not necessarily committed exclusively to one religion over the course of their lives, state control is simply an unwelcome intrusion into a deeply personal matter. The thinking of the CCP on religion appears less bold than its approach to the economy. It is somewhat surprising that even after the CCP relinquished control over important parts of the economy – that is, the fundamental infrastructure of society according to the ideology it claims to subscribe to – it remains reluctant to loosen its control over the superstructure of religion and beliefs, which is supposed to be “only” the reflection of relations of production. Should we read into this that the CCP is changing its views on that basic tenet of Marxism as well? Or should we expect that the CCP will make further adjustments on religious affairs soon?

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