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CHINA: Intellectuals and religious freedom

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In China, scholarship and the views of intellectuals are highly valued. There is tremendous interest amongst Chinese intellectuals, both scholars and officials, in religions and religious communities. Prominent intellectuals have defended religious and spiritual communities against government repression, through both internal reports and widely disseminated publications. These include, Forum 18 News Service has found, State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) officials in regular contact with scholars in Chinese universities and research institutions. Yet there is much frustration amongst scholars with their inability, due to the state's sensitivity, to conduct research on religion and religious communities in contemporary China. The role of intellectuals – whether or not they belong to a religious community - in advancing religious freedom cannot be ignored in Chinese society, Forum 18 notes. Without open and frank scholarly discussions on the topic of religion and its effects on contemporary China, genuine religious freedom faces another obstacle.

In China, the relationship between religion and scholarship has historically been uneasy. The strong association between Chinese scholars and Confucianism, and Confucianism's general bias against religion and superstition, has contributed to this difficult relationship. Also, as China's governing elites have historically come from amongst the country's intellectuals, Chinese officialdom has mainly viewed religions with suspicion and has sought to control their growth, despite the occasional imperial patronage that religions enjoyed. So the Marxist-Leninist view that "religion is the opiate of the people" was not seen as a significant ideological break from the Chinese past, but as a continuation of the view held historically by Chinese scholar-officials.

Of course, this simplified description of the relationship between Confucianism and religion must be qualified by the widespread perception that the two represent opposing ideologies. Echoes of this facet of the relationship can be seen in North Korea, where the official state ideology of Juche has distinctly Confucianist aspects, and is fundamentally opposed to the presence of and competition from religions (see F18News 29 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=752).

Because of the historical influence that Chinese scholar-officials had on official views on religion, it is unsurprising that Christian missionaries initially chose to target these elites in their missionary activities. Jesuit missionaries in particular focused on Chinese intellectuals as the objects of conversion. Although such efforts did not gain enormous popular acceptance of Christianity, they did gain important supporters for the religion amongst China's governing elites.

At the same time, these missionaries made important contributions to the field of science and technology in China, and became high-ranking officials in the Chinese imperial court. The Jesuit Matteo Ricci arrived in China during the late 16th century and converted several high-ranking Chinese officials through the demonstration of his mathematical prowess. His Jesuit successors included Fr Johann Adam Schall von Bell, whose many converts included one who eventually became the vice president of the Board of Rites, a position very near the top of the Chinese bureaucracy. Yet, shortly before Fr Schall's death, Catholicism was proscribed by the imperial court and he was imprisoned, due to the efforts of senior anti-Christian scholar-officials.

While these examples are Christian and involve Europeans, the relationship between Confucian scholars and Buddhism, which came to China from India, has also been historically uneasy. Chinese intellectuals have even attacked Taoism, especially its metaphysical elements. So, historically, the problem of official suspicion of religion is not solely a question of hostility to Christianity, or of hostility to westerners.

With this background, a surprising recent development has been the tremendous interest by the Chinese intellectual community in religions and religious communities. Many Chinese scholars of religion are "social Christians" – they are attracted to the social and moral dimensions of Christian teachings, but are not adherents to the religion.

The Chinese intellectual community is a diverse group. Unlike Europe or North America, the term intellectual (zhishifenzi) does not just apply to people who teach and do research in universities and other research institutions. In China, the term intellectual refers to anyone who possesses a university degree or higher education. They can be government officials, journalists, and freelance writers.

It is very clear that, throughout the Chinese intellectual community, there has been a sharply increasing interest in religion. Prominent intellectuals, both scholars and government officials, have defended religious and spiritual communities against

government repression, through both internal reports circulated only within the Chinese academic and governing elite and in publications disseminated widely inside and outside China.

Some years ago, during the height of the state crackdown on the Falun Gong movement, one young official in the State Council (the chief administrative authority) published an essay in a southern Chinese newspaper, arguing that the government's crackdown on Falun Gong was self-defeating and should therefore cease. Forum 18 has found that this young official is not alone in his views about religion in general and Falun Gong in particular. Other young Chinese government officials, including those employed in the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), appear to share these views.

Amongst China's intellectuals are an increasing number of university-trained lawyers who advocate religious freedom for China's many religious adherents. Many of these lawyers are employed outside the academic community, but others are university-employed. The most prominent recent example is Professor Wang Yi, a professor of law at Chengdu University in Sichuan Province. He is a self-proclaimed Protestant Christian who, in May this year, met US President George W Bush and testified before the US Congress' Congressional Human Rights Caucus in Washington DC. This has not brought him any publicly known punishment from the Chinese state.

Indeed, scholars and officials who deal with religion know each other and often appear to enjoy good working relationships. Forum 18 has found that SARA officials do seem to be in regular contact with scholars in Chinese universities and research institutions. Whether these contacts have a direct influence on policy is unknown.

Many Chinese scholars are sympathetic to the problems of religious communities in contemporary China, but this does not mean that most wholeheartedly endorse religion. But it is clear that an increasing number no longer view religion in strictly negative terms and, in general, oppose any state effort to repress or persecute religious communities and adherents. Such scholars' renewed interest in religions' historical developments and teachings - as well as interest in the growth in religious adherents in China - has undoubtedly contributed to the increasing acceptance of religions in post-Maoist China.

But many Chinese scholars of religion are religious adherents. Whether they have become religious adherents as a result of their research, or whether their conversion predated their research interest is another issue. However, it is very possible that it works both ways. One Chinese student told Forum 18 that, as a result of his research, he had been participating regularly in house church meetings. While he has grown increasingly sympathetic to these unregistered groups and appears to have accepted Christian teachings, he has yet to make the final decision to become a Christian. Even SARA officials have participated in religious gatherings, including those of unregistered communities.

The interest in religion among intellectuals can be seen in part through the proliferation of religion departments in Chinese universities. Today, it appears that every major university in China has a religion department. Forum 18 has visited members of the religious faculty in a few Chinese universities, some of whom received advanced degrees in religion from the West. Even the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the country's top research institution, has established a research institute devoted to the study of religion.

According to Professor He Guanghu, who teaches at the People's University and recently edited a book entitled "Religion and Contemporary Chinese Society," these religious research institutions and academic departments began to be established in the 1980s, after the Communist Party issued the document "Regarding the Basic Viewpoints and the Basic Policies on Religious Questions during our Country's Socialist Period." Along with the establishment of these institutions and academic departments, a large number of scholarly periodicals on religion have also been established. For example, Forum 18 has purchased several 2006 issues of the journal "Religion," published by the People's University (a prestigious Beijing university). Based on the subscription form, "Religion" is available for both domestic and overseas subscription.

What is the connection between the Chinese intellectuals and religious freedom in contemporary China?

First, Chinese intellectuals are not the main barrier to the spread of religion in Chinese society. Many have adopted a neutral stand on the issue while others have become active supporters of religious communities and have even become religious adherents. This is not to say that religion no longer faces opposition from intellectuals. Indeed, the state's repression of the Falun Gong movement reportedly began when a prominent Chinese scientist launched harsh criticisms against the movement and its founder. Nonetheless, these intellectuals have in general focused their public assault on religions and religious groups not belonging to the five state-permitted 'patriotic' religions - Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism. Therefore, many published attacks have focused on "cults" and "superstitions".

Second, intellectuals are clearly frustrated with the inability to conduct research on religion and religious communities in contemporary China, due to the state's sensitivity over the issue. In 2004, the previously mentioned Professor He Guanghu wrote an essay expressing his colleagues' general frustration. He complained that the study of newly-emerging religions (xinxing zongjiao) has been confined to the theoretical and empirical study of situations outside China. (He defined these as religious movements - such as the group that eventually led the Taiping Rebellion in China - which have arisen throughout the world from the second half of the 19th century.)

He Guanghu also complained that the study of Chinese folk religions has been confined to the study of those religions in the ancient past, while the study of Christianity has been confined to theoretical and historical studies. He pointed to the "multiple limitations, obstacles, and difficulties" that researchers confront in these areas.

Few, if indeed any, publications tackle the connection between religion and contemporary Chinese society, Forum 18 has found. The publications available in commercial bookshops are basically historical discussions of the five state-approved communities (see F18News 6 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=808).

Scholars are not only frustrated about the limitations to their academic freedom, they are also highly critical of the government's general policy on religion. As academics, these intellectuals appear to be free to express their views within academic circles. They also appear to be free to write manuscripts that are critical of the government. But according to many scholars, these manuscripts are unlikely ever to be circulated outside academia or the governing elite. Any topic that touches on the relationship between the state and religion is automatically barred from "external" publication.

Even academic publications that are - eventually - published and disseminated to the wider reading public are subjected to a process of censorship. This includes editorial reviews by both the publishing houses and the Religious Culture Press (Zongjian Wenhua Chubanshe), the publishing arm of the State Administration on Religious Affairs (SARA). During this process, publications may be rejected without any specific reason given. Even those that have made it through this process may have up to one third of their contents removed.

The standard internationally accepted definitions of religious freedom primarily deal with religious adherents and communities, and their ability to practise their religious beliefs. For example, Article 18 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

This international focus on religious adherents and communities is both necessary and understandable. However, the role of intellectuals in advancing religious freedom cannot be ignored in Chinese society, which prizes scholarship and highly respects the views of intellectuals. Without open and frank scholarly discussions – from a variety of religious and non-religious perspectives - on the topic of religion and its effects on contemporary China, the possibility of establishing genuine religious freedom in China today faces another obstacle. (END)

For analyses of other aspects of religious freedom in China, see <http://www.forum18.org/Analyses.php?region=3>

A printer-friendly map of China is available from <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=china>

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