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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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CHINA: The Economics of Religious Freedom

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Economics has a large effect on China's religious freedom, Forum 18 News Service notes. Factors such as the need of religious communities for non-state income, significant regional wealth disparities, conflicts over economic interests, and artificially-induced dependence on the state income all provide the state with alternative ways of exercising control over religious communities. Examples where economics has a noticeable effect on religious freedom include, to Forum 18's knowledge, the Buddhist Shaolin Temple's business enterprises, clashes between Buddhist temple personnel and the tourism industry, the demolition of a Protestant church in Zhejiang Province, the expropriation of Catholic properties in Xian and Tianjin for commercial development, the dependence of senior state-approved religious leaders on the state for personal income, and competition between and amongst registered and unregistered religious groups. Perhaps the greatest beneficiary of economic clashes is the state, which can use both control of income and also favouritism in economic conflicts to restrict religious freedom.

China's country-wide desire and need to make money has a large, if under-reported, effect on religious communities and the country's religious freedom. The need for non-state income, significant regional disparities in wealth, conflicts over economic interests, the need for good relations with the state to enable income generation, and artificially-induced dependence on the state for some income – particularly amongst some senior religious figures – all combine to provide the state with alternative ways of exercising control and blocking true religious freedom in China.

Chinese religious organisations – especially at or below the province level – mainly have to raise their own funds. Even those from the five state-approved 'patriotic' religions - Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism - can expect little finance from the government. However, in some cases the government has supplemented the incomes of some state-recognised religious organisations. In Shanghai, Forum 18 was told that the city government paid for half the cost of the rebuilding of a Protestant Christian church in the eastern district of Shanghai, which recently had to relocate to a new site. But this was an exception to the norm; religious organisations in general must search for non-state kinds of income, their main income sources being individual contributions, property, and other activities.

This search for non-state income dominates the lives of China's people, perhaps to an even greater degree than societies – such as those in Europe and North America – with overtly capitalist economies. Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China's economic modernisation policy since the late 1970s, once stated: "Poverty is not socialism, to get rich is glorious." His statement reflects not only state policy, but the widespread attitude of the Chinese people. The state encourages this, not only to further China's overall economic development, but also out of a recognition that it cannot provide the material welfare of all China's people. In this sense, the communist state has abandoned its unspoken contract with the Chinese people – economic security for life.

Current economic policy has created widespread and growing economic disparities, notably China's eastern coastal regions and China's hinterland. The disparities are even greater between coastal cities, such as Shanghai, and inland autonomous regions populated largely by ethnic minorities, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, as well as Ningxia – a region heavily populated by the Hui Muslims. In one region of inland China, Forum 18 was told that the average yearly monetary income in rural parts of the region was equivalent to the price of a cup of coffee in Shanghai.

In addition to these increasingly serious social problems, the policy has also promoted a widespread attitude summarised by the common phrase "look toward the money" (xiang qian kan). (This plays on the phonetic similarity of the Chinese words for money and progress) As the state-sponsored social safety net no longer works, and as the state has so far refused to allow other organisations – such as religious communities - to engage in large-scale public provisions of social welfare, money-making is not only desirable but essential. Migrant workers, for example, are legally forbidden to receive social services from local governments where they live. But migrants who can afford them can buy those services for themselves and their family.

This is not to overlook the fact that there are a growing number of small-scale social welfare services, such as clinics, provided by both Protestant and Catholic groups. It is possible that large-scale social welfare projects may be allowed in the future – and this will add to the need of religious communities to find income.

But where does this leave religious communities today, in their search for income?

One popular way for religious organisations to generate income is tourism. A prominent example is the Buddhist Shaolin Temple in Henan Province. The Shaolin Temple, which has been in existence for more than a Millennium, is widely known as the home of monks who are experts in a unique brand of martial arts. The history of the temple and the worldwide interest in martial arts have made it a popular tourist attraction. China Newsweek in April 2006 estimated - based on the average annual number of tourists visiting and the price of admission - that the temple generates an annual gross revenue of about 60,000,000 Renminbi (about 50,000,000 Norwegian Kroner, 5,900,000 Euros, or 7,500,000 US Dollars) from tourist admissions alone, of which the temple can keep 25 per cent. The other 75 per cent probably goes primarily to the local and provincial governments, with some going to the Chinese Buddhist Association. Even the 25 per cent the Temple keeps represents an astronomical figure by Chinese standards. In addition, there is a hugely successful Shaolin martial arts performance troupe, which has conducted over 1,000 performances in 60 countries. The Shaolin Temple is a large business enterprise, and plans to register its trademark in 80 countries.

The Shaolin Temple is arguably the most prominent example of the mixture of religion and commercialisation in contemporary China, but not the only example. The Yong He Lamasery in Beijing is a major tourist attraction, which is almost an obligatory tourist stop for Chinese and foreign visitors to Beijing (see F18News 25 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=462). Forum 18 recently visited another lamasery, the White Stupa Temple, which is dwarfed by the Yong He Lamasery in terms of tourist flows, but still charges admission. Another place of worship visited by Forum 18 was the Ox Street mosque, which charges non-Muslims to enter the grounds of the mosque.

The pursuit of income often contributes to conflicts between religious and other organisations. Examples include clashes between Buddhist temple personnel and the tourism industry over the use of scenic spots surrounding the temples. According to Wen Jinyu, a Chinese scholar of Buddhism, these conflicts usually involve the sharing of revenues generated from the admission fees to the parks and the temples, the use of land, and the ability of the Buddhist monks and nuns to enter the parks to visit temples, without being charged for this. At times, park personnel prohibit monks and nuns from conducting their normal religious activities, which then becomes a blatant violation of their religious freedom.

Similarly a recent incident in Zhejiang Province's Xiaoshan District, in which the local government demolished a Protestant Christian church under construction, also appears to be a conflict about economic interests. According to some sources, the Christian group had decided to re-build the church after it was damaged by a typhoon in 2005. After receiving unsatisfactory answers to its request to re-build the church from the local government, the group decided to continue with the planned re-building. Reportedly, the local government had wanted to move the church to another location due to interest in the commercial potential of the church's current location. Although the local government is clearly the perpetrator of this religious freedom violation, one cannot overlook the unidentified "commercial interests" that were defended by the local government (see F18News 1 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=641).

Two other prominent recent examples involve the government's expropriation of Catholic properties in Xian and Tianjin for commercial development, in December 2005. In Xian, 16 nuns were wounded and hospitalized, after a scuffle with uniformed police who escorted bulldozers to demolish the church without warning. In Tianjin, several Catholic priests were beaten by unidentified individuals, after staging a sit-in to request the return of several confiscated buildings currently occupied by the city's Religious Affairs Bureau, which intended to commercialise the buildings.

These conflicts also demonstrate the fact that the state often favours non-religious groups in their disputes with religious organisations, particularly over economic interests. But if religious groups demonstrate their economic prowess vis-à-vis other organisations, they may be the group favoured by the government.

The Shaolin Temple is an example of this. In recent years, the Shaolin Temple has cooperated with the local government to renovate the temple's surrounding area. Demonstrating the temple's economic power, the local government in 2001 removed two administrative villages and several shops from the area, which is over 50,000 square meters (over 12 acres) in area, for the renovation. This resulted in over 20,000 people being moved. In 2004, the temple invested over 50,000,000 Renminbi (about 39,000,000 Norwegian Kroner, 4,900,00 Euros, or 6,275,000 US Dollars) in the renovation project. In an apparent acknowledgment of Abbot Shi Yongxin's economic power, he is a vice-chairman of the state-approved Chinese Buddhist Association and a member of the Henan provincial delegation to the National People's Congress.

The case of Abbot Shi Yongxin and the Shaolin Temple illustrates how economic power can translate into political power for religious individuals and groups. Another illustration of this, that Chinese scholars have commented on to Forum 18, is the emergence of the phenomenon of so-called "Christian bosses." These are successful Christian entrepreneurs who utilise their economic power to safeguard and even expand the spiritual and material interests of the Protestant Christian community.

However, economic successes can also facilitate government control. As indicated earlier, it is highly likely that a large portion of any income from operations run by state-recognised religious organisations goes to the state. More importantly, good relations with the state are essential for religious groups like the Shaolin Temple to continue their operations. This indirect control of earnings enables the government to maintain its position as the final arbiter of religious life in China.

This situation also applies to non-Buddhist religious communities, perhaps in more severe forms. For example, Jason Kindopp, who has conducted an extensive field survey of the Protestant Christian community in China, observed that the government exercises financial control over the state-approved Protestant Christian community - the China Christian Council (CCC) and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) - by "siphoning off the church's main source of revenue – rental income from the vast number of properties that the TSPM inherited from foreign missions." This severely hampers the search for non-state income and results in the church and its personnel being heavily dependent on the government for community income and individual salaries.

Salaries received from the government is a highly significant part of personal income, especially for senior state-approved religious leaders. For example, Bishop Fu Tieshan, the head of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, is a "leader of the state" (guojia lingdaoren) by virtue of his government position as a Deputy Chairman of the standing committee of China's National People's Congress, which carries with it an official rank, with privileges, equivalent to the Deputy Prime Minister. Bishop Ding Guangxun, the leader of the state-approved Protestant Church, enjoys a similar rank as a Deputy Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. Even Abbot Shi of the Shaolin Temple, enjoys significant material privileges from being a provincial delegate to the National People's Congress. Such heavy personal financial dependence on the state is highly likely to shape the attitudes of these religious leaders, for example towards the role of the state in Chinese religious life.

However, many religious personnel in state-approved religious groups do not have this high level of state income. Religious personnel operating below the level of the province rely largely on the contributions from their own religious adherents and organisations. This gives these individuals – whether they like it or not - a financial interest in ensuring the absence of rival religious groups. It may throw some light on the role of local state-approved religious groups in preventing the registration of new religious groups, and even supporting local government repression of rival religious groups (see F18News 8 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=740).

This is not just an issue at province level or below. Forum 18 has been informed that one major reason for the heavy restrictions on Protestant religious activities by the Shanghai municipal government (a provincial-level administrative unit) is the local CCC/TSPM, which do not want to compete economically with other Protestant groups. This may also help to explain why these state-approved Christian groups are so keen on maintaining a monopoly on Christian publications (see F18News 24 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=636). In a Buddhist example, the Shaolin Temple has explained its effort to register its trademark around the world as a way of countering use of its name by "rival temples."

Conflicts over economic interests do not just take place between state-approved and unregistered religious organisations. They are also an unfortunate part of the relationships between unregistered groups. A Chinese researcher told Forum 18 that conflicts between Protestant Christian house churches can arise over the right to preach in congregations and the "stealing" of congregation members. As both guest-preaching and the size of the congregation directly involve financial rewards, local house churches desperately seeking funds may find themselves in competition with both the state-approved churches and other unregistered churches.

This kind of competition also affects the newer religious groups. The Eastern Lightning cult has undoubtedly committed criminal actions, as well as having suspect doctrines, and some sources suggest that the group may have connections with the Chinese underworld. There is the distinct possibility that economic interests played a significant role in motivating its members' actions.

Perhaps the greatest beneficiary of clashes between religious groups over economic interests is the state. As was noted earlier, economics and making money is considered throughout Chinese society to be all-important. Government control is certainly exercised through the centrally organised bureaucracies of the state-approved religious communities, but it should also be noted that internally divided religious communities also find it difficult to seriously challenge - in theory and in practice - any aspect of state policy. So long as the religious groups fight amongst themselves, the government can continue to use both control of income and also favouritism in economic conflicts as alternative ways of exercising control and blocking true religious freedom in China. (END)

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

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