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CHINA: State-imposed religious monopolies deny China's religious reality

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China officially recognises only five religions - Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholic Christianity and Protestant Christianity – which are formally represented by seven national state-controlled organisations. However, the reality of Chinese religious life is far more diverse than the state-imposed religious monopolies, with their artificial barriers to other religious communities – including those pre-dating Communist rule, Forum 18 News Service notes. Even within the state-recognised religions there is no absolute doctrinal and organisational unity. Yet the state insists on the illusion that all Chinese religious believers are represented by the existing state-controlled national religious organisations. This denial of reality creates problems by preventing improvements in relations between the state and religious believers. But it is unlikely that policy will change unless those outside the official system encourage the state – for example in preparations for the 2008 Olympics - to recognise Chinese reality.

The Chinese government recognises only five religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholic Christianity and Protestant Christianity. These five official religions are represented by seven national state-controlled organisations: the Chinese Buddhist Association, the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association and the Chinese Bishops Conference, the Chinese Daoist Association, the Chinese Islam Association, and the "Two Associations" of Protestant Christianity – the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the Chinese Christian Council (CCC).

There is no absolute doctrinal and organisational unity within the five state-recognised religions. Even casual observers note that the great majority of Han Chinese Buddhists are clearly distinct from their Tibetan Buddhist counterparts. Most prominently, Han Chinese Buddhists owe no spiritual or temporal allegiance to the Dalai Lama. There are also a variety of practices and beliefs held by Chinese lay Buddhists. In Islam, one can easily distinguish Hui Muslims from Uyghur Muslims, not just in terms of their physical features but also in terms of dress and language. Differences within the religions also extend to how the government treats them. For example, there has been far greater state repression against the Uyghur Muslims than against the ethnically Chinese Hui Muslims.

Christianity in China also shows great diversity. Catholicism has had a long and distinguished history in China (see F18News 2 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=821). Orthodox Christianity operates legally in northern China, without any affiliation to the national state-controlled organisations (see F18News 15 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=830). Perhaps the most diverse Christians in China are Protestants. Many congregations are direct descendants of the Chinese indigenous churches established in reaction to foreign missionary-led congregations at the turn of the 20th century, and these are often characterised by Pentecostalism. Other indigenous churches, such as the True Jesus Church and the Little Flock (Local Church) were founded in the 1920s and the 1930s. Among this mix are also descendants of former Seventh-day Adventist congregations.

Many rural Protestant church groups are led by charismatic leaders and some are regarded as "cults" by both the more orthodox Protestant groups and the Chinese government. These contemporary groups, including Eastern Lightning and the Disciples, are products of the late 20th century and bear little or no connection with the indigenous churches which originated before the Communist Party came to power. It is probable that the lack of full religious freedom in China is a major factor in such groups' formation and growth (see F18News 25 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=462).

Given the enormous religious diversity in Chinese life, why does the state continue to insist on the illusion that all Chinese religious believers are represented by one of the seven state-controlled national religious organisations?

One obvious reason is that organisational centralisation makes state control easier. For example, after 1958, with the "encouragement" of the state, the TSPM actively promoted the integration of all Protestant denominations. But this also has the risk for the state that a centralised organisation has the potential to form a cohesive force asserting its own and not the state's interests. Political, social, and economic incentives were used to co-opt individual national religious leaders, but arrests, imprisonments, and even killings were the primary means used to forcibly integrate national religious communities (see F18News 16 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=831).

The primary purpose of the forced integration was to ensure that Chinese Protestant congregations would not maintain any foreign links. This state concern persists today, not just about Protestant groups, but for all religious traditions.

The Chinese government has routinely stated that religious groups have in the past been employed by foreign aggressors against China. But the party-state's main concern is that religious groups have the potential to become competing sources of political and social power. If religions are somehow connected with foreign authorities, then they can pose even greater challenges to the state. Hence the government's insistence that Chinese Catholics cannot owe allegiance to the Holy See.

However, some Chinese Catholics, with whom Forum 18 recently spoke, privately indicated that Catholics still pledge their spiritual allegiance to the Holy See. This allegiance is not entirely private. In Beijing, Forum 18 came across a circular in a Chinese Catholic newspaper, posted on the bulletin board on the grounds of the ("patriotic" Catholic) St Joseph's Cathedral in Wangfujing. This urged all Chinese Catholics to boycott the movie "The Da Vinci Code," in accordance with the views of the Holy See.

Despite this, the state is clearly hostile to Chinese religious groups maintaining or establishing their own non-state controlled ties with foreign groups. One of the most prominent examples is the Chinese government's continued belief that the Falun Gong movement is funded and promoted by the US government. Although generally uncorroborated by non-Falun Gong groups, many overseas Chinese Falun Gong practitioners speak of being interrogated by Chinese state security officials about their alleged ties with the US Central Intelligence Agency, when Falun Gong practitioners return to China.

Since 1978, after the end of the Cultural Revolution and the advent of economic reforms, continued state centralisation appears to largely reflect the institutional interests of the patriotic religious organisations. For example, the "Two Associations" of Protestant Christianity generally resist efforts by Christian Protestant denominations to register with the government independent of the TSPM/CCC.

But the TSPM/CCC has not been totally successful in this. In many places different denominational groups, including Adventists, have been legalised without official affiliation with the TSPM/CCC. Similarly, congregations of the True Jesus Church and those of the Little Flock have sometimes registered directly with local authorities to meet on TSPM premises, while maintaining their own identity and autonomy. In many of these places, the TSPM/CCC plays the role of the state's "protector," maintaining vigilance against local state officials' "over-zealousness" in their dealings with Protestant congregations.

These variations in legalising religious denominations are not confined to Protestant Christianity. In provinces like Gansu, which also contains Hui Muslim autonomous areas, one can find several Islamic mosques in a single village. Each one of these mosques represent different strands of Islam.

The persistence of denominational ties has been noted by both the government and the national religious organisations. Bishop Ding Guangxun, a senior leader of the TSPM/CCC, has spoken on numerous occasions about the need for different denominations to respect each other. Ding himself was ordained in mainland China as an Anglican priest in 1942 and as a bishop in 1955, but this is not now legally possible for anyone else under the system of control which Ding is a key figure in. The Anglican Church cannot presently legally exist in China outside Hong Kong.

The Communist Party's United Front Department and the government's State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) have issued "work documents" on how party and government officials have dealt with the problems that may arise from differences among Christian denominations. In recent years, local and provincial governments in Guizhou, Fujian, Henan, and other provinces have also issued specific guidelines and reports that either mention or deal specifically with denominations.

For example, the Communist Party United Front Department in a city in Jiangsu Province has published a document on its website that spells out the importance of promoting harmony and reducing contradictions in that city between the Adventist minority and the majority of Christians who worship on Sundays. The document noted that the city had "educated" the local TSPM to include more Adventists among the leaders of the TSPM. It also noted that TSPM churches in that locality have been encouraged to construct additional "activities rooms," within the existing church buildings, to accommodate Adventist activities.

As one can see, in addition to the persistent concern that Protestants should not maintain un-controlled close ties with foreign Christian groups, the government sees church unity as an important means for maintaining social stability, or the creation of a "harmonious society" - the latest political slogan. Given the ongoing effort to promote religious "unity," the central state is unlikely to look favourably on attempts to nationally legalise the re-emergence of Christian denominations, including the Adventists. These non-state controlled bodies would - quite reasonably - want to have equality of legal, social, and perhaps political status as the TSPM/CCC and its state-controlled counterparts in the other religions.

This political logic also means that the state is unlikely to look favourably toward any attempt to introduce and seek recognition for religions such as the Jews, Baha'i, Hare Krishna devotees, and Jehovah's Witnesses - all of whom exist in China. Without a fundamental relaxation of controls, recognition of other religions would require the commitment of additional state resources - which are already over-extended - to "manage" these religions. At the very least, if the existing approach to control is maintained, recognising "new" religions such as Judaism and the Baha'i Faith would require new patriotic religious organisations, similar to the

TSPM for Protestant Christianity and the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) for Catholicism.

And in Marxist terms, it would be contrary to the interest of an avowedly atheistic party-state to extend formal recognition to more religions, as this would be a tacit further admission that religion was gaining ground over Marxism.

However, it is interesting to note that a new department dealing with "new" religions has reportedly been established in SARA. But the precise reasons for establishing this department, its objectives and its responsibilities remain unclear.

Laws and regulations on group registration provide additional obstacles to formal state recognition of China's highly diverse religious landscape. State registration is a legal requirement for all societal organisations, including religious organisations. Many religious groups prefer not to register at all, as in China registration is an instrument of state control. However, many groups have sought registration, at minimum as a way to gain protection. Being registered involves being under government surveillance. But as one Chinese scholar put it to Forum 18, being non-registered means that there is no possible legal redress when harassed by state authorities.

Amongst the other problems facing Chinese religious groups is the difficulty of registering with the government outside the framework of the existing national religious organisations. This problem for Protestant Christian groups has enjoyed consistent and widespread coverage among foreign media, human rights advocates, and churches. The main complaint has been that Protestant Christian groups cannot register with the government without the consent of the TSPM/CCC.

While there is much truth in the complaint, the situation may be more complex. National religious organisations like the TSPM/CCC do not possess the legal authority to determine whether religious groups can gain state registration. However, as a "bridge" between the government and the religious congregations, the TSPM/CCC has a legal tool which it can use to help or hinder registration applications. Current laws and regulations on group registration state that organisations seeking state registration must have a sponsoring agency. This sponsor can be a government agency or a registered organisation. This mechanism enables registered organisations like the TSPM/CCC to powerfully influence whether other religious groups obtain state registration.

In other words, given that the patriotic religious organisations collectively serve as the lowest level of the state apparatus, even if religious groups are able to register directly with government agencies, they will ultimately come under the relevant patriotic religious organisations. The established patriotic groups have both the political clout and the resources to maintain their position of power vis-à-vis the other religious groups.

An example of the powerful tools available to the nationally registered religious organisations is that, without state registration, religious groups cannot – against international human rights standards - legally conduct religious activities or register their religious venues. So if they want to carry out lawful activities in legal venues, they must do so through the registered religious organisations – principally the seven national registered religious organisations and their local affiliates. Under this system, even the leaders of unregistered religious groups must be authorised by the registered religious organisations.

Why don't religious groups seek government agencies as direct sponsors? Some local religious groups have been successful in doing this. But government agencies, which are ostensibly atheist, are normally unwilling to act as sponsors. This unwillingness may not be strictly ideological, as sponsorship entails political and legal responsibility for the behaviour of the sponsored group. There is very little incentive for government bureaucrats to take on such responsibility, especially in the light of the circumstances surrounding the Falun Gong movement and other religious or spiritual groups that have been subjected to state repression. For the same reason, there are very few incentives for registered groups to sponsor new religious groups.

Non-Chinese religious believers also face challenges in being able to congregate freely and openly in China. Technically, foreign members of religions outside the recognised five religions violate Chinese laws if they attempt to meet on Chinese soil. Foreign adherents of the five recognised religions need the sponsorship of the patriotic organisations to meet together in China.

For example, foreign Protestant Christians in China are generally able to meet on TSPM premises with TSPM pastors providing a "cover" by introducing the service before handing it over to foreign congregation leaders. There are very few exceptions to this practice.

Even those that are able to maintain autonomy vis-à-vis the TSPM must still follow the iniquitous regulation forbidding local Chinese from attending these meetings. This is a fundamental contravention of basic Christian teaching on the unity of the body of Christ, directly denying the Biblical teaching that in Christ all peoples are without exception unconditionally accepted. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this issue for the Christian faith, it being the cause of major splits in 1930s Germany between the Protestant "Confessing Church" and Nazi-supporting "German Christians" and in apartheid-era South Africa between the Dutch Reformed Church and other churches. It was a major issue in the work of the martyred Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, murdered by the Nazis in Flossenbürg Concentration Camp.

Is the present situation likely to change in the short term? The claimed five-faith monopoly of Chinese religious life is at best an illusion. But given the magnitude and complexity of the changes that are occurring and intensifying in Chinese society, it is unlikely

that the state will initiate any policy change. The changes going on in society are one primary motive for the state's promotion of the idea of a "harmonious society."

Any changes to the status quo, are more likely to emerge from the religious groups, especially those who have suffered the most from government repression. According to reports by the China Aid Association, many leaders of the unregistered Protestant Christian groups are becoming more assertive in defending their legal rights. Some lawyers have openly represented Falun Gong practitioners. However, the activism of some has been tempered by the lack of widespread collective action among all or even a majority of religious groups. So the potential of these groups to effect fundamental change remains unclear.

It is possible that, in the field of religion, foreign governments may be able to help the Chinese government to recognise the reality of Chinese society, by encouraging China to open up spaces for new religions and religious organisations. These Chinese religious organisations, after all, already exist. One Chinese expert, to whom Forum 18 spoke, indicated that improvements in Sino-Vatican relations may yield greater freedom for Chinese Catholic priests and lay people.

International religious organisations and their leaders can also be quite influential. In recent years, foreign religious leaders have made increasingly frequent visits to China. This offers the opportunity of access to Chinese political and religious leaders, allowing foreign religious leaders to encourage the Chinese government to allow true religious freedom. This would be in the government's interests, by allowing it to recognise the reality of China's enormous religious diversity. The denial of reality built into the present system does not help either the government or religious communities. The 2008 Olympics offers a particularly valuable opportunity for foreign religious leaders to advocate this improvement in Chinese state-religion relations.

As with all things in contemporary Chinese society, it would be unwise to assume that such changes in state policy will take place without pressures from outside the official state and religious apparatus. (END)

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

For an analysis of the impact on religious freedom in Xinjiang of tensions in the region, see F18News 23 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=834

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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