

# NEED FOR NEW UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGIOUS QUESTION IN CHINA

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In his "1st July speech" this year, Comrade Jiang Zemin deepened his theory of "the three representatives", making the point that Marxism had the theoretical quality of "keeping up with the times". He also made the point that the development of socialist civilisation must involve inheriting and further carrying forward all that is good in civilisation, must fully make manifest the creative spirit of the age, and must be imbued with a world vision that will prove inspirational. So far as the rich cultural heritage bequeathed by our country's several thousand-year old history is concerned, we should adopt what is essential and reject the dross. From the point of view of those of us who ponder over and try to understand the religious problems of the early period of socialism, these theories are imbued with an extremely inspiring role and a guiding significance in giving a positive lead to the mutual adaptation of religion and socialism.

## I

The reform of opening up has caused China to come to life. Every region has achieved progress by leaps and bounds.. The establishment of the market economy system, the enormous progress made in the reform of every system and the constant development and implementation of the results of higher technology have not only brought with them a rapid increase in productivity and an obvious improvement in the people's standard of living, but have also brought about and are continuing to bring about profound changes in the structure of society. Such changes in the economic basis of society have found expression in every aspect of the superstructure, and given rise to many changes in such areas as society, politics and the law, the concept of value, ideology and faith, ways of life, and culture and the arts. Religion, too, is no exception: under the impetus of the great tide of reform and openness, religious teachings and canons, ways of life and organisational systems have all undergone

change, and the status, influence and role of religion within the realm of the social spirit of our country have also changed in such a way as to give rise to changes in the perceptions, emotions and assessments made of it by the people. Religion, which for a long time previously existed in a situation of class warfare, economic planning and isolation, has now entered a new age in which ideology has faded, there are frequent contacts between China and the other countries in the world, information technology has developed to a high level and the economy is subject to rapid changes on a global basis. At the same time, we are faced with the challenges of a proliferation of the maladies associated with the industrial culture: a serious worsening of all kinds of social crises and a worldwide loss of faith, moral decline and deterioration in normal human feelings. The conditions prevailing in such an age have given rise to new responsibilities and new objectives in our research into the development of religion itself and into the theory of religion, and in the way in which we exercise control over it. They also oblige us to adopt a more open field of vision, and a more strategic, historical and developed viewpoint in trying to understand and in dealing with the religious question in our country

Ever since the beginning of reform and opening up, religious work in China has achieved enormous success, the Party's policy of religious freedom, which was abolished during the Cultural Revolution, has been revived, large numbers of sites for religious activities have been re-opened and restored, and both the Party's policy of freedom of religious belief and its religious theory have been clarified and systematised. However, such measures alone are not enough. Recently, as far as religion is concerned, many new circumstances and new questions have emerged. Because of the special sensitivity and complexity of the religious question, and the highly political element involved, the area of religious work - especially the area of research into the religious question - has been relatively sluggish by comparison with other areas in our social life, compared with the overall pace of our national development [for example] or in relation to the actual needs of religious work. Although, since the beginning of reform and opening up, study and research in the area of religion have been quite lively, and there have been many fresh ways of thinking, fresh achievements and breakthroughs in the theoretical area, nevertheless a certain period of time, a certain process, will have to elapse before these valuable

theoretical successes can manifest themselves in practical religious work. Although there is a considerable distance separating religion from the economic base, it does have a real bearing on social stability, on national unity and on world peace. How to answer and resolve the new situation and new questions in the present area of religion, and to complete and develop the Party's theory and policy on the subject - these are matters which urgently await consideration and are the major challenge confronting cadres in religious work and those doing research on religious theory.

## II

We have, in fact, encountered perplexing things so far as ideology is concerned in our religious work in recent years, or, it should rather be said, we have encountered perplexing things in our understanding and our work which have been brought about by the sluggishness of our theoretical consideration, something which originates deep down in the system of religious control and which has led to bafflement on our part about the religious question. Document No.19 brought about a revolutionary change in the ideological direction of religious work, restoring the religious policy of the Party which prevailed before the Cultural Revolution; Document No.6 proposed the strengthening of control over religious matters in accordance with the law, which led those of us engaged in religious work to move gradually in the direction of normality, orderliness and legal control. However, the fact that religion was a cultural system far removed from the economic base, that religious work had for so long been a matter of traditions and habits developed on the basis of the class war, and that we were constrained and influenced by the religious theory and religious viewpoint of the Soviet Union, led to our being lacking in penetrating and creative research and thinking on several profound theoretical questions in the area of religion. If we continue to rely on the philosophy of the class war of the social revolutionary period, on the pattern of thinking of the planned economy, and on the ideological framework of the feudal society as the basis for the regulation of control, and if we continue to think about and deal with religion [in the same way] during the [new] age of information technology and under the conditions of a market economy, then it will be hard to achieve any substantial progress or breakthrough in the matter of either religious theory or religious policy. This could obviously affect our judgments about

the basic situation of religion in our country, causing us to get bogged down in a situation where we make mistakes in our understanding of developments emerging within the area of religion and have blindspots in our religious work, and where we find ourselves in a situation of difficulty and doubt in which we are unable to make up our minds what to do and it is hard to take the necessary precautions.

The vitality of Marxism derives from its theoretical quality of keeping up with the times. Marx, Engels and Lenin made many brilliant pronouncements, but for historical reasons they were unable to make any profound statements about religious questions during the socialist period, especially on religious questions during the socialist period in China. As for the Mao Zedong era, our religious theory and policy had their correct side, but they also had their erroneous side. Because of the sabotage of the "Gang of Four", the wrong policies carried out during the "Cultural Revolution" reached extreme limits. During the era of Deng Xiaoping, as far as religious theory and policy were concerned, the most important thing was that we restored and put into effect the Party's policy on the freedom of religious belief. In 1993, Comrade Jiang Zemin summed up the successes of research on various fronts, during the course of which, while speaking about the actual situation of our country, he put forward his "three sentences" on dealing with the religious question, especially emphasising the importance of giving guidance to religion and the socialist society in mutually adapting to each other. This proposal about the mutual adaptation of religion and the socialist society was a creative development of Marxist thinking. It was a kind of positive cultural strategy and was a completely new concept. However you look at it, the significance and practical value of this theory cannot be overestimated. Even if we do not go so far as to say it is a revolution in Marxist religious theory, it is certainly a new contribution to Marxism's view of religion: it means that we have discovered a new benchmark for our thinking in our efforts to understand the religious question during the historical period of socialism, discovered a new point at which to break through on the theory of religion, discovered a new criterion and standard with which to make a judgment about religious work, and discovered a new confidence and assurance about doing religious work properly. All over the country, cadres engaged in religious work were very excited by it. Quite a number of articles were written on every aspect of the "three sentences", but none of them showed awareness of their

underlying meaning or implications, nor did any show awareness that this theory had to be based on a reconsideration of our original convictions on the subject, and even of some of the conclusions drawn from them. As far as some of the sensitive and basic questions on the religious side were concerned, these had been evaded by everyone, whether deliberately or not. This was because, in almost every political movement since the founding of the Chinese People's Republic, religion had always been an adversary to be struggled against, with the result that it was not only religious people who suffered serious harm but cadres involved in religious work also found it hard to avoid a similar fate. If we have no answer to such questions, however, it will be impossible for the theory about the mutual adaptation of religion and the socialist society to be put into effect.

### III

As for the reason why there may be misgivings about research on religious theory and religious policy, there are a few misconceptions in our understanding of religion.

*First, the excessive emphasis on religion, because it is a theistic belief, as the antithesis of Marxism.* Marxism's view of religion is very rich. If we simply equate the Marxist view of religion with atheism, and simply regard religion as a kind of ideology, a kind of theism, merely analysing it in an epistemological fashion, and if, when we undertake research on religion, we go no further in our attitude to it than proving it to be false, regarding it as false, unfounded, idealistic and unscientific in its world view and methodology, then as far as religion's innate character and social function are concerned, our conclusion is bound to be that religion is negative, backward, and even reactionary, that it is a relic of the old society and that it is something alien that is incompatible with the socialist society. In this way, our attitude to religion is bound to be that it should be restricted and outlawed, and as for the normal development of religion, the normal activities of patriotic religious organisations, and such questions as whether or not it can mutually adapt to the socialist society, we are bound to adopt a negative attitude to all of these things. As for the suppression and weakening of the patriotic religious organisations and the excessive restrictions placed upon normal religious activities, such measures must

inevitably lead to the growth and spread of irregular religious activities, and offer space in which irregular religious organisations and activities can be exploited by hostile forces. As for religious activities which take place without approval, when such activities begin to take shape and develop, we are often unable to control them because [the organisations responsible] have not been registered; moreover, since their behaviour is not obviously in breach of the law and it is therefore difficult to bring the law into play in such cases, they become a blind spot in our work, we allow things to get out of hand, and then the time comes when a storm blows up and we find ourselves without effective means with which to impose control and restriction. Thus a mistake in our understanding of the situation leads to a blind spot in our work.

If religion is entirely wrong, negative and useless, and is the antithesis of progressive thinking and progressive power, how can it be that it has been able to survive for thousands of years and that, up to now, it has still not declined? The religion that exists epistemologically is just one aspect of a system that has many forms. The idea put forward by Zhao Puchu [*trans. note: chairman of the Chinese Buddhist Patriotic Association*] that "religion is culture" has opened up a [new] field of vision for us, clarifying our political ideology and enabling people to understand the rich content of religion in its totality. It also provides believers, researchers and those who control religion with a broad platform on which they can get closer to and collaborate with each other. More and more people recognise that religion is not just a kind of faith, but is also a kind of approach to life, a kind of guide to values, a kind of pattern by which to understand the world and human life, a kind of human wisdom, which mirrors mankind's own pattern of existence and man's predicament, and which enables man to free himself from his predicament and aspire to a kind of spiritual power in human life. With such a huge system representing the cream of human thought over thousands of years, it is impossible simply to sum it all up from an epistemological viewpoint as no more than idealism. If we want to understand the nature of religion and its role in society, even if we wish to apply the method of epistemology, we ought also to apply the methods of sociology, psychology and political science, and even those of systematic engineering. Only in this way will we be able to have a comprehensive, dynamic, three-dimensional, genuine understanding and grasp [of the subject].

Apart from this, the fact that a bitter revolutionary war was waged before Liberation, and that, after Liberation, there was the wider situation of the Cold War - all of this forced us into a position where we were at the intersection between pressure by the east wind on the west wind and pressure by the west wind on the east, and experiencing encirclement by anti-Chinese forces. This serious crisis made it impossible for us to avoid laying too much stress on ideological purity, on the need for materialism, and on the antithesis and struggle between materialism and idealism. After Liberation, our Party changed from being a revolutionary Party into a Party in power, a Party with the status of one controlling society. Especially since the start of the policy of reform and openness, the central duty of society has no longer been engagement in the political struggle, but the development of the economy and of society, added to which there has also been the end of the cold war situation, and the facts that the main theme in the world has moved away from confrontation and in the direction of peace, development, understanding and dialogue, and that, internally, the tendency towards reform and openness has become irresistible, divergencies over ideology have become ever more diluted, and the differences between materialism and idealism, as far as the great majority of people are concerned, no longer have such important significance; at the same time, so far as religion itself is concerned, it has increasingly become, for individual people, their arbiter of values and a private matter which should not be the concern of other people. Against such a historical background, re-appraising the nature and social function of religion has become a matter imbued with very great theoretical and practical significance, a matter, moreover, which could arouse an abundantly positive attitude on the part of the great mass of religious followers and create a rational basis for the mutual adaptation of religion and the socialist society.

*Second, the excessive emphasis on religion as the tool of the political struggle.* Religion is indeed a tool of the political struggle, but this is not an attribute of the nature of religion. During the upheaval in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the role played by religion in adding fuel to the flames was indeed something that took us by surprise. In addition, when - after the end of the political setup in which the United States and the Soviet Union exercised their hegemony over the world - religion

increasingly became an important subject for discussion in the international political struggle and became a weapon used by western powers for the infiltration and subversion of China, this could not fail to put us on the alert.

From the day when religion first emerged, there has been an indissoluble link between it and politics. Since the time when the class society came into being, religion has always been entirely distinct from politics. It has either been a tool of the political struggle, or it has used politics in the service of its own objectives. If it has been exploited by the ruling class as the shackles with which to control thought, it has also been used by the oppressed class as a banner of resistance to oppression. Protestant Christianity was eulogised by Engels as the banner of the bourgeois revolution. This had its origin in its cohesive power and appeal, and in the hope which it gives to people in its doctrine and teaching. But in the final analysis religion does not come within the scope of politics, and it is not politics. The political character of religion is a product of history, society and culture; it is something that is decided by the social stratum to which it belongs and by the person in whose hands the power of leadership is vested. At a time, however, when the power of leadership within religions in this country is vested in the hands of religious officials who love their country as well as their religion and when the great mass of religious believers support the Party, support socialism, love their country and keep its laws, how can the political character of religion in our country possibly be called bourgeois or feudal? As the people who exercise power in our socialist country, we can also bring fully into play religion's appeal and capacity to inspire, and get it to play a positive role in the socialist revolution and in socialist construction in our country.

*Third, excessive emphasis on religion as the antithesis of science and of progress.* To be the antithesis of science is to be the antithesis of progress and the antithesis of development - this is a common view accepted by almost everyone. But the actual situation is not so simple. There are two questions here which require our careful reconsideration. One is: is scientific development the only indication of progress? The second is: is religion necessarily the antithesis of science?

Before experiencing the impact of modernisation, people naturally thought that technological and economic development was the principal criterion of social progress. Recently, however, people have increasingly seen that, despite the enormous progress made by society in its technological development and in the improvement in the standard of living, these things have not by any means solved the many emotional difficulties and problems with which mankind is confronted. In the developed countries in particular, apart from the problems that economic development has brought with it, such as the divisions between rich and poor, the pollution of the environment, violent crime, the decline in morality, the torrent of drugs and the break-up of the family, the great gulf between the materialistic lives of the rich and the spiritual lives of the poor has caused people to be plunged into bad feelings about the circumstances in which they live, with the result that religion has once more become the focus of warmth which attracts them most. The act of eliminating religion altogether from the lives of people today would cause mankind itself and the development of human society to lose the source of its culture and history, and cause people without a spiritual life to lose out on the support which spirituality gives, with the result that, in pursuing the development of society, the impression would be given that this is being done at the expense of other things and that there is no overall view of the situation. At the present time, in the countries where western materialistic civilisation is highly developed, what people are worried about is the loss of faith and idealism, the problems which the growing numbers of people who have lost their belief in religion are causing to society, the spread of unrestricted materialism and the proportionate increase in violent crime which this gives rise to. The indices of social progress are by no means only materials and economics. Technological development and economic prosperity are by no means certain to bring people an enhanced feeling of security or good fortune. Richness and strength of spiritual life, as far as people's spiritual existence is concerned, are of equal importance.

The connection between religion and science has always been a vital matter of the utmost importance to people. During the 20th century, when science and technology were developing at such a rapid rate, the opposite and conflicting beliefs of religion and science were inevitably subjected to a measure of questioning, whether on the part of religion or on the part of science. [Nowadays, however,] even more people than

previously think that religion and science occupy two different territories with different cultural systems, and that each has its own core territory and different cultural system. Religion belongs to the area of faith and value, while science belongs to that of tools and reason: each has its own core territory and it is not inevitable that there will be contradictions or clashes between them. There could possibly be clashes in the relations between them but they could equally well co-exist without coming into conflict with each other, or they could impact upon each other [positively] or even impel each other forward. Religion provides for mankind and the whole cosmos the values and significance of life. What it answers is the question of WHY [*sic - in English in text*]. Science, on the other hand, is engaged in investigating the objective laws for the movement and development of material things: what it answers is the question of HOW [*sic*]. Religion is incapable of answering the questions that confront science, just as science is incapable of answering the questions that confront religion.

Nevertheless, in the history of mankind there have been times when religion and science have been sharply opposed to and in conflict with each other, and the middle ages in Europe were a very good example of this. At that time in Europe, Christianity was everywhere the ultimate truth, and every scientific advance was inevitably a challenge to Christian faith, which resulted in the persecution of Copernicus and Galileo by the Church. Strictly speaking, in fact, the persecution of scientists by the Church during the middle ages was not because the latter were engaged in scientific research or scientific experiments, but because they upheld the principle of freedom of thought and dared to show contempt for authority, coming out with conclusions which differed from the doctrines of the Catholic Church.

If we look at history as a whole and with fairness, we cannot fail to acknowledge that religion also played a role in promoting science and technology. In ancient religious myths and in witchcraft, there were the embryonic shoots of scientific reasoning, which expedited the emergence of the earliest forms of such natural sciences as astronomy, geography, human physiology and medicine. Also, in Europe in the middle ages, learning was almost entirely fostered in the monasteries and churches: the first shoots of modern science almost all arose among churchmen. Despite the

fact that Copernicus's "On the Revolution of the Celestial Orbs" was banned, he was a monk, and it was precisely because of the fact that the monasteries were used for the preservation of medieval science and technology that we have his epoch-making, revolutionary astronomical theory. Kepler, the founder of modern astromechanics, too, was a member of the Protestant Lutheran faith, and it was while he was seeking the origin of God's way that he discovered the paths of the stars. He considered that the whole universe was made in the image and shape of the Trinity: that the Father was at its centre, the Son was a celestial body encircling the Centre, and the Holy Spirit was the complex link between the many [constituent parts] of the universe. The completion of the work entitled "Human Dissection" by the Protestant Christian, Vesalius, which, together with that of Copernicus, opened up the next stage of the modern scientific revolution, also benefited from the religious belief of the writer, who embarked on his research into the structure and functions of the human body in order to show forth the masterpiece of the great Creator, because he believed that man was the most outstanding product of God's creation.

In our own country, Daoism occupied an important position in the history of science and technology in ancient times. The goal of Daoism was to seek long life without growing old, to find the Way and so become immortal. Daoism was contemptuous of the way of nature whereby life was inevitably followed by death; it advocated a kind of fate-defying spirit, and coined a resounding saying to the effect that "one's fate is within oneself and not in the heavens". It did not believe in a pre-ordained fate or destiny, it strongly resisted nature and it pursued longevity by every possible means. It was the impetus provided by [concepts like] rebirth and regulating fate that caused Daoism to develop a whole way of preserving health whereby people remained physically fit and lived to a great age. It also gave a very big impetus to the development of human physiology and medicine in ancient times.

The Buddhist practice of fixed contemplation was one of the ancient breathing techniques and was connected with medical treatment, preserving good health, keeping physically fit and the development of true wisdom. Among the Mi people in Xizang, there was an abstruse art of polishing fine jade that was beneficial for the preservation of good health. The development of Tibetan medicine, which was

particularly efficacious, benefited from its promotion by monks. The Muslims also achieved outstanding successes in the areas of astronomical calendars and navigational skills.

The development of science and the revolutionary changes and social progress which accompanied it compelled religion to make continual adjustments in order to adapt itself to the [new] scientific and technological developments and social progress. Religion gradually came to a clearer understanding of itself, discovered its [true] status and stopped issuing orders in areas that pertained to science. So far as the gains achieved by mankind in science and technology were concerned, religions that were wise stopped adopting a negative attitude that resisted [such gains]. They sought urgently to establish a dialogue with science and, from the point of view of the tradition and moral principles of religious faith, began to put every kind of the new science and technology at the disposal of their faith.

From this it may be seen that, as far as the attitude of religious believers to scientists is concerned, there is no ideological barrier that cannot be bridged. They cannot, because of their belief in the existence of God, abandon their research into the laws that govern the movements of worldly things. On the contrary, their belief can become the driving force behind their research, and their inner motivation for carrying it out. Because, as they see it, the results of their research are simply a proof of the existence of God, a proof of the laws by which God exercises His control over the world and a proof of His magnificent truth.

In fact, even though there have been clashes between religion and science, this is a perfectly natural phenomenon, since there is no area that we can see in which clashes and struggles do not occur. If, therefore, [such things] occur in the area of political struggle and within an individual country - if there are parties outside the Party and factions within it - is it surprising that there should also be clashes and struggles between two such disparate areas as religion and science? As science and technology develop and society progresses, religion and science will co-exist over a long period of time; sometimes they will pursue dialogue with each other, occasionally they will clash - such will be the pattern for the future co-existence of the two sides. Because

religion and science have been on opposite sides in the past and may find themselves on opposite sides in the future, there is no need for us to devote a huge amount of our energy to a merciless struggle with religion.

#### **IV**

If we can emerge from the three blind alleys described above, and adopt a more magnanimous, more liberated, more expansive field of view with which to treat with and understand religion during the early stage of socialism in our country, then the problems of the position of religion within the socialist society in our country and how to give positive guidance to religion and the socialist society to adapt to each other will become easier to resolve.

Religion is something which uses a form of illusion to give hope to people in their criticism of reality and their yearning for an ideal. This is why it takes the form of a reversal, and why there are among its contents many beautiful things which deserve to receive the sympathetic understanding and respect of Communist Party members. At a time when idealism in the world is being lost sight of and utilitarianism is spreading unchecked, it is a spiritual way of life which is better able to preserve trust, virtue and idealism. If Communist Party members respect religion, it is certainly not because they are unable to abolish it but rather that there are aspects of it that deserve respect: it has existential value.

Although religion is theistic, it is certainly not necessarily in total conflict with or antagonistic towards the Marxist world view, its view on human life or its system of values. This is because religion's system of values, system of morality and ideal objectives include many things which are compatible with socialist values - for example, its call to forsake evil and do good, its opposition to aggression and exploitation, its advocacy of doing good to and loving other people, and its yearning for universal happiness. At the same time,, the phenomenon of alienation still exists in the socialist society, its economic base is one that is characterised by complex changes and its superstructure is inevitably highly pluralistic. Religion could become a constituent part of the superstructure of socialism, in the sense that, while socialist

thought and culture would play the leading role, this would be compatible with including other healthy cultures including that of religion. Atheism is something that can only be demanded of Party officials - it cannot be demanded of ordinary people. Socialism should be the most tolerant of ideologies where religion is concerned.

Apart from this, religious circles in China are imbued with the tradition of love of country and love of religion. Since the establishment of the People's Republic, religious circles have supported, and participated in an important way in the enterprise of, socialist reconstruction and, in their own special way, have made a major contribution, as was their duty, to our country's material and spiritual civilisations. We should also note, however, that if religion is used by illegal or hostile forces it can also be a factor which contributes to instability. Because of this, supporting the patriotic religious organisations, and through them mobilising and uniting the great mass of religious believers, should be our principal task in religious work. At the beginning of the new century, new unorthodox religions, which are constantly arising everywhere in the world, could have some influence on our country. As we watch the rivalry between theism and atheism, there is all the more need to keep an eye on the rivalry within the religious territory between the patriotic and the unpatriotic forces and between orthodox and unorthodox religions, which presents an even greater challenge to our country than any previous rivalry. Using the orthodox to suppress the unorthodox is our best choice.

To sum up, so long as we stop seeing religion as an opponent, or as a force different from ourselves which must be restricted and kept under control, and start treating it as a force which could be of assistance to socialists in such matters as political activities, the building up of morality, the administration of society, cultural and educational work and foreign affairs, we shall be able to bring about a fundamental ideological transformation in our attitude to religion. This transformation could have a profound influence on our religious work.

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