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CHINA: The media, popular opinion and religious freedom

By Magda Hornemann, Forum 18

The links between violations of freedom of religion or belief in China and state media policies and practices need to be analysed, Forum 18 News Service notes. It is difficult to demonstrate a causal linkage, not least due to a lack of reliable information. But the available evidence suggests a link between the state media's encouragement of popular indifference or hostility towards religious matters and the state's repression of religious freedom. Self-censorship in the Chinese media reflects the cautious attitude displayed by state officials. This makes it very difficult for people in China to obtain reliable information on and form their own opinions about religious people, groups and ideas that the state is hostile to. These include the Falun Gong spiritual movement and Shouwang Protestant Church in the capital Beijing. Reform of the media is a requirement for real and lasting improvements in Chinese religious freedom to take place.

In analysing why freedom of religion or belief is violated in China, attention has rightly mainly focused on the state's institutions, policies, and practices. One state institution that deserves more scrutiny is the media, because in Communist countries like China it has been an integral component of the state apparatus to promote atheism, among other state-supported ideas. Such sustained indoctrination has historically encouraged a lack of popular interest in - or even hostility towards - religion, religious groups and religious adherents. The state's intended result has been public support for state policies and practices hostile to religious freedom.

The connection between popular opinion on religion and religious freedom violations has not been systematically studied in relation to China. The absence of hard data makes it difficult to demonstrate a causal linkage. But evidence suggests that popular attitudes towards religion have facilitated the state's repression of religious freedom, and the Chinese media have facilitated those attitudes by maintaining its traditional function as an instrument of the state.

Popular opinion

There is little doubt that the number of religious adherents in China has risen over the past two decades. Signs of religious revival are visible across the country. This rising religiosity has accompanied greater societal modernisation, even though the Chinese state has demonstrated hostility toward religion (see eg. F18News 20 March 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1681).

Some research has shown that the state's attitudes towards religion have not been accompanied by declining religiosity. In 2007, the China Daily published the results of a two-year survey by two researchers at Shanghai's East China Normal University (ECNU). That survey suggested that there were about 300 million self-described religious people in China. This number contradicted the long-held official line that only 100 million religious believers lived in China. Other survey results have suggested that the majority of the Chinese people are quite "religious". For example, 60 per cent of the Chinese respondents to the Pew Forum's 2005 survey indicated that they believed in supernatural phenomena, supernatural beings and religious figures.

These results suggest that religion has made an important come-back in China after decades of enforced atheism. But despite the rising number of religious believers and increasing signs of religiosity, the great majority of ordinary people - as Forum 18 has noted in China - consistently express little interest in religion. Along with this, they also may profess open hostility toward religion.

Indeed, there are reasons to believe that the surveys have not captured the full picture of the religious attitudes of ordinary people. An obstacle to capturing religious attitudes is that "religiousness" has not always been defined clearly and consistently in the existing research. For example, we are not sure how the ECNU researchers defined religiousness. The Pew Forum, however, has indicated clearly that its project defined religious beliefs as beliefs in "supernatural phenomena", "religious figures" and "supernatural beings".

Another challenge is that even if rising religiosity has become an important trend, it has not led to formal religious affiliation. Even though the ECNU survey results suggested that nearly one-third of China's population are religious believers, the percentage of respondents who have indicated clear religious affiliation has remained around 15 per cent over the past decade, as the Pew Forum noted. In other words, the relationship between the "religious beliefs" of the ordinary Chinese and their sense of religious "belonging" is at best uncertain. This apparent contradiction challenges researchers to gain a fuller understanding of the religious attitudes of ordinary Chinese.

One way to get a better sense of such attitudes is to gauge the importance of religion in their life, especially in relation to other socio-political institutions. In this respect, the World Values Survey indicates that, for most ordinary Chinese, religion has not become very important. This is the case despite people's greater willingness to indicate a belief in the supernatural.

In the 2007 sample of the World Values Survey, Chinese respondents were asked about the relative importance of several social and political groupings in their lives. In the sample of nearly 1,500 respondents, over 98 per cent had identified the family as either "very important" or "rather important" in their lives, with nearly 80 per cent of the respondents indicating that family was "very important". Approximately 83 per cent of respondents identified friends as either "very important" or "rather important". Over 55 per cent of the respondents identified politics as either "very important" or "rather important". By contrast, just fewer than 22 per cent of respondents indicated that religion was either "very important" or "rather important", while nearly 50 per cent indicated that religion was "not at all important".

This is matched by the Chinese person's relatively low level of confidence in religious institutions. In the sample, over 60 per cent of respondents indicated that they had either no confidence or "not very much" confidence in "churches". In contrast, approximately 80 per cent of respondents expressed either "a great deal of" confidence or "quite a lot of" confidence in the police and another 74 per cent held similar views about trade unions, which have been heavily criticised within China for their failure to represent the interests of ordinary workers.

The survey is problematic in that it used the word "churches" as the sole name for religious institutions. Nonetheless, Christian churches are in China a common form of religious institution that has seen a dramatic rise over the last two decades. Yet the churches have not acquired greater legitimacy than two heavily criticised state institutions, suggesting that Chinese religious institutions maintain only a low level of public legitimacy.

This is puzzling, as religion is gaining popularity in contemporary China, and the state has become more flexible in its management of religion (see eg. F18News 20 March 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1681). Part of the answer to this puzzle can be found in the fact that the Chinese media has not always presented a comprehensive and unbiased picture of either religion in China or state institutions. This is not least because the state controls the media, including the internet. It also means that the Chinese media has not promoted religious freedom.

Media self-censorship

China is now in the era of post-communism, characterised by greater social pluralism, more individual choices and unprecedented consumerism. Chinese media outlets have been described as both commercialised and more pluralistic, and the media has indeed reported on a wide range of controversial subjects. Yet they have generally avoided religion-related subjects, as editors and reporters see religion as sensitive and controversial. When non-internet Chinese media do report on religion and religious freedom, reports tend to be negative.

Mainstream media outlets have also continued to serve as vehicles to propagate state policies and practices. Specialist religious publications are few, with a circulation mainly restricted to religious groups and government officials, and generally inaccessible to ordinary people. As a result, the media has fostered popular religious attitudes that are not conducive to the protection of religious freedom.

The Chinese media's self-censorship reflects the cautious attitude displayed in state documents and by state officials. 31 March this year marked the 30th anniversary of the promulgation of Document 19 of the Communist Party of China, entitled: "Basic Viewpoints and Basic Policy on Religious Issues in Our Country during the Socialist Period". Toward the end of the document, the authors wrote that writers "must adopt a cautious attitude when writing essays involving religious issues for publication in newspapers and other publications. [They] must not violate existing religious policies and harm the religious feelings of the masses who profess religious beliefs".

On 25 January, the state-sponsored Religion in China magazine published a speech by Liu Jinguang, who is the deputy principal of the Politics and Law Bureau in the State Administration for Religious Affairs. The speech was entitled "The Practice of the Chinese Mass Media in Promoting and Protecting Religious Harmony".

Liu listed four "principles" that the Chinese media should abide by when publishing religious contents:

- 1) published contents cannot violate state policies and laws, including those concerning religion;
- 2) published contents must adhere to the relevant doctrines of the various religions;
- 3) published contents must be beneficial for the unity of all religions;
- and 4) published contents must not harm the religious feelings of ethnic minorities.

These four principles track very closely what was written in Document 19.

According to Li Xianping, a professor of religion at ECNU who is well-known in China, the desire to avoid offending the Communist Party's religious sensibilities has resulted in the media adopting a practice of avoiding religious matters. When the media has reported about religion, most have supported and repeated state policies, acting in its traditional role as the state's mouthpiece.

The reporting of Liu Jinguang's speech in Religion in China was an example of this. Similar types of media coverage include reports about senior state leaders' meetings with senior Chinese and foreign religious officials, the proceedings of state-sponsored religious conferences, and the Chinese government's responses to foreign criticisms of its religious policies, such as from the US Department of State and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Other than this form of reporting, most Chinese media coverage of religion has tended to be critical without seeking to establish whether the criticism is valid. In his blog posted on 23 November 2010, Professor Li cited reporting about a recent controversy involving a former leader of the state-sponsored Daoist association, known in China as the "Li Yi phenomenon". The Daoist Li had claimed supernatural powers, including the ability to cure cancer, and the details of the controversy are (as is usual with influential figures in China) difficult to establish with a high degree of certainty. Professor Li cited the controversy as an example of how ideological pluralism can be promoted when the media become involved in religious reporting.

But the same reporting can also illustrate problems in the media. It may well be that the Daoist Li's activities and claims merit severe criticism. But even if the former Daoist leader carried out all the illicit activities he is accused of, the media in the main did not seek to establish whether or not this was the case.

As Professor Li noted, media reporting followed a line unlikely to incur the Communist Party's displeasure by promoting "scientism" and denying the value of religion, "returning to the so-called materialism and thus denying all religious beliefs" and analysing the truth in terms the Party would approve of. Indeed, much of the writing on this and similar cases has tended to be sensational in nature and involved an a priori assumption that religious figures are untrustworthy.

Through self-censorship, exercising its traditional function as the state's mouthpiece, negative reporting, and limited circulation of specialist publications, the non-internet Chinese media has promoted negative popular views about religion and religious freedom in contemporary China.

The internet

The state has adopted explicit measures to crack down on the promotion of religion and religious freedom on the Internet. In urban areas and among people under the age of 40, the internet has enjoyed rising popularity. Chinese internet users have been very active exchanging information. But the state continues to maintain a tight control over the publication of information relating to sensitive issues, including religion and religious freedom. This has long been the state's policy (see eg. F18News 21 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=366).

This has made it very difficult for people in China to obtain any information about religious people, groups and ideas that the state deems inappropriate. These include information relating to the Falun Gong spiritual movement, large-scale harassment of Shouwang Protestant Church in the capital Beijing (including arrests of leaders), and Chen Guangcheng, the blind activist-lawyer who has provided assistance to house churches and whose escape from house arrest, brief stay in the US Embassy in Beijing, and exit to the United States aroused worldwide attention. The mainstream media outside China has frequently reported on these cases - but the Chinese media, including internet media, has not.

Even when the Chinese social media has reported on these matters, readers have to go to great length to obtain the necessary information to form independent opinions. This is because of the state's Internet control mechanisms, which make it costly in terms of time and energy for readers to obtain information independent of the state media. Hence, only specific segments of the Chinese population have become aware of specific human rights and religious freedom cases. For example, Forum 18 has learned that college students have displayed strong interest in the recent case involving the blind activist Chen Guangcheng, while the majority of the population has remained unaware of the situation.

In short, the internet in China has not yet lived up to its potential as a vehicle to promote and protect religious freedom.

Media reform necessary for religious freedom improvements

Chinese communist leaders, especially Mao Zedong, have always emphasised the importance of controlling the media. In the past, the communist regime employed it as an explicit instrument of indoctrination to promote popular support for atheism. The media still performs this role, though more passively. This is seen in the absence of genuinely critical religious reporting seeking to verify all aspects of a topic, and limitations on the number of specialist religious publications and their accessibility.

Reform of the media is a requirement for real and lasting improvements in Chinese religious freedom to take place. This will be a challenge, even though some journalists and media organisations have become more willing to criticise state policies and practices and promote the rights and interests of ordinary people. Even so, an important element of the challenge is the lack of knowledge of religious matters among journalists, which reflects the historic secular tendency among Chinese intellectuals (see F18News 20 March 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1681).

Another reason is that many Chinese journalists have lacked opportunities to form and publish independent assessments about all aspects of religious communities without state pressures. Consequently, even when journalists may be aware of religious aspects of a story, they have not reported them fully and accurately either due to self-censorship or as a consequence of explicit pressures from state officials.

For example, despite widespread reporting outside China about the strong Christian commitment of Chinese-American basketball sensation Jeremy Lin, the Chinese media has not reported this. Similarly, even though many Christian groups have been involved in humanitarian relief following the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the Chinese media also has not reported this. The absence of reporting by the Chinese media of such religious aspects conveys a clear message to Chinese audiences.

Forum 18 is not aware of any concrete evidence that individual Chinese journalists have witnessed state religious freedom violations but not reported them. But as the state has a direct interest in preventing such reporting, it is safe to suggest that this has happened. In a similar case where the state has a direct interest in media coverage, Forum 18 learned that the leaders of the main Chinese TV channel China Central Television (CCTV) had halted an investigation by a CCTV news programme into flawed and dangerous buildings in Sichuan that were built before the 2008 earthquake.

In the last 30 years, the Chinese media has come a long way in its ability to act in the interests of society vis-a-vis the state. It is to be hoped that in future media coverage will facilitate the freedom of religion or belief in Chinese society. (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://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=China>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY