

25 November 2004

CHINA: "Religious distortion" and religious freedom

By Magda Hornemann, Forum 18

"Religious distortion," or religious teachings and activities differing from the mainstream, affect every aspect of Chinese religious life, Forum 18 News Service notes. The effects of religious distortion, in which the state plays the dominant role, include the uniquely Chinese phenomenon of female imams, state interference in Buddhist recognition of leaders believed to be reincarnated, state classification of some Catholic masses as "illegal" and "unorthodox," attempts to introduce radical changes in Protestant Christian doctrines and the removal of academic theologians who disagree. Not all the effects of religious distortion are thought by Chinese religious believers to be negative, but it has also encouraged the growth of groups harmful to Chinese society, such as Eastern Lightning. Increasing numbers of experts and advocates suggest that religious freedom pressure should focus on pressing the communist regime to observe its own growing body of laws and regulations, but it may be even more urgent to press the state to recognize and clarify the contradictions in its religious policy.

Recently, a Tibetan Buddhist visited Beijing's Yong He Gong Lamasery, which is reportedly the largest and most well preserved Buddhist lamasery in China today, and a major tourist attraction. The visitor later made some observations to Forum 18 News Service about the ostensibly functioning lamasery.

The visiting Buddhist remarked that the lamasery was "like a museum", with a monk sitting curator-like in each hall. It was notable that there were toilets on the territory of the lamasery, even though "this is considered defilement". On one side of the lamasery, there were six bowls filled with water in front of an image of Tsonkapa, the founder of the Buddhist school to which the monastery belongs, when there "should be seven at the very least - it shows spiritual indifference to ritual".

The visitor also observed that a mandala, an image created over many hours with coloured sand, lay carefully preserved in a glass case, while it would normally be destroyed as a symbol of impermanence: "That's the point." Curiously, tantric deities depicted in sexual union – "they symbolise the union of wisdom and practice" - were covered up with cloths, while, unlike similar monasteries, rows of low benches used by monks during rituals in the main temple had individual electric lamps, and no sign of sacred texts or instruments in constant use.

Furthermore, two thrones also stood in the main temple of the lamasery, one described as belonging to the Panchen Lama, containing a large portrait of the late tenth Panchen Lama alongside a smaller portrait of Gyaltzen Norbu, the boy claimed by the Chinese government - but disputed by the Dalai Lama - to be the eleventh incarnation. The second throne, described as belonging to the Dalai Lama, was empty.

These observations are important because they concern the degree to which "religious distortion" – defined here as religious teachings and other activities that differ from mainstream doctrines and practices – is an everyday event in China. Even more importantly, these observations raise the question of the extent to which the communist state is responsible for these distortions.

These distortions are found at all levels of Chinese society. At one level, religious distortions include the appointment, and recognition, of religious leaders that bypasses normal religious customs and practices. The case of the Tibetan Panchen Lama best illustrates this distortion. The ultimate decision to recognise the Panchen Lama, the second-ranking Tibetan Buddhist leader, is traditionally one of the powers held by the Dalai Lama, the religious and political leader of Tibet. However, as a result of state intervention, the Panchen Lama who was recognized by the Dalai Lama has been effectively under house arrest since 1995, while another boy has been appointed by the communist regime to that position (see F18News 15 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=584).

This is no surprise, given the fact that the state has maintained an active campaign to denounce the Dalai Lama for his "betrayal" of the Chinese "motherland". The Chinese state has portrayed the Dalai Lama as a "political leader engaged in separatist activities," which, according to the state, is contrary to his claim as a religious leader. According to the Chinese communist authorities, this invalidates the Dalai Lama's traditional prerogative of selecting the Panchen Lama.

Another example of religious distortions is the result of the state's insistence that the Roman Catholic Church at the Vatican cannot "interfere" in the affairs of the Chinese Catholic Church. The resulting distortions are that, firstly, the Vatican is not officially

permitted by the state to recognize Chinese bishops – although in practice, most Chinese bishops have actively sought and received "unofficial" approval by the Vatican – and, secondly, that public references to the Pope as the supreme Catholic church authority are discouraged. The regime has justified this policy by stating repeatedly that the Vatican is a foreign state and that the "Chinese people" will never permit foreign interference in their internal affairs, including religious matters. Yet, it is ironic that while the state implores the Chinese Catholics to engage in "self governance, self support, and self propagation," it has nevertheless felt necessary to interfere in the affairs of the Catholic community, including the power to appoint senior clerics and lay leaders.

Of course, religious distortions are not simply limited to issues involving the selection of religious leaders. They also concern questions over the interpretation of doctrines that are fundamental to the life of a religious community.

For example, in recent years, Bishop Ding Guangxun, the former head of the state-approved Protestant Chinese Christian Council (CCC) and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), has been actively promoting a campaign for what he describes as "theological construction," that will, in Bishop Ding's words, "weaken those aspects within Christian faith that do not conform with the socialist society." Pastors and seminary students have been "encouraged" to attend sessions that discuss his essays on this topic, which were first published in 1998. Academic theologians, such as Ji Tai, and students who challenged this agenda at the Nanjing Seminary Protestant theological college, were removed from the seminary (see the 2001 Forum 18 report at <http://www.forum18.org/Hearing20010305.html>).

As Tony Lambert, an expert on the Protestant community in China, points out, the central principles of Ding's "theological reconstruction" aim to overturn many of Christianity's central tenets – such as justification by faith, which Bishop Ding described in the April 1999 issue of the Nanjing Theological Review, the only officially permitted theological journal, as "politically reactionary and theologically incorrect." Other Protestant doctrines overturned include the reliability and inerrancy of the Bible, and the necessity of having faith in Christ as the sole path to salvation.

The attempt on the part of the state to reinterpret religious doctrines is also seen among the Islamic communities in China. According to Kahar Barat, an expert on Uighur affairs, the state-approved Islamic associations in China have recently begun to compile new interpretations of the Koran and other Islamic texts. He noted that, in September 2003, a conference on the new "interpretations" of the Koran was held in Urumqi [Urümqi] in Xinjiang in north-west China. The results of ongoing and completed doctrinal reinterpretations can be found in different parts of China. For example, female imams are a unique phenomenon that is not seen in any Islamic community outside China.

These doctrinal issues are directly related to the contents of religious teachings and the curricula for religious education.

According to some Protestant observers, sermons delivered at Protestant churches permitted by the state are not allowed to include references to the second coming of Christ and the accompanying day of judgment, which Bishop Ding describes as "a deception of the masses [and] contains no love of socialist society." In religious education, many observers have noted the fact that political indoctrination and the contents of government regulations are regular components of the curricula in state-approved institutions of religious education, particularly those in politically volatile areas such as Xinjiang and Tibet. This practice continues today. A Christian pastor who recently visited China obtained a copy of the daily academic schedule for a relatively new seminary. According to this copy, government regulations on religious affairs are required to be taught to the students on a daily basis.

These examples illustrate the extent to which state repression has directly resulted in religious distortions.

There can be no denying of the fact that state-sponsored repression has continued unabated. Some would even argue that the situation has worsened. According to Bob Fu, a former house church leader, in the first nine months of 2004, 400 arrests were made of house church leaders. Individuals have been beaten to death by public security officials for distributing Bibles and other biblical tracts. Others have been detained and arrested for printing Bibles and other religious literature. Still others, including the elderly, were imprisoned for sending children to Sunday school classes. It is not officially permitted to give any religious instruction to people under the age of 18.

In the light of these repressive conditions, it would seem that distortions are the norm, not the exception. Indeed, the state's power to determine religious orthodoxy has especially contributed to religious distortions. As Ji Wenyuan, a vice-director of the Religious Affairs Bureau in Beijing, stated at an international conference on religion and law held at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in October 2004: "A religion must be accepted not only by its own congregation, which follows its teachings, but also by non-believers who can live with it".

Religious organisations that either cannot or are unwilling to obtain government approval are automatically deemed illegal. Once an organisation has been classified as illegal, all its activities are automatically considered to be illegal and subversive. As Joseph Kung, an advocate of the underground Catholic community in China, stated, activities such as celebrating the mass and prayers for the dying – which are orthodox Catholic practices – immediately become illegal and unorthodox if they are undertaken by a priest who has not been permitted by the state to perform these activities.

Similarly, the government ensures that government approval precedes the carrying out of normal religious rites. For example, as

indicated in an earlier Forum 18 article about Xinjiang, the state strictly prohibits married Muslim couples from receiving religious rites before obtaining state marriage certificates (see F18News 28 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=421).

Through these repressive measures, the regime creates an atmosphere that indirectly promotes religious distortions. For example, according to Ngawang Sangdrol, one of the famous 14 Tibetan Buddhist "Singing Nuns," Chinese officials have said that there is no formal ban on displaying photographs of the Dalai Lama in the homes of Tibetan people, but government policy and practice have effectively banned such displays. This permits Chinese officials to claim that the absence of such displays in Tibetan homes is the result of voluntary decisions, and not an outcome of coercive state policies.

The 14 "Singing Nuns" acquired this nickname in 1993 when, whilst in jail, they smuggled out tape recorded songs of love and devotion to Tibet. For this offence of "spreading counter-revolutionary propaganda," they had their prison terms doubled or tripled.

The state's repressive policy has also led to the isolation of Chinese religious communities from religious communities outside China. This state-induced isolation has itself also been responsible for many religious distortions. Many observers have noted that, in regulating the extent and the nature of contact between Chinese religious communities and believers and their foreign counterparts, state policy has encouraged the growth of unorthodox practices. An example of this is the Chinese phenomenon of female imams, mentioned earlier.

Isolation has also effectively contributed to the growth of "cults" and "sects" that are not only unorthodox in their doctrines, but also have harmful effects on Chinese society. Protestant Christian observers inside and outside China have lamented that the lack of regular contact with foreign Protestant groups has contributed to the formation of groups like Eastern Lightning (Dongfang Shandian). These groups not only spread teachings contrary to widely-accepted Christian doctrines, but they also engage in criminal activities such as kidnapping.

However, it is also interesting to note that isolation may not only have negative implications for the growth of religion in China. For example, with regard to the phenomenon of female imams, the outcome of the isolation may actually mean that traditional practices are observed. Dr. Khaled Abou el Fadl, a prominent Islamic legal scholar, has noted that the Hui Muslim community in China, by permitting the employment of female imams, is actually more faithful to Islam's long tradition of female legal scholars than Muslim communities outside China.

In addition, isolation may be welcomed by local religious leaders precisely for doctrinal reasons. Despite the concern shared among house church leaders about the negative effects of isolationism, many have also welcomed the isolation because it meant that Chinese Christians would not be susceptible to the negative influences of cosmopolitanism and consumerism that are perceived to be plaguing the churches in Western societies. In fact, many observers have noted that many Chinese house churches are even more fundamentally conservative in their doctrines than the most conservative churches in North America.

Moreover, it is easy to forget that some Chinese religious communities have long histories of independence from non-Chinese communities that pre-date communist rule. The most prominent example is the "Three-Self" movement of Protestant Christianity in China. The original concept of "Three Self", which stands for "self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating," was introduced in 1851 by Henry Venn, founder of the Church Missionary Society. The idea was that indigenous churches must be self-reliant and not depend on missionary-sending churches and groups for financial and administrative support. Of course, as is well known, this concept was later expropriated by the communist regime for its own political purposes.

Furthermore, it is important to point out that many religious communities in China are not just passive recipients of state directives. For example, despite the state policy that religious education is prohibited for children under 18 years of age, Uighur Muslims continue to establish private religious schools that train minors. Similarly, underground Protestant house churches conduct secret private worship services and religious education courses. In many cases, pastors from state-approved churches provide clandestine support to these house churches for the conduct of these activities.

Notwithstanding the above illustrations of state interference, the state may not be guilty of all the religious distortions. To be fair, other factors must be taken into account. For example, religious distortions may be attributed to broad socio-economic trends, such as commercialization and consumerism.

On this note, one may point out that the descriptions of the lamasery in Beijing by the Buddhist observer can also be applied to numerous Buddhist temples and monasteries around the world, even those in free societies. Putting aside for a moment the issue about the unorthodox nature of the displays in the Beijing lamasery, the presence of toilets on the grounds of the lamasery, while understandably offensive to devout Buddhists, is quite practical for economic reasons, particularly since the lamasery in question is a major tourist spot. The fact is that the existence of a large number of Buddhist institutions in China and around the world depends on the financial income generated by tourism, and the decision to establish such facilities might easily have been made by the religious leaders in that lamasery. Of course, in this particular example of the lamasery in Beijing, it is more likely that the decision was made by the government, probably through the relevant state-approved religious organisation.

Another factor is that individuals, independent of the state, have made decisions that result in religious distortions. This should be of no great surprise, even in a society that is ruled by an authoritarian regime. After all, China is no longer a totalitarian state in practice if not in rhetoric. And notwithstanding the state's continued desire to maintain control over all aspects of society, it simply does not have the resources to fulfil this desire.

As Jason Kindopp, an expert on the Protestant Christian communities in China, observed: "Political authorities in most locales ... lack the resources and or willingness to mould individual congregation....They may still manipulate the selection of lianghui [CCC and TSPM] representatives and limit the church's engagement with broader society, but authorities in most urban and rural areas make little effort to penetrate individual congregations...." The sheer size of the country and the fact that the central government continues to face difficulties in ensuring that the provincial and local authorities act in accordance with central directives, means that individuals and groups can easily fly under the state's radar screen.

The emergence of Eastern Lightning (Dongfang Shandian), which is viewed by both the underground house churches and the government as a "cult," illustrates this point. Ironically, the case has in fact resulted in cooperation between the affected house church groups and local police in tracking down the Eastern Lightning. Even the Falun Gong, with a set of doctrines that is a unique blend of Buddhist, Taoist, and modern scientific principles, can be analyzed from this perspective. In fact, it offers an even more interesting case because Li Hongzhi, the founder of the group, received state approval and support prior to his fallout with the communist regime.

Despite these examples, no one should deny the dominant role of the state in causing religious distortions in China. Ultimately, as the most powerful player in society, the state has determined the range of choices, if not the choices themselves, that are available to religious communities when it comes to religious practices and doctrines. Given this fact, what must be done to reduce the role of the state in making substantive choices on religious matters?

Many outside observers have advocated that the state permit increased contact between religious communities in China and their foreign co-religionists. This approach has so far met with mixed results. The most significant reason is that the communist state remains suspicious of foreign religious influences in China. Thus far, contacts, at least those that have been officially approved, have been limited to visits by major foreign religious figures, including the Rev. Billy Graham, and other activities that in the main resemble social services. Some foreign religious groups have openly supported state-approved religious communities in activities such as the building of religious venues, and foreign clerics have even been invited as teachers. However, given the post-11 September 2001 world, it is unlikely that such contacts would gain the state's blanket approval, particularly in the case of contacts between Muslims in China and their co-religionists in the Arab world.

Given the fact that the state remains the chief obstacle to religious freedom, and therefore the chief source of religious distortions, and the difficulties of persuading the Chinese government to conform to international human rights standards, an increasing number of foreign experts and advocates are suggesting that foreign governments and groups should focus on pressing the communist regime to observe its own growing body of laws and regulations.

These individuals have noted that, in recent years, the Chinese government has promulgated laws and regulations on religious affairs that, while falling somewhat short of international standards, are nevertheless in general compliance with internationally accepted norms. As Pitman Potter, a scholar on Chinese legal affairs, has pointed out, whilst it may be difficult to get the Chinese government to establish laws that are in complete conformity with internationally accepted notions of religious freedom, the next best thing is to invite the Chinese communist state to "take its own legal system seriously."

However, as is widely reported, Chinese officials have displayed a tendency to make their practices contradict their rhetoric. For example, as mentioned earlier, while Chinese officials have told foreign government officials that there is no prohibition against religious education for minors, written documents and actual practices suggest otherwise.

More recently, at the above mentioned October 2004 international conference on religion and law, one religious affairs official noted that the government was revising its religious policy with the aims of curbing state arbitrariness and allowing greater autonomy for religious communities. Yet, at the same conference, another religious affairs official essentially stated that the state would never relinquish its control over religious matters. In the light of these contradictory attitudes amongst officials, whilst it is important to encourage the Chinese government to observe its own rules and regulations, it may be even more urgent to press the state to recognise and clarify the contradictions it displays. (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's surveys of: the prospects for religious freedom in China at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=292 ; the blocking of religious websites at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=366 ; the Chinese legal system and religious freedom at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=309 ; and public security system control of religious affairs at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=422 .

For religious freedom in Xinjiang see Forum 18's religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=414.

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

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY