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CHINA: "Religious Communists" and religious freedom

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Numbers of religious believers in China are, recent surveys indicate, much greater than previously thought, and a growing percentage of these believers are also Communist Party members, Forum 18 News Service notes. Many Chinese citizens Forum 18 has spoken to – including "religious Communists" - see Party membership just as a matter of gaining material advantages, and religious belief as a "private" matter. This "privatisation" is encouraged by the state's attempts to stop religious communities becoming a force that can challenge the party-state. Yet freedom to believe is only one part of religious freedom; the freedom to practice religion is also vital. "Privatised" religious belief, operating within state-prescribed legal and administrative boundaries, is highly unlikely to produce the two things the state ostensibly most wants from religious communities - contributions to social welfare reforms and social progress. If China had true religious freedom, religious communities would be able to organise themselves independently, and more able to help with social welfare - and China would definitely be on the path to democracy.

Membership of the Chinese Communist Party and religious commitment are sometimes assumed to be mutually exclusive. But this is not what many Chinese people think, as the influence of Communist ideology on society declines and the number of religious believers rises. This raises important questions for religious freedom in China.

On 1 January 2007, as reported by the China Aid Association, officials of the Public Security Bureau (PSB) secret police raided a Protestant meeting in Hebei Province's Baoding City. At first glance this appeared to be just another sad incident of state repression against religious believers. However, this meeting was unique in important respects. First, it was held in the local Communist Party school, a training ground for party cadres. Second, the meeting was hosted by the school's vice president, who presumably is a member of the Chinese Communist Party.

This incident could be seen as an example of Communist atheism's continuing slide towards "endangered species" status. However, this assessment may overemphasise the power of religion vis-a-vis Communism and not pay sufficient attention to the practicalities of being a Communist and being a religious believer.

In China today, a growing number of people possess the political identity of Communist Party member and the spiritual identity of religious believer. Reports say that at least one-third of the 60-70 million Communist Party members belong to a religious organisation. According to AsiaNews, the records of the Communist Party's Disciplinary Commission indicate that 12 million party cadres in urban areas are involved in religious activities, 5 million of them on a regular basis. At the same time, 8 million party cadres in rural areas are involved in religious activities and 4 million of them are regular religious participants.

This trend appears to be consistent across age groups. In 2003, a team of Communist Party officials at the Beijing Normal University surveyed approximately 3,000 undergraduate and graduate students in 10 universities in the Beijing metropolitan area. The author of the published report, who at the time of publication was an associate professor at the Beijing Normal University, claimed that the sample was highly representative of the situation around the country. The results of this survey were published in the 20 September 2004 issue of "Theoretical Movement" (Lilun dongtai), a publication of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Party School in Beijing.

The published results showed that Communist Party members constituted 35 percent of the religious believers in the sample. So in 2002 as many as 4,000 to 5,000 university students in the Beijing area may have been both Communist Party members and religious believers. Nationwide, according to the author's calculation, as many as tens of thousands of university students might have been both Communist Party members and religious believers.

Despite the finding that party members constitute 35 percent of religious believers, the survey team found that less than 8 percent of the party members in the sample were religious believers. Given what we know about the proportion of religious believers among party members, the results from this survey might have underestimated the extent of religiosity among university students who are party members.

In a recent essay, Professor Li Xiangping, a prominent Chinese religious scholar, also noted the rising number of religious believers who are already Communist Party members or are seeking membership. According to Professor Li, many of these "religious

Communists" are among the elites in society, achieving great success as businesspeople or philanthropists, or in other vocational areas. Their success has earned them the esteem of government officials. For Chinese officialdom today, such success also translates into political legitimacy. (For the link between religious entrepreneurs and religious freedom, see F18News 16 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=831.)

For religious believers who have achieved economic and social success, joining the Communist Party is made easier by the fact that - unlike in the Maoist period - they are not required to "repent" of their religious beliefs to become party members.

But the most interesting part of Li's essay is how religious Communists reconcile the apparent conflict between membership in an atheistic political organisation and personal beliefs in supernatural reality. According to Li, those individuals seem genuinely untroubled by the apparent contradiction, arguing that party membership is their "public" persona while religious beliefs are their "individual" concern. The two are not seen to conflict. Under pressure, they tend to give priority to political allegiance while maintaining their relatively low profile "individual" beliefs.

This illuminates the perceptions of individual Communists on what the limits of religious freedom in China are. Communist Party membership is seen not as an ideological decision but as a source of practical advantages. In a recent edition of the "Far Eastern Economic Review", Leslie Hook also noted this attitude among Chinese university students who are both religious believers and party members. "I have to live in China, and I want to achieve a good position in life, so it's best to be a Party member," she quoted one Peking University medical student as declaring. "The purpose that God has chosen for me is to alleviate the suffering of others and to heal them, so becoming a party member is a step on this path." However, Hook noted, the student was also careful not to publicise her religiosity for fear that her instructor might find out.

Other religious believers Forum 18 has spoken to make a similarly practical argument, by noting that since "capitalists" (by which they mean private business owners) are now accepted by the Communist Party, no reason remains to exclude religious believers from the party.

Some elements of the party-state have actively promoted the idea that religious believers are not the Communist regime's natural opponents. Some senior government officials have argued that religious believers can contribute positively to the building of the socialist state. In particular, they claim, in a socialist country ruled by workers, the feudal and "anti-revolutionary" aspects of religious institutions have generally been removed. Under the proper guidance of the socialist government, religions and religious believers can be expected to play a positive role in building socialism. So argued the deputy directors of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) in the 30 May 2003 issue of "Theoretical Movement". More recently, "The Economist" reported on an October 2006 Communist Party Central Committee document which applauded the positive role religion could play in ensuring social stability. It seems clear that, at least on paper, the view is growing within the Communist Party that religious beliefs and Communism are not necessarily incompatible.

The state can gain practical benefits by encouraging religion-party co-operation, and this is most obvious in rural areas of China where religious institutions have deep local roots and the capacity to mobilise residents to provide necessary social services. This helps maintain social - and so political - stability. Such provision of social services is an increasingly urgent need in China (see F18News 16 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=831). Lily Tsai, a political scientist, has found a strong connection between the level of public services provision and the strength of local religious institutions in rural China. She argued that there is a link between good public services - like well-maintained roads - and strong local religious and clan institutions.

The "Economist" report echoed this finding, noting that in many villages the most powerful persons are often local temple chiefs and in other villages, the local temple chiefs also serve as the village party chiefs.

But these positive views about the relationship between communism and religion are not universally held within the party-state. The author of the published results of the university student survey, for example, attributed the high percentage of party members who are also religious believers to the weakening of ideological indoctrination in Chinese universities. The author clearly believed that the rising number of "religious Communists" is an alarming trend that must be stopped. Despite challenges to this view within the Party, this view remains dominant. (For the party-state's general hostility toward religion, see F18News 8 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=740 and F18News 5 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=883).

As Professor Li's article and the "religious Communists" Forum 18 and others have spoken to indicate, religious belief is increasingly seen as a private matter for individuals, and not necessarily in conflict with political interests. This idea is not new. Scholars such as C.K. Yang in his 1961 book Religion in Chinese Society have noted that religion has traditionally been a private affair in China.

The Chinese government has actively encouraged this "privatisation" of religion. Since it cannot dismantle religion, it has tried to find ways to prevent it becoming a collective force that can challenge the party-state (see F18News 5 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=883). As is well documented, it does so by controlling the key religious organisations and religious venues while advocating the protection of the individual's right to religious "belief". Yet the freedom of

belief constitutes only one part of religious freedom, however vital; the freedom to practice religion in all kinds of ways is the other. The party-state has tried to ensure that religious practice remains private and individual-oriented, so individual Falun Gong practitioners can practice their beliefs in their homes – but not in a way that attracts public attention.

One troubling aspect of the state's attempt to "privatise" religion is that religious believers are deprived of the ability to organise themselves publicly to press the state to truly protect the right to religious freedom. Without the ability to engage in genuinely independent collective action, religious believers are forced to hope that the government will limit its own actions. This has not proved effective as a safeguard against the government's actions, as it retains – and uses - the arbitrary power to handle religious affairs as it alone sees fit, without accountability to Chinese citizens (see F18News 11 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=840).

The other cause for concern with the notion of privatising religion is the implication that religion will become "de-socialised" and "de-politicised". This is the argument made by prominent Chinese scholars like Professor Li Xiangping. Professor Li argued in his essay that the ultimate policy goal should be the establishment of de-politicised religion operating within state-prescribed legal and administrative boundaries. Although Professor Li undoubtedly made this argument in part to suggest that religious communities are not inevitably the Communist Party's natural political nemesis, it is hard to imagine under-socialised and de-politicised religion making positive contributions to social welfare reforms and social progress. And these are the two things which the state ostensibly wants most from religious communities.

Religious communities have – as indicated above – been an effective vehicle to provide local-level public services, but this "public" aspect of religion has mainly been confined to local and non-political matters. Religious communities, especially since the crackdown on the Falun Gong movement, have mainly remained silent on sensitive political issues such as the protection and expansion of religious freedom (see eg. F18News 5 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=883 and 8 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=740). This is despite the sporadic legal challenges mounted by individual activists (see F18News 24 August 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=636).

At least one survey on religious adherence has been conducted since the 2003 survey by Communist Party officials at the Beijing Normal University. The state-run "China Daily" has recently reported on the results of China's "first major survey on religious beliefs". Two researchers at the Shanghai-based East China Normal University conducted a poll in 2005–6 of 4,500 people over the age of 15. They found that over 30 percent of the sampled individuals described themselves as religious, which they claim suggest that 300 million Chinese are now religious. If true, this represents a three-fold increase from the current official figures. One interesting finding, according to the researchers, is that contrary to official party-state rhetoric, rising religiosity is not the result of poverty. Another interesting finding is that nearly 30 percent of the polled individuals emphasised the practical benefits of religious belief: religion, the researchers were told, "helps cure illness, avoid disasters and ensure that life is smooth".

The attitudes expressed by this significant percentage of polled religious believers – of concentrating on practical benefits for individuals – echo the focus among "religious Communists" on the practical benefits for them personally of Communist Party membership.

It would be hard to argue that the rising number of religious believers across China will never affect government policies. However, it would be wise not to assume that greater numbers of religious believers automatically lead to changes in government policy on religious freedom. One (or three) hundred million "individual" religious believers, unwilling to engage in direct dialogue and negotiation with – let alone to confront - the government, are not in themselves a collective force for positive political change for all of China's citizens. Lest we forget, nearly 10 years ago Falun Gong practitioners who were Communist Party officials did not call for religious freedom; they merely wanted the government to recognise Falun Gong's legitimacy.

Are Communism and religion compatible? As long as religion continues to be restricted – and therefore genuine religious freedom remains incomplete – the answer appears to be No. Can the two be reconciled to promote genuine religious freedom? Perhaps, but that would require the state to change its authoritarian policies to allow religious communities the freedom to organise themselves independently and engage with the state directly. Were this to happen, China would definitely be on the path to democracy. (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://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=china>

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