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CHINA: Will fashion for Confucius retard religious freedom?

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After trying for decades to destroy Confucianism, the Communist party-state has now "endorsed" Confucian ideas and drawn on them in political slogans, Forum 18 News Service notes. It is also trying to promote a positive image of China through Confucius Institutes in foreign universities. But the selective adoption of Confucian ideas – for example to bolster nationalism - may delay genuine religious freedom for all. This use of Confucianism as a political instrument will have negative effects on the freedom of followers of "new" religions, like Christianity, and of religions identified with political separatism, such as Uighur Islam and Tibetan Buddhism. Chinese state endorsement and control has already produced a distortion of some religious communities' core beliefs and followers of Confucianism face the same threat. The state's priorities remain upholding its political position and ensuring societal quiescence, so it is wise to be cautious in evaluating Confucianism's apparent comeback.

In recent years, Confucianism has been making a steady comeback in China. After decades of effort to destroy the ideology and its institutions, even the Communist party-state has "endorsed" Confucian ideas and drawn on them in its political slogans. Chinese people also seem to have a growing interest in applying Confucius' teachings to resolve social problems.

Not only have the political and social aspects of Confucianism been resurrected, some have also called for Confucianism to become an established religion that would rival non-Chinese religions, notably Christianity. Although a fully-fledged return of Confucianism as the state religion is unlikely, the state could adopt aspects of Confucian doctrine. This could slow the emergence of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in China.

In December 2006, a few days before Christians celebrated Christmas, an open letter from ten doctoral students in China's top universities posted on the internet caught the world media's attention. The students criticised many Chinese for celebrating Christmas without understanding its Christian roots. They urged non-Christian Chinese not to participate in Christmas activities like exchanging gifts and Christmas cards.

More significantly, the writers argued that the popularity of Christmas was a symptom of the increasing dominance of Western culture in China. They blamed the Chinese government's policy of economic reform for bringing this about and urged the government to regulate Christmas activities in public venues and forums. Furthermore, they urged the Chinese people to focus on traditional "Chinese" beliefs like Buddhism and Daoism. Even more specifically, they called for the revitalisation of Confucianism.

The students' letter was not an isolated incident and their interest in Confucianism was not without recent precedent. Confucianism has been a subject of interest among Chinese intellectuals (zhishi fenzi) for some time. Worried about what they see as the harm that the introduction of a market economy has had on China's political and social landscape, and the bankruptcy of Communist ideology, these intellectuals have been looking again at how useful Confucianism might be for promoting political and social growth and order.

Spurring this renewed interest in Confucianism is the growing sense among Chinese intellectuals that liberal democracy will not resolve China's problems. Professor Kang Xiaoguang of the People's University in Beijing, arguably the leading proponent of Confucianism in China, wrote in 2006 that Western democracy "is useless because it will not necessarily resolve the problem of political corruption, nor break the collusion between the officials and private businessmen, nor protect the interests of the masses, nor prevent the elite from plundering".

Likewise, Confucius' moral teachings are increasingly seen as a means toward improving human behaviour in a society filled with greed and selfishness. China's best-selling book today is one written by a Beijing Normal University professor on Confucius' "Analects", the main record of his actions and thoughts. Professor Yu Duan's "Notes on reading the Analects" has reportedly sold over three million copies in just four months.

Meanwhile, the government has joined the act. The political slogans of promoting a "Harmonious Society" (hexie shehui) and a "Well-Off Society" (xiaokang shehui) reflect Confucian doctrines. Confucian teachings have also made their way into the Chinese education curriculum, from kindergartens to graduate schools. In addition, the government has been actively promoting Confucianism overseas. It has established the "Confucius Institute" to promote the learning of the Chinese language and culture

around the world. According to the government, close to 100 such institutes have been established overseas in partnership with foreign universities.

Confucianism has also been making a comeback in the religious field. Earlier in 2006, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported that a group of Confucianists in Hong Kong were leading a campaign to seek Chinese government approval for Confucianism to become one of the major religions, joining the ranks of Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism. At present, these are the only five religions allowed to function in China (see F18News 5 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=883). Professor Kang has gone further, arguing that Confucianism should be made the state religion.

Although disagreement persists on whether Confucianism can be defined as a religion, it is clear that the original Confucian doctrines involve the worship of "heaven" (tian) and one's ancestors. One of the central duties of the Chinese emperor was to serve as China's "national priest," who conducted sacrifices to heaven. A department overseeing sacrificial ceremonies was at the top of every Chinese imperial bureaucracy.

Yet Confucianism is not practised in the same way other religions are practised. A true follower of Confucius would not worship him as a deity; a Confucius temple would not have incense burning constantly as if Confucius were able to extend spiritual support to his followers. Today, if Confucius is worshipped at all in the spiritual sense, it is conducted by ordinary people, who treat it like folk religion in the same manner as many Chinese would regard deceased generals and kings in China's past to be possessors of supernatural capabilities.

It should not be forgotten that in addition to his moral principles and the religious aspects of his ideas, Confucius' teachings are political in nature. As Professor Kang wrote, "Confucian orthodoxy is a political philosophy that elaborates on a set of basic principles for political practice."

Indeed, although Confucius was not agnostic, still less an atheist, he was primarily interested in earthly affairs. He was concerned that a focus on the supernatural would distract human beings from concentrating on establishing and maintaining proper political and social order in the here and now. According to the late Julia Ching, one of the most prominent scholars of Chinese religions, throughout history this "secular" aspect of Confucianism has led to close political ties between the state and Confucianism.

How should this recent interest in Confucianism be interpreted? On the one hand, many might welcome the growing interest in something other than Communism. The fact that society craves values and principles that can guide individuals' lives and their relations with others once again points up Communism's failure as an ideology that emphasises material interests. Even amongst Communist Party members, growing numbers have the political identity of a Party member and the spiritual identity of a religious believer (see F18News 13 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=910). Clearly, human beings are not just driven by the pursuit of material wealth; they also want a moral framework for their lives.

On the other hand, the selective adoption of Confucian principles by the Communist state means that genuine religious freedom in China is unlikely to be achieved in the near future. Although other religions have been politically repressed in China's history in the name of Confucianism, the teachings of Confucius are not inherently antagonistic to religion. The real challenge to religious freedom lies in how Chinese rulers interpret the Confucian doctrines and how Confucianism is used as a political instrument. This observation has important implications for religious freedom in China in the near future.

As demonstrated in the existing political slogans and educational programs, the Communist party-state is not interested in the spiritual aspect of Confucian doctrines. Confucianism is valued by the government first for its promotion of political and social order, and second for its moral teachings. Likewise, the contents of the popular writings on Confucianism suggest that the educated Chinese population is more interested in the philosophy's moral and ethical aspects than its spiritual component. In this context, it is safe to say that Confucianism is unlikely to become a state-approved religion, let alone the state religion.

Along with Chinese scholars' historically strong association with Confucianism, there is also a tremendous interest amongst Chinese intellectuals in religions generally and religious communities in China specifically (see F18News 2 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=821).

Not only is Confucianism unlikely to become a state-approved religion, but it is even more unlikely that the party-state newly-infused with Confucian ideas – however selectively chosen - will end the current five-faith monopoly and grant official recognition to "new" religions and religious communities. Thus, even faiths that have long been present on Chinese soil and are hanging on among isolated minorities, such as Russian Orthodoxy or Judaism, are unlikely to be given full legal status and permission to function (see F18News 5 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=883).

It also means that as the country opens up to the world and Chinese people have greater contact with members of faiths not historically present in China – including Baha'is, Hindus, Sikhs, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons – such religions are unlikely to be allowed to function freely. Foreigners living in China who are members of religions outside the recognised five are likely to continue to be subject to religious apartheid, where they can meet privately for worship provided no local people take part (see

F18News 5 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=883).

On a broader scale, the state's adoption of Confucianism's "secular" teachings means that religions and religious communities in China should not expect improvements in the government's religious attitude, policies and practices.

Furthermore, as can be gleaned from various state announcements and Chinese media reports during recent years, the Communist state's emphasis on political and social order means that the state-approved "patriotic" religious organisations are expected to continue, if not increase, their responsibility to exert control over other religious groups.

At the same time, religious groups that are considered troublemakers and the causes, either real or perceived, of political and social disorder will in all likelihood remain victims of state repression. One should expect that groups like the unregistered Protestant and Catholic churches, the members of the Uighur Muslim community, and the Tibetan Buddhists, will continue to be subjected to heavy control, monitoring and repression by the state apparatus. The wish to control is a major factor in the party-state's approach to China's Catholics and diplomatic relationships with the Vatican (see F18News 12 April 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=942).

Furthermore, as indicated, evidence suggests that Confucian values will be employed to bolster an increasingly nationalistic China. This was attempted by Yuan Shikai soon after the republican revolution of 1911 and by Chiang Kaishek in the 1930s and 40s. Indeed, the identification of Confucianism with Chinese nationalism is supported by scholars like Professor Kang. The attitude of Confucian nationalism may have more negative effects on "new" foreign religions, like Christianity, and religions that are identified with political separatism, such as Uighur Islam and Tibetan Buddhism.

Uighur Islam (see F18News 23 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=834) and Tibetan Buddhism, have, along with Christianity, long been the focus of state attempts to control their leaderships (see F18News 15 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=584)

In specific terms, the state may continue to find it useful to promote "indigenous" religions like Buddhism and Daoism. It can do so by supplying funds to these religious groups, building temples and staging fake ceremonies. Although Confucianism will not be promoted as a state religion, as demonstrated by the export of Confucius Institutes, it will be seen as an important aspect of Chinese nationalism. In this sense, the state is likely to support activities such as the holding of rituals at Confucius' birthplace and offering sacrifices to the mythical founder of Chinese civilisation, the Yellow Emperor. The primary goals of these measures are to gain foreign currency from tourists, entertain the masses and promote a nationalist sense of Chineseness.

Nonetheless, even with respect to Christianity (whether in Catholic or Protestant form), it is not clear how much it will be harmed by Confucian nationalism. For one thing, through conversations with Chinese scholars, Forum 18 notes that not all Chinese intellectuals and government officials agree that Confucianism should be deemed the "national" religion (see F18News 2 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=821). In addition, short of direct state intervention, it is hard to imagine how a renewed interest in Confucianism among some segments of the population will be able to stem a rise in China of Christian influences. But even as the state engages in the "positive" promotion of "indigenous" religions, the Chinese state is unlikely to engage in further "negative" intervention in religions - except for the political reasons discussed above.

Yet, a positive state endorsement is not always a good thing. Even for those faiths that a Confucian-inspired party-state would not find threatening - such as Daoism or, at least among ethnic Han Chinese, Buddhism and Islam - its positive promotion of such religions may result in the distortion of those religions' fundamental tenets and organisational goals (see F18News 25 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=462). The state will do whatever it takes to ensure that the twin goals of upholding its political position and ensuring societal quiescence are achieved, even at the cost of damaging the religions and the religious groups that it "supports".

For Confucianism, the state's selective endorsement means that its spiritual aspect will be heavily downplayed, in essence depriving all of a complete understanding of the Confucian doctrines' richness and complexity. For this and the other reasons outlined here, it would be wise to be very cautious in evaluating the "resurrection" of Confucianism in China today. (END)

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

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

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

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