

20 *The Chinese Communist Party's View on Religion (1982)*

Introduction by Hubert Seiwert

Introduction

The text reproduced below in excerpt was officially disseminated by the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee on 31 March 1982. It elucidates the party's view of religion and the principles of its religious policy. The preparation of the document took place in the early phase of the 'reform and opening up' policy that initiated a profound transformation of the Chinese economy, following the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Within this historical context, the CCP embarked on an ideological reassessment of religion, to include religious adherents in building a modern socialist society.

The ideological foundation of this directive is Marxism and Mao Zedong Thought (*Mao Zedong sixiang* 毛泽东思想). Within this ideological framework, religion occupies a secondary role. It is contextualised within the theory of economic and political oppositions, which manifest in class conflicts, and in conflicts between socialist and feudalist or capitalist social orders. In line with Marxist theory, the CCP posits that the realisation of socialism and communism will eradicate the social causes of religious belief, and religion will disappear. On the other hand, the party did not ignore the fact that, in contemporary China, religions continued to be part of the lives of large parts of the population, especially among ethnic minorities.

The "religious question" (*zongjiao wenti* 宗教问题) is the question of the party's correct policy regarding religion within the present socialist society. To elucidate this matter, the document draws upon experiences dating back to the inception of the People's Republic. On the one hand, the party has achieved the severance of various religious organisations from counter-revolutionary and imperialist forces; on the other hand, there have been leftist errors, wherein attempts were made to suppress religion by force. The prescribed approach for addressing the religious question involves fostering a patriotic coalition among all segments of the populace, encompassing diverse ethnic and religious groups. A prerequisite for this alliance is the guaranteeing of religious freedom. Only by affording religious freedom can the party unite the entire population, comprising both religious believers and non-believers, to construct a modern socialist state.

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However, religious freedom should not be misconstrued as religious organisations being exempt from state regulation. They are subservient to the party and the state apparatus. Religious personnel must be indoctrinated to support the party's leadership and the socialist system. Like other mass organisations, religious organisations are subject to the party's oversight, and do not constitute an autonomous domain within the socialist society.

The solution to the "religious question" thus involves the integration of religious adherents into the fabric of socialist society, and the commitment of religious organisations to recognise the political and ideological leadership of the Communist Party. This policy is not devoid of inherent contradictions. While the imperative of religious freedom of all citizens is emphasised, the document simultaneously underscores that this freedom does not extend to party members. It is asserted that a fundamental dichotomy exists between Marxist ideology and religious faith, between atheism and theism. Consequently, one cannot simultaneously embrace Marxism and theism. All educational institutions, including those responsible for training religious professionals, are mandated to propagate the party's ideology; this implies the state endorsement of atheism. This, however, contradicts the directive to abstain from anti-religious propaganda in implementing religious freedom.

The document articulates the tension between the exigencies of pragmatic politics and adherence to ideological tenets. The overarching political objective of economic development and modernisation necessitates including the multitude of religious adherents and religious organisations within the socialist society. As a societal phenomenon, religion is acknowledged and harnessed for the advancement of socialist endeavours. On the other hand, the document accentuates the fundamental incongruence between religious belief and the Marxist worldview. At the ideological level, religion and socialism are deemed incompatible; yet, in practice, religion constitutes an integral component of the socialist society. The authors of the text are convinced that this tension between ideology and practice will only be eliminated in the distant future, when all citizens can adopt a scientific viewpoint, and no longer need recourse to an illusory world of gods to seek spiritual solace.

This extensive document is presented here in selected excerpts, as translated by Janice Wickeri, with minimal alterations.

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The text can be found online here:

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The translation adopted here can be found in:

Janice Wickeri, trans. “Fully Implement the Policy of Religious Freedom.” In *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice*, edited by Donald E. MacInnis, 10–26. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.

The translator’s subheadings, absent in the Chinese original, have been retained.

Translation Adopted from Janice Wickeri

The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country’s Socialist Period

I. Religion as a Historical Phenomenon

Religion is a historical phenomenon pertaining to a definite period in the development of human society. It has its own cycle of emergence, development, and demise. Religious faith and religious sentiment, along with religious ceremonies and organizations consonant with this faith and sentiment, are all products of the history of society. The earliest emergence of the religious mentality reflected the low level of production and the sense of awe toward natural phenomena of primitive peoples. With the evolution of class society, the most profound social roots of the existence and development of religion lay in the following factors: the helplessness of the people in the face of the blind forces alienating and controlling them in this kind of society; the fear and despair of the workers in the face of the enormous misery generated by the oppressive social system; and in the need of the oppressor classes to use religion as an opiate and as an important and vital means in its control of the masses. In Socialist society, the class root of the existence of

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religion was virtually lost following the elimination of the oppressive system and its oppressor class. However, because the people's consciousness lags behind social realities, old thinking and habits cannot be thoroughly wiped out in a short period. A long process of struggle is required to achieve great increases in production strength, great abundance in material wealth, and a high level of Socialist democracy, along with high levels of development in education, culture, science, and technology. Since we cannot free ourselves from various hardships brought on by serious natural and man-made disasters within a short period of time; since class struggle continues to exist within certain limits; and given the complex international environment, the long-term influence of religion among a part of the people in a Socialist society cannot be avoided. Religion will eventually disappear from human history. But it will disappear naturally only through the long-term development of Socialism and Communism, when all objective requirements are met. All Party members must have a sober-minded recognition of the protracted nature of the religious question under Socialist conditions. Those who think that with the establishment of the Socialist system and with a certain degree of economic and cultural progress, religion will die out within a short period, are not being realistic. Those who expect to rely on administrative decrees or other coercive measures to wipe out religious thinking and practices with one blow are even further from the basic viewpoint Marxism takes toward the religious question. They are entirely wrong and will do no small harm.

II. The Religions of China

Our country is a multireligious state. Buddhism has a history of nearly 2,000 years in China, Daoism one of over 1,700 years, and Islam over 1,300 years, while Roman Catholicism and Protestantism achieved most of their development following the Opium Wars. As for the numbers of religious adherents, at Liberation there were about 8,000,000 Muslims, while today there are about 10,000,000 (the chief reason for this is growth in population among the ten Islamic minorities). At Liberation there were 2,700,000 Catholics; today there are over 3,000,000. Protestants numbered 700,000 in 1949 and are now at 3,000,000. Buddhism (including Lamaism) numbers almost the entire populations of the ethnic minorities of Tibet, Mongolia, and Liao Ning among its adherents. Among the Han race, Buddhism and Daoism still exercise considerable influence at present. Naturally, out of the total population of our country, and especially among the Han race, which accounts for the largest number of people, there are a considerable number who believe in spirits, but the number of those who actually adhere to a religion is not great. If we compare the number of religious believers at the time of Liberation with the present number overall, we will see that overall there has been somewhat of an increase in absolute numbers, but when compared with the growth of the population there has been a decline. But in our appraisal of the religious question, we must reckon fully with its definite complex nature. Generally speaking, we may say that in old China, during

the long feudal period and the more than one hundred years of semicolonial, semifeudal society, all religions were manipulated and controlled by the ruling classes, with extremely negative results. Within China, the Buddhist, Daoist, and Islamic leaderships were mainly controlled by the feudal landowners, feudal lords, and reactionary warlords, as well as the bureaucratic capitalistic class. The later foreign colonialist and imperialist forces mainly controlled the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. After Liberation there was a thorough transformation of the socioeconomic system and a major reform of the religious system, and so the status of religion in China has already undergone a fundamental change. The contradictions of the religious question now belong primarily to the category of contradictions among the people. The religious question, however, will continue to exist over a long period within certain limits, will continue to have a definite mass nature, to be entangled in many areas with the ethnic question, and to be affected by some class-struggle and complex international factors. This question, therefore, continues to be one of great significance which we cannot ignore. The question is this: can we handle this religious question properly as we work toward national stability and ethnic unity, as we develop our international relations while resisting the infiltration of hostile forces from abroad, and as we go on constructing a Socialist civilization with both material and spiritual values? This, then, demands that the Party committees on each level must adopt toward the religious question an attitude in accord with what Lenin said, "Be especially alert," "Be very strict," "Think things through thoroughly." To overestimate the seriousness or complexity of the question and so panic, or to ignore the existence and complexity of the actual question and so let matters drift, would be equally wrong.

III. The Party's Handling of the Religious Question since Liberation

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, there have been many twists and turns in our Party's work with regard to religion. In general, although there were some major errors, after the founding of New China, and for the seventeen years up to the "cultural revolution," the Party's religious work achieved great results under the direction of the correct guiding principles and policies of the Party Central Committee. We did away with imperialist forces within the churches and promoted the correct policy of independent, self-governed, and autonomous churches, as well as the "Three-Self Movement" (self-propagation, self-administration, and self-support). The Catholic and Protestant churches ceased to be tools of the imperialist aggressors and became independent and autonomous religious enterprises of Chinese believers. We abolished the special privileges and oppressive exploitative system of feudal religion, attacked and exposed those reactionaries and bad elements who hid behind the cloak of religion, and made Buddhists, Daoists, and Muslims break away from the control and manipulation of the reactionary classes. We proclaimed and carried out a policy of freedom of religious belief, enabling the broad masses of religious believers not only to achieve a complete political

and economic emancipation alongside each ethnic minority but also enabling them to begin to enjoy the right of freedom of religious belief. We carried out a policy of winning over, uniting with, and educating religious personages, and thus united the broad masses of the patriotic religious personages. We also assisted and supported religious people to seek international friendship and this has had good, positive effects. Since 1957, however, leftist errors gradually grew up in our religious work and progressed even further in the mid-sixties. During the “cultural revolution” especially, the antirevolutionary Lin Biao-Jiang Qing clique^I had ulterior motives in making use of these leftist errors, and wantonly trampled upon the scientific theory of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought concerning the religious question. They totally repudiated the Party’s correct policy toward religion, in effect since the founding of the People’s Republic. They basically did away with the work the Party had done on the religious question. They forcibly forbade normal religious activities by the mass of religious believers. They treated patriotic religious personages, as well as the mass of ordinary religious believers, as “targets for dictatorship,” and fabricated a host of wrongs and injustices which they pinned upon these religious personages. They even misinterpreted some customs and practices of the ethnic minorities as religious superstition, which they then forcibly prohibited. In some places, they even repressed the mass of religious believers, and destroyed ethnic unity. They used violent measures against religion which forced religious movements underground, with the result that they made some headway because of the disorganized state of affairs. A minority of antirevolutionaries and bad elements made use of this situation and, under cover of religious activities, boldly carried out illegal criminal activities, as well as destructive antirevolutionary movements.

After the smashing of Jiang Qing’s antirevolutionary clique, and especially since the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Party Central Committee,^{II} the correct guiding principle and policy toward the religious question of our Party was restored step by step. In implementing and carrying out our religious policy, we have opened both Buddhist and Daoist temples, as well as churches and religious sites. We have restored the activities of the patriotic religious associations. We have won over, unified, and educated religious personages. We have strengthened the unity between believers and nonbelievers in each ethnic group. We have righted wrongs and have launched a movement for friendly relations internationally among religious believers as well as resisting infiltration and like

I HS: Lin Biao (1907–1971) was a Chinese military leader, who, in 1959, became minister of defence, and, with the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), was treated as the future successor of Mao Zedong. However, in 1971 he allegedly plotted a (failed) coup, and died in an airplane crash. Jiang Qing (1914–1991) was Mao Zedong’s wife. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, she was a leading figure of the radical faction. After Mao’s death (1976), she was purged and sentenced to death, which later was commuted to a life sentence. In the history of the CCP, Lin Biao and Jiang Qing are considered the main representatives of the leftist deviations during the Cultural Revolution.

II HS: The meeting took place in December 1978. It inaugurated the ‘reform and opening up’ policy, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping.

doings from hostile religious forces from abroad. In all this, we have undertaken a large number of tasks and have obtained remarkable results. In this new historical period, the Party's and government's basic task in its religious work will be to firmly implement and carry out its policy of freedom of religious belief; to consolidate and expand the patriotic political alliance in each ethnic religious group (民族宗教界); to strengthen education in patriotism and Socialism among them, and to bring into play positive elements among them in order to build a modern and powerful Socialist state and complete the great task of unifying the country; and to oppose the hegemonism and strive together to protect and preserve world peace. In order to implement and carry out the Party's religious policy correctly and comprehensively, the main task now at hand is to oppose "leftist" erroneous tendencies. At the same time, we must be on our guard to forestall and overcome the erroneous tendency to just let things slide along. All Party members, Party committees on all levels, especially those responsible for religious work, must conscientiously sum up and assimilate the historical experience, positive and negative, of the Party in religious work since the founding of the People's Republic. They must make further progress in their understanding and mastery of the objective law governing the emergence, development, and demise of religion. They should overcome every obstacle and difficulty and resolutely keep the religious policy of the Party on the scientific course laid out for it by Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought.

IV. The Party's Present Policy toward Religion

The basic policy the Party has adopted toward the religious question is that of respect for and protection of the freedom of religious belief. This is a long-term policy, one which must be continually carried out until that future time when religion will itself disappear. What do we mean by freedom of religious belief? We mean that every citizen has the freedom to believe in religion and also the freedom not to believe in religion. S/he has also the freedom to believe in this religion or that religion. Within a particular religion, s/he has the freedom to believe in this sect or that sect. A person who was previously a nonbeliever has the freedom to become a religious believer, and one who has been a religious believer has the freedom to become a nonbeliever. We Communists are atheists and must unremittently propagate atheism. Yet at the same time we must understand that it will be fruitless and extremely harmful to use simple coercion in dealing with the people's ideological and spiritual questions—and this includes religious questions. We must further understand that at the present historical stage the difference that exists between the mass of believers and nonbelievers in matters of ideology and belief is relatively secondary. If we then one-sidedly emphasize this difference, even to the point of giving it primary importance—for example, by discriminating against and attacking the mass of religious believers, while neglecting and denying that the basic political and economic welfare of the mass of both religious believers and nonbelievers is the same—then we forget that the Party's basic task is to unite all the

people (and this includes the broad mass of believers and nonbelievers alike) in order that all may strive to construct a modern, powerful Socialist state. To behave otherwise would only exacerbate the estrangement between the mass of believers and nonbelievers as well as incite and aggravate religious fanaticism, resulting in serious consequences for our Socialist enterprise. Our Party, therefore, bases its policy of freedom of religious belief on the theory formulated by Marxism-Leninism, and it is the only correct policy genuinely consonant with the people's welfare.

Naturally, in the process of implementing and carrying out this policy which emphasizes and guarantees the people's freedom to believe in religion, we must, at the same time, emphasize and guarantee the people's freedom not to believe in religion. These are two indispensable aspects of the same question. Any action which forces a nonbeliever to believe in religion is an infringement of freedom of religious belief, just as is any action which forces a believer not to believe. Both are grave errors and not to be tolerated. The guarantee of freedom of religious belief, far from being a hindrance, is a means of strengthening the Party's efforts to disseminate scientific education as well as to strengthen its propaganda against superstition. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that the crux of the policy of freedom of religious belief is to make the question of religious belief a private matter, one of individual free choice for citizens.

The political power in a Socialist state can in no way be used to promote any one religion, nor can it be used to forbid any one religion, as long as it is only a question of normal religious beliefs and practices. At the same time, religion will not be permitted to meddle in the administrative or juridical affairs of state, nor to intervene in the schools or public education. It will be absolutely forbidden to force anyone, particularly people under eighteen years of age, to become a member of a church, to become a Buddhist monk or nun, or to go to temples or monasteries to study Buddhist scripture. Religion will not be permitted to recover in any way those special feudal privileges which have been abolished or to return to an exploitative and oppressive religious system. Nor will religion be permitted to make use in any way of religious pretexts to oppose the Party's leadership or the Socialist system, or to destroy national or ethnic unity.

To sum up, the basic starting point and firm foundation for our handling of the religious question and for the implementation of our policy and freedom of religious belief lies in our desire to unite the mass of believers and nonbelievers and enable them to center all their will and strength on the common goal of building a modernized, powerful Socialist state. Any action or speech that deviates in the least from this basic line is completely erroneous, and must be firmly resisted and opposed by both Party and people.

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III HS: Sections V to VII, dealing with the Party's work with religious professionals, the restoration and administration of churches, temples and other religious buildings, and the patriotic religious organizations, have been omitted.

VIII. Educating a New Generation of Clergy

The training and education of the younger generation of patriotic religious personnel in a planned way will have decisive significance for the future image of our country's religious organizations. We should not only continue to win over, unite with, and educate the present generation of persons in religious circles, but we should also help each religious organization set up seminaries to train well new religious personnel. The task of these seminaries is to create a contingent of young religious personnel who, in terms of politics, fervently love their homeland and support the Party's leadership and the Socialist system and who possess sufficient religious knowledge. [. . .]

All these young professional religious should continually heighten their patriotic and Socialist consciousness and make efforts to improve their cultural level and their religious knowledge. They should loyally implement the Party's religious policy. [. . .]

IX. Communist Party Members and Religion; Relations with Religious Ethnic Minorities

The fact that our Party proclaims and implements a policy of freedom of religious belief does not, of course, mean that Communist Party members can freely believe in religion. The policy of freedom of religious belief is directed toward the citizens of our country; it is not applicable to Party members. Unlike the average citizen, the Party member belongs to a Marxist political party, and there can be no doubt at all that s/he must be an atheist and not a theist. Our Party has clearly stated on many previous occasions: A Communist Party member cannot be a religious believer; s/he cannot take part in religious activities. Any member who persists in going against this proscription should be told to leave the Party. This proscription is altogether correct, and, as far as the Party as a whole is concerned, its implementation should be insisted on in the future. The present question concerns the implementation of this proscription among those ethnic minorities whose people are basically all religious believers. Here, implementation must follow the actual circumstances, and so make use of proper measures, not oversimplifying matters.

We must realize that although a considerable number of Communist Party members among these ethnic minorities loyally implement the Party line, do positive work for the Party, and obey its discipline, they cannot completely shake off all religious influence. Party organizations should in no way simply cast these Party members aside, but should patiently and meticulously carry out ideological work while taking measures to develop more fully their positive political activism, helping them gradually to acquire a dialectical and historical materialist worldview and to gradually shake off the fetters of a religious ideology. Obviously, as we go about expanding our membership, we must take great care not to be rushed into recruiting devout religious believers or those with strong religious sentiments. [. . .] Even though those

Party members who live at the grass-roots level among those ethnic minorities where the majority believe in religion have already freed themselves from religious belief, yet if they were to refuse to take part in any of those traditional marriage or funeral ceremonies or mass festivals which have some religious significance, then they would find themselves cut off and isolated from the masses. Therefore, in applying those precepts which forbid Party members who live among these ethnic minorities from joining in religious activities, we must act according to concrete circumstances, according to the principle of differentiation in order to allow Party members to continue to maintain close links with the masses. Although many of the traditional marriage and funeral ceremonies and mass festivals among these ethnic minorities have a religious tradition and significance, they have already essentially become merely a part of ethnic custom and tradition. So long as our comrades, especially those living at the grass-roots level, mark clearly the line between ideology and religious belief, then they can show appropriate respect to and compliance with these ethnic customs and traditions in their daily lives. [. . .]

There are some ethnic minorities in which nearly all the people believe in one particular religion, Islam or Lamaism, for example. Among these peoples, the question of religion and ethnicity is frequently intertwined. But within the Han race, there is basically no relationship between ethnic background and Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, or Protestantism. Therefore, we must become adept in distinguishing very concretely the particular situation of each ethnic group and of each religion, and in sizing up the differences and relationships between ethnicity and religion, that we may proceed correctly in our handling of them. We must certainly be vigilant and oppose any use of religious fanaticism to divide our people and any words or actions which damage the unity among our ethnic groups. If our Party cannot with clear mind and firm step master this particular question in the present great struggle as we strive to lead such a great nation of so many ethnic groups as ours forward to become a modern Socialist state, then we shall not be able with any success to unite our peoples to advance together toward this goal.

[Sections X and XI, dealing with criminal and counter-revolutionary activities under the cover of religion and international relations of China's religions, have been omitted.]

XII. The Role of the Party and State Organs in Handling the Religious Question

The basic guarantee for the successful handling of the religious question is the strengthening of the Party's leadership. The Party's religious work is an important constituent of the Party's united front and of its work among the masses since it touches upon various aspects of social life. This demands that Party committees on each level must vigorously direct and organize all relevant departments, which include the United Front Department, the Bureau of Religious Affairs, the Bureau of National Minorities, the

Department for Politics and Law, the Departments of Propaganda, Culture, Education, Science and Technology, and Health, as well as the Labor Unions, the Youth League, the Women's Federation, and all other mass organizations, in order to unify ideology, knowledge, and policy. The Departments must each take responsibility for their own work, but act in close coordination and take a realistic grasp of this important task in order to conscientiously and unremittingly carry it through to a successful conclusion.

We must strengthen the government organs responsible for religious affairs, to enable all cadres who give themselves to this particular work to study the Marxist theory of religion in a systematic way, to thoroughly understand the Party's fundamental viewpoint and policy on the religious question, to maintain close relationships with the mass of religious believers, and to consult on equal terms with persons in religious circles in order to cooperate and work together.

An important constituent of the Party's theoretical work on religion is the use of the Marxist viewpoint and method to carry out scientific research on the religious question. An important task for the Party on the propaganda front is the use of Marxist philosophy to criticize idealism (which includes theism), and to educate the masses, especially the broad mass of young people, in a dialectical and historical materialist and scientific worldview (which includes atheism). To do this, we must strengthen our propaganda in scientific and cultural knowledge as these relate to an understanding of natural phenomena, the evolution of society, and of human life, with its old age, sickness, death, and ill and good fortune. An indispensable aspect of the Party's theoretical foundation is the establishment of theoretical research teams armed with Marxist ideology for the study of religious theory which would strive to set up organizations for religious research and make use of related university disciplines. [. . .]

The central authorities of Party and State emphasize once again that all Party members must clearly understand that the Party's religious policy is not just a temporary expedient, but a decisive strategy based on the scientific theoretical foundation of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, which takes as its goal the national unification of the people for the common task of building a powerful, modernized Socialist state. Under Socialism, the only correct fundamental way to solve the religious question lies precisely in safeguarding the freedom of religious belief. Only after the gradual development of the Socialist, economic, cultural, scientific, and technological enterprise and of a Socialist civilization with its own material and spiritual values, will the type of society and level of awareness that gave rise to the existence of religion gradually disappear. Such a great enterprise naturally cannot be accomplished within a short period of time, nor even within one, two, or three generations. Only after a long period of history, after many generations have passed, and after the combined struggle of the broad masses of both believers and nonbelievers will this come about. At that time, the Chinese people, on Chinese soil, will have thoroughly rid themselves of all impoverishment, ignorance, and spiritual emptiness, and will have become a highly developed civilization of material and spiritual values, able to take its place in the front ranks of mankind in the glorious world. At that time, the vast majority of our citizens will be

able to deal with the world and our fellowmen from a conscious scientific viewpoint, and no longer have any need for recourse to an illusory world of gods to seek spiritual solace. This is precisely what Marx and Engels have predicted—that there will be an age when people will have freed themselves from all alienating forces controlling the world and will have come to the stage when they will consciously plan and control the whole of social life. This is also what Comrade Mao Zedong meant when he said that the people, relying on themselves alone, will create a new age both for themselves and for the world. Only when we enter this new age will all that shows a religious face in the present world finally disappear. Therefore, each of us Party members, from generation to generation, must put forth all our best efforts in the struggle to bring about this brilliant future.