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The Catholic Church in China: Conflicting Attitudes

By Anthony Lam

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(The following article is a revised and edited version of a talk given in Hong Kong in November 1999.)

One of the biggest mistakes the Communist Government in Beijing has made since 1949 has been to maintain a hostile attitude towards religions, especially towards the Catholic Church. This hostility stems from different and mixed political mentalities and beliefs within the Beijing government itself. First, there are the Marxist atheists who believe in material reality only. Then there are the nationalists who are adamant about China and the Chinese being superior to all other countries and peoples, especially to western countries and westerners. It is not at all surprising that Mao Zedong cried out on October 1, 1949, 'The Chinese people have stood up.' There are also the collectivists who believe that personal interests can only be safeguarded when the collective interest of the whole country is assured. For them, it is only justice to ask, or even to force individuals to sacrifice for the country. They actually prefer to say 'for the people'.

Antagonism towards religions in China has been due principally to these prevailing attitudes and mentalities. Towards the end of the 1970s, the government finally realised it had been aiming at the wrong target, that such hostility was not only meaningless, but actually harmful to their governance.

Their negative attitude had not changed significantly, however, when the open-policy was first introduced in 1979. It was not until the 1990s, and especially after Deng Xiaoping's visit to the south in 1992, that the government realised that religious matters should not be one of the government's overriding concerns. For a while, at least, it seemed that the Chinese government was trying its best to avoid any quarrel with religions.

The above statement may seem strange in view of the Falun Gong issue that has received so much press coverage lately, and the recent ordinations of five new bishops without prior approval from Rome. In terms of the Falun Gong, my opinion is that the government's extreme reaction to this movement is not due principally to Falun Gong's religious connections, but rather to the massive and surprising involvement of Party cadres within the movement. The government's reaction may be a warning to Catholics - and others - that if they wish to enjoy peace, they should not attempt to make converts out of Party members - at least not now. The consecration of the five bishops, on the other hand, is an issue that needs careful reflection and analysis in view of recent possible developments in Sino-Vatican relations.

Signs of withdrawal from the religious field

During the last decade, the government has given a number of signs to indicate some change of attitude.

- 1 The government has tried hard to 'clear its debt' by resolving much of the dispute with religious bodies over land and real estate. It actively searched for the documents to clarify property ownership. It has reached settlements with the church on ownership, either by giving back the land, buying it or parcelling out another piece in a different area. The government seems eager not to owe religious bodies anything.
- 2 The government is putting the Patriotic Association back into the church structure. It is no longer directly involved in the Patriotic Associations, perhaps with the exception of the National Patriotic Association that still plays a significant role in Beijing. The local Patriotic Associations are now considered as organisations within the church only with no direct linkage to government structures.

- 3 The government no longer hires church personnel. Except for very top level personnel in Beijing, most staff members of the local Patriotic Association have lost their posts in local governments, and are no longer on the government payroll. Several years ago, the government stopped subventing the church, and providing subsidies to the regional seminaries. Two years ago, the government stopped providing subsidies to the National Seminary, once fully government subvented.
- 4 The government seems to have put aside its ideological debate and redefined its relationship to the religions by laws and regulations. We can foresee that more and more regulations will be coming out in the near future. Some people have suggested that the regulations imply a tighter control over the religions. But I do not agree with that. The government can do exactly what it wants with or without regulations.
- 5 The documents related to settling the dispute of real estate date back to the early 1980s. In Document 188 (1980), the State Council urged the local governments to implement the policy of returning properties to the religious bodies. However, after twenty years, we still hear complaints from church personnel in China that they have not been able to get their church property back from the local cadres. Obviously, central government policy is one thing and the interests of local governments and local cadres is another. Moreover, on the local level, the key persons in the Catholic Patriotic Association are very close to the cadres of the Religious Affairs Bureau. These two groups are very eager to keep the status quo in order to maintain their personal interests. The same is true in other fields attempting reforms in Chinese society. The higher level of government has a policy and the lower level has a counter-policy, *shang you zheng ce, xia you du ce*.

Contradictory Attitudes in the Government

The withdrawal of government from the religious sector does not imply that the Catholic Church will not face any challenges in the future. The government as a whole does not want to get into trouble with the religions, but some officials do. The pragmatist leaders, e.g. Premier Zhu Rongji, would like to ease the relationship with the religions while ideology-oriented leaders, such as Deng Liqun, would like to strain the relationship. Fortunately, such leftist ideological figures are a minority in the top level of the government.

Why is there such a group of 'die-hard' theorists? I think it is safe to say that the issue is not so much related to ideological theory as to a power struggle. The leftist theorists can keep their high position in the government only by upholding an extreme leftist mindset. As long as the Chinese government claims to be a Marxist Communist Revolutionary government, these leftist theorists will continue to play an influential role in the government.

The Church in China is presently facing two different kinds of challenges and these come from two different sectors. The religious bureaux and the CPA on the one hand, and atheists on the other.

Attitudes towards open and underground church leaders

Interestingly enough, the government's attitude towards open and underground church leaders is more or less the same provided they cooperate with the government peacefully. Let me cite the example of Bishop Han Jide of Pingliang. Bishop Han was secretly consecrated as Coadjutor Bishop by Bishop Philip Ma Ji, Bishop of Pingliang, in September 1996. Bishop Ma passed away in February 1999. Instead of waiting for an election arranged by the government, Bishop Han openly declared himself the Bishop of Pingliang. The government sanctioned this in exchange for his cooperation in the future. Bishop Han was once an underground priest in Shaanxi province.

A definition of underground church

According to underground Bishop Lucas Li Jingfeng of Fengxiang Diocese, Shaanxi province, the government's definition of the underground church is 'the underground church consists of those Catholics under the control of priests ordained by bishops appointed by the pope.'

It seems that the government does not care too much whether the church leaders join the open church or not. The important thing is registration. In some cases, both sides are registered. In northern China (Shaanxi, Gansu, Nei Mongol, Hebei and the Northeast), most underground churches are registered. (They are registered with the local religious department and department of civil affairs rather than with the Patriotic Association.)

The government is already aware that most underground church leaders would like to cooperate with them, provided they are not forced to join the Patriotic Association. Only a handful of underground church leaders refuse to register with the government. (Some underground bishops in Hebei and Henan fall into this category.) Actually, both the underground and open church leaders are trying to get rid of the Patriotic Association. In this particular matter, both are fighting against a common enemy.

The church situation can be categorised as follows:

- Category 1: Underground extremists who refuse to cooperate with any government-sanctioned system, e.g. the Diocese of Qiqihar in Helongjiang falls into this group.
- Category 2: Underground sectors registered with the government, e.g. the Diocese of Fengxiang in Shaanxi province.
- Category 3: Open church sectors registered with the government, e.g. the Diocese of Liaoning.
- Category 4: Open church sectors registered with both the government and the Patriotic Association, e.g. the church in Beijing under the control of Bishop Michael Fu.

Interactions between the open and the underground church leaders

Actually, in most places, both the underground and open church leaders work well together. For the younger generation, the conflict is not severe. Often discord within the open church itself is much greater. Most young priests, regardless of their open or underground affiliation, can work well together. My last trip in Northwest China in August 1999 reconfirmed this impression.

Difficulties arise mostly from the bishops. Troubles appear when there are two or more authorities within in the same diocese. Wenzhou Diocese in Zhejiang province is one example of this. Actually, duplication of authority should not be a severe problem in the church in China. There are sixty-seven bishops in the open church and forty-four in the underground church (data of mid-1999). Considering the total number of bishops in China and the total number of dioceses (around 115), the question of overlapping authority is not serious. The trouble arises where there are both an open and an underground church bishop operating within the same diocese. In these cases, the problems of rivalry and identity need to be addressed and resolved.

Looking at the actual situation in China, we discover that there are four possible models that can help the open and the underground church resolve their conflicts.

- Model 1: The open and underground church could come to a tacit understanding that, within the whole area, there would be sub-areas where each bishop would be in charge of pastoral activities and where he would exercise his authority independent of other bishops in the area. For example, at the beginning of the nineteen nineties, the Xingtai Diocese in Hebei province had three bishops. Bishop Hou Jinde of the open church stayed in Weixian county, while Bishop Xiao Liren of the underground stayed in Xingtai city and Bishop Raimond Wang Chonglin, also of the underground, stayed in Biancun village of Ningjin county. None of these three bishops interfered in the other's pastoral work.
- Model 2: If the open church bishop is legitimate (in union with the universal Church), the other bishops could designate him the official diocesan bishop. Other underground bishops could

work as titular bishops. Although this title does not presently exist in China, the situation of Bishop Li Chongjie in Hohhot is a case in point.

Model 3: There is also the possibility of underground church bishops not being able to come to an agreement with the open church bishops even in spite of Vatican encouragement. The two sides are likely to end up in competition with each other and in a power struggle. In this case, if the open church bishop is not legitimate, the underground bishop will more likely have the advantage in the competition. Conflicts will continue until an agreement is reached. Fujian, Hebei and Henan are examples of this situation.

Model 4: The last model is for the bishops of both sectors to create an atmosphere of mutual trust and work together within the same diocese to carry out pastoral work. In this scenario, the underground church bishop would have to resign his post but continue his ministry in an unofficial capacity. This model seems to have met with some success in Wuhan in Hubei Province.

It is important to point out that whatever may be the differences, all are members of the same church, and we pray that someday they will be one again. This unity will not be easily achieved as different kinds of obstacles may emerge at any time. The consecration of five self-elected bishops on January 6, 2000 is one such example.

Government policy does not necessarily match the expectations of different interest groups. The Catholic Patriotic Association, for example, is not likely to be enthusiastic about the possible withdrawal of the government from the religious field. The CPA, along with whole system of religious affairs bureaux, is a product of an abnormal religious situation in China. As a product of this abnormal situation, any normalisation constitutes a threat to personal and group interests, as well as a loss of the privileges that many have enjoyed for decades.

The consecration on January 6, 2000 was obviously a product of conflict of interests. The situation was different from that of the 1950s or early 1980s. According to some news agencies, some candidates actually seemed quite eager to be elected and consecrated as bishops even without papal approval. However, it is also true that more than five candidates had been elected, but some refused to be consecrated in such circumstances. Even on the last two days before the consecration date, top-level officials of the Patriotic Association were at a loss to give the exact number to be consecrated.

It seems clear that the candidates in this particular circumstance should be responsible for their own behaviour. They should not blame the central government for having exerted political pressure. This is not to say that there was no pressure exerted by different levels of cadres, but church personnel could still say no. Actually, the consecration event - especially with the refusal of different candidates to accept the election - reflects that some church persons are strong enough to resist cadre pressure.

The consecration was an ill-conceived idea carried out at the wrong time by the wrong people. It was an unfortunate event, harmful to the process of normalising Sino-Vatican- diplomatic relations as well as to the unity of the Chinese Church. The consecration without papal approval destroyed the ground of mutual trust between the two sides. It ruined the efforts at reconciliation made by both sides in the last few years, and weakened the possibility of normalisation in the near future.

It is even a bit bizarre that a few candidates even came from dioceses where there are bishops already. In Mindong (Fujian province) and Baoding (Hebei province) there are underground bishops. In Changzhi (Shanxi province) there is even a 'semi-open' bishop. This duplication of authority is ripe to foster deeper division and power struggles. Furthermore, since the consecrated candidates had no papal approval, they must be ready to face strong resistance in their home dioceses. Further confrontation seems unavoidable.