CHAPTER 5

Religious Vitality in Contemporary China

Types of Atheism in Party Politics

In this chapter we start by discussing the various ways of interpreting Marx’ statement about the opium of the people in order to show how they relate to certain theoretical positions voiced in the context of official PPC documents. Moving from theoretical reflection to empirical observations Yang presents “a definition of religion with classification” dividing the phenomena under study between Full religion, Semi-religion, Quasi-religion and Pseudo-religion (Yang 2012: 37). Cults worshipping political leaders like Mao as if they were deities are pseudo-religions to Yang. His typology of four forms of religious devotion is confronted by him with three types of anti-religious attitudes in the theoretical argumentation of the Communist Party of China: Militant atheism, enlightened atheism, and mild atheism.

The party discussions frequently rely on alternative interpretations of Marx’s dictum that religion is the opium of the people, and some argue that opium was used for benign purposes as a pain killer. Of the three atheisms, mild atheism is the most recent development (ibid: 45). Mild atheism finds its foundation in the Marxian view that religion is a symptom of the sickness of capitalist society, and once its defects will have been corrected by socialism the people’s desire for religious orientation will disappear by itself. Accordingly, there is no historical need for the persecution of religions.

Mou Zhongjian is a representative of such mild atheism. According to him “theists and atheists... should respect each other” (ibid: 62). Mou opposes the scientific atheism that is propagated in China today because he considers it “destructive to social development” (Yang 2012: 63). While these ideas voiced by Mou may be the source of a hopeful view toward the future, it would be unrealistic to ignore the fact that at least until 2010 they were “peripheral in the official discourse of the Chinese authorities” (ibid: 63).

What makes Chinese party ideology difficult to reconstruct for Western students of Marxism is – as was mentioned here before – its indebtedness not merely to Marx and Engels, but in addition to the Russians Lenin and Stalin, to Mao of China (ibid: 47) and to Mao’s successors as party leaders. The three atheisms Yang distinguishes agree of course that religion must and will disappear; they differ, however, in the measures to be taken and in the patience they display in achieving their unquestioned goal. The policies toward that goal can be compared with reference to four periods in recent history:

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Period 1: 1949–1957: The five officially recognized religions were forced to become “patriotic” in exchange for not being annihilated like other religions. Those five are Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, and, strangely as two separate religions Old Christianity (Catholic and Orthodox) and New Christianity (Protestant). The separation of Christianity into two distinct religions is the result of the erroneous notion that they worship different deities: Catholics (and Orthodox Christians) the God of Heaven, Shang Di (上帝), while Protestants are perceived as worshipping Jesus. The unifying idea of the Trinity cannot be entered into the political debate about religions.

Period 2: 1957–1966: Forceful reduction of the number of temples and churches of the five “patriotic” religions.


Period 4: 1979–2009: Limited tolerance, economic development (tourism, foreign investment) as motivation for the construction of temples and churches, reversal of these political decisions due to disagreements within the party, and crackdown on certain sectarian groups (Qigong, Falun Gong).

At the beginning of period 4 it gradually became possible again, to select religious studies as a major at Chinese universities, although in some schools only at the graduate level. The example of the university study of Daoism may serve as an illustration of the changes. Daoism started as an academic field in Mainland China in the 30ies and 40ies of the last century. Scholars like Meng Wentong, Wang Ming, Chen Guofu and others wrote articles and books on Daoism, which are still important for scholars of religion today. But compared to research in other areas such as philosophy, history, Buddhism and Christianity, the achievements on Daoism were limited. That also applied to the number of scholars who studied Daoism at that time.

Between 1949 and 1979, during what Yang called phases 1, 2, and 3, the study on Daoism was forbidden. As a result, there were almost no contributions on Daoism except the studies on Tai pingjing and Bao puzi by Wang Ming. Since December of 1978, the Chinese government began to support research on Daoism which made it enter a new era in its history: Special institutions for Daoism were established.

With the permission of the Chinese government in 1979 the first Research Institute on Daoism was founded in the context of the Institute of Religious Studies in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. In 1980 an