Chapter five

“IN THE DEFENSE OF FAITH”
ANTI-CLERICALISM AND BUDDHIST APOLOGETIC IN THE
FOURTH AND EARLY FIFTH CENTURY AD

Resistance against Buddhism in gentry circles;
types of anti-clericalism.

As has been said before, Buddhism, in China as anywhere else, was not a
mode of thought or a philosophical system, but, primarily, a way of life, a
code of highly regularized behaviour, believed to lead to emancipation (vimokṣa, jītuo 解脫) from the fetters of birth and death and preferably to be pursued by
members of a closed and independent religious organisation, the Community
(saṅgha, zhōng 釋). Being such, it was necessarily bound up with a monastic
ideal which by its very nature was predestined to meet an intense resistance
from the side of the Chinese ruling class.

Buddhism had originated and developed into its characteristic form in a
country where the “religious life” (brahmacaryā) had been an institution since
times immemorial, where the community existed beside the temporal rulers, not
under their power, and where the king would pay homage to the monk, even if he
were but a run-away slave.1 In China, it had to seek recognition in a society where
the conception of governmental (i.e., in theory, imperial) authority was incompat-
ible with the existence of an asocial, improductive and autonomous body within
the state, and where systems of thought used to be evaluated according to their
practical efficacy rather than to their religious and metaphysical merits.2

Moreover, in China a clergy or priesthood had never existed as a distinct
social group.3 One might perhaps be inclined to qualify as a “clerical” organization
the famous semi-religious, semi-political mass-movement of the “Yellow Turbans”
黃巾 which under the leadership of the Daoist magician Zhang Jue 張角 in 184 AD
started a revolution that almost brought about the collapse of the Han empire.
In spite of such institutions and practices as the foundation of charitable settle-
ments (yìshe 義舍), the burning of incense, prostration, penitence, confession
of sins, the abstinance from alcoholic drinks and the custom of chanting in
chorus (duxi 都習)4 it is highly questionable whether we may regard the leaders
of the Yellow Turbans as a clerical group or class: their duties were religious as well
as secular, and, as their titles indicate, many of these dignitaries seem to have been
active in military and administrative functions in the complex hierarchical and local
administration of this sect.5 It should be noted in passing that later Buddhist authors
condemn the Yellow Turbans and comparable movements in most emphatic
terms, and not without reason: the activity of the Huangjin had been directed
against the governmental authorities, and any resemblance between the Yellow
Turbans and the Buddhist Church could only serve to increase the anti-clerical sentiments among the upper classes.\textsuperscript{6}

Anti-clericalism of the kind to be described in this chapter can hardly have existed among the illiterate population, and it is there that the expansion of the new creed must have been considerable: according to later sources (contemporary literature does not yield concrete information) there were in the period 265–316 AD in the two capitals (Luoyang and Chang’an) 180 (var. 182) monasteries and 3700 monks and nuns.\textsuperscript{7}

The number of monasteries in Luoyang in 316 AD is variously given as 42 and 32,\textsuperscript{8} whereas the total numbers of monasteries and monks in the ("Eastern") Jin territory in the period 317–420 are stated to have been 1768 and 24.000 respectively.\textsuperscript{9}

The conversion of the gentry, however, was an arduous task. The gentry was more than other social groups fettered by tradition, mentally confined within the narrow horizon of classical Chinese culture and ready to oppose—and, if necessary, to eliminate—anything that seemed to threaten the time-honoured ideals and vested interests of their class. From the beginning of the fourth century onward we find traces of strong anti-clerical sentiments directed against the activities and aims of the saṅgha as an organized body within the state and against the way of life of the individual monk.

It is a fact of fundamental importance, characteristic of early Chinese Buddhism, that, whereas in India the saṅgha mainly had to compete with other but analogous religious groups, in China the Church was bound to come into conflict with the gentry, i.e. the imperial bureaucracy, the government itself. In the following pages we shall treat some aspects of this ideological conflict between the Church and the temporal authorities: the various forms of anti-clericalism prevailing among the upper class and the stereotyped Buddhist counter-arguments.

Roughly speaking, we can recognize the following four types of anti-clerical argumentation:

a) The activities of the Church are in various ways detrimental to the authority of the government and to the stability and prosperity of the state (political and economic arguments).

b) The monastic life does not yield any concrete results in this world, and is therefore useless and improductive (utilitarian arguments).

c) Buddhism is a “barbarian” creed, suited to the needs of uncivilized foreigners. It is not mentioned in the records of the golden past; the Sages of antiquity did not know it and did not need it (arguments based on feelings of cultural superiority).

d) The monastic life means an unnatural violation of the sacred canons of social behaviour; it is therefore asocial and highly immoral (moral arguments).

The Buddhist defenders of the faith, on the other hand, adduce various arguments in order to prove

a) That monks are by no means disloyal even if they are not subjected to the power of temporal authorities, that, in fact, the Church helps to ensure lasting peace and prosperity, and that the Church as a whole cannot be condemned because of the blameworthy activities of a small minority of its members;