

Two Addresses to an Inter-Religio Delegation of Scholars of Religion Shanghai, 21 September 1985

RUAN Renze

Secretary General, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences
Vice-President, Society of Religious Studies

The Shanghai Society of Religious Studies was formed in March, 1982.

Shanghai is the largest city in China, which is rather developed in economy and culture. Also in Shanghai, religious bodies are more concentrated than elsewhere, with a large number of believers in Buddhism, Taoism, Islamism, and in both Catholicism and Protestantism of Christianity. Not a few leaders and well-known personage of the religious circles are living in Shanghai.

Among the academic people, including those in the universities, in the institutes of philosophy, history, sociology and law under the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, and in libraries, museums and publishing houses, quite a number of scholars are well-versed in religious studies, or are much interested in them.

In order to co-ordinate the academic efforts of scholars working on religious research, a proposal was made in winter 1981 to establish a society of religious studies and it has won widespread positive responses. Following preparation work for half a year, the inaugural assembly was held in March, 1982.

The president of the Society is Prof. Lo Zhufeng who is now attending a conference in Hangzhou and is unable to meet you today. He wants us to extend you his greetings and warm welcome.

There are five vice-presidents. Present with us today is one of them, Prof. Yen Beiming of the Department of Philosophy, Fudan University. Others are social scientists and religious scholars. The Society has also invited a few noted professors to be our academic advisers.

At present the Society has 220. members, who belong to the academic, religious, educational and other circles, and all have a keen interest in the study of religion.

The Shanghai Society of Religious Studies is a cultural and academic body, being an organization for scholars engaged in the scientific study of religion. Its aim is to study religion dispassionately. It does not attempt to refute religion, nor to promote it.

During the 3 years and more since the Society was established, we have carried out the following academic programs:

1. *Annual assemblies.* At the inaugural assembly in 1982 and the annual assemblies in 1983 and 1984, some dozens of theses on religion were collected. Some of them were read at the plenary sessions, and others distributed to the members in printed forms. There were also group discussions.

2. *Lecture forums.* Scholars on religion from home and abroad have been invited to give lectures, introducing the views and results of their studies and exchanging information in this field.

3. *Seminars.* Sometimes we hold seminars to discuss specific topics concerning religion, and sometimes seminars to recollect some historical facts about religions in China. Shortly ago, around the end of August, a large-scale seminar was held, at which more than ten members of the Society recalled the activities of religious leaders in Shanghai during the war of resistance against Japanese aggression more than forty years ago. Many moving instances have evidenced the patriotic spirit and tradition of the Chinese religious people.

4. *Visits to famous religious sites.* Such as visit to the Catholic pilgrimage site at Sheshan, Songjiang County.

5. *Reception of religious scholars from abroad.* Several times a year, visiting scholars from abroad are received. Oftentimes, the Society organizes academic discussions between the visitor or visitors and some of its members.

In the past 3 years and a half, the Shanghai Society of Religious Studies has insisted on two guidelines:

1. Organizationally, the guideline of “five lakes and four seas”, i.e. the principle of comprehensiveness or latitudinarianism. It means any one who is interested in the study of religion and willing to explore certain problems about religion is eligible for membership, regardless of one’s faith, academic viewpoint, profession or others. So long as one is devoted to the motherland, whether professing religious faith or not, whether believing in materialism or idealism, and whether holding one academic viewpoint or another, he or she is welcomed to join our Society without any discrimination. We reject any sectarian and narrow-minded attitude. We can not and will not make our Society composed of people with only one viewpoint and refuse those with other viewpoints.

2. Academically, the guideline of “letting a hundred schools contend,” i.e. the principle of academic freedom. Only by letting a hundred schools contend, can academic work truly develop, progress and flourish. If just one school is allowed to express itself and all the

other 99 schools are to be suppressed, all academic studies will be brought into a blind alley. Not only progress and development will be impossible, but stagnation and withering away will be the result. We hold that scholars with different viewpoints should be allowed to discuss freely and to respect each other.

The experiences of three years and a half have proved that our two guidelines are correct. In the time to come, we should continue to abide by these two guidelines and spur on the work of this Society for further progress.

XIAO Zhitian

Deputy Director, Shanghai Research Institute of Religion

Ladies and gentlemen, Comrades:

There is an ancient Chinese saying, "What a joy it is to have friends coming from afar." Today, it is with great pleasure for all of us colleagues of the Shanghai Research Institute of Religion to warmly welcome the visit of the International Delegation of Religious Scholars. Before we are to listen to the eminent presentations you scholars are going to give, please allow me to speak briefly about the work of this Institute.

It has not been long since our Institute was established, nor is our personnel great in number. During the last two or three years, besides individual research work done on various religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Islamism etc. with any of which each of us is more familiar we have been united in our efforts to tackle one common subject, i.e. problems of Religion in China's Socialist Era.

This is a new field of study and no ready answers can be found in the writings of our predecessors. Of course in our studies we make our efforts to learn from or refer to the views and methods we make our efforts to learn from or refer to the views and methods of Marxist writers and other scholars of the older generations, and attach special importance to making surveys on the actual religious situation. During the past few years, we in coordination with the Shanghai Society of Religious Studies have made extensive inquiries among religious believers as well as nonbelievers, among government cadres as well as common residents. We then make analytical studies on the data we have gathered and draw our own conclusions.

From what we have learned in the last two or three years, we feel that we are confronted with quite many questions concerning religion in China's socialist age. For instance, what are the characteristics of religions in Chinese history that distinguish them from religions in other countries? Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, what changes have taken place in the religious situation? In the socialist period, what are the grounds for the protracted

existence of religion? What is its relation with the socialist society? And so on and so forth. At the moment, I would like to make some personal observations about the question of coherence between religion and the socialist society.

Ever since the international communist movement came into being, and especially since the birth of socialist countries, many people have been concerned with such a question: whether it is possible for religious believers and Communists to cooperate with each other in social life, and whether it is possible for religion to cohere with the socialist society.

Theism and atheism are two different systems of thought. History has proved that any governing power or political group that attempts to stamp out any kind of thinking, be it atheism or theism, by administrative and compulsory means is bound to fail. In present day China, the religious believers have faith in God and the Communists are atheists. The best way to solve this contradiction is to practise the principle of mutual respect in matters of ideology, rather than to strike any compromise or to enforce supplantation.

Furthermore, religion is more than an ideology. Through long years of historical evolution, religion has become a kind of social force that assembles a segment of people within certain religious organizations, binds them together with certain religious doctrines and disciplines and has its influence on social life. Therefore, on the premise of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China as the common criterion, with religious people persisting in patriotic and socialist lines and with the Communist Party and the People's Government persisting in the implementation of the policy of religious freedom, religion can be coherent with the socialist society. This is a fact that has been proved true by the experiences in the past 30 more years since the founding of New China.

Human history has witnessed various social forms, and there is always a question of coherence between religion and any kind of social system. Those religions that could not adapt themselves to their times have already been eliminated by history itself. Take Christianity as an example. Just as Engels points out, "Like any great revolutionary movement, Christianity was created by the masses." In the 1st century A.D., several uprisings by the slaves and poorer people of the Jewish nation all resulted in failure. Faced with a desperate situation, they dreamed for the bliss in a heavenly kingdom. Relevant to such a situation an inheriting certain contents of Judaism, the Christian religion came into being. Later, it was utilized by the ruling class and was made the official religion of the Roman Empire. The feudal hierarchy formed in the Middle Ages was adapted to the feudal social system. The Reformation movement that took place in the 16th and 17th centuries was adapted to the repeated attempts of the bourgeois revolution. Nowadays, the liberation theology of the third world is adapted to the demands of national liberation movements. Therefore, it is entirely possible for religion to be coherent with the socialist society, being even an historical necessity.

It must also be pointed out that the coherence of today is in some way different from that in the past. In the socialist society, the Communist Party has

no need to use religion, but it gives support to any effort on the part of religious people to break away from domination and utilization by reactionary forces, so that religion can become its real self and religious faith the personal affair of citizens. Only in such a condition can coherence between religion and the new social system be realized.

For several thousand years, Chinese society progressed at a slow pace. For long ages, the masses of people, including religious believers, moaned and groaned in extreme misery and longed ardently for a change of their poverty-stricken and backward condition. The Chinese people led by the Chinese Communist party have overthrown the old system and established a socialist society. In the past 30 years and more, there have been remarkable achievements in economic development, and the livelihood of the people has been conspicuously improved. Now we are struggling after the goal for quadrupling the total value of industrial and agricultural production by the end of this century, and for building a socialist society with Chinese characteristics.

The broad masses of religious believers heartily support the socialist system, and this has laid a solid foundation for religion to be consistent with the new society. On the other hand, the Chinese Communist party and the People's Government have consistently carried out the policy of religious freedom. Although this policy was seriously undermined during the 10 years of turmoil, rectification measures have been implemented in recent years, and religious activities have been restored to normalcy. Some people have the fear that this policy may be a provisional one, because they think that the Communists being atheists would abolish religion anyway. As a matter of fact, it is precisely because the Communists are historical materialists that they understand the intrinsic laws that govern the inception and movements of religion. They believe that religion will wither away naturally only in the very distant future, and that any attempt to wipe out religion by compulsory measures will reap results to the contrary.

In our vast country with a population of one billion, Marxists are in the minority and those with different ideologies are in the majority. It is the common aspiration of all people to build a highly prosperous, highly civilized and highly democratic socialist country in our political and economic life, whereas ideological differences are secondary in importance as compared with those national goals. As is known to all that the policy of united front is one of the three 'magic weapons' that won the victory of the Chinese democratic revolution in the past, and the same is true with China in her present reconstruction period. While making united efforts to achieve the program of four modernizations, we should seek common ground and preserve differences in matters of ideology.

With regard to the manifestations of religion as being coherent with a socialist society, I can only mention a few due to the limit of time. Firstly, the broad masses of workers, farmers and intellectuals who profess religious faiths, together with their counterparts among the nonbelievers, are making great

efforts to develop production, elevate the scientific and technological levels and strive for the goal of raising the total value of industrial and agricultural production by 4-fold towards the end of this century. Secondly, while they were being ground in the misery of the old society in the past, not a few religious believers adhered to a negative and escapist attitude towards life, confirming what Marx says about religion as the lamentation on and the protest against the tribulations of this world, and hence playing a narcotic role.