Opening Statement

of

Rep. James A. Leach

Chairman, Asia and the Pacific Subcommittee Committee on International Relations
and
Chairman, Congressional-Executive Commission on China

at the CECC Hearing on Religious Freedom in China
Thursday, November 18, 2004, Room 2255 Rayburn House Office Building

The Commission convenes this morning to hear several experts, who have agreed to share with us their analysis of the intensifying government campaign in many parts of China against religious groups and individual believers and practitioners.

Religious freedom around the world remains among the most important issues of concern for most Americans, and for that reason, freedom of religion has been a central topic in our bilateral human rights discussions with China for many years. Unlike Karl Marx, who believed that religion was the "opiate of the masses," our country's founders held that ethical values, derived from religion, anteceded and anchored political institutions. It is the class struggle implications of Marxism—the exhortation to hate thy fellow citizen instead of love thine enemy—that stands in stark contrast with the demand of tolerance built into our Bill of Rights.

From the American perspective, the real opiate of the 20th and 21st centuries would appear to be intolerance, the instinct of hatred which becomes manifest in the individual and unleashed in society when governments fail to provide safeguards for individual rights and fail to erect civilizing institutions adaptable to change and accountable to the people. Churches, religious schools, hospitals, and faith-based charitable organizations are examples of this type of civilizing institution. Coupled with religious faith itself, such institutions can be a powerful force for tolerance.

Both the Congress and the Executive Branch have long stressed the importance of religious freedom in China. The Senate and House have frequently passed resolutions calling on Chinese authorities to respect the freedom of worship, belief, and religious affiliation guaranteed by international human rights norms. In his first term, President Bush raised U.S. concerns about religious freedom with the most senior Chinese leaders, emphasizing the importance of treating peoples of faith with fairness and dignity, freeing prisoners of conscience, and respecting the religious and cultural traditions of the people of Tibet.

The Chinese Constitution says that the government protects "normal religious activity," but in practice, the government and the Communist Party require that religion be consonant with state-defined patriotism. Official repression of religion is particularly harsh in Tibetan and Uighur areas, where religious conviction and traditions may frequently be interwoven with separatist sentiment. Chinese authorities

often see separatist sentiment as a precursor to terrorism, even when religious practitioners express such sentiment peacefully and advocate nonviolence.

In June 2003, the Commission convened a hearing to assess whether the rise of a new group of senior Chinese political leaders might augur a change in government policy toward religion. Our witnesses were not very optimistic about any such changes, at least over the short term. We also became interested in whether the new leadership group would encourage the social service activities of religious groups, so that faith-based groups would take responsibility for some of the social services that governments at all levels in China can no longer sustain.

Roughly 18 months later, we have seen evidence of some increased official tolerance of faith-based social service initiatives in some places in China, but in general we have not seen significant liberalization of Chinese government policy towards religion itself. Indeed, there is significant evidence of a tightening of repressive measures in many places in China.

With those comments, let me introduce our Commission members, and our first panel…