

Statement by
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I have been asked to testify about political trends in contemporary China and their implications for state-society relations, including religious affairs. This is an enormously complicated topic, and this short discussion can hardly cover it adequately. All I can do is to try to pick out some trends and identify their importance for understanding contemporary Chinese society, including the place of religion.

As you know, China has undergone a major leadership transition in the past year. This is really the first political transition China has had since the revolutionary generation has left the scene. Although I believe that we have seen signs of tension within the leadership - not unexpected - so far the transition has gone well and the new leadership is moving forward on an agenda that seeks both to build on the successes of the past decade and more and to correct the excesses that have emerged.

On the one hand, in response to the very rapid growth of the private economy over the past decade, the former general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Jiang Zemin, on July 1, 2001, called for opening up the CCP to "outstanding elements" from the new social sectors that have emerged in recent years, including private entrepreneurs. This call, which was endorsed by the Sixteenth Party Congress last November, was in part a ratification of de facto changes -- in fact, some 20% of private entrepreneurs are already CCP members (most of them joined the party first, then "jumped into the sea" of business). It was also a recognition that economic change and technical innovation are not being driven forward by the sorts of industrial workers depicted in traditional Marxist-Leninist literature and art but rather by the technically trained people being generated by Qinghua and other elite universities.

The change here that strikes me as really important is that by drawing party membership from all segments of society - not only in practice but in doctrine - the CCP is rejecting the notions of class struggle, both domestically and internationally, on which it was built. This change, it strikes me, is critical for building a more tolerant and democratic future.

On the other hand, the new leadership under general secretary Hu Jintao and premier Wen Jiabao have been emphasizing such issues as rule by law, opposition to corruption, social equality, and concern for the "masses." These emphases speak to major problems facing China in the early twenty-first century, including growing inequality, corruption, unemployment, the emergence of urban poverty, the abuse of authority, social disorder, and a general sense that the party is remote from and not concerned with the people. In response, the party has been exploring ways to increase accountability and to expand decision-making, at least within the party. In recent years there have been calls for "inner party democracy." There is much talk these days in party journals about setting up a system in which a standing committee of the party congress - a body that normally meets only every five years - would stay in session to supervise the implementation of policy. There is also much talk of institutionalizing procedures in which the whole membership of the party, not just the standing committee or top leader, would vote on major issues. There is also talk and some experimentation with trying to separate the powers of decision-making from implementation and supervision - in other words of creating some sort of check and balance system within the party. Finally, there have been regulations issued to expand the number of people involved in promoting party officials in an effort to break up small cliques of people and to enhance accountability. Such changes, still very nascent, reflect as realization within the CCP that Chinese society is changing - the populace is increasingly well educated and has a greater sense of its rights and accordingly demands greater accountability from its leaders and greater adherence to law.

Such changes in the party are interesting precisely because the party is the most conservative organization in China. It very much desires to stay in power and to maintain control over Chinese society. But if it is to have any chance to do so, it must change.

It must change because of the rapid expansion of the private sector, the large-scale immigration of workers from the rural agricultural areas to the cities, changes in social values, and the expansion of societal organizations.

In the 1990s there was a very rapid growth of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in China; by the latter half of that decade they numbered over 700,000. Most of these are affiliated in some fashion (and all must register) with a government office, from which they typically derive at least some of their funding. Thus, many people speak of these organizations as "government organized non-governmental organizations," or GONGOs for short.

The rapid growth of such intermediary organizations led many in the West to argue that China was developing a civil society similar to what has taken place in many parts of the world. Civil society is frequently seen as a necessary precondition of democratization.

But intermediary associations in China do not fit easily into Western categories. In the West we tend to distinguish between the state, the public, and the private spheres, seeing intermediary organizations as a distinct from the government and articulating social demands against the government. China has a very long history of intermediary associations if such phenomena as clan associations and guild associations are taken into account. Although scholars debate the role of such organizations, it seems that a clearly articulated public sphere never emerged. The idea of social organization articulating *private* interests *against* the government was certainly never accepted normatively; China's final dynasty (the Qing), for instance, had a specific legal prohibition against the formation of scholarly associations, fearing that they would become the basis for factional intrigue against the government, as they had in the late Ming dynasty.

There are at least two points here that I think are worthy of consideration. First, the notion of "private" has traditionally been understood quite differently in China than in the West. We have tended to see "private" as good; the expression of partial interests is central to our notion of pluralism. In traditional China, the term "private" (*si*) was generally viewed as the antithesis of "public" (*gong*). The government, specifically the emperor, was supposed to embody notions of "public." China has a long history of supporting remonstrance against the wrong policies of the emperor but such protests always had to be couched in terms of "publicness;" articulating a private, partial interest was taken as by definition in opposition to "public." Even when China witnessed the development of chambers of commerce and other intermediary associations in the early part of the twentieth century, the issue of their representing private and partial interests was fudged. Writers generally depicted merchants as coming together to decide on the one correct policy, ignoring the inevitable differences between large and small merchants, importers and exporters, manufacturers and distributors, etc.

Second and relatedly, Chinese governments throughout the twentieth century have either forced chambers of commerce and other voluntary associations into established hierarchical, corporatist structures or abolished them all together. The first pattern was adopted by the Nationalist government after it was established in 1928; the Communist government after 1949, and particularly after 1956, abolished most intermediary associations and those that were retained were expected to play the "transmission belt" role assigned to such organizations in Leninist systems. With the onset of the reforms, and particularly with the changes in state-society relations in the 1990s, the state has once again been adopting corporatist structures. Intermediary associations are supposed to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs and accept state supervision. This does not mean that they are simply extensions of state power; frequently they are able to inject local interests and concerns into the policy-making process. But it does mean that the whole conception of a sharp

distinction between public and private that we in the West are accustomed to and the corresponding notion that public policy is and should be derived from the push and haul of interest group politics is very foreign from the Chinese experience, both in the Communist era and before.

Religious organizations and activities are special types of intermediary associations, based as they are on the spiritual needs of their adherents, their tendency to absorb large numbers of believers, and the ability to mobilize large number of adherents around a cause. As with other forms of intermediary associations, the Chinese state has had long experience with religious organizations, much of it unhappy from the state's point of view. There is a certain irony in this in that scholars who study the origins of the Chinese state and the monarchical system note that the authority of early emperors was based on the emperor as the link between the human world and the heavens. Ancestor worship played an important role in this regard, and the emperor's family tablets established a legitimate and sacred line. In other words, monistic political authority was anchored in religious concepts.

Other families or religious organizations that challenged the central role of the emperor's family tablets were seen as a threat to the state, and dealt with accordingly. Although there were periods in Chinese history when Buddhism and Daoism occupied important places in the polity, the state ultimately asserted its authority over these religions. Thus, the Chinese state never allowed a powerful, organized clergy to develop.

The hostility of the Chinese state toward religious *organization* - and here I want to be very clear that what the Chinese state opposed was not the practice of religion but the emergence of powerful religious organizations that could challenge the authority of the state - was rooted in painful historical experience. Repeatedly religious organization of one sort or another has been used to mobilize peasant revolts against the state, and some of these have been successful. Examples of such revolts stem from the Yellow Turban Rebellion of the Han Dynasty to the White Lotus, Taiping, and Boxer rebellions of the late 18th and 19th centuries. Such experience has left a very deep imprint on Chinese political culture.

One might say that there is both a positive and a negative side to this political culture. On the one hand, the Chinese state, particularly in its modern form, is staunchly secular. Most (but not all) intellectuals in China today reject religion. The upshot of this is that they are relentless modernizers. One does not see the religiously inspired rejections of modernity in China that one sees in some parts of the world.

On the other hand, the Chinese state has continued to see religious activities that are organized outside of state control as potential sources of social instability. As with other forms of voluntary associations, the Chinese state has tried to force religious adherents to participate in one or another of the state-organized and controlled religious associations. Many religious adherents have not been willing to accept these restrictions, and that is where one sees the suppression of religious freedom. One might add that many government modernizers see religious organizations as inimical to their goals of economic development and therefore see little wrong with their suppression.

I should add that I know of very little academic research that has been carried out on the sociology of religion in contemporary China. We know very little about who converts to what religion and for what reason. We do know that in some parts of the country, the growth of religion coexists surprisingly amicably with the state. As I stated, the Chinese state can be tolerant of religious beliefs as long as it does not challenge state authority. But in other parts of the country, religious organizations are suppressed harshly. Sometimes these different responses seem to depend on such *ad hoc* factors as the relations between the local party cadre and the religious leaders; in other instances, different patterns appear to reflect different socio-economic conditions. But as I say, we know too little about this to draw strong conclusions. Serious research is needed.

The difference in attitudes about religious expression is one of the most sensitive and difficult gaps that exist between the United States and China. The United States was founded upon the idea of the free expression of religious beliefs, and we have witnessed a resurgence of religious feeling in recent years. The Chinese state has never condoned the free organization of religious communities, and the political elite remains rather hostile to religious beliefs and movements. It is important to bear in mind, however, that these attitudes are rooted not just in the authoritarian rule of the Chinese Communist Party but also in millennial-old cultural attitudes.

I am not one to argue that cultures cannot change - they do. But one cannot simply disregard them and expect that they can change over night. Indeed, I think that if one looks seriously at the magnitude of changes sweeping Chinese society over the past two and a half decades, one has to be impressed by the breath, depth, and speed of the changes. It is not just that the economy has grown, but that the organization of the economy and society have changed and new ideas and attitudes have emerged. The very rapid growth of intermediary associations is a case in point. There is a new emphasis among younger people on individualism and consumerism that shocks their elders. Attitudes change, but they do so over time and within their own context.

I think that the greatest hope for new attitudes toward intermediary associations and religious expression lies in the growth of a middle class in China. Historically China has never been a middle class society (another contrast with the United States which has always been a middle class society). It is only in the past two decades that we have seen a semblance of a middle class emerge in China. Estimating the size of this class is difficult, but a recent study in China projected it at 15 percent of the population. This is far from enough to call China a middle class society. Income distribution still tends to look more like a convex curve (with a small wealthy class at the top, almost nothing in the middle, and a very large group of people with average incomes or less) than the olive shaped pattern associated with middle class societies. Given the huge size of the Chinese population and the great disparities between the urban areas and the countryside, it will take a very long time - decades - for China to become a middle-class society. But I would guess that as that 15 percent figures grows toward, say, 25 percent over the next decade or so, one is likely to see a better social framework for social stability and hence greater tolerance toward a variety of attitudes - intellectual, social, religious, etc.