The politicization of religion by the CCP : a selective retrieval

André Laliberté

The Politicization of Religion by the CCP: A Selective Retrieval

Abstract: This essays looks at the diversity of approaches used by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in its politicization of religions. It first provides an overview of continuity with past practices by the Chinese state in the imperial and republican eras to stress the undetermined nature of ideological change in China. Then, it looks at the mechanisms by which the CCP makes religion a political issue and a matter of public concern within broader agendas. It stresses that this politicization of religions has unfolded in two different ways since 1949: besides the negative and coercive approach of the authorities, positive and cooperative strategy are also implemented. The regime hopes religions will be active politically to promote its objectives, such as projecting abroad an image of China's soft power, raising funds for philanthropic activities within China, or supporting the state 'patriotic' agenda. The actions by the CCP suggest that it does not look at all religions as equally valuable to serve its political objectives, as it still maintains a distinction between official and banned religions. The article documents that the state's encouragement to the revival of some religious activities is selective but on the other hand that CCP views are more nuanced than outsiders assume.

Keywords: state administration of religious affairs in China, Chinese Communist Party religious work

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1 Introduction

This essay looks at the politicization of religion by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This is part of a broader agenda of using tradition as a source of legitimation for the CCP authority, an issue that is receiving increasing amount of attention in recent research.[1] In this essay, "politicization" means the attempt by the CCP to make religion a political issue, or an issue of public concern. This

1 Madsen 2014; Perry 2013.

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has unfolded in two different ways since 1949. Politicization can be negative, or coercive, for example when the CCP during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) targeted all religions as "reactionary" accomplices to their political enemies, and more recently, in 1999, when Jiang Zemin selectively targeted Falungong, which he saw as a political threat. In the first years of the PRC and since the beginning of the reform and opening, however, the CCP has embraced a positive, or cooperative, politicization of religion, implemented by the cooptation of elites to establish religious associations for each official religion. The regime hopes religion will be active politically to promote its objectives, to project abroad an image of China's soft power, to raise funds for philanthropic activities within China, or to support its "patriotic" (*aiguozhuyi* 爱国主义) agenda.[2] Keeping in mind the near destruction of most forms of religion during the period of the Cultural Revolution, the more recent call by the state to encourage the recovery and bringing back to life of some religions represents a retrieval of religion. Obviously, this recovery could hardly lead to a return to the *status quo ante* because of the extent of changes experienced by China and the world since Mao. But this retrieval is also selective because political mobilization by religious leaders must serve the regime, and as we will see below, the actions by the state suggest that it does not look at all religions as equally valuable to serve its political objectives. The state still maintains a distinction between official and banned religions, the latter dismissed as "superstitions", or as "evil cults".[3]

With the commitment to socialist ideology weakened by the actions it has adopted since the beginning of the reform and opening policy in 1978, the CCP experiences an ongoing crisis of legitimacy. It seeks to address that problem, among other strategies, by affirming its role as the custodian and protector of Chinese traditions.[4] This positive politicization of traditions, which represents a complete reversal of the iconoclastic approach embraced during the Cultural Revolution, includes a variety of actions such as the restoration of sites such as monuments, memorials, historical sites, and religious venues, with the help of state funding, and often in conjunction with support from private foundations.[5] The focus of this essay is on the politicization of religious traditions, which extends to efforts at promoting intangible heritage. This became a major undertaking, for example, with the promotion by provincial governments of the cult to the Yellow Emperor during Jiang Zemin's tenure as China's leader,[6] and

2 For an example of the latter, see Vala 2012.

3 See Yang 2008 for the distinction between official religions and superstitions.

4 See Brady 2012. For an account of earlier efforts after 1989, see Zhao 1998.

5 See Oakes/Sutton eds. 2010.

6 See Billeter 2007.

continued during Hu Jintao's leadership when the CCP sponsored, with the help of united front organizations, international conferences promoting Chinese Buddhism and Taoism.[7] The Xi Jinping administration so far maintains this approach, as official support in 2014 for international conferences about Taoism and Buddhism on Chinese soil suggests. I focus in this essay on the religious dimension of this politicization of tradition and argue that the politicization of religion as a positive force in Chinese society does not herald a move towards the adoption of a liberal policy on religious practice: there is resistance to the latter among many cadres in the party, because many still harbor fears about religion as a possible threat to the regime.

Officially, the views on religion propagated by the CCP have changed since the Cultural Revolution from a wholesale attack on religious institutions and all kinds of religious beliefs and rituals – dismissed as feudal superstition (*fengjian mixin* 封建迷信) – to the current celebration of religions as part of Chinese cultural tradition.[8] This essay agrees with most of the recent conclusions reached in research about the legislation of religion in China that we cannot interpret existing regulations and laws as the implementation of the state's liberal neutrality towards all religions, but rather, as a deepening of government control.[9] The simultaneous celebration of religious diversity by the CCP and the ongoing surveillance of religion by its controlling apparatus begs the question: what sense can we make of these contradictory actions? In this essay I argue that contrary to what a commitment to Marxism-Leninism would lead one to expect, the CCP's guidance on religious affairs relies on an understanding of China's religious complexity. This implies that far from basing its policies on the idea of the withering away of religion, it looks at religion as long-lasting and therefore it is mindful of its potential as a resource or a threat.[10] To buttress this argument, the essay first outlines the CCP policy disparities on religion. Then, it will review the evolution of the CCP policies on religious affairs to underline how the idea of religion's complexity has contributed to shape policies.

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7 See Dotson 2011.

8 In a large-scale representative survey undertaken in China under the direction of Zhai Jiexia, over half of the respondents consider that Christianity is a Chinese religion. See Zhai 2010: 104.

9 For recent articles on CCP religious policy reaching a similar conclusion, see Qu 2011; Tong 2010; Lai 2006; Carlson 2005; Leung 2005; Ying 2005; Potter 2003.

10 The cooperative/coercive binary I use to describe the relations between the CCP and religions must be understood as extremes in a continuum, with the middle ground being negotiation.

2 A diversity of policies

The politicization of religion by the CCP takes many forms. On the one hand, there is a mobilization of religious associations to serve many of the regime's objectives, most visibly in the area of social service provision and philanthropy,[11] but also in the development of tourism,[12] the promotion of China's soft power abroad,[13] and the campaign to promote public morality.[14] This relatively positive appreciation of religion by the state must be seen as part and parcel of a broader campaign that links together the fate and renewal of Chinese tradition to the legitimacy of the CCP leadership.[15] On the other hand, the politicization of religion in contemporary China by the regime also betrays its concerns about the subversive potential of religion in the political sphere. For example, the state cracks down against specific forms of religious activities that it considers illegal, such as "evil cults" (*xiejiao* 邪教) accused of "harming society",[16] and against unregistered churches. Even for religions that are recognized by the state such as Protestant Christianity and Catholicism, authorities monitor their activities very tightly and prohibit worship outside of religious venues. Finally, for government authorities in the autonomous regions populated by Muslim Uyghur and Tibetan Buddhists, religious affairs are "securitized" in campaigns against "extremism", "separatism", and "terrorism".

The politicization of religion results from the CCP policies on "religious work" (*zongjiao gongzuo* 宗教工作). These policies ensure that religious institutions and believers comply with its directives and help it achieve its goals of social stability maintenance, social services delivery, local economic development, etc. This work also includes the most specific goal of monitoring the

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11 For an example of official support for that policy, see the statement by the vice-chair of the United Front Work Department (UFWD) for the Shenzhen City Party Committee, in Yao s.a.

12 See the endorsement of that position from the chair of the UFWD for the Wuxi City Party Committee, in Zhou 2010: 4.

13 On this topic see Xu/Zou 2014: 7–25.

14 Zhongyang tongzhanbu wangzhang 中央统战部网章, 2002.

15 This was made quite clear by many signposts displayed throughout Beijing in the summer of 2014, with slogans such as "Nurture and promote core socialist values on the basis of traditional Chinese culture" (立足中华优秀传统文化，培育和弘扬社会主义核心价值观 *Lizu Zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua, peiyu he hongyang shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhiguan)* ostensibly making the connection between the CCP's values and traditional culture.

16 Authorities have spent considerable energies establishing the China Anti-Cult Association, a research organization with its own website and branches all over the country, which convenes conferences whose sole purpose is to criticize the target of its activities. See CACA, 2014. For a critique of this approach, see Zhu 2010.

development of religious associations and offering guidance to religious leaders about what they need to do to meet government's objectives. This politicization of religion obviously entails a cooperative dimension, when the state mobilizes religious actors to support its objective, but it can also include a coercive dimension, when the state believes that religious actors oppose its directives.[17] This dual aspect of the politicization affects all forms of religion in China, not only the five officially recognized religions, albeit unequally and in different ways.[18] Some forms of religion benefit from a more cooperative relation with the CCP, if not open sponsorship, while other are subjected to a treatment where the coercive dimension is more important.

The most important targets of the CCP for a cooperative politicization of religion are Buddhist and Taoist institutions, whose supervision falls under the same division (*si* 司) within the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), a department within the State Council that maintains close relations with the CCP United Front Work Department. The division for Buddhism and Taoism administers the Buddhist and Taoist national associations, produces research guiding policies relevant to Buddhists and Taoists, and advises provincial and local level Buddhist and Taoist associations to ensure they comply with regulations.[19] Because many consider both religions as indigenous to China, this fits with recent CCP policies that ostensibly promote China's cultural heritage, as we will see below. [20] The CCP has shown its support to Buddhism by helping in the convening of three world Buddhist forums in 2006, 2009, and 2012, even though the official sponsors were the state-approved Buddhist Association of China

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17 The Falungong stands out as a case in point: in 1992, leaders of the Public Security Bureau believed that the exercises it promoted were beneficial for their health, as noted by Palmer 2005: 341. Jiang Zemin instead saw in the public performance of exercises by Falungong adherents a critique of his regime. On this point, see Thornton 2002.

18 A rough indicator of the differential treatment faced by religions is the large number of Christian sects deemed "cults" by the China Anti-Cult Association (CACA), relative to the much smaller number of Buddhist associations that face a similar fate. Over the 20 sects the CACA considered "cults" nationwide, only two were Buddhists, and at least twelve were Christians. See Duihua 2014.

19 Although the director of the SARA's ranking is not at a ministerial-level, his powers are much more important than those of his Taiwanese counterpart, who leads a small office within the MOI's Department of Civil Affairs. On the latter, see Laliberté 2009.

20 Yang (2011) and official statistics from the Chinese government claim that there are more Christians than there are Taoists, on the basis of a strict definition of Taoist, which excludes adherents of communal cults and popular beliefs. The argument that Buddhism and Taoism are "authentic" Chinese religions is not supported by everyone in China: I have met over the years enthusiastic followers of national studies (*guoxue* 国学) who claim that only Taoism qualifies as an indigenous Chinese religion.

(BAC), its Hong Kong counterpart, and the Buddha Light International Association (BLIA), an organization from Taiwan.[21] At the local level, the CCP cooperative dimension of its politicization of Buddhism for the last two decades meant support for the reopening of temples expropriated during the Cultural Revolution, and the reconstruction of others destroyed during that period or before.[22] This cooperative politicization of Buddhism, most importantly, meant encouraging Buddhist associations to raise money and undertake charitable activities serving the public interest.[23]

This CCP positive politicization, or cooptation, of Chinese Buddhism (*han-chuan fojiao* 汉传佛教), contrasts with a coercive politicization of Tibetan (*zangchuan* 藏传) Buddhism, which is nevertheless also supervised by the same BAC. The opposition to the Dalai Lama is an obvious example known worldwide of the coercive dimension of politicization of religion, which entails the CCP prerogative of approving the reincarnation of the Buddha who should lead Tibetan Buddhism, as well as the reincarnation for religious leaders at lower levels.[24] The coercive politicization is not limited to Tibetan Buddhism. It also affects the Mahayana tradition, which counts more adherents than Tibetan Buddhism.[25] For example, during the spring of 2014, the CCP has instructed the BAC to silence a well-known monk, Shi Shengguan (释声关), who had opposed some of its policies, in particular over the June 4th massacre.[26] Overall, however, the CCP politicization of Buddhism tends to be cooperative, and meets a positive response from most Buddhist institutions and their leaders.[27] People like Shi Shengguan are exceptional in their open opposition to the regime, but the fact that some have supported him in the past suggests that the cooperative

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21 Shi Hsing Yun 释星云 chose exile to Taiwan after 1949 and founded the Foguangshan 佛光山 monastic order there. He has established the BLIA headquarters in California but he cannot claim to represent all of Taiwanese Buddhists, many of whom follow other spiritual masters.

22 See Laliberté 2012; Fisher 2011; Ji 2011; Yang/Wei 2005; and Yoshiko 2009.

23 The CCP expects all religions to perform philanthropic activities, but until recently Buddhists were lagging behind Protestant Christians, who have developed the Amity Foundation, the largest religious philanthropy in China. For discussions on Buddhist philanthropy, see Wang 2014; Wang/Liu 2011; Liu 2006. For an example of this endorsement from the CCP, see Yao 2010. For the Amity Foundation, see Wickeri 2011.

24 Arpi 2013.

25 Although all Tibetans are "counted" as Buddhists in official statistics, "only" 18% of China's population is considered Buddhist, according to the Pew Research Center – using sources from the Chinese government. Accounting for the number of ethnic Tibetans, this still leaves a far greater number of Han Chinese who are Buddhists than there are ethnic Tibetans.

26 Wu 2014.

27 I do not assume that lay Buddhists always support the monks' generally deferential attitude towards the CCP.

politicization of Buddhism through measures such as the rebuilding of temples and the support to their charity does not always yield the outcome of unquestioning obedience to the regime desired by the CCP.

The CCP has also encouraged the growth and renewal of Taoism, for example by supporting the organization of a major Taoist international conference in 2011.[28] The visibility of that support is less apparent than the mobilization of Buddhist associations orchestrated by the CCP, but this may result from the fact that there are fewer adherents of Taoism than there are of Buddhism.[29] On the other hand, Taoism is a religion without major doctrinal differences cross-cutting ethnic cleavages, the way the differences between the Mahayana, Tibetan, and Theravada traditions almost reproduce the ethnic cleavages between Han Chinese, Mongols, Tibetans, and other ethnic minorities.[30] Some Taoists are non-Han Chinese, but their number is small, and they are not found among the minorities that have grievance over their culture, such as the Tibetans, the Uyghurs, and the Mongols. Taoists also do not suffer from controversies over religious authority that put them at odds with the CCP the way Buddhism and Catholicism do, with religious leaders residing abroad claiming authority over their followers in China.

The CCP also politicizes the three other official religions, but this time the emphasis on the coercive dimension is more important than is the case with Buddhism and Taoism. The CCP ostensibly claims to prefer a cooperative approach to Christianity and Islam, but the coercive dimension of its politicization, enforced in particular by the police and security apparatus, is likely to be felt more strongly for people who profess minority religions, all the more so because they live in a society where the state professes the superiority of its atheist orientation. The rationale for the coercive dimension differs whether it is directed at Christians, both Protestant or Catholics, or Muslims: the CCP expresses concern over what it sees as the attempts by Christian missionaries to destabilize society via evangelism, and fears the spread of violence by extremists and terrorists among the latter. The rhetorical construction of Christian and Muslim "threats" includes appeal to nationalism that denounce the connection between Christians and "foreign infiltration on campus",[31] on the one hand, and denunciation of Muslim as "terrorists",[32] on the other.

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28 Ye 2011

29 It is difficult to avoid conflating Taoism with folk traditions such as the Mazu pilgrimage. This makes the counting of Taoist adherents difficult, and this also complicates any effort to impose any form of orthodoxy.

30 There are some cross-cutting cleavages, with many Han Chinese embracing Tibetan Buddhism.

31 Xuyang 2013; General Office of the CCCCP and General Office of the PRC State Council, 2011.

32 For an example of that approach, see Liu 2014.

Examples of the coercive dimension in the politicization of religion in relation to Christianity abounds: the most recent ones in 2014 were the campaign against churches in Zhejiang because crosses atop them were deemed too big, and the continuing crackdown in Beijing against the Shouwang Church, whose leaders have been under house arrest since 2011.[33] There is a widespread perception among officials, which was conveyed to me over the years in many interviews, that the state is "worried" by the growth of Christian churches. For different reasons, the CCP policies towards Muslims under Xi Jinping have taken a turn towards more intransigence, for example with directives preventing the observance of the Ramadan, under the pretext of fighting against "extremism".[34] This time the fear is not so much a growth of conversions to Islam, but the possibility of separatism among Uyghurs.[35] These tensions should not leave us with the impression that the CCP has adopted a one-sided and coercive politicization of Christianity and Islam. Cooperation between the government and Christians – Protestants and Catholics alike – exists, and despite the occurrences mentioned before, many Christians worship without too much state interference in local churches, including the Protestant "house churches" and the Catholic churches "loyal" to Rome.[36] The engagement in charity has also contributed in no small part to good relations between the regime and Muslim organizations.[37]

The politicization of religion in China, whether cooperative or coercive, does not stop with the CCP united front work in relation to the five recognized religions or the more tense relations with the non-recognized "cults". It also affects religions recognized as "world religions", by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of World Religions, such as Judaism, Mormonism, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and Baha'ism. In some cases, local governments have ensured places of worship in large cities where foreign adherents of these religions are likely to worship.[38] The cooperative politicization of religion also benefits other forms of religious practices and worship that have not received official recognition and that are not institutionalized, known as "popular beliefs" (*minjian xinyang* 民间信仰), but which are increasingly receiving some

33 Harvey et al. 2014.

34 Farooq 2014.

35 This is not an issue for the other Muslim minorities, some of whom are dispersed throughout China, such as the Hui, or are too few in numbers, such as the Kazakhs.

36 For a history of the relations between Protestant Christians and the regime, see Wickeri 2011. For an account of the Catholics' relations with the CCP, see Zhou/Li 2005.

37 See McCarthy 2013.

38 On the restoration of synagogues for worship, see Xin 2003. For the Latter-Day Saints Church, also known as Mormons, see Vendassi/Thornely 2014.

forms of consideration from the authorities as "intangible (*feiyi* 非遗) heritage".[39] The CCP adopts the same attitude with respect to other religions that have many followers in Taiwan and in the global Chinese diaspora. Hence, although the state does not recognize Yiguandao (一贯道), a religion hugely popular in Taiwan, its followers can find accommodation to their worship in some temples registered as Buddhist or Taoist.[40]

The lack of regal recognition for Yiguandao naturally brings back to mind the issue of institutionalized religions that are not legalized, many of which the regime denounces as "evil cults". In the case of movements such as Falungong and the Church of Almighty God, the state has clearly politicized them negatively, as a "cult" that seeks to undermine the regime, in the case of the former, or as part of a sinister plot abetted by foreign hostile forces, in the case of the latter.[41] There are other groups among the un-recognized religious institutions existing in China, however, which the state tolerates. Besides the unrecognized branches of existing religions and unrecognized world religions mentioned before, a variety of religious phenomena exist that do not fit with the categories mentioned so far, some of which have emerged before the founding of the PRC, such as the religions of the ethnic minorities, and the teachings of "spiritual masters" and "religious entrepreneurs".[42] One example of the latter is Li Juming 李居明, a lay Buddhist based in Hong Kong, who claims expertise in divination and other Taoist techniques. Not part of any official association, he remains nonetheless accepted in the Chinese religious landscape, even if he has promoted practices that until recently were criticized as superstitious (*mixin* 迷信).[43] We cannot take for granted this tolerance, however, as the case of Shi Jingkong 释淨空 illustrates. A Buddhist monk born in China but living abroad, he stands accused of heading a cult and faces a ban on his entry.[44]

The status of Confucianism as a religion represents another instance wherein the cooperative politicization of religion is possible, but difficult to

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39 Liu 2014: 101–105.

40 Billioud 2011.

41 On the change of approach adopted by the CCP towards Falungong before and after the decision in 1999 to crack down on the group, see Ownby 2008; Tong 2010; Palmer 2005. On the different churches that claim an affiliation to Christianity but not recognized as such, see Dunn 2010.

42 On the different taxonomies of unregistered religions, see Walton 2014; Tong 2010; Palmer 2010.

43 I could not find a scholarly treatment of Li Juming (also known as Edward Li Kui-ming), but his work is widely available and shops under his name are open near Yonghegong 雍和宫 Lama temple in Beijing.

44 Duihua 2014.

implement. The idea that Confucianism should constitute a national religion is the desire of a vocal minority of cultural nationalists,[45] and although the promotion by the state of the Confucian Institutes may appear to support such an agenda, it is misleading: the Hanban office that manages the Institute has no reference to Confucius. The agency has chosen for its name the sage of Qufu, because he is one of the better-known Chinese among foreigners who is not controversial. Confucianism, however, is likely to remain officially promoted as an ethical system and an example of China's traditional culture and intangible heritage.[46] State officials and CCP cadres are more likely to feel comfortable promoting Confucianism if they think it is an ethical system than a religious belief. If they had chosen to turn Confucianism into a religion, the contradiction between their professed atheism and the promotion of religion, already compromised with the promotion of Buddhism and Taoism, would be even more acute. The ongoing debates on the religious nature of Confucianism remain intertwined with the revival of popular beliefs and some of the unrecognized religious institutions.[47] Speculations on China's "sixth religion" are unlikely to bear fruit, however, as "popular beliefs" are not likely to be officially recognized soon.[48]

We need to keep four caveats in mind when looking at the politicization of religion by the CCP. First, it should not be exaggerated: it also builds on an attitude of indifference towards religion by the majority of the population in Chinese society, if we are to believe what citizens of that country tell social scientists who survey them on their religious beliefs.[49] The regime remains committed to its goal of promoting atheist education and on the surface it appears to have succeeded at instilling this world-view to the population. Religion is far less visible in the Chinese media than in their Taiwanese counterparts.[50]

Secondly, not all of the five religions are equal in the eyes of government officials.[51] As we have seen above, some party cadres worry about the growth

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45 Kang Xiaoguang and Jiang Qing are the two best-known examples of this trend.

46 On the controversy about Confucianism as a religion, see Sun 2013: ch. 3: 77–95.

47 See Billioud 2010: 203, 214, who writes about them as "folk religions" and "salvationist religions", respectively.

48 As Adam Chau has demonstrated in his ethnography of a temple to the Black Dragon King temple in Northwest China, temples identified to such "popular beliefs" could be registered as Taoist (Chau 2005b).

49 The Pew Research Center counts 52% of the Chinese population as religiously unaffiliated, and finds China the country with the largest number of religious affiliated, although 7% of that group also believe in God. See Pew Research Center 2012. See also Yang/Hu 2012.

50 Social media are contributing to shatter that impression. See Travagnin forthcoming.

51 These religions are: Buddhism, Taoism, Protestant Christianity, (also now as "New Religion"), Catholicism, and Islam. This policy is a legacy of the previous KMT regime. See Yang 2008.

and development of Christianity in the area they rule, and would prefer the growth of Buddhism to pre-empt the former's.[52]

Thirdly, the state's positive acceptance of some forms of religions is conditional on meeting a host of regulatory requirements that are not clearly defined and vary across the country. In other words, even religious associations that belong to one of the five religions recognized by the state may face different treatment from one province to another, depending on the local laws on religious affairs.[53] For example, as we have seen above, Protestant churches in Zhejiang have suffered persecution in the Spring in 2014, but provincial governments in neighboring provinces did not undertake similar campaigns. Finally, a constant in all policy changes implemented by the CCP remains in force, at least in theory:[54] aspirant party cadres must profess to be atheists. As many positions in government need to be filled by CCP members, this means a systematic discrimination against religious believers in the full participation to public life.

The observations made above of the CCP's complex and multi-faceted politicization of religion reveals that the party's approach to religion is much more complicated than assumed abroad and cannot be limited to a dogmatic adoption of atheism as the 'sole criterion of the truth.'[55] In the next section, I will show how much this complexity results from the evolution of internal deliberations about how the CCP should relate to religion. These debates, as well as the existence of a cooperative relationship with some religious actors and the perception that some religions are a threat to the regime, reveal that far from adopting a doctrinaire view of religion as irrelevant to Chinese society, the CCP has a long time ago seen its importance.

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52 This was repeatedly reported by colleagues in conferences on religion in China.

53 Tong 2010, 381–384.

54 Party cadres always remind outsiders that it is a requirement, and non-party members scoff at the idea that a party cadre could have any religious sympathy. However, as the Falungong affair and numerous case studies of communal religions show, these rigid requirements are broken at the breach, and all the more so when the practices of communal religions or new religious movements do not meet the rigid definition of religion the party promotes. For an example on the latter issue, see Bruun (2003). On the Party cadres' membership in Falungong before the crackdown of 1999, see Palmer 2005, and on the participation of cadres to communal religions' activities, see Chau 2005b. Falungong was originally a martial arts regime and became popular when martial arts were being promoted as a great Chinese development. Anecdotal evidence reported by one anonymous reviewer revealed that party cadres and officials, if they are believers, are most likely to be Buddhists. But in localities such as Xiamen, some are even Christians.

55 An oblique reference to Deng Xiaoping's dictum about "practice as the sole criterion of truth", an interpretation of Marx's materialism Deng made in order to justify his policies.

3 An un-determined trajectory of ideological change

The fear over the subversive potential of organized religion, noted above, is rooted in the historical precedent of religious-political uprisings, and as a result, the politicization of religion by the CCP shows some remarkable continuity with past practices by the Chinese state in the imperial and republican eras. In many respect, what party documents often call the "religious question/issue/problem" (*zongjiao wenti* 宗教问题), or the role that the sociological category known in the West as 'religion' should play in Chinese society, was debated among intellectuals since the end of the Qing dynasty.[56] Hostile actions by the state for the sake of social stability, such as the suppression of "evil cults" considered a threat to social stability, the expulsion of Christians missionaries because of their subversive teachings, the persecution against Buddhism because of its influence on politics,[57] predates by centuries, and more than a millennia in the case of the latter, the actions of the CCP against some religions.[58] These continuities are striking but we need to keep in mind one crucial difference: when the imperial state sought to suppress religious deviancy or regulate religion, it did that in the name of preserving the governance structure of what John Lagerwey called a "religious state", in which political and religious authority were not distinct from each other.[59]

The politicization of religion under Xi Jinping, in its regulatory dimension, continues this approach, albeit CCP intellectuals, and others, would no doubt reject the idea that China today is a religious state. In the CCP's ideology, "scientific atheism" that represents the intellectual foundation of its view on religion stands above, and beyond, religious truth, in the same way that the CCP, as a "vanguard organization", stands above, and beyond, the law. The CCP sees in its atheist position the confluence of three different trends. The most important is the adherence to "scientific Marxism", as a philosophical system, a mode of existence, and a principle of social organization. The two other ones come from different philosophical traditions: the enlightenment tradition of

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56 Goossaert/Palmer 2011.

57 The first two persecutions occurred during the Northern Zhou Dynasty, in 574 and 577, the third one in 845 during the Tang Dynasty, and the last one in 955 during the Late Zhou Dynasty. Buddhism survived these persecutions as a tolerated religion but never regained the preeminence it had acquired under the Tang before the persecution during the reign of emperor Wuzong (840–846).

58 For an example of state persecution against a sect, see Kuhn 1990.

59 Lagerwey 2010; Goossaert 2006. Yang 2011 prefers to write about a "substitute religion".

Western philosophy, as well as China's own tradition of atheism, as embodied by Mencius (Mengzi 孟子) and Guanzi 管子.[60] The CCP can count on some support outside the party to promote that view. Hence, the Society for the study of atheism (*Zhongguo wushenlun xuehui* 中国无神论学会), which claims to represent atheists in China, has founded in 1999 a journal, *Science and Atheism* (*Kexue wushenlun* 科学无神论), that is exclusively dedicated to the critique of religion from the perspective of philosophy, and targets in particular "evil cults" and "feudal superstition" (*fengjian mixin* 封建迷信).[61]

In marked contrast to European governments adopting a posture of official secularism in their institutions through constitutional provisions enshrining freedom of conscience and granting legal recognition without paying attention to religious doctrine, the CCP shows a lot of interest for religion, which stems from many sources. The CCP views on religion rest, naturally, on the specific worldviews adopted by the CCP early on, premised on the materialist perspective of Karl Marx about the withering away of religion, as well as the views of Lenin about the means which the state should use to hasten this fate. However, the situation of China differs in many respects from that of Russia and the European countries where the state faced one or two major religious organizations. As seen above, since the 9th century, China has no single religious institution whose influence and material resources could match those of the state, but rather a centuries-old tradition in which political and religious authority resided at the apex of the state. As research on the resilience of popular beliefs shows, the CCP has failed totally to eradicate the world-view that gods and ancestors can shape this world.[62] As a result, its view on religion also takes into account the latter's revolutionary potential, as evidenced in the past history of uprisings in China inspired by leaders who claimed inspiration from Taoism, Buddhism, or Christianity, and whose religious dissidence was understood by rulers as political dissidence as well.

As a consequence, transplanting to China the institutions inspired by the Marxist-Leninist views on religion without taking into consideration Chinese conditions was bound to face difficulties. Social scientists advising the government on religious affairs gave up on the theory of "religion as the opiate (of the masses)" (*zongjiao yapianlun* 宗教鸦片论) at the beginning of the "reform and

60 See Xi 2012: 2–10.

61 This timing coincides with the investigation of Falungong and the beginning of the campaign targeting the organization and its followers, which casts doubt on the independent nature of the association.

62 See Chau 2005a; Bruun 2003.

opening" policy in 1978.[63] A more nuanced understanding of religion could be discussed and serve to orient policies in religious affairs, including the perspective on the "five characteristics" (*wuxing* 五性) of religion, which had been defended by Li Weihan 李维汉, former director of the Party Central Party School in the 1930s, and which have re-emerged as the basis of the CCP thinking on religious affairs.[64] The "five characteristics" of religion are specific to China and this justifies, in the eyes of its cadres, why the CCP religious work cannot be a mechanistic transplant of the USSR policy. For the proponents of this approach, religion is: long-term (*changqi* 长期), collective (*qunzong* 群众), ethnic (*minzu* 民族), international (*guoji* 国际) and complex (*fuza* 复杂).[65] Because religion is a long-term phenomenon, the party must work to ensure its compatibility with socialism. The collective nature of religion suggests that this is not only a matter of individual belief, but also a social reality that requires political and legal management. The ethnic dimension of religion calls for the party to respect the religious beliefs of ethnic minorities if it wants to succeed in its policy of maintaining national unity. Because religions are international, the party must be vigilant to ensure that they uphold the principles of independence, autonomy, and self-governance. Finally, because religion has a complex nature, the party's UFWD must improve its understanding of religious diversity.[66]

A number of theoretical approaches on religious affairs have emerged over the years, to provide guidance for more specific aspects of religious works. For example, the theory of "religion as culture" (*zongjiao wenhua lun* 宗教文化论) which emerged in the 1980s, serves as a justification to legitimate the CCP claim to preserve China's traditional culture, without appearing to endorse religion as a rival ideological system.[67] Overall, however, the prevailing view of the "five characteristics" remains the dominant approach guiding party work. This basis for the CCP religious work, as seen above in reference to the CCP policies towards different forms of religiosities, does not imply a uniform framework for the legal supervision of religion. Moreover, as we will see below, it has not precluded the promulgation of different strategies. The same could be said of the party documents that serve to guide policies and laws. The oldest directives

63 Duan 2008.

64 Duan 2013: 91–93.

65 Ren 2002.

66 Ren 2002.

67 We can interpret the founding of the Religious Culture Publishing House in 1995 by the SARA as an official endorsement of the "religion as culture" approach. But we can also see it as indicative of the length of the protracted nature of the debate about the place of religion in contemporary Chinese society.

since the beginning of the reform and opening policies remain in force, even though more recent legislations add clarifications and details on implementation.[68]

The CCP issued in 1982 Document 19 for party members.[69] Titled "The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during our Country's Socialist Period", this statement officially endorsed the break from the party's repudiation of religion enforced during the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. That document signaled recognition of the importance of religion in Chinese society, and admitted the mistakes of the previous decade and a half. The party issued this document at the beginning of the relatively liberal decade during which, under the leadership of General-Secretaries Hu Yaobang (1982–1987) and Zhao Ziyang (1987–1989), the CCP considered political as well as economic reforms. However, in the same way economic reforms hurt vested interests in the control of State-Owned Enterprises when the Party envisaged their dismantling, any idea of too relaxed a control over religious believers was bound to affect the interests of cadres who made a career in controlling religious affairs. Illustrative of the difficulties in implementing religious work, the CCP issued in 1985 another policy document, written for and addressed to party organizations, and distributed to members, which addressed problems in the implementation of the previous directives.[70]

Moreover, even though Document 19 repudiated the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, it did not reflect new thinking in favour of a secular state where political and religious authorities are separated from each other. Rather, it represented a compromise between the reformist approach embraced by those who supported Hu and Zhao in the direction of gradual political reform, and those who wanted to restore the stability of the authoritarian corporatist mechanism of control put in place in the few years between 1949 and 1966. The different aspects of Document 19 expressed these contradictions within the party. Although some of the paragraphs of Document 19 described freedom of religion in generous terms, the obligation of party members to be atheists represented a serious limitation to the civil and political rights of religious believers because, being barred from joining the party, their participation in state affairs was limited to the public positions that do not require party membership.[71]

After the June 4th massacre, the CCP religious policy did not repudiate Document 19 but political reform was jettisoned. In the climate of repression

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68 Zongjiaoju 宗教局 2012.

69 CCCCP 1982.

70 CCCCP 1985.

71 The Party prohibits members to join religious organizations but personal beliefs are a different matter.

that followed the events of 1989, CCP leaders expressed concerns that Chinese converted to Christianity in increasing numbers, and as a result Li Peng, during a 1990 work conference on religious affairs, asked cadres to pay attention to the issue on a daily basis.[72]

The contradictions between political reformists who had advocated separation between party and state, and their opponents, were "resolved" in favour of the latter, with the issuance in 1991 by the CCP and the CCP Central Committee of a policy document that brought more adjustments to religious work.[73] In 1993, however, Jiang Zemin enunciated his views on the compatibility of religion with socialism.[74] This was an important statement that broke from the classical Marxist perspective predicting the withering away of religion when productive forces are fully developed. This new-found appreciation of the relevance of religion did not mean liberalization, though. In 1994, the State Council, under CCP instructions, promulgated three sets of regulations, about the religious activities of foreign residents, religious venues, and the registration for religious venues. These regulations reminded religious believers that they had to practice their faith within rigorously defined boundaries.

Jiang's endorsement of the "compatibility theory" (*shiyinglun* 适应论) on religion coincided with other bold changes that he promoted in the party, such as the principle of admitting business people in the CCP, which the 16th Party Congress approved formally when it ratified in 2002 the "Theory of the Three Represents".[75] This sequencing of changes constituted another reversal of Marxist orthodoxy,[76] according to which changes in the superstructure of ideology, culture, and religion endorse and legitimate prior changes in the social relations of production. Jiang's approach, while putting changes in the superstructure ahead of changes in society's material base, was not only following on the footsteps of Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic approach, but it was also reproducing the attitude of the state in imperial time, when the monopoly of rites was an extremely important prerogative of rulers whose proper performance was considered the basis of social stability. The latter point was made clear in 2000 in a quite dramatic way when the greatest challenge raised against the regime, from

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72 See Li 1990: 195a. I thank an external reviewer for this information.

73 CCCCP and SCPRC 1991.

74 The two other points he stressed were: "correctly handle religious affairs" and "improve the management of religions in accordance with the law".

75 The "important thought of the Three represents" (*sangedaibiao zhongyao sixiang* 三个代表重要思想) stipulates that the CCP should represent "advanced social productive forces, advanced culture, and the interests of the overwhelming majority of the people".

76 Mao's voluntarist approach to socialism was a first reversal of classical Marxism.

the perspective of Jiang, was not internal strife within the CCP over the admission of business and entrepreneurs, but a controversy of a religious nature.

In July 2000, the seemingly liberal regulatory regime put in place with Document 19 and its amendments could not prevent the CCP form enforcing the worst instance of religious persecution since the Cultural Revolution, with the clampdown against Falungong and other *qigong* movements.[77] In the same year, the CCP launched two campaigns aiming to show that it remained committed to its engagement to respect freedom of religion. On the one hand, it reiterated that China was implementing the rule of law for registration of religious institutions. On the other hand, it used the same legalistic language to justify its campaign against what it had labelled "dangerous cults". Party cadres enforced instructions from the central leadership to make clear this distinction between the legitimate religions recognized by the state and the others, who were stigmatized as responsible for all ills of society. This distinction, enforced though the Jiang and Hu Jintao administration, remains in force under Xi, as discussed above in reference to the crackdown in the spring of 2014.

In 2001, Ye Xiaowen, then director of the SARA, highlighted the main theoretical and policy prescriptions that party cadres needed to know about, in the introduction to an overview of the CCP religious work since 1949.[78] The goal of that publication was to show to the outside world that China takes seriously religious affairs, and is ready to handle them with legal instruments. That document presented three constitutional benchmarks (*jizhun* 基准) on religion as well as lists of instructions directed at the public, cadres, and scholars working on religious affairs that are still valid in 2014. The "benchmarks" refer to three specific points (*yaodian* 要点) relevant to religion among the 36 articles of the Constitution: "freedom of religious belief", the "separation of politics and religion" (*zhengjiao fenli* 政教分离), and the "independence of religion". Although they appear liberal in their wording, they have major limitations. Freedom of religious belief, as most observers have noted, does not guarantee the freedom to practice, and forbids proselytizing. Separation between religion and politics is one-sided: religion should not influence politics, but political leaders, via the CCP UFWD, the State Council's SARA, and mandatory registration in the "patriotic" religious associations, constitute interference in religious affairs. Finally, the independence of religion (*duli banjiao* 独立办教), obviously curtailed by the above-mentioned state interference, in effect means

77 For an exhaustive description of that campaign, see Tong 2009.

78 Ye 2001: 1–8.

"religious organizations are not subjected to influence from foreign hostile forces from abroad".[79]

The CCP guidance on religious work stresses that the public needs to know about four principles (*sige yuanze* 四个原则), which are the three constitutional provisions just mentioned, in addition to relevant rights and obligations (*quanli yu yiwu* 权利与义务),[80] along with "four maintenances" (*sige weihu* 四个维护). The fourth principle, rights and obligations, serves to remind the public of the CCP particular interpretation of the three constitutional provisions that the public must know about – and underlines the rationale behind the limitations just discussed. The respect for the rights of the public – religious believers and non-believers as well – is conditional on the observance of the following four requirements: observance of the laws, patriotism, support of the socialist path, and approval of CCP leadership. To ensure they enjoy their rights, individuals and organizations – including religious associations – must also observe four duties. That is, they must maintain: people's interest (*renmin liyi* 人民利益); respect for the law (*falu zunyan* 法律尊严); unity among ethnic groups (*minzu tuanjie* 民族团结); and national unification (*zuguo tongyi* 祖国统一). The last three of these duties are in themselves revealing. The respect for the law, at the time of publication, reflected the CCP's growing interest for the concept of "rule of law", in anticipation of accession to the WTO; the reference to the unity among ethnic groups alluded to increasing concerns over the rise in unrest among minorities; and finally evoking the issue of unification reflects the importance of Taiwan under Jiang, and alludes to the possibility that religious leaders and their followers in Taiwan can work for unification with their counterparts in China.

The CCP also instructs its cadres about ten basic points they must uphold. In addition to their respect for the principles of freedom of religion, the promotion of religious organizations' independence – as defined above – the management (*guanli* 管理) of the separation between the state and religion, and the implementation (*zhengchu* 正处) of the "four maintenances", they must: be mindful of the importance of religion; implement the united front work; encourage religious groups' patriotism; understand the differences and connections between religious and national minority affairs; and seek to realize the compatibility between religion and socialism. Finally, they must uphold the merits and moral value of atheist education. Along with these ten principles, cadres must keep in mind the three sentences (*sanjuhua* 三句话) that they should relay to the

79 Ye 2001: 6.

80 The four principles were promulgated in 1998 by Jiang, during a tour in Xinjiang, in Ye 2001: 4.

population in general when they want to communicate the CCP policy on religion: China is a country with religious freedom, the management of religion is in accordance with the law, and religion is compatible with socialism, three sayings known as "talk about policies" (*jiang zhengce* 讲政策), "focus on management" (*gua guanli* 挂管理), "promote adaptation" (*zu shiying* 足适应). Finally, cadres are instructed to remind members of the epistemic communities working on religious affairs that they should uphold the viewpoints on the five characteristics of religion discussed above.[81]

Hu Jintao moved forward in the recognition of the importance of religion when in November 2004, the State Council promulgated new Regulations – in 48 detailed articles – which took effect on 1 March 2005.[82] James Tong saw in the language used by the regulation an end to the managerial approach of the state towards religion.[83] Furthermore, the new regulations' relative placement of measures that favour the protection of religious freedom before measures that restrict it suggested a greater acceptance of religion.[84] The regulation also circumscribed the state scope of intervention to the public dimension of religion, not to individual believers' behaviour, in conformity with international standards.[85] The regulations also removed certification requirement and reduced the number of activities from religious associations needing state approval.[86] The new regulations are included in administrative law (*xingzheng fagui* 行政法规), however, and therefore they are not considered as authoritative as national laws (*falü* 法律). To be sure, there was no shortage of external comments to criticise the regulation's shortcomings.[87] Many noted that the CCP had adopted the international standards of religious freedoms in this document, but they have not always implemented the substance of that document in some of its policies.[88]

During the second mandate of Hu, the CCP, the SARA, and academics met to discuss further the application of the idea that religion is compatible with socialism. Having promoted the agenda of "harmonious society", seen by many as reminiscent of Confucian values, the CCP UFWD came up in 2006 with the "theory on the positive contribution of religions" (*zongjiao jiji zuoyong lun* 宗教积极作用论). In 2012, a step further was taken in that direction, with the

81 Ren 2002.

82 The following remarks are based on the detailed analysis on these regulations, in Tong 2005.

83 Tong 2010: 384.

84 Tong 2010: 384.

85 Tong 2010: 385.

86 Tong 2010: 385–386.

87 For a critique of the regulation, see Petersen 2006.

88 Yang 2013.

joint promulgation by the CCP's UFWD, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the SARA, of an opinion (*yijian* 意见) stating that religious associations can engage in public interest work.[89] Although "opinions" have an even lower status than regulations or laws, it is interesting to note that they allow for religious institutions a greater scope of activities than was previously the case.

Although the CCP has moved since the beginning of the reform and opening policy towards an increasing acceptance of religion in general and in particular recognized its compatibility with Chinese contemporary society, there remains some important resistance. Because leaders have insisted since 1989 on presenting an image of unanimity, it is difficult to account for the extent and nature of this resistance. As Beja noted in his analysis on the Chinese democracy movement's failure to prevail in the late 1980s, the CCP has sought since the June 4th massacre to avoid at all cost giving the appearance of division within its own ranks, lest his adversaries would take advantage of perceived weakness to undermine its rule. It is too early to tell whether the ongoing campaign of Xi Jinping against corruption within the CCP is doing damage to the party's pretense of unity. However, if there are divisions within the leadership on religious matters, the evidence so far is scant. The promotion of a positive view on religion, which goes as far as suggesting it can thrive under socialism, co-exist with the opposite view-point that as China modernize, it will wither away while material and scientific progress prevail.[90]

Under Xi Jinping, and under the direction of Wang Zuo'an in the SARA, many issues remain unresolved in the domain of religious affairs. There are even signs that the politicization of religion is going to give less emphasis on the cooperative side that was embodied with the idea of the compatibility with socialism under Hu Jintao, rather highlighting the more coercive dimension of the politicization, with an accent on the idea of religion as a threat. This is what recent documents on religious work suggest, where the emphasis is on legalization (*fazhihua* 法治化), not in the sense of a wider application of the rule of law to respect religious freedom, but rather a more comprehensive management of the affairs of religion in accordance with the law. The recent publication of a policy paper on religious work pointed to the following international factors as challenges to religious work: globalization, religious extremism, and the role played by the internet. It also included challenging domestic factors such as the collateral damages of the reform and opening policy like growing inequalities, poverty, along with moral relativism, and decline in public morality. It is revealing of a bias towards a coercive politicization of religion that the strategy

89 Zongjiaoju 宗教局 2012: 355.
90 Xi 2012.

envisaged to ensure these problems do not affect development is more supervision from the CCP.[91]

This suggests that the state prefers to rely even more on the official religious associations to uphold its policies against cults and foreign interference.[92] The fear of cult is not limited to the *qigong* movement, but also to movements that claim to be Christian and that are not recognized as such by the official Church. The CCP anxiety over alleged connection between religions in China and so-called "foreign hostile forces" was palpable in the notice from the CCP Central Committee's UFWD, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of State Security, and the SARA, distributed by the General Office of the CCCCP and the General Office of the State Council, to municipalities, municipalities-level and military regiments, about the "foreign use of religion to infiltrate institutes of higher education" and the issue of proselytizing on campus.[93] The fear over foreign infiltration under the name of religion has not abated under the leadership of Xi Jinping: on the 60th anniversary of the founding of the National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches, Wang Zuo'an, the head of the SARA, pointedly reiterated that Chinese Christian theology should be compatible with China's approach to socialism.[94]

Yet, within the Chinese epistemic community, there are many voices that offer more nuanced perspectives on religion in world affairs – and therefore on its compatibility with a resurgent China – that could offer their insights if leaders want to develop more cooperative policies. Moreover, different departments and organs of the state, as well as actors in business, civil society, and the religious sector itself, have conflicting interests. It is not clear to what extent the CCP has successfully consolidated its uncontested position as the arbiter of these interests, and to what extent it has totally succeeded in insulating itself from capture by some interests in business and/or the military. The extreme nervousness of Jiang Zemin in 1999 and the swiftness of the campaign against Falungong no doubt relates to that fear that the CCP could be captured by that organization, even though in retrospect that fear looks exaggerated even if Falungong was an important organization, as the range of its membership throughout China and abroad attests.[95] However, the fear that China could be overthrown by a

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91 Liu 2013: 16.

92 China Daily 2012.

93 General Office of the CCCCP and General Office of the State Council of the PRC 2011.

94 China Daily 2014.

95 For a detailed description of the growth of Falungong before its suppression, see Palmer 2005.

nation-wide, unified political-religious movement remains improbable in the near future because of the huge diversity and complexity of China's religious landscape.

4 Conclusions

The politicization of religion by the CCP has become increasingly complex and in that sense reflective of China's own religious diversity. The surprising finding is that despite a theoretical commitment to a Marxist-Leninist theory that is premised on the withering away of religion, the guidance for state policy towards religion is inspired by the long institutional memory of the Chinese state's traditional control of religion, which has inspired in turn the more sophisticated idea that religion has five characteristics that should serve as a guide for policy in the long run. According to that perspective, religion is a lasting phenomenon, more than merely a matter of individual choice, a component of ethnic identity, influenced by international trends, and complex in its manifestations. This view represents a more realistic understanding of China's condition than a dogmatic implementation of Marxism-Leninism doctrine would produce. The different approaches adopted by the CCP to take these realities into account have oscillated between cooperative and coercive approaches to the management of religious affairs. What these changes have revealed, though, is that the CCP is taking religion more seriously than its official pronouncements would lead one to believe. This has allowed the CCP to develop policies that are openly supportive of some religions and cooperative, along with others that are more coercive.

The cooperative/coercive dichotomy used throughout this essay should not leave the impression that the CCP faces stark choices in dealing with different religions. The practice on the ground is more complex. The cooperative and coercive approaches represent opposite ends of a continuum in which the middle ground is occupied by negotiations, or even a form of benign indifference. To borrow from Robert Weller, writing recently about official policy on religious affairs in China, sometimes the behaviour of the CCP is "governing with one eye open and one eye closed".[96] The recent decision to encourage religious institutions' organization of activities for the public interest suggests a move forward with some important implications. Religious associations are offered an improvement of their status as important partners in different social programs

96 Weller 2014.

and relief efforts, but in doing so they also become, for many followers, adherents, and/or faithful, complicit to a political regime they disapprove on religious grounds. It is too early to tell whether this politicization of religion by the state through collaboration can trigger disaffection and exit to other forms of religiosity that are underground or illegal. It is also quite possible that the deepening of cooperative relationship makes religious institutions and their members more fully supportive of the regime.

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