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THOUGHTS ON DEVELOPING THE POSITIVE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE BUILDING OF A HARMONIOUS SOCIETY

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(Atheism is an integral part of communist ideology, although, one hears, increasing numbers of Party members actually participate in some form of religious activity, to the consternation of the official leadership. But in today's China the attitude seems to be much like that Edward Gibbon attributed to the Roman authorities: to the philosopher, all religion is equally false; to the magistrate, equally useful: and in China today, apparently, religion can contribute to a "harmonious society." This document explores the "positive role" of religion, showing how this is fully a part of Marxism. Marx said that the criticism of religion is the criticism of all religion, but supposedly was not attacking religion in itself but, rather, religion as providing the moral rationale for a system of exploitation. Under the new society religion no longer plays this role. The author seems to deal with several tensions. For one thing, over the long term, can religion really play a useful function unless it is recognized as in some sense true? And is it plausible to identify religion as both irrational and as in effect an innate human propensity? While the focus here is on religion's "positive" role, there is also a tacit appreciation of its subversive potential. Religion is a "private" matter—and acceptable, apparently, to the extent that it serves the purposes of the dominant political authority.)

In discussing the task of speeding up the transformation of the task of changing the strategy of economic development, the Party's 17th Congress at the same brought up an important topic concerning religious work: we must also "promote the positive role of religion in fostering social harmony." Prior to that, the Sixth Plenum of the Sixteenth Central Committee also said it is important "to develop the positive role of religious personages and of the believing masses in promoting economic development." I think this "positive role for religion" is relevant not only to the direction of religious work in the new era but is also a necessary aspect in the transformation of the Chinese way of economic development. It is no accident that the Party has pronounced on the need to promote the positive role of religion while at the same time urging the need to transform the economic development strategy and to build a harmonious society. To analyze the positive role of religion, we must go deeply into the background of the age in which we are implementing the scientific development concept.

Thought Number One: Is the Notion of a “Positive Role” in Accord with the Marxist Concept of Religion?

The notion of a “positive role” would seem to contain an internal tension. The traditional authoritative interpretation of the Marxist perspective on religion is that it is an attitude of complete negation and criticism. Marx himself coined the famous saying that religion is the “opiate of the people” (and Lenin said that this was the “foundation stone” for the Marxist interpretation of religion). Is, then, the idea of a “positive function” in accord with the Marxist interpretation? The answer naturally is in the affirmative. The idea of “opiate” and of a “positive function” would seem to represent two different extremes. But we must not stop at the surface; rather, we should go deeper into it. We will find the two are linked internally. The ideas of positive function and of opiate both uphold the basic Marxist standpoint, viewpoint, and method and also provide an understanding of how a Marxist political party should handle religion during the initial stage of socialism. The idea of a positive role for religion belongs to the Marxist perspective on religion and so those who have such a perspective should not only uphold it but also develop it.

1. The Basic Standpoint, Viewpoint, and Method Entailed by the Opiate Theory

In the three hundred years since the end of feudal rule of the Middle Ages, Western society has been undergoing the process of modernization. From Adam Smith, [David] Hume, [Auguste] Comte, to [Max] Weber, [Emile] Durkheim, [William] James, [Carl] Jung, and [Sigmund] Freud--all these major thinkers--devoted much attention to the phenomenon of religion. Their specific ideas differed, but they shared a common general understanding. Foreign scholars summarize them as follows: 1. Religion is mistaken and harmful. Religion damages the individual because it hinders rational thought. 2. The force of religion is weakening. In the process of modernization religious systems, behaviors, and ideas will lose most of their social significance. Especially as scientific understanding grows and is spread, religion will move toward extinction. 3. Religion is an epiphenomenon (or part of the superstructure). It is not “true,” but to a certain extent reflects basic social phenomena. People have already become accustomed to seeking out religion’s material and secular bases, but these are not the same thing as religion itself. 4. Religion is a psychological phenomenon. Very few people regard religion as a social phenomenon, but see it instead as a psychological phenomenon. 5. The multiplicity of religions is harmful to society; there are advantages in having a monopoly of belief. It is because there are many different religions or conflicts among religions that doubts about faith arise.

It must be said that among these representative social scientists, Marx had the most decisive and thorough theories concerning religion. But the nature of his critique and his ultimate conclusions were not the same as those of the rest. Marx’s critique of religion is embedded in his general critique of capitalism. Marx made a thorough negation of

capitalism from its effects on the social system to its effects on culture. The theoretical function of Marx's categorization of religion as "opium" was part of demonstrating the unreasonable nature of capitalism. There were three ways in which Marx regarded religion as opium. One, religion served to prove from every single perspective the reasonableness of the system of exploitation, providing that system with moral support and spiritual consolation. The system was beautified as an arrangement made by God, made into something sacred and glorious that could not be justly resisted. Two, religion promised people an illusory happiness. It kept the people in shackles (meaning bound to the irrational system of exploitation), disguising the shackles as beautiful flowers and so numbing the people's fighting spirit. Not only did it support the existing irrational system, but was incapable of giving the people any real help whatsoever. Three, religion is an expression of the bitter reality and also a protest against that reality. But this protest is passive. It is the "sighs of the oppressed" and nothing else. This kind of protest can do no harm to the system of exploitation and neither can it help the people to liberate themselves. In European society of Marx's day, especially in Germany, France, and England, there was great protest arising from all the contradictions in social relations, and religion had a deeply passive influence on the laboring masses. Therefore, in order to win over and mobilize the laboring masses to devote themselves to the revolutionary movement, it was necessary to undertake a critique of religion: "The critique of religion is the premise of all other critiques." Marx's concept of opium was not directed toward teachings but toward man. The proper way to perceive and to deal with the broad mass of believing proletarian laboring masses who lived lives of bitterness was to represent, support, and bring into reality their basic interests. This is the basic standpoint of the Marxist view of religion and also where its purpose lies. The Marxist view of religion is consistent with the Marxist view of the masses.

Therefore, without a doubt the true nature of the Marxist critique of religion is to deny capitalism and change an irrational social system; it is not directed against religion itself. As Marx saw it, the significance of the critique of religion was that it was a starting point, a window allowing a theoretical breakthrough. It was a way of going a step further to open a road to political struggle. Therefore, religion as such is not the major concern of the critique of religion. Once the old system drops its "sacred outer garments" and stands exposed, the spearhead of revolution can be directed against the root—"The critique of Heaven is transformed to a critique of this world; the critique of religion becomes a critique of law; the critique of theology becomes a critique of politics." The proletarian revolution can then overthrow the old system of exploitation. While Marxist philosophy has absorbed nourishment from [Ludwig] Feuerbach's materialism and Hegel's dialectics, Marx transcends his predecessors. As he said in a letter written in 1843 explaining where he was dissatisfied with Feuerbach: "He overestimates the role of nature and underestimates that of politics." The same words could apply to his attitude toward Hegel. Obviously, in exploring actual issues, the question,

as Marx said in his own words, is how “to change the world.” It is to “expose and transform the existing structures of society and politics.”

It must be pointed out that while Marx carried on a merciless critique of religion, he did not demand that religion be extinguished. He demanded only that religion be separated from its incorporation into the state and bourgeois rights and restored to its place as a private matter for citizens. Religion must be separated from politics. Religion would then no longer serve as an “opiate” maintaining the old social system. Engels even more than once bemoaned those people who were “leftier than left,” “more revolutionary than revolutionary,” who wanted the program of the workers’ party directly to stipulate atheism and declare war on religion. He upbraided Dühring for proposing as a revolutionary principle that a socialist society should prohibit religion. Marx believed that the extinction of religion was a natural historical process. In his later years he thoughtfully pointed out, “If considered in terms of the existing relations of daily life, of the existing relations among men or between men and nature that we see before us, the religion of the world as it exists today will be extinguished. It is a product of current material processes. Since it is an artificial construct freely made, put together in a planned way for a means of control, it is a mystification that we ourselves can cast aside. However, this requires a specific material basis or a particular set of material conditions. These conditions themselves are the natural product of a long and painful historical process.” “What is part of the human condition can be resolved by man. In religion today we see the extinction of the final forces of alienation, and following this will be the extinction of religion itself.”

2. The Thesis that Religion Has a Positive Function Upholds the Basic Standpoint, Concepts, and Methods of Marxism.

Social existence determines social consciousness. Marx has said: “Religion itself has no substance or realm of its own.” If we have to talk about the essence of religion, “we can only seek its nature in the material world at each stage of its development.” This tells us that the social function of religion and the essence of religion are linked internally. This social function does not derive from any notion of religion in the abstract, but is manifested in actual life as it undergoes all sorts of concrete social relationships. Different religions, or the same religion under different social conditions, perform different social functions. Ultimately that function derives from the nature of religion itself, but is much more decided by the nature of its social environment, especially the nature of the social system. That is to say, religion has two sorts of social function. It cannot be separated from its specific social conditions. Under different social conditions it may have an entirely different social function.

Marxism believes that the origins, development, and function of religion must in the end be traced back to the

historical conditions under which it developed. It has been more than 160 years since Marx, in 1843, declared religion to be the opium of the people; the historical position and core duties of Marxist political parties have changed since that time. The position of religion in society has also changed, and so has religion itself. In New China religion has been separated from government. Religion no longer functions as a state ideology exercising rule over social public life. It belongs to the private sphere, providing people with a view of the world and a view of values. Through its influence on believers and on the social organizations they themselves form to realize their collective interests, its overall results are positive. At the same time, the believing masses also undergo change. The number of religious believers now is greater than 100 million. While their beliefs are different from ours, this one hundred million plus also includes laborers and builders of socialism with Chinese characteristics. They are an important social base for our party in its role as a governing party. The Party must represent the basic interests of the great majority of the broad masses, and this naturally includes the basic interests of religious believers. The Party must to the greatest extent possible unite with all forces it is possible to unite with and mobilize all the positive factors that can be mobilized. It must put together a powerful collective structure to build a harmonious society, so naturally it must unite with, mobilize, and develop whatever is positive and active among religious believers. Therefore, there must be a change in our understanding of the social role of religion.

Perhaps we may say that the “opium” thesis is the understanding of a revolutionary party, while “positive role” is the understanding of a governing party. Shortly after the establishment of New China, Zhou Enlai had the following evaluation of the opium thesis: “This is a slogan for a revolutionary period. Now we have political power. It is no longer necessary to stress how religion is like opium.” Indeed, as early as the era of New Democracy our Party understood that many of those who participated in the Chinese revolution did not accept Marxist doctrine. But in this bloody and fiery struggle the Party sought truth from facts and established a broad patriotic united front that includes the broad mass of religious personages.

Today, in accord with the task of building a harmonious socialist society, with the continued existence of religion under socialism and religion’s development of new characteristics, with the interaction of the positive role of religion and the development of socialist society, the Party has proposed the scientific thesis, “Develop the positive functions of religion.” In this the Party upholds the basic standpoint, viewpoint, and methods of Marxism and meets the demands to “serve the people” and “represent the interests of the broad mass of the people.” It is a concrete manifestation of the Party’s desire and the demands of the times to uphold and develop the Marxist concept of religion. It is, indeed, a consideration of political correctness: whether it is a matter of representing the interests of the broad mass of the people,

or of fully developing a comfortable standard of living, or of promoting the excellent aspects of traditional culture and joining in the fierce competition of globalization—wherein different cultures collide, interact, and meld together: they all require this sort of thing. Under the new historical conditions, if we dogmatically continue to regard religion as the “opium of the people” and treat believers as hostile outside forces, taking an antagonistic attitude toward more than 100 million people, we will lose the political standpoint of Marxism on religion, casting away the basic viewpoint and method of dialectical and historical materialism. If this happens the ruling position of the Party cannot become consolidated. Practice proves that upholding the policy of religious freedom, upholding the perspective that “differences of belief are secondary matters within the overall context of common interests,” upholding the principle of “united cooperation in politics, mutual respect in matters of faith” are all part of current and long-term requirements of a correct understanding of religious matters under socialism with Chinese characteristics. Only in this way will the broad mass of religious believers be able to maintain an intimate emotional connection with the Party. This will allow religious work to provide correct guidance and maintain its dynamism. Religious workers must have this kind of understanding in order to have a correct scientific method.

Thought Number Two: How to Come to a Correct Definitional Understanding of Religion?

In order to deepen our understanding of the positive role of religion, we must return to the starting point. What is our definitional understanding of religion?

Max Müller, the founder of contemporary western studies of religion, said: “There are as many different definitions of religion as there are different religions in the world.” The enmity between those holding different definitions of religion is no less bitter than that between the different religions themselves. Obviously, it is very difficult to define religion in a way acceptable to everyone. Müller provided a scientific definition of religion: “Religion belongs to the capacity for infinite subjectivity.” It is an innate capacity of nature. It does not rely on the senses or on reason. It enables man to become aware of the infinite under various names and in various disguises. Without this ability there is no religion, not even the most primitive kind of idolatry or worship of material things.” Following up on the perception that religion is a human spiritual “capacity,” the contemporary western student of religion [Mircea] Eliade said that religion is an “anthropological constant, found wherever there are human beings. [Paul] Tillich says religion is “man’s ultimate concern.”

Apart from these scholarly definitions of religion, in academic circles there are understandings deriving from political science, psychology, the humanities, and the social sciences. Hobbes analyzed religion from the political

perspective: “Religion is that which stems from fear of the invisible as those forces are conceived in the heart or imagined through publicly accepted legends. Whatever is imagined from legends that are not publicly accepted is superstition. If those forces are truly as we imagine them, then that is religion.” He distinguished true from false religion on the basis of the power and will of the state: whatever the state or the ruler agreed to was religion; what the state or the ruler did not accept was superstition. [Friedrich] Schleiermacher, [Rudolf] Otto, and Freud approached religion from the perspective of psychology. Schleiermacher said religion is “the emotions that man relies on absolutely.” It is the inner and independent “sense and appreciation of the infinite.” Otto regarded religion as the “emotional interaction of reverence for and attraction to God.” Freud thought that “reliance” on God was something internal to man, analogous to a child’s sense of reliance on his parents. It was linked to these emotions toward parents in producing feelings of guilt. Western social science explanations of religion are represented by [Emile] Durkheim and Max Weber. Durkheim thought that religion was a factor in human social solidarity: religion is a social phenomenon and society is in turn a religious phenomenon. The “sacred” in religion is a symbol of the unity of society, a manifestation of social cohesion. Weber thought that the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism had a reciprocal influence on each other. Protestant ideology guided the birth and development of capitalism. Feuerbach explained religion from a humanistic perspective. He proposed that “man creates religion.” “Man is the origin of religion; man is the core of religion; man is religion’s end.” Feuerbach’s perspective on religion had an important influence on Marx and Engels.

In “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law,” Marx wrote a much quoted passage: “Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. . . . [It] is the *fantastic realization* of the human essence since the *human essence* has not acquired any true reality.” “*Religious* suffering is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.” Engels said: “Religion is the fantastic reflection in people’s heads of all those outside forces that go along with their daily lives. In these reflections, those human forces take a form transcending humanity.” We still take these words to be the authoritative Marxist definition of religion. They both define the Marxist view of the essence of religion and establish the main elements of the definition.

I believe that a definitional understanding of religion must lead us to recognize and grasp onto religion’s transcendence, its exclusivism, its doctrinal nature, and other traits.

Transcendence: All religions have some sort of transcendent theory. This means going beyond nature, supernatural. Without transcendence there is no religion. That is the essential distinction between religion and anything else. Religion

believes that only if man attains transcendence can he achieve salvation and resolve his ultimate concerns.

Why do people have to worship supernatural forces? It is because man is limited. People imagine that they can make use of supernatural forces to overcome their limitations and the banalities of daily life, transcending both themselves and the world and arrive at ultimate freedom. The English word *religion* derives from the Latin. Its literal meaning is “to bring together again” (在結合). In its origins the word held Christian significance. Mr. Huo Daomei [b. 1936; student of religion and proponent of “new humanism”] has made an acute analysis of this: The Bible says that the ancestors of the human race, Adam and Eve, committed original sin and were expelled from the Garden of Eden. But God was not willing to abandon man; by means of his own son, “the Word Become Flesh,” Jesus Christ, he made a bridge to rescue man, bringing man back from the dust of the world and into Heaven, once again to be together with God. First there is the separation of God and man. Then a savior takes away man’s sin, so that once again God and man are brought back together: this is religion. Obviously what is reflected in Christianity is the relationship of God and man, man’s channel to God. Through belief in and worship of God man is able to transcend himself and the world.

Transcendence is also the most basic characteristic of eastern religions as well. The selflessness, going-out, Nirvana all imply transcendence. The Zen teachers say: “With a clear mind you can see your nature; when you see your nature you become Buddha.” This also refers to transcendence, including transcendence from the subjective and from the world. The Taoists preach about life and longevity. The pursuit of life is a means for transcending the limitations of natural laws and attaining immortality or the ability to go beyond nature: this is a kind of transcendence. Naturally, the paths to transcendence are different in the eastern and western religions. To speak in generalities, in the west transcendence comes from outside. Man cannot save himself. He must believe in God and rely on outside force for salvation. In eastern religions, especially in Chinese religions, transcendence means internal enlightenment; we elevate ourselves by returning to our original nature. For example, in Taoism: “Man models himself on earth; earth models itself on Heaven; Heaven models itself on the Tao; the Tao models itself on the spontaneous workings of Nature.” “Man and Heaven are one”: the Way of Heaven is found in the Way among men; the Way of Man embodies the Way of Heaven. The *Dao De Jing* says: “Know all under Heaven without going out doors; know the Way of Heaven without peeping out of the window.” The *Baopuzi* says: “My fate is with me, not with Heaven.” In Buddhism, transcendence means to “begin with the mind and heart.” “If the heart is clear, the country’s soil will be clear; if the heart is at ease, all living things will be at ease; if the heart is at peace, all under Heaven will be at peace.” The *Diamond Sutra* says: “The mind is produced in response to nothingness.” Nothingness is the way the heart transcends the six-fold roots of evil and achieves clarity.

Following from the nature of transcendence, religion also expresses a sense of mystery and of the sacred. Religion

is how the limited grasps or pursues the limitless. It encompasses those things that cannot be completely grasped by man's rational thought. Therefore it involves mystery. In the intercourse between man and spirit, man hopes to achieve a better reward, both in this world and the other world. Therefore man shows feelings of respect, dependence, and appreciation to the spiritual (what transcends the natural forces). The sense of the sacred in religion is produced through the workings of those feelings. From mysticism it is easy to sink into the mire of superstition; and from misunderstanding the sense of the sacred it is easy to hurt the feelings of the believing masses. It is important that those engaged in religious work have an understanding and appreciation of this point.

Religion is a reflection of the transcendence of natural forces, with "spirit" at its core; and just because of this in one of its aspects it involves constraints on human nature. Tracing the roots to the bottom, whether we consider heaven or hell, souls or ghosts, religion cannot be separated from man. According to Feuerbach, the nature of religion is its relationship to man. "God" in religion is the revelation of what is generically human. "This is the model upon which man creates God." Therefore, "the secret of theology is anthropology; the secret of God's nature is human nature." Marx also criticized religion as the alienation of human nature from itself. He went beyond Feuerbach in that he not only identified the worldly base of religion—man—but he also saw that the "nature of man is not the abstraction of the concrete individual nature; in its expression, it is the summary of all social relations."

Exclusivism: It seems that every single religion proclaims that it alone possesses the truth and that that truth is single and absolute. What's more, each believes that the god it worships is the one who created life and the ten thousand things and is the source of all truth—and because of this is lord of the universe. For this reason, each of the various religions and sects rejects all the others. The exclusiveness of religion leaves each to close itself off, this closing off reinforcing the exclusivity. Comparatively speaking, the exclusivity of Chinese Buddhism and Taoism is relatively weak, something rare and precious. Buddhism is mild and tolerant, emphasizing the harmony of the Middle Way. It can encompass other religions and intellectual cultures. There is very little extreme exclusivity in its thought or theory. Add to this its basic teaching, which puts much more stress on going out of the world rather than coping in the world. It teaches weakness and little forceful compulsion toward disciples. Taoism is also basically like that, with the addition that Taoism also preaches purity and simplicity. The Tao patterns itself on nature; it takes no action and does not contend. It commends modesty, patience, self-control. The historical ability of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism to co-exist is proof of this.

Doctrinal nature: The Chinese term for religion, zongjiao (宗教) derives from Buddhism. Its meaning has to do with teachings, dogmas—their explanation, elaboration, and transmission. The most basic religious activity is the

elaboration of doctrine. This is what determines the particular religion's direction, meaning, rules, and other ideological emphases. For example, Buddhism says, "To exalt the dharma is the duty of the family; our work is to seek the well-being of the living." Evangelization, preaching, exalting the dharma, proclaim in the Way—all these embody religion's doctrinal nature. This is a common feature of all religions. Naturally, all actions that are aimed allegedly at proclaiming the scripture must be transparent and in accord with the law.

2. From the Five-Fold Character to the Three-Fold Character

Comrades inside the Party have been studying religion's nature for a long time. In 1917 in *New Youth* Chen Duxiu put forth his famous viewpoint concerning "substituting science for religion." In 1922 Li Dazhao wrote "Negating Religion," pointing out that religion involved unequal relationships. On 8 October 1952 Mao Zedong spoke to representatives of the Tibetan police force, pointing out that "religion is culture." He said: "Culture includes schools, newspapers, movies, and other such things, including religion."

In the 1950s Li Weihan [1894-1984; a first generation CPC member; in charge of united front work in the 1950s and 1960s, until he was purged in the Cultural Revolution] argued that religion has a five-fold character: persistence, mass following, ethnicity, internationalism, and complexity. This thesis reflected a relatively full understanding of the Party's concept of the social role of religion during the first period of national construction. It also became the basic viewpoint of the Party toward religion during the era of socialism. This was a historical contribution.

In 2001 Jiang Zemin told the National Work Conference on Religion that changes in the international and domestic situation and in religion itself had increased our understanding of the complexity of religion's role in politics, the economy, culture, and on ethnic issues. We must go a step further and develop, on the basis of the idea of the five-fold character of religion, go deeper into three of those characteristics: religion's persistence, mass following, and complexity. These "three-fold characteristics" are the basis for the Party's perspective on religion in the new era. This set up a theoretical basis for our religious work. Comrade Ye Xiaowen [1950-; from 1998-2009 director of State Administration of Religious Affairs] linked this three-fold character together with the basic direction of the Party's religious work (the "four sentences"). He pointed out that the "basic characteristic is persistence," so we must "actively guide the mutual adaptation of religion and socialist society. The "crucial characteristic is mass following, so we must "correctly, thoroughly, and in an all-around way carry out the policy of freedom of religious belief." Its "special characteristic is its complexity." Therefore, we must "rely on the law to manage religious work"; we must uphold the principles of "independence, self-government, and self-management."

I think there are three layers of meaning to the notion that religion is “persistent.” The first is that we must see religion through a historical vision, a historical perspective. We must look to its sources and the reasons for its continuation and also look to its huge contributions to the development of human civilization. Secondly, we must have the proper perception of religion’s current actuality and of its future role. Whether you like it or not, religion is going to endure for a long time in socialist society and will also undergo future developments. Religion’s existence and development will not go away because of anyone’s subjective desires. These cannot be changed by man’s subjective will. The third is that this persistence embodies certain rules. Communists do not believe in religion, but will treat religion with a scientific attitude. A scientific attitude is one which manages things according to rules. I think there are two levels to the idea of religion’s mass following. The first is the number of believers. The precondition for ordinary religion is a large following. The second is its organized nature, its sense of unity and solidarity, and its systematic nature. Religious activities are usually carried out by organized groups; and the development of religion has become increasingly a matter of systematization. Whether we consider organized religion, such as Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Christianity, or Catholicism, or folk religion such as the worship of Mazu [Goddess of the Sea; her cult is especially popular in Fujian and Taiwan], all religion will have some sort of organization and system. The only differences are those of degree. It is religion’s organized nature that permits its cohesive behavior that enables it to influence or even control large masses of people. Therefore, religion can sometimes become a very powerful social force and play a huge role in society.

Thought Number Three: How Should We Develop Religion’s Positive Functions?

I think we should proceed along three general methods:

1. The basic direction of in implementation should be the search for effective political guarantees.

General Secretary Hu Jintao has pointed out that the key to developing the positive function of religion is “to implement well the Party’s basic direction on religious work and to see that it takes root.” Why does he say that? I think there are three kinds of reason:

One: The Party’s basic direction in religious work is that the whole Party must, as a single body, completely comprehend the Party’s rules and discipline concerning religious work in the new era. The “four sentences” of the basic direction are the crystallization of the Party’s experience in religious work over the 30 years and more since reform and opening. They have been tested in the actual carrying out of religious work over the past many years. They embody the Party’s theoretical and policy creativity concerning religious work and reflect the consensus of the entire Party. They

have been written into the Party charter.

Two: The development of the positive function of religion is a direct necessary consequence of the Party's basic direction on religious work. The four sentences in the basic direction are mutually interrelated. The common foothold of each is to guide in a positive manner the mutual adaptation of religion and of socialist society. The force of this is extremely important. There are three levels of significance that are worth our thinking about deeply. The first is positive guidance, not treating religion in a passive manner or as something to react to when an issue comes up. They have developed into a way for our party to take an active, positive, integrated approach as we have never been able to before. Next is mutual responsiveness, not mutual rejection or opposition. Religion is no longer an object to be attacked and annihilated but should exist in harmony with the rest of us, something to be enjoyed in pleasure to the common good. Finally, the mutual responsiveness is with "socialist society," not with something else. That is the stipulation and affirmation of political correctness. That is, it is stipulated that religion should be responsive to socialist society, not some other kind of society. That is a basic demand, a basic demand of patriotism. The affirmation means that religion is itself a part of socialism with a Chinese character. Religion is an objective phenomenon of our society that will persist for a long time. Religious relations are one of the five great relations in socialism. The believing masses are joined with the Party in flesh and blood and are important builders in our common enterprise. Therefore, there is a direct logic and policy relevance to "positive guidance of the mutual responsiveness of religion and socialist society." It is something that is necessary in the development of the positive role of religion.

Three: The basic direction for the development of religious work provides the appropriate political environment, policy base, and legal guarantees. The first item in the basic direction is "thoroughly and in all aspects carry out the Party's policy of freedom of belief." That is also the basic spirit of Article 36 of the state constitution; it is the starting point for the Party's religious policy. It is the first premise for developing the positive role of religion. The second item in the basic direction is "carry out religious work according to law." This is the concrete manifestation of ruling the country and implementing policy according to law in the religious sphere. In our country, managing religious work according to law includes giving legal protection to the citizens' free exercise of religious belief. It also includes the regulation of religious relationships, activities, and behaviors in those areas where they have to do with the common good of the society as a whole. These two implications are mutually supportive. The management of religious work is one kind of social management. This must be done in the spirit of putting people first, administering according to law, democratic supervision, harmonization of relations, provision of services, so forth and so on. Therefore, in developing the positive role of religion, administration according to law is a major legal guarantee. The third item in the basic

direction is “uphold the principle of independent and autonomous management.” This is also in the spirit of Article 36 of our constitution. ^[1] Chinese religious associations and religious work do not accept foreign support. The reason for stressing this point is that in the past China was the victim of imperialist aggression and rapacity; and it is a historical fact that religion served as an instrument of this. ^[2] The principle is based upon the value placed by the Chinese people on national freedom and independence. It is also based upon an awareness of the plots by outside hostile forces to use religion to “westernize” and divide China. This is a major issue that affects national security and social stability. It is a necessary condition for the existence and flourishing of religion in China and also a necessary condition for religion’s assuming a positive role. The fourth item in the basic direction is “actively guide the mutual responsiveness of religion and society.” As pointed out above, this is a logical development of the need actively to guide this mutual responsiveness. It is a necessary implication and conclusion.

In sum, the Party’s direction on religious work and the development of the positive function of religion have an internal and necessary relationship. The basic premise for thorough implementation of the basic direction is a positive role, and this positive role provides a framing principle. We cannot depart from this basic premise or this framework.

2. Explore a Multiplicity of Paths for Developing This Positive Role

Marx once said: “It’s not enough for thought simply to embody practice; practice itself must foster the development of thought.” The notion of “positive role” is a scientific concept of major creative significance. It is a further deepening of the Party’s theory of liberating thought, of unceasing adjustment, of seeking to perfect policy. What still needs to be pointed out here is that it is a consequence of our practice over the past thirty-some years of “crossing the river by feeling for stones.” “Practice in itself leads toward thought.” We obtain true knowledge by means of practice. In the past 30 years we have fully restored and implemented the Party’s policy on religious freedom and the broad mass of believers have their freedom of religion guaranteed. Therefore they loyally uphold the leadership of the Party, uphold reform and opening, have actively thrown themselves into the task of building socialism and so have made positive contributions. We must go a step further in liberating our thought and help and support those in the field of religion to go more deeply in exploring and developing the multiple ways in which they can play a positive role: 1) Develop the ways in which religion can satisfy the needs of the great mass of believers; 2) Develop the ways in which religion can help make psychological adjustments in society; 3) Develop the ways in which religion can elevate the morals of society; 4) Develop the charitable activities of religious groups; 5) Develop the ways in which religion can creatively strengthen social management and civil society; 6) Develop the ways in which religion can foster a common

understanding among ethnicities, cultures, and the state; 7) Develop the ways in which religion can foster the excellence of traditional Chinese culture; 8) Develop the ways in which religion can foster national unity and world peace.

3. Pay Attention to the Limits Imposed by Policy

To a certain extent the development of the positive role of religion depends upon religion's own maturation and development. This is only natural. But in today's environment of cultural conflict, political struggle, and economic competition different religions may be at different levels of maturity and will exercise different kinds of influence. We must rely upon practice and pay attention to this and grasp onto it. Without comparison there can be no distinctions, and without distinctions there can be no policy. In guiding the development of the positive role of religion there are things that we must do and things that we must not do.

Because of my work, for the past few years I have participated in a good many [religious, charitable, and cultural] Buddhist and Taoist activities [Long list of the author's participation in various Buddhist and Taoist functions is omitted here.] For the most part these activities display the special Chinese tradition of a harmonious traditional culture as displayed in Buddhism and Taoism and meet the demands of our mainstream thinking on building a harmonious society. They display a positive social function and exercise a profound influence both at home and abroad.

The above has focused on the positive role that religion is able to play and has not said much about its negative side. This by no means implies that it is not an important issue and should be overlooked. It is no use denying that as a product of man's self-alienation, every religion to one degree or another involves fantasy, closed-mindedness, and intolerance. When society lacks balancing by science and reason, all religions can lead their adherents to extremism. We also need to see that while contemporary society operates on a system in which politics and religion are separate, religion necessarily has an ideological component and religious activities often have a political influence. Under certain particular conditions it can raise major political questions. We need to remember that religion has its special characteristics and complexities. It can have both a positive and a negative social role. This is true of all religions whatsoever.

Xin Hua Wenzhai, 5 June 2011

[1] **Article 36. Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief.** No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. The state protects normal religious

activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state. Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.

[2] In principle, Chinese religious organizations are not permitted to accept funds or other help from outside the country, although in practice various informal arrangements have evolved over the past several decades. The main impact of this “autonomy” is the refusal of the “official” Catholic Church formally to recognize any administrative authority of the Holy See.