

Report : “ Religion , Faith , State and Society ” Conference

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The ‘ *Religion , Faith , State and Society* ’ Conference was hosted by Department of Oriental Languages , Stockholm University , and coordinated by Mr. Fredrik Fällman , PhD , Researcher at The Royal Academy of Letter History and Antiquities , Department of Oriental Languages , Stockholm University. The conference was held at Lidingö Hotel and Education Centre , Stockholm , Sweden on 7 and 8 of June , 2011. It attracted about 17 participants from Sweden , Finland , China , America , Norway and Danmark.

The conference started from a consideration of the interaction between religion , faith , state and society of China , focusing on issues of the current situation of Chinese Christianity. The conference contains three keynote speeches , three responses and some free discussions.

1. Carsten Vala (PhD , Assistant Professor , Loyola University , USA) ***The Emergence of Urban Unregistered Churches and a Nationwide Network***

The speech starts with illustrating the specific relation between civil society and powerful state/government of China and argues that there is no clear separation between the civil society and the state in China. The state controls most of the resources. Hence , the most efficient way for social organizations to survive and develop themselves is “ to draw near to the state ” . The speaker mentions that , “ by sharing goals with the state , social organizations are seen as complementary to the state by fulfilling functions it cannot afford to perform , such as provision of social welfare ” . There is also no escape for unregistered churches.

Doctor Vala states that new types of large-scale , open unregistered churches have developed in cities across China very unlike traditional “ house ” churches ’ small , secretive worship

services cloistered in private apartments. These "newly emerging" urban congregations meet in office buildings and welcome visitors and state officials. For these churches, maintaining party-state connections (ties) have been the key method for their continued existence. According to Vala's investigation conducted in Wuhan, Shanghai and Beijing, there were several typical party-state ties established by unregistered churches. In Wuhan, one church kept its ties from the church leader's previous occupational work as a famous doctor who used to treat several highly ranked officials. In Shanghai, one famous unregistered church maintained its ties from the church leader's previous training from the official "Three-self" church. In Beijing, benefiting from the church leader's previous work experience as an official "Three-self" priest, an outstanding unregistered church (Zion church) runs quite well, while the other famous church (Shouwang Church) is struggling for its surviving. All those successful unregistered churches have paid much attention to keeping a channel of communication with local authority. In return, they won government's trust and were entitled with, to some extent, the legal rights to run outside the system of official churches. "Apart from satisfying regime demands, leaders of these large unregistered churches also must deflect criticism from traditional house church leaders in order to avoid losing legitimacy among Protestants who see them as cozying up to authorities." Nevertheless, these churches enjoy more benefits than what they lost.

Doctor Vala also demonstrates that universities, other than any other organizations, offer "safe-enough" spaces for various social movements and NGOs, especially for unregistered churches. Firstly, "universities offer 'safe-enough' spaces for Chinese to be exposed to Protestant Christianity apart from monitored official churches". Secondly, "university settings offered other benefits to unregistered congregations lacking firm financial backing and wanting new members". And last but not least, "universities have been hubs of Chinese Christian activity since the early 1980s is because hundreds of foreign English teachers, many of whom are American Protestants, teach and evangelize students and professors on campus".

The earthquake in 2008 and the accompanying relief effort were watershed moments for some unregistered churches. At least 150 churches around China participated by sending 1,500 volunteers in providing disaster relief. "Before the earthquake churches had mostly been linked to separate networks, but after the disaster he maintained that different networks linked together across the country."

In the end, Vala concludes his speech with two possible outcomes of these unregistered churches. First, it may be that state policy changed and these informal ties may be recognized

officially and transformed into state legitimation so that illegal organizations may join the state framework. Or, second, the gray zone may be rendered by the Party-state into black and white categories again, and these in-between organizations are eradicated.

2. He Guanghu (Professor , School of Philosophy , Renmin University of China , China)

The State Faith and the Religious Faith in Today's China

The inquiry of “ what is the ‘ state faith ’ of China ? ” is the main issue of Professor He Guanghu ’ s keynote speech. All through the speech, he is analyzing the concept of “ state faith ” of today ’ s / modern / contemporary China and its substance. He argues that the “ state faith ” does exist, although this specific noun is rarely used. His analysis starts with separating the meaning of “ state faith ” into three aspects, in other words, demonstrating how this concept was conducted in three different contexts. “ The first meaning is the state ’ s faith, or the faith of state; the second meaning is the national faith, or the faith of nationals; the third meaning is the faith in state, or the belief in state. ” He also tries to explain the relationship between “ state faith ” and religious faiths in each context.

In the first sense of state faith, he put forward that, “ CCP, with its political power, has made its ‘ faith ’ -Marxism or Communism-become the ‘ state ’ s faith of PRC ”. But that is no more than propaganda in some official occasions and contexts. The ‘ state ’ s faith, which embodies / the nature of atheism, in that sense, is not really religious faith, though it has some quasi religiousness. It expels other religions. The second sense of state faith-the national faith or the faith of national - “ does not exist in today ’ s China ”. Guanghu thinks the faith landscape of today ’ s Chinese is more than complex, there does not exist a prevailing faith, religious or non-religious, which is unarguably regarded by Chinese people (or most of them) as the “ national faith ”. He analyses through the “ Five Major Religions ”, namely Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism and the “ quasi-religious ” faith, namely Marxist faith and Confucian faith and other popular faiths and superstitions. Finally he expels their possibility as “ national faith ”. Guanghu deems that the “ state faith ” in its third sense-the faith in state or the belief of state-does exist in today ’ s China. Since the united empire was established in Qin dynasty, Chinese have been shaping an image of a scared superpower, which is upon all the individuals and social units, namely “ the state ”, with its representative the emperor or the gov-

ernment. "The 'faith in state' was strengthened to an unprecedented degree after 1949." And "one of the characteristics of this 'faith in state' is that it has taken 'patriotism' as most popular and main expression in modern China". For a lot of Chinese people, even for some religious believers, "the word 'patriotism' has readily become the properly expressive symbol of the faith in state".

Guanghu argues that the faith in state should not be treated as religious belief, which deserves ultimate value and unreasonable commitment from its adherents, but rather as quasi-religion or pseudo-religion, which should be "treated with reason". At the end, he warns that the worship of state or the faith in state would "distort the human nature and reverse the order for the state and the people".

3. Notto R. Thelle (Senior professor at the University of Oslo) ***Response to He Guanghu***

Of the three possible meanings of "state faith" – national or state religion; the various faith commitments of the people; and faith in the state, or the tendency to make the state an object of faith – He Guanghu chooses the last perspective as a focus for his analysis. There are several ways in which the state can be an object of faith: from people's trust in the benevolent ruler who will provide harmony, protection, and wellbeing, to the oppressive and forced submission. China, of course, has experiences of both of these trends/ways. In recent history, during the early stages of the revolution there was a deep trust among people that the state (or the party, the system) would provide a better future for all, but there were also stages when that trust was betrayed: the ideology became empty words, and the power became oppressive.

One may argue on a practical level: it is impossible to believe in the state when the state cannot be trusted. One may argue on a philosophical or ethical level: it is unacceptable to establish any state or authority with that type of absolute position. One may argue on a historical level: it is clear that throughout human history all attempts to create absolute state power have ended in disaster and inhuman oppression. One may argue from a religious position: even though religions have often provided ideological support for the state and the ruler, there is a potential conflict which emerges when the secular authority becomes absolute, putting itself over God, or wants to overrule the faith and conscience of the individual believer or the religious community.

Let me add a few comments from a theological and Biblical perspective. First, there is the Biblical first commandment that in principle is related to? all political authority: “You shall have no other god beside me” (Ex 20:3). Second, in Martin Luther’s interpretation “god” is “that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress”, which means that all sorts of authorities may function as “god” for people: the state, wealth, ideology, position, power, sex, the market. Third, in the Old Testament the people of Israel wanted to have a king like all other peoples in the region. The prophet said, “No, God is your king.” (1 Sam 8:1-22). Fourth, in the New Testament Jesus was in constant conflict with the political and religious authorities. On the other hand, there are statements that emphasize that one should submit to the political authorities, as there is no authority that is not established by God (Rom 13:1). Fifth, the famous saying, “Give God what belongs to God, and Caesar what belongs to Caesar”. (Matt 22:15-22) To give God what belongs to God is not to let God have a small spiritual realm and leave the real power to the emperor, but to realize that the emperor only has a small fragment of the cosmos that is God’s creation. Emperors come and go; rulers and political systems rise and fall; ideologies are changing or replaced by new ideas. Only God remains; his kingdom shall have no end.

4. Gao Shining (Professor, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China) ***Knowing and Being Known: Chinese Society and Christianity***

Gao Shining illustrates in her keynote speech how Chinese Christians have been known by the society and their efforts of displaying themselves from both historical and realistic dimensions. She starts with an introduction of the current booming situation of Chinese Christianity, then reviews the history since the establishment of the PRC until today, focusing on the different phases when Christianity witnessed totally different political and social situations. She roughly divides the period from 1949 to now into three phases: the first phase from 1949 when the CCP established the new government to the late 1970s when the Cultural Revolution ended; the second phase from the early 1980s when China began to reform and open up to the world to the end of last century; the third phase from the turn of the 21st century to now, when churches have become comparatively more open to society.

Generally speaking, in the first phase, “all the ways of knowing and understanding Christianity were derived from the propaganda and criticism by the party and the official media, and

even from the self-criticism of Christian church itself". Correspondingly, churches were criticized and attacked by society. Hence, they had no chance to display their value and create a positive image of Christianity. In the second phase, "with the development of Christianity especially in the countryside, the growth of Christian studies, the increase of publications about Christianity, and the policy of 'leading religion to adapt to the society' by the government, the negative knowledge and understanding of Christianity, slowly but obviously decreased". And "the idea of Christianity and religion as opium has been changed into the idea of religion as parts of culture." During this period, however, "churches had been quite close to their closed situation", which means that they essentially contributed nothing to improving their social image. They possessed no spare time and energy to consider the situations other than struggling for legal status, reconstructing churches and their surviving.

During the third phase, which Gao Shining paid her main attention to, although society, generally speaking, has been still kept blind to churches' activities, Chinese churches have been positive and active in various ways to reconstruct their social image and status as responsible and influential civil NGOs. There are some surveys conducted by Gao Shining, which show that, first, "among the various ways by which people know and understand Christianity, the one with the greatest impact is through the behaviors of individual Christians"; second, "the influence of the Christians' enthusiasm for mission cannot be looked down upon"; third, "the traditional forms of missionary work are changing, from the way of 'face to face' into E-media including Internet and mobile-phone". She also mentions that the collective good behaviors of churches have appeared in front of the public, which could gradually improve the social image of Christianity and show its existence. However, these activities include not just its contributions, such as churches' efforts during and after the devastating earthquake in Sichuan province in 2008, but also include its fight for its right of religious freedom with reasonable and peaceful ways. For example, for holding the worship service, some of the churches went into public places after losing their meeting houses.

In conclusion, Gao Shining states that "Christians' potentiality is very great even though their role in and effect on the society is still small nowadays." What is more, "Christian church's organization could play a very important role in reconstructing the civil society in China".

5. Knud Jørgensen (Adjunct Professor , Norwegian School of Theology , Norway)

Response to Gao Shining

Gao Shining's reference to revivals among the urban population and among intellectuals is dealt with in a larger context and perspective in a book by Micklethwait, John Adrian Wooldrige, *God Is Back, How the Global Revival of Faith Is Changing the World*. There are both sociological and more spiritual reasons for the growth among registered and non-registered churches in China. The sociological perspective would point to the cultural revolution and its destructive impact on Chinese society, the Tiananmen tragedy, several of Mao's reforms and social changes-e. g. the unification of the Middle Kingdom, the construction of infrastructure, and the focus on Mandarin as the language of instruction. In a sense, Christianity has benefited from being a western religion during a period when the open-door policy has aimed at learning from the west. The spiritual reasons would include the impact of persecution and suffering over decades, together with a Christian testimony of not compromising, the hunger for the word of God (the printing of more than 50 million Bibles), a strong focus on discipleship, obedience, penitence, conversion and prayer among Chinese Christians.

Another book by Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (2010) is especially relevant to this topic. Here the manifold and multifaceted revival movements in the first half of the 20th century are viewed as an essential background to the revivals during and after the Cultural Revolution. Gao Shining challenges the Christian church to play a stronger role in the reconstruction of civil society and as a main source of civil society. Beware: That is what the church did after Constantine, resulting in a destructive merger of the ways and ideologies of state and church and preventing the church from being a genuine counterculture. A church that loses identity in that way will also run the risk of losing its biblical identity.

中文题目:

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