

A Comprehensive Study of Religion's Position and Role In Cultural Development Strategy

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A comprehensive study of religion's position and role in China's cultural development strategy plays an important part in building a harmonious society in our country, furthering opening-up to the outside world in the course of globalization, promoting our overall national strength, consolidating our Party's ruling position and safeguarding China's cultural security.

I. The Importance in Making a Comprehensive Study of Religion's Position and Role in Cultural Development Strategy

Ethnic religions are by no means insignificant. Our Party has always attached importance to properly handling the problems of ethnic religions, had a good comprehension of these problems from a strategic perspective of China's revolution and construction and eventually formed a series of theoretical understanding and political tactics with Chinese characteristics guided by Marxism and supported by the practical experiences of China's revolution and construction. In the face of challenges and tasks in the new era of the new century, our Party and country call for us to keep pace with the times in order to enhance our understanding of religious issues and give them further consideration. There are many reasons for doing so, but the following are the 3 most important ones.

The most talked-about subject over the recent years is that in the wake of the great changes in the world setup brought about by the dismemberment of the USSR and break-up of the East European countries as well as the "September 11" incident, religion, as both a faith and an organizational form of social groups, has become a focus for regional development and security as well as an important component of strategy for international relations.

The changes in the world setup have brought about a transitional phase to the international order. Profound changes are taking place in such concepts as alliances, blocs and ideologies in the past while various forces are taking advantage of this opportunity to seek and secure their own interests. Accordingly, traditional concepts of national security have developed into the following 4 major aspects—economic security, military security, information security and cultural security. Pluralistic threats to security have changed the situation in which nations used to be either allies or

enemies, and multiple security relations can turn nations into cooperative partners in the area of non-traditional security whereas making them adversaries in the area of traditional security. Though this has made the international relations more complicated, it also reduced to their minimum the possibilities of large-scale conflicts and wars between big powers.

On the other hand, the quickening process of economic globalization, promotion of utilizing natural resources in a coordinated, comprehensive and circulatory manner among various countries, drawing on one another's experiences of social management, abiding by and sharing the rules in business and exchanging scientific and technological results have considerably improved both economic efficiency and life quality. At the same time, however, due to their unbalanced economic development, their different expectations of and various positions on making globalized order, all the countries have formed their own way of seeking their national interests and presenting their culture. As an important means for the two purposes, religion has not only triggered conflicts in all forms, but also played a very important role in cultural integration of different countries and regions.

Secondly, in the course of China's reform and opening-up to the outside world, a new setup has taken shape, featuring a pluralistic economy, multi-tiered social strata and diversified interested groups. Moreover, with their practice and exploration over the past few decades, our Party and country have gradually come up with a very clear national policy, namely, a new strategy for development guided by the outlook on scientific development and criterion of building China into a socialist harmonious society. Placing more emphasis on economic-social development in a comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable manner while giving priority to "people first", this strategy aims at building a society characterized by "democracy and the rule of law, fairness and justice, trust and amity, vigour and vitality, stability and order, and harmony between nature and man".

GDP per person has now exceeded US\$ 1000 in China. According to some countries' experience in their social development, the period covering US\$ 1000 to US\$3000 means a period witnessing both economic aggregates rapidly growing and social restructuring and changing. Therefore, various social contradictions and problems tend to crop up and become acute in this period. Building a harmonious society is a process of making overall plans with due considerations for all concerned, optimizing the structure of various essential elements in the formation of society and forming a virtuous circle in their interactions between different interested groups. This will not only prevent and reduce frictions to social reform and progress caused by structural imbalance and interest conflicts, and lower social costs; but also shape up a social capital¹—"soft national strength" as people call it. While bringing well-being to all walks of life, this social capital will increase in value with the feedback from all walks of life. Enhancing overall national strength means not only GDP growth but also that of "soft national strength".

Building a harmonious society is a grand strategic and social project, which means certain favourable interaction must be formed between various crucial factors in social structure. Imbalance in one form or another will inevitably occur in social development, but it will be impossible to build a harmonious society if religion, this crucial factor, is unable to interact favourably with other social factors or even plays a negative role. Therefore, building a harmonious society has not only made clear the orientation and keynote for China's social progress in the future, but also provided a general line of thought for us, religious researchers. When addressing and handling religious issues both at home and abroad in the years ahead, we must understand them according to the criterion of building a harmonious society and work out our tactics.

Thirdly, as multi-ethnic groups and multi-religions have long coexisted in China since its civilization, over one hundred million of religious masses and "5 major religions" at present in our country tend to be on the rise. The dual nature of religion in promoting social harmony and increasing social capital in value has made it clear that we must have a general command of religion in the strategy of cultural development.

Religion will exist for a long time in our society. In the course of time-honoured historical evolution in China, religion has seen complicated connections between different social strata, between ethnic groups in our country, between China and countries and regions around it and between China and the international community. It is endowed with historical and cultural heritage, rich and brilliant; and spiritual resources, profound and diversified. On the other hand, it is the bond of integration of ethnic groups. Chinese history has seen neither large-scale religious war nor bloody religious persecution (like the religious tribunal and "bloody Mary"), but religion has never been merely an ideological system. As a social organization, it has played various roles in Chinese history. It has played both a constructive and a destructive role, and provided both positive and negative social capital.

It calls for mobilizing the concerted efforts of the entire society to build a harmonious society and respond to the complicated setup of the international relations. More than one hundred million of religious worshippers make up for nearly 10% of China's population. Many people, therefore, think that religious beliefs of a small number of worshippers is something insignificant, and will fade away naturally in the course of social-economic development. As a matter of fact, the social impact caused by religious problems, especially the unexpected and large-scale incidents triggered by them, often outweighs the number of people involved. The great promotion and destruction this impact has brought about to social-economic development, as well as the spiritual inspiration and hurt feelings it generated therefrom, will far outweigh individual religious worshippers and groups. It is because religion has the influence on and interaction with the entire society, both of which transcend change of dynasties and societies that any society will attach due importance to religion while drawing its blueprint for cultural development.

It is incorrect to underestimate religion, which is one of various social forces, its role in a society—a public realm, its social-mobilizing ability and the social capital it provides. In a word, the reason why we propose to make a comprehensive study of religion's position and role in the strategy of cultural development is to study what kind of public products religion can provide for Chinese society in the course of building a harmonious society and opening-up to the outside world, what nature and function these products have, how to turn religion into an adhesive between various crucial elements of our society and different interested groups as well as a catalyst for increasing social capital in value, under what conditions religion can become a special courtesy for a harmonious society and what its “independent variable” and “dependent variable” are, which will help the government, society and religious community reach a clear consensus and work out “rules of the game” they all acknowledge.

II. It is Imperative to Make a Comprehensive Study of Religion's Position and Role in the Strategy of Cultural Development from an Original Perspective

1. A comprehensive study of religion's position and role in the strategy of cultural development means broadening religion's orientation in terms of its intension.

Some scholars hold that regarding religion's orientation there are 3 tiers, namely, ideology, politics and culture. With a view of addressing issues concerning world outlook, orientation of ideology is to make judgment on religion in the realms of atheism, theism, science and superstition, and its focus is on truth. To orientate political stand focuses on differentiation of enemy, us and friend; and in keeping with their interests in specific historical periods as well as their positive and negative impact on political action, religious organizations should be united as groups with different connections in order to make possible the political goal. Proceeding mainly from the fact that religion functions as a cultural system, its cultural strategy is determined by its social and cultural functions from the perspective of material culture, spiritual culture and political culture.

For a certain period of time in history, over-emphasis on the orientation of religion's ideology or political stand had a bearing on either the means of understanding or what religion had done itself. After the tempestuous years of the modern and contemporary bourgeois and socialist revolutions, society has been changing, so has religion, and man's understanding. In the wake of China's reform and opening-up to the outside world and emancipation of mind, the understanding of religion's attributes by the Chinese people has changed gradually from one dimension to multi-dimensions, from plane to stereoscope and from the unchangeable to changeable. Giving priority to determining cultural strategy is to broaden our understanding of religion rather than negate ideology and political stand—religion's attributes, so as to grasp religion's attributes from a more profound and deeper perspective.

Knowledge and practice mean a process of interaction. Man's change of knowledge will inevitably affect the existence and development of religion in the realistic society. The expectation coming from society and momentum for development originated from religion itself form another interaction. Especially in the course of the international relations becoming increasingly complicated and China's building a harmonious society, this interaction is bound to affect religion's position and role in the social and cultural development.

2. A comprehensive study of religion's position and role in the strategy of cultural development also means our perspective of religious issues is different from the specific research into their history and investigation into their status quo.

Study of cultural strategy means a forward-looking study of strategy, rather than considering religion as it stands and solving problems only according to their religious aspects. This kind of strategic study is naturally based on study of religious history, because religion evolves from the past to the present, and from the present to the future. However, study of religion from the perspective of cultural strategy aims at grasping religion's general trend rather than sorting out the details of religious history. This strategic study will certainly touch upon some local conditions and policies of the past and present, but it will not focus on explaining certain incidents or merits and demerits of certain policies at present. Strategy means taking the overall situation into consideration and studying in depth how "to prevent a fire before it starts" in the long run, rather than making a partial study of what is happening now or "putting out a fire" at a certain place, in a certain period and for a certain incident.

As for social development in China, strategic study aims at how to make the Chinese nation independent and strong in the international community, how to crystallize national consciousness in the midst of globalization, bringing into better balance social relations and promoting rationalization of the overall structure of our society, gradually realizing the future goal of the ruling party, and promoting long-term security and great order of our society and peaceful life for the Chinese people. Study of religion's position and role in the strategy of cultural development must proceed from a strategic perspective so as to orientate and research into religious issues within the framework of China's general strategy of social development and the new setup of the international relations.

III. It is Imperative to Make a Comprehensive Study of Religion's Position and Role in the Strategy of Cultural Development with New Ideas

It is insufficient to base our study of cultural strategy on the results achieved in the area of China's religious studies, which falls short of strategic thinking and is unable to break through the old thinking mode so as to bring forth new ideas. The new century and new era call for scholars of religious studies to further emancipate their mind, broaden their vision and draw on the research results achieved in such disciplines as

sociology, psychology (mass psychology in particular), anthropology, political science and science of law. The purpose of extensively absorbing nutrition is not only to broaden their vision, but more importantly to study religious issues from dimensional angles and press on irresistibly in order to obtain a profound perspective by showing great foresight.

A comprehensive study of religion's position and role in the strategy of cultural development attaches importance to new ideas. Whether this study could offer to our Party and government and different social communities a set of useful theories and strategic plans is mainly determined by what new problems, new ideas and new tactics it can put forward, and by integrating all the experiences and outstanding theoretical results acquired at home and abroad with the religious practice in China, requirements of China's social development and aspirations of the broad masses of the Chinese people. We believe that along with mobilizing and integrating academic forces, and carrying out this study in width and depth, a number of new views and ideas are bound to spring up and that there is still room for further discussion of the issues we have become aware of or started discussion so as to broaden our vision. Now, I'd like to put forward 3 questions that might help bring forth new ideas as a brick to attract jade.

1. What other useful role in terms of carrying forward civilization and tradition, religion can play in the course of building a harmonious society with Chinese characteristics apart from its own believing function?

China should stand proudly in the family of nations not only politically and economically, but also culturally. Therefore, it is paramount to build a cultural system with Chinese characteristics by way of integrating the essence of the traditional culture of the Chinese nation with the process of building a harmonious society. To fulfill this task calls for mobilizing all the cultural resources that can be utilized. The most important is how to look at religion's nature and role.

Chinese scholars devoted to religious studies have realized that religion means not only ideology, but also cultural system. In the course of transmitting history, religion, often in the form of belief, has carried with itself the ethics and values of a nation or a group. It can provide not only a meaningful life for individuals, but also for society such public product or social capital as guidance for values and behaviour. While addressing how to coordinate future study of religion with the great process of building a harmonious society in China, the following is the question people will often ask: is "teach and rule by imitating the deities" still necessary? Since so many people will believe in religion in the long run, religion will certainly exert a long-term influence on them even if the above-mentioned social demand has faded away. So the real question lies in whether religion could still play its previous role in carrying forward civilization, serving society, keeping people away from anything immoral and cultivating their mind and developing their character in the process of multi-pluralism and modernization, whether it needs a change in content and form, what orientation this change calls for

and how this change will interact with China's social reform and progress.

Especially since the post cold war years, religion, as a cultural resource, a group symbol and a linguistic system, has been functioning in a more prominent way. Religion, just as a scholar has said, "can serve as either a possible means of cultivating concepts of moral principles and ethics between different civilized systems so as to facilitate the establishment of globalization order, or a symbol of cohesiveness and cultural identity within ethnic groups, even as a natural cause for voicing their own interests from a strategic perspective". Many people always have the illusion that religion will eventually "fade out" from the social stage in the process of modernization. However, development process of many a country has shown that religion, a spiritual resource, can be utilized in many ways, either in providing a driving force for promotion of peace and social harmony or in breeding fundamentalism and terrorism. In the face of religion's international and national conditions, discussion of whether religion is really a spiritual resource itself, as some people point out, is a pseudo-question, because religion, as a spiritual resource, used to be and still is made use of by some people with different motives, which is absolutely true whether you acknowledge it or not. With regard to a more constructive study, discussion should be devoted to how we look at religion as a spiritual resource and how this resource should be utilized in the course of building a harmonious society in our country. Our understanding at present is too general, but many more questions in this respect are in the need of further study, especially such questions with operational nature calling for more concern as how religion can play this role. While promoting cohesiveness within its own groups, this role tends to generate exclusiveness against other groups, which is bound to create tension between different groups. Where is the balancing point between these two reacting forces? Where is the breakthrough point for their change from playing a positive role to playing a negative role? What are the previous and present experiences and lessons in this aspect accumulated at home and abroad? What steps should we take to prevent those situations we would not like to see?

2. How should we look at the phenomenon of religion pluralism and create a structure where conflict is reduced and a concerted effort is made to ensure the success of charitable acts while meeting the need of different religious beliefs?

As religion pluralism is a world phenomenon, there are several thousand of religious organizations in the world today. Of the countries in the West, the US is known as the most "religious" and "pluralistic" country. In 1995, there were at least 2500 religious organizations (meaning that every religious organization would have an average membership of 100,000 if the American population of 2.5 hundred million all believe in religion) listed in the Dictionary of the US Religious Organizations. Religion pluralism is neither a contemporary phenomenon. The process of Buddhism spreading to and taking roots in China means a process of division and development of its sects. Chan sect of Buddhism in China further split up into 5 families and 7 sects even after its birth. The formation of religion pluralism is decided not only by different religions a

country or a region has, but by many sects any foreign religion has broken up into in its localized process. In addition, native religions could become pluralized in the course of their development, for instance, Taoism became divided respectively into many sects (namely, Zhengyi sect, Quanzhen sect and Jingmin Taoism) in the course of its development.

Religion pluralism is a normal process of society's history. On one hand, for its survival and development, religion has to adapt itself to social change and development. As people have kept exploring religious beliefs, they could bring forth the new by weeding through the old so as to establish new religious doctrines and sects. The division of classes and social strata, and division of trades and professions formed in the course of social progress would also spur the division called for by religious beliefs so that new doctrines and sects would come into being to meet different religious needs of worshippers from different strata. On the other hand, the management costs are obviously different between religious organizations with a membership of 500 and 500,000 (so are their social capacities). When a religious organization has reached certain scope in terms of its membership and domain, a multi-tiered management would inevitably occur within itself. When a pyramid structure of management has reached certain scope, management costs would not only rise, alienation would but also take place, which will give expression to dogmatism in theology and bureaucracy in divorcing religion-worshipping masses, and even give birth to corruption and ossification as well as inner division arising therefrom (the most typical example is the Vatican of Roman Catholicism before the religious reform launched by Martin Luther). A study of the phenomenon of religion pluralism from a strategic perspective of cultural development must be focused on not only the trends of doctrine and sect division, but also structural connections formed between different religions and religious sects, the way by which certain "ecological" balance is formed, the way to establish a mechanism for harmonious coexistence between different religious sects and interaction between this pluralistic structure and social stability and development.

Many people are worried that religion pluralism will cause some social unrest and that sect scuffles will trigger instability in some areas. It is true that there has been no shortage of such incidents from the past to present. Since religion pluralism has long existed and will continue to develop, what we should do is not whether to do away with it, but how to look at and respond to it. It must be noted that finding solution to sect conflicts by most countries in the world including our country is fundamentally a gradual process of exercising the rule of law on one hand, and creating a cultural climate featuring social tolerance on the other. Of course, in the two respects, we still have to do a lot of work and study in earnest many issues, especially the issue of how to meet the demand for different religious beliefs from individual worshippers along with social and human development while creating a situation where conflict can be reduced and a concerted effort can be made to ensure the success of charitable acts as well as "rules of the game".

In China's future development, we should pay close attention to not only the "ecological" balance between institutionalized religions like "the 5 major religions", but also the "ecological" balance between the institutionalized religions and non-institutionalized religions such as popular beliefs (worship of Guandi, Mazu and ancestors). Many think that the former is the "high-grade" religion and the latter the "low-grade" religion—a manifestation of backward culture. In fact, non-institutionalized religions are the religious forms both in the pre-modern period (even in the pre-state period) and post-modern period. Modernization process has proved that the "high-grade" religion is not characterized by institutionalization. In the West—a typical society in the eyes of many, heated discussions have been going on over the recent years on the issue of "secularization": a community could be highly "secular" if it is judged by whether its residents are affiliated to a church or not whereas it could be very "pious" if judged by whether they believe in god or not. Along with the modernization of our society, the means and forms of meeting the need of people's own beliefs will also become modernized. Inspired by this phenomenon, we will not set the institutionalized religion against the non-institutionalized religion in a simplistic way by regarding them as two rungs of a staircase contradicting to each other while considering the strategy of China's cultural development, but regard them as a frequency spectrum ranging from zero to one and every frequency point, which has its respective function and merits and demerits, as the manifestation of organizational diversity (in fact, there is "institution" in the non-institutionalized religion). From the perspective of the post-modern period, non-institutionalized religion, with its lower social costs and less possibility of making non-religion alienated, can better meet individual demands of its worshippers. Of course, it does not mean that the traditional non-institutionalized religion could be transplanted unchanged in the contemporary society. On the contrary, anything improper in this religion must be discarded. However, it would be meaningless to talk about discarding its improper content and bringing its role into play if it has no position in the strategy of cultural development.

3. How should we understand and realize Lenin's anticipation that religious organizations should become "citizens' federations that share a common goal, enjoy full freedom and have no bearing on political power"?⁽¹⁾

Our generation's view on religion has changed considerably. Most of us have become aware that religion is a social and cultural phenomenon that will exist for long while many respect and tolerate others' religious beliefs, which is a manifestation of social progress. However, some others, who do not understand social management of religion, namely, placing religion under the rule of law, would think that this management means interference with the freedom of religious beliefs. In fact, they can not differentiate religious beliefs from religious organizations and their activities. From a social perspective, it is an individual's rights and private affairs to choose his own religious belief, have a religious belief or not and adopt what kind of attitude toward his chosen religion. However, religious organizations and their activities are different from individuals' religious beliefs. As they are social organizations and social activities

rather than individuals' private affairs, they are endowed with strong social nature. This social nature is manifested not only by the fact that the considerable number of worshippers any religion could gather would eventually form a social force to be reckoned with and pool together a certain amount of social wealth, but also by the fact that its activities and the social energy it has mustered could increase or decrease social capital in value and that it is itself part of social capital. Therefore, any government and society will coordinate the relations between religious organizations and other organizations and elements of social structure inevitably by legal and other social control means.

However, governing the activities of religious organizations by law does not mean politicization of religion. "Separation of politics from religion" practiced since the modern times has gradually become one of the mainstream patterns for the interacting relations between religion and politics. Weakening the political colour of religion (some call it "abandoning of politicization") facilitates not only reduction of intervention into and break-up of social and political life caused by differences of religious beliefs, which is conducive to social stability and order; but also religious organizations to be more focused on serving the spiritual needs of their worshippers (some say it just coincides with one of aims of "what is Cesar's belongs to Cesar, and what is God's belongs to God"). For some time at present and in the future, it is inevitable for the need to readjust structural relations of various kinds in the process of social transition. It will be one important aspect for religion to play a positive role in building a harmonious society provided that the government, religious and academic communities become clearly and conscientiously aware of the importance of weakening the political colour of religion and adopt positive and proper tactics in this respect.

Along with social development and evolution of pluralized religions, the number of religious worshippers and organizations will be on the rise for a certain period to time, which will inevitably increase social management costs. As for a developing country like China, it is impossible to increase these costs indefinitely. Even the government is able to cover the increase of the costs, there is still the problem of marginal results to be addressed. Therefore, we should discuss the means and rules of strengthening self-management of religious organizations and social supervision while studying religion's position and role in the strategy of cultural development.

A religious organization and a NGO have a lot in common, but the former is not a NGO in its strict sense. The reason is that it lacks an open character and transparency of a NGO. However, in the democracy process of our present-day society, any organizations responsible for the populace must accept social supervision (many of them are willing to do so) and at least establish a relatively sound mechanism of supervision, which is an effective means to prevent their own corruption and alienation. Different as they are from NGOs, religious organizations must play a positive role in the process of building a harmonious society in China, and they should not only

participate in more social welfare causes so as to increase social capital in value, but also strengthen the rule of law in terms of internal management and acceptance of social supervision. Mysterious nature of religious beliefs is understandable whereas mystification of religious organizations will make all walks of life vigilant, which is detrimental to both tolerance of religion formed in our society and the survival and development of religious organizations. In this respect, Lenin's anticipation that religious organizations should become "citizens' federations that share a common goal, enjoy full freedom and have no bearing on political power" is extremely inspiring. Though some people have called for studying this issue, insightful personalities of the religious community have made some experiments on system--building, this is, after all, an incremental process. As things are different between different religions, further investigation and study are needed for making clear how many steps we have to take, how we can achieve our goal, and what experiences we can learn at home and abroad.

A comprehensive study of religion's position and role in the strategy of cultural development is not merely limited to the aforesaid 3 issues. With in-depth study and participation of more researchers, more subjects and suggestions will definitely come up.

A comprehensive study of religion's position and role in the strategy of cultural development means studying, from an in-depth and long-term perspective, how to determine the orientation of religion in the course of China's primary stage of socialism and building a harmonious society, how to integrate the different dimensional orientation of essence, knowledge and function in order to cultivate a relatively objective and comprehensive understanding based on China's conditions, and how to attach great importance to the close connections between religion and nation, religion and politics while differentiating religious issues from national, political and legal issues. Studying location of the boundary of these different aspects and their interacted connections is helpful for us to overcome our concept of swinging from left to right, improve the unfavourable situation of playing the role of "a fire brigade", weaken the political colour of religion, give priority to the cultural function of religion, realize cultural integration, establish cultural principle awareness of the Chinese nation, safeguard China's political, economic and cultural security and promote a harmonious social development in China.

¹ Social capital is referred to various interacted network system, official and unofficial, in a society or a region or a community. This system covers face to face contact, exchange of personnel, and the obligatory relations and mutual trust brought forth by the personnel exchange. American political scientist Robert Putnam thinks that social capital serves as the value of a community to its residents, is composed by various relations that are the foundation of the community and derives from voluntary service and citizen participation (see also Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton University Press, 1993, pp152-62). When social capital and human capital (as for a church, its largest human capital is its worshippers)

become integrated, people are able to create and establish public civilization, and solve their common social problems by getting themselves organized. Emphasis placed by social capital on moral norms of mutual benefit, trust and social harmony as well as network system could bring about more potential resources by finding solution to the problems of education, urban poverty, unemployment, control of crimes and drugs and public hygiene. As an invisible and a special resource, social capital is neither a combination of finance and wealth in the sense of economics, nor a combination of material commodity and market service commercially speaking, but it can make the norms such as mutual benefit, trust, unity and participation specific. The potential social network it has built through families, organization members, friends, cooperators and neighbours can effectively ensure and promote healthy social-economic development. It is a resource indispensable for ensuring people's normal life.

⁽¹⁾ Also see *On Religion* by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 1979.