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Editorial

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Editorial

SÉBASTIEN BILLIQUOD AND DAVID A. PALMER

Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* provocatively dedicated the cover story of one of its recent weekend editions to the Christian revival in mainland China, asserting that with around 100 million believers, Jesus of Nazareth's following in the PRC now exceeded the membership of the Communist Party.⁽¹⁾ Whatever the reality behind the speculation on figures, one thing is clear: over the past 30 years, all forms of religiosity have been flourishing in China. The phenomenon is widespread and touches people in all segments of the population: urban and rural, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, young and elderly, and even supposedly atheist Party cadres. Ideologically, religion has been gradually ascribed a much more positive role by the authorities. Gone are the days when it was considered the opium of the people; on the contrary, its contribution to building a harmonious society is now openly acknowledged in a way that echoes the situation in the first decades of the twentieth century, when the modernising elites considered the imported type of religion essential for nation-building. The criteria according to which such a category was at that time defined (an organised system comprising a body of doctrine, an established clergy, designated places of worship, etc.) in opposition to "superstition" and imposed on society are still valid today. Notwithstanding the repressive campaigns to eliminate all forms of religiosity that did not fit these criteria, from the anti-superstition movement of the end of 1920s to the persecution of Falun Gong, the criteria remain as ineffective now as they were in the past in grasping the reality of Chinese religiosity and controlling its developments. Officially, China recognises five religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam), which are all benefiting from the current growth in receptivity to religion. However, their development is fuelled by a number of interacting factors (sociological, political, demographic, economic, etc.) that make it difficult to obtain a clear picture of the situation. In addition, the current religious revival goes far beyond the scope of these institutionalised religions. Suffice it to mention here the "*qigong* fever" of the 1980s and 1990s, the current renaissance of popular religion and temples generally, and the complex return and reinvention of Confucianism. These social phenomena need to find and negotiate space for the expansion and the institutionalisation of their activities. As a result, these forms of religiosity can take place within the established category of religion (e.g., by superficially accommodating the standards of an estab-

lished religion) and/or outside this category, for example by adapting to other categories such as sports, medicine and science, national studies (*guoxue*), culture, education, philanthropy, etc.

This issue of *China Perspectives* attempts to contribute to the understanding of these complex forms of religious reconfiguration. In other words, our project here is less to provide an overall picture of the religious situation in the PRC than to point to a number of emerging trends that often go against common assumptions and in some cases might become increasingly significant in the years ahead.

The issue starts with two contributions that provide background for our understanding of the various case studies that follow. Benoît Vermander's article provides an overall mapping of the religious situation and its general framework before arguing that the religious revival is also paradoxically synonymous with "an exit from religion," meaning that religion now serves as an auxiliary to social cohesion rather than as its foundation. David A. Palmer then studies the continuities and changes in the state-led institutionalisation of religion from 1979 to 2009 and their effects on the structuring of China's religious field. He highlights how religious affairs authorities, while hesitating to propose an explicit change in policy, are beginning to acknowledge the existence of an expanding realm of religious life that cannot be circumscribed within the five recognised religious institutions.

Subsequent contributions focus on specific forms of religious reconfiguration. Combining historical analysis with field observations, Vincent Goossaert and Fang Ling introduce the revival of Daoist temples in Chinese cities and explore the complex relationships between "official" temples managed by the Daoist Association and the burgeoning community temples, as well as the impact of this dual situation on the clergy and believers. In a completely different setting – a small town in a rural, multi-ethnic area of northwestern Sichuan – Kang Xiaofei analyses the situation of a small community temple with a Guanyin hall managed by a group of elder women and shows how the women are neither victims of "feudal superstitions" nor "obstacles to modernisation," but rather constitute a dynamic transformative force in rural China. With Nanlai Cao's contribution, we turn to Wenzhou, one of China's most advanced regional

1. *Postmagazine*, 12 April 2009. The figure of 100 million is considered a very high estimate, but there is no general agreement on the exact figure.

economies, to witness the changing dynamics of Protestantism. The author explores what he terms “the production of an elite Protestantism,” and in so doing counters the prevailing one-dimensional representation of Chinese Christian religiosity. His central argument is that the situation of Chinese Protestants is not limited to acts of spiritual seeking under state restrictions, but is also shaped by the desires and practices of self-making among neo-liberal individuals under rapid marketisation.

Guillaume Dutournier and Ji Zhe continue by analysing the situation of a “Cultural Education Centre” in the small town of Tangchi (Anhui), established by a Taiwanese Buddhist monk but strongly influenced by Confucian traditionalism. They investigate how the centre is inventing, somewhere between political control and moral proselytism, a new form of governmentality that could gain widespread acceptance. Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval build on fieldwork carried out in Qufu (Shandong), the birthplace of Confucius,

to study an emblematic case of the revival of ceremonies to honour the Sage. Their contribution highlights the contrasting and complex interactions between an “official” Confucianism and *minjian* (popular) activism. Finally, David Ownby examines the academic and intellectual career of Kang Xiaoguang, a prominent advocate of Confucianism as China’s state religion. He argues that Kang’s advocacy is rooted in a utilitarian vision of religion and a pragmatic desire to encourage the development of healthy state-society relations in twenty-first century China. In each of the cases presented, we see how the Chinese religious field is constituted through ambiguous interactions between the state and religious groups. These interactions, which in most cases cannot be described as relations of repression and resistance and even less as unfettered deregulation, will only grow in intensity and complexity following the parallel expansion of state governance and of religious communities. •