

China's Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief

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Contents

Preamble

I. Basic Policies in Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief

II. Legal Guarantees for Freedom of Religious Belief

III. Conducting Religious Activities in an Orderly Manner

IV. The Role of Religious Groups Has Been Fully Developed

V. Active and Healthy Religious Relations

Conclusion

Preamble

As a socialist country under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), China adopts policies on freedom of religious belief based on national and religious conditions to protect citizens' right to freedom of religious belief, build active and healthy religious relationships, and maintain religious and social harmony. Since the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012, China, under the staunch leadership of the CPC Central Committee with Xi Jinping as the core, has advanced law-based governance in all respects, integrating religious work into the national governance system, employing laws to deal with all social relationships concerning religion, and improving the management of religious work under the rule of law. Religious believers and non-believers respect each other, and live in harmony, committing themselves to reform and opening up and the socialist modernization, and contribute to the realization of the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.

I. Basic Policies in Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief

China adopts policies on freedom of religious belief, manages religious affairs in accordance with the law, adheres to the principle of independence and self-management, actively guides religions to adapt to the socialist society, and unites religious believers and non-believers to the greatest extent.

Adopting policies on freedom of religious belief. Respecting and protecting freedom of religious belief is a basic policy of the CPC and the Chinese government. Every citizen enjoys the freedom to choose whether to believe in a religion; to believe in a certain religion or a denomination of the same religion; to change from a non-believer to a believer and vice versa. Believers and non-believers enjoy the same political, economic, social and cultural rights, and must not be treated differently because of a difference in belief. The state respects citizens' freedom to religious belief and protects their normal religious activities. In exercising their right to free religious belief, believers should not interfere in the lawful rights of other people, or force others to believe in any religion. Believers should not discriminate against non-believers or believers of other religions. No one shall use religion to interfere in the lawful rights and interests of citizens. Believers should respect public order, customs, cultural traditions and social ethics in exercising their freedom of religious belief.

Managing religious affairs in accordance with the law. The state treats all religions fairly and equally, and does not exercise administrative power to encourage or ban any religion. No religion is given preferential treatment above other religions to enjoy special legal privileges. The state manages religious affairs involving national and social public interests in accordance with the law but does not interfere in the internal affairs of religions. The state protects citizens' right to freedom of religious belief, normal religious activities and the lawful rights and interests of religious groups, bans illegal religious activities, prohibits the dissemination of extremist thought and engagement in extremist activities in the name of religion, resists the infiltration of hostile foreign forces taking advantage of religion, and fights against illegal and criminal activities under the guise of religion. Believers should abide by the Constitution, laws, rules and regulations of the country. Religious activities should be carried out within the bounds of the law. No religion should interfere in the implementation of administrative, judicial and educational functions of the state. No abolished religious and feudal privileges should be resumed. No activities which employ religion to endanger social stability, national unity and state security are allowed to be carried out.

Adhering to the principle of independence and self-management. Religious groups and religious affairs are not subject to control by foreign countries; this principle is enshrined in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China. The Chinese government supports all religions in upholding the principle of independence and self-management, allowing religious groups, clerical personnel and believers to manage religious affairs themselves in accordance with the Constitution and law. This principle is a historic choice made by Chinese religious believers in the Chinese people's struggle for national independence and social progress, as Catholicism and Protestantism, which were known as foreign religions in China, had long been controlled and utilized by colonialists and imperialists. The establishment of this principle conforms to the historical trend of the Chinese people's search for national independence and liberation, to the demands of the times to realize the Chinese

Dream of national rejuvenation, and as a result religions in China have taken on an entirely new look, winning widespread understanding, respect and support of friendly religious believers around the world. Adhering to the principle of independence and self-management does not mean the severing of normal connections between religious organizations in China and their foreign counterparts. The Chinese government supports and encourages all its religions to conduct international exchanges, to build, develop and consolidate friendly relations with religious groups overseas, to enhance mutual trust and eliminate misgivings, and to present a positive image based on independence, equality and mutual respect. The Chinese government will resolutely oppose and deal with foreign organizations and individuals engaging in activities which violate China's Constitution, laws, regulations and policies, their attempts to control China's religious organizations, to interfere in China's religious affairs and to subvert the Chinese government and socialist system under the guise of religion.

Actively guiding religions in adapting to the socialist society. Actively guiding religions in adapting to the socialist society means guiding religious believers to love their country and compatriots, safeguard national unity, ethnic solidarity, be subordinate to and serve the overall interests of the nation and the Chinese people. It also means guiding religious groups to support the leadership of the CPC and the socialist system; uphold and follow the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics; develop religions in the Chinese context; embrace core socialist values; carry forward China's fine traditions; integrate religious teachings and rules with Chinese culture; abide by state laws and regulations, and accept state administration in accordance with the law.

II. Legal Guarantees for Freedom of Religious Belief

The socialist legal system with Chinese characteristics is continuously being improved, with enhanced implementation of the rule of law in protecting freedom of religious belief and increasingly standardized governance of religious affairs, providing stronger guarantees for the lawful rights and interests of its religious believers.

Freedom of religious belief is protected by the Constitution. According to Article 36 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, "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." Article 36 also stipulates that "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," and that "Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign control." These stipulations serve as the constitutional basis for the State in protecting citizens' freedom of religious

belief, administering religious affairs in accordance with the law, and building positive relations with and among religions.

Freedom of religious belief is protected by basic laws. China's Criminal Law, National Security Law, and Counter-Terrorism Law provide for the protection of citizens' freedom of religious belief. The principle of equal protection for all Chinese citizens is enshrined in the Election Law of the National People's Congress and Local People's Congresses, Organic Law of the People's Courts, Organic Law of the People's Procuratorates, Organic Law of the Urban Residents Committees, Organic Law of the Villagers Committees, Criminal Procedure Law, Education Law, Labor Law, Employment Promotion Law, and Trade Union Law. These laws stipulate that all citizens enjoy equal rights to vote and stand for election to people's congresses at all levels and to community-level self-government organizations, the right to equality before the law, the right to education, the right to work and to free choice of employment, and the right to join or organize trade unions in accordance with the law, irrespective of religious belief. The Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy states that organs of self-government in ethnic autonomous areas shall guarantee citizens of all ethnic groups the freedom of religious belief. According to the Law on the Protection of Minors, minors enjoy equal rights to life, development, protection, participation and education in accordance with the law, irrespective of their religious belief. The Advertisement Law prohibits any advertisements that contain any information that discriminates against religions. The Criminal Law stipulates that workers of State organs involved in serious cases, which illegally deprive citizens of their right to freedom of religious belief, shall be investigated for criminal responsibility. The General Provisions of the Civil Law states that a lawfully established place of worship qualifying as a legal person may register for the status of legal person to accept donations.

Administrative regulations regarding religious affairs are improving. The revised Regulations on Religious Affairs released in September 2017 strengthen the protection of Chinese citizens' freedom of religious belief and the lawful rights and interests of religious groups, bring government's management of religious affairs under due procedures in accordance with the law, and add provisions on safeguarding national security and maintaining social harmony. The Regulations prescribe the rights and responsibilities of religious organizations, places of worship, and religious believers when establishing places for and holding religious activities, setting up and running religious institutions, applying for legal person status, publishing and distributing religious books and periodicals, receiving donations, managing religious property, conducting charity activities, and carrying out exchanges with other countries. The Regulations prohibit the commercialization of religions, and include additions concerning religious information services on the Internet. In addition, the Regulations also require local governments to provide public services to religious organizations, religious institutions, and places of worship, and incorporate such sites into the overall local plans for land use and urban and

rural planning. The Regulations forbid any organization or individual from creating disputes and conflicts between believers and non-believers and prohibit print publications and the Internet from disseminating information which discriminates against religious or non-religious citizens.

The religious activities of foreigners in China are protected in accordance with the law. The Rules on the Administration of Religious Activities of Foreigners in the People's Republic of China highlights China's respect for the freedom of religious belief of foreigners within the territory of the People's Republic of China, and its commitment to protecting the friendly relations, and cultural and academic exchanges with regards to religion between foreigners and Chinese religious groups. Foreigners may attend religious activities at temples, mosques, churches, and other sites for religious activities. They are also permitted to preach at places of worship when invited to do so by Chinese religious bodies at or above the provincial level. Foreigners may hold religious activities attended by foreigners at sites approved by government religious affairs departments at or above the county level. They may invite Chinese clerical personnel to perform baptisms, weddings, funerals, prayers, or other religious services. They are allowed to carry religious printed text, audio-video products, and other religious articles that conform to relevant regulations when entering Chinese territory. Foreigners who conduct religious activities within China shall abide by Chinese laws and regulations. They shall not establish religious organizations, set up religious offices and sites for religious activities, run religious institutions, or recruit foreign students studying in China without authorization; nor shall they recruit followers, appoint clerical personnel from among Chinese citizens or engage in other missionary activities. The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Administration of Activities of Overseas Non-Governmental Organizations Within China prohibits overseas NGOs from illegally engaging in or sponsoring religious activities.

Religious extremism and violent terrorist activities are dealt with in accordance with the law. The Counter-Terrorism Law of the People's Republic of China states that China opposes all extremism that seeks to instigate hatred, incite discrimination and advocate violence by distorting religious doctrines or through other means, and forbids any discriminatory behavior on the grounds of region, ethnicity and religion. The Regulations on Religious Affairs prohibit any organization or individual from advocating, supporting or sponsoring religious extremism, or using religion to undermine ethnic unity, divide the country, or engage in terrorist activities. China takes measures against the propagation and spread of religious extremism, and at the same time, carefully avoids linking violent terrorism and religious extremism with any particular ethnic group or religion.

III. Conducting Religious Activities in an Orderly Manner

The major religions practiced in China are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism; with a total of nearly 200 million believers and more than 380,000 clerical personnel. China has numerous Buddhist and Taoist believers, but it is difficult to accurately estimate their numbers as there are no set registration procedures which ordinary believers must follow as part of their religion. There are around 222,000 Buddhist clerical personnel and over 40,000 Taoist clerical personnel. The 10 minority ethnic groups, the majority of whose population believe in Islam, total more than 20 million, with about 57,000 clerical personnel. Catholicism and Protestantism have 6 million and 38 million followers in China respectively, with 8,000 and 57,000 clerical personnel. China also has many folk beliefs which are closely linked to local cultures, traditions and customs, in which a large number of people participate. There are approximately 5,500 religious groups in China, including seven national organizations which are Buddhist Association of China, Chinese Taoist Association, China Islamic Association, Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, Bishops' Conference of Catholic Church in China, National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China, and China Christian Council.

Conditions of places of worship have been notably improved. The State requires the registration of places of worship for group religious activities in accordance with the law, so as to provide legal protection and ensure that all activities are carried out in an orderly manner. At present, there are about 144,000 places of worship registered for religious activities in China, among which are 33,500 Buddhist temples (including 28,000 Han Buddhist temples, 3,800 Tibetan Buddhist lamaseries, and 1,700 Theravada Buddhist temples), 9,000 Taoist temples, 35,000 Islamic mosques, 6,000 Catholic churches and places of assembly spread across 98 dioceses, and 60,000 Protestant churches and places of assembly. Religious groups and places of worship follow the unified tax regulations of the State, pay taxes and enjoy tax breaks accordingly. The government ensures that places of worship have access to public services such as running water, electricity, gas, heating, roads, communications, broadcast facilities, televisions, and medical services.

Religious texts and literature are published as prescribed by the law. The printing, publication and circulation of religious text, in different languages and editions, and printed works, audio-visual products and e-books that record, explain and/or annotate religious doctrines and canons, have met the diverse demands of citizens with religious beliefs from the various ethnic groups. Several large collections of religious classics, including the Chinese Buddhist Canon, the Chinese Taoist Canon and A Collection of Editions and Commentaries for the Laozi, have been compiled and published. Traditional sutra printing houses in Tibetan Buddhist temples have been well preserved and developed. There are now 60 such sutra printing houses, including the one in the Potala Palace, that can print 63,000 different sutras every year. Islamic classics, such as the Koran, have been translated and published in Chinese, Uygur, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz languages. The publication and circulation of the

New Collection of Al-Wa'z Speeches series and other reading materials and magazines have exceeded 1.76 million copies. China has printed over 160 million copies of the Bible in more than 100 different languages for over 100 countries and regions, including 80 million copies printed in the Chinese language, 11 ethnic minority languages and braille for churches in China. A great many religious groups and places of worship have launched websites; and the Islamic Association of China has a website in both Chinese and Uygur languages.

The religious education system has been further improved. By September 2017, there are 91 religious schools in China whose establishment was approved by the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), including 41 Buddhist, 10 Taoist, 10 Islamic, 9 Catholic and 21 Protestant schools. There are six national level religious colleges, namely, the Buddhist Academy of China, High-level Tibetan Buddhism College of China, Chinese Taoist College, China Islamic Institute, National Seminary of the Catholic Church in China, and Nanjing Union Theological Seminary. At present, more than 10,000 students study in these religious schools whose graduates total more than 47,000.

Social security for religious clerical personnel has been enhanced. The SARA and other relevant departments jointly issued the "Directives on Solving the Social Security Problem for Religious Clerical Personnel" in 2010, and again the "Notice of Further Solving the Social Security Problem for Religious Clerical Personnel" in 2011, which brought clerical personnel into the social security system. At the end of 2013, 96.5 percent of clerical personnel were covered by medical insurance, 89.6 percent by the old-age insurance, and all qualified personnel by subsistence allowance welfare. Almost all clerical personnel were covered by the social security system in China.

The religious activities of believers are being conducted in an orderly manner. All normal religious activities, including attending religious services, fasting, worshipping Buddha, praying, preaching, reciting scriptures, burning incense, attending Mass, being baptized or ordained, observing extreme unction, holding memorial ceremonies, and celebrating religious festivals, which believers conduct at places of worship or in their own homes in accordance with customary religious practices, are protected by law, and no organization or individual may infringe on these rights. Traditional Tibetan Buddhist activities such as scripture study and debate, initiation into monkhood or nunhood, abhisheka (empowerment ceremony) and self-cultivation, and tests and degree promotions in lamaseries are held on a regular basis, while ceremonial activities are also held during important religious festivals. Muslim customs regarding food and drink, clothing, festivals, marriages and funerals are fully respected. The Islamic Association of China organizes for Muslims to go on pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia every year, with the number of participants exceeding 10,000 a year since 2007.

Activities that disturb the normal order in places of worship have been rectified. In accordance with the “Directives on Some Issues Relating to the Management of Buddhist and Taoist Temples”, the SARA and other relevant departments have been conducting joint investigations since 2012 into the problem of religious revenue being used by businesspeople or “go public”. In 2017, the SARA and 11 related departments issued “Guidelines on Further Controlling the Commercialization of Buddhism and Taoism”, which prohibits commercial capital from being invested in religious revenues, to prevent normal religious activities from being affected by money-grabbing behavior. Relevant departments have intensified the management of the Internet regarding religious affairs, and swiftly dealt with the spread of illegal information concerning religions, effectively protecting the legal rights and interests of religious groups.

IV. The Role of Religious Groups Has Been Fully Developed

China encourages all religions to keep pace with the times and adapt to the socialist society, and contribute to economic growth, social harmony, cultural prosperity, ethnic solidarity and national unification.

Making efforts to interpret religious teachings and rules which conform to the national conditions and demands of the times. In the course of their development, religions in China have blended with traditional Chinese culture and adapted to the actual needs of social development. Chinese religious groups must conduct religious activities in the Chinese context, practice core socialist values, carry forward the fine traditions of the Chinese nation, and actively explore religious thought which conforms to the reality in China. While maintaining their basic beliefs, core religious teachings and etiquette system, the Buddhist and Taoist communities hold sermons, the Islamic community carries out work interpreting the classics, the Catholic community encourages the running of its religious work in a democratic manner, and the Protestant community conducts theological construction, all in an attempt to interpret religious teachings and rules to conform to the national conditions and demands of the times. The Buddhist community integrates patriotism with love of religion, focusing more on worldly concerns, promoting Buddhism to benefit all living creatures, public charity, and cultural exchange. The Taoist community is committed to promoting its religious principles such as “respecting the Tao and valuing morality”, “Tao follows nature”, “being quiet and serene”, and “embracing simplicity and wisdom”, to help carry forward and promote traditional Chinese culture. The Islamic community focuses on interpreting the thoughts in its religious doctrine of patriotism, peace, unity, tolerance and the Middle Path, serving to form correct belief, discerning right from wrong, opposing secession, and resisting religious extremism. The Catholic community actively promotes the localization of churches, managing church activities and making decisions in a democratic manner. The Protestant community draws nourishment from traditional Chinese culture, helping

to foster mutual respect and harmony between Protestants and believers of all faiths so as to allow Protestantism to better integrate into modern Chinese society.

Actively engaging in public charity activities. Since 2012, based on “Opinions on Encouraging and Regulating Religious Circles’ Participation in Public Welfare Charitable Activities”, religious groups have carried out an annual “Religious Charity Week”; with total donations exceeding one billion yuan. They have also held prayer services following the Wenchuan earthquake and other major disasters and incidents, utilized available resources to help the Sandu Shui Autonomous County, Guizhou Province to eliminate poverty, made donations to education in various forms, funded professional medical institutions to provide free services, subsidized medical treatment for disadvantaged groups, and carried out a range of activities to help the elderly and disabled by establishing nursing homes for the elderly and rehabilitation centers for the disabled. According to preliminary statistics, religious groups have established more than 400 nursing homes offering approximately 29,000 beds. They also advocate a “green environment” philosophy. Buddhist and Taoist communities have called for environmentally friendly forms of burning incense and freeing captive animals, and have constructed eco-friendly temples.

Conscientiously resisting extremism. Faced by the challenge of religious extremism to the bottom line of human civilization, religious groups have taken a clear stand and drawn a line against extremists, fully advocating correct belief and behavior, and fighting resolutely against the use of terrorist violence and instigation of separatism in the name of religion. In January 2013, eminent monks, experts and scholars of Buddhism of Chinese tradition, Tibetan tradition and Theravada tradition convened a meeting to call on all Buddhists to become more active in preaching to their believers about the correct outlook on life and opposing extremist behaviors such as self-immolation or the incitement of others to do so, which violate Buddhist teachings and discipline. In May 2014, the China Islamic Association released a proposal entitled “Keep to the Middle Path and Steer Clear of Extremism”, whereby well-known Islamic figures across the country condemned violent terrorist activities. In July 2016, the China Religious Culture Communication Association and the China Islamic Association held the International Seminar on the Islamic Middle Path in Urumqi, advocating the role of the Middle Path in opposing extremism. In December 2017, national religious groups jointly issued a proposal calling for religious communities to enhance their abilities to distinguish, guard against and resist the encroachment of cults, and maintain social harmony and stability.

V. Active and Healthy Religious Relations

Relations between the Party/government and religious groups, society and religion, different religions within the country, religions of China and foreign countries, and religious believers and non-believers are properly handled in China. This has enabled active and healthy religious relations to take shape.

Harmony between the Party/government and religious groups. The CPC adheres to the principle of “uniting and cooperating politically, and respecting each other’s beliefs” in the handling of relations with religious groups, and maintains good relations with religious circles. They have formed a consolidated patriotic united front. At present, approximately 20,000 prominent figures from the religious circles serve as deputies and members at all levels of people’s congresses and committees of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, and participate in the deliberation and administration of state affairs and exercising democratic oversight. Since 1991, Party and state leaders have held annual seminars before the Spring Festival with heads of national religious groups to listen to their opinions and suggestions. Mechanisms have been established between Party and government leaders and religious personages across the country to help enhance mutual understanding and friendship.

Social tolerance towards religions. Religious conflict and confrontation have rarely been seen in China since the introduction of Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism over the past 2,000 years. The state and the society have maintained an open mind towards diverse religions and folk beliefs, and respect both freedom of religious belief and diversity of folk beliefs. Religious groups carry on the longstanding tradition whereby religions in China must be Chinese in orientation, and actively adapt to society. They also carry on the fine traditions of patriotism, unity, progress, service to society, harmony, and inclusiveness. Religious groups conscientiously safeguard national and social public interests, public order and good customs, and fulfill social responsibility. In 2016, Chinese religious groups organized peaceful prayer services across the country to commemorate the 71st anniversary of victory in the Chinese People’s War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the Second World War, and call for the maintenance of ethnic solidarity, national stability and world peace.

Active exchanges and dialogues between different religions. Throughout history, different religions in China have blended together and drawn lessons from one another to become an integral part of traditional Chinese culture. In modern times, different religions respect and learn from each other, and take part in exchanges and dialogues, and a new realm of “five religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism) working together to achieve harmony” has taken shape. National and local religious groups have established a mechanism of joint conferences to discuss issues concerning religious relations, creating modes of religious dialogue with Chinese characteristics and enhancing mutual understanding and friendship.

Extensive international religious exchanges. Chinese religious groups have established friendly relations with religious organizations in more than 80 countries based on the principles of independence, equality, friendship, and mutual respect, and played an active part in international conferences involving diverse cultures,

beliefs and religions. Chinese religious groups participate extensively in activities run by international organizations including the World Council of Churches, World Fellowship of Buddhists, Muslim World League, and World Conference on Religion and Peace, as well as conferences set up by the United Nations Human Rights Council, and bilateral and multilateral dialogues on human rights. Chinese religious groups have responded actively to the Belt and Road Initiative, working to promote closer ties between people and the linking up of cultures. Chinese Buddhist and Taoist communities have held four World Buddhist Forums and four International Taoism Forums respectively, which have become important international platforms for the communication of Buddhism and Taoism both at home and abroad. The China Islamic Association organized the China Islamic Culture Expo & Art Show in Turkey and Malaysia in 2012 and 2014 respectively. Chinese and American Protestant organizations held the Second China-USA Protestant Church Leaders Forum in Shanghai in 2013, and the China-U.S. Church Symposium in the U.S. in 2017. In 2016, the China Islamic Association, China Christian Council, Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, Bishops Conference of Catholic Church in China and Union Evangelical Churches in Germany jointly hosted the China-Germany Inter-religious Dialogue – Peace & Sharing in Germany. Since China's adoption of reform and opening up in 1978, Chinese religious groups have sent more than 1,000 people abroad to study.

Harmony between religious believers and non-believers. Citizens who do not hold any religious belief respect the freedom of others to practice religion, and do not discriminate against them; religious believers respect those who do not believe in any religion. In regions where the majority of citizens are non-believers, the legitimate rights of minority religious believers are respected and protected; in regions where the majority of citizens are religious believers, the legitimate rights of the minority who are non-believers are equally respected and protected.

Conclusion

Religion is an integral part of human civilization. Protecting freedom of religious belief, properly handling religious relations and adapting them to the times, and curbing religious extremism are common tasks facing all countries around the world. Considering the development of religions and changes in religious work, and learning from both positive and negative experiences at home and abroad, China has embarked on a road to success which enshrines freedom of religious belief in law, promotes harmonious religious relations, and encourages religious groups to play a positive role. According to General Secretary Xi Jinping's report at the 19th CPC National Congress held in 2017, China will fully implement the Party's basic policy on religious affairs, uphold the principle that religions in China must be Chinese in orientation and provide active guidance to religions so that they can adapt themselves to the socialist society. China will continue to respect and protect its citizens' freedom to religious beliefs, and strive to build the country into a modern

socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and with a sound environment.