

“Transcendent and Secular at the Same Time” News from the Field of the Religious Media

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Over a year ago, from December 2–3, 2010, a **Conference on the “Position and Responsibility of the Religious Media Today”** was held at the Jade Buddha Temple of Shanghai. The convention, attended by 600 participants, was hosted by the journal *Zhongguo zongjiao* 中国宗教 (*China Religion*), which is published by the State Administration for Religious Affairs. Co-organizers were the organs of the official governing bodies of the five major religions: the journals *Zhongguo daojiao* 中国道教 (*China Taoism*), the Buddhist journal *Fayin* 法音 (*Voice of Dharma*), *Zhongguo musulin* 中国穆斯林 (*China Muslim*), the Protestant periodical *Tianfeng* 天风, and *Zhongguo tianzhujiao* 中国天主教 (*Catholic Church in China*). According to *Fayin* – which also reported on the event, as well as *Zhongguo zongjiao* – it was the first conference on this topic since the beginning of the opening-up policy.

The distinctive feature of religious media, according to the conference, is that it has to be both “transcendent and secular” at the same time. Its double responsibility – to the adherents of religion and also to society as a whole – was stressed time and again. Zhuo Xinping, Director of the Institute for World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, stated that many problems in society were caused or made worse by irresponsible media reporting. He asked the religious media not to follow this trend but rather to contribute to harmony within and between the religions, as well as between the religions and society.

Interestingly enough, it was stated that the “traditional religious media” are experiencing new competition from other mass media in China, which are increasingly reporting on religion. Religious topics “are now a focal point of public opinion and give rise to hot debate in society. That is a new challenge to the discursive power of the religious media and their ability to form public opinion,” according to the *Zhongguo zongjiao* report on the conference.

In addition, the traditional religious media are under great pressure due to the rapid development of the new forms of media (Internet, mobile phone) which have fundamentally changed reporting and reading habits, the report explained, adding that digitalization of the traditional religious media is unavoidable. Participants agreed that the printed journals with their commitment and dependability ought to complement the virtual character and arbitrariness of the Internet. During the conference it was pointed out that through

the Internet, the religious media become a source of attraction which extends beyond the circle of adherents of religions to the broader society. This certainly applies to China more than elsewhere because the printed matter of religious groups can only appear internally, whereas their websites are openly accessible.

The digitalization of the traditional religious publications demanded by the media conference made further progress in summer 2011. On August 1, 2011, an online edition of the official Protestant journal *Tianfeng* made its debut. The printed issues will still continue. The online and printed journals are identical. With this, wrote the *Tianfeng* editors, the Protestant church in China has taken a great step forward. The online issue, which must be paid for, can be accessed on the joint Internet portal of the Protestant Three-Self-Movement and the Chinese Christian Council at <http://tianfeng.ccctspm.org/tianfeng/> which has already been in existence for a number of years.

The Catholic equivalent of *Tianfeng*, *Zhongguo tianzhujiao*, also went online in summer (probably July) 2011. The new website www.catholicchurchinchina.org is, however, not identical to the printed issue but functions as a new, joint Internet portal of the official, State sanctioned Catholic governing bodies, the Patriotic Association and the Chinese Bishops' Conference. Up till then the official church leadership had no Internet presence, a fact that the researcher of Catholicism Wang Meixiu regretted in her "Observations on Chinese Catholicism in 2009" in the *Annual Report on China's Religions (2010)* published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. At the same time, however, Wang also demanded a clear separation of these two bodies; the new website does just the opposite. It has a very extensive layout. Alongside Church news (China and Universal Church) and a few other topics, the navigation pane provides especially for subpages regarding Church institutions in China: on the dioceses (with a further 98 pages on the official dioceses in China, which, however, apart from one address per diocese contain nothing more as yet), on the major seminaries, religious congregations, Church welfare organizations, and publications. Up till now the majority of the subpages have very little content. On the other hand, the subpages concerning *yi hui yi tuan* 一会一团, as the Patriotic Association and the Chinese Bishops' Conference are summarily named, are well equipped with information; we find there their statutes, committees and commissions, as well as information on the current office holders, and reports of meetings. Chairman of the Commission for Media and Publications is Bishop Lei Shiyin who was consecrated without a papal mandate on June 29 last year.

The website is still in a process of development but clearly shows the efforts of the two Catholic governing bodies, which are supported by the Chinese Government but not recognized by Rome, to portray fully from now on the Catholic Church in China with all its institutions. Up till now a leading role with regard to the interregional reporting from the various dioceses has been played by the journal *Xinde* (currently with 50,000 subscribers) which appears in Shijiazhuang, together with its website www.chinacatholic.org. In this connection it is interesting to note that the newly launched website of the official Catholic governing bodies has a twin, with the address www.chinacatholic.cn which is almost identical to *Xinde's* "traditional" web address, while *Xinde's* website has recently adopted

a second web address, www.xinde.org, to which all subpages from www.chinacatholic.org are linked automatically.

The journal *Xinde* 信德 (*Faith*) celebrated its 20th anniversary on September 1, 2011, with its number 456. Simultaneously it changed from a ten-day to a weekly publication. The concept was also changed and from now on will place the main focus on in-depth reporting and commenting on social issues from the point of view of religious ethics. The multitude of news from the life of the dioceses and parishes which was formerly to be found on the first pages of the newspaper now have to be looked for on its website. The jubilee issue leader called for continued support for the paper by submitting news and articles, as well as subscribing.

The jubilee number also presented some data on the history of *Xinde*. Twice, namely in 1997 and 2000, publication of the paper was temporarily halted. *Xinde* reached a low in the year 2000 with 22,000 subscriptions and the highest circulation to date with 61,000 subscriptions in 2008. Speaking to the news agency *UCAN* in November 2011, the editor-in-chief, Father John Baptist Zhang Shijang, and the newly appointed director of Faith Press, Father Joseph Li Rongpin, noted that the number of subscribers was strongly influenced by the fluctuations of Sino-Vatican relations. Moreover, according to Li Rongpin, the increasing number of diocesan newspapers, which are mainly gratis and bring local news that is more relevant to the immediate environment of the readers, is drawing subscribers away from *Xinde*. This is one reason for changing the concept of the paper.

A few statistics. In Mainland China there are more than 130 Buddhist newspapers and 147 Buddhist websites. This number was quoted by *Fayin* in December 2010. In the *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* (March 2010) Wai Yip Ho observed that in mid-2008 there were 50 to 60 “active, stable and reliable Chinese Islamic websites.” As his article deals with the Hong Kong website “Light of Islam” (*Yisilan zhi guang*, www.islam.org.hk or www.norislam.com), this number probably also includes websites outside Mainland China. Regarding the Catholic Church in China, in November 2011 *UCAN* estimated more than 30 newspapers and a dozen journals.

Social media. Microblogging is becoming increasingly important in the area of religion as well. One example of this was named by the State news agency *Xinhua* on March 7, 2011: Master Xuecheng, one of the vice-chairmen of the Chinese Buddhist Association and editor-in-chief of *Fayin*, publishes microblogs in 8 languages – alongside Chinese also in English, French, Russian, Japanese, German, Spanish, and Korean (to be found at <http://longquanzs.org/eng/> – the entries do not have much of a personal nature but feature more of a chronicle of the activities of Master Xuecheng and of the Longquan monastery). The Protestant Chongwenmen Church in Beijing, for example, has its own microblog (<http://weibo.com/chwmch>) on Sina Weibo, the leading Chinese microblogging service (a kind of cross between Facebook and Twitter, both of which are blocked in China). The religious microblogging scene is far more difficult to measure than the Internet sites. Its increasing significance, however, was taken into account also by the Federation of Asian

Bishops Conferences (FABC) as the following example shows: during the meeting of their Office of Social Communications in Taiwan from November 14–19, 2011, they offered the participating Asian bishops, priests, religious, and lay persons a two-day workshop on the use of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other branches of the social or rather multi-media communication.

Sources: *Fayin* 2010, No. 12, pp. 60-61 and 12-13 (Report on the Conference “Position and Responsibility of the Religious Media Today” and the conference report of Master Xuecheng); *UCAN* November 18 and 25, 2011; Wai-Yip Ho, “Islam, China and the Internet: Negotiating Residual Cyberspace between Hegemonic Patriotism and Connectivity to the Ummah,” in: *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30 (2010) 1, pp. 63-79; Wang Meixiu 王美秀, “Observations on Chinese Catholicism in 2009” (in Chinese), in: *Zhongguo zongjiao baogao* 中国宗教报告 (2010). *Annual Report on China's Religions*, Beijing 2010, pp. 89-110, here pp. 106 and 109; *Xinde* September 1, 2011; *Xinhua* March 7, 2011; *Zhongguo zongjiao* 2010, No. 12, pp. 27-32 (Report on the Conference “Position and Responsibility of the Religious Media Today” and the conference report of Fang Litian); 2011, No. 1, pp. 34-35 (Conference report of Zhuo Xinping); www.catholicchurchinchina.org July 2, 2011; www.ccctspm.org August 1, 2011; cf. *RCTC* 2011, No. 2, pp. 92-93 and 103-104.

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