

The Sixth Conference on the Role and Influence of Christianity in Contemporary Chinese Society (第六届基督教在当代中国社会的作用及其影响) Held in Beijing

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This international conference took place from November 22–23, 2016 at Renmin University (Renmin daxue 人民大学). It was the 6th gathering since its inception in 2011 and had chosen “The Contemporary World Order and its Relationship to Religion (当代世界秩序与宗教关系)” as its theme. This time, the conference was jointly organized by the Advanced Institute for Religious Studies of Renmin University of China (Zhongguo renmin daxue Zongjiao gaodeng yanjiuyuan 中国人民大学宗教高等研究院), Yuan Dao Study Society of Hong Kong (Xianggang Yuandao jiaoliu xuehui 香港原道交流学会) and Hebei Faith Institute for Cultural Studies (Hebei Xinde wenhua xuehui 河北信德文化学会).

Among the participants were officials (including ex-officials) from the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (Zhonghua Zhongyang Tongzhanbu 中共中央统战部) as well as the National Bureau for Religious Affairs SARA (Guojia zongjiao shiwuju 国家宗教事务局) and some members of religious administration offices at provincial level, journalists from state-run media such as *Zongjiao zhoukan* 宗教周刊 (*Religion Weekly*) and *Zhongguo minzu bao* 中国民族报 (*China Ethnic News*), researchers from various academic institutes and universities, as well as representatives from Christian churches.

What is noteworthy was the significant presence of participants from the Catholic Church: they composed more than half of the 60 plus registered participants and most of them were priests and sisters who had obtained advanced academic degrees overseas and are currently involved in teaching ministries in various seminaries, both in Mainland China as well as in Hong Kong. This, however, should not strike anyone as a surprise since two of the three organizers, namely Hebei Faith Institute and Yuan Dao Study Society, are Catholic organizations. Hence, as one will note below, even though the conference itself was (somehow misleading) on “Christianity” (*jidujiao* 基督教), the topics discussed during the two days were largely focused on Catholicism.

The opening session was presided by Prof. Yang Huilin 杨慧林, a former vice-president of Renmin University. He pointed out that the conference could provide a good opportunity to help people form correct knowledge about and a good attitude toward religion, to enhance mutual understanding among people from political, academic and religious

backgrounds and to lend more theoretical support to an ever more positive and active role of religion in the societal development. The opening speech was given by Dr. Zhuo Xinping 卓新平, head of the Institute of World Religions (Shijie zongjiao yanjiusuo 世界宗教研究所), a branch institution under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan 中国社会科学院). He first gave a brief overview of the current environment Christianity is faced with in China, which, according to him, does not look promising at all. As a matter of fact, perception by the society at large can even be deemed worse in comparison to 30 years ago. Nevertheless, he also pointed out that Christianity was no stranger to unoptimistic situations in history, and thus, instead of lamenting the challenges and obstacles, one needs to think positively and find opportunities for a better development. It is possible that Christianity could co-exist with others in harmony in a Marxist society, if it can adapt itself well to the reality. The “One Belt One Road” policy would provide new opportunities for such necessary adaptation. He raised an intriguing question toward the end of his address: Whereas China had the creativity to form the famous “one nation two systems” (yi guo liang zhi 一国两制, with regard to Hong Kong) strategy, could then the Vatican also come up with a matching “one religion two rules” (yi jiao liang zhi 一教两治) policy?

Fr. Cai Huimin 蔡惠民, director of Hong Kong Yuan Dao, and Fr. John Baptist Zhang 张士江, director of Hebei Faith Institute, also expressed their wishes for a successful gathering. In his speech, Fr. Zhang gave a parallel comparison between Pope Francis and President Xi Jinping 习近平, both of whom are for him charismatic leaders with vision, courage and creativity. Thus, with regard to the Sino-Vatican relationship new horizons could be opened up in this period.

The discussion of the conference itself was organized around four subthemes presented in four sessions. Each session featured 2-3 speakers with respondents supplying observations and feedback. The topics were as follows: The religious dialogue in international or local conflicts and coordination (国际或地区冲突与协调中的宗教对话); Neo-geopolitics and religious relationship (新地缘政治与宗教关系); Religious culture of the “One Belt One Road” and public diplomacy (“一带一路”的宗教文化与公共外交); Against the neo-geopolitical background: relationship between the Church in China and the Universal Church (在新地缘政治的背景下: 中国教会与普世教会的关系).

The two speakers for the first session were both famous scholars in the area of Christianity studies. Prof. Zhang Zhigang 张志刚 of Peking University (Beijing daxue 北京大学) gave a review of important researches devoted to religious phenomena in the international conflicts, whereas Dr. Yan Kejia 晏可佳 of Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (Shanghai shehui kexueyuan 上海社会科学院) traced the history of religious dialogue in the past 30 years in China, in which he particularly noted two parallel dialogues, namely the dialogue within religious circles and the study of religious dialogue in the academic circles. He encouraged people from the religious side to be more actively involved in the exchange with the academic world in this respect.

The second session featured three speakers. Dr. Tan Lizhu 谭立铸, director of the research office of the Chinese Catholic Theological Committee (Zhongguo tianzhujiao shenxue yanjiu weiyuanhui 中国天主教神学研究委员会), gave a talk on the Catholic

Church's work among the refugees (immigrants) that, as might have been expected, highlighted Pope Francis' commitment to the care of the poor and the immigrants. Dr. Liu Guopeng 刘国鹏 of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences helped the audience to better understand the organization of the Vatican State with a presentation on the relationship between the Roman Curia and the top ranking authoritative institutions of the universal Catholic Church. Finally, Rev. Dr. Chen Jianguang 陈剑光 of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Xianggang Zhongwen daxue 香港中文大学) shared with the participants the challenges and barriers the "One Belt One Road" policy has to face in an international religious setting. To be noted here is that the comments of one of the respondents, Fr. Jerome Heyndrickx CICM (Han Deli 韩德力), were very well received. Among other things, he mainly emphasized the importance of dialogue, which was badly lacking in the Chinese Church history. Both Pope Francis and President Xi Jinping are persons of dialogue and thus, given the much different situations today, dialogue could then lead to something we had all hoped for. Nevertheless, one must not be overly optimistic as problems accumulated in the past could not be resolved by one or two meetings. Those who question the process of negotiations between China and the Vatican have reasons to do so and their doubts are also being heard by the Pope and their concerns have also been laid on the negotiating table.

The second day was opened with three talks looking into the "One Belt One Road" policy. Fr. Zhou Shouren SJ 周守仁 from Hong Kong and Fr. Michael Bauer (Bai Hanxi 柏寒夕), pastor of the Shanghai German speaking Catholic community, brought insights from religious and theological perspectives, while Prof. Ren Dayuan 任大援 of the Chinese National Academy of Arts (Zhongguo yishu yanjiuyuan 中国艺术研究院) looked at the issue from a historical perspective, namely the exchange of ideas between the missionaries and the Chinese intellectuals in the Late Ming and Early Qing period.

The fourth session was perhaps the most intriguing session, highly awaited by all the participants, since it focused on the Sino-Vatican relations. First, Fr. Dr. Geng Zhanhe 耿占河 of Hong Kong Yuan Dao analyzed the larger international background of Sino-Vatican negotiations and maintained that its process is affected by China's international relationships, particularly to the U.S., Japan, and Taiwan, and the improvement of Sino-Vatican relationship will only bring benefits to both sides. Then, Fr. Tan Leitao SVD 谈雷涛, student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, offered instead a review of Catholicism's encounters with Chinese authorities in history and proposed that a good relationship between the two sides had always contributed to the well-being of China, whereas a broken relationship only brought harm and destruction. Finally, Dr. Wang Meixiu 王美秀 of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences gave an expert's review of the Sino-Vatican relations in the past 70 or so years. She expressed the hope that this time around, with a true reconciliatory attitude, building upon common concerns, needs and interests, the negotiation process could bear real fruit.

Among the respondents for this session, the now famous papal interviewer Dr. Francesco Sisci (Xi Shi 希士), a research fellow at Renmin University, gained much attention. He first stressed that although an Italian, he is actually atheistic in his personal beliefs. He briefly introduced the background and the preparation of his historical interview with

Pope Francis. For him, the Pope is not just any person, but a real world power; on the other hand, the recent events proved that the Vatican could be a powerful voice for the disadvantaged nations, and thus an improved relationship could help China gain a better international living space in the long run. Finally, he reminded us that the Vatican's ultimate goal is not proselytism but rather the promotion of peace.

During the closing session, Prof. Yang Huilin offered a very insightful summary, as well as learned reflections of the entire conference. Mr. Zhao Xueyi 赵学义, the former head of the Second Department of SARA, the department in charge of affairs in the Catholic Church, shared his experiences working with the Catholic Church. He believed that, comparable to the Sino-US negotiations in the 1970s, issues between the Vatican and China will be eventually resolved.

Looking back now, one probably has to say that this was by and large a “Catholic” conference. Besides the prominent presence of Catholic participants mentioned before, another significant character of this conference would be the obvious interest in and talks on Sino-Vatican relations. As a matter of fact, as Fr. John-Baptist Zhang noted, it was the first time ever that this topic could be discussed in such a setting. Let's then hope that this can also serve as a sign of something even more positive to come in the near future.