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The Chinese Communist Party has always had a complicated relationship with religious organisations and religions as a whole since the regime promotes atheist. Since the beginning of reforms in China forty years ago, there has been both a relaxation of control on religious activities and a religious revival. However, a very important distinction needs to be made between freedom of faith, which is well-accepted by the Party and freedom of religious organisations, which is tightly restricted and controlled.

Another distinction is made by the CCP leadership, and Xi Jinping in particular, between religions that are presented as Chinese or mainly Chinese, Daoism and also Buddhism, which entered China in the first century BC, and Western religions, including Islam, Christianity and Catholicism. The way those various religious organisations are managed is very different, the former group of religions enjoys clearly more freedom than the latter.

The place occupied by religion in China needs to be put in perspective: it is for example much smaller than in Muslim countries or even in the United States. Moreover, contrary to the West, including to Muslim countries, many Chinese embrace several religions at the same time.

The fact that among the elites and the counter-elites in China you have more and more Christians is both an issue for the authorities and a factor of potential political change. In Asia, there are precedents to that: the role of Christian churches in Taiwan or South Korea's democratisation is well-known and constitutes a real *bête noire* in the eyes of the Chinese Communist Party. That is why Christianity, particular protestant churches, will continue to be perceived by the Chinese authorities with a lot of suspicion in the coming years.

Thank you very much. I feel like being both the moderator and a speaker but let me maybe add a few words about religion and politics in China today, to the very comprehensive presentation made by Franciscus. First of all, I think that the Communist Party has always had a complicated relationship with religious organisations and religions as a whole, since the regime propagates atheism. I think that this is a big difference with the regimes that preceded the Communist Party, the Republic of China or Imperial China, where religious organisations were much better accepted by the government and more autonomous. It is also the case of other Chinese societies, like Hong Kong or Taiwan, where the cohabitation or coexistence between the state, the government and religious organisations is much easier than in mainland China.

There has been a relaxation of control of religious activities since the beginning of reforms forty years ago and, as Franciscus was saying, there has also been a revival of religious activities. However, I think that a very important distinction which needs to be made and has already been alluded to by Franciscus, is the distinction that the Communist Party makes between freedom of faith, which is well-accepted, and freedom of religious organisations, which is tightly restricted and controlled. Religious organisations are closely monitored and supervised by the Communist Party. For a long time, it was the State Council or Central Government's SARA (the State Administration for Religious Affairs), which was in charge of the five accepted religions in China. In March 2018, this whole administration was transferred under the Communist Party Central Committee's United Front Work Department. The way religions and religious organisations are administered has remained the same since 1949: the five officially accepted religions are Daoism; Buddhism, Christianity or Protestant churches, Islam, and Catholicism. It means that on paper at least, Judaism, Orthodoxy are not recognised as religions although in reality there is a department within this administration in charge of other religions, putting in the same basket all the religions which are less represented in China.

In the current Sinicization of religious activities, there is one thing that is very important, which was also mentioned briefly by Franciscus. This is the distinction made by the CCP leadership, and Xi Jinping in particular, between religions that are considered as Chinese or mainly Chinese, that is Daoism, but also Buddhism, which entered China

in the first century BC, and what the authorities deem to be Western religions, including Islam, Christianity and Catholicism. The way those various religious organisations are managed is very different, the former group of religions enjoys clearly more freedom than the latter. One of the concerns of the authorities regarding Buddhism is its commercialisation, the fact that a lot of Buddhist temples and abbots are involved in business activities that make them very rich, but which are also a perversion of their religious activities. That is one of the dangers that I think has been identified by Xi Jinping more than by his predecessors. For non-Chinese religions, I think that the danger that has been perceived by the authorities is the danger of penetration by other countries. If you take the example of Christianity, the major challenge identified by the authorities is the increasing influence in China of American or Western, very active, evangelical churches, particularly the ones based in the US. It is not a danger that is isolated from politics, because one of the manifestations in the civil society has been the large appeal of Christianity among a number of elite members. That is a very intriguing association for the authorities, because you see for instance, more and more dissidents or human rights lawyers in China that have become Christians in the middle of their endeavour to protect human rights, or to put pressure on the authorities to open the political system. That adds up on the danger of Western religions as perceived by the authorities. Franciscus has mentioned a number of examples of stricter controls of religious activities since Xi Jinping took over in 2012. One of the best-known examples as far as Christians are concerned has been the destruction of crosses in a number of provinces, particularly in Zhejiang. According to some data, something like 15,000 to 17,000 crosses have been destroyed in this single province, which for at least five years was ruled by someone very close to Xi Jinping, Xia Baolong.

As far as Islam is concerned, Franciscus mentioned the recent developments in Xinjiang. One thing I would like to add regarding Xinjiang is the fact that the Uyghur movement in favour of independence or autonomy, was traditionally non-religious, it was a secular movement, a Kemalist movement, influenced by Turkish modernisers. It became religious rather recently maybe in the last 20 years. Traditionally, the Islam practised by most Xinjiang Uyghur people, Kazakhs and others is more a kind of Sufi moderate Islam. However, in the last 20 years there has been a rise of radical Islam in Xinjiang, imported from or influenced by Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan and which has intensified the fight for autonomy or even independence and made it more violent. This has been a recent development as far as the political situation in Xinjiang is concerned and which does not justify but explains the reaction of the authorities. The harsh repressive policy that has been carried out by the Chinese government in the last few months or years is something we can discuss if there is a bit of time in the Q&A. In my view, this policy is very counter-productive because it may create more radical militants rather than solving the issue.

You mentioned that one of the motivations in China for people to embrace religion is a lack of trust in society. One of the answers of the authorities to that lack of trust, which I think a lot of politicians or government people in China admit to, has been the establishment on a trial basis of what has been called in China the social credit system. The aim of the social credit system is precisely to restore trust among citizens, or between the government and citizens. Whether it is going to work is another story, because it is very much a top-down and intrusive project that has been qualified as Orwellian by many observers. But in a way, it complements what people are trying to create in embracing religion at the grass-root level: not only communities of faith but also communities of trust. In many ways social trust has been destroyed not only by the communist regime but also 40 years of reforms and opening as well as a development strategy that has focused very much on improving material life, but not spiritual life, creating a spiritual and ethical void in the society.

Regarding religious activities in China, we have to put things into perspective, and Franciscus and I may disagree on this: the importance of religion for the Chinese society today. I would first add one thing, the fact that contrary to the West, including to Muslim countries, in China you can embrace or get involved in various religions at the same time. You can be Christian and Buddhist at the same time, which for us Westerners is pretty hard to understand. Chinese people's approach to religion may be very different from ours. The second thing is that for many urbanised middle class Chinese religion does not matter that much. It is not something that is structuring their lives. Yes, people go to temples and sometimes practise a religion or have some kind of faith, but how important religion is for them in their daily life is something that we have to question and put into perspective. Franciscus mentioned a few figures. With 15 million Uyghur and 20 million or so Hui, Islam will clearly remain a minority religion in China, which needs to be protected and guaranteed, but at the same time it is not going to become a central issue. The big issue for the Chinese leadership today is whether Christianity will emerge so much that it will become more important than any other religion. There are debates about the number of Christians in China. Clearly, Catholics are still a minority with 1% of the population at most, but Protestants and Evangelical churches are developing very quickly. Experts are

divided about the number of Christians in China: some people claim that there are more Christians than Communist Party members, in other words around 100 million Christians. I think a more reasonable figure would be 70 million, but it is still a large figure for China, because at the end of the Cultural Revolution their number was about 20 million at most, so it has increased very quickly. The fact that among the elites and the counter-elites in China you have more and more Christians is both an issue for the authorities and a factor of potential political change. As I have already mentioned counter-elites, for instance activists and human-right lawyers who put pressure on the CCP to open up the political system, are also very often Christian. For these reasons, Christianity is perceived even more as a danger by the Chinese government. The question is what kind of cohabitation the government will accept in the coming years with a lot of churches that are not really underground and are tolerated at the local level, but are not associated with the major official protestant organisation, the Three-Self Christian Association, which is under the government' supervision. You have got what we call a lot of house-churches in China. When they remain small, they are tolerated; when they get too big, they are dismantled.

Again, as Franciscus mentioned at the end of his presentation, the situation is not black and white, it is kind of grey because you have a certain degree of tolerance among the authorities for reasons that have to do with the fact that religion is perceived as useful to some degree. To use the well-known Marxist expression, religion is the opium of the people but it is an opium that if it used moderately is perceived, including by the authorities, as a stabilising force for the Chinese society. Religious organisations also play a useful role in charity and social programmes. Again, if we look at the past, when the Kuomintang was in power in China, it also used religious organisations to supplement the government's social policies, which are not always strong enough to fulfil all the needs of the poor and disadvantaged in the society. Again, I think that in China there is today a larger acceptance of religious activities, but the Party wants to be in control of any kind of religious organisations. Finally, and that is the bottom line I think for the authorities, the main danger is what the Communist Party calls foreign infiltration. Not only foreign infiltration for changing the soul of the Chinese people, but also changing their political minds and so precipitating a peaceful evolution of the regime towards another kind of political system. And in Asia, there are precedents to that: the role of Christian churches in Taiwan or South Korea's democratisation is well-known and constitutes a real *bête noire* in the eyes of the Chinese Communist Party. That is why Christianity will continue to be perceived by the Chinese authorities with a lot of suspicion in the coming years and I have to say, much more the Protestants than the Catholic Church as such.

The political context of China's religious revival is one in which the Communist Party is trying to strengthen its ideological propaganda and control over the society. However, there is an irony here in the sense that the Chinese society has never been more globalised. The youth are very much connected to the outside world while at the same time the Communist Party under Xi Jinping is trying to isolate or re-isolate China from the rest of the world. Here there is a tension for the future not only of China's relations with the outside world but also of Chinese society as such. This is something we may come back to in the Q&A. I am going to stop here.