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Editorial

Religious observance in China has seen an explosion over the last 25 years. A government white paper of April 2002 speaks of 200 million religious adherents belonging to a wide variety of faiths. This appears to be a 50 per cent increase over the previous three years alone (a 1999 estimate was 136 million).

The population of China is some 1300 million – nearly nine times that of the Russian Federation. In a country as diverse and densely populated as this it is not surprising that the experiences and treatment of religious believers vary widely, from outright repression to almost total toleration. So do the experiences of foreign visitors, depending on where they go and when. The article 'Chinese Islam: unity and fragmentation' in this issue of *RSS* delves into the complex relationships amongst 'religion, state and society' in the Chinese Islamic heartland. In *RSS* no. 2, 2002, Igor' Rotar' described the very different situation in the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), where Islam is identified with aspirations for national self-determination and provokes reprisals and repression from the Chinese authorities.

What remains deeply paradoxical in China is the state's ideological stance towards religion. The Communist Party still maintains that 'Marxist–Leninist–Mao Zedong thought' has the monopoly on truth and morality. Yet the Party today is not what it was in the 1970s. It now promotes western-style capitalist entrepreneurship by a younger generation experiencing a continuing economic boom. It is symptomatic that the core support for the Falun Gong movement, so vigorously suppressed over the last few years, came from the middle-aged: those who underwent all manner of hardships at the time of the Cultural Revolution for the sake of the Party and who now watch helpless and marginalised as market forces erode their pensions.

Despite the moral monopoly claimed by the Party, there is a fascination with religion, and a desire to engage with it, within the ruling establishment itself. According to government sources up to 20–25 per cent of Communist Party officials in certain localities engage in some kind of religious activity. In 1996 the first university religious studies department in China opened in Beijing. It is impossible to generalise from random facts like these; but is clear is that religion is impinging on ideological debate within China, and will continue to do so.

One thing will continue to guarantee this: globalisation. The leader of the Falun Gong movement, Li Hongzhi, now lives in the USA, and the movement worldwide uses the internet and international electronic communication to condemn the campaign to eradicate Falun Gong in China. In the XUAR Islamic fundamentalists maintain links with similar groups in former Soviet Central Asia, to the extent that 'Beijing is trying to protect the country from "harmful" influences from beyond its western borders. The border control system has been tightened up considerably. Satellite television is permitted throughout the rest of China except Tibet, but in the XUAR aerials which can receive programmes from the former USSR are forbidden.'

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(*RSS* no. 2, 2002, p. 137)

In October 2002 the US State Department released its annual *International Religious Freedom Report*, which included a long section on China. Official response from China was quick, expressing 'strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition' to the report on the grounds that it disregarded reality, unreasonably censured China's religious policy and gave 'high praise' to the Falun Gong cult. A Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said that it 'trampled the basic rule of international relations' and was 'a rude interference in China's internal affairs'. The latter phase recalls the rhetoric of the Cold War years. Yet China today, with its economy irrevocably globally enmeshed, cannot coherently invoke the fortress concept. Ideological evolution in China is inevitable; and it is clear that religion will play a central role in this process.

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Leïla Chérif-Chebbi is working for a PhD on Islamic fundamentalist reformism in twentieth-century China. Her recent writings include 'L'*Ihewani*, une machine de guerre contre le soufisme en Chine?' in Frederick de Jong and Bernd Radtke (eds), *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics* (Leiden, Brill, 1999) and 'Islam minoritaire: du rituel communautaire à la mobilisation des musulmans chinois' in Fariba Adelkhah and François Georgeon, *Ramadan et politique* (Paris, CNRS, 2000).

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