

# **The Steel Hand of Domination in a Velvet Glove of Hegemony – Aspects of Religious Discourse in China**

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## **Introduction**

Though I joined a professional study tour to Mainland China in 1997<sup>2</sup> for different reasons, my interest was soon caught by something that I had not anticipated. Having grown up in apartheid SA, and having lived through and even published (Loubser 1991; 1995; 1996) on the painful process of awakening to the recognition of an ideology that at first seemed as natural as the air that one breathes, I asked myself whether the parallels I perceived between the old South Africa and present day China were imaginary. After discussions with religious leaders from all five legalised religions the conviction grew that there were striking structural similarities in the manner in which religious discourses were influenced by government ideologies. Though my perception had been sharpened by experiences in South Africa, that is not the focus of this article. However, an analysis of the theme religion and ideology in China might be helpful when dealing with religious leaders, and can assist in clarifying the issue of religious freedom. This issue has become even more relevant since 5 October 1998, 'when the Peoples'

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Republic of China (PRC) officially signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights<sup>3</sup>.

## Profile of Hegemony

After different shades of repression and oppression, leading up to the harsh persecution during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1971) the PRC is now heading for an era of unprecedented religious freedom. Some questions arise: What would the limits of this freedom be? How would the Party justify this freedom to itself? Are religious bodies merely tolerated, or is some active role foreseen for them in society? From the discussions with religious leaders it was apparent that the government's role was ambivalent. On the one hand, religious activities are controlled by perhaps the strictest regulations found in the world, while on the other hand religious leaders admitted that they received some assistance and even encouragement from government officials.

For my analysis I shall employ the concept of hegemony used by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, as further developed by a number of scholars (conveniently omitting finer nuances of interpretation)<sup>4</sup>. In doing this I am aware of how precarious it might be to apply a concept developed in 'Western' thought to Chinese conditions, given the illusive difference between conventional Western and Chinese thought patterns<sup>5</sup>.

Somehow, the idea of hegemony comes to mind when scholars think of China<sup>6</sup>. Let us first begin with a brief profile. In the original classical Greek usage, hegemony denotes 'leadership' and was used to describe the hegemony of one city-state over another. During the revolution of 1905 - 1907 Lenin used the term 'hegemony of the proletariat' to describe the

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. article 'Dissidents call on Blair to press China on Rights, Environment', published on the Internet at [cmn.com](http://cmn.com), October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the development of Gramsci's thought over 33 years, its inner contradictions and varying interpretations, see Lumley (1977: 25-42).

<sup>5</sup> For a description of some of the differences, cf. Gernet (1982) esp. the section on language and thought, pp 238-247.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Marme (1987: 437), Weiss, 'The New Hegemony' (1988), Letter in *International Herald Tribune*, Tuesday, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1995 by Kok-ui Lim.

position of one party with regard to other groups in society, while working out the theory of the expansion of the bourgeois democratic revolution into socialist revolution<sup>7</sup>.

In 1926-1927 Gramsci linked on to Lenin for his definition of hegemony, but went far beyond<sup>8</sup>, giving it the definitive meaning it today has in international scholarship as an analytical tool for examining the 'complex interconnections between culture and politics which the idealists have suppressed'. The concept of hegemony calls 'attention to the wide variety of cultural manifestations in which ideology appears' (Adamson (1980: 176). Gramsci's basic observation was that force ('domination')<sup>9</sup> was insufficient to keep a group in power, and that it needed the consent of the masses. It is the 'predominance of consent over coercion in that concept' that has commended Gramsci to a wide range of theorists, who began to examine ways in which such a consensual basis can be achieved and maintained (Martin 1997: 33).

In a normal situation a government would be stable if it exercised not only coercive force, but moral and intellectual leadership (hegemony) that enjoys the consent of the masses. Should a situation occur that disturbs its consensual base, a government becomes unstable and an 'organic crisis' or 'authority crisis' sets in, creating the condition for a 'counter-hegemony'. New governments either achieve power by first seizing it and afterwards seek to establish hegemony, or a new hegemony first develops and is then promoted to a position of power. It is the latter process that concerned Gramsci as he applied this theory to the Italian state of the early twentieth century<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Soviet Encyclopedic Dictionary*, 1985 as published on the Internet, accessed August 1998.

<sup>8</sup> In "Notes on the Southern Question" in Gramsci 1978. See Adamson (1980:172-173).

<sup>9</sup> 'Domination', indicates a state's monopoly by means of force and its role as final arbiter of all disputes (Adamson 1980: 170; also 242).

<sup>10</sup> In the US the leading exponent of this theory has been Michael Harrington. American socialists struggle to wrest ideological hegemony away from the ruling class, and gain hegemony for radical ideology, as described in the pamphlet 'Toward a Democratic Socialism: Theory,

To establish a viable counter-hegemony, Gramsci went beyond the conventional 'class alliances' of the communist movement, and argued that alliances have to be formed with a broad range of civic and cultural organisations, which could include religious bodies, with the Party assuming a hegemonic role. The evolution of a class-consciousness thus coincided with a movement that involved not only an economical awareness, but also a broader moral and intellectual awareness (Adamson 1980: 171). Thus a 'moral and intellectual bloc' is formed, also known as the 'historical bloc'<sup>11</sup>. Hegemony has to be pioneered by articulating intellectuals who mediate between the aspirations of the masses and the socialist party. At a certain stage in the development of a counter-hegemony, the masses are catapulted out of their passivity and become the conscious agents of history. This is technically known as the 'cathartic moment'. Once the party controls the state, it needs to continue with the process of consolidating its hegemony.

As an analytical tool, hegemony supersedes the conventional definitions of ideology as either 'false consciousness' or a 'system of ideas'<sup>12</sup>. Hegemonic ideology seeks to legitimate a certain status quo that is maintained by force. In modern (undemocratic) states it does not do away with domination, but seeks to consolidate and reaffirm it. A successful hegemony conceals the coercive force of the state as much as possible. Therefore it seeks to establish a moral and intellectual rapport between the rulers and the masses, and is maintained by constant moral and intellectual pressure, reinventing itself from time to time as the agent of change in

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Strategy, and Vision' (1991) by Joseph Schwartz, member of the DSA National Political Committee.

<sup>11</sup> The idea of a 'bloc' was adapted from Sorel (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 42).

<sup>12</sup> Ideology: A system of beliefs, practices, attitudes, values, ideas and language that justifies a status quo. 'Hard' ideology derives its usage from Napoleon Bonaparte, and implies a fanatical commitment to a particular set of ideas. This definition informs the gut reaction many people have to the term as being associated with 'deception', 'distortion', or 'falseness'. The term may also be used in the sense of a 'soft' ideology, indicating the set of beliefs that people live by. In both cases ideology is involved in framing human experience, explaining reality, imposing sense and order on society and is expressed through language and ritual.

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society. As it controls the parameters of social discourse it becomes embedded in the institutions of society to such an extent that the systems it created are accepted as part of the natural order. As is the case with all forms of ideology, it lives by a number of myths that represent a simplification of reality and define the limits of critical enquiry. Usually it is the 'charismatic leader' or the heroic struggle of the 'historical bloc' or the 'cathartic moment' that becomes the paradigmatic myth. At the stage when it enters the social subconscious to such an extent that it appears natural, it operates as a closed, self-explanatory hermeneutic circle. At the same time hegemonic ideology is deeply agonistic, portraying counter-hegemonic elements as the enemies of peace, while extrapolating all opposition to cosmic evil. This ongoing process is technically known as the 'war of position'.

In summary one can say that there are three types of hegemony: (1) a neutral definition of hegemony as leadership; (2) hegemony as a positive consensus generated by the leading group in a democratic society; and (3) hegemony as a tactical strategy to maintain domination in an undemocratic society.

In this article I shall argue that Gramsci never completely broke with the third definition, and that this is also the definition that is operative in the PCR. The investigation will explore the ramifications which this kind of hegemony has for religious freedom<sup>13</sup>.

### Questions and Responses as Traces of a Religious Discourse

At the risk of oversimplification I now present a brief, generalised sketch of the religious discussions that took place over two weeks at numerous institutions. Place-names and names of interviewees are omitted.

*Q: How did you survive the Cultural Revolution?*

A: Religion had to be practised underground. In some cases members were protected by their communities. Many were executed while others survived

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<sup>13</sup> Though the concept of hegemony is often mentioned in literature, I am aware of only one article in which Gramsci's theory has been applied to the present China, cf. 'Ideological superstructure in Gramsci and Mao Tse-Tung', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35: 1 Jan-March 1974 (author unknown).

lengthy interrogations and 're-education'. All the sanctuaries were closed, many were destroyed while others were desecrated. (The present Government is seen as the 'liberator' from the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, just as Mao was seen as the 'liberator' from Japanese and Nationalist aggression.)

*Q: How do you assess the current atmosphere in the religious communities?*

A: They were brought closer by the hardships of the Cultural Revolution. There are examples of Christian and Buddhist groups assisting one another to reconstruct their sanctuaries. Though Protestant and Catholic Christians do not engage in internal dialogue, the relationship is cordial. All religions enjoy greater freedom than in the past and are optimistic. Otherwise secularism and worldly demands take their toll on the faithful.

*Q: Are you free to propagate your religion?*

A: Yes, within the set limits of the sanctuaries. This does not prevent outsiders to participate. No religious programmes are allowed in the media and on the streets. An example exists where Buddhist monks took down 'illegal' way-side shrines erected by laymen, in order to comply with current legislation. The printing of textbooks and sacred texts are allowed but restricted, while there are regulations controlling the intake of new members. The Government seems to be sensitive to the rapid growth of Christianity among the youth and the elite.

*Q: What are the main problems facing your religious activities?*

A: Too few facilities to train leaders, too little resources for printed materials, too much bureaucracy.

*Q: Do you experience any interference from the Government in your affairs?*

A: Bureaucratic red tape makes it almost impossible to find new premises for buildings. In some cases the local officials are helpful, though they tend to view religious bodies as their subordinates. As China is a huge country it is conceivable that there are areas where the local officials have not yet implemented new policies and are hostile to religious matters.

*Q: Is the practice of your faith anyhow compromised by the socialist policies of the Government?*

A: No practises are allowed that are dangerous to a person's health or to the economic welfare of the communities. This relates to issues such as dietary laws, faith-healing, proselytising and religious holidays especially in the non-Christian religions. In general, religious groups have adapted to this, since it does not affect the central tenets of their faith. Also all licensed religions have to comply with the 'three-selves principles' (self-government, self-support and self-propagation) and to oppose imperialist and counter-revolutionary elements<sup>14</sup>.

*Q: Can you inform us about the position of religious groups that are not licensed by the Government?*

A: They have made their choice to defy Government and they often represent extremist positions. By and large the licensed religions are not too concerned with those groups and would advise them to seek legalisation.

*Q: Are you aware of the persecution of people because of religion?*

A: Those who are prosecuted and brought to trial are guilty of criminal offences. (An example of a preacher who went on trial for raping young girls was cited on more than one occasion.) Also those who indulge in 'superstition' or profit from people's superstition are liable to be prosecuted.

*Q: What about the situation in Tibet, and especially with the Dalai Lama?*

A: Tibet was always part of China and enjoys autonomy. There are now more Buddhist temples than before the PRC's intervention. The Dalai Lama has been invited to return provided that he refrains from insisting on the independence of Tibet<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Adopted in the Christian Manifesto of 1950 and signed by 400,000 Protestant Christians, and afterwards applied to other groups. See Geffré & Spaë (1979: 99-100) for background information.

<sup>15</sup> Background to the PRC's ruthless politics regarding Tibet is given in Weiss (1988: 38-39). Much the same tactics is now applied to the Taiwan-issue: international isolation, recognition that the territory belongs to China, promises of limited autonomy and prosperity.

*Q: Do you enjoy full citizenship?*

A: No, only atheists believing in materialism are admitted as members of the Party, which is a prerequisite for holding office. Rare exceptions are made for people from the autonomous regions.

*Q: How do you evaluate the Tiananmen incident of 1989? Do you have religious critique of the state?*

A: That was an unfortunate incident. A difference between religion and politics is observed, though religion can serve a positive role in the construction of a patriotic, socialist society. Religious values can counter corruption as occurs occasionally among officials — as also reported in the newspapers.

## Evaluation

The absence of a critique of state policies and theory about how religion could support a future democracy was noteworthy. It is also telling that academics in religion, philosophy and social sciences were not familiar with Western disciplines such as hermeneutics or deconstruction, of which few have only remotely heard. The historical criticism of Western theology and proponents of the different varieties of liberation theology had apparently not yet arrived in China.

A preliminary response among our delegation to these answers was that the spokespersons were inhibited by the threat of reprisal from the side of the Government and that they gave prescribed answers. Surely, they were aware of the severe repression reported by human rights groups—in 1993 there were 500 complaints before the China Christian Council of abuses at local level, property problems and violence against members (MacInnis 1996: 289). Surely, they also knew that Chinese authorities in Tibet have chosen a young boy as successor to the late Panchen Lama (second to the Dalai Lama) ignoring the boy selected by Tibet's religious leaders (MacInnis 1996: 289). Especially noteworthy was the 'amnesia' regarding the underground Protestant and Catholic churches. And surely, they were aware that the policy to extend private ownership (affirmed by the 15<sup>th</sup> Party Congress concluded on the 21<sup>st</sup> September) would lead to an increased



pressure for democracy as evidenced by the Tiananmen-demonstrations of 1989? The latter was obviously a taboo subject.

Could it be that the leaders were so comfortably co-opted by the system that they did not really care about the wider issues? Were they deliberately toeing the Party-line? Or did they lack courage or proper information? As the talks proceeded the impression grew that our discussion partners were sincere rather than cynical. They all, rather convincingly, affirmed how free they were since the public practice of religion was allowed in 1979 and sought the demonstrate China's new open door policy. Such a finding obviously lead to the question as to *how it is possible for 'good' people to have been co-opted to such an extent by a repressive system?*

In the next section I shall argue that this phenomenon can be adequately explained by the concept of hegemony.

## Aspects of Hegemony

### Growing Importance of Hegemony

For an observer it is obvious that the Gramscian concept of hegemony finds a textbook application in present-day China.

With the open-door policy adopted by the Constitution of 1978 and the economic reforms of the 1990s new groups, such as entrepreneurs, are steadily on the increase<sup>16</sup>. At an incremental pace more groups are entering the social space also shared by religious bodies. These diverse civil associations have in common that they are voluntary associations based on consent and persuasion. This is exactly the situation foreseen by Gramsci where mere domination by the rulers is not enough to remain in power. In 1926 when he began using the word hegemony in its new sense he mentioned that 'the proletariat can become the dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of alliances which allows it to mobilise the majority of the working class population ...'<sup>17</sup>. He takes this idea of

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. article by Nicholas Lardy in Ying-Mao Kau & Marsh (1993: 103ff.), and speech by Li Luye permanent representative of PRC at the UN, also in Ying-Mao Kau & Marsh (1993: 443ff.).

<sup>17</sup> In "Notes on the Southern Question" in *Selections from Political Writings 1921-26*. (1978: 443).

hegemony beyond the proletariat, introducing the idea of a political leadership grounded upon a 'conjunctural coincidence of interests' in which the participating sectors retain their 'separate identities. Moral and intellectual leadership requires that an ensemble of ideas and values be shared by a number of sectors (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 66f). This theory requires communist strategy to put hegemonic tasks increasingly more central, especially when dealing with capitalist systems (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 60). There can be no doubt that Marxism-Leninism in China is undergoing such a radical transformation that it is even thought to be on the decline (in Ying-Mao Kau & Marsh 1993: 408-429; 437).

The Party is thus forced to abandon its class ghetto and 'to transform itself into the articulator of a multiplicity of antagonisms and demands stretching beyond itself' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 58). What is needed is hegemony, intellectual and moral leadership of the party, winning the consent of civil associations, including the religious constituent. For this, two factors are instrumental: the formation of an 'intellectual and moral bloc' and the development of a new type of intellectual leadership.

### **Moral and Intellectual bloc**

Gramsci defines hegemony as spiritual and moral leadership that operates through persuasion and consent. A social group might assume a hegemonic role when it articulates cultural and belief systems that are held to be universally valid by the general population. 'The social group or class that is capable of forming its own particular knowledge and value systems, and of transforming them into general and universally applicable conceptions of the world, is the group that exercises intellectual and moral leadership.' An example of such a (positive) hegemony is that of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Reformation that countered the domination of the old Roman Catholic system breached the gap between the clergy and the laity and created a hegemonic relationship between the people and the intellectuals. One result of this was the translation of Scripture into the vernacular languages. Thus the Reformation succeeded in translating its values into universal categories that went beyond the boundaries of the church and found general acceptance among the public (Fontana 1993: 35-37). By achieving this, a 'historical bloc' was formed.

### 'Organic' Leadership

The Party as the dominant group aspires to a leadership role in society. According to Gramscian theory this role requires the emergence of an *organic* intellectual within the people themselves. Thus the concept is born of a democratic philosopher who *articulates* the hegemonic ideology (Fontana 1993: 140).

The organic and dialectical interaction between intellectual and the masses resembles a relationship between teacher and student, where the teacher is also a student and the student is also a teacher. Through this totality constituted by the interaction of thought and action, the level of consciousness of the masses is raised. Consequently this transcendence does not destroy the different social spheres, but rather links them on a higher level, involving them in an open-ended reciprocal transforming relationship (Fontana 1993: 33-34). Thus the socialist party conforms to Gramsci's Machiavellian model of the 'New Prince' as hegemonic innovator and reformer, who closely and inextricably linked with the people, and, together with the people, uses the new political knowledge to engage in the *verità effettuale* and by so doing transform reality ...' (Fontana 1993: 147).

The implication of such a theory for religious bodies in the PRC should be obvious. These associations are now respected as separate social entities that must become part of the 'intellectual and moral bloc' under the hegemony of the Party. It is in this light that one has to understand the role of the Institute of World Religions at the Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing (founded in 1964), and the Religious Affairs Bureau. These two bodies, the former with an academic and the latter with an administrative task, are to serve, in Gramscian terms, as the collective 'new philosopher'. In theory these bodies are not to see their role as that of domination, but rather as mediator between the true interests of the religions and the Party. A question that remains is whether this process can really be as reciprocal and open-ended as foreseen by Gramsci when power is monopolised by the Party.

In an ironic sense this idea of hegemony deconstructs the philosophical base from which it arises. What it calls into question is the base/superstructure model of classical Marxism (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 58). Gramsci himself argued against a determinist understanding of base and

superstructure, saying that such a correspondence did not permit a simple reduction of one to the other. 'Economic conditions merely set the limits to forms of superstructural activity, they did not directly determine them' (as quoted to this effect by Martin 1997: 50). However, in spite of these insights, Gramsci did not manage to rid himself of Stalinist elements. His relatively undeveloped understanding of the systemic nature of language, prevented him from taking the subsequent step of completely separating the notion of hegemony from proletarian classism. This was only later carried through by post-structuralist thinkers (Brandist 1996: 108). Gramsci's essentialist notion of the historical bloc, which Laclau & Mouffe (1985) deplores as a step backward, is still, according to my observation, alive and well in the PRC, and preventing democratic plurality. With the Party monopolising the state in China, it is clear that the same contradiction exists as has been observed by post-structuralists in the thought of Gramsci, who stopped short of defining hegemony in such a way that it compromises the monopoly of the Party..

### War of Position; Politics of Consent

The present situation of religious organisations in China is further elucidated by the Gramscian concept of a 'war of position'. As the PRC responds to a continuing diversification of society, due to internal economic pressures and the demands of globalisation, the war of arms is replaced by a 'war of position'. The rigid social distinctions of classical Maoism—the Army, the Workers, the Party, etc.—are now opening up to new groupings, viz., the religious communities, civil bodies, new classes of entrepreneurs. This is the reason why China is entering a phase where *hegemony becomes more important than ever*.

The Leninist conception that a small cadre of professional revolutionaries could divine the 'true interests' of the working class, proved to be an effective strategy for underground organisation in repressive societies. However, Leninism's track record in democratic capitalist societies is dismal because citizens in 'bourgeois' democracies believe they should openly participate in determining their 'true interest'. As China is allowing more civil freedom, the classical Marxist theory that the class that has the means of material production at its disposal, at the same time has

control over the means of mental production, comes into difficulty, necessitating an extension of theory. This corresponds to Gramscian theory that 'accepts social complexity as the very condition of political struggle and ... sets the basis for a democratic practice of politics, compatible with a plurality of historical subjects' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 71). For the Party to maintain its hegemony in the new environment, it constantly has to conquer strategic moral and intellectual positions in society. The war of position seeks to assemble the 'disaggregated' social entities around the hegemonic core. The intellectual instrument through which this war is waged, is technically described as 'articulation'.

### **Articulation as Weapon in the 'War of Position'**

The concept of hegemony supposes a theoretical field dominated by the category of articulation. Articulatory practice can be understood as a discursive structure, which constitutes and organises social relations (Laclau & Mouffe 1985:93, 96). As religious discourse in the PRC inevitably articulates and structures social reality, it also becomes the target of a war of position.

The *elements* on which articulatory practices operate were originally specified as fragments of a lost structural or organic totality (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 93). 'The status of the "elements" is that of floating signifiers, incapable of being wholly articulated to a discursive chain. And this floating character finally penetrates every discursive (i.e. social) entity' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 113).

It is not the poverty of the signifieds but, on the contrary, polysemy that disarticulates a discursive structure. That is what establishes the overdetermined, symbolic dimension of every social identity. Society never manages to be identical to itself, as every nodal point is constituted within an intertextuality that overflows it. *The practice of articulation therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity* (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 113).

This theoretical angle explains why it is possible for Party hegemony to enter into the religious discourse even in the most subtle ways. This also explains why it is too simplistic just to conclude that religious leaders are collaborators or puppets of the regime when they articulate a certain optimism and defence of the system. The 'nodal points which partially fix meaning' may have been initiated by the Party, but is inevitably shared by civil communities.

The open and incomplete identity of every social entity also predicts some interpenetration of religious discourse into articulation by the Party. Laclau & Mouffe (1985:114) are of the opinion that '... the very identity of the articulatory force is constituted in the general field of discursivity [and that] this eliminates any reference to a transcendental or originary subject'. This may be going too far in the case of the PRC, where the Party itself continues to act as a 'transcendental subject'.

### Agonism

It is noteworthy that military metaphors such as 'struggle' and 'war' goes hand in hand with the exercise of hegemony. According to Laclau & Mouffe (1985: 136), 'the two conditions of hegemonic articulation are the presence of antagonistic forces and the instability of the frontiers that separate them'. The presence of these two aspects shows why the 'war of position', *vis-à-vis* a military war, is now so important. Antagonistic rhetoric abounds and is directed toward the anti-imperialist and unpatriotic attitudes, the perpetrators of the Cultural Revolution, corruption and counter-revolutionary attitudes. The instability of frontiers is related to the inevitable demands of economic globalisation and diversification, as well as the growing demand for democracy<sup>18</sup>. Thus the war of position with its varying frontiers requires a continuous adaptation to the shifting social landscape in which it is 'impossible to find ... that final anchorage [which is] not offered us by any sutured totality' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 137). This indeterminacy of the social, which gives a primary character to antagonism, assures the existence

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<sup>18</sup> Whereas Mao Zedong focused on the continuous struggle within the Party for ideological correctness, Deng Xiaoping argued that true socialism can only be built on a highly developed economy (in Ying-Mao Kau 1993: 429).

of the articulatory and hegemonic practices (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 145). As we shall see in the next section, this antagonistic 'war of position' is waged between unequal contenders.

### **Concealment of the State's Monopolising Power**

The Party in the PRC does not apologise for its totalitarian approach or for keeping a monopoly on coercive power (Cf. in Ying-Mao Kau 1993: 74). Whereas the elected Congress has the privilege of presenting legislation, the Party retains the veto right on laws passed. As the executive arm of the state it interferes with jurisprudence at every stage of the process (Ying-Mao Kau & Marsh 1993: 60-102). From the point of view of a liberal democracy this amounts to domination, regardless how deftly it is concealed or mystified as hegemony. Hegemony in this case serves as 'the vehicle whereby the dominant social groups establish a system of "permanent consent" that legitimates a prevailing social order by encompassing a complex network of mutually reinforcing and interwoven ideas affirmed and articulated by intellectuals' (Fontana 1993: 141).

Adamson (1980: 236f) is rather optimistic when he alleges that Gramsci, through advancing the revolution as a 'war of position,' has resolved the radical disjunction between violent means and ethical ends which has plagued classical Marxism. Though Party philosophy seeks to move away from military coercion, the 'war of position' is now conducted from the top. Gramsci would not have had a problem with this, for he had an absolute insistence on the centralising aspect of the party, where minority dissent is seen as 'extremely dangerous' (quote by Adamson 1980). From the point of view of a multi-party democracy, however, one has to agree with Laclau & Mouffe's rejection of Gramsci's idea of a 'dichotomically divided political space' (1985: 137) where a single political space is seen as a necessary framework for the logic of articulation to arise—there are not one, but *many* spaces.

As manifested in China, hegemony is merely supplementary to 'domination'. It complies with Gramsci's statement that: 'The supremacy of the social group is manifested in two ways: as "domination" and as "intellectual and moral leadership." A social group is dominant over those antagonistic groups it wants to "liquidate" or to subdue even with armed

force, and it is leading with respect to those groups that are associated with it' (Quaderni del Carcere 3: 19: 2010). How the PRC maintains hegemony among religious groups through the concealment of its power becomes evident from the brief review of religious policies in the next section.

### **Hegemony and Domination**

An example of the concealment of domination behind the façade of hegemony is the fact that every revision of the constitution since 1954 professed 'freedom of religious belief' although public practice of religion was only allowed after 1979. In the new constitution adopted in 1982, Article 36 on religious freedom still does not define the limits of that freedom:

Citizens of the [PRC] enjoy freedom of religious belief. No organ of state, mass organization, or person is allowed to force any citizen to believe or not believe in religion. It is not permitted to discriminate against any citizen who believes or does not believe in religion. The State protects legitimate religious activities. No person is permitted to use religion to conduct counterrevolutionary activities or activities which disrupt social order, harm people's health, or obstruct the educational system of the country (taken from MacInnis 1996: 286).

The corresponding policy statement, Document 19, issued in 1982 by the Central Committee of the Communist Party is to date the most comprehensive statement on the issue. It envisages the 'Party's work with religious professionals', the 'restoration and administration of places of worship', the 'education of a new generation of clergy', the 'Party's relations with religious ethnic minorities,' and the international relations of China's religions'. There is also a section on 'criminal and counter-revolutionary activities under the cover of religion. 'This is aimed at the practitioners of superstition, including members of secret societies, sorcerers, witches, phrenologists, fortune-tellers, and geo-mancers who "swindle money from people who earn their living through their own labor"'<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in MacInnis (1996: 286); see also Geffré & Spae (1979: 98).



It seems that bona fide practitioners of religion in the five licensed religions are seen as not being in conflict with the ideal of building a strong, modern, socialist nation as long as they are kept within certain boundaries (not harmful to interests of the nation; and not instruments of foreign interests). This approach develops an idea expressed by Mao Zedong and reaffirmed since 1975.<sup>20</sup> However, the authorities do experience problems: Many splinter and underground groups do not acknowledge the national associations that have been set up for their religion. (These are significant enough to draw attention from the government, and are the main objects of repression.)<sup>21</sup> The distinction between religion (world view and ethical conduct) and 'feudal superstition' (cheating people out of their money) is an obscure one, and open to varying interpretations by officials. MacInnis therefore calls the position of religion in China, 'a tenuous freedom' (1996: 289). From the above it is evident that the power of the state mostly remains unobtrusive for members of the licensed religions. The 500 complaints of government interference that came before the Christian Council in 1993, would appear to them far and few in-between.

The contrasting of hegemony with domination proves thus to be misleading. Both have to be seen as two extremes on a continuum that includes other elements as e.g., constraint, co-option and an measure of imposed authority (Adamson 1980: 242f). The best description of the present situation is that we have to do with a state of repression: repression by a Party with a steel hand in a velvet glove—the steel hand of domination in the velvet glove of hegemony.

### Selfpresentation of the Party as Agent of Change

Together with the mystification of government domination as hegemony, one

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<sup>20</sup> In 1940 Mao Zedong wrote that 'communists may form and anti-imperialist ... united front with ... religious believers, but we can never approve of their idealism or of their doctrines', quoted in Geffré & Spaë (1979: 98).

<sup>21</sup> Among these are indigenous Christian groups as the Jesus Family, the True Jesus Church and the Little Flock who have not joined the licensed three-selves church (Geffré & Spaë, 1979: 100).

also has to bear in mind that the government has a monopoly on information. It could well be that the religious leaders interviewed were honestly not aware of instances of repression or had received biased information, but Party propaganda involves more than the manipulation of loose bits of information.

Various strategies are employed to keep up the moral and intellectual pressure that eventually determines the parameters of social discourse. In order to pursue hegemony, it is in the interest of the Party to upstage itself as an agent of change. On a flight from Beijing to Xi'an we were surprised to receive wallets as gifts from the 15<sup>th</sup> Party Congress as a sign of the new economic policies. In the streets of Nanjing, the usual red banners across the roads proclaiming the results of the Congress, carried notices that they were sponsored by Nashua. The impression created, was that the Party is once more progressive and on the verge of 'liberating' the Chinese people, this time through economic reform. Thus an image of reasonableness is portrayed. The hope is kept alive of greater freedom and prosperity. The rhetoric of nationalism and world peace also serve these purposes (Weiss 1988: 42-51). Such rhetorical strategies are, however, supported by a deeper and more pervasive awareness, related to the hegemonic theory of catharsis.

## **Catharsis**

In societies where socialism is struggling for hegemony, theoreticians look forward to a 'cathartic moment' when through collective action each individual metamorphoses into a conscious agent of history (San Juan 1991: 83). This is when the oppressed classes make the transition from 'economic-corporatism' to their own hegemony (Adamson 1980: 173). Gramsci describes it as follows:

The term 'catharsis' can be employed to indicate the passage from the purely economic (or egoistic-passional) to the ethico-political moment, that is the superior elaboration of the structure into superstructure in the minds of men. This also means the passage from 'objective to subjective' and 'from necessity to freedom.' Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man,

assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives. To establish the 'cathartic' moment becomes therefore, it seems to me, the starting-point for all the philosophy of praxis, and the cathartic process coincides with the chain of syntheses which have resulted from the evolution of the dialectic (Gramsci 1971: 366-367).

In the case of China, that cathartic moment lies half a century in the past—in 1949 when the communists achieved supremacy. One could argue that China's case where domination has to be maintained, it is strategic for the Party to keep the memory of that catharsis alive. Thus the history of the Long March and of the humiliation at the hands of the Japanese and struggle against Chiang Kai-Chek turns into myth and the story of the dominant party becomes the story of the people. To the extent that the Party is able to relate all its present strategies to that central myth, it is able to assume a hegemonic role. And it is in the power of this myth that one has to look for the inability of religious leaders and academics alike, to come up with a critical analysis of their present situation.

### **Hegemonic Institutions Promoting the Historical Bloc**

Another way in which the Party promotes its hegemonic role among religious communities, is through the institutions it created. Reference has already been made to the ambivalent role of the Institute of World Religions at the Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing and the Religious Affairs Bureau. At one remarkable meeting with an official of the Bureau, the meeting was organised at the local headquarters of the Protestant Church, with their leaders invited to be present. This was explained as a demonstration of the good relationship that existed between officialdom and the Church, and of the fact the Bureau 'has nothing to hide'.

In assessing the role of a regulating body such as the Bureau, the concept of the 'historical bloc' is illuminating. Adamson explains that the 'historical bloc' as the social formation of an intellectual-mass dialectic (Adamson 1980: 176 with reference to Gramsci 1971). On the one hand a historical bloc is the effort to infuse a socialist dimension throughout society

by means of class alliances; on the other hand, once such a bloc has been achieved, it is the maintenance of 'a relatively stable relationship between structure and superstructure, between the productive, economic life of a society and its political and cultural awareness, between its being and consciousness'.

Gramsci's notions of hegemony as well as the historical bloc circumvent sharp and deterministic distinctions between base and superstructure. In this he moves away from the 'Second International Marxisms' where the superstructure is treated as a mere epiphenomenon, while Lenin's voluntarism also assumes that a new superstructure can be built independently from the base. Gramsci rather conceives of this distinction as a 'circular movement within an organic whole, rather than as a linear, mechanical relationship' between cause and effect (Adamson 1980: 178-179). According to Adamson:

... Gramsci thought that a great many civic institutions could be restructured to aid in the process of transforming "common sense" through "catharsis" into "philosophical reason," but a party would always be necessary to spearhead a revolutionary challenge (Gramsci 1980: 207).

It seems that the role of the Bureau fits this description. Under the banner of mutual co-operation, religious bodies are co-opted into one of the most elaborate systems in the world for regulating religion, with branches of the Bureau extending to all cities and towns where religion is practised. Whereas the Party can keep a firm control on the actions and critical voices of religious members, this control is staged as a hegemonic control rather than direct censorship and interference. For a balanced view, one has to keep in mind that religious leaders have occasionally expressed their willingness to participate in socialist programmes<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. statement to this effect by the National Christian Conference in 1961, and the participation of sixteen prominent leaders from four religions at the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in 1978 (Geffré & Spae, 1979: 102).

### **Determining the Parameters of Social Discourse**

Reference has already been made to the observation that none of the religious leaders and philosophers we met managed to come up with an articulated critique of the present Chinese state. In the sections above, various backgrounds have been sketched for understanding 'blind spots' such as these. The thesis of this article is that this silence was not due to deception, but has to be understood as an indication of the hegemony exercised by the Party. The various aspects of this type of hegemony—an increased need for hegemony leading to an emphasis on the war of position, a concealment of coercive power, the presentation of the Party as agent of change and preserver of myth, and the influence of regulating bodies—all contribute to the formation of a discourse in society that determines the parameters of religious language. This happens to such an extent that the present hegemony subconsciously determines the range of questions being asked.

We can turn to Gramsci and some of his interpreters for an examination of how this mechanism functions. It was his studies in historical linguistics that lead him to the formulation of his view on hegemony in the first place. Breaking away from idealist conceptions of consciousness, he sided with the Russian Formalists and others who saw language as a social given that structures consciousness (Brandist 1996: 94f). He also moved away from the romanticism of Croce, no longer seeing language as individual artistic expression, but rather as a social product and cultural expression of a given people (Brandist 1996: 98). It follows that the group that assumes hegemonic role, is also the group that succeeds in structuring the consciousness of the whole of society. As Brandist explains:

Discourses seek to bind other discourses to themselves according to two principles; either by establishing a relation of authority between the enclosing and target discourses or by facilitating the further advancement of the target discourse through the enclosing discourse' (1996: 103). Thus an effective hegemony produces an authoritative discourse that serves to conceal and subjugate the conception implicit in social practices 'to produce a state in which the contradictory state of consciousness does not permit any action, any

decision or any choice, and produces a condition of more political passivity (Brandist 1996: 104).

When a hegemony has this effect on the social discourse, it is no longer perpetuated only by the conscious articulation of intellectuals, but becomes embedded in the social subconscious.

For Gramsci a party was progressive when it adopts a *democratic* centralism, keeping previously dominant forces within the bounds of legality, and raising previously suppressed voices to an equal level where all compete freely according to their intrinsic merits (Brandist 1996: 103). However, in an advanced situation the unified language becomes a model of the 'tyranny of abstract ideas and dogmas over life' in the words of M. M. Bakhtin (who had czarist Russia and Stalinism in mind). Dialogue and debate merely become means for the acceptance of the perspective emanating from the centre; the result is known in advance, 'all accents are gathered into a single voice.

Though the open door policy of the PRC seems to move in the opposite direction, the 'single voice' causes many voices not to be heard—from the Dalai Lama to religious citizens in the highest chambers of government and the contributions of overseas scholars. This is an indication of how successful the domination of the Party is.

### Naturalness Entering the Subconscious

A last aspect of hegemony we look at is the way that it affects public opinion. On this issue Gramsci (1978, ref II 426-432) wrote:

What is called "public opinion" is closely connected to hegemony, namely with the point at which civil society makes contact with political society, and consent with force. The state, when it wants to undertake an unpopular action, creates adequate public opinion to protect itself; in other words, it organizes and centralizes certain elements within civil society. The history of "public opinion": naturally, elements of public opinion have always existed, even in Asiatic satrapies. But public opinion as we understand it today was born on the eve of the fall of the absolute state, i.e., in the period in

which the new bourgeois class was struggling for political hegemony and for the conquest of power

Hegemony, when successful, is internalised by the general population permeating the entirety of consciousness, saturating the consciousness to such an extent that it informs the structure and content of their 'common sense'. This is what Gramsci called 'ideological hegemony'.

When the masses believe, without questioning, that the dominant culture is authoritative then they have fallen into a hegemonic relationship. Acting as a mechanism of ideological control, hegemony allows for the ruling class to guide the praxis of the people without directly intervening in their personal affairs. In this way the existing social order is affirmed in a manner that appears to be natural and transcendent of institutions. As a result, hegemony provides a vehicle for the constant assimilation of change in culture, appropriating the discourse of social movement while promoting the agenda of the dominant group.

### **Empty Spaces in Religious Discourse**

We can now return to some initial questions: How free is religion in present-day China? What are the limits of that freedom? Why do good people belonging to the major religions appear to support a repressive system? What accounts for the empty spaces in the present religious discourse? Is it because people are ignorant, or choose to be ignorant? Or because piety prevents them from having anything to do with politics? Or because they hesitate to challenge the system realising how vulnerable they are?

As already stated, my thesis is that it is more than just fear of reprisal; more than just national pride, and more than just a lack of objective information. They are in the grip of an extremely powerful hegemonic ideology making use of a number of inhibiting factors. These were implied in the previous sections, but can now be listed explicitly:

- Fear. For many the trauma of the Cultural Revolution is still fresh. No-one would like to risk a repeat of that.
- Making the best of existing opportunity. The astonishing recovery of

religion after the utmost suppression renders leaders wary to test the limits of freedom.

- Gain. The system favours the licensed religions against sectarian groups.
- Uncertainty. I found educated Chinese to be ambivalent about democracy, agreeing with the position of Deng Xiaoping that since 80% of the population are living in conditions of relative poverty they 'cannot be trusted, at present, to vote wisely at national elections'<sup>23</sup>.
- Fear of the evils of capitalism—pornography, exploitation, poverty.
- Innate patriotism, summed up by the saying, 'Love country, love the Lord and love peace.' No contradiction is perceived between faith and patriotism<sup>24</sup>.
- The lack of a clear alternative vision.
- Conservatism. For most of the past centuries Chinese religion was controlled by the state and many may feel that this not an unusual situation.

With inhibiting factors such as these, thoroughly exploited by the present hegemony, it seems that the critical self-reflection of the people, spearheaded by intellectuals, that is supposed to be the starting point for a new order<sup>25</sup>, is absent. Whereas I could gather no evidence of the latter among academics or religious leaders *inside* China it seems that the totalitarian control of the Party will remain undisputed for some time to come—in spite of the 'impossibility of closure' of social entities. It is unlikely that religious leaders will be pivotal in new democratic initiatives as in East Germany and South Africa. Even after political change, it may take many years for the hegemonic structures to shift.

Do religious bodies have a role to play in preparing the way for democracy? The answer to this is a difficult one and constantly avoided by the leaders we interviewed. However, if hegemonic theory holds any water, one can predict that religious bodies will—together with a spectrum of other

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted from a summary of Deng Xiaoping's position. He foresaw at that 'socialism' would only be achieved toward the middle of the next century, enabling such elections (in Ying-Mao Kau, 1993: 424)..

<sup>24</sup> Cf. interview reported in article by MacInnis in Geffré & Spae (1979: 102).

<sup>25</sup> Gramsci as quoted by Fontana (1993: 146).

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civil associations—have to play a role in any democratic counter-hegemony that might be formed. China is nevertheless far from a Gramscian ‘organic crisis’. Such a crisis may only arise when the ruling class fails in some major undertaking which it has requested, or forcibly imposed (like losing a war). Only then it will be apparent that the old hegemony has broken down and the ground prepared for a counter-hegemony (Martin 1997: 47f). Given the notorious regularity with which periods of religious freedom has been succeeded by repression, one could ask: What would happen if the Party perceives its domination to be in real danger? Gramsci would have advised further politicisation, but Mao opted for destruction (cf. Adamson 1980: 243).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion one can say that the Party in PRC is most successful in presenting its own domination in hegemonic terms. Force is kept out of sight; consent is sought, facilitated and mediated. The findings of this article should give the Party ample reason to be satisfied. Insofar as ideological hegemony in China thrives on concealment, one might ask whether it would be in the interest of the Party to allow papers like this one to be read.

South Africans who have grown up in a society saturated with apartheid ideology, knowing how long it took the public at large to gain insight into the domination of the ruling class and how they were duped into different degrees of hegemonic consensus, may feel that they have a special understanding for the Chinese religious leaders and academics described in this article. The South African experience can assist one to realise why these leaders are trying to explain the inexplicable, rationalising the irrational, talking against their own better judgement, while believing themselves to be objective. But my Chinese visit also brought me a measure of hope, for the fact that one could establish contact, and could sometimes ask a radical question, is exactly the dynamics that might kindle a new critical understanding.

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