

Taipei talk

Initiatives for China/Citizen Power for China

Ninth Interfaith/Interethnic Conference

April 24-27, 2014

United to Build a Viable Democratic Opposition: Paths, Roles and Responsibilities

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Dear Friends,

I'd like, first of all, to thank Dr. Yang Jianli for inviting me to this conference, Daniel Gong, who made all the arrangements for me, and my friend Gordon Schulz, of Boston, who brought my name to Dr. Yang's attention.

It is a bit of an anomaly for me to be talking to you. Over many years I have worked with people in many conflicted situations, but the first rule of my kind of work with them has always been that I hear them, listen carefully over a long period until I have some understanding of what they are facing. I have not had the opportunity yet to do that with you. I hope, over these days, at least to begin. I should not start, then, by telling you things you know far better than I, but I will tell you what little I do know of your situation.

I consistently teach, among people actually engaged in conflict and in the classroom, the ways of reconciliation. I am, professionally, a Christian theologian, though I have been engaged for many years with conflicts. It has always seemed to me that the theology classroom is not the worst place to talk about reconciliation.

I am aware that most of you look at the Chinese government establishment with apprehension. For Taiwanese it is the threat of being taken over by China. For the Tibetans, and doubtless for the Uyghurs, it is being held in thrall, their distinctive traits being disrespected, and

nothing is more damaging to persons or peoples than humiliation. In most of the conflicts I have worked with religion has been a factor, very often either the claims of religious identity groups or the opposition to them. I've been aware that claims of actual religious faith have often, in fact, been about other issues. The faith issues are often subordinated to secular agendas to do with identity that have nothing to do with faith. In your very diverse situations, Chinese government looks at religion of any sort as potential competition, and it is not fond of competition. That is not something new in China since the advent of Communist Party rule. Chinese governments of the past, in my very limited knowledge, have always been insistent on control by a central power.

When I work with conflicted peoples, I always exhort them not to make enemies. When we are treated with disrespect, there is no need to respond with disrespect. Instead it is better to find common interests. Other conflicted parties, whether the Protestants and Catholics of Northern Ireland, the Israelis and Palestinians, the multiple parties of Lebanon, which are so often identified by their religious confessions, the competing powers in the Balkan countries, or the racially diverse populations of South Africa are also jealous of their claims to monopoly of power and hostile to any competitors who might dilute that power.

I worked for many years with the Northern Irish, looking from the start for any common ground among them. Very evidently they all needed jobs, but I never believed that an economic fix would be enough to resolve the communal conflict. It was my assumption that the militant groups of either side were not psychopaths but instead people who risked their own life or safety for the interests of their community, as they understood it, and who therefore deserved my respect. They would not act against those interests of their communities, but the ordinary people on the street were not truly organized. No one other than the militants were defining their

interests, and they looked only to their defensive interests in a military sense. Others were without any organization for their social needs, and were therefore people things happened to, who had nothing to say about what happened to them.

Hence I set about organizing community associations, through which local people would have a say about the education of their children, care of the elderly, essential services and whatever else they needed to be in control of their lives. I contacted all the peace groups that emerged, one of which received a Nobel Peace Prize before it even figured out what it was doing, to insist that they could not simply tell people to forget their troubles, go home and be good, but had to address seriously the concrete grievances that kept them apart. I was convinced always that, if peace were to be reached, it had to come from the people who were the war. Consequently I kept up a close dialogue with the militant organizations, all of them. Decisions had to be made by their leadership but the thinking would be done in the prisons, as it was in South Africa and it is now among Palestinian prisoners. Consequently, after acting as go-between for them and the British government during the hunger strikes of 1980-81, I took to holding many long conversations with prisoners of all parties, in turn, in the H-Blocks of the famous Long Kesh prison, arguing always that none of them had a life to look forward to unless they learned to accommodate each other. It was on the initiative of the militant organizations that the cease-fires of 1984 were made, leading through negotiation to agreement in 1998.

As I developed the same ideas among the confessional parties of Lebanon I heard their recognition that these were exactly the things they needed, and at the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada of 1987 I could recognize the same pattern of disorganized life in the resident population living under occupation, which was now transformed as they took the initiative in their society. Everything that happened in Israel, everything that happened in the United States or Europe that

related to the Middle East, was about them and their action. Even though they suffered intensely during this period, the fact of holding the initiative was exhilarating, and led eventually to the Madrid Conference and Oslo Accord, great accomplishments even though they were subsequently betrayed. In the Balkan countries, where vast masses of people had been displaced and each national community had been traumatized by the others, the way to reconciliation could only be through each welcoming back the refugees with provision that they could live safely in peace.

Power disparities, of their nature, make for conflict so surely that the conflicts cannot be resolved unless that disparity is addressed and a basis for stable relations found. That is regularly a long-term process. All of you are faced with a single enormous monopoly power of the state, disproportionate to anything you can muster, even all of you together.

If one concentrates on claiming power, or on challenging the power of an establishment, the hostility can only grow and may become violently suppressive. It is very easy to construct a view of the world and of our own lives as a battleground between good and evil, in which our objective must be to identify the evil and destroy it – or them. Different results will follow if we look for the legitimate interests of our opponents, and seek to find where they may meet with our own legitimate interests. We can recognize their fundamental humanity and entitlement even if they are engaged in denying our own and are more powerful than we.

You have been engaged, in your many meetings over these years, in trying to establish a common front among the many “outsider” groups of Chinese society present at this conference, to build a viable opposition. There are members of the Han Chinese majority among you too, people interested in building a common future. It may be an unfamiliar idea to try to find your

joint way, as citizens or, in the case of Taiwan, as a people of Chinese heritage who are external to the Chinese polity, into a Chinese future that includes those who now govern the country.

How is this done? Any of us can look to the fundamental order of society, the one thing that is most important to this as to all historical Chinese governments, but we can look to it in a democratic and participatory way which, if the government recognizes it, can be transformative of the central government itself. You have things to offer which are of benefit to the entire society. Taking a cooperative stance of this sort does not mean any endorsement or participation in the corruption that is endemic to any autocratic system. You can, in your many different ways and in your cooperative solidarity with one another, give an example to all Chinese society of a non-corrupt and pluralist order, not as rival to government but for the common good.

Economic development is government's next priority. Chinese government today operates, in my understanding, which comes from a great distance, not as a Communist system but in a *laissez faire* manner similar to any of the capitalist countries, though still mainly as a command economy. It is as likely as any of them to allow gross disparity of wealth and opportunity. You can model, again, a fair economy, and show its possibilities and its methods of justice to the whole land. This too can follow a model of revealing common interests, and not as rival to the system.

In the many conflict situations I have worked with, I have always had to deal with minorities and their troubles. I come to learn that minorities are most in danger when the more powerful groups of the society have some internal conflict within themselves, a bad conscience. They then need a scapegoat, someone else on whom they can blame their troubles and not have to admit to that bad conscience in themselves. There is also a context for the troubles, what I

have called the framework, which is basically the identity sense of the more powerful party, its answer to the question: who are we? If the internal conflict is about a failure to live up to the ideal people have of their society, then the danger to the scapegoats is all the greater. People deny such things, and the way for them to deny it is to make sure you have nothing to say about it.

Should we reckon with that in the case of Chinese government? I would make the assumption that members of the governing regime in China understand themselves as promoters of good for the people they govern, not as oppressors. To the extent that they are suppressors of the true character of any of you, I expect it to have a bad conscience.

Minorities tend to see themselves primarily as victims. Playing the victim in tense or even hostile relations always invites violence, and become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Hence the best advice anyone can give to minorities is not to be minorities, refuse to be minorities, not to accept at all the concept that they are minorities in their societies. You, any of you, are as much a part of Chinese society and entitled to its benefits as any other. Your opportunities within that society will grow as you are seen and understand yourselves as a valuable part of that society. The measure will be what you contribute to the society, including especially your standing united among yourselves as persons of dignity in the total society. To the extent that government tries to control your every move and thought, what you bring, not as minorities with a sense of persecution but as a united front, is opportunity for government to open up to you in your own participatory ways, and let go, without fear, of its autocratic methods and character. It is a benefit, in fact, that you offer to government, enabling them and you to establish an other-than autocratic relation. Autocratic governments are full of fear, and need to be released from it.

For myself, it is a deeply rooted practice to try to save the proposition of another, rather than to condemn it as false. I'm sure you have encountered people, in government and elsewhere, for whom you are in the wrong any time you are saying or representing anything other than what they are telling you themselves. But the propositions I speak of result from the true life experience of those who hold or assert them, something of fundamental value to them even if the conclusions they draw from them are very harmful. Oppressors and other offenders may have learned radical distrust of others, but be sure of this: they are searching for things that make sense to them.

If I am to spend my life winning arguments, always defending my own perceptions and seeking to make others forsake those basic propositions of theirs and adopt mine instead, I have shut my mind down and will never learn anything of importance again. When I deal with another whose proposition, on the face of it, I cannot save, then rather than reject it I should ask the other, with respect and readiness to hear, how he understands it. If then I still cannot save it, I should enter into dialogue with him (her), even with great intensity and forcefulness (not violence!), to come to a common understanding. This ought not be a way to draw that other to reject his proposition and adopt mine instead, but rather so that he – and I! -- should understand his proposition rightly, in ways that are good for him and me and for humanity, and in that way save it. He and I will both have learned things of great value in that process.

Can we extend this pattern to our relations to an autocratic government as well? This is difficult, as the government has levers of power that place restraints on me/us and on the dialogue I try to hold with it. I have to work doggedly to maintain my respectful bearing, not at all a matter of submissiveness or complaisance, with them. This has been my own experience

with British government trying to maintain full control of Northern Ireland, of Serbian government in its relation to Croatia or Bosnia or its own Muslim population, of South African government and its privileged white population in relation to its subject black majority, the multiple factions of Lebanon in their effort to gain mastery over each other or the plutocracy of the United States in relation to the population they can so easily manipulate.

I have spoken of citizens and of subjects. Those terms do not always accurately describe the people to whom they are attributed. British people are described as subjects of Her Majesty, the Queen, but act, to the extent allowed to them by government and the power elements of their society, as free citizens. The citizens of countries called “people’s republics” have most often been treated as subjects, without any real voice. But just as I say that no minority should think of itself or act as a minority, without full rights in the society of which it is part, so no subjects should ever assent to being subject, but should act for the good of the society as a whole.

Assuming that the intent of Chinese government is to serve the interests of Chinese people, all of them, their priorities are to provide necessary order and economic development. We’ve seen the problems that arise from heavy-handed action in each of these areas, with each of these propositions. We can be reasoned opposition to all the autocracies and inequities that come from these, but to be mere obstruction in either area is simply to create destruction. This government is not going to go away but can be transformed as its people – citizens, not subjects – produce models of free action that contribute to good order and the prosperity of all.

I am talking abstractions here, and hope I am not simply boring you, but I will offer one concrete area in which I would hope your contribution to the good order and happiness of Chinese society, and in fact of the world, would be a priority for you. I have a major concern

with the climate change and global warming that is taking place at a frightening pace as a result of our industrial society. This concern is greater than any regional or sectional concern, in China or elsewhere. Our planetary world is threatened with changes that, within the lifetime of our younger generations, will make it virtually uninhabitable, and destroy the civilizations all our ancestors have built in many thousands of years. I won't try to lecture you about the nature of these catastrophic dangers, as you must have some awareness of them. Scientists measure the rise in the world's mean temperature as some 0.8 degrees centigrade of surface temperature since the beginnings of industrial society, as a result of the amassing of carbon dioxide in the air. But the warming from the amount of carbon already in our air is mainly stored in the oceans, from which it will gradually be released, a quarter of it in the next decade, two thirds within fifty years. The damage already done will, inescapably, raise the mean temperature by 2.4 degrees centigrade over those years, already well beyond tolerable limits. The result will include rising ocean levels that will submerge coastal areas, island nations and the vulnerable wetlands that make up most of Bangladesh, desertification of vital agricultural areas, impoverishment of even the wealthy classes of our time, and uncontrollable wars over shrinking resources. The present ruling generation will largely escape these disasters which they are actively causing, but their children will be catastrophically affected by them, and their own children much more so.

China today, with its rapid industrial development led, as all previous initial industrial growth has been in other countries, by coal-fired power plants, pours more of this carbon into the air, at present, than any other country, even the United States, which of course has been doing so for long enough to be the main actual contributor to the calamity. But Chinese government is acutely aware of this vast growing menace and works, perhaps harder than any other country, to deal with it. Here is a prime area in which all the resources, of determination and intellectual

enterprise, of all the peoples represented in this room, should contribute to China's total effort to hold back the tide of carbon. I think all Chinese people are aware of the plague simply of particulate matter in the atmosphere of China, to which our scientists attribute up to a million deaths a year. But that is a number incomparable to the number who will suffer from the changing of the climate. Here is a threat which – I will say it again – Chinese government is determined to resist, though it feels aggrieved that Western nations, who have made the greatest contribution to the disaster, have paid no comparable attention, and it is a greater danger to all of yourselves than any regional or sectional issue you can raise. It offers any of you who are, in one way or another, marginalized by Chinese government, a concrete way, a ticket of admission, to reaching full involvement in the most important decisions that confront you and the whole Chinese and even world society.

So, what have I to offer you, I who am so foreign to all your cultures that it would be presumptuous in me to offer you solutions to problems I understand much less than you? What I know is the importance of solidarity among you, shared initiative and readiness to support one another when any of you is in special trouble, with Chinese government or anyone else. The one common ground among you is Chinese. You all need the opportunity to live as Chinese and at the same time be yourselves. Americans, once a very homogeneous society, are now so multi-cultural that we have to learn respect and equality of rights among us. The descendants of African slaves, at the beginning of the 20th century, were trying to assimilate into a white American culture, and had to discover for themselves that Black is beautiful and equal to all other Americans. So now do Americans of Hispanic or a variety of Asian cultures. We are all timid when it comes to standing up to power and must learn to support one another as we assert our own distinctive cultures in a society which itself has to learn to treat us with respect.

Your effort, in this and your previous conferences, has been to unite among yourselves to form an effective opposition in China, a difficult enough project in itself given all the divergence in your actual needs. What I propose to you is that Chinese government, that very government that is marginalizing you, treating you as minorities and as subjects, should be transformed by its experience of your free action for the public good. I expect that is within the hopes of Dr. Yang Jianli and is ultimately the intention of this conference. I wish you well with that goal.