

Some Reflections on Chinese Religion

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My understanding of Chinese religion, fragmented and unsystematic though it is, has been derived from many sources: from years of reading, certainly; but also from contact with Chinese friends whose cultural patterns, religious beliefs, and practices I have observed in Japan, in Taiwan, and in the United States where I have taught now for over thirty years. I also learned much—especially about what is going on in China today after the Cultural Revolution—from a short trip to Mainland China a few years ago.

“Universism” as a Model for Chinese Religion

As an historian of religions, I am sensitive to the implicit models of religion adopted by my colleagues in the history of religions. I say “implicit models” because in most cases, historians of religions are not even conscious of adopting a model; but a model is always implied whenever someone talks about “religion.” For example, those who have made a special study of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam before coming to the history of religions are apt to adopt Semitic religion as a model, with the deity above, nature and humankind down below, and meaning in history from beginning to end. Some who studied Classics may be tempted to adopt a Hellenistic model; and indeed the history of religions borrows many of its terms from Hellenism: theology, cosmology, anthropology, myth, symbol, to name just a few. Modern historians of religion, from Max Müller to Georges Dumézil, have always used India as a model. Even the Harvard Oriental Series subscribed to the idea which says, in part, that “the central interest in the history of India is the long development of the religious thought and life of the Hindus—a race akin, by ties of blood and language, to the Anglo-Saxon stock...¹ There are also historians of religions who, influenced by ethnologists and anthropologists, favor primitive religion as a model for understanding religion. Although many historians of religions today have come to think of the origins of religion as a

speculative and not an historical question, there is still a strong tendency to explain more complicated religious phenomena by recourse to the relatively simple model of primitive religions. Unfortunately, the above models are inadequate for treating the wide variety of religious phenomena present in Buddhism or in Chinese and Japanese religions.

As for Chinese religion, I still think of J. J. M. de Groot's old expression, "Universism," as a useful name for the cosmic-human, monistic view of the Chinese. According to such a view, the world was not created; the world *is*, which is why the Semitic model cannot be understood very easily in China. To the Chinese, even the prologue to the Fourth Gospel, "*En arché*" has a distinctly Hellenistic ring and implies, ultimately, and underlying substance or principle rather than a simple "in the beginning." It is taken for granted in China that the world has no beginning or end and that time is a chain of ever-repeating seasons. Creation, then, is a process of constant "re-creation" in nature, and human beings are integral parts of nature. Although the early Chinese believed in a celestial realm (*T'ien*, or Heaven) and a nether region (*Huang Ch'uan*, or The Yellow Springs), their view of life beyond this world was vague. In fact, "there was no idea of divine retribution after death. The concept of rewards and punishments meted out in heaven or hell during the life hereafter is utterly alien to Chinese thought and appears in China only with Buddhism."²

Immanent Theocracy

I have often heard it said that a Chinese wears a Confucian crown, a Taoist robe, and a pair of Buddhist sandals, and there is much truth in that observation. But without question the primary concern of the Chinese has always been with the "here and now." In Lin Yutang's words, the Chinese people "are in love with life, with its kings and beggars, robbers and monks, funerals and weddings and childbirths and sickness and glowing sunsets and feasting days and wine-shop fracas."³

It is my considered opinion that China under Manchu rule (1644-1912), Korea under the Yi dynasty (1392—1867), and Japan under the Tokugawa feudal regime (1603-1867) were properly called Confucian or Neo-Confucian states in the sense that to each of them "the order of heaven is not a transcendental substance but is inherent in the condition of human existence. This is the regulative principle to be recognized and realized."⁴ Indeed, the Confucian preoccupation with socio-political order leads inevitably to an "immanent theocratic principle," just as a religion based on a transcendental deity and his revelation must needs embrace a "theocratic principle." (It is worth noting that the Confucian immanent theocracy encompassed a grand synthesis of society-polity-culture-religion-morality which is hard for westerners to understand.)

Good and Evil

It has often been said that the Chinese are inclined to ethical and rationalistic, while the Hindus tend to be metaphysical-mystical and the Japanese lean toward the aesthetic. No wonder the rationalists of the European Enlightenment became enthusiastic admirers of Confucianism as they understood it. The leaning Sinophile among them was Voltaire. Although he readily admitted that the Chinese were ignorant of western science, he was persuaded that they excelled in the ethical values upon which every state should be built. "One need not," he said, "be obsessed with the merits of the Chinese to recognize that the organization of their empire is in truth the best that the world has ever seen..."⁵

Voltaire was convinced, moreover, that China had preserved the pure religion of Nature. With his usual hyperbole he went on to say:

Worship God and practice justice—this is the sole religion of the Chinese literati ...0 Thomas Aquinas, Scotus, Bonaventure, Francis, Dominic, Luther, Calvin, canons of Westminster, have you anything better? for four thousand years this religion, so simple and so noble, has endured in absolute integrity; and it is probable that it may be much more ancient.⁶

There is no question, however, that the ethical orientation of the Chinese is quite different from that of the westerner. To be sure, in one sense both the Chinese and the westerner ask similar ethical questions about the ultimate nature of reality, the standard of values, and the criteria for knowledge. But unlike most westerners, who, even in our secularized age, feel that something akin to a divine spark resides in one's moral consciousness, which divine spark determines his or her moral actions, the Chinese take for granted that good and evil are located somewhere outside of humankind, in the universe, in history, in the cosmos. As Y. P. Mei has stated:

1. Running through life and the universe is one all-pervading principle, rational and ethical in nature.
2. Man's duty is to follow this principle, which brings him into harmony with society and in tune with the universe.
3. Evil results when there is deviation from this path.⁷

And as Mark Mancall astutely observes:

Confucius said in his autobiography, "At forty, I had no more doubts. At fifty, I knew the will of Heaven. At sixty, I was ready to listen to it. At seventy, I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing what was right." In other words, Confucius had educated himself to the point where he could act in complete accord with the will of

“Heaven,” or the universe. Man was a part of a larger cosmos; the cosmos was not inside each man. To jump through time to the present, the same basic assumption persists: the revolutionary Chinese Communist sees the problem of the location of good and evil in much the same way. . . This is what gives rise to such phenomena as “brainwashing” and the “educational” aspects of the Great Cultural Revolution.⁸

Interestingly enough, the ethical orientation of many western youths is becoming very similar to that of their Chinese counterparts, except that in the contemporary West good and evil are located primarily in the home, in schools, in society, in the sexual-biological make-up of human beings, and so forth, and not so much in history or in the cosmos.

“Two-Tier” Distinctions

Over the years I have noticed that interpreters of China often resort to a “two-tier” model in order to explain certain contrasting features of Chinese religion, notably rationalistic versus non-rationalistic tendencies in religious thought, non-religious elites versus the superstitious masses, and public versus domestic cults.

Rationalistic versus Non-Rationalistic Tendencies of the Chinese

There is much truth in Christy’s observation that “the idealization of China was the first outstanding result of the impact of the Orient upon the European imagination.”⁹ Just as Europeans, after Rousseau, thought of New World peoples as Noble Savages, the Enlightenment rationalists—Voltaire, Leibniz, and Christian Woolf, for example—promoted Confucius as the Noble Sage. European intellectuals, in fact, considered the Chinese generally as model rationalists; the non-rationalist Chinese was the exception to the rule. Curiously, it was this European idealization of the Chinese which caused members of the Chinese intelligentsia in modern times to view themselves as rationalists. Hu Shih, a leader of the Intellectual Renaissance, finds a rationalist thread running through the entire course of Chinese history. In fact, he says:

Approach every subject in the spirit of doubt; seek the truth; do not compromise. That has been the spirit of those Chinese thinkers who have kept the torch of intellectual freedom burning throughout the ages. That is the spirit which has made Chinese thinkers feel at home in the new world of science, technology, and democracy.¹⁰

Non-Religious Elites versus Superstitious-Religious Masses

Closely related to the rationalistic versus the non-rationalistic tendencies of the Chinese is the dichotomy between the non-religious elites and the superstitious-religious masses. Most modern Chinese intellectuals seem to be proud of being non-religious rationalists and look down upon the adherents of “religions of the people.” Many intellectuals, as well as the current Beijing regime, do not consider Confucianism religious. As Wing-tsit Chan states:

.If religion is interpreted as an organized system, then Confucianism is definitely not a religion. It has no priesthood, no church, no Bible, no creed, no conversion, and no fixed system of gods. It has no interest in either theology or mythology. Even Confucian ceremonies are more social than religious. ...

On the surface, it would seem that Confucianists have not been interested in religion. It is true that they have remained aloof from superstitions and idol worship, leaving these to ignorant people.¹¹

Clearly, modern Chinese intellectuals have stereotypes as strong as those of the European Enlightenment rationalists, considering a tradition “religious” only if the sort of transcendental deity they reject as superstitious—the Semitic model referred to above—is present. Lamentably, they do not acknowledge as religious the traditional Chinese notion of “universism”—or, or that matter, the immanent theocratic ideal; and the current notions of “religion” and “non-religion” can only serve to confuse and mislead people as long as they are left to go unquestioned. For example, a most confusing article, addressed to cadres and entitled “Our Party’s Basic Policy Regarding Religious Questions during the Period of Socialism,” appeared in the issue of *Red Flag* dated July 16, 1982. Although the article warns the cadres that Party members are “expected not to believe in religion,” it urges them to assist at cultural rites such as weddings and funerals in order “to identify with the masses.”¹² The article makes clear the precept that “freedom of religion” does not allow Party members to believe in religion as they please: “Freedom of religious belief is only for ordinary citizens and not for Party members who should be atheists.”¹³

Public Versus Domestic Cults

Throughout the long history of China, Chinese society had two centers of gravity, so to speak: the family and the state. Religious cults, therefore, developed along quite distinct family and state lines. This is the only dichotomy in Chinese religion which is apt to make sense to an historian of religions inasmuch as he or she already knows something of “cults” and “worship.” To be sure, the term “worship” may be misleading, but at least it conveys the Chinese attitude of public reverence shown to Heaven, ancestral spirits, and the spirits of the sages. There was no official priesthood for the state cults because, as

Derk Bodde has pointed out, “the worship of the divine forces was performed almost entirely by the ruler, who, as the “Son of Heaven,” acted as intermediary between the world of the supernatural and the world of man.”¹⁴

The traditional state, however—which I distinguish here from the Chinese State since the Communist revolution—was considered an extension of the family and provided the norm for all human communities. I would even go so far as to say that if an outsider wishes to feel the religious pulse of China, he or she should examine the domestic cults (which are very eclectic, to say the least). I am convinced that due to the importance of the family cult, Taoism and Confucianism did not develop and system comparable to the parish in Christianity. For the same reason, one should explore both domestic Buddhism and temple Buddhism in order to grasp the meaning of Chinese Buddhism generally.

Perhaps the most far-reaching effects of the Communist revolution in china were brought about by the rejection of “family” in favor of “commune.” Even though communes have disappeared since the era of Mao Tse-tung, I rather suspect that the Chinese family system has changed so much that it no longer enjoys the significance it did before the Communist revolution. Needless to say, I am most curious to see what transformations Chinese religion will undergo in the days to come.

Notes

1. Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translation*, Harvard Oriental Series 3 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1896), “General Introduction.”
2. Derk Bodde, “Dominant Ideas,” in *China*, ed. Harley Fransworth MacNair (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1946), p. 19.
3. Lin Yutang, *My Country and My People* (New York: John Day Co., 1936), pp. 103-104.
4. Jean Escarra, *Le Droit Chinois* (Paris and Peking: H. Vetch, 1936), p. 17.
5. Quoted by Derk Bodde, *Essays on Chinese Civilization* (Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 137.
6. Quoted in Arthur E. Christy, ed., *The Asian Legacy and American Life* (New York: John Day Co., 1942), p. 22.
7. Y. P. Mei, “The Basis of Social, Ethical, and Spiritual Values in Chinese Philosophy,” in *Chinese Mind: Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Charles A. Moore (Honolulu: Human Development/East, 1967), p. 150.
8. Mark Mancall, “Two Realities,” in *Understanding Modern China*, ed. J. M. Kitagawa (University of Chicago Press, Quadrangle Books, 1969), p. 239.
9. Christy, p. 16.
10. Quoted in MacNair, p. 230.

11. Wing-tsit Chan, "Confucianism," in *An Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1945), p. 150. The current Beijing regime recognizes five religions, namely, Taoism, Islam, Buddhism, Protestantism, and Catholicism, and be it noted that Protestantism and Catholicism are regarded as two distinct religious systems.
12. Cited in Joseph Spae, ed., *China Update* (Summer 1984) 53.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
14. Bodde, "Dominant ideas," p. 19.