

The Reformation of the Chinese Religions Today

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, the term 'Chinese Religions' is taken to mean Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. The other mainstream religions such as Christianity and Islam, for example, are not included since they did not originate in China and have few Chinese attributes. Daoism and Confucianism are clearly products of China. Buddhism, while originating outside China, has been transformed to such an extent by its encounter with Chinese society that it now displays many Chinese characteristics and so it can also be considered as a truly Chinese religion. Thus, all three have qualities peculiar to China.¹

As to whether these three can properly be called religions, there is no dispute concerning Daoism and Buddhism. In the case of Confucianism, however, many critics would object to the reference to Confucianism as a religion.² For this reason, it is necessary for me to say why Confucianism is included among the Chinese religions under discussion here.

1. This does not mean that Buddhism is exclusively Chinese, but that the word 'Buddhism' used here refers to the Chinese kind of Buddhism only. This does not exclude the fact that some kinds of Buddhism may have, for example, Cambodian or Japanese characteristics.
2. The critics form a majority among academic circles in Mainland China and a sizable proportion among Chinese scholars in Taiwan, Hongkong and overseas. They understand the Chinese character 教 in the word Confucianism 儒教 as 'cultivation' and not 'religion', so they call Confucianism 儒家 (Confucianist school or Confucianists) or 儒學 (Confucianist scholarship or Confucianist teaching) when they refer to it solely, i.e. not in parallel with Buddhism and Daoism. But one can notice that they often add Confucianism to Buddhism and Daoism as religions and call them 三教 (the Three Religions), thereby suggesting that Confucianism does, in fact, have some religious nature.

It would be best to consider the following questions before tackling the issue of Confucianism as a religion as such. The first question is whether, in addition to Daoism and Buddhism, there exists any other religion which occupies the high ground in Chinese history. The answer to this question is in the affirmative. I refer here to the system of ideas and sacrifices which has belief in *Tian* (Heaven or God) and the worship of ancestry as its main content, and which has lasted for more than three thousand years down to the twentieth century. This system appeared in China long before the entry of Buddhism or the rise of Daoism as a religion. Early evidence of its existence is recorded in the inscriptions on animal bones and tortoise shells dating from the Shang Dynasty (1766-1122 BCE), and it did not disappear even during those periods in Chinese history when Buddhism and Daoism were at the heights of their power and splendour. Evidence of this can be seen in the fact that it was enshrined as the orthodoxy during the Sui and Tang Dynasties (589-618 CE). It is neither Buddhism nor Daoism, but a religion in its own right, since it embodies not only the essence of a religion i.e. faith in the ultimate (*Tian*), but also all the other elements of a religion, namely, experiences and ideas of a faith nature, as shown in the statements about ancestors “sojourn with God” recorded in the King’ s oracle inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty; in the ideas of ‘God’ and ‘providence’ shared by all the people as expressed in the Book of History and the Book of Odes; in the theoretical arguments for the existence of *Tian Dao* or Heavenly Logos by the innumerable Confucianists through more than two thousand years; and in the Chinese collective unconsciousness centered on God as revealed in many expression using *Tian* in the Chinese language. Evidence can also be found in actions and institutions which have a faith dimension such as the sacrificial rites set up in the tenth century BCE for kings, princes, officials, bachelors and the common people; in the consecration of the “Heaven, Earth, Monarch, Ancestry and Teacher” tablets³ which can be found in many Chinese families even now in the final decade of the twentieth century. Evidence can also be found in the patriarchal clan institutions related to the sacrificial ritual established three thousand years ago and in the clansmen organization which has reappeared today in the

3. The ritual was set down in the Book of Rites (禮記) 2000 years ago, and it could be found in Mainland China today even though everything religious began to be swept away from the late 1950’ s onwards. This is the personal experience of the author who was born in 1950 and has been living in the Mainland since then.

countryside in Mainland China.⁴

A second question follows from this: Whether this other religion has any relations with the Confucian school of thought or Confucian scholarship, and if so, can it then be called Confucianist religion (儒教) or Confucianism in the religious sense. The answer to this question is also affirmative, for it was the pre-Qin Confucianist school, represented by Confucius, which accepted and attempted to restore the ideas and institutions of the above-mentioned religion. It was the Han Confucianist school, represented by Tung Chung-shu, which theologized and helped to establish the Confucianist religion as the exclusive orthodoxy; and it was the Sung Confucianist school, represented by Chu Hsi which theorized and helped to enforce the religion as the state religion.⁵

Since the Confucianist scholarship which inherited and developed the traditional religion⁶ was the orthodox basis for all Chinese ideology for more than two thousand years, and was set down as the official system by all the historical Chinese monarchical governments which took so-called 'Providence' as their legitimate basis, it was natural for it to be the sole ideological representative of the religion established as the state religion by the same governments.⁷

4. c.f. Qian Hang's 'The Significance of the Re-emergence of the Clan Structure in the Chinese Village' (Twenty First Century, October 1993, The Chinese University of Hong Kong), and 'The Re-establishment of Clan Organizations and Its Environment' (Chinese Social Sciences Quarterly, Volume I, Winter 1994, Hong Kong Social Sciences Service Centre).
5. Chinese academic circles, including critics of 'Statement of Confucianism as a religion', recognize the fact that Confucius accepted the idea of 'providence' and sought to restore the ritual of the patriarchal and religious Zhou Li. Tung Chung-shu theologized the Confucian scholarship and helped to combine it with traditional religion and set it up as the state religion, and Chu Hsi systematized the theory of Tian Dao and helped to make Li Jiao based on the theory officially authorized. This is without mentioning the great Confucianists such as Hsun Tzu who declared the Li as 'service of Heaven and Earth, reverence of Ancestry and honour of Rulers and Teachers'; Han Yu who advocated the Dao Tung or the orthodox line of transmission of the Dao in opposition to Buddhism and Daoism; and the countless Confucianists who were the interpreters of the religion throughout the past 2000 years. As a matter of fact, the Confucianist Li is originally an institution centered on religious sacrificial rites, the Confucianist Dao is a concept of the transcendental or the ultimate.
6. That Confucianist scholarship originated in the ideas and institutions of Zhou based on the concept of "Providence" and the ritual of sacrifice has been argued even by the critics mentioned above (c.f. Yu Dun kang and other's essays in the special issue of Knowledge of literature and History, 1989).
7. According to Mu Zhong jian, another of those critics, "the worship of Tian and the cult of ancestry are of primary importance" for all the people of Imperial China, while Buddhism

To sum up, this religion which pre-dates Confucianism has had such long, wide, deep and exclusive relations with the Confucianist school and Confucianist scholarship that it can rightly be called the Confucian religion or Confucianism in the religious sense.⁸ In fact, the word 'Confucianism' has been used in parallel with Buddhism and Daoism as religions for more than fourteen hundred years, since the Northern Zhou Dynasty (557-581 CE). It is my contention then that Confucianism can justifiably be included among the Chinese religions, and while it also contains social, ethical and philosophical elements, its origin and core are essentially religious.

I. THE NECESSITY TO REFORM CHINESE RELIGIONS

The necessity to reform, from the point of view of the Chinese religions themselves, comes from their need of revival and rectification. This need arises in turn from their historical decline and lapse into abuses. From the external point of view, the necessity to reform comes from the need for a spirituality and nomos on the part of Chinese society and culture which arises in turn from the secularization of society and the slide towards anomie.

(i) *The Decline of Chinese Religions and the Secularization of Chinese Society and Culture*

The decline of Chinese religions and the secularization of Chinese society and culture can be considered in three stages.

The first stage is the period before the revolution in 1911. Since the Song Dynasty(420-477 CE), the intensification of political despotism and official corruption exposed more and more the contradictions within Confucianism. While on one hand it became the state religion with a stable institution and completed sacrificial system⁹ with Confucian priests and

and Daoism occupy a secondary place, namely, they may be embraced or not. (c.f. Zhou Xie fan, et al. *A Survey of the Religions in China*, chap.1. Jiangsu Wenyi, Nanking, 1992). Furthermore, it was in an official capacity that the emperors and lords embraced the Tian worship and the Ancestry cult, while it was in a private capacity that they embraced Buddhism or Daoism.

8. Mu Zhong jian proposes to name it "The Chinese patriarchal traditional religion" .(c.f. op. cit.) The name is not appropriate not only because it is verbose and clumsy, but also because the name of a religion should be that which is formed historically and used commonly rather than the terms which are made up by some researchers to describe some of its characteristics, just as we cannot call Hinduism "Indian caste traditional religion" .
9. In the Song Dynasty, there were more than thirty major sacrificial ceremonies held every year, and the institution became much more elaborate than before. In the Ming Dynasty, the sacrificial ceremonies were classified as major, middle and minor, and many sacrificial altars and temples were built and continued in operation down to the Qing Dynasty.

‘saints’.¹⁰ On the other hand, it became a tool of the rulers and its surrender to the secular regime became more and more manifest.

The Confucian literati-officialdom (士大夫) who were its embodiment, became increasingly tied to and dependent on its despotism.¹¹ The result of all this was that the absoluteness, transcendence and ultimacy of its ideas of Heavenly Dao and Human Norm became theoretically weakened, as shown by the rise of the ‘School of the Mind’ and the criticisms of Li Zhi and others, and its original teachings were neglected as shown in the literati’s increasing interest in popular dramas and stories.¹² This condition of decline and the secularization of society and culture had, of course, a mutual influence on each other.

On the part of Buddhism and Daoism, their polarization became increasingly serious with the emergence of the bourgeois class and social conflicts since the time of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 CE). On one hand, the abstruse meaning of Buddhist scriptures became the exclusive objects of study and enjoyment for a decreasing elite of Buddhist and Confucian scholars, while on the other hand, Taoist hermits and literati officials who had fallen out of favour withdrew from society and took refuge in the leisurely and carefree purports of Daoist philosophy.¹³ Meanwhile, the common people tended to treat the two religions as means to an end, such as the attainment of happiness and the avoidance of disasters. The end result was that the comprehensive and profound

10. As can be seen from the addition of the great Confucians Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao, Chu Hsi, Lu Chiu yuan and Wang Yang ming to the objects of sacrificial offering in the Confucian temples.
11. The great events, just to mention a few of them, were the conflicts between the New and Old Parties and between the “Situation” and “Principle” Parties in the Song Dynasty, the scandal of the “Controversy on the Li” and the oppression of the Dong Lin Party in the Ming Dynasty and the “Literary Inquisition” which occurred repeatedly in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. These indicate that the Confucian group, as the spokesmen of the Tian Dao had been overwhelmed and crushed by the secular regime. Furthermore, the Mongolian regime of the Yuan Dynasty stipulated that Confucianists were the ninth class of all the subjects (between prostitutes, the eighth class, and beggars, the lowest class. In addition, the dictators and eunuchs of the Ming Dynasty subjected the Confucian literati and officials to tortures and insults in the public courts, and the Manchurian regime of the Qing Dynasty forced the Confucians throughout China not to speak on whether it conformed to Li to be loyal to non Chinese rulers. All these facts could not but depreciate Confucianism in the minds of Chinese people, even if only unconsciously.
12. These works, which had been despised by the Confucians because they contained real feelings and emotions, were in sharp contrast with the empty teachings of Confucian scholarship and thereby undermined the cultivation of Confucianism.
13. From the middle ages down to modern times, many Chinese literary men used to speak of the drunkenness, romances and even their visiting of prostitutes as the expression of Taoist unconstraint.

theories of the Chinese religions fell into neglect, as shown in the ‘Zen Buddhist Revolution’ , and the prevailing of the ‘Pure Land’ belief, and their goal of transforming their adherents into buddhas or immortals gave way to more immediate concerns as shown in the pre-occupation with worldly happiness among the common believers. In addition, the prevalence of various superstitions which mixed elements of Buddhism and Daoism with all kinds of folk cults encouraged the shift towards secularization of society and culture.¹⁴

The second stage in the decline of Chinese religions and the secularization of Chinese society and culture is the period between the revolution of 1911 and 1949. With the breakdown of the previously closed society and the advent of western culture, some representatives of the three Chinese religions initiated some efforts to revive them in the new and open circumstances.¹⁵ But all these attempts failed. The marks of the failure were the spreading of attacks on the so-called ‘Confucian Shop’ and all the traditional religions by the May 4th movement, and the triumph of the ‘New Culture’ movement. The Chinese religions continued to decline and their failure was seen a natural and necessary under the historical conditions whereby secularization was seen as the appropriate goal of the new society and culture.

The third stage of the decline of Chinese religions and the secularization of Chinese society and culture corresponds with the period from the revolution of 1949 to the reforms and openness which began at the end of the 1970’ s. In Mainland China, the communist party, which was the left-wing in the May 4th movement, became the governing power throughout the country. It not only attacked all the Chinese religions and other traditional religions at an ideological level, but also destroyed the last institutional basis of Confucianism, the patriarchal clan organization at the social level, and it brought the remaining forces of Buddhism and Daoism under government control. During the so-called ‘Cultural Revolution’ , most of the Buddhist and Taoist temples were destroyed and all their

14. The decline of Chinese religions and the secularization of Chinese society and culture were much motivated and reflected by the popular works of fiction and novels, so that Gu Yan wu could say: “Books such as fiction and novels are so widely spread among the Confucian literati and officials, peasants, workmen and businessmen, and are even familiar to women, children and other illiterates through story tellers, so that their influence is more far reaching than Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism.” (Daily Additions to Knowledge, Vol xiii)

15. Among the attempts were those of the Confucian Association headed by Kang You wei; the Chinese Buddhist Institute by Ouyang Jian; and the General Daoist Council of the Republic of China by Zhang Xiao chu, etc.

activities banned. By that time, Chinese religions, as well as all other religions, came close to extinction in Mainland China. At the same time, the pseudo-deification (having idolatry as its essence and the pseudo-nomos (having totalitarianism as its essence) of society and culture were growing in strength; but these trends also gave rise to counter-currents of extreme secularism (having materialism as its essence) and a growing anomie (having cynicism as its essence).

(ii) *The Abuses in the Chinese Religions and the Anomie of Chinese Society and Culture*

With the coming of reforms and openness, and with the gradual freeing of the economy, society and culture in Mainland China began to revive in the early 80' s. To the surprise of many people, some of the cultural factors which had been supposed to be dead, including the Chinese religions, came back to life within a very short space of time. Judging from the outside, the revival of all forms of religion and their astonishing growth are the outcome of the reforms and openness. Seen from the inside, from the point of view of the religions themselves, they are the result of the suppressions of the 'Cultural Revolution' ; for the forced suppression of ideas almost certainly evokes a counteraction from the suppressed such that in the field of competing ideal and ideologies, those of the suppresser are placed at a disadvantage.

But the enthusiastic counteraction of the revival also brought with it some abuses. The enforced restraint over a long period of time and the concurrent growth in disillusionment gave rise to much nostalgia. Since all the religions in Mainland China had lost contact for a long time with their counterparts outside, they could not but make their nostalgic recollections and immediate spontaneity the basis for the revival. It is the interdependence and tension between the recollections of the old and the spontaneity of the young, between governmental management and non-governmental autonomy, between ancient conventions and modern understanding that has led to abuses and confusion in the revival of Chinese religions. On the part of Confucianism, there is support for the sacrifice at the Huang-ti tomb, but there are criticisms of the rebuilding of the Yan-ti tomb; there is toleration of the revival of the patriarchal clan organization,¹⁶ but there is anxiety concerning the trend of making ancestor' s tombs grandiose; there is propaganda concerning the cultivating function of Confucianism but there is rejection of the religious nature of Confucianism.

16. See note 4

On the part of Buddhism and Daoism, while there is restoration of temples, there is the appearance of abuses; while there is an upsurge in pilgrimages, there is an undercurrent of mammonism; while there is an emphasis on modern ideas, there is an upholding of ancient superstitions, and so on.

The chaos in the religions and the anomie in society and culture intermingle with each other and the resulting state of affairs is harmful to religions and to society and culture alike.

II REFORMATION OF SOCIETY AND CULTURE IN NEED OF REFORMATION OF CHINESE RELIGIONS

Inwardly, among the four elements of any religion—feelings and experiences; actions and activities; thoughts and ideas; and organizations and institutions—the former two are more spontaneous and dynamic while the latter two are inclined to be systematic and static. Therefore, generally speaking, religious reformation is mainly directed to the latter two. Of course, as the latter two elements stem from and have an impact on the former two, the reformation of ideas and institutions presupposes, and at the same time influences, changes in the feelings and actions.

Outwardly, the reformation of any religion that has some direct or indirect relations with other religions must take these relations and these other religions into account.

The possibilities for reform of Chinese religious ideas lie in the changes taking place at the level of Chinese religious feelings. The possibilities for the reform of Chinese religious institutions lie in the changes at the level of Chinese religious actions. The possibilities for reform of the Chinese religions in the direction of ‘Three Religions in One’ (三教合一) lie in the history of their relationship to each other and their approximation to the ‘Western’ religions. We can find the changes and the possibilities in the following descriptions:

(i) Confucianism

Any tourist visiting today’s Beijing can see the remains of the altars to Heaven, the Earth, the Sun, and the Moon. They can also see temples to the Imperial Ancestors, and to Confucius and his disciples. The sacrificial rituals held on these altars and in the temples down through the centuries indicate that there are three identifiable elements in the Confucianist religion: Worship of Heaven, Cult of Ancestors, and Cult of Gods. However, since the Song and Ming Dynasties, with the institutionalization and routinization of the official sacrificial rites, with the secularization of

Chinese society and culture, and under the impact of two far-reaching revolutions this century, there have been changes in the way these three elements impinge upon the mind of the Chinese people.

Firstly, because it is the original collective unconscious of the Chinese nation, the feeling of Heaven as the truly ultimate and truly transcendent remain in the depths of the Chinese mind and is expressed in the everyday language and moral judgment of the Chinese people. Secondly, because it is not an idea of something ultimate, the idea of ancestry has lost its mask of religious importance and has been reduced to some kind of natural feeling by more widespread knowledge of modern social and natural sciences. Thirdly, and to a more radical degree, the same thing has happened to the idea of 'gods' since they are nothing more than the deification of some human beings (e.g. cultural heroes) or natural things (e.g. the sun, moon, famous rivers and mountains) and have no ultimacy or transcendence.

Although the degree of decline in feelings towards ancestors and deified heroes varies among people in different areas and classes, it is, however, a general trend in today's China. Nowadays, the ideas of Confucianism, as expressed in modern Confucian theories, have by and large removed the elements concerned with the cult of ancestors and gods.

(ii) Buddhism and Daoism

For centuries, in the minds of the common people, Buddhism means the discipline of the self through abandonment of one's family and the world and Daoism means the practice and quest for long life through magical means and the control of ghosts. However, since the time of Tang and Song Dynasties, the ideas of Zen Buddhism such as "taking firewood and water to the kitchen is also a true way to Buddha" and ideas of Neo-Daoism such as "attaining everlasting life in heaven is useless to the world" have become widespread. The two religions absorbed many of the ethical ideas of Confucianism and emphasized more and more the this worldly and moral norms so that the mass of believers treated them just as teachings on good behaviour and good living. Therefore, it is not surprising that in modern China some representatives of the two religions, for example OuyangJing-wu, Master Tai Xu and Chen Ving-ning, advocated helping and saving this world and accepting modern and advanced thoughts.

(iii) Reformation Trends from within and without the Three Religions

The trends I have in mind here includes some potential drives or demands for reformation as well as acts of reformation. These differ for Confucianism on one hand and Buddhism and Daoism on the other.

For Confucianism, the trend is to revive through reform while for Buddhism and Daoism, the trend is to reform through revival.

Confucianism could not revive without reforms. That is the lesson learnt by wise Confucianists from the failure of Yuan Shi-kai's restoration of Confucianism. Contemporary Neo-Confucianists in Taiwan, Hongkong and overseas have accepted a large number of ideas from Western and modern philosophical, social and political thought. They can be called 'new' because they have, to some degree, reformed their theories. Meanwhile, most of the scholars who are advocating Confucianism in Mainland China do not support the restoration of the cult of ancestors and of gods. They are of the opinion that Confucianism could once again be used to cultivate the people, but without the out-of-date elements.

Buddhism and Daoism should reform through revival. Indeed, they have been proposing this since their decline in modern ages. After the revolution of 1911, Master Tai Xu proposed the reformation of Buddhism by "the revolution of doctrine", "the revolution of institutions", "the revolution of temple properties" and "accommodation with the thought and culture of the age". And after the revolution of 1949, while the Buddhist leadership proposed the slogan "Buddhism in a human world", the Taoist leader Chen Ying-ning came out with the declaration that "ninety percent [of Taoist magic] is false."

Outside the religions themselves, the discussion among scholars on the advantages and disadvantages of their institutions and what did or did not belong to the essence of their teaching, along with the abandoning of their out-of-date elements by the younger generation, and discontent with their abuses among government officials—all these are potential factors in promoting reformation. Besides, increasing contacts with Protestantism and Catholicism, both of which have undergone reformation, are important factors which are helpful to the reformation of Chinese religions. Moreover, since the Song Dynasty, the course of the so-called 'Three Religions in One' has not been completed. Its continuance is not impossible and can also be a promoting agent in reformation.

III DIRECTION OF REFORMATION IN CHINESE RELIGIONS

(i) Reformation of Ideas

Among the so called ‘ideas’, I include the ideas of the content of belief and the various ways in which these are embodied in practice. The direction can be expressed in the following three phrases: “Worship of Heaven without cults of ancestors and gods”; “Discipline of Self without abandonment of the world and family”; and “Valuing of Life without indulging in superstition and magic” As to the meaning of these three phrases directed to Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism respectively; “Worship of Heaven” means faith in God rather than sacrificial rites to Heaven. “Without the cults of ancestors and gods” means denouncement of the deification of worldly things and figures, but not the denouncement of feelings for parents, sages and nature. “Discipline of Self” means the practice of Buddhist soteriology for the self and all sentient beings rather than the mere observation of rules for monks and nuns. “Without abandonment of world and family” means care for the suffering of the world and responsibility towards society and family but not a discarding of the transcendent and other-worldly spirit. “Valuing of Life” means respect for one’s own and other’s life rather than the seeking of long life above all else. “Without indulging in superstition and magic” means the discarding of all magic proved to be harmful by practice and reason, but not the abandonment of Taoist methods and techniques helpful to health.

As to the meaning of the three phrases as directed to Chinese religions as a whole, Worship of Heaven, Discipline of Self and Valuing Life can be understood as the preservation of the essence of the three religions—the idea of Heaven (天), Dao (道), and Buddhahood(真如佛性) as the origin of the cosmos; the practice of self-cultivation(修身修行) as the personal way of sanctification, and the commandments of benevolence (仁), compassion (慈悲) and valuing life(貴生) as the social norms. “Without the cult of ancestors and gods” etc. can be understood as the denouncing or discarding of all the elements in the three religions which are superstitious, egocentric and idolatrous.

(ii) Reformation of Institutions

By the word ‘institution’ I mean the nature and form of the organizations and institutions, their conventions and activities and their distinctions between clergy and lay people. The direction can best be expressed in the

three phrases: “Shift to the non-governmental”; “shift to the academical”; and “shift to the this-worldly”.

Applied to Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism respectively, this means shift to the non-governmental for Confucianism because of its long and close relationship with government and authority, and its academic and this-worldly characteristics. The shift to the academic and this-worldly are mainly directed towards Buddhism and Daoism since they have historically been non-governmental but have emphasized their rites for too long at the expense of exposition of the doctrines to ordinary believers.

(iii) Reformation of Religions as a Whole

As to the Chinese Religion as a whole, the three phases point to the common direction of the reformation of institutions. This is also true of all religions in China today, including Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam.

Through the reformation proposed here, Chinese Religions will be able to cooperate with all the great religions of the world in the service of human spirituality because they will free the truly religious spirit from the non-ultimate or the pseudoultimate.

EPILOGUE

As an ideal, the reformation of Chinese religions can come true only when the believers and leaders alike realize the necessity, possibility and direction of the reformation and take action accordingly. And it can come true also if it receives support from the politico-economic and sociocultural reformations.

Chinese religions have no future, though, if they do not seek and strive to glorify and enhance the true spirit through reformation.

Chinese society and culture have no future if they do not absorb the true spirit through reformation.