

Caijing (annual edition), China 2009

Tests of Faith

Religion in the broadest sense is rising from deep roots in China, despite official restrictions and perceived secularization

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One of the biggest surprises of the Reform Era has been a resurgence of religious activity in almost all areas of Chinese life. Religion had been heavily restricted since the beginnings of the People's Republic, and then severely attacked during the Cultural Revolution. Even many religiously-inclined foreign observers, such as former Christian missionaries, did not dare to have high expectations about the future of religion in China – they doubted that many of their vulnerable, poorly educated converts could have withstood the persecutions of the Cultural Revolution. And whatever their ideological differences, secular intellectuals, both in China and the West, were in agreement that China's modernization would inevitably bring about secularization, that is, a general decline in religious belief and practice.

But once policies toward religion were partially loosened, and once the market economy gave Chinese people increasing practical freedom of expression and association, religious activity began to sprout up everywhere. Literally millions of local temples, and thousands of churches, and mosques have been rebuilt. Elaborate public religious festivals are held among people of all faiths. Outside of the public eye, many millions of people practice private forms of religious devotion and spiritual cultivation. The growth of these religious practices has been continuous and it shows no signs of stopping.

Although there is obviously a lot of religious activity in China today, there are wildly different estimates of just how much. The State Statistical Bureau claims that there about 100 million religious believers. A recent study by respected scholars at Shanghai University estimates about 300 million. On the other hand, Peter Ng, of the Center for Study of Religion in Chinese Life at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, estimates that, if one considers "religion" to mean any form of invocation of supernatural powers – such as praying for good fortune or burning incense to gods or ancestors at seasonal festivals – then as much as 95 percent of the Chinese people probably practice religion to some degree.

The crux of the matter in these different estimates is the definition of "religion" – a question that has very important practical as well as academic implications. The Chinese government defines religion as a system of beliefs, formally organized through nation-wide institutions. It recognizes five such religions -- Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, (Protestant) Christianity, and Catholicism – and it has established "patriotic associations" to serve as liaisons between the

leaders of these religions and the state. (Even for the five officially recognized religions, official statistics do not count those who worship in unregistered venues such as the flourishing Protestant “house churches.”) But the official definition of religion has a strangely Western – indeed Western Protestant – cast to it. In fact, the very word “religion” (zongjiao) was introduced into the modern Chinese language around the beginning of the 20th century from Japan, which had acquired the concept from European Protestant scholars. However, modern anthropologists have much broader definitions of religion. They would include all forms of rituals and myths, all practices, whether local or national in scope, whether formally organized or not, through which people try to establish a connection with cosmic order. If one accepts this definition, then Chinese society is indeed teeming with religion.

Most Chinese intellectuals, however, have been reluctant to accept such a broad definition. More than once when I have given lectures on religion at prominent Chinese research institutes, I have been assured by the Chinese participants that the Chinese were not a religious people and that there is very little religion in China. But on the streets surrounding such oases of secularity, practically every shop and small restaurant has a statue of a Buddha or a Daoist deity with incense burning before it. Inability to comprehend such manifestations of religiosity leads to a difficulty in comprehending the dynamic churning of Chinese culture that is going on and to difficulty in discerning its potentials for better and for worse.

This religious churning in China defies some deeply held assumptions, in both China and the West, about the nature of modern society and the place of religion in it. First of these is the assumption that modern societies are secular societies. This is not true, neither in China nor anywhere else in the world. Almost all modern states are secular, in that they base their legitimacy on this worldly effectiveness rather than supernatural mandate. But most societies, including Chinese society, are not secular – they are filled with religious beliefs.

A second assumption is that religion is part of “tradition” that is being gradually (even though more slowly than some might have predicted) overcome by modernity. In China, certainly, this is not the case. Although in some places, for example, the rebuilding of temples may be due to the persistence of ancient traditions in communities that resist modernity, in many other places such temple building is a thoroughly modern response to modern situations. A good illustration of this would be the rebuilding of the ancestral temple of “Chen Village” in Guangdong Province. This village (which was the subject of a book by Anita Chan, Jonathan Unger, and myself) had not had a functioning ancestor temple since land reform in the early 1950s. But now the village has been absorbed into the Shenzhen metropolis and it has become prosperous by leasing its lands to factories. The Chens are now surrounded by a sea of 50,000 migrant workers. In response, the Chens have spent two million yuan to build a new ancestral temple. This is not just the revival of a tradition. It is an initiative made possible by modern prosperity and in response to a modern situation – to the need to maintain the Chen lineage’s identity in a fluid, pluralistic urban environment. It is a modern response to a modern problem.

A third assumption that must be overcome is that religion has some social function that can be clearly defined as good or bad, i.e., that it increases social solidarity, harmony, care and compassion or that it causes social fragmentation, conflict, and even violence. The fact of the matter is that all religions, in different contexts, do all of the above. Moreover, there is no unified system of religion in China and no standard form of religion. Many community temples in northern China worship 300 gods – different combinations for each community – and many temples in south China worship as many as 1000 gods. Even religious traditions like Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam, which are committed to a greater degree of doctrinal and liturgical uniformity, are divided into many factions or sub-communities within China.

Under different circumstances, different forms of religious practice are intertwined with local society in different ways. Under some circumstances, religious practice can be a statement of belligerent ethnicity. Under other circumstances it can cultivate peace between belligerent peoples. Under some circumstances, as in the case of ancestor worship in Chen Village, religious practice can help a community assert its self-interests over against outsiders living in its midst. Under other circumstances, as with many temples in south China, local religious ritual helps to link together regional networks of communities through the practice of sharing incense sticks from one temple with another. To say that “religion” is good or bad is like saying that “society” or “culture” is good or bad. The terms are so broad and cover so many phenomena that any simple attribution of positive or negative qualities is meaningless.

Chinese religion then is like Chinese society itself, tremendously variegated and complex and developing in many directions at once. The instinct of the Chinese government is to create comprehensive frameworks that will bring order and predictability to all this contradictory diversity. Too often, though, its policy frameworks have been of a “one size fits all” variety that fail to acknowledge the diversity of religious life, fail to channel religious energies toward national goals, and in cases where religious practices might actually threaten social stability, actually make the problem worse. For example, heavy handed treatment of certain Catholics, Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists who might seem to have resisted state authority has created martyrs who have inspired even greater resistance.

A wiser policy might be to loosen restrictions on religious development and let the marketplace of meaning balance out the good and the bad. There are indications that some top officials are open to this more flexible approach. But even if they begin to change their policies, they might encounter resistance from mid-level and local officials who might have vested interests in maintaining the older policies. So effective change in religious policy will probably take a long time to develop.

The mainland Chinese government might learn from Taiwan about how an open religious policy can lead to a more harmonious society. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Guomintang government

on Taiwan strongly attempted to regulate and control religion. It never completely succeeded, however, and in the 1980s it was pressured to do away with most controls. Under such circumstances, groups like the Unity Way (Yi Guan Dao) that were once suppressed as heterodox sects have come forth to play a very constructive role in Taiwan public life. Other heterodox sects that have been even more harshly suppressed in mainland China have found viable niches in Taiwan, but there is no sign that these groups are a source of instability in Taiwan's religiously open society. And new Buddhist organizations like the Buddhist Compassion Relief Association (Ci Ji) have inspired millions of followers to reach beyond borders to help those in need and have helped cultivate the spirit of responsible care that is a necessary condition for a democratic society. Moreover, by contributing money and personnel and organizational skills to help victims of the Sichuan earthquake, groups like Ci Ji have even helped to heal divisions across the Taiwan straits. This over all beneficent religious renaissance in Taiwan is the result of the loosening of political restrictions on a Chinese religious culture. Some scholars think that same thing will eventually happen in mainland China.