

Final Essay on 'The Future of the Religion in China in the Global Era' for the course 'Chinese Culture and Religion' by Professor Fan Lizhu at the Fudan University, Shanghai, China

Written by Katarina Baer, the 7th of June 2020

I once was in Hongkou in Shanghai with a friend, and we met a local man named Xu, Mr. Xu. Mr. Xu of Hongkou sounded very relaxed in his attitude toward life, so my friend said to him: "You sound a little Buddhist. Do you have a religion?"

Mr. Xu answered: "A religion? China is an atheistic state. Some are Buddhist, some are Taoist. In the west there are Muslims. Do I look like one? I don't pray, and I am not religious. There is a temple close by, so there are Buddhist people among us here. For me religion means nothing. I don't believe in anything that I don't see with my own eyes. China is a communist country, and the Communists don't believe in Gods. So, maybe I believe in Communism, ahahhah!"

He laughed, but I think he hit the point. During the first 30 years of communist power, tremendous damage was done to the traditional culture of China, including its religions. As Fenggang Yang writes in his article 'Triple Religious Markets in China' (The Sociological Quarterly): "When the so-called Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution began in 1966, all religious sites were closed down. Many buildings were torn apart, statues of gods and religious artifacts were smashed, and religious scriptures were burned. Secretly keeping a religious scripture or an artifact was a crime, and some people took great risks to save scriptures, sculptures, and buildings in the name of preserving antiques or cultural heritages."

The spite of religions by the Communists goes way back to the origins of the ideology. The German founder of Communism, Karl Marx, argued that religion creates false consciousness. It teaches that social inequality is God's will and thus mystifies the real cause of inequality and misery which is exploitation by the Bourgeoisie, he claimed.

One of his famous quotes says that religion is the opium of the masses: Religion prevents change and keeps the elite in power by providing spiritual comfort for the poor – by making a virtue out of poverty, and promising a better life after death if people obey the rules now, for example.

The Communists also claim, that there are direct links between the church and the bourgeoisie – the bourgeoisie fund the church, and the church support (ideologically) the bourgeoisie.

There is another point to the despise of religions by Communists. Let's first answer the question what religion is.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines religion as follows: "Religion, human beings' relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, absolute, spiritual, divine, or worthy of especial reverence. It is also commonly regarded as consisting of the way people deal with ultimate concerns about their lives and their fate after death. In many traditions, this relation and these concerns are expressed in terms of one's relationship with or attitude toward gods or spirits; in more humanistic or naturalistic forms of religion, they are expressed in terms of one's relationship with or attitudes toward the broader human community or the natural world."

A broader definition offers the Science Daily: "Religion is an organized collection of beliefs, cultural systems, and world views that relate humanity to an order of existence. Many religions have narratives, symbols, and sacred histories that are intended to explain the meaning of life and/or to explain the origin of life or the Universe. From their beliefs about the cosmos and human nature, people derive morality, ethics, religious laws or a preferred lifestyle."

The Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari goes even further in arguing that any system of common values, that is, ideologies too, are systems of belief.

From Harari's perspective Communism is a system of belief. Since Communism is a dictatorial system, it has hard time accepting any other religions.

Things changed in the Communist China, thanks to Deng Xiaoping. With his reform and opening up -policies, since the late 70's, religious life started coming back to China. But still today you often hear people – even the barber Xu from

Hongkou in Shanghai – say, China is the least religious society on earth.

The scholars Graeme Lang and Fenggang Yang refer to a study saying the same thing. They give a thought to the interpretation that it indicates a resounding triumph of atheist propaganda by the Chinese Communist Party. They then claim: “However, empirical observations on the ground show a reality of religious revivals in many and diverse settings: rural religious festivals attract hundreds of thousands of people, urban temples and churches are packed with worshippers, and Christian house-churches proliferate in both rural and urban areas.”

Other studies and observations broadly support the claim. Millions of Chinese have searched for something other than material wealth. Some have looked to old religions such as Taoism and Buddhism while others have turned to a more modern import, Christianity, for answers. “Across China, hundreds of temples, mosques and churches open each year, attracting millions of new worshippers,” writes Ian Johnson in his book *‘The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao’*.

Johnson also claims that hundreds of millions of Chinese are consumed with doubt about their society and turning to religion and faith for answers that they do not find in the radically secular world constructed around them.

According to Johnson there is twice the number of temples today that existed in 1990, and the number of Protestants is growing at a rate of seven per cent a year. Adam Yuet Chau gives in his book *‘Religion in China – Ties that Bind’* more specific numbers, referring to a study *‘Global Religious Futures’* of the year 2010 by Pew-Templeton Foundation. The study gives the following figures out of the total of 1,4 billion people -population of China:

18,2 % Buddhist (244 million people)

5 % Christians (68 million)

22 % practice folk religions (presumably including Daoist people)

2 % Muslims (24 million)

52 % unaffiliated (700 million)

Less than 1 % Jews, Hindus and followers of other religions (11 million)

Adam Yuet Chau points out that the White Paper of the Chinese Government gives much smaller numbers for religious people on China.

Now what could be the future of the religion in China in the global era? Let's take a closer look at one major religious philosophy of China, namely Confucianism. The stance of Confucianism is very conflicting.

As Chen Na argues in his article 'Why is Confucianism not a Religion? The Impact of Orientalism': "Because Article 36 of China's Constitution grants Chinese citizens freedom of religious belief without specifying a limited group of religions, this gives rise to the question of what happens to all the other religions. In particular, it raises the question for this study: Given that Daoism and Buddhism are listed, why not Confucianism?" He points out that it is well known that in the Chinese religious tradition of 'Three Teachings,' Confucianism has been the dominant 'Teaching,' and Chinese culture is also called a Confucian culture.

In Chen's opinion Confucianism should not be denied a place in the list of the 'legally protected religions' in China. "But as a matter of fact, Confucianism has been deprived of such a position ever since the early twentieth century – issue that shapes China's sociocultural development, and an issue that defines Chinese cultural identity", he writes.

Interestingly for an outsider, president Xi Jinping speaks of Confucianism with warm words. According to the South China Morning Post, while for decades the officially atheistic Communist Party attacked Confucius as a symbol of feudalism, he has been thoroughly rehabilitated in recent years as a means of rallying patriotism and countering foreign influences. Xi has repeatedly called for religious leaders and believers to be guided by "socialist core values". Party bureaucrats overseeing religion have demanded that key religious tenets and texts such as the Bible and Koran be interpreted "in conformity with the demands of modern Chinese development and excellent traditional Chinese culture", the SCMP writes.

Adam Yuet Chau refers in his book 'Religion in China – Ties that Bind' to a particular brand of Confucianism that has been brought into daylight by the communist party.

The party has even started five-day Confucian culture immersion courses for religious leaders. The courses take place in the sage's hometown as part of a campaign to extend government control over faith communities through a process of Sinicisation. According to the South China Morning Post, the ruling Communist Party's United Work Front Department said in a news release that the activity was designed to ensure the primacy of traditional Chinese values above all.

"To hold activities here ... is a collective tribute to excellent traditional Chinese culture and a conscious identification and integration with Chinese culture," said the release, posted on the department's website. Participants pledged to "cultivate the Chinese cultural character of our nation's religions so that our nation's religions are rooted in the fertile soil of excellent traditional Chinese culture, and to ceaselessly and deeply advance the Sinicisation of our nation's religions", it said.

Tu Weiming takes a different approach to Confucianism in his article 'The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism: Implications for China and the World'. It was published in year 2001.

In the second part of the article Tu Weiming draws us a picture of Confucian Humanism as an Anthropocosmic Vision. His starting point is the notion that the human kind is driving toward an ecological catastrophe, and therefore "for the human species' continued existence, in principle and practice, a fundamental reformulation of our relationship to nature is critical".

Confucian Humanism as an Anthropocosmic Vision is in his thinking something that China could offer not only for herself but for the whole world to lean on in this critical moment of history. He argues that Confucianism can offer an ecumenical worldview for the whole humankind.

He is arguing that the world is heavily dependent on the secular humanism – as he calls it – in its urge for modernity. Secular humanism looks in his argumentation at nature from an anthropocentric and instrumental point of view. It sees nature only as a bucket full of resources to be used to make life better and richer for the human kind. And since being secular, there is no space in secular humanism for religious or spiritual thinking or feelings. Instead in Confucian Humanism

the earth-human relationship is intertwined. Earth is not a material object “out there” but our proper home.

China, he argues, has lost her connection to her Confucian heritage. In the past communist decades Confucianism was promoted as secular Confucianism so that it was able to match the desires of modernity: scientism and materialism. Tu Weiming’s argues – ten years before Xi Jinping becomes the leader of China – that Confucianism has been misused in China as a justification for authoritarian polity.

He claims, that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. He even writes that efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred. He also argues that it’s scientists who can understand this most deeply, since – I quote: “many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe”.

Tu Weiming also encourages China to look at India as a good example of a major democracy and a rich population that has managed to intertwine it’s indigenous traditions and spirituality with modernity. “China’s iconoclastic attack on tradition is in sharp contrast to India’s continuous reaffirmation of her spiritual roots. What lessons can Chinese intellectuals learn from the Indian experience?”

What about the overall condition of religions in China today?

The Chinese government claims there is freedom of religious beliefs in China. But the contrary can be observed. The most attention from the outside world has attracted two cases, the Tibetan and the Uighurs. They have drawn a chorus of criticism not only from human rights groups, but also academics, foreign governments and the United Nations.

According to the South China Morning Post, the lives and movements of Tibetan monks are heavily regulated by the Chinese government, which is eager to avoid any hint of disobedience in the restive region which, although technically autonomous, is tightly controlled by Beijing. Faith is an integral element of Tibetan identity and nationalism and is therefore perceived as a potential threat to the authority of the Chinese state, explained Kate Saunders of the US-based NGO International Campaign for Tibet for the South China Morning Post. Between 2009 and 2016, a total of 145 Tibetans, the

majority of them monks, set fire to themselves in the past seven years in protest against Beijing's rule and 117 of them died, according to International Campaign for Tibet.

Then to the other case, the Uighurs. In February 2020, a newly revealed database exposed in extraordinary detail the main reasons for the detentions of uighurs in Karakax county: their religion and family ties. The database was obtained by Associated Press. It profiled the internment of 311 individuals with relatives abroad and listed information on more than 2,000 of their relatives, neighbours and friends.

According to the South China Morning Post, the information offers the fullest and most personal view yet into how Chinese officials decided who to put into and let out of detention camps, as part of a massive crackdown that has locked away more than a million ethnic minorities, most of them Muslims.

The database emphasises that the Chinese government focused on religion as a reason for detention – not just political extremism, as authorities claim, but ordinary activities such as praying, attending a mosque or even growing a long beard. According to the SCMP, it also shows the role of family: people with detained relatives are far more likely to end up in a camp themselves. Similarly, family background and attitude is a bigger factor than detainee behaviour in whether they are released.

“It's very clear that religious practice is being targeted,” said Darren Byler, a University of Colorado researcher studying the use of surveillance technology in Xinjiang to the South China Morning Post. “They want to fragment society, to pull the families apart and make them much more vulnerable to retraining and re-education.”

Beijing claims that the detention centres are for voluntary job training, and that it does not discriminate based on religion.

According to the South China Morning Post, meanwhile in the neighbouring regions of Ningxia Hui and Gansu – home to many Hui Muslims – domes, Islamic decor and Arabic signs have been taken off the streets and some mosques. According to the paper, no new “Arab style” mosques can be built and some Arabic-language schools have been shut down.

In the year 2015 president Xi Jinping introduced a campaign called “Sinicise Religion”. The South China Morning Post claims it is an attempt by the officially atheist party to bring religions under its absolute control and into line with Chinese culture. “The campaign has coincided with an intensified clampdown on religious freedom across the country, especially on Protestants, Catholics and Muslims who the party fears could become tools of foreign influence or ethnic separatism”, the South China Morning Post writes.

And in the year 2019 Beijing vowed to push ahead with its controversial campaign. “We must fully implement the [Communist] Party’s fundamental policy on religious affairs and uphold the Sinicisation of religion in China”, the Chinese premier Li Keqiang was said to tell.

Nor has Christianity remained untouched. A wave of underground congregations have been forced to shut down, with their members and pastors interrogated and detained, the SCMP reads.

For Christianity, the plan calls for “Sinicised theology”, including retranslating the Bible and rewriting annotations. It also demands Chinese traditional culture be integrated into expressions of faith, with “Chinese elements” to be added to liturgies, sacred music, clerical clothing and church buildings. Examples given include using traditional Chinese tunes to compose hymns and encouraging Christians to practise calligraphy and Chinese painting.

The suppression of religions and minorities can be seen as part of the overall tightening grip of the Party over the society.

During this Corona-spring 2020 there was a moment, when it looked like everything was possible. After the death of doctor Li Wenliang in early February so many Chinese people raised their voices to express their anger over how the regime had handled the outbreak. And so many voices were raised in the Chinese social media for freedom of expression and for the change of the regime.

But then censorship was tightened and dissidents were taken into custody – with more power than earlier. The coronavirus outbreak led to a spike of online censorship in China, a recent article in the SCMP claims.

That is certainly not a good thing for the freedom of religion in China either.

In Fenggang Yang's article 'The Red, Black and Grey Markets of Religion in China' it is said: "No modern country actually allows the unfettered exercise of that (religious) freedom, and to allow completely unrestricted freedom would be socially unsound."

I don't think anyone would dare to dream of unrestricted freedom of religion in China, but even something close to what a liberal country can offer seems to be lightyears away. It would imply a totally new political thinking and leadership in China.

I am afraid, under the present regime, the religious life of Chinese people will continue suffering from suppress and rejection. The future of religions in China looks very blurry at the moment.

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