

Religions and Beliefs in China

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Translated from the French by Betty Ann Maheu, MM

Translation of Lesson 7 of the Chinese Language Textbook¹

“Many Westerners say that the Chinese do not believe in any religion. Many people also think that the Chinese do not have a religion of their own. Is it true that the Chinese have no religion?”

“Many people wonder because, compared with Westerners or other Asian peoples, today’s Chinese are not really concerned with religion and do not pay much attention to religions. The reasons for this are both social and political; some are even ideological.

“Since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the government has been encouraging people to rely on their own efforts, and on their own hard work to accelerate the development of the country, rather than to believe in spirits and divinities. Neither does it encourage any belief in the power of religions. This attitude of the government has deeply influenced the younger generations. Aside from these political considerations, religious beliefs are not developed, not only in Mainland China but also in modern Chinese societies (Hong Kong, Taiwan). This is due to the fact that religions in China are not so highly organized as

¹ The first part of the article above is Joseph Bierchane’s translation of Lesson 7 “Religions and Beliefs of Chinese People” of the new Chinese textbook *Jiedu Zhongguo (Getting into Chinese Thought)*, Volume 2 of the textbook *Zhongguo wenhua jiancheng*, Beijing University Edition, Beijing University Press. The author is Wang Hailong. The textbook is designed for foreign students who come to China to study the Chinese language and Chinese culture. The text of Lesson 7 is followed by an analysis of the contents by Joseph Bierchane, a person well acquainted with the problems of religions in China. The entire article is translated from the French version of Bierchane’s article.

those in the West with their regular, well-balanced activities. Furthermore, Chinese religious traditions are not as strong as those of the West, which have influenced the thought and technology of modern man.

“Like all other civilizations in the world, the Chinese at the beginning had a primitive religion. Later on, with the development of society, the evolution of civilization, and from contact with other peoples, various religions arose. Chinese civilization absorbed many religions that came from elsewhere; it “sinisized” religions from outside making them Chinese.

“With this introduction, we are aware that not only were there religions in China, but religions also enjoyed rich periods of development. The constant stress on the principle ‘let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend’ was also applied to the development of religion. In these last years, with the reform movement, China’s openness and its search for close cooperation with Western countries, people have begun to pay special attention to the modern development of religions. There are good reasons to believe that with the on-going progress of the Chinese economy, politics, and of technology, the restoration and development of Chinese religions are entering into a new phase.

“For several thousands of years, primitive peoples had no good means of production. They did not have enough food or clothing. This is the reason they had to rely on the ‘goodness of heaven’ and of nature. Besides the worship of heaven, religion consisted in rendering worship to badly understood and powerful phenomena such as the wind, rain, thunder, lightning, etc. The lack of knowledge among these primitive peoples led them to believe that these phenomena could not be understood; that many things in this world were mysterious. They related these to their own destiny and thought they had to respect them. Later, primitive religions maintained ‘the belief that everything was inhabited with a spirit.’ These practices were called, ‘The worship of heaven and earth.’

It is on the basis of ‘The worship of heaven and earth’ that the Chinese have set up their religion, which includes the worship of ancestors. When these primitive peoples worked, they encountered various difficulties. Some courageous and intelligent chiefs would help them overcome their difficulties and achieve successful results. These chiefs became the ‘cultural heroes’ of the

Chinese nation. Finally, they transformed themselves progressively into divinities and into the common ancestors of the Chinese nation, for example, 'Yandi' and 'Huangdi' whom people worship. This tradition of ancestral worship continues, but people today recognize only their own ancestors instead of accepting those of the whole nation. Even today, on the occasion of the Spring Festival, and other celebrations, people burn incense to their deceased ancestors, bow to them and offer them sacrifices, etc. The worship of ancestors includes all these things. Following the Qin and Han dynasties, there arose religions with national dimensions such as Taoism and Buddhism. In addition, Confucianism sprang up and influenced the development of Chinese culture. Western Sinologists, who study the structure of Chinese civilization, always divide the ancient religions into three branches: Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Actually, the last one is not a religion, but it has played an irreplaceable role, one more important than any religion, in the development of the country's ancient culture. It is a culture, a philosophy that the Chinese have never considered a religion."

(The Chinese text at this point gives a brief presentation of the different religions found in China: Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and finally Christianity. The translator included only the textbook's description of Christianity.)

Description of Christianity

"We must also mention the development of Christianity in China. It was introduced during the Tang dynasty and was called 'the Luminous Religion.' Later, its influence diminished. It was reintroduced during the Yuan dynasty, and the adherents constructed a church called 'The Temple of the Cross.' It had certain connections with Europe. During this era there were terrible conflicts among Christians, Buddhists and Taoists. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Western Christians tried over and over again to enter China to evangelize. Christianity, which was identified with Western civilization, came into conflict with Chinese culture during the period of evangelization. The West, nevertheless, brought with it some enlightenment, (author's note: this is a vague term to signify the philosophy of Lights, the awakening of China or a new

inspiration,) and made diverse contributions. Christianity is one of the world's most influential religions with many adherents in China.

“Specialists, who have studied Chinese culture from its very beginning, are aware that the beliefs of the Chinese are different from those of other nations. Chinese believers pay attention to obvious advantages, consequently, they are not extremists and their faith is neither very well grounded nor enduring. The faith of the Chinese is not exclusive; they can believe in many religions at the same time. For example, a Chinese family can practice ancestral worship, adore the Taoist gods, and at the same time burn incense to Buddha. The Chinese prefer to let the gods live in harmony, and to call on them when they have need.

“Because of this casual and pragmatic religious attitude, the Chinese have neither great love for, nor great hatred toward religions. Their sacrifices and their offerings are never unconditional. From ancient times until now, the Chinese think of religion in a practical way. They remember they have a religion when they need help: such an attitude is typical of Chinese religious pragmatism. This is summed up in a famous saying: ‘People do not burn incense when everything is going well, but grasp the feet of Buddha when in distress.’

“Up until now, human beings possess only limited knowledge. Many phenomena cannot be explained. They are mysterious and cannot be fathomed. This is favorable terrain for the growth of religions, which explain these phenomena through their teachings.

“What is the attitude of educated Chinese towards these things? Let us go back to what Confucius, the great thinker of ancient times, said. The writings of the Sage do not speak of a ‘super-power’ or of different divinities. When someone asked Confucius if he knew anything about death, he clearly replied: ‘We do not know life, how could we possibly know death?’

“In reading this you can get the impression that Confucius believed neither in spirits nor in any divinity. He held them at a distance while respecting them. The Sage’s attitude has influenced many generations. Later on, the Chinese venerated different gods and respected all kinds of religions, or even believed in them. A certain number of people ‘would rather believe that these gods and religions exist than not believe in their existence.’”

Commentary on the Text

This text is interesting from various points of view. It is Lesson 7 from the Chinese language book for Westerners, Asians and Africans who, in greater and greater numbers, are beginning the study of Chinese language and culture.

The Chinese government is very careful to project a favorable image of their country to foreigners. Furthermore, it strictly controls all publications, and especially those that deal with religions in China. In fact, these could end up putting atheism, the official doctrine of the country, in danger. We can then be certain that this text reflects the present thinking of the Chinese leadership. But in this situation it is also a matter of having watered things down so as not to shock foreigners who come to study in China. They bring a lot of money into the country. It's wise not to offend their sensibilities in religious matters.

First comment: China today openly addresses the subject of religion with foreign students. This is new. During the 1980s, students' questions on religion were answered in vague formulas, hinting that this was a phenomenon of the past which was more or less mixed up with superstition, and it was about to die a happy death, (the author of these lines himself studied in China during this period). When compared to China's economic, scientific and technological development, religion was not an interesting subject for class discussion, and it was not a good idea to stop to deal with China's past. Rather one should look ahead to the future with optimism.

The fact that the subject is now included in the textbooks could mean that the leadership views religion in a more positive way. But it could also mean that professors of Chinese language, harassed by the students' questions, have decided no longer to beat around the bush, but to confront the subject head on.

Second comment: Even if the authors do not speak about the "opium of the people," the authors of this text are faithful to Marxist theory in their analysis of religious phenomena. Religion, according to them, is the result of ignorance and poverty. People practice religions to avoid danger and evil fortune. We also sense that behind the text's affirmation, there lurks the theory that religion

will eventually fade away. Chinese religions are neither robust nor strong. Their natural death is here and now foreseeable. Finally, the text considers religions as shortcuts to explain natural startling phenomena (rain, thunder). But they are never seen as a spiritual quest, a search for the meaning of life, or an endeavor to communicate with the Transcendent.

Third comment: China is viewed from the “Han” point of view. There is no mention whatsoever of the Tibetans or other ethnic minorities (there are 55 ethnic groups besides the Han), that all have their own religions. The writers develop the point of view that for the Chinese, religion rests on unreliable foundations; it is utilitarian and has little depth. Consequently, they conclude that religious life is only marginal in the country, that for the great majority of the people, their real preoccupations lie elsewhere.

We can ask ourselves, whether this is indeed the real situation, and why the Chinese government at all levels expends so much energy in persecuting and controlling religions, that they consider inoffensive. The terrible persecutions of the past, especially at the moment of the Communists’ takeover of power and during the Cultural Revolution, are reduced, according to the authors, to encouragements (what an euphemism!) to depend only on one’s work, and not to rely on religion.

Certainly, the intensity of the persecutions has diminished with time, but they are still going on in China today. The zeal which the different Patriotic Associations and Three-self Movements, etc. exercise to control religious activities in the country is a constant source of worry: they keep the religious leadership at a distance; they channel the various spiritual currents that manifest themselves in the country to render them inoffensive; they prevent religions from progressively regaining importance.

The Chinese government fears the Tibetans, suppresses Lamaism and has not yet permitted the Dalai Lama to return home. It also dreads any communication between the Muslims of Xinjiang and their co-religionists in the neighboring countries such as Kazakhstan and Tadjikistan. It fears that they are organizing themselves to seek their independence, and this is the reason for their uprisings. They prevent Chinese Catholics from having normal relations with the Holy See, and interfere in the nomination of

bishops. They forbid the Protestants from having churches outside unregistered locations. They imprison members of the Fa Lun Gong under the pretext that it is a perverse cult.

The teaching of Marxist atheism is still required in all primary and secondary schools, and higher education institutions in the country. The publication of books or reviews with religious themes is always strictly limited in number and the contents are censored. Why go to such lengths to combat a religious attitude, which, according to the text, is both incidental and pragmatic? If, in truth, the Chinese have neither great love, nor great hate for religions, if religions are really marginal, why oppose them?

When we study the attitudes in relation to the religious phenomenon in Chinese universities, we discover that in effect many young people say they are atheists. But if we scratch the surface a little, it becomes immediately obvious that this is not atheism of conviction but of ignorance. These students have had no way to know in their youth about religion, and they voluntarily recognize that their attitude is the result of their education. In fact ever since they were very young, they have been emphatically told that believing in a religion was the result of ignorance, and that God did not exist. As soon as we explain why we believe in God and the foundation of faith in Christ, their attitude changes and they discover a whole new world, the one of the spiritual life, that they never before imaged existed. Most of them have never reflected on problems such as: life after death, the existence of evil, the meaning of life. The ignorance in which these young students grow up engenders immaturity and a total absence of personal questioning. For them, the world is simple, there is but one truth, the one that the Communist Party teaches. It is sufficient to obey the Party's orders in order to live a problem-free life.

To belong to the Chinese Communist Party, people must swear that they are atheists. But many do this without realizing the significance of their action. Sometimes later, they discover a faith, or they begin to practice a faith they once had. Those in charge of the Party are very harsh with their members that practice a religion. The strictures and threats of punishment are significant. In spite of these threats many ignore the rules, and summons to correct behavior are without effect. It seems that the terrible repression inflicted on members of the Fa Lun Gong is due to the fact that

many Party cadres secretly supported this spiritual movement, or were actually members. It also seems that there were supporters even in the ranks of the government. Those in charge of the Party immediately realized that this was a possible threat to their power.

The Chinese practice a very pragmatic religion based on personal interest. This is true for many other people throughout the world as well as for those of the ancient Middle Kingdom. The authors of the text have doubts about the motivations of people who adhere to a religion. They are right. Motivations are seldom pure. But it would be well for them likewise to question the motivations of those who adhere to the Communist Party. Do they not belong to the Party out of pragmatism and self-interest? We see that the argument to denigrate traditional religions in China can be used against those who denounce them.

In fact, this textbook is probably addressed, first of all, to those foreign students who would like to communicate their faith to their Chinese friends. They are forewarned: the Chinese are not very interested in religion; they are not good believers. Don't throw yourself into such a hazardous venture: you will expend lots of energy, and will be disappointed with the results.

The textbook makes some good observations. It is moderate in tone and its contents are tolerant and reassuring. However, it is not convincing. The authors have certainly never been to Hong Kong or Taiwan, and still less to the West, to see what it means to believe in a religion. They would have discovered that there are different levels of adhesion and participation, and that we cannot judge a spiritual movement on the deformities and deviations that some of the members inflict on the ideal proposed. We cannot take as the norm the faith of the non-practicing, poorly enlightened and badly formed believers. Neither do the authors seem to suspect that natural religions and revealed religions are markedly different. Obviously, we are dealing with observers that have tried to be objective and open about the religious world, but who nonetheless remain outside, and are completely pledged to the all-powerful Chinese Communist Party, which as usual in this domain, dictates its requirements and its way of looking at things.