

ENTRY ON RELIGION IN THE CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIA



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The idea of an encyclopedia which would include all branches of general knowledge in the Chinese language has been around for some time. It took on concrete form with the establishment of the Chinese Encyclopedia Publishing Company in 1978. Obviously, it is a mammoth project, culminating in a set of 80 volumes, containing altogether over 100,000 entries. It is designed to encompass the broadest range of human learning, from ancient philosophy to modern science, from primitive art to contemporary cultures. Now, after a ten-year wait, the new Chinese Encyclopedia has begun to roll off the printing presses of Beijing and Shanghai.

Among the Encyclopedia's many entries, there is one under the general heading of "religion". It is the work of Luo Zhufeng and Huang Xinchuan, two researchers from the Academy of Social Sciences' department for the study of religion. The religion entry contains about 12,000 words and gives a broad general analysis of the subject. Considering the fact that this entry serves as an introduction to the whole volume on religion, its importance is not to be underestimated. It does, moreover, represent the Mainland Chinese government's present thinking with regard to religion.

The religious studies department of the Academy was established by the government for very practical reasons. With the number of religious believers in the world exceeding 2.5 billion, or over 60% of its total population, China feels that an understanding of religion is important for its outside contacts as well as necessary for the smooth functioning of government within its own borders. This knowledge is especially vital if its current policy of modernization is to achieve success. Modernization depends in part on closer ties to nations where religion plays an important role. Internal necessity and enlightened diplomacy, then, require research studies into religion. One has only to think of Europe and America where over two-thirds of the world's Christians can be found. While pragmatism may seem to be the driving force behind this interest, it must also be said that Mainland Marxists are not blind to the important role religion continues to play in modern societies and they are anxious to study why this is so. This is in marked contrast to the situation in the Republic of China, (i.e. Taiwan) where academicians and educators seem not to have progressed much beyond the old-fashioned Scientism of the 1920's, where religion was seen as a pacifier for the ignorant and unenlightened and should be relegated to the realm of folklore and fairy tale. This is why government organizations for the study of religion have yet to put in an appearance on Taiwan. Such organizations that do exist have all been established by religious believers themselves on their own.

As for the entry on religion which appears in the new Chinese Encyclopedia, it is divided into five parts: the origin and development of religion, its nature and function in society, special characteristics of religion in China, religion during the period of Chinese Socialism, and research studies on religion--its present trends and future development. Of the five topics, the one dealing with religion in China and the other on research studies into the subject of religion in both East and West received the most objective treatment in terms of the information offered. From a research-science point of view, they are the most realistic and down to earth. The first section, which is on the origin of religion, is for the most part solid, although it does contain some unfortunate inaccuracies. For example, it is more than a little misleading to say that Christianity is merely a composite of Jewish theology, primitive Greco-Roman philosophy and popular Oriental mystery rites. Also, the statement attributing the sole source for the origin of religion to be a primitive fear of nature is simplistic, to say the least. It is, however, in the second section--the nature and function of religion in society--where pure science gives way to halting ideology. In this section, the historical-materialistic point of view remains constant throughout. The authors maintain that religion is a



spiritual weapon used by the exploiting class to anesthetize and control the masses. It is also an abstraction absolutizing elements in the material reality from which it is drawn, but which has no objective foundation in and of itself. Unfortunately, such theories are proposed as absolutes without any supportive arguments from scientific, objective reality. The article does not see its own view as one opinion among many, but rather as an incontestable principle demanding universal acceptance and application. But in all fairness, it must also be noted that the authors do acknowledge the contribution of Scholastic philosophy during the Middle Ages toward harmonizing religious faith with the authority of reason, and they go on to affirm the rich heritage of art, music and literature that

religious faith has passed on to all cultures. It singles out the contribution of Buddhism as an outstanding treasure of the Chinese cultural legacy, and the role played by Daoism as a seminal influence in the development of early Chinese holistic approaches to the healing sciences. Nor are the positive elements of Christianity in China overlooked. While it has a history of being used by European imperialists as a tool for exploiting the Chinese people, its value as an instrument for the dissemination of modern Western science and ideas is not to be neglected. Such remarks give a better balance to this section, and save it from becoming merely a collection of arbitrary ideological dogmas.

The encyclopedia's entry on religion, taken as a whole, is of special significance insofar as it offers a clearer insight into the intellectual underpinnings of the government's current official policy on religion. This is especially so in its treatment of religion during the period of Chinese Socialism. A summary analysis of this section might run as follows: at this point in the evolutionary process towards a pure socialistic society, when the material life of the people has not yet reached sufficient development, and the higher consciousness level of a socialistic culture has not yet been achieved, the religious appeal

to and reliance upon the supernatural will continue to be a factor within society. The 1949 Liberation destroyed the system whereby the exploiting classes held sway over the powerless masses. It also put an end to "the imperialistic power of the Church." Patriotic peoples of every nationality have now become part of the patriotic United Front. The authorities continue to permit "freedom of religious belief" for two basic reasons: first, because "some of the moral teachings of believers happen to coincide with the requirements of socialism, and some of the positive ethical values promoted by certain religious cultural traditions ought to be respected, protected and encouraged"; secondly, "the outside contacts maintained and developed by religious believers enhance understanding and friendship between the Chinese people and the people beyond our borders." I quote from the original source to give the reader the idea of how clearly the overriding practical and pragmatic approach of official religious policy is stated in this section of the article. It also betrays a certain colouring of the entry's content in the government's favour.

After the above brief analysis, it is difficult to make a summary judgement of the complete article. Serious consideration and careful examination must be given to each part. But there is no denying the pervading influence of Marxist analysis as the authors' fundamental criterion in the selection of the contents. On the one hand, the authors state clearly their intention to adhere to the scientific principles of "seeking truth through facts", yet the heavy burden of Marxist interpretation refuses to be laid aside lightly. It's like a woman once burdened with bound feet, who limps along even after the binding has been removed. There is one sentence in this section that exemplifies this conflict of science and ideology in more detail. "Chinese studies on religion try to implement their methodology in the scientific spirit of Marxism, which is the spirit of seeking truth through facts." The contemporary philosopher, Karl Popper, has said that a characteristic of scientific knowledge is that it is based on the principle of falsifiability, which means that what is stated can be proven wrong.(1) Based on this principle, Marxist social and economic theory is at best a working hypothesis, and cannot be taken as immutable truth. Besides, "implementing Marxism" and "the scientific spirit of seeking truth through facts" are in contradiction because Marxist theory so often goes against objective facts. Deng Xiaoping himself declared that the economic theory of Marx is not infallible and the economic policy pursued by the China Mainland today is not entirely in accord with Marxist theory. It is also a point of fact that the well-known prediction of Karl Marx regarding the demise of capitalism has yet to be fulfilled. As Marxism does not reflect reality in many

instances, then, this article which seeks to implement Marxism by seeking truth through facts, stands on very shaky scientific ground.

There is another bone I have to pick with the Encyclopedia's religion entry. The names of non-Chinese scholars quoted in the article are not spelled out to clarify just exactly who they are. Instead the reader has only the phonetics of the Chinese characters to work on, with the result that even those who have made extensive studies on religion are at a loss to decipher who it is who is being quoted. Moreover, scientific treatises should come equipped with detailed footnotes to enable the interested reader to investigate further, and at the very least, there should be a list of the major reference works from which material has been taken. Unfortunately, all of this is lacking.

As a result of the unprecedented disaster of the Cultural Revolution, the Mainland of China is now walking down a more reasonable and pragmatic road. It is understandable that given the practical realities of the present situation, Chinese authorities are reluctant to abandon the Marxist heritage overnight. According to Marxist theory, religion is the opium of the people, only to be tolerated until the day when the material and scientific conditions of life are firmly established; then, of course, religion will die a natural death. This Marxian prediction has yet to be fulfilled. In fact, in Europe, America, Japan and other countries having highly developed economies and cultures, interest in religion has not only not disappeared, but is thriving. Even in such places as the Soviet Union, where atheism is assiduously and tirelessly promoted, there is a dramatic revival of religious interest. This is because religion is not merely a sociological phenomenon arising from ignorance or exploitation, but rather it is rooted in the radical limitation of the human condition and in man's innate drive to search for meaning in life.

The people of mainland China have long rejected a dogmatism that is neither objective nor realistic. I believe the day is not far off when it will become clear to all whether or not the Marxist concept regarding religion is objective and in accord with reality. We can already see signs of this reflected in the Encyclopedia as it moves more and more towards a pragmatic approach. It already affirms the many more positive values of religious belief. (It came as no surprise that Fr. Jerome Heyndrickx, director of the China-Europe Institute at Louvain University, when on public TV, should praise this trend toward pragmatism.) While from the scientific point of view, pragmatism is not the only path to truth, yet if the Chinese Marxists fully utilize this approach in their search for facts, then it is definitely a positive

step forward. According to William James, founder of the school of pragmatism, while the empiricists limit themselves to whatever is tangible, the pragmatists utilize the entire experience gained from praxis.(2) If this approach continues, the distortion of Marxist ideas on religion may one day be corrected, while authentic Marxist concern for the plight of the working classes will continue to be affirmed as an everlasting value in society.

Of course, a proper understanding of an enlightened policy toward religion cannot be based on distorted theory. As religion finds its origin in the limitations of the human condition and man's innate drive to search for meaning in life, it is then an integral part of his human dignity and must not be considered merely as a tool for political advantage. There is little need here to mention that loving one's motherland is the duty of every citizen. Religious believers are not exempt from this responsibility. Love of country flows naturally from religious faith as one important aspect of a religious life. It is not, however, the entire content of religious life. To arbitrarily categorize believers into patriotic and non-patriotic, condemning the latter while making the former a constitutive part of a patriotic United Front, is to misunderstand the true nature of religion and bend it to serve political ends. To label this "Freedom of Religion" when it bears only a passing resemblance to true freedom is to open oneself to serious criticism not only at home but from abroad as well. From where does this criterion for dividing religious believers into patriotic and non-patriotic derive? Apparently it depends upon whether or not an individual is conforming to the will of the present political authority. A believer who prefers to die rather than go against his religious principles, is, in fact, possibly more deeply patriotic than those who conform out of fear of reprisal. So much for using "seeking truth from facts" as a basis for dividing believers into patriotic or non-patriotic. There are echoes here of the Cultural Revolution when presumed guilt was prosecuted as actual crime.

The true function of government is not absolute control over every aspect of its citizens' lives, but rather to assist the people, moderating public activity in appropriate ways and at appropriate times. In this way the people will flourish. No matter whether it be in the field of economics, academics, or the arts, personal initiative and independence should be encouraged for the sake of the common good. This is one reason why Hong Kong and Taiwan enjoy such prosperity today. It is the same in the religious field. If religion is expected to contribute to the stability of society and advance the social and cultural welfare of the people, then it is paramount to allow religion

to grow and develop according to its own basic principles and guidelines. The government should intervene only when activities are harmful to the common good. For example, in Taiwan there are temples in residential districts that sometimes use loudspeakers to broadcast their prayers, thus intruding in and disturbing the normal life of the community. In such cases, the government has the right and duty to intervene to correct such abuses. However, with regard to the purely intrinsic affairs of the religions themselves, the government should not interfere.

The above holds true for all religions. With regard to the Catholic Church, an essential characteristic is its universal communion with members throughout the whole world under the leadership of the Pope. To force Catholics to cut themselves off from their relationship with the Pope on the grounds of being patriotic is an act which could bring about the opposite of what it hopes to achieve. Under the present mainland religious policy, there is a danger that conflicts might arise within the Catholic Church of Hong Kong after 1997 over the issue of who is patriotic and who is not among believers. Any dissension would severely curtail the potential good this community can do for the country. A pragmatic approach would dictate that the government authorities respect the good being done by the Catholic Church, and at a propitious time move to establish relations with the Holy See in order to allow the Church to continue to develop according to her own intrinsic principles and traditional guidelines. In this way, the Catholic Church would be able to make a strong contribution to the stability of a society which is presently threatened by an aimless materialism. On the other hand, to make of the Catholic Church a political tool would result in the loss of her true identity and the spirit of "frankness" which Mencius states is a consequence of morally right conduct. Even in the matter of maintaining "outside contacts" and enhancing the friendships between the Chinese people and people beyond our borders, Chinese Catholics would carry out this task much more effectively and convincingly if they were allowed to be themselves and to be completely free.

(Footnotes see P.5)