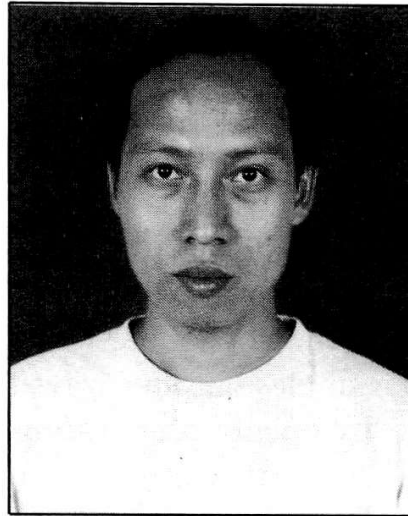


Belief and Superstition

By Anthony Lam

Translated by Norman Walling

For several months newspapers and magazines have been keeping the world informed about the plight of the Falun Gong in China. Before China outlawed the Falun Gong last July, very few people had ever heard of the group. Today they have become a symbol of resistance that the Chinese government has equated with Poland's Solidarity Movement. For an outsider, the similarities are not too obvious, yet the activities of the sect's faithful and convinced followers have triggered a panic button in high places. The government has arrested thousands of the adherents, relegating them to prisons and labor camps with sentences ranging from a few months to as many as 18 years. Hundreds of members and even sympathizers have been fined as much as 70,000 yuan for their ties to the group.



It is not my aim to discuss the Falun Gong directly here, but perhaps an analysis of an article, entitled "Disseminate Atheism, Promote a Scientific Spirit, Build a New Socialist Civilization,"¹ by Mr. Ren Jiyu, the Director of the Chinese Institute of Atheism and a noted expert in the field of religion, might help us better understand the mentality behind this seemingly bizarre crackdown and the actual situation of religion in China today.

Ren Jiyu was born in Shandong Province in 1916. He studied Chinese literature in Beijing University and taught philosophy there after he graduated in 1941. In 1946, he was asked to set up the Research Institute on World Religions and was appointed its first director. It was here that he gained a reputation for his research studies on Chinese Buddhism. With the onset of the Cultural Revolution, research studies on religion came to a complete halt. But by the end of 1979, the Institute had reopened, with Ren reinstated in a leader-

ship position. When, in 1984, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was planning an ambitious program that would offer doctoral studies in 21 different subjects, it was to Ren that they turned to oversee the project. At present, Ren is Director Emeritus of the Academy.

Ren's long and distinguished career at the Institute of World Religions in the Academy of Social Sciences has gained him credibility and respect among scholars both in Mainland China and abroad.

In his article, Mr. Ren points out certain areas that give him cause for concern. "In the past few years," he says, "some leftover trash from the dustbin of history has resurfaced under the guise of science and culture, and is now threatening to undermine the nation's scientific spirit. And the minds of great numbers of our people, especially the young, are being poisoned and corrupted as a result." Mr. Ren singles out four ways this is being done:

1. by openly propagating theism, over and against all the norms of scientific common sense;
2. by making claims that human nature is capable of immaterial and transcendental thinking;
3. by perpetuating pseudo scientific ideas and promoting the practice of witchcraft;
4. by advocating feudalism and superstitious practices under the semblance of respect for our traditional culture.²

The first two items on Ren's list refer to a phenomenon that took place during the late eighties and early nineties when a rash of wonder workers suddenly appeared all over China. Claiming to have special supranatural powers, they attracted large crowds of people, including some scientists. But when finally exposed as charlatans, they quickly lost favor and disappeared from sight.

Item four on the list is concerned with *The Book of Changes*, China's ancient literary classic, which admits of so many diverse and contradictory interpretations, and whose scientific value is subject to much debate, that we only mention it here in passing.

We must, however, take issue with Ren's claim that propagating theism goes against the norms of science and common sense. Religious believers, among others, find such a premise unacceptable.

It is important to note at this point that Ren's academic expertise does not lie in the discipline of the natural sciences, but in the field of religion. He initially gained his reputation through his stud-

ies of philosophical Buddhism and philosophical atheism.³ So when he says that “One of the main achievements of modern natural science and atheism has been to prove that the world is matter in motion, and that there is no God,” his assertion amounts to little more than a personal bias. While it may be a sound scientific working hypothesis that the world is indeed matter in motion, his conclusion from this, that there is no God, is gratuitous and unscientific to say the least. It is an indisputable fact that many of the world’s great scientists believe in God. Need we mention that Mr. Cui Ai, a native born Chinese who was awarded the 1998 Nobel Prize in physics, has been a committed Christian from his youth. Moreover, the world’s largest Christian body, the Catholic Church, has not only been a strong advocate of science throughout its history, but continues to attract renowned scientists from all over the world, irrespective of their personal religious beliefs, to its Academy of Science in Vatican City. The fact is there is no real conflict between science and religion. Albert Einstein, voted the man of the century, and who many consider to be the century’s greatest scientist as well, was a believer who once said that “there is no conflict between good science and good religion, only between bad science and bad religion.”

Ultimately, the existence of God is a philosophical issue, no matter how eager Ren is to make it a legitimate object of scientific study. Genuine scientists will find his assumptions difficult to accept, especially when he proposes them on scientific terms.

Furthermore, lumping all Ren’s four categories into one pudding, and declaring the whole to be anti-scientific in all its individual parts, only serves to trivialize and confuse the issue. To equate belief in God with chasing after “wonder workers” and other charlatans is to insult the intelligence of religious believers. To label them “theologians,”⁴ as does Mr. Ren, is just plain ignorance. The word “theologian” has a very specific meaning in educational circles. It denotes a practitioner well versed in the field of speculative theology, i.e. the study of God and his relationship to the universe. Or is Mr. Ren being deliberately misleading here, in an effort to sow some seeds of confusion?

Religion and Theism

Ren’s vehement campaign against “pseudo-science” and the prevailing atmosphere of superstition on the China mainland is cause, if not for alarm, certainly for some concern. He states: “The phe-

nomena of pseudo-science and witchcraft, which existed in the past, is still with us. Moreover, in recent years, the activities of those engaged in these phenomena have taken a more serious turn. These charlatans operate not only in rural and isolated areas, but have also penetrated the political and cultural centers of our larger towns and cities. They are no longer limited to the lower echelons of our rural and urban areas, but they have found acceptance and support among the upper and middle levels of cadres, intellectuals, university professors, and even some scientists, who have become leaders in these activities.”⁵

No doubt the increase in the number of those practicing the “pseudo-sciences” is reason enough for concern, but the truth of the matter is that such movements (even the Falun Gong) are certainly not as threatening as Ren would have us believe.

Ren was quite deliberate in his choice of words, knowing full well that they would be taken as offensive and upsetting to believers. Proof of this can be seen towards the end of his paper where he states: “We must be sure, when exercising our authority in reference to religious believers, that we critique the feudal superstitions of pseudo-science and witchcraft against a backdrop of ‘theistic ideology.’”⁶ While Ren obviously wishes to draw a line between pseudo science and religion, he places them both in association with one another, revealing a covert attempt to treat theism and the pseudo-sciences as one and the same thing.

Ren goes on to say: “We should not hesitate to proclaim that atheism and religion have fundamentally opposing worldviews. Each examines the other. And while religion studies atheism from a variety of theological perspectives, atheism presents a Marxist view of religion. This is at the heart of their mutual critiques.”⁷

Ren knows that feudal superstitious practices and the pseudo-science of witchcraft not only are in conflict with scientific atheism, but are also opposed to orthodox religious faith.⁸ While his intentions may be good, he ends up confusing the three concepts of atheism, pseudo-science, and religious faith. This can only lead to more misunderstandings in the future.

In the first part of his paper, Ren speaks in highly exaggerated terms of the grave threat posed by both theism and the pseudo-sciences. However, in his concluding words, he makes no mention at all of theism, while roundly condemning witchcraft and other superstitious practices, which “not only harm the mental and physical

health of our citizens but also do harm to orthodox religious faith. They only give religion a bad name. Therefore, not only is it possible, but it is imperative that we work together with religion to eradicate witchcraft and other feudal superstitious practices.”⁹

When Ren equates theism and pseudo-science in part one of his paper, and then in part two tries to enlist theists to join in a united front against the pseudo-sciences, what can he be thinking of? Does he really expect religious believers to join with him in a battle against theism? This is the crucial point of his article.

Atheism and Politics

As a believer myself, I know of no real conflict between science and religion. Their goals may be different but they are not contradictory. And while the roads taken by each may differ, they often converge when both disciplines come together in shared knowledge and insights. Such a meeting can result in a rich dialogue, as each seeks to share the truths it has discovered with the other.

Since these ideas have been discussed at great length in many other contexts, there is no need for us to elaborate on them further. Certainly his many years of experience in the study of religion cannot have left Ren ignorant of such basic factors in the religion-science dialogue.

Sifting carefully through Ren’s paper for clues to an answer, one comes upon a sentence tucked away at the bottom of page three that seems to reveal quite clearly the author’s underlying motivation. It reads: “It is the special responsibility of the Institute of Atheism in China to propagate science and atheism. However, it has in recent years been unable to advance this work.”

Ren does not elaborate further on the difficulties standing in the way of “advancing this work.” But it is clear from the context that the purpose of his present paper is to challenge both the pseudo-sciences and theism in an effort to make up for the Institute’s past lapses in this area.¹⁰

On the final page, Ren proposes four steps that the Institute should take to accomplish its goals:

1. Uphold the basic principles of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought, and Deng Xiaoping’s directives for building socialism with Chinese characteristics. If we continue to rely on Marxist ideology, especially its critique and analysis of problems that confront us,

and if we continue to adopt a scientific attitude of seeking truth from facts, and if we ground our arguments on reason, then we shall at last see the day when the truth will finally receive full acceptance by the masses.

2. Support Party leadership and actively work for the realization of the Institute's goals. The Institute of Atheism works closely with scholars from the Academy of Social Sciences and the Academy of Sciences, who are subject to the direction of Party committees affiliated with both. We, too, are united with them in a joint effort that involves large numbers of social and natural scientists, and we rely heavily upon both the Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Social Sciences for help and direction.
3. Cooperate and assist other institutes in efforts to influence public opinion and gain media support. The Institute does not work independently of other institutes and organizations, but it cooperates with them to oppose all forms of feudal superstition, pseudoscience and witchcraft. We must work to cultivate good press relations and to win public support for our cause. We firmly believe that we have and will continue to have the support and backing of the mass media.
4. Give top priority to the support of our ideas by promoting them through positive and highly selective methods. In promoting truth we must be critical of errors. But the aim of such criticism is to aid our people in making clear distinctions between truth and error, and to enable them to know how to act accordingly. Therefore, we must support positive efforts to promote our teaching, explaining it in such a way so as to assist people in forming a correct view of themselves and of the world.¹¹

In summary, then, we can readily see from the above how Ren's main purpose is to strengthen political discipline. It seems nothing short of amazing to us to watch how adroitly politics and scholarship are made to merge and mingle in a modern society that is on record as advocating openness and free access to knowledge. Unfortunately, the driving force behind Ren's four points is obviously political and has little or nothing to do with scholarly research. Ren states quite openly that the real link between the Academies and the

Institute is their willing acceptance of direction by their two Party committees. Thus, Ren has totally politicized the issue of atheism and brushed to one side any further discussion by intellectuals and scholars.

How atheism relates to scholarly research and religious studies is an important element in interdisciplinary dialogue. Such a dialogue between religious believers and atheists can uncover even greater depths of meaning about the mystery of life itself. Ren, however, rejects all scholarly discussion and places the entire matter on the level of politics. This does not serve the needs of either atheists or religious believers, nor does it hold out much promise for the future of Chinese society.

Conclusion

As a believer and as a Catholic, it is obvious that I do not espouse atheism personally. Nevertheless, the Church, of which I am a member, continually instructs its members to keep an open mind and maintain a respectful attitude for the beliefs of others, even belief in atheism. The Second Vatican Council has placed great importance on entering into dialogue with atheists. The Holy See has established a special Secretariat for Dialogue with Non-believers in order to foster closer relationships with atheists all over the world.¹² It has examined its own conscience and accepted responsibility for its members' failures in living up to their mission to live out the Gospel in their lives that may have caused them to become a scandal to others and obstacles of faith for many non-believers.

Yet believers themselves must often bear some responsibility for this situation (of unbelief). For, taken as a whole, atheism is not a spontaneous development but stems, rather, from a variety of causes, including a critical reaction against religious beliefs, and in some places against the Christian religion in particular. Hence, believers themselves can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism. In so far as that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral, or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than to reveal the authentic face of God and religion.¹³

These words remind believers that before addressing the doubts, questions, and challenges of atheists, we must first reflect on our own failures in showing the true face of God by our words and

deeds, and thereby have added to the misunderstandings and misconceptions atheists may harbor towards religion.

The Church teaches us to distinguish between atheism and atheists, and while disputing the former, we must continue to harbor only sentiments of acceptance and love for the latter.

The Church strives to detect in the atheistic mind the hidden causes for the denial of God. Conscious of how weighty are the questions which atheism raises, and motivated by love for all men, she believes these questions ought to be examined seriously and more profoundly.¹⁴

As a Chinese, it troubles me to see my government and some of our leading scholars adopting such a narrow minded and one dimensional approach to the problem. It can only give rise in the future to more misunderstandings and unnecessary conflicts. Religion in China has suffered enough from the anti-religious political campaigns of the past decades. It seemed that after the Cultural Revolution things got back on the right tract with the publication of the State Council's White Paper on *The Situation of Religious Freedom in China*, in which the government stated that: "all religions in China enjoy equal footing and have harmonious relationships. No religious conflicts occur. Citizens who believe in religion and those who do not, respect and live in peace with each other. The reason for this is due to the influence of a long standing and well established compatibility and tolerance inherent in Chinese traditional cultural values. A more important reason is that after the People's Republic of China was established, the Chinese government formulated and implemented the policy of freedom of religious belief, thus establishing the relationship between the State and religion that is compatible with national sentiment."¹⁵

Placing to one side the question of whether such a religious policy was in fact a continuum of Chinese history, the White Paper's mention of "China's long standing and well established compatibility and tolerance inherent in its traditional cultural values" which fosters an atmosphere of peace and harmony is a commendable ideal well worth striving for. Ren's attack on theism seems on the face of it to be a deviation from this tendency towards "unity in diversity." Perhaps more serious is the impression he leaves that it is no longer possible to have scholarly exchange on this issue. If his paper is to be judged as the author's willing descent into the dark pit of power poli-

tics, then, should Ren's challenge to theism ever become actualized in Chinese society, this would not bode well for our nation's future.

Endnotes

- ¹ *Study of World Religions*, Vol. 4, Dec. 1, 1997.
- ² Ibid. pp. 2-4.
- ³ Cf. "China's Great Encyclopedia, Section on Religion," China's Great Encyclopedia Press, Beijing, Shanghai: Feb. 1988, pp. 317-318.
- ⁴ Loc. Cit. *Study of World Religions*, p. 2.
- ⁵ Ibid. p. 3.
- ⁶ Ibid. p. 7.
- ⁷ Ibid. p. 7.
- ⁸ Ibid. p. 7.
- ⁹ Ibid. p. 7.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. p. 3.
- ¹¹ Ibid. pp. 6-7.
- ¹² *Tripod*, Oct. 1985, Vol. 29, Cardinal Poupard's "A Sincere Dialogue Creates Fraternity," p. 45.
- ¹³ Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, No. 19, Abbot ed., The America Press, 1966, p. 217.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. p. 218.
- ¹⁵ *Tripod*, Dec. 1997, "The White Paper on Religious Freedom in China," p. 37.