

The Concept of Religion in China and the West

Vincent Goossaert

The religious question in China is not limited to the contemporary tensions between the Catholic and Protestant churches and the Beijing regime, the repression suffered by Tibetan Buddhists or Uighur Muslims and the problems associated with so-called 'sectarian' movements. Though these issues are very important and worthy of interest in themselves, they have to be understood in a wider context which takes in the totality of religious realities in China, including those we in the West do not see because they fall outside our representations of what is religious. Furthermore, the contemporary religious question assumes meaning only if we consider all the struggles between the Chinese state and society's religious structures since the end of the 19th century. In another publication I have sketched out the modern history of relations between the Chinese state and the religious structures of the society.¹ Here I should like to show the importance of the concept of religion itself and of the controversies around it in the history of those conflicting relations. We shall see that the concepts, such as religion, used in the humanities and social sciences have consequences that go far beyond the context of academic debates and can help to feed repression and social conflict.

Religious structures in China

Before describing the uses of the concept of religion in China, I first need to sketch the religious context to which it was applied around 1900. At that time (and still today to a certain degree) the whole of China's religious organization may be seen as a coherent system, which I call Chinese religion:² it is all-encompassing, not exclusive. It embraces all forms of religious practice, whether personal (meditation, salvation techniques, body techniques including martial arts, access to knowledge and revelation through possession and spirit-writing) or group (worship of local saints or ancestors, death rituals), which are all grounded in Chinese cosmology. It includes ancient sacrificial religion, Confucianism which continued it, Taoism and Buddhism,

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as well as the sectarian movements that were formed later. The most common form was the worshipping community with a temple, dedicated to a local saint: this kind of community was not Confucian, Buddhist or Taoist but linked to all three. Chinese religion existed but did not have a name because it did not have an overarching church structure or dogmatic authority. It brought together all forms of China's religious life, with the exception of certain religions of foreign origin which, because they required exclusive membership and claimed a monopoly of the truth, could not be included: these were the three monotheisms, Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

The three institutionalized forms of Chinese religion are Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. They are precisely defined by four elements: a priesthood, a liturgy, a canon (defining orthodoxy) and education centres – monasteries, academies (*shuyuan*) – where the canon was preserved and the priests trained (in the liturgy in particular) and ordained. It was only in these centres that Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism in the strict sense were to be found. Therefore the only people who claimed to be Confucian, Taoist or Buddhist were priests and a limited number of laypeople who closely identified with the three religions and adopted their rules of life. The three religions were not to be confused (so there was no syncretism) but were seen as of equal importance: they coexisted and collaborated, and shared some common values. The vast majority of Chinese people owed allegiance not to these three religions but to local worship communities, to which they belonged either out of obligation (communities based on locality, lineage or professional guilds) or voluntarily (a huge variety of pious associations or sectarian groups). These different communities generally employed the services of the three types of priests (except for the sectarian groups, which were often anticlerical) and made great use of the three religions' symbolic, textual and theological resources. Belonging to several religious communities was looked upon as positive because it fostered piety and morality.

The concept of religion

People's allegiance not to a single religion but to various worshipping communities within a pluralist religious system was clearly opposed to the notions of religion in use in the modern West before sociologists discovered religious modernity some decades ago. It is very well known that in Chinese, as in many other languages, there is no precise equivalent for the modern western concept 'religion'. In China a neologism, *zongjiao*, was formed, or rather adopted from Japanese, to translate the western concept of 'religion' as a structured system of beliefs and practices, separate from society, which organizes believers in a church-like organization. It quickly became part of usage from 1901, and since then has retained that sense, which is now outmoded in the social science of religions in the West. Several historians of ideas have traced the way the notion has been translated, understood and discussed by Chinese intellectuals.³ However, for me as a social historian, the arrival of the western idea of religion is not restricted to an intellectual encounter between the West and China, enthralling as that encounter may have been. On the ground it was above all a powerful ideological tool that shaped and motivated a brutal policy of destruction and repression.

To summarize a complex process,⁴ we can say that by adopting the concept of religion based on the model of Christianity, and the complementary idea of superstition (*mixin*), Chinese intellectuals brought about a radical, unprecedented break in the religious field. Except for some minority thinkers before the advent of communism,⁵ religion was thought of as acceptable, whereas superstition was to be condemned. This dichotomy is very different from the traditional one that had dictated the religious policy of succeeding dynasties up to the end of the Qing (1644–1911), which contrasted cults and communities recognized as orthodox by the state with others seen as heterodox. The notion of religion was understood as meaning an entity with a positive role to play in building the nation state and helping to cement the spiritual unity and moral values of the people. Consequently, and in imitation of the Japanese and western constitutions, the various Chinese constitutions (promulgated from the advent of the Republic in 1912 up to today) recognize religious freedom. But this religious freedom is hedged about with limiting conditions, in particular a restriction to the only authentic ‘religions’, which are separated from the ‘superstition’ that the Republic of China, especially with the Guomindang regime from 1927, and the People’s Republic of China committed themselves to combat and wipe out.

Religion and religious policy

A list of five religions (all of them ‘world religions’), that were recognized and so covered by religious freedom, was fairly rapidly defined under the Republic and remains the same today: Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Buddhism and Taoism. Several sectarian groups were recognized between 1912 and 1949, and again in Taiwan since the 1980s, but they are all still banned in the People’s Republic. Starting in 1898 and up to the 1910s, attempts to define a ‘national religion’ based on Confucianism failed and Confucian intellectuals (a fair number of whom converted to Christianity) gradually turned towards reinventing their tradition in non-religious terms. Even though, throughout the 20th century, the five great religions had to suffer violent attacks, constraints and destruction, they were also able to defend themselves publicly, organize into hierarchical national associations to negotiate with the authorities, and after the end of the Cultural Revolution retrieve their main educational centres. On the other hand no state-approved organization was allowed to come into being to defend the hundreds of thousands of local temples and cult associations. That was logical, since local cults were the sites where the traditional and quite autonomous structures of local society were rooted which the modern state wished to destroy in order to take over their material and symbolic resources.

Thus from 1912, and still today, legislators and administrators had to tackle a complex task: separating out religion from superstition, a difficult business, in that those ideas do not correspond to any strictly Chinese category, but a crucial one since it determined religious policy on the ground, permitting or banning festivals and rituals, protecting or destroying temples. Experts were sometimes called in by the government to assist in this work, and still today that is part of the functions of researchers in the science of religions in the People’s Republic. A high point in the takeover of scholarly discourse by state religious policy was reached in November

1928 with the 'Rules to decide whether temples are preserved or destroyed'. This lengthy text, which purports to be a scientific study of the forms of religious life, provides criteria and a list of examples for both categories, 'to be preserved' and 'to be destroyed'.⁶ The authentic 'religions' (particularly purist forms of Buddhism and Taoism) and temples dedicated to heroes of Chinese civilization, Confucius among them, were to be preserved; the rest had to be destroyed. This distinction turned out to be impossible to apply on the ground, especially in the case of Taoism, which was indissolubly associated with local cults. But since then public discourse and publications from researchers and Taoists, even the most scholarly among them, have been concerned with this burning issue: drawing a dividing line, which is constantly shifting in accordance with political contexts, between a 'genuine Taoism' and 'superstitions'.

The most significant consequence of this process of purification that aimed to separate the five approved religions from 'superstitions' (that is, the basis of Chinese religion) was that the great majority of communities worshipping local saints in village or neighbourhood temples were deprived of all legal protection, and their temples were confiscated and converted into schools, police stations, garrisons, etc. The religious life of these temples, which was rediscovered by observers from the 1960s on (in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the diaspora, then in China itself from the 1980s), is today the focus of researchers' attention. A kind of rehabilitation of local cults is taking place under the title 'popular religion', 'folk religion' or *minjian xinyang* (literally 'popular beliefs'). However, though these labels help us to realize that the Chinese religious environment is not limited to the five approved religions together with the sectarian groups, they nevertheless confirm a process that has been underway for a century with the aim of separating religions from superstitions; by inventing a new, hybrid category of popular religion to replace the mass of 'superstitions', we forget the fundamental unity of Chinese religion's practices and representations, within which local cults and Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian institutions all have a stake.

Another effect of the religious policy implemented for a century by succeeding regimes is the introduction and use of a new idea, that of believer (*xintu*, another neologism). The use of faith as a criterion of belonging came in with the adoption of the concept of religion, but it too is ill-adapted to the Chinese religious context. The statistics the Republican then communist regimes tried to gather were aimed at estimating the number of believers, but the figures recorded and published concerned essentially members of the associations of the five approved religions. In the case of Buddhism and Taoism the associations do not recruit much beyond the priests (we should remember that traditionally only members of either priesthood think of themselves as Taoist or Buddhist), with the result that figures for believers in fact represent only a fraction of the populations taking part in Buddhist or Taoist institutions' activities. Today the purpose of the official figures issued by the People's Republic of slightly more than a hundred million believers, out of a population estimated to be more than a billion three hundred million people, is above all to show that religions are a minority activity in China. We should note in passing that worldwide statistics on religions are valueless as long as the Chinese case is not seriously taken account of.

So we can see that the inseparable concepts of religion and superstition give rise to debate, and many texts suggest varying interpretations. But it is important to understand that these debates are not restricted to intellectual or confessional circles but are political: the simple fact of labelling a group a religion legitimates it. The exception is the sectarian groups whose religious character is recognized but who are disapproved of: those that in Chinese are called *minjian zongjiao*, literally 'popular religions' (to be distinguished from local cults, for which westerners would reserve this label 'popular religion'). As for the local cults, they are described using terms we would translate as 'folklore' or 'popular arts and traditions'. To sum up, religious policy is on the one hand to reduce the legitimate field of 'religion' using notions alien to Chinese reality, then to monitor the religions thus recognized. Western observers are in general sensitive to the second aspect – monitoring – but less so to the first.⁷

The reinvention of religions

Apart from its role of justifying repressive policies, the concept of religion has had a profound impact in China, as it has in many Asian countries, on the religious communities which have incorporated it in order to redefine and reinvent themselves. We have already mentioned the debates among Confucian intellectuals (which today are raging even more fiercely) on the religious nature or otherwise of their tradition – debates that have relevance only in relation to the difference of the European model of 'religion' compared with Chinese religion. As far as Buddhism and Taoism are concerned, they managed to get recognized as 'religions' – they fulfilled certain criteria: a doctrine based on speculative texts, a separate organization – and were spared by some of the anti-superstition measures, but at the cost of reinventing themselves to a certain extent, which meant cutting links with the wider context of Chinese religion. Monks and priests had to leave the local temples where they lived, stop taking part in local festivals and withdraw to the monasteries.

In doing this Buddhism and Taoism were forced, from the early 1900s, to create a discourse that incorporated western notions of religion and more recently of secularization and religious modernity. Those who adopted this discourse are today acclaimed in confessional and academic circles to the extent that they have in large measure helped their religion to survive and be passed on in difficult conditions. Nevertheless we have to be aware of the price paid for these developments. Buddhists such as Taixu (1890–1947) and his disciples,⁸ as well as, though more discreetly and hesitantly, Taoists such as Chen Yingning (1880–1969), have tried to bring their religion into line with science and nationalism, redirect it towards action in this world and reject superstition. In their thought, modernization is accompanied by criticism and rejection of a whole raft of practices through which priests helped the people (in particular healing and exorcism, funeral rites) and took part in family and village religious and cultural life. However, this development is far from being carried through into daily reality. Wherever they can, Buddhists and Taoists are today rediscovering their place within village society and its cults.⁹

There has been much talk in various Asian countries of the 'Protestantization' of Buddhism, which, so as to adapt to modernity, rejects rituals and emphasizes the

spiritual, philosophical and moral behaviour of the individual, creating an organization for the laity.¹⁰ The fact that modernist types of discourse, with explicit allusions to the emulation brought about by the Christian and especially Protestant presence, dominate Buddhist and Taoist intellectual discourse today in China should not make us forget everything that discourse suppresses, passes over or aims to discard, out of both conviction and necessity. These types of discourse breathe new life into a certain Buddhist or Taoist fundamentalism (a totally theoretical, peaceful and benevolent fundamentalism, of course), whose aim is to define a pure form of religion uncontaminated by outside 'customs' or social practices. These fundamentalist tendencies had been forced to take a back seat by the incorporation of Buddhism and Taoism into Chinese religion since at least the 10th century, but have for a century been allowed to be expressed once again, in that the state wishes to have religions exist as totally independent entities. At the same time institutionalized Taoism and Buddhism now have to invent a laity for themselves, and not without difficulty; incidentally it is significant that the clearest successes in getting lay organizations to adopt specifically Buddhist or Taoist individual practices have not been achieved by Buddhist or Taoist bodies but by independent associations. I am thinking particularly of *Ciji gongde hui*, a charitable foundation set up in Taiwan in 1966 by a Buddhist nun, which has contributed considerably, among other things, to lay people's practice of vegetarianism (which was rare before the 1960s). Through this type of organization there is slowly being built up an organized Buddhist laity, but without the supervision of official Buddhist institutions, which remain bodies responsible for the internal operation of the priesthood and monasteries. A majority of the Chinese population believe in Buddha but nevertheless do not wish to follow the rules suggested by the priests and official institutions.

A second case of the direct impact on Chinese society of the concept of religion was its adoption by some of the huge range of sectarian groups that have been very active in China since at least as far back as the 15th century. In the 19th century certain groups, while continuing a link with the sectarian tradition's exclusive, messianic, salvationist message, adopted spirit-writing, which allowed them to communicate constantly with the gods and receive revelations, and also committed themselves to charitable work. In addition, in the decades between 1910 and 1930 they assumed a discourse on 'eastern civilization' being destined to save humanity from the negative impact of western materialism. Thus they had a message of universal salvation and synthesis of the five religions (in their case Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, Islam).¹¹ And so, since they also had a hierarchical organization like a 'church', updated lists of members (which amounted to tens of millions), a doctrine and clear founding texts, and a heavily emphasized social purpose (charitable work), they fitted perfectly the western definition of a religion and requested to be approved accordingly, some of them receiving a positive response under the nationalist regime and the wartime Japanese occupation, a response that was withdrawn by the communist regime. More recently the communist government attempted to sweep in sectarian movements by removing their religious form within the context of *qigong*, but was forced to renege on its approval of *qigong* groups when they naturally reassumed explicitly their character as religions.

The third and last aspect of the impact of the notion of religion on the Chinese social environment is the internalization of the opposition between religion and superstition by the peoples who have remained faithful to the traditional organization of local society and have therefore not joined universalist salvation movements or structures set up by Buddhist or Taoist national associations. As we see throughout the world, people who are subjected to a hegemonic discourse that downgrades their culture (labelled 'popular') preserve that culture, while at the same time adopting the deprecatory discourse about it. And so today at the grassroots old ladies taking part in a pilgrimage or a local saint's festival can be heard to say: *wo bu xin zongjiao, wo xin mixin* (I don't believe in religion, I believe in superstition). Here 'superstition' has become the name for Chinese religion in the variety of its local expressions, and 'religion' the term for the official forms of this religion.

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The Chinese case is not unique. Throughout Asia, in colonized countries such as India or Indonesia as well as those that resisted the western powers like Japan or China, the western notion of religion has dictated the religious policies of modern states and therefore forced local religious traditions to reinvent themselves to fit that notion and those policies. In a recent article Michel Picard demonstrated this phenomenon with regard to Bali. Traditional Balinese religion was questioned by Dutch colonizers, then the Indonesian state, and they both wondered whether Bali really had a 'religion' worth recognizing and protecting within the framework of religious freedom, or whether it was not in fact just a matter of 'customs' or even 'superstitions'. Balinese leaders, for whom their selection and representative character already posed a problem, in that Balinese religion had no hierarchical structure or doctrinal authority, had to reinvent their tradition (on paper) according to criteria, including monotheism, that in the state's view defined a religion.¹² In Asia there are many similar examples to be found of religious traditions that, in order to bolster their reaction and resistance to western influence, are redefining themselves in terms set by the West. However, the Chinese case seems to me to stand out by the radical manner in which western ideas of religion and religious policy have forcibly brought about a re-ordering of religion at the grassroots. More than the notion of atheism, which however has been adopted by the Communist Party as official doctrine, or that of monotheism (though Christian disapproval of 'Chinese idolatry' helped to foster the anti-superstition movements), it is the narrow definition of the idea of religion, following a model inspired primarily by Christianity, that appears as the most pronounced western influence in China as regards religious theories and policies. It is also through recognizing the breaks and ambiguities caused by adopting that idea that we should approach the question of religion in China over the last century and on the ground today.

Vincent Goossaert
CNRS, *Groupe de Sociologie des Religions et de la Laïcité, Paris*
Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. Goossaert (2003).
2. The term 'Chinese religion' that I use obviously does not correspond to the notion of religion as it was used in the West and adopted by the Chinese around 1900.
3. See especially Nedostup (2001) and Bastid-Bruguière (1998).
4. Goossaert (2003).
5. The anti-religious movements that arose in the 1920s were either anti-Christian and anti-imperialist or directly inspired by communism: Bastid-Bruguière (2002).
6. Nedostup (2001: 196–211).
7. Potter (2003) illustrates this western analysis, which focuses on the issue of the control of institutional religions.
8. See Pittman (2001) which is a good reflection of western admiration for Taixu and modernist Buddhists.
9. On the current renaissance of cults see Lagerwey (1997) and Overmyer (2003).
10. See for instance Goldfuss (2001).
11. Duara (2003: 103–22).
12. Picard (2003).

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