

Religious Diversity and Public Religion in China

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The two main themes of this book are that religious activities and beliefs have a legitimate place in public life and that this applies to China as well as everywhere else. The first half of the book is a good summary of Western, mainly American, theories of the public role of religion, pro and con. In this discussion, the author's own position is clear; he supports the view that religion is a source of ethical values and contributes to the public moral and communal life of civil society. The discussion of China begins halfway through the book with six pages on its "religiosity and religious diversity" based mainly on C. K. Yang's *Religion in Chinese Society*, which was published in 1961. The author repeats several times that Chinese religious traditions "lack organizational strength:" they are characterized by "organizational weakness" (pp.75–6, etc.), in part because of their polytheism. Christianity and Islam, by contrast, have "effective religious communities" and "organizational dynamism" because of their "faith in One God ... beyond all the many" (p. 77). He then summarizes the political context with its well-known emphasis on state control of religion, which "Throughout history ... has remained unchanged" (p. 79).

The last section of the book is "a proposal" for the public role of religion in the future, when the author hopes that China will become democratic. For this discussion he chooses "Christianity as an example" because it "synthesizes an ethical system with worship of the supernatural," and follows the Chinese scholar Zhuo Xinping in maintaining that "...Christianity, with its clear moral orientation, plays a leading role in promoting moral development in China" (p. 100). The author's proposal is the implementation in China of what he considers the best American theories supporting the public role of religion. These views can "enrich Chinese political life ... [and lead to] strong demands from religious communities for ways of expressing public concern ... [So] I suggest that religion should be granted a larger role in Chinese public life" (p. 131). The prime example of this "larger role" that the author hopes for is opposition to abortion, concerning which there are several references in his bibliography. There is no recognition in this book of the negative and divisive influence of some religious beliefs of both Christianity and other traditions.

Professor Xie, who is now at the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong, notes in his "Acknowledgments" that "This project deepened my understanding of the current situation of religion (and of Christianity in particular) in China (p. vii). However, this statement would be more convincing if there were more reference to the revived local/popular traditions that have been much studied in both China and the West since the early 1980s. None of these studies is referred to here. On this basic topic the author relies almost entirely on the 50-year old research of C. K. Yang, which made an important contribution, but parts of which have now been superseded, in particular his emphasis on the "diffused" nature of popular religion. We now know that these local traditions in fact are highly organized, and institutionalized in families, lineages and village communities, led and continued by the people themselves. There is a fine example of evidence for this in an article by Kenneth Dean in the 2003 issue of *The China Quarterly* in which Professor Xie read an article he cites here on Protestant Christianity. Evidence for the long-established organization and structure of local community religion has also long been available

in the two series of studies by Chinese scholars edited by Wang Ch'iu-kuei and John Lagerwey, and in a book of English-language reviews of these books that was published in 2002, in plenty of time for our author to consult if he had been serious about studying Chinese religions other than Christianity.

A related problem is the author's puzzling statement that there has never been a state religion in China (p. 81), when in fact the state supported an elaborate system of rituals and beliefs from the Shang dynasty on. It was a fundamental responsibility of emperors and officials at all levels of administration to sacrifice to a wide range of deities. Indeed, every dynasty published books of regulations for such rituals.

Christianity began as a fellowship of Jews who gave their allegiance to a new charismatic leader against the opposition of the Roman state and some orthodox Jewish leaders. They continued to meet hostility as they moved beyond Palestine to other areas of the Roman Empire, so it is understandable that their movement took a sectarian form that distinguished its own leaders, rituals and beliefs from those outside the group. This sectarian structure helped the early Christians establish themselves, primarily in cities, and later in areas of old Europe outside the Empire. There were analogous sectarian groups in China at about the same time and later, but the mainstream of Chinese religious ritual and practice was and is based in families, lineages and communities of farmers in rural villages. It is not sectarian in form, but includes everyone in the community, is organized by local people themselves, deeply institutionalized in the fabric of their lives, and has continued from generation to generation, in some cases for many hundreds of years. It is a tenacious tradition that has revived in many areas of the country since the early 1980s. Indigenous Chinese local religion is indeed organized and institutionalized, but in its own, non-sectarian ways, which are not the same as the European model that was brought in much later by Christian missionaries. This being the case, Professor Xie's argument that one reason China needs Christianity is because Chinese religious traditions are not well organized is questionable, and simply reveals his acceptance of a Western view of religion.

In sum, this book has serious shortcomings; it is suggestive of a promotion of conservative Christianity in the guise of an academic discussion. This is all too evident both in what the book says and what it lacks, and in its discussion of opposition to abortion as a prime example of what "public religion" might accomplish.

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Governance of Biodiversity Conservation in China and Taiwan

GERALD A. MCBEATH and TSE-KANG LENG

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The plight of the global environment, while not being a new issue in itself, has become a daily cause for concern in the press, especially in the light of recent high-profile reports such as that by Sir Nicholas Stern. Given China's role as a leading producer and its potential as a consumer, its stance on environment and development is relevant to us all and the release of McBeath and Leng's work on the People's Republic's efforts in this field, also a much-debated topic, is a timely reminder of this.