

# **The Transcendental Dimension of the Age of Disenchantment: The Paradox of Religion in the Contemporary Context of China**

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**Abstract:** In the context of modern China, the question of religion has unique significance as a cultural and social issue. This article tries to clarify the basic paradoxes and dilemmas which are often neglected of this area, and therefore reveals the original horizon from the perspective of intercultural hermeneutics.

**Key words:** religion, intellectual history, intercultural hermeneutics, disenchantment, enchantment

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In the contemporary context of modern China, the question of religion has unique significance as a cultural and social issue. This essay cannot unfold the various dimension of the problem of religion in China, nor can it provide thorough research data for one related question. What we can expect from a short paper like this is that it may clarify some of the basic paradoxes and dilemmas of this area, some of which are often neglected because they seem to be so obvious and familiar. Thus I want to present a very simple discussion of these dilemmas in order to tackle the issue of religion in China from a more basic point of departure.

## **The First Paradox: The special context of the concept of religion in China: Name and Reality (*Ming yu Shi*).**

Seen from a theoretical and academic perspective, the dilemma of religion in China is first of all a dilemma of name and reality.

We know that religion is an important form or an important dimension of the spiritual life of mankind, and religion did more or less develop parallel to the progress of mankind. Being a form of dialogue between the limited human existence and the world of transcendence, being a special way of listening and responding to the world of transcendence, being a spiritual activity and social conduct as providing meaning (*Sinngebung*) for life from the background of a tran-

scendental world, religion has never ceased to be alive in the history of mankind. However, on the academic map of the humanities the scientific study of religions as one of the secular academic disciplines has only a history of some 150 years, since the efforts of the generation of the German-born English scholar Max Mueller helped to set up the science of religions as a young academic discipline among all the others. The English Protestant missionary James Legge translated a series of Chinese classical texts, and these texts were to become an important part of the great project of the series *Sacred Books of the East*, which were published continually in Europe at that time.

We are confronted with the fact that if a young academic discipline uses its critical expressions to treat the world of religious phenomena which accompanies mankind on its journey through time, then this discipline will face all kinds of shortcomings and deficiencies. This situation happens in the context of China. When we use the religions of revelation that come from the Semitic culture and are related to the tradition of Abraham (Jewish religion, Christianity and Islam) as basic standard in order to analyze religion in our culture and religion within other cultures, then we see that this problem of shortcomings and deficiencies is even more serious.

Here we must state, that the etymological studies within Chinese scholarship is unable to meet the urgent needs of the academic world. In the texts of the old Chinese documents and classical books, the word “religion” (in Chinese *zong-jiao*) is a combined word of two characters and appears in manuscripts that are usually notes and anthologies. Most of these documents in the form of notes basically mention “*zongjiao*” as having the meaning of character formation (“*jiao hua*”) within traditional Confucianism, and this would roughly mean “to establish an authoritative master who teaches (for the local community)” (“*she zongshi yi wei jiao*”). The entry “religion” (*zongjiao*) in the *Jizuan yuanghai* (vol. 28) compiled by Pan Zimu from the Song dynasty may be taken as the most representative:

“Zong jiao (religion),

In the fifth year of the Han Dynasty (equals 5 AD) authoritative masters (*zongshi*) were set up in every province, in order to correct the descendants of the royal family (in the provinces) and in order to educate (*jiaoxun*) them. These (masters) could choose men of virtue and justice and employ them, and they could write reports to the emperor about those who did not fulfill their duties. In the third year of the Xianning period of the Jin Dynasty (227 AD), authoritative masters (*zongshi*) were established in order to encourage the royal family to follow virtue and justice, and if somebody’s conduct was not correct they would hold an assembly and discuss the matter. In

the third year of the Wude period of the Tang Dynasty (620 AD), all literati of the whole country were ordered to set up one authoritative master (*zongshi*) in every district (*zhou*), in order to be a general supervisor. At the beginning of the Chongning period of our Dynasty (Song) (1102), Cai Jing asked to set up a Court for Moral Life (*Dun zong yuan*) and ordered to build schools, appointing masters for the supervision of the examinations. . .

In this text we find the origins of the system of “authoritative masters” (*zong shi*) in the Han, Jin, Tang, and Song Dynasty. In all of these texts we do not find anything mysterious or esoteric, it is all only about character formation (“*jiaohua*”). In the Buddhist scriptures, for example in the *Hongming jishi*, *Song Gaoseng zhuan*, *Wudeng Huiyuan*, *Chanlin Sengbao*, *Linjian Lu*, *Fozu Lidai Tongzai* and other scriptures there appears the word “*zongjiao*” with various frequency, but its basic meaning is always “adherence to some direction (within Buddhism)”, that is to say to confirm and to confess one special school of thought, or it means directly the adherence to “one of the sects”, namely the teaching of one’s own sect, and here it usually denotes the Zen School—the Buddhist school which has been thoroughly Sinicized and is still in the process of being Sinicized.

(The monk of Changsha) enters the hall (and says): “If I would always preach to you about our school (*zongjiao*), then this temple would be a desert already. This matter has nothing to do with me, (and) I just want to tell you this. All of the worlds are just an eye of the monk, all of the worlds are just the body of the monk, all of the worlds are just one’s own light, all of the worlds are just within one’s light, in all of the worlds everybody is himself. I have often talked to you about the three worlds and the many Buddhas who help all the living beings, and this is always the light of mahaprajna (great wisdom). When the light has not started to shine yet, where can you go? When the light has not started to shine yet, there is no Buddha and no message about the all the living beings, and where could there be mountains, rivers, and the land?”<sup>①</sup>

At a first glance, the expression “if I would always preach to you about our school” entail a certain dogmatic differentiation (*panjiao*), which may look similar to the apologetic tradition (Apologie) of Christianity, but in fact the spiritual orientation of the two is absolutely different. When the people expect that the master will tell them something about his own school and enlighten them with his special method, this crazy monk tells them that if they would always

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<sup>①</sup> Shi Puji 释普济, 五灯会元 *Wudeng huiyuan* [Compendium of Five Lamps], vol. 4, (Hunan Changsha Jing Cen Zhaoxian Zen master).

talk about his own school then the temple would have been deserted long ago. This kind of extreme and paradoxical way of expression leads religious life to a world of light: “All of the worlds are just one’s own light, all of the worlds are just within one’s light, in all of the worlds everybody is himself”. This on the contrary leads to the association with Derrida’s cherished concept of *Deiwo*, this concept of deity and godhead common to the Indo-European languages. The original meaning of this word is “bright”, “heavenly”.<sup>②</sup> In this self-sufficient transparency of the Zen school, the “*avidya*” dissolves and disappears by itself.

As a matter of fact, the expression “*zongjiao*” as used in the context of Chinese classical scriptures is very far away from the context of academic studies today. The contemporary academic meaning of the term “*zongjiao*” (religion) was introduced from the Western word “religion” through Japan, and it is now an academic term translated into Chinese (after 1911, the main propagator of the Movement of Confucianism as State Religion of China, the loyal disciple of Kang Youwei, Chen Huanzhang, used a somewhat cumbersome transliteration of the word religion as “*Li-li-jin*” (“re-li-gion”).<sup>③</sup> However, one can find similar or corresponding words in the Chinese documents of antiquity, namely even in writings from before the Qin dynasty. In the *Shangshu. Yaodian* we can find the expression “*Yin yu liu zong*” (sacrifice to the six masters), but this “*zong*” is very far away from the modern usage of the word “religion” (*zongjiao*). We should first understand it from a sociological point of view. On the other hand, an expression found in the *Zhouyi* (Guangua, Huici) is like this: “watching the divine Dao of Heaven, and keeping it throughout the four seasons; the sage (*shengren*) uses the divine Dao to establish education (*shengren yi shendao she jiao*), and the whole country becomes peaceful.” This expression can really lead to a dialogue with the concept of religion in the modern paradigms. In this phrase, the various elements of religion which are confirmed by different modern academic schools of the study of religion are already clearly manifest. Here is the transcendental dimension which is confirmed by different academic schools as the essential dimension of religion, namely: the “divine Dao” (*shendao*), and it is even called the “*shendao* of heaven” (*tian zhi shendao*), which is an absolute, divine, non-secular, and transcendental reality. Here is the problem of the “establishment of education” (*she jiao*), which most institutionalized religions have to face; here is also mentioned the problem of the sociology of reli-

<sup>②</sup> Jac. Derrida / Gianni Vattimo, *Zongjiao (Religion)*, (Sanlian, Beijing 2006), 10.

<sup>③</sup> See his *Kongjiao Lun, Minguo Congshu* [Discussion on Confucian Religion, Series of Republic of China], 4, 2, (Shanghai Shudian, 1989).

gion and ethics of religion, namely the beneficial social factors of religion, which means that “the whole country becomes peaceful” (*tianxia fu*) – religion is not only concerned with the spiritual life of the individual person, it does not only offer meaning and orientation of life for the individual, but it is also concerned with the life of the whole society. In other words, is not merely about the private sphere, but even more about the common public life. If we use the wording of the academic language of today, we can say that this ancient discourse already implies the question how a religion can construct the meaning of the world of common life, namely how to enhance the spiritual harmony of the individual and on this basis establish the harmony of the society as a whole.

However, exactly this expression from the *Yijing*, which implies the ideal concept of “divine Dao establishing education” (*shen dao she jiao*) from a perspective of comparative religion, also presents to us a most vague paradox of religion in China—and this first of all is the paradox of Confucianism. In which sense is a sage (*shengren*) establishing “education” (*jiao*)? Where is the transcendental dimension of this “*jiao*” (education)? What is the concrete morphological feature of this religion? What is the institutional basis of it? What is the model of the practice of this religion? What are the daily ceremonies of it? What kind of clergy supports this religion? All these questions leave those who debate Confucianist religion today with many questions.

### **The Second Paradox: The Historical Facts of Religion and the Spirit of Religion: Is China a country of religion or has she been an irreligious country right from the beginning?**

If we want to discuss the historical facts of religion in China, this doubtless is a topic without limits. Everybody knows that the question of religion in China is an important field of research within the history of thought in China. Putting aside the continuing debate concerning the question of Confucianism as a religion, the fact is that starting with the *Wuism* (shamanism) of antiquity, the Han Dynasty developed a religion which originated in China, namely Daoism, and during the Han Dynasty Buddhism also started to spread far and wide in China, all these developments are historical facts that are not doubted within religious or secular circles. Besides Buddhism, the research on the history of the interaction between Chinese and western religions has become the hot spot in the studies of international sinology, and it also has presen-

ted countless topics of research for the field of comparative religion studies. The *Jingjiao* (Nestorian Church) entered China in the year 635 AD during the Tang Dynasty. About the date when Islam entered China there are different views, but the date ascertained by Chen Yuan (giving the second year of the Yonghui period of the Tang Dynasty, 651 AD) seems to be quite convincing. At the same time, Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism, entering China through Persia and Central Asia, were also quite popular in the time of the Tang Dynasty. The studies on them constitute an interdisciplinary subject of great topical interest in the field of Sinology, Religion studies and Central Asia Studies.

During the three phases of the Roman Catholic Church entering China in the eras of Yuan Dynasty, Ming Dynasty and Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, positive dialogue between Chinese culture and Christian culture has been kept on till today, with its beginning from the 16<sup>th</sup> century Catholic missionaries as Matteo Ricci. Since Robert Morrison, a Protestant missionary from London Missionary Society, entered China in 1807, the interaction between Christian civilization and Chinese civilization began on the level of institution and system, differing from comparatively pure spiritual activities of Catholic missionaries, through establishment of modern newspapers, hospitals and schools, getting involved into the construction of modern Chinese public space.

Apart from the above comparatively institutionalized religions, a combination the southern school of Daoism (*zheng yi jiao*) and folk religions in the South, taking shape in the form of various folk religions and worships, has been active in rural areas. Lamaism, coming into being as the fusion of Buddhism with the native cultures of Tibet and Mongolia, itself is a branch of studies, impossible to be investigated thoroughly. All above counts for much in academic research, not to mention active shamanistic tradition among nationalities of Altay language, ranging from the Greater Xin'an Mountains to the Tianshan Mountains, and popular belief in Matzu across Taiwan Strait. Any topic in the above field will naturally result in numerous and heated discussions.

However, contrary to the facts mentioned above, among the elite thinkers, including Liang Qichao, Xia Zengyou, Cai Yuanpei, Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi, Liang Shumin, existed the discussion on "Is China a country of religion?" in the early 20th century; a new circle of discussion with similar spirit was stimulated by Ren Jiyu in the 1980s and has been carried on into this century. Have they all ignored the above questions concerning the history of religion and the related phenomena? The answer tends to be negative. For both parties of such a discus-

sion, the religious phenomena in Chinese history are actually out of question. Under such presupposition, how could the question whether China is a country of religion come into being? The absurdness of this issue presents us a deeper consideration.

In short, we can make a preliminary remark. In the 20th century's context of academic thought, the elite thinkers and scholars of China live in a world of real facts with Confucianism-oriented spiritual life, which actually should have been discussed with a quite different paradigm. Is there a world of religious spirituality with universal character above this world of real facts? How should we embrace this unique spiritual tradition? The religious concepts, based on paradigm of institutionalized monotheism (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, originated from Semitic areas), led to the judgment of those elites without them being aware of it. Hence, in the context of Chinese civilization, when religious matters are the focus of discussion, monotheistic prophetic religion and revealed religion come to serve as reference and standard. While Europe witnessed openness of Christian theology and religion studies, along with a variety of methods and criteria, in the 20th century, Chinese scholars picked up conservative religious concepts in the framework of Christian theology. Therefore, quite paradoxical questions come out now and then.

Gustav Mensching, a noted German theologian, who succeeded in separating independent religious studies from theology in the 20th century academic context, set his definition of "Religion" in the authoritative encyclopaedia of religion studies, *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, simply as *erlebnishafte Begegnung mit heiliger Wirklichkeit und als antwortendes Handeln des vom Heiligen existentiell bestimmten Menschen*.<sup>④</sup> With his universal theological studies and experience of religious dialogues, Hans Küng, also a noted theologian in Germany, presented his three great world religions "river systems": the Semitic - prophetic (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), the Indian-mystic (Buddhism, Hinduism), and the China-sage (Confucianism, Taoism, Mahayana Buddhism with Chinese coloring). The two theories may provide us with a new starting-point for the question concerned in this section. Following their working approaches, we can promote religion studies in the light of morphological methodology.

Once the morphological methodology is confirmed, a number of spiritual phenomena, kept in the world of ancient Chinese thought, will have connection with our present academic research, and in the meanwhile, establish relationship with our present living world and spirit-

<sup>④</sup> Religion, S. 2. *Digitale Bibliothek Band 12; Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, S. 27411 (vgl. RGG Bd. 5, S. 961) (c) J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck).

ual orientation.

We hereby take the above mentioned *Wu* in early ancient times as an example. In recent years, under the influence of cultural anthropology and Chinese studies with an American paradigm, Chinese academic circles get used to taking Shamanism to refer to early ancient *Wu* culture. However, are early ancient *Wu* and today's Shamanism linked by one genealogy if viewed in the light of the phenomenology of religion? Werner Eichhorn, a German sinologist, directly applied the rigid term Wuismus in his *Die Religionen Chinas*. This term corresponds to that early ancient *Wuism* (*Wujiao*) discoursed by Wen Yiduo.<sup>⑤</sup> The term Wuismus can hardly take its hold in academic circles. It is because of this queer term that the morphological character of the ancient Chinese spiritual world is revealed and simple equivalent between *Wu* culture, a specific Chinese tradition, and Shamanism, a significant learning in anthropology, can be avoided. There is much space for detailed investigation in differences of theory between Shamanism, still active among nomadics in Central and North-eastern Asia, and *Wuism*, a belief of the ancient Chinese forefathers with settled farming life.

From the double standpoints of spiritual history and religion studies, the transition from *Wu* to *Shi* was the key to the exposition of early development of rationalism and a decisive factor for the morphological character of ancient Chinese religiosity. In light of morphology, maybe we can be exempted from this spiritual dilemma: either pay no attention to the basic phenomena and numerous facts of ancient Chinese spirituality, or ignore religiosity of Confucianism tradition, alleging that China has no religion, or simply step into the footprints of some Jesuit missionaries to China as Joachim Bouvet, Jean Francois Foucquet, affirming the monotheism within this spiritual history with their Figurist approach.

### **The Third Paradox: Religion in the construction of Modernity: Enchantment and Disenchantment**

In terms of Max Weber, the noted German sociologist, modern history is actually a history of spiritual disenchantment; religion is one aspect of, or maybe the leading aspect of a “magic charm” that needs to be eliminated. With the progress of the Renaissance and the Reformation, rationalism, scientific and industrial revolution, technical application, representative de-

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⑤ 闻一多 Wen Yiduo, 闻一多全集 *Wen Yiduo quanji*【Complete Works of Wen Yiduo】, Vol. I, (Kaiming Press, 1948), 143.



mocracy, the “magic charm” has been gradually taken out from the spiritual world. In the present age, the world of networks and digital tools can only embrace a senseless transparency and colorless nakedness. However, the question is whether religion has stepped off the world and whether the individual spiritual stage follows Nietzsche’s remark “God is dead”. This would be a serious misunderstanding coming from an ignorance concerning the modern developments and the present situation of spiritual life in the West.

In his famous lecture *Wird der Westen das universale Modell der Menschheit?*.<sup>⑥</sup> Maurice Godelier, the sociologist in France, pointed out that the modern Western world was constructed on three axes: capitalism, representative democracy and Christianity. They constitute the essentials of western modernity: laissez-faire as the core of capitalistic economy; universal suffrage and representative system as the core of political democracy; Christianity as the core of spiritual life. To use a more generalized language, these are the backbones of modernity: production and communication form the pattern in economic life; organizing skills form the pattern in political life; individual conversion and establishment of meaning are the pattern in spiritual life.

In this way, maybe we can avoid being superficial and can learn to appreciate Weber’s proposition of modern world history simply as a process of disenchantment; we can understand the reason why religious life is thriving incredibly with different forms in an age of the globalization of rationalism and scientism; we can face religion’s role as a double-edged sword in its social function: dynamics for harmony and root of conflicts. In a world disenchanted by scientific technology and industrialized civilization, a more challenging problem is to reset the transcendental aspect of spiritual life and to reconfirm the richness of individual spirituality without limitation. In a disenchanted world, returning back to enchantment has been a pseudo-problem, just like an adult cannot magically return back to be an innocent and naive child. The problem we are facing is actually one of enchantment. Technical rationality is shining over the world brightly but destroys the sense of the mysterious, religious life doesn’t “prepare a way” for modern human beings, who are advancing bravely on the bleak and desolate wasteland without traces of gods and spirits; instead, religious life can provide a spirit-oriented “home to return to” in an awkward situation—and it can show the way to a specific “home to return to”. That is probably an important base for us to understand religious life in the modern

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<sup>⑥</sup> Maurice Godelier, *Wird der Westen das universale Modell der Menschheit?* (Wien: Picus Verlag, 1991).

age, otherwise we cannot comprehend the new turn with the rejuvenation of institutionalized religions worldwide during the recent decades and the flourishing New Age Movement, along with various forms of new religiosity or substandard religiosity.

Disenchantment and enchantment are probably a starting point for us to understand the vigorous development of Chinese religions during the last 20 years. Discussions on Confucianism's religiosity are now in the ascendant. Buddhism and Taoism with folk colorings, reviving in the vast countryside, gradually come onto the scene of Chinese modern life. The dialogue between Christianity and Chinese religion has long been beyond the circles of scholar-officials and missionaries. In brief, individual, spiritual and inherent aspects of modernity cannot be separated from religious life. This is not an exceptional phenomenon within the building-up of Chinese modernity. Making thorough investigations and conducting studies concerning religion and religiosity has become an inevitable aspect for the construction of Chinese modernity.

Obviously, in the social, spiritual, and academic contexts of the 21st century, we can make a candid remark-the question whether China is a country of religion has long been a pseudo-problem, yet one with profound significance. Based on this pseudo-problem, all discussions and studies on religion reveal their pressing character and thereby get their significance.

中文题目：

## 当代精神史语境中的中国宗教难题

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**提要：**在当代中国语境中,宗教问题是重大且意义独特的文化主题和社会主题。本文期望将这一领域中的若干根本性问题、难题及其所包含的、而又常常被熟视无睹的种种悖论式困境,进行粗略的讨论,以期从跨文化解释学的特定角度,重启初始的视界。

**关键词：**宗教、精神史、跨文化解释学、祛魅、致魅