Understanding Chinese Popular Religion and Sharing the Gospel

When discussing Chinese Popular Religion, Winfried Corduan describes that we are truly discussing "a synthesis of separate elements."[1] However, while there is a wide variety within Chinese belief, there are some common elements. For example, the Chinese people tend to look back upon a past time when everything allegedly operated in an ideal fashion.[2] Also, religious faith in China tends to include an intertwining of political realities with religious ones (i.e., the prosperity of the empire is related to the piety of the people and rulers) and the practice of divination.[3] Divination refers to the notion that under appropriate circumstances, the spiritual forces of the universe will manifest, allowing a fortune-teller to interpret whether they are aligned with the proper "basic state."[4]

This "basic state" refers to a balance (on the whole) between yin and yang. These are allegedly two opposite forces which permeate the whole world and which, if out of balance, can lead to negative results.[5] The correct balance on yin and yang is called the "Dao (Tao)."[6]

One form of Chinese religion was known as "Mohism." The Mohists believed that "embracing the principle of universal love would restore the empire."[7] Central to this belief was the distinction between partial love and universal love. When we show a greater degree of love

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[1] Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*, 2nd Ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 388.

[2] Ibid., 390.

[3] Ibid., 391-92.

[4] Ibid., 392.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 393.

[7] Ibid., 396.

to some people over others (such as to our family or close friends), we are exhibiting partial love. Universal love, on the other hand, does not make such distinctions. According to the Mohists, if everyone demonstrated universal love, "it will become impossible to kill each other in war." [8]

The difficulty arises, however, with implementation. Someone must ensure the entire society embraces universal love, which is why Mohism inevitably leads to authoritarianism. However, this result in supposedly reached in order to achieve the virtue of universal love, so it was seen as justified. [9]

Fajia also advocated for totalitarianism, but not with any higher goal in mind such as was the case with the Mohists. For them, totalitarianism was the basis for their entire philosophy, not merely the means to achieve a more desirable end. [10] They believed, "The meanings of words should be legislated; crimes should be punished severely; the emperor should hold absolute power" and "all rebellions should be suppressed." [11]

The foundational beliefs of Daoism are found in the Daodejing, recorded no later than the third century B.C. [12] Corduan summarizes Daoist philosophy with one word, "quietism." [13] Anything done by humankind affects the Dao. Thus, the best way to achieve balance is to do nothing. All the problems of the empire could be solved if humanity does as little as possible. [14]

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 397.

[10] Ibid., 397-98.

[11] Ibid., 398.

[12] Ibid., 399.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

As described by Corduan, part of the Daodejing also contends that "opposing values are not truly real; they are expressions of human conventions."[15] These include any opposing categories, even as fundamental as being and nonbeing. Thus, the Daodejing says we should avoid making judgments altogether.[16]

This, however, is a self-defeating philosophy as it in itself is a judgment. This can be illustrated by simply asking that if all opposing values are merely human convention, does this include the values of truth and falsehood? If these too are merely human conventions, then one cannot contend that this teaching of the Daodejing is "true" in any objective sense. If truth itself is merely convention, then this precept is also mere convention. If truth is not mere convention, then not all opposing values are convention. Either way, the philosophy falls apart.

The Daodejing also teaches that once we cease attempting to bring about a better life for ourselves or for society, then the Dao will manifest. This is why it urges people to do as little as possible.[17] But if we do as little as possible in order to bring about the harmony inherent in the Dao, then aren't we attempting to bring about a better life by doing so? Again, the Daodejing is self-defeating. At its core it teaches that we should try to bring about a better life by avoiding trying to bring about a better life.

Daoism underwent a number of transformations from its original base philosophy, to include additions of alchemy, the search for immortality, and eventually the inclusion of personal

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[15] Ibid., 400.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 401.

gods and a plethora of rituals.[18] Even after these changes, however, there remained the belief that success was determined by balance in the spiritual forces. This balance, however, was felt to be capable of being harnessed, and the resulting energy would be able to increase a person's qi (ch'i), i.e., their life force. The more qi someone has, the longer they can live or the more powerful they can become.[19]

Those who sought after immortality, the fangshi, began to include the worship of various deities in their rituals. As a result, the more popular side of Daoism inched closer to the more philosophical branch, resulting in the Daojiao religion forming in the first millennium A.D.[20] When Buddhism increased its popularity in China, Daoism added many new gods of its own in order to "compete."[21] While only one example, this progression is consistent with Corduan's advocacy of original monotheism. In regard to Daoism, we see movement from fewer gods to even more gods, not the other way around.

Jun Lu and Qin Gao examined the 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents and found something else that made Daoists stand out from their Chinese Confucian or Buddhist counterparts. Given the pervasive connection between Chinese religion and culture, Lu and Gao found that Daoists, more so than the other religious groups, were highly competitive and tended

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., 402.

[20] Ibid., 402.

[21] Ibid., 404.

to believe that their religion was far more consistent with what it means to be Chinese than were either Confucianism or Buddhism. [22]

Confucianism is named after its founder, but the name "Confucius" is actually a Latin transcription of his actual name Kongfuzi (K'ung fu-tzu). [23] The central teachings of Confucianism are found in "the *Analects* or *Conversations*, the *Lunyu* (*Lun-yü*)." [24] Confucius believed that the way to solve the problems of the empire was for everyone to return to living in a manner after the ideal state of old. If we observed how people behaved back then and modeled our behavior accordingly, we could bring about peace and prosperity. [25] He did not include any new gods or acts of worship. Rather he focused solely on "the proper execution of duties." [26] Chief among these duties was to seek the welfare of others, but not at the complete expense of your own goals. [27] Confucius also incorporated the concept of *li*, doing the right thing at the right time. This meant that there was a proper way for people to perform virtually every task, leading to a plethora of regulations. Nothing, though, was more important to Chinese culture than filial piety; i.e., loyalty to one's family. [28]

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[22] Jun Lu and Qin Gao, "Contesting Chineseness: An Examination of Religion and National Identity in Mainland China," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 57, no. 2 (2018): 319, 336.

[23] Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 405.

[24] Ibid., 406.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., 407.

[28] Ibid.

While many Chinese people claim to be Buddhist, their variety of Buddhism bears little resemblance to "textbook" Buddhism.[29] Many worship Buddha as god. They appreciate that he found the way to nirvana, but they see this less as a model for them to follow in their own lives and more as something that made it possible for them to enter the afterlife successfully.[30]

In practice, the beliefs of many Chinese people are a synthesis of different religious systems. As Corduan describes it, belief "flows in the direction of a plethora of rituals and obligations without much discernible doctrinal underpinning."[31] The goal of these rituals is to gain health, success and prosperity in this life. The focus is directed more to our current existence than it is at an afterlife. These popular practices also include a powerful emphasis on luck. Divination is used as an attempt to choose the best path, but no one can escape fortune completely.[32] Practitioners of Chinese Popular Religion attempt to bring about good fortune via feng shui, a way of organizing things in a manner that avoids evil forces and harnesses the good ones.[33]

Many of these popular beliefs, while perhaps evolving from other religions, still fall outside the boundaries of formal "institutionalized" religions recognized by the government, which can lead to conflict between their practitioners and the state. As Xing Zhou notes,

> Folk beliefs are neither recognized nor administered by the Chinese government. Chinese folk beliefs generally refer to different notions about gods and spirits, belief rituals, and related customs that common people steadfastly hold on to or

[29] Ibid., 409.

[30] Ibid., 410.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., 411.

> maintain in their everyday practices. They are not the same as official 'institutionalized' religions that enjoy relative freedom of belief and legitimacy through their recognition by the state government.[34]

While Chinese culture includes some elements that may be favorable to sharing the Christian gospel, it also presents a great number of significant obstacles. Corduan points out one advantage in that their worldview is "explicitly supernatural." They already acknowledge the existence of a spiritual world.[35] Also, their culture has instilled in them a strong sense of objective obligations and not having lived up to them, which can potentially lead to a discussion of sin. However, this is simultaneously a disadvantage because in large part these obligations are seen as being owed to family, not to God. Thus, the Christian must find a way to guide them toward shifting the focus of their obligation.[36]

One possible way to approach this shift is to build upon the familial obligation. After all, Christianity is by no means opposed to honoring your family. However, we recognize an even higher duty to God. Perhaps engaging in discussion about God as "father" can connect with them on the level of filial piety to show how the highest level of piety is owed to the supreme Father.

Lu and Gao, however, came across another finding in their research that points to a substantial obstacle to sharing the gospel in a Chinese culture. Specifically,

> Believers identifying with one or more of three traditional Chinese religions, with the exception of Buddhists, are disinclined to think of Christianity as constitutive of Chineseness. … there is enough ground to say that in future controversies and contestation over the symbolic boundaries of Chineseness, may believers of

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[34] Xing Zhou, "Folk Belief and Its Legitimization in China," *Western Folklore*, vol. 76, no. 2 (2017): 319, 152.

[35] Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 419.

[36] Ibid., 419-20.

> traditional Chinese religions will play an even more active role than the nonreligious Chinese to underrate, at best, or vilify, at worst, Christianity's annexation with the Chinese nation.[37]

Thus, there is a view spread throughout the Chinese religious community that Christianity is inconsistent with the very essence of being Chinese. This, combined with Corduan's observation on the importance of maintaining the approval of parents, form large obstacles that Christian missionaries and apologists need to overcome.[38] Despite these obstacles, however, the Holy Spirit is moving in China. Yunfeng Lu notes that while there were only 700,000 Christians in China when the People's Republic was established in 1949, there were 2.2 million in 1982 and approximately 70 million in 2007.[39] This rapid expansion despite such significant challenges is evidence that God is ultimately in control, and no matter how large a mountain looks, it is not by our power that we can surmount it, but by His.

[37] Lu and Gao, "Contesting Chineseness," 336.

[38] Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths*, 419-20.

[39] Yunfeng Lu, "Understanding the Rise of Religion in China," *Chinese Sociological Review*, vol. 45, no. 45 (2012): 3.