

SPECIAL ISSUE: RELIGION AND SOCIETY: CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Introduction

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This special issue discusses the interactions between imported religions and Chinese civilization and society. It is widely accepted that Judeo-Christian culture and ancient Greek culture constitute the two major sources of Western civilization. If the latter laid the philosophical foundations of Western civilization, the former served as its religious core.

Judaic culture and Chinese culture are the two oldest continuous civilizations in the world. As such, their encounter has attracted much attention from researchers inside and outside China. Historically speaking, China is the only Far Eastern society where Jewish history has lasted continuously for over a thousand years. Unlike most Jewish communities in other parts of the world who lived amidst Christian or Islamic traditions, those in China lived with Confucian culture. Having no reason whatsoever to quarrel over the authenticity and meaning of any shared books or common spiritual heritage, the experience of these communities adds a quite unique chapter to the history of the Jewish Diaspora. Xu Xin presents a panoramic picture of major Jewish communities all over China from the Song Dynasty to the present day, focusing on Jewish religious practices: holiday rituals, religious buildings, education, diet and burial practices. He depicts in detail the harmonious interactions on Chinese soil between this monotheistic sub-group and a civilization quite remote from the monotheistic biblical tradition. On this basis, Xu discusses the attitudes and policies of successive Chinese governments towards the Jews.

The Jewish community in Kaifeng, Henan Province, has attracted the most research interest due to its high degree of integration into Chinese society. Published studies are numerous in this field. David Stern provides a unique perspective by setting his discussion of the Jews of Kaifeng in the context of the traditional Jewish construction of theories of

human nature. He reviews the interpretation in late antiquity and medieval times of the saying that man was created “in the image of God,” and analyzes the implications of such interpretations for the construction of Jewish-gentile relations. He then points out that the successful adaptation and assimilation of the Jews in Kaifeng into Chinese society may serve as a counter-example to dualistic opposition and mutual exclusion between Jews and gentiles, showing that it is possible to have a high degree of shared values without having to give up one’s cultural identity.

It should be noted that Judaism is not a proselytizing religion. To a large extent, it was this fact that determined that it was the Christian missionaries in China, rather than the Chinese, who first noticed and studied Kaifeng Jewry. Obviously, the experience of the Jews in Kaifeng provided an important frame of reference for the preachers of this other monotheistic religion in their attempts to adapt to Chinese culture and to reflect upon the problems arising from their missionary activity.

Chen Yiyi explores modern Chinese intellectuals’ attitudes toward Christianity by reviewing the Chinese Anti-Christian Movement of 1922-1927, focusing on the role of Peking University professors and students in the first stage of the movement. He finds that key factors in the movement were conflict between the core values of Chinese and Christian culture and the Chinese people’s urgent pursuit of industrialization and modernization in order to free themselves from humiliation at the hands of the Western powers. Special attention is paid to non-mainstream views. In the early stage of the movement, some foreign-educated professors in Peking University who were not Christians themselves but had first-hand experience of Christianity showed great tolerance and rationality in relation to Christianity, although most of their views on the subject tallied with those of the mainstream. They warned against “using religious-type zealotry to conduct an anti-religious movement.” The existence of these voices of reason, few though they were, was a product of cultural maturity, sophistication and health.

In today’s China, different religious traditions are developing rapidly in a way that cannot be overlooked. Temple fairs have resumed and temples play an important role in promoting the well-being of local society. Buddhism has kept pace with the times and attracts believers, including many graduates, with various activities. Changes have appeared in Chinese Islam, too, with the development of ethnic minority regions and increasing numbers of pilgrimages to Mecca. As for Christianity in China, Daniel H. Bays commented that “On any given Sunday, there are almost certainly more Protestants in Church in China than in all of Europe.”¹ It is estimated that China now has at least three hundred million Christians; this is an amazing figure given the tiny number of Christians thirty years ago.

However, religious studies in China are still in the preliminary stages and lack the necessary

1 Daniel H. Bays, “Chinese Protestant Christianity today.”

theoretical instruments and methodology to understand the current religious renaissance.

Lu Yunfeng and Graeme Lang discuss the challenges and opportunities sociology of religion faces in China. Sociology of religion first emerged as a discipline in the West; its research focus, therefore, has naturally tended to be on Christianity, an exclusive religion. For a time, its research scope was so narrow that it was sometimes referred to as “sociology of Christianity.” Since many concepts and theories in this field are based on the understanding of an exclusive religion, they naturally meet with great challenges in China, where mainstream religions are non-exclusive. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, as well as folk cults, are syncretic and non-exclusive. Lu and Lang believe that the study of Chinese religions will help eliminate fixed modes of thought and promote the development of sociology of religion.

This special issue aims to explore cultural interaction and adaptation and to understand their role in cultural self-consciousness in the era of globalization.

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Reference

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