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Exploitation of Contemporary Religious Revivals a Few Doubts About the Explanations Provided by Scholars

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Abstract

Since 1970s, religious revivals have been happening all across the world. Numerous scholars have been investigating the reasons behind such a phenomenon. However, everyone seems to perceive it from a macroscopic and general angle, trying to provide a universal explanation. Therefore, everyone inspects this phenomenon from a “global” point of view. The purpose of this paper is to try to find out the cause and development of the revival as well as the true meaning behind the explanations provided by the scholars. However, after studying the materials, the author finds the discussion, or the attempted explanation, provokes many doubts.

Key words: Religion; Faith; Islam; Christianity; The Orthodox Catholic church; Taoism; Buddhism

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INTRODUCTION

First of all, let us look at a fact: according to the data from Professor Zhang Zhigang’s *What is Religious Studies*, in 1996, four fifths of the global population were religious (Zhang, 2006, p.11). Furthermore, according to the data

from Li Pingye’s *Contemporary Chinese Religious Profile* in the book *The Guide of Religion Studies*, amongst the more than six billion people living on this Earth, more than five billion of them are believers (Zhang, 2006, p.395). These were data from a decade ago; if there were a later data, the result may be even more astonishing. Moreover, we need to pay attention to the believers in China: the above data claim that there are only more than one hundred million believers among the total Chinese population, which is more than 1.3 billion. That is to say, deducting the Chinese population, the global religious population will be more than 90% of the total population, which is doubtlessly astounding. Let’s first put aside the authenticity of the Chinese believers data (which will be discussed later in the paper) and look at the change in numbers of believers in China, the US, Russia, and the Muslim world to see if it can shed some light.

1. ACCORDING TO STATISTICS, THE MUSLIM POPULATION WAS FIVE MILLION IN THE LATE 1940S

It rose to ten million in 1982, and the figure reached twenty million during census. The Catholic population was 2.3 million in late 1940s, three million in 1982, and four million during census. The Protestant population was seven hundred thousand in late 1940s, three million in 1982, and sixteen million during census. There was an addition of more than one hundred million of traditional believers such as Taoists, Confucians, and Buddhists, the statistics of which were undocumented (Zhang, 2006, p.393). And statistics show that in the United States of America, there were 86.8 million of various religious believers in 1950. The population escalated to one hundred and ten million in 1960, which further increased to one hundred and thirty million in 1969. A census in 1986 shows that more than 95% of the citizen believed the

existence of God or spiritual omnipotence (Wei, 2002). In Russia, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, religious revival is an indisputable fact. Statistics show that three fifths of the Russians claim they believe in God. This ratio is higher than those of Germany, Netherlands, and Scandinavian countries. Among these believers, two fifths claim that they didn't believe in God, but now they do. 58% of the believers claim that they are Orthodox believers, but only 10% of them come from Orthodox families (Greely, 2002). In addition, since the end of the 1970s, Islamic revival has taken place mainly in the Middle East areas and has spread to Asia, Africa, Europe, and America. Especially after the outbreak of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, Iranian Muslims founded a theocratic country and shocked the world, hence pushing the Islamic revival to a new climax. Islamic organisations actively spread religious cultures all over the world, causing the number of its believers to increase annually. Now Islam has become the second largest religion in the world, just after Christianity. During the Islamic revival, extremist ideology is relatively more animated than other thoughts, thus it has been adapted by terrorist groups and causing global concerns, especially after the 9-11 event (Xi, 2007).

From these data, we can see that since the 1970s, the religious population has increased drastically. This global trend has surprised many scholars who believe that religions are declining. At the same time, this phenomenon inspires them to reexamine religion, which is one of the oldest cultural heritages in human society, and to try to provide the reasons behind it. But in fact, much Eurocentric academic discursive much influences our perception on this worldwide religious phenomenon. Can we find explanations that are relatively reasonable and objective, and free of the Western influence? We always try to find a general and comprehensive explanation for this phenomenon. However, the situation in each country or each region is not the same, or even can have great difference. Should we not fully consider each individual case and provide reasonable explanation respectively, instead of giving a comprehensive interpretation? In addition, if the above cases do exist, i.e. the reasons of religious revivals in each country or each region is different, then how should we perceive the rise of such phenomenon: is it purely coincidental, or does it contain some hidden inevitable factors? Before diving into further discussion, let's see how the scholars explain whilst query these explanations with the above questions.

First of all, let's look at the reasons given by each scholar behind Islamic revival. In his *Worldwide Religion Revival*, Wei Xinlong attributes the origin of this phenomenon as a "crisis of faith." When depicting the Islamic revival, he says: Islamic fundamentalism is similar to Christian fundamentalism. Islamic fundamentalists believe that the Muslim world is being invaded and

misled by heathens and Islamic rebels, who have given up Sharia and its principles, and embraced secular laws and value judgements. To save the Islamic society, a national Jihad has to be waged against the rebels to overthrow their regime and to build a society based on Islamic Sharia. Then the Jihad should be spread to fraternal countries to save their nations, thus recovering the glory of the Islamic world (Wei, 2002). We can cross-reference this explanation to *A Global View on A Global Religion Revival* by Gao Changjiang. Under the premise of religion being a form of culture, he focuses on the results of "globalisation" and believes that the reasons behind the revival are as follows: firstly, this grand revival movement is a form of resistance against the worldwide cultural imperialism of Western countries. Some non-Western countries use religion, which they see as a form of culture, to fight back against foreign invasion and retain localisation. It is used to reconfirm and strengthen cultural identity of a nation. It is also an endeavor to rebuild a spiritual home. Secondly, religious revival can also be seen as a rebellion against cultural homogenisation, which is the result of globalisation. It is a form of universality of difference, or a movement to revive national culture, to rebuild an identity of national culture, and to reconstruct the national characteristics. Thirdly, religious revival is a recitation of national powers that have been oppressed, eroded, and beaten in the process of globalisation. Fourthly, the risk society created by globalisation, especially the universality of the risk, is the spirit, or the psychological motivation, of this religious revival movement (Gao, 2002).

Although Gao's explanations are new interpretations for global religious revival, we can still use them as reasons for Islamic revival. Why? We too have such doubts. We know that from a cultural perspective, globalisation is, to a certain extent, a global invasion, homogenisation, or even obliteration of intrinsic local cultures from Western countries led by the US. At the same time, this explanation is not valid for the case of Western countries, because they are the cultural exporters, or the invaders. Their culture is not being changed or threatened, hence no conflict. Furthermore, though the difference exists, East Europe belongs to the Christian Culture as well. They have the same cultural heritage. Therefore, the culture-religion theory cannot provide a valid argument for the religious revival in East Europe, either. Our country has been greatly impacted by globalisation as well. But the culture in our country is centred around Confucianism rather than one certain religion, so we cannot simply attribute the religious revival in China to a counteract to globalisation. Then why this culture-religion theory can explain the revival movement of Islam? We know that the essence of the Muslim culture is in *Koran* and *Al-Hadith*, which mean the nature of Muslim culture is religion-based. All of its values have their roots in the Islamic doctrine. Therefore,

any conflict against the Islamic world can be perceived as a conflict against their culture.

2. BUT THEN ANOTHER PROBLEM ARISES

If the Islamic revival is its nation's struggle and defiance against foreign invasion while seeking independence, can this kind of religious revival be link to the religious revivals in other parts of the world? We know that once you are born in a Muslim society, you will be a Muslim for a life time. Therefore, the religion proportion of Muslim is always high. This is a kind of cultural phenomenon. If the above is true, then Islamic revival cannot be explained as a revival caused by a drastic increase in the number of believers, like other places do. Therefore, Islamic revival is not like any other religious revival. The cultural heritage has never been broken. It is more likely that the nature of the Islamic movement is to seek self-development, such as to recreate the magnificent glory of its past days. However, such religious revival movement is unique to the Islamic world and cannot be described in religious revivals in other countries or other regions. Moreover, the Islamic religious revival cannot be explained solely as a form of refusal and defiance, either. It is because there are many Muslim countries; each and everyone of them is different. In short, we should try to avoid such general explanations when studying a phenomenon and should aim for relatively detailed first-hand information to get a relatively more reasonable explanation.

We also need to pay attention to the fourth reason for Gao's explanations, which is globalisation does not bring peace or eliminate poverty as people have anticipated. On the contrary, the endless expansion of Science and Technology and its instrumental rationality has brought various new problem to humanity and the whole world, especially psychological problems.

The horror of reality, the despair against technological rationality, and the weakness in mind inevitably lead to the rejuvenation of irrational feelings and the seek of symbolising holy thoughts, hence constructing a delusional spiritual sanctuary. It is under such circumstances that Religion begins its revival. (Gao, 2002)

This is a common belief. We can call it as an "anti-secularisation" theory. We may refer to Wei Xinlong's theory of "crisis of faith," generalise the reasons of religious revival in the Western world - especially in the US - and raise questions. According to Wei, there are many forms of the crisis of faith. One important form is the citizens lose confidence in their government and political system, and begin to doubt the mainstream value system. Under such circumstances, many people feel gloomy about the future, become apathetic to politics, are unwilling to adapt to the political party as well as its guiding principles and the restriction of the social

norms, harbour prejudice in all ideologies, and express disillusioned, resigned, and indifferent attitudes. In the fall of 1986, the American Association for the Study of Higher Education (AAHEA) carried out a research involving three hundred thousand college freshmen. The result shows that only 40.6% of the students believed that life should be meaningful. Not only in the United States, people in Germany and Japan also face this problem. After that, he quotes Toffler's point to explain why people can feel disappointed, bored, scared, and lonely. American futurist Toffler argues that before the third wave, the passing of the second wave has destroyed many people's lifestyles. And "losing a lifestyle will result in psychological breakdown" and "the deprivation of the meaning of life," or even "generate some individual faults." Toffler further develops his viewpoint in *The Third Wave* and says,

The sudden change in the existing social guidelines, the vagueness in individual function, social status, and the power structure, the break off of culture, but first of all it's the collapse of the enormous ideological system and industrial reality that shatters most people's perception on the world. As a result, many people only see chaos when they observe around them. Deep inside, they feel powerless as individuals, and life is empty. (Wei, 2002)

3. THIS EXPLANATION SEEMS RATIONAL AND NOTHING CAN BE QUESTIONED

It can even explain the religious revivals in the Islamic world and in China. But this seemingly rational explanation is just an implicit prejudice and self-centred pride. They think that North America and Europe can represent the whole world. Though they see the phenomenon of global religious revival, but they cannot exclude self-centred pride in their explanation. On the other hand, such study in China is still feeble. There are not enough materials for thought, hence the scholars have no other way but to yield to the logic of Western explanations. Now, why do I say that? Let's try to explain. In the aforementioned explanation for Islamic revival, we can conclude that the religious revival in the Islamic world has a unique background. It cannot be simply attributed to culture-conflict, even less to disappointment in mainstream value system. It is because the Iranian Islamic Revolution is not triggered by the disappointment in mainstream value system, but by the severe oppression of their mainstream value system. The purpose of the Revolution is to return to the original cultural value system. Khomeini's slogan of "No East, No West, Just Islam" is the best annotation. Moreover, after we analyse the reasons for religious revivals in East Europe and China, we will also know that we cannot simply "take it and use it."

Having said that, can the theory of crisis in faith caused by mistrust of mainstream value system, or anti-secularisation, provide logical explanations for religious revival in the Western world? If it can, should we ask questions such as: When did this disorientation to the nation, the society, or even the future of mankind that is caused by the problems that are freshly created by the secularisation that is the product of instrumental rationality and technological civilisation begin? Is it synchronous with the religious revival, or before it? We know that the development of technological civilisation and instrumental rationality has never stopped since the dawn of modern science. If it is to say that the early development dispelled religious believes, then when did religions accumulate the energy to repel it? Furthermore, why were there no religious revivals after the two world wars? Why are there more believers in the US than any other countries in Europe? And etc. Many scholars have answered those questions, but as we have seen, one answer to a question may provoke more questions.

4. THE FORMER USSR COUNTRIES IN EAST EUROPE AND MIDDLE ASIA ALSO EXPERIENCED AN UPSURGE OF RELIGIOUS REVIVAL AFTER THE DISINTEGRATION

We will use Russia as an example to analyse and see if this phenomenon is consistent with religious revivals in other regions. In his essay *Religious Revival in East Europe*, A. M. Greely notes two important points in the religious revival in East Europe: first, religious revival in Russia is an obvious thing. Three fifths of the people claim that they believe in God. The ratio is higher than those of Germany, Netherlands, and Scandinavian countries. Second, young cohort (especially those born in 1970s) and old cohort (especially those born before the 1930s) score higher than other cohorts. More specifically, in religion, the children are similar to their grandparents, or even surpass them. While the parents seem to abandon religion (Greely, 2002). Why so? Professor Yu Sinian provides two explanations. First, Christianity is one of the three world religions. The Orthodox Church, which is a branch of it, is a legacy of Russia. The Orthodox Church is becoming a testimony to the Russian history and culture. During USSR era, Orthodox Church was being restricted. A purely materialist government was unlikely to allow the flourishing of religious powers. Therefore, religious activities were prohibited, some churches were demolished, and the number of priests and parishioners declined. However, even in the most cruel time, Orthodox Church was not purged. Its religious doctrine and rituals remained intact, hidden in social consciousness and concepts, as well as in folk festivals and memories.

Then came the Khrushchev Thaw, during which time the Orthodox Church was seen as unjustly oppressed and persecuted and gained its respect again, leading to its recovery. Second, the huge transformation of East Europe and the disintegration of USSR not only caused the shift of power and social instability, but also created an unprecedented “religious vacuum.” God stepping out to fill the gap is just what people needed. When the old social authorities were overthrown and the new ones were yet to be established, the Orthodox Church, which is an all-time spiritual authority, immediately became the patron of the people (Yu, 2006).

It may seem to be a sound explanation. And if we cross-reference it to the two significant changes mentioned in *Religious Revival in East Europe*, this explanation seems valid as well. The Orthodox Church was only artificially distorted and oppressed. It has never been stopped as a key value system. Once the external shackles are shattered, the rebound and recovery will be inevitable. In fact, when the society was unstable and livelihood was hard, the only thing people could do be to seek spiritual comfort. Yet the influence of former communism had not fully vanished; it still existed in the believes of intermediate people. This is a thought-provoking phenomenon. Especially the believers ratio among young people, which is explained in *Religious Revival in East Europe* as “an influence to individual belief and will be.” but Professor Yu believes that the young people get religious is just “out of curiosity.” Another notable thing is they both mention that young people are unlikely to become churchgoers; nor will they become any more active. Therefore, the real believers are still those who were born in the 1930s, when the Orthodox Church had a real influence on the society and people’s lives.

But then other questions appear. If the religious revival in East Europe is just the recovery of old culture, and it just rides the tide of social instability to become the mainstream culture, while the root of the culture has been harmed, because the people inheriting it have changed. The middle aged people are not religious, while the young are just under the pressure of social reality. Once the society finishes its transformation, this variable will become unpredictable. In addition, this explanation isolates religious revival of religious revivals in other regions, even cut off their connections, which will cast more doubts.

I cannot find any scholarly discourse on religious revival in China, or the discourse is too bureaucratic, so I have to make conclusions myself. There are many similarities between China and East Europe. For example, China is also a communist society; and the leading ideology of the country is still materialism. Also, religions in China have also experienced oppression. And since the reform and opening-up in the late 1970s and early 1980s, religious revival has been having a strong momentum.

Under such circumstances, the explanations for religious revival in East Europe can also be used to explain the religious revival in China, such as the rebound of religion against artificial oppression. Nonetheless, we need to take note of the following points. First, China is still a communist country now. Religions in China are still being oppressed. Second, unlike East European countries, the key value system in Chinese history does not come from religious culture. But religious cultures like Buddhism and Taoism have profound and complicated influence on Chinese culture. Thus, the religious revival in China is different from that in East Europe the following perspectives. First, young Chinese people lack religious concepts. The increase in religious believers is mainly from three more vulnerable groups: illiterates, old people, and women (Zhang, 2006, p.397). There may be people doubting the authenticity of this conclusion, but from my personal experience (I came from a rural family), I believe this argument has its merits. Second, the number of believers is too complicated to be counted. For example, traditional beliefs such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism (believes in Heaven, fate, spirits, and ancestors) have never been abandoned, especially among the lower class people. There are around nine hundred million rural people in China. From my personal experience, though the national ideology of materialism has been influential, rural people are still tend to be believers. Only this kind of belief is very complicated, often expressed as an indistinct mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Third, there are numerous folk religions that are not recognised by the government, ranging from secretive to semi-overt to overt. Some of them are notorious, such as the Falungong cult.

CONCLUSION

If we are to draw a conclusion, according to *The Guide of Religion Studies*, the “new situations” and “new problems” of Chinese religions are as follows: First, the change in number and structure of believers, namely the drastic increase in Christian believers and increase in believers from the three more vulnerable groups. Second, the change in the structures of religions, namely the eastward movement of Tibetan Buddhism and the westward movement of Christianity and Catholicism. Third, the polarisation of the secularisation of religions and mysticism experience. Fourth, the intensification of religious internationalisation. Fifth, repeated failure to prohibit illegal activities in the guise of religions

Zhang, 2006, pp.397-398). However, such conclusion is insufficient. It cannot get to the heart of the problem. For example, most importantly, is there a way out of the religions in China? What part can the religions play in the Great Chinese Renaissance? There are too many questions to ask but too few people are looking into it.

The complexity of religions in China outruns any other countries in the world. Therefore, the questions triggered by it are probably the most. But unfortunately, there are very few research results in this area, and even fewer authentic, referential views or theories. Many Chinese scholars seem only satisfied in following the Westerners’ steps and lack of their own consciousness and researching logic.

We seem to be able to make one simple conclusion. The so-called “global religious revival” idea is problematic, because under specific circumstances of different countries or regions, the reasons behind each revival are different. Like the aforementioned Western countries, Islamic countries, East European countries, and China, each country or region has its own complex background. Hence it is wrong to call it a global movement. But what we should think about is whether the religious revivals emerged from those different background have a common inexorable trend. Or can we perceive it from a more broad view, like the globalization idea proposed by Gao Changjiang, or a religious culture angle to explain such phenomenon. There may be many scholars studying in this area, but it is a shame that I can’t more relevant resources. Also due to the time limit, I can’t go any deeper. Based on the existing materials such as Gao’s explanation, there are no convincing theories or detailed explanations; and too many questions are left unanswered.

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