

SOME PRESENT DAY RELIGIOUS TENDENCIES IN CHINA

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MR. J. N. FARQUHAR has laid the west under a heavy debt by his summary of the effects of the modern age upon religion in India, in his valuable book *Modern Religious Movements in India*. While some things have happened since he wrote that need to be included in a down to the minute statement, one finds there a fairly complete catalogue of modern tendencies in Hinduism.

Thus far, however, no one has attempted to make such a summary for China, at least no such attempt has come under the present writer's observation. Perhaps it is still too early to do so, since so many of the revolutionary changes that have come about in China have occurred in the very recent past. Nevertheless it does seem possible and worth while to enumerate at least some of the more prominent tendencies observable during the last quarter of a century. Some special articles of high merit touching certain particular tendencies have appeared in the journals but nowhere have the various tendencies been brought together in a summary.

One could not hope to do more in a brief article than outline what is happening, but even an outline will be instructive. The writer may be permitted to state that he has conducted a Seminar during part of the year on "Modern Tendencies in the World's Religions," and that the situation in China was studied; also that one of his students, Miss Louise Hobart, has written her Master's thesis on the topic, *Significant Religious Trends in China since the Revolution*, in which some of the tendencies merely noted here are discussed in considerable detail.

It will not be necessary to do more than suggest to the readers of THE OPEN COURT Magazine that all of those forces and influences that tend anywhere to produce change in religion have been

playing upon China in an unprecedented way during recent years. General scientific progress, on its practical side, has effected vast economic and so also social changes; made easily possible inter-communication and so promoted important cultural interchanges, and stimulated intellectual progress enormously; on the more spiritual side, through the thoroughgoing application of the scientific method great changes in philosophical and religious ideas have been effected.

Consider for but a moment some of the cultural interchanges which China has experienced during recent years, for most of the types here mentioned have been but very recent. The Christian Missionary enterprise, to be sure, is more than a hundred years advanced in China, but its greatest activity has been since the beginning of the present century. It has, of course, been one of the principal influences making for religious change. The voyaging of students to study abroad has had far reaching effects; the increased number of occidental travellers to China year by year is by no means unimportant; the exchange lectureships which brought to China such men as John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, Paul Monroe and others has had enormous influence.

Add to these the influences of the World War; the dissemination of moving pictures made in other lands; the exchange of periodicals; the translation and circulation of books from other languages—all these, not to make the catalog too long, have been slowly but surely inducing subtle changes in the religious thinking and practice of the people.

Consider again the complete revolution in the educational system of China which almost overnight became modern in its organization, its curriculum, and its general aim. Even during the restless years since the revolution the number of students has increased yearly by leaps and bounds—from 1915 to 1923 the number of schools increased from 86,799 to 178,972—the number of students from 2,905,152 to 6,617,792, or over 100% gain. Consider the mass education movement which is reaching vast numbers of adults yearly; or again the literary renaissance which has brought books and periodicals for the first time within the reach of the common people.

What has been the result of these and the score of other influences upon China's religious life and thought?

I think we may note at least three major characteristic reactions,

each of which involves large sections of the population.

First, the radial, hostile or critical attitude to religion, which manifests itself in the tendency away from all religion, or at least away from religion as at present known in China.

Second, there is a distinct reaction against the extreme of no religion to some form of reemphasis upon or revival of the traditional forms of religion, varying all the way from a rigid fundamentalist reaffirmation of the old to a modernistic reformation within the various faiths.

Third, there is a frank recognition of the failure of the traditional religions to satisfy, and an attempt to find satisfaction through a combination of elements chosen from a variety of religious sources, that is, the Syncretic tendency.

A fourth interesting and important tendency within Christianity is toward the nationalization of the church but of that, space will not permit us to treat here.

Within the radical school, widely divergent groups are found. Indeed one group has swung so far away from religion as traditionally conceived that it seems to have repudiated religion entirely. Never strongly theistic or given to supernaturalism, many of the *literati* who have come under the sway of the modern scientific method have set themselves against religion as they understand it, some of them very actively participating in the so-called *anti-religious movement*. While much greater prominence has been given to the so-called *anti-Christian movement*, this latter is but one phase of the wider movement against all religion. The bitterness of the anti-Christian demonstrations was accentuated by the fact of Christianity's connection with foreign powers which had violated China's sovereignty, an offense which became the more serious as China's sense of nationalism developed. This movement doubtless drew support from groups which were not opposed to religion as such, but there was still a very influential group which had discarded religion altogether, and possibly, in part, due to the influence of Russia were taking essentially the position of the Soviet Republic toward it.

Mr. Chang, a thoughtful Chinese writer on the Anti-religious Movement distinguishes three distinct points of attack on religion.¹ "1. Against religion itself. 2, Against Christian teaching. 3. Against

¹ *Chinese Recorder*, Vol 54, pp. 459 ff.

the Christian church." It will be noted that it is Christianity which comes in for the major attack. On religion itself, he declares the attack is based on four counts. "1. Religion is out of date, it is a product of primitive people. 2. Religion is unfavorable to human progress. 3. Religion has no connection with morality; a morality based on religion is passive, unnatural and, in so far as it is motivated by desire for rewards, is hypocritical. 4. Religion is not necessary for mankind. The elements of religion which are in harmony with human instincts have for the most part been outgrown in the evolutionary process. Those elements which remain can be completely provided for by changing the environment, promoting the arts and adding real knowledge."

This extreme group, centering largely in the universities and among students, has been very active in trying to eliminate all instruction in religion from the schools, and to separate government entirely from any connection with religion; and have been active in the publication and dissemination of a radical anti-religious propaganda literature. How numerous the group is, it is impossible to say, but that they exercise a profound influence on the life of China out of all proportion to their numbers can not be doubted.

Aside from the "root and branch" hostile group, Mr. H. C. Hu distinguishes two other liberal parties:

"First, those who say that while religion has eternal value, present day religion has no value. All existing religions need radical revision.

Second, Those who say that religion from past to present has greatly influenced mankind, but it is now necessary to apply the scientific method to the study of the history of religion, in order to discover what results have been good and what bad. This party thinks religion should be given a chance to prove its own worth."²

Typical declarations of radical leaders may be cited as follows:

"There is no reason why we should regard religion as a subject for reverence."

"Everything great or small is natural, nothing supernatural. 'God' in a religious sense is supernatural, different from ordinary natural matter, and a spirit unknowable by human beings. Since this supernatural something cannot

² *Chinese Recorder*, Vol. 54, p. 447.

be proved by any definite method, its claim cannot be recognized. If people seek to dress up religion in terms of modern science and say that God is energy or ether or something of that kind, this is nothing more than evasion."³

In general the radical anti-religious groups may be said to be hostile chiefly to supernaturalism on the one hand and institutionalism on the other, but to have a high regard for those humanistic values which are associated with religion and constitute perhaps its main strength in the minds of modern minded religious persons. It would probably not be unfair to classify them as scientific humanists, since it is through the application of science or the modern scientific method that the human values are to be secured.

At the opposite extreme from this radical wing is a reactionary group which has made a desperate attempt to hold on to the old religions though here it does not seem that there has been quite the same extreme unyielding fundamentalism that has appeared in other religions, notably Christianity.

The most notable illustration of this tendency was the formation of a national Confucian Society in 1911 by Mr. Chen Huan Chang, who received his doctor's degree from Columbia University. Headquarters of the movement are at Peking where a very elaborate modern building with all sorts of features such as kindergarten, gymnasium club rooms, etc., is to be found. It has branches in most of the provincial capitals and the larger cities. A strong attempt was made, when the revolution set up the new republic, to have Confucianism made the state religion, but this was successfully opposed by the combined efforts of the other religions, Christianity leading. In 1912 the government abolished the study of Confucian classics as a required study in the elementary and secondary schools.⁴ In 1914 President Yuan Shih-Kai issued a mandate in which Confucianism was declared to be simply a "doctrine," not a "religion." In 1917 a more modest attempt to write into the Constitution a clause providing that the teachings of Confucius be made the basis of all moral instruction in the schools was defeated.

The creed of the Confucian Society as stated by Dr. Chen consists of five articles:

³ "Religious Problems as Viewed by Chinese Thinkers," *Chinese Recorder*, Vol. 53, p. 513 ff.

⁴ Ph. Vargas, "Religion and the Renaissance in China," *International Review of Missions*, XV, 9.

"First, By sacrifice to Heaven, the Sages and Ancestors, to do reverence to the three roots of life.

Second, To gather the five blessings by meditation upon the Sages and classics.

Third, To establish a harmonious social order by the cultivation of the moon and harmony.

Fourth, To establish universal brotherhood by the use of property and personal influence.

Fifth, To attain the highest longevity by nourishing the person and the soul."⁵

In Shansi province the governor has established the "Heart Cleansing Society" which meets on Sunday for lectures at which attendance is compulsory. He built a large "Hall for Self Examination" in 1922, but a writer in 1926 says that this remarkable effort, the only one of its kind in China, seems to have failed already.⁶ The movement is tolerant of other religions, Christians having been invited to address its meetings, but their basis is traditional Confucianism. They advocate the return to the "five relations," worship of Shangti, and thrift and morality.⁷

Another illustration of the reemphasis upon already existing religions is the modern revival in Buddhism, which while not to be compared with the corresponding revival in Japanese Buddhism is nevertheless noteworthy. A prominent indication of the revival is to be found in the formation of a number of new societies and associations with the purpose of "propagating the Dharma and benefiting humanity," and it is important to note that they are largely composed of *laymen* and *women*. The leaders are mostly lay scholars. To name a few of these organizations there are "The Buddhist Church," "The Enlightening Association," "Society for Enlightening the People," "House of the Enlightened." Over all of these is the "National Buddhist Church."

We may note the objects and requirements of but one of these, the "Enlightenment Society."

"First, To propound the essence of Mahayana Buddhism so that opposition may be dissolved, doubts removed, faith strengthened,

⁵ Lewis Hodous, *Christian Occupation of China*, p. 28.

⁶ Ph. Vargas, *loc. cit.* p. 8.

⁷ Lewis Hodous, *op. cit.* p. 29.

religion energized, and mankind transformed into saintly and heavenly beings.

Second, To propagate the essence of Mahayana Buddhism so that the wicked may be led into loving kindness, the selfish persons to righteousness, the wise to thirst for the doctrine, the strong to love of virtue and the struggling, misery filled world transformed into a place of peace and happiness.

Requirements for membership are high. . . . faith in the three Treasures, (Buddha, Law and Order); the *four great vows* (to save all beings, destroy all passions, to know and teach others to know the law and lead others to understand the teachings of Buddha); observance of ten commandments, (Not to kill, steal, commit adultery, lie, exaggerate, slander, be double tongued, covet, be angry or heretical). In addition one must be diligent in studying the *sutras*, and faithful in fasting and charity. The Society was founded in 1915." They publish a magazine "The Voice of the Sea Waves" as a medium of propaganda. Membership includes both monks and laymen.⁸

Two important features, found in at least some of the organizations, represent an attempt, not to defend the old, but to accept reforms which will adapt it to the changing conditions in China. In this sense it can not be classed as reactionary. First, there is an effort at a new expression of old Buddhist beliefs. Second, there is a distinct socialization of religion in modern Buddhism.

One of the learned modern Buddhist scholars says that Buddhism is not a religion, and he ascribes no final authority even to Gautama or any collection of scriptures. In place of creeds it has forms of ascetic practices only for cutting off the two great obstacles, restlessness and onesided knowledge. Instead of emotional faith, it teaches intelligent self confidence, thus it is more than a religion. Nor is Buddhism a philosophy, it seeks no ultimate reality but only self realization. The ascription of reality to an outside heavenly God is an illusion.

The Buddhist monthly says, "This magazine is willing to take in all currents of thought, both expressed and practiced by the human race. . . and to compare them with Buddhism from an unbiased viewpoint. It welcomes any criticism from people of any religion and any branch of knowledge."

⁸ T. T. Lew, *China Today Through Chinese Eyes*, p. 83.

Evidence of the increased socialization of Buddhism may be found in the avowed aim of a Buddhist Seminary at Nanking which "trains men to benefit the world not self."—The monkish life is declared to be a life of uselessness a thing of the past.

Special meetings are held closely resembling revivals in which the scriptures are read and discussion takes place instead of mere recital of the ritual. They seem, according to observers, designed to stir enthusiasm. They have undertaken a more or less pretentious educational scheme founding numerous schools and colleges which stand on a level with government schools, except that they offer special courses in Buddhism. Some of them are for the education of monks who as a class have been noted for their ignorance.

Other evidences of socialization are the founding of charitable institutions such as the Buddhist relief association the "Buddhist Mercy Association," and the "Yellow Swastika Society," corresponding to the Red Cross. Orphanages have also been founded; preaching missions to prisoners have been carried on; missionary preaching bands have been formed; public lectures given, libraries established; and Buddhist literature and the Buddhist scriptures have been more widely circulated.

That this activity is largely among the more enlightened Buddhists is, of course, true, but it cannot fail to have very far reaching effects upon the entire Buddhist group in China. One reason specifically assigned for this renaissance is the negative influence of western philosophy. "The more dissatisfied students become with it, the more they turn to Buddhism."⁹

The third tendency, that of Syncretism is one of the very interesting phases of China's religious life in this modern age. The main movement has been admirably described by Mr. Paul D. Twinem in the *Journal of Religion*.¹⁰ It will be sufficient for our purpose here simply to indicate the names of the more important ones and to describe one in some detail. We may therefore, mention the "United Goodness Society." The "Apprehension of Goodness Society," "The Tao Yuan," "The Six Sages Union True Tao Society" and finally the "Study of Morality Society." The

⁹ *Chinese Recorder*, Vol. 56, pp. 89 ff.

¹⁰ Vol. V, pp. 463 ff; 472 ff and 595 ff. Lewis Hodous wrote also of "Tao Yuan" in *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 4, pp. 71 ff., and briefly of the others in *The Christian Occupation of China*, pp. 28-9. The facts presented here are taken from these three sources.

general characteristic of these movements is that they attempt to bring together certain elements that are found in the other religions of China and in some cases certain other modern innovations. "The Apprehension of Goodness Society," for example, combines five religions, namely, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam and Christianity, as does likewise the "Tao Yuan." The "Six Sages Society" adds Judaism to the other five. Since of this number the *Tao Yuan* is one of the most important, we may briefly describe its growth and general principles. It had its origin as late as 1921, taking its beginning from a revelation by means of a planchette in 1920. This provided them with a true scripture which served as a basis for their organization. The Society had a very rapid growth. By 1923 it had spread to a number of principal cities and even outside of China. The aim as expressed in their literature is "The worship of the *most holy primeval father*, the founders of the five religions, and the gods, saints, worthies, and Buddhas of the whole world throughout all generations, together with the perception of the God given, world center, true scripture as the connecting link between the truths of the five religions." This scripture is secret, and is shown only to members. Interestingly enough it is not yet complete, but is still being received by means of the planchette in Italy, in the French language. It is expected that the whole will be complete at the end of a twelve year period.

Members of the group need not forsake their own religions in order to join the Society, for all religions come from the great Tao, the primeval father. Two things are of great importance in Tao Yuan, namely meditation and philanthropy, which seem to stand on about the same level of importance. They have a decalogue which somewhat resembles the Mosaic code. Briefly it is,

1. Do not dishonor parents.
2. Do not lack virtue.
3. Do not lack goodness.
4. Do not lack righteousness.
5. Do not lack mercy.
6. Do not conceal goodness.
7. Do not be cruel.
8. Do not have secrets.
9. Do not have envy or spite.
10. Do not blaspheme.

There is quite an elaborate organization with six departments or courts, each with its executive superintendent, secretary and treasury. One of the most important departments is called the "sitting department" which has to do particularly with meditation. The worshiper sits upon a stool, clasping his hands on his knees, and meditates for a period of four minutes, four different times a day. There is an elaborate system of reports to headquarters regarding this phase of their worship. Self-examination is one of the features of the system. There is rather an elaborate system by which it is carried on. A book is kept in which at night are entered all the offenses during the day, and it is interesting that the big offenses are failure to sit, impatience, smoking drugs, drinking, gambling, carousing; the minor offenses are slander, anger, careless words, etc. A species of penance is enforced. For ordinary offenses, "Sitting" is increased four fold, and in case of major offenses twelvefold.

Space will not permit us to go into further detail regarding this movement. One element seems to be common to most of the Syncretic movements and evidently comes into them from Taoism, that is the use of the planchette which is lacking in only one of the major Syncretic movements. The device of recording one's offenses and keeping books will be recognized also as a Taoistic contribution. Indeed one is struck, as he studies these curious attempts to combine religions, with the important place which Taoism seems to take in them. In a Seminar in which we attempted to discover the modern tendencies within the various religions we were able to find in available source materials nothing of significance within Taoism. It is apparently in connection with the Syncretic movements that Taoism is playing its major part in the modern changes in China's religions.