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# A Flexible Indeterminate Theory of Religion: Thinking through Chinese Religious Phenomena

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**Abstract:** This essay explores a few of the reasons for the failure of Western theories to capture Chinese religious experiences. It will include Durkheim’s insight that “The sacred . . . is society in disguised form” and variants of secularization theories in contrast to Confucian ones, especially Xunzi’s theory about ritual, read as representative of religion. This article will examine the impossibility of asserting a straightforward claim, without exception, that could capture the three thousand years of historical and contemporary diversity manifested by the three institutional religions (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism), the continuous formation of popular religious movements, ever developing sectarian groups, and pan-Chinese quasi-religious practices like ancestor veneration, divination, healing practices and the like. The study will start by looking at variable categories used in the study of different religions, the similarities in assumptions among the three institutional religions such as the “good” and self-cultivation, and the central place of secularization theory in the contemporary study of Chinese religions. A theoretical orientation of both flexibility and indeterminacy is suggested based on indigenous ideas.

**Keywords:** Chinese religion; secularization; Xunzi; Durkheim; sociology of religion

## 1. Introduction

What is “Religion” and how is it situated in society? Is it the projection of a community as the sacred?<sup>1</sup> Is it “false consciousness”—the “sigh of the oppressed, the heart of a heartless world” and “the opiate of the masses”?<sup>2</sup> Is it one crucial factor in shaping human character and endeavors?<sup>3</sup> Is it superstition and destined for the dustbin of history?<sup>4</sup> Is it a product like any other to be marketed and

<sup>1</sup> The emperor during historical dynasties was construed as the Son of Heaven and even the modern state itself, Liang Yongjia argues, “assumes a religious aura.”

<sup>2</sup> The upheaval during the 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed numerous examples of “false consciousness”. Two examples with a twist away from reward in the next world toward active resistance using magic in this world will serve as illustrations here. The Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), led by Hong Xiuquan who believed himself to be the younger brother of Jesus, claimed an estimated 20 million lives. And the Yihequan or the Righteous and Harmonious Fists, also known as the Boxer Rebellion in the West, was a peasant uprising that was encouraged by the empress dowager, Cixi, and supported by the Manchu government. The participants believed that their rituals made them impervious to bullets. They were slaughtered.

<sup>3</sup> The voluminous literature on the effect of Confucian culture on the diligent and frugal individual and the subsequent successful development of East Asia is an example.

<sup>4</sup> The New Culture Movement from the early 20th century is a clear example of this. It aimed to transform traditional Chinese culture by disassembling Confucianism, which was believed to perpetuate gender inequality, and Daoism and Buddhism, which were deemed superstitious and kept the populace mired in ignorance. Instead, the reformers introduced Western ideals of democracy and gender equality and encouraged scientific thinking.

consumed?<sup>5</sup> Does the “secular” state itself represent a religious community?<sup>6</sup> Is religion a political tool used by the state to manipulate a governed population? Or is it a tool for an oppressed population to foment a revolution?<sup>7</sup> How do religions encounter each other? And, is religion an extrinsic way to enter a different culture through conversion and an expression and declaration of disaffection with the first?<sup>8</sup> An investigation of the substance and function of religions in Chinese communities globally will result in affirmative answers to all these questions because they each apply to particular segments of the population. A universal theory about, or one that comfortably includes the substance and functions of religion in Chinese society, however, cannot at this point be determined.

That a universal sociology of religion cannot be determined is meant in two ways here: first, in the obvious sense that current Western theories fit badly to the Chinese case; and second, in the sense that a general theory of religion based on Chinese religious experiences must be able to account for other religions, be open to change as new ideas and practices develop, accommodate differences that arise from dissimilar historical conditions, be nimble enough to handle diverse native or “insider” perspectives, account for a continuum of preferences for homogeneity and diversity, and explain the privileging of uniformity by some and pluralism by others. Such a theory may well be impossible to formulate and may not even be desirable; but better information and sharper analysis for an aspect of human culture and society that has been and remains so central and influential are always beneficial and illuminating. As Western theories fail to account for the multivarious entirety of Chinese religious experiences, the incommensurability can effectively spur on scholars and researchers to investigate reasons for this. This essay is such an attempt. It explores a few of the reasons for the failure of Western theories to capture the Chinese case by examining the impossibility of asserting a straightforward claim, without exception, amid the historical and contemporary diversity of the three institutional religions (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism), the continuous formation of popular religious movements, ever developing sectarian groups, and pan-Chinese quasi-religious practices like ancestor veneration, divination, healing practices and the like. It will also suggest a theoretical orientation of flexibility and indeterminacy based on indigenous ideas.

Why should this matter? Why should it be important still or is it already important to understand religion in its substance and functions in this nominally “secular”, non-religious age? The reasons, it seems to me, are many. If we are to better serve peaceful ends, it is imperative that there is a firm understanding of religion in all its incarnations—for it continues to offer personal meaning and identity to some, define and motivate purposeful individual actions in others, and provides instrumental means for non-religious and even political ends for yet others. The process of how these private factors mesh with historical events and ideas help to shape our understanding of religion, and the varieties of this understanding have political impact. For the study of Chinese Religion(s),<sup>9</sup> the challenge unexpectedly begins at variable categories found in Introduction to World Religions textbooks. Students of world religions often read about Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism but then

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<sup>5</sup> All the Daoist and Buddhist paraphernalia including most visibly talismans and small shrines where various statues are placed; services like divination and installation of altars and shrines in stores to ward off unwelcomed supernatural forces are all examples of this.

<sup>6</sup> Liang Yongjia argues that the Chinese state has never been secular. He writes that “For more than two millennia, the core ideological conviction shaping and buttressing imperial governance also direct correlatively the purpose and process to regulate, control, and exploit all rivalry (sic) religious traditions whenever it is deemed feasible and beneficial to the state.” He argues that post-Mao “nationalism” becomes the transcendent. Citing Tim Oakes and Donald Sutton, he quotes from the introduction of their edited volume, *Faith on Display: Religious Revival and Tourism in China*: “The gods and churches are sponsored and in principle subsumed within the party-state—much as approved gods and religious institutions in imperial times were subsumed ideologically within the imperial metaphor and bureaucratically within the official system.” (Liang 2014)

<sup>7</sup> The agitation by and suppression of the Muslim Uyghurs and Buddhist Tibetans are illustrations of this.

<sup>8</sup> The conversion to Christianity and the disavowal of traditional rites like funereal rituals by many Chinese is an example of this. I am not aware of any studies on the acceptance of coexisting Daoist and Buddhist funeral liturgies for Christian converts. Anecdotally, my experience within the Toronto Chinese-Canadian community is that while Daoist and Buddhist funeral practices are performed alongside each other, Christians often try to keep other family members from practicing them.

<sup>9</sup> This is true also for other “ethnic” religions such as Japanese and Korean.

encounter a different system of classification based on “nation” for East Asian Religions such as Chinese Religions, Japanese Religions, Korean and Vietnamese Religions.<sup>10</sup> These disparate headings turn out to be unstable too, and just a few examples will suffice here. For example, Deborah Sommer uses *Chinese Religion* in the singular as the title of her book, following Arthur Freedman’s position that there is one Chinese religion<sup>11</sup>, whereas Joseph Adler chooses “Religious Traditions” with the qualifier Chinese in the *World Religions* series edited by Ninian Smart, then uses Chinese Religion in the singular for Lindsay Jones (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion 2/e*, and Chinese Religions in the plural once again in Jonathan Fenby (ed.) *The Seventy Wonders of China*; and finally, Daniel Overmyer applies the plural in *Religions of China: The World as a Living System*.

These first categorical and numerical “indeterminate” qualities depend, of course, on the tautological definition of religion and what institutions, ideas, and practices a theorist prioritizes. Scholars who focus on aspects of or specialize in the study of China are deployed here in an initial effort toward a theory of religion based on Chinese religious experiences. Sinologists like Robert Campany, Thierry Meynard, Michael Puett, Michael Szonyi, and Tan Soon Har have all noted that Chinese religious experiences fit badly into theories like secularization which have been drawn primarily from Protestant categories and experiences. Meynard reminds his readers that it was a rejection of their initial understanding of Confucianism as “natural religion,” by their Dominican and Franciscan brethren, that led Jesuits to advance the idea of civil religion which eventually developed into notions of secularization. (2005) Szonyi extends the latter ill-fitting idea to include market and rational choice theories, writing that both can be found in pre-19th-century Chinese history and therefore are not a “modern” Western phenomenon. (2009) There is thus an odd twinning of the qualities of *déjà vu* and not-quite-right in the application of these ideas to the Chinese case. Further, Campany and Puett both note that early indigenous Chinese theories about ritual render Western sociological attempts—like Durkheim’s to “unmask the true meaning of religion” as missing the point and oddly irrelevant. To better understand religious phenomenon, Puett argues for including early Chinese ritual theories to the reservoir of ones we already have. James Spickard, a sociologist of religion, goes further and asks proactively how a Chinese sociology of religion might expand current theoretical understanding by focusing on lay communities rather than formal organizations and individuals as current theories are wont to do (Spickard 2017).

Puett and Spickard’s recommendations for the inclusion of indigenous theories are timely, for the current theoretical incompatibilities have notable consequences: they often mark Chinese Religion(s) as a theoretical outlier and may at times even contribute to misunderstanding about the state of religion in different Chinese communities, both native ancestral and diasporic.<sup>12</sup> Elements that contribute to the anomalous case will be examined. First, there will be a brief outline of five pervasive informal Chinese ideas and attitudes that offer notable contrasts to the Judeo-Christian tradition; these are not representative of all Chinese religious experiences and they are chosen primarily for their contrastive quality. The focus on the popular will be followed by a discussion of classical Confucian theories about ritual through the works of Tan, Spickard, Campany, and Puett. The latter two scholars concentrate on Xunzi, with mentions of Confucius and Mencius, while Puett draws from the *Liji* (*Book of Rites*) too.

<sup>10</sup> One wonders if one would speak about an English Religion, a Scottish Religion, a Welsh Religion, an Irish Religion, a British Religion, British Religions, or British Religious Traditions. And what might one include within them? Continuing as well as defunct pre-Christian contact Folk Religion and popular practices? Or Christianity only?

<sup>11</sup> See (Freedman 1974). On the Sociological Study of Chinese Religion. In Ahern, Emily M., Arthur P. Wolf, & Joint Committee on Contemporary China. Subcommittee on Research on Chinese Society. *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press. Maurice Freedman was a well-respected 20th-century Sinologist and British anthropologist.

<sup>12</sup> Szonyi writes that “it becomes evident that it is unproductive to discuss issues such as whether there is religious freedom in China without attending to the historical process through which the notion of religious freedom emerged there.” (Szonyi 2009) See also Woo (2019), Religion and Politics in the People’s Republic of China: An Appraisal of Continuing Mistrust and Misunderstanding.

Second, there will be a very brief examination of how Daoist and Buddhist ideas generally reinforce Confucianism. Daoist ideas of complementarity and ineffability in the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* will be the focus, along with Buddhist notions of emptiness and interpenetration, and the different qualities in the spiritual capacities of religious devotees. The latter will be read from *Treatise of the Golden Lion*, a work of the 7–8th-century monk, Fazang, and the very influential Mahayana *Lotus Sutra* respectively. Together with Confucianism, they could form a basis for a theory of religion that is predicated on complementarity, change, and differences. Finally, there will be an analysis of Meynard’s account of the early Christian misreading of Confucianism and how this confused idea is repackaged and imported back into China followed by Szonyi’s discussion of the wholesale purchase of secularism as a part of modernization by the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The latter’s rhetorical question: “is it any wonder that religion has become a target of political intervention?” will in turn be contrasted to Liang Yongjia’s contention that the Chinese state has never been secular and has always controlled other religions in a “hierarchical plurality”. This ideological circle offers a tantalizing suggestion that “Western” secularization theory originates in part from the East, so that its adoption by the PRC is a peculiar sort of homecoming. Globalization would therefore appear to be more deeply embedded than suspected in both the East and West.

## 2. Shared Ideals and Assumptions

### 2.1. Common Notions in Popular Religiosities

Traditional Chinese “popular (non-)theology” or prevalent religious attitudes<sup>13</sup> drawn from Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism often contrast with monotheistic ones. Five will be covered here. First, there is a popular Chinese idiom which claims that “All religions<sup>14</sup> teach people to be good,”<sup>15</sup> carrying with it an implicit sentiment that it really does not matter which religion is professed. This belief may come from the pan-religious ideal of goodness and compassion found in *ren* or humaneness/goodness/benevolence/compassion in Daoism and Confucianism, and *cibi* often straightforwardly translated as compassion in Buddhism. There is also a sense that this goodness is discovered by its lack: that is, people need to be taught how to be good because they tend not to be good when left on their own. It is, therefore, often assumed that it is through moral education that a person becomes a responsible human being.<sup>16</sup> There is a second interpretation of “lack” in the sense that “To be able to recognize or to know goodness, a lack of it is necessary.” That is, goodness can only be comprehended when wickedness is experienced. The absence of goodness, however, does not seem to have generated a robust discussion on theodicy and the focus remains squarely on “the god”.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For this section, I draw from three decades of reading and asking questions of self-confessed Daoists, Buddhists, practitioners of folk religions, agnostics, and atheists. I have had casual conversations and or formal interviews at temples, shrines, community functions, various universities, gatherings with family and friends, and elsewhere. Although I have never met a self-identified Confucian, Confucian ideals are often found in the person’s conversation, whatever their (non-)affiliation is. See Woo (2010), *Chinese Popular Religion in Diaspora: A Case Study of Shrines in Toronto’s Chinatowns*; and Woo (2016), *Distinctive Beliefs and Practices: Chinese Religiosities in Saskatoon*.

<sup>14</sup> Ritual is treated here as a broad equivalent to Religion and includes informal practices like bowing three times when offering incense at a temple or in front of an ancestral altar at home, chanting and meditating alone or with others, placing a shrine at the foot of a tree, and visiting the grave of a dead relative to pay respects. More formal rituals could include state rites to Heaven and Earth, or public rituals of exorcism and renewal.

<sup>15</sup> I am never quite sure what to make of this. When I point out that religions can be very destructive, I am told that violence and terrorism are deviant; that all religions in their most essential teachings, teach people to be good. When I push further and suggest that not everyone’s “good” is the same, the response is often the silver rule: “Do not do to others what you don’t wish to be done to you.”

<sup>16</sup> This is not universal and there are philosophical differences. Mengzi and Wang Yangming are two Confucian thinkers who believe that people are innately good; Yangming was especially leery of classical book learning that Zhu Xi advocated—he was influenced by Buddhism. Many Mahayana Buddhists also believe that ubiquitous Buddha Nature can be discovered not by formal education alone, but by meditation.

<sup>17</sup> Confucianism may have influenced this orientation. As noted later in the article, Tan Soon Har argues that “The authority that has primacy in Confucian life is . . . neither political nor religious, but moral . . .” She goes on to say that “Confucians would deny the autonomy of both the political and the religious” because they “have a more holistic outlook that keeps

Consequently, there is no apparent prevailing equivalent to the notion of sin and “evil” suggested in the Genesis Fall.<sup>18</sup>

This theological hazy<sup>19</sup> one-sidedness might easily be applied to Confucianism but of course it fails to capture teachings in Daoism and Buddhism, which will be briefly discussed later. Nevertheless, it leads us into a second widespread notion, which carries us into a tendency best described as “straddling”, illustrated well by a fundamental belief that the world is at once orderly and patterned, and chaotically dynamic.<sup>20</sup> This inclusive metaphysical inexactness likely comes from a supposition of change: that is, the belief in the inevitable transformation that comes from the co-existence of alternating opposites, of the complementarity of knowable sameness and unfathomable difference. The inclusion of two opposing elements is perhaps best represented by the first two hexagrams in the *Book of Changes*:<sup>21</sup> *qian* (the creative and a symbol for Heaven) and *kun* (the receptive and a symbol for Earth) and the first chapter of the Daoist *Daodejing* (also *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*). The former two symbols are said to generate through interaction the other 62 hexagrams—that is, all things in the universe thereby marking a theory of impersonal non-anthropomorphic-divine creation; the latter includes examples that point to the relative and dependent nature of existence:

The difficult and the easy complement each other;  
 The long and the short off-set each other;  
 The high and the low incline towards each other;  
 Note and sound harmonize with each other;  
 Before and after follow each other. (Lau 1963)  
 (And we might add:  
 The good and the bad stand by each other.  
 The saintly and the evil lean in to each other.)

Alongside these abstract ideas are ubiquitous personal tutelary gods and goddesses, and they belong to and are a part of the complex complementary world; a creator god such as the one described in Genesis, like sin and evil, is not as common in the Chinese religious landscape.<sup>22</sup> The focus on goodness<sup>23</sup> and the presumption of constant transformation and complementary opposites mark two components of Chinese religious thinking that contrast the centrality of the wickedness or sinfulness of human beings and the absolute unchanging oneness of God in the monotheistic traditions.

A third distinctive aspect is the attention paid to the natural differences of individuals’ characters, mental and physical abilities, and the life conditions they find themselves in, resulting in different levels of understanding and the need for different teachings. The differences that are accepted in the Chinese religious tradition allow for an especially broad range of syncretic beliefs and practices and affect the (non-)development of boundaries for orthodoxy and heterodoxy especially vis à vis folk religiosities.

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together the moral, the political, and the religious to yield what they consider a truly satisfying existence within the continuity of the personal, the familial-social, and the cosmic-infinite.”

<sup>18</sup> James Spickard cites a story from the 20th-century anthropologist C. K. Yang: “A Baptist missionary urged a Chinese college student to repent, to which the student answered: ‘I come of reputable ancestry, I have a good conscience, and I have always been strict about my moral responsibilities and conduct. How is it that I am full of sin?’” (Spickard 2017), from Yang, C. K. 1968. “Introduction.” Max Weber. *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*.) However, it is also true that the Daoist Yellow Turbans introduced the idea of sin that is inherited from ancestors and Buddhism brought with it elaborate ideas of depravity, sins, punishment and hells.

<sup>19</sup> An interesting parallel, perhaps, is the description of the sage in the Daoist *Daodejing*. He is described as “unadorned”, “drowsy”, “muddled”, and “foolish”.

<sup>20</sup> On trivial matters, this is expressed by the response of “It’s simply like that.” The same response is offered for events ranging from life passage events like marrying, becoming a parent, to ravages wrought by a typhoon or getting hit by a truck.

<sup>21</sup> The *Book of Changes* is a text for divination. It has 64 hexagrams with commentaries, and functions as a guide through the inevitable changes and transformations in human life and the natural world.

<sup>22</sup> There are stories about the goddess Nü Wa creating human beings and Pan Gu creating the world, but these are understood to be folk tales, as they lack the credibility and gravitas of the Genesis account.

<sup>23</sup> See Analects 12.19: “In administering your government, what need is there for you to kill? Just desire the good yourself and the common people will be good.”

The 4th-century B.C.E. Confucian philosopher Xunzi talks about the natural difference among a sage, a *junzi* (one of noble character), an official, and an ordinary person in their mental-psychological capacities to understand the meaning of ritual;<sup>24</sup> and in a similar way, the *Lotus Sutra* explains the existence of numerous teachings within the *dharma* as necessary and unavoidable because of differential spiritual capacities of the faithful.<sup>25</sup> The acceptance of a broad range of interpretations and contradictory teachings offers a sharp contrast to the monotheistic foundation built on one God, and one essential set of revealed and or divinely-inspired scriptures.<sup>26</sup>

There is a fourth element that Jeung et al. (2015) determines as *liyi*—that is, propriety or good manners and right action in relationships. These two pervasive paradigmatic virtues when combined with the universal *ren*, echo some of the values embedded in the “habits of the heart” that Bellah posits as part of the basis for a civil religion. They were likely some of the ideals that persuaded Jesuits to read Confucianism as a Natural Religion too. But the focus on benevolence, propriety and right action are distinctly this-worldly and secular as they govern civility in public and reciprocity in personal relationships without specific reference to Heaven, the divine or sacred. Herein lies a sharp difference in reaction to what appears to be “secular” values: Robert Company writes that “Durkheim is more sensitive than Xunzi . . . to a problem inherent in this procedure (of unmasking the function of religion): once society and its attendant moral code are stripped of the authority formerly lent them by religious symbols, and reduced to their ‘rational nakedness,’ whence comes their authority?” (1992) But for the Chinese, apprehended through Xunzi and the Confucians, the absence of “religious symbols” and the divine does not pose a problem because the virtues are predicated on this-worldly benefits of social harmony, physical security, and economic-political stability, not the enticement of salvation in a future existence. Moreover, many Daoists and Buddhists would point to their teachings on *karmic* consequences, which operate “naturally” without the intervention of a deity.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, the Chinese understanding of virtues is predicated primarily on earthly benefits and function without a religious authority like God, and is therefore different from Bellah’s idea of a civil religion that sacralizes the state.<sup>28</sup>

The values that led to the Jesuit misreading of dynastic Confucian China and the eventual conceptualization of a post-Christian or post-Religion civil religion, have in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) morphed into “core socialist principles” billeted everywhere in both English and Chinese:<sup>29</sup> prosperity, democracy, civility,<sup>30</sup> and harmony for the country; freedom, equality, justice, and rule of law for society; and patriotism, dedication,<sup>31</sup> integrity, and friendliness for the individual. These core socialist principles bring us to the last and fifth element within Chinese religious experience: broad acceptance that politics drives religion. Religious ideas and practices have been malleable and shaped to serve political interests. For example, Shangdi or Lord on High, the ancestral deity of the

<sup>24</sup> Although this appears similar to the four levels of interpretation in Jewish exegesis, Company and Puett show that Xunzi encourages the Confucian literati to interpret the rituals not as “true” but as indirectly training emotions and attitudes.

<sup>25</sup> *The Essential Lotus* says: “For numberless kalpas in the past/countless Buddhas who have now entered extinction,/a hundred, thousand, ten thousand, million types/in numbers incapable of calculation—/such World-Honored Ones,/using different types of causes, similes, and parables,/the power of countless expedient means,/have expounded the characteristics of teachings.” (Watson 2002)

<sup>26</sup> There are undeniably thousands of Protestant sects, but they all confess and profess to believe in Jesus and the creator God of Genesis.

<sup>27</sup> This is of course not quite right. Buddhism, and Daoism imitating it, both have salvational figures such as Amitabha, the Buddha of the Pure Land in the West.

<sup>28</sup> Meynard notes that the Jesuit idea of civil religion is different from Bellah’s. The latter assumes an intended formal sacralization of the state.

<sup>29</sup> In the Chinese cities of Guangzhou and Hangzhou, for example, posters can be seen on the street and in the subway, and the surrounding villages.

<sup>30</sup> *Wenming* are the characters in Chinese. They can be translated as enlightened, cultured, and civilized indicating good manners and kind consideration.

<sup>31</sup> *Jingye* are the Chinese characters. They can be translated as dedicated to study and work or respect for school and work. The second character *ye* has a sense of profession, occupation, business, and course of study.

Shang dynasty<sup>32</sup> and personal tribal god was banished over three thousand years ago and replaced by the extra-tribal, impersonal, abstract Heaven by the Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–256 B.C.E.). The use of Heaven allowed the Zhou to more easily assert that they were given the mandate to rule: that is, the Mandate of Heaven was bestowed on them because of the failings of the Shang rulers. By claiming that they were chosen for their virtue, the Zhou gained an aura of universality sanctioned by the divine, thereby undermining all bounded sectarian religions, which would by definition be limited and narrow in their perspectives.<sup>33</sup> In contrast to this political Confucianism and as if to illustrate the reality of complementarity and theoretical flexibility and indeterminacy, Zhao Litao points to an example that offers the exact opposite. He writes that “The syncretic and non-political nature of traditional Chinese faiths is best demonstrated in local communal religions, which combine beliefs and practices from Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism and take the form of ancestor and protective deity worships, geomancy, exorcism, and prognostications.” (2010) Chinese Religion(s) is at once demonstrably political and non-political.

In place of a specific focus on salvation, truth, charity, institutional affiliation and attendance, community, and unity in a loving God, Chinese religiosities seem to assume sectarian variations<sup>34</sup> and are premised more on “general” principles shared by the range of elite, popular and folk traditions: the privileging of benevolence, assumption of change and complementary opposites, attention to differences in individual capacities and capabilities, reliance on propriety and right action to establish a secure and stable humane society, and acceptance of sacralized political power for universal good over sectarian religion for the good of only some. Is it surprising that theories emerging out of Judeo-Christian traditions that are guided by dogma and ritual practices derived from revealed and divinely-inspired scriptures from one divine source, which privileges institutional belonging and community, would be ill-fitted to Chinese experiences that are relatively unsystematic?

## 2.2. Classical Confucian Theories of Ritual: Religious and Secular as Complementary and Integral to Each Other

### 2.2.1. Theoretical Ancestors: Being Religious yet Keeping Away from Gods and Spirits

The preference for generic virtues like benevolence, propriety, and right action that has encouraged a reading of non-religiosity rests on Confucian theoretical foundations. The early generalization from a specific supernatural deity to a natural one from Shangdi to Heaven, and the use of the Mandate of Heaven that sets a pattern for political supremacy and the sacralization of the state are two elements that give an aura of civil religious secularism—they are a part of the Confucian tradition too. In turn, these two shifts that promote an interpretation of secularism are reinforced by another factor: the acceptance of the inscrutability of what lies beyond the human realm. Confucius asserts in the *Lunyu* (*Analects*) that knowledge is “To know when you know something, and to know when you do not know something.” (2.17) As Tan Sor Hoon aptly notes, as Confucius recommends that one should “keep one’s distance from the gods and spirits while showing them reverence,” (6.22) and one disciple observed that the Master “did not speak of . . . prodigies, force, disorder and gods,” (7.21) Jilu, another one of his students, asked “how the spirits of the dead and the gods should be served.” And Confucius

<sup>32</sup> Shangdi, the Lord on High, was the god of the imperial family of the Shang dynasty. The Zhou naturalized this lineage transcendent into impersonal Heaven. Shangdi was then picked up by the Christians as a translation for “God”.

<sup>33</sup> Liang Yongjia contends that the current relationship between the political establishment and religions in the PRC is not so different from that of dynastic China. He writes: “The gods and churches are sponsored and in principle subsumed within the party-state—much as approved gods and religious institutions in imperial times were subsumed ideologically within the imperial metaphor and bureaucratically within the official system.” He describes this as “hierarchical plurality”: “a state encompassing religion, and the accordance of legitimacy between state and religions, as well as among religions.” Zhao Litao agrees with Liang and describes the traditional relationship between the state and religion as “soft secularism”. He states that “By and large, religion has always been weak vis a vis the state.” (Zhao 2010)

<sup>34</sup> A major contradiction in religious goals, for example, is the Daoist pursuit of longevity and even physical immortality in some cases in contrast to the Buddhist striving towards enlightenment and leaving behind the dusty world of suffering. This description, of course, overstates the difference. The genius of the religious faithful is in syncretizing/synthesizing not only Daoism and Buddhism and Confucianism, but also Islam and Christianity.

replied, “You are not able even to serve man. How can you serve the spirits?” When Jilu, undeterred, pressed on and asked, “May I ask about death?” The answer he received was “You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?” (11.12) (Tan 2010)

Confucius does not confess agnosticism or atheism; one intuitively felt that he simply did not know enough to speak intelligently about, or to decide on the issue of spiritual orientation. The reasons for not discussing religious topics notwithstanding, the relative paucity of writings on such subject matters in the classical Confucian tradition often misleads students of religion to characterize Confucianism as secular.

### 2.2.2. The Ultimate Goal: Peace through Self-Cultivation

What the Confucians do talk about is government and the role of self-cultivation—that is, the place of “refining one’s person” in political success. In the *Daxue (The Great Learning)*,<sup>35</sup> listed as chapter 42 in the *Liji*, is the following:

In ancient times, those who wished to make bright virtue brilliant in the world first ordered their states; those who wished to order their states first aligned their households; those who wished to align their households first refined their persons; those who wished to refine their persons first balanced their minds; those who wished to balance their minds first perfected the genuineness of their intentions; those who wished to perfect the genuineness of their intentions first extended their understanding; extending one’s understanding lies in aligning affairs.<sup>36</sup> (Then in reverse order, the author repeats the famous eight steps towards world peace.)

Only after affairs have been aligned may one’s understanding be fully extended. Only after one’s understanding is fully extended may one’s intentions be perfectly genuine. Only after one’s intentions are perfectly genuine may one’s mind be balanced. Only after one’s mind is balanced may one’s person be refined. Only after one’s person is refined may one’s household be aligned. Only after one’s household is aligned may one’s state be ordered. Only after one’s state is ordered may the world be set at peace.

From the Son of Heaven to the common person, for all alike, refining one’s person is the root. That roots should be disordered yet branches ordered is not possible. That what should be thickened is thin yet what is thin becomes thick has never yet been so. This is the meaning of “knowing the root.” This is the meaning of “the extension of understanding.”<sup>37</sup>

The ultimate goal for “the world (to) be set at peace” without any specific reference to the divine would likewise seem secular to monotheists. This process towards peace begins with the individual. All persons should “balance their minds”, be genuine in their intentions, extend their understanding of the world, by categorizing and studying or investigating things. In having disciplined themselves, they can then go on to “align” their household and to bring “order” to their states. The emperor may be the divinely appointed Son of Heaven who is the impersonal transcendent sacred, but everyone including the “common person” should take “refining one’s person” as the fundamental: “the root.” In this way, each person is integrated into their family, community, and the sacralized state.

James Spickard reflects this when he writes that contrary to theories of secularization, “Confucian thought is . . . neither secular nor religious, but denies the validity of these conceptual categories.” He suggests, correctly I think, that “a sociology of religion primed to pay attention to *li* and *de* (that is, virtue, of which benevolence and right action are two) would see congregations as ritual communities

<sup>35</sup> The *Liji* or *Book of Rites* is an edited volume that dates from the Warring States to the Han dynasty (c. 400 B.C.E. to 9 C.E.). The tradition understands Zeng Shen (505–436 B.C.E.) to be the author of the *Great Learning*. Western scholars believe that the authors are unknown.

<sup>36</sup> “Aligning affairs” is often also translated as “investigation of things”.

<sup>37</sup> See Eno (2016). *The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean: An Online Teaching Translation*. <http://www.indiana.edu/~ljp374/Daxue-Zhongyong.pdf> (accessed 28 March 2019).

and put community-building at the heart of religious activity,” and consider the “biological ties of the family” and society as sacred. Tan Soon Har goes so far as to argue that Confucians “have a more holistic outlook that keeps together the moral, the political and the religious” in contrast to Western secularist philosophies that try to separate religion from politics. A fulfilment of the Mandate of Heaven after all rests on discernible evidence: the existence of a safe, stable, and thriving empire or country. That is, the emperor and his ministers must rule well so that the country is peaceable, prosperous and secure, and the people happy and well-sustained.

The formal integration of religion and politics first happened over two millennia ago as Confucianism became the state religion during the Former Han dynasty in the 2nd century B.C.E.,<sup>38</sup> it not only formed an influential primary institutional reference, but it also represented a complementary and competing tradition for other religions. The ascendancy of Confucianism above other religions happened toward the completion of the compilation of the *Liji*, almost half a century after Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.), Mencius (c. 372–289 B.C.E.), and Xunzi (c. 310–c. 238 B.C.E.) ruminated and wrote about the meaning and function of ritual.

### 2.2.3. Confucius and Mencius: The Germ of Ritual Theory

It would be impossible to trace or to measure the exact effect that Confucian ritual theories have had on the development of Chinese society and religion. It would not be unreasonable, however, to assume that the Confucian discussion about human provenance and patterning of rites helped to shape state policies towards religions and folk religiosities, which in turn affected the development of the religious landscape.

In the 6th century B.C.E., Confucius took the ancient rites of the Zhou dynasty and recast them not as rituals to appease or to praise supernatural beings, nor as magical solutions to natural phenomena like drought and flooding but as Campany writes, he interpreted them instead as “a medium for the cultivation of one’s inner dispositions and for the perfect expression of one’s humanity.” When asked about the Zhou ancestral *Ti* sacrifice, Confucius admitted that it was not something he understood; but a person who did know the meaning of the rite, he said, would be able to govern the empire effortlessly (see Campany and Tan). Mengzi, following the Master’s humanistic orientation, taught that *li* starts in the natural attitude of respect and modesty, one of the four *duan* (beginnings) of human nature which he presumed to be innately good.

Xunzi, following Confucius’ advice to “Sacrifice to the spirits as if the spirits were present” (3:12) arrived at a very different interpretation (see Campany and Puett). He came to believe that rituals were developed by sages: that is, persons who were capable of “governing the empire effortlessly” as Confucius had indicated. That rites are humanly created and do not have divine origins was thus established definitively. Following Confucius, Xunzi affirmed that they were created “to train human desires, to express human emotions, to give structure and coherence to human society, to provide a total cultural habitat in which virtue and wisdom can flourish (Campany 1992).” Given the focus on peace, self-cultivation, and the unfathomable meaning but the continued performance of at least some of the rites, Tan insists that

In Confucianism, the political is subordinated to the moral, and *the religious is accessible only through a significant level of moral achievement*. (Emphasis added.) Human beings must focus their attention and effort on the moral (self-cultivation), and the rest will fall in place. The authority that has primacy in Confucian life is therefore neither political nor religious, but moral.

As Tan interprets it then, it is not that Confucianism is not religious but that, “religious commitment is a continuation of moral commitment” at a higher level. The central task for a Confucian is not to

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<sup>38</sup> This was during Han Wudi’s reign (r. 141–87 BCE).

gain salvation for themselves in a dogmatic afterlife but to build a harmonious society for everyone through ethical engagement, before all else. A secular worldly goal this may seem, but it is predicated on the Mandate of Heaven.

#### 2.2.4. Xunzi and the *Liji*: The Development of Theory

Tan's notion that "the religious is accessible only through a significant level of moral achievement" suggests that she understands "religious" differently from Xunzi. Whereas she believes that religion develops out of moral and implied spiritual cultivation, Xunzi believes that while the meaning of ritual<sup>39</sup> is unknowable, common people typically associate them with the supernatural.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, he writes that rites should be maintained because they act as a kind of social adhesive, discouraging instability. Regardless of the apparent differences between Tan's 21st-century interpretation in contrast to Xunzi's 4th-century B.C.E. understanding, Confucianism is shown to be notably different from monotheistic traditions when the function of religion is considered alongside all the elements discussed in the previous sections.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, there is in the *Li Yun* chapter of the *Liji*, ideas that further corroborate Spickard and Tan's understanding that Confucianism assumes both religious and secular qualities.

While the rules of ceremony have their origin in heaven, the movement of them reaches to earth. The distribution of them extends to all the business (of life). They change with the seasons; they agree in reference to the (variations of) lot and condition. In regard to man, they serve to nurture (his nature). They are practised by means of offerings, acts of strength, words and postures of courtesy, in eating and drinking, in the observances of capping, marriage, mourning, sacrificing, archery, chariot-driving, audiences, and friendly missions.

Thus propriety and righteousness (*liyi* as discussed by Jeung et al.) are the great elements for man's (character); it is by means of them that his speech is the expression of truth and his intercourse (with others) the promotion of harmony . . . (Rites) constitute the great methods by which we nourish the living, bury the dead, and serve the spirits of the departed. They supply the channels by which we can apprehend the ways of Heaven and act as the feelings of men require. It was on this account that the sages knew that the rules of ceremony could not be dispensed with, while the ruin of states, the destruction of families, and the perishing of individuals are always preceded by their abandonment of the rules of propriety. (Legge 1885)

With the recognition that "the rules of ceremony have their origin in heaven," Confucianism is undeniably religious in spirit. Yet these rules also serve seemingly secular ends, as they help to nurture human nature to stave off disorder by encouraging honesty and harmony. And, in contrast to monotheism, rituals are important the *Liji* offers, because when rites are abandoned, it is the state that is imperiled not one's personal eternal life.

Robert Campany believes that theories about rites had started to bubble up beginning in the 6th century B.C.E. because ritual performances had become "peculiarly problematic or opaque" and needed "interpretation or explanation." Puett determines that for Xunzi and the early literati, "Rituals were attempts to domesticate humans and help them forge better relationships with each other." Xunzi and the Confucians were not unique in their interest in theory; other contemporary ritual theorists included Daoists, Legalists, Mohists and Logicians. Daoists understood ritual in terms of natural

<sup>39</sup> Demonstrated here is the need to clarify which aspect of religion is considered. Tan seems to be thinking of what would likely fall under "theology", whereas Xunzi is clearly referring to naïve indigenous beliefs and practices.

<sup>40</sup> An analogy might be made between that the sage who developed the rites in Xunzi and Tan's higher level of religion achieved through moral cultivation. Such a comparison is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>41</sup> These include virtues, transformation, complex complementarities, varying spiritual and intellectual capacities, authority of impersonal Heaven as ultimate, limits to one's knowledge, importance of self-cultivation for every individual, and most importantly the absence of discussions about the divine and an afterlife.

processes, Legalists in reward and punishment, Mohist in social utility, and Logicians in linguistic analysis. Perhaps not unlike Western theorists during the 19th and 20th centuries, these classical Chinese thinkers moved beyond the rituals themselves and assumed a “kind of cognitive distance” from them and so moved from theological to what Campany describes as “performative ground.” While the widespread attention to the principles for ritual performance over two millennia ago presents intriguing opportunities for inter- and intra-cultural comparisons, we will focus on Confucianism here.

Like Puett, Campany argues that for Xunzi, from “the point of view of the human community, ritual functions to reinforce social hierarchy and maintain social order.” In fact, *Xunzi* points out that “Sacrifice is a great benefaction. When superiors receive some benefit, they then bestow it on those below them. It is just that superiors receive the beneficence first and subordinates receive it later; it is not that superiors accumulate excess while subordinates suffer from cold and hunger.” (Sommer 1995) From this vantage point, “superiors” and “subordinates” are understood primarily in social terms: a deeper equality and sharing of material wealth are assumed. Here, ritual appears to symbolize what we might understand to be something like income redistribution through fair and presumed “trickle-down” economics. That is, “sacrifice” represents an ideal of fair economic allocation of material assets.

In this way, Xunzi tells us that the “rules of ceremony are the embodied expression of what is right. If an observance stands the test of being judged by the standard of what is right, although it may not have been among the usages of the ancient kings, it may be adopted on the ground of its being right.” But what is “right”? What is “right ... makes the distinction between things, and serves to regulate (the expression of) humanity (*ren*) ... Humanity is the root of right, and the embodying of deferential consideration.” Distinction is, therefore, crucial. If it were absent, Xunzi believes, people will fight over goods that are scarce and go to war with each other.

The focus on “natural” social distinction is clearly different from the monotheistic notion that all are equal before God. The hierarchy of superior and subordinate are recognized in tandem with the understanding that the former is obligated to share resources with the latter. That is, “that superiors (are not to) accumulate excess while subordinates suffer from cold and hunger.” If superiors should accumulate excess and let subordinates suffer, then some of the primary ritual functions—the fair distribution of goods, preservation of harmony, and prevention of strife and conflict—would be violated. But not everyone would understand this. In fact, Xunzi was convinced that

Only a sage can fully understand ritual. The sage has a clear understanding of it, the gentleman finds comfort in practicing it, the official takes it as something to be preserved, and the common people accept it as custom. To the gentleman it is the way of being human (*ren dao*); to the common people it is a matter of serving spirits (and ghosts). (Watson 1963)

The Chinese religious universe that is so jam-packed with countless popular movements, sectarian groups, and folk beliefs and practices is likely a result of these assumptions: religious beliefs and practices, old and new alike, need not or perhaps even ought not be reined in because ordinary people cannot help themselves—they will always need or want to believe in the supernatural, as in “serving spirits.” Since sages are understood to be the human originators of ritual that in turn have their “origins in heaven”, it is not surprising that “early Chinese practices involve an explicit attempt to transform the divine into forms that resemble those found in society” in order that they could be more easily absorbed and properly performed (Puett 2013).

The various Confucian theories are thus, as Puett defines them, “explicitly humanistic, but not in a debunking sense.” Rather, they have everything to do with the domestication of “both the human and divine realms” and they are seen as necessary for human society to flourish. As Puett so forcefully attests, “the divine order itself appears to be fully contingent (on a particular local community), and explicitly dependent on the social arrangements that are quite openly seen to be such, and the divine is explicitly seen as being defined by these contingent social relations.” So, if we take Durkheim’s radical insight that “The sacred ... is society in disguised form” and apply this to Xunzi and the

Confucian tradition, Puett asks, “what are we to unmask, if the practices are already explicitly doing what we would want to unmask them doing?” That is, what is there to unmask when ancient theories tell readers openly that Confucian rituals are intended as indirect means to tame human beings by theory and design?<sup>42</sup>

Even as Durkheim and Xunzi seem similar, there are important differences, as both Company and Puett point out. Confucianism recognizes a given-ness (Heaven here for simplicity’s sake) that is beyond human understanding and control. However, an admission and declaration of ignorance, and a willing acquiescence to the limits of our minds do not mean that the divine is abandoned, as both Spickard and Tan clearly demonstrate. For Confucians, therefore, the sacred that is perennially bound up with existential questions is always assumed, and the central challenge lies in finding the best way to live well by oneself and with others given the pattern of nature (Heaven and Earth). Or as Buddhism would have it: we are born, we become sick, we grow old, we suffer and then we die. The challenge of our lives is to understand the essential markers of no-self, impermanence, and unsatisfactoriness and discover ways to transcend the *samsaric* world. As different as this perspective is from the two indigenous Chinese traditions, it has served as complement to Confucianism both on the personal and communal-state levels, and inspiration and standard for Daoism.

### 2.3. Potential Buddhist Contributions to Theory

The struggle to understand and the effort to theorize about the meaning and function of ritual are absent from Buddhism. Buddhist philosophy, nevertheless, has much to contribute toward a theory of religion based on Chinese experiences. As different as Confucian and Buddhist teachings might be, two similarities stand out: self-cultivation and the aspiration to help others—in the “town marketplace” rather than in government, in Buddhism’s case.

From the iconoclastic Meditation (Chan) School, there is the Ox-Herding story which helps to explain some core ideas in Buddhism. The narrative begins with a seeker, the oxherd, who believes that they (the self) and the ox (the “ultimate, undivided reality”)<sup>43</sup> are different and separate. They begin by searching for the ox, see its hoofprints, catch sight of the ox, struggle with it and catch it, tame it with whip and rope, get up onto the ox and head home, abandon whip and rope as rider and ox settle in at ease, then they realize the unity of all things including whip and rope, understand the nature of things as they are, and finally return to the “town marketplace” like an ordinary person but with the extraordinary and profound awareness of things-in-the-world-as-they-are (Koller n.d.).

Koller writes that the ox symbolizes the ultimate, undivided reality, Buddha-nature, which is the ground of all existence. The oxherd in turn symbolizes the self, who initially identifies with the individuated ego, separate from the ox, but who through discipline and with progressive enlightenment, comes to realize the fundamental identity with the ultimate reality which transcends all distinctions. When this happens, the oxherd realizes the ultimacy of all existence and that there is nothing that is not Buddha-nature. For our study here then, the sacred is not different from the mundane. The oxherd—that is, the seeker and religious faithful—now understands the preciousness and profundity of the most ordinary things of life, illuminating ordinary living with his enlightenment.

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<sup>42</sup> Drawing from a personal anecdote is the following story. In the 1950s, in a wealthy, well-educated, Nationalist Party sympathizing, Shanghainese Chinese family in diaspora in Melbourne, the teenaged third daughter asked her father why they should continue to practice ancestor “worship” when it is clearly superstitious and has no scientific basis. Her father replied that the better term to use is not worship but veneration, and that the spirits may not really exist but the ritual is performed out of respect and memory of where you come from.

<sup>43</sup> The Ox-herding pictures are used as metaphor for teaching about the stages of spiritual training through meditation, a disciplining of the mind. This is one part of the traditional three trainings, which also include an adherence to clerical rules for monastics or precepts for laypeople, and the cultivation of insightful wisdom.

In contrast, Fazang (643–712), the influential third patriarch of the Huayan school, approaches the core Sino-Mahayana concepts of emptiness<sup>44</sup> and interpenetration<sup>45</sup> philosophically. His *Treatise on the Golden Lion* illustrates well these Buddhist notions. Fazang teaches that a lion made of gold comes into being because a craftsperson creates it. The lion like the oxherd or seeker is the self, and the gold is Buddha Nature. Each part of the lion is distinct, yet each also establishes the presence of the rest. The gold could of course be melted down, then the form of the lion will no longer exist and only the gold or Buddha Nature will remain. The lion's existence is therefore contingent, but the gold is not. Fazang says that

The lion represents the character of wholeness, and the five organs, being various and different, represent diversity. The fact that they are all of one dependent-arising<sup>46</sup> represents the character of universality. The eyes, ears, and so on remain in their own places and do not interfere with one another; this represents the character of particularity. The combination and convergence of the various organs makes up the lion; this represents the character of formation. The fact that each organ remains at its own position represents the character of disintegration. (Fazang n.d.)

The craftsperson's preconditioned conception of what a lion is, their skill, and the whole and the parts of the sculpture together form the eventual shape of the lion. Applied specifically, one might say that Chan Buddhism arises and takes the form it does because of the presence of Confucianism, Daoism, and other factors like the spiritual needs of human beings who suffer. Fazang continues to say that "when we look at the lion, we see at once that all conditioned things, without going through the process of disintegration, are from the beginning in a state of quiescent non-existence." That is, they do not exist until they come into existence through dependent arising. "By being free from both clinging and detachment, one can . . . comprehend the fact that from the very no-beginning" the lion comes into being from the conditioned origins of many elements including the gold, the craftsperson, and the accepted norms of what a sculpted lion should look like. In this way, misconceptions, misapprehensions, and "all illusions are in reality non-existent." That is, they are all conditioned, subject to the influence of other elements around them. For Fazang and Buddhists, when the interrelated and conditioned nature of all things is realized, that is "Enlightenment."

In the context of a theory of religion, the ideas of emptiness and interpenetration would suggest that religion and secularism co-arise out of ignorance, an erroneous belief that phenomenal elements are separate and independent from each other. This understanding, not unlike Spickard and Tan's assessment of Confucianism's contrastive difference especially from many theories of "hard secularism", would probably lead many Buddhists to view religion and secularism as part of a particular ideological formation, related to and defined by each other. In that sense, both ideas are "empty": that is, lacking in stand-alone, independent meaning and are devoid of universal, definitive, unchanging characteristics. So, if according to Chan, everything is Buddha-nature,<sup>47</sup> there is no need for orthodoxy or to grasp onto "right" belief and practice and hold exclusively to Buddhist teachings. For different reasons then, both Confucianism and Buddhism have accepted other teachings and their interpretations of "reality." They have in the main coexisted easily historically, accepting and contributing to each other's development and along with Daoism, generating many sectarian movements, creating a religious landscape that is markedly different from the monotheist West.

<sup>44</sup> Emptiness refers to two core ideas in Mahayana Buddhism: that all things are composite—that is, made up of different elements; and that they are impermanent—that is, they change over time.

<sup>45</sup> To explain the idea of interpenetration, Fazang is said to have put a statue of a golden lion at the centre of a room with mirrors on all the surfaces, thereby showing the infinite reflections of the form of the lion.

<sup>46</sup> That is, simply put, the lion arises because there is an idea of a lion, the interest in seeing a lion, so when a form of the lion arises, the five organs (among other body parts) are generated as a part of it.

<sup>47</sup> Theravadins do not believe this and not even all Mahayana Buddhists agree. The Faxiang (a branch of Yogacara) school believes that there are people, *icchantikās*, who are so completely devoid of any good roots that they are doomed to eternal *samsaric* existence.

#### 2.4. Potential Daoist Contributions to Theory

Like Buddhism, the struggle to understand and the effort to theorize about the meaning and function of ritual are absent from Daoism too. Like Buddhism, Daoism has much to contribute to potential theories about religion too. The first chapter from the *Daodejing* under the section on “Common Notions in Popular Religiosities” reveals an orientation towards complementarity. This second indigenous Chinese religion,<sup>48</sup> like Confucianism and a sinicized Buddhism, includes an integral component for self-cultivation. But the spiritual adept is not a Confucian sage or *junzi* intent on bringing peace and harmony through government, nor are they a *pusa* or *bodhisattva* (an enlightened being who defers enlightenment to aid others) who ferries suffering beings to liberation; the Daoist Holy Man (and in the *Zhuangzi*, he is a man) is instead described as living far away from human society. His skin is “like ice and snow” and he is “gentle and shy like a young girl.”

He doesn't eat the five grains, but sucks the wind, drinks the dew, climbs up on the clouds and mist, rides a flying dragon, and wanders beyond the four seas. By concentrating his spirit, he can protect creatures from sickness and plague and make the harvest plentiful. (Watson 1968)

There is a fantastic quality to this Holy Man. Zhuangzi mixes magic and mystery into philosophical ruminations and it is difficult to know when he is serious. But like the oxherd, the Daoist sage is careful not to make radical distinctions. In his famous passage on “this” and “that”, Zhuangzi says this about the sage:

Everything has its “that”, everything has its “this”. From the point of view of “that” you cannot see it, but through understanding you can know it . . . [The sage] illuminates all in the light of Heaven. He too recognizes a “this”, but a “this” which is also “that”, a “that” which is also “this”. His “that” has both a right and a wrong in it; his “this” too has both a right and a wrong in it. (Watson 1968)

Resonating with Buddhist emptiness and Daoist complementarity, Thierry Meynard, a Jesuit Sinologist and scholar of philosophy writes that “We should recognize that the boundary between the religious and the secular is not as rigid and absolute as we have thought, but a changing reality in history.” He refers to the Jesuit theologian, Henri Bouillard, who uses the term “holy” to bypass “the binary opposition between religion and secularity” and writes that “the holy is an element of the profane, where the religious human being recognizes the echo of the divine, and by which he expresses his personal relation, as well as the whole profane's relation to the divine.” (Meynard 2005)

A theory that takes seriously Buddhist and Daoist ideas discussed above would easily support Meynard's insight that religion is dynamic and not lived through “a theoretical belief in dogmas but as a life experience in which the divine makes itself manifest.” (Meynard 2005) And if we substitute religion and secularism for “this” and “that”, we find again a natural reasoned preference, as in Confucianism and Buddhism, for understanding the two concepts as related and or embedded in each other. As for Confucianism, Zhuangzi criticizes its positive virtues as “false adornment”. Yet, on one occasion, signaling agreement or perhaps cheeky fellowship, he puts the following words on meditation and self-cultivation into Confucius' mouth:

Make you will one! Don't listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don't listen with your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but spirit is empty and waits on all things. The Way gathers in emptiness<sup>49</sup> alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind. (Watson 1968)

<sup>48</sup> For our purposes here, the focus will be exclusively on Lao-Zhuang or philosophical Daoism that forms one foundational stratum of a boundless complex of multitudinous variations within religious Daoism.

<sup>49</sup> This Daoist emptiness refers to vacuity, like the hollow of a bowl, and is quite different from and not to be confused with the Buddhist emptiness which involves the concepts of no-self and impermanence.

By the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth centuries, religious Daoist schools like Numinous Treasure adopted wholesale Buddhist teachings, institutions, and practices. Daoists took on swaths of “excellent” elements from Buddhism while retaining its prime foci on health and longevity, sharing with Confucianism the ethos proclaimed in the *Liji*, which declared that “what is right, (even though) it may not have been among the usages of the ancient kings . . . may be adopted on the ground of its being right.” In this way of thinking, if a new idea, method of cultivation, or institutional structure could bring succor and joy to people, accepting it is only sensible. If this seems unprincipled and inconsistent, the first two lines of the *Daodejing* offers some insight into the Daoist approach to inter-religious encounter: “The *dao* (way or path) that can be taken or spoken is not the constant *Dao*. The *ming* (name or title) that can be named is not the constant *ming*.” In short, things change. Speaking and naming are human activities that are limited and limiting; even if there were Eternities, The Way or The Name (or Sign) could not be captured in the mortal realm.

### 2.5. Shared Fundamental Pluralism: Assumptions of Difference and Diversity

Like Daoism, Buddhism accepts the plethora of different teachings without resorting to parsing dogma for orthodoxy and heresy, but they explain the diversity of views more instrumentally. In the *Lotus Sutra*, the historical Buddha justifies his inconsistent teachings as “expedient means”; that is, he explains that he tailors them to the nature and capacities of his audiences. To his disciple, the elder Shariputra, he remarks: “Shariputra, you should understand this./The Law of the buddhas is like this./Employing ten thousand, a million expedient means,/they accord with what is appropriate in preaching the Law./Those who are not versed in the matter cannot fully comprehend this./But you and the others already know/how the buddhas, teachers of the world, accord with what is appropriate in employing expedient means (Watson 2002).”

Diversity and perhaps even a conscious pluralism in the historical and contemporary coexistence of institutional, popular sectarian, and folk religiosities<sup>50</sup> are obvious characteristics of the Chinese religious landscapes: all three religions contribute to them albeit in different ways, as described above. All three religions also assume a pre-modern sense of the embeddedness of religion in all facets of life. Xunzi assumes the need for rituals because of wicked human nature and the need for domestication; Laozi’s statement about ineffability assumes an ultimate Way and Zhuangzi’s “this” and “that” assumes that the Way and its attendant Abiding Truth is never one-sided; Buddhism, on the other hand, assumes primordial ignorance and unsatisfactoriness to be so deeply rooted in human beings that it accommodates suffering beings with innumerable teachings. These insights notwithstanding, the disastrous and humiliating encounter with the West beginning from the mid-19th century resulted in wholesale attempts to disestablish religions in mainland China. There were two exceptionally devastating periods of destruction: the first happened during the New Culture Movement in the mid-1910s to 1920s amid the nascent Republican era, and the second during the Cultural Revolution amid the early Communist People’s Republic era. The institutional religions and their syncretized popular and folk derivatives were put under extreme pressure.

### 3. Secularism and Other Theories: Easternization and Westernization?

Current Western theories fit badly and do not explain the Chinese case because of differing assumptions, histories, beliefs, and resulting practices. This mismatch is not in itself a problem: the tendency or ambition to build a determinable universal theory is. On this, Spickard quotes Bill Ashcroft, who states that “Universalism offers a hegemonic view of existence by which the experiences, values, and expectations of a dominant culture are held to be true for all humanity.” Meynard rues the fact that people have, ironically, forgotten that “the process of universalization first happened

<sup>50</sup> This pluralism is especially true of the islands of Taiwan, the Republic of China and Hong Kong. The political ecology makes the situation on the mainland People’s Republic of China more complex.

in the contingencies of an historical encounter between different cultures trying to overcome their differences." He traces the origins of secularization theory back to a Jesuit misreading of Confucianism and its place in Chinese government and opines that "without the Chinese concrete example of a society that was at once both a-religious and virtuous, the Enlightenment could have not imagined such a society ever being possible."<sup>51</sup> Like the French Sinologist, Joël Thoraval to whom he refers, Meynard argues that the secular culture of China made an "important contribution in shaping the modern concept of religion," for China offered to Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire, an example of "a society without a revealed religion and without a church," and in so doing set Western cultures on a path toward secularism and theorizing about secularization. Since secularization theory in part emerged from a misunderstanding of a particular historical situation and was developed specifically in the West, it is unclear to me if its broad universal claims at this time, in its current iteration, can yield reliable data and prognosis.

But strategic scholarship can meet the challenges of incommensurate secularisms and deficient theories. Deeper cross-cultural and inter-cultural understandings of secularity and religiosity in contemporary cultural China should be possible.<sup>52</sup> To this end, Szonyi recommends a theory of Chinese secularization that encourages "placing the history of Chinese religion in the global context of the reinterpretation of religion in response to the globalization of European ideals". He further suggests the analytical categories of "political" and or "civil" religion that emerge out of research by other sinologists<sup>53</sup> who have picked out strands of "millenarianism and exorcism" from Maoism.<sup>54</sup> Szonyi's choice of civil religion is especially interesting: for as with secularization, the idea brings our discussion full circle, back to the missionaries. For it was the Jesuits who created the concept of "civil religion" predicated on an empire or country ruled through non-religious principles and governance. The first generation of Jesuits had astutely observed and understood Chinese rituals to be "naturally religious," but the Dominicans and Franciscans had disagreed and insisted that the rituals were false because they were not Christian. So, to distinguish Chinese practices from the "real" religion of Christianity, the Jesuits compromised and introduced the category of civil religion.

The early Jesuit depiction of the Chinese "social and intellectual elites as secular rationalists" is called into question by Szonyi, who cites recent studies of "religious and ritual dimensions of Confucianism and the state cults and the engagement of the elite with other elements of the religious marketplace"<sup>55</sup> as evidence against the characterization of the traditional Chinese literati and other elite as rational. Whether the elite can properly be described as "secular rationalists", it seems to me, depends on how religion and secularism are defined, which elites were encountered and described, and what social or political occasions they performed in. As an alternative source to historical accounts, participant responses from contemporary interviews<sup>56</sup> conducted with diaspora Chinese in Toronto and Saskatoon suggest that for non-Christians who have had some experience or acquaintance with traditional culture, religious and secular sensibilities are not independent and isolated from each

<sup>51</sup> This is impossible to say. The Chinese society idealized by the Roman Catholic missionaries and Enlightenment thinkers was an imaginary one. The missionaries could very well have invented the idea from some other circumstance. The crucial point is that China was a factor in the conceptual development of secularism and the misunderstanding has relevance in understanding the current place of religion in the world.

<sup>52</sup> "Cultural China" refers to the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China (Taiwan), and the multiple Global Chinese diasporas.

<sup>53</sup> Szonyi includes the works of Geremie Barmé, *Shades of Mao*; Stephan Feuchtwang and Mingming Wang, *Grassroots Charisma: Four Local Leaders in China*; Barend Ter Haar, "China's Inner Demons: the Political Impact of the Demonological Paradigm" in *China Information*; and Zuo Jiping, "Political Religion: The Case of the Cultural Revolution in China" in *Sociological Analysis*.

<sup>54</sup> There has been a long history of millenarianism in political movements encouraged by religious beliefs. Early examples include the Daoist-inspired Heavenly Masters and Yellow Turbans from the Han dynasty; and later examples include the White Lotus and the Taiping rebellions during the Qing. Exorcism is still current in folk practices.

<sup>55</sup> I cannot speak specifically to this as I do not know which studies Szonyi refers to. I would say generally that there are different notions as to who the "elite" are. I believe that Xunzi is speaking about mental and psychological capacities and not what we would call categories of socio-economic class when he describes the four groups. In other words, a very poor scholar or carpenter might be construed as *junzi*, while an extremely wealthy "official" may in fact be a very ordinary person.

<sup>56</sup> The choice of interviewees is the crucial factor here. I look forward to more scholarship on this in the future.

other—they can very easily coexist. (Woo 2010, 2016) To reference Zhuangzi very loosely, “this” and “that” are not merely oppositional complements that only stand side by side, they live in each other.

As for the findings of millenarianism and exorcism in Maoism amid a “secular” Communism, Xunzi appears to have been correct in his assessment of ordinary people and their understanding of the world in terms of ghosts and spirits, and thereby offer a stronger prognosis than theories on secularism; natural, political, and or civil religion; and market and rational choice theories. Szonyi unsurprisingly finds also that core theoretical subjects like differentiation, political supremacy over religion, privatization, and freedom of choice that are postulated to indicate modernity in western theories all find precedence in Chinese history. Further, he finds evidence that contradicts the theory of incremental secularism in the “unexpected” popularity of spiritual practices for the Falungong in the PRC,<sup>57</sup> and the “deprivatization” of religion in Taiwan where religious groups have abandoned the “assigned place in the private sphere and (now enter) the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society” and in the process provides a means through which to criticize the government. Once again, Xunzi’s theory on the function of religion variously interpreted, offers a plausible explanation to the different status and roles of religion for a variety of groups in contemporary Chinese societies.

Both Meynard and Szonyi speak to the profound effect that western concepts about religion, science, and democracy have had on China: one of the most extreme and detrimental case is, of course, the brutal suppression of religion during the Cultural Revolution. Meynard reminds his readers that though the concept of religion “indeed came from the West . . . (it was) as a Western response to Chinese reality.” The moral of the story here seems to be this: the misunderstanding of China—of its religion in this case, by the West and the Chinese themselves, happened from the very beginning four hundred year ago and has continued till the present. So, it is all the more important to remember Szonyi’s insight that

Recognizing that secularization even in its more restrictive forms is a highly contingent process (that is “the very measures themselves turn out on closer analysis to be culturally specific rather than universal”) will shape other debates as well. For example, it becomes evident that it is unproductive to discuss issues such as whether there is religious freedom in China without attending to the historical process through which the notion of religious freedom emerged there (2009).

He continues to say that the PRC’s policy and treatment of religion are “inevitably” evaluated by western analysts through what would be considered the “legitimate exercise of power.” But the mainland government’s measure of legitimacy is not “respect for individual rights” alone, as the prominence of human rights in the West might suggest but includes “the pursuit of nationalism and modernization.” That is, PRC national interests concentrate on freedom from foreign incursion and achievement of a prosperous and stable country. This sounds remarkably like the goals of governance stated by Xunzi. Could be that religion, as predominantly defined by Protestant theorists, is simply not important to the PRC government—just as it has not been central to dynastic China in the way that revealed teachings have been core to much of the experiences, politics and histories of the monotheistic West? If so, are the PRC’s recent policies and actions encouraging religious charity work simply a pragmatic response to the reality of religious development in the country rather than a shift in theoretical perspective? And what does all this mean for a flexible, indeterminate theory of religion?

#### 4. Towards a Sociology of Religion Based on Chinese Experiences

A sociology of religion based on Chinese religious experiences would start from assumptions that are different from monotheistic ones. Here are some. Religion may not always be easily identifiable or

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<sup>57</sup> One magical practice here is the calling on the master to heal one’s illness while meditating on the revolving dharma wheel (*falun*) in one’s abdomen.

valued for its inherent worth even in a nominally religious society. It will not have one sole universal function and may provide calm and refuge for some, a means of comfort and escape for someone else, purpose to another, and instrumental means to yet others. It has been shaped by multiple perspectives, and mental and spiritual competencies, and can refer to a breadth of phenomena that ranges from formal institutions and dogma, to folk religiosities that for example attend only to life cycle rituals and lack permanent structure. It can be used politically within a secular environment or it can be the foundation for government. It can foment rebellions and revolutions against the state, or it can be used to establish a nation. It can be expansive and inclusive, or it can be restrictive and exclusive. It can offer common values and goals and help to foster a stronger community, or it can reinforce questionable and irrational ideas and practices and bring disintegration.

Approaches to understanding religion using Chinese experience would acknowledge important insights and contributions made by both indigenous and western, and classical and contemporary theorists. Like Chinese Religion(s) itself, such theories would likely seem unorganized and they would probably be syncretic. They would recognize differences in human nature, capacity, and capability which necessarily infer different interpretations, varying functions, divergent organizational structures, dynamic historical conditions, which must lead to diversity and pluralism, then reactive homogeneity, then back, and back again, yielding imperishability. One analysis using secularization theory, for example, might see the PRC as a hard-secular state to start, one that comes out of what Szonyi describes as, by referencing Partha Chatterjee, “an exemplar of . . . the derivative discourse of anti-colonial nationalism.”<sup>58</sup> Its operative stance is derived from the western discourse on secularization which seeks to banish religion because its total absence would be construed as a mark of modernity and cultural superiority. Associated with this is a belief that Tan labels as “vituperative atheism”, which would in part explain the horrendous brutality and violence that was unleashed during the Cultural Revolution. But the theorist might go on to say that because of the persistence in religion, the PRC is now transitioning into a soft(er) secularism that tolerates and even happily accepts charity-performing religious communities,<sup>59</sup> particularly from the five officially recognized religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam). Nevertheless, the state will continue to prosecute and persecute separatist, terrorist, political Islam and try to “re-educate” benighted Muslims to the better, more rational core socialist principles.

Just as easily, another theorist could see the apparatchiks of the Communist Party of China (CPC) as priests, and the party itself as the church of a political or civil religion, with the core socialist principles as shared common “religious” values. Such an interpretation would see the five religions as coexistent but secondary to state institutions and values, as they remain potential competitors with divergent visions of what utopia might look like. This is not unlike the position that Buddhism and Daoism have occupied over much of history in relation to state Confucianism. Liang Yongjia argues that the Chinese state has never been secular<sup>60</sup> and that “For more than two millennia, the core ideological conviction shaping and buttressing imperial governance also direct correlatively the purpose and process to regulate, control, and exploit all rivalry (sic) religious traditions whenever it is deemed feasible and beneficial to the state.” (Liang 2014). Both Cao Nanlai (Cao 2018) and Laliberté (2012, 2015) agree with Liang’s assessment that the current PRC policies and actions follow the traditional “state lead/religion follow” model. It might be said that this supremacy of the Confucian state over other religions was likely the aspect that the Jesuits observed. Secularization theory and secularism appears, therefore, to have led us in a circle back to traditional conventions, reminding us

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<sup>58</sup> While this is true, the Chinese example is odd in that it is unlike the mainstream Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist nationalisms as the Chinese mainland abandoned its own religious traditions and adopted instead Communism, a foreign ideology. However, one might argue, like Liang, Cai, and Laliberté, that the current policies and implementation mark a distinctive continuation of traditional norms and values.

<sup>59</sup> See Laliberté (2015) on the Taiwanese Buddhist group, Cizi (Tzu Chi or Buddhist Compassion Relief).

<sup>60</sup> We still encounter here the issue of definition. If we take seriously Xunzi’s theory, then Confucianism, as Tan and Spickard insightfully identify, is neither simply religious nor secular—the categories are not theoretically helpful.

of Meynard's remark that secularism originated from a Western attempt to understand China. Here, Xunzi's theory could easily be employed to explain or justify state supremacy and the use of a religious hierarchy and celebratory pageantry for the end of harmony. Most importantly, in such a system, the primary allegiance of citizens and religious groups must be to the state civil religion; and religious communities especially would be required to conform to the laws of the church of the CPC. When framed as such, the PRC could be understood as practicing Bellah's civil religion, wherein the state is sacralized though without sharing Bellah's values, and not in the way elucidated by Xunzi.

These are just two possible readings of the current PRC situation in which religion finds itself. In short, a general Chinese theory of religion would be a flexible one that embraces many specific sub-theories and anticipates transitions and transformations, without the expectation of one eternal unchanging universal theory that is ultimately indeterminate.

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