Religion in China

By Bob Whyte (Source: http://www.sacu.org/religion.html)

It has often been said that the Chinese are not deeply religious. It is true that they have shown a comparative indifference to metaphysical speculation; Chinese culture was perhaps the first to develop an intellectual scepticism concerning the gods.

Attempts to manipulate the forces which shape the human and natural worlds have been a key element in all China's religious traditions. This is manifested in a complex mix of religious, superstitious and magical beliefs and practices. Popular religion has always been dismissed as 'superstition' by the intelligentsia, particularly Marxists. Yet the various folk traditions in the religion of the rural masses have a comparable preoccupation with this worldly concerns, expressed in earthbound beliefs in the gods of the family and the soil.

In their different ways most Chinese have shown themselves to be concerned primarily with the human person and society. In a predominantly rural country, this has manifested itself in a concern for the land and its prosperity. Thus religious practice has been closely linked with the question of the ownership of the land.

Persistent beliefs

The communist revolution sought to break these ancient connections, but with limited success. While the power of the clan or lineage has declined, the family has remained the focus of production. The rural reforms of recent years have reinforced this. Despite all attempts at reeducation by the Communist Party the family cult associated with Confucianism and popular religion still flourishes throughout the countryside, as do so-called 'superstitious practices'.

Peasants saw no contradiction in attending both Buddhist and Daoist worship, nor in incorporating a diversity of gods into the local pantheon. The Confucian state, dominated by Confucian thinking, was generally tolerant of the various religions that contended for the hearts and minds of the people, and other religions were allowed to flourish provided they did not challenge the fundamental Confucian order. Both Buddhism and Daoism inspired heterodox religious systems, and from time to time these broke out in social rebellions, leading to state intervention and attempted suppression.

Confucianism

Confucius (Kong Zi) lived from 551 to 479 BC in the state of Lu (in modem Shandong province). He came from a family of officials and his concern was with the restoration of the Way (Dao) of the ancient sages. His teaching was therefore related mainly to society and its government. He advocated strict conformity, and thought that fostering correct behaviour, within the context of the family, would produce an ordered society. He was not particularly interested in religion, except insofar as it related to social life.

However, in 59 AD during the Han dynasty, it was decreed that sacrifice should be made to Confucius and this began a process which was to make Confucian philosophy into the foundation of the Chinese political order. Confucius himself had only accepted the legitimacy of sacrifice to one's

own ancestors, but from now on an official Confucian cult emerged, with its own temples. It gradually became linked with the state cult of the Emperor.

From the fifth century AD Confucian orthodoxy retreated before the popularity of Buddhism and Daoism. But a renaissance came during the Song dynasty when Confucianism responded to the challenge and developed its own metaphysics. This new trend is known as Neo-confucianism, and its main exponent was Zhu Xi (1130-1200). It subsequently became the main orthodoxy of the scholar officials until the demise of the imperial system in 1912.

In contemporary China, the Confucian cult has disappeared, but the Confucian approach to government and society retains a powerful hold on many people.

Lao Zi founder of DaoismDaoism (Taoism)

The origins of Daoism are obscure, but it is first seen as a rival to Confucianism. The teachings of early Taoism are ascribed to Lao Zi (Lao Tze) in the fifth century BC who is the reputed author of the most influential Taoist text, the Dao De Jing (The Way and its Power). Where the Confucian stressed ethical action, the Taoist spoke of the virtue of Wu Wei (non-action), going with the flow of things.

Like the Confucianists, Daoists looked back to a golden age. The good ruler, they thought, guided his people with humility, not seeking to interfere with the rhythms of social life conducted within the larger patterns of the natural world and the whole cosmos.

The Daoist adept was concerned to achieve 'immortality', seen as transmuted earthly existence. This led to the development of alchemy and to methods of meditation aimed at reaching material immortality.

As time passed Daoism found itself in direct competition with the foreign teachings of Buddhism. It borrowed Buddhist practices and also drew on folk religious traditions to create its own religious form and ethos. It secured an essential place in popular religious life, but in this form it has ceased to bear much resemblance to the philosophical precepts of the early teachers. The earlier, more philosophical Daoism has continued to inspire Chinese painters and poets through the ages and its teachings appealed to many a scholar official who adhered to a strictly Confucian ethic in public life.

Buddhism

Buddhism is the only foreign religion that has been widely accepted in China. It first entered China in the second century AD and by the Tang dynasty was the most dynamic and influential of all religions. However, its very success led to a severe curtailment of its activities in the late Tang, since officials began to see its power as a threat, both to their own power and to the order and prosperity of society. After this it remained an important element in Chinese life, but took its place alongside Daoism and a revitalised Confucianism.

Both Confucian and Daoist teaching were 'non-dualistic' - matter and spirit formed a continuum within a cosmos that was self-generating and impersonal. Buddhism, however, taught a radical dualism. Through a long process of adaptation, various Chinese schools emerged such as Chan (Zen)

and the Pure Land school, which were far more congenial to traditional Chinese thought. Zen, with its meditative techniques, and Pure Land with its stress on faith in the Amitabha Buddha as the way to salvation, became the dominant forms of Chinese Buddhism. These teachings with their focus on sudden enlightenment and on salvation through grace rather than through ascetic practices appealed to many ordinary Chinese.

Buddhism today continues as an important force in some parts of the country. The extent of its influence is unclear, but it remains a key component in village religion. Temples and monasteries are reopening in many places and new monks and nuns are in training.

Islam

Islam first came to China in the seventh century AD (during the Tang dynasty). It was brought by Arab traders to the ports on the South-East coast and by Arab traders and soldiers to the North-West. It remains the religion of minorities to this day.

In later centuries many of the various nationalities in the North and North-West converted to Islam from Buddhism and Nestorianism and as these peoples were incorporated into China during the Qing dynasty, China acquired a sizeable Muslim population. Meanwhile male Muslim settlers from the Middle East married Chinese women but retained their distinctive customs. Thus the community was formed which came to be known as the Hui people, who have since also settled in other parts of China, along trade routes and in major cities, even as far as Yunnan and Lhasa.

There are perhaps as many as 15 million Muslims in China today, of whom over seven million are Hui. Politically, Islam is important both because China seeks good relations with Muslim countries and because the non-Hui Muslims live in strategically sensitive border areas.

Almost all Chinese Muslims are Sunni, but there has been considerable influence by Sufi brotherhoods in the past 200 years. Historically there has been little persecution of Islam. But there have been serious 'Muslim' rebellions in the North-West in the last century which were responsible for untold loss of life, though the issues at stake were national autonomy rather than religion.

Christianity

Christian missionaries arrived overland from Persia in the seventh century. The so-called Nestorian Church that grew up around the foreign communities in the larger cities did not survive the demise of the Tang dynasty.

Under the Mongol dynasties in China, both Nestorian and Roman Catholic churches were established, but serving the Mongols rather than the native Chinese. It was only with the arrival of the Jesuit Matteo Ricci in 1588 that Christianity made an impact on a small but significant group of Chinese. Qing Emperor Kang Xi's edict of 1721 banning Christianity did not eliminate Christianity, and when the missionaries returned in force in the mid- 19th century they found surviving Catholic communities.

For the first time Protestants also sought to establish churches. All foreign missionaries in this period were linked to the imperialist 'opening up' of China and therefore Christianity was rejected as a foreign religion by many.

The Liberation of 1949, while producing an enormous crisis in the church, also provoked a rethink which led, in the 1970s and 1980s, to a quite unexpected resurgence of Christianity. Today there are probably around 10 million Christians in China. Most significantly, the Christian community is free of foreign control and is increasingly accepted as a Chinese religion.

Popular folk religion

Village religion continues to flourish, although not necessarily retaining all the old forms. The family cult related to ancestors and to family events such as birth, marriage and death, is central. Families will use elements from Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism since none of these makes claims of exclusivity. There is much semi-magical and superstitious belief mixed in with more overtly religious elements. Without doubt, folk religion is in transition as it adapts to the challenges of Marxism, modernization and, in some areas, Christianity. Nevertheless, the rather limited evidence that exists suggests that while some things such as clan temples are disappearing, other elements are surviving and have perhaps even experienced a revival in recent years.

Broader sense of spirituality

The importance of religion in the history of China is greater than it appears at first sight. At the same time, it is true that Chinese people have not tended to express their awareness of the spiritual through the formulation of dogmas and through metaphysical speculations. To this extent at least, the view of China as a society uninterested in religion contains a degree of truth. But this perspective is based on a 'narrow understanding of religion'. Chinese people are no less concerned with ultimate questions of human life and destiny than any other people, but because their mode of expression has been so different from that of European culture, their way of asking these questions has not easily been subsumed under western definitions of 'religion'.

Chinese spirituality has been expressed through painting and poetry, through a sense of unity with the cosmos and the world of nature. To understand the Chinese religious response to life one must first understand what has inspired the greatest Chinese artists; only then will one discover that sense of 'awe' that is at the heart of an authentic religious response.

Buddhist and Daoist influence on art and poetry has been immense and through this they have entered the mainstream of Chinese tradition. It is a tradition that is profoundly ethical, but sees human beings in relationship to each other and to the cosmos. It is organic and dynamic. It understands the importance of people within the family and society.

If this religion is bound to this earth then this may be because it has recognised the impoverishment of both the mechanistic materialist and the idealist understandings of reality. Chinese perspectives may well have much to offer in a world no longer satisfied with the supposed certainties of the Enlightenment.

See also: A guide to religious concepts in China (http://www.sacu.org/religion2.html)