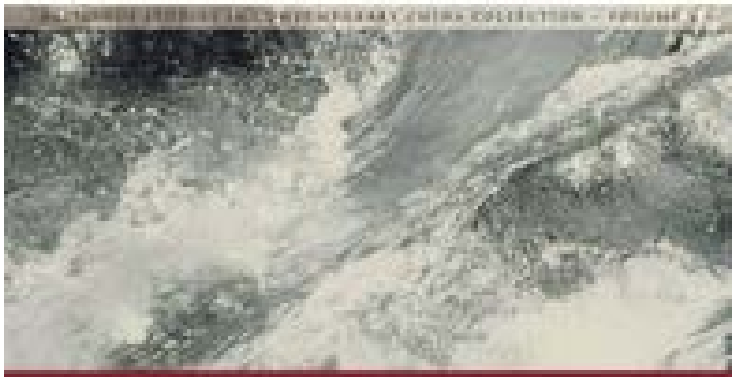
Marxism and Religion



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BRILL

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Opiate of the Masses with Chinese Characteristics: Recent Chinese Scholarship on the Meaning and Future of Religion*

Thomas David DuBois (杜博思) *and Chi Zhen* (池桢)

Along with the revival of religion itself, China since the 1980s has seen a flowering of theoretical scholarship about the nature of religion, its role in society, and its ultimate fate under socialism. This sort of scholarship divides into themes and schools. The field of religious studies, which is grounded in various branches of the social sciences, has only recently emerged as a discipline in its own right. This field is small but growing, albeit slowly. It stands in stark contrast to Marxist or Marxist-Leninist theory, the study of which continues to occupy a place of prominence in universities and research institutes nationwide, and which also has much to say about the essential features of religion.

This collection draws on essays from *Religious Studies Theory* (*Zongjiaoxue lilun*) and *Marxist Approaches to Religion and Issues in Chinese Contemporary Religion* (*Makesi zhuyi zongjiao guan yu dangdai Zhongguo zongjiao*), two volumes in the series "Highlights of Contemporary Chinese Religion Research" (*Dangdai Zhongguo zongjiao yanjiu jingxuan congshu*), originally published by Minzu Press in 2008. On its own, each of the original volumes comprises a survey of the state of the field as it is practiced at a particular level in China. Together, they provide insight into how these two perspectives relate to each other, the changing landscape of ideas about religion and Marxism themselves, and the role that this very particular sphere of high-level scholarship might play in the formation and promotion of government policy.

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Marxist Theory and the Study of Religion

A cursory reading of current trends in China would give the impression that the rise of religion is a direct consequence of Marxism's increasingly apparent irrelevance. It is not difficult to see the two as directly opposing forces, particularly given the truism that political Marxism itself bears at least a *phenomenological* resemblance to religion.[1] Even without taking the phenomenon of popular worship of Mao Zedong himself into account, the mass extremism of the 1960s and 70s seemed to tick all of the boxes that identify religion: the prominence of a divine figure and orthodoxy of text, as well as rituals of purity, obeisance, and belonging.[2] Leaving aside the very problematic question of what properly constitutes religion, many observers have linked the recent resurgence of religion in China to the social dislocation created by three decades of market reforms, and specifically the ideological and spiritual vacuum created by the decline of Marxism as a guiding social force.[3] Given these circumstances, it would be easy to assume a fundamental incompatibility between these two scholarly worlds, with intellectual growth in the field of religious studies coming at the expense of a moribund Marxism; one might even be tempted to view scholarly attention towards religion as a realm of relative autonomy, if not resistance.[4]

Yet the relationship between religious studies and Marxism is not simply a matter of one totalizing ideology replacing another. The recently deceased

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1 The question of Marxism as religion has been taken up by generations of scholars. One of the better-known examinations is to be found in Trevor Ling, *Karl Marx and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

2 Regarding the ritual life of Communist figures, see Adam Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 47, 51. Recent fieldwork by Yu Luo Rioux introduces the phenomena of ritual attendance of Mao's spirit, and of pilgrimage to sites of revolutionary significance, in an unprecedented level of detail. Yu Luo Rioux, *Marketing the Revolution: Tourism, Landscape and Ideology in China* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Colorado at Boulder, 2007), especially pp. 397–404. The pitfalls of viewing Marxism as a surrogate religion are taken up by a number of the authors referenced here, notably by Gong Xuezeng and Arif Dirlik.

3 Rioux makes this point repeatedly. Others have done so with respect to the recent emergence of patriotic education campaigns. See, for example, John Kennedy, "Maintaining Popular Support for the Chinese Communist Party: The Influence of Education and the State-Controlled Media," *Political Studies* 57.3 (2009): 517–536; Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

4 It is somewhat ironic in the context of this volume that the idea of religion as a locus of ideological resistance itself derives from the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Dwight B. Billings, "Religion as Opposition: A Gramscian Analysis," *American Journal of Sociology* 96.1 (1990): 1–31.

scholar Lü Daji (吕大吉) not only edited both of the Chinese volumes from which this collection draws, but contributed a substantive article to each one, confirming that it is possible to remain conversant in both approaches without being torn asunder ideologically. More generally, the two approaches coexist because they address the same questions, albeit from different directions. As a purely theoretical discipline, religious studies seeks to uncover the nature, mechanisms, and functions of religion, in a way that may touch upon theology but remains distinct from it. As an ideological system, Marxism is premised on the transformation of belief and consciousness, which will necessarily prompt a certain resemblance to religion, and in any case it views the development of religion within society as a fundamental historical process. As purely academic concerns, the two approaches are equally interested in uncovering the nature of religion itself, and of the place of religion within a larger framework of social evolution. They make natural, if not necessarily amiable conversation partners.

Moreover, the two fields as they are represented in this volume share a number of practical realities. Each draws from the highest level of China's academic elite, most of whom spent careers crossing paths with each other in a variety of scholarly and official capacities. Both fields adhere to similar political contours, and in their development they followed the same timeline of events that shaped the transformation of perspectives on religion, as well as on ideology more broadly. These constraints are particularly evident in the sort of scholarship that makes its way into the top tier of academic journals, and thus into these two volumes. As members of the scholarly and political elite, the authors themselves necessarily present only a very selective view of a much larger field. But that is by no means to say that this scholarship is simply a restatement of or propaganda for political orthodoxy. While these articles, the earliest of which go back to the early 1990s, do demonstrate the changing scope of what subjects may be addressed in scholarly debate, they also highlight those topics that are of particular interest to Chinese scholars, a dynamic that in many ways exists independent of political necessity. This is true for the burgeoning discipline of religious studies, which must necessarily react to the rapidly changing central policy towards religion in China. It is even more true for Marxist scholarship (of which this work on religion is a relatively small subset), which is itself part of a constant and ongoing process of retroactively recreating the entire narrative of the Chinese revolution.[5] The links between these two types of scholarship is evident in their chronology, which reveals parallel developments

[5] Arif Dirlik, "The Discourse of 'Chinese Marxism,'" in *Modern Chinese Religion: Value Systems in Transformation, 1850–Present*, ed. Vincent Goossaert, Jan Kiely, and John Lagerwey (Leiden and Boston: Brill, forthcoming).

in both fields. Contrary perhaps to expectations, in neither one are the changes easily characterized by something as simple as greater or lesser permissiveness on the part of state censors.

Religious Studies

While the study of religion has a very long history in China, the Western discipline of religious studies is fairly new and somewhat rudimentary. By religious studies, we mean the discipline as a self-identified, distinct subfield of the humanities and social sciences, one with its own theoretical perspectives and debates, as well as its own institutional identity in terms of scholarly centers and publications. The study of religion was of course part of the theological and social science training available in China before 1949, but that particular channel of inquiry was narrowed and eventually cut off during the first decades of the People's Republic. While the study of religion continued into the 1950s, the concerns of the field moved in a starkly different direction, and by the mid-1960s had disappeared altogether. It was only with the change in religion policy during the late 1970s that religion and religious studies made their current scholarly comeback. In a thirty-year retrospective of the field, He Guanghu shows the significant growth in the field from nearly nothing to its present state of about 800 scholars, but emphasizes that on the whole religious studies remains little more than a drop in a vast ocean, and that the field as a whole continues to face significant external pressures in everything from publishing to academic employment.[6]

In this context, the two decades of religious studies scholarship represented in this volume are the record of a field struggling to carve out an identity. This duality of purpose is evident in each of the book's chapters, beginning with editor Lü Daji's 1998 overview of the field of religious studies as it developed in Europe. The article focuses primarily on the intellectual transformation of the field during the second half of the nineteenth century, showing how the evolution of the discipline kept pace with the major milestones of Western thought. While of value as a work of intellectual history, the article speaks most directly to scholars of religious studies. Lü's goal is to make the Western discipline, at this point still somewhat alien to China, intelligible to Chinese scholars, precisely so that China can create its own school of religious studies thought. That

[6] He Guanghu, "Thirty Years of Religious Studies in China," in *Social Scientific Studies of Religion in China: Methodologies, Theories, and Findings*, ed. Fenggang Yang and Graeme Lang (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), pp. 23–46.

said, the article reveals little indication of what a Chinese approach to religious studies might actually entail, or how a distinctly Chinese school might develop. Lü maintains a distance from each of the thinkers and their ideas, with the single exception of his lengthy plea for his fellow scholars to dispense with the fetishization of Marx and Engels. In a theme that would reoccur during the subsequent decade, Lü passionately decries textual fundamentalism and advocates frank and creative discussion of the classical canon precisely in order to adapt the spirit and essence of Marxism to a changing world.[7]

The second chapter, taken from an article by Zhuo Xinping (卓新平) in the following year, echoed Lü's expansive view while espousing an approach that was both more theological and more overtly grounded in Chinese thought. For this piece, Zhuo mined the Chinese classics both for evidence of religion as an evolving historical institution, and for Chinese ideas of the nature of divinity. Zhuo's article is remarkable both for its ambition to tackle big themes, and for the rather striking absence of the tools that would have been necessary to do so. On the one hand, the vast conceptual ambition of the article prevented Zhuo from going into depth, but more fundamentally, his eagerness to demonstrate that China had its own answers to the great questions of religious studies forces Zhuo to rely upon modern concepts and terminology, through which he retroactively analyzes his sources. Like Lü, Zhuo is content to end his article without much in the way of conclusions. His one caution is for fellow scholars to be aware of the inherent complexity of religion, in particular to separate religious belief from its social manifestations, and to understand that there may be good and bad woven into each. Like Lü's call to defetishize Marx, this idea may appear somewhat innocuous in retrospect, but it carried a great deal of political significance at the time the essay was first published.[8]

Within a few years, the contours of the discipline had already become much clearer. In a chapter that was first published in 2006, Jin Ze (金泽) builds an overtly instrumentalist argument that China must harness religion to its own advantage. Jin begins with the reality that religion is growing globally, as well

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7 Lü Daji 吕大吉, "Cong dui jindai xifang zongjiaoxue fazhan de shensi tantao zongjiaoxue de xingzhi he neirong goucheng" 从对近代西方宗教学发展的审思探讨宗教学的性质和内容构成 [The nature and substance of the study of religion: A critical perspective from the development of modern Western religious studies], in *Zongjiao xue tonglun xinbian* 宗教学通论新编 [A new introduction to religious studies], ed. Lü Daji (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1998).

8 Zhuo Xinping 卓新平, "Zhongguo dangdai zongjiao lilun" 中国当代宗教理论 [Theories of religion in Contemporary China], in *Zongjiao lijie* [Understanding religion] 宗教理解, ed. Zhuo Xinping (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 1999).

as in China, particularly among ethnic minorities. This reality presents a certain risk, but the threat is not religion as such. In response to an earlier view that religion was by definition a threat to China's security, Jin presents religion as an opportunity, and thus advocates approaching it with a scalpel rather than a sledgehammer. He slices religion into distinct social and political "orientations," each of which has positive and negative potential, and cautions that compressing all of these manifestations into a single phenomenon not only runs the risk of offending believers at home and abroad, but also sacrifices opportunities to use religion's positive potential to build social cohesion and values, as well as to strengthen ties with China's neighbors. Like Lü, Jin takes pains to play down the novelty of his stance, emphasizing that this approach is not merely reconcilable with Marxist historical materialism, but that it is in fact the correct interpretation of Marx.[9]

Li Xiangping's (李向平) ambitious chapter attempts nothing less than a sociology of religion in China, and begins by taking aim at the model of adversarial civil society, one that holds up organized religion as a check on state power. Li hearkens to the debate, which played out in the journal *Modern China* during the 1990s, over whether civil society existed historically in China, and echoes that debate's ultimate conclusion that the idea of civil society is simply a poor fit. Li prefers instead to view religion through the Chinese concepts of *gong* 公 and *si* 私, which loosely translate as "public" and "private," but without the connotation of antagonism implied in the civil society thesis. He further qualifies this idea by stating that Chinese religion is not precisely public, but communal, although it is increasingly centering around discrete social "units" (单位 *danwei*). Returning, as much scholarship in this field does, to policy principles, Li compares religions to NGOs (a comparison that Jin Ze rejects) and advocates a political approach to religion that is neither public nor private, and thus neither controls religion, nor relinquishes control entirely.[10]

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9 Jin Ze 金泽, "Quanmian yanjiu zongjiao zai wenhua fazhan zhanlüe zhong de diwei yu zuoyong" 全面研究宗教在文化发展战略中的地位与作用 [An overall inquiry into the role religion plays in the strategy of cultural development], *Zhexue yanjiu* 哲学研究 [Philosophy research] 12 (2006): 31–36. [Translator's note: The original title in Chinese is "Hexie shehui jiangou yu zongjiao yanjiu 和谐社会建构与宗教研究" (The Creation of Harmonious Society and Religious Studies).]

10 Li Xiangping 李向平, "Zongjiao shehuixing ji qi biaoda—Zhongguo zongjiao shehuixue de jiben mingti" 宗教社会性及其表达——中国宗教社会学的基本命题 [The social dimension of religion and its representation: A fundamental thesis of Chinese sociology of religion], in *Zongjiaoxue lilun* 宗教学理论 [Theories of Religious Study], ed. Lü Daiji (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2008), pp. 129–163.

The revival of religion, both in China and globally, also presented a moment of crisis. A tradition of Chinese scholarship continued to view religion primarily as a threat, not merely because of the actions of the believers themselves, but because of the weaknesses that religion revealed within society. In a variety of ways, Chinese scholars of this period sought to externalize the reasons behind the rise in religion. One example is Gao Shining's (高师宁) 1999 discussion of new religious movements (NRMs). Like the previous two articles, Gao begins by enumerating the sources of social dislocation, explaining why these lead to a rise in NRMs. However, while contemporaries were beginning to emphasize both positive and negative aspects of religious belief and religious belonging, Gao treats the rise of NRMs as a kind of social pathology. The examples she raises, including those of Heaven's Gate, Aum Shinrikyo, and Jim Jones's People's Temple all fall under what the Chinese government would officially classify as cults, particularly in the heat of the campaign to eradicate Falungong.[11] In an essay originally published in 2003, He Qimin (何其敏) took a slightly gentler approach, outlining the complexities that transformed both China and the world over the previous two decades, and the variety of religious responses they elicited. Among these, she distinguishes three types: secularization, fundamentalism, or innovation, which in this context refers specifically to the development of New Religious Movements.[12] Unlike Gao, however, He is more willing to concede positive and negative aspects among each type of response. A few years later, Wang Xiaochao (王晓朝) took a comparable approach. Again leaning towards the negative, Wang explained the revival of religion in China as the confluence of numerous external factors, including general social transformation and a low level of education that leaves people susceptible to manipulation.[13] One of these many factors, that of social contradictions, is worth noting and will feature prominently in the subsequent section.

This quick sprint through twenty years of religious studies reveals certain trends. The most obvious is the surprising absence of politically prominent

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11 Gao Shining 高师宁, "Shilun xiandaihua yu xinxing zongjiao de guanxi" 试论现代化与新兴宗教的关系 [A tentative analysis of the relationship between modernization and new religion], *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 世界宗教研究 [Studies in world religions] 4 (1999).

12 He Qimin 何其敏, "Xiandai shehui de fazhan he zongjiao de yanbian" 现代社会的发展和宗教的演变 [The development of modern society and the evolution of religion], in *Zongjiaoxue gangyao* 宗教学纲要 [Introduction to religious studies], ed. Lü Daji (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003).

13 Wang Xiaochao 王晓朝 "Guanyu quanqiu zongjiao fuxing de lilun fenxi yu sikao" 关于全球宗教复兴的理论分析与思考 [A theoretical examination of and reflection on the global revival of religion], in *Zongjiaoxue lilun*, ed. Lü Daji, pp. 311–325.

topics. Neither the Dalai Lama nor Falungong are mentioned in any of the articles. The allusions are certainly unmistakable, in references respectively to ethnic separatism and cults (and to a certain extent, NRMs), but the fact that six prominent articles on the place of religion in China all manage to avoid naming the government's two most conspicuous villains does speak to the very real constraints under which this work was conducted. Another less obvious omission is that of superstition as a foil to religion. Superstition has a long career as the bugbear of Chinese intellectuals, one that reaches back to before 1949, when the difference between legitimate, progressive beliefs and those old beliefs that deserved to be discarded or eradicated was boiled down to that between two newly minted concepts: religion and superstition, respectively. Early attempts at social engineering through the fiat-mandated transformation of religion took this difference very seriously. The Republican government not only outlawed divination, spirit writing, and the use of shamanistic rituals in funerals and healing, it took the "poison of popular superstition" seriously enough to give the term a legal definition in an addendum to its own code.[14] Yet it appears to have disappeared here. Superstition is mentioned, but only in the context of historical quotations: at least for these scholars, the term has lost its conceptual currency.

Moving past these easy points, we can look at what these articles actually do say. In different ways, and with different degrees of emphasis, each of the articles addresses the same three questions: the nature of religion, the reasons behind its recent resurgence, and the role religion does and should play in society. Some take a global perspective, others focus specifically on China, but all of the articles aim at the same very ambitious goal of making a coherent and comprehensive statement about the essential nature of religion. In doing so, they are all forced to remain at a very high level of abstraction. This is perhaps to be expected from work that is conceived in theoretical and disciplinary terms, and many of the same authors do write very differently in their more specialized work on the histories of religion in China and Europe. Nevertheless, the paucity of detail ultimately weakens complex arguments, and moreover pushes the authors towards overly simplistic and essentialist explanations.

It also blurs the lines between the place of the author as an examiner of social trends and as the voice of an aspirational ideal. Each of the authors represented here advocates not merely an understanding of how religion operates

14 *Shenci cunfei biaozhun* 神祠存废标准 [Standards for the preservation or eradication of gods], promulgated 1928. Text in *Zhonghua minguo fagui huibian: Neizheng* 中华民国法规汇编：内政 [Compiled laws and regulations of the Republic of China: Internal administration], vol. 3 (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1933), pp. 806–814.

in society, but also a vision of how it should or should not develop. Certain of the pieces lean very overtly in the latter direction. This is not necessarily a criticism, particularly given that most of these authors also operate with one foot in the political realm. However, it does give us reason to observe all the more closely subtle changes in attitude and advocacy, of which two deserve mention. Comparing the papers over time, those written after the year 2000 are more confident in asserting the positive benefits of religion, and tend to take for granted the separation of religion into personal belief and social manifestations. To appreciate the significance of these changes, we now turn our attention to the section on Marxism.

Marxist Perspectives on Religion

The Chinese volume from which this section derives was edited jointly by Lü Daji and Gong Xuezeng (龚学增), and here again the editors provide the intellectual anchor for further exploration of the field. Lü again begins by looking backwards. As if in answer to the expectation that Marxist scholarship would have devolved into a *pro forma* propaganda exercise, Lü's 1994 historical overview of Marxist perspectives on religion already suggests that it is this section that will support the more ideologically ambitious agenda.[15] In this article, Lü focuses on the early years of Marx and Engels's intellectual development, tracing their transformation from students of Christian theology to the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848. Lü emphasizes that the root of this transformation was not disaffection with religion as such, but rather the logical imperatives of the shift from Hegelian idealism to the materialism inspired by Feuerbach. In this view, materialist relations are the foundation of society, of which man is a product. Material reality thus produces religion as a symptom of its own contradictions, not merely as a social construct, but also as a product and reflection of the inner estrangement that man feels as a result of his material condition. This portrayal shows religion as an inner crisis, rather than an external conspiracy, and lends new significance to the idea of religion as the "opium of the masses" (a phrase that would be subject to repeated

15 Lü Daji, "Gaishuo Makesi, Engesi lishi weiwu zhuyi zongjiao guan de jiben lilun yu lishi fazhan" 概说马克思、恩格斯历史唯物主义宗教观的基本理论与历史发展 [An outline of the basic theories and development of Marx and Engels's historical-materialist view of religion], in Lü Daji, *Xifang zongjiao xueshuo shi* 西方宗教学说史 [A historical sketch of Western theories of religion] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1994).

reinterpretation over subsequent decades), one that is more profound even than the usual interpretation of religion as an externally generated lie perpetrated to keep the lower classes quiescent.[16]

At the same time, Lü uses the opportunity to repeat his call for scholars to open the Marxist canon to critical examination. By separately tracing the development of Marx and Engels's ideas, as well as emphasizing the points of difference between them, Lü underscores the point that both men were products of their time and so their ideas must be continually reviewed and updated in order to retain their relevance. Here Lü is speaking both to policy, as well as to China's history of Marxist fetishization which, at the time this article was first published, was not such a distant memory.

Lü's article is very much in the spirit of China's early reform era. In conjunction with his signature economic reforms, Deng Xiaoping had firmly established the idea that China must adapt Marxism to a new era. Social reforms would be more sporadic, but did include a radical reevaluation of religion. This new policy was outlined in the 1982 "Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period" (*Guanyu woguo shehui zhuyi shiqi zongjiao wenti de jiben guandian he jiben zhengce* 关于我国社会主义时期宗教问题的基本观点和基本政策, also known more simply as Document 19), which departs from an earlier orthodoxy by stating that religion can be a socially progressive force. Its provisions include support for patriotic churches and an elaboration of religious rights, most notably a categorical defense of the right to personal religious belief or disbelief. Although under the new policy, religious organizations would remain subject to significant scrutiny (the patriotic churches were placed under the newly created Bureau of Religious Affairs, and were prevented from engaging in political activity or receiving foreign funds, among much else), they would nevertheless be allowed to operate legally, and would see the return of property seized over the course of previous years. As an ideological justification of the change in policy, Document 19 explained that religion neither could nor should be destroyed by fiat, a point that Lü underscores in his reiteration of the disastrous effects decades of such policies had created in the former Soviet Union. But even as Lü echoes the spirit of Document 19 in its policies, his materialist interpretation of religion as itself as a kind of spiritual barometer of social ills was already passing into history. Later works would grow ever more vague in their references not only to the existentialist challenge that religion poses to socialism, but increasingly even to Marx himself.

16 This latter view is often casually attributed to Marx, but is more properly the work of Antonio Gramsci.

This difference is already evident in Gong Xuezeng's 2003 reappraisal of Lenin. At the time this piece was first published, Lenin had for many already become associated with the worst of China's revolutionary past, the "leftist deviation" of the 1960s and 70s. In the case of religion, Gong rejects this interpretation on two grounds, not merely because it is inaccurate, but also because it takes Lenin's ideas out of the context of his time. Gong emphasizes that Lenin's well known and violent clash with the Russian Orthodox Church was due to that institution's political loyalty to the tsarist regime and antagonism to the young Soviet Union. Gong emphasizes the fact that Marx and Engels were first and foremost thinkers: their apparently soft approach towards belief derived from the fact that neither had ever actually faced religion as a political force. Conversely, Gong takes special pains to demonstrate that Lenin not only accepted the freedom of personal religious belief, even among revolutionaries, but that he had claimed that it was the Church who was the genuine enemy of such freedoms.[17]

Gong's article seeks both to humanize Lenin personally, and more importantly to rehabilitate him as a figure of continued relevance for Chinese socialism. His highly sympathetic portrayal of Lenin as a historical figure focuses on the political crises of the early Soviet Union. As with the previous article, the implication here as well is that Marxist truths are not static, but must adapt to circumstances, and be reinterpreted in each generation. This admonition is particularly important given that Gong's particular emphasis on Lenin's division of religion into separate spheres of personal belief and social organization, either of which may be friend or enemy, so closely echoes similar themes in religious studies scholarship produced after the year 2000. At the same time, Gong's close hew to policy hints at the ways that his reinterpretation is itself a process of selective memory. Lenin's rehabilitation comes at the expense of a large portion of the historical record, most notably of Stalin and Trotsky, but also of other movements to reconcile with the resurgence of the Russian Orthodox Church since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Like all of the articles in this section, Gong's defense of the Marxist tradition is also a process of redefining the canon, one that retroactively imposes an internal coherence on the evolution of Marxist thought, and omits as much as it leaves in.

17 Gong Xuezeng 龚学增, "Quanmian bawo, kexue pingjia Liening zhuyi zongjiao guan" 全面把握、科学评价列宁主义宗教观 [A comprehensive understanding and scientific appraisal of Leninist perspectives on religion], in Gong Xuezeng, *Shehui zhuyi yu zongjiao* 社会主义与宗教 [Socialism and religion] (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2003).

The subsequent article, also from Gong Xuezeng, gives an overview of Chinese Marxist perspectives on religion from 1949 to the present. The timeline is broken into three periods: the early stage from 1949–1966, the period of ideological extremism from 1966–1976, and the current stage, which began in 1978. The period before 1978 is discussed only briefly, as the stage in which work consisted of sorting out the general principles of Marxist-Leninism, albeit ones that had already been subjected to heavy Stalinist redaction. Scholarly debates of the time echoed a familiar divide between Chen Duxiu and Mao Zedong on the proper handling of religion, but increasingly relied on doctrinaire manipulation of the canon, most notably by laying claim to the true meaning behind Marx's iconic characterization of religion as the "opium of the people." By the late 1950s, these debates had largely devolved into black or white statements of ideological purity, and were soon drowned out completely by the shrill sloganeering of the Cultural Revolution.[18]

The body of this article is concerned with the period after 1978, in which not only research on religion itself, but also scholarship specifically focused on Marxist interpretation of religion again flourished. As was the case during the 1950s, the points of departure for this new wave of scholarship were the problems of interpreting Marxist truths in light of current circumstances. With religion now under partial rehabilitation, scholars explained the complete rejection of religion as a Leninist (shorthand for leftist) aberration. Some even went as far as reinterpreting the iconic comment about opium in a positive light, by means of the somewhat tortuous claim that Marx was referring to the use of opiates as a medical anesthetic. Although it is somewhat striking that there is no scholarly consensus of interpretation on this point, it is perhaps even more so that other, more significant questions were no longer being asked. Gong's 2008 essay has already taken the next step forward from the separation of personal belief from organizational religion, by defining his subject solely in terms of the latter.

Gong Xuezeng's portrayal of Chinese Marxism reflects many of the changes that separated him from the perspective Lü put forward fourteen years earlier. Coinciding with the country's economic takeoff, the 1990s were also the beginning of a vast and ongoing expansion of religion in China. This development posed two challenges to the party-state: how to explain the new attraction

18 Gong Xuezeng, "Xin Zhongguo Makesi zhuyi zongjiao guan yanjiu gaishu" 新中国马克思主义宗教观研究概述 [A survey of Marxist perspectives on religion in New China], preface to *Makesi zhuyi zongjiao guan yu dangdai Zhongguo zongjiao* [Marxist approaches to religion and issues in Chinese contemporary religion], ed. Lü Daji and Gong Xuezeng (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2008), pp. 1–23.

of religion as something other than a symptom of social and economic dislocation, and how to deal with the increasingly powerful and potentially unruly religious sector that lay outside of the control of the patriotic religious organizations. The first strike against this new religious ebullience was the 1999 campaign to suppress Falungong, followed by containment of protests within lama temples in Tibet, Gansu, Sichuan, and Qinghai. Globally, the September 11 attacks in New York and the initiation of the U.S.-led War on Terror marked a distinct change in the tone of some of the most strident critics of China's religious policy, and no doubt produced a certain sense of vindication among those in Chinese policy circles who had previously advocated a more hawkish stance towards control of religion.

High-level deliberations about how to react to the new challenges posed by the religious resurgence commenced with a work meeting convened jointly by the CCP Central Committee and the State Council in 2001, ultimately leading to the promulgation of the *Regulations on Religious Affairs* (*Zongjiao shiwu tiaoli* 宗教事务条例) in 2004. The *Regulations* begin unremarkably enough with a reiteration of the stance that had been put forward in 1982 (and repeatedly since then), recognizing the social contributions of religion and the rights of religious believers. The novelty of the document lay in its call for a firmer hand not merely in establishing the boundaries of religion, but in actively guiding religion to "adapt to socialist society" (*yu shehuizhuyi shehui xiang shiying* 与社会主义社会相适应). The phrase itself is not new: it had already appeared over ten years earlier in the 1990 "CCP Central Committee Circular on the Reinforcement of United Front Work" (*Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jiaqiang tongyi zhanxian gongzuo de tongzhi* 中共中央关于加强统一战线工作的通知). But it was only in the early twenty-first century that the ideal was actively promoted. The precise meaning of adapting religion to socialism is never defined, and practical interpretations can vary considerably. Like any political slogan, it is both an ideal, and "code and cover" for a variety of private agendas.[19]

The remaining articles in this section reflect these changes more overtly. In his 2005 article on the "Sinicized Marxist" view of religion, Fang Litian (方立天) alludes to recent policies, including the 2004 *Regulations*, but heads off the question of change by emphasizing the overarching unity of Marxist approaches to religion, in particular the continuity of Chinese policy before

19 Ryan Dunch, "Christianity and 'Adaptation to Socialism,'" in *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, ed. Mayfair Yang (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 155–178.

and after 1978.[20] Through a judicious (and very selective) use of quotations from Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, Fang places considerable attention on the leniency of religious policy during the early years of the People's Republic. Putting aside for a moment the question of what Fang leaves out, he does very successfully outline the early articulation and continuity at least of the theory that separates religious belief from political affiliation. But in fact, this idea reaches back well before 1949. Although Fang is less concerned with Marx or Lenin, it is surprising that neither he nor any of the other authors go into the earlier writings of the Chinese communists. Mao himself strongly condemned the Soviet-inspired tactic of destroying religion as a part of revolutionary agitation: in his iconic 1928 "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan," Mao insisted that "It is the peasants who made the idols, and when the time comes they will cast the idols aside with their own hands; there is no need for anyone else to do it for them prematurely."[21] At the same time, Fang's narrow scope leaves him somewhat prone to exaggerating the innovations of the early CCP. For example, Fang paints the separation of individual belief from the political stance of organized religions as one of these unique innovations, whereas this is precisely the idea that Gong Xuezeng had attributed to Lenin. Fang also overstates the internal coherence of the Chinese stance, even after 1978. As for the problem of interpreting Marx's characterization of religion as the "opiate of the masses," one that both Lü and Geng show as having deeply vexed the rehabilitation of religion in China, Fang dismisses it with an offhand quote from Zhou Enlai to the effect that all ideas need to adapt to new circumstances.[22] Even if Fang is on the whole correct in his interpretation, it is quite striking to see the degree to which the Marxist tradition had by this point become self-referential to the Chinese experience, particularly that after 1978.

The heart of Fang's article centers on events after 1991, particularly the "Five Natures" (*wu xing*) theory of religion. Adapted from a minor section of the 1954 "Summary of the Party's Principal Working Experience among Minorities over

20 Fang Litian 方立天, "Lun Zhongguo hua Makesi zhuyi zongjiao guan" 论中国化马克思主义宗教观 [On the Sinicized Marxist view of religion], *Zhongguo shehui kexue* 中国社会科学 [*Social Sciences in China*] 4 (2005): 41–53.

21 Mao Zedong, "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan," 1928. English translation available at http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_2.htm.

22 Albeit one that is very much in the spirit of Mao's own criticism of the worship of texts. See Mao Zedong, "Fandui benben zhuyi" 反对本本主义 (Oppose book worship), in *Mao Zedong nongcun diaocha wenji* 毛泽东农村调查文集 (Collection of Mao Zedong's village investigations), ed. The CCCPC Party Literature Research Office (Beijing: People's Publishers, 1982), pp. 1–11.

the Past Few Years" (*Guanyu guoqu jinian nei dang zai shaoshu minzu zhong jinxing gongzuo de zhuyao jingyan zongjie* 关于过去几年内党在少数民族中进行工作的主要经验总结), the Five Natures theory has developed into an evolving (in the sense that others continue to add to it) statement of the essential features of religion in China, specifically its longevity, popularity, ethnicity, globality, and complexity.[23] As Fang briefly mentions, and other authors go on to develop more fully, this very comprehensive statement on the nature of religion (a concern that now brings us firmly into the disciplinary territory of religious studies) will become increasingly prominent as both a guide and justification for policy.

In his article, Zhu Xiaoming 朱晓明, then the Executive President of the Central Institute of Socialism, builds on this relationship between the understanding of religion expressed in the Five Natures and the formation of policy on religion. Like Fang, Zhu begins by defending the current policy's Marxist credentials, echoing the sentiment that it is only by adapting theory to present circumstances that China has been able to remain faithful to the fundamental spirit of Marxism. Zhu emphasizes the ways that the Chinese Party has learned from its own experience. Even more than Fang, Zhu restricts his scope to recent events, particularly the decades since the 1982 promulgation of Document 19. Zhu recounts the major policy milestones of these years but does not really demonstrate much progress, instead emphasizing the continuity of policy and purpose. Within the Five Natures theory, Zhu latches on to the "longevity" (*changqi xing* 长期性) of religion to explain the persistence and expansion of religion in the People's Republic, in these terms praising the wisdom of the Party's long-term strategy of bending religion to adapt to socialism. Like Fang, Zhu seeks to emphasize the novelty of the current approach, a stance that forces him to overlook nearly a full century of attempts by a series of Chinese governments to bend religious institutions to their will.[24] Moreover, apart from reiterating a few general principles (e.g., religion cannot oppose socialism or the state, nor can it be controlled by foreign interests; the Party must take extra

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23 See Ye Xiaowen 叶小文, "Dangqian woguo de zongjiao wenti—guanyu zongjiao wuxing de zai tantao 当前我国的宗教问题——关于宗教五性的再探讨" [Immediate questions concerning Chinese religion: A re-examination of the five natures of religion], in *Zhongguo zongjiao yanjiu nianjian* 中国宗教研究年鉴 1997–1998 [China Yearbook of Religious Studies, 1997–1998] (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2000).

24 Shuk-wah Poon, *Negotiating Religion in Modern China: State and Common People in Guangzhou, 1900–1937* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2011); Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009).

care in guiding religion in the countryside, and in ethnic areas), Zhu is equally unwilling to speak in detail about precisely how religion should adapt, how the transformation is to be carried out, or how its success is to be measured.[25]

In his brief article, Ye Xiaowen 叶小文, long-serving director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), argues for the legal, as opposed to administrative regulation of religion. Echoing sentiments heard throughout this section, Ye begins with the statement that since religion is an ideology that derives from and belongs to the masses, the Party must respect the principle of freedom of religious belief. From there, he moves on to the Five Natures theory (a topic on which he had already written elsewhere), within which he focuses specifically on two points. Like Zhu, Ye notes that the longevity of religion demands that the Party prepare for the long future existence of religion in China, and for a long struggle to bend religion to socialist ends. From there, Ye moves on to another of these natures, the inherent "complexity" (*fuza xing* 复杂性) of religion, which he says demands flexibility in how the Party interprets each individual case, but also a firm set of guidelines that transcends these details. In policy terms this idea translates into encouraging self-governance of religious affairs and administration according to law.[26]

Ye's emphasis on law deserves closer examination because it iterates a theme that appears in a number of other articles. Law is by no means new in China, but only became a political buzzword in 1997, when the Fifteenth Party Congress called for "rule by law." For this reason alone, it is not surprising to see law as a recurring motif, at least on a cosmetic level. But beyond this, law figures naturally into the theoretical perspective on religion that links the two halves of this volume. Li Xiangping claims that it is law and existence within a legal framework that separates religion from belief, quoting legal scholar Harold Berman's statement that "religion without law loses its social

25 Zhu Xiaoming 朱晓明, "Lun 'Zhongguop tese shehui zhuyi zongjiao guan'—Guanyu xinshiqi zongjiao gongzuo shijian fazhan he lilun chuangxin de sikao" 论"中国特色社会主义宗教观"——关于新时期宗教工作实践发展和理论创新的思考 [On the 'socialist view of religion with Chinese characteristics:' Rethink of practical development and theoretical innovation of religious work in the New Era], *Zhongyang shehui zhuyi xueyuan xuebao* 中央社会主义学院学报 [Journal of Central Institute of Socialism] 1 (2005): 5–17.

26 Ye Xiaowen, "Pojie 'nanti' de liangda jinzhan—Lüetan shier nian lai woguo de zongiao lilun he fazhi jianshe" 破解难题——略谈十二年来我国的宗教理论和法制建设 [Two great improvements in solving 'difficult problems:' A brief discussion on theories of religion and legal reconstruction over the past twelve years], *Zhongguo zongjiao* 中国宗教 [China religion] 5 (2005): 4–8.

and historical character and becomes a purely personal mystique."[27] Li Xiangping emphasizes the importance of legal personhood for religions. Building his analysis around the trinity of law, religion, and society, Li explains that "the state's requirement of religious legitimacy is the legal control of state power over religion, that society's requirement is the recognition of religion and social control, and that the religious corporation's own requirement is the mutually beneficial interaction between religion, state, and the existing laws—in which religion creates its own space for activities and has itself freed from the state's and society's illegal intervention within the established framework of law." Beyond such practical considerations, law is also another realm of ideal and absolute principles, and provides a bridge between the articles on Marxism and the exploratory articles in the section on religious studies. Yet on the whole, this was an opportunity missed. Interestingly, for all the emphasis on law, there is no strictly legal perspective represented in the volume.[28] But again, as a statement of principle as much as policy, a legal perspective would help to bridge the considerations of religion in this volume and comparable deliberations, such as those surrounding the rapid expansion of China's charitable and NGO sector.[29]

Finally, Wang Zuoan 王作安, successor to Ye Xiaowen at SARA, closes the volume with its most up-to-date article. Wang's article reiterates many of the basic ideas outlined elsewhere, and provides a glimpse of how thinking and policy toward religion might reflect the new ideal of a harmonious society (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会).[30]

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27 Originally in Harold J. Berman, *The Interaction of Law and Religion* (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 12.

28 See, for example, Ren Jie 任杰, *Zhongguo gongchandang de zongjiao zhengce* 中国共产党的宗教政策 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2007), pp. 136–194.

29 Recent years have seen a vast expansion of scholarship on the NGO sector in China, most notably Karla Simon's recent volume, *Civil Society in China: The Legal Framework from Ancient Times to the New Reform Era* (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013). The best source for up-to-date information is the China Development Brief 中国发展简报 (http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/).

30 Wang Zuoan 王作安, "Goujian hexie shehui yu zongjiao gongzuo xin linian" 构建和谐社会与宗教工作新理念 [Building a harmonious society and new ideas of religious work], Zhongguo zongjiao 中国宗教 [Religion in China] 9 (2005): 16–19. See also the insightful essay by Anna Sun, "Doing 'Religion Work' in China?" (http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/10/22/doing-religion-work-in-china/).

The Spiritual Significance of Marxism

Any discussion of the translation of ideology into policy begs the question of which comes first. The battles that have historically divided the Party over questions such as the pace and nature of social reform and industrialization were at least as much ideological as they were practical. Certainly in the decades before Deng Xiaoping's rise to prominence, the maintenance of pure and correct Marxist/Maoist ideology and socialist spirit was the paramount concern, particularly for those in the so-called "Red" faction of the Party. A cursory reading of recent history would suggest that the pragmatic economic policies of Deng and his successors have doomed Marxism, and ideology more generally, to a distant second tier of concern. If that is the case, is scholarship (both Marxist and otherwise) on such essential questions as the nature and future of religion anything more than a cover and retroactive justification for policy decisions that have already been made? Of course the authors in this volume are themselves all very close to government, particularly Ye Xiaowen and Wang Zuoan, who in their official capacity both form and represent official religion policy.

There is, moreover, an unmistakable unanimity in the timeline that links the two halves of this volume, most notably the shift in emphasis between the 1990s and 2000s. Although we can only speculate about how this came about and what it means, we can certainly dispense with the idea that Marxism is a casualty of China's economic growth, or that ideology more broadly has become purely rhetorical. On the one hand, it is easy to exaggerate in retrospect the guiding role that ideological purity played in the past. However fundamentalist his followers, Mao was himself highly pragmatic even in such centrally important questions as how and when to carry out class struggle; the essays in this volume demonstrate that he and Zhou Enlai were equally pragmatic where religion was concerned.[31] Moreover, while the intense rejuvenation of interest in Marxism over the past decade—what Hu Daping has called a "re-Marxization"—is in part a product of political sponsorship (such as the "Marxism Project" [*Makesi zhuyi gongcheng*], initiated by Hu Jintao in 2004 to reinterpret the Marxist classics in light of contemporary circumstances), it is also a response to the country's new economic, political, and social prominence. China's new place in the world gives scholars both reason and license to think about China charting a new course, one that differs from that of the

31 See, for example, Philip C. C. Huang, "Rural Class Struggle in the Chinese Revolution: Representational and Objective Realities from the Land Reform to the Cultural Revolution," *Modern China* 21.1 (1995): 105–143.

West (whether what is often called the "neoliberalist order" more generally, or the specific terms of human rights discourse). In this setting, Marxism departs from its past life as a guide to the implementation of socialism, and takes on meaning as a touchstone and inspiration for China's future. Early signs suggest that these trends will continue or even accelerate during the Xi Jinping era.[32]

The reinvigoration and reinvention of Chinese Marxism also helps explain the change in tone concerning religion specifically. The religious sphere experienced momentous changes at the turn of the millennium: the tenacity of Falungong and Tibetan Buddhists in the face of intense suppression, and the rapid expansion of religion in China, coinciding as it did with the abandonment in all but name of anything resembling socialist egalitarianism. It would be plausible to link these events to the change in scholarly tone, to say that events placed Chinese scholars on the defensive, causing them to draw a self-referential circle of truth around themselves and the most recent generations of Chinese leadership. Based on the transformation of Marxism, we would draw just the opposite conclusion, that the self-referentiality of more recent scholarship is not a retreat from criticism, but a sign that Chinese scholars are less dependent on the Marxist canon, or on external models of thought more generally. This includes even critical ones, such as the human rights discourse, a topic on which China as a whole is far less defensive (or at least less reactive) than it had been two decades earlier.

Finally, where does the scholarship in this volume fit into a larger world of ideas, either of religion or of Chinese Marxism? It seems to have very little connection to applied religious studies, whether the study of religious texts or the ethnography of religious communities, which is all the more surprising given that many of the volume's contributors are well known for their work in precisely these areas. Yet despite the very close connection many of these authors have to policy circles, their work is equally vague as a guide to policy formation. Both sections, particularly the newer scholarship, tend overwhelmingly to favor principles over specifics. There is very little in either one that points either to specific policies or to policy recommendations. The distance from any form of lived religion, I think, points less to censorship than to the fact that religion continues to maintain an *iconic* value—religion as what Arif Dirlik has called "an essential moment of cultural and political identity"—that is entirely separate from any form of actual religious life or religious regulation.[33] In this aspect, religion as a fetishized object remains one of many ideals with ties

32 Dirlik, forthcoming, especially footnotes 3 and 87. Hu Daping, "Marx in China," *Socialism and Democracy* 24.3 (2010): 193–197.

33 Dirlik, forthcoming.

to long-evolving discourses and deeply held but equally abstract beliefs concerning modernity, ideology, and scientific secularism. This is not only because religion continues to inspire such strongly held beliefs (such as Li Xiangping's passionate rejection of the characterization of Marxism as China's state religion), but because it is often all the more meaningful when presented in an abstract form, as it is here.