The State of Religion in China: The First Glimpse Through a Survey

Fenggang Yang, Director

In spite of exciting speculations outside China and anxious alarms inside China, it has been difficult to find out the scale of the growth of Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, folk religion, etc. Such basic information is readily available in Western countries and many non-Western societies, but Chinese people are not used to social surveys or being questioned by a stranger about their faith, as religion remains a politically sensitive topic in China under Communist rule.

Overcoming tremendous social, political, and methodological obstacles, the Horizon Research Consultancy Group, a well-established Chinese company with an international reputation for conducting social surveys, successfully conducted the Chinese Spiritual Life Survey (CSLS) in 2007, the first of its kind, with a nationwide representative sample of 7,021 cases. After carefully examining the nuanced questions for many months, the Purdue research team made a set of presentations at the Seventh Annual Conference of the Social Scientific Study of Religion in China, which was co-sponsored by our Center and held at the Renmin University of China on July 26-27, 2010. The major findings include:

1. Among the Chinese adult population (ages 16 and 75), 85 percent of the people either hold some supernatural beliefs or practice some kind of religion. The proportion of real atheists, those who do not hold supernatural beliefs or participate in religious practices, is no more than 15 percent of the population. This seems to be a big surprise to many people in China because atheism remains the ideological orthodoxy upheld by the authorities through schools, mass media, state agencies, and Communist Party organizations.

2. Buddhism is the largest religion in China today with 18 percent of people self-identifying with Buddhism, and only 3.2 percent of people self-identify with Christianity. This is in sharp contradiction to the pervasive perception of the monopolistic growth of Christianity. In Chinese public media and Chinese Communist Party documents, the rapid and monopolistic growth of Christianity has been repeatedly referred to as an ominous trend endangering state security or cultural security.

3. The number of Protestant Christians has grown extraordinarily, while the Chinese Catholic Church membership may have shrunk. In 1949, there were about 3 million Catholics and less than 1 million Protestants while in 1997, the White Paper on the Freedom of Religious Belief by the Chinese government reported 4 million Catholics and over 10 million Protestants. According to this survey, there are about 3 million Catholics and 30 million Protestants among the adult population. It is possible that the survey failed to reach the Catholic population concentrated in certain areas. However, it is also possible that the Chinese Catholic Church membership has shrunk in recent years.

“Seeking the truth in facts” is a basic principle in the social scientific study of religion. These facts cry out for theoretical explanations, which we will explore in a series of articles. Meanwhile, a similar or even more important question is: Will religion play any role in shaping Chinese society in the coming decades? To address this question, our Center is organizing the Chinese Spirituality and Society Program. It includes 17 projects of empirical research on various religions in Chinese society, which are briefly introduced on the next page.

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On November 1, 2010, the Center on Religion and Chinese Society announced the grant recipients for the Chinese Spirituality and Society Program. A total amount of half a million dollars was awarded to one center and 16 individual scholars and their research teams. The winning projects were chosen from among 162 project proposals by reviewers who are bilingual in both Chinese and English, and experts in the study of Chinese religion and society. The 17 proposals include the study of Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, Islam, Protestantism, and folk religion. The topics cover various research questions including religion and the construction of a civil society, social and spiritual capital, religion and entrepreneurship, and the three color markets of religion. The proposed research methods include surveys, fieldwork, and case studies; 14 of the 17 winners are based in mainland China, 1 in Hong Kong, 1 in Macau, and 1 in the USA.

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The first research training workshop of CSSP was held on July 21-25, 2010 at Renmin University of China. Thirty principal investigators and their team members attended and presented their proposals. During the workshop, four lectures on proposal writing and research design were given by Hsing-Kuang Chao of Tunghai University in Taiwan, George Hong of Purdue University Calumet, David Palmer of the Hong Kong University, and Carsten Vala of Loyola University Maryland.

The 7th Annual Conference of the Social Scientific Study of Religion in China was held on July 26-27, 2010. More than 160 scholars from around the world attended the conference, 105 of whom presented papers. The theme of this year’s conference was “The Present and Future of Religion in China.” The sessions included religion and the state, quantifying religions in China, the ecologic theory of religion in China, theories of the social scientific study of religion, economics of religion, empirical studies of Christianity, studies of Christian churches, empirical studies of folk religions, contemporary beliefs and spiritualities, religion in rural areas, empirical studies of Buddhism, religion and higher education, religion and Chinese diasporas, religion and society, studies of world religions, religious policy and practice, traditional Chinese religions, and theories and concepts of religion.

The 7th Summer Institute for the Scientific Study of Religion was held on July 28-August 7, 2010 at Renmin University of China, Beijing. Starting this year, the Summer Institute will be part of the Chinese Spirituality and Society Program, and the objective is to train faculty members at Chinese universities that have been offering or plan to offer sociology of religion courses on both undergraduate and graduate levels. The keynote lecturer was Professor José Casanova of Georgetown University. Alice Wang of Purdue University served as the interpreter. The five lectures are available to view at http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/beijing-lectures-on-the-sociology-of-religion.

In addition, a number of scholars gave lectures, including Fenggang Yang of Purdue University, Hei-Yuan Chiu of Academia Sinica in Taiwan, Hsing-Kuang Chao of Tunghai University in Taiwan, David Palmer of the Hong Kong University, Andrew Abel of Hastings College, Yuting Wang of the American University of Sharjah (AUS) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Nanlai Cao of the Hong Kong University, LOU Yule of Peking University, MA Xisha of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, YANG Guiping of Central Nationality University, and GAN Chunsong of Renmin University of China.
Individual Behavior or Church Activities?
——Ways to Understand Christianity in Today’s China

On October 5th, GAO Shining, a senior research fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, gave a lecture entitled, “Individual Behavior or Church Activities?——Ways to Understand Christianity in Today’s China.” She stated that the principal approach for Chinese people to understand Christianity has experienced a great transformation from the churches’ social activities to the individuals’ faith-based behavior. Before 1949, people got to know Christianity mainly through the churches’ social activities, but this approach was blocked after 1949. An alternative and convenient way for ordinary people to approach Christianity is through individual Christian deeds that are considered moral.

Why Christianity Is Thriving in China Today: A Sociological Perspective

On September 9th, Professor Fenggang Yang delivered a lecture entitled, “Why Christianity Is Thriving in China Today: A Sociological Perspective.”

In the lecture, Professor Yang stated that the Chinese government policy on Christianity has changed through four main stages: “suppression” (1949-1966), “eradication” (1966-1979), “controlling to weaken” (1979-1995), and “controlling to contain” (1995-2010). Despite religious regulation, there are now about 33.5 million self-identified Christians in China, according to the 2007 Chinese Spiritual Life Survey. Also, some new Christian groups have gradually emerged in Chinese society, including the so-called cultural Christians, boss Christians, transnational Christians, Christian lawyers, and Christian artists.

Professor Yang proposed that the fundamental reason for Christianity’s growth in China is its compatibility with modernity. In other words, Christian beliefs, rituals, and organizations can better meet the social needs during the modernization process. He projected that Christianity will continue to thrive in China in the foreseeable future.

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HE Guanghu presented a lecture on the above title. He made a very important distinction between two concepts: “nationalism” and “statism.” Unlike nationalism, “statism” is often manipulated and distorted by the government. According to him, it is “statism” that has motivated the “selective” patriotic actions by Chinese youth in recent years. The dragon, as Professor He clarified, is exactly the totem of this “statism.” Though often calling themselves “descendants of the dragon,” most Chinese have forgotten two facts. First, the dragon was only a token of the emperors. Second, the dragon was originally an evil man-eating monster.

For about 1200 years since its first entrance, Christianity in China has experienced dramatic ups and downs, which, according to Professor He, have been strongly related to the fluctuations of “statism.” In fact, the relationship between Christianity and “statism” is quite negative.

Professor He further suggested that, for Chinese churches to oppose “statism,” the best symbol of the nation should be a dove, especially a flock of doves. The dove appears weak and not a rival to the dragon. But the dove without ambiguity symbolizes peace, which is valued in Chinese culture and by all human beings. If the Chinese want to send a message to the world, it should be the dove rather than the dragon.

Social Roles of Christians in China

Jointly sponsored by the Center on Religion and Chinese Society, the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, and the Asian Studies Program, a lecture entitled, “House Churches Going Public and the Transformation of Chinese Society,” and a forum, “One Hundred Years of Democratization of China and the Roles of Christians,” were held on October 4-5, 2010 at Purdue University. YU Jie gave the lecture and participated in the forum.

On October 4, YU Jie, a well-known independent writer, gave a lecture entitled, “House Churches Going Public and the Transformation of Chinese Society.” According to Mr. YU, the Christian faith can provide three important values in the democratization process of Chinese society. First are the values of human rights. Second are the values of tolerance and reconciliation. Third are the values of love and trust. Behind the illusory fast development, Chinese society has been brought to a crisis of moral degradation, hurt and distrust, and the breakdown of families. Only when thousands of Christian churches, as “life communities,” have established the creed of covenant and the society of contract can China become a normal country again.

In the forum, “One Hundred Years of Democratization of China and the Roles of Christians,” five scholars from mainland China and Purdue University presented their observations and comments on Christianity and China’s democratic transformation during the past 100 years. More than 30 students and faculty members attended the forum.
CRCS Visiting Scholars

In the past few years, CRCS has been hosting visiting scholars from China. These scholars are particularly interested in the study of religion and Chinese society. In the past year, we hosted LIU Ying, a Ph.D. candidate at Beijing Normal University, and LI Huawei, a Ph.D. candidate at Peking University. Both of them visited our Center for a year. We also had CAO Yuanming, an art lecturer at Shanghai University, who came to inaugurate the photo exhibition (August 30-October 10, 2010). CRCS encourages scholars who are interested in the study of religion and Chinese society to apply to visit our Center. Please visit http://www.purdue.edu/crcs/ for detailed application information.

**CAO Yuanming (Art Lecturer at Shanghai University)**

For years, I paid close attention to the village churches in my home town. From 2004 to 2009, I made photographic records and artistic creations for these village churches. My works, including photographs, sculptures, oil paintings, DV, literature, etc., were in many exhibitions during this period of time. From August 31 to October 10, 2010, Professor Fenggang Yang, the Director of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society, invited me to give an exhibition at Purdue University. My interactions and communications with others during this time have helped me better understand the significance of my artistic creation of the pictorial documentation of Chinese village churches from the past few years. This experience has also helped me, as an artist, gain much understanding of the theory and knowledge of the sociology of religion, which will be tremendously helpful for my future practice of religious art.

Invariably, the first visit to the U.S. made me feel some excitement. The America I saw is somewhat at odds with the America in my imagination. What impressed me most here is the serenity, health, and simple beauty, which forms a stark contrast to the instability and deteriorating environment brought forth by the radical developments in today's China. Personally, I think everything I observed here (at Purdue and in the U.S.) is closely related to churches being the center of people's lives, which also testifies to the importance of village churches as a space for faith in contemporary China.

Before I knew it, the three-month visit and exhibition came to an end. My personal experience of the U.S. forms a sharp contrast to my concerns and thoughts for China. A few days ago, I read an article entitled, “The Grief of Tolstoy.” At age eighty, Tolstoy gave away all his possessions, closed the gates of his estate behind him, hopped on his horse cart, drove straight to the Optina monastery, and wept bitterly in the arms of the abbot of the convent. Is there anyone like him in today’s China? After returning to China, I’ve been thinking, if there were no space for faith such as that of the churches, what would the future be like for Chinese society?

My sincere thanks go to Professor Fenggang Yang, the Director of CRCS at Purdue, Dr. Lily Szeto, Mrs. Joanne Yang, Dr. Alice Wang, those who helped me, and all the friends who shared this period of time with me.

(Translated by Alice Wang)

**LIU Ying (Ph.D. Candidate in Philosophy at Beijing Normal University)**

During my visit to Purdue, I was deeply impressed by the strong religious nature of American society, and thereby understood the religious background of the core values of America, which include the Idea of God, Freedom, Equality, Democracy, Individualism, Idea of Capitalism, etc. These values are the invisible integrating power behind the strong diversity of American society and the spiritual bottom line which makes different social forces reach consensus on the problems concerning human or state interests. As the American life style, these values have a strong religious background, though some of them are universal. On the basis of the diverse religious beliefs, in the private sphere, the Civil Religion—which develops under God and takes public education as a central part—was formed and supported the sustaining of these core values. Religion has made great efforts in the public education of this modern country, which is full
of the spirituality of pluralism and has provided the spiritual foundation to the nation which is “under God.” A core value system of a nation calls for appropriate spiritual, institutional, and material pillars. The religious background of American core values makes me reflect: What are the pillars of the core value system of contemporary China? What kind of pillars do we need?

“Good things are always made by smart people through hard efforts” (quoted from Jing Chai, a Chinese reporter’s blog). I was also impressed by the earnest nature and persistence of the professors and students: a friend continued working on a paper which she had invested in for nearly 2 years; a professor of CRCS came to the student seminar immediately even when he hadn’t got over jet lag; most professors would distribute a detailed syllabus at the beginning of the semester; some of them even designed a personalized teaching web and updated materials whenever necessary; a professor from the Philosophy department, who is over 70 years old, taught basic classes every week. He always stood by the platform and answered every question with patience…These moments moved me. I believe their earnest nature is sincerely originates from some kind of insistence in the heart.

Thanks for all the help from my friends. I also learned a lot of wisdom about life from them during the year. Although I haven’t converted to a religion, I did experience the great spiritual power of religion and I respect and admire those who are sincere believers. We who are near-sighted should have this experience: if one piece of our glasses were broken, we would suffer from blurred vision even though the other piece worked. For me, this year of visiting and learning at Purdue helped me fit my glasses. Now the glasses are more complete, and they will help me to see more about human nature and cherish more about the beauty of life.

LI Huawei (Ph.D. Candidate in Religious Studies at Peking University)

The United States is experiencing an economic recession, and Purdue University also reduced its operational funds last year; however, why does everyone I meet look so happy? Why doesn’t the economic recession lead to social unrest? This is a thought-provoking question.

From my point of view, three factors account for the American stability: first, the sound moral order; second, the open system of social mobility and civil society; third, the democratic voting system and separation of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the government.

The sound moral order makes the society full of universal fraternity and trust. How to cultivate the benign moral order? “In God we trust,” printed on the dollar, tells us the key point. All kinds of civil religious rituals show the importance of God (“God” can be the God of Judaism, Allah of Islam, or even a deity of Hinduism) in American life. Through the divine dimension of God, the American moral order could be maintained and reproduced continuously.

The open system of social mobility assures that elites of a new generation from a lower class can realize upward social mobility. George W. Bush restated the American Promise, in his Inaugural Address 2001, that everyone belongs, that everyone deserves a chance, that no insignificant person was ever born. Obama also restated the creed of the Declaration of Independence in his inauguration speech on 2009. The open, equal chance and free mobility guarantee that immigrants can realize the American dream and integrate into American society.

Within the democratic voting system, it is possible for every American citizen to be elected president. Obama’s winning of the election represents the realization of the American dream. The justice of the legislative and judicial branches resolves conflicts and lessens the contradictions between individuals, individuals and government, and the justice remolds the authority of the social justice, too.

The United States is a country with nearly perfect institutions, and what’s more, all kinds of institutions can be internalized in people’s mind structure by constant reproduction and socialization. This is the key to putting various institutions into practice. Although American experience isn’t necessarily suitable for China, the stability of society is just what we are longing for. We might learn something from the United States.

I hope that China can also offer every citizen a fair chance to join the upper classes, and the development of civil society can be untied systematically in China. I hope that the domestic moral order can be cultivated continuously but not be disrupted over and over again. If all of this mentioned above were realized, China would show the world not only the rise of an economy, but also the rise of a great civilization. A great nation must be a country with universal values and open spirit to embrace various ethnic groups, races, and religions; it also must be a country in which people from all backgrounds can pursue happiness and realize their dreams through hard work. It also must be a country in which citizens can share achievements of social development so they will be proud of their country and even willing to die for their country. With this great hope and expectation, I hope China can restore the glory of the Tang Dynasty and set the trends in the world again.
Center on Religion and Chinese Society

News and Activities

- Dr. Fenggang Yang gave an invited lecture at the University of Notre Dame on "Why Protestantism is Thriving in China Today, but Not Catholicism" on December 8, 2010. The workshop is sponsored by the School of Arts and Letters through their Institute for Scholarship in Liberal Arts Mellon Grant Interdisciplinary Workshops.
- Purdue University President France Córdova and Provost Tim Sands visited the Center on Religion and Chinese Society (CRCS) on November 8, 2010.

From left to right: Irwin Weiser (Dean of the College of Liberal Arts), Fenggang Yang (Director of CRCS), Provost Tim Sands, Bert Useem (Head of the Department of Sociology), and President France Córdova.

- Dr. Fenggang Yang attended 2010 SSSR, the Annual Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Baltimore, Maryland, October 29-31. CRCS Postdoctoral Fellow Joy Tong, graduate students Anning Hu, Fan Jiang, Jun Lu, Zhenyu Tang, R.J. Leamaster, and Miao Li also attended the conference and presented papers.
- Dr. Fenggang Yang gave a plenary presentation entitled, “Explaining the Failure of the Greatest Secularization Experiment in Human History,” at the XVII Congress of the International Sociological Association in Gothenburg, Sweden on July 11-17, 2010.
- CRCS Postdoctoral Fellow Dr. Joy Tong presented a paper, “Religious Experience of a Young Congregation: Case Study of a Mega-Church” at the XVII Congress of the International Sociological Association in Gothenburg, Sweden on July 14, 2010.

Website:
http://www.purdue.edu/crcs

This website has been developed into a center of information and resources on Chinese religion, spirituality, and society. It includes an archive of government documents, scholarly articles, and short essays on Chinese spirituality, religion, and society.

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ChineseSSSR/

This online/email discussion group is for scholars and students interested in the social scientific study of Chinese religions (including religions among the Chinese anywhere in the world). Currently (December, 2010) it has more than 700 subscribers from many parts of the world. Most of the postings are in Chinese, and some are in English. If you are interested in joining the group, please visit the website above or send an email to CRCS@purdue.edu.