Seeking Harmony in China

The Religion and Society Debate

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Most religious practices are tightly controlled in China. Like many cultural and educational organizations, churches must meet strict registration guidelines. Many groups that cannot accept the strictures operate secretly, underground, for as long as they can.

Yet what about China as a whole—as a modern nation and state? Shall we identify it simply as a secular communist system? No, that would not be quite accurate. Look with me for a moment at the moves now being made by China’s leaders to revive admiration for, if not veneration of, Confucius (see Richard McGregor’s “The Pursuit of Harmony,” Financial Times, 4/12/07).

The religious zeal that characterized the communist regime of Mao Zedong (from 1949 to 1976) led him to attack Confucius as an outdated drag on the transformation of China. Mao destroyed the temple that honored Confucius in the ancient philosopher’s hometown of Qufú. As a comprehensive wisdom for life, Confucianism was a major roadblock to Mao’s plan to radically transform China into a communist society. It may be surprising, then, to realize that Mao’s attempt to build a new kind of society based on his own wisdom—published as a devotional guide in his little Red Book—led him to assume a position similar to that of earlier Confucian emperors. Mao adopted a role like that of the ancient Son of Heaven (the emperor) who was empowered by the Mandate of Heaven to establish a harmonious Confucian social order.

Among the problems that China faces today, decades after Mao, is a weakening moral fabric. The current way of life that China’s leaders have authorized is dedicated to ever-increasing economic growth, which also justifies personal quests for wealth. Just as consumerism, individualism, and the all out push for economic growth in the West can undermine moral obligations and social solidarity, so in China we can see a similar tendency picking up speed. The present government in China senses that its moral authority is weaker than Mao’s and much weaker than that once enjoyed by the emperors who nurtured strong Confucian moral bonds with the people.

This may be the reason why the Communist Party today is quietly and even publicly beginning to reinstate Confucius. To be able to keep pushing an agenda for China’s growth, the political leaders need to regain something like the mantle of “benevolent and enlightened” authority that united the people with their leaders in early eras. The
leadership needs the people to trust it and to agree that the government’s strong control over society and the economy is best for achieving a harmonious society.

What does any of this have to do with religion, you might ask? The quest for national harmony in China today requires that any set of beliefs or pattern of wisdom that any group holds must conform to, or remain subordinated to, the way of life prescribed by the government and Communist Party. The government alone bears the Mandate of Heaven (even if “heaven” is not mentioned and has only metaphorical status). The party’s path to social harmony is the only legitimate path for China as a whole to take.

What I’ve just described is a government-led religious way of life, and this is where Confucius reenters. As Richard McGregor writes, Confucius can serve the leaders as “an important antidote to organized religion, which is growing rapidly in China, especially Christianity in various forms. At a time when Chinese leaders fret about rampant capitalism and a parallel ‘collapse in values’, they prefer any spiritual vacuum to be filled by a quasi-state religion framed around Confucius rather than a potentially dangerous import.” There is no room, in other words, for two (or more) ultimate authorities and comprehensive ways of life to coexist in the same place at the same time. A Confucius-blessed, communistic-capitalist way of life ordained by a government that subordinates every other way of life to its own, is nothing less than a religious way of life.

Those of us who live in the United States and other western countries may be quick to say how terrible it must be to live in a country with so little freedom to practice different religions. But we should pause to reflect for a moment. Don’t most of us agree to practice our diverse religions privately in ways that will support (or at least not interfere with) the continued progress of the American way of life? In our case, an authoritarian government may not exert the kind of control that the Communist Party exerts in China, but don’t we, through democratic majorities, readily vote for or submit to whatever policies Congress and the president say are necessary to keep America Number One and to keep the economy growing? Is it not an American civil religion, rather than Christianity or any other privately practiced religion, that marks out the path of life for most Americans?

Religions, not all of which are oriented to a transcendent deity, direct entire communities and whole societies along paths of life (or death) toward their intended goals. The religions of nationalism, socialism, liberalism, Islamism, and democratism appear to be the dominant religious faiths today. Some of the privately practiced religions may be seeding the soil for greater public influence in the future, but none of them appears to be carrying the day in many, if any, parts of the world.

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