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Understanding Chinese Governance by Critiquing ‘Religion’

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Abstract

As an indirect response to Galen Watts and Sharday Mosurinjohn’s “Can Critical Religion Play by Its Own Rules?” this article aims to explicate what ‘critical religion’ as a distinct theoretical framework means for the author in terms of how it has provided them a critical framework for understanding the history of China, especially its transition of self-identification from *tianxia* (天下, all under Heaven) to a secular nation state, and some of its pressing ‘religious’ issues today. Upon the identification of a postcolonial condition in modern China where the indigenous elite have uncritically accepted ‘religion’ and other interdependently arisen modern categories, not only will the differentiation between ‘Chinese religion’ and ‘Chinese politics’ be demonstrated as an illusion, but ‘negotiating religion’ will be proved by means of two case studies as a more adequate approach to understanding the governance by the Chinese Communist Party in contemporary China.

Keywords

critical religion – Chinese religion – Chinese politics

1 Introduction

In the end of last August, when Rajalakshmi Kannan, one of the editors for the *Critical Religion Association* website, asked whether my colleagues and I had come across Galen Watts and Sharday Mosurinjohn's article published in the JAAR critiquing Critical Religion, I was busy preparing a new undergraduate course, "Religion and Politics in China: From Premodern to Contemporary Times", for both Religion and Politics students at Stirling and did not get an opportunity to read it. In the following several weeks, when asked by more than half a dozen of people for my possible responses to that article, I started to be aware of the influence it had made among the scholars of religion, especially those who saw themselves as practicing a critical religion approach and those who had particular interest in this 'emergent' tradition, whether in an optimistic or skeptical way.

My curiosity of this article arrived at its summit when Timothy Fitzgerald sent me his draft response to it and asked for my comments, which I was not able to provide until recently. Before reading this article, therefore, I was a bit thrilled, expecting something that may at least renew in a substantial way my understanding, and even future employment, of the methodological approach that has guided my research for a few years. This was not only because I believe that no theoretical position should feel themselves immune to critique, but also because I have the expectation that serious critical inquiries into critical religion (whatever it may mean) would be capable of helping clarify both its essential convictions and divergent points of view among self-identified critical religion scholars, myself included. Regrettably, after reading it earnestly, I found this article to a great extent misses the point. Apart from a few opportunistic arguments and the wrong reification and essentialization of 'critical religion' as a school, the most serious problem lies in that it hardly touches upon the theoretical kernel of critical religion, especially that of Timothy Fitzgerald, i.e., the critical historicisation of the binary categorial distinction between 'religion' and 'secular' in their relation to other modern categories that lack any essential content, such as 'politics', 'the economy' and 'the nation state'.

While this paper does not intend to make an argument directly against that of Watts and Mosurinjohn on the basis of a textual analysis of their article, it aims to provide a response to their critique of critical religion by explicating what this approach means for the author and how, as a distinct theoretical framework, it provides a renewed framework for understanding the history of China, especially its transition of self-identification from *tianxia* (天下, all under Heaven) to a secular nation state, as well as its pressing 'religious' issues today. Upon the identification of a postcolonial condition in modern China where the indigenous elite have uncritically accepted 'religion' and other

interdependently arisen modern categories, not only will the differentiation between 'Chinese religion' and 'Chinese politics' be demonstrated as a modern construct, but 'negotiating religion' based on critical religion theories will be proved, by means of two case studies – 'Falun Gong' and 'Uyghur Muslims', as a more adequate framework for understanding the governance by the Chinese Communist Party in contemporary China.

2 What 'Critical Religion' Means to Me

Even though I use the term 'critical religion' frequently in my own teaching and research, I do not believe that it can be essentialised into a school, as did Watts and Mosurinjohn, which has definite members and clear boundaries. Any attempt of that kind would be bound to doom as obviously diverse points of view have always existed among those who are considered as the core members of critical religion. Taking Russell McCutchen and Timothy Fitzgerald as examples, even though both have some problem with the term 'religion', either has their own methodological starting point regarding how to treat 'religion' critically. As a result, their theories are not always compatible with each other in some important respects.

Thus, critical religion must be defined in a specific theoretical context if we want to use it consistently. Having allowed it to guide my research for some time, critical religion for me is less a new approach to the study of religion as a modern theoretical discipline than a transformed way for grasping the modern world as a whole. In a pedagogical context, it can be understood as a 'threshold concept', which is defined by Jan H.F. Meyer and Ray Land (2006, 3) as "a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view." It is true that 'critical religion' as a term was born in a well-defined theoretical field called 'religious studies'. However, even in its early stage critical religion had shown its potential to become more than 'an internal view of subject matter', as manifested in Timothy Fitzgerald's (1997) "A Critique of 'Religion' as a Cross-Cultural Category". Along with its development in later years, the transformative effects that it is able to generate have gone far beyond religious studies. In fact, we may even say that it is the faculty and subject area divisions within modern universities that 'critical religion' as a threshold concept is able to transform our understanding of.

According to Timothy Fitzgerald (1997, 2000, 2007a, 2007b, 2015), Talal Asad (2003), Brent Nongbri (2013) and Trevor Stack (2015), etc., all of whose critical

engagement with 'religion' can find their influence on my own works, 'religion' in its binary distinction with the 'secular' is a modern invention or rhetoric construct, even though both are at the same time power categories, constructing a world in which practices and institutions deemed as 'religious' form into various power relations with those 'secular' ones. To be more specific, 'religion' was reified in a symbiotic way with 'secular' and other modern categories such as 'politics', 'science', 'the economy' and 'the nation state', in order to naturalise the latter into realms where 'neutral' and 'objective' knowledge about the world can be established and hegemonic power distributed. As Fitzgerald (2007b, 212) correctly points out, "a non-religious domain of politics ... could not have been thought of unless 'religion' had been siphoned out of the totality and placed in a special essentialised category". It is evident that what this quote points to is not so much a subject area as its artificially constructed nature. Moreover, if the categories we use to organise the world, including its institutions, are problematic, what is also problematised includes the world itself, along with our knowledge about it as a whole. In that sense, critical religion is not about any discipline, nor even an interdisciplinary enterprise, since problematising the configuration of modern categories entails questioning its expressions as social scientific disciplines in modern universities.

If, based on what has been discussed above, 'critical' requires a thorough re-examination of 'religion' and related categories, the three criteria established by the Frankfurt School (Bohman 2005) for any critical theory also accord to what I see as theoretical features owned by critical religion: (1) It is *explanatory*, i.e., it explains the operation and effects of ideology, domination and oppression in the world we live in. As shown above, through historicising the modern categories, critical religion is able to expose the effectively empty, and at the same time power, nature of these categories, as well as the hegemonic structure built upon them. (2) Critical religion is also *practical*, in the sense that it is able to identify the actors who seek to transform the reality. Although it sees humanities and social sciences scholars working in modern universities as accomplices in normalising the hegemonic system of categories, they are also those who, once 'enlightened' by analyses committed to critically historicising modern categories, can become agents of resistance and change by participating in such analyses and seeking to provide alternative explanations of the world. (3) It is *normative*. Like any critical theory, critical religion has no difficulty in devoting itself into a distinctively moral cause. It does not only provide clear norms for criticism but aims to bring about transformation.¹

1 For this reason, I was surprised by Watts and Mosurinjohn's (2022, 6–10) critique of critical religion as crypto-normative.

Thus, as a theoretical enterprise which takes the formation of modern world as its subject, critical religion has the potential to become a meta-framework for humanities and social sciences. At the same time, as modernity with its diversity can only be identified in every specific context, critical religion has to manifest its explanatory, practical and normative virtues in a contextual way. The two sections below, in the form of case studies, demonstrate how recognition of the rhetorical configuration of a series of essentially empty modern categories, along with discursive analyses based on this recognition, can help demystify China's modernisation in its relation to colonialism, and provide new perspectives on some 'religion' related issues in contemporary China.

3 A 'New' Perspective on Chinese History

In his most recent article, 'Japan, Religion, Nation, History', Timothy Fitzgerald (2022) explains how what he refers to as uppercase History, i.e., "the new professionalised discipline that looked for universal meaning" (20) has helped invent 'Japanese religions' through deploying modern categories including 'religion', 'secular' and 'politics'. The same, we can say with confidence, is true of Chinese History, in which topics such as the 'history of Chinese religions' and the 'history of Chinese politics' can be seen everywhere and have become part of the standard disciplinary configuration. According to it, both religion and politics as two distinct spheres of human enterprise are (paradoxically) ahistorical constants in the history of China. What varies is merely the relationship between them, which is contingent in nature. The transition from premodern to modern for China, in this view, entails a new, ought-to-be relationship between religion and politics, as it does for the European societies, defined by the separation of religion from the state and the recognition of religious freedom as a universal human right.

When examined through a critical lens to the category of 'religion', the picture above, as produced by uppercase History, becomes unreliable all at once. Just as there was no differentiation of a distinct 'religious' sphere from the 'secular' one as excluding it and nothing could exist outside the encompassing Christian order in medieval Europe (Morrell 1958; Gierke 1913; Fitzgerald 2007; Nongbri 2013), *tianxia* in imperial China (BC 221 to AD 191) can be seen as the Chinese parallel of Christendom, being a conception of the world as a cosmological totality which, on the basis of a certain understanding of the relationship between Earth and Heaven, prescribed a comprehensive series of principles and values for all kinds of relations in society (Wang 2012; Lewis and Hsieh 2017, 25–29). What had played a central role in this *tianxia* system was

the performance of a hierarchal series of rituals, through which the imperial governance as a whole was embedded in a transcendental cosmology. This ‘ritual governmentality’, as termed by Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (2011, 29), operated as “an encompassing power construct” in imperial China and allowed transcendental norms and values from Heaven to permeate *tianxia* (ibid., 31; see also Lagerway 2010).²

Unlike Christendom where Christianity stood as, at least formally, the only legitimate institution, the *tianxia* order and its ritual system consisted of multiple practices and institutions. While Confucianism or *rujiao* (儒教) enjoyed a dominant status for most of the time, Daoism and Buddhism sometimes too could be prominent in the ‘ritual governmentality’ through exploiting the cosmological cover of Confucianism or/and winning favour from individual emperors. What cannot be ignored also includes local popular deities that could acquire legitimacy in local or even imperial governance through being granted titles by the court (Pi 2005). None of these practices and institutions, however, had been differentiated as belonging to a distinct religious sphere. The indigenous term Chinese used to refer to these practices and institutions was *jiao* (教, teaching), which, though coincidentally identical with the suffix the Chinese attach to the terms for different religions today, totally lacked “a strong ‘contrastive’ emphasis of being ‘opposed to other, non-religious kinds of things’” (Kuo 2017; see also Chen 1999, 21–27). Thus, when being incorporated into the encompassing Confucianism-based *tianxia* system, these practices and institutions constituted together an existential realm that was universally permeated by rituals, and it was impossible for one to differentiate ‘religion’ from the ‘secular’.

Such a framework allows us to grasp the so-called ‘process of modernisation’ of China starting at the second half of the 19th century as less a progressive transition from religious premodernity to secular modernity than the invention and then institutionalisation of a configuration of modern categories, including the religious-secular binary, leading to redistributing power in a radically new way in the Chinese context. It was this configuration and its institutionalisation that made the modernisation of China appear like (partly) a separation of religion from politics based on a scientific worldview and thus progressive. Through categorising those aforementioned practices and institutions into religion or even superstition – the latter of which stands as another term that has been made subject to the modern religious-secular framework

2 A more detailed discussion of *tianxia* as the Chinese counterpart of Christendom can be found in Zhe Gao (2023), “Not about Religion: A Reinterpretation of the Chinese Rites Controversy”.

(Nedostup 2010, 9) – the new Chinese elites were able to disintegrate gradually the all-encompassing *tianxia* and claim for themselves a domain of ‘politics’ in which they could either establish a liberal democratic system approving, or a Stalin-Leninist totalitarian regime disapproving, the right to hold private property, both in the name of science, progress, equality and the Chinese nation as constituents of the modern mythical narrative.

What makes China’s acceptance of the configuration of modern categories including ‘religion’, ‘secular’, and ‘politics’ relatively unique, and perhaps also less obvious, is that it was a process which can hardly be described as colonial imposition, as in the case of India or the Middle East. This is partly because neither was China fully colonised by the West nor its imperial or Republican government toppled by foreign powers. Nevertheless, as Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (2011) correctly points out, this semi-coloniality does not invalidate the post-colonial condition of China today, since colonisation in China was embodied more in a radical transformation of mentality among Chinese people and the following institutionalisation of the modern worldview, or simply in ‘colonisation of consciousness’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 1997). Therefore, modernisation in China should be more appropriately described as a self-imposed Chinese enterprise than foreign imposition.

This critical understanding of Chinese history, especially of its transition from imperial China to modern China as a result of colonialism, helps underline the problem of mainstream politics about China that adopts a dualistic framework between the liberal, democratic West and communist China, especially when approaching the ‘religion problem’ in today’s China. According to it, while the Western approach to religion is built upon a neutral, scientific understanding of religion and its relationship to the state (politics), as provided by the institutionalised subject areas and departments such as religious studies, sociology, politics, and economics in Western universities, the Chinese approach to religion is more or less still an ideologised one, built upon dogmatist atheism; this difference should be responsible for their different approaches to religious freedom, with that in the West being universally respected and in communist China being infringed or repressed all the time. However, when the religious-secular binary turns out to be not so much a fact of nature as an ideologically-loaded belief, not only does ‘religious freedom’ prove to be an unsubstantial human right whose boundaries are always fluid and vary in different countries due to the effectively empty nature of ‘religion’, but ‘politics of China’ as such stands as a power-laden concept that has frequently been used, in an ideological way, for othering China into an enemy of free economy and democratic capitalism by neoliberalism. While this ‘unorthodox’ perspective is certainly not identical with an endorsement of the Chinese Communist Party’s

agenda and policies, it could be indeed helpful in destabilising the Western discourse around 'religion in China' and 'Chinese politics' and offering a new framework for understanding some of the pressing issues which have been habitually analysed by deploying the modern categories.

4 Politicising or Negotiating Religion?

In his 2015 article, "The Politicization of Religion by the CCP: A Selective Retrieval", André Laliberté makes an attempt to understand the Chinese Communist Party's 'religious policies' within a 'politicization' framework. In his view, in order to maintain and consolidate its legitimacy and authority, the strategy adopted by the CCP is to in different ways (e.g., cooperation and coercion) cross the boundary between religion and politics, making the former serve its own political objectives. As explained by Laliberté, "politicization" means the attempt by the CCP to make religion a political issue, or an issue of public concern". This kind of treatment is representative today among those who take 'religion' in China as their research topic (see, for example, Goossaert & Palmer 2007; DuBois 2010; Dessein 2017). One of its merits lies in its breaking away from the traditional, ideologised approach to the subject and trying to re-embed it into the complex social historical context from which it had been abstracted. While the hegemony framework tends to simplify the picture to unilateral control over, or repression of, religion by an atheist state, Laliberté and others' renewed framework identifies much more complex interactions among multiple actors which are more than ideological antagonism.

That said, it is not difficult to find that this framework is still built upon the configuration of modern categories examined above, seeing 'religion' and 'politics' as essentially distinct from each other with the former being a private affair and the latter concerning public issues, even though sometimes they could be confused, as in the case of contemporary China. This dichotomous understanding, while allows various forms of interactions between 'religion' and 'politics', has tacitly endorsed the power implied in these categories and their institutions, and is able to fully grasp neither the reasons behind the CCP's 'religious policies' nor the implications of those 'religious issues' in China.

In such a circumstance, I would argue, a more adequate framework is urgently needed. Instead of seeing 'religion' and 'politics' as two essentially distinct spheres of human enterprise and exploring their relationship in the Chinese context, critical analyses should be carried at a discursive level, as suggested by critical religion scholars. That means instead of taking the validity of such questions as "how has the CCP politicised Falun Gong as a religion?" as

self-evident, analyses should focus on the very discursive framework within which such questions are asked: Who created this framework? Why has it become the standard framework we use to understand and explain what happens between Falun Gong and the Chinese state? How have different agents negotiated 'religion' and related categories within this framework actively or passively, in different ways with different interests and agendas? Are there any problems with it? And do we have any alternative framework for understanding the 'religion' reality in China in a postcolonial context?

'Politicising religion' and 'negotiating religion' are juxtaposed here in order to differentiate between these two frameworks. While 'religion' in the former refers to a static and isolable entity, that in the latter points to an effectively empty category and its institution which are always dynamic reality and whose legitimacy and boundaries always negotiated in various forms of power relations by multiple actors. Participants of this process of negotiating include but not limited to the Chinese state including its governments at different levels, adherents of practices and institutions regardless of their 'religious' legitimacy, their organisations, the media, foreign governments, scholars, and such sectors as tourism, business and education. Since the categorisation and institutionalisation of 'politics' in China has been conditioned by those of 'religion', as did in the rest of the modern world, this form of discursive studies does not only tell us about a certain realm of Chinese governance related to 'religion' but is indicative of how governance operates generally in China. The two concisely discussed examples below should be helpful in explaining how those habitually deemed as 'religious' issues can be investigated in a critical religion framework and what possible new insights may be acquired from it.

The first example is the aforementioned Falun Gong movement. Since its crackdown by the CCP in the end of the 20th century, it has always been considered by many scholars as a classic example of the CCP's violation of religious freedom (see, for example, Ownby 2008; Penny 2012; Chang 2004), in spite of the fact that 'religion' is by no means something that can be identified, whether by experts or by laymen, in their daily life and that the classification *qigong* (气功 life energy cultivation), of which Falun Gong has been considered by many as a member, has a complicated categorial history (Otehode 2009; Palmer 2007). While the neo-liberal interpretation reduces the picture to a political repression of a new religion, a comprehensive discursive study of *qigong* and *Falun Gong* can tell us much more about the complexity of modern China's state building and the dynamics of power, illuminating not only how the categories such as 'religion', 'superstition', 'science', 'supernatural', and 'cult' have been exploited by various actors, including both the CCP and the adherents of Falun Gong, but also the respective interests behind

their strategies and the implications. For instance, with its origin in Buddhist, Daoist and Confucianist practices, the emergence of *qigong* as a distinct, new category in 1950s through exploiting existing modern categories such as 'science' and 'medicine', as well as its institutionalisation, demonstrate both the Chinese elite's pursuit of modernity in China and the revisit and restructuring of traditional resources, and, more importantly, the tension between them, rather than simply a 'religious' movement under new established authoritarian 'politics', or even the latter's politicisation of the former.

On the other hand, through a discursive lens, the revival of *qigong* from the late 1970s is indicative of the new features of Chinese modernisation under the banner of 'Reform and Opening-up'. Instead of demonstrating merely a greatly looser control over 'religion' from 'politics', what the attempt to relate *qigong* to the scheme of a 'Chinese style of modernisation' and the debate over supernatural power in the 70s and 80s provide us are important clues about both the emergence of a new form of nationalism and a more liberal approach to China's modernisation by the CCP. The latter can also be seen in that fact that the aforementioned tension was to some extent resolved in a way of the Buddhist and Daoist origins of *qigong* being recognised. This certainly symbolises a transition of the CCP's approach to using its authority to determine the bounds of 'religion' in the direction of conceding some of it previously owned sovereignty to the 'religious' domain – a change in the categorisation and institutionalisation of both 'religion' and 'politics'.

What is even more outstanding is the negotiating of categories among various actors and its power implications since the CCP started to repress Falun Gong in the summer of 1999. The strategy adopted by the state was to criminalise the movement, including both its practice and organisation, into an '*xiejiao*' (evil cult 邪教), in spite of the fact that Falungong had been tolerated for years as a *qigong* organisation (rather than a religion). This is very different from the categorial strategy the CCP had frequently employed when restricting some popular 'religious' practices by degrading them into 'superstitions', indicating a much more serious concern the CCP has regarding its governance. While hardly emphasised its 'religiousness' throughout the 1990s lest it should fall outside the CCP's categorisation of 'religion', Falun Gong since its being outlawed has actively, though also implicitly, resorted to the category of 'religion' for itself, in order to show that their well-deserved religious freedom has been unrighteously destroyed by the Chinese government (DuBois 2010). More interestingly, when conceiving the Chinese state represented by the CCP, the founder and leader of Falun Gong, Li Hongzhi, adopts a similar strategy to that of the CCP. Just as for the CCP Falun Gong transgresses the boundaries for religion in the sense that it creates a genuine threat to public order, in Li's

conception of the Chinese state, the latter occupies more than a purely 'secular' domain and is doing more than 'secular' evil; it is not only violating Falun Gong practitioners' religious freedom, but also contravening the law of the cosmos (Penny 2008). Here the Chinese state is categorised into something which is beyond the so-called 'political' realm and acquires a metaphysical or even cosmological implication. Again, a critical analysis at the discursive level provides us a picture in which the interactions between Falun Gong, the Chinese state and other actors manifest themselves as a greatly more complicated process of categorisation and power dynamics than does a dichotomous framework that reduces them to an antagonism or conflict between religion and politics.

One may say that the example above does not suffice to illustrate the universal applicability of discursive studies on 'religion' and related categories since it is only the controversial 'religious' status of Falun Gong that makes a critical religion framework appear necessary. While one way to respond this possible objection is to negate the existence of any uncontroversial status of religion, the following example should be able to show that this framework is applicable to even one of the most 'religious' religion in the sense that most people would agree on its religious status.

In recent years, 'Uyghur Muslims' has attracted huge attention internationally from media, governments, and NGOs. When discussing the issue, focus has been more than often put on the complex relationships between Islam, Uyghur nationalism and the CCP's 'Xinjiang policies'. Regarding the role played by Islam in the turmoil of Xinjiang, scholars do not share the same point of view. Some deny the prominence of Islam in promoting Uyghur nationalism, claiming what lies at its root is social, economic factors (see, for example, Gladney 2009; Becquelin 2000; Olivieri 2018); some, on the other hand, suggest that Islamic ideas are increasingly basic for Uyghur nationalism (see, for example, Clark 2015); others hold a more balanced view, simultaneously identifying a parallel between the rise of Uyghur nationalism and the Islamic revival in Xinjiang and acknowledging that it is not Islam alone but multiple factors that have strengthened Uyghur nationalism (see, for example, Fuller & Lipman 2004).

Despite the apparent disagreement between each other, when dealing with the aforementioned relationships, most of these studies deploy without hesitation the modern categories including 'religious', 'economic', 'social' and 'political' as if these are valid and neutral epistemological tools. For them, Islam in the context of Uyghur nationalism represents a distinct 'religious' factor which can, and should, be differentiated from the 'social', 'economic' or 'political' ones. Apart from the inadequacy and the ideologically-loaded nature of this modern configuration of categories, this framework, when examined though a

critical religion lens, also fails to pay attention to the involvement of Uyghurs not only in the ethnic classification project in which they became one among the fifty-six nationalities in P. R. China, but also a historical transition in which their previously encompassing *din* was categorised and institutionalised into a 'religion'.

In fact, the period in which Islam started to be seen as a 'religion' in China largely overlapped with that in which Uyghur as an imagined community, i.e., a 'nation(ality)', started to emerge. This does not imply any definite relationship between Uyghur nationalism and Islam, whether embodied in 'Islamic nationalism', or 'secular nationalism', but certainly a deep and continuous entanglement between the categorisation of 'religion' and that of 'nation' in a postcolonial context, where both categories as modern products receive serious reconsideration, as in the case of Political Islam or Islamism in the Middle East and North Africa. Thus, any study of contemporary Uyghur Muslims and their nationalist movement should be taken in relation to the history of their 'religion' – not as an autonomous, isolable entity, but a category which has constantly been created, accepted, tested, negotiated, exploited, resisted and challenged since its introduction among Uyghur people. Although few studies have actually been carried on in that direction, it would be worth for scholars in the subject area considering the following theoretical questions: Whether or to what extent can Uyghur nationalism be seen as a parallel to Political Islam in the Middle East and North Africa? What are the differences between the categorisation and institutionalisation of 'religion' in Xinjiang and those in inland China? To what extent can Uyghur nationalism be seen as a continuous effort, dating back to the first decades of the 20th century, to refuse and resist against the modern categorization and institutionalization of Islam as a 'religion' imposed by the Chinese state? To what extent, on the other side, can the reactions the Chinese state had made to it be seen as a continuous effort to build a modern nation-state, of whose fabric the demarcation between 'religion' and the 'secular' or 'politics' in accordance with China's agenda for state building should be an integral part, and whose sovereignty over Xinjiang is non-negotiable?

5 Conclusion

One of the unsatisfactions Watts and Mosurinjohn have with CR scholars is that the latter, in their words, "maintain that being 'critical' requires limiting ourselves to studying rhetorical battles over *religion*" (16). While the discussion

above shows my endorsement of the importance, and actually necessity, of doing 'religious studies' at a discursive level, this is not a justification of Watts and Mosurinjohn's allegation. What both authors fail to see is that studies of how 'religion' and related categories are negotiated are certainly compatible with, and actually entail, studies of the practices and institutions that 'religion' signifies. Without understanding the doctrines, practices, organisations and ethical codes of Falun Gong, for example, we could by no means grasp fully the interests of those parties who participate in constructing the discourses about Falun Gong, nor could we understand their implications. Similarly, how are we supposed to answer the aforementioned question "What are the differences between the categorisation and institutionalisation of 'religion' in Xinjiang and those in inland China?" if we have no idea how Islam is practiced by Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang and how other traditions signified by 'religion', such as Protestant Christianity and Han Buddhism, are practiced by people living in inland China? On the other hand, investigating the discursive battles over the uses of 'religion' and related categories can help shed new lights on how those practices or institutions involved organise and transform themselves.

In fact, what is denied by CR scholars, especially Timothy Fitzgerald, is not studying whatever practices and institutions signified by the term 'religion', but studying them as if we know what 'religion' essentially refers to. 'Critical' here points to critical awareness, and accordingly critical investigations, of all uses of 'religion' and interdependently arisen modern categories, and this supplements and transforms, rather than excludes, existing studies in the area of religious studies. It thus cannot be denied that as a theoretical framework, critical religion has universal applicability, since the configuration of modern categories has made itself indubitable to almost every corner of the globe. At the same time, as a 'critical' theory whose objectives include helping the creation of dynamic social transformation and a 'postmodern' theory which negates the modern grand discourse about 'religion', critical religion cannot be fully exerted unless it embodies its transformative power in local theories as products of particular situations and contexts. Historicisation as a reverse process of making universal meaning, as pursued by uppercase History, must express itself in specific and distinct narratives. Even though postcoloniality can now be seen as an almost universal condition in the sense that most societies with different historical traditions have been integrated into a unified global capitalist system, it is by no means homogeneous and must be understood as plural. As one of these 'postcolonialities', modern China whose history receives a preliminarily analysis above within a critical religion framework shows great potential to produce more local narratives, in which the stories of making

Chinese 'religions' and 'politics' since the second half of the 19th century await to be retold, the power structures formed in the process to be illustrated, and their domestic and global implications to be recognised.

Biography

Zhe Gao is a Senior Lecturer of Religion and Translation at the University of Stirling, UK. His first book, *Co-creation and Gift: A Critical Study of Theologies of Work* (2015), through reflecting on the two dominant theological approaches to human work after the Reformation, tries to draft a theo-economics of human work based on the concept of 'gift'. Most of his academic journal papers are either interdisciplinary Christian studies of public issues or concern the contextualization and inculturation of the Christian faith in modern China, or both. His more recent research focuses on the history of 'religion' as a modern category in its relation to Chinese intellectual and political narratives since its being introduced to China in the end of 19th century.

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