

Thoughts on China's contemporary religious relationship: Discussion in view of current theories

**Author:**Zhigang Zhang¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Institute for Marxist Religious Studies in New Era, Hangzhou City University, Hangzhou, China

Corresponding author:

Zhigang Zhang,
1176933725@qq.com

Dates:

Received: 10 July 2023

Accepted: 24 Aug. 2023

Published: 16 Nov. 2023

How to cite this article:

Zhang, Z., 2023, 'Thoughts on China's contemporary religious relationship: Discussion in view of current theories', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(5), a9224. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i5.9224>

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How to deal with the ever more complex religious relationships is not only a significant issue for Chinese central government and the Communist Party but also a cutting-edge topic for the religious academy at home and abroad. Based on the review of the latest internationally acknowledged four theoretical orientations, namely religious market model, religious ecological model, religious compatibilism, and religious praxism, this article proposes an innovated framework, positive orientating theory of Chinese religious relations. The author intends to explore more active thoughts on theories and policies that would particularly reflect on and align with the typical characteristics of religious relationships in Chinese context.

Contribution: Based on the review of the latest internationally acknowledged four theoretical orientations, namely religious market model, religious ecological model, religious compatibilism, and religious praxism, this article proposes an innovated framework, positive orientating theory of Chinese religious relations.

Keywords: study of religious relationship; interreligious dialogue; religious market model; religious ecological model; religious compatibilism; religious praxism; positive orientating theory of Chinese religious relations.

Introduction

In recent years, with the growth of China's comprehensive national power and international influence, both the Chinese state and its ruling party have been paying more and more attention towards religious issues. That is, religious relations are now seen on a par with party relations, ethnic relations, class relations, diaspora relations in terms of their significance, and become one of the five critical relations that must be dealt with appropriately in current Chinese political and social sphere. In order to build harmonious religious relations, scholars at home and abroad have been actively proposing new ideas and theories, among which the Religious Market Model and the Religious Ecological Model are the most inspiring and influential. In order to invite discussion, firstly I will go over these two theories and their debates. Secondly, the new research trends in interreligious dialogue and religious relations in the international academia will be examined. In the last part, I present some of my own thoughts on those questions.

Religious market model and religious ecological model in the Chinese context

Religious market model

Major arguments

The Religious Market Model, or the Theory of Religious Economy, is proposed by the American religious sociologist Rodney Stark, whose landmark work is *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (2000). This work summarised the empirical studies of European and American scholars into 36 definitions and 99 propositions, arguing systematically for the Theory of Religious Economy as a 'new paradigm of religious sociology'. The new paradigm may be briefly described as follows:

All social systems include a unique sub-system that is focused on religious activities, which may be called 'a religious economy'. It is constituted by all religious activities in a particular society,

Note: Hangzhou City University Section: Cross-cultural Religious Studies, sub-edited by Chen Yuehua and Ishraq Ali (Hangzhou City University, China).

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including the 'current and potential believers' market', 'one or more organizations trying to attract or retain the believers' as well as 'the religious culture these organizations could provide' (definition 32). Just like there are the supply or demand sides internal to the commercial economy, such is also the case with religious economy. The difference between the new and the old paradigms is just that the 'suppliers' instead of the 'demanders' are seen as the major driver of religious changes. Therefore, according to the Theory of Religious Economy, the suppliers become the driving force while the demanders remain a stable basis. In short, firstly 'a set of market niches that are stable and exist in all societies' is to be verified. Secondly, how religious organisations and market niches are interacting with each other under different government regulations can be analysed.

According to Fenggang Yang (transl. 2004), the religious scholar who has translated *Acts of Faith* into Chinese, the sociology of religion has experienced a sea change in the past 20 years, namely the decisive victory of this new paradigm of the Religious Market Model, which even forced Peter Berger to switch sides and publicly give up the secularisation theory that he had proposed during the 1960s. Thus, it was no wonder that the book was highly acclaimed within the social scientific study of religion when it first came out. Many scholars believed that it would become a classic and would impact the social scientific study of religion for the next few decades. The book has been regarded as the epoch-making work since Steven Warner proclaimed the 'emerging New Paradigm in the sociology of religion' in the early 1990s (Yang 2006).

The reason for the Religious Market Model to be widely accepted is that it could answer many of the practical questions that are difficult to explain with the secularisation theory. Chinese scholar Wei Dedong has had a comment on this: Why in modern societies religion has not declined or disappeared but has been full of vigour? This is a difficult question that has troubled religious scholars globally since the 1960s. Nevertheless, when sociologists of religion in the West made the breakthrough in the form of the Religious Market Model, those problems associated with the religious phenomena in contemporary Euro-America were solved.

Acts of Faith was translated into Chinese and published in 2004, and immediately Chinese scholars had heated discussions about this book. The term 'religious market' soon became popular. Many scholars have tried to apply this new paradigm to the study of Chinese religions and generated some insightful results. For instance, Fenggang Yang's article, 'The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China', has been highly praised by both Chinese and American scholars. The main points of the article are: to tighten the religious regulations will only further complicate the religious market and result in the emergence of three religious markets, that is, the 'red' legal market, the 'black' illegal market and the 'gray' neither-legal-nor-illegal or both-legal-and-illegal market. Black market exists as long as there is government restriction on the numbers and activities of the

religious organisations. So far as the red market is constrained, and the black market suppressed, the gray market necessarily comes into existence. The tighter the government's regulation over religious groups, the bigger the gray religious market becomes. What deserves our attention is that the bigger the gray market grows, the greater the chance that new religions and cults will emerge with the potential of causing social unrest (Yang 2006).

Major academic debates

Although influential, the Religious Market Model has also been subjected to much criticism. In summary, scholarly debates within and outside China focus on the following points: firstly, is this new paradigm a universally applicable paradigm? The Religious Market Model mainly came out of the study of religions in contemporary European and American countries. Will the result of such empirical studies be sufficient to explain the religious phenomena in those other countries or societies where Christianity is not the dominant tradition? Secondly, and in connection with the first problem, as the research data used for building the Religious Market Model had their source in mainly institutionalised religions and their activities that are epitomised by Christianity, is it possible that such studies have overlooked non-institutionalised religious forms and their evolvments? Furthermore, to the point that the Religious Market Model has focused on the main religious traditions of the West at the cost of neglecting many other religious phenomena, does it mean that the latest sociological studies of religion in Europe and America still entail a sense of 'Christianity-centrism', or has even become a religious sociology that is catered to Christianity? Thirdly, as a theoretical model of Religious Market, it makes the 'suppliers' the driving force for religious changes, while the importance of the other two constraints, that is changes in the religious demand and the government's regulation on religion, could have been underestimated. Lastly, is it possible that the Religious Market Model has too readily applied economic principles, especially the laws of market economy onto the study of religions, to the effect of ignoring the sacred nature of religious traditions, so much so that the complex reasons for religious beliefs are reduced to 'commercialized rational choices'? How many religious people would accept such a simplified and vulgarised approach exactly (Lu 2008; Sharot 2002; Wei 2006; and Yang 2006)?

In response to the first challenge, Stark and his collaborators reassert with confidence that to say a sociology of religion is only applicable in western countries will be like to say that a certain physics is only applicable in the United States, or a biology only good for Korea, which is nothing but ludicrous. What they attempt is a systematic approach to delineate the propositions that are applicable in all places – just as they are able to explain the religious acts in Canada, they will be able to explain those that happen in China (Stark & Finke 2004). Fenggang Yang comments on this and says the basic principles of the Religious Market Model are overall generalisable. Other than the Religious Market Model it is

hard to find any other macro theory that has more explanatory power for the overall Chinese religious situations. In the meantime, it is important to understand that this theory has its limitations and some of its propositions have to be amended.

Also, on the general applicability of the Religious Market Model, Chinese scholar Lu Yunfeng studies the religious situations of Chinese societies and comes to the thought-provoking conclusion that the model does have its explanatory boundary. In fact, Stark has stated frankly that his theory is mainly used to analyse 'exclusive religions'. If we take this theory without reflection and apply it to the 'non-exclusive religions' in Chinese society, it will lead to awkward results just like the proverbial orange trees native to South China being moved to the North and ending up bearing bitter fruits. Non-exclusive religions have their own logic and emphasis. Specifically, on the micro-level, 'religious commitment' and 'conversion' have been the research focuses for the western religious sociologists; however, for the Chinese society where 'non-exclusive religions' are the mainstream, these two concepts are far from essential. On the mid-level, 'denomination-church model' may be extended to China, but it still needs to be noticed that denominational religion takes only a very small percentage in the Chinese religious markets, and far less than those taken by Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism and folk religions. This is because in Chinese society the typical religious organisations are not denominations but grass-root organisations such as sacrificial communities, temple fairs and incense societies. On the macro-level, there have been huge differences between the East and the West regarding the motivations, forms and consequences of religious regulations. Yet the Religious Market Model has largely overlooked such rich complexity and focused only on how the government has fostered 'religious monopoly'. The aforementioned criticism may be understood as directed towards not only the Religious Market Model but also the sociology of religion since World War II. The author believes that the study of 'non-exclusive religions' in Chinese societies can help to relieve the sociology of religion of its 'Christianity-centrism' (Lu 2008).

Religious ecological model

Major arguments

Theoretically speaking, this model tries to respond to the following questions: Why Christianity in China has developed so quickly since the Economic Reform in the 1980s? What important impacts will the fast growth of Christianity in China make on the overall Chinese religious situation? Duan Qi's article, which was entitled 'The Imbalance of Religious Eco-system Is the Main Reason for the Fast Development of Christianity in Today's China' and presented at the 2008 Ethnic Religions Forum, may be seen as a response characteristic of this approach. According to Duan, the so-called 'religious ecology' refers to the social co-existence of all religions. Not unlike a natural eco-system, there should normally be checks and balances between religions in order to have a balanced eco-system where all religions find their own niches and meet the demands of different believer groups.

Nevertheless, inappropriate intervention could upset that balance and cause the rapid growth of some religions and the withering of others. That Christianity in China has developed so quickly because the Reform and Opening Up needs to be seen in the light of an imbalanced religious eco-system (Duan 2009).

Although the Religious Ecological Model has only become a focus of scholarly attention in recent years, its major theses were advanced as early as the 1990s. For instance, Leung (2009) points out after investigating the development of Chinese rural churches:

Christianity developed dramatically in rural areas in China after the Cultural Revolution. One of the important reasons is that since the founding of PRC, the Chinese Communist Party has been trying with all efforts to wipe out folk religions, which has eliminated the greatest barrier for the spread of Christianity in rural areas, and provided the latter with a broad space for development. (p. 216)

Or as Liu Jian observes after studying religious developments in Wenzhou, China:

In some provinces or cities, when the officials implemented the policy to reopen religious venues, they reopened Christian churches first and then Buddhist or Daoist temples. There are more Christian churches opened to the public than Buddhist and Daoist temples. This has provided more space for the development of Christianity. (p. 16)

Liu (2004) also uses Hong Kong and Taiwan as examples of evidence: Christianity had seen rapid growth in these two regions in the 1970s, but their number of believers has not increased steadily during the past 30 years. The main reason for that may be the relative balance reached between multiple religions, and the flourishing of folk religions may have been the biggest contributing factor to the change.

The Religious Ecological Model not only stimulates scholars to investigate the rapid growth of Christianity in recent years but also instigates their reflections on China's religious and cultural strategies. Religious theorist Lü (2009) points out that, if we are not biased, we should admit that Liu Jian's and Leung Ka-lun's analyses are realistic and reasonable. Since 1949, our social reformation and religious policy have caused the vacuum of beliefs and faiths for the public. Nevertheless, as simplified atheist teaching failed to convince people of theoretical atheism, they have become the easy targets of Christian evangelical expansion, especially with international backing. The reality definitely calls our attention ... The fundamental solution to this issue is certainly the teachings of Marx and Engels, that is to create a social system in which the human and social interrelations are extremely clear and reasonable ... But, such 'reasonable' society still only exists as an ideal, in the human mind, while the social reality is still far, far away from such an 'ideal'. What is most critical today is to adjust our religious strategies to the social reality. It is necessary that we inherit and reconstitute the great aspects of the religious and cultural traditions of all Chinese ethnic groups over a period of time, so that they will fit with the

socialist social reality, and the vast number of citizens may find their spiritual home from within their own religious and cultural traditions.

Mou Zhongjian further pointed out that the overdevelopment of Christianity in China would bring about a series of negative consequences. Firstly, while instigated to bring about a peaceful evolution in China, hostile forces from abroad would speed up enforcing their plans of Christianising China. Secondly, the rapid growth of Christianity in the form of social movement, often underground, can hardly cultivate its believers and indoctrinate them properly, and so causes them difficulty in having normal communications with the society. Many churches would appear but look dissimilar from the Christian ones. They would be liable to be exploited by bad social forces and risk doing harm to the healthy development of Chinese Christianity under its pledge to patriotism. Thirdly, it would hurt Chinese cultural and ethnic integrity, thus causing damage to the Chinese national spirit, which, jointly shaped by Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, has retained the characteristics of people-orientedness, self-discipline, social commitment, benevolence and peace. Instead, the exclusiveness and aggressiveness of monotheistic religions would be amplified, which would be unhelpful to China's peaceful rise as a nation and the building of a harmonious world. How then to eliminate the negative consequences? Mou proposed five remedies from the level of cultural strategies: firstly, we should build our cultural confidence and consciousness; secondly, the pluralistic and harmonious religious and cultural ecology of China has to be restored and promoted; thirdly, Chinese Christianity should be encouraged to take its cultural and national context seriously and develop its theology in the light of sinicisation; fourthly, we should enhance the legal system and legal regulations, limit the expansive evangelical activities; fifthly, we should advocate Chinese tradition of harmony without uniformity, actively encouraging dialogues between Christianity and other religions.

Major academic debates

As what is aforesaid, the Religious Ecological Model seeks to explain the rapid growth of Christianity in China and has caused reflections upon China's religious and cultural strategies. Correspondingly, the scholarly debates have been centred on those two issues.

Firstly, on the main thrust of this Model, is it fair to attribute the rapid growth of Christianity since the Reform and Opening Up simply to the imbalance of religious ecology, and especially to the mistakes of China's religious policy? Scholars have had different opinions on this. For instance, Ma (2009), who disagrees with this Model, made the following points: (1) All religions had been negatively impacted although to various degrees before 1978. Later when new religious policies were implemented, it was not like foreign religions that received preferential treatments all over the country. There were places where native religions were favoured ones, and many other places where all religions

have been treated equally. Therefore, the implementation procedures and force of the new religious policies should not be seen as the necessary cause for the rapid growth of 'foreign religion' and the 'decline of native religions'. (2) Even though there was an imbalance of religious ecology, it does not necessarily bring about the explosive growth of Christianity. Normally, when one religion withered and caused the imbalance of religious ecology, all other religions could claim some of the space for their growth. But why in reality the developments of other major religions have been relatively stable but Christianity alone has grown so rapidly? That is exactly what we need to find out and discuss. (3) There are multiple reasons for the rapid growth of Christianity since the Reform and Opening up. Externally, policy, society, government and state have played their roles; internally, it has had much to do with the methods and characteristics of the Christian evangelical mission, for example, strong international backing, dodging government regulations, the adoption of pyramid selling and sales quota in its practices, proselytising to all possible groups, flexibility, simplicity, and openness to extreme measures (Ma 2009). (4) The danger of the Religious Ecological Model lies in mainly the following: firstly, it will provide a 'theoretical umbrella' (i.e. justification) for 'the abnormal development of Christianity', thus preventing people from seeing the real causes; secondly, the strategy of 'religion against religion' implied by this model, that is to promote Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, as well as folk religions to balance the growth of Christianity, could eventually lead to negative effects such as unfairness, discords, and even conflicts in interreligious relations. To summarise, using 'imbalance of Chinese religious ecology' to explain the rapid growth of Christianity in China and especially citing it as the main cause is ill-founded theoretically and harmful in practice. The rapid growth of Christianity in China is caused by many elements but it has nothing to do with the imbalance of religious ecology (Ma 2009). However, it could potentially lead to the dominance of Christianity or even its monopoly in China, which will damage the religious ecological balance we have today and have serious negative impacts on the nation, society and Christianity as well. Thus, strategic planning needs to be made and comprehensive measures taken in that light.

Secondly, in regard to China's religious and cultural strategy, Li (2010b) holds that while the religious ecological model prevalent in China today seemingly deals with the relations between Christianity and the orthodox Chinese beliefs and folk religions, its essential concern is with the power relations between state and church, and how religious beliefs and social power may come into balance. The grounding argument of the 'imbalance of religious ecology' has led back to the old contentious positions, that is 'Christianity is a foreign religion' versus 'Christianity is not a foreign religion'. What is lurking behind are such ideas as 'Christianity is not the traditional or orthodox faith of the Chinese people', 'the rapid growth of Christianity is not a good thing', 'Christianity and folk Chinese religions go against each other'. Among them, the most alarming view is that the rapid growth of

Christianity has posed 'three challenges' to the Chinese society, namely challenges to the bottom lines of traditional beliefs, political ideology, and social control. For that reason, some scholars suggest that 'religious security' be incorporated into the mid-to long-term planning for 'National Cultural Security'. Such view of restraining western Christianity through promoting traditional or native Chinese religions is really to fend off modernity with nationalism. To have religious nationalism as the guiding rule for the religious belief system in China today is sure to bring about another kind of religious ecological imbalance very quickly (Li 2010a, 2010b).

International trends: From religious compatibilism to religious praxism

'Interreligious dialogue' has become a hot topic and a new frontier in the global field of religious studies. The mission at this frontier is to explore the approaches to correctly understand interreligious relations and to promote interreligious harmony. Generally speaking, three theoretical paradigms have been developed on this problem, that is religious exclusivism, religious inclusivism, and religious pluralism. Nevertheless, based on developments in the field during the last decade, I would like to call attention to two relatively new theoretical models in this article, which I term as religious compatibilism and religious praxism.

Religious compatibilism refers to the theory for interreligious dialogue propounded by the famous German scholar Hans Küng (1988:253–256), especially since the publication of his *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* project. The basic claims of this theory are as follows: (1) speaking from religious history, we should admit that 'different true religions' have co-existed, in pursuit of the one goal although by various ways; (2) for the believer of a true religion, it is important to acknowledge the 'positive validity' of the other religion, without accepting them as 'unconditionally true'. Only then could believers retain their faith convictions while learning from each other and engaging in 'fraternal emulation'; (3) no one religion could claim a monopoly on the truth but are all 'on the way'. Hence, there is no 'my truth' or 'your truth' to speak of. Instead, all religions should open up to each other's beliefs, learn from them and share the truth they each discover. For nearly two decades, Küng has dedicated himself to the cause of putting the aforementioned ideas of interreligious dialogue into practice, which then resulted in the influential *Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration*. The declaration has been regarded as the first 'bottom-line ethical guiding principle that can be accepted and agreed by all religions'. With wide and warm response to the declaration, Hans Küng believed that this bottom-line ethical common ground could be a 'sign of hope', specifically, for promoting religious reconciliation, and by transforming the old paradigms, reconstructing global order and achieving world peace (Küng 1996).

Since Küng's *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* came out, famous American scholar Paul Knitter has proposed a new

theory, which he calls a 'correlationally and globally responsible model for dialogue' and the author shall term it as Religious Praxism in this article. In explaining his model, Knitter (1996:15–17) makes in particular the following two points: firstly, the reason that interreligious dialogues are 'correlational' lies in the plurality of all existing religions, which is not only a fact but also the quintessence of religious relations as a problematic. For that reason, the goal of interreligious dialogue is never 'uniformity' but to promote a friendly dialogic partnership on the premise of fully acknowledging the differences between each other, so that all participants in the dialogues could talk, listen, learn from and testify to each other. Secondly, the reason for religious dialogue partners to share a 'global ethical responsibility' is that without collective attention and efforts to alleviate the already globalised human and ecological suffering, any interreligious encounter or dialogue may not only fail to achieve any goal but could even incur danger. Thus, all religions should partner with each other and work for the human and ecological justice and welfare. Only on that basis would it be possible for religions to better understand and more effectively talk to each other.

On the evolution of the ideas of interreligious dialogue, John Hick, the religious philosopher believes that religious exclusivism has stayed in the stage of refusal or denial, religious inclusivism in the stage of awakening, and only religious pluralism has helped believers of different religions enter into dialogue. Following his analysis, we may say that religious compatibilism is a step further from religious pluralism, while religious practicalism stands for the effort to put compatibilism into practice.

The reason that religious compatibilism has drawn wide attention has much to do with its high-profile dialogic practice, especially the creation of *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*. In fact, we could detect from the *Declaration* a new orientation in interreligious dialogue, which is a shift of focus from theoretically oriented to practice-oriented dialogue. As we all know, interreligious dialogue has come to the spotlight as a result of deepening studies of comparative religion. Initially, the focuses of the discussion were on the theoretical difficulties caused by the fundamental differences between religions. For instance, are different ideas of divinity in conflict with or contradictory to each other? Could any one religion or all religions own the only or absolute truth? What does the 'Ultimate Reality' refer to, and can researchers recognise and describe it? Obviously, not only it is hard to achieve consensus on such aporia but also there may not be exact answers to them in the first place. Hence, the difficult situation for interreligious dialogues prior to this. The *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* that Küng developed is thus a significant move to step away from the theoretical entanglement, and take interreligious dialogue to the sphere of moral practice, in order to respond to the economic, political and ecological crises on the global scale. Seen in this context, the practical significance of this move cannot be exaggerated.

Nevertheless, from the point of view of Knitter, Küng's *Declaration* is not exactly theoretically thorough, that is, it has stopped at general ethical consensus. Instead, Knitter introduces the practical philosophy's perspective on truth, which is used to change our world, is always discovered in people's practical activities. The relationship between religious truth and interreligious dialogues is also the same. Thus, he emphasises that all religious beliefs have to face 'the reality of suffering'. Whatever the idea of 'salvation', 'enlightenment', or 'nirvana' might mean in the respective religions, they all have to answer to the 'human suffering'. Whether people are Hindus, Christians, Jews, Muslims or Buddhists, should ever a doctrine of their faith become the excuse for neglecting or tolerating 'the suffering of human beings and the earth', that faith would lose its credibility.

It is based on this practical view of religious truth that Knitter proposes that interreligious dialogues today should suspend such theoretical difficulties as the 'shared substance, experience or purpose of all religions', but take the 'reality of suffering' as our 'shared context' and 'urgent agenda', and make 'liberatory practice' 'the first priority' and 'central task'. That is to say, facing the many difficulties and crises of the age of globalisation, especially phenomena of injustice and unfairness in international society, if all religious faiths do not share the responsibility and join efforts to bring about change, interreligious dialogue will become meaningless (Knitter 1996:60).

Theory and policy: The positive orientating theory of Chinese religious relations

In the previous two parts, I have traced and summarised the domestic and international theoretical developments in the field of religious relationship. In this part I hope to discuss furthermore concerning theories and policies. Let me start with the Religious Market Model and the Religious Ecological Model that Chinese scholars have paid more attention. It should be seen that the two theoretical approaches help us to think about how to promote religious relations in China today. They also raise many good questions for scholars to research and discuss. For instance, the Religious Market Model makes us reflect on such questions as whether religious activities need to be under government regulations, whether religious regulations by the government might have impeded the healthy development of religions, whether opening up religious market will be beneficial to the improvement of religious relations, and so on. Similarly, the Religious Ecological Model reflects on such questions as whether the ecological balance of religious system depends on state policies and regulations, whether folk religions should be treated as superstitions altogether, whether cultural strategies have to be developed to ensure the development of native religions, and so forth.

While we fully recognised the positive significance of these two approaches, it is also made clear in the previous sections that both the Religious Market Model and the Religious

Ecological have been controversial. Apart from the arguments raised by all the debating sides, I am hoping to question further here: Can we see religious activities as 'market behaviours'? Or can we treat religious relations as 'ecological phenomena'? What I am questioning here is not a matter of rhetoric, that is, whether we could use such terms as 'market' or 'eco-system' to describe religious phenomena and its developing mechanism in a vivid fashion. Rather, my problem is with the conceptualisation behind the usage: to what extent is it possible for us to understand religious faiths, handle religious conflicts, and build religious relations by way of the concepts, theories and methods in the disciplines of economics or ecology?

There is no doubt that when Chinese scholars discussed these two theories, they were trying to offer help and to construct healthy religious relations in China. However, both the researches into the religious situation and the proposals put forward should not leave the Chinese context. Let us think for a second: Can we build a religious market system like what we have done with the economy? Can we restore the balance of religious eco-system like what we need to do with the natural environment? Not only that would not fit with China's social and religious context, but I doubt any modern country would possibly interfere with religious affairs in that fashion. Thus, in order to build harmonious religious relations, we should take the 'Chinese context' of those relations very seriously. On that latter point, Director Wang (2009) from China's State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) has made the following points that are worth observing: China is a country of many religions, and so interreligious relations need to be taken care of. While the majority of Chinese people do not belong to any religion, there are also a large number of Chinese religious believers, so we need to handle well the relations between believers and non-believers. China is currently in the midst of profound social transition, and is seeing rapid growth of religions and their social impacts, so the relations between religions and all other aspects of society need to be taken care of. Moreover, China is a socialist country, and its ruling party, the Communist Party, has Marxism as the guiding principle, which advocates atheism, so it is very important to handle well the relations between the state and religion. Of all the relations discussed here that involve religion, the relation between the state and religions is undoubtedly the most important and critical. Thus, in order to handle religious relations appropriately, we should handle well the relations between the state and religions.

Generally speaking, scholars within and outside China could all agree that there are mainly three types of state-religion relations, that is 'unification of state and religion', 'state first and religion second', and 'separation of state and religion', and that the Chinese case falls in the last category. That categorisation has its historical basis. As many experts have pointed out, in the long history of the Chinese civilisation, there has never been a time when religious power top or even run parallel to state power. Instead, state government has always been in control of religious organisations and their

activities. However, in my view, the categorisation cited here is still too theoretical and general for understanding the exact 'Chinese context' with regard to its state–religion relation. Regardless of the historical complexity, what defines China's state–religion relation today is the fact that the ruling party is the Chinese Communist Party, which has Marxism as the guiding theory and embraces atheism. Understanding that unique aspect is thus important for grasping Chinese religious relations, especially the relation between the state and religions in the right context, and for exploring any feasible approaches to their positive development.

In recent years, many in the academic, political or religious spheres within and outside China have held the view that the three decades since the Reform and Opening up may be seen as the 'golden period' of religious policy in the history of China. There is perhaps sufficient policy basis to that observation. Going over the religious policies over the last 30 years, we can see the following impressive positive policies: to actively guide religions to fit with socialist society; let religion be given the full scope in the construction of socialist harmonious society; giving religious professionals and believers full opportunities in contributing to the economic and social development; state–religions relation should be taken as one of the five major relations in national politics and social life. Understood and explicated properly, is it possible to say that as China's Reform and Opening Up deepen, the religious policies of the Chinese state and its ruling party have become more open and positive? Or could the continuous developments in the government policy also mean that current religions in China have not caught up with the country's rapid progress into modernity, and that they have yet to play their positive social roles in the process? One thing can be sure of is that under the guidance of the current policy, those religious organisations that have been localised or sinicised will be able to develop and achieve to their full potential.

Based on the aforementioned analysis, it is clear that in order to achieve good religious relations, especially the relation between the state and religions in the context of today's China, it is critical that all sides think from the national level and take into heart the national interest, thus respect each other in the matter of beliefs, unite and collaborate in national politics, and see to it that religions play their positive roles in building a harmonious society and a harmonious world, and contributing to the economic, political and cultural development of China. So far, the approach that is the most feasible and best meet the social need is to lead all religions to participate in charity and social service. Nevertheless, even this most practical approach will present new challenges to both the Chinese government and the religious institutions involved. Let me explain this briefly next.

At the moment, the main urgent problem that China's State Administration needs to solve is how to implement its religious policies in a top-down fashion. In another word, while during the last three decades, the guiding principles that the Chinese government and its ruling party hold on religious

affairs have become more and more open and positive, in order to put them into practice, there are obvious difficulties at two different levels: the first challenge is for the government administration at the higher level to listen to the unanimous call from both the religious and the academic spheres and develop legal regulations for religious charity and social service. The second challenge is for the administration at the base level. Many administrative personnel have yet to improve their knowledge and understanding of religions in order to manage and coordinate religious affairs. It is important that they should focus on helping all religions give full play to their positive potentials. Not only should they manage religious affairs by the law, but become 'servants to the religious people', that is, they should serve the believer population wholeheartedly.

Nevertheless, if the Chinese state administration becomes serious and effective in implementing its increasingly open and positive religious policies, arguably religions in China will be faced with even more significant challenges. On that, I would like to quote here below an 'outsider', an American scholar's observations for a glimpse of insight (Marsh 2008:205–211). Of course we may not agree with the aforesaid comments entirely:

... in what ways religion can contribute to social harmony in China ... This focus on social harmony stands in sharp contrast to earlier phases of CCP rule, when turmoil and even revolution were justifiable methods in achieving policy objectives ... But social harmony has another side as well; not only does it imply some degree of tolerance on the part of the state, it also implies a degree of support for the state's objectives on the part of religious organizations. Some fear this is a new litmus test, and that organizations that cannot prove they can contribute to social harmony in China will be discriminated against or even shut down ... (p. 207)

... overall the impact of religion on social harmony is probably more positive than negative. As Berger's work has shown, under conditions of modernity, individuals choose not only to believe or not to believe, but what to believe, and in making their selection they are accepting a set of moral and ethical precepts that offer very many positive functions for society as a whole. In this way, religion not only instructs its members how they should relate themselves to God, but also to other members of society. And since religions that seek to destabilize society are few and far between, this means that religion contributes in a fundamental way to social harmony. (p. 208)

Finally, what I hope to develop through the given discussion is a theory that may be called 'Positive Orientating Theory of Chinese Religious Relations'. Its main points may be put as follows: firstly, I have stressed 'Chinese' here with the hope to emphasise the importance of Chinese context when dealing with religious relations, especially in terms of taking into account the religious policies and religious situations during the three decades of Reform and Opening Up. Secondly, I stress the 'positiveness' of my theory in order to clarify the main direction we choose in conducting theoretical research and policymaking. Obviously like all other things in the world, religious faiths and practices in the real life have their benefits and drawbacks. Seeing from the mainstream

development of Chinese religions and the majority of religious believers, or from China's overall religious situations, we should move forward with the times. In other words, it is time that we change from the old critical view that emphasises the negative aspects of religion to the constructive view that focuses on the positive aspects (Zhang 2009). Lastly, the use of the term 'orienting' is to suggest the Chinese context of state-religion relationship has to be the nexus of China's religious relations. As previously mentioned, with China's peaceful rise and its social progress, the religious policies are becoming more and more open and positive. Notably, the 'National Religious Work Conference' held in April 2016 explicitly stated the need to 'support the basic beliefs, core doctrines, and ritual systems of various religions'. Nevertheless, it seems like religions in China have not adapted fully to the new situation and policies, and thus have not fully exerted their positive influence in the construction of harmonious society and in promoting economic, political and cultural progress. In essence, the new framework emphasises the unique religious context of China (as explained in the article), the positive contributions of various religions to society, and the background of the state-religion relationship in China. Seen from now, the approach that is the most feasible and best meets the social need is to lead all religions to participate in charity and social service.

Conclusion

All in all, the 'Positive Orientating Theory of Chinese Religious Relations' that I propose does not stay as 'doctrines or thoughts' but aim at 'social practice', which means guiding believers of all major religions to fully participate in the great cause of building a harmonious Chinese society. Only in this way can we promote mutual understanding, build common grounds and achieve the harmonious interactions between religions, believers and non-believers, and all religions and the society as a whole.

As China's global influence continues to expand, grasping the intricacies and distinctiveness of its religious relationships becomes increasingly paramount. This article initially delineates four primary theoretical frameworks of religious relationships, followed by the introduction of a novel framework aimed at more accurately explicating the current religious dynamics in China. This new framework diverges from previous theories to some extent, yet concurrently retains certain core perspectives from them. This suggests that a more integrated, adaptable, and targeted approach is requisite when delving into the interplay between religion and policy.

In summary, this article endeavours to proffer a fresh perspective and toolset for comprehending and dissecting religious relationships in China. With the ceaseless evolution of socio-political and cultural backdrops, the study of religious dynamics will persist as an arena imbued with both challenges and opportunities. Can such thinking fit with not only the Chinese context of religious relations but also the latest developments in the international field of religious

studies and interreligious dialogue? I hope we can have further research and discussion on this problem.

Acknowledgements

Dr. Yang Peiyi provided many suggestions for this article and helped me avoid some errors in English expression.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

Z.Z. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research is supported by the National Social Science Fund of China project 'The Constitution of fundamental theory of "the Sinicization of Religions"' (18ZDA231).

Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in the article are my own and not an official position of the institution in which the research was carried out.

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