

Will Christianity Dominate the Chinese Faith System? On the Comparison between China's Belief System and Christianity Belief

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Abstract

This article attempts to explore the issue of faith in China including whether there is faith in contemporary China and what kinds of faiths Chinese people believe in, and the main reasons of why Christianity as both a dominant faith and religion in most western countries fails to be broadly accepted by most Chinese people. This article addresses that there is indeed a loose but complicated pattern of faith system in China. It usually embraces various religions, philosophies, ethics and even superstitions. However, because of the clash of two distinctive types of civilizations and political cultures, Christianity seems hardly to domain the whole faith system in China. Compared with the introduction of Buddhism in China, the introduction of Christianity is not as smooth as Buddhism does. Why could not Christianity become a broadly welcomed religion by most Chinese people in contemporary China? It may be mainly because that there are two main obvious conflicts between Chinese faith system and Christianity. For this article, the author both applies the documentary research method and depth interview to obtain supporting materials and empirical data.

Keywords: Chinese faith system, Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, Folk faith

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Introduction

The issue of Chinese faith has been a far-reaching academic research in China, and it always has a close relationship with some important problems to be given much more emphases on, such as the related problem of Chinese traditional culture, Chinese traditional philosophical system, Chinese political culture as well as Chinese moral and ethical system. Especially, during the period of social transformation in contemporary China, China has been undergoing a serious faith crisis which has stirred almost the whole academic sphere. Therefore, numbers of scholars from all walks of China have actively been exploring and solving the faith crisis in China.

However, on the basis of searching and analyzing a large of historical data and historical literatures as well as conducting the depth interviews on religions and other faith forms, this article clearly assumes that there indeed has been a set of complicated system of faith with diversity and inclusivity in contemporary China, which has been shaping Chinese people's concept of thinking and mode of behavior as well. Generally, the set of faith system of contemporary China basically embodies four kinds of faiths including religion faith, moral faith, political faith and folk faiths and customs. However, the primary social influences resulted from those different types of faiths in contemporary Chinese faith system are totally in different levels. Specifically, the effect of the political faith in China has been decreasing gradually; the religion faith as well as folk faiths and customs are usually put much more emphases on by Chinese people; the moral faith mainly represented by the Confucianism has been making positive effects on Chinese ancient society and contemporary society as a set of philosophical theory more than as a set of faith system in China. This article also explores that the reason why Christianity as both a dominant faith and religion in most western countries fails to be profoundly accepted by most Chinese people, and then two main reasons are revealed respectively.

This article could be divided into three main parts. In the first part, the connotation of faith has been discussed and revealed the different academic voices on the faith crisis in contemporary China; In the second part, the concept on Chinese faith system is put forward and explained; In the last part, two main internal conflicts between Chinese faith system and Christianity are deeply discussed.

The connotation of faith and the faith crisis in China

The definition of faith varies obviously as it is not easy to reach a consensus in academic field especially under a variety of distinctive human culture. In China, the origin of the word faith could be traced back to Tang dynasty and could mainly be explained as a certain of thought which emphasizes on some attitude of showing respect and belief towards some claim, doctrine, religion, and person. In western country, especially some countries with strong religions such as Christianity, Buddhism faith and Islam faith, when comes to the connotation of faith, it usually could be regarded as some thoughts and behaviors relating to religion. To some extent, it naturally originates from the misapprehension towards the nature of faith and essence of religion. In English, the connotation of faith usually includes two distinctive dimensions which are the word belief as a noun and the word believe as a verb.

In academic world, there are numerous understandings and interpretations about the connotation of faith in various respects such as its nature, value, effect and so on. Dai (2000) explained that the nature of faith was totally consisted by four parts: subjectivity as the basis of faith; spirit of tragedy as the result of faith; spirit of transcendence as the process of faith; hyper-rational spirit as the pattern of faith (p. 305). Shen (2009) asserted that as the object of faith was not a certain of intangible supernatural spirit but the real ontology which in fact was shown as a certain of authentic and tangible object known as deity, the faith accordingly in nature was a kind of pious worship towards almost all sorts of authorities (p. 35). Wang (2000) pointed out that the essence of faith rested with a sense of self-awareness which basically centered on transcendental ego and reality in order to pursue more further significance in life (p. 4). Wu (2014) have revealed that upon most occasions, the nature of faith was a kind of firm conviction and rigorous obedience to some codes, and the faith in nature was a type of hypothesis towards the significance of life (p. 240). Feng (2001) explained that faith was a certain of profound and overall reflection of human awareness on human survival conditions, human survival history and human survival outcome, and faith as the highest form of consciousness of human being was some subjective adjustment towards the relationship between the subjective inner world of human being and the objective outer non-human being world (p. 52). Feng (2006) also considered that faith was a creation gradually created by the spiritual culture of human being, and meanwhile conversely the faith itself made a positive effect on the ongoing progress of human civilization (p. 112).

The serious phenomenon of faith crisis in contemporary China has become an obvious fact. Lu and Li (2003) in their empirical investigation from the perspective of social psychology have revealed that under the circumstances of faith crisis in China, the condition of faith crisis might be improved positively with the help of faith education (p. 72). However, there finally are two distinctive Chinese academic schools in the respect of discussing the radical reason resulting in Chinese faith crisis. Based on the narrow concept of faith, theory and hypnosis of one academic school mainly emphasize on the primary cause of Chinese faith crisis rest with the fact that there are no faith and the culture of faith in China. Deng (2007) explained that the nature of faith should differentiate totally from the concept of conviction, and the real faith was deeply associated with the other world instead of the present world, and accordingly the only way to solve the problem of faith crisis in China should depend on the enhancement of self-consciousness of Chinese people (p, 26). In contrast, the other academic school basically explores the Chinese problem of faith crisis on the basis of a certain of broad concept of faith which however, blurs the differences between faith and conviction.

What do most Chinese people believe? A complex faith system in contemporary China

Actually, there indeed has been a set of complicated system of faith with diversity and inclusivity in contemporary China, which has been shaping Chinese people's concept of thinking and mode of behavior as well. Generally, the set of faith system of contemporary China basically embodies four kinds of faiths including religion faith, moral faith, political faith and Chinese folk faiths and customs. However, the primary social influences resulted from those different types of faiths in the Chinese faith system are totally in different levels. Specifically, the effect of the political faith in

China has been decreasing gradually; the religion faith as well as folk faiths and customs are usually put much more emphases on by Chinese people; the moral faith mainly represented by the Confucianism has been making positive effects on Chinese ancient society and contemporary society as a set of philosophical theory more than as a set of faith system in China. Accordingly, it is true that there is a serious faith crisis in contemporary China according to some empirical investigations and theoretical researches. However, the key problem of Chinese faith crisis primarily lies in how to coordinate the relationship among these forms of faiths in China and how to take advantage of these different types of faiths to release social burden and create a real harmonious community in the end.

As an important part constituting the contemporary complicated faith system in China, the religion faith is generally composed by the faith towards Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.

First of all, Taoism is the earliest Chinese religion faith, which takes a crucial role in shaping Chinese ancient philosophy. Overmyer (1985) has pointed out that “Daoism, China’s earliest organized religion, with its own special priests, rituals, and scriptures” (p. 35). It is the Taoism that firstly describes the cosmic concept of ancient China and also points out that there is a closely dynamic relationship between nature and human being. Overmyer (1985) has described that “different organs of the body were believed to be residences for these gods. Priests were supposed to prepare for rituals by meditating on the gods and abstaining from sex, wine, and strong-tasting foods” (p. 39). Besides, the contemporary Chinese Taoism is consisted by two main branches. Sung-Hae (2006) has explained that “one is the Orthodox Unity (Zhengyi) sect, which began in the year 142 as a popular movement known as the Way of the Celestial Masters (Tian shi dao) or the Way of the Five Pecks of Rice (Wudoumi dao)” (p. 101). As for the other branch of contemporary Chinese Taoism, Sung-Hae (2006) has pointed out that “the other branch of Chinese Daoism, which began in the twelfth century but is presently exercising the role of leadership in the People’s Republic of China, is the Order of Complete Perfection (Quanzhen jiao)” (p. 101). However, although the Taoism no doubt situates itself on the initial place followed by other types of faiths in China, the amount of the believers of Taoism in contemporary China still accounts for a small proportion.

Secondly, as a set of faith system, Buddhism originated from India and introduced gradually into China has become one of the crucial faiths in contemporary China. Actually, with such a long history of the introduction of Buddhism in China, the continuous reconciliation of different forms of civilization between China and India could obviously promote the tendency of the Buddhism’s localization development in China. Tang (2001) has pointed out that during the whole process of introducing of Buddhism from India to China, Buddhism was gradually reshaped itself under the circumstances of a combination and even contradiction between two distinctive civilizations (p. 69). On the primary stage of Buddhism introduced into China, several main sacred scriptures of the Buddhism were translated and preached extensively during the period from 148 A.D. to 316 A.D. in ancient China, and especially during the West Jin dynasty period of China, the capital Luoyang had become the centre of spreading Buddhism. Especially, during the period from 618 A.D. to 906 A.D., the relative independent Buddhism sects developed gradually such as Tiantai sect, Dharma character school, Hua-yen school, Chan sect, and Pure-land school. Just as

Jiang (1999) described that during this special historical period, it was the master Xuanzang who brought about six hundred and fifty-seven Buddhism scriptures from India to China, and he translated almost more than one thousand three hundred and thirty-five volumes (p. 46).

Thirdly, compared with the process of the Buddhism transmission path, the introduction of Christianity and Islam from western civilization to Chinese civilization seems not to be more smoothly and successfully. Accordingly, as the foreign religions, the influence made by Christianity and Islam on Chinese society is likely to be dwarfed under the comparison with the impact brought by Buddhism in China. Just as Shi (2009) revealed that the localization of Christianity was not a success in China and there had been some contradictions between the Chinese culture and Christianity (p. 114). As for the impact brought by Islam on Chinese civilization, Luo (2005) explained that the far-reaching influence brought by Islam was confined with nationality and regionalism, and therefore, Islam usually made significant impact on the regional culture and custom of some nationalities in China instead of the whole Chinese civilization (p. 79).

Apart from the religion faith in contemporary China, moral faith and political faith are two important Chinese faiths which together constitute the two branches of Chinese faith system in contemporary China. As a certain of moral faith, the Confucianism is believed by most Chinese people and is also propagated and advocated by Chinese government. To some extent, the Confucianism is regarded as either a set of ethical norm which constantly regulates social order as a moral tool or a certain of faith which could also relatively facilitates the social harmony in China, which radically represents the spirit of China and actually has been being introduced to other countries as a sort of method of cultural output taken full advantage of Chinese government in contemporary China. The political faith in contemporary China at least is consisted by two key sections: Marxism which is gradually reshaped by Chinese particular political culture and real political practice; Communism which is accepted as the highest and purest political ideal in Chinese political life.

In addition to the religion faith, moral faith, political faith, Chinese folk faiths and customs occupy an essential and irreplaceable place in the Chinese complex faith system, which has been aroused heavy academic interest in China. Wang (2005) assumed that the research of folk religion was an important part in the domain of social history study, and some meaningful academic results made folk religion become a breach to better understand the Chinese traditional society (p. 123). What is the folk faith? Zheng (2006) has explained that the folk faith in nature inherited the primitive religion tradition from ancient times and it mainly focused on the particular worship towards ghost, spirit and witchcraft rite, which made it alien from the official and broadly accepted religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism in China (p. 10). What's more, Chinese folk faiths and customs as an informal form of religion finally enrich the contents of formal religions. Luo (1994) pointed out that Chinese folk faith originated from Chinese primitive religions such as totem worship, nature worship, ghost and spirit worship, and ancestor worship and basically emphasized the thought that all things had spirits, and then the folk faith in China could be regarded as a meaningful method to preserve Chinese traditional culture (p. 55).

However, what is the main characteristics of Chinese faith system? Actually, the primary traits of Chinese faith system could be concluded into three parts. Firstly, Chinese faith system is a marvelous creation of multicultural integration, which allows the Chinese faith system to possess strong inclusivity and openness. Meanwhile, the foreign culture and faith introduced into Chinese cultural system is gradually reshaped and re-explained in the context of Chinese traditional culture, and then the Chinese faith system is a whole set of dynamic system based on Chinese traditional culture and other alien cultural elements. Specifically, Chinese faith system is composed not only by Confucianism, Taoism and Chinese folk faiths and customs stemmed from Chinese traditional culture, but also by other foreign religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam as well as Marxism and Communism. Secondly, compared with other types of faith in Chinese faith system, Chinese folk faiths and customs situate themselves in a relatively vital place, which has become a typical method to protect and preserve Chinese traditional culture. However, it also makes Chinese faith system rich in superstitious color. For instance, Chinese people usually accustom themselves to believe the mysterious power of ancestor, ghost, spirit, number and nature. Importantly, the spirit of worship based on the general creed of that all things have spirit would also nourish a psychological blind worship towards some talented people in China. The last but not the least, Chinese faith system in nature possesses the utilitarian orientation and practicability. Chinese people would like to believe any kinds of idols as long as all things they are praying are to be granted in the end. Otherwise, a faith crisis towards a certain of idol regarded as a failure might finally appear with a negative stir and violent behavior.

Two main internal conflicts between Chinese faith system and Christianity

Compared with the path of the introduction of Buddhism in China, the introduction of Christianity is completely not as smooth as Buddhism does. Just as Zhang (2008) has pointed out that it had been more than one thousand years since Christianity was introduced into China, however, Christianity could not integrate perfectly itself into Chinese society, and the spirit and theory of Christianity still lack the capability in nature to complete the whole process of full integration with Chinese traditional culture (p. 27). Why could not Christianity become a broadly welcomed religion by most Chinese people in contemporary China? It may be mainly because that there are two main obvious conflicts between Chinese faith system and Christianity.

On the one hand, there has been an obvious conflict between the spirit of salvation and suffering in Christian doctrine and the utilitarian spirit nourished in the cradle of Chinese folk faiths and customs. Specifically, in Christianity, the theory of two different worlds known as the present world and the pure and divine other world separates radically human being from the gods, body from soul, and humanness from divinity. To some extent, Christianity puts much more emphases on the pure other world instead of the present real world. Accordingly, in the theoretical system of Christianity, it is inevitable for human to taste the suffering for the final salvation in the other world, which could be relatively in accordance with the nature of faith. However, how to understand the essence of faith? Actually, it is always associated with the spirit of tragedy. Just as Dai (2000) explained that since the nature of human being was a combination of the finite represented mainly by some limitations in the real world and infinity basically shown as the ideal of stepping into the other world after the end of life, human confined with the finite in the present world had to

experience the continuous sufferings resulted from the uninterrupted process of self-denial in order to fulfill the infinity after death (p. 301). Totally speaking, it is the tragic color of faith that gradually facilitates the final process of transcendence over some limitations originated mostly from human nature, such as utilitarianism and hedonism and also promotes the course of human civilization to move ahead step by step. As a logical consequence, the primary characteristic of Christianity rests with the suffering in the real world for the eternal salvation and love in the other world. One of such a pious American Christian has ever explained as follows:

For my part, we should keep close intimacy with our God, which however, does not mean that we could protect ourselves from any kinds of sufferings and miseries. Actually, trusting in God is not definitely such an easy way to totally get rid of the whole sufferings but a significant method to wait and see what God is going to arrange for us and what we are going to be used by God. It is a real trust in God rather than a greedy desire from God. (Berlin, personal communication, March 3, 2015)

However, in Chinese faith system, the utilitarian orientation and practicability are particular characteristics, which mainly derives from the huge effect made by Chinese folk faiths and customs. Actually, the trait of utilitarian and practicability are initially nourished and represented obviously in the forming process of some parts of Chinese folk faiths and customs. Specifically, Chinese folk faiths and customs originate from the primitive concept of animism which is mainly shown as the pious worship towards nature, such as the worship to heaven and earth, mountain and river, wind and rain. With the further development of animism, the concept of immortality of soul which describes that souls could be immortal and eternal and could not be confined within the bodies, and then the concept of ghost and spirit appears finally. Just as Xu (1987) explained that the initial faith concept gradually developed from the worship towards the whole nature especially the totem which was usually the worship towards some animals and plants associated with some tribes into the worship towards ghosts, spirits and ancestors regarded as the powerful power that could protect the believers from danger and curse (p. 77). Obviously, behind the general process of Chinese folk faiths and customs is there a truth that whatever the types of worships are, they are built on the basis of a particular purpose orientated to the self-preservation and self-satisfaction. Basically, the original concept of utilitarian orientation and practicability could be traced back to the pursuit towards initial self-protection and self-gratification. Obviously, when Christianity built based on the spirit of suffering and salvation meets with Chinese faith system imbued with the tendency towards utilitarian orientation and practicability, a big contradiction filled with several obvious differences comes with no doubt.

On the other hand, there has been a radical contradiction between the western liberalism based on the individualism with strong self-awareness and the Marxism with Chinese characteristics built on collectivism with weak self-awareness, which makes Christianity become a spiritual must in most western countries instead of a definite necessity in China. Basically, as a usual but vital ideology in most western countries, liberalism has been playing such an important part in enriching the political culture and shaping the primary characteristics of citizen. The liberalism is built on the basis of individualism. How to appropriately understand the basic connotation of individualism? Zou and Zhao (1999) assumed as follows:

As for the nature of individualism, during the whole development of western civilization, individualism as a certain of lifestyle, outlook on life, and moral value possessed the universal significance, and it constituted the basic method to understand the main relationship between human being and the world including nature and human society. Specifically, the intensive permeation of individualism could be generally represented by humanism in philosophical sphere, democracy in political sphere, liberalism in economic sphere and self-awareness required by cultural sphere. (p. 12)

Besides, as for the explanation towards the nature of individualism, number of scholars contribute various significant meanings. However, under the intensive effect of contextualism and Chinese inherent psychological construction which is mainly associated with the long-term accumulation of Chinese traditional culture, the concept of individualism is always misunderstood and easily interpreted as a certain of egoism. Briefly, the connotation of individualism could be explained at least in three aspects. Just as Yang (2007) explained as follows:

The value system of individualism could be concluded in three basic elementary propositions. First of all, all the values were individual-centered; Secondly, individual itself in a society was largely regarded as a certain of means and purpose, which possessed the highest value. The society was merely treated as a certain of useful tool to fulfill the purpose of individual; Lastly, all individuals shared the moral equality, and no one should be seen as a certain of tool used by others for satisfying their desires. (p. 41)

Obviously, the nature of individualism as an important ideology of most western countries rests with the cultivation of the spirit of self-awareness which could be developed quite well with the assistance of Christianity. How to understand the development of self-awareness need the help from Christianity? Just as Deng (2007) revealed as follows:

The most important trait of Christianity was that it was a certain of religion focusing on the development of self-awareness. Christianity was basically built on the spirit of self-awareness and the soul of independence. Accordingly, we could draw an objective conclusion that the religion with self-awareness usually was established on the basis of the independent awareness of individuals which embraced self-awareness.

In Christianity, with the help of the Kant's classic explanation of the nature of God, God is indeed the alienation of the spirit of self-awareness gradually accessed to the perfection by self-denial again and again. Deng (2007) explained that the reason of why Christianity was so-called the purest religion all over the world mainly consisted in that there was such a close relationship among the value of Christianity and the development of self-awareness and the independence of soul, which clearly certified a truth that the worshipped objects of Christian faith were merely the believers themselves but other mysteries (p. 25). Actually, with the deep profound development of self-awareness, the gap between material world and spiritual world would become so bigger and bigger that the spiritual need of individuals could hardly be satisfied merely with some materials provided in daily life. Under this circumstances,

individuals tend to be easily confined with the serious spiritual wasteland. However, it is Christianity that brings the almighty God who is actually the alienation of self-awareness of individual and an eternal perfect being to save individual out of the spiritual wasteland. Because of the final appearance of the spirit of Christianity, all the sufferings and miseries are being in a relatively reasonable way, and then living in the material world will always be regarded as a stretch of long-term suffering journey constituted on the basis of salvation and spiritual satisfaction and even the final freedom in the other world. Therefore, Christianity is to individuals in most western countries is what soul is to body.

However, in contemporary China, Marxism is defined as a certain of official ideology which puts emphasis on the importance of the principle of collectivism, which has been propagandized and strongly advocated by Chinese government. Individuals living in China have more easily been experiencing the condition of losing individuality, and then the process of seeking for the way out of the spiritual wasteland for most Chinese people seems not to be inevitable either. Since under the true circumstance in which the material resources could not be provided fully and equally in contemporary China, the profound caring for the whole spiritual life for most Chinese people who are stretching themselves to survive from the poverty seems to be a question to need an answer in the distant future.

Specifically, the primary principle of individualism lies in that interests and rights of individual in a society usually tend to be considered fully, and the priority is always given to individual. However, the collectivism stresses on the importance of collective more than individual. Just as Guo (2007) pointed out that what so-called collectivism in simple words referred to a value that the interests of the collective totally weighed more than the interest of individual since the logic behind collectivism was that the interest of individual would be realized on the condition of the realization of the interests of collective (p. 81). Accordingly, in contemporary China, the spirit of self-awareness has hardly been cultivated, and the problem related to spiritual world could always be released usually with the help of family and close friend. However, for most individuals who possess relatively mature self-awareness, it is not enough to comfort the spiritual world through merely relying on family, friend and even some consoling communities, but resorting to the spirit of Christianity and almighty God who actually is created and represented by the human introspection would be the final way. Besides, for most Chinese, on account of the huge influence of political ideology emphasizing on the importance of the firm adherence to the principle of the collectivism and the Chinese dictatorial political culture on which the parental relationship between authorities and subjects is built, the spirit of self-awareness of most Chinese people could hardly be nourished.

Conclusion

In contemporary China, during the period of social transformation in contemporary China, China has been undergoing a serious faith crisis which has stirred almost the whole academic sphere. Actually, there indeed has been a set of complicated system of faith with diversity and inclusivity in contemporary China, which mainly embodies four kinds of faiths including religion faith, moral faith, political faith and Chinese folk faiths and customs. However, the conflicts between the spirit of Christianity and the utilitarian spirit nourished by Chinese faith system as well as the serious

contradiction between two different political cultures and ideologies weaken the influence of Christianity on Chinese society. Additionally, the serious problem of the spiritual wasteland mainly resulted from the immature spirit of self-awareness of Chinese people seems not to be solved completely with the only assistance from Christianity.

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