Fenggang Yang

Religion in China. Survival & Revival Under Communist Rule.

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For all those who want or need details about religion in China, this is certainly an unavoidable book. In addition to the numerous papers published in various journals, in this book Fenggang Yang offers a comprehensive description of the past and present religious situation in China. In particular, two chapters of the book are devoted to this topic, giving the reader many important details, which are less known or available elsewhere. The first one deals with the Chinese Marxist atheism and gives not only a description of what Marxist atheism means, but more importantly, outlines changes and debates which demonstrate the differences in understanding and applying the allegedly "unique" Marxist position. These changes and debates were framed by political dynamics but they are not reduced to them. For a wider readership, and in view of a possible comparison with other former communist societies, the concept of religion and culture is particularly interesting. As shown in the book, rehabilitation of the concept of culture in scientific analysis as a concept with its own significance and life and framing religion as part of a cultural phenomenon has opened a path to more nuanced research and writings about religion. Although still influenced by social circumstances, examples of those who follow this path nicely illustrate the complex nature of the relations between sciences and social realities. The second chapter, devoted to the description of the Chinese religious situation, deals with the regulation of religion. It analyses four distinct periods, from establishing political control over religious groups in the period of 1949-1957, a more tight control and diminishing of religious activities in the period of 1957-1966, to the period of 1966-1979 in which efforts were directed towards eradication of religion and the last one, from 1979 to 2010, in which religion was tolerated but the official policy was characterized by a strong (expanding) governmental control. Indeed, the very strict control is a key factor in understanding the Chinese religious life today. Moreover, the control can be viewed as the last essential ideological stance of the Chinese Communists and it would be interesting to observe how, and whether at all, this would be changed in the future, in line with the overall changes in Chinese society.

Besides offering a valuable insight into the Chinese social and religious life, the book has a clear or, more precisely, far-reaching theoretical ambition. Fenggang Yang embraces a theory which is known as the market theory in the sociology of religion. Economic approach is centred on the notions of demand, supply, and regulation which, according to the authors of this approach, can explain the different dynamics (vitality) of religious life in different countries / parts of the world. For the author, the benefit of such an approach is visible in its successful application to the Chinese situation, and this is the way he proceeds with the analysis after describing the situation in the chapters briefly presented here. He does this, as in his other publications, through two main concepts. One is the concept of red, black, and gray markets of religion, while the other is the oligopoly model.

A crucial question in this regard is what the consequences of an excessive regulation of religion are. As is generally known, social sciences deal mainly with unintended consequences of social action. Therefore, it is not surprising to find, at the very least, mixed results of governmental actions. However, the author channels this only to the concepts of red, black, and grey markets. Very simply, as the model basically starts from presumptions of stability of religious demand, it is not surprising that restrictions on religions (visible in the red market

which consists of officially permitted religious organizations, believers, and religious activities) will result in the emergence of a black market. Organizations and activities which from an official point of view became illegal and while they were not totally suppressed, they went underground. All those who do not want to be engaged in prescribed organizations / activities (red market) and all those who find the costs of engaging in the black market very high will, in one way or another, produce a very complex and volatile grey market. The real socio-religious life is happening in the grey market. According to the author's estimation, partly based on empirical data but which needs to be proved further, there are hundreds of millions of potential religious consumers in China, those who, at the moment, partly and in very different ways share or participate in any kind of religious or spiritual believing or belonging. It is interesting to note here that, though the model implies a presumption of constant (or not suppressible!) religious demand, the author rightly finds this too simplistic and recognizes that the "shortage economy of religion" (the concept which he borrows from Janos Kornai's analysis of the communist economic model) also results in suppression of demand or very different relations between supply and demand.

The oligopoly model tries to capture numerous situations which cannot be described by religious monopoly or religious pluralism (and the total ban on religion), i.e., the situation in which only the selected few religions are legal, while others operate in the black or grey market. It seems that the oligopoly operates also when some religious brands have special privileges or government access. However, it is not clear from the book whether special relations with a selected few imply that others, which do not have them, are illegal or that others operate freely but simply without official support. These two situations are quite different! Nevertheless, according to the author, the oligopoly model is present in many countries of the world and can be used as a framework for discussions about different meanings of plurality, pluralisation, and pluralism.

As already noted, this is an ambitious book. Fenggang Yang believes his model can have universal applicability. Moreover, he makes numerous references to previous communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe throughout the book and claims that his analysis is suitable for explaining the dynamics of religious life during the communist times (the red, black, and grey market) and even today (the oligopoly model with variations of other models). However, this is not a place for the debate (which is indeed well known) about the market model and its applicability in Europe or other regions, alongside the American context which initially triggered such a theory. Nevertheless, it should be said that Yang's claim will very probably face harsh criticism from all those with a better knowledge about the past and present of the communist / post-communist Europe. For the purposes of this review, only a few preliminary observations will be made. The impact of the communist regimes on religious life has been widely discussed in the literature (which is not referred to in the book) and which has shown, at the very least, huge variations among different countries, variations which would be very hard to explain (or reduce) in terms of the red, black, and grey market. This is not a denial of the fact that in many countries religions went (partly) underground, but in explaining how and to what extent this occurred, other social factors should not be neglected. A broader historical perspective is needed, besides acknowledging the differences in the way communism was implemented in different countries. Also, the concepts of the public and the private (particularly in cases when religion remained socially embedded in everyday life of the majority, although it had no access to the public sphere) seems to be more appropriate in describing the communist past. The same type of criticism can be directed to the oligopoly model which, as said, has remained less understandable and is empirically insufficiently grounded. As the literature on the church-state relations in Europe shows, the majority of countries have the so-called cooperationist or hierarchical model, which explains the differences in the ways religions are treated socially and politically, but which has such different meanings in different countries and such different implications for the religions which operate but lack (partly or

totally) official support. Finally, the relations between plurality and religious vitality are far from expected in a market model.

These critical observations are not intended to deter future readers from the book. Quite the contrary, this remains an interesting book, particularly important for understanding the Chinese situation. The book can also stimulate debates about the concepts we use to describe our past, and moreover, our present.

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