

Comments on Religious Concepts under Diverse Visions

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Abstract: *In the Western context, because of its organizational structure, religion has become synonymous with the church. In contrast to this, in traditional Chinese society the concept of religion is not monotheist or institutionalized. And thus there is harmony between multiple religions. The way of existence of China's traditional religion is a normal state of the world's religions. In recent years, the institutional religions in Western society are facing a downward trend, while the number of people in pursuit of spirituality continues to rise, which reflects the enhanced awareness of the religious idea of "religiousness" or "individual religion".*

Key Words: *Church-state Relations; Institutional Religion; Individual Religion; Spirituality*

Since the 1970s, the world has set off a wave of religious revival; in the 21st century, religion becomes a major theme of the international community.^② In China, since the 1980s, religion also was

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^② Professor of University of California Santa Barbara, Mark Juergensmeyer considers globalization and religious politics the two major themes of the beginning of the 21st Century. See Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to al Qaeda*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2008, p.ix; About

on the increase. Therefore, the tension between religion and society as well as between religion and politics was gradually highlighted. It deserves careful consideration and examination whether or not possible to directly apply religious concepts and theories built in the Western context to China and to deal with religious issues accordingly. This article aims to explore the diverse interpretations of religious ideas and theories in academia. The author hopes this will be conducive to construct a theoretical paradigm of religious studies in China.

I

According to the theory of the sociology of religion, religion is becoming a universal cultural phenomenon of human society, because it has some capabilities to fulfill some kind of personal and social need. Malinowski pointed out: "Religion is not only people explaining and projecting their dreams; it is not only a sort of spiritual electric - mana -; it is not solely to be recognized in social communion - no, religion and magic are ways men must have, being men, to make the world acceptable, manageable, and right." "Strong personal attachment and death, the thing people feel the most helpless and desperate existing, is the most important source of religious belief." (Roberts, K., 1984: 49-50). Due to their inability to control the living environment, people are confused. Due to the evil and the unfortunate, people feel helpless. Religion, on the other hand, can make people feel that there is some strength and hope more powerful than themselves. Malinowski's "functionalism" attributes the presence of religion to the basic needs, motivation and emotion of the individual human being, so it has the characteristics of individualism and psychology. A. R. Racliffe Brown

global religion resurgence, see Wang Xiaochao, "Theoretical analysis and thinking on global religious resurgence", in Guo Changgang, ed., *Globalization, Values and Pluralism*, Shanghai: Shanghai Joint Publishing House, 2008.

proposed an alternative functionalism, namely “structural functionalism”, that religion is to meet the needs of the social structure. From Brown’s point of view, social stability needs to be broadened in consistence with the understanding of the values, beliefs and norms. Rituals can strengthen the structure of faith, values and social norms of the whole community. And fear of hell, anxiety over offending god as well as worry about the devil all help to protect the community. Durkheim’s “metaphorical parallel principle” can also be attributed to the structural functionalism. Durkheim claims that the sacred world is in parallel with the secular world, and because of the fear of punishment from God, the behavior patterns that may lead to social disorder were prohibited. From Durkheim’s view, “God” is actually a metaphor of “society”. To worship God is to worship people’s own society. However, people are not aware of this projection process, and taboos and moral criteria thus become unquestionable absolute imperatives (Roberts, K., 1984: 51-52).

In today’s Western religious discourse system, religion actually refers to that of structural functions, because it has its own concept of moral order and requires the subjective life of the believers to be “subject to the ‘higher’ authority with transcendent significance, goodness or truth” (Heelas, P., & Woodhead, L., 2005: 5). Its core value is to obey authority, the authority being an organization of religion, its own - church. Therefore, in the Western context, religion is institutionalized, is an “orderly ideology”, which must constitute a competitive relationship with the secular regime (Juergensmeyer, M., 2008: 19-20). The Western discourse system is actually built on the Christian experience.

After obtaining legal status in the Edict of Milan and going on to become the state religion, the Christian organization system has been growing rapidly. In the words of American scholar Sydney Meade, “Since Christianity became the state religion - conceptually the City of

God, it has also become a universal society with organized action. After the perish of the Roman Empire in the West, a republican society retained." (Mead, S., 1967: 263). The growth of the church organization system: "Initially it did not tend to the unity of the church and church authority. Revelation involves the life in the future world - heaven and hell, as well as preparation for this life through prayer and through personal humility and obedience", but later "the church as an organization, is almost entirely linked with the social, political and economic life of the society. It is not standing on the opposite side of the political order, but in the order. Religion is associated with politics, economics and law, just like the latter three are associated with one another. The jurisdiction of the church and the secular jurisdiction are mixed." (Berman, H., 1993: 64).

From Pope Leo III (reigned 795-816) crowned Charlemagne in St. Peter's Basilica in AD 800, to Gregory VII (reigned 1073-1085) promulgated the *Dictatus Papae* with 27 statements, claiming that he "can depose emperors, and a plenary meeting of the church should not be convened without his command" (Berman, H., 1993: 116-117), to Innocent III (reigned 1198-1216) taught Europeans to see the Pope as the supreme ruler of the world, the power struggle between the Pope and the secular monarchy became increasingly intense. Church defenders strongly advocated the divine right theory, claiming that "just as the moon's brilliance is from the sun, kingship gains its glory and authority from the Pope". In order to achieve victory in the power struggle, the church would use of a variety of forged material. The fake "Donation of Constantine" claimed that the sovereignty of the Western Roman Empire has been transferred to the Bishop of Rome since the time of Constantine I in the fourth century. According to the "Collection of Isidore", the emperor was subordinate to the Pope since the Christian first year, and the Pope is the successor of Christ as well as the Apostle Paul (Zhang, S., 1992: 149). At the same time, with the

institutionalized network of the church expanding, corruption was also born within the church. Priests and monks “gambling, cursing, excursing, carrying the sword, gathering money and committing adultery”, “lived a Dionysus life” (Durant, W., 1998: 25).

To overcome the destined drawbacks of the institutionalized church, people inside and outside of the church in the Western society were all carrying out reform. The existence of monasticism was something against the growing secularization of the church. Reason for monasticism prevailing, according to the American scholar Bruce Shelley: “The hermit often fled, then, not so much from the world as from the world in the church. His protest of a corrupt institution led him into the dangers of a pronounced individualism. Against the great imperial institution, the channel of divine grace, the early monks set the life of the soul, face to face with God.” (Shelley, B., 2004: 129-130). From a contemporary perspective, the emergence of the monastic system can be seen as a new religious movement. Dissatisfied with the corrupt and degenerate church atmosphere, some pious Christians demanded to reform the church, to abandon the pursuit of secular power, to return to the simple nature of the early Christianity, and to seek personal inner fulfillment. Similar movements happened in church history again and again. The founders of Pietism called their pietistic movement “the church in the church” (Cirpriani, R., 2003: 158-159), because they were “opposed to the policy of the church organization, opposed to what they thought was compromising and harmful, emphasizing on the essentiality of personal beliefs and believing faith is essentially characterized by the ‘personal experience of God’s grace in the soul of the believer’.” (Shelley, B., 2004: 369).

German sociologist Ernst Troeltsch and the US Catholic theorist Richard Niebuhr also analyzed the emergence of new religious groups. They believe that if the church continues to compromise with the secular society, which makes some members feel that the church is no

longer faithful to its religious traditions, there will be some "heresy" out there to form a new religious organization. These organizations have strong sectarian features. They intend to avoid the main characteristics of the church from which they are separated, and they take theological principles in full in accordance with biblical interpretation. But after a period of time, these new sects will gradually take on the characteristics of the church that it once refused. So, it has become a hotbed of breeding new sects (Lee, R., & Marty, M., 1964: 24-26). Domestic scholars in China also have some brilliant expositions: "the religious resurgence, the new sects and other revivals or reform movements are pathways for the religious organizations to overcome these functional disorders. Therefore, the rebellion against institutionalized religious organizations has become one of the important reasons for the development of the new sects. The majority of internal conflicts and divisions within religious organizations can be attributed to the resentment against the drawbacks of institutionalized organization and the desire of rebirth." (Sheng, D., & Yao, P., 2007: 115).

In addition to all the reform efforts spontaneous or passive, the most effective program to address the drawbacks of the religious institutions is the separation of church and state. In the United States, for example, on the matter of whether to establish a state religion, the founding fathers recognized that only when religion is "universal, non-institutionalized and non-coercive" can it be favorable to shape the moral foundation for the newborn republic (Wald, K., 2003: 78). But if religion is "special, institutionalized and coercive", it might be a threat to the stability of the Republic. It is because the founding fathers saw religion as a force possible to both strengthen and undermine the political stability that there is a special set of church-state relations, neither are the religious effects on government all endorsed, nor is there unlimited hostility." (Wald, K., 2003: 74). The wall between the

government and the church cuts off the possibility of collusion between religion and power, and effectively eased the tension between politics and religion. Experiments of the American separation of the church and state system opened new church-state relations. "Ties between government and a special faith are cut off, to prevent the church from interfering with the running of the government." (Wilson, J., 1978: 192). American religion has therefore returned to what Winnifred F. Sullivan said to be, "private, voluntary, individual, textual, and believed", instead of "public, coercive, communal, oral, and enacted religion." (Sullivan, W., 2005: 7-8).

II

Regarding the tendency for the institutionalized religion to deviate from the original meaning of religion, psychologist William James has a good analysis: "at the outset we are struck by one great partition which divides the religious field. On the one side of it lies institutional, on the other personal religion. As M.P. Sabatier says, one branch of religion keeps the divinity, another keeps man most in view. Worship and sacrifice, procedures for working on the dispositions of the deity, theology and ceremony and ecclesiastical organization, are the essentials of religion in the institutional branch. Were we to limit our view to it, we should have to define religion as an external art, the art of winning the favor of the gods. In the more personal branch of religion it is on the contrary the inner dispositions of man himself which form the center of interest, his conscience, his deserts, his helplessness, his incompleteness. And although the favor of the God, as forfeited or gained, is still an essential feature of the story, and theology plays a vital part therein, yet the acts to which this sort of religion prompts are personal not ritual acts, the individual transacts the business by himself alone, and the ecclesiastical organization, with

its priests and sacraments and other go-betweens, sinks to an altogether secondary place. The relation goes direct from heart to heart, from soul to soul, between man and his maker." (James, W., 2008: 20-21).

James strongly inclines to think the personal religion is the foundation of the concept of religion. He said, "In one sense at least the personal religion will prove itself more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism. Churches, when once established, live at second hand upon tradition; but the founders of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine. Not only the superhuman founders, the Christ, the Buddha, Mahomet, but all the originators of Christian sects have been in this case; so personal religion should still seem the primordial thing, even to those who continue to esteem it incomplete." (James, W., 2008: 20-21). James further questions the meaning of the concept of "religion" in Western society: "In critically judging of the value of religious phenomena, it is very important to insist on the distinction between religion as an individual personal function, and religion as an institutional, corporate, or tribal product ... The word 'religion', as ordinarily used, is equivocal. A survey of history shows us that, as a rule, religious geniuses attract disciples, and produce groups of sympathizers. When these groups get strong enough to 'organize' themselves, they become ecclesiastical institutions with corporate ambitions of their own. The spirit of politics and the lust of dogmatic rule are then apt to enter and to contaminate the originally innocent thing; so that when we hear the word 'religion' nowadays, we think inevitably of some 'church' or other; and to some persons the word 'church' suggests so much hypocrisy and tyranny and meanness and tenacity of superstition that in a wholesale undiscerning way they glory in saying that they are 'down' on religion altogether. Even we who belong to churches do not exempt other churches than our own

from the general condemnation." (James, W., 2008: 20-21).

Russian-born American sociologist Pitirim Sorokin followed James's logic in his analysis of the evolution of institutionalized religion: "to some extent, it is an unfortunate and inevitable fate the transition from asceticism to activism. Once the founders of the asceticism started to attract the attention of other people, they began to gain followers. With the increase in the number of followers, an organization appeared. With the emergence of the organization, the attitude of pure asceticism - the attitude of completely ignorance as well as non-interference of experience no longer exists. 'Organizations' or 'institutions' is a kind of phenomenon in this world. They require a variety of administration of needs and relationships including management, command and guidance, which purely belong to the categories of experience. Therefore, any kind of abstinence, once developing a certain degree of influence, became an organization. Once an organization, it is bound to become more and more initiative, and the more initiative there is, the faster it develops, which is an inevitable transition." Once this institutionalized network is formed, "the salvation of the individual soul becomes the salvation of the soul of others. From transcendence it returns to experience and s gradually more and more entangled with it." (Sorokin, P., 2010: 46).

Similar to the distinction between religion and religious organizations made by James et al., German sociologist Georg Simmel made a distinction between the concept of "religion" and "religiousness". He believes that religiousness is the essential attribute of religion, which is "inner form of human experience, so it comes before religion. Religion is just a conversion of religiousness in experience, to achieve religiousness through different ways on an organizational level, such as churches, denominations, sects and movements." (Cirpriani, R., 2003: 98). Their relationship is the content and form. In Simmel's view, "religiousness" is "a presence or an event

in our souls, is a part of our talent. Religious nature and libido is the same in essence." (Simmel, 2005: 49). Religiousness is the life and soul of religion, even if the external religious establishment disappear, "religious values are still saved intact in the soul." (Simmel, 2005: 53). Simmel also foresees that "religious people will only be individuals, and the public would be forever chasing existing religious doctrines and institutions. The key to the modern religious problems is also the transition of religion: from 'religion' to 'religiousness', from the public to the individuals. The so-called post-religious religion, from this opinion, is the individual religion, and is the significant growth of the religious life of individuals." (Liu, X., 2005: Introduction 33).

While Western sociologists attempt to distinguish between institutional religion and personal religion, religion and religiousness, political theorists are trying to understand the essence of religion from the point of view of the political reality. As Locke put it: "real religious life and power only lies in the heart of inner belief. If there is no such belief, faith will not be the faith." (Locke, J., 1994: 6). And the church is just "combined group composed by members on a voluntary basis" where believers are free to enter and exit. The church is for the salvation of souls, and salvation is the only reason for people to join the church (Locke, J., 1994: 8). In other words, the church is merely an external form of establishment, while the belief inside the heart is fundamental. American separation of church and state system designer Thomas Jefferson also said: "I always think that religion is purely between our God and our conscience, and conscience is responsible to God, instead of the priest ... My opinion is that there would never have been an infidel, if there had never been a priest. The artificial structures they have built on the purest of all moral systems, for the purpose of deriving from it pence and power, revolts those who think for themselves, and who read in that system only what is

really there.” (Jefferson, T., 1993: 1646-1647). Holding such a view of religion, he drafted *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom* in which he wrote: “That the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time.”^① Jefferson even pointed out that when reading the Bible, it is necessary to pay attention to what are the words of Jesus, what is coined by those known as the Jesus believers. These artificially added contents are what give rise to endless debate, harm Jesus’s original intent, and tarnish as well as distort Jesus’ acts and precepts. He said: “In extracting the pure principles which he taught, we should have to strip off the artificial vestments in which they have been muffled by priests, who have travestied them into various forms, as instruments of riches and power to themselves... We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus, paring off the amphibologisms into which they have been led, by forgetting often, or not understanding, what had fallen from him, by giving their own misconceptions as his dicta, and expressing unintelligibly for others what they had not understood themselves.”^② The aim of Jefferson’s deletion of the Bible is to restore the original appearance of the Bible as the perfect moral template to restore the simple essence of Christianity as a religion.

^① <http://www.e-cpcs.org/newsinfo.asp?Newsid=9792>.

^② Jefferson once made a cut version of the *Bible* for his own use, mainly to capture the “pure, simple and unadorned doctrine believed and performed by the Apostles without knowledge, apostolic Christian Fathers, as well as the Christians in the first century, a total of 46 pages.” See Jefferson, pp. 1521-1522.

III

The Chinese religion is closer to Malinowski's nature of individual needs. Many Western scholars have also recognized the aspects that Chinese religion is different from Western ones. Ninian Smart thinks that Western religion has the characteristics of the organizational structure, but to explore the characteristics of the Chinese religion from the perspective of organization will cause misunderstanding. "Sociologists categorize religious organizations into the church, sect and denomination. This is obviously in accordance with the West, especially the Christian phenomenon ... In traditional Chinese society there is a complex coexistence of four or more than four traditional religions: Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and folk religion." (Smart, N., 1996: 196). American theologian Paul F. Knitter sees the possibility of "unity of differences" from Chinese religious diverse coexistence: "The Chinese people are religious hybrids. Unlike the Europeans and the Americans, they did not grow up in a one-religion mode. Although a special Chinese man and woman can prove that their main religious worldview to be Confucianism or Buddhism, they are not pure Confucians or Buddhists. This mixed quality of the religious life in China is expressed in the 'three religions' concept. 'Three religions' refer to Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The same individual in a different context of life can accept Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism at the same time." (Knitter, P., 2003: 3).

Late Chinese American scholar Yang Qingkun pointed out, China is by no means a country without religion. Also religion is not dispensable for the life of the Chinese people. The "non-religious" and "rational" assumptions are due to other reasons. It is rather a self-deception of the modern intellectuals "in the face of strong Western politics and economy, trying to emphasize the Chinese

nation's greatness to meet their psychological needs." In fact, the religious life of the Chinese people can be seen everywhere. "On the vast land of China, almost every corner, there are monasteries, shrines, altars and worship places. Temples and altars are scattered everywhere, which is a powerful manifestation of the ubiquitous force of religion in Chinese society. They are a symbol of the social reality." (Yang, Q., 2006: 24). An important reason for the unclear status of Chinese religions is "the lack of a structural, formal, organized religion in China's social system, and therefore people usually see folks' ceremony as un-institutional and religion in the Chinese social and moral order does not seem so important." (Yang, Q., 2006: 5). To resolve the status of Chinese religions, he put forward the concept of "diffuse" religion as an interpretation paradigm of Chinese religious phenomenon.

Mr. Yang's paradigm has pioneering significance in exploring the differences between Chinese and Western religions. There is no need holding Western religious discourse as a ruler to consider religions in all regions of the world. Zhang Guangzhi pointed out in the study of the peoples of the world into the process of development of civil society from the savage state that, in human society, there are two kinds of transition from barbarism to civilization. One is global or non-western, the main representative being China. The other is the Western style, "in the establishment of the rule fitting for the world, we should not only to use the historical experience of the West, but also China's historical experience. For rules based on these historical facts, the applicability will be greatly enhanced." (Zhang, G., 2010: 17-18; Wu, C., 2009: 46-47). In particular, he pointed out that "modern social science is a product of the history of Western civilization, the summary of the historical experience of Western civilization. Therefore, its general rules are very naturally applicable for the law in the history of Western civilization." (Zhang, G., 2010: 24). Following

this line of thought, we can see that compared to monotheism, polytheistic religion is in fact a common phenomenon in early human history. Max Weber said in the exposition of the "general character of the Asian religions": "in principle, Asia was and still is a land of free competition of various religions, similar to the late ancient Western 'tolerance'. In other words, tolerance under the state restrictions - do not forget that this is also limits for all religious tolerance, but the direction of action is different." (Weber, M., 2005: 461). Despite the pejorative, Weber pointed out the fact that religious pluralism formed in these areas has formed free competition and harmony. In fact, even in the West, before Christianity, Greek and Roman religions are also as such. Whether the worship of the Olympia gods led by Zeus (Jupiter), or worship with mysterious characteristics like Orphic worship, Mithra worship, etc., their relationship with the secular politics is in harmony, without serious tension or competition. From the historical point of view, religion, church-state relations and other issues of Western society after Christianity, are in fact, more like a special case, rather than the existence of a universal culture of human society.

Monotheistic religion has long been regarded as a model of higher level than polytheistic religion, which in fact, is merely a point of view by the shackles of the Enlightenment and evolutionary thinking. In the past one hundred years, the Western concept of evolution and development had a significant impact on the sociological study of religion. Many religious doctrines also followed the concept of evolution, treating religion as a kind of evolutionary process from the low-level to the advanced level. "In addition to William Kimsey (perhaps Nietzsche), there are few modern western philosophers that dared to explicitly defend polytheism." (Funkenstein, A., 1994: 99). Scholars from various countries especially non-Western scholars have come to realize that polytheism is not the lower stage of religious development, but the normal status in the religious development

process. Compared with monotheism, for polytheism it is easier to reach a harmonious coexistence between religions. The Japanese scholars Takeshi Umehara asserted, "Just as past trends were to shift from polytheism to monotheism, the future civilization is going to steer from monotheism to polytheism. So far, to keep the multi-ethnic coexistence in this small world, polytheism is superior to monotheism."^① Therefore, the polytheistic Eastern religions are able to make a significant contribution to the development of world religions. Indeed as Professor Katsuhiko Kohara, director of CISMOR, Doshisha University said, "in Said's 'Orientalism' we see, in the eyes of the 'rational', 'moral', 'mature', 'normal' Westerners, Oriental is 'irrational', 'vulgar', 'naïve' and 'strange', and thus the West has reason to control the Orient. Now we see, 'Orientalism' can in turn become 'Westernism'. Polytheism from the East can be used to resolve many problems brought by Western monotheism."^②

IV

In recent years, the influence of Christianity in European society is declining. At the same time, the pursuit of "spirituality" is on the rise. More and more believers claim that they pursue a spiritual rather than a religious life. They even proposed the so-called "faith without ascription" (Davie, G., 2007: 86-87; 128), claiming that although infrequently involved in church activities, they are not without faith.

^① *Mori no Shisou ga Jinrui wo Sukuu (The Idea of the Forest will Save Mankind)*, Shogakukan, 1995, p.158. See also Professor Takeshi Umehara's speech on the International Symposium of globalization and religious pluralism 2010 organized by the Global Research Center of Shanghai University.

^② Takeshi Umehara: A Critique of the Pluralist Model in Christian Theology: Reflecting the Perspective of Japanese Religions and Islam. The article is Umehara's conference paper of the International Symposium of globalization and religious pluralism 2010 organized by the Global Research Center of Shanghai University.

In fact, this is a return from the “derivative” institutionalized religion to the “native” individual religion. 2008 nationwide survey of religious identity affirmed the tendency that Americans are increasingly “non-Christian”, which was indicated by previous studies indicates. As shown in the table below, in the years 1990-2008, the increase in “non-believers” was about 20 million people, rising from 8.2% to 15%.^① Plus those who do not know what kind of faith they belong to and those who refused to answer faith questions, there are more than 1/5 of the total population that are adults without religious identity in 2008, while in 1990, this group accounted for only about 1/10 of the population. The survey also pointed out that “the challenge for Christianity comes not from other religions but from the refusal of the various institutionalized religions.” (*American Religious Identification Survey 2008*).

Religious Self-Identification of the U.S. Adult Population: 1990, 2001, 2008

Group	1990 adults x 1,000	1990 % of adults	2001 adults x 1,000	2001 % of adults	2008 adults x 1,000	2008 % of adults
Catholic	46,004	26.2%	50,873	24.5%	57,199	25.1%
non-Catholic Christian	105,221	60.0%	108,641	52.2%	116,203	50.9%
Total Christian	151,225	86.2%	159,514	76.7%	173,402	76.0%

^① US Religious Landscape Survey 2008 data declared adults that do not belong to any church accounted for 16.1% of the population. See http://www.pewtrusts.org/our_work_detail.aspx?id=568.

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Group	1990 adults x 1,000	1990 % of adults	2001 adults x 1,000	2001 % of adults	2008 adults x 1,000	2008 % of adults
Total non-Christian religions	5,853	3.3%	7,740	3.7%	8,796	3.9%
None/ No religion, total	14,331	8.2%	29,481	14.2%	34,169	15.0%
Did Not Know/ Refused to reply	4,031	2.3%	11,300	5.4%	11,815	5.2%
Adult population, total	175,440	100%	207,983	100%	228,182	100%

The situation in Europe is more prominent. According to the 2004 European Social Survey, in the countries that people claim to hold higher trust of religious institutions, actually very few attend church weekly activities. Denmark with 74% of the trust of the religious institutions, only 3% of the population goes to the church once a week. Trust of the residents of the religious institutions in Finland and Sweden are respectively 71% and 21%, but in the two countries, only 5% adhere to go to church weekly. Weekly church attendance is less than 10% in France and Germany. In Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom, the number of people is 10%-15%. The situation in the veteran Catholic nations is slightly

better, Austria 18%, Spain 21%, Portugal 29% and Italy 31%. Only in Ireland the number of people going to church is more than half of the population (54%). The weekly church participation rate is 27% in the only Orthodox European country Greece (Gallup European Social Survey). It can be seen in large part, active participation in the activities of the traditional religious organizations is no longer a principal social expression of faith.

In response to this phenomenon, sociologists have given much attention. The British sociologist Malcolm Hamilton says in his book *the Sociology of Religion* that "In much of the modern developed world 'religion' can no longer be equated with familiar mainstream church and denominational forms but takes on a plurality of guises that render the boundaries between religion and non-religion bewilderingly fuzzy. New Age, flying saucer cults, radical environmentalism, eco-feminism, human potential groups, holistic therapies - all have been identified as instances of a growing religious diversity quite different in character from the organized and exclusive religiosity of the church, denomination and sect. Even sport, fitness and dietary practices have been claimed by some as essentially religious in nature or at least forms of spirituality very akin to religion. A multiplicity of terms has been introduced in an attempt to capture this diversity and complexity, such as invisible religion, implicit religion, surrogate religion, quasi-religion, secular religion and others." (Hamilton, M., 2001: 13). The most prominent feature of this change is that people are no longer subject to some kind of "higher", "greater" transcendent or collective authority (authority that used to "the source of meaning" of personal life). Instead it took to the person-centred, subjectivity-centred life. Famous sociologist Charles Taylor calls the profound changes in Western society "the massive subjective turn of modern culture" (Heelas, P., & Woodhead, L., 2005: 2). British sociologist Grace Davie also pointed out that, when the

industrial age turns into the post-industrial age, an important feature is a "wide variety of divinities" replacing the system of the church. "The attention given to spirituality (especially religion) continued to rise rather than fall in post-industrial society, although no longer based on the form of institutional church." (Davie, G., 2007: 105). British scholar Philip Sheldrake said more bluntly in *A Brief History of Spirituality*, "In the process of evolution, spirituality has replaced religion, because it is more suited to contemporary needs." (Sheldrake, P., 2007: 205). In view of this, scholars began to recognize the institutionalized religious ideas based on the Christian experience does not have universality, and started to reflect on the theory of religion and religious issues from a more diverse perspective. American religious philosophy and theology professor David Griffin, the editor of *Deep Religious Pluralism*, focuses on the multiple meanings of "religion" in the book, particularly the "de-westernization" in the definition of religion. He thinks that the Western definition of "religion" is entirely evolved from Christianity, which in practice is yet another expression of the "Western cultural imperialism", because it is in full accordance with the standards of Western Christianity to decide "what is important, and what is not." (Cobb, J., 2005: 244). Talal Asad, Post-colonialism theory expert from City University of New York even thinks that, in fact there is no universally applicable definition of religion in that the elements that construct religion are constrained by the specific historical conditions. Religion as a trans-historical and cross-cultural phenomenon is only a modern Western concept. "It is power that constructed a religious ideology, provided prerequisite for some kind of religion to have its own unique characteristics, set particular religious practices and discourse and produced particular religious knowledge." (Asad, T., 2002: 116). Professor of University of California Santa Barbara, Mark Juergensmeyer is more concerned about the consequences of applying

Western religious concept to other societies. He pointed out that, when Westerners used "almost missionary enthusiasm" to export to Asia and Africa, assuming it to be "the best heritage the West gave to the public life of the world", in fact, they were planting hidden dangers to these areas' political stability and social harmony. The reason former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, the former Prime Minister of India Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi were assassinated is directly linked to the Western-style separation of church and state that they pursued during their administration. "The development of religious politics in the Islamic world today, is another proof of the failure of the West." (Juergensmeyer, M., 2008: 28-29).

From the foregoing analysis, we can draw the following conclusions: the individual dimension of religion, compared to its structural and institutional dimension, is more native and universal, as well as more spiritual and transcendent. Such individual religion may develop into institutional religion, steering religion towards "earthly orientation" which is the social control. Religion in Chinese society is based on spiritual needs rather than institutionalized form. From this dimension, some scholars are bound to "find" many "problems" using the Western institutional religious discourse to understand and discuss Chinese religions. We should thoroughly explore the characteristics of various historical stages of religious development in our country, each civilization, and all regions of the world, to build a more reasonable discourse system and form an independent scientific theoretical paradigm.

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