

# **Academic Studies Concerning Social Politics and Religion in Contemporary China**

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**ABSTRACT:** Chinese Religions in the contemporary process of globalization have undergone great changes, and exerted unprecedented impacts in Chinese society since China's reform and opening-up to the outside world. This article will analyze the academic studies of religions in the Chinese society today, discussing the present social existence of religion, its significance and functions in this society understood by the Chinese scholars. Major expositions of this article include the relationship between religion and politics, religion and law, religion and society, and the mutual interactions of religion and culture in the contemporary Chinese society. I will point out, that the main understanding of religions in China today is based on their close relationship with the Chinese society and their roles in contemporary Chinese development.

**Keywords:** Chinese Religions, Contemporary Society, Globalization, Academic Studies

## **Introduction**

Contemporary Chinese society faces the process of Globalization, which has brought human being together closer than ever. This new sense of 'closeness' reflects especially the relationship between religion and society. Various religions are developing side by side in this global society. Although people in contemporary China have different understandings or interpretations on the positive and negative meanings of religions in the society under the influence of globalization, no one can deny the fact of rapid development of religions in China. The revival of religions in China, which associates with globalization, is catching the attention, first at all, to its impact on the society. Before the reform era, religion in China was characterized as private affair, which should be no connection with the society. So the study of religion was mainly from ideological perspective. No body paid special attention to the academic study of religion. But now, this academic study of religions in China plays leading role. The beginning of academic study of religion in China can be traced back to the "New Cultural Movement" about 1920's. There were some scholars such as Chen Yuan (1880-1971) who taught in Furen Catholic University (later on Beijing Normal University) and Tang Yongtong(1893-1964) who taught in Beijing University, they were pioneers of academic study of religions in China. Chen Yuan developed the study of history of religions in China, including Chinese Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism and other religions, while Tang Yongtong focused on the study of Chinese Buddhism. In the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century China established the first academic institution for religious studies. That was the founding of the Institute of World Religions in the Chinese Academy of Sciences in 1964, which was under the

initial suggestion of Mao Zedong who read the book on Buddhism by Ren Jiyu and had talk with him. So, Ren Jiyu became the founder of this Institute. In 1977, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences(CASS) was established. Since then, the Institute of World Religions belongs to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Ren Jiyu was its director from 1964 to 1985. After him, Tu Jiwen (from 1985 to 1988), Kong Fan (from 1988 to 1993), Wu Yungui (from 1993 to 1998) and I (since 1998 to now) play the role of its directors. With China's opening up to the outside since 1978, the Chinese Association of Religious Studies (CARS) was established in 1979, and Ren Jiyu was its first chair person (1979-1988), Zhao Fusan took the chair in 1988 and was replaced by Kong Fan soon after 1989. Now I have this chair since 2001.

With the transformation of globalization and economic reform, the situation of religious existence in China today is changing. China re-establishes the connection with the international communities after being disconnected from the outside world for thirty years. This brings a drastic social, economic and political change to China, including the transformation of spiritual life among Chinese people at the very in-depth level. On the stage of globalization, the development of religion in China is now under the influence of an international society, not just a closed society in China itself. Chinese society is no more a closed society, but an open one which is expanding its connection with other nations and drawing the attention from the whole world. While Chinese are revealing their understanding of religion to the world, their attitudes are changing at the same time and Chinese consider religion no longer as an "internal affair". This is namely the beginning of open religions in an open society of China, which means also the necessity of dialogue of religions between China and the world. So, the Chinese Association of Religious Studies had also connection with the International Association for the History of Religion (IAHR) since 1980 and sent its scholars to participate in IAHR International Conferences in Canada, 1980, in Australia,1985, in Italy, 1990, in Japan, 2005, and in Toronto, Canada, 2010. Since 1990, CARS became the formal member of IAHR and held also a local IAHR conference in Beijing, 1992. In this period CARS had some indirect contact with AAR as well.

The rapid revitalization of religions in contemporary China reflects the interaction between the global society and the reforming China. Religion becomes more open and transparent under the influence of globalization. At the same time, these changes bring new questions on how to define religion from an academic perspective; where to situate religion in Chinese society; and how to understand and handle religious issues as social issues by the government.

Based on my analysis, I argue that the complexity of the relationship between globalization and religion in contemporary Chinese society can be best illustrated in the following four areas: politics and religion, rule of law and religion, society and religion, and culture and religion. These four relationships are not static but interconnected and responsive to each other. Among all, the relationship of politics and religion in Chinese society is the most important one. Religion in contemporary Chinese society is still constantly changing, and its change is influenced by the social transforms as well. However, the ways and the magnitudes of how this change

takes place are still uncertain. The interest of academic study of religion in China focuses on the relationship between religion and social politics, which has its historical background and new development in the social transition of China today. So, I'd like to talk about the academic studies concerning social politics and religion in contemporary China.

The relationship of social politics and religion in contemporary China is a continuation of the ancient tradition, but it is also influenced by the current social context. The unclear definition of religion explains why the contemporary relationship between social politics and religion is vague and imprecise.

The complexity of the relationship between social politics and religion, and the tension between religion and society can be illustrated in the following areas:

### **I. Unified State System and Chinese Religions**

The unified state system still prevails in contemporary China and it is widely accepted, supported and endorsed by the Chinese people. Although there are changes in the international environment and influences from polyarchy and transparent federal systems through globalization, these impacts on Chinese politics are still insignificant. In comparison between Western society and Chinese society, the diffused power system and laissez-faire policy are less efficient than the centralized political system that the Chinese government adopted. Thus, there is lack of support for the new system from the West, even in contemporary open society of China. Under the unified state system, unified ideology is necessary. Social order and stability should be considered as the most important thing, and as the prerequisite of social development. In the contemporary Chinese context, religion cannot serve as the source of social solidarity. Instead, a non-religious mainstream ideology, like the one in ancient China, can gain stronger supports from the people.

### **II. Marxism and Confucian Influence**

Marxism has taken over the leading role of Confucianism as social ideology in contemporary China. Thus, no matter Confucianism is a religion or not, it is impossible to resume its role as it had been in ancient China. Even when it attempts to renew its content, it is still difficult and challenging to do so. Marxism as leading ideology has now namely the function of Confucianism in ancient China for the society. However, unlike Confucianism, Marxism is not originated from Chinese culture and it is the fundamental disadvantages to establish itself as the leading ideology in a society with different cultural traditions. In order to avoid the awkward situation of complete Westernization, Chinese polity actively promotes "Sinicization of Marxism", in order to get social support for it. However, the question of substance and function remains unresolved. Furthermore, the Chinese government is trying to divert from the classic Marxism in Europe to a "harmonious culture" in Chinese society, that emphasizes diversity as the ultimate leading ideology. This new policy, on the one hand, creates space to open up for and absorb new ideas from the other cultures. On the other hand, it gives room for self-recognition and self-realization on Chinese cultural identity. However, it is uncertain that the social secularization and

localization of Marxism might reduce its sacredness in Chinese politics. In the dialogue between Chinese traditional culture and Marxism, or in the process of Sinicization of Marxism, we can find the subtle influence of religion.

### **III. Cultural Consciousness and Religion**

The rise of cultural consciousness in contemporary Chinese society has brought up the question and challenges of self-recognition. Chinese politics linger around the “firm belief in Marxism” and “cultural nationalism”. It is now stuck in a dilemma. What Chinese alternative can be used to resist the domination of Western ideology as the universal value? The answer is not yet clear. The revitalization of cultural nationalism is constrained by Marxism. However, at the same time, Marxism from the West is not able to serve as the unique value that best suits to the Chinese context. It is because, based on its origin, Marxism is a Western ideology for the working people in the Western society. The criticism of Western ideology through “double rejections” brings the argument back to its beginning and does not help to answer the call for alternative. Chinese people are experiencing a complex and painful reflection of their self identity and cultural consciousness, and the debate over Marxism and *Guoxue* (or the study of national cultural heritage) among academics in China illustrates this process. Both concepts are being redefined and expanded, and that process creates new challenges especially for *Guoxue*. With Confucianism serves as its core principles, the rise of *Guoxue* prohibit Confucianism from structurally reintegration with Buddhism and Daoism.

### **IV. New Socialist Context and Religion**

The adaptation of religion into the new socialist context brings changes to the features that demonstrate the intermingling and separation of politics and religion. We need a new interpretation on the hierarchical pattern between politics and religion in Chinese traditions, in which politics have power over religion. The fundamental ideology in contemporary Chinese society inclines towards separation of religion and politics. Religion is not considered as mainstream of ideology, and not compatible with the core value system in contemporary Chinese society. Accordingly, it is difficult to locate and apply the “positive elements” of religious beliefs to social development. However, in terms of political administration and social integration, the government has adopted some methods that bring religion and politics together. For instance, in the “Fan Fang” system (or, the foreigners’ quarter system) in Tang dynasty, religious leaders were appointed by the imperial government. This political administrative pattern, in which the government selects and appoints religious leaders, still prevails in contemporary Chinese politics and become an undividable characteristic. Political considerations, in some cases, serve as the ultimate bases for decision over religion leadership. Another feature of intermingling of politics and religion is to appoint government officials to work within religious organizations, in order to administrate it ‘from the inside’. At the same time, religious leaders are being incorporated into the political system. They are appointed to serve as representatives at the People’s Congress or Political Consultative Conference, and become part of the

“state leadership” after they achieve a higher position in these political institutions. This pattern changes the religious nature of religious organizations to “semi-governmental” organization. This development shows that religion and politics have more cooperation and connection again in the contemporary society.

## **V. Globalization and Transnational Religion**

There is political tension between transnational religion and the underlying principle that religious affairs should be under the control of state. However, with the expanding network of religious organization, it is becoming more difficult for the state to administrate religious affairs. Globalization changes the religious landscapes in the post-reform China. In the new globalizing network, religion is no longer an “internal affair”. A new global vision and international common sense are required to handle religious affairs. With the increasing political and economic interaction with the international community, it becomes necessary for the Chinese government to participate in the dialogue and negotiation about religious freedom and human rights. Although China firmly against and condemns that some foreign countries use religion as a way to intervene China’s internal affairs and to infiltrate into the country as “color revolution”, it cannot ignore the fact that religious affairs are already activities in a global society and have inevitably international connections.

There are five main official religions in China, including Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. Among all, only Daoism is a native religion. All the rest have their international background and thus they are called “world religions”. Obviously, followers of these religions tend to have a self-identity that is beyond the national boundary. They look for a universal and shared identity through its transnational religious network. Their decision over being loyal to the state or to their religion might change, during the process when they linger around their national and religious identity. Under this complex situation, the cost for the Chinese government to control religious affairs increased because there are many external intervening factors that are beyond the state control. Due to the competition of resources and other factors, religions in China divided along the lines of being ‘above-ground’, ‘below-ground’, ‘legal’, ‘illegal’, ‘inside the country’, ‘outside the country’, ‘cooperation’ and ‘contention’. These diverse segregations and divisions create another problem for lawmakers in terms of legislation. Even though the government attempts to use laws and regulations to administrate religious affairs, they still have to face to the challenge on how to define “religious affairs” and how to implement the rules of law. Religion lives no more in a closed small society, but in an open, and much broader society.

## **VI. Civil Society and New Alternatives by Religion**

Religion that is being cut off from the political system seeks to be the alternate political and cultural choice. They turned to civil society, and “international attention or intervention”. In the globalized informational era, illegal religion and other religion that is disapproved by the government are no longer opting for a peaceful escape from politics and society. They actively search for a way to be

accepted in society.

Some religions become corrupted in order to satisfy the material and practical needs of their followers, and to gain popularity. Some of them distort into “a religion of worshiping commercial goods”. People worship to those deities that would promise to solve their immediate problems in daily life. They see religion as a remedy for disappointment and confusion in life. New religious movement disturbs the social stability and encourages the rise of secretive religious organizations, which all reflect the frustrations among people. In contemporary commercial society, religion faces the danger of secularization and alienation.

Religions with foreign cultural background reject the idea that China has a unified ideology which serves as the root of traditional culture. They consider the revival of traditional culture as a disguise of conservatism; a manifestation of the exclusiveness of nationalism; and a cultural nationalism that contradicts with cultural universalism. They criticize the unified state system and centralization of power. In contrast, they demand democracy and freedom. They protest against the expansion of political control in religious sphere, and insist on freedom of missionary and forming religious organizations. They worry that religious organizations are becoming “special interest group” because of their semi-governmental status, and they hope that there will be “autonomous election” within religious organizations. They hope to register directly with the government for their legal status, so that it can become the first step in the formation of Chinese civil society. In response to the reconstruction of Chinese core value system, they concern that it will become the “political nationalism and extreme nationalism”. They suggest that although there is limitation of Marxism as Western philosophy, the idea of ‘harmonic Communism’ is compatible with Chinese philosophy. It helps to bridge for communication and integration between the Western and Chinese philosophies. However, this idea still lack of sacredness and thus unable to transform as universal value or a core value system.

For the religions with foreign background, their ideal social structure is “a modern state system that built upon civil rights – a value system that centered with love, self-reflection and tolerance”. The best example will be federal state system based on Protestant culture and value in western countries<sup>1</sup>. However, from the Chinese government’s point of view, this integration of religious attitude and political structure is a warning. It worries that the Chinese modernization process will become, essentially, a scenario that “the lamb of God” wins victory over “the Chinese dragon”<sup>2</sup>. By emphasizing difference or independence of religion, it might become a special society within a common society, or an “enclave” of other society in it.

## **VII. Religion in the Understanding of Social Value and Cultural Heritage**

Due to the unclear understanding of religion as value system and its political functions, media and public society in general still have diffuse and dualistic opinions about religion. This becomes a challenge for religion to incorporate and develop in

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<sup>1</sup> Jianyong Yu. ‘Jidujiao de Fazhan yu Zhongguo Shehui Wending –yu liangwei ‘Jidujiao jiating jiaohui’ peixunshi de duhua’ *Lingdao*, April 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Zhuoan Wang, ‘Woguo Zongjiao Zhuangkuang de Xinbianhua’, *Zhongguo zongjiao baogao 2008*, ed. Ze Jin and Yonghui Qiu (Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2008) 86.

Chinese society. In general, there are three phases of development for the conceptions of religion in Chinese society, from the Marxist notion's of "religion as opium"; to an understanding of "religion as culture"; and then to understand "religion as religion" itself, no disguise is now necessary. These different understandings of religion in different time phase still prevail. They are intertwined and mixed that it is difficult to untangle each of its contribution to the mainstream understanding of religion.

The general understandings of the meaning of contemporary religion in Chinese society began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese word *zong jiao*, or 'religion' was introduced to China through Japanese literature, particularly *The History of Japan (Ribei guozhi)* written by Huang Zunxian (published in 1895). This was the beginning when Chinese politicians and intellectuals paid attention to religion. In general, the meanings and social functions of religion had a low reputation among people, especially the intellectual elite class. The renowned scholars at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, including Liang Qichao, Cai Yuanpei, and Liang Shuming, all rejected religion and promoted the notion that "there was no religion in China". They believed that Chinese is the only "non-religious ethnic group" in the world. However, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity was introduced to China as the largest religion in the world. Chinese people's understanding of religion was overshadowed by the Opium War and the unequal treaties. For this reason, religion was rejected and excluded in the cultural and political movement, such as the trend of 'Enlightenment', the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement, during the Chinese modernization period. This exclusion could be best illustrated by the anti-religions and anti-Christian movement that had taken place in the 1920s.

Since then, the low reputation of religion prevailed among scholars, regardless of how they understand Confucianism is a religion or not. Kang Youwei, who attempted to promote respecting Confucius and Confucianism as the state religion, was being heavily criticized. Many scholars who promoted and respected Confucianism tried to avoid the discussion about Confucianism and religion.

Historically, it was the norm to name Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism together as 'the Three Teachings' and the word *jiao* (teaching, or religion) could be used for describing all. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, there was a saying that 'the Three Teachings are like the legs of a tripod, and it is impossible to miss one' (*Sanjiao piru ding, queyi buke*)<sup>3</sup>. The Three Teachings had a very positive and significant role in ancient China. During the Three Kingdoms period, it was believed that 'Confucius and Laozi established the religions by the rules of Heaven, and we should not go against it; and Buddhism is a religion established to be practiced by the universe' (*Konglao shejiao, fatian zhiyong, bugan weitan; Forzhi shejiao, zhutian fengxing*). Between the Song and the Yuan dynasty, Liu Mi composed a book entitled 'The Discussion of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism' (*Rushidao pingxin lun*) to praise the Three Teachings. It pointed out that the attempts to abolish religion in ancient dynasties were waste of effort.

"Confucian religion in China reinstalled the principles of moral

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<sup>3</sup> Jiyu Ren, ed., *Zongjiao Dacidian* (Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, 1998) 634.

conducts, and ethical relations were enlightened. It made ceremonies, music, laws, and punishments had everywhere full course, without irregularity or collision; It educated the universe, and its contribution to the world is significant. Therefore, when the Emperor of Qin attempted to destroy Confucianism, it survived. Daoism in China urged people to stop seeing friends and to have simple life and few worries; to exercise self control and to be humble. It cleared the habits of being confused and entangled, and back to the status of silence and doing nothing (*wuwei*). It is of services to the world. Therefore, when the Emperor Wu of Liang attempted to destroy Daoism, he failed. Buddhism in China made people to give up the superficial and opt for the substantial; to give away the false and return to the truth. To begin practice with determination, one will learn the way to practice with natural ease; to begin with practice from a desire for own advantage, one will extend to other's benefits. To become a Buddhist is the best way for the people, and there is nothing else. Therefore, when the three Emperors Wu of Northern Wei, of Northern Zhou and of Tang attempted to destroyed Buddhism, it was not successful.”

Song Dynasty was the time when Confucian religion was formed. The characteristic was to integrate the specialties of the Three Teachings. Thus, people used the metaphor of ‘sun, moon and stars’ or ‘yellow gold, white jade and five grains’<sup>4</sup> to describe the melodious integration of the Three Teachings and emphasized its peaceful togetherness.

Historically, Christianity had also been marginalized and was treated as cult during the Roman Empire period. However, Christianity had not disappeared even it experienced the ten major persecutions. Instead, it became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Christianity was responsive to the changing social conditions over time. This explained how it survived the political disturbance and unrest overtime, yet able to retain its core religious values. In contrast, conservatism in Confucianism “restricted the development of new ideas, limited the technology and scientific development of China...during the decline of feudal system in China, the social impact of Confucianism was negative, conservative and suppressing. It reinforced the status quote of feudal society and imprisoned people’s mind”<sup>5</sup>. As a result, Confucianism was being eliminated and abandoned. “The slogan of ‘Destroy the curiosity shop of Confucius’ (*Dadao Kongjiadian*) was proposed during the May Fourth Movement. At that time, the progressive liberals pointed out that Confucianism was the spiritual doctrine for the Chinese conservative forces. It was only through destruction of Confucianism that China could be saved... Furthermore, Confucianism was the obstacle for social progression in New China. It was both the philosophical and social obstacles”<sup>6</sup>. In the modern social transformation, Confucianism had lost its leading role as the core Chinese ideology, and its religious identity. Instead, revolution and class struggle became the key themes in society

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<sup>4</sup> Dahua Cui, ‘ “Rujiao” bian’, , *Rujiao Wentie Jinlunji*, ed. Jiyu Ren (Zhongjiao Wenhua Chubenshe, 2000) 113-114..

<sup>5</sup> Jiyu Ren ed., *Ru jiao wen ti zheng lun ji*, pp. 31, 72, 72.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 31, 73



during the political disturbance and civil wars. It was until the economic reform era, when the principle of class struggle was abandoned and replaced by “harmonic society” and “peaceful togetherness” as the core value, Chinese people started to revisit the meaning of Chinese cultures and philosophy of Confucianism.

However, it is debatable that whether this change can be completely successful. During the revolution period, “religion as opium” was the common perception, and Confucian religion was also among the rejected. In the reform period, religion was being neutralized and considered as part of culture. However, the role of religion in society is still ambiguous. Although religion is not being seen as a positive cultural element, at least the negative connotation has alleviated. The discussion about Confucian religion as part of traditional culture resumed.

At the crossroad of economic and social development, China has complex love-hate relationship with its own culture. Its enmity is because of the conservative and backward side of the culture, which leads to the introduction of socialism as the alternative from the Western world. At the same time, the love for this culture with 5000 years long history is based on its uniqueness. Chinese people cannot risk to loss their self-recognition to their own culture and be proud of their cultural identity. It is natural and necessary for Chinese people to love their own culture. The Chinese society is currently facing this dilemma. One the one hand, they should love their Chinese culture. But on the other hand, they should be constantly self-reflected and try to avoid falling behind in the development.

### **VIII. Religious Understanding at Crossroad**

The current conceptualization of religion in China is inconsistent and vague. One the one hand, it is still common to see religion as something pessimistic, negative and backward. It is important to resist religion and prevent religious organization from development and gaining support from the people. On the other hand, it is necessary to “manage religious organization to be integrative with the socialist social development; to maximize the positive impact of religious leaders within their community, in terms of advancing the economic and social development”<sup>7</sup>. In the process of revitalizing the essence of Chinese traditional culture, it is hoped that religion can be appreciated. However, if Confucianism is considered as not a religion, the traditional religious culture with the Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism will not be able to revitalize. Buddhism and Daoism only are not enough to serve as the foundation for Chinese culture and spirituality. It will be lacking the core value in the traditional culture. Without the understanding of Confucianism as the essence of the Chinese traditional culture and recognize its spirituality, the strategy to control the development of religious leaders and their groups will be failed because it misplaced its focus. In other words, understanding the Confucian spirituality is the critical point to understand Chinese religiosity. Continue to treat religion as something bizarre in Chinese society is similar to how China was being marginalized in the international community, being the center of criticism and accusation. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>7</sup> Jintao Hu, *Gaoju Zhongguo Tese Shehui Zhuyi Weida Qizhi, wei Duoqu Quanmian Jianshe Xiaokang Shehui Xinchengli er fiedou – zai Zhongguo Gongchandang di di shiqici quanguo daibiao dahui shang de Baogao* (Renmin Chubenshe, 2007) 31-32.

some intellectual elites stress that Chinese society and its culture was the only secular one in the world. However, the same attitude created obstruction and hindrance for the Chinese social development nowadays, and serve as the basis for hearsay and obstacle in intellectual exchange with the outside world. It is only until Chinese restore to the shared understanding of religion as “normal” with the rest of the world, China can be freed from the accusation of religious discrimination. It is until then that religion can have a chance to develop peacefully in China, instead of being a “superficial decoration” for politics. When religion is conceptualized as its anthropological definition, the relationship between social politics and religion will enter the stage of healthy and normal development in the globalization era.

### **Conclusion**

Relationship between social politics and religion is an important one to illustrate how human beings are constantly adopting to the changing environment overtime, and there is no exemption for Chinese society in the globalization era. Hence, Chinese political leaders emphasized the importance of constructing a harmonious relationship between politics and religion. It is because religion “has a irreplaceable function for promoting group unity and increase social solidarity”<sup>8</sup>. In contemporary China, a new positive attitude is constructive in terms of understanding religion. This provides a good environment for religion to develop freely and normally. However, the rapid revival of religions challenges the existing legal boundary that control over religion and disrupts the social order. This creates tension between politics and religion, and difficulties for clear understanding about religion. Therefore, people are paying close attention to look at the future and consequence of this development of religion, and whether religious organization will be challenged and restricted. These are also the practical questions that need to be solved. It is difficult to achieve any agreement on the diffused understandings of religion. However, in general, enhancing China’s development of rules of law and social structure; promoting cultural and academic exchange with international community; emphasizing the importance to understand the spiritual life of the people; promoting social justice, love and democracy in order to develop a harmonic society; persisting the rules of law; and administrating religious affairs by law are the paths of development that we must go. The new understanding of religious existence in Chinese society and its function in this society should be taken from religious participation and contribution to the present construction of this harmonious society.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 31.