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Reflections on the Dialogue between Chinese Buddhism and Christianity in the Context of Modernization (1949-2000)

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Abstract: This paper examines the interactions between Chinese Buddhism and Christianity through the lens of Chinese modernity as a dialogical framework. It argues that these dialogues unfold across various platforms, primarily through the opposition to secularism and the promotion of social harmony. Spanning the period from 1949 to 2000, the study divides this interaction into four distinct phases: the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s–1980s, and 1990s. By analyzing the nature of Buddhist-Christian engagement in each period, this research reflects on the challenges and opportunities shaping their dialogue within the specific context of Chinese modernity.

Keywords: Chinese Modernity; Buddhism; Christianity; Religious Dialogue; Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

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1. Introduction

While China during the period of 1911–1949 was characterized by both external and internal conflicts, the era from 1949 to 2000 witnessed the country's transition to a unified and relatively peaceful environment, thereby embarking on a distinct path of modernization with Chinese characteristics.

The precise definition of "modernity" remains contested within academia. As Chen Jiaming (2015) notes, the term was initially used by Pope Gelasius I in the 5th century AD to distinguish his era from that of his predecessors[1]. Scholars have categorized modernity in various ways: Chen (2015) identifies perspectives from Giddens, Habermas, and Foucault[2], whereas Liu (2015) differentiates between institutional, philosophical, and modernization frameworks[3]. Departing from these classifications, this paper focuses on the constitutive elements of modernity and proposes a categorization based on six analytical dimensions:

First, some definitions provide a comprehensive description of modernity's components. For instance, Lu Feng (2009) divides it into ideological dimensions—such as liberalism and scientism—and social goals like industrialization and urbanization[4]. Similarly, Liu (2015) defines modernity as "a comprehensive reflection of the spirit of the times in modern society" [5].

Second, other scholars emphasize the interrelatedness of these elements. Alan McFarlane (2015) argues that modernity is neither merely technological nor tied to a specific time, but rather emerges from the interplay of demographics, political structures, and social organization[6].

Third, certain theorists summarize modernity using concise core concepts. Che Xiaomin (2015) suggests that rationality and capitalism are its two foundational dimensions[7], while Anthony Giddens (2016) limits modernity to capitalism, industrialism,

surveillance, and violence control[8].

Fourth, modernity is often defined by its radical break from tradition. Giddens (2016) contends that modernity "has shaped its life forms by throwing us off the track of all types of social order in unprecedented ways," highlighting features such as the separation of time and space[9].

Fifth, from a macro-sociological perspective, the formation of national consciousness became a hallmark of modernity by the mid20th century, whereas failure to establish a nation-state was viewed as a sign of backwardness[10].

Sixth, some definitions associate modernity with a scientific worldview. For example, Rather Shaw (2012) describes it as a shift from myth to a metric based on nature and scientific calculation[11]. Conversely, Troeltsch (2004) views modernism as the Church's adaptation to the modern world, incorporating scientific methods into religious thought[12].

While some Western scholars frame Chinese modernity as antagonistic to the West—arguing that it represents a challenge to liberalism and American influence[13]—this perspective overlooks the internal logic of Chinese civilization. This paper posits that Chinese modernity possesses its own unique trajectory.

In summary, if modernity is understood as a trait distinct from "tradition" or "antiquity," encompassing politics, economy, and culture, then it reached a mature stage in China after 1949. Drawing on Ernst Troeltsch's methodological framework, this study constructs a model of "dialogue" between modernity and religion, applying it specifically to the Chinese context.

Although modernity's origins are debated, its impact on China was largely mediated through Western influence since the Republican era. Initially, Christianity symbolized "modernity" but later faced criticism (e.g., the AntiMissionary Movement). Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Christianity gradually adjusted its social functions in accordance with national laws and social development needs. However, since the 1990s, data indicate a dramatic increase in the Christian population. Building on Zhang Xiuhua's (2008) periodization—which divides post1949 history into phases of "exploration" and "second enlightenment"[14]—this paper adopts a fourperiod framework to clarify the evolving relationship between Christianity and Chinese modernity from 1949 to 2000.

This study selects Buddhism and Christianity as the primary subjects for this dialogue. Their interaction reveals both historical conflicts and mutual transformations, illustrating how religious discourse adapts to modern contexts.

From 1949 to 2000, the relationship among Chinese Buddhism, Christianity, and modernity was largely characterized by compromise, shaped by nationalist sentiments and historical mentalities. While Western scholars like Paul Knitter have extensively explored BuddhistChristian dialogue, few have examined this dynamic within the specific context of Chinese modernity. Addressing this gap, this paper analyzes the patterns of coexistence between Chinese modernity, Buddhism, and Christianity.

The search for common ground is essential in modern society. Both Buddhism and Christianity were once labeled as "superstitious" and antithetical to modernization in China. Furthermore, Christianity bore the additional stigma of "cultural aggression." Despite these challenges, platforms for dialogue emerged, centered on opposing secularism, promoting social harmony, and seeking truth. Consequently, in the secular sphere, Buddhism, Christianity, and modern China have collaborated to produce a more harmonious societal melody.

2. Historical Periodization: From 1950s to 1990s

2.1 The 1950s-1970s: Adjustment and Self-improvement of Religions

Although Chinese Catholics and Protestants embarked on a path of isolation from the West from the 1950s onwards, this trajectory facilitated a process of complete "Sinicization" that aligned with the prevailing social climate. This situation stemmed from a combination of patriotic fervor, geopolitical shifts influenced by American messaging, and the Chinese government's evolving understanding of religion at the time. As Madsen (2015) notes, "This political separation from the chief Western Catholic colonial power opened up the possibility that the Chinese church could be led someday by nationalist elites"[15]. Similarly, Bays (2015) observes that despite Marxism's ideological disdain for Christianity, "some Chinese Protestant individuals and organizations still retained useful social capital upon which to draw at the beginning of the new regime"[16].

During the 1960s and 1970s, China's relative closure and focus on indigenous modernization models meant that Christianity

was heavily influenced by the Soviet paradigm, often viewed as an element incompatible with socialist construction.

However, a significant shift occurred after the reforms. The 1981 Resolution on Certain Historical Issues of the Party since the Founding of the Stateclarified that adherence to the Four Cardinal Principles did not require religious believers to abandon their faith, provided they refrained from anti-Marxist propaganda or interference in politics and education[17]. Supporting this change, Xi Zhongxun stated at the Fourth Plenary Session of the Chinese Christianity that "the view that pits the building of spiritual civilisation against the citizens' belief in religion is incorrect"[18]. This period of openness allowed for greater religious visibility, as Wickeri (2011) noted, describing the increasingly familiar scenes of public religious gatherings in mainland China.

Building on this momentum, the number of Christians in China surged during the 1990s, reflecting the government's continued inclusivity toward religion. According to statistics from the China Christian Council and the Chinese government, the Christian population grew from 3 million in 1985 to 5 million in 1990 and reached 10 million by 1996 [19]. Concurrently, the concept of "Sino-Christian theology" (often abbreviated as "Sino-theology") emerged as an intellectual movement within the Chinese-speaking world since the late 1980s[20].

Nevertheless, the influence of Christianity remained constrained. Its historical presence in areas such as education, journalism, and medicine had diminished. Even among Christian intellectuals—who possessed limited space for discourse—their impact was restricted to narrow academic circles. As Li (2008) points out, although the number of intellectual Christians has increased, they remain isolated from the broader Chinese church, limiting their ability to influence either society or ecclesiastical development[21].

2.2 The 1980s-1990s: Revival and Growth

Building on the momentum of the 1980s, the number of Christians in China surged during the 1990s, reflecting the government's continued inclusivity toward religion. This growth was not merely quantitative; the composition of the congregation also shifted qualitatively. According to statistics from the China Christian Council and the Chinese government, the Christian population grew from 3 million in 1985 to 5 million in 1990, reaching 10 million by 1996[22].

Concurrently, an intellectual movement known as "Sino-Christian theology" (often abbreviated as "Sino-theology"; hanyu shenxue) emerged in the Chinese-speaking world, particularly in Mainland China, since the late 1980s[23]. However, the influence of this movement remained limited. Christianity's historical presence in sectors such as education, journalism, and medicine had significantly receded.

Even within academic circles, the impact of Christian intellectuals was constrained. As Li (2008) notes, although their numbers have increased in recent years, they remain a small fraction of the overall Christian population. Isolated from the broader Chinese church, these intellectuals are neither significantly influenced by church movements nor capable of substantially affecting the church's development[24].

3. The Dialogue Platform of Chinese Modernity-Buddhism-Christianity

3.1 Against the Secular

Being opposed to the secular constitutes a major common ground between Buddhism and Christianity. To oppose secularism is to pursue the spiritual dimension of human existence, rather than merely settling for material satisfaction. Secularisation is so deeply intertwined with human history that it can be said to exist wherever there are human societies. As world religions, Buddhism and Christianity in fact emerged with inherent anti-secular elements.

The etymology of "secularity" can be traced to the Latin saeculum, meaning "generation", "lifespan", "age", or "century". Within the Christian tradition, "secular" originally denoted worldly, non-religious affairs in contrast to sacred or religious matters. However, with the rise of human subjectivity and the diminished role of the divine in human society, the term has acquired a broader scope. As Charles Taylor writes: "Secularity is a condition in which our experience of and search for fullness occurs; and this is something we all share, believers and unbelievers alike."[25]

Whether secularism encompasses or is equivalent to individualism remains a matter of interpretive disagreement.

Perhaps due to the term's strong Christian intellectual origins, it has received relatively little scholarly attention in mainland China.

In modern society, secularisation has reduced religion's political significance. As Chen Jiaming observes: "Secularisation has withdrawn religion from the political sphere, prevented it from intervening in politics or dominating intellectual and cultural life, yet this has not stopped religion from remaining a viable spiritual faith, retaining its influence in the spiritual realm, and continuing to provide a spiritual haven for people."[26]

At the same time, modernity is not simply identical to secularism, nor is secularisation inherently negative for religion. To address the shortcomings of secularisation, modern Chinese thought may engage with religion to resist excessive secularisation. In this context, "secularism" refers primarily to an overemphasis on material life at the expense of the spiritual dimensions of individuals and society.

In this process, Jürgen Habermas argues that "the culture and secularisation of society should be understood as a dual learning process. It must rethink the limits of both the Enlightenment tradition and religious doctrine."[27]

Although Habermas did not specifically analyse Chinese modernity, and Western scholars in the twentieth century generally paid little attention to it, his framework for understanding Western modernity remains valuable. In certain respects, modernity cannot be rigidly divided into "Western" and "Chinese", especially when examining its cultural effects. Habermas's perspective is therefore worth adopting.

This understanding is reciprocal. Religion should not view secularisation as an outright compromise with modernisation. Instead, the process allows both sides to observe the limits and transformations of modern society and religion themselves. In the 1990s, Catholics and Evangelical Protestants began constructive dialogue and identified shared ground in opposing the secularising tendencies of modernity. Similarly, a dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity can be established on this basis. As Gerard F. Rutan notes: "The real fight is not against each other, but against the lust and sin of the secular world."[28]

In the course of modernisation, both Buddhism and Christianity have shifted from emphasising the afterlife or "other shore" to engaging with this-worldly existence. Many people also hope that Buddhism and Christianity can offer guidance toward inner peace. For instance: "Catholics found it difficult to avoid secular ideas such as humanism, the Enlightenment, and political liberalism until the 1960s. A view then emerged: regretful of the aporias of modern thought, many argued that only religion, by appealing to transcendent dimensions, could rescue modernity from its dead end."[29]

Habermas further maintains that religion preserves vital traditions: "Within the communal life of religious groups, certain things that have vanished elsewhere can remain intact — provided dogmatism and coercion are avoided." These are dimensions that cannot be restored through expert knowledge alone. I refer here to existential confusion, the pathologies of modern society, the fragmentation of individual life-plans, the distortion of existential structures, and the loss of rich forms of expression and moral sensitivity."[30]

Although both Buddhism and Christianity have evolved in modern society, no one can clearly delineate exactly how much each has changed or how fully they have preserved their traditions. After all, preachers, monks, and believers are not ancient figures but modern people who speak modern languages and use modern tools. These are themselves part of modernisation, not separate from it.

"Public consciousness of modernisation involves, to varying degrees, both religious and secular mentalities and reflective transformations. When both sides treat the secularisation of society as part of a complementary learning process, they can contribute to public debate and engage with one another seriously on cognitive and rational grounds."[31]

In this sense, the thoroughly secular or atheistic segments of modern society ought to better understand and not disregard religion. Religion itself has also undergone profound changes alongside modern society. Modernity places increasing emphasis on the individual, yet in traditional religious frameworks, the individual was often secondary to the divine.

3.2 To Promote Social Harmony

Whether between different religions, or between religions and modernity, genuine dialogue plays an irreplaceable role in promoting mutual understanding. Such understanding can also, to a certain extent, foster harmony rather than opposition.

Firstly, diversity constitutes one of the challenges of modern society, and increasing diversity implies a growing potential for intergroup conflict. Although the human world has never achieved full unity at any point in history, diversity in the modern globalised system is accompanied by much closer interconnectedness. This makes the impact of diversity on other groups and

communities more abrupt and intense. To a certain extent, "it is becoming increasingly difficult for a community to organize political forces, build loyalty, inspire collective commitment to common goals, and so on, based on its self-understanding, especially under conditions without strong land ownership or excessive surplus wealth."[32] For Chinese society, this trend may appear somewhat less pronounced, yet the potential of a multi-dimensional world deserves to be realised, and the power of religious dialogue can serve as a unifying force. For instance, Gao Dahong argues that "the harmonious thought of Tibetan Buddhism constitutes an important intellectual resource."[33]

Secondly, it can be observed that since the 1980s, after Buddhism and Christianity regained a certain degree of social freedom, their charitable activities have emerged as a positive force in China's modern society. For example, the Shanghai Jade Buddha Temple donated more than 27 million yuan to social welfare causes between 1984 and 1995. The Charity Foundation of Xiamen's Nanputuo Temple distributed over 27 million yuan in donations from 1994 to 2004.[34] At a time when the pursuit of individual self-interest has become a dominant social norm and caused moral confusion, such charitable acts have formed a clear and positive current in society.

In Chinese practice, it is also evident that modern China has closely integrated modernisation with Buddhism and Christianity under the principle of patriotism. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, and especially since the reform and opening-up, religious theological thought has increasingly incorporated patriotic content. For example, although "Christian charities in China have long faced difficulties, partly due to their perceived foreign ties and the suspicion, in the view of the CCP, that they collude with foreign forces to subvert the socialist system through 'peaceful evolution'."[35] Christianity in China maintains that becoming prosperous through reform and opening-up is not contradictory to biblical teachings, and Christian hymns include songs of filial piety and prayers for national blessings. The Buddhist community promotes the idea of Earthly Buddhism, encouraging adherents to "observe the Five Precepts and Ten Virtues to purify the mind, widely practise the Four Boundless States and Six Paramitas, and love the country and protect the faith."[36] Since the late twentieth century, alongside China's modernization drive and the construction of a "people-centred" society, both Buddhism and Christianity have also embraced a people-centred orientation, creating greater opportunities for the two traditions to cooperate as faiths committed to the well-being of the people.

André Laliberté argues that "The ambition of the corporatist logic adopted by the CCP is to shape the religious field so that it can mobilize pliant religious actors to help it face demographic issues such as population aging, the skewed sex ratio, and urbanization."[37] However, it is a false assumption that religious believers are necessarily compliant. One must examine China's efforts to build a harmonious society from a more pragmatic and complex perspective.

3.3 Seek Reality

The need for diversity and unity reflected in dialogue aligns with the spirit of modern society, and such unity lies in the pursuit of a shared truth. For humanity, the quest for reality is the only path to transcend worldly life. Religion seeks reality in its own way, while modern society pursues the truth of the world through technology. Yet it is undeniable and unavoidable that "relevance, relatedness, and dialogue are now constitutive elements of our human understanding of reality."[38] Whether different paths to reality can ultimately converge points to the direction in which genuine dialogue may be achieved.

If truth is absolute and unique for humanity, and if different beliefs represent merely distinct expressions of the same truth, then both religious dialogue and cultural dialogue become possible. "It can 'speak' to me, can truly communicate with my thought, yet only in a language and set of categories that I can understand."[39]Although most religious believers are not engaged in dialogue at this philosophical level, it remains an extremely meaningful dimension of interreligious dialogue. Some overseas scholars have also explored this path. On a theoretical level, Yuan Huiwen argues that "emptiness" constitutes the seed of East-West religious dialogue: "Since negative theology centers on the elaboration of 'emptiness' and 'nothingness', it can serve as the seed of East-West religious dialogue, from which the dialogue between Christianity and Zen may blossom and bear fruit."[40] Nonetheless, such intellectual exchanges exert little direct influence on ordinary religious believers.

4. Reflection on Dialogue Forms

4.1 Before the Economic Reform

The mainstream ideological orientation of Buddhism and Christianity in the People's Republic of China was framed by

patriotism, an ideological background that endured even after nearly three decades of religious restrictions and retained its core character. Consequently, after Buddhism and Christianity regained a degree of religious freedom, the principle of "loving the country and loving the faith" remained paramount. As China set out to build a modern socialist country, the participation of Buddhists and Christians in national construction became inevitable. Arguably, one imperative of religious dialogue is dialogical practice. Amid the constant interplay and mutual integration of changing forces, certain details — including individuals and traditions — have had to be overlooked or even compromised, yet overall balance has been maintained through the efforts of many.

In the 1950s, Buddhism and Christianity in modern China adopted a model of compromise, seeking common ground while reserving differences to achieve such accommodation. For the new China, top leaders regarded religion as acceptable within certain limits. Thus, "…there emerged policies protecting freedom of religious belief, an emphasis on political unity and cooperation, mutual respect, and theories and practices promoting the adaptation of religions to socialist society. These reflected the wisdom and choices of the Communist Party of China and the vast majority of religious believers, and represented the best path available."[41]

As late as 1955, "Mao Zedong reviewed the speech Lu Dingyi planned to deliver at the Second Session of the First National People's Congress and deleted the passage stating that 'Whether idealist or materialist, everyone should actively support and not oppose the Marxist ideological movement at present.' He added: 'It is unrealistic to demand that the bourgeoisie and religious believers become active supporters of Marxism or refrain from opposing it.' "[42] Even in October 1959, during his meeting with Khrushchev, Mao stated: "I think communists could join the church if they are among the masses."[43]

The new Chinese government's approach was widely recognized and won support and respect both within and beyond religious communities. For example, "The process of guiding and transforming Christianity to adapt to the new regime demonstrated the Communist Party of China's exceptional capacity for guide and leadership amid complex changes: it clearly perceived various power configurations, acted in a timely and measured way, improved conditions strategically, and addressed multiple challenges."[44]

All this reflected the flexibility of top leaders' thinking and their profound understanding of Chinese traditions. Under Wu Yaozong's plan for Protestantism, Protestant and Catholic churches were no longer externally independent but were brought into a framework of political affiliation. In 1950, he stated: "Schools and hospitals once made important contributions, but problems arise if they continue to operate independently, for in the future such affairs should be fully managed by the state."[45] Yet his position is understandable, as China's own institutional and developmental path was still being explored. In fact, influenced by China's study of the Soviet model at the time, the space for religion appeared to be narrowing.

From the latter half of the 1960s onward, the unified approach adopted by modern China toward Buddhism and Christianity led to a dramatic decline in religious activities. Whether Tibetan Buddhism, Buddhism in general, or Christianity, compliance with state and national policies took first place, while religious faith became secondary. At this stage, China's drive toward modernity relied less on material development than on the ideological dismantling of old systems. As a People's Daily editorial explicitly stated on June 2, 1966: "The struggle between two hostile worldviews — the proletarian and the bourgeois — is like a life-or-death war; one side must prevail. Either you devour me or I devour you. Either the east wind prevails over the west wind, or the west wind over the east wind. There is no middle way."[46]

During this period, the most critical challenge for Buddhism remained its dialogue with modernity — yet Buddhism was reduced to near silence. In the late 1960s, the 10th Panchen Lama himself proposed "five measures for the democratic reform of monasteries", one of which was to implement state laws and bring the Constitution into monasteries. [48] Even in October of the same year, during talks with Li Weihan and Wang Feng, he proposed that "rules should be established so that people who recite scriptures daily also set aside time to study state policies."[49]

The same applied to Christianity. "From the nationalization of educational institutions in the 1950s through the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese Christianity completely withdrew from the educational sphere. Formal theological education was terminated and thoroughly disrupted, only to be gradually restored after the end of the Cultural Revolution."[50]

In short, before the reform and opening up, Buddhism and Christianity were largely treated as adversaries to China's modernization drive and effectively silenced.

4.2 After the Reform and Opening Up

In the 1980s, China needed to integrate into the global economic market. At that time, it was impossible to develop the economy solely relying on its own ideological and interpretive system. To be an equal participant in the international community, China had to embrace greater tolerance toward other cultures and values. This represented a state of intersection amid constant coordination and transformation.

Comrade Deng Xiaoping played a pivotal role in promoting the revival of Chinese religions, including Buddhism and Christianity. "On April 19, 1980, Deng Xiaoping published an article in People's Daily entitled 'An Event of Far-Reaching Significance', in which he commemorated the Tang Dynasty monk Jianzhen and fully affirmed the positive role of religious figures in international cultural exchanges. Deng Xiaoping's instructions on religious issues provided important guidance for the rectification of work in the religious field at that time."[51]

Regarding Tibetan Buddhism, the government, on the one hand, actively promoted its standardized development, and on the other hand, guarded against subversive forces linked to it. In 1980, after a 14-year hiatus, the United Front Work Department of the CPC Tibet Autonomous Regional Committee promulgated the management regulations concerning Tibetan Buddhism: Several Specific Provisions on the Implementation of the Party's Policy of Freedom of Religious Belief (Draft). On April 1, 1984, the CPC Central Committee issued the "Tibet Work Conference Document", which pointed out: "We should actively guide and support religious circles to launch public welfare and service activities, such as charity work, medical care for humans and livestock, protection of beneficial wild animals, and assisting the government in promoting agricultural, animal husbandry and forestry production measures. Doing so will... expand the common ground between them and us, thereby better facilitating their positive role." [52]

Temples responded positively to the conference's spirit. For example, "Gami Xiaoxitian Temple opened a Tibetan language training class in March 1985, enrolling 40 students with a five-year schooling period. The curriculum included philosophy, astronomy, geography, history, medicine, culture, mathematics, etc. Some highly educated monks from Zamtang County and Aba County taught in local primary and secondary schools and provided free medical services to the public, achieving positive results." [53]

The Constitution for Democratic Management of Buddhist Temples, drafted by the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee of the Tibet Autonomous Region and approved by the People's Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region, was officially implemented in November 1987. The "Constitution" generally stipulates: "Under socialist conditions, temples in various regions are collective organizations composed of religious clergy and believers." [54] In modern terms, monks are defined both as religious clergy and as citizens of the state.

Chinese Buddhism began to actively exert its influence on the higher education system in the 1990s. These initiatives were not highly visible, but they signaled a renewed recognition of the importance of cultivating young, educated followers—who would ultimately form the backbone of China's future.

From this period onward, the secularization of religion emerged as a noteworthy issue. "It is noteworthy that from the 1980s onward, the Buddhist community and academic circles began to confront the issue of Buddhist secularization, alongside a rising fundamentalist trend advocating that 'the sacred remains sacred and the secular remains secular'."[55] Wang Leiquan also summarized the problems of Buddhist secularization as follows: "(i) Lack of spiritual cultivation in the Dharma; (ii) Ambiguous positioning of the relationship between monks and laity; (iii) Impact of lay Buddhist practitioners; (iv) Confusion between political and economic relations." [56] These issues remained unresolved by the end of the 20th century.

In the 1990s, amid a relatively peaceful and stable domestic and international environment, all social sectors were mobilized to focus on economic development as the central task, allowing religion to collaborate closely with modern China. Modern China also increasingly recognized the need to regulate religious-secular relations through legal means—an important manifestation of modernity taking shape in Chinese consciousness. However, the full scope of changes in Buddhism and Christianity can only be comprehensively assessed in hindsight.

Conservatives argue that "when market forces... penetrate churches or temples, religion becomes contaminated."[57] Similarly, Du Weiming contends that Western-style "democracy" is inappropriate for the religious sphere: "In fact, in a fully democratic or highly capitalized democratic society, there are many important domains where democracy should not intrude—most notably religion and academia." [58]

It is widely recognized that both Chinese Buddhism and Christianity operate dual management models: traditional and modern. During this period, as China joined the global market, its integration with the world deepened. The situation in the 21st century lies beyond the scope of this paper and will not be discussed here.

In summary, following the reform and opening up, dialogue between Buddhism, Christianity and modernity in China gradually gained more opportunities, although the dialogue paradigm remained predominantly modernity-oriented.

5. Challenges

5.1 How Can China Continue Its Cultural Tradition of Tolerance?

How to uphold an inclusive cultural tradition without succumbing to narrow-mindedness represents both a trend and a challenge for China. The trend lies in the fact that the cultural atmosphere of globalization makes unipolarity difficult, and indeed nearly impossible, to sustain in the traditional social sense (and in reality, unipolarity has never been able to endure for long at any historical stage). The challenge is that China's long history of feudal rule and accumulated social experience have frequently turned religion into a high-level political issue. Of course, this is not unique to China; the separation of religion from politics is a goal pursued by other modern countries and also one of the hallmarks of a modern state.

This requires each society to define the scope of its inclusiveness—a scope that is both rooted in tradition and shaped by the new needs of contemporary society.

As early as a century ago, Troeltsch observed that in modern society, the influence of religion may decline, yet modern society remains indispensable to religion: "That which is unconditional and absolute, namely, faith in the purpose of the world and in the inner meaning of life which resides in the morality of all realities, nevertheless always and continually calls for religion."[59]

Thus, for modernizing China, continuing the traditional Chinese ethos of religious tolerance is itself a manifestation of greater modernity.

5.2 The Altruism of Religion vs. The Egoism of Modern Society

There exists a tension between the altruism of religion and the egoism inherent in modern society. Both Buddhism and Christianity advocate and practice selfless dedication to others and society. Modern society, by contrast, has emphasized individual self-interest since the Enlightenment, regarding the individual as the ultimate reality. This has led to the infinite expansion of individual selfish desires, often preventing people from treating others as equally valuable beings.

Although some Buddhist schools emphasize that nothing exists apart from one's own mind, their basic precepts and practices remain fundamentally altruistic. For instance, the precept of "not lying" among the Five Precepts for lay followers can be seen as altruistic to a certain extent, while the paramita of giving among the Six Perfections stresses that one must benefit others boundlessly in order to attain Buddhahood.

These two contrasting value orientations cause altruism-oriented Buddhist and Christian adherents to feel out of place in secular society, and may even lead them to sacrifice their own personal interests.

Admittedly, secularism cannot be fully equated with selfishness, nor can religious faith be simply identified with altruism. Secularized religious beliefs, in particular, can no longer be regarded as purely altruistic. This issue deserves in-depth discussion, but owing to space limitations, this paper only addresses the relative characteristics of the two and will not elaborate further.

5.3 How Do Buddhism and Christianity Maintain Themselves in Modernity?

Anthony Giddens identifies three main driving forces of modernity: the separation of time and space, the development of disembedding mechanisms, and the reflexive deployment of knowledge. [60]

These forces have transformed how Buddhism and Christianity sustain and transmit their traditions. As observed in the Chinese context: "Today, while the beliefs and purposes of religions in the process of socialist modernization remain

unchanged, their cultural characteristics, social activities, and certain value orientations have evolved. They now display features compatible with socialist society and have become a cultural driving force for socialist modernization."[61]

Meanwhile, as Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye notes: "Far from being confined to a narrowly defined sphere of 'religiosity', charismatic Christians in the reform era apply their master Christian narrative to every aspect of their lives: not just the devotional, but also the secular; not just the 'spiritual', but also the 'scientific'."[62]

This paper attributes such transformations to two interrelated dimensions: internal changes within religious traditions themselves, and broader shifts in the overall social climate. The former may be understood as the effect, and the latter as the underlying cause. As a result of these changes, the social mechanisms of Buddhism and Christianity have become fundamentally different from those in traditional societies, and their social status has also been drastically transformed.

All these shifts have altered the very connotations of Buddhism, Christianity, and traditional social life as compared with the pre-modern era. Although such changes have not yet touched the doctrinal core, they are nonetheless irreversible.

Conclusion

Reason tells us that modern society is a pluralistic organism composed of various elements, and religion is one of its organic components. Thus, despite the absence of dialogue between Buddhism, Christianity, and modernizing China in the 1960s and 1970s, the two religious traditions have gradually regained their voice since the late 1970s. Against this background, Buddhism and Christianity have both the potential and the actual achievement to contribute to opposing secularism, promoting social harmony, and pursuing ultimate reality.

However, China's modernization has its own distinctive characteristics: Buddhism and Christianity participate in modernization under the leadership of the Chinese government. Moreover, during the period of socialist construction from 1949 to 2000, the roles of Buddhism and Christianity experienced significant suppression during certain periods, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, yet they were never entirely eliminated as cultural and spiritual resources. With the advent of the reform and opening-up era, the legal governance of religion has become the core framework regulating Buddhism and Christianity. Even under such modern regulatory constraints, Buddhism and Christianity have nonetheless acquired a space in which to speak.

Given that dialogue is both indispensable and non-essential, the relationship between Chinese Buddhism, Christianity, and modernizing China still faces several challenges. These include: how Chinese society can sustain its inclusive cultural tradition while pursuing modernization; how to reconcile potential tensions between the ultimate goals pursued by Buddhism and Christianity and the values of modern society; and the fact that dialogue demands extremely high moral and intellectual standards, raising the question of how to achieve genuine dialogue rather than mere "monologue" or "conflict." Furthermore, as Buddhism and Christianity continuously compromise with modernization, how can they preserve their own identities without evolving into belief systems fundamentally distinct from their traditions?

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