Can Confucianism be considered "Popular Religion"?

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Research Essay

Popular Religion: Can Confucianism be considered “Popular Religion”?

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There is no single definition of what is 'Popular Religion'. There have been multiple interpretations and perspectives on the concept of popular religion. To Chau (2006), popular religious institutions “illustrates the coming together of many social forces: the political ambition of local activists, the regulatory and paternalistic interventions of local state agencies, the economic interests of temples, merchants, and related specialists (including folk musicians and opera performers), the collective religiosity and fun-seeking spirit of the worshippers, and the increasingly frequent trans local linkages between social actors in local communities and outside actors”. To Bosco (1994), popular religion has referred to the mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, Spiritism, and ancestor worship that centers on family altars and village temples. Some scholars have defined it as rural in contrast to urban forms of religion, the religion of the peasant in contrast to that of the ruling classes; or, in a variation of this definition, the religion of the masses as contrasted with that of the intellectual or sophisticated classes (Hinnells, 1995). Popular religion can also mean the religion of ethnic or minority groups located in a context of a major and dominant religion (Hinnells, 1995). According to the Division of religion and philosophy in University of Cumbria, Popular religion dates back to the earliest periods of Chinese history. Evidence of divination, astrology, belief in spirits and demons have been a part of Chinese culture since time immemorial. These primitive beliefs were modified by the development of classical Chinese philosophy in the form of Confucianism and the transplantation of Buddhism into China. It is therefore difficult to define popular religion as what this term consists of is not only problematic but differs across societies and culture.

Looking at popular religion today, it would seem to be a product of globalization and can be loosely defined within the perimeters of a few social factors such as, belief, practices, deities, festivals and temples. In a modernizing era, popular religion produces innovation. It would thrive on adopting new ways in integrating itself with contemporary societies and culture.

Confucianism

It is a hotly debated issue over whether there is a “Confucian religion” in China. I stand by the idea that Confucian is more of a philosophy than a religion. This claim would be further addressed in the essay. There are different perspectives we can view this from, either from the Chinese people’s perspective or the westerners perspective. I would assume that the Chinese people view Confucianism as more of a religion as compared to the westerners. This is because while Confucianism has been fully recognized in China and heavily integrated into the society, it is only later did Confucius theory spread over the borders into the western world. With deeper analysis and breakdown of Confucianism, we see the subtle differences it carries as compared to other major religions.
Moreover, in today’s society, different religions have to innovate and localize itself to continue to attract the masses. Popular religion today is reflective of the religion’s ability to adapt in a globalizing world. Is Confucianism then, considered as a popular religion? We will first have to address the debate of whether Confucianism is a religion or not?

To begin, the Chinese people may consider Confucianism as one of their religions alongside Taoism and Buddhism as the rituals, beliefs and attitudes are similar. For example, Confucian culture holds a rational attitude toward society and life (Zheng, 2011). It believes that human rationality is the cornerstone of people’s happiness and that the pursuit of moral life leads to the transcendence of life itself (Zheng, 2011). Similar to the other major religions in China, morality is a common theme in their teachings. According to (Zheng 2011), The Chinese people consider Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism as the “three main religions” of China. There is the Tao of Quan Zhen, which advocated the unity of three religions, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism (Xie, 2009). To the Chinese, Confucianism is not only a philosophy but as well as a religion. Alongside China’s most influential religions are Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam; Christianity also began to spread to China in the early Tang Dynasty.

According to (Xie, 2009), however, strictly speaking, the Confucian doctrine is not a religion, it was a part of the mainstream Chinese culture and had a profound impact on the people, with respect to their thinking and behaviour patterns. It thus possessed a status similar to the other religions but it is not a religion. In the view from the State, Confucianism is not part of the 5 official religions in China. However, it can be seen that the state does support the philosophy of Confucius.

Confucianism was regarded by the officials and emperor as a political tool for a unified empire, the position of Confucianism in China was rooted in the hearts of the Chinese, thus making it an important tradition of Chinese culture. In many parts of the world, people associate china with Confucius. The sage has become a “popular” representative of Chinese culture. It can be said that contemporary Chinese people’s lives are a product of Confucian culture (Zheng, 2011). Indeed, the Chinese government is still seeking a unified ideology to legitimize a unified state. Marxism is too western, and the nature of a Sinicized Marxism is unclear. Confucianism is argued to be part of the essence of traditional Chinese culture. Although it is debatable, to what extent Confucianism is the unifying ideology of china, there is a movement to make Confucianism the basis of Chinese culture and national identity (Yang and Tamney, 2012). Therefore, Confucianism is but a tool to glue the Chinese people together, a state apparatus in unifying national ideology.
Gods or Deities
What sets Confucian apart from the other 5 religions would be that Confucian does not have a divine God or deities but emphasizes on its teachings. The teacher, Confucius, threw his whole being into setting up a systematic theory of Benevolence, which studies the relationship between people based on feudal ethics (Xie, 2009). Confucius was a famous thinker, educationist, and the founder of the Confucian School in ancient China from State of Lu in Shandong province. His philosophy exerted far-reaching influence in the later ages (Xie, 2009) and was committed to the education of china and its people. Confucius was a ritual and sacrificial master (Littlejohn, 2010) who believed that religious rituals produce meaningful experiences. These practices were mostly offerings to ancestors and it was not specifically to any Deities or Gods. Hence, Confucianism is not a worship of a God but the study of Confucius theory. Even though we see his students and other people offering sacrifices to him, they were out of deep respect and admiration for a man and not for a divine being. Unlike other religions like Taoism which worships hundreds of Gods, clearly a multi-god religion (Xie, 2009). This point would present itself as one of the main key elements that sets Confucianism apart from Buddhism or Taoism, just to name a few.

Rituals and practices
Scholars of Chinese civilization have often identified ancestor-oriented family rituals as keys to Chinese culture (Ebrey, 1991). The “orientation to ancestor worship” is central to the entire development of Chinese civilization. For example, one of the early Confucian classics, the I-li [Etiquette and ritual], provided step by step instructions on how shih (lower officers, gentlemen) should perform family rituals. The performing of rituals and ancestor worship in China is strong and key in Chinese culture and tradition. It has become an orthodox. Similar to the Christians where the church issue rules on key family ceremonies (baptism, confirmation, weddings, last rites, funerals, masses for the dead). The state also frequently asserted its supremacy in the realm of instituting rites. Therefore, in china, we see that the Confucian discourse tended to dominate discussion of family rituals. Despite having diverse ethnicities and religion, ancestral worship and family rituals were a common practice with the Chinese people. Tributes paid to Confucius and ancestors are Chinese traditions with a long standing history (Zheng, 2011. In this aspect, while Confucianism adheres to one of the factors of popular religion, it does not necessarily mean it is considered as a popular religion.

Beliefs and Values
While Confucianism seems to have similar beliefs and values with Taoism, Buddhism and Spiritism, Confucianism centers on a way of teaching or the “Dao”. Confucianism has another
name, *li jiao*, the religion of rites or the teaching of rites. It revolves around the pursuit of the unity of the self and *Tiān* (Adler, 2014), and the relationship of humankind to the Heaven.

Different religions have values and teachings that are passed down through scriptures, priests and teachings. For example, Buddhism believed in the practice of compassion through charitable work. Similar to Confucianism, it had a profound impact on Chinese culture and life, and infiltrated into Chinese philosophy, ethics, as well as people’s daily lives (Xie, 2009). Many values in different religions overlap, as the supernatural and after-life is a common theme that shapes the practices and rituals. Confucius philosophy parallels other religions in their beliefs and aspects, and is practiced by the masses in China. It can be considered as a popular belief to the Chinese people.

**Temples/churches**

A physical space is a noteworthy element in identifying what is and is not a religion. Places of worship and prayer are often associated to the classification of religious congregation. Institutions and structures allow red market religious groups to flourish as people are able to openly practice their religion with state support. Confucianism has various schools, hospitals and temples under its belt. It is a recognized religion in the eyes of the Chinese. In 2005, the center for the study of Confucian religion was established, and guoxue education started to be implemented in public schools (Yang, 2007). Another modern proponent of the institutionalization of Confucianism in a state church is Jiang Qing (Yong, 2012).

**Conclusion**

The points above reveal the unanimous perspective and belief that Confucianism is a religion to the Chinese people. In China, Confucius teachings have been incorporated so deeply into the education system and daily lives of the people that the people themselves regard Confucianism as one of the popular religions. Despite Confucianism not being a state religion, it is still supported by officials and intellectuals and this philosophy has trickled down to many parts of society. Yet, the controversy over whether Confucianism should be classified as a religion is subject to debate. In the 16th and the 17th centuries, the earliest European arrivals in China, considered Confucianism to be an ethical system, not a religion, and one that was compatible with Christianity (Elman, 2005). To the westerners, scholarly articles would point to Confucianism is not based on a belief in the supernatural or in a personal god that doesn’t impact reality (Adler, 2014). Attributes of Confucianism may also be traced to Chinese fold religion. Ultimately, it boils down to how does one classify religion? Is it a moral science or philosophy? Even though Confucianism performs various functions similar to other major religions, and is fully embraced and adopted by the Chinese people which may allow them to
see it as a religion in their perspective, strictly to definition, Confucianism is not a popular religion.

Bibliography


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