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The Modernisation of the People's Liberation Army
and its Repercussions

Vincent Goossaert et David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*

Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 2011, 464 pp.

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- 1 Historian Vincent Goossaert and anthropologist David Palmer have pooled the expertise in their respective fields to take stock of the extraordinary changes taking place over the past several decades in the Chinese religious landscape. They approach the subject through two perspectives – historical and sociological. In the first seven chapters of Part I, the authors retrace the different stages in the evolution of the “religious question.” Chapter 1 introduces the characteristics of Imperial China and the following four chapters describe the dramatic transformations of the late Imperial period and the Republican era. The authors present the destruction of the religion associated with the ancient regime, which began under the reform period; the Republican state’s moves to foster modern religions; the emergence of new traditions in response to the state’s ambitions; and finally the brutality with which transformations of the religious landscape in urban milieu were imposed on the

countryside. These discussions facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the Communist Party's religion work – discussed in Chapters 6 and 7 – with the Cultural Revolution constituting a major breaking point. Part II jettisons the chronological approach in favour of an appreciation of multiple religious modernities in the Chinese world. In Chapter 8, the authors evoke Chinese religions' alternative trajectories outside the People's Republic, among Chinese communities in the Western and Japanese colonial worlds, then in the new Sinified states of Taiwan and Singapore, and finally in the global Chinese diaspora, in order to better highlight the fact that although these are marginal experiences, they have played a major role in redefining the rapport between state and religion, and could inspire the Chinese leadership. In the next two chapters, the authors consider in depth the themes of filial piety and the revitalisation of religious life around communal religions and temple associations. Chapter 11 paints a canvas of the major transformations of religious life in an increasingly urbanised China: body cultivation movements, the return of Confucianism, lay Buddhist movements and evangelical Christianity.

- 2 The *Zongjiao wenti* (宗教问题), which is translated as the “religious question” but may also be rendered as the “religious problem,” and which lies at the core of this work, is spelled out in five interrogations whose relevance goes far beyond the Chinese context. The Enlightenment stoked the first of these concerns in the West: how to reduce religion's domination in cultural and societal spheres, an indispensable prerequisite for emancipating minds in the march towards modernity (p. 401). The second, flowing from the first, stems from the characteristics of the Chinese religious landscape, which were poorly grasped by the European concepts of secularisation and religion designed to account for their own realities: how were Republican and Communist reformers to think of Chinese religious practices and their control (p. 402)? The third question reflects the dilemmas confronting the Communist Party as it wields power: how to remove from Chinese religions their potential for opposing the regime without alienating citizens wedded to their rites? These interrogations lead on to a fourth, of international relevance: given that secularism as a model of relations between religion and politics is far from achieving unanimity, should we not rethink the theory of secularisation to which it is closely linked? Finally, is religion expected to become a source of alternative civility; a commodity among many on the culture market, or among health products; or perhaps as a source of ethnic or national identity?
- 3 The authors remain cautious with respect to the possible responses to these questions and offer three possible scenarios concerning the future of religion in China. The first of these postulates an expansion of religious freedoms to the point where the country institutionalises a laissez-faire policy similar to the situation prevailing in Taiwan and Hong Kong. The second scenario envisages a return to the Qing period's practice through which the state granted religion more space in social life, but retained the role of ultimate arbiter in religious matters. Finally, the third scenario contemplates the state engaging in a civilising mission, actively promoting a civil or political religion.
- 4 The authors bring an impressive record of publications on China's temples, Daoism, and phenomena such as *qigong*. This work is likely to have an enduring influence not only in their fields of specialisation, but also in the fields of political science and sociology, similar to the classical study of David K. Jordan and Daniel Overmyer on Chinese religions in Taiwan. Unlike the latter, however, *The Religious Question* is not a case study, but a brilliant synthesis and update of the research undertaken by Chinese

and Western scholars over the past two decades on the relationship between the political and the religious spheres in China since the Hundred Day Reform (*wuxu bianfa* 戊戌变法), the ephemeral event during which the “religious question” was first evoked and has continued to haunt Chinese leaders with modernist ambitions to this day. The book’s merit is that it does not limit itself to the PRC: it also covers Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Chinese communities across the globe. This is a wise choice, reminding us that Chinese civilisation’s responses to modernity should not be limited to the effort to create a new society in the PRC since 1949. This book represents a masterful introduction to the complexity of Chinese religiosity, but it will also constitute a source of inspiration for many research agenda.

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