

## *Religion and Politics, Church and State in Chinese History*

John Lagerwey

WHEN I BEGAN to study Chinese history in 1968, the standard understanding was that China had no native religion, that Confucianism was not a religion, and that Buddhism, a religion of foreign origin, had long since gone into terminal decline. Studies over the last half century have demonstrated that, on the contrary, there was a native religion, Daoism, Confucianism was a religion, and Buddhism has continued to thrive right down to the present. Together, these 'three teachings' (*sanjiao*) as they were called in Chinese received ongoing state support throughout imperial history (220 BCE–1911 CE). Often, moreover, they would band together to oppose a fourth form of religion, one founded on mediums (*wu*) who spoke for the gods enshrined in local temples. To be complete, a history of Chinese religion must therefore describe these four religions and their interactions. What such a description would lead us to discover is that the ultimate arbiter between these four religions was the state itself. Headed by a Son of Heaven who possessed the Mandate of Heaven to rule, the state in fact functioned like a church. That is, there is nothing really comparable in Chinese history to a conflict between church and state because the Chinese state was a church-state.

To explain what this affirmation means in concrete historical terms, we must begin with Confucianism, for it is chronologically speaking the first of the three teachings to emerge. Confucius (551–479 BCE) himself had no intention of founding a religion. He saw himself as a transmitter, one who carried on the ritual traditions of the Zhou dynasty (1050–256 BCE). He is also traditionally credited with editing the texts which embodied those traditions and came to be called the Classics (*jing*). During the Warring States (481–221 BCE), these ritual traditions were rethought less as a means to communicate with the world of the gods and the ancestors than as a means of self-cultivation:

by practising the various rites, especially those addressed to the ancestors, elite members of society could learn the meaning of reverence (*jing*), awe (*wei*) and sincerity (*cheng*).<sup>1</sup> The emphasis, in other words, came to be on the living practitioner of rites who through them learned appropriate attitudes, rather than on the 'real presence' of the gods. Indeed, when asked by a disciple whether the ancestors were present at the sacrifices, Confucius is said to have told him to do 'as if'.

The five 'Confucian' Classics had achieved sufficiently universal recognition as foundational to the Chinese state for them to be carved in stone in the year 175 CE.<sup>2</sup> It is because these Classics provided both the justification for and basic outlines of sacrificial rites addressed to gods and ancestors that it is not just legitimate – imperative – to speak of Confucianism as a religion. That is, insofar as animals were slaughtered and offered in the context of these rites addressed to invisible entities, it is hard to know what else we could call this other than a religion. The gods were generally defined as humans who deserved to be remembered for their contribution to public or state welfare, and throughout Chinese history the state expended considerable time deciding which gods were deserving of such recognition, and then considerable expense making the sacrifices:

Some staggering statistics give perhaps the best measure of the Han imperial investment in religion: in 31 BC the chief minister Kuang Heng reduced the number of officially supported sites of worship from 683 to 208 and also eliminated 200 of 373 sites for Han ancestor worship. He was, however, removed from office the following year, and by the end of Wang Mang's reign, the number of cult sites had soared to 1700.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, when in 197 BCE the Han founder's father died, he decreed the creation of sites of worship for him throughout the empire, 'and the same was done for him when he died two years later. This explains why, at the time of the failed reforms of Kuang Heng, there were 167 shrines in the provinces and 176 in the capital city, plus 30 sites dedicated to the memory of various empresses.<sup>4</sup>

As important as these individual sites and foci of worship were, as expressions of dynastic legitimacy they paled in importance next to the sacrifice to Heaven first performed by Wang Mang (r. 9–23 CE) and regularly thereafter until 1914. It was there that the emperor illustrated what it meant to be the Son of Heaven and to hold its Mandate:

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it meant a magnificent parade to the southern suburbs of the capital to sacrifice a buffalo, a goat, and a pig, first to Heaven and then to the imperial ancestors. Anyone wishing to imagine the scale and solemnity of this sacrifice need only visit the Altar of Heaven (Tiantan) in Beijing, and the Daoist temple in the park nearby where the emperor prepared for this sacrifice by a period of fasting.

Some decades before the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 CE, the Daoist religion was born and Buddhism entered China. The question of the relation between the pre-imperial Daoist philosophy of Laozi (fl. fifth century BCE) and the Daoist religion is a fraught one. Put in the simplest possible terms, Laozi, who in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) was thought to have been a specialist of rites from whom Confucius sought instruction, was deified in the second century CE as the divine Lord Lao, embodiment of the cosmic Dao.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the Han his 'five-thousand character text' (*Wuqian wen*) was read as a book on self-cultivation that led to immortality, and it was recited and taught in the context of the new Daoist religion. Daoist self-cultivation consisted in meditation on internal gods understood as 'vital energy' (*qi*), and Daoist ritual in using these internal energies to heal the sick and to send memorials to external gods understood as officials.

The period between 220 and 589, when the Sui dynasty reunified China, is perhaps the most fertile in Chinese religious history. We shall here retain only four facts. First, Buddhism presented a huge challenge to the Chinese state because, coming from India, where the priestly was superior to the warrior (royal) caste, Buddhist monks at first refused to bow before the Son of Heaven. But 'the head of the monks at the court of the Northern Wei, Faguo (fl. 396–409), explained that he was "paying homage, not to the emperor but to the Buddha."<sup>6</sup> Second, together and separately each of the three teachings, all based on textual traditions requiring a high degree of literacy, defined itself in opposition to the religion of the mediums and their gods – the religion of the people – and participated in its occasional suppression or partial incorporation. Third, starting in the year 431, 'altars were created with Daoist priests to serve them in every provincial capital. This is the first recorded unified system of state-supported religious institutions in Chinese history.'<sup>7</sup> In the Tang dynasty (618–907), both Buddhism and Daoism had state-financed monasteries implanted throughout the empire. Fourth, during this period the state often sponsored debates between the three teachings in order to decide which should be ranked first. The definitive answer was given by Emperor Xuan (r. 578–80)

when he sat on his throne flanked by the images of the Buddha on his right and the Daoist Heavenly Worthy of the Primordial Beginning on his left:<sup>8</sup> as the Son of Heaven who sacrificed to Heaven, he embodied in the first place the Confucian tradition, to which he had added the cosmic Buddha and Dao.

All subsequent dynasties pursued similar policies of support of the three text-based teachings, their institutions and their rites. That is, as regards the Confucian religion, the register of sacrifices (*sidian*) in which were recorded all local cults deemed worthy of state recognition continued to be regularly updated, and the sacrifice to Heaven practised. Debate about the sacrifice to Heaven led in the Tang to its being defined not in terms of the 'dynastic family's possession of the empire' but of the 'public nature' of the empire:

New reliance on Haotian shangdi [Emperor on High of Bright Heaven] at the expense of other deities intensified the ruler's identification with all-powerful Heaven and enhanced his standing as the one man and so improved cosmological grounds for an enhanced absolutism.<sup>9</sup>

The imperium sought basically to provide balanced support to Buddhism and Daoism. Thus in 738 Xuanzong decreed the selection of one temple each in all 331 districts. But a decree dated 637:

gave formal precedence to Daoism over Buddhism on the grounds the latter was a foreign religion, while Daoism derived from the nameless Origin of the universe, and Laozi was the origin of the imperial clan. When the monk Zhishi protested, he was whipped to death. . . Imperial dreams of Laozi in the years 740 and 741 led to the unearthing of a statue of Laozi near Pavilion Hermitage – imperial confirmation that this was indeed the subject of Xuanzong's dream – creation of a new temple to house it, and distribution of painted copies throughout the empire. The name of this new Daoist temple in Chang'an was Palace of Great Clarity (Taiqinggong 太清宮), and in it the statue of the emperor was placed next to that of Laozi.<sup>10</sup>

The Song dynasty (960–1276) also found for itself a Daoist ancestor and, therefore, continued the institutional favoritism shown to the native religion. But something radically new also took place under what was probably the most Daoist of all Chinese emperors, Huizong

(r. 1101–26). Not only was he one of four emperors to write a commentary on the *Laozi*, he also became convinced that he was himself a high Daoist god, Changsheng dadi or Great Emperor of Long Life. He then ordered the creation of a whole new network of Daoist temples throughout the empire, each with the image of the divine emperor on a central altar: 'They manifested to visitors, especially scholar-officials who were required by imperial order to pay their respects, the divinity of their current emperor.'<sup>11</sup> An 1117 edict explained he felt he had 'a mission of saving China from the foreign religion and returning it to the correct way.'<sup>12</sup>

The same emperor, in 1111, eliminated 1500 'illicit cult sites' (*yinsi*) in the capital and, in 1117, prohibited male and female mediums: his creation of a Daoist theocracy went hand-in-hand with his attack on the religion of the people. But, as already suggested, suppression was only half of the story; the other half was to incorporate selected gods in the state registry of sacrifices. Such incorporations, done by giving the gods official titles and signboards, go back to the pre-imperial period, but they gained a new intensity under the Northern Song, especially under the two emperors – Shenzong (r. 1068–86) and Huizong – associated with 'New Policies' that increased central control and direct links between the centre and local society. Huizong's divine Daoist identity and the unprecedented number of suppressions and incorporations are clearly three related expressions of these New Policies. Moreover, insofar as the procedures of incorporation were very reminiscent 'of the way the medieval Catholic church vetted candidates for sainthood, it also reminds us that, in China, the real church was the state.'<sup>13</sup>

To complete our historical survey of the Chinese church-state, we must look briefly at the last native dynasty, the Ming (1368–1644). Its founder, Taizu (r. 1368–99), decreed the creation of a network of territorial gods for all China: earth gods for every group of 110 families and city gods for every county and prefecture. The third emperor, Yongle (r. 1403–24), completed the network by placing at its pinnacle a god who had first gained state recognition in the Tang, Zhenwu (True Warrior). Not long after he had built a Forbidden City in Beijing containing a temple to Zhenwu, Yongle built a Forbidden City for the god at the top of the 1,700-metre Peak of the Celestial Column on Mount Wudang in Hubei province, where Zhenwu was said to have ascended to heaven. If an incoming county magistrate or prefect had to begin his tour of duty by reporting to the local city god, each Ming emperor after Yongle had, upon ascending the throne, to send a 'sacrificial writ'

to Zhenwu on Mount Wudang, to ask for his protection and help. This meant, in effect, that the administrative divisions of the empire had a parallel division into parishes, each centred on the worship of an official, state-designated 'saint': state officials, including the emperor, were subordinate to and dependent on a 'church' whose gods were dependent on state recognition.

While the True Warrior was a vegetarian, many of the new Daoist martial gods that emerged in this period were meat-eaters, meaning that Daoism, which had begun life as a religion that rejected the blood sacrifices of popular religion, was engaged in a process of incorporation that paralleled and no doubt aided that of the state. The Buddhists, meanwhile, who had been forced by the Ming founder to regroup in large, state-recognised monasteries, were also increasingly allotting separate, entry-level halls to local gods. Local Buddhists and Daoists came also, especially in the Song, to be worshipped as local gods in their own right. Like the emerging national pantheon, emblematically represented by the gods of war and letters – Guandi and Wenchang – recognised by the state but also by the people, popular forms of Buddhism and Daoism – source of their elite reputation as 'decadent' and 'in decline' – were in fact contributing to the creation of a single Chinese religion, a religion whose time- and space-specific forms of institutionalisation had always to be negotiated anew with the state.

But our story would not be complete if we did not evoke the parallel changes in Confucianism in the period from the Song to the Ming. Starting in the eleventh century, certain Confucians undertook to thoroughly refashion Confucianism by incorporating into it aspects of both Buddhism and Daoism and creating for it a philosophical genealogy very much like that of the Chan school of Buddhism. According to their view, the 'transmission of the Way' (*daotong*) had come to a halt with the pre-Qin philosopher Mencius (372–289 BCE), and the emperors of the Han and Tang did not qualify as embodiments of the Dao/Way. That is, whereas the Confucians had hitherto seen themselves as 'serving when the Way was practised and withdrawing when it was not', they now saw themselves as the true depositories of the Confucian Way – and denied this role to the emperor. This startling new development, which came down to saying, like the Buddhists, that the state was no longer the church – to making a distinction between political and spiritual power – while it had a pre-history in the Han-era idea that Confucius was an 'uncrowned king' (*suwang*), was no doubt related to a key fact about the Song from the very start, namely, that it had to

negotiate its status with tribal empires to the north and, in a word, recognise the existence of a second Son of Heaven who, to make matters worse, was the 'elder brother' of the Song. Throughout the Northern (960–1126) and Southern (1127–1260) Song, these 'neo-Confucians' as they are often called in English constituted a 'war party', while successive emperors and their hated prime ministers negotiated peace with non-Chinese regimes to the north. In the end, one of those regimes, that of the Mongols, extinguished the Song and ruled all China as the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368).

The Mongols, themselves adherents of Tibetan Buddhism, began by abolishing the Confucian Classics-based examination system and relying heavily on Daoists and Buddhists to rule. But in 1314 they reinstated the examination system, using, for the first time as the basis for these exams, the so-called Four Books: the *Lunyu* of Confucius, the *Mengzi* (Mencius), and two separate chapters of the *Classic Book of Rites (Liji)*, the *Zhongyong* (Doctrine of the Mean) and the *Daxue* (Great Learning). The creation of what was in effect a new set of foundational Confucian scriptures was the work of Zhu Xi (1130–1200), and the new form of the exams was based not just on the Four Books, but also on Zhu Xi's commentaries on them.

In making neo-Confucianism official state orthodoxy, the Ming founder Taizu was thus following the Mongol lead. The consequence of bringing neo-Confucianism 'in from the cold' was that Taizu saw himself as a sage-king 'who had united politics and morality'.<sup>14</sup> He even went so far as to order the excision of 85 passages in the *Mencius* 'that he saw as undermining the ruler's authority' (they were reinstated in 1414, under the Yongle emperor).<sup>15</sup> He also wrote a commentary on the *Laozi*, in which he insisted on the idea that the sovereign's body was coterminous with the body politic. That is, he took quite literally the ancient Daoist adage to the effect that 'governing the state is like governing the body'. But, whereas this phrase was traditionally used by Daoists to explain to the emperor his need for Daoist self-cultivation so that the order which would then reign within his person would extend spontaneously to the empire, in the emperor's commentary it became a different matter altogether: because he embodied the Dao, the state was in effect his Body. In short, Ming 'absolutism' was founded on Daoist ontology (*ti*) and expressed pragmatically in the form of Confucian orthodoxy (*yong*).

The Jiajing emperor (r. 1522–67), who likewise saw himself as 'uniting politics and morality',<sup>16</sup> has with reason been called 'the most

Daoist of the Ming emperors'.<sup>17</sup> But, as the result of a rites controversy in which he insisted, against his Confucian counsellors, on making sacrifices to his biological father rather than to the previous emperor as adoptive father, he made a decisive change in state policy that would lead to the transformation of China into a lineage society built around sacrifices to ancestors. Until his reign, in accord with the *Book of Rites*, ordinary people had only parents and grandparents: legally, they were not allowed to have ancestors because ancestors and their worship were, from the beginning of Chinese history, directly associated with political power. 'The rites [of ancestor worship],' the *Book of Rites* famously stated, 'do not go down to the people.' Already one of the Confucians of the early Song whose thought would become central to Zhu Xi's synthesis, Cheng Yi (1033-1107), had said that all people should have the right, indeed the obligation, to worship their 'founding ancestor' (*shizu*), that is, the individual, however far removed in time, that a given local family group saw as its origin. But in Cheng Yi's time and for long after, one had to be a high official in order to worship anyone beyond one's grandfather, and the founding ancestor was off limits to all but the imperial family. The neo-Confucians had continued to chip away at these ritual/legal interdictions, but it was not until 1536 that the Jiajing emperor 'finally gave to the commoners the right to have ancestors.'<sup>18</sup> This gradually led to the utter transformation of Chinese society by the creation of ever-bigger and more powerful lineages, with ancestral halls (*citang*) and genealogies (*zupu*). As David Faure has written:

The lineage villages built around their ancestral halls that Maurice Freedman wrote about were few and far between in the early Ming era. Had Freedman visited the Pearl River Delta in that period, he would have seen the remnants of the Buddhist monasteries that had served as focal points of local organization in an earlier age . . . The administrative transformation of county government and the ritual reforms that ushered in the family temple together promoted the lineage society that lasted from the sixteenth century until the nineteenth.<sup>19</sup>

This is the Chinese society encountered by the Jesuits when they arrived in China in the late Ming, and that enabled them to more or less plausibly describe China as a society governed by a Confucianism which was not a religion but a philosophy.



The Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1911), like the Mongol Yuan before it, practised a form of Tibetan Buddhism. With regard to Daoism, they shifted their patronage away from the Heavenly Master tradition supported by the Ming to the Integral Perfection tradition first supported by the Yuan. But, above all, 'the three great Qing emperors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries claimed to have ended the distinction between politics and morality and the tension between literati and rulers by uniting the 'succession of the Way' and political power in their own person.'<sup>20</sup> Ming and Qing emperors, in other words, saw themselves as pope-sovereigns of their church-state.

After the fall of the Qing in 1911, successive governments sought to modernise China, in part by destroying its traditional religious culture, classed as 'superstition' (*mixin*) in the Republican (1912–49) and as 'feudal superstition' (*fengjian mixin*) in the Communist period. All through the Republican era, temples were confiscated and turned into schools, or simply destroyed. The height of the destruction occurred during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). But what needs to be underlined is that, however radical twentieth-century destruction was, it built on millennia-old elite, essentially Confucian attitudes and assumptions. In the past, episodic destruction of temples of the people's religion had been supplemented by occasional suppressions of Buddhism, Manichaeism, and multiple rebellions characterised by the same mix of religion and politics as the state itself. Legitimacy was totally bound up in the religious self-definition of the state and its ruler, meaning that, in matters religious, the church-state was the final arbiter and brooked no opposition. At the same time, the ongoing reverence, for Sun Yatsen in Taiwan and for Mao Zedong in China, while it may look to a Westerner not unlike American reverence for George Washington, must also be understood in terms of the millennia-old worship of dynastic founders, as what can only be characterised as the divinisation of Mao can be made sense of only if the divine status of the Son of Heaven is factored in – divine status which moved, as we saw above, from mere association of ancestors and Heaven or the Dao to the self-definition of the Song emperor Huizong as a Daoist god to the Ming founder's conviction he embodied the Dao. The divinisation of the ruler of a religious state is not an occasional aberration but an intrinsic part of its foundational logic. In contemporary China, which has moved decisively away from the disastrous personality cult of Mao, as did Song China from that of Huizong, what remains unchanged is that ideological orthodoxy and orthopraxy – things associated by Westerners with religions – continue

to be determined by the state. If in the past it was the emperor, today it is the Party that functions like a church.

Over the last decade, as China has risen to world power status, it has begun to redefine itself. If, in the Maoist era, it challenged Moscow as the centre of world communism, the soft power it now exports is embodied in some 350 Confucius Institutes implanted in universities throughout the world. Indeed, one could legitimately say that, under Hu Jintao (r. 2002–2012), with his ‘harmonious society’ (*hexie shehui*), the revolutionary page was definitively turned, and the Restoration begun. But had Confucianism ever died? As a religion of blood sacrifices to Heaven, the gods, and the ancestors, yes. But as a patriarchal, elitist, and hierarchical ideology of power, in becoming ‘secular’, it became an even better foundation for a church-state in which orthodoxy had only one legitimate form of institutionalisation. That is, by delegitimising all forms of sacrifice other than that for Party and State, it effectively abolished all religious challengers. This alone can explain the paradox that the ‘people’s government’ acted so decisively to realise the millennial dream of Confucian orthodoxy to eliminate the religion of the people’s gods. To this day, long after the national Institute for the Study of World Religions in Beijing had recognised Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism as the five world religions worthy of study, the people’s religion – insofar as it has been allowed to reoccupy the space the empire had begrudgingly conceded to it – is still classified not as a ‘religion’ but as a ‘belief’ (*minjian xinyang*). And Confucianism? Why is it the only one of the traditional three teachings not to be studied in the Institute? Surely because the idea it was and is a ‘purely secular’ political and ethical philosophy – not a religion – has prevailed. That, precisely, is what makes it an ideology made to order for inspiring the practice of a modern church-state.

### Notes

1. Mark Csikszentmihalyi (2009), ‘Ethics and self-cultivation practice in early China’, *Early Chinese Religion Part One: Shang through Han (1250 BC–220 AD)*, Leiden: Brill, vol. 1, pp. 525–7. Because ancestors represented political power, only the elite had the right to sacrifice to ancestors.
2. Michael Nylan, ‘Classics without canonization: Learning and authority in Qin and Han’, *Early Chinese Religion Part One: Shang through Han (1250 BC–220 AD)*, vol. 2, p. 748.
3. Cf. John Lagerwey (2010), *China: A Religious State*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, p. 26.

4. Ibid.
5. See Anna Seidel (1969), *La divinisation de Lao Tseu dans le taoïsme des Han*, Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient.
6. Leon Hurvitz (translator), *Wei Shou Treatise on Buddhism and Taoism*, an English translation of the original Chinese text of *Wei-shu* CXIV and the Japanese annotation of Tsukamoto Zenryū, reprint of *Yün-kang, the Buddhist Cave-Temples of the Fifth Century AD in North China*, vol. 16 supplement (Jimbunkagaku Kenkyusho, 1956), p. 53.
7. Lagerwey, *China: A Religious State*, p. 32.
8. Lagerwey, *China: A religious state*, p. 35.
9. Howard Wechsler (1985), *Offerings of Jade and Silk: Ritual and Symbol in the Legitimation of the T'ang Dynasty*, New Haven: Yale University Press, p. x.
10. Lagerwey, *China: A Religious State*, pp. 33–7.
11. Shin-yi Chao (2006), 'Huizong and the Divine Emyrean Palace Temple Network', in *Emperor Huizong and Late Northern Song China: The Politics of Culture and the Culture of Politics*, ed. Patricia Ebrey and Maggie Bickford, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 349.
12. Patricia Ebrey, 'Huizong's stone inscriptions', in *Emperor Huizong and Late Northern Song China*, p. 257.
13. Lagerwey, *China: A Religious State*, p. 43. On the procedures, see Valerie Hansen (1990), *Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127–1276*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, ch. 4.
14. Peter Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008, p. 146.
15. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism*, p. 147.
16. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism*, p. 151.
17. Pierre-Henry de Bruyn (2004), 'Wudang shan: The Origins of a Major Center of Modern Taoism', in John Lagerwey (ed.), *Religion and Society in Chinese History*, vol. 2, *Taoism and Local Religion in Modern China*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Chinese University Press, p. 573.
18. Lagerwey, *China: A Religious State*, p. 50.
19. David Faure (2007), *Emperor and Ancestor: State and Lineage in South China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 14.
20. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism*, p. 151. Bol is referring to the emperors Kangxi (r. 1661–1722), Yongzheng (r. 1723–35), and Qianlong (r. 1736–95).