CHAPTER 7

Science and Religion in Traditional China*

1 Introduction

In the history of Western society and culture, both science and religion have been important and powerful elements. Christianity has been a force to reckon with ever since it took root in ancient Roman times: it has been the single most dominant factor in Western culture for the greater part of the past two millennia. Neither has science played a trivial role in Western history: since having earned some degree of importance during the late Renaissance period, its significance in society has been ever growing. It is thus to be expected that the two key elements in a society would have deeply influenced each other. This is all the more so because the objects of science and religion – Nature and God – were directly linked in the Western conception in that God created the natural world. Thus, throughout Western history there has always been an obvious potential for a strong connection and interaction between science and religion. Thirteenth-century Christian scholasticism, the Galileo affair, science in Puritan and Restoration England, eighteenth-century natural religion, and the Darwinian controversies are only the more conspicuous cases; there are numerous other examples that can be found in almost all other times.¹ In fact, when we look at the relationship between science and religion in the West, we are really looking at the relationship between the two pillars of Western civilization – Athens and Jerusalem.

In traditional China, however, the situation was drastically different. Science and religion were not as important in China as they were in the West; nor was there an obvious link between the objects of the two. Of course, there were exceptional periods in which religious elements, sometimes even scientific interests, carried more weight. For example, several centuries following the fall of the Han 漢 dynasty, around AD 200, Daoist and Buddhist beliefs and prac-


tices became prominent. That same period corresponded as well to a heightened interest in various ‘proto-scientific’ activities – alchemy, astrology, hygiene and other forms of physical and physiological therapies. Yet there never was a period in which a single religion was dominant in China like Christianity was in the West or Islam was in Arabic societies. Even at its very height, Buddhism represented just one among many religious currents of the time. Nor were those scientific – and proto-scientific – activities ever integrated fully into the scholarly pursuits of the dominant intellectual class. They were the activities mainly of marginal – both socially and intellectually – groups of society; even when in some periods interest in them was strong among the ruling class, it was always secondary to their main intellectual concern – moral and social problems. As a matter of fact, as the traditional pattern of Chinese society and culture evolved in the Song dynasty (960-1270), both religion and science’s hold on society became even weaker still.

Given this situation, it is not surprising that the relationship between science and religion in traditional China was quite different from that in the West, as many previous studies have pointed out. Yet too much attention to this point of difference has sometimes given rise to problems that hinder a proper understanding of the unique nature of the science-religion relationship in traditional China. In the present paper, I shall discuss these problems and suggest some ways to look at the relationship more fruitfully.

2 Hidden Assumptions in the Previous Studies

Discussing the relationship between science and religion in traditional Chinese society amounts to discussing the relationship between two things of relatively little importance in that society. This could easily lead, if one is not very scrupulous, to the danger of assuming that religion must have played a significant role in the development of science in China, as it did in the more religiously-oriented Western societies. Indeed, most of the previous work on the science-religion relationship in China reflects the influence of such an assumption, which consists of the following two pitfalls: 1) emphasis and exaggeration of

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