Since the 1990s, a team of religious studies researchers from the Minzu University of China have explored the relationship between religion and ethnicity in China. Striving to “seek truth from facts” (实事求是), we have investigated the role of religion as a carrier of ethnicity and examined both the ethnic nature of religiosity and the religious nature of ethnicity. Our goal has been the establishment of ethno-religious studies as a subdiscipline of religious studies. On the basis of several broad, comparative studies of China’s ethnic minority regions (first conducted in 2004 and then again in 2006–2007), we have reached the following fundamental conclusions: (1) The ethnic composition of the Chinese nation is best described as a pluralistic unity and the structure of Chinese belief as a pluralistic harmony; (2) Among ethnic minorities, the prevalent trend is the adoption of a single predominant religion as the basis of understanding for a community comprised of diverse viewpoints. These findings provide the framework for uncovering the present and historical realities of Chinese culture and thought and provide a new perspective for understanding the broad impact of ethno-religion on social politics, economics, and culture. This chapter provides a brief summary of our findings.

I. Our Theoretical Starting Point

Religious phenomena cannot exist, develop, or change in isolation, for they are, at all times, in constant interaction with other social factors. Similarly, our studies of religion, particularly of issues relating

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1 Previously known as the Central University of Nationalities.
to ethnoreligion, have not occurred in isolation, for they have taken place within the context of China’s social development and against the backdrop of globalization. Religion is, holistically speaking, a social phenomenon; i.e., its most meaningful aspects are revealed in the mutual interaction of collectivities. The ethnic group is one of these collectivities.

Theoretically speaking, minzu (民族, or ethnicity/nationality/nation) is established on the basis of tribal (or clan) lineage. The members of an ethnic group, or clan, generally reside within a common geographical region and share a common language and culture as well as a collective means of economic subsistence. However, ethnicity differs from clan membership in that the former does not rely on blood lineage as the most fundamental and defining relationship. Ethnic ties usually include a common outlook, a continuous cultural tradition, a self-conscious sense of identity, and an enduring sense of shared existence. Therefore, the initial significance of blood lineage decreases with historical evolution, social development, and population migration, and the fundamental characteristics of the ethnicity are increasingly maintained through shared socio-cultural elements, of which religion is a major component.

While individuals may, in many instances, perform the most meaningful activities within a religion, as an institution of beliefs, rituals, and norms, religion is always associated with a particular human group. Religion not only impacts and transforms individuals, but more importantly, it affects the social collectivity, strengthening ethnic identity and cohesion:

Included within the process of the birth and evolution of an ethnic group is the development of religion. Ethnic culture and relations are inevitably influenced by religion. Resultantly, religiosity becomes one of the most significant attributes of ethnicity. As the belief systems of ethnicities, religions possess the cultural traits of and are associated with the challenges, development, and survival of ethnic groups.2

Thus, from an academic perspective, our understanding of religious phenomena would be incomplete without a study of the relationship between religion and ethnicity. From the more practical standpoint of social development,

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