The Modern Study of ‘Religion’, the Confucian Tradition, and the Human Person

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Abstract

In the modern and global eras, people of diverse ways of living have come into increasing contact and have been inclined to make comparisons. On what scholarly basis can comparison be deeply informative, even life transforming? In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the West gave birth to the modern concept of ‘religion’ and to several modern academic disciplines that investigate this newly named thing called ‘religion’. These disciplines include sociology, anthropology, psychology, and phenomenology of religion. Respectively, these disciplines discern religion as concerned with social wholes, with ‘who we are’ as human beings, and with inward motivations expressed in outward phenomena such as ritual, scripture, moral conduct, artistic form, and social institutions. Engaging modern understandings of religion, particularly the psychology of religion, this essay takes initial steps to compare what some psychologists call ‘the interdependent self’ and the ‘independent self’ with the ‘parent role’ and the ‘child role’ in the family-based relationship that Chinese people call xiao (in this essay translated as ‘properly ordered family/clan affection’; others sometimes translate it as ‘filial piety’). For Confucians, xiao is the root of the cultivated virtue called ren (kindness). This match between the two Western and Chinese conceptions enables astute appreciation of how religious and moral discipline brings these two kinds of self and/or roles into complementary relationship, maturing the best of both. This case study, engaging the multi-disciplined, modern study of religion, exemplifies how contemporary peoples around the world can learn well from each other.

Keywords


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The Western academic discipline called psychology developed rapidly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, along with two other newly-minted social sciences: sociology and anthropology (Capps 1995; Waardenburg 1973, Whaling 1995). All three social sciences took increasing shape and form in response to nineteenth century western Enlightenment philosophers’ new and diverting question: What is ‘religion?’ (Schleiermacher, 1799/1996, p. 18), a question replacing two long-established Christian theological questions, namely, ‘Who is God?’ and ‘What does God want from us?’.

The Western-generated academic discipline called the ‘psychology of religion’ concerns the ‘inward’ (invisible) side of ‘outward’ (visible) human actions that are described as ‘religious.’ As this Western discipline is incorporated into the Chinese academy today, Western and Chinese scholars alike are attending carefully to two questions:

1. What in China can be considered a Chinese match (always partial, never exact) for what Westerners call religion?
2. What can be considered a Chinese match (always partial, not exact) for the Western word ‘psyche,’ a term whose Greek root means ‘breath, spirit, soul’ to which modern terms like ‘mind’ and ‘mental,’ and contemporary terms like ‘consciousness’ and ‘inner self,’ refer today?

Attending to these two questions this essay has three parts. To answer the first question, the first part of this essay examines, in broad strokes, the emergence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of the modern concept of religion and of several modern academic disciplines designed to investigate precisely what this newly named concept is. By examining the intellectual history leading to the development of the modern, academic discipline called psychology of religion, we can appreciate how this discipline’s focus on the inner human psyche that motivates outward actions has helped scholars to discern important distinguishing features of religious experience (both inward and outward). Contributions from the psychology of religion, joining with those coming from sociological, anthropological, and phenomenological study of religion, have enhanced considerably the Western, modern understanding of religion, enabling informative comparisons of apparently quite different customary ways of living.

The second part of this essay then turns to what Westerners since the early modern period have labelled ‘Confucianism’. By examining the ancient origins of this complex, weighty, and long-enduring Chinese tradition, what Kongzi (Confucius) in the sixth century BCE added to this tradition, and this tradition’s persistent focus on inward cultivation of ren (kindness, benevolence,