CHAPTER 6

The Development of Modern Society and the Evolution of Religion
(现代社会的发展和宗教的演变)*

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Abstract

Modern society, which underwent two world wars, is the historical period that has witnessed the most drastic changes and most rapid development in the history of mankind. Religion, as an integral part of social cultural systems and ideologies, is bound to meet the challenges brought about by social changes and transform itself accordingly in the wake of social development. Not only will traditional religious churches change in their doctrines, devotional behaviors, worshiping activities, and organizational systems, but there will also be new religions or religious movements. The question of how to understand the trend of social development and the related evolution of religion is thus an important issue in the study of religion in present-day China.

Keywords

modern society – religious evolution – new religions

The Development of Modern Society and How it Influences Religion

Modern society is a very complex whole, whose development and changes are multidimensional and thus influence religion and other social cultural forms in multiple ways. To put it briefly, the things most revealing of the fundamental characteristics and trends in the development of modern society consist

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mainly in (1) economic globalization; (2) political multipolarization and cultural pluralism; and (3) the great progress of advanced science and technology.

(1) Economic Globalization

Inasmuch as modern science and technology have developed continually and innovatively in the twentieth century, the social economy has progressed from mechanization, electrification, and automation to informatization. In the 1980s, the trend of economic globalization emerged.¹ One decade later, it was brought by degrees to a climax. In the new millennium, it is sure that such globalization will gain in depth. It is an irreversible trend.

Economic globalization, however, is a worldwide effort to reshuffle the industrial structure; in addition, it is led by advanced economies, motivated by transnational companies, and marked by the formation of integrated world markets. In this globalizing course, goods, services, information, production factors, and so forth are going over the border and flowing freely and globally at an ever increasing rate and scale. Moreover, the efficiency of resource allocation is improving through the international division of labor and consequently economies are becoming increasingly interdependent. Following the end of the Cold War, political barriers remaining in the way of economic globalization have been reduced, and developed countries like the United States are attempting to control or monopolize the global market further. To do it, they devote themselves to rhapsodizing over economic liberalism, promoting liberal policies regarding economy and trade, and paving the way for economic globalization. The establishment of multilateral trading systems—the World Trade Organization, for example—gives impetus to the formation of an integrated world market and its mechanisms. Especially in the 1990s, the phenomenal development of science and high technology centered on the revolution of information technology has removed borders while flattening the globe consisting of countries and regions, thus creating the possibility of economic globalization.

Economic globalization is a profound revolution in economy. It also exerts a tremendous influence on and even impinges upon all the social aspects—such as politics, economy, the military, culture, modes of thinking, value judgments,

¹ So far there is no unanimously agreed-upon definition of economic globalization in the world. According to the IMF’s survey, the phenomenon of globalization is “the growing economic interdependence of countries worldwide through increasing volume and variety of cross-border transactions in goods and services, freer international capital flows, and more rapid and widespread diffusion of technology.” See International Monetary Organization, World Economic Outlook, May 1997.