CHAPTER 10

A Survey of Marxist Perspectives on Religion in New China

(新中国马克思主义宗教观研究概述)

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Abstract

Vicissitudes can be seen in the development of Marxist perspectives on religion in the New China. For seventeen years—from the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to the year when the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966—the relevant work focused on sorting out and summing up the basic views of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. It paid greater attention to these great teachers’ analyses of religion in the class society. To a certain extent, the understanding of the Marxist view of religion in this period was influenced by the Soviet Union. Then, inasmuch as the mistake of Leftism became increasingly dominant in China and Chinese society was enchanted by the idea of “attributing a central role to class struggle” in the Cultural Revolution, scientific research into Marxist perspectives on religion was abruptly stopped. It is in the era of reform and opening-up that true prosperity is dawning in this field. Not only are the Marxist views of the world and methodologies upheld but the “contention of a hundred schools of thought” is also enacted. A huge number of books and research articles have been published and significant academic fruits have been picked.

Keywords

New China – Marxism – religious perspectives – accounts of research

The development of Marxist perspectives on religion in the New China can be roughly divided into three stages. Stage one: 1949–1966. This was the initial stage, in which Marxist perspectives on religion were tentatively explored. Stage two: 1966–1976. Normal research work was suspended in a coercive manner. Stage three: 1978 to the present. As the discipline of Chinese religious study is coming into being, research work has been reactivated and is becoming more active day by day. This field has been fruitfully explored so far.
An incomplete survey shows that approximately two hundred articles and more than ten books devoted to the views of religion that were formulated by Marx, Engels, and Lenin respectively and to the Sinicization of Marxist perspectives on religion have come out in the last five decades.

**Stage One**

The New China was founded in 1949. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) became the ruling party in China, and Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought became the guiding ideology in the CCP’s administration of the country. Studying and propagandizing Marxism-Leninism was the main task in the ideological field. Naturally, research devoted to Marxist perspectives on religion was burgeoning.

During this stage, academic inquiry into the religious views of Marx, Engels, and Lenin was rudimentary at best. In due course it fell under the remarkable influence of the Party’s and state’s mistake of Leftism in ideology and politics. The characteristics of this research work were as follows: (1) the translation of major works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin on religious questions; (2) the translation of research by scholars in the Soviet Union; (3) the publication of Chinese scholars’ research; and (4) a certain number of debates concerning the religious views of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Overall, the number of published papers devoted to this topic in China was very small. It is—on the basis of a partial survey, of course—estimated that the total number was less than ten. In addition, there was not a single academic monograph in this field.

At the very beginning of the New China, in order to cooperate with the treatment of religion by the Party and state, news agencies and publishers turned their hand to translating and introducing some writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin on religion and academic books by Soviet scholars about the Marxist theory of religion. They produced two books—one was *Shehui zhuyi yu zongjiao* 社会主义与宗教 (Socialism and religion) published by Tianxia tushu gongsi (天下图书公司, All Under Heaven Books), and the other was *Zongjiao wenti xuanji* 宗教问题选辑 (Collected writings on religious questions) compiled by Dongbei xinhua shudian (东北新华书店, Northeast New China Bookstore). The former included several pieces written by Lenin—“Socialism and Religion,” “The Attitude of the Workers’ Party to Religion,” and “Classes and Parties in Their Attitude to Religion and the Church”—and an entry entitled “Religion and Church in the Soviet Union,” which was quoted from *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. The latter embraced some of Engels’s discussions on religion, Stalin’s exposition of the (communist) party’s attitude towards religion, parts of *The Twilight of World Capitalism* by William Zebulon