

The Bounds of Religion and the Transition from the Tao to Mao

Religion is an important force in human history. We are all agreed upon that. From this simple observation flow vital consequences for the study of religion. We are not perhaps in agreement as to what religion is, but in this lecture I do not wish to go directly into matters of definition. But I do wish to show that our study is expansive in that it needs to consider and indeed comprehend ideologies such as Maoism; and it needs to be bold in its claims to a multidisciplinary status.

Thus to some extent I am chary of the approach of Mircea Eliade, when in *The Quest* and elsewhere he tends to identify the history of religions with a certain kind of phenomenology and when he centres it upon a creative hermeneutic which would interpret spiritual values, both archaic and world-wide, to modern man. His is a noble venture for which he is brilliantly equipped, but it narrows the subject, for it leaves on one side various facets of living religion.

In trying to illustrate the broader, more expansive, way in which the study of religion should develop, I am explicitly asking you to go more on the offensive. We have allowed modern intellectuals too often to be cultured despisers of religion. We have too often had to watch a little helplessly while otherwise intelligent men commit that most insidious fallacy: What I believe to be false cannot be important—coupled often with another: What is unimportant in London or Copenhagen is unimportant.

In order to give flesh to my claims about the expansiveness of our subject, I take the case of modern China, and Maoism in particular. But before getting into that story, let me make one other observation. Our subject is still in its youth. Of course much indeed has been accomplished in the last hundred and fifty years, as Dr. Sharpe's fine new book demonstrates, and there exist today many worthy successors of the giants of the past—men such as Levy-Strauss, Widengren, Eliade, Bianchi and others. But because of the need to integrate so many disciplines and because of remaining uncertainties about method, perhaps the classical period of the study of religion lies in the future. Synthesis is difficult, and few have the powers of a Weber or an Eliade in this respect. So we look forward to a bright future to add to a distinguished, but often groping past. And now to Mao.

Mao's thinking and action have always been close to one another, and therefore, though his theory may be borrowed from the West, its application has been specifically Chinese. Indeed the romantic, bloody and almost miraculous story of his restoration of China's power and dignity is interesting as both a spiritual and material response to the acute practical and intellectual challenges posed to China by a marauding and magically powerful West. It is, incidentally, interesting to contrast the case of India. India's saving ideology was composed of Vedantin and other elements drawn from India's past and given Western dress: Mao's ideology was drawn from the West and given Chinese raiment. Also incidentally, I would remark that some of the insights which can be gained from the study of new religious movements in relatively small-scale societies—a study vigorously being developed by, among other people, Dr. Harold Turner of the University of Aberdeen—can be brought to bear upon other transactions across what may be called the white frontier, including those

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in China and India. By the white frontier I mean the cultural interface between white and to some degree Christian culture on the one hand and other cultures. I do not mean a literal frontier, but a frontier both in spirit and in matter—a frontier where traditional societies need to digest an imported science and other values, and where coca-cola cans are used to decorate dwellings and ritual airfields. This white frontier is white only because Europe had spiritual and material expansiveness during a certain period of human history, so that sea-power, the gun, Galileo and the Bible could make a world-wide impact. This period is of course coming to an end. Now we find there are other important frontiers of a quite different nature developing in the minds and possessions of men. However, let us get to China.

Very often along the frontier you have more than one attempt to solve the problems posed by confrontation of cultures and the breaking up of the challenged culture. It was so in China. It is therefore of great interest to see Maoism in the perspective of the earlier Taiping rebellion. Or maybe we should call it the Taiping revolution. You will doubtless know the story, but let me recapitulate the essentials.

The leader of the Taipings was a Hakka who had some education. Hung had also somewhat briefly come into contact with Christianity. But he failed the civil service examinations twice, and became for this and other reasons embittered with the establishment and the Manchu dynasty in particular. In the aftermath of his disappointment he had a series of visions, and during his trance-like state he found himself commissioned to cast out devils, by a figure he interpreted to be the Father of the Christian trinity who was also his father, and by an elder brother conceived by him to be Christ. Thus he was a visionary and charismatic figure who became the centre and the founder of a new religion. In the wake of the disastrous Opium War, in which Britain enforced its lucrative dope-pushing, Hung raised the flag of revolt. After three years of preparation this revolution began overtly in 1850. Landless peasants, bandits and others joined the new movement, which had its original military base in the mountains of eastern Kwangsi. In 1852, they left this base and marched into Hunan, collecting powerful support, and in 1853 they marched to Nanking, and took it. They never, despite a northern expedition, took Peking. But in 1853 the new dynasty of heavenly peace was installed in Nanking, with Hung as charismatic heavenly emperor.

Hung evolved a new ethic partly derived from Christianity, and partly based on his visionary insight. Property was to be in common. Men and women were to be equal. Land was to be radically redistributed. Temperance was to be observed, and the hated opium to be eschewed. All images were to be destroyed, and China's older religions to be rooted out. The language was to be reformed and brought closer to ordinary speech. A new calendar was to be introduced. Foreigners were to submit to Chinese jurisdiction. The foreshadowing of Mao is striking. And even embarrassing in a way to today's China, which has to interpret the Taiping revolution in its own way.

Because Hung had visions, and because his followers were known as God-worshippers, we have no difficulty in looking upon his movement as religious. Yet at the same time it needed material and historical conditions for its short-lived success. It is impossible to write the history of the Taipings except by combining insights about Hung's personal visions and leadership, the effectiveness of the Taiping ideology, and the engines of revolt provided by cultural and social conditions during the decaying days of the Manchus. The triangle of charisma, ideology and social hunger was the base on which the Taiping revo-

lution was built, and that social hunger itself was a blend of poverty, disintegration, alienation and national spirit. Why then treat Hung as a topic in the history of religions and fail to treat (say) Hitler. He had his own strange inner life, charisma and an ideology. The social hunger of his time was also a blend of economic collapse, disintegration, alienation and above all hurt national pride. You may say that Hung was not evil as Hitler was. But if we get into such value-judgments our historical analysis will become thoroughly clouded. This is one reason why the history of the Nazi period has yet to be written. However, one must accept that Hitler did not display directly the shamanistic and prophetic traits of Hung. But one main message of our study (stressed in his own way by Dr. Frederick Streng in his paper at this Congress) is that religion is multiform. It cannot be shrunk into a single essence. Types of experience types of leadership, types of ritual—and so on—all these vary very widely.

The Taipings failed. Why? Partly they lost their cohesion, for Nanking corrupted their austere morals. Perhaps Saigon is doing the same to the North Vietnamese troops today. Again their military leadership proved to be less than brilliant. But perhaps most significantly of all, their ideology was not fitted for empire, and had too little possible purchase upon the minds of the educated classes. Why is this vital? Both an empire and a church need functionaries who if they are to be effective need a degree of education. If they have this, then their ideology must be plausible. The doctrinal dimension of religion is an important bridge between the vision and the administrative reality. But Hung's theology was a quaint, though initially dynamic, adaptation of Christian ideas. It did not have strong power in the sophistications of China. It failed sufficiently to move hearts through the intellect, a role which doctrine must play.

We may note in this connection one of the reasons for the critical condition of Christianity in some modern societies. In the face of science, Marxism and other intellectual motifs of the modern world, where education has become a big industry, Christian doctrine cannot maintain a sufficiently widespread plausibility. No doubt it is waiting for a Godot in the shape of a new Aquinas. Because of its less than compelling intellectual quality, modern Christianity becomes even at this level, a matter of personal choice. As Oscar Wilde neatly said "Man finds it easy to believe the impossible, but man finds it hard to believe the improbable". At any rate, in the face of the new challenge of the West, and in terms of the older traditions of the Chinese past, the Taiping ideology proved insufficiently dynamic and plausible.

As I have indicated, part of the problem waiting to be solved in 19th and 20th century China was the issue as to how scientific and technological thinking could be incorporated into the fabric of Chinese belief. There were those who thought that it could simply be taken up in a way leaving Chinese ideology and society intact. The slogan of Western science for development and Chinese values for living was, however, not a sound one. To combat the marauding magic of the West, including science, China needed a deeper social reconstruction. In his own intuitive way Hung perceived this, as later did sun Yat-sen and of course Mao. China, then, needed to modernise, and its own resources were inadequate for the new challenge. Let us just look at those spiritual resources briefly.

First, Confucianism had a double disadvantage. First, it was too much bound up with the survival of the old civil service class; and it was precisely this class which had a vested interest in not importing new-style ideas and education from the West. It is not surprising that those reforms which included

the abolition of the tradition-based civil service examinations heralded the downfall of the Manchu empire. Second, the hierarchic character of Confucianism considered as a system of social ritual did not harmonize with the liberal ideas and ethos thought in the 19th century to be the underlying social basis of science, technology and social development. Moreover, Confucianism of this latter period did not retain much creativity or dynamism. There was to be no neo-Neo-Confucian revival.

As for Buddhism: despite its considerable riches both in philosophy and forms of religious living, it suffered from certain defects as a nationalist and reconstructionist belief-system. Its tendency to otherworldliness in its more devotional forms, such as the Pure Land movement, and its contemplative dimensions, as in Ch'an, were ill-suited to the robust requirements of social transformation and nationalist warfare, which were looming upon China's horizon. Its relatively pacific character was, for the same reasons, a disadvantage. Moreover, Buddhism has always proved surprisingly vulnerable in the face of determined enemies. The monastic base is strength in peace-time and weakness in war.

The third strand in the web of Chinese religious tradition, namely Taoism, had severe drawbacks as an engine of modernization. It is true that it retained a purchase on some of the secret societies which themselves were important in peasant rebellions and therefore ultimately in both the Taiping and Maoist revolutions. But though interesting for its older anarchistic dimension, its forms had become magical and opposed in spirit to the new science. It could not easily appeal to the intellectual, whether the intellectual whose ethos was drenched in Confucianism or the intellectual groping outwards to Western forms of thinking and social action. My emphasis here and elsewhere upon the intellectual is due to the fact that any revolution in China to be effective had to have a spiritual and doctrinal outreach and direction, and this needed mainly to be articulated for obvious reasons by intellectuals. Indeed, it is a truism that Mao's successes were not only due to his brilliant generalship and hardiness in adversity but also to the direction in which he challenged the revolutionary social hunger of the ordinary Chinese who lived and fought with him. To use the power of the gun you need the material aspect—the cartridge, the bullet, the gun itself; but you need the mental or spiritual aspect—the aim and the reasoning behind the aim. So Taoism was ill-suited to the new tasks, and even if it were to be refined by a rediscovery of origins through the *Tao-teh-Ching*, a philosophy of non-action was scarcely relevant it seemed to the overwhelming spiritual and material problems besetting Chinese civilization.

In brief the older resources of China's brilliant tradition were not equal to the new strains put upon China. However, there were other factors favourable to the required transformation, even if in their bones the Chinese could not believe in foreign civilization. Incidentally, the Japanese had been used to cultural imports from China, and were better adapted to cope with Western technology, which they so brilliantly also imported and reorganised. China was however too smug, too huge, too refined. One is reminded of Britain too, in its present post-imperial phase, relatively impervious to foreign ideas.

But one factor favourable to transformation was the resentment at the Manchus, still looked on as a foreign dynasty, for they had of course leaped the Great Wall in grabbing power in China. Thus the Taipings insisted on the discarding of pigtailed and growing hair on the front part of the head (shaved off by Manchu custom). They were thus sometimes nicknamed the 'long-haired'

ones. Perhaps it is a nice coincidence or a little joke by Providence that Mao's name means Hair. The unpopularity of the Manchus meant that the first Chinese revolution of 1911 could gain popular support. And even if Sun Yat-sen's dreams of a balanced republican constitution blending eastern and western political and social values were to prove to be illusory, the mood generated was one of new hope.

Why was it however that it was to be a Chinese form of Marxism which was to provide the aim behind the Chinese trigger of national aspiration? Of course, it was due to discipline, a theory of history relevant to the colonial epoch, a good adaptation to Chinese realities, military luck and brilliance, and I shall have a bit more to say about these matters. But it is useful to look more closely at the beliefs and values which Mao and the Reds brought to bear, and their relationship to the values and urges of the Chinese tradition. I shall arrange my thoughts under this head by seeing Maoism as an ideology or religion which could do two things. First it could provide an analogous function to the old religions. Second, it could provide content reversal. Reversal of content was a necessity for transformation, but it could not work without the analogy of function. Let us then begin with the latter in relation to the old traditions.

Confucianism had its elite governed by an ethic and a system of knowledge (the Classics). Maoism had its party members and cadres and a new puritanism, together with a new practical set of doctrines, as found in the thought of Marx-Lenin-Mao.

Buddhism appealed to the devotional fervour of the masses, partly because of its otherworldly promises and the prestige of its institutional holy men, the monks. Maoism appeals to a new Pure Land, not to the West (though somewhat from the West) which is to be found here on earth in the East. It uses a type of devotional fervour, but to other than traditional ends. Incidentally, it is important to recognise that in a period of transition and social transformation the atoms of society do not swim along in the easy currents of thought and value imposed by a stable matrix. Rather the atoms need a new dynamic and a new glue to fasten them together in new configurations. That glue is supplied by an evangelical-type commitment. Disintegration is the herald of evangelicalism, as is well evidenced in the Maoist saga. Regarding Taoism: its anarchic elements enter into the cultural revolution in its peasant-based desires for the overthrow of an oppressive system. Even if Taoism's magic is rejected, the desire for a new magic and a new secret of immortality is reflected in the way the charisma of Mao and the numinosity of technology are used. The miracles of Mao are in the tradition of the later Tao.

But if functions are taken over by the new ideology, the contents are on the whole reversed. Against the hierarchic character of Confucianism, there is a new and somewhat aggressive egalitarianism. It is no surprise that the dunce's cap should have been used to uproot dignity; nor is it a surprise that the enemy in recent times should be represented as Confucius. He is the symbol of the old order which is now reversed in the interests of a reconstructed China. Again in the style of content reversal, there is a rejection of the cult of ancestors. The past is replaced by the future. The authoritative spirits of the new China are the spirits of the future. Against the old Heaven there is the people. Indeed Mao fairly explicitly makes the equation in one or two of his poems and elsewhere. So the mandate of heaven so-called becomes the mandate of the people. Again, in place of the old emperor is the new charismatic figure, the Chairman. His thoughts become the new thoughts, a democratized version of the new classics

(Marx, Lenin, Mao) replacing the old classical texts. But even these works are not to be studied too much, for excess of poring over books is decried by Mao. He said that one should not even read all the works of Marx. On the whole Mao opposes science to literature. If one element of the new canon is Maoism, the other is the application of scientific thinking, but of course in a Chinese context. And as for the older arts, whether painting or opera, new values are brought into being. The realism of idealistic pictures of Mao at the Lushan pass or other scenes—this is a conscious rejection of the older Chinese aestheticism. There are traces of it left, but on the whole the emphasis is on heavy foregrounds, heroic moulds, rather than the ethereal character of much of earlier Chinese art, especially that which has been under the influence of the Tao and of Ch'an.

Regarding Buddhism different motifs come into play. The contemplative aspect of Buddhism finds its opposition in the strong emphasis upon practical action in the thought of Mao. Its pacifism is replaced by a rather aggressive militarism—of course a militarism in the service of a cause. We should not forget that Mao's apophthegm about power growing out of the barrel of a gun was uttered in the context of the need for party control over the army machine. The rifle of militarism is aimed by the eye of ideology. Against the other-worldly ideal of the Pure Land there is China, almost numinously captured in one of Mao's poems, where he writes:

Mountains dance like silver snakes,
hills gallop like wax bright elephants,
trying to climb over the sky.

And again in the same poem interestingly:

Genghis Khan, man of his age
and favoured by heaven,
knew only how to hunt the great eagle.
Such emperors are all gone.
Only today are we men of feeling.

And against the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation or rebirth there is a new type of solidarity, between men today and the future achievements which reflect upon the meaningfulness of life and of present endeavour. In opposition to the individualism of the no-self doctrine there is the collectivism of the no-class doctrine. Against spiritual forces there lie material processes (though ones that have a spiritual aspect, in their way and in accordance with Marx and Mao). And a new philosophy replaces the older sophistications: Marx looms where the Buddha once serenely held his presence.

Content reversal in regard to the Tao takes the following form. Against the heavenly forces one finds earthly ones. In regard to the magical quest for immortality a new kind of acceptance of the heroic dimension beyond death emerges. Again to quote one of Mao's poems, regarding the death of his wife and the wife of a colleague, he writes:

I lost my proud poplar and you your willow.
As poplar and willow they soar straight into the ninth heaven
And ask the prisoner in the moon Wu Kang what is there.
He offers them wine from the cassia tree.

The anarchistic non-action philosophy of early Taoism is replaced by a robust espousal of action and war as means to the end of the social justice and peace. Against the magic there is scientific Marxism.

One could go on. But it is indeed possible to discern in all this some of the elements of contrast in content between the older philosophies and religions and the perhaps brash new product of Maoism, to prove so effective in the reconstruction of China.

The first main lesson I would learn from this brief account of some of the reasons for Maoism's success in China is that it is both continuous and discontinuous with the older traditions which we recognise as being religious in principle (and so liable to appear in textbooks and on syllabuses of students in our universities). The discontinuity is hardly greater however than that between given religions in the traditional mode. For example Theravada Buddhism eschews the creation and a god to be worshipped monotheistically. Its focus is amazingly different from that of (say) Islam. Islam and Buddhism are to that extent discontinuous, but no more so than (say) Christianity or Buddhism on the one hand and Maoism on the other. In short the bounds of religion need to be continuously revised and so extended beyond what is laid down by the conventional wisdom.

The second main lesson which I would adduce is that it is somewhat naive to think of Maoism as essentially materialistic. A continuous motif in Mao's thought is that the mental or spiritual aspect is important whether in war or agriculture. Indeed he thinks of it really as paramount. But as always the spiritual need material representation to have force, or rather something more than representation, namely expression. The spiritual controls the material world through expressing itself materially. This is similar to the traditional religious poses in regard to icons, texts, rituals and other concretisations of the invisible.

But it might be objected that Mao rejects the invisible in the sense in which I have been using the term. My only reply is that the interplay of contradictions within the bosom of matter and in the ongoing structures and flows of history are just as invisible as the actions of the older numina. The gods acted their ideas out in the human world: so too do the forces analysed by Marxism—but in the latter case we get into greater abstractions and less of the personal flavours associated with much of polytheism and indeed monotheism. But the fact that Maoism is more abstract in this sense should not bar its being treated analogously to a religion. After all the Tao was not a person, but more a principle or a pervading spirit. So if ancient Taoism can be treated religiously, so also modern Maoism. Perhaps we can sum up the invisibility as it were of the forces to which Mao appeals through a quotation: he writes "When we look at a thing, we must examine its essence and treat its appearance as an usher at the threshold". Again he writes: "The fundamental cause of a thing is not external but internal: it lies in the contradictoriness within the thing". Metaphysics, but a this-worldly kind, and also oriented to the future. Heaven on earth, and the future instead of the past—such is the glowing and metaphysical vision prepared for the following of Mao. Hence it is absurd to put Maoism in one basket and Taoism in another, or Christianity here and the Theravada there.

Another interesting contract within Mao's thinking is typical of religions of a more traditional kind. Thus Mao combines a sense of destiny with a heavy emphasis upon a sort of voluntarism. Thus he can write on the one hand as follows:

“The socialist system will eventually replace the capitalist system: this is an objective law independent of man’s will”. But on the other hand, Lin Piao could write, in the preface of the Little Red Book: “Once Mao Tse-tung’s thought is grasped by the broad masses, it becomes an inexhaustible source of strength and a spiritual atom bomb of infinite power”. Permeating Mao’s writings is the thought that determination and commitment can move mountains. Indeed one of his parables is to that effect. In his use of the story of the Foolish Old Man who removed the Mountain he identified God (who really did the job in the last analysis according to the traditional version which Mao adapted) with the people.

In brief Mao stresses the importance of mental and spiritual forces in the struggle and is not a technological materialist. He may be an atheist, but he perceives newer invisible powers at work in the world and in human history.

In brief the materialism of Mao is ideal. It is not a flat positivism. And in its embodiment as a force in human history it has a certain plausibility, a kind of persuasion which leads men to their own idealisms, even if as a philosophy it is not to be regarded, from Mao’s point of view, as idealistic.

For the reasons I have explained, by analogy of function and content reversal, Maoism has succeeded in modern China. It is one of the most impressive mental engines of change in recent history. And because of its character it is hard to deny that the historian of religion, or more broadly the student of religion, who deals with religion in its multi-dimensional aspects, must have much to learn from and then to say about the new Tao.

But Maoism like religions weds theory and practice, doctrine and ritual, myth and ethics and so forth. It integrates what should be with what is. This wedding is one which is celebrated throughout the great religions. So one conclusion I would draw about the bounds of religion is that we should break those bounds if they are conventional. Our field stretches beyond the conventional fences.

The second main lesson which I would learn from this matter is that it is highly inadequate, to say the least, just to select themes as a way of dealing with the spiritual forces operative in the world. This is the path of pure phenomenology. But the themes have purchase on the world through people—so we are committed to see how they work from the point of view of historical, doctrinal, psychological, social and other forces. The tendrils of myth stretch inexorably and strongly into practice. I think the myth and ritual approach is a staging house to a strongly integrated view of theory and practice in religion and ideology.

The third main lesson which I would derive from this excursion into China is that we cannot define religion in an essentialist manner. Varieties of religious object and response are legion. I believe here in a Wittgensteinian family-resemblance theory of definition. If one abandons essentialism there can be no reason why one should not extend the history of religions beyond its conventional and traditional moulds.

So let us be more expansive in our claims about the study of religion. We should not let it collapse into the constrictions of piety and individual belief as typical of a marginal force. Not only is religion an important factor in human history: it is wider than we think. Why not Tao-ology or Dharmology?

Long live the history of religions and ideologies, therefore. And to end, a poem:

Mao was the mad Hung again.
The Taiping rebellion however
Was no blood-solution. Never
Would China repair the grey-green willow
And the characters on the scrolls
Till it swam against the red-devil salt billow
With strong arms. The souls
In Hunan were bitter and rice-blown
But Mao vowed he was not lone
In the grassland and ice
And in the caves of Yen-an
And on that great day in Peking.

NINIAN SMART