

## A Commentary on Future of Religion FAQ

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In Kirby and Gary's article, there are many useful guidelines for studying the future of religion. However, their suggestions mostly drawn from the observations in the contemporary Western societies, might ignore some issues that are essentially important for the peoples in other regions of the world. Each religion tradition has to constantly adjust itself to the challenges posed by the changing world, and the pace of change does not always run smoothly. In some non-Western societies, the degrees of confrontation between religion and social change could be extremely painful, because the whole society has gone through a dramatic change in a very short period of time. Therefore, some religious phenomena that was not obvious in the Western religious history, was easily overlooked by Western scholars, but when we consider the future of religion in the world as a whole, we couldn't leave them without discussion.

Most religious scholars in the Western societies, when facing the issue of social change, tend to sum up their research focuses on the relationship between religion and science. However, in non-Western societies, besides the challenge from scientific knowledge, the religion traditions have to deal with the challenges from the foreign values and beliefs, and often press a local belief system to make an immediate response. As an observer of the religions in Taiwan, I'd like to use Taiwan as an example to demonstrate the point in the following paragraphs.

### *Stressing more on material good in indigenous religion*

Most social elite in non-Western societies, if not in a mood of strong nationalism against any foreign influence, eagerly imitates the ways of doing things

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in the West, which are often considered superior ones. Social elite are proud to teach their children English, Western classical music and philosophy, and the richer even send their kids to study overseas. They look down upon indigenous religion. Without the actual involvement of social elite, the moral quality of indigenous religion is on the decline. The majority of common people, who practice indigenous religion, now live by the rules of capitalist economy. They learn to calculate gain and loss in a market term. Their concern in material good is compounded by the shortcomings of school education. The education system tends to dress practical knowledge and skills, and to prepare the youth to enter the job market as soon as possible, because they want to catch up the developed countries in a very short period of time. Schools do not teach students how to understand themselves and lead a meaningful life. As a result, the daily concern of common people with material gains shows up in their religious practices. People can not wait, and they want to achieve material ends immediately, and they want a good life now, in "this" world. So magic is thriving to achieve immediate goals. The quality of indigenous religion is downgraded.

In Taiwan, the majority of people practice Taiwanese folk religion which is a belief system synthesizing three great traditions, Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. The elite, especially those with Western education, generally looks down upon the believers of folk religion as a low-class belief. Two or three decades ago, some scholars once thought that folk religion would wither away gradually, after the rise of educational level of total population. However, folk religion still exist, but its content of belief is moving more toward concrete concerns in this world than the abstract moral values. This is partially because the school education only focussed on practical knowledge, such as the subjects of business and engineering, and thus people was use not to quest for transcendent meanings in religion. Another important reason is that the rapid economic development since the end of World War II, make most Taiwanese people well-off. The content of folk religion in a large extent reflects people's daily interest in material gains.

### *New religions thriving in response to foreign influence*

In non-Western societies, the very rapid pace of urbanization put a lot of pressure on urban immigrants, and when people suffer more, the need for religion is high. However, for those longing for abstract moral values, indigenous religion could not be satisfied with. Hence, new religions are booming, and they must respond to new challenges from modern science and the domi-

nant belief system in the world, Christianity. In the West, new religions also appear all the time, but the pace of sprouting out a new one is slower in non-Western societies. Their beliefs are also influenced by the advance of science, but they are more or less in line with one great tradition, Christianity, with the exception of the prosperity of new religions in the U. S. A. where people is more open to accept foreign elements brought in by immigrants. It is more likely for a non-Western society to learn about Western beliefs than the other way around. More people in non-Western societies have learned about Bible stories than the West have for the scriptures from any other religious tradition.

In Taiwan, a large number of new religions sprout out during this past decay, because people began to demand a belief system which could offer a more systematical explanation for the modern life. These new religions in essence are the synthesis of many belief systems, including science and Christianity. Scientific concepts and terms, such as magnetic field, energy, heat, and light speed, are used to link together all spirit forms including a variety of souls, Buddha, and Jesus Christ. Many new religions make an effort to respond the strong influence from Christianity. Encountering beliefs between the East and the West could produce such a religious picture that "Jesus Christ will come in a flying saucer (or in a form of cloud) to save those in good deed which content includes practicing meditation and Chi gong everyday. Most of results for this encountering still look rough, but some meaningful dialogue between two different religion traditions also takes place. For example, the religious traditions such as Taoism and Buddhism lack the concept of social welfare. Family or clan members used to take full responsibility for caring the ill and the poor. In the course of rapid social, the size of family shrinks. The responsibility is left for the government. Religious staff in Christianity used to criticize the traditional beliefs showing no love for their fellow men. In response to this, nowadays most religious groups have some sort of social welfare to help its believers. Some even do a remarkable job to help those in need overseas.

### *A trend moving toward individualist need*

Interacting with the dominant global value, individualism, is another good example of foreign influence. It took the West about two or three hundreds years to gradually develop this concept. Nowadays, individualism is simply a way of life for the peoples in the West. Therefore, one popular view among the Western researchers on the study of religion is that, separate individuals will long for the need of close bonds, and the future of religion could provide

such an important function. In contrast, in some non-Western societies, traditional social norms stressed more on actions toward collective goals, and under the strong influence of individualism, the trend of religious change might move toward the need of separate and individual wellbeing.

In the past, people in Taiwan lived very closely with family members, and must work for the collective interests of one's family and clan. Directly working on individual interest was considered selfish. To keep a balance with this demand on collective needs in everyday life, religion tradition such as Taoism and Buddhism, was inclined to help a person to get away from collective bondage, and find personal enlightenment. The strong influence of individualism from the West reinforces and accelerates this religious tendency. Nowadays, one obvious trend of religious development in Taiwan stresses more on individual practices and personal salvation. Under a lot of strain from interpersonal relationships, people go to religion to find a private and solitary space to breathe and rest. Therefore, we might see that when a society emphasizes more on collective need, religious beliefs and practices would dress more on individual wellbeing; otherwise, a society operated by the principle of individualism needs religion to bond people together. In short, one important function for the future of religion is to keep a delicate balance between the need for collective good and social interaction, and the need for individual wellbeing, enlightenment, and solitude.