

The History of the Institute of World Religions Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

Wu Yungui

IN my private talks with foreign scholars and friends when I was abroad in the past years, they often put up such questions to me as “Why should the Chinese Communists have devoted so much attention to the study of religion, given that they do not believe in any religion at all?” and “Did the Chinese scholars study religion merely for the sake of eliminating it?” For clearing up these misunderstandings, I have given brief explanations on several occasions during my stay in foreign countries, but have never yet found an opportunity to give a detailed answer for such misconceptions. So, I hope to take this opportunity to give a systematic account of the founding and developing of the Institute of World Religions (IWR) wherein I have worked for 35 years since 1964 when I was graduated from a college, which might be useful, I hope for a correct understanding of the basic facts related with it. Needless to say, what is more significant for our purpose here is to enhance, through face-to-face talks like this, mutual understanding, deepen friendship and broaden academic exchanges and co-operations between scholars of our two countries. I will talk about three questions as follows:

The Background for the Founding of IWR

China is an ancient civilized nation with multi-nationalities and multi-religious beliefs. Apart from Taoism and folk religions that were born at different times in the native land, there are also Buddhism, Christianity and Islam that were introduced from overseas in history into China. In the course of their taking roots, opening out blossoms and bearing fruit in the land, all these religions have left their clear and enduring prints on the Chinese society, particularly on the knowledge and practice of the Chinese people. In their long historical development, all these religions—native born or imported from abroad, have experienced a problem of adapting themselves to China’s social environment, and as a result of in-culturation or sinicization process, these different cultural elements have become mutually complimentary and flourished, and

thus formulated traditional Chinese culture with a good harmony of different elements as what we understand it today. In this sense we can say, therefore, understanding Chinese religions is understanding Chinese culture, and studies of Chinese religions are the first step to a profound understanding of Chinese society.

However, such ideas were not very clear at first. A decisive factor to deepening our understanding is an instruction given in 1963 by the late Chairman Mao Zedong. He said in the written instruction that religions have had a profound impact and influence on the world's population, of which we have little knowledge. He argued that you can not write out a good history of philosophy, literature or world history without understanding the story of human religion. His instruction came at a crucial time that it virtually led to the birth of the Institute of World Religions, the first of its kind ever appeared in the Chinese academic world. Since then China has had a professional research body for religious studies backed by and serve the state.

At its early days IWR had only three research departments with some 20 personnel. It was affiliated then to the Philosophy and Social Sciences Division of the Chinese Academy of Science (the former body of today's Chinese Academy of Social Sciences). Its work, however, was soon interrupted by the Cultural Revolution just after it began to operate. With the ending of the Cultural Revolution, China was ushered into a new period of reform and opening to the outside world. With the fundamental changes taking place in every aspect of social life, man's attitude on religions has experienced a big change, which in turn laid down a good foundation for religious studies on the part of Chinese scholars. Today as we recollect the history of IWR, we are happy to find that we have now over 80 working staffs, yet we are more delighted to see that we truly understand today the nature of religion and the significance of religious studies. A general point of view shared in common among my colleagues in the Institute today is that we should conduct research on human religion in a correct way that is comprehensive, historical as well as dialectical in nature. We should not only pay attention to the study of human religious ideas as we did in the past but also to the study of those ideas that embodied themselves in the forms of human religious culture. And to do so, the first step for us is to make friends with religious believers, Chinese and foreign alike. Our general attitude towards religious people can be termed as "respect each other, learn from each other, and co-operate on equal basis." Compared to the early days of IWR, we can say that our understanding of its policy today is a break-through in the sense that we really understand what religion

means to us as human beings. If we must put in simple words our understanding of the scope and meaning of religious studies today, it should be like this: We are trying to make a deep and systematic study of human religious phenomena from the dimensions of theory, history and reality. And religious studies can be conveniently termed “human science” because such studies are aimed at understanding of the human nature which exists deep inside the depth of human heart.

The Management System for Scientific Research

As a research institution at the state level, IWR shoulders heavy tasks in scientific research, whose working staffs have a strong sense of mission. For the sake of discipline developing and personnel-training, we are trying to combine producing academic works with talents-training, combine personal interest with the needs and demands in scientific research, and combine the collective interest of the Institute with the interest of the state. For the management of scientific research, a multi-level projects are organized and managed over by the Academy through its Scientific Research Bureau. Projects at the Institute level are organized and coordinated by the director-general through its Department for Scientific Research Affairs. Projects under the Institute level are organized and coordinated by the chairman of the department. Another classification of the projects followed for years is to classify projects according to their source of funds. Thus, we have six types of projects: state-funded projects, academy-funded projects, academy-supported younger scholar projects, institute-funded projects, department-level projects and personal projects. Apart from these, we accepted each year special tasks commissioned or distributed by the departments of the State Council concerned, which were in most cases investigation reports on certain hot religious issues. The principal purpose of scientific management is to guarantee the quality of the projects undertaken by the working staffs of the Institute. For this, procedures such as project-sponsoring, middle-term-check up, final examination and approval of the projects, assessment of the final result and publication of the works completed are normal practice for the scientific management department.

Another important aspect in scientific research management is to help personnel-training. To recruit and train up research workers, IWR has adopted two measures. One is to recruit working staffs from college graduates, particularly from those having master and doctor degrees, and help them grow up after they entered the Institute, through such methods as sending them abroad for graduate studies or doing research for a period of time, training them through distributing work to them,

and examining and raising up their working abilities through professional check-ups and promotion of academic titles. This has yielded good results. Most backbones in the Institute are university graduates in 1960s. For example, Professor Yang Zengwen who has been to Japan for many times for academic visit is one of them. As for those young-and-middle aged backbones, most of them are college graduates with MA or Ph.D. degrees who have worked as guest scholars for a period in foreign universities. Graduates with doctor degree working in the Institute (17 in number) have played important role in their posts. For example, Dr. He Jingsong who come to Japan this time as a member of our delegation is one of those doctors trained by the Institute. As a young associate professor in Buddhist studies, Dr. He is diligent in work, and has published three books, including *A History of Buddhism in Korea*, the first book of its kind ever published in China.

Another way for talents-training is to find “good buds” in the course of disciplinary developing and to help them grow up through putting pressures on them by assigning tasks for them to accomplish. This is basically a duty of the chairmen of the departments, and we are grateful to them for their role in this connection. To promote disciplinary building, IWR has established seven sub-departments, each of them constituting a sub-branch of learning. Thus we have departments respectively for Buddhist Studies, Christian Studies, Islamic Studies, Taoist Studies, Confucian Studies, Contemporary Religious Studies, Studies on the General Theory of Religion and Studies on Buddhist Culture and Art. For publication of papers, articles and reports written by our colleagues in the Institute, we have two journals (*Studies on World Religions* and *World Religious Cultures*), both published quarterly. An old Chinese saying has it, “an excellent master has good disciples.” As most chairmen of the departments are experts with rich and profound learning, they have trained up through their work a good many of young-and-middle aged scholars for the Institute. Naturally, not all of those who have received training will surely become first-rate talents.

Major Academic Works Produced by IWR

Religious studies can be dated back to ancient times in China. However, modern religious studies from new outlooks and with new approaches have been less popular until the first 30 years after the founding of the People’s Republic of China. For a long time in history, Chinese scholars were interested in their religious studies in Buddhism and Taoism, but they have left only a small number of works on them. This backwardness in religious studies has changed by a great deal nowadays through

protracted efforts on the part of Chinese scholars. For example, in 1994, IWR welcomed a special occasion for celebrating its 30th anniversary, and we were very happy to find that on display in the exhibition hall over 150 books and more than 1,000 papers and articles on religion produced by the Institute. If added to them with those works produced by other Chinese scholars, the amount would have become surprisingly big.

If calculated according to the fields involved, the above-mentioned publications can be classified into 10 categories: (1) works on the history of different religions; (2) works on philosophy of religion; (3) works on the general theory of religion; (4) works on different subject matter of various religions; (5) introductory works on religion for general readers; (6) religious classics with annotation; (7) republications of ancient religious literature, and of valuable materials; (8) republications of religious cultural relics and literature unearthed; (9) religious dictionaries and other reference books; (10) translations of valuable works by foreign authors.

Of all departments in the Institute, Buddhist studies department is the biggest one, whose scope of interest covers four aspects, namely Buddhism in the Han nationality populated areas, Tibetan Buddhism, Theravāda Buddhism and Buddhism in foreign countries. Buddhism among the Han people is widely studied whose works have a wide coverage, including those on Buddhist scriptures, historical development of Buddhism, doctrines of different sects or schools, Buddhist philosophy, temple economy, Buddhist tradition at different localities, biographies of eminent monks and the inter-reaction of Buddhism and traditional Chinese culture. Evaluation of scientific result is a complex matter, people may very often than not have different opinions about one book. Generally speaking, most influential works on Buddhism include: *The Great Buddhist Sutras in Chinese Language* (edited by Ren Jiyu), *History of Buddhism in China* (Ren Jiyu), *An Intellectual History of Buddhism in China* (Guo Peng), *History of Chinese Zen Buddhism*, *History of Chinese Hua Yan Sect* (Wei Daoru), *A History of Buddhism in Japan* and *Modern History of Buddhism in Japan* (Yang Zengwen), etc.

Apart from Buddhism, other disciplines have also their representative works. Christian studies are noted for the best-known works: *Contemporary Catholicism* (Ren Yanli), *Contemporary Theology of Protestantism* and *Contemporary Theology of Western Catholicism* (Zhuo Xinping). Major works in Islamic studies include *A History of Islam* (edited by Jin Yijiu), *History of Islam in China* (Li Xinghua) and *Outlines of Islamic Law* (Wu Yungui). Important works in Taoist studies

include *Abstracts of Taoist Scriptures*, *History of Chinese Taoism* (edited by Ren Jiyu), *Chinese Taoist Metaphysics* and *Taoist Philosophy* (Lu Guolong). Theoretical works on religion are best represented by Professor Lu Daji's two books: *On Religious Studies* and *History of Theories of Religion in the West*.

Religious studies are a new branch of learning in China. Though we have made a big progress in the past 20 years, we are still faced with lots of difficulties and problems, such as knowledge-restructuring, training of young scholars, increasing quality of academic works, etc. In a word, we have a long way to go.

In concluding my speech, I would like to express once again my hearty thanks to our Japanese host, Mr. Yasuo Morita, chairman of the board of trustees of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy for his kind invitation of our delegation to visit Japan and to make presentations before such a great audience. Thank You.