

# Re-understanding of the Social Role or the Cultural Function of Religion

—Theoretical Reflections drawn from International Hot Issues after the Cold War and Religions

Zhang Zhigang

## I. Theoretical Problems that this Paper Reflects on

IN the past five years, I have been responsible for a significant issue “Research on Contemporary Religious Conflicts and Dialogues,” one of the “Chinese Ministry of Education’s Key Projects of Major Subjects of Philosophical and Social Sciences” (2003–2008). After these five years of progressive research, I not only deeply felt that this topic was extremely crucial, but I also perceived a number of questions on the theories of religious studies that were worth pondering over. If these questions were integrated as one point, that would be how one re-understands the social role or cultural functions of religion under the background of “globalization” or “global village,” especially under the reorganization of international politics, economics and cultural structure in the post-Cold War era. Let me first explain briefly my comprehension on the above two questions: Firstly, the comprehension of the important practical problem raised by this issue which I was responsible for. Secondly, the comprehension of the theoretical problems of religious studies that I have perceived through the probing of this important issue.

### 1. *Important Practical Problem*

One year prior to the September-11 attacks (9/11), Mr. Qian Qichen, Vice Premier of China, and concurrently holding the position as the dean of the School of International Studies (SIS) of Peking University, pointed out that: Religious and ethnic issues have stood out after the Cold War. Many international hot issues are mostly related to religious and ethnic problems. The religious issues after the Cold War have the following characteristics: (a) Religion is often associated with ethnic issues. (b) Freedom of religion is often associated with human rights issues. (c) Religion is often associated with fundamentalism or terrorism. (d) Religion is often associated with the political situation of the

state and the problem of ethnic division or unity. (e) Religious identity often cuts across national and ethnic boundaries. Therefore, we must study religious issues attentively.<sup>1</sup>

After the world-shaking 9/11 incident, the importance and seriousness of religious problems has aroused the universal concern of the international community. This prompted many experts and scholars in China and abroad to reflect on the great changes of international situations before and after the Cold War, and re-think the extensive influence of religious factors on the various international hot issues and major conflicts. As one expert on international issues pointed out, the following series of political, economic and military conflicts; such as the conflicts of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Northern Ireland, the Molucca Islands and Aceh province in Indonesia, the disputes over Kashmir, and etc., contain ever-complicated and ever-increasing religious factors. “We can say that rapidly change of international situation could not be separated with religions. After the 9/11 attack, religious and ethnic problems have been important driving force in international politics and caused the convulsive fluctuation in the world situations.”<sup>2</sup>

This poses an important practical problem upon us: Why do religious factors cause such extensive and heavy impact on the various international hot issues and major conflicts after the Cold War?

## 2. *Some Theoretical Problems of Religious Studies*

(1) Formulation of “religious conflict” is relatively simplistic.

After the Cold War, although “religious conflict” has become the most frequently used keyword in domestic and foreign media, if studied closely, “simple or direct religious conflict” is rare, small and has little effect. This signifies that, what is known as “religious conflict” would usually appear in a more complex and intricate form. Actually, the fact many domestic and foreign theorists pay attention to is that almost all international hot issues or major conflicts in the post-Cold War contain some religious factors or are on the basis of religious background that cannot to be ignored.

(2) Current religious views or concepts of religious studies are also relatively simplistic.

How does one explain the extensive influence of religious factors or backgrounds toward international hot issues or major conflicts after the Cold War? The following viewpoints are commonly found in the related study results: Firstly, they are “in the coat of religion,” “under the ban-

ner of religion” or “took advantage of religious faith” and others. Secondly, the so-called “Benefitism”: attributing religious influence or role to this or that benefits, such as economic benefits, political benefits, military benefits, benefits for an ethnic group or a nation. Thirdly, the “combination-of-factors theory”(theory of synthetic factors): the international hot issues or major conflicts are generally made of many interwoven factors, such as territorial disputes, struggle for resources, security issues, political interest, ideologies, religious beliefs, racial or ethnic discord, and so forth.

With regards to the former two viewpoints, anyone who researches on some major religious traditions and not looks upon them as “fraudulent matters,” will then easily find these two views are simplistic and superficial. As for the third viewpoint, more explanation is required. This view was proposed by “war and conflict” researchers, and has become a common methodology in this field.<sup>3</sup> This methodology seems to be comparatively comprehensive and have “taken every aspect into consideration.” However, in my opinion, this view on religion is still simplistic. That is, it put the religious factor in the same category with various factors or causes of the economy, politics, military, races or ethnic groups. This view apparently ignored the uniqueness of religious phenomena, and this cannot explain the mutual interaction of “religious faith factor” with the other factors, and its complicated influence. The above views have been prevalent mainly in the studies of international politics and international relations.

The religious academic world has been ever-changing over the past century, nevertheless, some theoretical viewpoints are still holding dominant positions, such as theories on the decline and fall of religion; separation of government and religion; personalization of religion; secularization of religion; marketization of religion and so forth. Do these viewpoints suffice to explain the fore-mentioned important practical problem? Here is the question first, then I will review and comment.

It is precisely because the above theories are insufficient in general, I considered, by exploring the fore-mentioned important practical problem—why does religious factors cause extensive and significant influence to the many international hot issues and major conflicts after the Cold War—we would likely be able to achieve a breakthrough in the theory of religious studies in order to understand more comprehensively and deeply the complicated characteristics of religious phenomena and its social role or cultural function. The following is a brief report of my theoretical attempt in recent years. The main method is to grasp the “religious factor” as the keyword of the aforementioned important prac-

tical problem, then explain it emphasizing the four complexities influenced by it. I named them as “nature of accumulation,” “nature of permeation,” “nature of infiltration” and “nature of depth.”

## **II. Nature of Accumulation of Religious Factors and Its Influence**

After the Cold War, a number of many international hot issues and major conflicts have been increasingly and deeply affected by religious factors. This is a new problem arising from new circumstances. However, first we need to be aware of is the fact that religion is an ancient, universal social and cultural phenomenon. Precisely because of the long and profound relationship of religion with human society or cultural activities, thinkers dedicated to cultural history or civilization history researches, mostly put emphasis on the social role or cultural function of religious traditions. Due to the limited space of this paper, we can only review on the inspiring studies of Toynbee (Arnold Toynbee) and Dawson (Christopher Dawson) of the social role or cultural function of religious traditions.

According to the great work of comparative history of civilizations “*A Study of History*” (1934–1961), Toynbee’s plan to interpret the history that he had studied with great concentration, is the systematic categorization of the relationship between religious traditions and social civilizations (cultures in a broad sense) and the comparing of the 26 social civilizations in order to reveal the basic model of transformation of human civilization. He investigated deeply into the important social and historical role of religious traditions in the process of civilization’s birth, growth, breakdown, and disintegration. He considered that religious belief as a fundamental attitude of human life could be said as “source of life” or “spiritual bond” of each social civilization, and that once a certain social civilization lost its traditional spiritual belief, it was bound to decline until replaced by a new form of civilization. Why did he say this? Toynbee believed that for hundreds and thousands of years, various major religious traditions were able to attract many followers because they responded respectively to some major psychological types of humankind, and satisfied the emotional needs generated by each type of believers under different forms of civilizations. Therefore, all activities of civil society including politics, economy and culture have been maintained by the way of life which each religious belief explained. As a result, when he overviewed the transformation process of civilization, he kept paying attention to the deep

impact of the different religious traditions towards the cultural mentality or cultural sub-consciousness. Such investigation and analysis permeate the entire volume of the “*A Study of History*.”

Same as Weber (Max Weber), Christopher Dawson, the renowned cultural historian and philosopher of history, also investigated the origins of modern Western culture from the aspect of religious traditions. But when compared with Weber, Dawson’s theories hold a broader view. Weber’s research was strictly limited to the affinity between Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Dawson’s investigation was on the historic connection between the religious traditions and the evolution of Western culture. In his opinion, to reveal the causes of modern Western culture, one must not overlook the historical process of accumulation of traditional religious culture. In particular one must not underestimate the period which was the threshold to the modern age because the spiritual creative power which was necessary to the modern culture, even to the pioneers of modern culture, was all bred and formed during this period.

Basing on the comprehensive investigation of Western cultural history, especially the Medieval cultural history, Dawson pointed out something which gave one much to think about: What is known as a religion is not an abstract ideology, and it is not merely a kind of an ancient spiritual resource, but is mainly continuous cultural traditions and cultural customs that exerted its subtle influences in history. Yet, previous researchers often concentrated on the “high-level issues,” that of political, ideological, intellectual and so on, they were not aware that these issues made just a very small portion of the long course of history. In fact, the greatest influence on the common people and social life still comes from the cultural customs or religious traditions.<sup>4</sup>

Summing up the study results of the above two eminent scholars, we can obtain the following points:

(1) If we can say that only a broad view of the evolution process of human history or culture, instead of a study on certain period of time in history or culture, make us possible to study and discuss the social role or cultural function of religious traditions comprehensively and deeply, then, the currently existing religious factors in the human society or cultural activities should mainly be regarded as the result of historical accumulation. This is the point that I would like to stress first from the standpoint of methodology. This point allows us to reflect upon ourselves as follows: the fore-mentioned modern theoretical views on religions, theory on the decline and fall of religion; separation of government and

religion; personalization of religion; secularization of religion; marketization of religion and so forth, are the views mainly limited within “Western Modernization,” a particular space and time and cultural stage. If we stretch the meaning of this interpretation, why cannot we say that it impedes our comprehensive and profound understanding of the social role or cultural functions of Eastern and Western religious traditions?

(2) As a result of historical accumulation, religious factors and its influence usually don't surface, rather be stored up in the depth of society and cultural activities. In other words, the influences of religious factors mostly work in a subtle manner, like the cultural traditions, cultural customs, cultural psychology or social sub-consciousness that the fore-mentioned two scholars investigated.

(3) Although “in a subtle manner” may be comprehended as a normal form of religious factors and its influence, people always review and reflect on their history or cultural tradition in one way or another, especially when in the historical turning point, corresponding to the challenge of time. In this crucial moment of history, the most religious factors and its influence would strongly affect and be clearly reflected .

I think this historical characteristic will help us to understand the background of the evident increase of the religious impact after the Cold War. However, it is noteworthy that the obvious influence of religious factors on many international hot issues and major conflicts of today emerge not only from the new situation, that is, the realignment of international political structure, but also from the historical background of “globalization” or “global village.” This has provided us an unprecedented “theoretical opportunity” in order to re-understand the social role or cultural function of religion from the global viewpoint.

### **III. Nature of Permeation of Religious Factors and Its Influence**

The accumulation nature mentioned previously is mainly probed and illustrated from the historical point of view on religious factors and its influence. When we look back to the present reality, the permeation nature of religious factor and its influence is another characteristic that should not be neglected. The permeation nature of religious factors derives from the wide spreading of religious phenomena. To understand this is not difficult at all. Let us go over the following statistics first:

It was estimated that up till 2001, the world population was about

6.128 billion, among which 2.024 billion Christians, 1.213 billion Muslims, 363 million Buddhists, 823 million Hindus, 14.552 million Jews, and about 23.68 millions Sikhs, 1.03 billion were followers of all other new religions.<sup>5</sup>

The above statistics show clearly that most believers in the world still subscribe to several traditional religions. This fact proves the former characteristics, that is, the religious factors and its influence should mainly be regarded as the results of the historical accumulation. More thought-provoking fact is that even in the present hi-tech era, the believers account for 80% of the world's population.

This huge figure awakens us that: (1) Such widespread religious phenomena are not illusion, but a true reflection of the situation of faith and most people's way of life in the world. (2) Although the objects of worship of various religions are all "transcendent, sacred and even mystified," all believers have explained "the ultimate meaning of life" and also set their "rule of earthly life" basing on such beliefs.

One of the founders of modern sociology of religion, Durkheim (Émile Durkheim), pointed out long ago, "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things."<sup>6</sup> Sociologist of religion Yinger (John Milton Yinger) also stressed that: "Religion, then, can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life."<sup>7</sup> In the recent three or four decades, one of the most influential concepts in international study of religion is "Ultimate Concern." This concept includes an attempt to grasp the nature and function of various religious beliefs by the method of comparison with cross-cultural and cross-age concepts. Its advocate Tillich (Paul Tillich) considered that: "Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the world, is ultimate concern. ....Religion is the substance, the ground, and the depth of man's spiritual life. This is the religious aspect of the human spirit."<sup>8</sup> Such views are designed to show that : for the broad masses of believers, religion is not just a world and life view or their standard of value. It is the way of life to which they are devoting themselves. Or one can say that religious belief is in fact the lifestyle that certain types of believers acquired through their ultimate concern. Therefore, we can determine that the so-called religious factors are bound to permeate and influence the spiritual activities and material life of followers.

We can recognize the breadth of religious phenomena caused by permeation nature of religious factors, as well as from the viewpoint of the relationship between religions and ethnic groups. Broadly speaking, there are over 2,000 ethnic groups, large and small, which spread out in

more than 200 countries and regions. Until now, no ethnos or country is found without any religious phenomena. The religious beliefs of most ethnos are multiplied and diversified. But some ethnos have embraced their common religious tradition. For example, almost all Arabs are Muslims, almost all Jewish are Jews, most Indians are Hindus, and so forth. Accordingly, we can judge that religious factors permeate and influence all ethnos, countries and regions. The religious atmosphere is strong, especially where the majority of the population are religious believers. Therefore, the social influence or cultural function of the religious factor particularly cannot be ignored. For example, this is the case with the so-called “Christian World” and “Islamic World.”

#### **IV. Nature of Infiltration of Religious Factors and Its Influence**

The fore-mentioned permeation nature of religious factors means that religious factors have a very strong nature of infiltration. In other words, religion can infiltrate and affect several major factors of human social activities, such as politics, economy, culture, and so forth. The term “nature of permeation” is used to graphically show that religious factors are distributed throughout the entire social life in tangible or intangible ways. Like this, “nature of infiltration” can explain that the religious factors can penetrate into all the other factors of social activity obviously or obscurely, resulting that the religious belief as the view of the world, life values, and the way of living is infused together with the other factors such as politics, economy and culture. Then they become inseparable, functioning together and causing influences. When one is aware of this complex feature of religious factors, this enables us to think further into how religious factors have affected the many post-Cold War international hot issues and major conflicts.

As previously mentioned, many Chinese and foreign scholars believe that major international hot issues and conflicts are not caused by “one single cause,” but are the result of various factors of economy, politics, military, culture, ethnos and religions interwoven together. If so, why do I consider this type of research concept is too simple or even too superficial to understand religions? The main reason is that this type of concept still remains in “the mere recognition of surface phenomenon,” simply explaining the religious factor as a kind of relatively independent phenomenon which can be discussed on the same plane as factors of economy, politics, military, ethnos and nations. Yet, is this true in reality? This is the problem. Let us see with two examples.



As commonly known, the root cause of the Palestine-Israel conflict, which is also the deadlock of the problem, is the territorial dispute, particularly on Jerusalem. This dispute is connected with the struggle for survival and development of both. Therefore, it entirely affects the various benefits of the two conflicting parties; such as the political, military/security, economical and cultural benefits. However, the complication is that it is the continuing territorial dispute from religious backgrounds. Most Palestinians are Muslims, while the majority of Israelites are Jewish, and Jerusalem is the holy place that is never to be lost in the hearts of both parties. Just as Huntington (Samuel Huntington) wrote, "Once the conflict becomes focused on religious issues, it tends to become zero sum and difficult to compromise: .....either Jews or Muslims control the Temple Mount."

The above analysis clearly states that in such an uncompromising territorial dispute between Palestine and Israel, the so-called religious factor does not appear singularly and not play a partial role; instead it creates "the specific atmosphere" in the entire conflict. This atmosphere envelopes all the other conflicting factors, such as territorial issues, ethnic contradictions, economic benefits, political divergences, cultural differences and so forth. These factors are inevitably infiltrated and conditioned by the heavy influence of religious factor to a certain degree. If we can regard the Palestine-Israel territory dispute as a typical case, would the "infiltration nature of religious factors and its influence" assist our further and deeper understanding on the influence of "the religious background or atmosphere" towards international hot issues and major conflicts? To prove this point, let us take a look at the following example.

Is America, as Bush (George W. Bush) claimed, entrusted with a special mission from God—to spread freedom and democracy to the whole world? This is the question Albright (Madeleine Albright) intended to pursue in her recent book *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God and World Affairs* (2006). She, former United States Secretary of State, examined and analyzed this problem through various angles; such as the impact of religious traditions towards America's view, the effect of the Christian Right on U.S. policies, the Bush administration's success and failure in responding to 9/11, the challenges posed by the war in Iraq and the importance of understanding Islamic World. She came to the following conclusion: U.S. policy-makers must understand the power and role of religion in motivating others or coloring how American actions are acceptable. Religion and politics are not only inseparable, but when the two are joined, if utilized appropriately,

can be a force for justice and peace.<sup>10</sup>

Schröder (Gerhard Schröder), former chancellor of Germany, looking back his many meetings with President Bush after 9/11, recalled that President Bush time and time again said he was a devout believer, he would obey only the highest authority—God’s will. In President Bush’s speech on January 29, 2002, he used many words from the Bible to declare that Iraq, Iran and North Korea were the “Axis of evil,” and they would be next U.S. military targets. Schröder pointed out that: If a devout believer determines his behavior through prayers in his personal life, it is understandable. However if in the political decision-making, its legitimacy is from God’s will as President Bush claimed, it would be problematic, because it would not allow any criticism, and less likely to make changes through exchanging views. Schröder reflected on this and said that all of them (mainly refers to state leaders of the European Union) underestimated the role of religions and ethical teachings in America. The political group formed by neoconservative intellectuals and Christian fundamentalists had great influence on U.S. domestic politics and on the President, but “personal demonization of Bush” had hindered them from analysing this political group critically.<sup>11</sup>

## V. Nature of Depth of Religious Factors and Its Influence

Regarding the religious influence on the depth of culture, Paul Tillich pointed out years ago that: “Religion as ultimate concern is the meaning-giving substance of culture, and culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concern of religion expresses itself. In abbreviation: religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion.”<sup>12</sup> He explained that all religious acts, not only in organized religion but also in the most intimate movement of the soul, are culturally formed. In other words, there is no cultural activity without an ultimate concern expressed in it, be it from the theoretical function or practical function of human spirit.

On the research of cultural meaning and social function of religious traditions, the most important theoretical result in the last thirty years is probably the “Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Cultures” by Geertz (Clifford Geertz). Based on solid fieldwork and thorough case studies, this theory explains more concretely and deeply how “religious tradition as a system of symbols” is accumulated and forms the worldview and the sense of values in a certain cultural region; how the tradition subtly influences the psychological tendency and the motivation of action in a certain ethnos or social grouping. Geertz

defines “religion” as (a) a system of symbols which acts to (b) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [and women] by (c) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (d) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (e) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.<sup>13</sup>

Even though the achievement of these studies may not be perfect, or even have a certain kind of deviation such as “religious determinism,” however they have undoubtedly reasonable and inspiring contents. From the perspectives of these two fundamental theories—the “nature” and “function” of religious belief, we can deepen our understanding of religious factors and their impacts. The foregoing discussion shows that the so-called religious factors do not only refer to a particular religion itself, but generally refer to the reflections or embodiments of various religious beliefs in the human culture and the social living realm. The effects of the religious factor mainly mean the cultural function or social role of religious belief. Speaking academically, the function or role of a matter depends on its essence or its nature. The religious factor in the social life should also be the case. Therefore, on comparison studies we can define “religious belief” as “ultimate concern,” or in the more common concept it refers to the world and life view or values with some ultimate, absolute, or sacred characteristics. Then, it is not difficult for us to comprehend the depth nature of religious factors and its influence that we are probing here.

Here I use the phrase “the depth nature,” mainly because I want to emphasize the following: Religious factor is the reflection of religious belief in the real life or the social embodiment of the belief. It includes, therefore, the world-life view or values of various religions in the depth of it. Consequently, from deep or the most fundamental level, religious factor exercises huge influences on the political, economic, and cultural activities of humankind, especially on social organizations, party groupings, races, ethnos, international associations or organizations and so forth, which are possessing deep religious traditions and strong atmosphere of faith. If we acknowledge this nature of depth, we can comprehend more accurately how and why the religious factors and its influence have the aforementioned three kinds of characteristics, namely, the nature of accumulation, nature of permeation and nature of infiltration, at the same time we can get a better understanding where the influence of religious factors are coming from towards the post-Cold War international hot issues and major conflicts.

## VI. A Brief and Immature Conclusion

For the past twenty years, I mainly followed two lines of research, the theory and method of religious studies and religious philosophy. As a result, I have held a general interest, or one should say, a strong theoretical interest to explore the above four characteristics. In my opinion, if these four characteristics can be established, then this theoretical idea may help us to reconsider methodologically such long-term popular religious viewpoints, as theories on the decline and fall of religion; separation of government and religion; personalization of religion; secularization of religion; marketization of religion and so forth. This reconsideration is necessary because these viewpoints not only could not explain the immense influence of religious factors towards the post-Cold War international hot issues and major conflicts, but also made people underestimate and even ignore the social role or cultural function of religious beliefs for long periods of time.

This brief report is no more than an immature theoretical attempt. I would appreciate any comment and criticism from experts and scholars.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Qian Qichen: Some Key Problems in the Study of Today's International Relations, *Journal of World Economics and Politics*, 2000, No. 9.

<sup>2</sup> See Lu Zhongwei : Religious Factor in International Conflicts, *世界宗教问题大聚焦* [The Focus of World Religious Issues], ed.Center for Ethnic and Religious Studies in China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), Beijing: Shishi Press, 2003, "Preface," pp. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Kalevi J. Holsti, Canadian renowned scholar in international politics pointed out: "Investigators of conflicts, crises, and war reached a consensus years ago that mono-causal explanations are theoretically and empirically deficient," *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order 1648-1989*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 3. The author referred to the Chinese translation by Wang Puqu and others, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on Dawson's viewpoint, refer to *Progress and Religion; Religion and the Modern State; Religion and Culture; Medieval Essays; Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* and many other works. Readers can also refer to my book *宗教文化学导论* [An Introduction to Religious Studies], Beijing: Orient Press, 1996, Chapter 4. 道森的文化史学 [Dawson's Cultural History].

<sup>5</sup> *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, January, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, New York: The Free Press, 1965, p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> J. Milton Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959, pp. 7-8.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel P. Huntington: *Who are We? The Challenges to America's National*

*Identity*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004, p. 357. The author referred to the Chinese translation by Cheng Kexiong, Beijing : Xinhua Press Agency, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> See Madeleine Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God and World Affairs*, New York: Harper Collins, 2006: Abstract.

<sup>11</sup> See Gerhard Schröder: *Entscheidungen. Mein Leben in der Politik*, Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2006. The author referred to the Chinese translation by Xu Jinghua, Li Yueyi, Shanghai: Yilin Press, 2007; mainly pp. 91, 110, 113.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 90.