

Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 2011, xi, 464 pp. – Bibliography, Index.

This volume will probably remain a must read in years to come for any one hoping to get a wider grasp and deeper understanding of what its title calls “the religious question in modern China”. It is a new publication on a topic already explored by quite a few other researchers. But, as if it were a “four hands” piano performance, it presents itself written by two authors without giving any hint as to whom such and such part of the research should be attributed. Setting aside any modesty approach, both authors are already well known by their peers in the field of socio-religious and Chinese studies. Vincent Goossaert, an historian, senior research fellow at the National Centre of Scientific Research in Paris, is deputy director of the Societies-Religions-Secularisms Institute and does research on the social history of modern Chinese religion: his focus is on Daoist traditions, present day Daoist Masters as professionals and their social roles. David A. Palmer, trained in social anthropology and religious studies, is assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and research fellow of the Centre for Anthropological Research at the University of Hong Kong; his main field of research has been on the *qigong* recent history and “fever” period. Both authors have harmoniously developed the main themes of their research in the publication under review.

They are aware that the “religious question” has been the concern of the Chinese state ever since the late reforms that preceded the collapse of the Qing dynasty; the burning issue had been simmering all along the revolutions that have followed and throughout the different political regimes that have successively been established during the 20th century. The motivations were all the same: the rise of China as to be on a par with other modern countries.

Hence the question: “Before the twentieth century, Chinese religion was [...] characterised by diversity but one with an ordering centre of gravity: the religio-political state. The end of the imperial regime and the 1919 anti-traditionalist May Fourth movement ejected this ordering centre; the twentieth century was witness to a succession of substitutes [...], which did not endure. The result is a decentred religious universe, exploding centrifugally in all directions. Since traditional Chinese cosmology and society were religiously structured, the result is a de-centered society, a de-centered China: a Middle Kingdom that has lost its Middle. Thus the religious question: will there ever be, once again, a spiritual centre of gravity for the Chinese world?” [Introduction, p. 3]

The aim of the book therefore is “to provide a comprehensive overview of how this question arose and persistently resurfaced as one of the central issues in the history of modern China, from 1898 to 2008.” [Ibid.] Obviously the question is not only an administrative and socio-political issue.

The inquiry (which deals with the pluralistic religious world of China) progresses through two equally long parts, of seven and six chapters each.

Under the title “Religions and Revolutions”, the first is of historical nature. From “The Late Qing Religious Landscape” (chapter 1), it enters into the discussions and controversies on the notion of “religion” by contra-distinction with “superstition”. The debates have preceded and continued during the republican period to accompany “The Construction of a Modern State” (chapter 2). Reference was to be made to the “Model Religions for a Modern China” through a scrutiny of mainly Christianity and Buddhism and their inner organisation; hence the question of “appartenance” or “Religious Citizenship” (chapter 3). But the Chinese religious traditions are historically interconnected — be that in their academic scholarly expression or in their popular participation and practice: as such, not so much as in a “system” that would mutually link them than as in a common world experience that gives them their mutual coherence. Even though distinction was made by the state between internationally established religions and in the Chinese world popular “superstitions”, in China some sectarian movements and “redemptive societies” were also affected by a “Cultural Revitalization” (chapter 4) through secularization. In 1898 a campaign was started aiming at selecting popular temples and converting them into schools or other secular purposes, preserving only those more effectively serving the local communities: the lingering campaign had to face “Rural Resistance and Adaptation” in order to reach its goal (1898-1949 — chapter 5). On the “religious front”, it might be said that the present regime has built on what its forerunner had already started and prepared (1921-1966 — chapter 6). Yet, the issue remains unsolved in this quest for a “spiritual civilization” at the price of what the authors describe as “Political Utopianism” (chapter 7).

This sketchy summary of the historical background of the question at stake does not do justice to the detailed information provided in the mentioned chapters of the book. The second part of the

volume, of a more analytical and deeper nature, is probably what makes of the study an advanced and original contribution. On this, the Introduction is quite clear: "While leaving open the question of the ultimate definition of religion, we have chosen to take China's religious landscape as part of an evolving ecology of elements in constant interaction with one another, and in which a major change in one element, or the addition of a new element, may lead to a cascade of changes in the rest of the system. This "ecological" approach is based on an anthropological perspective of religion as a "total social phenomenon," which cannot be fully isolated as a distinct institution." [p. 6] It is based on this holistic and ecological premise on "religion" in China that the second part of the volume deals, as its title sums it briefly, with "**Multiple Religious Modernities Into the Twenty-First Century**".

And, as if it were to stress that the question goes beyond the domains of political regimes, the 'resilience, resurgence and reconfigurations of "religion" ' [p. 14-15] are first examined in the so-called margins of China proper, under former colonial or post-colonial regimes (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Southeast Asian diaspora – chapter 8, "Alternative Trajectories for Religion in the Chinese World"). As varied as they may be under the influence of the social and cultural contexts, the religious practices had to adapt themselves to some new setting, first of all at the level of family rituals (chapter 9, "Filial Piety, the Family, and Death"). Similarly, challenging the earlier reforms of the past century, many temples have been restored and their activities resumed in many localities in China – or newly established in the diaspora (chapter 10, "Revivals of Communal Religion in the Later Twentieth Century"). But, in the midst of contemporary secular societies, the "religious quest" developed into new forms: movements of spiritual practices, individually or in group, be they meditation techniques, bodily exercises (*qigong*), caritative action (Buddhist Tzu Chi foundation in Taiwan), "redemptive societies" in networks, Christian house churches (chapter 11, "The Evolution of Modern Religiosities"). Challenged by all these religious reconfigurations, the political establishment had to adapt its parlance and institutions (chapter 12, "Official Discourses and Institutions of Religion"), all the more so that, with these manifestations of some undeniable revival of religion in the Chinese world, the question of inheriting from such or such religious tradition connected also with other identity factors in a global world (chapter 13: "Global Religions, Ethnic Identities, and Geopolitics").

The Conclusion adds to the historical and socio-anthropological data gathered in both parts of the book the depth of some reflections. By comparison with the "religious question" in a few contemporary modernizing countries (in the former Soviet empire or parts of the Muslim world—Turkey, Iran) [p. 394], the authors note: first, that authoritarian, anti-superstition reformist efforts have nowhere succeeded; second, that "religion could never fit in the constraint corporatist space left for it by authoritarian secular regimes"; and third, "that it is not an inherent political nature of the religious traditions in question (Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and so on) that caused the emergence of religious groups active in civil society, but the authoritarian management of religion by secular regimes that forced the development of religions in places other than their "traditional "realms of neighbourhood temples, mosques or churches" [...]: "secularizing political regimes have been constitutive of modern forms of religion." [p. 395]

And this is particularly true of the "tremendous creativity and invention" of the Chinese religion all along the last century. Like in the world at large where faith in secular ideologies does not appeal any more, the authors assume that "religiosity will continue to increase" in China in a quest for "ultimate meaning" beyond material prosperity if any. But "how the social and institutional configuration of this growing religiosity will evolve" remains to be seen: thanks to some reforms? or by returning to some pre-republican Qing model? or through a secular cloning of religion? These are three eventual scenarios briefly mentioned by the authors. [pp. 397-401]

Moreover, "intractable as ever" the "religious question" in China includes five issues which the authors present as needing to be addressed: the western and post-Enlightenment model of modernity and secularisation, the difference between the Chinese and the European organisations of the religious and cultural worlds and their concepts, "the specific issue of loyalty to the regime and to the socialist system", the global dimension of the "religious question", and the role of "religion" in future societies. [pp. 401-404] Obviously, these are "religious questions" of world dimensions.

The book includes an extensive Bibliography [pp. 405-440] and a generous Index [pp. 441-464].