

RELIGIOUS REGULATION AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITIES IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA : THE CASES OF TWO CONGREGATIONS IN AN URBAN AREA

Pierre Vendassi

Doctoral Student, Sociology

Centre Emile-Durkheim, Université de Bordeaux, France

pierrevendassi@yahoo.fr

Abstract: This paper is based on observations led among two Christian congregations in a Coastal city of China. Despite being two Christian groups with different traditions and cultures, members of both groups still share some strong similarities regarding social backgrounds, conversion process and religious beliefs. They nevertheless develop very distinct religious Identities. If this can be seen as the mere result of original differences in religious traditions and organizations, we tend to think that the different legal statuses and levels of exposure to state control of both groups may have an influence on the religious identities their converts develop. The observations being still in process, this paper conclusions are provisional.

As in other parts of the world, Christianity in the People's Republic of China express itself in various ways. Many groups with different denominations, organizations and theologies have been recently trying to develop their activities in PRC. Since China doesn't enjoy full religious freedom, there is also a diversity of legal statuses among these groups, some being officially recognized and some other being banned. As suggests Yang¹, Christian groups, as well as other religious organizations present on the Chinese religious market can be divided in three sub-markets, according to their legal situation : An official red Market, an Illegal black market, and a grey area, or grey market, in between.

¹ Fenggang Yang, The Red, Black and Gray Markets of religion in China, The sociological quarterly, 47(2006), p.93

The official or red market, includes all legally approved activities conducted in accordance with laws and regulations. It currently comprises Protestant and Catholic churches, along with Daoist, Buddhist and Muslim state-approved associations. Ethnic minorities are also granted permission to practice their own religion in accordance with laws and regulations.

The illegal or black market, includes all banned activities and organizations, such as « evil cults », some expressions of folk religions, and many Christian congregations referred to as « House churches », both from protestant, Catholics, and other Christian traditions.

The gray market, situated in between the two markets includes all ambiguous religious activities, that are neither approved nor repressed, or that are unofficially approved. Boundaries between these three markets are often blurry, but the concept still allows us to situate religious groups we are studying on a scale from officially recognized to banned.

Since there is a diversity of Christian groups, there is potentially a diversity of Christian Identities emerging from these groups. This communication aims to illustrate how positions on the religious market can influence the construction of Christian identities. We will only focus our analysis on two religious congregations of Christian traditions, settled in an urban and economically dynamic city of PRC, and whose traditions, theologies, organizations, and legal statuses are very different.

1- Presentation of the groups and their legal situations

The Hosanna Church :

The Hosanna church (The name has been changed) started its activity in PRC in 2004. It is a branch of an independent house church from Taiwan. It is led by a fifty years-old female pastor, who, after moving to this city for

economical reasons, felt the desire to start her own religious congregation. She received no formal ordination but follows an on-line training provided by her Taiwanese original pastor. The congregation is independent and self-sufficient (thanks to the pastors family support and members contributions). From four people meeting at the pastors house in 2004, they became sixty active members today. Though in the beginning new fellows joining the group were already Christians, the newcomers are now mostly new converts having found their religious conviction within the Hosanna church.

Apart from the pastor herself, no formal assignments or tasks are given to members of the group. The Hardcore of the group is constituted of about fifteen members who voluntarily involve in all the aspects of the organization : preparing the meetings, leading the songs, taking care of the treasury, cooking, animating extra-activities, or accompanying new converts in their first steps on the Christian path.

The doctrine of the group is mainly evangelical, based on faith in Christ, the Bible, and sharing the Gospel with non-believers. Though emphasizing personal change through individual relation to God, group practices, including Bible studies and prayer meetings, are the core of religious practices. Members are also encouraged to share their faith with others whenever they can. A charismatic influence can be seen, especially in conversion narratives that include exorcism and healing, but charismatic expressions remain moderate in group life and practices.

The church is not registered with the official church and therefore conducts its activities illegally. It evolves on the black market, avoiding any direct control from local government. The group began to hold its meeting in a rented flat a few months ago, after the Pastors House became too small for the congregation.

The LDS Church :

The LDS congregation opened during the 90's. The LDS church is a bureaucratic centralized and patriarchal organization, whose clergy is exclusively male, and whose leaders are appointed by the head of the church along a vertical line of authority. Church headquarters are based in the USA, and congregations are reporting to areas leaders that are themselves reporting to the head of the church. The general practice of the church is to renew its local leadership every few years. Thus, the leader of the Local branch has only been leader for a couple of years and will be replaced at some point by another member of the congregation. The current leader of the congregation is a PRC citizen, as required by Chinese regulations, and is assisted by two counselors. He is a convert to the church from non-Christian background, and if he has been converted in PRC, one of his counselor became a believer and member of the LDS church while living in the USA. The congregation is mainly composed of Local Chinese, with a few Taiwan and Honk-Kong members. Although LDS members from other nationalities are found in the city, they are not allowed to mix with local members, and the two groups are therefore ignoring each other and growing separately. Despite this and other regulations, the group has been slowly but constantly growing since its opening, and counts today 80 active members. Most of them, men and women, are assigned tasks and responsibilities, and are thus involved in the organization of the group.

It is a restorationist church adding to classical Christian views (salvation through Christ and acceptance of the Bible) some unique doctrines and practices. The LDS church in China is situated in a gray area, not being an officially registered church, but being granted permissions to hold its activities, with some important restrictions.

2- Similarities : Populations and beliefs

Despite being very different, the two groups populations present some strong similarities.

Populations :

Members of both groups are representative of China new urban middle-class, being generally younger and more educated than average. According to estimations from members and our own observations, in both groups, around 70% are aged twenty to fifty, which is younger than average Chinese population. More than half of the members have a university education, which is also more than in Chinese general population.

As in many other churches, males are underrepresented with two thirds of the congregations being women.

Though we didn't make formal statistical research on this point, according to our observations, many of the members are benefitting from a social upward mobility, which means they are directly benefitting from Chinese socio-economical recent transformations. They usually have a religious background either atheist or of traditional Chinese religion, with low level of practices and beliefs.

Beliefs :

LDS and Hosanna are doctrinally speaking very different, and their members tend to accept the doctrinal and theological specificities of their respective groups, subscribing to official beliefs and creeds. However, once asked about their own personal beliefs and religious experiences, The specific beliefs and creeds of the groups are rarely mentioned. What makes sense to the members and what they consider essential to their faith is very

similar for both kind of believers and can be summed up to a few key points :

A- *Belief in God.* *God* is the loving father of humans : he created man, an everyone can have a personal relation with him. What really is the nature of god is a secondary question, the main point being the assurance that God created men, and having a direct experience of divinity.

B- *Belief in a Divine plan.* God has a plan for the world and for each individual. He watches over people, and nothing happens that is not allowed by him. Both groups theologies are providing specific and differing explanations of what the plan is. However, what matters most for people seems not to be having a clear understanding of what the plan actually is, but, having the assurance that their life is watched over, and that both success and failures are part of a plan, and are made for them to progress towards more happiness.

C- *Belief in Salvation through Christ.* Everyone makes mistakes in his life, and can overcome them, as well as pains and weaknesses, through living a Christian life and benefitting from Jesus-Christ grace. In a context of high social pressure and high individual expectations, this means that it is acceptable to make mistakes, fail or feel weak, and that there is a way out of personal failure sufferings or dissatisfaction.

D- *Belief that harmonious family relationships are essential to happiness.* Most members refer at family relations as essential to their happiness. They also believe that these Family relations can be improved through living a Christian life, and developing love-based relationship.

E- Belief in traditional moral norms. Acting according to moral principles brings Inspiration from God and is the key to harmonious relations to others, and harmonious society. This last point seems to be very important. One of the main benefit from religious practice expressed by most of the members we met and interviewed is the ability to have a clear definition of right and wrong, and moral principles to guide their choices and daily actions.

Despite sharing these similarities, members of the two groups are not living the same religious life, and differences are visible in the Christian identities they are developing. Some of these differences seems to be influenced by the legal situations of the groups.

3- Group strategies and impact on religious life

The Hosanna Church is an illegal religious group, on the black market, and tries to remain far from local authorities control. Thus it has to remain quiet and small. No public actions are attempted, and converts are encouraged to spread the good news through their personal network (family, friends, and close co-workers) rather than public communication operations². It is already planned that if the group reaches one hundred people, it will spit in two congregations, independent one from another.

Though we would naturally think that being illegal is an unfavorable position, here this can be seen as a beneficial strategy :

² Some other illegal groups are taking public actions despite regulations. They are however often bigger, with more capital, or they decide to do so in specific environments such as universities campuses.

- With no regulation on activities, members can take part in as many religious activities as they want, which they do three times a week in average (Sunday worship, prayer meeting and Bible study on week days).
 - Because it is small and slowly growing : members enjoy a family like atmosphere and newly arrived ones are well integrated in a group where everybody knows each other.
 - The pastor is better able to answer individual needs and follow up with each individual. She is also able to preach freely any topic, including eschatological ones (which are usually avoided in the official church).
- As a result, level of group practice is Higher than in its Taiwan counterpart, and great conformity in religious and social practices among members can develop.

The LDS Church , while not being officially recognized, has been conducting negotiations with the government, both nationally and locally and seek its approval. As a result, the government is tolerating LDS activities, but the congregation has to undergo strong control and limitations. Every kind of group practice is limited, and any opening of new congregation is controlled. To maintain its position and grow, the LDS church chose a more complex strategy consisting in :

- Strictly obeying official rules : only very quiet proselytizing among family and close friends is tolerated, and constant negotiations with government required. If a newcomer wants to be baptized, unless he is a relative of a member, he can not be baptized in PRC. No foreigners are allowed in the congregation, except Taiwan and Hong-Kong citizen. Diffusion of any material outside of the group is forbidden. Any activities outside of the regular Sunday ones must be declared and approved by authorities.

- Investing in non-religious projects (cultural, social and educational) to become a valuable government partner. Thus the church since the opening of PRC has been developing Cultural exchanges, English teachers programs, and social development programs, using its economic weight to prove itself valuable and reliable in the eyes of Chinese officials, as a social development partner.

- Sending missionaries to Chinese communities abroad, to maintain the flow of converts despite limitations within China's boundaries. There are more and more missionaries sent in European, American and Asian missions to speak mandarin and teach mandarin people. A high rate of members in the branch have actually been converted outside of PRC and joined the branch once back in PRC.

As a result, the community is able to maintain its activity with close supervision by the local government. It is also able to maintain a growth, through conversions of relatives and conversions outside of China. But the other consequence of this strategy is strong limitations on community activities, and community life. It seems that the group, despite the good-will and involvement of its members has to invest much energy and capital in protecting its credibility in the eyes of the government, at the expense of developing community life, activities and social cohesion. As a result, members, even if identifying themselves to the group, are living their faith more individually and have less opportunities to develop common practices³.

³ It may be true also that the LDS church is a less community-oriented church than the Hosanna and other similar churches. However, LDS members we met and that converted outside of China often mentioned the lack of group activity and community life compared with what they experienced abroad (USA, Australia, UK etc.)

4- Government control and perception of affiliation by converts:

In the area where we investigated, Christian faiths seem to be generally well accepted.⁴ In fact, many Christians from different groups, including Hosanna church, are often reporting a raise of expectations from family, friends or boss and colleagues, once these learned about their Christian affiliation. This seems to mean that Christians are enjoying a rather good reputation. But, because of religious regulations, this does not have the same effects on the two groups converts:

The Hosanna church is not directly controlled nor regulated, which means that members enjoy a rather high level of freedom in their religious activities. They are not undergoing any kind of pressure by the government⁵. As a result, a positive reinforcement of religious practices takes place. Since being Christian is perceived as increasing members reputations, They will cultivate their Christian Identity, trying to become as visibly Christian as possible- individually speaking (Christian Jewelry, visible prayers before meals in restaurants, Bible study at work, not working on Sundays, and refusing corrupted practices at work in the name of their faith)

⁴ Churches packed with both Christians and non-Christians for Christmas mass, as well as people wearing cross necklaces and other Christian signs without being themselves Christians are indication of the good acceptance of Christians. This however may vary in different areas of China.

⁵ The pastor stays aware, and strives to maintain a level of quietness about the group, but having never been controlled during the last seven years gives her the feeling that if the government had a problem with her activities, they would have already make her stop.

The LDS Church : is constantly under the control of the government and pays attention to stick with the rules. As a result, members are clearly and constantly conscious of the oddity of their religious affiliation. Religion appears to them a very sensitive issue, and they try to limit the exposure of their religious affiliation. Only if they are very directly asked, will they say they are Christians (apart from the family and close friend sphere). No positive reinforcement takes place, and they develop a quiet and private Christian identity⁶.

5- Consequences on members representations and practices :

Hosanna's members tend to see themselves as part of a community, or a family. Through common meetings and practices, they spend a lot of time every week sharing and elaborating « Christian » norms and representations and conform to these in their daily lives. Their life is more and more centered on the group, and they perceive their Christian affiliation as primary, and more important than other affiliations to other social groups.

- They strictly want to marry in the bonds of Christian faith.
- Women abandon professional ambitions to become housewives, and men's professional ambitions slightly decrease too: Reaching high positions is not the only way to success anymore, and if improving ones financial situation is still perceived as desirable, it is only secondary to having a stable family and religious life.

⁶ This seems especially to be true for recent converts, those more experimented with a long history abroad feeling more comfortable about their affiliation. However, they are not the majority.

- They also develop strong negative identification, and clearly separate what is Christian from what is not : other religions are considered evil and corrupted, especially Buddhism. Leisure time is spent with Christians : bars, KTV, dance-clubs are replaced by choir practices, praise meetings, and service activities. Members try to remain to the maximum in a Christian environment, avoid non-Christian places and activities.
- They develop the feeling of having a mission to fulfill as a group, and a model to spread. They believe in Christianity as a way of life and a social model to promote.

LDS members develop looser bonds to the group. Because of legal restrictions, members only see each others once or sometimes twice a week, and leisure group activities are planned only every three months. Though some members have good friends among the group that they individually see outside church meetings, they don't talk to much about religious matters together.

-An interesting thing we noticed is a tendency among members to accept religious mixed marriage, as long as the potential spouse share their moral values ; This can appear surprising given the fact that some religious practices and their benefits, usually considered essential in the LDS doctrine are only available to married couples who are both members of the church.

- Males continue to have strong economical ambitions, being conscious that they still need personal success to improve their social status. Thus their conversion to the group doesn't alter their previous representation of the importance of economical success, and even sometimes emphasize it : In order to be able to benefit more from their religious affiliation, they need to make it possible : By obtaining better jobs and positions, they gain in

credibility in the eyes of non-members, therefore legitimizing their religious affiliation.

- Members are open to other traditions and remain affiliated to other social groups. Therefore, we observed a great tolerance toward ancestor worship and even worship in temples, with a purpose of fulfilling traditions, this not being perceived conflicting with religious practices. In one case, that may not be representative but still illustrate tolerance toward that kind of practice, we observed a member who in its personal practice would substitute Buddhist text to Bible studies, without considering it conflicting with its faith. Some other members are involved in Buddhist community service programs.

-On the contrary of Hosanna members, many members are not replacing KTV's and night-clubs by Christian practices: they make it all coexist without feeling any problem about that.

However all these points may only be the expression of differences between two religious models without regards of political or geographical situations, They are still likely to be signs of the ability for one group, and the lack of ability for the other, to fully integrate its members, and provide them with not only a religious system, but also social and cultural patterns to follow.

Conclusion :

Our observations so far tend to show that legal positions of groups, and their situation toward state control has an influence on the Christian identities created in the groups, and this in two ways :

A : By creating among controlled groups (such as the LDS Church) religious identities that are completely conform to the official concept of religion promoted by the government : religion should be a private and individual

matter, that should not affect social cohesion nor compete with other institutions.

B : By indirectly influencing the emerging of religious identities on the black market that are at the opposite of legal conception of religion and religious practices : communities oriented and de-culturated⁷, that is to say distinctly religious and distinctly Christian/ protestant in culture (Hosanna church).

More observations should be- and are- conducted among these groups and others, in order to confirm the validity of the present observations and their interpretation. However, the duality between state-run religious organizations promoting a model of socially integrated individual practices, and other organizations community-oriented is observed in other religious traditions, such as Daoism as recently described by Goossaert et Ling⁸. Further investigations should be led to better understand the diversity and unity of Christians individuals and groups in China, and how local contexts influence the identity of both converts and their affiliation groups.

⁷ Roy Olivier, *Holy Ignorance, when Religion and Culture Part Ways*, Columbia University Press, 2010

⁸ Goossaert Vincent, Ling Fang, *Temples and Daoist in Urban China since 1980*, China Perspectives, 2009/4