

Religion in China: Focusing on the Monotheistic Religions

Introduction

Katsuhiko Kohara
Director, CISMOR

On September 24, 2011, a public symposium titled, “Religion in China: Focusing on Monotheistic Religions,” was held at Shinmachi Campus of Doshisha University. In the symposium, three guest lecturers, Dr. Xu Xin (Professor of Nanjing University/Director of Center for Jewish Studies), Dr. John Z. X. Wang, (Lecturer of Xiangfan University), and Mr. Min Junqing (Vice Secretary-General of China Hui Studies Association) discussed the history and status quo of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in China from their respective perspectives. This paper further explores the issue of monotheistic religions in China based on their lectures.

While the points of emphasis differed from one another, each of these lecturers spoke about the historical background and status quo of the monotheistic religion of his specialty and its relationship with Chinese society and government. The combination of China and monotheistic religions may seem somewhat strange, but in reality, monotheistic religions have been deeply rooted in Chinese society, as will be shown by the following discussion. Further, though a communist country, China is expected to have the largest Christian population in the world in the near future in light of the rapid spread of Christianity. Still, the exact size of the Chinese Christian population remains controversial (see the paper of Dr. Wang). Islam was introduced into China about 1,300 years ago. Today, there are some tens of millions of Muslims all over this country, most of whom are the Hui people. China also has some centuries-old Jewish communities, though small in population.

Historically speaking, therefore, the monotheistic religions are not incompatible with Chinese society at all, which, however, does not necessarily mean that these religions are securely established in today’s China. Though Christianity and Islam are included in China’s five approved religions, their relationships with the Chinese government have always been sensitive and tense, which will be discussed later in this paper.

The attitude of the Chinese government toward freedom of faith has often been exposed to criticism from America and other countries, but the first thing for us to do is to develop a correct understanding of the realities of the politics-religion relationship in China. China's five approved religions are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholic, and Protestant Christianity (Confucianism is not regarded as a religion) and believers in these religions are allowed to practice their faith though under certain conditions. At the same time, they are required to show their loyalty and patriotism to China and its national order, and in this sense, the Chinese politics-religion relationship bears a close similarity to that of pre-war Japan. Anyway, in light of the critical importance of the relationship with China for maintaining peace in East Asia, we should not confine our interest to political and economic relationships alone, but we should try to foster a broader understanding of the values inherent in Chinese society. The discussion in this paper is also meant to contribute to developing such an understanding.