

Life, Culture, and Religion

You-Sheng Li

In her book *A History of God*, the English author and former nun Karen Armstrong states,

When people began to devise their myths and worship their gods, they were not seeking a literal explanation for natural phenomena. The symbolic stories, cave paintings and carvings were an attempt to express their wonder and to link this pervasive mystery with their own lives; indeed, poets, artists and musicians are often impelled by a similar desire today...God was a product of the creative imagination, like the poetry and music that I found so inspiring. (K. Armstrong: A History of God. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944.)

Today a low but substantial percentage of our population indicates that they have no religious faith, and it certainly is conceivable that a culture or a society can easily survive without God or religion. Nevertheless, almost all early recorded cultural traditions have had a religious faith in some form or other. In all my extensive reading on primitive human civilizations, I have never come across any non-religious cultural traditions.

Religions, however, are not the only avenue for experiencing awe and wonder; it can also be experienced through the arts and through an appreciation of nature. Nobody condemns the arts or nature, but today there are those who are condemning religions. One of these is the Englishman Richard Dawkins. According to him, "good people do good things and bad people do bad things, but it takes religion for good people to do bad things." Both Karen Armstrong and Richard Dawkins live

in the man-made secondary society, where the arts and religion tend to be separated. This was not the case in the genetically coded primary society, the society humans were born with. (<http://taoism21cen.com>) The following is a quote from Chuang Tzu:

In the ancient time, yin and yang were in harmony. 1) Gods and spirits were quiet and did not interfere with people. 2) The four seasons followed their own course. Animals and plants were not harmed. 3) Humans lived to their full life span. People had knowledge but there was no use of it. This is called the big One. (Chuang Tzu, Chapter 16)

Thus according to Chuang Tzu, gods and spirits do not interfere with people in a primary society. It is consistent with Karen Armstrong's view that both art and God are the product of human imagination, inspired by the same feelings of wonder. Neither art nor religions should normally interfere with people. Although Chuang Tzu did not mention the secondary society he was in, he apparently described this happy and peaceful picture of primary society in contrast to secondary society. Thus, it is the opposite in secondary society, namely, 1) Gods interfere with people, 2) They damage their natural environment, and 3) People's lives are cut short by their own actions. Both arts and religions can give feelings of awe, but only organized religions can interfere with people with such power as to make them feel fearful. Thus they have to obey the gods with awe.

In reality, all cultural traditions fall between the two extremes. Nevertheless, we still can determine which tradition is close to which

extreme. The early Mesopotamia civilization which started with the advent of cities was nothing but an economic enterprise. They dug canal networks for irrigation and erected huge platforms to build temples, which were not only far the largest buildings in the cities, but were also visible in the landscape miles away and dominated the city's skyline. One scholar offered the following description of their religion: "The importance of a deity was measured by how well his soldiers performed in battle and how much land they conquered... Not much going on in (Sumerian) heaven unless you were a god... The dead spent eternity in a dreary, poorly lit, depressing shadow world... where they wished they were dead." It was no wonder that archaeology documented shortened life spans associated with the emergence of civilization in the Middle East.

Their neighbouring Egyptians started with rural areas and had a united nation a few hundred years before Mesopotamia. Their religion appeared to be an improvement on the Sumerians. The same scholar states: "Egyptians believed in a continuation of one's earthly condition in one's earthly body after death... The cult of Osiris, which grew rapidly during the Middle Kingdom (c 1900 BCE), promised resurrection and eternal life to all, regardless of social status... did not really have a hell..." (G. Stebben: *Everything You Need to Know About Religion*. New York: Pocket Books, 1999.)

The earliest civilization in Europe was created by the Minoans who lived on the island of Crete. They possessed hardly any weapons and had no constructions for defense. They worshiped a goddess. Their shrines were located at homes, in caves, and on hilltops. A scholar says, "In Minoan religion, there is a conspicuous lack of anxiety about death... A hymn to Nature as a Goddess seems to be heard from everywhere, a

hymn of joy and life."

At one time, Chinese civilization was close to a Taoist ideal society. Their society was a quasi-primary society, a society similar to a primary society. They consumed what they produced and only rarely bought something from outside. When I was a child in the early 1950s, the gods Chinese peasants worshiped were all natural deities. The only temple for villagers to pay respect to the gods was for the god of earth. Since it was considered as representative of a local god like a tribal leader, a village may have several such temples, each for a clan or a cluster of households. They were usually the size of a room, much smaller than a farmhouse. Even

though the temple was only a single room, peasants were free to use it for something else. They could be used as gristmills, a public place for meetings, or a playground for children during rainy days. In my village, all the temples for the god of earth had no image of the god. Each household of peasants usually worshiped three ad-

ditional gods: the kitchen god, the fortune god, and the god of heaven and earth. Except for the kitchen god, who had a paper portrait hung on the wall, the other two had only specific locations, the storage room for the fortune god, and the yard for the god of heaven and earth. The god of heaven and earth was really a god of nature and had thus no image, but the fortune god was a male deity. A Chinese calendar was often printed below a portrait of the kitchen god in order to increase its sale. As a child, I saw clearly that Chuang Tzu was right: gods do not interfere with people, and they do not have power. The Chinese countryside also had temples of Buddhism, Taoism, and even Catholic churches. The power of their gods usually stayed inside their buildings, since the Chinese government was not religious. Most Chinese people worshiped them all, disregarding their difference.

***It is easier to fight
for principles than
to live up to them.***

Chinese Proverb

But things changed with the advent of Mao's Communism, which was in fact a powerful religion in all aspects. When I joined a Sunday service in a Church for the first time at Cambridge in 1980, I was amazed to find out that all the formality was exactly the same as I went through a hundred times in China to worship nobody else but Mao. A Chinese palmist usually reads the face and the palm to tell one's future. When Chinese peasants saw the awe-inspiring portrait of Mao, with the unusual mole on his chin, they claimed that this man was born a God like Jesus. To be precise, they saw him as another emperor, since they judged emperors as godlike. Mao was not, however, an ordinary emperor, he was much more powerful than any Chinese emperor. He had a much larger bureaucratic machine facilitated by modern communication technology. For the first time in Chinese history, he organized five hundred million peasants to shout with one voice and move in one direction. They did achieve miracles, but their miracles were nothing but harmful.

My junior high school (grades 7-9) was ten miles away, and I walked home on weekends. I still remember the beauty of the isolated Chinese countryside: orchards of flowers and fruits one after another beside the road. The peasants were happy to see someone passing by their fields. They often stopped working to show their hospitality to me. They even offered me the produce of their farms. Once Mao's orders came down, the landscape changed overnight. The flowers and orchards were all gone. I had to cross several canals without even a drop of water in them. One half finished reservoir could be seen miles away. I was enticed to climb up its banks, more than a dozen meter high, and saw

hardly any water inside. It was like a huge bowl or an open mouth trying to suck water from the blue sky. We did not know how dreadful the hell Mao devised for his people was, because he put them all in hell when they were still alive. One thing is certain: they could no longer live to their full life span because many of them died of

starvation. Mao's communist religion oppressed its people so mercilessly that a lot committed suicide.

Unfortunately, I heard of suicide again many years later during a recent visit. A young lady told me, "It is better than dying of cancer!" The peasants think all cancers in the village are caused by water pollution. The most infectious is, however, the so-called spiritual pollution: corruption is everywhere, and 90% of Chi-

nese millionaires are from government official families. It is no longer easy to feel happy. If those peasants had the power to devise a hell, they would certainly make one for those corrupt millionaire officials. Certainly huge economic changes are occurring in China, but if the whole population is to share in the prosperity, there is a real need, not for Chinese society to adopt any kind of religion, but to revert to the moderate philosophies of Taoism and Confucianism that shun greed and are based on compassion with love and respect for all humans – and that is what humanism is all about.

You-Sheng Li holds a Ph.D. in laboratory medicine from Cambridge, England. He is the author of A New Interpretation of Chinese Philosophy – An Anthropological/Psychological View. He is a member of the Humanist Association of London (Ontario) and Area.

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