



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

## “Chinese Religions & Religions in China”

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

26 January 2020

[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

Part of what I say at the beginning of each Sunday Service is that as Unitarian Universalists, “We draw wisdom from all the world’s religions, balanced with the insights of modern science.” And this sermon is my annual invitation to reflect on religion as such.

What is this thing called “religion”? Where did it come from, and what is it about? For better or worse, it is difficult to respond to those questions in a concise way because what we humans mean by “religion” is multifaceted, complex, and notoriously difficult to define.

Although there is no simple, uncontested definition of religion, I have been studying the field of religion for many decades at this point, and I will share with you my “Top Five Best Definitions of Religion” list that I have collected over the years:

5. From a traditional western academic perspective, religion can be defined as a **“culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings”**

(Melford Spiro).

4. More generally, religion can be defined as, **“An experience of the holy”**—that is, an encounter “set apart” from ordinary or mundane aspects of reality (E. B. Tylor).

3. Another definition that focuses on experience is religion as an encounter with a **mystery that is simultaneously terrifying and fascinating** (“*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*”) (Rudolf Otto). One related metaphor particularly appropriate for our UU symbol of the flaming chalice is that religion is like **“playing with fire”**: it can be alluring

and a source of warmth, but it can also be scary or can even burn you (Margaret M. Mitchell).

2. A quite useful definition of how religion functions is that anything is religious if it becomes our **“ultimate concern”** (Paul Tillich).

1. My favorite definition comes from my favorite religion scholar, who defines religion as **“humanity’s millennia-long encounter and struggle with the anomalous, the powerful, the really, really weird stuff that does not fit in, that does not make sense”** (Jeffrey Kripal).

To add in a few more major definitions of religion from a [skeptical perspective](#), religion has been defined as an *illness* (Freud), a *narcotic* (Marx), a *weakness* (Nietzsche), and a *projection* (Feuerbach) ([Tweed](#) 3, 51).

Diving deeper into the word “religion” itself, the most popular etymology of “religion” is that it derives from the Latin word *religare* (related to the English word *ligament*), **meaning “to bind together.”** I appreciate the ways that definition points to how religious rituals and spiritual practices can be powerful ways of building and supporting a community. The shadow side, of course, is that religion can also be abused to bind people together in a controlling way. (Cults are an extreme example.)

The case has also been made that a more correct etymology of **“religion” is from the Latin word *religere* (“to be careful, mindful”) in the sense of reading the morning newspaper “religiously.”** And there is a strong argument that this latter sense more accurately characterizes religion in the ancient world, which often tended to center on a “careful performance of ritual obligation.”

In contrast, the modern, Western sense of the word religion is often about “intellectual assent” to certain beliefs or an “inner sentiment” of faith ([McCutcheon](#) 109).

For this morning, since yesterday was Chinese New Year on the traditional lunar calendar (initiating the Year of the Rat), it seemed like an auspicious time to explore the larger phenomenon of religion from the particular angle of religion in China. One reason is that for those of us who are primarily familiar with religion in the United States, learning more about other cultures is both valuable itself and it can help teach us more

about our own situation through a comparative lens. Another significant reason is that our UU 6th Principle is “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all,” and it’s hard to take that goal seriously without focusing at least occasionally on China, which I have never done explicitly before in a sermon.

Consider, for instance, that the current worldwide population of humans is 7.6 billion people. Here in the United States, we are a large-country, population-wise—the third largest in the world—with a total of 331 million people, but in the global scheme of things the U.S. contains only 4% of the number of total humans alive today. By comparison, China is the number-one most populous county on earth with approximately 1.4 billion people or 18% of the world’s population. There are more than four times as many people in China compared to the U.S. (If anyone is wondering, India is a close second at 1.3 billion people.)

The three traditional Chinese religions are Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism (Goossaert 20). Unlike the perhaps more familiar religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, traditional Chinese religions have never been separate institutions with adherents that exclusively followed one of the three paths. Instead, most Chinese people have historically followed some blend of the three traditions.

Also, similar to that etymology we considered earlier of religion as what you do ‘religiously’ (that is, regularly or ritually?), most practitioners of a blended “Chinese Religion” did not focus on belief; rather, they looked to religion to provide services:

a community might invite a priest or monk to perform rituals at temples, for example, and each of the three offered its own special techniques—Buddhist Chan meditation or devotional Pure Land spiritual exercise, Daoist meditative exercises, or Confucian moral self-cultivation. (Johnson 2017: 20)

In some ways, this approach is related to our UU slogan that, “We believe in deeds not creeds.” The focus is on what you do, not what you allegedly believe—because what is most evidently believable is, not words, but *behavior* (Johnson 2017: 21).

Along these lines, I’ll use Confucianism as an example. Especially from a Western perspective, Confucianism is more easily understood as an “ethical system or system of norms.” Its function in Chinese society is akin to so-called “Judeo-Christian

norms” here in the West, “where even those who dispute or reject those norms still find themselves shaped by them, consciously or not” (Rana 7). In China, Confucianism plays that kind of outsized role, and emphasizes “mutual obligation, maintenance hierarchies, a belief in self-development, education, and improvement, and above all, an ordered society” (Rana 7-8).

Here’s one excerpt from Confucius’s *Great Learning* that you might find children chanting historically as well as today in China:

Their thoughts sincere, their hearts were rectified.

Their hearts rectified, their persons were cultivated.

Theirs persons cultivated, their families were regulated.

Their families regulated, their states were rightly governed.

Their states rightly governed, the kingdom was tranquil.

(Johnson 2017: 104)

You can trace that rising crescendo culminating in the rightly ordered society.

And although there is much more to be said about the 2,500 year-long history of Chinese religion, I focus for now on the past century or so, which has included a huge number of major shifts.

For a little background: In 1839, starting with the First Opium War (fought between Great Britain and the Qing dynasty), China suffered a series of military defeats, which over time caused a national crisis of confidence (Johnson 2017: 18). Religion, especially anything deemed “superstitious,” was one of the scapegoats accused of holding China back (Goossaert 50). Ironically, now that China is a rising power, traditional religion is widespread again. So clearly religion and political power are compatible. But that truth was not clear in the late nineteenth century (Johnson 2017: 19). Although a definition of insanity is “continuing to do the same thing and expecting a different result,” sometimes one can choose the wrong thing to change.

Here’s some of what resulted from the governmental targeting of religion. In 1851, there were 866 temples in Beijing, today there are 18. Only 2% of the temples in that city survived the purge. More broadly, “

China had an estimated one million temples around the turn of the [twentieth] century....Scholars estimate that by the middle of the 20th

century, **half of the temples that existed in China at the end of the 19th century had been destroyed....** At the end of the 19th century, most villages had at least one temple and many had half a dozen; vast sections of the Chinese countryside now have no temples at all.....  
(Johnson 2019)

It is perhaps important to note that much of this loss was prior to the Communist rise to power. At the time of the Communist takeover of 1949, “half of those one million temples had been destroyed, shuttered, or converted to other uses” such as schools.

And in ways that I do not have time to fully unpack, it is interesting to consider that the “cult of Mao” was also religious in some interesting senses. Mao Zedong was the “founding father of the People's Republic of China, which he ruled as the chairman of the Communist Party of China from its establishment in 1949 until his death in 1976.” And to name only a few ways of people acting religious toward him, “People wore Mao badges, waved his book of sayings like a Bible, and traveled to his hometown as if on a pilgrimage” (Johnson 2017: 27).

What has been interesting since Mao’s death is the remarkable regrowth of religion in China. In the words of one Chinese citizen, **“We thought we were unhappy because we were poor. But now a lot of us aren’t poor anymore, and yet we’re still unhappy. We realize there’s something missing and that’s a spiritual life”**  
(Johnson 2017: 16-17).

In addition to a return to the traditional Chinese religions, one of the most remarkable points of growth has been in Protestant Christianity in China, which has grown sixty fold from one million adherents in 1949 to an estimated **60 million** or more adherents today.

And similar to the way the Chinese government cracked down in 1999 on the meditative movement practice of Falun Gong as it grew to include more than 70 million practitioners, we are witnessing a government persecution of Protestants today in China (Johnson 117, 214):

- In churches that the government approves of, often sermons must be vetted in advance “to avoid contentious political and social issues” and clergy are not called by the congregation, but rather appointed by the Communist party (Johnson 2016).
- In 2018, the Chinese government, “banned online sales of the Bible, burned crosses, demolished churches and forced at least a half-dozen places of worship to close” ([The New York Times](#)).
- And last year, “The pastor of one of China's best-known unregistered "house" churches was sentenced to nine years in prison on charges of inciting subversion of state power” ([The New York Times](#)).

Even worse has been the recent treatment of Muslims in China. If you haven't read *The New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof article from last year on “[China's Orwellian War on Religion](#),” I strongly encourage you to read it. The upshot is that China is detaining at least one million Muslims in concentration camps.... The further tragedy is the [concentration camps](#)—and separation of children and parents—on our own U.S.-Mexico border undercuts the moral authority of our country to speak out for human rights and religious freedom.

I do not, however, want to end on this bleak note. Overall, more closely studying the history of religion in modern China has made me freshly aware of how quickly the situation can change from better to worse and back again. As recently as 1970, you can find examples of scholars describing China as “a nation state, with one-fourth of the earth's population...with hardly a trace of religion...” (Goossaert 1). That scholar could not perceive at the time that the seeds of religious revival in China were already sprouting.

So I will move toward my conclusion by encouraging us to remember the significant wisdom that remains in Chinese religion whenever it is allowed to flourish. Of the three traditional Chinese religions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, I have said the most previously about Buddhism, so I will turn to Daoism, which is likely the second-most intriguing Chinese religion to many westerners, although I will one day also spend more time on Confucianism. What wisdom might there be for you today from Daoism?

The *Daoist* worldview reminds us that all of us humans — whether sage-rulers or just us common folk — are merely a part of a much larger whole. We are not special in the grand scheme of things, so we should be cautious about over-interpreting what happens to us in any sort of ultimate perspective (Moeller 55, 141).

As the *Daodejing*, the most important Daoist text, says in Chapter 58:

It is upon bad luck  
that good luck depends.

It is upon good luck  
that bad luck depends.

Who knows where it ends?

But perhaps this view is better exemplified in this ancient Daoist story:

There was an old man at a frontier fort in the north who understood Daoism. One day he lost his horse, which wandered into the land of the Hu tribesmen. His neighbors came to condole with him and the man said, “How do you know that this is bad luck [that I lost my horse]?”

After a few months, the horse returned with some fine horses of the Hu breed, and the people congratulated him. The old man said, “How do you know that this is good luck [that I now have so many fine horses]?”

He became very prosperous with so many horses. Then the son one day broke his leg riding, and all the people came to condole with him again. The old man said, “How do you know that this is bad luck [that my son broke his leg riding]?”

One day the Hu tribesmen invaded the frontier fort. All the [healthy] young men fought with arrows to defend it, and nine-tenths of them were killed. Because the son [had a broken leg], both father and son escaped unharmed. Therefore, **good luck changes into bad, and bad luck changes into good. It cannot be known where their altering ends.**

(99-101)

**YINGYANG** Thus, we can begin to see why one of the central characteristics of the Daoist master is **equanimity**: “**mental calmness, composure, and evenness of**

**temper” even in a situation that feels especially difficult at the time.** Whatever happens to us is never only about us individually. We are part of a larger whole, which our UU Seventh Principle called the “interdependent web of all existence.” Or as Dr. King said: “In a real sense all life is interrelated. All...are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

So, what wisdom might the *Daoist* worldview hold for you today? Is there perhaps something happening in your life — whether seemingly good or bad — that is actually not only about you, but actually part of a larger whole in ways that may be difficult to perceive at the moment? How might a larger context—a larger container for your experience—be freeing or liberating or increase your capacity for equanimity?

### **Works Cited**

Goossaert, Vincent and David Palmer. *The Religious Question in Modern China* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

Johnson, Ian. *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao* (Pantheon, 2017).

\_\_\_\_\_. “China Seeks Tighter Grip in Wake of a Religious Revival” (*The New York Times*, 2016). Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/world/asia/china-religion-regulations.html>.

\_\_\_\_\_. “China’s New Civil Religion The Communist Party is reviving traditional beliefs for political gain — while cracking down on some faiths” (*The New York Times*, 2017). Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/21/opinion/sunday/chinas-religion-xi.html>.

Mitter, Rana. *Modern China: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd Edition (Oxford University Press, 2016).

Moeller, Hans-Georg. *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (Columbia University Press, 2006).