

On the Difference Between Religion and Falun Gong (Falun Dafa)

XU YONGLI, YAN JINGJUN

The article raises the question of the correlation of such social phenomena as religion in a general sense and the discipline of Falun Gong, which was introduced in the 1990s by the "teacher" Li Hongzhi. The problem of the correlation between these concepts is of interest at this time for the citizens of China, because in the People's Republic of China it is officially forbidden to profess Falun Gong. Nevertheless, there are many adepts of it. The authors of the article describe in detail various aspects that characterize these both phenomena, closely consider their inherent traits and make a comparative analysis. A large quantity of references from theological sources is presented in the article as well as the facts that concern the sect of Li Hongzhi's disciples. Relying on the data resulting from the investigation, the authors conclude that the discipline of Falun Gong cannot be considered as a religion.

Keywords: religion, Falun Gong, China, religion in China.

Religion is a social and historical phenomenon with long history as well as a special social ideology. Religion is characterized by god-worship, highest faith, sutras, doctrines, and creeds. In addition, religion calls on people to perform good deeds and to respect life and to be morally good. But Falun Gong is totally different from religion. It does not possess the basic characteristics of religion and is not religion. This paper will highlight the difference between religion and Falun Gong.

FIRST, THE CHARACTERISTICS OF RELIGION

The dominant trend of religion is consistent with social development, and is a benefit for social harmony and stability.

(a) The object of worship of traditional religion is god

Religious figures and prophets have many names Buddha, Jesus, Krishna, Moses and ask people to pray to them or through them to reach God. Religious clergies, such as bishops, priests, pastors, imams, monks, and priests, are not the objects of worship by other believers, and also the other believers are not allowed to worship these clergies.

The ultimate goal of religion is to worship the almighty and in every religion the founder may be regarded as a holy person but is not worshipped as god but merely as the facilitating link to god. Furthermore the objects of worship are unearthly gods and departed ancients, such as the Maitreya Buddha and Sakyamuni from Buddhism, Lord Lao Zi and Zhang Tianshi from

Taoism, Jehovah and Jesus from Christianity, and Allah and Muhammad from Islam. The clergies are not the god itself or the incarnation of god, therefore, they are not worshipped by people as god. Moreover, none of the founders of religion call themselves god. Religion does not take living people as the founder of religion and the god being worshipped is not a real, specific person, but the highest spiritual entity and absolute existence. It is the abstract god on the other side of the world. What religion worships is an unearthly "god", and religious clergies are just the servants of god. In religion, god and man can not be confused or be regarded as one, and even the highly respected clergy can not claim to be god.

(b) Religion contains highest faith, scriptures, doctrines, and creeds

All religions have their own beliefs, scriptures, doctrines, and creeds, which constitute the theory system of the religion. Under the influence of religious scriptures, such as the *Tripitaka* in sutra, the *Tao Te Ching* in Taoism, the *Bible* in Christianity, and the Koran in Islam, believers can improve their own cultural and moral qualities. All religions have profound cultural thoughts and normative precepts. They believe the existence of god but emphasize rational enlightenment. Religion reflects the spiritual sustenance and pursuit of the believers. All religions have their own world view, view of society, view of life and values. They are unreal reflections of the external forces dominating people's daily life in the form of supra-mundane and are personified at the same time. They are reflected as the

believers' worship and fear to such external forces, and the spiritual sustenance and pursuit of the believers.

Throughout history, various religions have all formed unique religious faith, religious feelings, and corresponding systematic and complete theory of religion, creed, and religious rules. They attract believers with their profound creeds. During the long-term religious practice, a complete set of observances for worship rituals and other religious activities have been formed, which are publicized and open. As supervision and guidance, these observances are kept by the believers.

There are strict religious organizations and religious systems for each religion. Religious organizations are legitimate social institutions officially registered through the government. Religious organizations hold religious activities and public service activities which are beneficial to society in accordance with the state Constitution and laws. They are legitimate social institutions subject to legal protection. Religion seeks to coordinate with state power, and plays a supporting role in social life.

(c) Call on people to perform good deeds

Various religions all have the characteristics of calling on people to perform good deeds. They guide the followers to renounce evil and turn to virtue, to purify the society and human relations. Religious doctrines and religious rules advocate harmony, exhort people to do good, and uphold living in harmony. They also advocate peace, love, justice, humility, tolerance, reason, moral excellence, compatibility, and complementarity. There are harmonious elements of truth, goodness and beauty in the doctrines and rules. For example, Buddhism believers are required to believe in Sanzo, including scriptures, laws and theories. In addition, Buddhism advocates "Five Precepts and Ten Virtuous Deeds", "be merciful to save the world", "refrain from all evil and do all good" and "do not seek comfort for oneself but only wish sentient beings would be away from suffering"; furthermore Taoism advocates "show mercy to orphans and the very poor"; the core of Christianity is to love and one of the decrees is to "Love God, love common people"; Islam says, "those who believe and do good deeds are the inhabitants of Paradise".

For a long time, religious doctrines and disciplines have been the common code of ethics in maintaining social order. Sakyamuni proposed the moral thought of "all beings are equal" when he founded Buddhism, claiming to impose "mercy" on all creatures and "illuminate all things with the light of boundless infinite love." Mohammed was supported by the masses when he founded Islam, because he was against the slaughter among tribes and advocated the benevolent and equal moral thought that "all Muslims are brothers". The "good deeds" of religious believers is the pursuit for truth, goodness and beauty. It plays a very important role in adjusting people's psychology, helping those who suffered setbacks eliminate psychological stress and balance psychological needs, and giving people courage and strength in their lives. Therefore, "good deeds" is helpful for the adjustment of personal relationship, family harmony and social stability. The reason why religion has a long enduring history is a result of its "charitable and benevolence" ethical calling. Religion is committed to serving the society with a positive attitude and the spirit of vulgarity, which sublimated people's spiritual realm. Religion calls on people to do good and accumulate merit, to save the world and help others, to be respectful and tolerant, and to advocate peace and love. All of these are the same as virtues advocated by the modern society. With its fine tradition of charity and "help those in danger and relieve those in distress", religion, to a certain extent, plays a role in regulating people's thinking and behavior. Some doctrines, canons, and religious precepts require no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no greed, no robbery, and no lying. Some other attitudes have positive impacts on people's thought, such as "equal love", "help people in distress", "exhort people to do good", "to do good and accumulate merit", "praying to Allah to give great reward in this world and hereafter", "serve the human". In addition, the Buddhism circle advocates a terrestrial Buddhism of "a solemn country and benefiting sentient beings"; Taoists advocate a life Taoism of "being benevolent, peaceful harmonious, saving the world and benefiting the people"; Christianity maintains "patriotic and law-abiding, glorify God and benefit man"; Islam upholds the idea of

“encouraging people to do good and stop people from doing evil”, and so on. Although the statements are different, but they are all committed to guide believers to adapt to society, and to teach people to perform good deeds, maintain good relationship with neighbors, and to contribute to society.

The principles of “tolerance, equality, and universal fraternity” proposed by religion are conducive to eliminate dissatisfaction, so that inner peace can be achieved. Religions in China all have an excellent tradition of patriotism and the doctrine of maintaining social stability. They advocate believers to integrate with the society, to serve the society, to bring benefit to people, to maintain social harmony and to support the leadership of the Communist Party of China and the socialist system.

(d) Concern about people's this life

In addition to the emphasis on doomsday, salvation and the pursuit of happiness of heaven, religion also concerns about people's this life by giving people comfort, exhortation and encouragement. For example, Christianity teaches people to be philanthropic, patient and tolerant; Buddhism teaches people to be merciful, helpful and lenient; Islam requires people to be solidary, fraternal and courteous. Religion seeks to adapt to society, reform itself with social development, actively promote service to the society as well as bring benefit to the mankind. Buddhism stresses mercy, “be infinitely merciful” to all sentient beings. Influenced by Lao Tzu's thoughts of “respect Tao and value De” and “recompense injury with kindness”, Taoism attaches great importance to the key role of moral goodness in practice. Disputes among Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism existed during Northern and Southern Dynasties, but finally consensus was reached despite the differences of these three religions, because they share the same goal of exhortation. The so-called “three religions” actually refers to three methods of moral education in essence. Therefore, the essential characteristic of traditional Chinese religions is “moral religion”. The purpose of the so-called “instructing according to the sacred way” is to form simple yet profound moral atmosphere in

the society. China's Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are also influenced by this tradition of moral religion, which makes the moral content of their doctrine gradually enriched and highlighted, and strengthens their function on social moral education.

(e) Respect for life and people-oriented

All religions are based on the respect for life, advocate the people-oriented concept, and emphasize the love for life. Buddhism believes that it is indeed difficult to be born as a human being, so we must cherish life and devote our finite life to performing good deeds and developing kind affinity with people. On the contrary, suicide and self-mutilation fundamentally violate the “no killing” precept of Buddhism. Although religion believes that prayer and practice are beneficial for people's physical and psychological health, it does not advocate refusal to medical treatment. Taoism has even made great contributions to Chinese medicine. There are indeed exercises to benefit internal organs in Taoism. These exercises take shape after several generations, based on the eminent taoists' experiences and studies about body meridians and “essence, energy and spirit” of the human body. In practice, methods must be dictated by the teacher from the heart and practitioners gradually achieve longevity. With this goal, Taoism has made unremitting exploration in theory and practice in medicine, health care and the practice of individual lives. There has been large number of accomplished eminent taoist priests, physicians and thinkers among the taoists, such as Ge Hong, Tao Hongjing, Sun Simiao. The “YiFang Ming” in the “Five Sciences” (five kinds of knowledge) of Buddhism refers to medicine and pharmacy, and many monks are proficient in medicine and treatment. All religions regard “no killing” as the leading precept and killing is a fundamental felony in the precepts. Taoism believes that “respect life and value De” is the right way. Islam believes that life is the gift from “Allah”, and should be treasured and respected by being aggressive and struggling a wonderful life. By contrast, Islam is against suicide and suicidal behavior, which are regarded as a crime. Those who committed such behaviors will suffer in the hell-fire.

SECOND, THE MAIN FEATURES
OF FALUN GONG

There are clear distinctions between “Falun Gong” and Buddhism, Taoism and other religions. Falun Gong is a typical cult.

(a) Founder-worship

Opposite to religion, the object of worship of Falun Gong is its founder — Li Hongzhi, who is a human being. The god Falun Gong believes in is a specific and living leader who is still alive. The leader is directly deified as a god, even as the highest god to be worshipped. Li Hongzhi proclaimed himself as god and claimed that he possesses supernatural power, and can even call the gods and use the spirits as servants, so the followers faithfully worship him unconditionally. Li Hongzhi boasted that “his birth” and “he was given personal instruction at the age of four by Master Quan Jue, the tenth-generation teacher of Buddhist Dafa, which is passed on to only a single disciple.” What’s more, he also said that he possesses various ESPs (Extra Sensory Perception), including invisibility, handling, fixing objects, mind control, and so on. Claiming himself as the reincarnation of Buddha, he boasted he can decide the explosion of the earth and he is the sole savior who is able to help the whole human obtain salvation in a bright new world as well as the only one in the world who is spreading the proper Dharma before Doomsday. He even changed his date of birth to make it coincide with the birthday of Sakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, in an attempt to show that he was the “reincarnation of Sakyamuni.” In order to deify himself and attract believers, Li Hongzhi claimed himself as “an incarnation of god in human form” and beyond the human. He also claimed that he is the only savior on earth who is greater than Syakamuni, Lao Tzu, Jesus, and can dominate the universe. Only he can bring “hopeless” human to another “better world”.

(b) Lack of systematic doctrine

Without profound historical and cultural heritage, Falun Gong was fabricated with a word or two from Buddhism and Taoism. It takes full advantage of the influence of Buddhism and Taoism in the hearts of the people, and at the same time imitate, pirate, and belittle religion. By plagiarizing the Buddhist symbol “Falun” as the

name of its Gong, Falun Gong stole the core concept of Buddhism and boosted himself as savior and the highest Buddha greater than Sakyamuni. What is more, some other concepts from Buddhism, such as “Dharma body”, “three realms”, “the one and only way”, “Karma power”, “white kamma and black kamma”, “final Dharma”, “discard attachment”, and “Dharma-pala”, are also plagiarized.

As a conventional metaphor and praise for Dharma, “Falun” is a terminology of Buddhism and entrusted with the deep religious feelings of believers. Although some of the concepts are borrowed from Buddhism, but the original meaning of these concepts have been changed by Li Hongzhi. So Falun Gong has no intrinsic link with Buddhism. There is no “universal law” in Buddhism, but Li Hongzhi said “Falun is the wisdom of the universe”, which is not a concept from Buddhism. Although Falun Gong is under the banner of religion, it is neither traditional Buddhism nor Taoism. Li Hongzhi tried to belittle the gods of other religions and boasted that he is the god at the highest level in the universe and the Dharma he is spreading is the only complete one. In the eyes of practitioners, Li Hongzhi is as high and lofty Lord Buddha of the universe. They worship him with the utmost sincerity. Li Hongzhi plagiarizes the concepts from other religions, yet tries to disparage them at the same time. On the one hand, he claimed himself as the reincarnation of Sakyamuni, and deluded the world with his so-called “boundless Dharma”. On the other hand, he insulted and profaned other religions by saying that he is a savior greater than Sakyamuni, Lao Tzu, and Jesus. In addition, Li Hongzhi claimed that Falun Dafa is the way of practicing Buddhism yet is not Buddhism itself.

Lacking of systematic doctrines, Falun Gong preaches mysticism, and deliberately fabricates psychological terror and tension with the purpose of confusing people and controlling the practitioners spiritually. Li said his book *Zbuan Falun* — with profound connotation and everlasting appeal — is a “Book from heaven” which can guide the practice. Also, every word in the book is the image of his “Law Body” and the “Law Wheel”, which is a “ladder” to heaven for the practitioners. Li assured that practitioners will be

protected by his “Law Body” and the “Law Wheel”. According to his fallacy, there will not be any danger for the practitioners as long as they are pursuing the true cultivation, and a successful end will be achieved.

(c) Spreading Eschatology

“Doomsday theory” is the basis of all cults. Falun Gong preached that mankind has entered the “end of Dharma”, “society is morally corrupt”, “the devil will appear to destroy the ordinary society”, and only “Falun Dafa” can save all humans as an “extraordinary Dafa”. The intention of all these fallacies is to cause social instability and to achieve its sinister political purpose. Falun Gong deludes some practitioners to commit suicide to seek “consummation”, which basically is murder. Falun Gong asks practitioners to give up a normal life and break social order. Li Hongzhi advocates that the end of the world is coming and the whole planet will explode. And that he is the sole savior who can help save humans and send people to heaven. Putting the followers into extreme fear and a crazy state of mind, Li further enhance the absolute spirit control on the believers. Falun Gong advocates “eschatology”, “earth explosion theory”, and talked about the human destruction in order to cause social panic. Such fallacies as “Doomsday” and “„Falun Gong“ is the only way to avoid the end of the world” concocted by Li Hongzhi can be traced to the same origin as pseudo-religion theory.

(d) Mind control on the followers

By distorting religious doctrines and adopting measures such as lies, deception, psychological suggestion and other induction methods, Li Hongzhi believers are “brainwashed”. This helps them lose their normal consciousness, so that he can realize spiritual control on them. The followers must abide by the will of their “spiritual leader.” Not only the followers’ actions are under control, but also their spirit. This kind of control is highlighted by the absolute exclusiveness of Falun Gong. Captivated by the idea of “consummation”, some practitioners are deeply lost in Falun Gong and cannot get out of it.

Inside the Falun Gong community, its own rules and regulations are higher than the normal rules of our society. Due to the requirement to conceal the truth to the family and society, Falun

Gong practitioners abandoned their family and live away from the community, and hold illegal gatherings secretly. To control the minds of the practitioners of “Falun Gong,” Li Hongzhi adopted the measures of enticing, brainwashing and threatening them. Li Hongzhi asked the practitioners to practice Falun Gong only, and said that only Falun Gong can improve the “Xinxing” to a higher level. Falun Gong practitioners are asked to give up “fame, wealth, love” and “to forget life and death” in order to achieve “final consummation.” In *Fa-teaching in Sydney*, when talking about attention in practice, Li Hongzhi said: “I think undivided attention should be maintained in the practice! <...> it is called ‘the one and only way’ in Buddhism.” The intrinsic nature of the so-called “the one and only way” advocated by Li Hongzhi is that people can only practice Falun Gong, only read his books, only believe his words, and only study his “Law”, without touching upon other contents. But the real meaning of “the one and only way” in Buddhism is that all Dharmas are the same in essence, even for those against other, and that’s the meaning of “all Dharmas return to One Dharma”. Thorough understanding of Dharmata means entering into “the one and only way.” By using a fanatical religious sentiment, which put the believers under a highly excited state, Li Hongzhi has realized the spiritual control over his followers.

(e) Disrespect for life

Falun Gong preached that people don’t need to go to hospital if they practice the Gongfa. Li Hongzhi said that illness and misfortune are caused by karma, they are forms of karmic retribution and means of «paying karma.” Medicine cannot cure the illness, so do not go to hospital. The only way to “eliminate karma” is to practice “Falun Dafa.” Many practitioners are so obsessed in Li Hongzhi’s fallacies that they neglect kinship and family. The only thing they care about is cultivating and promoting their levels so that they might reach “Buddhahood”, some even committed self-immolation.

“Falun Gong” captivates and encourages practitioners to give up their lives, neglect kinship and family, even commit self-mutilation to help enter heaven or reaching “Buddhahood”. Those who are so obsessed with Falun Gong view people who

disagree with them as “devils”. They are also deluded to refuse a doctor and medicine, abandon their wife and children, and even kill their parents. All these behaviors lead to the falling-out and unhappiness of thousands of families. Falun Gong advocates that instead of seeking medical treatment people should tolerate illness. Only by toleration can people pay their debt, reach a higher level, and finally return to the highest level of universe to enjoy life in heaven.

Contradicting with his fallacies, Li Hongzhi has sought medical help for his own illnesses. From 1982 to 1992 when Li worked for the state-owned Changchun grain and oil-supply company, he had 73 medical expense reimbursements from the government. And 48 out of these 73 were treatment he himself received. And on July 8th, 1984, Li had an operation for acute appendicitis in Jilin City People’s hospital.

Sickness and death are the natural order of life, which we can not escape. To achieve immortality, many people practiced hardships since ancient times, but all have failed.

(e) Secret form of association

Falun Gong claimed to be a loose group, but in fact it is an underground organization with a top-down rigorous secret system. Li Hongzhi’s illegal organization, the “Research Society of Falun Dafa”, was the top national organ of the “Falun Gong” organization. Li Hongzhi himself was its chairman. The “Research Society of Falun Dafa” set up 39 general instruction offices, 1 900 ordinary instruction offices and 28 000 practice sites throughout the country. More than two million people joined the “Falun Gong” organization. Thus a large-scale organization with complete system and series of rules and regulations are formed. The practitioners absolutely abide by Li’s directives, which ordered them to seclude themselves from the outside world, from their relatives and the family. As a result, they gathered to form a “Falun Gong” community, in which only practitioners of the “Dafa” can be

accepted. Li Hongzhi releases his “scripture” and controls the affiliates from abroad with modern means of communication. His directives were relayed by the “Research Society of Falun Dafa” to the various general instruction offices, which then passed them to the ordinary instruction offices, practice sites and individual practitioners. So, the “Falun Gong” organization is an unregistered organization with complete and strict system.

In summary, Falun Gong has nothing in common with religion. It is not a religion, but just an illegal organization that stole some concepts from religion and distorted religious scriptures by violating religious doctrine as well as endangering religion and society. In order to improve people’s ability to identify and resist Falun Gong, basic knowledge of religion should be propagated, so that fundamental distinctions between religion and Falun Gong can be highlighted and the nature and characteristics of Falun Gong can be revealed.

О РАЗЛИЧИИ МЕЖДУ РЕЛИГИЕЙ
И ФАЛУНЬГУН (ФАЛУНЬ ДАФА)

Сюй Йонгли, Ян Джинджун

В статье поднимается вопрос соотношения таких социальных явлений, как религия в широком смысле этого слова и течение Фалуньгун, основанное в 1990-х гг. «учителем» Ли Хунчжи. Проблема соотношения этих понятий носит актуальный характер для граждан Китая, так как в Китайской Народной Республике официально запрещается исповедовать течение Фалуньгун. Тем не менее там существует множество его приверженцев. Авторы статьи подробно описывают различные аспекты, характеризующие оба явления, внимательно рассматривают присущие им черты и проводят сравнительный анализ. В статье приводится большое количество ссылок на религиозоведческие источники, а также факты, касающиеся течения последователей Ли Хунчжи. Опираясь на полученные в результате исследования данные, авторы заключают, что течение Фалуньгун не может считаться религией. Ключевые слова: религия, Фалуньгун, Китай, религия в Китае.