

Marxism, Tradition, and Reality: The United Front Logic in Li Dazhao's Critique of Religion

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Abstract: Li Dazhao's critique of religion was a vital ideology rooted in Marxist religious thought as its foundation, enriched by China's outstanding traditional culture, and grounded in China's specific realities. By combining Marxist principles with China's unique context and cultural heritage, Li Dazhao's critical perspective offers important insights: viewing religious criticism as essential for the united front, considering religious groups as crucial components of the united front, and promoting the concept of "religious decolonization" to foster the united front's subjectivity. In the new era, understanding the significance of Li Dazhao's critique of religion for the united front is valuable for promoting the Sinicization of religion, expanding new theoretical horizons, and advancing both the Sinicization and contemporary development of Marxism.

Keywords: Li Dazhao; Critique of Religion; United Front; The "Two Integrations"

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1 Introduction

The relationship between religion and socialism is a vital issue in the field of the united front. The report from the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China introduced the important theoretical concept of "integrating the basic principles of Marxism with China's specific realities and the rich traditional Chinese culture." The idea of the "two integrations" theory reflects both an in-depth summary of the Party's century-long theoretical and practical experience and a necessary step for adapting Marxism to China's unique context and the needs of the times. As the "Father of Chinese Marxism" and one of the founding members of the Communist Party of China, Li Dazhao's work on religious criticism and his efforts in the united front highlight the deep significance of the "Two Integrations." Therefore, understanding the link between "religious criticism and united front theory" in studying Li Dazhao's thought remains very important today.

Li Dazhao's religious critique drew from multiple intellectual sources, including traditional Chinese culture, Western Enlightenment thought, and Marxism. In adhering to the principle of "two integrations," he achieved a localized reconstruction of Marxist religious critique theory, forming his own distinctive religious critique ideology. He consistently applied and comprehensively utilized this ideology in united front practices..

2 The Cultural Substratum: Fine Traditional Chinese Culture

2.1 Harmony (Hehe) and People-as-Root (Minben)

Previous scholarship has mainly concentrated on Li Dazhao's introduction and exploration of Marxist theory, often neglecting his strong foundation in traditional Chinese "Old Learning" (Jiuxue). We should acknowledge how Li Dazhao embodied the traditional scholar-official spirit of "practical application of learning to statecraft" (Jingshi Zhiyong), which evolved into the modern revolutionary awareness that "every common man bears responsibility for the rise and fall of the nation" amid the threats facing modern China. Special attention should be given to the cultural roots underlying Li Dazhao's critique of religion, including traditional Chinese ideas of "Harmony" (Hehe), "People-as-Root" (Minben), and "Great Unity" (Datong).

Li Dazhao's early thought contained a clear concept of "Harmony." He proposed: "The way to enlighten the people lies in harnessing the inherent harmony of their nature to cultivate their innate talents and abilities. Like measuring to reveal, one should not impose what is not inherently present in them in pursuit of forced growth. The results will then be readily apparent. For human life involves desires, and politics is merely one method of fulfilling those desires." (China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.1, p.269). He emphasized guiding the masses and promoting social development through the "harmony and integration" philosophy. Early "harmony and integration" thought also shaped Li Dazhao's critique of Western religious persecution, emphasizing that "their extraordinary methods, though seemingly sound political strategies, have lost their inherent value by alienating the people. They fail to achieve their goals and instead cause harm." (China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2017, Vol.1, p.270). He argued that dealing with religion and religious believers should not involve crude coercion or oppression, but rather guiding them according to circumstances to serve political ends. This perspective also shaped Li Dazhao's dialectical approach to religious figures in united front practice, leading him to acknowledge and praise their sincerity toward the world and profound compassion, stating: "The sincerity of religious figures toward the world and their profound compassion have deeply moved my heart." (China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.1, p.149). This enabled him to correctly address and scientifically unite religious groups within the revolutionary united front.

2.2 The Politics of "Min Yi" (People's Constant Norms)

Li Dazhao's political concept of "Min Yi" (Min Yi, or the People's Constant Norms), as an early prototype of his socialist people's government ideology, originated from China's traditional "people-centered" philosophy. Building upon the Shangshu's principle that "the people are the foundation of the state; when the foundation is secure, the state is at peace," he proposed: "In ancient times, the sacred vessel of political authority resided in the ancestral ritual vessels; today, it resides in the people's ritual vessels. The ancestral vessels may be stolen, but the vessels of the people cannot be stolen; the ancestral vessels may be moved, but the vessels of the people cannot be moved" (China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.1, p.269). Thereby, transcending the contemporary notion of "five-ethnic-group republic." He emphasized the vital role of the common people in the rise and fall of a nation. In his critique of religion, he stressed: "In China, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and Christianity coexist in a broad-minded manner. The principle of freedom of belief has been

tacitly understood by our ancestors”(China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.1, p.406), thereby transcending the contemporary notion of “Five-Race Republic.” By respecting the religious beliefs of all ethnic groups, he established a rational and legitimate theoretical foundation for forming a broader united front alliance.

2.3 The "Datong" (Great Unity) Ideal and Marxist Synthesis

The ideal of “Great Harmony” represents the profound pursuit and social vision of the Chinese nation spanning millennia. The social vision described in the Book of Rites as “the emergence of the Great Way, where the world is held in common”—referred to as “Great Harmony”—embodies all the highest political ideals of Chinese civilization. Li Dazhao's pursuit of a “new society” can be understood, on one hand, as the October Revolution introducing him to Marxist revolutionary ideals, and on the other, as the completion of his Marxist “transplantation” of the ideal of Great Harmony. Li Dazhao's critique of religion delved into historical and economic depths, identifying “the insoluble nature of the roots of good and evil” as the cause of religion's emergence. Yet fundamentally, he asserted that “both religion and philosophy change with material conditions”(China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.3, p.138). Consequently, he argued that the morality required today is “not the morality of gods, nor the morality of religion... nor merely class-based morality,” but rather “Human Morality,” “Datong Morality” and “Mutual Aid Morality” (China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.3, p.146). The United Front, serving as the concrete embodiment and practical path of this “Mutual Aid Morality,” is envisioned to further break the shackles of religion and realize the Communist society of Great Unity.

3 Theretical Foundation: Marxism

Following the publication of his seminal article *My Views on Marxism* (Wo de Makesizhuyi Guan), Li Dazhao's application of the “Two Integrations” became primarily manifest in his absorption and utilization of historical materialism, dialectics, and scientific socialism. These theoretical pillars were concretely reflected in his critique of religion and his logic regarding the United Front.

First, Li employed historical materialism to analyze religion, emphasizing the nexus between religion and economics. He argued that studying religion “purely through ideology remains mysterious and indecipherable” (China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.3, p.16), positing instead that religion belongs to the “economic explanation of human culture.” For a historical materialist, “observing social phenomena centers on economic phenomena as the most critical factor”(China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.3, p.6) By distinguishing between the “economic base” (which Li termed “foundation structure”) and the “superstructure” (which he termed “surface structure”), he achieved a profound epistemological insight:

“The surface structure always shifts in accordance with the foundation structure. The changes in the foundation structure are driven by the ultimate internal force of evolution—productive forces. Matters of human consciousness cannot influence this foundation in the slightest; rather, the foundation determines human spirit, consciousness, -isms, and thoughts, compelling them to adapt to its course” (China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.3, p.14).

Second, Li's critique of religion exhibited the brilliance of Marxist dialectics from the very beginning. In his early work, *Min Yi and Politics*, Li demonstrated the ability to dialectically distinguish the essence from the dross within religion. He cited compelling historical examples:

“Jesus Christ is honored today as the sole Savior, yet in his own time, he was executed as a rebel against Heaven. More recently, Tolstoy is revered as a literary giant and philosopher, yet he was once excommunicated. From this, we know that so-called ‘heresies’ are not necessarily evil, and ‘profane words’ are not necessarily profane. Truth and justice may indeed reside within these heresies and profane words”(China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.1, p.283).

Building on this dialectical view, he further proposed: “We should realize the Confucian principle of ‘Daily Renewal’, uphold the Buddhist merit of ‘Repentance’, and follow the Christian meaning of ‘Resurrection’, to reform our outward appearance and cleanse our hearts” (China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.1, p.287).

His goal was to “dialectically absorb” the essence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity to “abandon the autocratic self and welcome the constitutional self”(China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.1, p.287), thereby ensuring that the “reconstructed self fits the new system of a reconstructed China, and the reconstructed China fits the new trends of a reconstructed world”(China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.1, p.287).

Thirdly, Li Dazhao's critique represents a further elucidation of Marxist Scientific Socialism, directly manifested in his analysis of “Socialism and Religion.” In his work *Socialism and Social Movements* (Shehuizhuyi yu Shehui Yundong), addressing the relationship between the two, Li stated explicitly:

“Many oppose this issue, assuming a close association between socialism and atheism. In reality, from a theoretical standpoint, these are two distinct matters.”(China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.4, p.253).

He further emphasized the materialist perspective:

“They [socialists] apply historical materialism to observe society, believing that man is not created by God, but that God is created by man. Phenomena in the spiritual realm are entirely reflections of the material and economic conditions of human society”(China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.4, p.254).

Li's emphatic clarification that “socialism and religion are theoretically distinct” served as the theoretical basis for his unequivocal advocacy of “Freedom of Belief” during the Anti-Christian Movement (Fei Jidujiao Yundong). Furthermore, it stands as the theoretical source and an early prototype for the Communist Party of China's establishment of its policy on freedom of religious belief.

4 The Realistic Foundation: Modern Chinese Social Reality and Historical Context

4.1 Modern Chinese Social Reality and Historical Context

Since the Opium War of 1840, China has faced “profound changes unseen in a century.” To salvage the nation from the crisis of “national subjugation and racial extinction,” modern Chinese history has witnessed a succession of reformist and revolutionary movements taking the stage: the Taiping Rebellion, the Boxer Uprising, the Self-Strengthening Movement, the Hundred Days’ Reform, and the 1911 Revolution.

Against this backdrop, Li Dazhao did not merely contemplate social issues through the lens of traditional culture and the dissemination of new ideas like Marxism; more importantly, he deepened the practical application of these theories through socio-historical practice. His logic of the United Front thus germinated, developed, and deepened within the specific historical context of China's national peril.

From the perspective of bathroom activities, the physiological factors that impose negative impacts on the elderly to engage in bathroom activities can be roughly separated into two aspects, namely, motor function and sensory function. On one hand, in terms of motor function, the degeneration of muscles and bones is expected to mitigate the flexibility of activities of the elderly, which means that the dominant force of the body is sometimes expected to be out of their own control. In such cases, it is easy for the elderly to feel powerless in the bathroom, where they mostly need to rely on auxiliary facilities to complete those activities. On the other hand, in terms of sensory function, against the backdrop of the deterioration of sight, hearing, and smell, the ability of the body's different senses to transmit signals to the central system decreases, which will contribute to the fact that the elderly tend not to be sensitive to temperature.

National peril served as the historical starting point for Li Dazhao's United Front logic. In 1917 and 1919, countering the Japanese propagation of "Great Asianism" (Pan-Asianism), Li published articles such as Great Asianism and Great Asianism and New Asianism. In these texts, he exposed Japan's annexationist intentions—acting as an accomplice to imperialism—and rejected the Japanese-led "Great Asian" alliance. Instead, he emphasized the promotion of national self-awareness and the breaking of racial prejudices. He called upon "enlightened scholars of both East and West to strive for the harmony of Eastern and Western races" (China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.2, p.156), thereby advocating for the formation of a united camp based on "World Humanism."

4.2 The Warlord Era as a Turning Point

The warlord conflicts marked a historical turning point in Li Dazhao's united front strategy. In 1922, following the founding of the Communist Party of China, Li Dazhao focused on the social reality of fragmented factions and warlord strife, steadfastly advocating for revolution and calling for "the formation of a united front to combat both warlords and foreign imperialism" (China Li Dazhao Research Association, 2013, Vol.4, p.209). That August, after multiple meetings with Sun Yat-sen and in-depth discussions on major issues concerning the Chinese revolution, the ideological foundation for cooperation between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party was preliminarily established. The bloody suppression of the workers' movement by warlord Wu Peifu during the February 7 Massacre of 1923 directly led the Communist Party, led by Li Dazhao and others, to recognize the inadequacies of revolutionary theory and advocate for the establishment of a broad united front. It can be said that the warlords' role as agents of imperialism in the chaos and oppression of Chinese society marked the turning point where Li Dazhao's united front ideology, confronting practical challenges, expanded toward alliances with different class-based political parties.

4.3 The International Dimension

After stepping into the old age stage, the aging of the body is expected to impose a direct impact on one's behavioral characteristics. With prominent dull actions with a slow reaction speed, the elderly witness a weaker coordination ability of the movement in comparison with before. In addition, the elderly are prone to getting exhausted and generating the feeling of fatigue. Last but not least, given the sharp decline in the physical function of the elderly, their resistance will also gradually weaken. In such cases, they have to attach great importance to seasonal changes and diseases brought by climate change, where the elderly will cast their eyes on and fully leverage preventive measures in advance.

Finally, the Third International (Comintern) represented a historical breakthrough in Li Dazhao's United Front logic. The founding of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1921 received critical assistance from the Comintern. In mid-July 1921, Comintern representatives, including Maring (Henk Sneevliet), arrived in Beijing. Li engaged in extensive dialogues with them, exchanging views on vital issues such as the principles of party building and affiliation with the Comintern.

Subsequently, Li dispatched Deng Zhongxia to accompany the representatives to Shanghai to meet Chen Duxiu and attend the First National Congress of the CPC. From this point onward, the early CPC effectively operated as a branch of the Comintern. In early 1924, the Kuomintang and the Communist Party formed a united front. The Kuomintang established three major policies: "alliance with Russia, alliance with the Communist Party, and support for farmers and workers." Li Dazhao and other Communists joined the Kuomintang as individuals. Subsequently, Li Dazhao traveled to the Soviet Union to attend the Fifth Congress of the Communist International and served as the Chinese Communist Party's representative to the Comintern. It can be said that Li Dazhao held a triple identity within the Chinese Communist Party, the Kuomintang, and the Communist International. This enabled China's democratic revolutionary forces and alliances to transcend territorial boundaries, forming a broader international coalition.

5 The Core Implications of Li Dazhao's Critique of Religion

Li Dazhao's critical approach to religion was a specific conclusion he reached by applying Marxist theory to the concrete religious landscape of the revolutionary era. His critical thinking on religion served as the starting point and foundation for the Communist Party of China to interpret religious and united front theories, formulate religious and united front policies, and advance religious and united front practices.

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