

Study on Religious Education in the United States and Its Inspiration*

UNE ÉTUDE SUR L'ÉDUCATION RELIGIEUSE AUX ETATS-UNIS ET SON INSPIRATION

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Abstract: The United States is one of the nations with most fantastic religious background, and in reality religion and religious education permeates all aspects of American life. Religion lies in American family education, school education, political activities and social life, playing a role that can not be ignored. An important inspiration can be drawn from the study of religious education of the United States to the ideological education in China.

Key words: Religion; Religious Education; The United States; Inspiration

Resumé Les Etats-Unis est l'une des nations qui ont des fonds religieux les plus fantastique, et en réalité la religion et l'enseignement religieux imprègnent dans tous les aspects de la vie américaine. La religion réside dans l'éducation familiale américaine, l'enseignement scolaire, les activités politiques et la vie sociale, en jouant un rôle qui ne peut pas être ignoré. Une source d'inspiration importante peut être tirée de l'étude sur l'éducation religieuse des Etats-Unis à l'éducation idéologique en Chine.

Mots-clés: Religion; Éducation Religieuse; Etats-Unis; Inspiration

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The United States is, on the one hand, the most secular country without any state religion in the world, but on the other hand is one with the most fantastic religious color. This country has the tradition of secularism, but religion and religious education play an important role in American culture and society, and permeate all aspects of American life, such as the American family education, school education, political activities and social life. The studies of American religion and religious education can not only be contributed to a better understanding of the America's situation of religious education, but to expanding new study perspectives for the ideological and political education in China.

1. THE TRADITION AND CURRENT SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

1.1 The Traditions of Religious Education of the United States

Religion has widespread influence in the United States. In the 17th Century, the Puritans, filled with a strong religious passion, landed on the continent of North America across the Atlantic Ocean from England and established the colonies, trying to realizing their religious dream for the sake of God. During the colonial period, the teaching materials from primary schools to universities were of strong religious color. In primary education, the course books, of which catechism

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was one of indispensable elements, were full of religious instructions, and Sunday schools mainly taught catechism. For example, a text titled "Good Guys should Do" said: "Fear God, honor their parents, do not lie, never lost. Love Christ, often pray, do good, not hesitate." Praying and reading Bible were very popular at schools. Students should attend morning and evening prayers and go to church to hear the missionaries preach the sermons on Sunday. Many Universities were also established mainly by the Church, such as the Harvard University(1636), Yale University (1701), Dartmouth College (1769), College of William and Mary (1693) and so on. During that period, the main objective in talent cultivation of the universities was to train priests and missionaries. Out of the first seven graduates of Harvard University, five had become missionaries. Until the end of 17th century, more than half of the graduates of this university took preaching as their profession. Up to 1753, the main objective in talent cultivation of Yale University was to train priests, and the majority of faculties were priests. Priests controlled not only the university education, but also the primary and secondary education. In New England, priests supervised the schools established by local governments. A major purpose of their education was to continue and consolidate the Puritan traditions. "All the priests are deeply interested in the dogma, theology and the domination over secular people's ideology, guarding the door to knowledge with a flaming sword in hand" (C. Beard and M. Beard, 1991, p. 154). Therefore, Beard, a famous American historian, said that what turned on the light of knowledge of the colonies was not the open-mindedness of the government officials but the enthusiasm from different schools of religions.

After the founding of the United States, although the Constitution clearly regulates "secularism", religions in America are always closely intertwined with the process of American history, and play a huge impact on the political, economic, legal, and cultural fields. American sociologist Richard Newhouse said, "A basic fact about the United States is that Americans themselves claim that most of them are Christians and the moral foundations of American society are Jewish-Christian morality just as non-Christian believe." (Zhang, 2007, p.13) "Americans' concept of value is based on the powerful religious morality. The United States is not a religious state that stresses the divine right, but without religion, it will be hard to imagine what the United States is like today."(Liu, 2001, p. 3) Dr. Peter Oakes, a professor of the department of religion of Virginia University stated, "The strong religious color of the United States is closely linked with its history. American Muslims, Jews or Christians, no matter what religion they believe in, are influenced by a series of "religious awakening movements" in American history. For example, during the War of Independence, American people became aware of the concept of natural rights; the Civil War led to the abolition movement; the social gospel movement of late 19th century and early 20th century brought about a wave of protest against industrialization and a storm of protection of the rights of workers. Currently a lot of people turn to the religions again for they realize that the progress of science and technology cannot get rid of various social problems, and also cannot answer the fundamental problem of "where it originates, and where it goes". All these religious awareness campaigns have made religion an important role in life" (Xiong, 2002, p. 60-61).

1.2 The Contemporary Religious Education in the United States

Since World War II, American religions have undergone a series of ups and downs: the religion heat in the 1950s; the decline of religion heat in the 1960s, and the revival of religion heat in the 1970s and 1980s. After the decades of ups and downs, religion has permeated the blood of American culture. As the American scholar William Ethel said, "The United States is not only the most modern country in the world, but the most developed religious country."(William,1985, p. 114) In today's America, religious education penetrates in all the aspects of the social life.

Firstly, religious education permeates family life. In contemporary American family education, parents often tell the stories in "the Bible" to their children. On weekends, parents take their children to churches to participate in various religious rituals to get the baptism of spirit and soul. Secondly, religious education permeates school education. Bible in the United States is the best-selling book. In public schools, the school authorities can not prohibit students' self-organized religious activities for any religious reasons. The U.S. private schools open religious courses with at least 2-3 periods at least or 4-5 periods at most per week. Thirdly, religious education penetrates into political activities. American Government attaches great importance to religions functioning as a tool for implementing the political administration and influencing ideological and public opinion, and adopts various measures to create a strong religious atmosphere. For example, President always put his hand on Bible while he is taking the oath of office; American Army, Navy, Air Force have chaplains and the clergy of various rank finally, religious education penetrates into the church and social life. Church is the important institution for religious education. Various religious festivals and charitable activities are of significance in American social life, such as the grand and solemn Thanksgiving Day, Christmas, Easter, etc.. On these festivals, Americans are able to feel the strong religious atmosphere and the presence and influence of God.

In addition, the United States instills religious dogma, which is consistent with the development of contemporary capitalism and most of which are about the basic ethics, into the majority Americans by means of mass media. About 1,300 broadcast stations and 36 TV stations spend the most or all of the time on religious propaganda. Besides, there are specialized religious radio stations broadcast the religious programs all day; what's more, religious education has penetrated into some TV programs. (Yang, 2002, p. 107-109)

2. THE ROLE OF AMERICAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

2.1 The Supportive Role of American Religious Education

American religious education, as a kind of spiritual support, has been playing a supportive role in Americans' outlook on life, the realization of life value, the shaping of personality, ethic concepts and national spirit. Its important role is manifested in the economic and political fields:

1) In the economic field. On the one hand, the faith in disillusionment, contempt for material wealth and the ascetic way of life, and the pessimistic attitude towards the reality, all of which are advocated by religious education, may play an adverse role in economic development. However, on the other hand, the ethical and spiritual beliefs advocated by religious education, such as fairness, honesty, thrift, and trustworthiness, are the moral principles involved in economic activities reasonably, and play a positive role in economic development. According to the Calvinistic theological theory, what people do is to add the glory of God in different ways. This idea will produce immense motivation if it is combined together with American people's strong desire to succeed, to make fortunes, to get God's salvation. If a person works more hard and achieves more than the other people around him, from the religious point of view, it shows this person's behaviors make God more glorious and identify his status as an elect of God, so wealth and success themselves symbolize a kind of virtue.

2) In the political field. In American society, religion and religious education have a special political influence. They go beyond political parties, but they are often espoused and respected by various political parties, and often play a role of "moral authority" or "political conscience". In the rich Christian culture atmosphere of the United States, for boarding the stage of political world, any candidates competing for government officials should believe a religion, especially Christianity devoutly, use religious language to cater to the voters' faith, and clarify their own political opinions with religious and moral beliefs. Churches also exert their influence to play a positive role in assisting community development, improving the situation of the low-income earners, protecting rights of women and children, preventing the prevalence of crime, and protecting the environments etc. In recent years, the Church is also directly involved in the peace movement, democracy movement, human rights movement, anti-war movement, anti-nuclear movement, anti-racial-discrimination movement and ecological protection in order that the various political forces can be supervised and restrained by resorting to Christian value system.

2.2 The Normative and Guiding Role of American Religious Education

The normative and guiding role of American religious education means that the religious belief can guide and regulate people's thinking. The value norms of religious education exercise the function of driving the society forward and governing the society, which is reflected in the following two aspects:

1) The normative and guiding role of religious education in the individual thinking. American religion is closely related with people's daily life. Americans are affected by families since childhood and closely linked with religious activities, so religion has penetrated into the daily life of the public and have a wide, profound and positive impact on their ideology, emotions and behaviors. For example, the Christian education emphasizes the instruction on such virtues as love, dedication, honesty, humility, forgiveness, generosity, courage, patience and endurance. Religious education also adopts some nice secular norms which are quite popular in daily life, such as respecting the elders and caring for the young, being ready to help others, thrift, and not trespassing, etc., and makes these secular ethical principles more authoritative. The implementation of the ethic norms in religion education does not resort to the external forces, but depend on the self-restraint in order that the public's inner spiritual power could be awaked to maintain what they think is right and virtual. So, religion has become the norms of people's thinking and behavior involuntarily, which stimulate the public to be imposed on the much sterner ethic requirements.

2) The normative and guiding role in the whole society. Just as each society has its own dominant value concept and ethical standard, what Americans push for is Christian tradition. The majority of Americans agree with Christian ethical principles based on Bible. It is precisely because of the traditional ethical power coming from religions that American society composed of immigrants can reach a consensus on ethical issues and has established the moral rules admitted by most of Americans. The numerous active religious organizations and permanent extensive church activities in the United States involve thousands of ordinary people and coordinate their activities. Universal love advocated by American religious education may lead people not simply to focus on their own interest but stress sympathy and friendliness to get rid of coldness and indifference and to establish a harmonious, sincere and cozy atmosphere, which is beneficial for the development of individuals and the whole society. In addition, some religious dogma and religious ethical principles can redress the public's psychological imbalance and satisfy people in a noble moral way, and thus the society is stabilized.

2.3 The Group Integration Role of American Religious Education

Integration refers to a certain comprehensive social relationship formed through continually updated and repeated interaction between different groups of people of a country, based on the similar or the same cultural traditions, life style, value concept, institutions. The group integration role in religion education is mainly manifested in ideological and political fields:

1) Ideological integration role. The United States coordinate the public's thoughts and actions to realized Americans' sense of group identity and sense of belongingness by resorting to the powerful religious forces and widely expanded church activities. American citizens have achieved a certain national ethos and social belief by means of religious education which stresses that religious belief should be closely combined with the national ethos and social belief, and that the piety to God should be connected with loyalty to the nation. For example, Christianity cultivates the public's national ethos and social belief by combining the devotion to God with the royalty and devotion the country. In America, religions have become part of social life and the foundation underlying all efforts to build the country. With religious emotions the United States has created a social belief. That is, patriotism, enterprising spirit, initiative, individual success, which has become a strength that unifies the United States.

2) The political integration role. U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower once said, "If our government is not based on deep religious beliefs it has no meaning." (H. R. Guggisberg, 1988, p. 2) The United States is a capitalist country that implements two-party system, in which Democratic Party and Republican Party are the two major political Parties; of course, there are other parties such as Communist Party, Socialist Party, and Socialist Workers Party and so on. After the Civil War, the two major bourgeois Parties, Democrats and Republicans, control the U.S. political stage.

On the one hand, the two Parties have the same political interest in the maintenance of the existing social system and so on; on the other hand, the two Parties struggle for power publicly or secretly. How to unify political Parties' own interest and national interest? Religious education and its value concept play a key role in maintaining the relationship between Parties. Despite the wide varieties of U.S. religion and the different degrees of intimacy in the relationship between the different Parties and the Church, but all the Parties generally agree with the basic value system represented by Christianity. "God Blesses America" is still the faith followed by all the Parties. The decision-making bodies are always impacted by their religious value system while making decisions. Each year the United States holds the National Prayer Breakfast attended by the President, senators and members of the House of representatives, and on the same day each state also holds a prayer meetings hosted by the state governor and the state council, both of which have created a strength of unity and make the public realize that any governments and any official are based on a certain religious belief.

3. INSPIRATION FROM AMERICAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TO THE IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL EDUCATION IN CHINA

3.1 Stressing the Application of Implicit Methods in Ideological and Political Education

In China's traditional ideological and political education, especially school education, there are usually formal uniform materials, a elaborate curriculum and normative classroom teaching. The positive explicit education has its advantages, but lacks flexibility and effectiveness. However, religious education in the United States, not only embodies in school education, but permeates every aspect of social life. The success of American religious education shows that under the new situation the nature of imperceptibility and permeability of ideological and political education should be stressed so that educates could be enlightened and educated unconsciously in the elaborately designed educational environments by being instilled with the agreeable theories and concepts of ideological and political education.

It is quite important for the ideological and political education to penetrate into the reality of social life, exert the role of the social environments, and create a good educational atmosphere. A major feature of U.S. religious education is focusing on building a macro-context of Americanism, in order to achieve the "unconscious" education, that is, the public are instilled with the education by being imposed to such a context unconsciously. Churches, as well as schools, families and society, are the powerful platform for the religious education. Since educatees live in the real world and are always affected by the environments, it is necessary and important to expand the coverage of the ideological and political education by making use of all the advantages and combing with the strength from families, schools and society, and to maintain the permeability and persistence of the ideological and political education so that educatees can get ideological edification and spiritual baptism in a perfect educational environments.

3.2 Stressing the Establishment of the Noble Belief in Ideological and Political Education

The sanctity of religion is an important condition for people to exercise religious teaching. Many facts prove that once a norm is endowed with sanctity it will claim the supreme authority, and thus it will be piously worshipped and observed. At present, one of the obvious and typical problems in China's ideological and political education is that the educational norms lack the sanctity which should have existed in the minds of educatees. This problem is resulted from the fact that some educators themselves do not firmly believe in or are not enthusiastic about Marxism, then they do like making a thorough theoretical research and in teaching their methods are mechanical and inflexible. As to educatees, their aim to take the ideological and political course is to gain academic credits, instead of obtaining the essence of the course. In view of this, it is necessary for the ideological and political education to train educatees for a better pursuit of the sanctity of morality, establish the high status of ethics in the eyes of the learned, that is, to reconstruct moral "faith", otherwise the moral education and morality itself will lose their dignity, and will lose the binding effect on human behaviors. (Tang, 2004, p. 75-78)

So how to make subjects obtain the sense of sanctity of moral beliefs? How to make educatees establish their own beliefs and sincerely pursue the value system? Of course, these problems cannot be solved by means of what is called illusory religious theory "divine morality", but by resorting to a pursuit of reasonable and scientific ambition and value in life. "At present, it is our ultimate ideal to realize communism and completely liberate all human races. But why such a great ideal lacks the correspondent attraction in reality? The most important out of the complex reasons is that the target is too grand so that it cannot regulate the individual behaviors and it is hard for individuals to realize the sanctity and nobility of this ambition. So, how this ultimate ideal obtains sanctity and nobility by means of reasonable exposition is a thorny and inescapable topic in the ideological and political education and moral construction. I suppose it is only by converting the grand and general ideal into specific ambitions and converting the respect for the ambition of liberating all human races in the world into the care and respect for individuals that a harmonious world can come into being." (Guo, 2007, p. 202-204)

3.3 Stressing the Importance of the Individual Value in Ideological and Political Education

In China, less is discussed about the value of the ideological and political education, not mention the dissemination about it. If there is, we confine the value of the ideological and political education to the development of an organization, such as an enterprise, a village, a school or a community. As to the function of the ideological and political education, more stress is given to the social function of it, and less is done for the research of value and meanings of ideological and political education to individuals. This is the larger gap between religious education and the ideological and political education in China, from which we should learn a lot. In the market economic system, only when people think that something is valuable, will they pursue it actively. As to the ideological and political education, it is usually asked what benefits the individuals can get from ideological and political education in the end. This question cannot be avoided but need thorough research and exposition. In religious education, religious belief is a kind of individual behavior and can produce powerful motivation and stimulus, for individuals believe that observing the religious teaching can lead to psychological comfort and emotional satisfaction in the near future, and to the "karma" in the far future. In order to acquire effectiveness of ideological and political education, it is necessary for us to expose and disseminate the functions of the ideological and political education on individuals, turn the goal of moral education from being focused on "normative" education to the transmission of "care", and change the ideological and political education from emphasizing the outside norms of individual behaviors to individuals' endogenous needs. "In fact, the successful ideological and political work, can settle down individuals spirit, help educatees establish noble morality, regulate interpersonal relationships, resolve conflicts, and provide a steady stream of spiritual power for individual development" (Zhou, 2009, p. 116-117).

In short, religion, as a cultural form, plays a series of roles and functions in the ideological and political of education. Religious education is the dominant form of American ideological and political education, playing a critical role in American society. For strengthening and improving the ideological and political education of China, it is positive and meaningful to draw nourishment from American religious education and explore the positive influence of it on aspects of content, method and forms of China's ideological and political education.

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