

Xinzhong Yao and Paul Badham, *Religious Experience in Contemporary China* Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2007. pp. 275. ISBN: 978-0-7083-2035-8. £75.00 hardback.

Sir Alister Hardy, writing in *The Spiritual Nature of Man* about the first 3,000 accounts of spiritual/religious experience collected by the RERU at Manchester College Oxford, stated that 'The studies must be applied to other cultures – to other faiths.' It was 'vital,' he believed, to establish whether the characteristics of such experiences 'are indeed applicable to mankind as a whole.' (Hardy, 1979, pp. 141-2)

The opportunity to do this came in 2002 when the Templeton Foundation invited Professor Keith Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, to recommend a project for funding and, in consultation with Prof. Paul Badham, the goal of a 'global project' to study spiritual/religious experience world-wide was formulated. *Religious Experience in Contemporary China* is the result of the first such attempt to study spiritual/religious experience in a culture outside a Western Christian/post-Christian milieu. The book is based on a comprehensive survey of religion and religious experience in China, carried out by leading scholars inside and outside China in 2004-07. A joint project of the Ian Ramsey Centre for Religion and Science at Oxford University, the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre and the Centre for Chinese Studies at the University of Wales, Lampeter, and supported by the Templeton Foundation, the aim was to investigate scientifically the religious situation within China and compare the findings with those in Britain.

The book sets out the methodological and sociological issues of the survey (the questionnaire used is included in an appendix). It discusses religious experience in the context of contemporary China, examining the influence of Confucian, Christian, Buddhist, folk religion, gender and rural influences on religious belief and experience. The results are based on 3,196 completed accounts collected from 10 sites in urban and rural areas across three regions of China. The book concludes, in Chapter 9, with reflections on religion and religious experience in Britain and China, and compares the state of religion in China after fifty years of atheist communism with that of the secularised culture of modern Britain. The book contains an excellent bibliography, glossary of Chinese characters and index.

Amongst the interesting findings is the high response rate of the Han Chinese regarding the question as to whether they had experienced a 'kind of (spiritual) power ...' (a variant of the 'Hardy question'*) – 56.7% answering in the affirmative, comparing with 31% to 49% positive response rate in Britain over the past thirty years, and 44% and 43% from surveys in Australia and the USA. Parallels also found in the types of experiences reported lead the authors to speculate on the likelihood of religious experiencing deriving from a common source. If a criticism is to be made, it is that the book focuses solely on the statistical data with, sadly, no examples of spiritual/religious experiences included, as there were in Alister Hardy's *The Spiritual Nature of Man* and David Hay's *Religious Experience Today* and *Exploring Inner Space*. Fascinating though the data is, it would have been nice to have been able to relate the statistical information to people's actual personal experiences, and this could have led to a warmer and even more valuable read. It is understood that, of the 3,196 people interviewed in the China survey, about 10%, or around 300 subjects, volunteered accounts of their experiences; and the intention is for these actual stories of the Han Chinese to be translated and added to the Alister Hardy archive. It is to be hoped that eventually a representative sample of these might, in turn,

be published – perhaps in a further comparative study illustrating the similarities, differences, and parallels with the stories of people in the Western world.

Funding is currently being sought for ‘a comparative study of religious experience across cultures and traditions’ in Turkey, Japan, India, Russia, Brazil, the USA and Taiwan. Should this succeed, Sir Alister Hardy’s hopes will be brought even closer to fruition, and another major step forward made possible in the understanding and appreciation of the universality and importance of contemporary spiritual/religious experience. In this event, it is hoped that this study might include some accounts of these experiences in the findings, and that such, perhaps, might be in a form more readily available to the general reader.

Reviewed by John Franklin, Secretary, AHS.

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* ‘Have you ever experienced a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?’, used in Sir Alister Hardy’s original research.