

# Harmonious Coexistence and Conflicts among Religions: —A Theoretical Approach Based on Cases of Multi-Religion Communities in Yunnan China

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**Abstract:** The wisdom that brought about harmonious coexistence of different religions can serve as good lessons for the building of harmonious society. Religious harmony is a fundamental element in ethnic harmony and social harmony. The key point in achieving religious harmony is the pluralism of its believers' identity. Religious harmony can't be made without the harmony between the believer group and believer individual, and more importantly between believers of a certain religion and those of another. Religious conflict is not necessarily destructive; on the contrary, it can be constructive and even beneficial when it is controllable in form and in scale.

**Key words:** religious pluralism, Limitations of Harmony, Constructiveness of Conflict

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Along with globalization, it becomes more and more frequent for different religions to get in touch with each other, to exchange and to mutual interact. How to bring about religious harmony is becoming a more urgent issue facing us. Harmonious coexistence of religions is a kind of religious relationship by which two or more religions exist in friendly state. Religious harmony happens only in those religions that exist in the same time, in the same place and within the same population. Only when two or more religions exist simultaneously and they interact upon each other that it is possible for religious harmony to happen.

## I.

Every religion has its own thoughts on harmony and on non-violence. So, religious harmony should not only serve as a guide line for religions to coexist but also be popularized in other sectors of human life. We the Chinese people today are facing historical economic transformation and social transformation but the spiritual transformation which unavoidably accompanies the social and economic transformations is yet to be recognized. Religious harmony can serve as one of the resources for spiritual transformation and provide us with experiences in harmonious coexistence. Therefore, in social governing and in cultural development, we should study religious harmony on

the premise of social harmony and we shall also build a harmonious society based on religious harmony.

Harmony dictates common spirit, common principles, and common rules even, but the ways and the tools by which to achieve harmony can be various. The style of harmony may also be diversified. Religious harmony is essentially a kind of social relationship. Harmonious relationship does not exist in a vacuum. It exists in certain circumstances within a certain population. Some religions may claim universality. But no matter how universal they are, they can not cover all human beings. Their population is only larger than that of other religions, and they are more influential comparatively. When different cultural groups are more frequent in getting in touch with each other, it is unavoidable that different religions shall meet. As that society gets more established, the opportunities for the different religions to be involved with other religions become more frequent. However, religious harmony does not mean religious integration; each of these religions involved shall not lose its independent identity. Rather, each of the religions shall benefit from the others and shall grow together. Therefore, religious harmony is a target, a process, and also a cultural tradition. Objectively speaking it is a phenomenon and a fact, and subjectively speaking it is an ideal and a faith. Advocated by Raymond Panikkar, Paul Knitter, and other famous scholars, the religious dialogue has gained acceptance. But the religious dialogue does not fit the Chinese situation completely. Dialogue is a means for harmony. Under certain conditions, the means may not work. Dialogue may lead to harmony. In other words, dialogue is a means for harmony, but not the other way round by claiming harmony is a means for dialogue.

From the history of religion, we can see that the conflicts between religions are mostly due to the competition for believers. How well the problem of religious identity is solved marks the dividing – line between religious harmony and religious conflict. It is also an important criterion for judging the state of relations between the religious and non – religious social sectors. Chinese history shows that when the dominating religion did not stop its believers from believing other religions at the same time, the relations between religions were harmonious. Yunnan province is outstanding in religious harmony in China. In Yunnan, it could be seen that believers are members of several religions at the same time. Their souls belong to different gods. It is possible that they are major members of one religion and minor members of another. It also could be seen that one religious site is used by another religion. In other words, different religions share a common religious site. This kind of site sharing is a natural result of pluralism of identification.

When the variables of religious harmony are taken into consideration, it appears that the narrower the geographical space is, the smaller the population is the smaller the population is and the more frequent the interactions between religions are, the more typical of relationship the religious harmony is. Religious relationship in essence, is a kind of social relationship. If religious harmony can be achieved within a smaller social unit such as a family, it is easier to achieve the same in a larger social unit such as a village which comprises many families.

## II.

All religions share some common characteristics, without which religions can not be put into a same category. However, without generous spirit and tolerant attitude of all religions in a certain region, religious harmony is not possible in this region. So, when we study religious harmony, we should focus firstly on the differences between the religions, secondly on their interactions, and thirdly on their common interests. Religious harmony is characterized by multi – sidedness, limitedness, openness and dynamics. In fact, in comparison with social conflict, social harmony is limited, conditional and temporal. Multi religion is a precondition for a religious harmony, for without the existence of two or more different religions and their interactions upon each other, there would be no base for harmony. In any given community, the religious relationship is always changing, adapting itself with the incoming of a new religion. The surviving of a religion depends on constantly recruiting new believers. The death of old believers makes it necessary for a religion to recruit new believers. What weakens a religion more is that some of its older believers may give up their current religion to take up a new one. Therefore, it not uncommon in history to find that some religions, in order to maintain the size of their memberships, forced their believers to remain and/or force believers of other religions to be turncoats. In Chinese history, there are times when Buddhism and Taoism were in conflict. Either of them worked out theories to protect its faith and they exchanged attacks. In the end, they realized mutual enmity was destructive to both of them. They developed out believer identity tolerance to solve this issue, allowing believers freedom to believe two or more religions simultaneously. This laid down the foundation for the fusion of the three main religions in non – religious social sectors of the Chinese life. There was a famous saying, expressing vividly the fusion of the three religions: “to deal with the society by Confucianism, to cultivate spirit by Buddhism, and to build health by Taoism.”

A religion is a special community organized around a holy faith. The essence of a “god” upon which the holy faith is laid, is to hold together rather than to break apart. The god of one religion is different to the god of other religions. In the theories protecting itself, each religion would from its own position belittle the god of other religions at the neglect of the common essence of all gods. The strategic goals and action logic of religious protection are in two directions: inside, to keep hold of its old believers; outside, to convert new believers. And the two hands of implementing the religious protection are soft hand: religious exhortation and persuasion, and hard hand: religious monopoly, religious inquisition, and religious punishment. When the new believer is at the same time a believer of another religion, theoretical contradictories are unavoidable and belief conflicts are unavoidable. So the more believers a religion hosts, the more likely that it gets into conflict with another religion. This also requires us to limit our study of religious harmony within a specific time and place, and in a specific community. To achieve religious harmony, there are many necessary conditions: proper religious policies, proper background, proper structure, proper function, proper

reasoning, and even proper sentimentality. Any one of these, when unbalanced, may destroy religious harmony. On the other hand, it is much easier to cause religious conflict; a different interpretation of a religious doctrine or even a remark considered improper by another religion may initiate a war between religions or within a religion.

We use "specific" to characterize religious harmony, we are to emphasize that the meeting of religions must happen in a specific time and place; that the relations between religions are multisided; that the social position of all religions are equal; and that the interaction between religions are structural and dynamic. Harmony, in actual social relations, is an ordered state achieved through spiritual, and material supports accumulated from disordered state. To achieve the ordered state, the value of other religions should be planted in the mind of the believers and integrate the foreign value into its own value system. The foreign value should be appreciated, instead of being belittled. A religion which puffs itself up would very much likely deflate other religions. Therefore, it is necessary to overcome self - centralism tendency, and it is most importantly necessary to respect each other, to understand each other, and to appreciate each other. Religious harmony should be a total one; harmonious both inside and outside. It is true some religions are more advanced, but the advanced ones should recognize the equal social position of the less advanced. Some religions have a longer history, but the long history ones should not push shorter history ones. Some religions are stronger, but the strong ones are fair to the weak ones. When totally harmonious, religions are beneficial to each other and beneficial to human beings as a whole.

Suppose two religions have never got in touch with each other. Each is peaceful to the other. But this is not harmony. Without getting in touch with each other, they would not understand each other. Without understanding each other, they would not respect each other. And without mutual respect, there would definitely no room for harmony. Looking at the past and looking at the present, we can see that religious conflicts are mostly caused by misunderstandings. A small misunderstanding snowballs to cause a serious event.

It is a general fact in the development of religion, that there was only one religion in a given community at the beginning. With the communication and exchange of this community with other communities, other religions got into this community. New religions coming into this community brought about three situations: conflict, assimilation, and harmony. Pluralism of religion is the general tendency. Within a religion, fractions are developing. Outside a religion, new religions are coming, as the development of communication and transportation technology has advanced so much in the past years. Religious harmony is merely one type of relationship between religions. It is dynamic and may change to become other types of relationship. The other possible religious relationships are religious conflict and religious assimilation. Religious conflict may include religious war, and religious opposition. Religious assimilation may include religious substitution, and religious dissolving. Religious harmony may include religious dialogue, and religious peaceful coexistence. Therefore, when we talk about religious harmony, we should have a broader,

dynamic, and multi – sided view.

### III.

Religious conflict usually is a necessary step to religious harmony. We may be correct to say that without religious conflict there would not be religious harmony. But religious conflict is inevitable and repeated. Between religions there are unavoidable contradictions. Through contradictions, religions get used to each other, understand each other, appreciate each other, and benefit from each other's strong points, so as both are growing. Therefore, natural, restrained, and benign religious conflict is the first step for a religion to become matured. Conflict is therefore of constructive value and significance. At its beginning is far from being perfect on many sides because neither theory, organizational system nor ritual system is well established. It needs to borrow from other religions positive elements to improve itself. So, religious conflict exposes its weak points, which are the target of its rivals. Religious conflict helps it to become aware of its weak points and to stimulate it to find ways to mend up.

Religious conflict and religious assimilation are aimed at monism, while religious harmony is aimed at pluralism. So, when we study harmony, we should pay enough attention to conflict. A conflict is two or more parties rivaling for a targeted object, and a conflict may not necessary result in destruction. As all parties involved in the conflict are fought over the same object, there exist potential constructional elements. When the contradictories between the parties are resolved, there shall appear a new type of relationship. The new relationship is harmony.

Conflicts between different religious groups may strengthen the interior cohesiveness within each of the religion. For example, the Wa ethnic group, in the past, used human scalp to worship their rice god and the grown – up ceremony for a Wa male required him to kill a stranger and use it in the worship. So the relationship between the Wa ethnic group and other ethnic groups was tensed. This kind of situation strengthened the interior cohesiveness of the Wa group. Any person who violated their rules might be expelled from their village. When this happened, death was waiting for the expelled.

Religious conflict does not necessarily result in destruction. Moderate conflict is very often the step needed for an advanced religion to gain a place in the backward religion community. Living in Yunnan's Bingzhongluo township, there are the Lisu, the Nu, the Tibetan, the Dulong ethnic groups. The local main beliefs are primitive religion, Lamaism, Catholicism, and Christianity. In Bingzhongluo members of a family may believe in different religions. Nowadays, these religions coexist peacefully, but in history there were conflicts among them. When a new religion comes into a community, it is unavoidable that the new religion conflicts with the existing religion. For a backward ethnic group, to accept the new religion and give up the old one is like the birth of a new life; pain is unavoidable. The incoming of a new religion at the same time harms the social position and economic interests of some people. But often, on the whole, the incoming of a new religion

rejuvenates the ethnic culture and brings about progress in social productivity. So, we should not take religious conflict as a disaster. We should analyze it and find out what kind of religious conflict it is. Some types of religious conflicts are the expressions of the internal need to develop and establish the religion. However, we should also be on the alert for the possibility that religious conflict might be used by some people to create trouble.

Ideally, harmony should be the normal state of religious relations. But what is happening throughout the world tells us that religious conflicts are everywhere. Even where there are examples of some harmonious cases, the harmony is exclusively a state achieved only after conflicts. There is not an ethnic group that does not have a religion. And there is not a meeting of two or more religions without conflict. Today, Bingzhongluo Township is regarded as a sample of religious harmony. But in history, there were many cases of religious conflict. Records show that at the time when Lamaism came into Bingzhongluo, lamas persecuted the shamans, the priests of the primitive religion. Later when Catholicism came in, there were conflicts between the missionaries and the local lamas.

At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, religion at Bingzhongluo began to become diversified. Du Jiangong, a Living Buddha from Dege Monastery, a Lamaist monastery in Sichuan province, went to Fugong County to spread Lamaism and failed. Then he moved to work in Bingzhongluo, spreading Lamaism among the Nu, the Lisu and the Dulong ethnic groups. This time he succeeded in breaking ice in primitive religion's monologue in belief. The most serious conflict took place during the fourth generation of the lamas. To expand the influence of Lamaism, the lama in charge, invited workers from outside to build larger monasteries. Lamas raised the funds from the local people in whatever possible ways, even by using force. It took seven years to build the Puhua monastery, which was much larger than the Feilai monastery. At its high time, Puhua monastery hosted over a hundred lamas. The monastery owned 130 mu of rice field, 30 mu of woods, 100 more horses, 100 more oxen, and 1000 more goats. But at this time, a malignant communicable disease was spreading and many of the lamas were infected. It was widely believed that disease was spread by ghosts, and Shamans could cure because they could drive ghosts away. The lamas invited all local shamans. The shamans worked very hard in curing the lamas, but they could not "drive the ghosts away"; as the lamas did not recover from the illness. The lamas punished the shamans by killing them all. But one of the shamans named Kunchu managed to get away. Kunchu reported the massacre to the local government. The government imposed on the Puhua a fine of a pail of gold to pay for the lives of the slain shamans. Puhua monastery lost most of its assets and fell into decline. A pail of gold was not the biggest loss for Lamaism. This event made it known that Lamaism was incapable of coping with disease and lamas had to invite shamans to cure them. This cast doubt on Lamaism.

In 1888, I. Leuefieg, a French missionary, was sent to spread Catholicism in Zayu of Tibet but was driven out. He came to spread Catholicism in Bingzhongluo and Catholicism became one of the three biggest religions there. The other two were Lamaism and the primitive religion. But because catholic missionaries tried to increase its influence by forcing local people to convert to

Catholicism, they caused conflicts with Lamaism, which climaxed in the case of Baihanluo Arson. Baihanluo Church was set on fire. Protestantism came later, and learning from the Catholic lesson worked cooperatively and was friendly with other religions. Its influence grew faster.

In fact, Protestantism, after coming to Yunnan, did have conflicts with local religions. Even today, the conflict exist but in a low degree. On the whole it exists harmoniously. Take the Hani ethnic group as an example. Recently, Protestantism caused some problems in some Hani communities and in some Hani families. A possible scenario is one in which one of the couple believes in Protestantism and goes to the church every Sunday. The other has to work on Sundays. As time moves on, the one who has to work every Sunday becomes unhappy with the wife or husband who goes to church instead of work. It happens that the wife or the husband refuses to unlock the door for the other who goes to church and for staying out late.

Different opinions appear in the family of which some members who believe in Protestantism when an old family member dies. Those family members who believe in Protestantism would bury the dead in the Christian way, and other family members would bury the dead in the traditional way, worrying that if buried in the Christian way the dead would never be able to unite with the ancestors. There is another example. Those Hani people who believe in Protestantism do not visit the family graveyard at the Qingming Festival, a traditional festival for family members to go to graveyard to remember their ancestors. This causes relatives to be unhappy.

Traditionally, the Hani village would worship by offering a sacrifice of an ox when they start a big project, such as digging well, or building canal, or a bridge or other public facilities. Hani who believe in Protestantism regard such ceremonies as superstitious and do not participate. Some of them cut trees from the village holy hill for building churches. Such actions make the Hani people who do not believe in Protestantism angry. They cut off water supply and electricity supply to the Christian families. They confiscate the Christians' land and forest. They even drive some Christians out of their village. These cases show that it will not have religious harmony for a community to accept a new religion at the cost of its own traditional culture.

Two causes of religious conflict can be identified; The first cause is neither side understands the differences between them. The second cause is that neither side deals properly over issues of interest between them. When the believers of two different religions can not take an understanding attitude towards each other and both sides are belittling each other, there would not be religious harmony. But the primordial spirit of religion is not to break apart, but to hold together. In a primitive community, religion plays the role of cohesiveness. However, religion is created by man and does not go across its population boundary easily. If there is no limit for a religion to spread over the world and its spirit is not worldly and can not include different believing systems, it shall bring about conflict, not harmony, under the stimulation of non - religious social forces and economic interests. So, the purpose of studying religious conflict is to alert against the magnification of the differences between religions, to clear away the ideological root of this wrong concept, and finally to turn conflict into harmony.

The more pluralistic in its believing system a community is, the less possibility of religious conflict it shall have. On the contrary, those ethnic groups which are more closed in one religion shall have less chance of harmony.

The intermarriage between believers of different religions happens and the intermarriage is well appreciated by other members of the community. This is a sign of religious harmony. This also signifies that people in this community have more freedom in choosing his religion.

In the religious harmonious communities in Yunnan, we see a plurality of religious identifications. A man can acquire the membership of different religions. This means that each of the religions can absorb nutrient elements from other religions. We also see that the same site serves different religions in their religious ceremonies. Sharing the same religious site accompanies the plural religious membership. From dialectical viewpoint, the interaction of religions includes both conflict and harmonious elements. And what kind of religious relationship it is, is decided by which of the two is at the dominating side. Therefore, a harmonious relationship is achieved by constant conflicts between the religions, and harmony is not something that we can make once for all.



中文题目:

## 多元宗教和谐与冲突

——基于云南多元宗教关系的理论探讨

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**摘要:**多元宗教和谐共处的智慧能够为和谐社会、和谐世界的建设提供宝贵的经验,宗教和谐是民族和谐、社会和谐的基础。能否解决信徒的宗教身份归属,成为宗教之间能否和谐的关键。特定地域内的宗教和谐必然要表现为信徒群体和信徒个人之间的和谐。宗教冲突并不必然具有破坏性,在可以控制的规模、范围和水平上的冲突,为了特定的目标而发生,往往具有潜在的建设性价值和意义。

**关键词:**多元宗教、和谐的有限性、冲突的建设性

