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The Religion of Falun Gong

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A Review of *The Religion of Falun Gong*

Paul Hedges¹

The Religion of Falun Gong. By Benjamin Penny. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012, xiii + 262 pages, ISBN: 9780226655017 (cloth), \$50.00.

There is little doubt that Benjamin Penny's careful and detailed analysis of the religious aspects of Falun Gong will become required reading for anyone exploring this particular organization, and should be widely read by those with an interest in contemporary China and new and alternative spiritualities in general. Though, as he notes, the classification of the movement as a religion is far from straightforward—both its own adherents and the Chinese authorities would not term it a “religion”—he shows that it is imbued with a deep religiosity that means examining it as religion is not illegitimate.

The book proceeds through six chapters that seek to examine the main aspects of the rise, development, and ideology of the Falun Gong movement. Penny does this with far more detail and precision than is done in much other literature on the subject, and I found a number of

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my own understandings improved or corrected convincingly and authoritatively.

To go through the chapters, first is “What is Falun Gong?,” which provides as background for the reader an impressive overview of both existing literature and Penny’s own research. Chapter two, “The History of Falun Gong, 1992-99,” explores the movement from its beginnings until the fateful showdown with the Chinese authorities. The next chapter, “The Lives of Master Li,” looks at the biography of the founder, Li Hongzhi, and discusses the way he is presented and understood within his own writings and by the movement’s participants. Penny shows that Li operates as a charismatic leader and has taken on quite cosmic proportions in the movement’s understanding. Chapter four, “Spiritual Anatomy, Cosmos, and History,” explores various aspects of the belief system and cosmology of Falun Gong. Here, and throughout, an invaluable service provided by this book is in the analysis of Falun Gong not simply as a set of teachings but as a developing and evolving movement, showing especially how the various understandings and presentations of ideas and concepts have changed since 1999. Chapters five and six may to some degree be considered together as they deal with “Cultivation” and “Steps to Consummation,” or the practices and notions of spiritual/religious transformation that are believed to occur in Falun Gong.

Throughout the text, Penny’s grounding as a historian of Chinese religion is revealed in the way he dissects the movement’s reliance upon previous religious systems, notably Buddhism, and as he demonstrates how Li has changed and reshaped the concepts and terms that were taken from this heritage. Penny also notes the ways that Western ideas have shaped the beliefs and presentations of Falun Gong, and how Li’s exposure to American culture may have facilitated this. The final section, “Epilogue: Transformations,” further expands upon the notion of the evolution of the movement.

One area I would have liked the author to develop further is the question of what it means to call Falun Gong a religion in relation to

scholarly debates around the meaning of this word. As is widely known what is branded and classified as a religion is to some degree culturally determined, and this is very much true in China. Though this is explained, a more analytic discussion related especially to wider disputes within Religious Studies as to whether religion is even a legitimate category of academic discourse would be useful. Penny's text fits into this discussion in a very useful way because it shows the flaws in the scholarship that argues that we should abandon the term "religion." Rather, to some degree, I would suggest, Penny shows that religion is a necessary category if we are to make sense of Falun Gong, which is not simply a therapeutic Qigong tradition, nor some specifically Chinese heterodox sect/evil cult.

This is not to say that "religion" as a concept is not without its problems and that commonplace descriptions derived from a Christian narrative can be misleading, but more nuanced scholarly discourse around the term would, I believe, allow us to suggest that Falun Gong fits neatly alongside other phenomena we label in this way and that it provides a useful analytic category in such situations. That Falun Gong is not identified as a religion by its followers or some others would show, I suggest, *contra* critics of the category religion, not so much that the category religion itself is inherently flawed (any single term is of course culturally bound and limited, and the same goes for any word), but that the naming process is political and contested, and shows the limits we impose on our terms. This issue could be expanded upon here; however, such disputes are not the book's aims, and it succeeds admirably in providing a clear and authoritative account of the theoretical development and underpinnings of Falun Gong in the context of understanding it as a religion, that is to say as a tradition which has affinities to such traditions as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

For students of Buddhist Studies, the way in which classical motifs and concepts are utilized in a contemporary context will no doubt prove fascinating, while the question of what it tells us about contempo-

rary Chinese spirituality and religiosity will no doubt also be much discussed. For instance, Li's major text/scripture is *Zhuan Falun*, which is the Chinese rendering of the Buddhist terminology of "turning of the wheel of Dharma," indicating the Buddha's first sermon, which links him into the Buddhist tradition, and as Penny notes Li has made claims to rectify Buddhist and other teachings, yet at the same time he reworks this motif so that, for Li: "The *falun* of Falun Gong is an intelligent, spinning body of high-energy matter" (191, citing Li *Zhongguo Falungong* 36). As such, Li takes this familiar Buddhist phrase and notion but employs it as part of his self-cultivation scheme.

As another example, Li also makes use of the language of Buddhas and Buddhahood, arguing in ways very congruent with Chinese versions of Mahāyāna, that we are all innate Buddhas, and that many beings have achieved this state at different times. At the same time, however, Li also seems to regard "Buddha" as being another term for Dao (or Way, drawing here on Daoist tradition), or other divinities/Gods. Therefore, he uses language and concepts that will be familiar to his Chinese audience for religious ideals. Indeed, it may be said that he draws on syncretic trends in Chinese thought like the so-called Three Traditions (*sanjiao*) discourse which sees each of China's three "main" traditions (Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism—Li does not have so much to say on Confucius but also includes him, while he also adds Jesus into his cosmological framework) as all teaching about the same truth but in different ways or aspects. However, in so doing Li also takes over these terms and places them within the structure of his own system such that the great Buddhas, like Amida and Maitreya, become practitioners of self-cultivation within the cosmos of Falun Gong rather than teachers of traditional Buddhist values.

The book is an important contribution to the study of Falun Gong, being the first major academic work to explore the teachings, beliefs and practices of that movement in detail. It is worth, in relation to this, noting how it relates to some other texts. Perhaps most similar is

Maria Hsia Chang's *Falun Gong: The End of Days*, which also sets out the beliefs of the system, although it is very much done so in a wider historical and political context that seeks to make sense of why the Chinese government has sought to control and suppress specific religious movements. She also does not enter into the same depth to examine the key texts and the ideology behind it, and here Penny's knowledge as a scholar of ancient Chinese religion proves invaluable.

Also looking at Falun Gong in the context of Chinese popular religion, David Ownby in *Falun Gong and the Future of China* does excellent work in contextualizing the movement and tracing its development, but focuses on narratives of practitioners in field work done in the USA and elsewhere, and so doesn't explore the textual and ideology so closely. David Palmer, for instance, in *Qigong Fever: Body Science and Utopia in China*, has meanwhile shown how Falun Gong fits into the craze for qigong that brought not just Li but many other self-cultivation movements to prominence. His work, however, with this focus does not detail the ideology and theological aspects of the movement in the way that Penny so ably succeeds in doing. Other works also do not focus on this, for instance, Vincent Goossaert with David Ownby guest edited a special edition of *Nova Religio* on "Mapping Charisma in Chinese Religion," which brought some useful work about Qigong and Falun Gong together, and with David Palmer produced *The Religious Question in Modern China*, but neither work explores Falun Gong specifically in the depth that Penny does here.

As such Penny's work is an important contribution, and his study manages to give both an empathetic phenomenological survey, yet also with critical analysis and historical contextualization. Such that while Penny surveys the literature and movement, he also supplies a whole set of background commentary, where his background as a historian of classical Chinese thought helps give us a meticulous and contextualized treatment of this. The teachings and ideas of Li Hongzhi are explored in more depth than anywhere else, while he provides the context in terms

of Chinese traditions, especially Buddhism, that helps explain where his ideas come from, but also showing how they differ from previous usages. In sum, this is a book that will be invaluable reading for anyone interested in contemporary Chinese religious thought, and especially in the way that popular traditions like Falun Gong continue to make use of motifs and ideas from previous traditions such as Buddhism and employ them in new ways.