

SERGIO TARGA, FABRIZIO TOSOLINI,  
TIZIANO TOSOLINI

# FAITH & MONEY



*Asian Study Centre*

XAVERIAN MISSIONARIES - JAPAN

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## Introduction

The present publication of the Asian Study Centre attempts a phenomenological — but not only — analysis of the complex relationships between faith and money in the religious contexts of modern Bangladesh, Japan and Taiwan. Perhaps stimulated by the ubiquitous presence and overall importance of money in the modern world's dynamics and transactions, the three authors explore money's place and role within the internal economies of non-western religious-cultural setups.

Following the path of previous publications, the present book does not intend to present a systematic and complete view of the subject; nonetheless, it does aim at provoking debate by providing basic conceptual frameworks, phenomenological data and interpretative keys. It certainly tries to go beyond a certain traditional reflection, common in Christian settings, which often, when it comes to faith and its practices, takes a midway stance between the two opposites of wealth and poverty. Money and financial resources in general are not charged here with moral value, nor are they seen as fostering or hampering a religious faith. They are first and foremost intended as means to a fullness of life in whichever ways believers of different religions understand it. The authors always look at their respective field of study from the viewpoint of Christian agents. This is gladly acknowledged. Perhaps it is the dialectic relationship established between the authors' religious-cultural background, and the respective religious-cultural environment under study, which leads them to highlight wealth and gratuity as the conceptual categories calling for our common thought.

The book is divided into three main sections. Each section comprises three contributions relating specifically to Bangladesh, Japan and Taiwan. The first two, which are more phenomenological in outlook, try to analyze how religions in the three countries sustain themselves and how these same religions are practiced by their respective believers in order to obtain welfare and well-being. The third section, which is more comparative in perspective, searches for the logic of gift in the different religious contexts. That logic is seen as capable of subverting the moral economy of any religion and thus capable of challenging humanity towards gratuitousness. One of the conclusions of this work will be that only through a logic of gift-giving, can money be demoted from being the super-value of the modern market economy.

In *Money's Ways*, the three papers start out by reviewing the salient traits of the recent and remote history of Bangladesh, Japan and Taiwan respectively. The purpose of this exercise is to pinpoint the relationships between religion and state in the recogni-

tion that money *is* power. Not surprisingly, the different religious environments of the countries point in the same direction. Religion in these countries has been, and still is, instrumental to political power. Apparently there is a symbiotic relation between religion and politics which is unheard of in modern Europe. However, this relationship, which at times is also difficult and dialectic, does not necessarily involve direct funding or financial involvement of the state. In recent years, the threat of terrorism has made the State more intrusive and vigilant, especially in Bangladesh and Japan. In Bangladesh and Taiwan, the state attempts to establish forms of patronage with religious institutions through donations in order to increase its control over them and to boost its own political legitimacy. In the main, the religions of these countries sustain themselves through donations from their respective believers and by providing them with religious services.

In *Getting Rich*, the papers look at how believers relate to the divine in order to obtain some sort of economic and/or other form of benefit. Despite different sociological environments and religious practices, it seems that the same logic lies beneath the religious experiences of believers in the three countries at study. The gods of wealth are numerous and are often called upon to grant devotees well-being in its various forms. Apparently, devotees and gods are bound together by forms of patronage which forces the gods to grant their devotees' wishes in exchange for the latter's devotion, sacrifice and ritual actions in general. In Bangladesh and Japan, this is somehow tempered by a tradition of asceticism which reminds believers of the inconsistency of finite reality. This is less emphasized in Taiwan where, on the contrary, money and its quest assume a greater role in the people's religious experience. Managerial attitudes can also be recognized in the way Chinese live out their religiosity. Peculiar to Chinese religious practice is the use of ritual money which is offered and burned during particular rituals.

In the last section, *The Logic of Gift-Giving*, the authors benevolently search the three fields for gift-giving dynamics. The latter's presence is recognized but, at the same time, their differences from Christian thought are highlighted. The patronage relationship that entwines gods and devotees is also at work among people in general, thus establishing an unequal form of reciprocity which leaves little, if any, space for gratuitousness. In a special way, the paper on Taiwan offers a reflection on how money and power, with the prestige it brings, may actually be used in the service of gratuitousness in the Chinese context. In the author's own words of the author, the power of truth may be actually revealed by and through the truth of power.

Last but not least, the three authors wish to express their heartfelt thanks to Steve McKend for revising and translating the text.

## Money's Ways



Money often, if not always, is synonymous with power, it pursues power and makes the exercise of power possible. Because of money or financial resources, religious views may actually become instrumental to political processes and proposals. It is therefore important to look briefly at the history and background of the relationship between religion and state in Bangladesh before tackling the intricacies of the relationship between money and religion. I shall then move on to describe Islam's relationship to money in Bangladesh at institutional and popular levels.

Bangladesh was born in 1971 after a bloody war of independence, which caused the death of three million people in just 9 months. Unlike Pakistan, whose eastern part it was until 1971, Bangladesh was born as the result of a secular struggle centred on Bengali language and culture. In its 1972 Constitution, Bangladesh enshrined secularism, democracy, socialism and nationalism as the major pillars of its policies. Pakistan, on the other hand, was the result of communal politics that emerged from Muslim nationalism. It was the brainchild of Indian Muslim elites who, at the partition in 1947, reclaimed and obtained a state of their own with strong British support. With the assassination in 1975 of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh, and most of his family, Bangladesh entered a period of turbulent and bloody politics. After a series of military coups and counter coups, general Ziaur Rahman managed to stabilise the country under his regime (1975-1981). Sheikh Mujibur's policy of having no institutional relation with religion was slowly but steadily abandoned.<sup>1</sup>

The first institutional change was brought about by general Ziaur Rahman. He amended the constitution by inserting the Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim<sup>2</sup> in its preamble and by substituting secularism with «absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah.»<sup>3</sup> General Ziaur was himself assassinated in an attempted military coup. General Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1982-1990) took over Ziaur's legacy and took it further. In 1988, through the Eighth Constitutional Amendment, he added the following words to article 2 of the Constitution: «The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but other

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<sup>1</sup> It was Mujib himself, however, who in 1974 began that policy by re-establishing the Islamic Foundation and by participating in the Organisation of Islamic Countries. See Islam Sirajul, *State and Religion. Banglapedia*. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2003, vol. 9, p. 427.

<sup>2</sup> *In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful*. Proclamation Order No. 1, 1977. See *The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*. Dhaka, 2000, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

religions may be practised in peace and harmony in the Republic.»<sup>4</sup> Islam was being resurrected as the legitimising ideology of the military power holders of the time. Consequently, the defeated Islamist forces, who had been fighting against the mere idea of an independent state and had joined forces with the Pakistanis, got the chance to re-emerge from political oblivion.

The instrumental «Islamisation» brought about by military rulers became the unofficial policy of the subsequent civil governments too. In 1991, after the general election held in the wake of General Ershad's resignation (1990), the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (B.N.P.) succeeded in forming a government with the external backing of the Jamaat-e-Islami, a radical Islamist party, accused of collaboration and atrocities during the liberation war of 1971.<sup>5</sup> What is more, the second government of the B.N.P. (2001) was formed with the direct involvement of the same Jamaat-e-Islami party. This obviously signalled the full integration and legitimisation of radical Islamist politics within the polity. However, it must be said that, from a formal point of view, this ongoing Islamisation process did not change that much, at least from a juridical perspective, the character of the state and the way of life of the people, the great majority of whom continue to pursue a traditional, moderate, tolerant and syncretistic way of Islam. Islamisation in Bangladesh is a political expedient which cannot be dispensed with. As a matter of fact, governments try to get involved more and more in the religious life of the people. Thus, the minister of Religious Affairs provides help and support to mosques and prayer grounds; in the same way, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca comes under his supervision and organisation; more importantly, the ministry directs the policies and programmes of the Islamic Foundation in charge of the National Mosque in Dhaka and of the training of *imams*. Basically, the Islamic Foundation is a branch of the ministry of Religious Affairs. It receives money from the government or, with its permission, from other sources as well<sup>6</sup> and its role is essentially of a cultural nature. It grants financial aids to mosques and Islamic libraries. It produces Islamic literature which is then distributed around the country. At district level it maintains a

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> After the war of independence in 1971, the Jamaat-e-Islami was banned as a political party because of its role during the liberation struggle. It was general Ziaur Rahman who rehabilitated it.

<sup>6</sup> «The Foundation gets funds from the following sources: (a) funds of the Islami Academy and of the Baitul Mukarram Mosque that have been handed over to the Foundation; (b) grants and loans from the government; (c) loans from other domestic sources; (d) grants and loans from foreign governments or organisations with prior permission of the government; (e) donations and contributions; (f) returns on investments, royalties, and incomes from the Foundation's own properties; and (g) miscellaneous sources.» Syed Ashraf Ali and Syed Mohammed Shah Amran, *Islamic Foundation Bangladesh. Banglapedia*. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2003, vol. 5, p. 330.

representative. The Islamic Foundation does not have any doctrinal or theological role. Even the training of *Imams* is carried out as a free and non-compulsory programme. *Imams* may actually attend the training or skip it altogether. From the time of general Ershad, in 1984, the President of the Republic chairs the semi-official Zakat Fund Committee. The latter, on a voluntary basis, solicits the annual Zakat contributions to be spent on charitable projects and institutions, such as orphanages, hospitals and schools etc. On the whole, however, it seems that these initiatives are carried out mostly to make a good impression on international Muslim partners, primarily Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, even non-Muslim communities may avail themselves of grants from the same ministry. Grants are sometimes given to repair old Hindu temples or build new ones. It may even be said that the government's policy concerning religions is essentially one of tolerance and fairness. Given the numbers of the Muslim population, it goes without saying that this community is taken care of more readily, if not for religious reasons, at least for political ones.

Practically, the religious life of Muslims, especially in rural areas, goes on without any knowledge of the Islamic Foundation or the Zakat Fund Committee. The Muslim community in Bangladesh is highly decentralised and it basically depends on the local village mosque and its *imam* for its religious needs. Apparently, as we shall see, money does not play any significant role in the religious life of the people in these village communities. A *milad* is held when a child is born. The *milad* is a prayer which is said in the house of a newborn child. If the child is a boy and its parents are well-off, the prayer may take the form of a big celebration which ends with a meal for relatives and well-wishers. A fee of between 50 and 100 taka<sup>8</sup> is given to the imam or religious specialist. The celebration of male circumcision comes next. Although there is no fixed age, this is usually carried out after the age of 5. The operation itself is performed by a specialist who is neither a doctor nor an *imam*, *moulobi* or *maulana*,<sup>9</sup> called *hazam*. These *hazams* are Muslims who belong to a low caste whose profession it is to perform circumcisions. There is no fixed fee for this operation: it is paid for by donations, which are usually between 100 and 500 taka. Seven days after the circumcision, the *hazam* returns to see the boy and he is offered a meal on that occasion. A son's circumcision is

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<sup>7</sup> The information in the last paragraph was taken mostly from the article Bangladesh Islam in Bangladesh, published on the following web site:

[http://www.photius.com/countries/bangladesh/society/bangladesh\\_society\\_islam\\_in\\_bangladesh.html](http://www.photius.com/countries/bangladesh/society/bangladesh_society_islam_in_bangladesh.html)

<sup>8</sup> The current exchange rate is 88 Taka per Euro.

<sup>9</sup> The difference between these three religious specialists lies in the degree of Islamic education they have received. The list presents them in order of importance. The *maulana* is one with a higher level of Islamic studies.

celebrated for an entire day with music and meals for friends and relatives, who are expected to show some reciprocity with gifts. There is no fixed date or time for the celebration of *akika*, the giving of names to sons or daughters, and there is usually no money involved. Again, it is celebrated between relatives and friends and requires the host to slaughter two goats for a son and only one for a daughter. Either the *imam* or a *maulana* is called to slaughter the goats. From the time of primary education, both boys and girls attend, on a non-compulsory basis, an informal Islamic instruction carried out at the local mosque or *madrasha* (i.e. Muslim religious school). Here they study, for one hour each day, the Arabic alphabet and memorise the fundamentals of Islam. Parents pay the instructor between 20 and 50 taka each month for this instruction.

Marriage is by far the most important celebration, at least as far as money is concerned. Apart from the dowry that the girl's parents must pay to the boy's parents (which has nothing to do with Islamic tradition and legislation and is also a criminal offence liable to harsh punishment in the country's current law) the aspiring husband must pay his future wife the *den-mohor*. This is a sort of ransom money that the husband ought to give to his wife as her personal belonging. This amounts to at least 10,000 taka though it can run to several hundred thousand taka as well. This, of course, depends on the status, education and wealth of the bride and her family. Although this is a strong religious injunction, this money is not usually paid. However, the importance of the *den-mohor* in the collective consciousness of Muslims fully emerges when a woman is widowed. At her husband's funeral the officiating imam asks the widow publicly if the deceased has paid the *den-mohor*. If the answer is no, the wife can either condone it or lay her rightful claim, which is usually upheld, to the property of her late husband. Furthermore, in the case of divorce, the wife can reclaim the *den-mohor* in any court of law.<sup>10</sup> A tax is paid to the government and is calculated according to the consistency of the money involved. This is usually calculated at 20 taka for the first thousand and 10 taka for each thousand taka above this amount.<sup>11</sup> Usually, this tax should be paid by the groom's father, but in practice it is often, if not always, paid by the bride's parents. The *maulana* officiating at the ceremony is given at least 50 taka and then takes part in the meal offered on the occasion to relatives, friends and important people of the village. Although it is not compulsory, the bride and groom are requested to donate some money to the religious institutions of the village, firstly to the mosque and the *madrasha*, according to their financial possibilities. This should involve at least 150 taka for each institution. The marriage religious ceremony is very short, but the

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<sup>10</sup> Apparently in this case the *den-mohor* is a sort of payment to the wife for having «used» her.

<sup>11</sup> For example, on a 10,000 taka *den-mohor*, this tax would amount to 110 taka.

whole celebration can continue for a couple of days or even more. During this time, the hosts are very busy catering for hundreds of guests. Again, the expenditure for the whole marriage can run from 30,000 taka (for poor people) to hundreds of thousands taka (for the rich).

The life of a Muslim ends with the *zanaza*, or religious funeral. The presiding *maulana* or *imam* does not take money. This funeral does not involve any other expenditure apart from minor ones related to the buying of incense, simple white clothing etc. Five, six or seven days after the death, the *maulana* goes to the home of the deceased for the reading of the Koran. He may receive between 500 and 1,000 taka for this religious service. The ceremony lasts an entire day and involves a meal or two offered to relatives, friends and neighbours. On the anniversary of someone's death a *milad*, lasting a couple of hours or so, may be offered. In actual fact, a *milad* can be held on a number of occasions, such as thanksgiving for success in an examination, a good harvest etc. Besides the relatively small fee to be given to the prayer leader, a meal or some light refreshments may be offered to the participants.

From time to time, villagers of one or more localities may organise what in Bengali is called a *dharma shobha*, or religious gathering. This consists of two or three days in which people come together and listen to invited Islamic scholars. These are not supposed to be paid, since Islam maintains that money may not be charged for religious preaching. However, it is said that they receive money secretly from the organisers. These gatherings may involve good amounts of money which are, however, collected as donations from the villagers and especially from the well to do of the area. The preachers may get thus between 500 and 5,000 taka each and the expenditure for the whole organisation of the programme may amount to 20,000 taka upwards. The veneration and honour of particular religious figures called *pir* is widespread throughout Bangladesh. These *pir* are Muslim holy men who belong to a mystic tradition which are believed to work miracles. Their tombs are particularly venerated on the anniversary of their death. These anniversaries are called *oros* and huge masses of people visit their *mazars* (i.e. tombs), bringing gifts in nature or money for the disciples of the deceased *pir*. Fairs are also held in the precincts of a *pir's mazar*. Religious preaching is imparted to the numerous pilgrims and food is offered to them free of charge. The whole expenditure is covered by donations from pilgrims and the people of the area in which the *pir's mazar* is located.

The people who lead the prayer in the mosques, generally called *imams*, rely for most of their needs on the charity of the people they serve. Every Friday, during the prayer, money is collected from the mosque goers. 500 taka of this sum is given monthly

to the *imam*; the rest goes into the mosque fund and is used for its activities. Another 100-200 taka from the same fund is given to the *muezzin*. The rest of the money needed by the *imam* and his family is collected from donations in money or kind from the people. People often donate food to *imams* to thank Allah for graces or favours received, especially to free themselves from religious vows they have undertaken in particular circumstances. Nevertheless, the financial situation of *imams* is, generally speaking, quite miserable. For this reason, the profession is looked upon as having a low social status and importance.<sup>12</sup>

Apparently, the government of Bangladesh is not in any way involved with these religious practices of its people. At most, local administration officers may donate sums of money on a private basis for the performance of particular celebrations. Apart from this, however, the government does not seem to either control or interfere with these practices. Nonetheless, in the last few years the government has been increasing its control over another sector of religious activity in the country, namely the one embodied by Islamic NGOs.

In 2002, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA, the FSAT (the US Financial Sector Assessment Team) visited Bangladesh to assess measures to halt money laundering by terrorist networks. The USA believes that terrorists launder huge volumes of money worldwide through donations given to Islamic NGOs. The FSAT recommendations were accepted by the Bangladeshi government, which decided to set up a special inter-agency team in order to monitor the financial transactions of Muslim non-governmental organisations and financial transactions in general. 200 Islamic NGOs operate in Bangladesh under the corporate banner of BAMWA (the Bangladesh Association of Muslim Welfare Agencies). According to press reports, up until 2000, these NGOs had spent about 25 million US dollars on religious education each year.<sup>13</sup> Needless to say, they stand accused of encouraging sectarianism and fundamentalism. So far, the only proven case involving Islamic NGOs and money laundering was uncovered in 2001. The investigation led to the banning of Saudi Arabia based NGO Al Haramain Islamic Foundation in July 2004. To date, however, nobody can say how much money was spent and where. As a consequence of the war on terrorism and the fears it has created in the west, many Islamic NGOs are in financial dire straits, since

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<sup>12</sup> The information in this section on the different religious practices of Muslims in Bangladesh was obtained in an interview I carried out on 11-5-2006 with Abul Hossain, the head master of a primary school in Bausola, Jessore district and with Saifuddin Muttaqui, the Thana Education Officer of Monirampur, Jessore district. Unpublished manuscript.

<sup>13</sup> See Sharier Khan, *New Bangladesh Strike Force to Target Islamic NGOs*. Published on 12 April 2004, OneWorld South Asia web site: <http://southasia.oneworld.net/article/view/83486/1/>

many of their non-Muslim donors have stopped funding them altogether. Significantly, the biggest Islamic NGO operating in Bangladesh, the Rabeta Al-Islami, funded by Saudi Arabia, is operating normally. Despite tighter checks and controls by the government, there are doubts about the seriousness of the government's efforts. The tightening of the Laundering law may be used not only to check Islamic finances but also to harass businesses, political opponents and non-Muslim religious institutions. In other words, the application of anti-laundering measures may have been adopted more to please the USA than anything else. In this respect, a strange event took place in September 2002, when 7 foreign activists of the Al Haramain Islamic Foundation (which was later outlawed) were arrested by the police. These people were then mysteriously and secretly released and allowed to depart from Bangladesh.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Al-Haramain, Continues Operation in Bangladesh. *The Daily Star*, 4-6-2004.

In order to describe how a religion relates to the existing state — not only in its beliefs and practices, but also in its institutional, juridical, and financial facets — it is necessary to offer a historical overview of this relation, albeit a brief one limited to more recent events.

In Japan, the intertwining of theories and practices regulating the ever instable and delicate relation between religion and state have undergone many changes throughout history. In recent centuries, until the end of World War II, not only was the influence and use of religion in the political realm a determining factor in structuring and shaping the social life of the country, it also offered a decisive emotional and ideological support in the transformation of Japan into a totalitarian state. One can mention, in this regard, two religious traditions which, in different ways and for different reasons, inevitably brought Japan to the disastrous defeat of the Second World War: State Shintō<sup>1</sup> and Zen Buddhism. The former was a means to ideologically legitimize Japan's spiritual superiority over other nations, as well as to justify its colonial expansion in the name of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, while the latter had the role of inculcating in the minds of Japanese soldiers the belief that to die for the «greater self» of the nation was the purest, most sublime and altruistic ambition an enlightened mind could ever attain.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One must remember that there are several kinds of Shintō: 皇室神道 (*Kōshitsu Shintō* — Shintō of the Imperial House: this is a general term for conclave rites performed by the Emperor in order to pray to the imperial ancestral deities for the continued duration of the state, for the people's happiness and for world peace); 神社神道 (*Jinja Shintō* — Shrine Shintō: a general term for all the rites and other activities performed by a local community or a kinship community, mainly in a building called *jinja*, or a shrine); 民俗神道 (*Minzoku Shintō* — Folk Shintō: this is not a separate Shintō group; it has no formal central organization or creed. It is seen in local rural practices and rituals, e.g. small images by the side of the road, agricultural rituals practiced by individual families, etc.); 宗派神道 (*Shōha Shintō* — Sectarian Shintō: this consists of 13 sects which were founded by individuals since the beginning of the 19th century. Each sect has its own beliefs and doctrines. Most emphasize the worship of their own central deity; some follow a near-monotheistic religion); 国家神道 (*Kokka Shintō* — State Shintō: during the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the emperor was restored as the head of the government and Shintō was established as the state religion. State Shintō was considered the official belief of the entire Japanese race and was embodied in the huge number of shrines throughout the country. After World War II, the Allied Occupation separated Shintō and the state and this break was written into the new Constitution).

<sup>2</sup> See Victoria's works: *Zen at War*. New York: Weatherhill, 1998, and *Zen War Stories*. London: Curzon Press 2003.



After World War II, the Allied Powers, who laid out the plans for restructuring Japan's political and social fabric, decided to get rid of all political, civil, and religious restrictions, thus preventing Shintō from getting involved in any matter concerning the nation and the state. Shintō shrines were deprived of all the privileges from which they had unconditionally benefited prior to the war (e.g., to be placed under the supervision of the Ministry of Home Affairs rather than that of the Ministry of Education, like other religions, sects and denominations), State Shintō was explicitly abolished and with it the divine figure of the Emperor was reduced to a mere «symbol of the State and of the unity of the people». The postwar Constitution issued by the Allied Powers in 1947 granted freedom of religion and mandated separation of religion from state,<sup>3</sup> prohibiting state patronage of any religion.<sup>4</sup> In 1951 the Japanese government, resolute as it was in eradicating from its land all forms of militarism and ultra-nationalism, and determined to promote the principle of religious freedom as stated in the Constitution, promulgated the so-called Religious Corporations Law, in which «religious corporations» were defined as organizations dedicated to the spreading of religious teachings and beliefs, the performance of ceremonies, sacraments and related functions, and the spiritual assistance of their believers or followers. This law makes no mention of the economic supervision of these religious organizations, since its sole aim was to formulate the minimal parameters necessary for a religion to become a member of the Public Service Corporations (公益法人 - *kōeki hōjin*), i.e., that group of charitable organizations which, being private, could elude the control of the state over their activities. Among these Public Service Corporations<sup>5</sup> is included the so-called Religious Corporation (宗教法人 - *shūkyō hōjin*) which, from a legal point of view, protects all religious organizations from external interfering factors. In order to strengthen their financial foundation, religious corporations have been granted the legal right to own, maintain and use worship facilities and other properties, they are exempt from corporate income tax, real estate tax, and registration tax, and they are allowed to engage in business activities in support of their religious aims and purposes.

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<sup>3</sup> Art. 20 of the Constitution: «1) Freedom of religion is guaranteed to all. No religious organization shall receive any privileges from the State, nor exercise any political authority. 2) No person shall be compelled to take part in any religious acts, celebration, rite or practice. 3) The State and its organs shall refrain from religious education or any other religious activity».

<sup>4</sup> Art. 89 of the Constitution: «No public money or other property shall be expended or appropriated for the use, benefit or maintenance of any religious institution or association, or for any charitable, educational or benevolent enterprises not under the control of public authority».

<sup>5</sup> The Civil Code defines Public Service Corporations as «associations or foundations relating to worship, religion, charity, science, art, or otherwise relating to public interest and not having for its object the acquisition of gain» (n. 34).

This policy, which protected religious organizations from state control and relieved them from fiscal duties applied to other political organizations, changed drastically in 1995. Two events in particular forced the Japanese government to modify the statutes of the Religious Corporation Laws by assigning greater powers to the Ministry of Education and decreeing stricter controls on the activities of religious organizations: the formation, in 1964, of the political party Kōmeitō (公明党 – Clean Government Party) by Sōka Gakkai (a new religion derived from Buddhism) and the nerve gas attack in Tokyo on March 20<sup>th</sup> 1995, which was carried out by the apocalyptic sect known as Aum Shinrikyō. Curiously, both events highlighted two important aspects of the political debate concerning the relation between religion and state. On the one hand, there are those who affirm that article 20 of the Constitution was never intended to prohibit any citizen or religious organization (as in the case of Sōka Gakkai) from participating in the political process. Rather, the primary concern of the Japanese Constitution has been to guarantee the independence of religious organizations and freedom of religious belief, protecting them from state interference and preventing the state from using such organization for its own interests and ideologies. On the opposite end of the spectrum are those who affirm that a religious organization, if exempted from state limitations and controls, could easily turn into a dangerous and even destructive element for society. They urge the people to ask for stricter laws to be applied to some religious organizations, thus implicitly advocating a wider and more direct intervention of the state in such matters. Although it is hard to predict how this controversy will develop in the future, Hardacre states: «The Aum Shinrikyō incident seems likely to stimulate the state to strengthen its oversight of religious organizations. Laws passed in the immediate aftermath resemble the prewar relation between religion and state in seeming to assume a responsibility for the state to monitor religious organizations to protect society and a presumption that religion is an appropriate object of state oversight.»<sup>6</sup>

The apparent transparency in which the debate on the separation of religion and state is conducted becomes suddenly blurred as soon as someone asks for clarifications about the relation between religion and economy, specifically about how religion finances itself and, ultimately, how religious organizations use their income and profits. Obviously, the difficulty in shedding light on this point is due to the fact that the major religions in Japan (Shintō and Buddhism) are very cautious about revealing the exact amount of their economic resources.

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<sup>6</sup> Hardacre H., *State and Religion in Japan*. P. Swanson and C. Chilson, *Nanzan Guide to Japanese Religions*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006, p. 286.

However, while it is difficult to find objective data on their budgets, one can hazard a guess at how a religion supports itself economically by analyzing the profits related to its religious activities, rites and ceremonies. In the case of Shintō, this year roughly 93.37 million Japanese made their annual visit to the temple on New Year's Day in order to win the favors of the gods and ask them for happiness and prosperity. Although the various newspapers reporting the event concluded their articles with the typical «the shrine will follow its tradition of not announcing the total», they also pointed out that «this year's donations included 10.000 yen bills [US \$84] as well as 100 yen bills from the old days and a number of *takarakuji* or lottery tickets,» and added the opinion of a temple official, who stated that «this year we sold quite a lot of fortune decorations, each priced at 10.000 yen.»<sup>7</sup>

Along with this New Year's ritual (whose profits alone, according to some estimates, would cover the yearly expenditure for the maintenance of the temple and the support of its religious personnel), there are other celebrations through which Shintō increases its income. Traditional weddings are one example. Though they are no longer very popular, they are still solemnly celebrated in the sacred precincts (some estimates put the average cost of a Shintō wedding at about \$42,000, a sum that includes both the celebration and the reception after the rite). Other examples are the so called ground-breaking ceremonies (地鎮祭 - *jichinsai*), during which the site where a new building will be erected is consecrated to the gods (the rite lasts less than an hour and costs \$320), and the 宮参り (*miyamairi*) ceremony, when parents and grand-parents bring their infant to a shrine to express their gratitude to the Shintō deities for the birth of their child and ask the shrine priest to pray for his or her good health and happiness (there is no fixed fee for this celebration, but the parents usually offer \$80).

While these (and other) Shintoist liturgies primarily concern the dates and rites of passage of a person's life, Buddhism in Japan seems to cater exclusively for funeral and memorial services. While many stress the necessity of a more authentic approach to the doctrines of the Buddha and the fact that his message of liberation is addressed to the living person, it seems that Japanese Buddhism is unable to rid itself of the nickname of «religion of the dead». Moreover, considering today's alarming situation of 少子高齢化 (*shōshikōreika* – declining birthrate/aging population) and the consequent transformation of the Japanese population into a «super-aged society,» one can foresee that this distorted and disrespectful idea of Buddhism is not very likely to change in the near future.

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<sup>7</sup> Data are taken from: *Japan Times*, 5<sup>th</sup> January, 2006.

However, independently of this academic diatribe, one can legitimately ask how much it costs to die in Japan, and what kind of figures are associated with this last and definitive rite of passage. A 1992 questionnaire survey by the Japan Consumer's Association revealed that the average cost of a Buddhist funeral is about \$20,800 thus distributed: \$ 11,200 for the funeral home, \$4,300 for the catering service, and \$5,100 for the temple. This last figure covers the wake, the funeral, the cremation, the rites to be carried out during the first seven days after the funeral, and the conferral of the posthumous name on the dead person (戒名 - *kaimyō*). The price for this last practice (which in the past was meant to emphasize the social status of the deceased — the longer the name conferred, the higher the status) varies in accordance with the different Buddhist schools. Among the most expensive are the Nichiren school (a *kaimyō* of 6 Chinese characters usually costs between \$4,000 and \$5,000, while a *kaimyō* of 9 characters costs about \$10,000-\$20,000) and the Zen school (\$3,000-5,000 for a *kaimyō* of 6 characters, \$5,000-15,000 for one of 9). As for the Pure Land school, the price is around \$2,000 for a *kaimyō* of 6 characters and \$3,000-4,000 for one of 9. One should also take into account the cost of the grave (the price of which varies depending on the location: in Tokyo, the average cost of a 1 square meter grave plot is \$20,000) and the purchase of the family headstone (another \$20,000). Bearing in mind that there are about 1.7 million funerals per year in Japan, these figures show that Buddhist monks are increasingly transforming their religious activities into a lucrative private business. As a result, monks have lost their spiritual role as community leaders and are now seen as simple *bozumaru moke* (*bozu* having become a crass word for monk, and *maru moke* as one who works little and gets paid well).<sup>8</sup>

As for the profits derived from Christian liturgical celebrations, one can immediately notice that parents spend nothing for a Baptism (although they usually contribute to the church with some donations), while the stipend for a Eucharistic celebration varies between \$42-84. The price of a wedding is around \$840 (\$84 of which go to the priest, while the rest goes to the church), and the same price applies to a funeral (with the same money distribution as the wedding). A burial niche for the dead person's ashes costs the relatives \$680, and the price for maintaining it is about \$12 per year. In addition, each church member must pay a monthly fee (calculated on the average family income) for the maintenance of the church and communal activities. Finally, it should be noted that a summary of the financial budget of the Church in Japan is regularly made public at

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<sup>8</sup> Yohinaru Tomatsu, *The Secularization of Japanese Buddhism: The Priest as Profane Practitioner of the Sacred*. Paper presented at the American Academy of Religion, Philadelphia, 1995. Some of the data presented in this paper is taken from this work.

the end of every fiscal year.

The last area considered by our study is new religions, namely, those religious organizations which, like the previously mentioned Aum Shinrikyō, do not directly draw inspiration from common traditional religions, but appeal to the charisma of their founders or to the novelty or vitality of their doctrines. As Astley rightly affirms: «The appeal of a new religious group, often centered on the personal attraction of a charismatic leader, is immediate... New religions focus on the here and now, on present existence. People can relate to them because they are contemporary and deal with the problems facing people in the world as they perceive it. They provide alternative means of making sense of human experience amidst the social change that accompanies progress in scientific and technological knowledge. They also may provide hope for the future, or direction in people's lives, and invariably offer people some form of control over their destiny.»<sup>9</sup>

While these new religions have exhilarating goals, and offer dynamic and immediate solutions to the various existential problems afflicting people, their financial movements, profits, and income are not altogether transparent (as, for example, in the already mentioned Sōka Gakkai). It was estimated that this new religion had a net profit of \$2 billion in 1995, most of which derived from the donations of its 3.5 million followers. It seems that no government authority controls how this money is used and nobody (other than high-ranking monks) knows exactly where it is deposited.

Sōka Gakkai's peculiar situation is not an isolated phenomenon, but seems to involve most of the organizations making up the wide and variegated mosaic of the new religions. Moreover, this fact can only cause a feeling of apprehension in all the Japanese who do not belong to their religious circle. As we have seen, this feeling leads many Japanese to urge the state to enforce stricter controls over the practices and activities of the new religions, their ingenious self-funding methods and their all too often invisible profits. A religion that is well remunerated, but released from all responsibility and transparency vis-à-vis society, sometimes can only be frightening.

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<sup>9</sup> Astley T., *New Religions*. P. Swanson and C. Chilson, *Nanzan Guide to Japanese Religions*, cit., pp. 91-2.

Whilst religion in Japan has been used as an *instrumentum regni*, at first sight it seems to play a different role throughout China's history, sometimes even an opposite one. The end of the Tang Dynasty (907 AD) is linked to the persecution of Buddhism (843-845) by the Taoists and Confucians and the revolt of Huang Chao (875), which led to the slaughter of thousands of Muslims and Christians. The Mongol Yuan dynasty ended in 1368, when Zhu Yuanzhang (Hongwu) proclaimed the new Ming («light») dynasty, a title that calls to mind the Manichean elements that had influenced, along with millenerian doctrines of Buddhist inspiration, the sect of White Lotus which brought him to power.

Hongwu (1368-1398) exercised a very strict control over religious sects, including the one to which he belonged and, while he used neo-Confucianism as a state ideology, he remained suspicious of the Confucian men of letters who he frequently and violently purged. The ideological foundation of the Tai Ping revolt during the XIX century (1853-1864) lay in a syncretism of Christians, Taoists, Buddhists and Menchu elements. Secret societies, which also had some religious doctrines and ideas, played an important role in the fall of the Qing dynasty (1911). «Chinese history, and also that of the last dynasty, appears studded with a series of interventions of the secret societies, at both social and political levels, in some case also with a decisive character, every time that they created the presuppositions for the development of anti-government movements.»<sup>1</sup> In the Chinese world, religion played a dialectic role on the one hand vis-à-vis political establishment (or it was used by those who played such a role); on the other hand, its role was one of support and legitimation of this establishment (in any case an *instrumentum regni*, but in a very complex and articulated manner).

Upon this historical basis we can understand the great attention paid by the current Chinese government to religious phenomena, albeit in the different ways in which such control is exercised. For the People's Republic of China the problem is a real one (see, for example, the Muslim irredentism in Xinjiang, the Lama irredentism in Tibet and the unexpected apparition of the Falungong sect); in Taiwan it has another profile, a more social dimension, though no less worthy of attention. A sign of this is the fact that one of the ways in which the state controls religious organizations in Taiwan is by monitoring their financial situation: there is some concern that religious organizations

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<sup>1</sup> Santangelo P., *Storia della Cina. Dalle origini ai giorni nostri*. Roma: Newton Compton, 1994, p. 68.

might use their resources to establish power networks which, though not antagonistic, could be at the least parallel to those of the state, thereby undermining its effectiveness and legitimacy as a government.<sup>2</sup>

In Taiwan at least, the temple is an appropriate starting point for a phenomenological analysis of the financial aspects of religious organizations.<sup>3</sup>

Temples, especially unofficial ones, represent a bond that unites a territory (and also different territories because of the somewhat dynastic relationship that are established among different temples) and its population. The temple is the catalyst that allows a human group to organize itself and live as a community, as a small society, with its own identity and its own original autonomy. It embodies a vision of the world that makes the religious aspect its essential symbolic source, capable of shaping all the aspects of the community's life, including the economic dimension. The temple is the focal point not only of the prayers and public celebrations in honor of the gods, but also of their devotees' arts and jobs. In line with this vision, society's life events are expressed in religious experience, which thus takes on the function of revealing the dominant needs and tendencies of a given period.

Recent research on the temples of Taipei during the last 150 years thus describes their typology, and it can be applied generally to the contemporary Chinese situation:

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<sup>2</sup> Worthy of note is the fact that the religious organizations in Taiwan refer to the Ministry of Interior. As for membership, Vermander B., *Religions in Taiwan: Between Mercantilism and Millenarianism. Inter-Religio*, 32/4, 1997, pp. 63-74, offers the following data: «The 1996 report of the Interior Ministry offers some of the most accurate information to date. Among the twelve religions officially recognized in Taiwan, it lists 3,938 temples of various Buddhist obediences served by a clergy of 9,360 monks and nuns. The faithful registering with these Buddhist associations totals 4.8 million people. The number of temples affiliated under the Taoist association's banner, and home for most folk religious practices, amounts to 8,292, with registered persons numbering 3.8 million. A very loose definition of Taoist clergy results in a total of 31,950 persons in this category. Among the recognized new religions, Yiguandao 一貫道... claims a membership of 942,000 persons. It is followed by Tiandejiao 天德教, whose claim of having 200,000 followers appears rather dubious to many observers, while the 185,000 members attributed to Tiandijiao 天帝教 seems a plausible estimate... Xuanyuanjiao 軒轅教, established by the legislator Wang Han-sheng 王寒生 in 1957 claims to have a membership of 136,000 and Li-ism 理教, one of the syncretistic religions that has flourished in China throughout the ages, gives a figure of 140,000. According to the 1996 report, Catholic membership is 304,000 and the membership of the various Protestants denominations is 402,000» (p. 65). At p. 66, Vermander adds to the number of the officially recognized denominations a thirteenth, the Unification Church 同一教. As for the Catholic membership, the most recent data show a slight decline, the faithful numbering in 2006 about 280,000 (personal communication by the Chargee d'Affairs of the Vatican in Taiwan, given on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> The following section lays the emphasis more on the manner of the administration and control of money than on how funds are actually raised and their amount. It is within the complex process of administration that the power of money is exercised and its benefits reaped.

«During the later decades of the nineteenth century, under conditions of greater political stability, Taipei's non-official temples could be subdivided into three overlapping types: the compatriot, the territorially based, and the commercially based.»<sup>4</sup> The groups that converge around the temple can hail from the same place, live on the same territory or practice the same commercial activity. These forms of mutual belonging can explain the services asked of the temple and its importance in the organization of social life. People go to the temple to offer prayers and fulfill vows, obtain knowledge of the future, establish contact with the ancestors or with deceased relatives, receive cures through sacred channels and sums of money are offered for all these services. The influx of devotees from beyond the temple's own territory depends on its fame, which is determined by the benefits obtained by those who invoked the intervention of the local god. Thus the temples' fortunes, including their financial status, are very much influenced by their antiquity, circumstances and events: poor temples and rich temples, great and famous temples, small and forgotten ones.

There are two levels or areas in temple administration: the festival management and the temple management. The people in charge of organizing celebrations vary from year to year, and may be chosen from among the members of associations connected with the temple who volunteer and are also qualified to do the job. Their service and the money they spend are repaid by the publicity they receive: «Indeed, to be seen to sponsor a festival or to contribute to the building of a temple is a way of legitimating wealth and power.»<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, the management of the temple property is more exclusive, long-term and inconspicuous. It reflects the original order of ownership and tends to remain stable. Yet some situations arise that can cause changes in the group that administers the temple: «Each proposal to build, rebuild, or make major repairs to a temple creates an opportunity for someone to donate enough to become a main sponsor and thus become important... in the management of the temple and its property.»<sup>6</sup>

In a somewhat contrasting vein with these localized structures are the official temples, which are sponsored by the central government: the Temple of the City God and the School Temple for the cult of Confucius. «The state religion was centralized, hierarchical and exclusive; it also functioned as a form of ideological control over popular religion.»<sup>7</sup> Those who frequent these temples belong to the prosperous class,

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<sup>4</sup> Feuchtwang S., *City Temples in Taipei under Three Regimes*. M. Elwin & G. W. Skinner (eds), *The Chinese City Between Two Worlds*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974, p. 263.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280.



such as merchants and government officials. The arrival of the Japanese colonial government in Taiwan (1895-1945), and the subsequent arrival of the Republican government, led to the a more direct control over the temples. In addition to making restoration work necessary on the buildings (which creates state sponsorship opportunities and the inclusion of new agents in the management of temple property), associations were created that would be accommodated in the temple's premises, in the interests of an increased presence and supervision by central government in the life of local communities. Laws were passed making the registration of temples compulsory; some of them were registered as «associations», others as «nonprofit corporations». The latter have the advantage of tax exemptions and easy-to-obtain permissions. «However, nonprofit status means that the authorities not only supervise elections, but also inspect the temple books.»<sup>8</sup> Funds are raised through popular contributions, payment for services provided by the temple, contributions to annual celebrations, renewal work and rites of consecration. The state also contributes to maintenance, thus claiming some control over the temple administration. This is connected with the temples' social role at both local and central levels: the temples contribute to the regeneration of society: the new power situations are ratified in them and emerging figures are legitimized. The group is mirrored in them and converges around them, adapting to the changing times. In this way, beyond the question of the administrator's transparency in the use of money, the funds acquire their true social function. A sign of the widespread and immediate perception of the necessity to channel money back into the social sector is the construction of new temples, especially in the south of Taiwan, which express the gratitude of the newly rich people to the gods (who blessed their business), as well as an opportunity to demonstrate their entrepreneurial successes.

However, this situation reveals the subordination of religion (or of transcendence, as a westerner would say) in its organized forms to the merely human dimension of social life, especially to politics, in the power struggle between state and local levels of jurisdiction. Likewise, the various forms of financial contribution to the temples show that the relationship between devotees and their gods is essentially a financial transaction controlled from below: vows and offerings do not so much express gratuitousness as a reward (or even advanced payment) for benefits received from the gods. If these are not granted, the devotional relationship dies and the devotees look for other patrons in the vast Chinese pantheon. It could perhaps be said that piety and social life form one single unit in the Chinese world, a univocal reality, whose most powerful symbolic dimensions and references finds expression through religion.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

Even a brief description of the typology, organization and management of the temples is important because it is upon the basis of this model that we can also understand the administrative forms adopted by other religious organizations. These alternate between the local and state dimension, autonomy and centralization, with the financial aspects strictly related to the political orientations.

As for Buddhism<sup>9</sup> in Taiwan, there is an increase in the number of enormous structures which converge around charismatic leaders. Some masters (who came from the mainland) have seen their followers multiply over time and with their financial support have built huge centers, true and proper religious citadels; this has happened not only on the island, but overseas too, where they have become ambassadors of the Chinese and Taiwanese forms of Buddhism. These organizations, which are separate and independent of each other, aim at pursuing mainly cultural goals. In this context, the Tzu Chi (慈濟) Relief Foundation (founded by a self-ordained Buddhist nun and that specializes in material assistance to others, especially in times of natural calamities) is both similar to others and atypical. The Foundation relies on a widespread network of volunteers, some of whom are people of low social extraction. The funds necessary for the organization's life come from monthly quotas paid by the members, from occasional campaigns (especially when natural catastrophes occur and the Foundation offers its help), from volunteer recycling work, the proceeds of which are used to sustain the organization's television channel. Worthy of note is the fact that volunteers have to make relatively large payments in order to climb the ladder within the organization, paying, oddly enough, for the right to serve it more and better.

These groups can count on the great number of Buddhists present in Taiwan, the proceeds from cemeteries and prayers for the dead, the bond between sponsorships of religious works and the legitimation of richness and status, the connection between this legitimation and political aspirations. The very structure of Buddhism and its doctrines mean that these organizations tend to be elitist, responding to the needs of cultured and, in any case, emerging people. This explains why they can also receive large sums of money from individual donors.

At the present time, in addition to the recurring problem of transparency in the management of resources, these groups are facing uncertainty in the succession of their respective charismatic leaders; they especially have to deal with the possibility that, in the absence of such leaders, their following (in terms of vocations to the monastic life,

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<sup>9</sup> In addition to the Buddhism that is formally distinguished from other religions, in Taiwan there are Buddhist elements and orientations also in traditional temples, a presence that is historically connected with the attempts to impose state control on the local temples.

volunteers and sponsors) might significantly diminish in number.

In any case, on the fringe of these experiences we can observe that the success of the projects, the dynamic nature of their management and their visible accomplishments all catalyze the influx of new resources. This fact seems to follow an internal logic, independently of the existence or pursuit of advantages of another kind: those who see how one of these centers prospers feel motivated to support it beyond any personal advantages.

At this point, another observation is worth making: those who manage religious organizations take some models of management from the business world. This is true especially of the new movements, which seem to offer their religious services in a way that is very similar to companies trying to expand. They seek their own slot on the basis of clear doctrines, a solid hierarchical organization, rituality and recognizable external forms, in such a way as to meet the needs of the potential followers with a satisfying offer. They rely on the public charismatic nature and the private shrewdness of the founders who capitalize on the widespread need of many to find a place in a solid system with specific rights and obligations. The appeal of the presentation contrasts with the quite stringent duties of the followers, especially the fixed contributions that must be regularly paid to the organization, and whose use is not always a matter of public knowledge. One example of this is the mystery that surrounds the relationship of the Yiguandao religion with some great financial enterprises. In this entire process there is a clear similarity between the social progress towards a market economy and the evolution of the ways in which Chinese religion is lived and organized.

A common denominator of this is the fact that the resources of religious organizations are managed by individuals and/or groups in such a way as to generate profit, at least in terms of the appreciation, prestige and social legitimacy of the individual characters involved in this management.

The Christian (Protestant and Catholic) world, relying as it does on traditional fund-raising and financial management in dependence on western societies, and after presenting itself to China in the past as a superior form of organization, now seems to find it difficult to review its own models and distinguish between what can be changed and what should be retained. The various non-Catholic denominations show a greater capacity for adaptation: although they generally maintain a remarkable doctrinal rigidity (new followers must break off all ties with their past beliefs), they easily embrace the models and initiatives of the business world to spread their religious message and to accomplish works that emphasize their success and, therefore, prove their truth. Sometimes this even results in the different logic of the Christian message being overshadowed.

owed and the faith, with its obligations (not least the 10% of personal income), being presented as a way to human success or for the satisfaction of personal aspirations.

Another factor that favors the adaptation of these groups to the current models of religious entrepreneurship in Taiwan is their mutual independence. They can thus multiply their charismatic figures, which offer to many people the opportunity of a more direct contact with the supernatural world they represent and to find their reassuring place in the setup of their organizations.

The Catholics seem to have been caught out the most by this situation: after a splendid beginning in the years 1950-70, a series of factors relegated them to a vicious circle of uncertainty at management and project level (related to the post-Conciliar era) and poor visible achievements. However, it must be remembered that Catholics are few in number and, what is more, they are spread over a large territory and affiliated to many different organizations, each of which also has problems of sustenance; consequently, their accomplishments cannot be compared to those of much larger groups. Their financial structure is much weaker than all the other religions: first of all, they rely on voluntary offerings which are generally less generous than those demanded by others for similar services; secondly, the donors and those who manage Catholic resources do not enjoy the rewards of prestige or social climbing. If the management of sanctuaries and spiritual centers were left to those who build them, Taiwan too would see the construction of great structures that could hold their own in comparison to any Buddhist monument.

In spite of this weakness, the Catholic model seems to be the most sustainable one in the long term, relying as it does on its unconditional gratuitousness. In any case, it must increase in self-confidence, so that the modest dimensions of many Catholic works might be interpreted as a sign of moderation rather than inefficiency, with its true resources being enjoyed at spiritual and relationship level.

## Getting Rich: How and Why?

Since the beginning of time religion has, so to speak, functioned as something of a tranquilizer, a refuge, and a talisman against hunger, diseases, catastrophes, enemies and death. In a way, religion has been almost a last resort in the attempt to turn things around and defeat the unknown, powerlessness and the sense of being adrift in a world beyond human control. The main allure of religion rests in the recognition and manipulation of superior beings who possess powers that man would like for himself. Within these dynamics, which we may aptly term psychological as well as sociological, man has often seen prosperity and well-being as distinctive signs of divine predilection and blessing. On the contrary, indigence and misery have always been considered a curse, and often charged with moral connotations as well. Consequently, poverty could only be the result of the sin, guilt and misbehavior, either of an individual or of his ancestors. These general considerations, which are of a universal nature, can be found to a greater or lesser extent even in the way religious people live out their beliefs today. Though I am well aware that religions are not monolithic entities, and that the same religion may be lived in different situations and cultures in absolutely different ways, I shall attempt a phenomenological analysis of how and why people in Bangladesh want to get rich. Needless to say, I take it for granted that Bangladeshis, whatever their religious beliefs, do choose comfort and wealth over and against poverty and misery.

Islam as such does not offer a coherent and systematic economic theory. However, Islam has principles and norms which may lead to the formulation of some sort of economic doctrine. The starting point is the belief, found in the Holy Koran, that man is God's plenipotentiary on earth.<sup>1</sup> The earth is at his service and Islam looks upon any economic activity undertaken by man as having a theological goal: to bless God and his kindness. God is the real owner of everything and man is his administrator. Man has a vicarious right to ownership, which he may actually acquire either through his own work or through juridical rulings. Wealth acquired through illicit activities is forbidden. For example, money gained by theft, gambling, prostitution, corruption, bank interest, usury etc. is generally considered unlawful. As far as the use of wealth is concerned, the rule is that financial resources cannot be used to the detriment of individuals and/or the community. Unlike capitalist ideology, Islam decrees that any economic activity is for the common good. Self-support is the main purpose of financial activities and obtain-

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<sup>1</sup> See the *Koran* II, 30; VI, 105; XXVI, 62; XXXV, 39; LVII, 7.

ing God's blessing is its ultimate goal.<sup>2</sup>

On the basis of these general principles, in Bangladesh (as elsewhere in the Muslim world), socialism or communism was thought by many to be a possible way for Muslims to reach an egalitarian and just society. Socialism became one of the four pillars upon which the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh was based. But beyond this, it is worth remembering that in the previous years, and following the country's independence, Bangladeshi peasants and workers were galvanized by a strange figure halfway between a religious saintly figure and a leftist politician. Maulana Bhasani (1880-1976)<sup>3</sup> was the one who rallied the movement. In 1957 he founded the National Awami Party (NAP) with an explicit leftist and pro-China orientation. He was somehow able to combine Islamic religious afflatus and Maoist political leanings. Endowed with the charisma of a Muslim *pir*<sup>4</sup> and a strong sensitivity to social justice, he exerted a great appeal on the toiling masses of Bangladesh. Unfortunately, his death led to the demise of the movement and the end of a socio-revolutionary interpretation of Islam. Subsequent leftist leaders were unable to repeat his feats. Probably, the latter propounded a leftist ideology detached from any Islamic reference which made it unacceptable to the Muslim masses of Bangladesh. People here do not easily embrace ideologies. Bhasani's success story had been rooted in the Islamic tradition of the people and as such acquired appeal. Moreover, he showed the people how to stave off hunger, a sure way of gathering proselytes in Bangladesh.

It is a fact that Islamic politics, whether leftist or rightist, do not seem to attract huge numbers of disciples in Bangladesh, though it must be said that, at present, rightist Islamists seem to have the upper hand in the country's politics. In the main, Bangladeshis seem to confide in private religious practices to try and do away with hunger and poverty in general. Surprisingly enough, Bangladeshi people, whatever religious creed they belong to, do turn to very similar religious practices when it comes to implore well-being, good health, luck and money. Two levels of religious practice may be distinguished here: a public and a private one. The public practice revolves around places of pilgrimage, usually the tombs (called *mazar* or *dargah*) of saintly people, generally

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<sup>2</sup> These notes attempt to summarize an Islamic economic theory which is not always easy to pinpoint. In fact, Islamic scholars do not always agree with each other. For a general survey of this point see Reissner J., *Il dibattito intraslamico sul moderno ordine socio-economico*. In AA.VV. *L'Islam oggi*. Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1993, pp. 231-51. See also Chowdhury A. M., *Economic Order of Islam and Private Ownership*. Dacca: Islamic Cultural Centre, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> His real name was Abdul Hamid Khan.

<sup>4</sup> *Pir* stands for Muslim holy and mystic person generally associated with a Sufi order. The term comes from Persian and means «guide», what in Arabic is *Shaikh* or *Murshid*.

called *pirs*. These pilgrimages may take place anytime during the year, but they often focus on the anniversary of the *pir's* death (*oros*). These saints are believed to be intermediaries between the people and Allah. Orthodox Islam generally frowns upon these practices. However, people are not really interested in dogmatic purity; they are more interested in the miracles these *pirs* are thought to have performed and continue performing. In fact, the status and the greatness of a *pir* are proportionate to his power to perform miracles. If a dead *pir* were to stop performing miracles he would certainly lose his status and be forgotten. The saint is considered to possess a special *baraka* or blessing and people believe this is hereditary. *Mazars* or *dargah* are often managed by successors and disciples of the dead *pir* who perpetuate the message and practice of the saint. People who go to such places of pilgrimage hope to have a share in the saint's *baraka*. What is more, objects that came in contact with the saint's tomb are thought to possess his blessing, and soil collected in the vicinity of the tomb, along with pieces of clothes used to cover the tomb, are often distributed as amulets. These have the power to ward off illnesses and bring about healing. In this respect, some *mazars* are believed to be effective for some kinds of illnesses and some other to be effective for different kinds of ailments. Often *mazars* are not really the tombs of the saint that is venerated there. The saint is known to be buried in a different place: the *mazar* in question is then either the place where his power revealed itself through a miracle, or it is the place built by some devotees upon the orders received from the saint himself in a dream. Needless to say, this does not bother the devotees in the least because their main purpose in visiting the *mazar* is to harness the saint's power. This is done by offering gifts usually in nature but also in money. Goats are slaughtered, food is distributed and religious vows are made. In the people's minds, these pilgrimages may substitute the *haji* to the Mecca. Prayers, together with dance and music, usually accompany the pilgrimage and promote the devotees' emotional involvement. Unlike the institutional prayer in the mosque, *mazars* can be visited by both men and women and, what is more, by non-Muslim devotees too. Indeed, it is quite common for Hindus to visit Muslim *mazars* and offer prayers and gifts at the *pir's* tomb. Likewise, it is not uncommon to see Muslim devotees visiting the tomb of a Hindu *sadhu* (holy person) if people believe he is capable of performing miracles.<sup>5</sup>

Among the public practices of Bangladeshi people is their turning to specialists

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<sup>5</sup> On Sufism, and the popular cult originating from it see De Jong F., *Le confraternite mistiche e l'Islam popolare*. In AA.VV. *L'Islam Oggi*. Bologna: Editrice Dehoniane, 1993. pp. 723-48. See also Geijbels M., *An Introduction to Islam: Muslim Beliefs and Practices*. Rawalpindi: Christian Study Centre, 1975, pp. 286-327.



who may or may not have a specifically religious affiliation. They may be formally Hindu or Muslim, or they may just refuse a religious identification in the name of a generic and catholic humanism. Be that as it may, their expertise is often offered in a religious guise. This class of people, as it were, attracts disparate characters. Thus *kavirajas*, or traditional medicine men, may offer remedies for illnesses, which may be in the form of medicines usually extracted from plants and herbs, *mantras*<sup>6</sup> or a combination of both. Another group of people are called *ujas* and these are usually summoned to treat a snake bite. They do so with *mantras* and blowing air onto their patients. There is also a group of people, usually itinerant ascetics, known as *fakirs* (Muslims) and *sadhus* (Hindus). They are surrounded by a halo of holiness and thus the villagers turn to them for solutions to a number of problems. More often than not, all these people sell their services and they often distribute *taviz* and talismans, which are believed to be powerful weapons against any kind of evil. *Taviz* in particular are distributed by Mullahs too. These are some sort of Muslim clerics who at the village level help in performing marriages, slaughtering animals on festive occasions etc. The *taviz* or *maduli* are amulets, usually in the form of small cylinders in whose cavities a verse from the Holy Koran or from any other scripture is kept. They are often tied to the body by means of a small cord. Interestingly, nearly all Bangladeshi wear one of these amulets irrespective of their religious creed.<sup>7</sup>

At the private level of religious practices which are meant to bring about prosperity and well-being, a major role is played by the goddess Sri-Laksmi, certainly for Hindus and, to a certain extent, for Muslims too. Unknown in the Vedic literature, she is associated from the Christian era onwards with the god Vishnu<sup>8</sup> as his obedient wife and consort. In this role she is the perfect model of a Hindu wife serving her husband as Lord. Throughout her long history, Sri-Laksmi has been associated with prosperity, well-being, royal power, fertility and illustriousness. She embodies these qualities so that, whenever they are present, Sri-Laksmi herself is present and reveals herself. Because of her auspicious garb, she may be the most known and venerated goddess in the whole Hindu pantheon. As a matter of fact, she is worshipped throughout the year. Her

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<sup>6</sup> *Mantras* are a form of religious prayer but basically magic formulas taken indistinctly from both Hindu and Muslim scriptures. They are usually secret and transmitted from master (*guru*) to disciple only.

<sup>7</sup> The words *taviz* and *maduli* mean exactly the same thing. The first one is of Arabic origin while the latter is Bengali. People however use both indiscriminately.

<sup>8</sup> To this day her association with god Vishnu is more common in the Indian subcontinent. However, throughout her history she has been associated as wife to other gods as well. See Kinsley D. R., *Hindu Goddesses*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988, pp. 23-9.

devotees make *Vratas*, or religious vows, to her. Her blessing is thus sought in exchange for some acts of devotion or piety. Usually Sri-Laksmi is asked to protect the marital fidelity of the spouse, to grant him longevity, to bestow abundant crops and material well-being. In what may be one of the earliest literary composition on Sri-Laksmi, the Sri-Sukta,<sup>9</sup> she is praised for a number of qualities, some of which we have already seen above. For our purposes, it is interesting to observe that Sri-Laksmi is described here «as moist (verses 13-14), perceptible through odour, abundant in harvest, and dwelling in cow dung (verse 9).»<sup>10</sup> Sri-Laksmi is clearly associated here with the fertility of soil, something which will not be emphasized in her later history, but which remains a reality even in today's religious knowledge of village people. In this same hymn, Sri-Laksmi is again associated with the lotus and the elephant. The former again links Laksmi to the mysterious power of fertility, growth and beauty. In Indian tradition the lotus signifies the rise of organic life out of formless cosmic water. Secondly, the lotus links Sri-Laksmi to purity and spiritual power. The lotus points to transcendence, to the overcoming of this finite world's limits. On the other hand, the elephant with which Laksmi is often represented points once again to fertility. In Indian tradition the elephant is linked to rain. Laksmi is thus assimilated to the sap of life and to crops which depend on it. The elephant, moreover, is a symbol of royal power. In bygone days, the king was thought to be responsible for rain. He was somehow the image of Indra on earth. Indra was the king of gods and the dispenser of rain.

Above and beyond the previously mentioned mythological and theological depiction of Sri-Laksmi's cult in the Indian subcontinent, common villagers in today's Bangladesh seem to acknowledge the centrality of Laksmi in their daily life. Apparently, a picture of Laksmi hangs on the wall in any Hindu house, especially in the place where rice and crops generally are kept. Usually, a symbol of Shiva in the form of a phallic image is also drawn on the same wall. This is believed to ensure prosperity and fertility. Sundays and Thursdays are especially dedicated to the worship of Laksmi. In this case, women are usually the main devotees. They are in charge of this worship, which is carried out in their own homes, either alone or with a group of other women. On the latter occasions, a special sweet made of coconut, *naru*, is prepared, and offered to the goddess and eaten as a sort of communion (*prasad*). On such days, charity or alms to wandering beggars is not given. The reason for this denial is that on these two days it would

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<sup>9</sup> The hymn is a later addition to the Rig Veda. It may be dated to the first Buddhist period. A translation of this hymn by Sri Swami Krishnananda can be found at the following web site: [http://www.divyajivan.org/ashtalakshmi/sri\\_suktam.htm](http://www.divyajivan.org/ashtalakshmi/sri_suktam.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Kinsley D. R., cit., p. 20.

be unfortunate (*alaksmi*) to remain without rice or money. One must remember that Sri-Laksmi reveals herself in prosperity and it would therefore be impossible or inappropriate to worship her in poverty. On these same days, women are forbidden to manufacture brooms. In the Bangladeshi mentality, brooms are ill-omened and those who use them belong to an untouchable caste. To use or manufacture brooms would cause Laksmi to leave the precincts of the house.

The worship of Laksmi is not limited to Sundays and Thursdays. Each morning and evening, most Hindu women wave lit incense sticks over the entrance to their homes. The door is left open to welcome Laksmi and prosperity. As in the above cases, no alms are distributed during this time. Interestingly enough, all these practices are basically carried out with hardly any use of words. It seems that gestures are more meaningful and powerful here than any verbal communication. This is especially true for Muslim women. Though it is difficult to gather this kind of information, it seems that many Muslim women do carry out some sort of Laksmi worship in the secret of their homes, though they are probably not aware of this. After centuries in which both Hindus and Muslims have lived together, some form of fusion, and perhaps confusion, is only natural. Muslim women are known to prepare *narus* and offer fruits, flowers and incense on particular days. They are also known to smear the area in front of the granary with cow dung. These are all elements of a Laksmi worship, particularly the smearing of cow dung.<sup>11</sup> In North India and Bangladesh, Sri-Laksmi is often associated, or presented together with Ganesh, the god with the elephant head. Ganesh is worshipped especially by merchants and shopkeepers. Hindu merchants keep one of his effigies in their workplaces. Where a Hindu presence is still consistent, every morning a Hindu priest goes around shops, imparts his blessing and collects alms from both Hindu and Muslim shopkeepers to celebrate the worship of Ganesh in the temple precincts. Ganesh is believed to be the merchants' protector, and capable of granting prosperity and the smooth running of businesses.

In Bangladesh, as well as in the rest of the Indian subcontinent, the quest for well-being and prosperity is somewhat tempered by the religious and cultural strand of asceticism. Both the Muslim and Hindu traditions show appreciation and veneration towards ascetics of different brands. *Pirs*, *fakirs*, *sadhus*, are all respected, if not venerated, for their austere lives. In their different doctrinal foundations, they are all reminders that the only real prosperity consists in overcoming worldly attachments in view of attaining God's love. Even in orthodox Islam, wealth and well-being are not ends in

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<sup>11</sup> See Dhal Upendra Nath, *Goddess Laksmi: Origin and Development*. New Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1978, p. 178.

themselves but means by which people can express their gratitude to Allah. In Hinduism, the doctrine is further elaborated in the theory of the four *purusharthas* (the legitimate pursuits of human life) and four *ashramas* (stages of human life). The former are *kama* (physical and emotional pleasure), *artha* (material wealth), *dharma* (righteousness) and *moksha* or *mukti* (liberation) so ordained in order of importance. These ends of human life are supposed to be lived out in different phases of the same: *brahmacharya* (the student of Brahma), *grihastha* (the householder), *vanaprastha* (life in the jungle) and *sanyasa* (the ascetic), the last two phases are specifically oriented to achieving *moksha* or *mukti*. Be that as it may, the tension between the religious quest for prosperity and the religious thirst for spiritual detachment do seem to find a mid position in the way Bangladeshi people live out their lives. What people ask of their respective gods is to live with dignity a life which for many of them is well beneath the so-called poverty line. Money is certainly important to them, but not so important as to forget the fickleness of reality, which Hindus would easily identify as *maya*, illusion and delusion.

Within the silent *pantheon* of every religion, people have always paid particular attention to those gods who were thought to interact with them and take care of their nourishment, their health, their needs and necessities. A god, it is said, should not only be worshipped, respected, and feared: a god should also be able to protect and take care of people in their frail condition, to intervene in each individual's history in order to help a person solve or remove those unpleasant situations that, in an unexpected way, annihilate and make a mockery of every human effort or power. The tacit and implicit agreement that supports the relationship between gods and people, the impatient scrutinizing of the sky in order to decipher a sign that one's prayers have been accepted, the tinkling of coins as they are thrown at the feet of the divinity and whose sound mingles with the murmur of prayer: these are all gestures that remind us of how an individual implores God to redeem and solve all the unfavorable situations that frustrate the hopes and desires of our frail human existence.

Welfare, or economic well-being, seems to occupy a privileged position among the many different needs and necessities that people seek to satisfy. This ambition is supported by a simple observation: if the relation between «well-being» and money is not as immediately obvious as it would seem at first, if indeed wealth cannot buy happiness, it is also true that poverty can achieve even less, and indigence can only be accompanied by renunciations and privations. To be able to obtain a certain economic stability, not to despair for the uncertainty of tomorrow, not to dwell excessively on how to perpetuate the well-being one has achieved (or simply on how to manage to pay annual taxes and fees): this means to eliminate a great deal of the anxiety and preoccupation that characterize human existence.

In Japan there are many divinities, ancient and new, that one can invoke for help in carrying the burden of existence. For example, the cluster of gods called *shichifukujin* (七福神), an eclectic group of seven deities from India, China, and Japan, who have the power to generate prosperity, good fortune and happiness. Their names, as well as their shapes and the unmistakable smiles that characterize their sculptures and portraits, are whispered and touched in accordance with the particular necessities to which they offer a solution. There is Ebisu (蛭子), god of fishermen and tradesmen, who grants success and good fortune to those engaged in professional activities; Daikokuten (大黒天), god of wealth and prosperity, who carries a large sack on his shoulders and pours out his

powers on all those who touch him; Benzaiten (弁財天), goddess of fine art, happiness, literature, science, and fortune; Hotei (布袋), god of contentment and happiness: rubbing his stomach is said to bring good luck; Fukurokuju (福祿寿), god of wisdom, longevity and prosperity; Jurōjin (寿老人), the god who knows the secret of long life; and finally, Bishamonten (毘沙門天), the god of war, warriors, and precious items. According to tradition, on New Year's Eve the seven gods enter port together on their treasure ship (宝船 – *takarabune*) to bring happiness to everybody. On the night of January 2<sup>nd</sup>, people place a portrait of these divinities under their pillows: if they have a lucky dream that night, then the happiness, abundance, and wealth that these deities carry with them will also be theirs throughout the year.

Another phenomenon that incorporates tradition and popular belief in connection with the search for success or prosperity, is the acquisition of a *daruma* (だるま), namely, a small doll meant to portray the historical figure of Bodhidharma, an Indian monk who founded Zen Buddhism in China in the VI century AD. Two peculiar legends from the life of this monk are told to explain the shape of the doll and the brief propitiatory rite that the buyer (or the one who seeks favors from the *daruma*) has to perform on it. According to the first tale, he attained enlightenment after meditating in a cave for nine years and, during those years of meditation, his arms and legs wasted away, shriveled up and fell off. The second legend relates that the monk, upset with himself for occasionally dozing off during meditation, decided to cut off his eyelids in order to remain constantly awake. This is the reason why the doll portraying him is round-shaped, with no limbs; when it is tipped over, the doll always returns to an upright position (this is a symbol of Bodhidharma encouraging the purchaser to persevere in the pursuit of his own goals even when others are trying to knock him over). The rite that the buyer has to perform simply consists in drawing an eye on the doll with black ink while silently making a wish. The *daruma* is then displayed in a high location in one's home, workplace, or in the offices of politicians at election time so that its presence may accompany the buyer, the employee, or the political leader in striving after their specific goal. When one's goal has been achieved, or a resolution fulfilled, the other eye of the doll is colored in, and the figure is usually returned to a shrine and burnt. If, on the other hand, the result turns out to be other than the one intended, the buyer purchases another *daruma*, thereby starting all over again the secret dance of trust and abandonment to this pale-faced character wearing a gold-striped red dress, with a belligerent countenance and eyes lost in the far off lands of enlightenment.

Along with the quasi-folkloristic expressions of trust in the *shichifukujin* and in the *daruma* doll we have just described, the Japanese who seek sacred shortcuts to

well-being can avail themselves of many other heavenly signs, perform various spiritual practices, and spend their time listening and deciphering the mysterious words delivered by the mediators of divine things. Those who find themselves near Kamakura, an ancient political center of Japan situated to the south of Tokyo, should definitely pay a visit to Zeniarai Benten, a temple built by Minamoto Yorimoto in 1185 to ask for peace after the bloody battles fought to establish the shogunate. The temple is now famous all over Japan, not so much for its historical and political significance as for the practice of *zeniarai* (銭洗い), of washing or immersing one's coins in the spring gushing forth from a rocky hollow near the temple — in the hope that they may double in the future. According to a survey conducted by a magazine publisher, two thirds of the visitors are women, along with quite a few traders and shopkeepers who go down on their knees and dampen bundles of 10,000 yen bills in the sacred waters. The hundreds of *torii* and votive banners decorating the entrance of the temple, erected by its devout worshippers as a sign of gratitude for having received a favor, silently bespeak the power of this practice, thus drawing other pilgrims and people in need to the temple.

But if this temple is uniquely famous for the miraculous halo that surrounds it, other temples are no less attractive to those who are seeking good fortune and protection. Among the various devices that the visitors can use to obtain a veiled anticipation of their future financial condition are the おみくじ (*omikuji*), or oracles written on tiny paper strips, obtained by drawing lots, in which lucky or unfortunate events are indicated. One's overall fortune can range from outstanding to average to bad, covering various aspects of life such as academics, business, marriage proposals, and victory or defeat. Once read, they are tied or hung on a temple tree in the hope that their prophecies may come true. Those in need of more continuous assistance, instead, can purchase an お守り (*omamori*), or talismans that are said to summon good fortune and expel evil. Answers to a prayer include traffic safety, success in passing a school entrance exam, business prosperity, good health and childbirth without any complications. If one needs to solve even more explicit and direct problems, he can resort to an 絵馬 (*ema*), one of those votive tablets where the individual writes down the particular need that the given divinity is called upon to satisfy. *Emas* have rightly been called «letters to the gods and buddhas» due precisely to the visible and tangible medium through which people are able to externalize and express their innermost fears and worries, and to seek solace and support in time of trouble. Among the various requests are petitions for safety, prosperity, success, an increased salary and victory in the competition among rival business companies.

Whereas in the temples there is no shortage of the usual donations, which people

deposit in offertory boxes (賽銭 - *saisen*) as they set to venerate a god and devoutly mutter words as sighs of invocation and expectation, one can observe another curious phenomenon in the crowded streets of towns and villages in the shape of statues of animals that people believe are capable of transforming themselves into divine messengers. The most popular ones are the *tanuki* (this animal can be seen with its straw hat and a flask of sake at the entrance of inns and bars luring passers-by to enter), the 招き猫 (*maneki neko*), a cat frequently found in shop windows sitting with its paw raised and bent, as if beckoning customers to enter, and the fox, the traditional ambassador of the Shintō goddess *Inari* (稲荷), protector of crops and patron of rice growers and traders.

What we have described thus far belongs to the sphere of religion and the sacred; but there are also more sophisticated and modern techniques for those who seek a certain degree of economic well-being without having to inconvenience the gods. For example, the swarm of soothsayers and fortune-tellers, whose booths run along the sides of boulevards and streets, whose waiting rooms are situated next to the stores that embellish majestic shopping malls, and whose shows are frequently broadcast on radio and television. There are also lotteries that promise special offers and discounts; pachinko venues filled with noise and clouded in smoke, where the marbles quickly sliding on glass screens bring about a fateful coincidence between their movements and the player's desire for good fortune. Yet again, there are the traditional Japanese calendars hanging on the walls of every home, whose dates dictate not only the rhythm of festivities and anniversaries, but also that of the days that are favorable for initiating a new enterprise, or ill-omened periods during which no project or initiative should be started.

Of course, not all Japanese people are caught up in the frenetic quest for a rapid and unexpected financial prosperity or a magical increase in their bank accounts. Indeed, in Japan's major temples it is not unusual to see pilgrims dressed in white, with traditional stick and Buddhist rosary in hand, earnestly walking their religious path, determined to reconsider their relationship to life and rethink the order of values according to which they had previously interpreted their existence. Similarly, there are people who withdraw to Buddhist monasteries or choose the ascetic way of the hermit, in which silence, simplicity, and austerity are necessary ingredients for a deeper understanding of reality. It is also not unusual to come across begging monks at the crossroads who, motionless and composed, hold a bowl in which the passers-by place the donations that they will use to buy something to eat. Though it may sound paradoxical, and as marginal and rare as these displays of religiosity are, they nonetheless remind



people of how the kind of wealth and prosperity that are taken to be essential elements of a dignified and respectable life have a significance that goes beyond economic well-being. The serene and almost detached faces of those who embark on a spiritual journey, renouncing not only material comfort and luxury, but also the idea of a god who can be trusted only as long as he fulfills human expectations and desires, testify to the presence, in Japanese society, of a constant reminder: the vision of a life beyond the mere equation, or blending, of being and appearing, of possession and happiness, of the ever fluctuating currency value and the oftentimes veiled meaning of existence.

All these distinctions, noticeable by most, sometimes become vague and confused in a country where there is no actual poverty, illiteracy, and malnutrition, and where there is no shortage of welfare organizations for those who are in trouble or in financial difficulties. In a country where restaurants are outnumbered only by its population, where handsome features are taken to be a sure sign of fame and success, where it is sufficient to guess what sort of knick-knacks attract 5% of the teen girl population to be able to determine that within a month 60% of them will join the bandwagon and own the same gadgets... all that wealth promises here is only an increase in spending power, an escape from middle class anonymity, the illusion of being able to experience the fleeting feelings of lightheartedness and stability for a longer time and with more intensity.

Not unlike the silent presence of beggars and monks that embellish the otherwise flat social landscape of Japan, Christianity, too — with its reminding people of the importance of spiritual riches and of storing treasures in heaven — can help people to establish a different and more balanced relationship with life. Money is certainly an essential element for a peaceful existence and a guarantee against poverty; and yet, money should never be considered an end in itself, or the meter for judging the success or failure of a life. Within the crumpled folds of a society that categorizes its wastes with increasing precision, that urges its people to buy items and store them in their homes as if they were trophies awarded for having achieved economic well-being, and takes the liberty of wasting energy and spoiling nature only to give in to the luxurious sports and hobbies of its citizens... perhaps Christianity can and must spread a message that may help the Japanese to look beyond their well-being, inviting them not to appeal to the gods in order to receive more of what they already possess abundantly, and warning them of how the temptation of sitting at the same table with sorcerers and soothsayers, of unwinding lottery tickets and trusting oracles and talismans, ultimately does nothing except diminish that sense of providence, gratitude, and faith that not only is priceless, but compared to which everything else is worthless. What Christianity can offer to Japa-

nese opulence is that sense of abandonment to God's will, the trust in His love that tells the individual that he is welcome for who he is, not for what he has, and invites one to dwell in God's mystery and grace for a longer time than that needed for an incense stick to die out, or for the waves of a temple gong to dash against the silent echoes of nothingness...

As soon as he finds his bearings in the varied world of Chinese religion, a westerner who grew up amidst Christian traditions cannot fail to marvel at the importance attributed to money. This is mainly true of popular religion, but it also extends to Buddhism, at least in its devotional forms. The saying: 有錢使鬼推磨 (*you qian shi gui tui mo*, anyone who has money can make even the spirits work the millstone) vividly portrays the effectiveness of money in the world of the gods, which in its turn has a powerful influence over the world of men.

In order to gain at least a cursory knowledge of the different ways in which money is present in the many-sided Chinese religiosity, we can start with a description of the gods of wealth and then consider the use of money in rites, ending with an attempt at interpreting the ideas upon which these traditions are based.

### The Gods of Wealth

«Walk into any provision store in any China Town around the world, from Vancouver to Jakarta, and you can buy a small statue of the “god of wealth” (財神, *Cai Shen*) to furnish your home altar or complete your *feng-shui* preparations, though do not try to buy the proprietor’s own statue. There are, in fact, various gods of wealth, as well as wealth-beckoning cats, and numerous other deities to whom people pray for financial assistance.»<sup>1</sup>

According to one report, the red-faced Guan Yu is honoured as the «martial» god of wealth (武財神 *Wu Cai Shen*)<sup>2</sup>, while the most popular “civil” (文 *Wen*) god of

<sup>1</sup> Caltonhill M., *Private Prayers and Public Parades: Exploring the Religious Life of Taipei*. Taipei: Taipei City Government, 2002, p. 38. Unless stated otherwise, the following information about the gods of wealth is taken from this work, pp. 38-41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38. According to Wu Luxing, *100 Chinese Gods*. Trans. Wang Xuewen and Wang Yanxi. Singapore: Asiapac Books, 1994, p. 67, the martial god of war was Zhao Gongming (趙公明), a general under the Shang Dynasty. He fled to the mountains and cultivated Taoism. When he finally succeeded, he was summoned by the Jade Emperor [the main deity in the Taoist Pantheon] and was made Marshal of the Divine Fragrance Hall. «He wore an iron crown on his head, held an iron staff in one hand and had a swarthy face full of beard. He rode on a tiger, cruising in all directions and governing the Three Worlds. He had great power to control thunder and lightning, create winds and rain, exterminate plagues, subdue evil spirits, cure diseases and change the winds of bad luck. Under his command were eight courageous generals, six immortals, five thunder gods, many fierce soldiers and 28 generals. So, whenever people sought for justice or to make money in business, they would pray to Marshal Zhao and always had their wishes granted.»

wealth is the «Stellar Gentleman who Increases Wealth» (增幅財帛星君, *Zeng Fu Cai Bo Xing Jun*). A legend traces his figure back to a minister (比干, *Bi Gan*) under the tyrant king Zhou (紂), last ruler of the Shang Dynasty (11<sup>th</sup> century B.C.). Zhou cut Bi's heart, in order to see if a sage really did have seven cavities as rumored. Later, Bi was put in charge of one of the seven stars of the Big Dipper and subsequently became worshiped as the god of wealth. He is associated with the northerly direction.<sup>3</sup>

The god of wealth is portrayed as an elegant scholar with a white face and long beard. In his left hand he holds a jade scepter with the wishing words *ru-yi* (如意). In his right hand he holds a treasure bowl on which it is written: «Beckon wealth — bring treasure» (招財進寶, *zhao cai jin bao*).<sup>4</sup> He is often shown together with three other deities: Fu (福, happiness), Lu (祿, prosperity through official rank) and Shou (壽, longevity), and a rarer figure Xi Shen (喜神, god of pleasure and love) to form the most commonly seen group of Chinese traditional gods.

«The God of Wealth acts as chief minister in a celestial Ministry of Wealth. His officials include the Celestial Venerable who brings treasures, Celestial Venerable who Presents Jewels, Immortal Official of Commercial Profit and so forth, though there is a great regional variation, and many deities are worshiped as gods of wealth in their own right. Other “folk figures” include the Wealth Beckoning Child, Cash Tree with coin leaves and ingot fruit, God of Wealth of the Five Roads worshiped by innkeepers, and Lord of the Land (土地公 *Tu Di Gong*), who is then portrayed holding ingots or coins.»<sup>5</sup>

In the midst of so many autochthonous gods, there is also the Wealth-Beckoning Cat (招財貓 *Zhao Cai Mao*), a legacy of Japanese rule over Taiwan. «Known as *maneki-neko* in Japanese, they are mostly yellow (money-making) or white (lucky), though black-colored (warding off evil) cats also exist. There are various legends regarding the cats' origin, most dating from the Edo period (1603-1867).»<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Wu Luxing, *100 Chinese Gods*, cit., p. 67, before mentioning Bi Gan, offers another possible identification: «As to who the God of Fortune was, there were many explanations. Some said that he was named He Wulu, who lived in the late Yuan Dynasty and died in battle against invaders. It was said that people who prayed to him could make fortunes wherever they went. This was how he had the name, “the God of Fortune.”»

<sup>4</sup> These four characters can also be put together in order to make one character, which is used especially in the celebrations of the new year to wish for wealth and prosperity.

<sup>5</sup> Caltonhill M., *Private Prayers*, cit., p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41. The best-known legend in Taiwan tells that «a younger son of a prominent Edo family almost brought his family to ruin through gambling, only to be saved by his cat, Tama, who appeared holding a gold coin. Each time he lost that money, he asked Tama to find a coin, which it did but seemed to become thinner. The man followed his cat, and saw it pray at a temple, “Take of my paws, take of my feet, give me a gold coin...” as it became fainter until it finally disappeared. The gambler

In addition to the patron gods of wealth in general, there are many other figures that have become associated with particular trades or social groups. The following can be listed among the «patron deities:» of carpenters, joiners, blacksmiths and potters: Lu Ban; who is said to have invented a wooden falcon that could fly; of winemakers: Yi Di, a lady who taught a man who had rescued her, the art of fermenting rice wine; of weavers, the Old Woman Huang Dao; of flowers: the goddess Hua Xian; of brush-makers, Meng Tian, who introduced the Chinese brush-pen, just about the time the Qin emperor had burnt all of China's books except a few on farming and warfare.

Then there are patron deities for horse-rearers, barbers, actors, minstrels, silk-workers, cobblers, story-tellers, paper-makers, prostitutes (they honour 觀音 GuanYin or Zhu Bajie, the pig in the romance *The Journey to the West*, because «all men behave like pigs»), thieves, butchers, students, people who are about to die...<sup>7</sup> Then there is the Kitchen God (灶神, *Zao Shen*), who listens to all that is said in every family's kitchen during the year and finally, on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of the 12th lunar month ascends to heaven to report to the Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝, *Yu Huang Da Di*). On that day every household cleans the kitchen and bribes the Kitchen God by putting some sugar, or glutinous rice on the lips of its portrait before burning it, so that it would deliver good reports to heaven, or keep its mouth sealed. People would also use the following verse in worship: «Yellow goat makes you rich and indigo money can move the deities.»<sup>8</sup>

The list goes on: Mazu (媽祖), GuanYin, Zhusheng Niangniang (註生娘娘) are invoked by women who have difficulty in conceiving; the Old Man Under the Moon prepares weddings; the Eight Immortals point the way to immortality; the omnipresent Tu Di Gong maintains links with one's homeland, etc. In short, there is no sphere of private and social life that does not have a patron among the gods. Even though, strictly speaking, this is not a financial action, it certainly has to do with every aspect of affluence, which is one of the goals of the quest and possession of money.

As far as Buddhism is concerned, alongside Guan Yin («She who sees the voices» of those who are in distress) we can mention a recumbent, potbellied and jolly figure of Buddha, the symbol of future happiness. Yet it is said that his abundant belly is swollen with the pain of humanity, which he has gathered up and transformed into peace and serenity.

All these gods have their particular rites which are celebrated on their respective

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reformed his ways, restored his family fortunes, and, with a statue of Tama to welcome customers and remind him of his past, started the tradition of wealth-beckoning cats.» Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-1.

<sup>8</sup> Wu Luxing, *100 Chinese Gods*, cit., p. 69.

feasts. Given the great number of gods, there are a great number of festivities and rites, and practically every day of the year is taken up by feasts. When the different rites of the various religions are added, it is truly quite possible to agree with the statement of some of the first missionaries, according to which the Chinese are the most religious people on earth.<sup>9</sup>

### The Offering of Money in Rites

Both private and public rituality is performed in quite simple fundamental ways, which consist of expressions of respect, prayers, burning of incense and ritual offerings. Ritual offerings usually consist of fruit, liquor, flowers and paper money. Paper money is usually burnt in the periodical sacrifices at the beginning and at the middle of the lunar month. The receivers of the money offering are the ancestors or the spirits (the latter is a recently established custom). The offering of money (which is actually a bundle of small sheets of silver and gold colored paper with writing, which are burnt in specially provided containers or ovens) helps the dead relatives to meet their necessities in the afterlife. This also explains the importance of money at the time of death and burial rites: «Ghost money should be burnt soon after death, as it will be needed quickly. This is why friends and relatives may be seen burning money at the roadside or riverbank immediately after a traffic accident or drowning. Ghost money is needed to bribe the

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<sup>9</sup> There is also a striking resemblance with Catholic devotion of the Saints, so much that a famous Presbyterian missionary, James Legge, could comment on the ideas of a Scottish Presbyterian Bishop, De Laune: «Indeed, the analogy between the religion of China and that of the Papal church is very striking, and we can account for it only by the fact that the great outline of the worship of heathen Rome was adopted by the so-called Christian Church. In his scheme of the Pagan, Papal, and Christian Churches, under the division of the objects of worship, De Laune says concerning the second — “Besides the Supreme God, Jehovah, the Governor of heaven and earth, whom they pretend to worship, they have diverse inferior deities, gods and goddesses, whom they divinely worship; Diva or Sancta Maria, the Queen of heaven and mother of God; with Divus Petrus, St. Paul, St. John, St. Thomas, St. Stephen, St. Andrew, & c.; to whom they, as their numens, or intercessors, build temples, erect altars, and dedicate feasts; paying also so much reverence to the pagan gods as to keep their names in the days of the week, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday; they have also tutelar and ethereal gods or goddesses to be applied to by several vocations, cities, families, orders, sick persons, as Divus or St. Nicholas, for the mariner; St. Windoline, for the shepherd; St. John Baptist, for the husbandman; St. Mary Magdalene, for the courtesan; St. Hubert, for the huntsman; St. Crispin, for the shoemaker, & c. The city, county, family, and phisic gods are innumerable; St. George, for England; St. Dennis, for France; St. Mark, for Venice, & c.; gods almost for every disease; besides the god-making power, that is in the Pope and cardinals, to canonize what deceased worthies they please, and to appoint them temples, altars, orders, and festivals.” Nearly every point in this description is applicable to the religion of China...» In Legge J., *The Notions of the Chinese concerning God and Spirits*. Hong Kong, 1852, pp. 57-8.

officials of hell. Hell is seen as composed of a series of courts staffed by judges and guards who are as corruptible as their human counterparts. People judged to be good eventually pass through the courts and become ancestral spirits (or, according to Buddhist thinking, are reborn in one of the six realms of existence), while bad people stay in hell and become tormented ghosts.»<sup>10</sup> Much of Chinese rituals are connected with wandering spirits. The monthly offerings which take place at the entrance of shops and businesses, may be made turning towards the space inside the gate, or turning towards the outside. In the first case they are directed to the ancestors, in the second to the wandering ghosts. The seventh lunar month is believed to be the month in which ghosts come out of hell (through the water) and exert their bad influence on people. At the middle of the lunar month the Ghost Festival is celebrated. A ship is made, of wood and paper, filled with ghost money and then sent on the waters and burnt. «Today, in some rural townships in south and central Taiwan, especially at Ghost Festival, people wrap up the spirit money in red paper and burn it as an offering to the “good brothers” (spirits), hoping that after they get a red envelope and become a loyal god of wealth, they will no longer tamper with the affairs of men.»<sup>11</sup>

The paper money is sometimes folded in a special way and then tied together to form bundles of paper, which are then burnt in offering.

Real money is also used with ritual money as a votive gift to the temple (to ask for benefits or to give thanks for a benefit that has already been granted), or to reward those in charge of the ritual services. There are voluntary offerings as well as specified tariffs, which are the traditional source of income for temples and religious institutes. This use of money is common to different cultures. Ritual money, however, seems to be peculiar to the Chinese world and is the subject of some curiosity.

### Some Observations

The interpretation of Chinese religiosity has puzzled, and continues to puzzle, generations of scholars and there are many different attempts at interpretation. It therefore seems prudent to limit ourselves to a few observations that could spontaneously arise in anyone who looks at these phenomena from the outside. All that we have said so far, at the level of mythology and rites, seems to indicate that Chinese gods and men, although confined to separate spheres, live alongside each other in an inter-related manner. The extraordinary spontaneity in the relationship with the gods, and the ease with which the

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<sup>10</sup> Caltonhill M., *Private Prayers*, cit., p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Wang Jia Feng (ed.), *Trademarks of the Chinese*. Taipei: Sinorama Magazine, 1992, p. 119.

needs and situations of the world are projected into the divine sphere, confirm this hypothesis, as does the naiveté with which human methods and resources are thought to be valid and effective in the other world. An outside observer draws from these perceptions a similar idea to the one given by the observation of children playing with dolls, who unconsciously enters as actors into the world they are creating, together with the characters to which they continually give life.

It seems that gods and men are so intertwined as to need each other. While men are weak on the one hand, at the mercy of forces beyond their control and, consequently, in need of the gods' help, on the other hand, the gods need the memory, veneration and gratitude of men if they are not to fall into oblivion. This explains how devotion, prayer and offerings are ultimately a form of exchange equivalent to what happens in the financial sphere. Grace versus thanksgiving. In this context, money becomes the price of men's relationship with their gods. Both of them need it to guarantee their continued existence. In this sense, the possession of money is necessary to exist, receive respect and assert one's power, both among men and among the gods. For this reason, people strive to create and maintain good relationships at all costs and at all levels. In this context it is difficult to say who controls whom; while it is true that men decide on the destiny of the gods through their memory, it is also true that men are weak, that they oppose and annul each other and that they are at the mercy of pain and death. At this point, the imagination of the fabulous world of the gods, in which the people's history and heroes are fused together, offers a different experience of reality, in which dreams are mixed with wakefulness, myth with history, limits with limitlessness, present with past and the company of men with the company of the ancestors and the spirits. An experience which, rather than being described as one of escape or opium, is perhaps better portrayed as a solution, or at least as an attempt at a solution, to pain and anguish but, above all, to the mystery of life itself.

In this sense, the color red can be considered a key to interpretation: it is ubiquitous, and not by mere coincidence, in Chinese life. It represents good fortune, it is a very important well-wishing symbol that should not be treated in a trivial way.

To understand its meaning we must remember the tradition, or the myth, of the New Year. The celebration includes the night vigil with one's family. It is not important what people do, it is necessary to keep the vigil. In the morning, when they meet friends and acquaintances, people congratulate each other, but not with good wishes for the future; they congratulate each other for the danger they have avoided. During the last night of the year, it is said that a monstrous animal known as Nian (Year), passes by (hence the Chinese word for New-year: 過年, *Guo Nian*, the passage of the Year) look-



ing for someone to devour. For this reason, those who survive the night congratulate each other for having avoided the danger of Time (of Chronos, as the Greeks would say) which devours its children. The danger, however, is avoided thanks to the strips of red paper bearing good wishes that are hung on the jambs and the lintels of the door to the house, which must remain closed. These strips of paper remain on the door even for the entire year as a continual protection. Red is the colour which wards off the evil spirits. It protects everything that is new: the new year, children (who are often dressed in red), brides on their wedding day, newly opened shops that hang red ornaments with symbolic shapes. Yet this is not all: strangely enough, it also protects the temples and the offerings, which establish contact with the invisible world and which should not therefore need any protection. It seems that red protects both men from the gods and the gods from men: small red strips indicate the presence of sacred and numinous places, so that people do not offend the presence they contain.

At this point, it seems that red should be interpreted as aspiration: aspiration to the truth of all things, to contact with the nascent state of the universe, the reaching of an uncontaminated state, of innocence, of the dawning promise of perfection; a state obscurely perceived as present at the beginning and which was inevitably lost thanks to human intervention. Red envelopes (which should contain new banknotes just withdrawn from the bank, a sum that is a good token), a typical new year present, can be seen as the aspiration to a perfect relationship between men – and also between men and the gods, an aspiration to truth and a new dawn of existence to which the entire complex world of Chinese religion is truly and intimately oriented.

## The Logic of Gift-Giving

The relationship man tries to establish with god or with a transcendental principle, however we wish to call it, is but the abstract projection of the same relationships man experiences with other men in a particular societal context. Natural environment, political dispositions, social customs and economic conditions all contribute significantly in their dynamic and systemic correlations to shape and reshape the way people interrelate with each other and with their gods. This is so true that when religions are uprooted from their original societal contexts they inevitably undergo transformations and remodeling to adapt to their new environment. It is also obviously true that these same religions influence their new environment so that the end result is at least a modified, if not a completely new, social-religious entity. This is what happened in Bangladesh to both Islam and Christianity. Despite their formal resolute stress on doctrinaire orthodoxy, the faithful of both communities generally live out their respective faith according to Hindu cultural and traditional patterns.<sup>1</sup> These need to be briefly outlined.

In Bangladesh «the principle of hierarchy in interpersonal relations is accepted as morally right and necessary, as in South Asia generally, and is ritualized in many ways. When two people meet in daily intercourse they commonly establish relative rank one way or another; it may depend on wealth, lineage, education, rank of employment, or even a small difference in age. In daily intercourse a person accorded higher rank than another is given the right to extract service and respect from him, and he provides some patronage in return. Thus in the moral order reciprocity is expected between the “big” and the “little” people.»<sup>2</sup> Maloney aptly depicts what actually holds together the Bangladeshi society: hierarchy and patronage. Although in theory equality among the people may actually be asserted, in practice it does not really exist and this is appropriate within the moral economy of Bangladeshi society. Patronage is the content of the relationship between the relative and different ranks on the hierarchical ladder. The end result is an unequal and asymmetrical reciprocity which is expected by both patron and client. If an inferior acknowledges a superior, the latter expects from the former obedience, loyalty and service in general. The former in turn expects protection and blessing

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<sup>1</sup> Hindu in this context does not necessarily indicate Hinduism as a religion. Hindu here refers to its original meaning of people living beyond the river Hindu, i.e. the peoples of the Indian subcontinent. The reference here is to Indian culture.

<sup>2</sup> Maloney C., *Behaviour and Poverty in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1991, p. 40.

from the patron. These expectations are forms of entitlements or rights (*adhikaras*) which, if respected, produce prosperity and maintain a harmonic social order. Behind these social dynamics it is not difficult to discover the essence of the caste system, in which indeed *adhikaras* play a big role in defining caste belonging and identity. *Daya* or indulgence, grace, mercy and blessing play a significant role in the relationship between unequal people. *Daya* is the entitlement of inferiors towards their superiors, «it implies an indulgent redistribution of wealth, abstract goodness and personal aura.»<sup>3</sup> Even a beggar is entitled to this and, just as he has the right to receive from a donor, the donor himself has the duty to give.<sup>4</sup> In some way, the beggar feels that he is giving the donor the possibility to fulfill his claim to superiority. Once a beggar has received something, he does not need to thank the donor and, in fact, he does not. These obligations and counter-obligations pervade any social intercourse in Bangladesh, sparing neither familial or friendship relationships.

At this point it may be useful to comment on the place of mothers in this cultural setup. In Bangladesh and the rest of South Asian societies, the mother is the symbol of nurture par excellence. Traditionally, breast feeding lasts until the baby is over two years old, or at least until a new baby is born. The baby learns *daya* from this prolonged period of close relationship with his mother. He depends on her *daya* and at the same time he is controlled by it. Some believe that this early relationship with the mother is fraught with psychological implications. Sudhir Kakar, for instance, sees in this the roots of misogyny in adult Bangladeshi males.<sup>5</sup> Whilst a child expects *daya* on the one hand, fear is its correlated companion on the other. *Daya* and fear go hand in hand: the former is a superior's prerogative, while the latter is the characteristic of an inferior's dependent status.

It goes without saying that in such a cultural setup there is little, if any, scope for «gift giving» in the way we are accustomed to in the West. *Dan* (gift) is not and cannot possibly be free from expectations and especially from obligations. Gift-giving in Bangladesh is always associated with the attempt to establish a fruitful relationship in terms of advantages, economic or otherwise. Generally speaking, he who gives wants some-

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 42. For a discussion on rights (*adhikaras*) and their role in consolidating the caste system cf. Targa S., Caste, King and Dharma: From Varendra to Bangladesh. An Historical Perspective. *Quaderni del Centro Studi Asiatico*, 2006, 1/1, pp. 29-36.

<sup>4</sup> I imagine that Bangladesh must be the only country in the world in which beggars came together and organized a procession to demand an increase in alms! This episode took place in Dhaka some years ago.

<sup>5</sup> See Kakar Sudhir, *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, 1979.

thing from the one who receives. In this sense he may be considered relatively inferior to the receiver; relatively inferior because an influential person in a village may organize a meal for the poor of his village without being considered an inferior person. On the contrary, his gift reinforces his superiority status. Nevertheless, the influential man is not free from expectations while feeding the destitute of the village. At the very least, his gesture must be reciprocated with loyalty. In short, gift giving is a way to establish some forms of patronage where patron and client may embody a relative and differential hierarchical status *vis à vis* each other and the situation in which they find themselves.<sup>6</sup> Be that as it may, the obligations involved in gift-giving are of a quite strong nature. They actually constitute some form of rights and duties for both clients and patrons respectively. Non-compliance causes a relationship to break down, the loss of one's honor, and a breach in the moral order of the society.

The network of rights and duties, which any social intercourse entails, transforms relationships into sort of contracts where love, gratuitousness, generosity, friendship and good itself can only have a relative meaning, which is always subordinated to a purpose. To do good for its own sake does not make much sense in Bangladesh, and this not because people do not know what good is or are too wicked to carry it out. Quite the contrary: good is always referred to conformity and correctness concerning the way things are or should be, what Hindus might like to call *dharma* and Muslims the will of Allah. In this context, and with a certain degree of fatalism, actions, ritual or otherwise, are somehow preordained and pre-known in their effects, especially on society.<sup>7</sup> Good and evil do not necessarily have an intrinsic meaning *per se*. Good is any action that aims at maintaining the social order, whilst evil is any action that aims at its disruption. It may be said that a good man is one who knows the rules of the game and plays accordingly.

When it comes to worshipping the gods, it is no surprise to see many of the previously mentioned anthropological and cultural traits. Here too it is a matter of knowing the rules and acting accordingly. The first of these rules is that gods and goddesses are not insensitive to particular human acts. People believe that ritual actions cannot but produce particular and desired effects. Somehow these acts maintain the power to bend the gods' will. Hindu mythology is full of such stories in which heroic ascetics embark on impossible austerities to force the gods to grant them their desiderata. Writes

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<sup>6</sup> In this respect the Hegelian dialectic between servant and master may be of some use here to understand the relationship between gift giver and gift receiver.

<sup>7</sup> For a further insight into this kind of ethics, see Chennakesavan Sarasvati, *A Critical Study of Hinduism*. Delhi: South Asia Books, 1980, pp. 101ff.

Kinsley: «One of the most effective ways to achieve what a person wants in traditional Hinduism is to perform *tapas*, “ascetic austerities.” If one is persistent and heroic enough, one will generate so much heat (also called *tapas*) that the gods will be forced to grant the ascetic a wish in order to save themselves and the world from being scorched.»<sup>8</sup> Obviously, most of the common people do not usually undertake these ascetic practices. However, they do so vicariously when, for example, venerating a *pir’s mazar*, offering gifts to his disciples, catering for wandering *sadhus* and *fakirs*. People try and get what they want from the gods through various acts of ritual gift-giving.

Gifts do not necessarily need to be expensive: in actual fact, they basically consist of food, animals, sweets, flowers etc. The crucial point is that this ritual giving is carried out within the network of expectations and obligations that a patronage relationship entails. Thus the goddess Laksmi is addressed always as *ma* (mother)<sup>9</sup>, which immediately reminds us of the two poles of *daya* and the fear that South Asian cultures experience in connection with the symbol of nurture *par excellence*. People expect prosperity from Laksmi or Allah because of their fear and submission to them. They thus seem to earn a right to that prosperity. «A corollary principle is that the prosperity of any individual or group derives morally from, and is validated by, the indulgence of a higher being who can grant it.»<sup>10</sup>

Apparently, in this construct there is little scope, if any, for the freedom of both the devotee and his or her god. The only freedom for both is to have knowledge of the rules which govern the moral order of society and the cosmos.<sup>11</sup> Strange though it may seem, this knowledge is necessary only in order that it may be discarded. In fact, these rules will eventually be overcome at the attainment of *moksa* or *mukti*, that is, at the moment in which it is realized that the so-called empirical reality in its multifaceted manifestations is just nothing. Then, the individual self will dissolve and remerge into the universal Self. The warm but false illusion (*maya*) of individualized empirical experience will give way to the cold but true reality of nothingness. It is difficult to say just how much this philosophic and theological implant influences the religious understanding and practice of common people in Bangladesh. However, the widespread es-

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<sup>8</sup> Kinsley D. R., *Hindu Goddesses*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> As a matter of fact all goddesses are addressed in the same way. Interestingly, gods are not usually addressed as fathers. Goddesses are always manifestations of *Sakti*, unbridled and energetic power.

<sup>10</sup> Maloney C., cit., p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> See Targa Sergio. *Ethical Perspectives in the Bhagavadgita*. MA dissertation (Unpublished manuscript). London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1997, pp. 17-9. After all, in Hinduism the gods are not considered as supernatural beings; they are certainly higher beings but always within the scope of nature and themselves subjected to the law of the universe, *dharma*.

teem shown by the people towards fakirs and *shadus*, or ascetic people in general, may be significant and partly explain the degree of legalism and fatalism that surrounds religious practices. Providence, gratuitousness or grace in their Judaeo-Christian acceptance, seem to be unheard of in this context. The pedagogical injunctions of *dharma*, as it were, cannot but lend, in fact, conditional importance and consistence to both gods and devotees and their ensuing relationship. This perhaps is also the reason why the Christian message and practice are often misunderstood. For Bangladeshis it is nearly impossible to understand that Christian service might just be about gratuitousness<sup>12</sup> and not an attempt to establish a *do ut des* relationship.

Despite the positive consideration of asceticism among both Hindus and Muslims, prosperity and well-being remain in the main signs of the blessing and presence of God among his people. I doubt that Jesus' «Blessed you who are in need...; Blessed are you who now go hungry...; Blessed are you who weep now...»<sup>13</sup> can make much sense to the people of Bangladesh. Neither Islam nor Hinduism cannot find a place in their theological reflection for what St. Paul says «...power is most fully seen in weakness. I am therefore happy to boast of my weaknesses, because then the power of Christ will rest upon me. So I am content with a life of weakness, insult, hardship, persecution, and distress, all for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.»<sup>14</sup> In Christianity, God's *kenosis* in the crucifixion of Christ is, obviously, the stumbling block in the path of defining a glamorous theology of material goods. However, apart from theological reflections, Bangladeshi people perhaps find it difficult to understand the Christian proposal because of the ambiguous behavior of both Christian Churches and missionaries. «The money and power-based strategies and statuses generated by the institutional and personal affluence of Western missionaries contradict principles which are at the very heart of Christian mission as prescribed in the New Testament.»<sup>15</sup>

Providence, gratuitousness or grace are preached from the pulpits but often denied in practice by a luxurious lifestyle. This is an even more serious a problem when one bears in mind that a great number of Bangladeshi people live beneath the poverty line. As a matter of fact, and from the point of view of results, there is not much difference between the denial of providence-grace within the patronage relationship of the Indic cultural context and the denial of providence-grace in the name of efficiency of

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<sup>12</sup> However, it must be acknowledged that the misgivings of many Muslims and Hindus have been sometimes motivated by the bad behavior of both Christian Churches and missionaries. Christians have been known to offer money and other services in order to allure poor and destitute people.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 6:20-21.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9-10.

<sup>15</sup> Bonk J. J., *Missions and Money*. New York: Orbis Book, 1991, p. 82.

the Western cultural setup. Gift-giving and its underlying logic of self immolation still remain an unfulfilled goal for Hindus and Muslims as well as Christians. And if indeed *the poor are blessed*, it is possible to think that the simple religiosity of people in Bangladesh, which basically expresses itself in the request for daily food, may bring them much closer to God than the sophisticated but schizophrenic religious life of Christians.



The number of texts which introduce researchers, scholars or merely curious readers to Japan's mysterious and fascinating culture, to the manifest or veiled practices which regulate its society, to its people's customs and to the luxurious and elegant courtesy with which human relationships are embroidered... all tend to highlight some elements that are taken to be characteristic or peculiar to this country. A quick look at the indexes of these books makes it easy to observe how unusually emphatic are the descriptions of some crucial words, concepts and attitudes proper to Japan, of cultural manifestations that are found nowhere else. In an endless medley of words and concepts, of strange names and unknown formulas, the authors of these texts strive to make more familiar, or less esoteric, ideas and experiences which, so they tell us, have little in common with those expressed in other cultures. For example, the recurrent motive of *aimai* — those ambiguous expressions that invert the normal grammatical sense of words by conveying negation through affirmation and allusion through clarification; of *kenkyo* — the well pondered sense of modesty that makes it difficult to meet another person on an equal footing; of *amae* — in which the hierarchy of relations is constituted on the basis of feelings of benevolence or dependence towards another; of *shūdan ishiki* — that group consciousness which establishes what choices and decisions an individual is supposed to make. The list could go on forever, with increasingly detailed and precise catalogues, inventories of cultural and social differences that would emphasize their untranslatability, their refinement, and their peculiarity.

And yet, for anyone who has had the chance to be in contact with other cultures, with other ways of relating to reality or of representing it, it is interesting to observe that what strongly emerges from all these pages is not so much their positive content, but rather what they lack or fail to include. If, for example, we were to look in these handbooks and dictionaries (which explicitly emphasize the uniqueness of the Japanese) for some information under the heading «transcendence,» we would inevitably be referred to the few paragraphs under the heading «immanence,» a concept — it is said — that permeates all things, something pre-philosophical and pre-reflective that validates experience as it presents or reveals itself to our eyes, a notion that is at the root of numerous distinctions between the Japanese and the Christian religious universe. We are told that the notion of immanence is connatural to the spiritual sentiment of the Japanese people and this is why they favor the idea of impermanence rather than of creation, re-

incarnation rather than resurrection, nirvana rather than heaven, *maya* rather than hell, ignorance rather than evil, liberation rather than salvation and self-knowledge rather than grace, redemption, or atonement. The only possible transcendence in Japan, therefore, seems to correspond to that which leads the real back to itself, that «going beyond» which, not having aims, ends, or further desires, is simply a «going on.» It is the concretization of forces and anonymous existences that are born without reason, prolong themselves out of weakness, and entrust their hopes to the impassive riddles of a destiny that keeps delaying or postponing its arrival.

Again, if we search for data on the concept of «disinterestedness,» that attitude which does not calculate personal gain or the benefits derived from one's dedication to others, not only are we invited to ponder and dwell on the profound and sophisticated Buddhist notion of 自他不二 (*jitafuni*, or non-duality between self and other, a state of compassionate love and self-forgetfulness so refined that is almost impossible to find), but we also discover how voluntary activities (in which, by definition, one offers his time and energies to others in order to help them solve some precarious situation, to meet some necessity or need) are a phenomenon that only recently found its way into ordinary language.

We could of course dwell on other words and concepts, point out other aspects which, whilst lacking in this culture, are instead present in other social contexts... and yet, for our present purpose, we are truly struck by the complex and formal manifestations of how Japanese people relate to others only when we read some descriptions of their concept of gift-giving. For example, under the heading 贈答 (*zōtō*, or the *Japanese Custom of Gift Giving*) we read: «Western people often give presents without expecting anything in return, and do so simply because they want to. As a result the notion of *giri* is not nearly as strong, though people feel a sense of obligation when they receive a gift from others. On the other hand suppose someone from the West gave a personal present to a Japanese person. The Japanese would give some gift in return that was of equivalent value. But if the original gift were worth more than their relationship, the Japanese person would feel burdened and subject to a heavy *giri*.»<sup>1</sup> And later, as if to emphasize how this subtle «contractualism» also covers their relationships to the gods — indeed, that the latter is to be understood as the prototype of our relations to other

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<sup>1</sup> Davis R.J. and Ikeno Osamu (eds), *The Japanese Mind. Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture*. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2002, p. 240. The concept of *giri* (義理) can perhaps best be understood as a «constellation of related meanings, the most important of which are as follows: 1) moral principles or duty, 2) rules one has to obey in social relationships, and 3) behavior one is obliged to follow or that must be done against one's will.» Ibid., p. 95.

people — the text continues: «For most Western people, “just giving” is a good thing to do. This may be influenced by religious beliefs, which state that is better to give than to receive. People give but do not expect rewards in this world, and although this ideal is not always put into practice it is an effective explanation of gift given in the West. On the other hand it is interesting to note that the Japanese often offer money to their gods and deities while praying, expecting *goriyaku*, or benefit and favor in return... There exists a give-and-take relationship even between the gods and people in Japan, and this morality of balancing relationships has strongly influenced the Japanese custom of gift giving.»<sup>2</sup>

In Japan all gift-giving, in order to be truly such, must follow the detailed catalogue of regulations and laws that structure its dynamics (i.e., from whom and to whom, what and how, how much and when), ought to obey a meticulous set of norms and rules that will allow people to recognize it as «gift» within the complex symbolic social universe. Any gift, as well as every act of gift-giving, is merely a way of actualizing the invisible texture of duties that have to be fulfilled, debts that have to be paid, relationships of inferiority or superiority that have to be confirmed and strengthened, obligations that have to be recognized and reciprocated. Certainly, this weaving of exchanges, these bonds that invisibly tie a person to another by creating a certain reciprocity in the paradoxical situation of dependency and subjection that they establish, cannot be compared too lightly, or reduced to mere economic exchange. As Takie Lebra writes, «Reciprocity must be distinguished from pure economic exchange in that its significance lies in the creation or maintenance of a social relationship rather than in the transfer of goods from hand to hand. What is exchanged might well be of economic value, as in the exchange of gifts... However, if part of reciprocity, such an exchange is coupled with an exchange of non-economic values such as love, respect, pride — the values that are the ingredients of a social relationship. The vocabulary of reciprocity is “giving,” “accepting,” and “returning” rather than selling, buying, and paying or borrowing and lending.»<sup>3</sup> Still, as the author unwaveringly admits: «Reciprocity... excludes wholly unilateral types of action, whether they are sacrifice and devotion, generosity and benevolence, dominance and exploitation, or compliance and submission. When applied in the Japanese cultural setting reciprocity immediately suggests the concept of *on*... *On* is a relational concept combining a benefit or benevolence given with a debt of obligation thus incurred... One does not simply engage in an *on*-relationship but it is born into debtor

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>3</sup> Lebra Takie Sugiyama, *Japanese Patterns of Behavior*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984, p. 101.

status vis-à-vis one's parental and ancestral benefactors, who all have contributed to bringing one into this worldly existence. One is born, in other words, with a birth-debt (far from birthright). Both *on* credit and *on* debt are thus ascribed, so equality in bargaining power between partners is ruled out at the very beginning of one's life.»<sup>4</sup>

Now, if this is the social and cultural situation in which people live, if these are the coordinates that describe every relationship with alterity (both human and divine), then clearly such key concepts as gratuitousness, gift, donation, providence, etc., must be extremely hard to transmit or make accessible in the Japanese context. The problem, as usual, is not terminological, nor does it consist in the fact that all these words are absent in the Japanese vocabulary. Instead, what seems to be missing is the will or the desire to let oneself go and experience in one's life these attitudes that surpass a strictly human logic. What seems to be missing is the desire to break away from a cultural milieu that identifies every relationship with others with a contract, a bond, a convention and an obligation that tradition has already stipulated and certified in advance. In fact, everything in Japan has a price (even the often praised *kimochi* — or that «feeling beyond common feeling that makes a Japanese person who he is» — can be found, surprisingly, on the price-list), and each price only multiplies, *ad infinitum*, the number of possibilities of buying and selling, of gaining and supplying, of bartering and exchanging. What is offered as gratuitous, as «free of charge,» when the left hand does not know what the right is doing (Matthew 6:3), is not only frowned upon, it also carries the stigma of defect and imperfection, an idea of low quality merchandise, the halo that usually surrounds a shoddy product. Thus, every gift is nothing but the throw of a boomerang, something that must return to the starting point after having erased the invisible trace left by its trajectory; it is a giving that offers nothing, since the one who gives expects to be treated in the same (or in an equivalent) way, so as to be repaid for what he gave.

In Japan, even the Church does not seem to be immune to this economic system in which money hardly ever turns into an offer without compensation, or into a gift without expectations. Rarely do the richer dioceses help the poorer ones; sometimes the former do not even realize the needs and necessities of the latter. On their part, the poorer dioceses cannot explicitly ask for the support and the assistance of the richer ones, lest they get into debt with them not only financially, but also morally. And if at times donations and collections are solicited and requested through posters and placards that usually cover the billboards at the entrance of the Church, they mostly con-

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 91, 104.

cern far distant countries, lands that are ignored by the Japanese, or even unknown to them in their poor geographic awareness: East Timor, Vietnam, Cambodia, Peru... these are all nations whose people have learned by heart how to say «Thank you, we will never forget your generosity» in at least twenty different languages; nations that are too poor and tired to even try to enter the familiar game of «not losing one's face before the other,» because against hunger and misery, even dignity and self-respect are powerless, and sooner or later will have to bow and kneel.

A logic of the gift: perhaps this is what is missing in such a wealthy and opulent country as Japan, the world's second economic power, which many envy and long for as the ultimate promised land. It is a logic whereby we may not only try to give while expecting nothing in return, trusting the words according to which «it is more blessed to give than to receive» (Acts 20:35), and realizing that if truly «you received without charge,» then you must also «give without charge» (Matthew 10:8), but a logic whereby we may also pay attention to the silent moral imperative which, as in the case of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), would force us to go beyond the mere possibility of quantifying an encounter and turning it into a commodity, guide our attitudes beyond all calculation and gain, and emphasize the immediate compassion and generosity which alone can bring about proximity and fraternity. Then perhaps what seems to be missing in Japan is precisely that which money cannot buy, nor prosperity ever guarantee: the idea of a gift that not only would imply, but also overcome every concept of duty, an offer consecrated without reason, transcending the culturally established boundaries of obligation and debt, an idea of economy that transcends the mere logic of maximization of profit and assiduous accumulation, thus opening up our horizons to embrace that universe, both human and divine, wherein echoes a question to which the Japanese still seem unable to give — or to donate — a satisfactory answer: «What do you have that was not given to you?» (1 Corinthians 4:7).

The observations contained in the previous papers demonstrate the great importance of money in Chinese religiosity in Taiwan. Perhaps devotion to the ancestors, although it contemplates the offerings of paper money, is the only one relatively unaffected by the mentality of investment, interest and return, which pervades other forms of devotion.

Increased wealth is not an end in itself; it is but an intermediate moment in view of other goals, among them the regeneration of society through works that promote growth in the quality of life (cultural centers and activities) and the recognition and legitimization of the status acquired by individuals. The latter motive seems capable of motivating the commitment and the great dedication of many in the organization of temple life. It is also interesting to note that traditional Chinese religion does not have any missionary programs or initiatives. Everything serves the life of the community and the temple is one of the most profound sources of its identity.

Other religions that have made contact with the Chinese world are measured against these parameters, the main difference being that their activity necessarily aims at increasing the number of their followers.

If the past is a great teacher, an attempt at a comprehensive interpretation of the Taiwanese traditions and trends with regard to the relationship between religion and money should start examining the experience of the Christian Churches and the recent history of Catholic and Protestant missionary activity on the island, its initial forms and how it developed.

This experience also shows how attempts were made at solving the problem of insertion into a cultural tradition so different from the West, by investing and using material resources in view of achieving spiritual goals.

As in the whole of China, in Taiwan too the missionaries used humanitarian and cultural services, the fruit of Western progress, in response to local needs. The Protestants made the most remarkable interventions in this field at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, providing medical assistance, dispensaries, small hospitals and schools, whilst the weak Catholic presence was an obstacle to any meaningful interventions.

The situation changed with the withdrawal of Chiang Kai Shek from Taiwan and the arrival from mainland China of a large number of Catholic missionaries who were already experts on the Chinese world. Especially in the areas entrusted to the Religious

Orders, there was a regular «Church foundation», through the purchase of land and the establishment of social works (schools, dispensaries, hospitals), which made the Catholic Church an important factor in the life of the island's new community at religious, social and economic levels. On the basis of a religious motivation, and in view of religious goals, the Church took on managerial roles, which involved considerable sums of money (the majority of which came from abroad) and generated allied activities of considerable dimensions, thereby increasing the network of relations and, consequently, influence in social life. The Protestants also developed in similar ways, emphasizing their influence at political level (they inspired the foundation of the current President's Progressive Democratic Party), while the communities and Churches of the most varied denominations multiplied, often independently of each other.

In the 1970s, together with the changing world and local situations at all levels, the Catholic Church began to feel the impact of the new ideas that had emerged from Vatican II and the progressive reduction of foreign missionaries, a process which was not accompanied by the latter's replacement with new autochthonous generations of pastoral agents. This led to disorientation in the management of the acquired resources and a certain division between the various protagonists (the foreign missionaries, who were more receptive to the new theological ideas and prophetic choices made in other parts of the world, were more in favor of a front-line pastoral action, whilst the local pastoral agents continued along more traditional lines). There was also a slowing down in the numerical growth of the communities and a loss of overall cultural relevance, in spite of the presence of two Catholic Universities on the island (at the present time there is no Catholic television channel, there are very few bookshops and the number of Catholic publishers is very small). The Protestants do not seem to have suffered the effect of these uncertainties and their influence has continued to expand, as far as possible, on the strength of factors (greater mutual independence, importance of the leaders' charismatic nature, brevity of the pre-baptism phase, a strong economic and organizational structure of the different groups, the possibility of intervention and witness in the social sphere) that promote a more rapid adhesion to the Christian message.

In recent years, however, there has been a revival among Catholics of visible actions of renewal and re-qualification of the existing resources (repairs and construction of new churches; new pavilions in schools and hospitals, organization of foundations for charitable works and the support of ecclesial life; works undertaken by the local Church, stepping into the shoes of the foreign missionaries of the past). This has obviously been done with a limited number of available personnel, but there is a visibly renewed appreciation of the importance of works as a witness to the credibility of the message.

On the basis of these facts, we could make a comparison between the different approaches to the relationship between religion and riches in the Taiwanese context, and a reflection on their positive and negative aspects, especially in the light of the fact that the visions vary according to the different origins of the pastoral agents. A foreign (Western) missionary almost immediately thinks that visible works are not necessarily advantageous to evangelization (they may even be an obstacle to it), whilst the Chinese Christians and clergy believe that prosperity is first and foremost a sign of authenticity of work carried out at spiritual level, as well as being a very effective instrument for its growth<sup>1</sup>.

This brief analysis demonstrates the permanence of what can be defined as an entrepreneurial spirit in the way in which the Catholic world of Taiwan perceives and embodies faith and witness. This permanence raises some questions which, though they are ancient are nevertheless always new: are these people perhaps forgetting the prophetic logic of the Gospel, which teaches us to rely solely on the divine power of proclamation? Or does the materialization of faith in works bear witness to the importance of the incarnation and make tangibly visible the new world brought by Christ, a world that would otherwise be merely a fleeting dream? Is the mysterious mechanism of conversions set in motion, or is it hampered by works and institutions, balance sheets, projects, statistics and influential friendships? Are these conversions authentic, profound and sincere, or are they just repeating indefinitely the mentality of the «rice-Christians»?

This series of questions seems to lead us back to the fundamental dialectic between truth and power: what is really important, the power of truth or the truth of power? Which of the two approaches determines the way in which religiosity is lived in Taiwan, from the most simple forms (of traditional religion) to the more sophisticated ones (Buddhism, Christianity and other organized religions)? Do the prayers, offerings, celebrations, the promises of individual believers and the different ways of managing the religious organizations express a search for the truth, or are they just a power game in which success is the only measure of blessing?

To a missionary from the Northern hemisphere, who knows that appearances can be deceptive and who has a direct experience of the post-modern world's criticism of Christianity, every forced compromise of the truth is unacceptable: the truth must be allowed to penetrate hearts with its own immediate, irresistible and apodictic evidence.

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<sup>1</sup> The different approaches are also connected with the age of the missionaries as well as their different backgrounds: older missionaries and those who hail from the Southern hemisphere show a more immediate and prudent appreciation of works and structures in view of evangelization.



Such a missionary believes that the only acceptable way is to give each person the clear and lucid opportunity to choose whether or not to believe in the personal love of Christ; this is the only way that does not harm the freedom of others, it is not proselytism and respects as much as possible the dialogue among believers of different religions. In the eyes of a Western missionary, every form of propaganda, which necessarily implies an effort to sell a product by suggesting motives that have nothing to do with it<sup>2</sup>, every bait that has been set to catch a prey, have nothing to do with the purity of the message; on the contrary, it is a disgusting distortion. In connection with this, a Chinese saying comes to mind, an anecdote attributed to Jiang Tai Gong (姜太公), who helped King Wu to found the Zhou Dynasty (12<sup>th</sup> century BC): «Jiang Tai Gong fished without a hook for ten years because he wanted the fish to bite on their own.»

The vision of the power of truth is the result of Western culture's centuries of history, in which specific contributions of Greek philosophy and Christian revelation came together. We should perhaps remember Socrates, Plato and the discovery of the existence of a world of ideas that is endowed with its own consistency, stability, and immutability; in short, a world endowed with its own truth and transcendence, against which the physical power is impotent. Socrates died because the (quest for) truth he taught to young people, corrupted their customs and broke down the power relationships that held the Athens of the Thirty Tyrants together. He was a man who lived in the presence of the truth, a man who knew that he did not know and therefore searched. Like him, and even more than him, is Christ, who stands before the mystery of God as the only one who knows Him and who accepts a death outside the city of men in order to bear witness to the truth. Through Christ the world is freed once and for all from the logic of human power alone and taken into the sphere of divine power, which reveals the ultimate truth. Christ does so, not by standing aside from the world but immersing himself in the life of men, offering himself as the true way of organizing the life of individuals and communities. Upon these foundations the western world preserves this possibility in its spiritual, cultural and social DNA and, extreme though it may be, this possibility continues to exert a powerful attraction from generation to generation, raising armies of

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle has this to say about how to introduce a topic to listeners: «You may use any means you choose to make your hearer receptive; among others, giving him a good impression of your character, which always helps to secure his attention. He will be ready to attend to anything that touches himself and to anything that is important, surprising, or agreeable; and you should accordingly convey to him the impression that what you have to say is of this nature. If you wish to distract his attention, you should imply that the subject does not affect him, or is trivial or disagreeable. But observe, all this has nothing to do with the speech itself. It merely has to do with the weak-minded tendency of the hearer to listen to what is beside the point.» (*Rhet.* III. 14, 1415ab).

martyrs and saints, of men and women who find the meaning of life in ideals that are invisible and bereft of any material advantage — thereby re-creating the society in which they live.

The Chinese world, instead, seems to embody the other side of the coin: the perception of the volubility of events, although it is limited to the alternation of opposites and the perennial play of opposing forces. This is a world in which the best one can do is to adapt and try to obtain the greatest possible advantage from it.<sup>3</sup> Thus it is power that is credible and true is the power of the chief; the behaviour that knows how to adapt to such a reality is also true and brings advantageous results. We could say that Chinese culture does not have sufficient awareness of the possibility of an immediate personal relationship with the absolute truth and, therefore, tradition becomes its ultimate criterion, it merges with the individual and ends up oppressing him. As a result, the law of behaviour is the necessity of using all available resources to one's personal advantage, in an attempt to establish one's personal power and limiting as much as possible the oppression experienced at the hands of those who are stronger.

At a more philosophical level, we could perhaps also say that Chinese culture is governed by a thought that is not sufficiently aware of the *objective* existence of an ultimate meaning that is absolute, transcendent and, at the same time, important for the individual and before which each one is responsible. We could also say that this thought certainly recognizes its place within the complex play of forces, but these forces are still within its act, since it is this act which thinks and assesses them. Thus the one who knows, and his thought, have no other measure than themselves and ultimately the entire process is unconsciously and unavoidably geared towards an advantage, an advantage that seems to be personal when it is really anonymous and takes on the appearance of an unassailable myth, devouring lives and hopes in its mortal embrace. The power

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<sup>3</sup> It may be useful to quote some passages from Jinmei Yuan, *The Role of Time in the Structure of Chinese Logic*. *Philosophy East & West* 56/1, 2006, pp. 136-52: «Chinese logicians in ancient times presupposed no fixed order in the world. Things are changing all the time. If this is true, then universal rules that aim to represent fixed order in the world for all time are not possible... My proposal is that Chinese logic is structured in the present time or the time of the *now*. This time is subjective and "spreads out" to more than one possible world» (p. 136). «The pictures of possible worlds in subjective time follows the presumption in Chinese philosophy that everything is changing. No fixed order can be found. To see the beauty of Chinese logical structure and the power of Chinese arguments, one needs to abandon the concepts of the universal truth and universal logical rules. The truth in Chinese logical reasoning is relative to a world. Chinese logic is about "indicating" a world. A meaningful issue is on the time of now. The structure of Chinese logic is a series of flexible possibilities recognized as harmoniously coexisting in the present moment. This structure emphasizes a new way to look at these relationships. The wisdom shown by this kind of structure is that it is an open system ready for the emergence of novelty» (p. 149).

behind knowledge, and therefore behind action, is immediately sensed as a possibility of advantage. From this perception is born an attraction that seems to know no opposition and it is capable of measuring anything.

We could also interpret this situation in a similar way to the humanism that followed the European Middle Ages; a phenomenon which has been subjected to much analysis and criticism in the Western world, while the Far East seems to have reacted to it with great, immediate and even naïve confidence, apparently unaware of the tragedies it caused.

It is true that the long and rich history of Chinese philosophy has produced teachers and schools that have discovered dimensions of human experience open to transcendence and the mystery of the Absolute (for example, Lao Zi, Zhuang Zi, philosophical Daoism). However, these people abandoned the city, preferring solitude as a more consistent way of searching for the infinite. Confucianism, which is the most representative philosophical current of Chinese culture, by emphasizing morality and the moral ego, looks upon the individual as part of a community, totally inserted into a network of relationships in which the truth follows the relationship of power. This also explains why the Confucian doctrines have been used as *instrumentum regni* by the state authority.

Nevertheless, the perception of the truth of power brings with it an important message, a need connected with the most profound dimensions of human existence: man is handed over to his own counsel, he finds in his hands the richness and the responsibility of possessing intelligence. Whatever he chooses, he cannot deny that what he does is the fruit of the resources he has at hand and a purpose he has in mind. To deny, criticize and escape are also positive choices, made in view of a project. The real problem is choosing the best goals and the best ways of achieving them.

At the same time, the entrepreneurial spirit and the search for advantages reveal the importance of the material aspects of life also in view of achieving more spiritual goals. Behind an attitude that too easily criticizes the existence of structures there may also be some negative reasons, which verge on the rejection of one's own belonging; and not to desire any advantage when doing something necessarily means wanting some advantage.

In this context, money also finds its space within religious experience, as the fruit, experience and symbol of the importance of its human dimension. The forms of its presence and its use in the world of Chinese religiosity, and also, perhaps in a special way, the way in which its importance is felt by the brothers in the faith who belong to this culture, could be an incentive for further reflection. On the one hand, there is an

authentic need to purify religious action, both in its intentions and its means, in the knowledge that for us the only power and truth lie not in ourselves but in Christ, who is the power and the wisdom of God. On the other hand, it is precisely this need for purification that moves us to place all our resources at the service of God's plan with an entrepreneurial spirit, in the logic of the Incarnation. In it visibility is the cipher, openness and invitation to the invisible.

## Conclusion

The intimate and intricate relationship between faith and money we have analyzed so far, has led us to investigate the different ways in which people interact with their gods in order to obtain from them help and favors, time and miracles, quality of life and money. In the cultures we have examined (and in which we live), the omnipotence of gods and spirits is something quantifiable that can be bought like anything else, it is something that can be bent or bribed to serve human whims and wishes. Gods are not just supernatural entities to be feared or venerated: they must also prove to be worthy of their status by granting people what they desire, they must be seen to work for them by acknowledging and taking care of most (if not all) of their needs and requests. In Bangladesh, as in Taiwan and Japan, some gods are specifically endowed with the task of protecting and increasing human wealth and well-being: Sri-Laksmi and Ganesh, Cai Shen and Tu Di Gong, Hotei and Daikokuten (to name but a few) are all viewed as deities that can change people's fate or life by granting them fortune and prosperity, money and riches. People's relationships with these gods easily bypasses the mere feeling of reverence and respect in order to reach the tangible law of offer and demand that governs any financial system and economy. Poverty is inevitably seen as a curse, a malady that diminishes or thwarts human aspirations, inspirations and ideals. Money, on the other hand, is the cure for every need, lack or want: in order to be, one must be rich; in order to have, one must not only labor but also ask for divine intervention. Money is divine because it makes people think that everything is permissible to them, that no price is too high, that everything can be bought. All they have to do is ask a divinity to grant their requests, rescue them from their misery and give them what they want.

The religions that structure and systematize this relationship with these gods are themselves powerful tools that must be kept at bay: to control them is to control the access to what human beings aspire to become, to monitor them is to supervise the financial well-being they promise to fulfill. This is why the state or the different political powers in Bangladesh, Japan and Taiwan have managed to supervise the ever unstable relationship that the religious phenomena entertain with society by inscribing them within its logics, structures and offices.

On the basis of the different experiences of the complex relationship between faith and money, it is all too easy to say that gratuitousness is a long-awaited guest in the

cultures of Bangladesh, Japan and Taiwan. In Taiwan's folk religion, piety is the price a believer pays for obtaining favors and it bestows upon him clear rights vis-à-vis the divinity; indeed, if the god fails to grant a request, he is mistreated, scolded, even beaten and discarded. In Japan too, religious gestures are performed in order to obtain graces that are easily measured on the scale of material advantages. The situation of Bangladesh is slightly different, partly because the real poverty of people forces them to ask the gods for material favors, partly because there are living examples of dedication to an ideal of perfect devotion and renunciation which are respected and honored. The respect exhibited towards them shows just how much this attitude and way of life are desired. In Japan and Taiwan Buddhist monks and nuns should embody the same ideal; however, they are protected by the structures to which they belong and this makes their lives rather easy and comfortable. The sacrifice implied in individual asceticism is rewarded with the protection offered by community life.

The case of desiring gratuitousness, made by a western Christian observer, can however easily be turned against him, as in the case of Matteo Ricci when he confronted his Confucian friends. His talk of Heaven as the reward for faith and virtue was met by their criticism: in this way, virtue would not be so pure and disinterested as he claimed it should be. They maintained that virtue should be practiced for its own sake and not for any other advantage whatsoever, not even if its ultimate reward was Heaven. Indeed, from this viewpoint, Christian religion also finds it hard to explain why it pursues the total offering of oneself (and substances) only and purely in view of God's love. Was it not Jesus who promised all the (spiritual and material) future goods of the Beatitudes, as the reason for present joy and happiness in the midst of every sort of hardship? Doesn't the Gospel repeat the promise of the hundredfold to those who follow Jesus? Were not the Apostles lured into following him also by the prospect of becoming high ranking officials in his future Kingdom? Jesus invites his believers to ask: the more you ask the more you will obtain; in his parables he praises the enterprising spirit of the servant who was entrusted with ten talents. The logic of profit can be found throughout his message, not only at a spiritual level but, one could say, even at a material level. In her secular tradition, the Church found a way to connect faith and reward in a clear, appealing way, through the doctrine of merit. The rebellion of the Protestants, on this point, cannot but show the presence of the same logic behind their case, with the difference that the community has no say in the matter. In both cases, the controversy within the communities went unchallenged in their missionary activity. Abundant wealth and action were used in order to win over the biggest number possible to faith.

It is therefore important that we try to redefine such basic concepts as faith, money, interest and advantage, gratuitousness and gift, in the hope of finding some solid and common ground, in view not only of one's activity or service, but much more in view of one's personal share in the faith he professes to hold.

Why do people pay in order to obtain divine favor? Why do people need those favors fulfilled in the first place? How is it that people have to give money to buy something that the gods should give them for free (since money is of no use to the gods and, above all, no amount of money can buy something which is priceless)? And why should money be used in this exchange or transaction with the gods (instead of, for example, simple prayers and litanies)?

Money embodies power and freedom. To have money is to have the most influential tool available to people for shaping (or buying) their future and economic security. Money is the tangible expression that represents the time we have wasted in order to acquire something we know we can exchange for something else, for something we like. Money is the measure of our human dreams, the refreshing waters that can quench our human thirst, our illusion of being infinite and immortal, the opium that allows one to see the unthinkable.

On the one hand, faith begins where money ends, where money knows or experiences its impotence. Faith is the silent failure of any economy, the realization that we cannot buy one more day of our life, nor postpone for one second our inevitable death. Faith is faith without money, in spite of money, regardless of our confidence in money. On the other hand, faith could be seen as money, as something we might use in exchange for other invisible goods, for other imperceptible assets. To believe is to put our innermost trust in someone else's hands, it is to trade all that we are in order to obtain or gain access to what we are not. Faith could be seen as money whenever a religion encourages people to treat gods as inanimate objects that need everything in order to give all, whenever a religion demands all that human beings are and have in order to perpetuate itself in the future. In all these (and other) situations faith, like money, is something disposable, usable, exploitable. For what is missing in all these relationships with the gods, in all these religious expressions, is that form of gratuitousness that offers without compensation and gives without thinking of what it can get in return. What is missing in this relationship is what faith should simply acknowledge or realize: that something is truly given only to those who are ready to accept, that to receive that which eludes our power is more difficult than it seems. For before we accept a gift, we must first acknowledge that we are given to ourselves and, secondly, we have to accept



to accept, which implies recognizing a dependence on that which one is not. This consent supposes that one abandons any reduction of givenness to exchange and economy, to renounce any claim to an impossible give-and-take relationship with God. To adopt this logic of givenness, to accept that God in Christ can offer us something we know we cannot repay, is to step over the threshold of that faith which moves mountains and sees in the dark. To enter into this gratuitous relationship with God is to go beyond the limits imposed by cultures, politics and societies in order to embrace that which is eternal and priceless, offered to all and never exhausted in its givenness. To accept what money cannot buy or exchange is to realize that there is another way of evaluating our world and communities, our encounters with ourselves and others. Faith has a logic that surpasses mere transactions, exchanges and contracts because it deals with those possibilities and promises that cannot be quantified. Faith is something that no money can buy, and money can only see in faith that which it can never be, nor ever become. Indeed, “were a man to offer all the wealth of his house to buy love, contempt is all he would purchase” (The Song of Songs, 8:7)

The reassessment on the basis of Christian faith of the main terms/themes of this research allows us to take a further step, a vision about the way money should and could be used by our organizations in view of our goals.

A first statement, even an axiom, is that the question of money with reference to faith cannot be avoided. As it cannot be avoided at an individual level, even less can it be avoided at a collective level. Whatever decision is taken about money, even the decision to avoid dealing with money, projects, works, etc, is itself an economic decision.

Therefore we must think and reflect about all the economic aspects involved in our presence and service in a place (how money is raised, how it is employed, for what purposes): not only individually, but together, since it is as a community that we live and work, as a visible sign of what the Church is.

We must strive for a clear Christian understanding of riches as something that serves spiritual goods and goals. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus tells us to make friends with dishonest riches, so that when they cease to be, you shall be received by friends into the eternal tents. Riches are in view of creating deep and heartfelt interpersonal relationships. They are for the improvement of the quality of interpersonal spiritual life: God’s Kingdom is not a matter of food and drink, but justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Part of such a spiritual welfare is also a set of material conditions conducive to it. Especially where there is material poverty, we can dream of economical activities that help us to achieve a true spiritual relationship among all those involved, at every step of the way and not only at the last step, when money is earned and spent. In the long run we may

even dream of a new economy, where the real value on the market (or rather gratuitously offered and received) is love, God's love. Without forgetting that a deeply spiritual and joyous interpersonal relationship is not necessarily the result of good or acceptable material conditions.

However, we must never forget that not everyone possesses the competence for every project. We should acknowledge our limits and commit ourselves to what really belongs to our responsibility: the ability and task of animating, sustaining, fostering a new spirit and new initiatives, offering to those who share our faith the formation they need.

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## FAITH & MONEY

The present publication of the Asian Study Centre attempts a phenomenological — but not only — analysis of the complex relationships between faith and money in the religious contexts of modern Bangladesh, Japan and Taiwan. It aims to go beyond a certain traditional reflection, common in Christian settings, which often, when it comes to faith and its practices, takes a midway stance between the two opposites of wealth and poverty. The authors also endeavor to explore the logic of gift in the different religious contexts. That logic is seen as capable of subverting the moral economy of any religion and thus capable of challenging humanity towards gratuitousness. One of the conclusions of this work will be that only through a logic of gift-giving, can money be demoted from being the super-value of the modern market economy.