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PROJECT

Premodern Empires and Religious Toleration: A Historical Comparative Study

Existing studies of empires emphasize the high capacity of premodern empires to stomach and skillfully exploit religious, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversities. They thereby belie the fact that premodern empires displayed vast differences in the handling of religious diversity in their territories – while some empires allowed all kinds of religions to flourish, other empires persecuted heretics and nonbelievers and carried out forced conversion. During my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, I will work on my book manuscript that seeks to map and explain the variations among more than 30 selected premodern Eurasian empires in their level of toleration of different religions. This book manuscript will argue that a premodern empire's level of toleration of different religions is not primarily determined by the state capacity, geopolitics, or the specific attributes of the religious ecology in that empire, but by the nature of the state religion installed by the premodern empire. It will further argue that an empire tended to be intolerant when its state religion had a zero-sum mentality (zero-sumness) toward other religions and a strong conversion drive (evangelicalness).
Zero-sum evangelical state religions could lead to religious wars, inquisitions, religious persecution, and forced conversion. These were commonplace in premodern Europe where Christianity, a quintessential zero-sum evangelical religion, reigned. Yet, it was also in this land of extreme religious intolerance that the modern ideologies of religious liberty were born. The book manuscript will reflect on this great paradox of history.
In the age of secularism, the political influence of zero-sum evangelical religions seemed to have waned. Yet, the zero-sum/evangelical mentality continues to profoundly shape the world we live in, manifesting itself in various secular ideologies and movements, when their advocates still think in a true/false or right/wrong binary mode and strive for hegemony.

Recommended Reading

Sun, Yanfei (2014). "Popular Religion in Zhejiang: Feminization, Bifurcation, and Buddhification." Modern China 40 (5): 455–487.
— (2017). "The Rise of Protestantism in Post-Mao China: State and Religion in Historical Perspective." American Journal of Sociology 122 (6): 1664–1725.
— (2019). "Reversal of Fortune: Growth Trajectories of Catholicism and Protestantism in Modern China." Theory and Society 48 (2): 267–298.

The Religious Toleration of Premodern Empires: Between Pragmatic Default and Ideological Constraints

In light of the undesirable or even dire consequences associated with the pursuit of cultural homogeneity in the modern nation-building process, scholars have grown appreciative of the extensive religious, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity displayed by premodern empires. In particular, scholars admire premodern empires' skills in playing the politics of differences and stress their propensity for tolerating heterogeneous religions and cultures in their own territories.

This emphasis, however, belies the fact that the religious policies of premodern empires differ significantly: while some indeed allowed all kinds of religions to exist and flourish, others persecuted heretics and nonbelievers and carried out forced conversions.

In this talk, I will examine major premodern empires in Eurasia and seek to map the pattern of variations in their policies towards different religions. I will try to place these premodern empires in different tiers according to my criteria of religious toleration. After examining existing relevant theories, I will present my own theory, which emphasizes the nature of the religion/belief system that an empire adopted as its state religion. Additionally, I will propose a scheme for dissecting the nature of state religions.

This talk will highlight a dilemma faced by premodern empires. While occupying a vast expanse of land populated by people of diverse ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultures, the weak infrastructure capacity of the premodern empires, conditioned by their lack of effective bureaucracy and of modern means of transportation and communications, made it impossible for empires to extend their reach to the local and frontier societies without compliance from local elites. Therefore, pragmatically minded rulers of premodern empires would view acceptance of local diversity, including religious diversity, as a sensible choice. Yet, this policy of religious tolerance could also reinforce the centrifugal tendency of the regional elites. Rulers of premodern empires thus had the incentive to adopt and promote one religion/belief system as the state ideology. The installed ideology, however, could possibly create strong constraints on the religious policies of the state, preventing it from adopting more pragmatic policies towards religious minorities when needed.

In the end, what this talk wants to showcase is how premodern empires could be trapped or kidnapped by their own legitimating ideology. Of course, this is a story by no means limited to premodern empires.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOWS' LIBRARY

Sun, Yanfei (Dordrecht [u.a.],2019)

Reversal of fortune : growth trajectories of Catholicism and Protestantism in modern China

https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1852818751

Sun, Yanfei (Chicago, Ill.,2017)

The rise of protestantism in post-Mao China : state and religion in historical perspective

https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1853787493

Sun, Yanfei (London,2014)

Popular religion in Zhejiang : feminization, bifurcation, and Buddhification

https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1852822821