On the Phenomena of New Religions in Taiwan

1. Introduction

According to Wuthnow (1980: 59-60), the three periods that are likely to trigger dramatic changes in religions during the formation of world order in the modern time are – a) when the central power of the world system increase rapidly; b) when conflicts arise between the two extremes of the core and peripheral regions; c) when the new world order undergo reconstruction and become more stable. The emergence and development of new religions in Taiwan seems to have no direct relationship with the aforementioned states of affairs; and yet it is not completely unrelated to the inclusion of Taiwan into the world system. However, in our analysis of the concrete phenomenon of religions in Taiwan, the key to these problems may lie in internal social factors.

Li Yi-yuan (1984) has conducted an in-depth analysis on the utilitarian nature of the Taiwanese religions and pious organizations. Accordingly, in a rapidly changing society, new religions emerged because of the separation between the religious belief system and moral system. The utilitarian aspects of religions in the folk traditions illustrated this formless divorce between religion and morality. On the other hand, pious organizations attempted to counter this tendency by filling the gap between Chinese religious system and ethical system.

In his examination of new religions in Taiwan, Tong Fung-wan (1983) held that the reasons behind their emergence lie in – the crises in society, the awakening of the sense of nationalism, the yearning for contentment in present life, the reaction force of traditional religions, the hope for attaining Nirvana in the next life, and the inventions by religious geniuses.

2. Trend and Development of Religion in Taiwan

Before 1945, the phenomenon of religion was rather simple, at least, on the

surface. Most of the Han people believed in Chinese folk religion, while native people believed in traditional, aboriginal religions. Even though the religions policies imposed by the Japanese colonial government were not completely ineffective, the actual results were trifling. There were quite a number of Buddhist Shrines, but the actual number of Buddhists was small. Taoism tended to merge with folk religion. There were not too many true Taoists, except Taoist priests whose circumstances were unique. In terms of Western religions, there were only Catholics, Taiwan Presbyterian Church, Taiwan Holiness Church, and Taiwan True Jesus Church. The rates of their development were not slow, but these religions had limited power. For example, the number of Christians rose from 16 thousands in 1905 to 40 thousands in 1945. The number increased 1.5 times within 40 years. However, in terms of the entire population in Taiwan, the proportion of Christians increased only by a little more than 1%. Some Christian branches, like Salvation Army, had also been spread to Taiwan; however, they did not continue on. In addition, both the development of misericords and the planchette halls had unique, important characteristics. During the Japanese colonial period, these organizations faced significant impact. Some organization had changed slightly, while others had declined.

When the Japanese colonial era ended, religion in Taiwan underwent important changes because of the movement of the people, the direction of government policies and other social, economical changes. From 1956 to 1980, the number of registered temples rose from 2928 to 6244. If we added up the number of privately owned altars and unregistered temples, the trend of increase would seem considerably stronger. In terms of Christianity (including Catholics and Protestants), only 52 Catholic churches after Taiwan recovered the rule from Japan in 1945. The number rose to 669 churches in the 80s. The members also increased from the originally 11 thousand to 300 thousand. Protestants had only 238 churches at the beginning of the recovery period and about 40 thousand believes. At present, there are more than 2300 churches and 360 thousand members.

In the past year forty years, the population in Taiwan has increased more than 2 times. For this reason, the increase in the number of temples, churches, as well as members might seem insignificant. However, when we further considered the number of temple and church per 10 thousand people and the proportion of

religious members in the population, we found that, the increase was substantial, at least in terms of number. Only the trends of increase were different because they were not developed at the same time. Before 1960, the number of temples per 10,000 people tended to drop; however, after 1960, it gradually increased. In 1980, the number of temples per 10 thousand people was higher than all the figures in the past. This situation showed that the number of temples increased had actually increased, not due to the increase in population,

In the mid 1960, the growing rates of Christian churches and Christians were very rapid. The increase rate of Catholic churches had reached 752%, while the rate of Protestant churches was as high as 410%. The number of Catholics rose by 876%, while Protestants rose by 234%. After the mid 1960s, the rate of increase slowed down. In 1965 to 1980, Catholics rose 32%, while Christians rose 63%. In the past forty years, the increase rates of special, independent Christian sects, like Church Assembly Hall and Taiwan True Jesus Church, were considerably stable and tended not to show major differences across different time periods.

With respect to Buddhism, before Taiwan recovered its rule from the Japanese, Taiwan Buddhism was suppressed by Japanese Buddhism. In the middle period of the Japanese colonization, in an attempt to promote Buddhism, some Buddhist members organized activities or even distributed publications. However, these measures were not very effective in propagating and expanding the religion. After the colonial period, Taiwanese Buddhism returned to Chinese Mahayana Buddhism and gained a better understanding in terms of making progress in development. For instance, the development of Buddhist organizations took shape after they organized activities in which their members learned to follow the doctrine and formed Buddhist associations within society. The number of temples had definitely increased; however the number of temple per 10 000 people had not risen. On the other hand, the number of people who left home to join the monasteries and followed monastic laws increased. Moreover, the educational levels of these people were higher. Many Buddhist associations were formed in universities. The number of these kinds of Buddhist organizations – which were not associated with any particular Buddhist temples – had increased substantially. For these reasons, more and more university students were converted to Buddhism, or even became nuns and monks. Buddhist activities soon flourished and were independent from

the support of temples. In recent years, many intellectuals converted to Buddhism and devoted their effort to creating publications and participating in other cultural activities. In the late 1980s, because Tibetan lamas frequently visited Taiwan, the esoteric doctrine of Buddhism had also developed considerably in Taiwan.

In examining the trends of religions, the rapid growth of new religions as well as social movements was an extremely important phenomenon. For instance, the expansion of the power of I-Kuan Tao was a striking example. According to studies conducted by Tong Fung-wan (1983), Sung Kuang-yu (1984), and Chiu Hei-yuan (1986), the number of I-Kuan Tao members was between 200 thousand and 400 thousand. This number might be slightly less than the number of Buddhists and Christians. Based on Chiu's estimation, the number of 'real' Buddhists was approximately 1 million, while the number of Christians was about 600 thousand. Unlike I-Kuan Tao, Buddhist organizations had a loose structure. The main branches of I-Kuan Tao had a rigid structure. Typically, each organization had 30 thousand to 50 thousand people. On the other hand, the total number of Christians was high. However, except for Catholics and the Taiwan Presbyterian Church, none of the individual Christian organizations had more members than a main branch of I-Kuan Tao. In 1987, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Executive Yuan recognized I-Kuan Tao as a lawful religion. This not only suggested that the expansion of I-Kuan Tao did not have an ulterior political purpose but this was also a turning point for the development of I-Kuan Tao.

Another remarkable religious development was that of Cihui Temple. This religion grew from a single temple in 1949 to 70 branches in 1975. Currently, it had more than 200 branches, which were spread all over Taiwan. Although the organizational structure of the Cihui Shrine was not as rigid as I-Kuan Tao, it has a close-knit network. For instance, Cihui Shrine had temples that attracted many members in different counties. These members were also devoted to the main branch in Hualien.

The Hsingtien Temple was founded in the northern part of Taiwan. By the end of 1960s, it had already become an influential religion. With the support of volunteer workers, the Hsingtien Temple attracted about ten thousands members by providing supernatural, non-professional, somewhat informal religious services, like drawing lots and religious services for startled infant.

The religious organization, Tiende, originated in Mainland China. Although the expansion of Tiende in Taiwan was not very rapid, it developed considerably well because of the support of retired senior government officials, who had converted to this religion. T'ienti was a sect that had separated from Tiende. It was founded in 1981. Since then, it quickly and solidly progressed. At the time of the study, there were close to ten thousands members. Since Syuan Yuan Jiao established the religion in 1957, the development after 1970 was evident.

At the end of 1970s, some senior representatives of the National Assembly and other community members founded the Hong Hua Centre. The core idea was to pay reverence to the five religions – Buddhism, Christianity, Confucius, Islam, and Taoism. In mid-1980s, there was a breakthrough in the development of this religion. Since the beginning of 1988, it organized a series of large-scale religious and culture lectures and activities. Most of the lecturers were influential people from academic and religious circles. Meanwhile, Hong Hua Yuan not only had a newspaper column, but it also participated the field of social welfare.

The religion, Ruzong shenjiao, gradually formed out of planchette halls, which were set up in different areas of Taiwan. In late 1980s, this religion had become an important power that should not be overlooked. According to Cheng Chih Ming's research (1987), after the mid 1970s, traditional planchette halls became more organized and systematic. They formed alliances with one another and established as an association. Ultimately, they developed into a partially institutionalized religion. Because of publication about planchette, it became a popular trend and books on this subject were distributed for and wide. In Taiwan, the influence of this trend was increasingly great, especially in terms of its influence on religion.

In addition, Taiwan had many new and old temples. They started by drawing believers from surrounding areas and, eventually, they attracted believers from all over the country. These temples, subsequently, became popular religious, tourist destinations. The scale of the temples grew and their financial resources increased as the temple attendances increased. At the end of 1986, the Chao Tien Temple in Peikang organized lectures to teach people about their religion and brought the statue of Matsu from their earliest temple in Fukien for people to worship in different places. The Tachia Jenlan Temple went further by going to the first Matsu temple in Fukian province in China to bring back a statue of Matsu – the goddess

of sea – which enlivened a tide of religious worship. The Song Shan Tsuyou Temple and the San Shai Chang Qin Temple organized tremendously large-scale religious ceremonies in which they set up altars, bowed, and made offerings to the gods in Northern Taiwan. This event further intensified the lively, religious atmosphere. These temples were important centers for folk religion, whose development greatly differed from the development of the new religions discussed above. Although folk religion had an eventful development, it was basically a kind of 'diffused religion', which was defined by Yang Ching-kun. In contrast, more than half of the above mentioned new religions were characterized as 'institutional religions'. It is more accurate to say that these religions developed from the 'diffused religions' and other social factors to become more institutionalized religions.

Finally, private altars could be seen in streets and alleys of towns and cities. The worshipping of "Eighteen Wang Kung" further set off the production of TV programmes and series. People at all levels of society were fascinated by 'masters', like Lin Yun and Lu Sheng Yan, who claimed to possess supernatural knowledge. In 1985, the trend of the Dai Jia Le or 'Happy Lottery' emerged. This trend not only become widespread within two years but it also remained popular over time, which, ultimately, engendered serious social problems. Folk religious beliefs, especially the belief in the gods of 'yin' became the key of the gamblers for 'Happy Lottery' to guess the number of the lots. The spreading beliefs about the efficacy of some gods and altars led to a craze of worshipping "You Ying God" and "Bai Xing God" as well as wandering ghosts. At present, although it was difficult to get a complete set of statistics, the number of temples that the 'Happy Lottery' had brought about was shockingly large.

3. Basic Characteristics of New Religions

What are the basic characteristics of these new religions? What kinds of distinctive social, economical, political reasons facilitate the phenomena of new religion? In order to tackle these issues, what kinds of positions and policies should the government take? How can we deal with different kinds of new religious development appropriately? These questions concern many people. In

addition to the above questions, we will further clarify, in theory and concepts, whether the nature of the developments of new religions can be classified as new social movements.

First, we will examine the characteristics of the religious phenomena. In general, seven characteristics are worth considering. These characteristics are not completely unrelated, but they have a cause and effect relationship with each other in some instances. They are concerned with – 1) extensiveness in terms of geographical distribution, 2) trembling and awe-inspiring effects, 3) the idea of efficacy related to answering prayers and making predictions, 4) religious propagation; 5) believers' orientations 6) the focus on worldly, practical goals, and 7) restoration and revival.

The geographical distribution of new religions was not localized, both institutional kind of religions, like I-Kuan Tao and T'ienti, and diffused religions like private altars and the worship of the gods of 'yin' related to lottery. In other words, the influence of these kinds of religions was extensive and occurred in all parts of Taiwan. The significance of the characteristic of extensiveness is rather complicated. Perhaps new religions become popular and known to us because of other reasons and, therefore, the actual characteristics of these religions did not seem to related extensiveness. However, looking at this from another angle, religions that encountered regional barriers were unlikely to prosper. This point can be illustrated by the development of Taiwan folk religious beliefs. In the past 40 years, religions that were regional or specialized for certain occupation tended to deteriorate. In contrast, religions that continued to flourish were those that were more universalized or geared towards the general population (Yu, Guang-hong 1982). From these findings, we could infer that extensiveness was a construct of the universalizing of religion. Another example to illustrate this point is that, although private altars seemed localized, their extensive characteristic was expressed in some situations. Briefly speaking, the establishment of private altars was regulated by a loose system of control. Some altars were divisions of a main branch. For example, many private altars were set up in different areas by branches of the Cihui Temple and the Sheng Hua Temple. There were also other small-scale systems of altars. In addition, even though some altars did not originate from or were not associated with others, they were functionally related.

People who sought help from one altar would also often visit other altars. After 'Happy Lottery' became popular, gamblers sought 'efficacious' altars. These broke the regional barriers. Finally, looking at the distribution of altars in all parts of Taiwan, the development of individual altars could not be labelled as an unrelated and independent phenomenon.

During the process of religious conversion, many members of new religions had awe-inspiring religious experiences. Special psychic experiences that were attained through sitting meditation formed an important foundation for many religions. Fasting and praying triggered some extraordinary experiences among Christians. Planchette revelations produced strong feelings among members of the Confucian Spirit Religion, the Cihui Temple, and I-Kuan Tao. The nascent development of the esoteric doctrine of Buddhism facilitated members to feel strongly moved during the practice of Kuan Ding and Kuan Shiang. The Black Sect Tantric employed various kinds of supernatural skills. which aroused the interests of not only many people in the movie industries but also college professors, who had lost in these experiences. For a long period of time, religious experiences, especially mysterious religious experiences, had produced trembling and awe-inspiring effects. Although traditional religions could also provoked these kinds of religious experiences, the feelings aroused by new religions might have been more intense. Because of the change in time, the trembling effects that traditional religions stimulated could no longer satisfy peoples' needs. In contrast, new religions could satisfy those needs. The fact that many members of new religions came from traditional religions supported the case in point.

The trembling and overwhelming sense experience often accompanied with the idea of efficacy in terms of answering prayers and making predictions. We can say that the sense of tremble is mostly facilitated by the sense of efficacy. Without some efficacious religious events, people will not trembled or feel overwhelmed. However, it is important to note that the sense of religious efficacy does not always trigger an overwhelming experience. Religious efficacy is simply an affirmation that some events have occurred, while trembling related to a strong emotional or psychological reaction. Many new religious emphasized the idea of efficacy. Sometimes they mainly focused on efficacy while neglecting deeper, and more profound religious experience. For instance, many privately owned altars

emerged because of the sense of efficacy alone. During the economic recession, Eighteen Wang Kung used this sense of efficacy to appeal to people from lower classes, creating a religious trend. Accordingly, touching a particular dog was most efficacious. The religious content of touching a dog was empty and feeble. In the trend of the 'Happy Lottery', the attempts of seeking popular statues of gods and basically reflected peoples' superstitions about the idea of efficacy. Many abandoned temples, wandering ghosts, tree gods and stones became popular suddenly, because they were branded as efficacious in helping worshippers to win the lottery. Their 'legends' were, mainly, related to accurately guessing two digit numbers. While some of these efficacies marvelled for a longer period of time, very often they lasted only for a short time. For this reason, there was a lot of hearsay about believers' violence towards those kinds of deities.

Many new religions spread to all areas of Taiwan mainly because of their strong characteristic of propagation. The religious elites or leaders of these religions were not only skilled in rejuvenating the organizations, but they also devoted a lot of effort to propagating their religious thoughts. Most religious organizations that were characteristically institutional tended to have a strong intention of spreading their religions. For instance, I-Kuan Tao and T'ienti often used the idea of 'cultivating the virgin land' as the driving force of propagation. In fact, 'cultivating the virgin land' was used as a special term in promoting their religions. Another example was that, recently, the Hong Hwa Center used the media to skilfully publicize the influence of their religion. In addition, the propagation strategies of these religious organizations were flexible and adaptive. For example, I-Kuan Tao switched from focusing on 'non-local Taiwanese' to 'local Taiwanese'. In contrast, Catholics tended to focus on 'non-local Taiwanese'. These amounted to important differences, which provided the basis for the religious movements. T'ienti also had similar tendencies here. For these reasons, a strong characteristic in propagation generally resulted in a rapid expansion of religious influence.

In addition, some temples and altars used the idea of efficacy as a way of self -promotion through different channels. These altars became famous far and wide and attracted a continuous stream of visitors. For instance, pilgrims one after another visited the Chao Tien temple in Peikang. In order to actively reach

out to people, the temple further launched parades and propagative activities all around Taiwan. The speed of the propagation of the efficacy of altars and their networks and channels has not been concretely analyzed at present. However, from the definite results of their propagation, we can imagine that the speed was surprisingly fast and the networking was extremely efficient. In addition to the traditional way of spreading, new, efficient propagating mediums might also have been an important reason for the success. An example would be the role newspapers and magazines played in publicizing information about the 'Happy Lottery'. In addition, the publications about planchette and the distribution of texts from the Confucian Spirit Religion were impressive. For example, 3 million copies of Journey to the Underworld were produced four years ago. The power of propagation was evident here.

The emergence of new religions was not only related to attracting members, but, more importantly, they emerged because members participated enthusiastically. This was due to the fact that many new religions were believers' orientation. Most of the leaders of new religions possessed charisma, and, thus, the believers greatly respected them. Traditional religions did not lack these kinds of talents; however, the expression of these talents was confined within the regulations of these religions. In other words, in terms of the style of leadership in new religious movement, charisma was a crucial characteristic. On the other hand, many institutional religions had already routinized and, therefore, the charisma of their leaders became less important. These charismatic leaders of new religions appealed to believers, with whom they also tended to have a considerably close relationship. These kinds of intimacy was also a key reason for the development of new religions. In terms of the characteristics of believers, we observed that, believers tended to have a strong psychological change in the process of religious conversion, or, at least, they gained a strong sense of satisfaction through participating in religious activities.

New religions tended to focus on worldly, practical goals like helping people adapt to a changing society, although some new religions took a nostalgic return to the past, using reminiscences from the past as a reference to what was missing in contemporary society. Most of the clergy members of new religions were not recluses and were not required to remain unmarried for their whole

life. In terms of their basic principles, many of these religions did not encourage people to live as hermits, isolated from society. We could further examine the two types of religions – institutional and diffused. Most institutional, new religions tended to have clear religious principles, which had a strong focus on traditional Chinese morality. These religions sanctified traditional moral rules and made these rules more religious. Furthermore, these religions focused on practical behaviors. For example, T'ienti and Tiende emphasized the 'twenty words of truth' as its fundamentals – loyalty, forgiveness, incorruptibility, insight, virtue, rectitude, justice, trustworthiness, forbearance, fairness, philanthropy, filial piety, benevolence, compassion, awareness, moderation and fidelity, frugality, truthfulness, propriety and harmony. These are worldly rules of conducts for people adapting to modern living. I-Kuan Tao and Confucian Spirit Temple focused on the sanctified doctrine of Confucius philosophy. They emphasized enlightenment through development in practical life. On the other hand, diffused, new religions mostly focused on solving problems of everyday life. The focus of these religions was practical not only in terms of fulfilling social functions, but also in attaining utilitarian goals. Many new altars and temples tended not to have clear religious teachings. They only provided worshipping activities and fortune-telling services. These aimed at solving problems in modern life. After the 'Happy Lottery' became popular, important sites for gods that were branded as efficacious sprang up. These kinds of sorcerous religions clearly had a practical or worldly focus. However, it is important to notice here that these phenomena were fundamentally different from the institutional religions discussed above.

Finally, an important characteristic of new religions is that no new religion is completely new. Most of these religions were developed anew or revived. Many of these religions were based on different pre-existing religious or cultural ideas, which were reformed and developed anew. We should take a closer look at institutional and diffused religions. Most institutional religions tended to integrate pre-existing, universal religions. They borrowed not only the teachings, but also the rituals of pre-existing religions and fashioned them anew. With respect to these trends, Li Yi Yuan's research (184) pointed out, "… however, regardless of how religious phenomena produced strong reactions, their reactive model could not be removed from the limits of traditional Chinese culture." In other words, although new religions appeared to be new, because they needed to adapt to the needs of

modern society, they had integrated elements of traditional culture and further refined them. For instance, institutional, new religions often adopted characteristics of existing, institutional religions and further modified and integrated them. Sometimes, they also integrated characteristics from existing diffused religions. For instance, many new religions proposed to have combined teachings from three to five different religions. It was evident that these religions were clearly influenced and limited by traditional Chinese culture. On the other hand, diffused, new religions generally adopted and strengthened some qualities of traditional folk religion. For example, in the past two years, there was a trend of worshipping the gods of 'yin'. Even, the early trend of worshipping "Eighteen Wang Kung" could also be seen as a revival of the religious system of 'You Ying God' . Likewise, the development of altars could be considered as an attempt to adapt to the migration of people in society demographic change by strengthening traditional folk beliefs.

4. Analysis of the Cause of the Development of New Religions

The characteristics of the phenomena of new religion were discussed above. Based on the present research and observations, the reasons of why these kinds of religions tended to flourish will be laid out in the following. However, because the phenomena are considerably complicated, although some scholars have analyzed individual aspects of the phenomena, a comprehensive research has not been produced. In the following, we will take the initial step towards examining the structure of the issues, which needed further discussion.

1. Changes in society increased the sense of uncertainty. The societal differentiation created a lot of opportunities for people. However, people did not always succeeded in seizing those opportunities. Religions often helped to diminish or eliminate the sense of uncertainty. However, traditional religions, themselves, faced problems in adapting to the changes of society. Sometimes, they failed to solve problems for people. Conversely, new religions had the aforementioned characteristics, such as the idea of efficacy, the awe-inspiring effects, the tendencies of believers, which were often effective in reducing or eliminating the sense

of uncertainty. Take the example of the 'Happy Lottery', it is difficult to determine the numbers of the lots, but people believed that the ghosts could help them, regardless of whether the predictions are efficacious or not. In addition, as Yu De-hui's analysis showed, the assistance that members of the Hsing Tien Temple offered was mostly involved with helping people make decisions through the manipulation of supernatural power.

2. The social mobility of the population facilitated that some people became cut off from old religions. New religions, in turn, gained a considerably large number of prospective believers. Folk religion usually focused on a particular region. It tended to be not only regional, but also they emphasized a clear sense of rights and duties. When a large numbers of people moved from villages to cities, the regional characteristic of these religions weaken. On the other hand, the religious orientation of people, especially those who moved from villages to cities, did not change substantially. For these reasons, these people formed the basis of members of new religions. Besides, a single individual living in a novel place would be more likely convert to a religion or participate in other social movements. The fact that university students converted to Buddhism, I-Kuan Tao, and the Unification Church supported the case in point.

3. A low level of knowledge in the general public engendered the development of religions that were based on the idea of efficacy, i.e., the emergence of privately-owned altars. On the other hand, an increased level of knowledge among some people created opportunities for the development of new religions that had deeper religious thoughts. However, it is important to note that the relationship between the knowledge level and religious beliefs was not absolute. Religions that characteristically focused on the awe-inspiring experiences and the idea of efficacy also appealed to some highly knowledgeable people. Because of these circumstances, new religions had lots of room for development and activities. For example, even some professors held beliefs about the efficacious nature of statues of gods relating to the 'Happy Lottery'.

4. The development of different kinds of modern, publicizing mediums and tools made the propagation of religions easier. Although virtually no new

religions could use television or wireless cable to spread their religions, many of them used other effective mediums, such as by word of mouth. In additions, the mass media were curious about new religions as well as the flirtation between new religions and the limits of the law. These also increased the news value of reports on new religions.

5. In an attempt to respect religious freedom, the government tended to adopt lax religious policies, which enabled new religions to develop freely in an unregulated environment. Because some new religions were suspected to have ulterior, political motives, they were suppressed by the government. However, these efforts were unsuccessful and, in fact, produced opposite effects. Religions groups that were suppressed became well-known to the public. Furthermore, these persecutions increased the sense of mystery of these religions and sustained their development, which ultimately increased the power of these religions.

6. Many new religions were very capable in terms of bringing people together. They had effective and flexible strategies of propagation as well as a functional pattern. In terms of propagation, most members were enthusiastic and motivated or even strongly believed that it was their mission to help to spread the religion. For instance, I-Kuan Tao's idea of saving all living creatures led the members of this rigorous organization to recruit potential believers actively. On the other hand, some lively temples that were famous far and wide mobilizes more local and foreign believers to achieve their developmental goals effectively. In addition, diffused, new religions focused on the idea of efficacy effectively facilitated zealous collective behaviors. In short, these religions were strong in promoting social movements and mobilizing people.

At present, we could only have the above mentioned general analysis of new religions. Many situations relating to these kinds of studies are worthy of closer examination. Basically, in addition to the development of the religious systems, because new religions were closely related to the social and cultural changes, sometimes, new religions could reflect important changes and problems within the society. Related research needs to be conducted. In terms of a research plan, we need to conduct full and complete case studies on each new religious organization

and its unique circumstances. Moreover, the research should attempt to assess the similarities and differences as well as their exchange between religions. In other words, it is important to examine these from mobilization theory of social movement. Finally, it is important to develop an explanation and theoretical model from a solid basis of data.

5. A Few Suggestions

The above analyzed the phenomena of new religions in Taiwan based on the findings of our research and observations. The following will further propose some ideas and suggestions on how to approach the phenomena of new religions and what sort of attitudes we should hold regarding new religions.

1. New religions are formed naturally when a society undergoes changes. For instance, the social mobility of people in society and social alienation could be beneficial to the emergence and development of new religions. Under talented religious leaders, new religions launch social movements that lead to social changes. The number of new religions was not small. While some had clear religious teachings, others involved only manipulation of witchcraft and the mysterious. Nonetheless, we should hold tolerance and critical attitudes towards these phenomena. These two kinds of attitudes seemed to be contradictory; however, actually they should be complementary. Concretely speaking, regardless of the kind of religion, especially new religions, we should not have preconceptions in situations that we do not understand. In a more open society, there cannot be a single, dominant religion. Religious diversity is an essential trend. Most religions emphasize absolute truth in a diverse society. If religious organization or ordinary people could not hold a tolerant mindset and keep an open mind about other beliefs, there would be enumerable kinds of arguments between religions. Furthermore, religion could not exist apart from society, and religion always has had considerably influence on society. For these reasons, we need to discuss this topic from a social criticism viewpoint, in order to clarify the significance of religions in modern society. While some religions could have negative effects on society, we should make rational

judgement only after objectively and impartially understanding their particular situations.

2. Government policy and laws about how to handle religions were not complete at present. In addition to the constitution law regarding the respect for religious freedom, there are laws that are concerned with regulation of temple registration. These regulations were legislated 50 years ago. For these reasons, the government often lacks formal guidance and has suffered problems arising from the unclear written law regarding the handling of religious affairs. In recent years, these gave rise to conflicts between religious organizations and the government. Related governmental departments have attempted to draft the laws concerning the regulation of religions twice. However, many people in the religious circle suspected the government of having ulterior motives. The drafts showed a lack of a clear understanding about the existing religions. Many conditions of the law were obstructive and difficult to implement. There are even cases in which the basic idea of the law seriously goes against religious ethics. For these reasons, related departments needed to study the concrete characteristics of different religions impartially, in order to determine and establish a just law under the principle of respecting religious freedom.

3. In handling religious affairs, inconsideration or inappropriate political considerations often produced negative effects. Briefly speaking, if religious organizations were considered to be not involved in politics, the government often turned a blind eye at it, which indirectly supported the development of religions that promoted the idea of efficacy. However, when some religious groups, especially new religions, were considered as having political agendas, the government and the ruling political party often had a subjective preference for certain religions, or even, adopted inappropriate measures to suppress it. This facilitated abnormal development of religious organizations and created not only tension between politics and religions but also instability for the society.

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