

“Secular Theocracy? State and Religion in Early China Revisited”

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Traditional Chinese state poses a very peculiar model of state-religion relations. On the one hand, it can be qualified as theocratic, insofar as pontifical functions were among the major responsibilities of the supreme ruler and of his underlings who possessed authority in outlying territories. On the other hand, super-human powers seem to play a markedly lesser political role in China than elsewhere in Eurasia, a phenomenon that gave rise to misperception of pre-modern China as a “secular” state. In trying to resolve this ostensible paradox, I trace the formation of the state-religion symbiosis in China from the Bronze Age polities to the early imperial dynasties (ca. 1200 BCE to the beginning of the Common Era). I argue that two major peculiarities of early Chinese state allow us to understand the subsequent trajectory of China’s religious policies. First was the avowed desire to stability and predictability in human relations with the divine power, at least insofar as the political realm is concerned. Second, and related to the first, was the state’s attempt to monopolize access to the supreme divine powers and to prevent formation of an independent priesthood stratum. By reviewing ebbs and flows in the state’s attempt to control the religious realm, I hope to elucidate one of the sources of strength of China’s imperial polity.