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Religious Equality: From the Perspective of School Canteens

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Abstract: In recent years, rampant terrorism supported by racist Islam has provoked heated discussions on religious equality. Ina global context, inequalities against religious people occur all the time,but few studies have explored this issue from a microperspective. Following the definition of equality given by Modood, this study examined religious equality from the perspective of school canteen operations. Focusing on the current situationof university school canteens, the study pointed outone of the major problems, that is, the insufficient attention to or the neglect of the religious students' specific needs. The study then analyzed the reasons why it is important to take the needs of students with different religious backgrounds into consideration from three aspects: equality aspect, legal aspect ,and cultural aspect. In the end, this study proposed solutions to the existing problems based on interviews with religious students, aiming to provide insights into the protection of traditional religious culture. The problems concerning religious inequality in primary and secondary school canteens should also attract the attention of future studies. More importantly, topropose more reasonable suggestions, the voice of religious students and staff should be heard.

Keywords: School Canteens, Religious equality, Diversity

1. Introduction

Religious inequality can be widely seen around the world. According to Wilde et al. , in American society, religious inequality remains strong, which is in contrast to the assumption made by some scholars [1-2]. They investigated the socioeconomic background and education of different religious groups and found statistically significant differences concerning the class backgrounds among religious people, with the Black Protestants at the most distinguished educational and economic disadvantages. The situation facing the Muslim community is also not favorable. As Modood argued, the phenomenon of anti-Muslim is increasingly remarkable in Europe. One of the reasons is that Muslims are perceived to put forward demands which are politically exceptional, culturally unreasonable, or theologically alien to European countries. Against this background, Muslims have been singled out as an extremely uncontrollable and uncooperative group.

This study investigates religious inequality from the perspective of school canteen operations, aiming to provide more insights into the protection of religious food culture. The first part of this paper was devoted to introducing this topic and presenting its organization. The research background of religious inequality was then provided by giving the definitions of key terms, reviewing relevant studies, and pointing out the research gaps. The third section depicted the

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present situation of religious inequality in the global context and pointed out issues concerning the operation of school canteens. In the fourth part, the reasons why religious canteens should be set up on campus were analyzed, followed by solutions provided in the fifth section.The paper was then wrapped up in the final part.

2. Literature Review on Religious Equality

Modood argued that our understanding of "equality" should include not only individualism and assimilation from the cultural aspect but a politics of acknowledgement [3]. This means that religious people need not conceal or apologize for their origins, background, or religious community, and yearn for respect from others. Two clear conceptions of equality were developed by Modood as follows:

- The right to assimilate to the majority/dominant culture in the public sphere, with toleration of 'difference' in the private sphere;
- The right to have one's 'difference' (minority ethnicity, etc.) recognized and supported in both the public and the private spheres.

With numerous religions co-existing in the world, the promotion of religious equality should be paid special attention to. Modood developed three dimensions that made specific demands. The most basic demand concerns no religious discrimination which argued that religious groups are not supposed to experience discrimination in job hunting and other situations. The second demand is related to the even-handedness of native religions. Many religious minorities claimed that equality should be interpreted to mean that religious minorities should receive as much support from the state as those mainstream religions do. The third demand is that religion generally is supposed to be an aspect from which the inclusiveness of institutions could be judged.

Religious inequality recently has captured the attention of some scholars. Wilde et al. explored class differences among religious groups in America [1]. They found that Mainline Protestants and Jewsare at the top of the socioeconomic ladder and Evangelical Protestants are at the bottom. Inaddition, a religious community could effectively predict both educational level and the general socioeconomic position. Therefore, they demonstrated that religious inequality still exists in America, it is remarkable and appears to be persistent. Modood investigated the status quo of Muslims in British multiculturalism. He argued that legal and political measures should be enacted to ensure that Muslims are treated as equal citizens in European states. Islam and Muslim minority identity in China was examined by Gladney [4]. This research discussed whether Islam in China would be accommodated or separated. This study concluded that we have numerous alternatives to either absolute separatism or accommodation either within the Muslim community or between Muslim groups.

Inequality has been discussed for a long while. But it often comes along with geography, social or economic status, gender, race, as well as ethnicity. Regarding the inequality on account of religious groups, however, it is either solely given passing recognition, discussed as a by-product of other kinds of inequality, or even ignored totally. Thus, religious equality has not received its due attention.In addition, most of the existing research concerning religious equality has focused on the discrimination Muslims confront. Some religions, especially those with a small number of followers, however, have tended to be overlooked. These minority groups are marginalized not only in social life but also in academic research.

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3. The Present Situation of Religious Inequality

3.1. Global Context

According to one opinion, despite all the disturbances, religious freedom is not seriously threatened. However, a recent study by Fox found that religious inequality is still increasing globally.

Fox noted that compared to many nations in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, Western states such as Switzerland, Germany, as well as France are practicing greater official religious discrimination [5]. Every year, harassment, vandalism, and threats of violence against Jews in Australia are documented. His data set presented 35 different sorts of religious discrimination guided by the official policies, such as limitations on the construction of religious structures, restrictions on religious books, and bans on chaplaincy services in jails.The data also includes 27 other forms of socially motivated religious discrimination, such as blatant violence, harassment on public transportation, workplace discrimination, and damage to places of worship. Jews are the minority group most likely to experience this type of unfairness, however, all kinds of religious minorities are in the face of it in some nations.

In Europe, Islamophobia has become an issue now. Islamophobia is a term used to indicate irrational enmity towards, anxiety about, or hatred of Islam, Muslims, and their culture. Islamophobia is still widespread in Europe today and can be reflected in numerous areas, including organizational and institutional practices, individual actions and attitudes, and regulations. For instance, Muslims are more likely to experience verbal or online threats of physical violence, condemnation, and harassment. Physical or verbal assaults against people, property, and places of worship are also common, especially against those who manifest their religious identity visibly, such as women who cover their heads or faces with the *hijab* or *niqab*.

The picture is not any better in Eastern countries. Muslims in India who rent apartments in communities with a dense Muslim population claim that this is where they ended up since they had previously been refused by landlords elsewhere and were now afraid of being rejected again. Outside of the so-called Muslim areas, Muslims there have a profound and pervasive sense that they are not welcome. The persistent ghettoization of Indian Muslims in Indian cities, according to Gayer and Jaffrelot in their influential book *Muslims in Indian Cities*, "is primarily the outcome of organized violence [6]."

3.2. Problems with Chinese School Canteens

In August 2000, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China required schools to build halal canteens as long as there lived more than thirty students with halal eating habits. At present, although most colleges have set up halal canteens as required, there are still problems during the operation which should be further improved [7] .

First, the dietary guidelines of religious groups are not strictly followed. Both halal and kosher regulations forbid pork and relevant productsand call for the slaughter and processing of animals in a specific manner under supervision. Offering religious meals at schools could be more difficult and expensive if facilities are managed to prevent cross-contact with non-halal or non-kosher goods. Therefore, to lower the cost, some religious school canteens have failed to obey the dietary rules.

Second, most of the canteen staff lack sufficient training and are not up to the standards. The special needs for preparing religious meals create higher demands on staff in school canteens. However, training for staff in religious school canteens is insufficient in most cases. The vast majority of non-religious workers possess a relatively superficial understanding of the dietary culture and rules of certain religions, which has generated worries among students and their parents over the quality of religious meals provided by school canteens.

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Third, the processes of food preparation are not transparent enough. Since cross-exposure might happen in each stage of food preparation, complete transparency should be guaranteed through the processes of ordering, warehousing, distribution, and cooking. Most religious canteens at schools, however, have paid little attention to providing enough details, such as the certification of the vendors, the sources of ingredients they use, as well as the proportion of their religious staff.

Fourth, with a large number of students, the consumer base of school canteens is diverse and plural. However, religious canteens at schools have not been able to satisfy every user's religious dietary needs. Although occupying only a small portion, some religious students have found that their school canteens lack sufficient accommodation in the food offered. In Chinese schools, halal food is more easily available compared to other religious food.

4. Reasons why Religious Canteens should be Set in Schools

4.1. Equality Aspect

As Modood stated, equality means one has the right to make their difference recognized and supported. In schools, almost every religion has more or fewer followers, and many of them have special dietary laws or practices. For instance, under halal guidance, pork is not allowed and alcohol should also be banned. There are several rules regarding fasting, especially during Ramadan. Jewish people adhere to a more complicated set of rules that include limitations on the method used to butcher meat, the animals that may be consumed, the parts of the animal that may be consumed, dietary pairings, and preventing contamination. There are no specific guidelines for dietary restrictions in Buddhism. Many Buddhists practice a vegetarian diet as part of the idea of "doing no harm." In schools, however, owing to high barriers and costs, few of these guidelines have been appropriately met. This is an example of discrimination against religious groups that results in the denial of a fundamental right—the opportunity to actively select healthy foods at school in accordance with religious requirements. To provide even-handedness for religious students and staff, it is necessary to set up religious canteens, or at least offer religious meals as needed.

4.2. Legal Aspect

Setting up halal canteens in schools has been required formally by the Ministry of Education. Among the 55 ethnic minorities in China, there are 10 ethnic groups with halal eating habits. In order to show respect for the customs of those religious people and provide them with convenience, some specific requirements have been put forward. First, in boarding schools for ethnic minorities with halal dietary habits, halal canteens must be established. Second, all schools in which there are students or staff with a halal diet should set up separate halal stoves and halal food windows. It is also stated that the establishment of halal canteens and stoves is an important step to implement the Party’s ethnic policy. Therefore, it is not only encouraged but required to set religious canteens in schools.

4.3. Cultural Aspect

Food is frequently seen as a way for religions to maintain their cultural identity [8]. Muslims around the world fast during Ramadan because they hold that the Prophet Muhammad received the Quran, the Islamic holy book, from God during this month. Jews adhered to a kosher diet to maintain their spiritual health, as prescribed by Jewish scripture. Many Buddhists and Hindus practice vegetarianism, in part due to their beliefs in non-harming or non-violence. In this way, the distinctive dietary guidelines express people's religious beliefs and reflect their individuality and identity. Giorda asserts that the school lunch program promotes social and cultural inclusiveness [9].

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Schools are a place where people from different cultural backgrounds can mix and coexist peacefully. This should also include people from different religious backgrounds. Setting religious canteens in schools is thus a significant measure to maintain the cultural traditions of religions. It is also conducive to deepening the understanding of non-religious students and staff about the religious culture so as to inspire their respect for religious people.

5. Solutions to the Problems

5.1. Regulations

To ensure the establishment of religious canteens in schools, specific regulations need to be imposed and strictly observed. For instance, the proportion of religious staff in religious canteens should be stipulated and staff training and examination should be conducted regularly. In addition, religious supervisors could be set to participate in the operation and management of religious canteens.

What should be noted here is that observing the religious guidelines does not mean that religious students should be completely separated from others. An ethnic student from Peking University reported in the interview that she was satisfied with the religious canteens operated at her university. The halal canteen there is not set up separately, but as a halal window in the canteen, which makes ethnic students feel integrated and treated equally. In this way, religious students can have meals with their non-religious friends and need not go to a different canteen owing to their special eating habits.

5.2. Economic Support

As the preparation of religious food demands a higher cost, an appropriate budget should be allocated to build qualified religious canteens and develop religious menus. With economic support, schools could hire cooks familiar with religious diets and select religious vendors with high reputations, and choose a reliable supply of ingredients. In addition, some of the funds can be used to develop dishes for religions with a small number of followers so that students and staff of all religions can take their preferred options.

5.3. Cultural Respect

Religious diets mirror exactly the culture of religions, reflecting their guidelines and beliefs. To promote the establishment of religious canteens in schools, the fundamental measure is to enhance the understanding of religious cultures among non-religious people [10] . In particular, religious cultures can be taught more effectively by being incorporated into compulsory courses like history that relate them to larger political and economic realities. In this way, ‘a seed of understanding and respect’ could be planted and popular misconceptions could be dispelled. It is significant to remember that the goal of such courses should be to educate students about the principles, history, practices, and beliefs of certain religions, rather than debating whether or not they are right or wrong or contrasting them with one another. In Peking University, as the interviewee responded, plates with halal style are used for halal meals and private rooms with halal characteristics are provided for staff and students, which is a good way to give ethnic students a sense of belonging and to attract the attention of non-Muslim students to Islamic food culture.With a more comprehensive understanding of religions, people are more likely to engender respect for different faiths and then different dietary guidelines.

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6. Conclusions

Religious inequality is still persistent all over the world, which can be reflected by the fact that religious people are always ignored in mainstream society with their due rights curtailed. This study discussed religious inequality from the perspective of school canteens by reviewing relevant literature and online articles, as well as interviewing ethnic students. It pointed out that religious canteens in schools sometimes failed to strictly follow the dietary guidelines and their staff ended to receive inadequate training. Moreover, the processing of ingredients is not transparent enough and the eating habits of religious people other than Muslims have not been taken into consideration. Based on the interview conducted with religious students, as well as relevant journal and online articles, this paper proposed solutions from mainly three aspects. First, relevant regulations should be improved by adding more details and providing more humane dining environments for religious people. Second, financial support for religious canteens should be increased. Third, religious courses and dining facilities should be offered to enhance the understanding of and respect for religious cultures.

Future studies may adopt a more diverse research approach, such as interviews, questionnaires, as well as field trips, to probe into the problems existing in religious canteens. In addition to religious canteens in university, the problems concerning religious inequality in primary and secondary school canteens should also attract the attention of future studies. More importantly, to propose more reasonable suggestions, the voice of religious students and staff should be heard.

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