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2018

document version

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citation for published version (APA)

Colijn, H. A. (2018). *One House, Two Paths: Popular Religion and Protestant Christianity in Contemporary Chinese Households*.

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One House, Two Paths: Popular Religion and Protestant Christianity in Contemporary Chinese Households

Summary

In post-Mao China, forms of popular religion have been revitalized while in the same period millions of people have converted to Protestant Christianity. My doctoral research in the region of Southern Fujian explores how practitioners in these different ritual systems live together as spouses; as parents and children; as grandparents and grandchildren. I focus on the enactment of communal rituals (weddings, funerals, Christmas celebrations, Spring Festival rituals) by such "pluriprax" households, because considering Chinese religious history I expected practices (ways of doing) to be more contested on a grassroots level than scriptures or doctrines (believing). How do people in contemporary Southern Fujian form and maintain pluriprax households, despite their conflicting ritual obligations? In the context of the individualization of modern Chinese society —individual empowerment in the domestic sphere and in relation to socio-economic institutions— my interlocutors in Southern Fujian generally value personal emotional, romantic, and religious fulfillment over adherence to communal ritual obligations (e.g. obligation to venerate ancestors, obligation to abstain from superstition). This creates a field of tension, because as members of ancestral lineages practicing forms of popular religion and as members of churches practicing Protestant Christianity, individuals still have certain obligations to fulfill. Communal rituals thus signal moments of tension and division among my research population. Yet pluriprax households in Southern Fujian have been able to thrive in the context of individualization. Due to the disempowerment of Chinese ritual communities (ancestral lineages, Protestant churches, socialist production brigades) in the course of the twentieth century, individual household members are able to abstain from, simplify, or integrate various rituals through polytropy. These ways to change, evade, or "harmonize" ritual obligations accommodate the participation of practitioners in different ritual systems, allowing them to form and maintain pluriprax households.

My thesis contributes to (inter)religious studies by theorizing the central importance of practice (what to do, when, where, and how) in settings of religious diversity. Most studies of "mixed" or "interfaith" families in Western societies still have an inherent bias toward mentalist beliefs and worldviews, but the boundary-

transcending ritual practices of pluriprax households in Southern Fujian harbor important theoretical insights for the study of interreligious relations. My thesis also enriches the study of religion in Chinese societies by shedding light on the largely unexplored topic of pluriprax households, and by bringing in a new debate (from the discursive field of individualization) to the field of religion and ritual in Chinese societies. Finally, the thesis contributes to theorizing about modern mainland Chinese society by providing ethnographic examples of the challenges and problems that arise on a grassroots level in the context of individualization (e.g. conflicting ritual obligations), and the creative responses of people facing such challenges.