

An Innovative Scheme for the Governance of Religious Online Public Opinion in Universities: A Design Based on the 4R Crisis Management Theory

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[**Abstract**] The emergency management of religious online public opinion is an important part of the management work in universities, and the modernization of college governance in the new era. Based on the review of relevant theories and concepts of religious online public opinion in universities, this article analyzes the problems existing in the governance of religious online public opinion in universities from the perspective of 4R crisis management theory through literature analysis and questionnaire survey. Coping strategies are proposed for the governance of religious online public opinion in universities, and a “reduction-preparation-response-recovery” governance model of religious online public opinion is constructed, providing reference for the effective response and governance of religious online public opinion in universities.

[**Key words**] universities; governance of religious online public opinion; 4R crisis management theory

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General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out at the 2016 National Conference on Religion that it is necessary to attach great importance to religious affairs on the Internet, vigorously publicize the Party’s religious theories and policies on the Internet, and spread positive voices. At the 2021 National Conference on Religion, he re-emphasized the need to strengthen the management of religious affairs on the Internet. With the rise and popularization of Internet, Internet religion has become a new area of concern for religious governance. On the one hand, Internet facilitates the dissemination of religion, expands the forms of religious communication, and enriches the content of communication; on the other hand, religious information is highly susceptible to distortion and speculation in the process of Internet dissemination, which stimulates irrational discussions among netizens, and in turn creates religious online public opinion that is not conducive to social stability, and poses a new challenge to religious governance. In Internet religious governance, religious online public opinion is an important topic, and a difficult issue to be overcome in the process of modernizing the Internet religious governance system and governance capacity. At the same time, the governance of religious online public opinion in universities is an important part of the modernization of university governance and management in the new era. In the management of university public opinion, the governance of religious online public opinion is a shortcoming in the management of universities, coupled with the specificity and sensitivity of religious issues, some universities seem to be overstretched in the handling of religious affairs, and do not know how to scientifically and effectively prevent and respond to religious online public opinion on campus. Therefore, this paper implements General Secretary Xi Jinping’s proposition that “religious affairs have a bearing on the rise and fall of the country”, takes religious online public opinion as the

research theme, and through literature analysis and questionnaire surveys, explores and researches the characteristics of religious online public opinion, the law of evolution, as well as the dilemmas and problems faced by the governance of religious online public opinion in universities, and further researches religious online public opinion in universities based on 4R crisis management theory. Based on 4R crisis management theory, we further study the governance mechanism of religious online public opinion in universities, and put forward relevant countermeasures and suggestions, with a view to improving the capacity of religious governance in universities, constructing a harmonious, healthy and stable religious governance system in universities, and promoting the modernization of university governance capacity in the new era.

1 Basic characteristics and evolution laws of religious online public opinion

Online public opinion refers to the collection of tendentious emotions, cognition, attitudes, behaviors, and subsequent influences of the public on various social phenomena, problems, hot news and emergencies, which are spread through the Internet. It is a new form of public opinion and a concentrated response of citizens to the political, spiritual, material and social civilization activities in modern society. The religious online public opinion refers to the public opinion formed by the public's attitude, emotion and opinion to the phenomenon, and event and problem involving religious elements and spreading on the Internet, which are displayed through the Internet in the form of text, pictures, audio, video and etc., reflecting a social emotion and value orientation, and forming a certain scale of public opinion. Religious online public opinion, as a type of online public opinion, has the basic characteristics of directness, arbitrariness, suddenness, concealment, and deviation that general online public opinion possesses. However, due to the religious nature of religious online public opinion, compared with general online public opinion, it has special characteristics and is more likely to attract social attention, exhibiting complexity, sensitivity, and disorder.

1.1 Basic characteristics of religious online public opinion

1.1.1 Complexity

Religious online public opinion is closely related to religious affairs in terms of content. Compared with general online public opinion, religious online public opinion is more easily influenced by ethnic emotions, religious beliefs, customs, international politics, and other factors. The stakeholders involved are complex, involving multiple social levels, and the relationships involved are very complex. Moreover, various audiences have distinct positions and different perspectives, usually with their own firm positions that are not easily changed. The overall situation appears to be complex and complicated.

1.1.2 Sensitivity

The religious nature of religious online public opinion is often linked to domestic and foreign political affairs. Domestically, religious online public opinion is often related to ethnic and border conflicts, which are related to national security and ethnic unity. The conflicts are not conducive to the unity and development of all ethnic groups, and are prone to causing disharmony between ethnic groups and affecting political stability. Internationally, religious online public opinion often involves malicious religious infiltration, with the intention of undermining China's social stability, which is also closely related to international politics, showing a general sensitivity of religious online public opinion.

1.1.3 Disorder

Due to the agility and freedom of Internet communication, religious online public opinion has dispelled the patent nature of religious organizations and governments in the traditional sense for religious affairs discussions. People from all walks of life can participate in and even release discussions and views on religious affairs. Moreover, due to the strong and firm personal attitudes and emotional tendencies of religious believers towards public opinion related to religious affairs, there can be an uncontrollable impact on the development of the situation. At the same time, in the context of religious public opinion, the speeches of clergy and religious

organizations of various religions have strong appeal and can even change the direction of public opinion, demonstrating the uncontrollability and disorder of the development direction of religious online public opinion.

1.2 Evolution laws of religious online public opinion

Religious affairs governance is one of the important contents of public management. From the perspective of public management, religious online public opinion can be seen as a type of public crisis. According to the characteristics and evolution laws of public crises, as well as the 4R crisis management theory, the evolution laws of religious online public opinion can be roughly summarized into four stages: generation, development, climax, and decline. At different stages of development, religious online public opinion exhibits different characteristics. Specifically, in the stage of public opinion generation, public opinion mainly refers to relevant topics that have sparked public discussion due to the emergence of sensitive information in events. At this stage, the amount of discussion and visits on this topic is relatively small and has not attracted widespread public attention and discussion, but there is a potential risk of further fermentation. In the development stage of public opinion, public opinion has further developed and evolved. Many related topics have emerged on the Internet, and the trend of public sentiment has fluctuated with media reports. At this point, if the relevant departments cannot release authoritative and detailed information in a timely manner to eliminate public doubts, various speculations and rumors will breed and quickly spread on the internet. In the peak stage of public opinion, the main content of topic dissemination has shifted from personal opinions, attitudes, or media reports to public opinion orientation. The public's attention and participation in this event have further increased, and public opinion pressure has sharply increased. In the stage of public opinion decline, the main body of online public opinion gradually reduces its attention to this event, and the public no longer has a desire to express their attitude towards this event, but instead focuses on new events or topics. But if there is no continuous follow-up, there is still a risk of crisis recurrence and other subsequent crises occurring. According to the characteristics of public opinion at different stages, relevant departments need to take targeted and feasible measures in the governance process.

2 Analysis of realistic conditions for the governance of religious online public opinion in universities (taking an Anhui university as an example)

Students and relevant teaching and management staff in universities are two key groups in the governance of religious online public opinion in universities. Understanding the religious beliefs of college students, their level of understanding of religious policies, and their attitudes towards religious communication are the foundation for religious management in universities. The evaluation of religious work in universities by relevant teaching and management staff, as well as their views on religious communication, can reflect the current shortcomings of religious work in universities. These are the practical conditions for the governance of religious online public opinion in universities. Only by accurately analyzing these practical conditions can targeted countermeasures and suggestions be proposed for the current situation, so as to achieve good governance results. Therefore, this study conducted a survey of students and teaching and management staff at an Anhui university through questionnaire survey. Based on the data obtained from the survey, the following analysis was conducted.

2.1 Basic situation of religious belief among students in an Anhui university

According to the results of the questionnaire survey, among the surveyed student groups, 57% are members of the Communist Youth League, and 42% are members of the Communist Party of China; 95% have no religious beliefs, and 5% have religious beliefs. From the data, it can be analyzed that currently almost all college students are members of the Communist Youth League or the Communist Party of China, with most students having no religious beliefs and only a very small number of students having religious beliefs. Regarding attitudes towards religious beliefs, in the question "How do you view college students with religious beliefs", 76% of the students chose the option "understand", 9% chose the option "understand and respect", and 11% chose the option "completely do not understand". In the question "Do you think that life needs religious beliefs", 66% chose "no

need” and only 4% chose “need”. From the survey results, it can be analyzed that although most college students express understanding of religious beliefs, they still believe that life does not need religious beliefs.

2.2 College students lack proper understandings of China’s religious policies

In the questionnaire survey, regarding the question of “Do you understand China’s current religious policies”, no students chose the option of “completely understand”, only 14% chose the option of “basically understand”, 57% chose the option of “basically don’t understand”, and 28% chose the option of “completely don’t understand”. In the question of “Do you think religion will have a positive impact on colleges and universities”, 47% students said “uncertain”, and in the question of “Do you think there is any contradiction between religious belief and ideological and political education for college students”, 57% students said “unclear”. From the survey results, it can be analyzed that current college students lack a correct and comprehensive understanding of religion and religious policies.

2.3 The publicity and education work of religious policies in universities is not in place

In the questionnaire survey of management staff, regarding the question of “Can your department implement important policies on campus religious activities in a timely and efficient manner”, 7% of the respondents chose “uncertain”, 46% chose “completely”, and 46% chose “basically”. In the question of “Has your department carried out publicity work on religious laws”, only 7% of the respondents chose “often”, 38% of the respondents said “never”, and 46% of the respondents said “rarely”. In the question of “Has your department hosted thematic activities on religious work”, 69% of the respondents chose “never”, 15% chose “rarely”, and only 7% of the respondents chose “often”. In the question of “Has your department hosted thematic activities on religious work for potential missionary groups”, 30% of the respondents chose “almost none”, and 38% chose “yes, with excellent results”. From the data of the questionnaire survey, it can be analyzed that universities have not done a good job in implementing religious policies, and there is a lack of religious education.

2.4 The religious work system in universities is not sound

In a questionnaire survey of management staff, 15% chose “not very sound” and 7% chose “uncertain” in the question of “Do you think the current religious work system within the school is sound”, while no one chose “very sound”. It can be seen that the current religious work system in universities is not sound and perfect. In the question of “Has your department established a joint collaboration mechanism with other departments on campus religious work”, 38% chose “uncertain”, 30% chose “established and can fully play its role”, and 7% chose “established but with little effect”. This indicates that there is a lack of a sound joint collaboration mechanism in the current religious management work in universities.

3 Application of 4R crisis management theory in the governance of religious online public opinion in universities

According to the natural processes of generation, development, climax, and recession of the crisis, many scholars have proposed a crisis management cycle theory, in which the “stage” model of crisis management is the most intuitive application. The US Federal Safety Management Commission developed Fink’s four-stage theory of crisis management into four steps of crisis management from a management perspective, including mitigation, prevention, response, and recovery. American crisis management expert Robert Heath eventually adjusted the four stages of crisis management to a 4R model: reduction, preparation, response, and recovery. By finding the manifestations and causes of crises in different stages and analyzing their impacts, we can minimize the losses and risks caused by the impacts, thus achieving the goal of crisis management. The 4R model of crisis management was first applied in corporate crisis management, and later has been widely used in many fields due to its scientific nature and wide range of practical applications.

This paper, from the perspective of public administration, regards religious online public opinion as a type of public crisis. From the perspective of public crisis management, based on the 4R crisis management model, we

study the governance strategies for religious online public opinion in universities from four stages: reduction, readiness, response, and recovery. We predict problems before they occur, identify problems when they emerge, deal with problems when they occur, and restore order after they end, achieving whole-process governance.

4 Governance stages of religious online public opinion in universities

4.1 Reduction stage

At this stage, public opinion is still in latency and has not fully erupted. There are several problems in the governance of religious online public opinion in universities: firstly, the legal system related to the governance of religious online public opinion is not sound. For example, the Regulations on Religious Affairs (hereinafter referred to as the Regulations), revised and improved in 2017, identified the legal liability for various religious activities and acts that affect religious work, and stipulated the punishment methods and responsible subjects for non-compliant religious acts. However, the Regulations did not stipulate the Internet religious activities, religious online public opinion and other related situations. There is no clear responsibility subject and relevant punishment regulations for religious online public opinion issues, resulting in unclear rights and responsibilities in the actual implementation process, and making it difficult to define. Moreover, in the Regulations on the Administration of Religious Affairs, it is stipulated that each department is responsible for religious work, and specific responsibilities are not divided, resulting in unclear responsibilities of each department and mutual shirking and buck passing when encountering sudden religious issues. The Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services (hereinafter referred to as the Measures) issued in 2022 have multiple legislative subjects, and most of them are principled provisions, which do not involve the handling of specific issues, resulting in greater difficulty in applying laws and uniform law enforcement. Secondly, the organizational system for managing religious online public opinion is not sound. At present, the response of universities to online public opinion is mainly arranged and managed by the Propaganda Department or Integrated Media Center in conjunction with the school party committee, without specific institutions or organizations for the governance of religious online public opinion. As a result, most of the governance of religious online public opinion only focuses on in-process control, without attaching significant importance to pre-prevention and post-processing. Without a fixed emergency comprehensive coordination, decision-making body, and specialized functional departments, there is no core for prevention and control work, which weakens the ability to coordinate and handle crises. Universities cannot adapt to their public safety situation in the information age and social transformation period, which is not conducive to the safety and stability of the entire university.

4.2 Readiness stage

There are several problems at this stage: First, there is a lack of a sound prediction and supervision system for religious online public opinion. In the governance process of religious online public opinion, universities lack supporting institutions, equipment, and professional talents to conduct technical prediction of religious online public opinion, which often makes it difficult to detect problems in the early stages of religious online public opinion, and cannot timely curb the spread and development of religious online public opinion and supervise it. Second, there is a lack of crisis awareness and proactive response to public opinion. Some university administrators have a weak sense of crisis, inadequate ideological understanding, and responsibility awareness to actively respond to the governance of religious online public opinion. Third, there is a lack of comprehensive plans to deal with it, staying in the “firefighting” mode. The management of religious online public opinion in universities is only an occasional mode of emergency management, without attaching importance to pre-emptive prevention, strengthening daily crisis awareness education, preparatory prevention, plan rehearsal, safety management, facility inspection, etc. Once an emergency occurs, they begin to look for solutions, while missing the opportunity to control the emergency in its infancy.

4.3 Response stage

At the response stage, firstly, when universities respond to religious online public opinion, they are not

proactive in making public information about public opinion, and lack enthusiasm in publishing online public opinion information, which result in asymmetry in information dissemination and increase the difficulty of public opinion response. At the same time, if universities adopt a passive attitude towards online public opinion and do not actively and timely disclose relevant information, or cannot accurately judge the development trend of online public opinion, it will lead to the continuous spread and expansion of negative public opinion, which will ultimately lead to a trust crisis among the public towards universities. Secondly, universities lack rapid response capabilities and flexible coping abilities in dealing with emergencies. After the occurrence of emergencies, the handling methods are relatively simple, without considering the emotions and attitudes of students and event-related people. Thirdly, the official media of schools do not play a positive guiding role. In the new media era, universities have established their own official media accounts, but most of them lack good operation and management, and their influence is not significant. In the governance of religious online public opinion, the official media of schools usually choose to “keep silent” to avoid “saying too much and making mistakes”, which fails to play a positive guiding role. Fourthly, students lack correct judgment. Due to the characteristics of sudden events and serious impact of religious online public opinion, it will cause certain psychological impacts on students. And most college students do not have religious beliefs, so their understanding of religion is limited. Therefore, when various religious online public opinions emerge like a flood, it will seriously interfere with the audience’s judgment on the authenticity of information. Students’ lack of knowledge about religion and the sensitivity inherent in religious topics can easily trigger public discussions. In addition to non-believers, there are also some religious students in universities who have different beliefs due to their religious differences. Religious students often have different views and attitudes towards religious online public opinion, which further increases the difficulty of governance of religious online public opinion in universities.

4.4 Recovery stage

During the disposition of religious online public opinion, some universities have neglected the follow-up work of emergency management, while focusing on the real-time handling process of the incident and the process of learning lessons from it afterwards. After the end of online public opinion, university administrators often consider that the handling of public opinion crisis events is over and relax their vigilance, but neglect the process of summarizing experience in public opinion crisis, which is not conducive to solving practical problems. There is no clear and systematic system to regulate the investigation and identification of relevant personnel in the recovery and summary stage, and the existing institutional regulations in universities do not provide detailed explanations.

5 Innovative scheme for the governance of religious online public opinion in universities : A design based on the 4R crisis management theory

Based on the division of crisis management stages in crisis management theory, as well as the current problems and causes of religious online public opinion management, this article argues that, based on the 4R crisis management theory, the realization of religious online public opinion management in universities requires four aspects: reduction stage, readiness stage, response stage, and recovery stage.

5.1 Reduction stage: reducing risks

First, we should strengthen the theoretical research on religious online public opinion. Compared with social online public opinion and livelihood online public opinion, the theoretical research on religious online public opinion has commonality in the dissemination law. However, it cannot be ignored that the research on religious online public opinion is different from that of other social network public opinion, which has distinctive characteristics such as political, policy, theoretical and practical aspects. Universities should give full play to their academic research advantages, focus on the deep and hot issues of religious affairs in cyberspace on the basis of drawing lessons from and absorbing current research methods of various disciplines, summarize the laws of the dissemination and development of religious online public opinion, and promote valuable and influential research

theories. We should promote the process of theoretical research on religious online public opinion and improve relevant policies and regulations related to it.

Second, we should enhance the comprehensive governance capability of religious online public opinion in universities. A sound mechanism for managing religious work should be established. At present, universities lack a religious online public opinion management department, and the institutional work management mechanism related to online public opinion is relatively loose. Information from various departments is not smooth, and the overall grasp is insufficient. The guidance and handling of religious online public opinion are often in a passive state. In response to these issues, universities can establish relevant institutions or departments, refine the scope of responsibilities and powers, improve governance efficiency, and achieve effective governance. We should strengthen the construction of the religious talent team, expand the united front team, and cultivate a group of compound talents who are familiar with religious practice and Internet technology. The education and training efforts for existing religious management staff should be continuously increased. At the same time, the “United Front Think Tank” can be used to establish a team of online inspection talents, gradually forming a stable team of observation experts for public opinion, and regularly conducting risk assessments and reviews on major religious websites, video accounts, Weibo, official accounts and other online platforms.

Third, we should improve students’ rational awareness and judgment ability. In the formation process of religious online public opinion, college students play an extremely important role as both disseminators and recipients. However, in the dissemination of religious online public opinion, most students are often at disadvantage due to their lack of religious knowledge, cognition, and complete information reception. Groups lacking the ability to distinguish true and false information are easily driven by empathy, thus becoming facilitators of false public opinion. Therefore, universities should hold lectures, forums, and other activities to enhance students’ learning of China’s religious laws and regulations, improve students’ ability to distinguish true and false religious online public opinion, and at the same time enhance their media awareness as public opinion disseminators, so as to “not create rumors, not believe rumors, and not spread rumors”.

5.2 Readiness stage: real-time monitoring and warning

First, a sound warning mechanism for information on religious online public opinion should be established. In the era of big data, data and information are a new resource. Xi Jinping emphasized that “be good at acquiring, analyzing, and applying data” and “enhance the ability to use data to advance all work”. Only by mastering religious big data can we truly improve the governance effectiveness of religious online public opinion. Universities should make use of their resource advantages and professional talents to strengthen the digital governance capacity of relevant departments, promote the construction of basic religious information database, religious management literature database, negative sample database of online religious information, monitoring and governance platform of online religious information, develop efficient and accurate governance information tools, design and optimize the automated review algorithm model of online religious information, and realize the intelligent and precise online religious information governance in an intelligent and precise manner. They also should effectively integrate resources, establish big data analysis platform on the information about religious online public opinion, monitor the full picture of religious online public opinion and the online and dynamic situation in real time, and predict, analyze and research on it. At the same time, a mechanism for warning and grading of religious online public opinion, a monitoring mechanism, a mechanism for research, judgment and release, and a mechanism for responding to and lifting the early warning, governance and repair of religious online public opinion relying on informatization are established, so as to better grasp the laws of development of online public opinion on religious affairs, be keen at detecting precursors, and improve the ability to grasp the laws of religious online public opinion and the ability to guide it.

Second, we should improve the crisis awareness of management staff in relevant departments of universities.

As a type of online public opinion, religious online public opinion in universities has the characteristics of suddenness, sensitivity, and harmfulness. Usually, the outbreak of public opinion is short-lived and has a strong impact, leaving insufficient time for management staff to react and study disposal plans. This requires cultivating and improving the crisis awareness of staff in relevant departments of universities. Through systematic training, simulation drills, etc. , we should be able to “see the forest for the trees” in the readiness stage of religious online public opinion in universities, predict and prepare for the direction of events and possible adverse effects, so as to deal with public opinion in a targeted manner and minimize or avoid the adverse effects caused by public opinion as much as possible.

5.3 Response stage: active response and positive guidance

First, we should establish proactive response strategies. A sound mechanism for sharing religious online public opinion information should be established, information sharing and exchange should be strengthened, and the smoothness of internal and external communication should be ensured. A scientific response strategy based on information communication should be built. Campus media such as official account, radio, web page, and Tiktok video should be used to timely publish the information, process, and handling of religious online public opinion, establish correct public opinion guidance, and eliminate negative impacts in a timely manner. At the same time, it is necessary to enhance the awareness and ability of relevant departments and staff in universities to respond to religious online public opinion, strengthen the construction of organizational talent teams, regularly organize talent recruitment and training, and encourage relevant university management staff and campus official media to take the initiative at critical moments, release official authoritative information, and promptly respond to misleading public opinion.

Second, we should strengthen the positive promotion of mainstream media on campus. To prevent the occurrence of religious public opinion in universities and reduce the negative impact of religious public opinion, we should give full play to the role of campus media platforms, provide high-quality Internet religious information, and use positive publicity to build consensus. Special attention should be paid to publicizing the Party’s religious work theory, principles and policies, publicizing religious laws and regulations, and promoting college students to consciously support the leadership of the CPC and the socialist system, and adhere to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

5.4 Recovery stage: improvement and summary

First, we should summarize our experience and clarify the improvement plan. With the public opinion comes to an end, we should continue to pay attention to it and summarize it. First of all, we should carefully summarize the experience and lessons in handling religious online public opinion, providing a reference basis for subsequent religious management work. Secondly, we should improve relevant rules and regulations, clarify punishment requirements, and provide clear basis and guidance for the next step of work. Finally, we should strengthen daily management work and constantly improve the emergency management mechanism of religious online public opinion. We should formulate corresponding emergency plans for religious online public opinion, continuously improve the level of religious online public opinion governance, and promote the development of religious work and higher education.

Second, we should maintain the image of universities and reduce adverse effects. For universities, sudden religious online public opinion can have a certain adverse impact on the teaching order and social reputation. Therefore, in the crisis recovery stage, universities should first focus on communication, disclose the process, results and related information of public opinion handling, maintain the teaching and management order, avoid rumors that are not conducive to the development of universities, and respond to and counteract the rumors that have already occurred. Secondly, universities should actively carry out positive publicity, strengthen their positive image through holding academic exchange forums, broadcasting promotional videos, holding cultural activities,

etc. , maintain the image, and reduce the adverse impact of public opinion on the reputation.

6 Conclusion

Religious online public opinion in universities is similar to other online public opinions, but has distinctive features that are different from them. Moreover, religious online public opinion in universities has a significant impact on the values of college students, the reputation of colleges, and social stability. The 4R crisis management theory emphasizes the adoption of different targeted control strategies at different stages of crisis evolution based on the law of crisis evolution, and presents the advantages of dynamic crisis prevention and control, stage-based crisis management, and full-process crisis resolution. In the governance of religious online public opinion in universities, we should fully leverage the advantages of the “4R” model, and build a “reduction-readiness-response-recovery” model of religious online public opinion governance from the stages of reduction, readiness, response, and recovery, to enhance the ability of colleges to respond to religious online public opinion, minimize the risks of religious online public opinion, and create a harmonious and stable campus environment.

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