

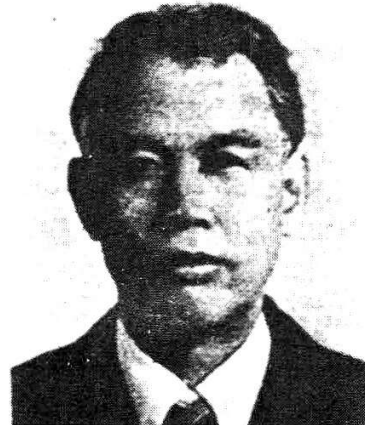
The Christian Quest for Truth

Commentary on Fang Lizhi's Science and Religion

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A distinguishing feature of Fang Lizhi's article is that in its quest for truth, it never deviates from the mode and manner of the research scientist, and thereby avoids falling into the kind of stereotyped thinking that seems to ensnare so many of China's intellectuals. From the outset the author affirms the important role religion has played in the development of Chinese culture--something that goes counter to the claims of certain "men of letters" who say that there is no religious element to be found in Chinese culture. Nor does Professor Fang follow in the wake of the majority of our country's scholars, be they on the mainland or abroad, who still persist in accentuating the conflictive and negative elements in the relationship between science and religion. The professor merely makes passing reference to this, perhaps unwilling to get bogged down in the old familiar arguments, before moving on to his principle interest, which is the positive influence Christianity has had on the development of Western science.



While my primary academic concern over the past two decades has been the history of Western and Medieval philosophy, I have in recent years also devoted some time and effort to the study of traditional Chinese thought. With this in mind, I should like first to enlarge upon Professor Fang's remarks regarding the Christian cultural "presuppositions", which he sees as having had a positive influence on scientific study and how this applies to the Chinese cultural scene. Secondly, because the history of philosophy is not Professor Fang's main expertise, certain inaccuracies in his article are perhaps unavoidable, and I hope I may be permitted to offer my own modest opinion on these minor discrepancies.

Christian Cultural "Presuppositions" and Chinese Culture

The New Testament, in which Christianity is grounded, attaches great importance to the practice of charity, but at the same time by no means disregards the cognitive element in the quest for truth. Accordingly, St. Augustine found little difficulty in synthesizing Christian doctrine with Plato's enthusiasm for philosophical truth. Augustine considered the pursuit of cognitive truth as leading one into contact with God, for God indeed is truth. Later during the Middle Ages much of this enthusiasm for searching out truth was concentrated around theological questions, but the science of logic and its attendant "universal" propositions also generated many a heated discussion among Christian scholars. Many of them took a keen interest in the natural sciences as well, for they believed that the universe was God's handiwork and the reflection of God's wisdom. Renaissance scholars such as Bacon, Newton, Galileo and Copernicus fell heir to this intellectual tradition. Bacon's *Instauratio Magna* ends with a prayer in praise of God the Father, Creator and Lord of all. Copernicus also concludes his *Harmony of the Universe* with a prayer of thanksgiving to the "Lord and Creator of the World". This not only illustrates the profound regard they had for the "presupposition" of the intelligibility of the created universe, but also how they considered their study of the Creator's masterpiece to be a religious activity of the highest order. In one respect, this was a continuation of the Greek spiritual tradition of the "love of wisdom", but Christianity added to that legacy its own unique love for truth itself. Christians also recognize the fact that certain mysteries lie beyond the grasp of human intelligence, but they regard these as exceptions. Basically, they believe that the universe as a whole is indeed intelligible.

The earliest Chinese literary reference to laws governing the universe is to be found in the *Hong Fan*. This lists the "Nine Categories" which comprise the nine codes bestowed by Heaven to regulate nature and the affairs of human beings. By the time of the Warring Kingdoms (475-221 B.C.), Taoist thought came to regard order in the universe not as a gift bestowed by Heaven but as an innate property of nature itself. Xunzi also believed that Heaven was synonymous with nature, and that nature's

motion had its own constant laws. ("Heaven's motion is constant.") He considered what appeared in nature as strange or unusual phenomena merely to be part of the natural order of things. ("Change in the universe is governed by the interaction of the Yin and the Yang.") It would seem, then, that the ancient Chinese scholars did little follow up on their initial observations of unusual phenomena because they did not regard such phenomena as something out of the ordinary. After all, the final analysis of Tao is "mystery within mystery" and ultimately unknowable. Following along the same line, when Zhuangzi in his treatise "On Perfect Joy" states, "The ancient bamboo generated an insect, the insect a leopard, the leopard a horse, and the horse a man," no one bothered to investigate whether this was possible or had actually taken place. And further when a fox of superior quality turned into a human being or even when a tree of elegant refinement was transformed into a person no one bothered to question let alone investigate such possibilities. And although Wang Chong showed himself to be quite adept in his critique of the philosophy of Confucius and Mencius, he still believed that auspicious omens accompanied each Han Dynasty emperor's accession to the imperial throne. But all of this is far from saying that the ancient scholars were ignorant of the order and constancy in the world; rather, what they lacked was any strong faith in the efficacy of the natural order to remain in every case constant. Needless to say such an attitude would hardly serve to stir up any strong sentiments to investigate such matters further. Professor Fang says that interest in religion did not run deep among Chinese scholars. The fact of the matter is that neither did they show much interest in science for its own sake, that is, science in quest of truth. All they demanded from science was practical results.

In the final analysis, from which of these two attitudes does scientific progress stand to gain? The answer goes without saying. Professor Fang has the courage to raise such questions, for which he merits our gratitude and respect. Actually, Christians, too, are capable of harbouring certain biases that can provoke conflicts with science. But this comes as a result of blindness in the human heart. Essentially no conflict need arise between science and Christianity.

Certain Discrepancies and Inaccuracies

Professor Fang's article contains several other points worthy of discussion. But since his field of specialization is not Chinese philosophy nor Church history, it is not surprising to find some minor inaccuracies. Along with most other Chinese scholars, Professor Fang seems to share the opinion that since Confucius is quoted as saying "Distance yourself from veneration of the spirits" and again "I do not yet know about life, what can I know of death?", and because his emphasis was on moral principles and functions in society, then Confucius himself was lacking in religious faith and fervour. Actually, Confucius was convinced that his cultural mission came as a mandate from heaven; therefore, in times of great personal danger, he put his trust in heaven and remained calm. This attitude itself is a sublime religious sentiment, one grounded in a firm faith in heaven.

Professor Fang also thinks "the Taoist religion is native to China, and finds its source in the writings of the 6th Century B.C. philosophers Laozi and Zhuangzi." He goes on to say that although the Taoist religion flourished during the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618-905), the Taoist concept of the universe never became part of the religious faith of astronomers. Obviously, Professor Fang is confusing Taoist philosophy with Taoist religion. The Taoist religion is concerned with techniques for cultivating one's temperament and prolonging one's life, and is an amalgam of magical charms, witchcraft, quackery and traditional religious beliefs borrowed from ancient Confucianism and Moism, along with elements of Buddhism and Chinese folk religion. All this is quite different from the philosophy promoted by Laozi and Zhuangzi. Taoists have honoured Laozi with the title of *Most Ancient and Revered Teacher*, but this does not prove that the Taoist religion originated from the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi. And finally, the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi does not date from the 6th century, B.C. Scholars are now in general agreement that the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi dates from the period of the Warring States (B.C. 475-221).
