

## *The New Confucians and Christianity*

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The May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement of 1919 called for the immediate modernization of China. This modernization also called for the discarding of traditional Chinese culture and the radical embracing of Western values. This attitude towards traditional Chinese culture has been characteristic of Chinese intellectuals of both China and Taiwan during the past decades and remains even today the dominating trend.

However, a few intellectuals of the May 4<sup>th</sup> era helped set another trend. This group sought to preserve what they esteemed as highly valuable in Confucianism's ethical and metaphysical legacy and amalgamating these perennial Chinese traditional values with certain Western values that the Chinese felt they needed. These intellectuals were the forerunners of the New Confucians' Movement or the *Dangdai Xinrujia*. Today, this movement has developed into a lively and interesting cultural phenomenon among intellectual circles in both the Chinese *Diaspora* and in China itself.

One of the main objectives of the New Confucians' philosophical endeavors is to describe traditional Chinese life and world-view using Western logical and metaphysical concepts. These are borrowed especially from Kant and Hegel whose philosophy they have carefully studied.

### **Impact of Christianity on New Confucians**

Given this group's Western orientation, it would be interesting to explore the impact of Christianity on this movement. Let us take, as an example, the definition of the attributes of Heaven. The New Confucians describe Heaven as the source of all things, eternal, almighty. They define it as transcendent and immanent, absolutely above time and space. This concept is not foreign to Kant, who after all, was a devout pietist, nor to Hegel who was a Christian theologian. In this article, however, our purpose is limited to taking a quick glance at the New Confucians' view of Christianity.

If we wish to discover how the New Confucians' view

Christianity, we need only study one or the other of the outstanding leaders of the Movement.

### **Tang Junyi, leader of the New Confucians**

During the last few decades, Tang Junyi (1909-1978) was one of the most prominent leaders of the New Confucians Movement. His influence remains strong even twenty years after his death. In his day, he dedicated a great deal of effort to analyzing the religious significance of Confucianism and comparing it with the major religions of the world. His opinions about Christianity are typical of the views of the New Confucians. He has also been very influential in shaping these views.

In his numerous writings, Tang Junyi often deals with religious issues; but the clearest statement of his viewpoint can be found in his major philosophical work: *The Existence of Life and the World of the Spirit*, which he wrote in the last few years of his life. This book - a fascinating synthesis, half Hegelian and half Confucian - is an attempt at gathering together all human knowledge into three main realms, namely the objective realm (objective knowledge, or knowledge from external objects), the subjective realm (knowledge typically pertaining to the inner self of the knowing subject, including reflection on sense perceptions, philosophy, arts, mathematics, and moral knowledge), and the transcendent realm (concerned with religious experience).

According to Tang, the cognitive life of human beings does not stop at knowledge of the object (external world) or of the subject itself (literature, philosophy, moral values). Beyond both object and subject, there is still the transcendent realm left to explore. This realm is concerned with whatever lies beyond the human world, beyond time and space. Its sphere of knowledge is utterly beyond sense perception, and also beyond rational activity. Human beings have exerted a great deal of effort exploring this particular field of knowledge. The effort has yielded a variety of outcomes.

### **Examining three outcomes**

Tang examines three of these outcomes, which he considers typical of three different directions: the sphere of the "Return to the One"; the sphere of the "Absolute Void"; the sphere of the "Virtue of Heaven at Work".

***The sphere of the Return to the One***

The sphere of the *Return to the One* pertains to Christianity, and to Western monotheism in general. It also includes Islam and Judaism. Tang believes that the great monotheistic current of thought of the West is the result of the confluence of Hebrew religion and Greek philosophy. This confluence of thought occurred during the Middle Ages, when God was both the object of religious faith and of philosophical research

Concerning the existence of God, Tang finds fault with St. Anselm's ontological explanation, as well as with St. Thomas Aquinas' various arguments. He accepts Kant's argument from 'practical reason'; but finds that it too is not without fault. After also examining the theories of Spinoza, Leibniz, and Fichte, Tang finally states that the God the philosophers can reach is inevitably and only an abstract concept. It is not the true God. God must be reached not through philosophy, but through religious faith.

Tang, however, believes that the God of the monotheistic religions of the West is not perfect, because, according to him, God is not absolute. Being opposed to His faithful (his creatures), God is *relative*, and cannot any longer be the true *Absolute*. In the end, Tang concludes that neither philosophy nor religion can enable human beings to succeed in reaching the transcendent realm (i.e. God).

***The sphere of the Absolute Void***

The sphere of the *Absolute Void* relates to Buddhism. Tang states that Buddhists try to reach the transcendent realm by denying the existence of the knowing subject as well as of the external world. Buddha discovered this way as an escape from sorrow and the challenges of life. Thus, the true meaning and essence of life are reached in the liberation from the concrete life experience. Buddhism, however, is not a total denial of the values of life. It is a denial only of those values that are not essential to *pure* life. By getting rid of the non-essentials, one reaches the *Pure Land*, a world in clear-cut opposition to the secular world, where confusion and perturbation born of desire, pollute life. The way to get rid of the perturbation is manifold. It is done through a combination of learning, understanding, and behavioral discipline.

Understanding mainly consists in grasping the doctrine of causation which, in Buddhism, according to Tang, occupies the same

importance as the proofs of the existence of God in the Christian tradition. However, this doctrine, like the proofs of the existence of God in Christianity, is not free from doubts and perplexities. Tang concludes, however, that Christians have no doubts about the existence of God, although they may experience some doubts about the proofs given for it.

In the same way, Buddhists do not have any doubt about the Nirvana, despite the perplexities arising from the use of a negative way. Both these realities-God and the Nirvana- belong to the transcendent realm, to the highest aspirations of human yearning. They are totally beyond empirical experience and beyond the rational activity of the human intellect.

### ***The sphere of the Virtue of Heaven at Work***

The *Virtue of Heaven at Work* expresses the transcendent realm of the Chinese cultural tradition. If we look at Chinese antiquity, we will notice that at the time of the *Book of Poetry* and *Book of History*, at the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty, the Chinese believed in a Heavenly Lord (*Shangdi*). He was the God of their line of descendants, and they worshipped him. Then their culture developed, and *Shangdi* became the highest God ruling over all other gods. He was the ruler of heaven and earth; all human beings received life from him, as well as an innate ability to raise themselves up to a higher spiritual plane and to communicate with him. This is precisely the religious world-view that Confucius inherited.

Confucius, however, was not a religious leader. He did not elaborate a theological doctrine based on the *Book of Poetry* and the *Book of History*. However, he believed that the *Virtue of Heaven* itself resided within human nature. Within his purview, human beings discipline themselves through the many and varied hardships they encounter during their lives, and thereby achieve moral maturity. This is how human beings manifest the *Virtue of Heaven* and make the *Virtue of Heaven* active in their daily lives.

From the above, we can surmise that in ancient times China, not unlike India or the West, was filled with a mythological religious yearning for the transcendent. In China, unlike India and the West, this did not develop into a separate organized religion. It developed instead, into the Confucian tradition of thought, concentrated on the *Virtue of Heaven at Work*, manifested or made visible in the moral growth of human beings. According to Tang, it is through moral acts

that the human person enters into communion with his/her most intimate source of life, the moral self. This self is strictly linked to Heaven, and a gift with which Heaven endows the human heart. The more human beings grow strong morally, the more they enter into a communion with the Heaven that is above heaven, earth, and all things. Thus moral acts are for Tang the highest (and the only true) experience by which one can ever reach Heaven.

At the highest level of communion, as in the case of a *saint*, the spirit of the human being and the transcendent Heaven become one without one being external to the other, and without any distance between the two.

### ***Unity of Heaven and the human being***

This ideal is also expressed in the *Unity of Heaven and the Human Being*. Viewed from the human side, we can say that human beings strive to develop their conscience to the utmost, in order to know their innermost Nature, and through the knowledge of their Nature, to know Heaven. Viewed from the side of Heaven, it is *Ming* (the decree of Heaven) which realizes itself in the world, and it is the *Virtue of Heaven* that manifests itself in the moral life of each human person. Human beings, thanks to their moral life, raise themselves to Heaven, know Heaven, and become one with Heaven.

The best we can do is to try to interpret Tang, but it seems safe to say that this becoming *one* should not be understood as a logical *Aristotelian* statement, but as a mystical expression, which is nonetheless true although unfathomable. Becoming one with Heaven means that from morality and through morality, one attains to the trans-ethical yearning, a realm that transcends practical experience and the conclusions of reasoning. In Christianity, this is the realm of the *Divine*. In Buddhism, it is the *Nirvana*. In Chinese traditional thought, it is the Confucian ideal of the *Unity of Heaven with the Human Being*.

### ***Tang's respect for all religions***

In Tang Junyi's viewpoint, both Christianity and Buddhism can be considered great and noble human achievements; but the very fact that Confucianism is placed at the top of the ladder of the various spheres shows a value judgment on his part. As a matter of fact, Tang has always displayed a deep respect for all religions; that is, for all human effort to reach the transcendent realm, and especially for

Christianity and Buddhism. He, however, as a Confucian, believed in human conscience, and considered even the act of faith of a person toward his/her own religion as a decision made by the person in his/her conscience. The act of faith itself, then, is an act of conscience, a moral decision. Consequently, Tang maintains that all saints, no matter what religion they belong to, cannot but resemble one another. In other words, Tang has always considered all religions, even the major religions, as all aiming at the same goal as Confucianism, but through a turn, or detour, making the way unnecessarily longer. The detour made by the Buddhists is the effort to achieve self liberation from illusion. The bypass of the Christians is faith in salvation through Jesus Christ, incarnated on earth in order to reconcile human beings with God/Heaven.

### ***The Christian and the Confucian heaven***

The Christian perceives that the Christian God bears strong similarities to the Confucian Heaven, the source of all things, the eternal, spiritual, almighty Mind that has established the whole cosmic order by granting the energy of life to everything and placing the moral law in human hearts. We can also note that Christians basically adhere to the *Virtue of Heaven at Work*. After all, in the Bible, faith in God and love of God are synonyms with obeying God's commandments. There is undoubtedly a subtle similarity between the Confucian basic theory of Heaven's presence in the human heart through one's conscience ("respectfully heed your pure mind!"), and the Christian ideal of the Kingdom of God. When the faithful heed the voice of God through their conscience, if they follow God's will with a pure mind, the Kingdom is already in their hearts. In other words, God is in them and with them.

### ***The Christian and Confucian life view***

Such very subtle and profound affinities in the Christian and the Confucian life view might explain a puzzling phenomenon: None of the sincere Confucians, who in the last centuries since Ricci's time, converted to Christianity, ever renounced their previous Confucian beliefs. They became Christians without leaving behind their Confucian heritage of beliefs. So, they were both Confucians and Christians. This is true not only of Xu Guangqi, Li Zhizao, Yang Tingyun of old; but also of people like Lu Zhengxiang and Wu Jingxiong in recent times.

A dialogue between Christians and Confucians would inevitably raise a host of thorny issues. In fact, it seems obvious that the Confucian Heaven is quite similar to the Christian God. The Gospel sometimes uses the word Heaven, or Heavens, as a substitute for God. Matteo Ricci at times used it interchangeably with *Tianzhu*. However in the eighteenth century, anyone who used the name Heaven for the Christian God, automatically incurred excommunication (Bulla *Ex Quo Singulari* of 1742).

There are also other serious theological issues, such as original sin vs. Confucian optimism, the eternal fate of non-believers, salvation through grace vs. self-cultivation, the uniqueness of redemption through Christ, and so on. These are all issues needing at least an ecumenical council for their solution. In any case, while a debate on these issues could certainly raise many difficult theological problems, it would also be quite enriching for a deeper understanding of the basic Christian doctrines themselves.■

### ***Faith Newsletter***

The ***Faith*** newsletter, published in Chinese, by the Catholic Church in Hebei Province, began publication on September 1, 1991. It is addressed to clergy and laity throughout China and to others overseas who are interested in reading news about the China Church in China.

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