

Towards a Chinese Theology of the Incarnation

By Umberto Bresciani

Christianity has indeed set down roots in China. They may be fragile and thin, but they represent heroic sacrifice, often to the point of the shedding of blood. And they carry with them the hopes of the Chinese church of the future. We pray that they be spared the fate of the Nestorians of the 8th century, and that of the Franciscans in the Mongolian era of the Middle Ages, both of whom have all but vanished from history.

For a church to grow and mature in foreign soil, it must enter into a profound dialogue with the local culture, coming to grips with its philosophical and religious values. I am of the opinion that Christianity is still in the initial stages of such a dialogue with China. The bold and lightning start made by Matteo Ricci and his companions at the turn of the 16th century eventually gave way to a period of hesitancy, a period characterized by fitful starts and painful setbacks. The Rites Controversy almost brought the entire enterprise to a close. During the Age of Colonialism, few attempts were made at establishing a dialogue; the Western powers were so self absorbed in notions of their own cultural superiority so as to deem such a project unnecessary and irrelevant. Many missionaries, caught up in the attitude of the times, saw their mission primarily as bringing “faith and civilization” to the Chinese. In other words, they brought not only their religious beliefs, but also the entire apparatus of Western science and culture.

There now exists in China an authentic local church, with its own indigenous organization and leadership. This does not, of course, absolve Christians of their duty to make Jesus Christ known to all the Chinese. And while the missionary mandate is firmly in the hands of the local church, foreign Christians can play subsidiary but important roles, each according to his or her individual talents and specific charisms.

Christians, seriously concerned about the task of evangelization, must from time to time review their strategies and redefine priorities. Recently, I have given much thought to an appraisal of the present state of the China-Christian dialogue. And I have asked myself what steps should we now take to insure its future?

A problem of choice

Initiating a dialogue with Chinese culture poses a problem of choice. Chinese culture is far from monolithic. Over the centuries it has absorbed and been enriched by many different schools of thought. And while at present the philosophies of Western Marxism and scientism may seem to the outsider to hold sway, the more traditional schools of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism still exert a powerful influence. Nor can we overlook other factors, such as the presence of China's ancient 'folk religion,' which enjoys widespread popularity.

What complicates the matter even further is the lack of statistics on which to base choices. These are hard to come by in China. What is the number of practicing Buddhists? or Confucianists? or Taoists? All such questions go unanswered. Those who have been around awhile meet this lack of statistical data, while puzzling to the newcomer, with knowing smiles and a shrug of the shoulders.

It must be noted from the start that there are those who would deny the relevance of any dialogue with China's past. Why bother with ancient history, they say? Surely it is enough for Christians to proclaim their belief in Christ Jesus and to preach the Gospel without any reference to the past. Such an attitude is self-deceiving. Jesus Christ is indeed the Son of God, but he is God incarnate ... a real human being. God's way with humankind has been to reveal his invisible self through visible reality. Incarnation means that God has entered human history. His message of salvation has come down to us through the Jewish people, and it has been formulated in concrete terms that they could comprehend and understand. Subsequently, men and women from Palestine to Rome carried the message of the Gospel, where a lengthy dialogue with the

then prevailing Greco-Roman culture was initiated. There are those who claim to believe in a Bible that has come down from heaven in a pure and unadulterated form. The fact of the matter is that the Bible has been given concrete shape and form by the cultures and psychological orientations through which it has traveled. No teaching lives in isolation from its times.

Given the many schools of thought offered by Chinese culture, my own choice of a starting place for the dialogue would be Confucianism.

Given the many schools of thought offered by Chinese culture, my own choice of a starting place for the dialogue would be Confucianism. In this I would be following the lead of most contemporary Chinese scholars, who consider Confucianism as the mainstream philosophy of modern traditional Chinese thought. This is not to ignore or underestimate the impact of Buddhism, but Confucianism still holds primacy of place among the Chinese people. It is true that Confucianism is not held in high esteem on the China mainland today, but the reasons for this are historical. During the early part of the 20th century, those at the forefront of the struggle to topple the old regime targeted Confucianism. Their reaction was primarily emotional. Their rejection of Confucianism, however, did not represent a rejection of the inner core of authentic Confucian teaching, but only the lingering vestiges of an old social order. Confucian values are still very much in evidence among Chinese people and it continues to exert a formative influence on their attitudes and behavior not only on the mainland but in the Chinese everywhere.

Popular folk religion also continues to attract a large following among ordinary people. It is often denigrated as superstitious and money grubbing, but it should not, in my opinion, be dismissed out of hand as being devoid of any genuine spiritual value. Folk religion tends, by its very nature, to be eclectic; and while its style attracts negative criticism, it does draw much of its content from the three major sources of traditional Chinese thought: Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism.

Our Christian churches would have much to gain from an in-depth dialogue with Buddhism. Buddhism, as a philosophy or as a religion, never ceases to fascinate. We can learn much from its wealth of spiritual values. But such a dialogue would have to reach beyond the borders of China itself to include Thailand, Korea, Sri Lanka, and many other Buddhist countries. On the other hand, Confucian values such as worship of ancestors, filial relationships and duties, its conceptualization of heaven, and its ethical and moral teachings are generally more dominant in Chinese society.

Knowledge of Taoism is also important for understanding the Chinese mentality. Philosophical Taoism—the teachings of Chuang-tze and Lao-tse—is well known and admired among educated Chinese. Taoism's influence on Confucian thinkers has been so profound that sometimes it is difficult to draw the line where the one leaves off and the other begins. The scholar Wing Tsit Chan goes so far as to claim that Neo-Confucianism, the school of thought most prevalent in China for the past 1,000 years, is a new philosophy, representing the synthesis of traditional Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. On the other hand, Taoist rituals have traditionally had close ties to popular folk religion, which has brought it into discredit with Chinese intellectuals. In fact, both scholars and the common people alike look down upon the popular religious expressions of Taoism.

While Marxist-Communist thought, often coupled with atheistic scientism, remains a strong force among many modern Chinese, it lies outside the scope of this article. While many Chinese have taken to these “quasi religions,” some with a great deal of enthusiasm, a dialogue with them would differ little from the one already taking place in the Western world. I do assume, however, that just as in Russia, where the demise of Communism revealed the majority of Russians still practicing their Orthodox faith, the masses of Chinese have also held onto their basic traditional beliefs.

I would say that those engaged in evangelization should keep in mind the spectrum of religious orientations in China. But at the same time, they should concentrate on developing an in-depth doctrinal-theological dialogue directly and primarily with

Confucians. More precisely, I would suggest a dialogue with the Neo-Confucianists. Such a dialogue will benefit both sides, increasing the pace of evangelization among the Chinese people while adding many new insights to our own Christian understanding of God, as is to be expected in any true dialogue.

The search for a beginning

Jesus Christ came into the world so that those who believe in him may have eternal life. This is, in a few short words, the sum and substance of the doctrine of the Incarnation. This doctrine took root during the early centuries of the Christian era in the many ancient cultures of the Near East and Europe, with each culture adding its own distinctive coloring to the fundamental teaching. It is to be expected then that a Chinese theology of the Incarnation will also develop along indigenous lines and produce characteristics unique to its own cultural history and traditions.

What directions will a theology of the Incarnation take among the Chinese? My own study of Chinese church history has turned up three fundamental approaches from the past. The first was that taken by Matteo Ricci. He supported the teachings of ancient Chinese thought and criticized the Neo-Confucian teachings of his day. For Ricci, ancient Chinese thought was more compatible with the worldview of the scholastic philosophers of the West. He believed that the ancients were quite correct in holding the “Lord of Heaven” in high esteem, and faulted what he thought to be the basically atheistic thought of the Neo-Confucians that should be repudiated. Ricci's position can be defended in the context of the cultural assumptions of his day, but to repudiate Neo-Confucianism today would be to dismiss the value of a millenium of cultural development. Should we then, opt for the vision of the Chinese sages, seeing in it what the early Fathers of the Church saw in the Greco-Roman philosophies of their time—a valuable preparation for Christian revelation?

Another approach would be to follow the Way of the Tao into the deepest levels of Confucian thought. Following the concept of the Tao would lead us to John's Gospel and its opening Prologue

and the incarnation of the Word. There are Chinese translations of John's Prologue that read: "and the Tao became flesh and dwelt amongst us."

"Tao" in Chinese, however, is a very general term. It would be the task of Chinese theologians to define its specific content and show how it might be used to serve theological purposes. Chinese scholars among themselves speak of the "Tao of the Taoists," distinguishing it from "the Tao of the Buddhists", and which, they explain, differs from "the Tao of the Confucianists." Jean-Francois Fourquest, an 18th century Jesuit missionary, was the first to associate the "Tao" with the "Logos" of John's Gospel. Others following his lead have added ideas taken from the *Tao Teh Ching*, a book so often translated in the West as to lead one to believe it to be more popular among Westerners than it is among the Chinese themselves. Generally speaking, the Chinese mind tends to run along more concrete and practical lines. Even Confucius hesitated to speculate on such abstract issues as the "essence of human nature" or "the way of heaven." It may be said, then, that while this line of thought is compatible with Confucianism and Taoism, and can turn up for the Christian some rich and penetrating insights, as a whole it appeals more to the Western mind than to the Chinese way of thinking.

The third direction the Sino-Western dialogue took began with the Jesuits missionaries of the 17th century. Its focus was on the *Book of Changes*, (*Yi Ching*), and its proponents were called "figurists." These scholars delved deeply into Chinese culture and came to discover, especially in the *Book of Changes*, what they termed to be "figures" that were emblematic of various Biblical characters and Judaic-Christian teachings. Their efforts were admirable, and perhaps their greatest achievement was to draw attention to the *Book of Changes*, which is a radical but often overlooked focal point for Confucian thought. It has served as the basic source of Confucian cosmology and metaphysics for over two thousand years. Unfortunately, these learned scholars, living isolated almost hermit lives in Peking, had little influence since they were virtually ignored by their contemporaries. Nor did their penchant for the peculiar enhance their reputation. They mixed excellent

scholarship with questionable theories from both Biblical and Chinese sources, such as cabalistic interpretations of numbers and preternatural prodigies.

Having reviewed above the three historical approaches to the Sino-Christian cultural dialogue, I would like to propose a fourth. It is one less exploited than the others, but may be more relevant to our present purposes. This is the doctrine of the “moral self” or the teaching of Mencius on “the goodness of human nature.” While there can be no doubt that a study of the Tao and the *Book of Changes* can

I believe a more suitable port of entry for theological dialogue can be found in Confucian ethics, specifically in its notion of the “moral mind,” an ethical concept basic to the Chinese way of life.

offer rich insights, I believe a more suitable port of entry for theological dialogue can be found in Confucian ethics, specifically in its notion of the “moral mind,” an ethical concept basic to the Chinese way of life.

At first sight, the Confucian notion of the “moral mind” seems poles apart from the Christian theological tradition.

1. Confucianists believe that human nature is intrinsically good and perfectible through human efforts; it is in no way “fallen,” nor does it need any help to achieve perfection from the outside.
2. They teach that human beings are endowed by heaven with a moral conscience, have no need for grace or redemption, and, therefore, have no need of an “Incarnation.”
3. Finally, the moral potential of human beings, which is given to them by heaven at birth, is to be realized through their own personal efforts. By doing so, they will achieve their human perfection or “sainthood,” and at the same time contribute their part to the development of a wholesome and harmonious universe. There is no mention here of God's grace or of the Sacraments, or of aspiring to attain eternal life.

But are the Christian and the Confucian points of view radically irreconcilable or do they only seem so on the surface? Is there any possibility for building bridges to join together these two schools of thought? Let me preface my answer with a few remarks concerning not the content but the style of Confucian teaching.

Confucian teaching is composed of direct statements and axioms that are dictated by wisdom and based on the common experience of life. While rich in psychological insights, its style is highly rational; it is made up of truths that are self-evident, readily accessible and immediately comprehensible to the human intellect. This approach is very much in the style of Confucian teaching on the “moral mind.”

On the other hand, we have the doctrine of the “Incarnation,” a religious truth that is also an unfathomable mystery. But can we maintain that the Christian and Confucian positions are poles apart? We can, but only if we also posit that we are one hundred percent certain we have grasped the full meaning of the Incarnation. Since no one dares to make this assertion, we have a road left open to us; namely, a re-examination of the Incarnation from the point of view of the Confucian teaching on the “moral mind.”

A full elaboration of the mystery of the Incarnation is beyond the scope of this article. However, I would like to offer here a few words that might indicate which direction such an investigation might be worth working on.

The time is coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers ... This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel. After that time, says the Lord, *I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.*

Jeremiah 31:31-33

These words of Jeremiah the Prophet need no explanation for Confucianists, for its message has always been a central part of their teaching, i.e. that Heaven has placed his law in the minds and written it in the hearts of all human beings.

Then the king shall say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For *I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink ...*"

Matthew 25:34-36

Jesus' description of the Last Judgment is one of the most beautiful in St. Matthew's Gospel. The sentiments expressed would have struck a sympathetic chord with Mencius who taught that human nature is basically good and this concept is in fact fundamental to the whole of Confucian tradition. There is in all of us an innate urge to do good, especially when we see someone in need. To see a human being hungry elicits in us the desire to alleviate his hunger, if thirsty to assuage her thirst. Those who are faithful to these impulses and act upon them are "saved." Mencius does not speak of "salvation," but rather of being "on the side of Heaven," of "fulfilling ones nature," in effect, of attaining authenticity as a person.

I say emphatically that anyone who listens to my message and believes in God who sent me has eternal life, and will never be damned for his sins, *but has already passed from death to life.*

John 5:24

In the language of the New Testament, to believe means to do God's will, to do good. Those who believe already have eternal life; by rejecting evil and choosing the good, they have moved from darkness into light from death to life. The whole purpose of Jesus' coming is to effect a change in the minds and hearts of human beings. The call of John the Baptist and of Jesus was a call to repentance ... a mending of one's ways and a turning of one's life

around, and baptism was the outward sign of this inner transformation.

Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Mathew 6:9

The Chinese believe that Heaven is benevolent, the source of life, and all that we possess. Christianity brings new life to these ancient notions, strengthening them and rooting them in concrete reality, especially in the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. Through the Our Father, people are brought into a relationship of intimacy with this benevolent, ageless Presence, with the Lord of Heaven, who sits upon a throne high above the clouds, watching over the teeming masses of humanity below as a father watches over his children with tender concern and loving care.

Your kingdom come... Matthew 6:10

The theme of the "Kingdom of Heaven" is very rich in the New Testament, which develops along many lines and on many different levels. According to Matthew's Gospel, the whole purpose of Jesus' coming is to establish the "Kingdom of Heaven."

While at first glance, it might seem far-fetched to connect the concept of "the Kingdom" with anything in the Confucian tradition. However, if we search below the surface of Confucian poetic imagery for the inner meaning behind the outward symbols, we may come to discover some striking similarities. To take one example, St. Paul defines "the Kingdom" in these terms: "The kingdom of God is neither food nor drink, but *righteousness*, peace, and happiness in the Holy Spirit." (Romans 14:17) Allowing for different nuances of meaning between Paul's concept of righteousness and that of Mencius, both are key words in articulating each other's ethical systems.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that *whoever believes in him* should not perish, but *have eternal life*.

John 3:16

Eternal life is a concept quite alien to Confucianism. Confucius used to say: "When you do not know about life, how can you know about death?" (Analects XI 11) One should consider with care, however, the real meaning of "eternal life" in the New Testament. While not excluding the otherworld dimension, the core concept of "eternal life" might have an additional meaning, especially as the term is used in the Gospel of John. When John writes,

And this is eternal life, that they may know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

John 17: 3

is he not trying out a definition of "eternal life" as "knowledge of God and Jesus Christ"? In Johanne vocabulary the word "knowledge" has a very specific meaning:

Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. Whoever says "I have come to know him," "but does not obey his commandments, is a liar..."

(I John 2:3-4)

Here again we discover that the focal point of a fundamental Christian concept, i.e., that of "eternal life," is to be understood as a wholehearted and dynamic commitment to ethical values. This is not far removed from the Confucian view of life, which insists on a life program (*shih chien*).

The Easter Message

Nowhere is the meaning of salvation history presented in such length and clarity than in the liturgy of Holy Week and Easter. The key word is "passover." The Passover is an ancient feast still celebrated by the Jewish people to commemorate their "passing over" from bondage into freedom, from a state of slavery in Egypt to liberation in the Promised Land. For Christians, this has become the sign and symbol of their own passage from the slavery of sin into the freedom of sons and daughters in the Kingdom of God. This passage

took place in history with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those who believe in the message of Jesus and are baptized, pass over from a state of sin to salvation, from darkness into light, from death into new life.

It seems obvious that the one purpose of Jesus was to bring people from evil to goodness, to free them from their sins, and lead them to a new life of freedom. The writings of the New Testament and the earliest Christian tracts, such as the *Didache* and the *Epistles of Ignatius of Antioch* testify to this. Both insist on putting emphasis on the duality of life “before and after” baptism: the passage from “death to life,” from “darkness to light,” from “old to new.” In doing so, they made it quite clear that the spiritual experience of those early converts to Christianity demanded a radical change of behavior, and to walk in a new way of life.

Similarities in the above doctrines can be found in the teachings of Confucius. Confucian notions of setting the heart right, making amends for mistakes, renewing oneself on a daily basis, developing one’s moral sensibilities, realizing one’s moral potential, and striving for the highest good, all indicate that Confucian teaching and Christian doctrine seem to be pointing us in the same direction.

Seen in this light and put in the above terms, the purpose of Jesus’ coming to this earth, the meaning of the Incarnation, would not seem far fetched to the Confucian scholar, nor so alien to his own teaching. A devout Confucian could easily come to agree with the devout Christian that the teaching of Christ and the “teaching of the Sage,” as Confucius is sometimes called in China, wonderfully agree, and that Christianity brings to wholeness the “Doctrine of the Sages.”

The literati, who were among the very first converts to Christianity during the time of Ricci and his companions, were aware of this. In his writings, we find Hsu Kuang-ch’i (1562- 1633) saying that he embraced Christianity because it provided “a supplement to Confucianism and a replacement for Buddhism.” He went on to add that it led a person “to do away with idols and to fulfill the law of the scholar-mandarin.”

Pursuing this line of thought a little further, we might say that Confucius speaks in literal terms while Christianity speaks in the

language of symbols. We know that Jesus himself was fond of using similes, metaphors and parables to convey his message. Perhaps we might go one step further, and say that the history of salvation is one great panorama of signs and symbols that God uses to convey his message of salvation to all human beings.

Confucianism is a human doctrine, a philosophy. Perhaps we can state that religion speaks in poetry whereas philosophy speaks in prose. But do not both have truth as their object? It well might be that once we apprehend truth directly, we would have no more need for symbols. But for the present, as long as human beings are earthbound, we will continue to learn by way of symbols, by way of concrete and visible signs. For the present, symbols are indispensable means whereby we reach out to apprehend the truths we live by. So it has been in the past, so it is now and so it shall be in the future. It is also an undeniable fact that not only children, but adults as well learn better through the language of symbols, poetry and fiction than through plain talk. This is the reason why more novels are read than doctoral dissertations, and cinemas are more crowded than lecture halls. This is also a reason why religious ritual has a more profound effect on human beings than abstract sermons do. This is how God has created us, and this is the way God has planned the history of salvation including this story's most central episode: the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. The world needs both philosophy and religion; and it needs Confucianism and Christianity, that the complementary nature of both may enrich the common human experience.

Perhaps someone in the near future, who attempts to develop a Christology along Confucian lines, might possibly move this way: all human beings are called to actualize their true nature; all are called to become "saints" like Yao and Shun, the ancient model of the sages. The ultimate Confucian ideal is to become "one with Heaven." Besides, every human being is endowed by Heaven with a moral mind and is, in some way, a "Child of Heaven." Jesus, the Holy One of God, is already a "saint" who has taken on our human nature, and who has realized his "moral self" to its utmost capacity. What then are the basic differences between Jesus the Christ who states that he himself is Heaven, and human beings in some way "children of heaven"? Certainly, Jesus Christ shares our humanity,

becoming like us in every way but sin. In Confucian terms, he is a true son of heaven, who, in the development of his moral nature, drew ever closer to the Supreme Ideal, until he finally arrived at a place unique to all others, entering into a state of becoming "one with Heaven." Has Christ not achieved the highest place among all human beings in Heaven? On the other hand, what does John mean when he says: "If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does what is right has been born of him." (1 John 2:29)

Under this and similar perspectives, I trust that the Christian message will be understood, appreciated and accepted by the intellectuals of China, and subsequently by all the Chinese.

While finishing this paper, I came across the work of Wu Min-chieh, *Points of Contact between Christianity and Chinese Culture*, (Transl by Rev. Graig Moran, Hong Kong, Taosheng Publishing House, 1990), p. 113. He is of the same mind as I and has written on the subject before me. I can find no more fitting way to bring this article to a close than by quoting him: "The study of the concept of mind ... is a necessary first step in the development of a Chinese theology."