

A Christian Hermeneutical Approach to the Texts of Confucianism and Taoism

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Christian hermeneutical approach to the texts of Confucianism

The Confucian tradition is not considered to be a religion. It is rather a philosophy of life and hence, it is much more easily appropriated by people of different religious persuasions, much as Plato and Aristotle were appropriated by Western Christianity. If one understands hermeneutics as an intelligent reading of a text out of which some meanings can be derived, there are two important factors: the text to be read and the reader of it. This section will concentrate more on how readers, with both Christian and Confucian mentalities, approach the Chinese classics to draw meanings in consonance with the Bible.

Text and reader

A text never stands alone in black and white without a context. In the case of the Bible, the context refers to a complex of living realities that point to a community of faith with its history and culture. Anyone today who wants to do an intelligent reading of a biblical text has to take into account, for example, the Western Asian cultures in which the Old Testament was born, and the Mediterranean cultures in which the New Testament came into existence.

Furthermore, one cannot read any text intelligently without bearing in mind his or her own existential situation arising out of history and culture. An intelligent reading is a fusion of two horizons: the text with its context, and the reader with his or her existential situation.

In this context one may distinguish two types of Christian Confucian readers. The first is the one who reads the Bible against the background of the Chinese classics that throughout history have shaped a more or less homogeneous Confucian way of thinking. The second is the one who delves into the Confucian text, with the Christian mentality, so as to find those values and meanings in harmony with the life-truths taught by the Bible. It is the second type that will be further explored here.

The Bible and the Confucian classics

With regard to the relationship of the Bible and the Confucian classics, there are four parallels or similarities that are worth focusing on.

1. The process of canonization of the books. While the Christian community felt a need to officially determine which books are in fact inspired and belong to the Christian canon, Confucian scholars did not feel this need. However, over the years they have come to unanimously regard the *Four Books and Five Scriptures* as their constant points of reference.

2. The way of reasoning. Often in the Chinese classics the understanding of self requires some presuppositions coming from an understanding of the “others” or “the Other,” be this God or Heaven. In turn, the understanding of Heaven also requires an understanding of the self and others. In this regard, there is a certain similarity between the biblical world and that of Confucius.

3. Application of meanings to life. This is essential to Chinese wisdom. Any search for truth which does not end up with an application to daily life has not yet reached the stage of wisdom. This aspect has much in common with the Biblical approach, especially in the Wisdom literature.

4. The “surplus” meanings of a text. In regard to Sacred Scripture one uses the term *sensus plenior* or “spiritual meaning.” As one studies a biblical text, it is possible to draw meanings that are beyond, but without contradicting, the intention of the writer, or the understanding of the believing community of a certain time and space. This is the so-called “surplus” meaning which, however, is not intended to distort the “literal” meaning but rather to complement it in a “fuller sense” (*sensus plenior*). The same is true for the study of the Confucian text. Therefore, a Christian (whose

background is the biblical world) can draw “surplus” meanings from a Confucian text, which a Confucian may never have thought of, without usurping the Confucian text for purposes foreign to the text. The same would be true for a non-Christian reader (from the Confucian world) who reads the Bible.

Interplay between grace and nature

Similar ways of searching for the “surplus” meanings have already long been practiced in the Church. We recall that the Greek Gnostic reading of the Bible by way of allegory was adopted by the Alexandrians in the early Patristic period. The Benedictine tradition of *lectio divina* did the same thing in the Middle Ages. The monks in general had little access to the biblical text in the original languages, nor did they have any historical-critical tools for understanding the context. They did have the Greek-Latin training of the seven liberal arts and classical authors. In a marvelous way they drew spiritual meanings enriching the life of the Church. St. Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* is an example of this.

In the Scholastic tradition scholars did the same thing reading the texts with the eyes of philosophers (such as Aristotle) so as to draw new meanings from the Bible. This common practice found a good expression in St. Thomas Aquinas: “Grace does not take away nature, but rather perfects it” (“*cum gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit eam*”).

Vatican II focused on historicity. The Christ-event is historical and has been understood, preached and written down in a historical process. Since the event in question is grace-filled and can never be imprisoned in a particular version (be it inspired), any sincere reader, by reading the inspired text about the grace-filled event, can always grasp new meanings that have never been expressed deeply enough.

Hence, Vatican II was aware that “new avenues to truth are opened up,” and “it is possible to create in every country the possibility of expressing the message of Christ in suitable terms and to foster vital contact and exchange between the Church and different cultures” (GS 44). It is along this line that we believe that the fusion of the Confucian and biblical worlds through a proper approach to texts of both kinds can give rise to a new and fruitful understanding of the life-truths.

Confucian sensibilities

Before turning to the fruitfulness of the fusion mentioned above, it is good to describe, without being exhaustive, some major sensibilities common to Confucians who find themselves facing a text. Through these sensibilities the literal meaning of the text may be more securely approached and distortions avoided. These sensibilities should not be taken as single and isolated approaches, for they are so interwoven that one leads into another.

A sense of morality

Putting oneself in the proper relationship to others (king, parents, children, friends), and doing what is right, are essential to Confucian morality. The norms are in some way pre-established by Heavenly Truth (*tien li*), which, though innate in everyone, is not easily understood or articulated by the ordinary people. However, through the daily practice of what is dictated by one's conscience, one can realize these norms in a more explicit way. Moral experience is a human way of travelling by which one can reach the Heavenly Way (*tien tao*). Truths, especially those of the Transcendent, can be attained from moral experiences. The direction of coming to know is from below upwards. If a text is worth serious reading at all, it is because it has to do with the Way. "If I learn the Way in the morning, then I am ready to die in the evening."

The sense of knowing and doing

To separate knowing from doing, or vice-versa, is inconceivable for an authentic Confucian. Acquisition of knowledge aims at realizing something important in one's life. Knowing gives the guideline for doing; whereas doing confirms the truth of what comes to be known. To pronounce principles for life, without putting them into practice first, is to miss the entire sense of the search for truth. A strong interconnectedness between knowing and doing is often found in Chinese literature.

Sense of the concrete

Ordinary people do not like building up systems of truths into a philosophical structure, or spending time on abstract speculation. If a Confucian has to accept certain truths at all, it is

primarily because those truths touch concrete life. Images, stories, parables, and dialogues are often used to convey principles of life.

Sense of the whole

“Systems of truths or values” are not easily assumed. One tries to accommodate every type of truth. Hence, boundaries become vague and flexible. Often no exclusivist position is found. Ambiguity of words is almost intended. As a matter of fact, the Chinese classics leave much room and liberty for various interpretations, because truth cannot be imprisoned in abstract, stagnant concepts and words. Words are meant to accommodate different values of life, so that life may find Wholeness by embracing whatever is said to be true of life. Truths are in need of words for transmission, but the same truths must be freed from words for the sake of understanding the whole. It is taken for granted that the Whole should contain what is negative (*Yin*) and positive (*Yang*). Only in the fusion and complementarity of the contrasting poles can one find the safe path, or the “middle way,” to the Whole.

Sense of integrating one’s subjective feeling

Aware that ambiguity could lead to mere personal feeling and complete subjectivity or relativism, a Confucian has certain devices to keep oneself from falling into harmful subjectivism. The first and foremost is to measure the understanding of a text against one’s own moral conscience. This measure is to safeguard the validity and universality of the doing, for example, “Don’t do unto others what you don’t want others to do unto you.” It naturally follows that one should avoid drawing any meaning from a text which could be harmful to the self and others. The common good and personal wholeness must be taken into account.

Sense of awaiting and instantaneous enlightenment

Conscious of the fact that human learning needs time and patience, a Confucian should not rush to a hasty conclusion. As for the truths of Heaven, or the Transcendent, one may not easily find sure ground. It would be better for one to keep silent and wait, rather than to make wild statements which are of no avail. This does not mean that one should abandon the search for the Transcendent,

rather one should start from what is more basic and sure within the reach of one's experience. The desire for the Whole does not allow one to miss the truth of Heaven.

As for the truths of daily life, one should make strenuous effort, since they are within one's reach. The hardships and sufferings of the world are such that one may be tempted to think that less freedom would be a worthwhile sacrifice to avoid pain. Yet, this is not the case for an authentic Confucian. The search for truth is such that one has a cost to pay. Truth is no "free lunch." The very worth of the human consists, according to the Confucian sensibility, in gaining something true, beautiful and good for oneself through one's freedom and effort. A Confucian can never tolerate being given anything without one's consent, or by putting one's dignity in jeopardy. Patience and perseverance, among other factors, are the indispensable cost: "If you don't get through the cold of the snow and the chill of the wind, you won't get the fragrance of the plum blossom."

It is a common belief that in one's sincere and hard search "understanding" (fragrance) will come all of a sudden, with great surprise and reward. This is what the Japanese Zen tradition calls *satori*, the instantaneous enlightenment by shock. Truth, especially that of the Transcendent, is not to be obtained according to one's own plan and programs. Truth, as it were, has its own pace and its own time to reveal itself to the searcher. All this implies that, despite all the human effort and cost, truth still comes as a free gift.

Some examples

The examples given below exemplify how a Christian, who has developed Confucian sensibilities, might delve into the Chinese classical texts and find surplus meanings in harmony with the Bible. The texts are chosen from the Four Books. These examples are clear enough to serve the purpose, though no in-depth reading is attempted.

The Great Learning

In the first few sentences of *The Great Learning* one finds "the way of great learning consists in brightening up our luminous nature, in being kind to people, in not ceasing to do so until one arrives at the supreme good."

“In brightening up the luminous nature” indicates that our nature is good, right at the outset, but we need to remove all the possible dirt that could darken it. It could also be understood that we should make an effort to let our virtues shine before others. The two readings are not mutually exclusive though their focus varies. They both refer to the fact that every one has to take care of his or her own moral growth.

“In being kind to people” refers to the attitude that we need to assume in our dealings with others. There is also another reading, which says “in renewing people.” The renewal starts from the self but does not cease at the self. In the epigraph on a bathing basin of the Tang Emperor Dynasty it is written: “Renew yourself, doing it everyday, again and again.” The renewal should go from self to others. These two senses can be put together to mean that one should be kind to people out of one’s heart, and only by doing this is one in a position to renew others. This, by way of resonance, recalls the Lord’s saying, “I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:34).

“In not ceasing to do so until one arrives at the Supreme Good.” The Supreme Good bestows a sense of the Transcendent, towards which everyone is to strive. The emphasis, however, is not only centered on the Transcendent, but also on the journey of Great Learning, which is intended to be an unceasing effort on our part.

The Middle Way

Here again, one finds a synthesis of life-principles right from the first sentences. “Nature is given to humans as mission by Heaven. To live in full what nature commands as mission is the Way. The construction of this Way is teaching.”

The Chinese expression *tien ming* could mean the life or mission from Heaven. It coincides with the biblical teaching that human life is a gift, and at the same time a calling to a certain mission. The mission is nothing other than to live up to the standard of human nature. This is the Way. Again, by way of resonance, we recall the saying of John Paul II who summarizes the biblical teachings on the mission of the Church, saying: “The human is the way of the Church” (*Redemptor Hominis*).

The typical reasoning of the Confucian mentality is verified here. When one tries to ascertain the way of self-realization, one

needs to derive it from “Heaven” and “others.” The same is true for talking about Heaven. One needs to derive truths by starting from the self and others. They are interrelated.

The Confucian Analects

The very first three sentences point out the strict connection between self, others and Heaven:

“What a delight while learning and revising!” This is obviously concerned with self-realization.

“What a joy when friends come from afar!” Here friends indicate the relationship with other people.

“I won’t be frustrated if I am not known by people. Such is the behavior of a just man”. Here one finds a remedy for frustration. If this is read with another sentence: “Who knows me is Heaven.” One comes to the realization that the impressions of other people about oneself carry no weight at all. What counts is the acknowledgement from Heaven.

Mencius

At the outset this text records a dialogue. The chief of state asks, “Master, you come from thousands of miles away. What profit are you going to bring to us?” The Master replies, “Why should Your Majesty talk about profit? There is also the virtue of being kind (*jen*) and just (*yi*).”

More often than not it happens to us that in life we give preference to profit, while forgetting the virtue of being kind and just. It is only this double virtue, not the profit, that gives rise to human worth. It is not easy to find an exact translation of *jen* and *yi*. They are, according to some scholars, not far from the senses of Hebrew *hesed* (compassionate) and *emet* (upright).

The ideal of a just man is well expressed in the saying: “I prefer being killed to losing *jen*. I will sacrifice my life for *yi*.” Again, by way of resonance one can recall the wonderful words of St John: “The Word is made flesh; he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace (Gk *charis*, Hb *hesed*) and truth (Gk *aletheia*, Hb ‘*emet*).” In the ultimate analysis the Gospel affirms also that Jesus is the one

who fulfils the ideal of a just man, on the cross, for he prefers being killed to losing *jen* and sacrifices his life for *yi*.

Conclusion: openness and balance

The search for the “surplus” meanings of a text in any intelligent reading is justified, provided that these meanings are harmonized with each other. Neither a Christian nor a Confucian would have any difficulty in admitting this. This creative openness allows the fusion of two horizons: the Confucian and the Christian, in such a way that the “surplus” meanings found in texts, Confucian or Christian, may be mutually enriching and enlightening. Of course, it is tacitly assumed that the same God speaks in both texts, though in different manners.

This kind of openness is not without its weaknesses and limitations. It readily lends itself to fanciful and forced interpretations. A balance must be kept in this kind of hermeneutics. To achieve this, both the Confucian sensibilities and the Christian traditions should be taken into account. One can ask: Do these surplus meanings accord with Confucian sensibilities and the Christian tradition?

Were Confucius alive today with his eagerness to learn all the time, he would be most open-minded to all kinds of theologies, East and West. At the same time, with his sound judgment, he would also know how to keep the necessary balance.

A Christian hermeneutical approach to the texts of Taoism

Basic text of Taoism

Both philosophical Taoism and religious Taoism take their inspiration from the same basic text and author *Tao-te-ching*, written during the Spring-Autumn Period in Chinese history (722-431 B.C.E.) by Lao Tzu, an older contemporary of Confucius. In addition to the text of Lao Tzu, Taoist philosophy also relied heavily on the writings of Chuang Tzu, that are normally assigned to the Warring States Period (403-221 B.C.E.)

Taoistic sensibilities

The way of presenting the Transcendent in Taoism has a great similarity to the apophatic mode of thinking. The best way of

expressing the Transcendent is just to let the Transcendent be entirely free from any possible imprisonment in a word. Hence, a term for the Transcendent makes sense only if it indicates how ineffable the Transcendent is.

One should not forget that Taoist philosophy is very much in consonance with the thought of Chuang Tzu, who projects the “aspiration for freedom” in an esoteric but attractive way. There lives a spirit-man in the mountains of a remote island who “does not eat the five grains but sucks in the wind and drinks the dew. He rides the vapor of the clouds, yokes flying dragons to his chariot, and roams beyond the four seas” (Chuang Tzu: Chapter 1, *The Inner Chapters*). It is in this freedom that one takes great delight. It becomes dreams that attract many who want to shed the burden of life.

Not unrelated to life, the attempt of approaching the Ineffable is to struggle with the way of expressing the Transcendent-Immanent. The fact that *Tao-te-ching* insistently presents Tao (principle) as nameless, incomprehensible and unspeakable, reveals a certain spirituality of life. It is advisable for one to adopt a life of silence, simplicity, non-violence, self-emptying and non-action. It is only in submitting oneself to whatever comes from Nature that one can experience the Ineffable, which, paradoxically, is so near to life in its non-active receptivity, and yet so far in the active attempt of grasping it. This is the way Lao Tzu presents it: “Reach emptiness to its ultimate, abide in genuine tranquillity. Ten thousand things rise together; I am to contemplate (*kuan*) their return. Now things flourish; each returns to its root. To return to the root is tranquillity; it means to recover life. To recover life is constancy; to know constancy is enlightenment” (chap. 16).

One might be easily tempted to think that all the apophatic thinking, dreaming of an esoteric freedom and adopting a life of non-action, has very little space for positive thinking. It is not the case. There is also another sensibility common both to Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, namely, to search for wisdom from the foolish, to obtain the noble from the lowly, to take notice of the unnoticed, to find usefulness from uselessness. It indeed requires a lot of intelligence and thinking to get the positive from the negative.

Examples

Having assimilated the sensibilities of Taoism, the Christian can apply them in fruitful ways. In the following case, a Christian who has developed these sensibilities is able to first grasp more precisely the meaning of the *Tao-te-Ching*, then to compare its concepts of transcendence and wisdom with the biblical concept of God and of Wisdom, and thus draw surplus meanings for both.

The concepts of *Tao*, *Wu*, *Yu*, and *Te*

The Chinese character for *tao* consists of two elements: one means “head” and the other “to run.” It means “that on which someone goes”: a path or road, then extended to mean method, norm and principle. While in Confucianism *tao* is employed to signify the way of heaven or of humans, in Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu *tao* acquires a metaphysical meaning. *Tao* is the ultimate reality, as well as the first principle underlying form, substance, being and change. The assumption is made that for the universe to have come into being, there must exist an all-embracing first principle that is called *tao* (see Chap. 25 of *Tao-te-Ching*).

Paradoxically, the nameless *tao* is designated as *wu* (non-being) as well as *yu* (being). The concepts of *wu* and *yu* are basic in Lao Tzu’s thought. As the origin of heaven and earth, *wu* is not nothingness or emptiness in a purely negative sense. Being the first principle of all things, *tao* cannot be a “thing” in the way that heaven and earth and the “ten thousand things” are things. Inasmuch as it is devoid of form and limitation and is not an object or thing, *tao* is *wu*. Inasmuch as it is what has brought the universe into being, *tao* is *yu*. *Wu* and *yu*, non-being and being, are the two sides of the same coin: *yu* is the manifestation of *tao* viewed as *wu*.

Tao is called “mystery” or “mystery upon mystery” (Chap. 1), which is at once transcendent and immanent. The transcendent character of *tao* can be seen in the description given in chapter 25 of *Tao-te-ching*:

There was a thing, formless yet complete in itself, born prior to heaven and earth. Silent! Empty! Existing by itself, it remains unchanging. Pervading everywhere, it is inexhaustible. One may think of it as the mother of all beneath heaven. We do not know its name, but we term it *tao*.

To express the immanent aspect of *tao*, Lao Tzu employs the term *te* (virtue or power) which is presented in the second half of *Tao-te-ching*. *Te* is *tao* “dwelling” in objects, that is, *te* is what individual objects obtain from *tao*, and thereby become what they are. *Te* is described as a mother nurturing all things: “It is *tao* that gives them life. It is *te* that nurses them, grows them, fosters them, shelters them, comforts them, and covers them under her wings” (Chap. 51). Thus *te* manifests the immanent, “feminine” aspect of *tao*.

From *Tao* to the Christian God

This way of presenting *tao* as “nameless” or *wu* helps us appreciate the apophatic tradition in Christian theology, which describes God as silent, hidden, incomprehensible. Inasmuch as God is beyond all knowledge, God is nameless; inasmuch as God is beyond all being, God is *wu*. As an heir to this tradition, Thomas Aquinas came to the conclusion that the highest human knowledge of God is the recognition that we do not know God (*De Pot.* Q.7, a.5).

Like *Tao*, the Christian God is immanent as well as transcendent. God who dwells “in unapproachable light” (1 Tim 6:16) is also, in the words of St. Augustine, “nearer to me than myself.” While all three divine persons are transcendent-immanent to the world, each one bears this character in a distinct manner. The Father remains the hidden source and transcendent ground of the Godhead, even in immanence. The Son, while remaining in the hidden ground of the Father, is God’s self-communication in creation and in the history of salvation. The Holy Spirit is the inner bond of love uniting the Father and the Son, as well as their Breath that permeates and animates all things. The Spirit is like the maternal (*te*) of God, that shelters, nurtures, and transforms all human beings and the entire creation, though in Taoism the personal nature of God is not clear, nor is the concept of creation.

Wisdom in Taoistic books and bible

Taoistic enlightenment and its ways

Although Lao Tzu explores the meaning of *tao*, his chief concern is for humans and their way of life, both as individuals and

in society. He designates an ideal person a sage or true person. While Lao Tzu teaches that everyone can and should strive to become a sage, he presents the sage especially as the ideal ruler of a state.

Since one and the same *tao* is inherent in all things, permeating heaven, earth and humans, Lao Tzu perceives unity between human beings and nature, and even envisages an exact correspondence between the microcosm of a human being and the macrocosm of the outer world. Moreover, Lao Tzu describes certain general principles of *tao* running through the phenomenal changes of the universe, which may be called “invariables.” The ability to know these constant laws is called “enlightenment”: “to know constancy is enlightenment” (Chap. 16). The true sage is one who is able to perceive the invariable way of *tao* as manifested in nature and to follow accordingly.

a) “Non-action” (*wu-wei*) is the first invariable way or law of *tao*: “*Tao* invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone” (Chap. 37). Non-action means that *tao* does not actively intervene but allows things to follow their natural courses. Spontaneity is the hallmark of *tao*: “humans follow earth; earth follows heaven; heaven follows *tao*; *tao* follows its nature (*tzu-jan*)” (Chap. 25). Consequently, the sage must follow *tao* in cultivating non-action as a way of life. Non-action should not be taken to mean doing nothing. It actually means a quiet surrender to the ways of *tao* by respecting the natural course inherent in things, without making violent or unnecessary interferences. Non-action is characterized by the sage's having no thought of self, that is, being unconcerned with personal interest (Chap. 7). Non-action also implies taciturnity and detachment from one's own achievement. Lao Tzu recommends non-action above all as the essential quality of an ideal ruler who must conduct a rule of *wu-wei*, interfering with the people as little as possible, and allowing them ample scope for self-development. He is convinced that “acting by non-action, nothing will not be governed well” (Chap. 3).

b) Closely related to the idea of non-action is the pair “reversal” and “weakness.” Weakness is the function of *tao*. The movement of *tao* is not linear but circular. There are things that, apparently opposite, are in reality relative and complementary to

one another, e.g., difficult and easy, long and short, high and low, front and back (Chap. 2). Paradoxically, great things often resemble their opposites (cf. Chap.41). Moreover, the reversal in the movement of *tao* is reflected in the changing phenomena of the world: “Bad fortune is what good fortune depends on; good fortune is what bad fortune hides in” (Chap. 58). *Tao’s* law of reversal tends to balance uneven situations: “Is not the way of heaven like the stretching of a bow? What is high is brought down, and what is low is raised up. So, too, from those who have too much, *tao* takes away, and those who are deficient, it augments” (Chap. 77).

Since phenomenal change is governed by the law of reversal, the sage, enlightened by this law, must act in a manner opposite to what he wishes to achieve, for “he who grudges expense pays dearest in the end; he who has hoarded most will suffer the heaviest loss” (Chap. 44). “The sage, putting himself in the background, is always to the fore. Remaining outside, he is always there. Is it not just because he does not strive for any personal end that all his personal ends are fulfilled?” (Chap. 7). Likewise, “just because he never at any time makes a show of greatness, he, in fact, achieves greatness” (Chap.34). Knowing that anything that goes to one extreme must swing to its opposite, “the sage discards the excessive, the extravagant, the extreme” (Chap. 29) The sage knows when to stop, and when to withdraw: “holding (a cup) until it overflows is not as good as stopping in time... When your work is done, then withdraw. That is the way of heaven” (Chap. 9).

c) “Weakness” is closely linked to the previous two: non-action and reversal. The opposite of the weak is the strong. In the world everyone wants to be strong. Few people understand that strength and power are perilous: “hardness and rigidity are associated with death. Softness and weakness are associated with life. Powerful weapons will not win; massive trees will be cut down” (Chap. 76). The weakness recommended by Lao Tzu is not an end in itself, but a means that leads to real strength. What is at issue here is a weakness that overcomes strength: “The soft and the weak win over the hard and the strong” (Chap. 36). Lao Tzu evokes the image of water: “Nothing under heaven is softer or more yielding than water, but when it attacks things hard and resistant, there is nothing superior to it” (Chap.78). Real strength means inner

strength, achieved through practicing the weakness recommended by Lao Tzu. "One who overcomes himself is strong" (Chap.33).

d) Weakness is related to the fourth invariable of Tao: "simplicity." Lao Tzu contemplates an original state of innocence in which Tao is simply embraced. He considers the setting up of moral codes and human institutions as an artifice that follows upon our failing away from the original state (Chap. 18). Hence, Lao Tzu advocates a return to primal simplicity by discarding knowledge and reducing desires (Chap. 19). On account of our present perversion, this return to simplicity requires cultivation. Lao Tzu employs the images of an infant and an uncarved block to describe simplicity. Since the child's knowledge and desires are very simple, Lao Tzu often compares a person who has cultivated himself to a little child (cf. Chap. 20, 28, 55). Similarly, Lao Tzu uses the word *p'u* (uncarved block) to indicate the state of simplicity in which desires are restrained.

In consonance with the biblical wisdom

Non-action, reversal, weakness and simplicity find ample parallels in the Biblical teachings. The following instances or figures in the Old Testament illustrate these parallels:

a) Job is a biblical figure revealing wisdom as "non-action." Job was unable to reconcile his suffering with his sense of his own innocence. Later, he realized that God is beyond every understanding, and what man can do is simply to let God be God. "I know that you are all powerful: what you conceive, you can perform. I am the man who obscured your designs with my empty-headed words. I have been holding forth on matters I cannot understand, on marvels beyond me and my knowledge. I knew you only by hearsay; but now, having seen you with my own eyes, I retract all I have said, and in dust and ashes I repent" (Job 42:2-3, 5-6). In suffering Job was enlightened by God to grasp that non-action is the best way to let God accomplish in us his great designs.

b) Jeremiah provides an example of wisdom as "reversal." In his prophetic role he fell into despair and started to make complaints against God, "Why is my suffering continual, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Do you (Lord) mean to be

for me a deceptive stream with inconstant waters?” Then the Lord replied, “If you come back, I will take you back into my service”(Jer 15:18-19). There is a play on the Hebrew word *shub* (turn and return): “If you turn to me, then I’ll let you return.” In carrying out the service given by God, the prophet Jeremiah is constantly hesitating between his own will and God’s will. The solution for the prophet is to will what God wills.

c) Judith illustrates the wisdom of “weakness.” As a Jewish woman, Judith is fragile and weak before men. In an unexpected way, however, she became the instrument of God, and succeeded in killing the powerful General Holofernes. God used the weak to defeat the strong. The Jews were thus delivered from the Assyrians. In the prayer of Judith there lies a deep conviction: “Your (the Lord’s) strength does not lie in numbers, nor your might in violent men; since you are the God of the humble, the help of the oppressed, the support of the weak ...”(Judges 9:11). Thus, God not only upholds the weak, but, like the *tao*, has chosen weakness and apparent foolishness as the way of saving the world.

d) David is an example of the wisdom of “simplicity.” In his battle with the Philistine Goliath the Bible describes David as “a young boy of fresh complexion and pleasant bearing.” He prefers five stones, a sling and a staff to the heavy helmet, breastplate and the big sword of Saul. He comes out all alone to face and kill the giant Goliath. The appearance and the weapons of this young boy symbolize the power of simplicity. At a deeper level, there is the simplicity of the young David’s faith in God: “Yahweh, who rescued me from the claws of lion and bear, will rescue me from the power of this Philistine” (1 Sam 17:37).

The Paradox of the Cross

In many ways Chinese wisdom is in consonance with biblical wisdom. However, any Christian reading of a non-Christian text has among its aims, whether explicit or implicit, to answer more deeply the question: What kind of wisdom is, then, found in the historical event of Christ? The early Christians, through their living encounter with the Risen Christ, began to answer this question. They realized that the entire Old Testament is pointing to

Christ. There are OT instances and figures whose full meaning can only be grasped in Christ and his Body (the Church), a reading which Jews then would not recognize. Today, when we Christians read a classical Chinese text, we pose the same queries: Why Christ? Of what value are other types of wisdom? Especially, how do these types of wisdom relate to the wisdom of the Cross?

“The true key-point,” as John Paul II puts it, “which challenges every philosophy, is Jesus Christ’s death on the Cross.... The wisdom of the wise is no longer enough for what God wants to accomplish. What is required is a decisive step towards welcoming something radically new: ‘God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise ... ; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are’ (1 Cor 1:27-28).” Again, he notes: “The preaching of Christ crucified and risen is the reef upon which the link between faith and philosophy can break up, but it is also the reef beyond which the two can set forth upon the boundless ocean of truth. Here we see not only the border between reason and faith, but also the space where the two may meet” (*Fides et Ratio*, 23).

The meeting of Taoistic and Christian teachings is not for the sake of finding a “winner,” but to link whatever is enlightening and fertile in the search for truth. The insight of Taoism, that one achieves wisdom through embracing certain kinds of foolishness, may help Asian Christians to grasp more deeply the mystery and challenge of the Cross of Christ.

Summing up

As in the case of Confucianism, the proposed Christian hermeneutic may be fruitfully applied to Taoism. Again, as with Confucianism, a sense of balance is required: a balance that seeks to be true to the literal meaning of the texts, while remaining open to surplus meanings, which a Christian may discern in the light of faith.