

The First Commandment in Chinese Culture

Umberto Bresciani

A lawyer stood up and, to test him, asked, "Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" He replied, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." (Lk. 10: 25-27)

For a very long time, I have been cultivating the mental hobby of comparing Chinese and Western culture. The Ten Commandments are a foundation stone of Western culture. Do the Chinese have the same norms? We know, of course, that they have moral precepts teaching people not to steal, not to kill, and so on. We could say that China and the West share the Ten Commandments from the fourth on. If we consider the importance of the fourth commandment (Honor your father and mother) in Chinese culture, we could also say that in the Chinese world the fourth commandment figures as the first. Whoever observes the importance of filial piety as a moral duty in the Chinese tradition is bound to acknowledge the truth of that statement. But what about the first three commandments? Do the Chinese lack these entirely? Do the Chinese lose against the West seven to ten? In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the second and the third commandments are extensions or applications of the first. Therefore it is imperative for us to examine whether the Chinese have or do not have a first commandment: "I am Yahweh your God....You will have no other gods before me." (Deut. 5:6-7)

Heaven in the Chinese world

Everybody knows that there are a variety of religious expressions existing in the Chinese world. However, if we examine the ancient classic tradition (now usually almost always referred to as Confucian tradition), we discover that for the Chinese, there was always a Heaven high above everything else. Heaven was so high

above that the emperor alone was empowered to give official liturgical worship to it. The common people were supposed, in the words of Mencius, to respect Heaven (jing tian), to serve Heaven (shi tian), and the like.

The importance of filial piety

Comparing a culture with Ten Commandments (the West, including Judaism, Christianity, and in some ways also Islam) with a culture with only seven (China) brings to light an interesting cultural difference. The Chinese cultural tradition emphasizes the practical, the pragmatic side, that is, you do not see Heaven, but you do see your parents. We may legitimately paraphrase Confucius (*Analects*, XI, 11) and say, "If you do not know how to serve your parents, how can you serve Heaven?" Therefore, the first commandment is to serve and honor your parents. It is through your respect for them that you show your respect for Heaven. As a result, traditional Chinese morality hinges on the duty of filial piety. Perhaps we can say that the first commandment is present in the Chinese consciousness, but it is hidden, or implicit in the commandment of filial piety.

Private and public worship

There is another notable cultural difference. Whereas the West emphasizes the duty of each person to give public worship to Heaven, the Chinese reserved that worship for the emperor only. It was his exclusive right and duty. As a result, the common people only prayed to and worshipped the lower deities. We might say that they prayed to and worshipped the saints or spiritual beings that could provide some help to the petitioner since they had a special connection with Heaven.

In the West we find that there is an emphasis on the individual person making frequent contacts with Heaven through prayer. In China, however, although Heaven might be mentioned in wise sayings and popular daily expressions, it is, by and large, relegated to the background. Everybody knows, of course, that everything originates from Heaven, and that whatever happens is destiny, or Heaven's Will, Heaven's Plan. The Classics are replete with examples of this.

The powerful and literate minister of the Ming emperor Wanli, Ye Xianggao, expressed his amazement in this regard. He was not baptized, but he was a long time and close friend of Matteo Ricci. His friendship and familiarity with Ricci brought him to understand the substance of the new religious doctrine Ricci was endeavoring to spread. In his Preface to Ricci's main work, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, Ye Xianggao wrote:

It is not that the scholars of this world (he meant China) avoid speaking about Heaven, but they consider Heaven as something too high and distant, so that the eye or ear cannot perceive it. But when Westerners speak about Heaven, they consider it as close as one hair to another, or as the connecting of inhaling and exhaling in breathing, making the human world appreciate that [Heaven] is most affectionate and intimate.

Renaissance of Chinese culture

With the disappearing of the imperial system, even the liturgical rites to Heaven were forgotten. The substance of the idea of Heaven, however, has remained alive in the Chinese consciousness. Chinese Catholic leaders have often mentioned the importance of worship to Heaven. A recent case in point is Cheng Shiguang, bishop of Tainan (Taiwan), now retired. In his book, *Tian ren zhi ji [The Realm of Heaven and the Realm of Humans]* (1974), he argued for a renaissance of Chinese culture, including the worship of Heaven, no longer reserved for the emperor alone. He maintained that there should be worship of Heaven both at the public and private levels. The public worship would include some form of ritual on the part of provincial governors, city mayors, etc. The private worship would take place within the family, in front of the family altar. This worship or ritual should take place at least at the end of the year (for thanksgiving) and at the beginning of the year (for blessings). The bishop also advocated that people be taught to worship Heaven privately in their hearts, by praying to Heaven at least each morning and evening, when going out to work and when going home from work. It should be a very simple prayer uttered in one's heart directly to Heaven, without any fixed formula.

I believe that something similar might have existed in Chinese society in the past since even today, certain pious old style

families still preserve some habits of daily worship to Heaven. When I happen to go out early in the morning, I often see families opening their door to the new day. Then the lady of the house comes on the threshold and stands facing Heaven; with incense sticks in her joined hands, she bows to heaven a few times, then puts the sticks in a special holder on the side of the door. What a beautiful religious act!

Comparing Chinese culture and Western religion

In talking about the Ten Commandments, we might wish to state that any comparison between Chinese culture and Western religion is out of place. The two are so radically different! The Ten Commandments are a revelation of God; Chinese morality does not come out of any revelation; it is innate in the human heart. I do not claim to be able to settle all possible theological debates about this difference nor do I wish to ignore the profundity of the question, but I do want to ask: whether we always have to look at things in isolation from one another? The Bible does not do that so drastically. Toward the end of Deuteronomy, after expounding and repeating the law of the Covenant, Yahweh says,

This Law, which I am laying down for you today, is, neither obscure for you nor beyond your reach. It is not in heaven, so that you need to wonder, "Who will go up to heaven for us and bring it down to us, so that we can hear and practice it?" Nor is it beyond the seas, so that you need to wonder, "Who will cross the seas for us and bring it back to us, so that we can hear and practice it?" No, the word is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to put into practice. (Deut. 30: 11-14)

I am of the opinion that the Chinese who have absorbed within themselves the Confucian religious ideal at the very wellspring of Chinese culture would readily subscribe to the concept expressed in the quotation above.