

Confucianism and Christianity in Mutual Interaction

An Appraisal of Paulos Huang's Contribution to the Dialogue

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During the 21st century, the interaction between Chinese and Western culture is likely to constitute the single most important dialogue between civilizations. All of us should therefore be grateful to Dr. Paulos Huang for mapping so helpfully the historical and actual dialogues between Confucianism and Christianity, and for pointing so succinctly to zones of conflict as well as convergence between the two traditions.

Inter-cultural dialogue is today not only going on between persons living far away from one another on different continents. The most intense dialogue takes place in the minds of individuals who have the burden and advantage of embodying more than one culture. Such person is Dr. Huang who is a Chinese living between Hong Kong and Helsinki, and a Chinese Christian deeply immersed in Chinese tradition and mentality. He states his own tension as follows: "Every time when I focus on my own deeds, I realize that *sola gratia* is my hope. Once I have peace and certainty concerning salvation, I will again paradoxically try to self – cultivate".^① The tension expressed here is between acknowledging the duties of Heaven (in Christian parlance, the divine Law), while trusting the grace of God by which God accepts the human person (according to the Christian Gospel), even in states of human imperfection.

Whether one pursues the Confucian Way or the Christian Way, or combines aspect of the one with the other, it becomes clear that both traditions have long ago left the domains of magic and superstition. What matters is the formation of mentalities and attitudes towards reality, inspired by the great practical teachings of canonical Books. The open question, then, is what constitutes, human reality, and what is Ultimate Reality? Is, or should, Confucianism be open to the Christian awareness of a personal – like God? And is,

^① Paulos Huang, *Confronting Confucian Understandings of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation: A Systematic Theological Analysis of Basic problems in the Confucian – Christian Dialogue*, (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2010).

or should, Christian theology be open to the concerns expressed in the Confucian concept of self – cultivation?

The work of Dr. Huang shows convincingly that Confucianism and Christianity cannot simply be either contrasted or united, as if each partner in the dialogue were clearly defined units. Within Christianity, two varieties are sorted out, viz. Catholic and Protestant theology. As for Confucianism, Dr. Huang helpfully proposes a typology of five phases of Confucian self – development, from Ancient Confucianism over Neo – Confucianism to varieties of Modern Confucianism. All of these schools claim to constitute the genuine Confucian heritage, but differ, as a matter of fact, markedly from one another. No surprise, therefore, that some forms of Confucianism are hostile to Christianity while others are highly appreciative of Christianity. The main question, as pointed out by Dr. Huang, is the question of transcendence vs. monism. His thesis is that both Ancient Confucianism and several varieties of Modern Confucianism are sympathetic to Christian ideas of transcendence.

One example of this trend is the Harvard Professor TU Weiming, who argues that Confucian humanism differs from secular humanism by assuming that human morality is inconceivable without a constant reference to Heaven, which according to the *I Ching* is creativity in itself. According to TU Weiming, Heaven cannot be conceived merely in naturalistic terms; the role of human persons is exactly to *participate* in the creativity of Heaven, as it were by *attuning* oneself to the resources of Heaven. In this sense, human beings are also co – creators. So conceived Heaven is omnipresent and omniscient, but not omnipotent; the role of human beings is exactly to complete Heaven’s great work.^②

Let me take this opportunity to say where I as a Christian theologian find consonances with and differences to the Confucian notions of self – cultivation. I do appreciate the Confucian concept of self – cultivation, and see this as a fertile concept to be explored in future dialogues. The idea of self – cultivation may even be endorsed by Christians, in so far as also Christians assume that God’s Law is not extrinsic to human nature, but is part of the human condition of being placed in a constant relation to God. This relation to God is part of being a human, even where the person lives as a sinner in a sinful world. Even the most austere view of human possibilities in the Christian tradition has always claimed that being a “sinner” can never characterize a human being fully, without giving due account of the positive view of the human person as “created in the image and likeness of God” (Gen 1:26 – 27).

To put it in traditional terms, human nature may have become perverted, but human nature cannot simply be deleted or annihilated. To put it in other terms, the person living in sin cannot exist without traces of being destined to live in attunement to God (or Heaven). Moreover, the Christian Gospel states that even though the human relation to God is distorted, God is steadfast in keeping His relation to each and any human being, wherever he or she lives. Even where human beings do not actually trust God, God trusts in human beings. Let me here remind of a central passage in St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans: “What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means!” (Romans 3:3 – 4). The point is that God’s positive relation to humanity is maintained, even where human beings neglect God’s Law in their minds and deeds.

Exactly here, however, differences emerge, and no sincere dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity should neglect remaining differences. As Dr. Huang points out there is no correlate in

② TU Weiming, “Confucian Spirituality in Contemporary China”, Paper for the Beijing Summit on Chinese Spirituality.

Confucian thought to the Christian notion of God's "justification" of humanity in Jesus Christ. The central idea is here that human beings are unconditionally accepted by God, even where we are weak, unwise, and wrongdoers. However, as Dr. Huang point out, there might be a stronger resonance between the Confucian understanding of self - cultivation, and the Christian notion of "sanctification".

There are here, as I see it, interesting zones of contact between Confucianism and Christianity. Confucians remind Christians of the fact that God's Law is not purely external to being a human with God - endowed possibilities. Christians, on their side, may remind Confucians that our self - cultivation will always be incomplete. The very claim to be or to become *perfect* via self - cultivation constitutes the problem, seen from a Christian view. For what is perfection, if so strive so ardently for becoming perfect that we take pride in our achievements, and constantly need to inform other people about our own superiority (thus hiding our own weakness)? The Christian response might be that we are actually never becoming perfect by our own achievements. The hidden spot (in Christian terms, "sin") lies in the very Self that we tend to see as the engine or activity - basis of our many attempts to cultivate ourselves towards perfection. According to Christian teaching, our own Self needs to be freed from self - inflation, that is, from attempts of self - justification. This is where Christians point to the Other - Power of God, who is at work not only from the Heaven, but dwells amongst us, in the midst of our struggles and weaknesses. So St. Paul says, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourself" (Philippians 2:3). By acknowledging our own imperfection, we can take joy in any progress of cultivation, for "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13).

In this view, there is no contrast between divine and human powers. There is no fixed - pie view of power, so that if one takes a bite from the cake, there is less left to the others. It is not the case that when God does something, we are rendered powerless, and when we cultivating ourselves, we are detracting from God's power. Rather God uses power to empower us, in the midst of our lives. God is generous by giving so as to be able to receive. Similarly, on the Christian conception of God it is as natural for God to live in the midst of our earthly turmoil, as it is for God to reside in Heaven. "The Word of God became flesh and lived among us", as it is expressed in the Christian doctrine of incarnation (John 1:14).

What I suggest is that both Confucians and Christian may be able to say that the active role of human beings always presupposes a mutual relation between Heaven and humanity. How this is going to be spelled out remains to be explored in future dialogues. At this stage I can only express my deep gratitude and respect for the many impulses for dialogue that we have received through this important work of Dr. Paulos Huang.

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——黄保罗对儒基对话的贡献评定

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