

## Editorial Foreword

### Between *Tian* and Humankind: A Reflection on Confucian-Christian Dialogue

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In discussing belief, Chinese people often speak of “*Tian*/heaven” and “Way of *Tian*/heaven,” while westerners “God” and “divine will.”<sup>①</sup> The general impression conveyed is that these two are completely different beliefs. Chinese and Western historians of religion both regard “*Tian*/the ruler of *Tian*” and ancestor worship as the main elements of China’s primitive religions. When Chinese refer to “*Tian*,” there are rich connotations. According to one historian of philosophy, “*Tian*” has at least five meanings: the material, the sovereign (personal), destiny, Nature and “principle.”<sup>②</sup> Apart from the “physical *Tian*” with its cosmological meaning, these five meanings may be reduced to the debate between “metaphysical *Tian*” and “personal *Tian*,” corresponding to the difference between “the way of *Tian*” and “Providence.”<sup>③</sup> As the main stream of Chinese culture, Confucianism is often regarded as a tradition rich in rationality and a humanistic spirit, rather than a religion in the Western sense. Confucius “respected ghosts and gods and avoided talking about them,” addressed the principles of “ren” (benevolence)

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<sup>①</sup> The traditional Chinese category “Tian,” literally means “sky,” is usually translated as “heaven” in English, but this translation has a strong Christian or western connotation. The author keeps its Chinese form instead of finding an English equivalent word in order to retain its “strangeness” and “otherness” to western readers.

<sup>②</sup> FENG Youlan, *Zhongguo zhe xue shi* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2000), 27.

<sup>③</sup> LAO Sze-Kwang, *Xin bian Zhongguo zhe xue shi*, Vol. 1 (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2005), 45.

and “*li*” (rites) and stressed the importance of revealing “the sacred” in the secular. Not only have many Westerners labelled China a secular society with no tradition of religious belief, but a great many famous modern Chinese scholars under the Enlightenment influence, such as LIANG Qichao, HU Shi, LIANG Shuming, QIAN Mu and FENG Youlan, have also held the view that there is no religion in China.<sup>①</sup> The first reason is that in Western terms Confucianism scarcely qualifies as a religion; but the second is that, since religion represents an irrational and backward culture in an Enlightenment perspective, these modern Chinese scholars preferred the “no religion” option as proof of the advancement of Chinese culture.

In reality, the Chinese have had the concept of ghosts and gods since ancient times. Human beings and gods or ghosts did not live together, but there were shamans (wu 巫 and xi 覡) who could communicate between the two, and people set up name tablets for gods and ghosts and ranked them in order. After the Xia and Shang dynasties when the concept of “*Tian*” and “ruler of *Tian*” came into being, polytheism did not completely disappear. Even those who hold that there is no religion in China admit that in the *Book of Songs*, the *Zuo Zhuan* and *Guo Yu*, there are many references to *Tian* and ruler of *Tian*, most of which refer to a personal god. The religious belief of the common people from ancient times onwards has been that this god (Shangdi 上帝) was the supreme authority, with other gods inferior to him in status and power.<sup>②</sup> For the ancient Chinese, the sun, moon, stars, mountains and trees, sages and saints could all become gods. Careful observation will show the same polytheistic beliefs still alive in Chinese rural society. Modern scholars were not unaware of the persistence of ancient beliefs and ancestral shrine worship, but have simply ignored their religious nature and chosen to regard them as social customs, “superstitions” or poetic acts.<sup>③</sup> Long ago Xunzi exposed the attitudes of elite scholars towards common beliefs. In Xunzi’

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<sup>①</sup> LIANG Qichao, *Zhongguo li shi yan jiu fang fa* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 1987), 282; HU Shi, “Ming jiao,” in *Hu shi wen cun san ji* (Hefei: Huangshan Publishing House, 1996), 46; LIANG Shuming, *Zhongguo wen hua yao yi* (Shanghai: Academia Press, 1987), 111; QIAN Mu, *Xian dai Zhongguo xue shu lun heng* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2001), 1; FENG Youlan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. ZHAO Fusan (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2015), 3-7.

<sup>②</sup> FENG Youlan, *Zhongguo zhe xue shi*, 23-27.

<sup>③</sup> FENG Youlan, *Zhongguo zhe xue shi*, 275.

s *Li Lun*, it says of sacrificial ceremonies: “The sages understand the meaning of the *Li*. *Junzi* (君子, the superior person or gentlemen) enjoy the practices of *Li*. *Li* has become the routine of the officers and the customs of the ordinary people. *Junzi* consider *Li* to be the activities carried out by human beings, while ordinary people consider *Li* something related to spirits and ghosts.”<sup>①</sup> In Xunzi’s *Tian Lun* we read: “When there are important affairs, we divine the future before we reach any decision. We do these things not because we can thereby get what we want but because they are just a sort of decorum. The superior man considers acts of divination as a sort of decorum, while ordinary people consider them as having supernatural forces.”<sup>②</sup>

It is clear that, since ancient times, there have been two different perspectives and attitudes towards sacrifice, ghosts or gods and divination in Chinese society, namely, that of the sage / *Junzi* and that of the ordinary people. The dichotomy of “sage/*Junzi*” and “common people” also determines the dichotomy of “elite” and “mass” in Chinese belief. In the eyes of sages and *Junzi*, Confucianism is a kind of rational philosophy, and whether there are gods or not is not of concern. This can be described as a kind of “spiritual Confucianism.” Meanwhile, “folk Confucianism” permeates the daily life of the common people and involves many ghosts and gods.<sup>③</sup> Correspondingly, this difference has its correspondence in the atheistic Buddhism of the elites versus the theistic Buddhism of the masses, or Daoism as philosophy and as religion. Because of the positive role of sacrificial rites in education and in maintaining social order, the sages and elites rarely interfered in the common people’s belief in ghosts and gods. The two forms of belief maintained a parallel existence in traditional Chinese society. Historians have often regarded “personal *Tian*” as a more primitive concept, gradually to be replaced by “metaphysical *Tian*” in the Spring and Autumn era, but this is not

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<sup>①</sup> WANG Xianqian, *Xunzi ji jie*, (Beijing: Zhonghua Boolsotre, 1988), 376.

<sup>②</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>③</sup> Confucianism has multiple meanings in the Chinese context. Apart from “spiritual Confucianism” and “folk Confucianism,” there are also the so-called “institutional Confucianism” and “political Confucianism.” Analysis of the Confucian religion as a practice in daily life, see YANG Ching-kun, *Religion in Chinese Society*, trans. FAN Lizhu (Shanghai: Shanghai Peoples’ Publishing House, 2007), 225-253.

the whole story. In the context of modernity and atheism, Confucian sacrificial rites as practices of state religion disappeared along with late imperial social structures, while folk sacrificial rites remain in rural society as local customs. The idea of ghosts and gods as well as religions were denounced and frowned upon as “superstition” by the sages and the superior. At present, “Confucianism” is not among the five major religions recognized by Chinese government, while Folk Confucianism with its religious attributes is more often labelled “folk religion” or “folk belief.”<sup>①</sup> Scholars influenced by the Enlightenment ideas frequently ignore folk beliefs and popular concepts when discussing history and religion, while academic discussion on the religious nature of Confucianism or the dialogue between Confucianism and *Christianity* usually focuses only on elite Confucianism, including the well-known theory of “immanent transcendence.”

Influenced by MOU Zongsan, contemporary Neo-Confucianist thought holds that although Confucianism is not a religion, nor is it a form of secular culture. It has its own unique dimension of transcendence, which differs from the Christian concept “external transcendence” and is a kind of “immanent transcendence” based on the union of *Tian* and humankind.<sup>②</sup> For Neo-Confucians, the Christian God created the world but is not a part of the world so is a kind of “external transcendence” or “pure transcendence.” Confucian “immanent transcendence” refers to the inseparable relationship between metaphysical principle (dao) and its application.<sup>③</sup> Neo-Confucians also believe that “immanent transcendence” is superior to “external transcendence,” an idea has become widespread and a regular theme in Confucian-Christian dialogue. On closer inspection, however, it is not only an over-generalization to reduce

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<sup>①</sup> Although studies on folk religion has always been in the academia, the administrative departments of religious affairs in China have not enlisted folk religion along with the “five major religions.” Instead, it is merely referred to as “folk beliefs.” On the reflections and history of folk religion, see LI Tiangang, *Jin ze: jiang nan min jian ji si tan yuan* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2017), 1-22.

<sup>②</sup> Xiong Shili also proposed the idea of immanent transcendence. Mou Zongsan, Tang Junyi and others put forward this concept in “Declaration to the World on Behalf of Chinese Culture.” Mou elaborated this concept in a series of lectures in 1970’s. LIU Shu-hsien made further elaborations with help from Tillich’s concept of “ultimate concern.”

<sup>③</sup> LIU Shu-hsien, *Li yi fen shu yu quan qiu di yu hua* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2015), 43-45.

the Christian view of God to “external transcendence,” but the concept is also confusing in itself. Christian theology emphasizes God’s transcendent and immanent attributes, and the doctrine of the Trinity is the best illustration of God’s transcendence and immanence. The Father created *ex nihilo*, transcending the created order, while the Incarnate Son and the omnipresent Holy Spirit point to the immanence of God. If God is a pure external transcendence, there is no way to talk about the salvation of humanity or the world. God is both transcendent and immanent; the entire Christian tradition from the Bible to contemporary theology have upheld this loud and clear, and there is no need for further discussion. Neo-Confucianism sees Christianity as embodying “external transcendence” partly because it lacks a comprehensive understanding of the Christian tradition. Its emphasis on “immanent transcendence” is evidently a response to the assertion that Confucianism is merely a secular culture. The judgement that Confucianism is a “perfect religion” while Christianity is a “detached religion” exhibits the “reverse Orientalism” of cultural nationalists. However, MOU Zongsan’s own use of the concept of “transcendence” is polysemous and ambiguous. First of all, this concept seems to refer to a static and ontological transcendence, the metaphysical principles of the way of *Tian* or infinite wisdom. Because the principle of *Tian* and the nature of the heart/mind are originally one, this transcendence does not rely on external means, and so is called immanent. Such an understanding of transcendence also stipulates the inward path of pursuing transcendence, that is, self-transcendence based in the moral consciousness of the subject. Immanent transcendence in this sense has an implicit tendency towards the unity of Humankind and Nature. When MOU regards God as “externally transcendent,” this concept contains both senses of transcendence and “the transcendent.” Some scholars have pointed out that MOU’s use of “transcendence” is closer to Kant’s “the transcendental” and he has translated “the transcendent” as *chao jue*, “the all-surpassing and beyond compare.”<sup>①</sup> In this case, the discussion of transcendence is transformed into a question of *a priori*. Even if we allow that the concept of

<sup>①</sup> FENG Yaoming, “Dang dai xin ru jia de chao yue nei zai shuo,” in *Ru xue yu dang jin shi jie: di er jie dang dai xin ru xue guo ji xue shu hui yi lun wen ji zhi er*, eds. YANG Zuhan (Taipei: Wenchin Press, 1994), 75-93; LI Minghui, “Ru jia si xiang zhong de nei zai xing yu chao yue xing,” in *Ru xue yu dang jin Shi jie*, eds. YANG Zuhan, 55-74; ZHENG Jiadong, “Chao yue yu nei zai chao yue: MOU Zongsan yu kang de zhi jian,” in *Social Science in China*, no. 4 (2001): 43-53.

“immanent transcendence” contains the sense of “self-transcendence” and the ontological meaning of “transcendence” beyond the world of phenomena, this “transcendence” would still be only a metaphysical principle. Confucianism is content to stop at metaphysical reflection, but lacks critical reflection on metaphysical thinking itself. When Christianity talks of the transcendence of God, it is relative to the world’s ontological freedom; God created *ex nihilo* and transcends the world in the various aspects of ontology, ethics and epistemology. “Transcendence” means “heterogeneity” and “distance” between God and the world, indicating God’s “otherness.” In contrast, MOU’s “immanent transcendence” is based on the “homogeneity” of the moral subject’s heart/mind principle and the ontological principle of the cosmos. These together constitute a “Totality” and carry no meaning of “transcendence” as in Christian theology.

Whether Confucianism is a religion depends on which definition of religion we adopt, just as whether there is transcendence in Confucianism depends to a great extent on how we are to understand “transcendence.” At least from the perspective of western theology, this “immanent transcendence” still belongs to the category of “immanence.” Basing Confucian-Christian dialogue on the distinction between immanent and external transcendence is evidently not the most effective route forward. There are two main reasons for this: firstly, the distinction is based on a “spatial” understanding of “transcendence” and does not accurately reflect Christian faith. Secondly, as for the Confucian tradition of internal sacredness, this theory emphasizes the “School of the Mind” (心學, *xinxue*) approach of Zisi-Mencius and ignores approaches addressing the ontology of the cosmos, such as those of the *Zhong Yong* (*The Doctrine of the Mean*) or *Yi Zhuan* (*Commentary on the Book of Changes*), resulting in “confusion of existence and value.”<sup>①</sup> As mentioned above, “immanent transcendence” presupposes the existence of a transcendent *Tian* as the source of all value, so “transcendence” is analogous in Christianity. However, because of its focus on the mind, this “immanent” transcendence is ultimately only the “self-transcendence” of the moral subject towards a perfect self-realization. “Transcendence” is realized through the effort of the subject, and is eventually absorbed into immanence. The theory of “immanent transcendence” is

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<sup>①</sup> ZHENG Jiadong, “Chao yue yu nei zai chao yue: MOU Zongsan yu kang de zhi jian,” in *Social Science in China*, no. 4 (2001): 52.

inevitably reduced to humanism, leaving the “religiousness” of Confucianism indistinct. But in reality, contemporary neo-Confucianists have defined the religious nature of Confucianism from three aspects: apart from pointing out that the beliefs of “ren” (benevolence), “yi” (righteousness) and “Dao” (the Way) have an inherently religious transcendent nature, they admit to the religious emotion involved in offering sacrifices to *Tian*, the earth or one’s ancestors, and acknowledge the transcendent dimension of the idea of “Unity of *Tian* and Humankind.”<sup>①</sup> As discussed above, the “School of the Mind” approach of contemporary Neo-Confucianism not only reduces ontological transcendence to the self-transcendence of the subject, but also, consciously or unconsciously, ignores elements in the Confucian tradition with characteristics of so-called “external transcendence,” such as worshipping *Tian* and veneration of ancestors. As Xunzi understood long ago, what is a matter of ghosts and gods for the ordinary people is a cultured practice for the elite. Confucianism, as a complex ideological system, certainly has its rational and philosophical aspects—but since dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity is an inter-religious undertaking, reflection on the religious nature of Confucianism should not be limited to Confucian philosophy alone.

Modern Chinese scholars often take a Western definition of religion as the paradigm for understanding religious concepts, and come to a conclusion that there is no religion in China. But as contemporary Western archeological and anthropological studies have shown, Shamanism is a more universal form of belief than Semitic religions.<sup>②</sup> This has led to many non-Western primitive beliefs and folk religions becoming the subject of religious studies. LI Tiangang, a contemporary Chinese historian who studies Chinese folk religion, believes that discussion of the religiousness of Confucianism should start from folk religion. Although doctrine and ecclesiastical organization may not be as prominent in Chinese religions, they are superior to Christianity at sacrifices, temple fairs, and dharma gatherings. Confucian sacrifices are deeply rooted in folk and base beliefs. The basic characteristics of Han

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<sup>①</sup> KWOK Hung-biu, “Ji du jiao de nei zai chao yue shen guan: dui LIU Shuxian chun cui chao yue shen guan de hui ying,” in *New stage in Christian-confucian dialogue*, eds. LAI Pan-chiu and LI Jingxiong (Hong Kong: Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, Chung Chi College, 2001), 303-304.

<sup>②</sup> CHANG Kwang-chih, *Zhongguo kao gu xue lun wen ji* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2013), 353-365.

belief come from native Chinese religions and not foreign ones, and the roots of Chinese religions lie in popular beliefs; “folk religions evolved from the Confucian temple system are the source of modern Chinese religion.”<sup>①</sup>

Obviously, the above views are based on a broad concept of religion.<sup>②</sup> Any religion includes rational doctrines, ritual practices and mystical elements. Confucian religiosity embodies philosophical doctrines, but is seen mainly in sacrifice and ritual. The traditions of ancestral worship that were the source of Confucianism were formed in the Zhou Dynasty and were part of the important legal code that sustained Chinese society until the end of the Qing Dynasty. “The teaching of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius,” which upheld “the Five Classics” and valorized ancient ritual, not only predated the “Way of Confucius and Mencius” and its School of the Mind approach, but also predates Daoism and Buddhism. Therefore, the Confucian system of ancestral worship and state sacrifice is the real representative of Chinese local religion and the basic form of belief. Daoism, Buddhism, and even Islam and Christianity, which came from other parts of the world, can only be truly “indigenized” through communication and integration with local beliefs.<sup>③</sup> HE Guanghu has also understood Confucianism as the “indigenous religion of China for 3000 years from the time of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, centered on belief in the Supreme Ruler *Tian*, and including the concept of the Supreme Ruler, the experience of the Mandate of *Tian*, and sacrificial activities.”<sup>④</sup> He also regards Confucian religion as the source of Confucian philosophy. “The teachings of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius” stress sacrificial rites and performances, and emphasise praxis, and so spread at a popular and grassroots level. “The Doctrines of Confucius and Mencius” on the other hand advocate the “heart/mind learning (*xinxue*)” approach, strong in self-cultivation, and were more prevalent among literati and government officials. The former was regarded as

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<sup>①</sup> LI Tiangang, *Jin ze: jiang nan min jian ji si tan yuan*, 496, 498, 528.

<sup>②</sup> According to the definition of religion by the French sociologist Durkheim, religion consists of belief, ritual and church (community life). LI Tiangang, *Jin ze: jiang nan min jian ji si tan yuan*, 507.

<sup>③</sup> For a discussion on relationship between sacrificial rites, folk religion and Confucianism, see LI Tiangang, *Jin ze: jiang nan min jian ji si tan yuan*, 163-140.

<sup>④</sup> HE Guanghu, “Zhongguo wen hua de gen yu hua: tan ru xue de fan ben yu kai xin,” in *Ru jiao wen ti zheng lun ji*, ed. REN Jiyu (Beijing: Religious Culture Press, 2000), 309-310.



Confucian orthodoxy in the Han and Tang dynasties, while the latter became mainstream in the Song and Ming dynasties. Although belief in a personal Ruler of *Tian* has gradually declined in the “heart/mind learning” approach, belief in ancestral temple worship and sacrifices to *Tian* and the supreme ruler *Di* of the “Five Classics” has never ceased. The multiple meanings of “*Tian*” may be distinguished in academic studies, or one of these senses might be emphasized by a certain philosophical school (e.g. the “heart/mind learning” tradition understands *Tian* in its metaphysical sense), but in reality, the multiple meanings of “*Tian*” cannot be completely separated. Even when Confucius himself speaks of *Tian*, it has both a metaphysical sense and a personal sense.<sup>①</sup> In Chinese folk concepts, “the Way of *Tian*” and “the Will of *Tian*” have always been closely linked; and “*Tian*/Lord *Tian*” in the sense of a personal god has always been the frame of reference in the Chinese daily life. Any act against the “Principle of *Tian*” would be punished by the personal *Tian*. As Paulos Huang observes, “The supreme God exists not only in ancient Confucianism, but also in the hearts and daily lives of grassroots people.”<sup>②</sup> In contemporary Chinese society, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and other religions have been “purged of irrationality.” Their basic forms of belief have been stripped away, resulting in the separation of doctrine and religious practice. In order to trace the origins of Confucianism as a religion, we must return to the transcendent Heavenly Ruler/ the Way of *Tian* and the sense of awe in searching for the transcendent.

“The unity of *Tian* and humankind” is a core concept in Chinese culture, one not only recognized as a “consistent way” by contemporary New Confucians,<sup>③</sup> but which has also influenced Daoism and Buddhism. In distinction to the understanding of moral metaphysics among Neo-Confucians, scholars such as Zhang Guangzhi (Kwang-Chih Chang) and Julia Ching have interpreted “Unity of *Tian* and Humankind” from a Shamanistic cosmology, reducing it to a kind

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<sup>①</sup> For instance, the metaphysical sense in “天何言哉” (Does Heaven speak?), and the personal sense in “獲罪于天，無所禱也” (He who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray). Translation quoted from James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 1 (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2011), 326,159.

<sup>②</sup> Paulos HUANG, “Could Not the Communication between Confucianism and Christianity Happen on View of Truth? Dialogue with Mr. Tu Bao-jui,” in *Journal of Jilin Normal University* (Humanities & Social Science Edition), no. 4 (2018): 2.

<sup>③</sup> LIU Shuxian, *Li yi fen shu yu quan qiu di yu hua*, 57-82.

of primitive Shaman experience.<sup>①</sup> LI Zehou has also expounded the “shaman-historian tradition” in Chinese culture, where the Duke of Zhou (Zhougong) and Confucius respectively completed the rationalization process from Shamanism to ritual, interpreting ritual through the principle of “ren,” and Confucianism subsequently became mainstream in Chinese culture.<sup>②</sup> From this perspective, the “ritual” and “ren” used by contemporary Neo-Confucians to explain the religious nature of Confucianism have their own origins in primitive religion. In this sense the folk religion that continues the Shamanistic belief of “the Unity of *Tian* and humankind” and a “communion between humans and god” can be regarded as the inheritor of Chinese religion and even Confucianism.<sup>③</sup> “Unity of *Tian* and Humankind” has affected the basic thought patterns of Chinese religion and philosophy in pursuing harmony between humanity and nature, and has also to a degree affected the inculturation of Christianity in China. Confucianism holds that “all human beings can be Yao and Shun;” Buddhism says that “all living beings have the Buddha nature,” while Daoism’s unity with nature through “inaction” reflects the optimistic attitude of Chinese culture towards human nature, in sharp contrast to Christianity’s culture of “sin”. According to Church historian Justo L. González, Christian theology can be roughly divided into law-oriented fundamentalism, truth-oriented cultural theology, and history-oriented Eastern Orthodox traditions. Although these three types all have their counterparts in Chinese Christian theology, Chinese theologians have seldom adopted the stance of Augustinian “monergism,” preferring to accept the “synergism” of the Eastern churches, emphasizing a cooperative relationship between human beings and divine will. This shows that the concept of the “Unity of *Tian* and humankind” has a profound influence on the thinking of the Chinese people. In this sense, the traditional Orthodox view of “*theosis*” and the view of “Unity of *Tian* and humankind” might open up a wider space for dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity.<sup>④</sup> As LAI Pan-chiu points out, the theory of “*theosis*” does not belong exclusively to the Orthodox tradition, but has been gradually accepted

<sup>①</sup> CHANG Kwang-chih *Zhongguo qing tong shi dai* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2013), 261-290, 489-497; Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (London: MacMillan, 1993), 5.

<sup>②</sup> LI Zehou, *You wu dao li shi li gui ren* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2017).

<sup>③</sup> LI Tiangang, *Jin ze: jiang nan min jian ji si tan yuan*, 506.

<sup>④</sup> CHOW Alexander, *Heaven and Humanity in Unity: Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment*, trans. LEE Yenyi and WONG Wai-Yip (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma Press, 2015).

as part of the Ecumenical tradition.<sup>①</sup> Given this, Confucian-Christian dialogue needs to re-examine both Christian tradition and Confucian tradition in a broader perspective.

“*Theosis*” refers to the communion of humanity and God through the incarnate Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit. It signifies both salvation and the realization of humanity as “*imago dei*.” Real humanity is defined by the humanity revealed by Christ and has an eschatological dimension. The doctrine of “*theosis*” does not define human nature by Original Sin, and embodies a dynamic view of human nature, emphasizing the active participation of human beings. As the “mediator” of creation, human beings maintain unity with the universe; while through the Eucharist rite, humanity enters into a close communion with God, supplemented by daily moral cultivation. All of these are analogous to the “Unity of *Tian* and humankind” that originated in Shamanistic sacrificial rites and advocated the practice of self-cultivation. “Unity of *Tian* and humankind” seeks harmony between the sacred order and the secular, with *Tian* and humans forming a kind of cooperative relationship. The *Zhong Yong* regards human beings as co-creators who “can participate along with *Tian* and earth.” However, *theosis* does not mean that humanity can have the same nature as god, but that humans can obtain the same way of being with God through communion with the Trinity. There is still a “gap” in the unity of humanity and God, for besides the “economic Trinity” Christian theology also leaves the space for the “immanent Trinity,” thus, maintaining God’s transcendence. The question is, how does humanity realize harmony in the concept of “Unity of *Tian* and humankind”? Can a perfect human nature can be realized only by “immanent transcendence”? Does humankind’s “self-transcendence” need an “initiator”? What exactly does the “inter-space” between humankind and *Tian* mean? If humankind and *Tian* are one, how is the presumed transcendence of *Tian* embodied? These questions will surely prove stimulating for future dialogue. If, according to Roger T. Ames, the religiousness of Confucianism lies in exactly such “co-creativity,” this creation is obviously different from the “*creatio ex nihilo*” commonly understood in Christian theology, and points to a kind of “*creatio in situ*.”<sup>②</sup> “Secularization” can be seen as a common issue facing both Christianity and

<sup>①</sup> LAI Pan-chiu, *Guang chang shang de han yu shen xue: cong shen xue dao ji du zong jiao yan jiu* (Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma Press, 2014), 175-178, 193-216.

<sup>②</sup> Roger T. Ames, “Taking Confucian Religiousness on Its Own Terms,” in *International Comparative Literature*, Vol. I, no. 1 (2018): 17-31.

Confucianism.

The distinction between “sacred” and “secular” is a basic structure of human religious life, and the two concepts are interdependent and symbiotic. “Secularization” is a specific concept that originated in Western culture and history. We can even say it is a theological concept. The tradition of regarding Confucianism as being “secularly orientated” is obviously an assertion based on specific views of the “sacred” and the “transcendent.” And yet whether in seeing the sacred in the secular or in revealing the transcendent in the benevolent heart, Confucianism highlights the subjectivity of humanity. After all, “*Tian* sees through people’s eyes, and *Tian* hears through people’s ears” (“Tai Shi,” *Book of Documents*). The secularization of western society is mainly manifest in the separation of church and state and the withdrawal of the sacred from personal and public life. Because of God’s ontological transcendence, the “secular” must be modified and defined through “sacredness,” while secularization means that the sacred order has lost its normative power over the secular. In modern society, secularization manifests itself in a pluralism of values and a relativity of truth, rather than the disappearance of religious beliefs. Christianity is no longer able to take on the role as foundation of morality and values in western society. This is what “God is dead” means. Secularization has its own value pursuit, including attention to individual freedom and rights, the marketization of the economy and the democratization of politics. Of course, the decline of transcendence will also result in the flattening out of spirituality. Chinese society is evidently not experiencing secularization in the Western sense, but is facing the problems of value pluralism and anomie. In China, secularization is linked to modernization. Confronted with the challenges of industrialization, marketization, western political ideas and ideology, Confucianism has lost its guiding position in society and institutional foundation, and has withdrawn from the public sphere. Chinese society is similarly facing “diseases of secularization,” such as hedonism and consumerism. The common problem that Confucianism and Christianity are facing is how to reshape the relationship between *Tian*/God and humankind in the secular era and endow spiritual life with a transcendental dimension.

The diversity of beliefs has made it possible for dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity, and at the same time makes both sides of the dialogue more like partners than rivals. For this reason inter-religious dialogue no longer need to take a standpoint of “exclusivism,” “inclusivism”

or “pluralism,” because such truth-oriented dialogue will only ever sink into an “identity dispute” or monologue. If we realize that pluralism is characteristic of the secular era, then inter-religious dialogue can only ever be practice-oriented, starting from a common context, insisting on the rationality of coexistence, paying attention to a common future, and giving new explanatory power to traditional doctrines in the current situation. The starting point of the dialogue is not abstract doctrine, but concrete religious life and community practice. As far as the dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity is concerned, we should recognize the vitality of folk religion and its transformation in contemporary society, as well as the mutual integration and transformation of different faith communities. Only when dialogue is based on a comprehensive study of religious phenomena and combined with community practice can it re-enter the public sphere and provide transcendent spiritual resources for a pluralistic society. Most importantly, the search for meaning and transcendence should be future-oriented: not a future “predetermined” by any religious truth, but a future that is in the process of being “generated.” This future is itself a product of Confucian-Christian dialogue, or of dialogue in an even broader sense. In this way, the boundaries of the old identity are not immutable, and the possibility exists of discovering multiple identities or a new cultural identity. When studying *Tian*/Heaven and the human, or discussing the sacred and the secular, it is not sufficient to be “preoccupied with *Tian* and indifferent to human” or to “replace the Way of *Tian* with the Way of Mankind”. Only an “intermediate” encounter between *Tian* and humanity in the interval of time and space is the right place for the “apprehending/emerging” of meaning.

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