

Breaking New Ground in Confucian-Christian Dialogue?

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The Second International Confucian-Christian Conference was held at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California, July 7-11, 1991. The First International Confucian-Christian Conference had met in Hong Kong in 1988. Hong Kong is a location readily accessible to Confucian scholars and Christian theologians from the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, S. Korea and Singapore as well as from North America and Western Europe. The Kong Hong conference already demonstrated not only that Confucianism still has strongholds in countries other than the Chinese cultural environment—places like Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and certain institutions in the West—but also that it can engage the serious attention of Christian thinkers in various parts of the world. Now competent Asian Confucian scholars and Christian theologians are prepared to go outside of the Asian continent to meet their counterparts in America to exchange views on issues of common interest. So it was that some twelve delegates from S. Korea, the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong travelled to California to meet almost an equal number of people either originally from N. America or now residing there. Berkeley proved to be a fitting venue for such a meeting. Its academic institutions, including theological seminaries, with their multiracial and multicultural setting, are accustomed to dialogue: intra-Christian, interreligious, and faith-culture dialogue.

This second conference was only about half the size of the first one. The smaller number of participants was actually more conducive to face-to-face discussion. Most of the participants by this time already knew one another. Besides, almost all of the participants are “bilingual” in that, in addition to their expertise in their own tradition (Confucian or Christian), they are knowledgeable in the other tradition as well. Thus favorable conditions were present for a real Confucian-Christian dialogue. All participants were on an equal footing; there was no hint of any

condescension or proselytizing. Everyone had something to say from one tradition and something to learn from the other.

The conference adopted a format which helped to facilitate dialogue. The planning committee had formulated eight issues for the participants to address. Each participant was to choose one issue and to prepare a short reflection paper on it. Happily the discussants were evenly distributed among the eight issues, with three discussants assigned to a given issue. As a result, around the selected issues some real exchange of ideas took place.

Instead of rehearsing discussions around the eight issues one by one, a few highlights are given here to show that new grounds have been broken.

First, the problem of "dual identity." Early in the conference, each participant was asked to briefly tell how he/she first came to an encounter with the tradition other than the original one. Virtually everyone present has had the benefit of getting to know a tradition (Confucianism or Christianity) besides their inherited religious or cultural tradition (Christianity or Confucianism). With some of the people dual identity arises as an existential question. The conference was not interested in probing the participants' personal life, but the "confessional" exercise at the start showed that the question of religious/cultural identity is existentially real. As the exchange of ideas unfolded, the issue of dual identity (and other issues) was approached with scholarly analysis, without losing the confessional stance altogether.

Indeed, the question of dual identity in the context of the modern world leads to an unraveling of a series of theological and intellectual issues. These issues include the integrity of a given tradition, the meaning of interfaith encounter, the problem of religious pluralism, etc.

Rigid adherence to an inherited religious framework on the one hand, and mere apprehensiveness about "syncretism" on the other, will not survive long in a pluralistic world. Neither is it satisfactory to pursue a merely "objective" scholarly study of Confucianism or Christianity. Dual citizenship as a political issue was also brought up. It may be a cause of conflict if citizenship involves political pressure, but if it is dual identity (or even "multiple religious participation," as one presenter put it) in religious/cultural terms, then mature theological understanding is called for.

The feminist issue was injected into the problem of religious identity. A Korea Christian woman finds herself under the double disadvantage of a

patriarchal social structure reinforced by Confucianism and a male-dominated Christian ideology imported from the West. Interestingly, Korea shamanism seems to suggest a paradigmatic pattern for the recovery of Korean women's full status as human beings. At the most, that is only a suggestion or hint from shamanism. Is the biblical faith or Confucian humanism hopeless in that regard? This is illustrative of the need for further probing, even after the conference concluded. Incidentally this conference had a better representation by women, both on the Confucian and Christian side, than the previous conference.

Second, the issue of modernization and tradition. It is taken for granted that both Confucianism and Christianity have evolved their respective traditions. But it does not follow that Confucianism and Christianity need to be trapped in traditionalism. On more than one occasion, the participants took up the question of modernization (beyond the designated topic). Someone thought that the ideals of equality and democracy are a challenge to the renewal of Confucianism as well as Christianity in Asia. Another participant argued that Confucian and biblical teachings on the potentiality of human nature (not just on the goodness vs. the evil issue) is an inspiration for the renewal of humanity and that the priority given by Confucianism and Christian ethics to virtue over obligation is a promising resource for the betterment of the world. More than one person saw in Confucian teachings humanization and in Christian thinking resources to deal with the ecological crisis. A Confucian scholar from Hong Kong asserted that commitment to humanity and creativity would free Confucianism from its time-bound categories, and he left the door open to the Christians' commitment to the same end for a joint venture into the future. Similarly, a Korean Christian now teaching in the U.S. spoke of "the humanizing of modernity" as "notes on the agenda for Confucianism and Christianity in the future." He pleaded for the forging of a common discourse which would take into account the modern liberal idiom of human rights, equality, freedom, etc., while reflecting the classical (Confucian and Christian) heritage of honor, virtue, love, etc. Awareness of the challenge of modernization is not something especially new; what is more unusual is that the challenge is faced by both Confucians and Christians jointly, for mutual encouragement and complementarity.

Third, the question of the universal and the particular. Significantly, the issue arose not so much in terms of the relationship of one religion to another but

in the sense that a deeper universal principle underlies particular manifestations of various sorts. Indeed, in this conference (and already in the first Confucian-Christian Conference) Confucianism was lifted out of a parochial setting and was recognized for having values worthy of wider attention. The interest at the Berkeley conference was not in how Confucianism as such, given its universal elements, could be related to Christianity as a universal religion, as though a super-universal religion could be formed. (Granted Christianity is a universal religion, except that care must be taken lest the universality should be an imposed mold from Western Christendom. Happily, there was no such danger at the conference.) As a matter of fact, the need for contextualization was appreciated, with respect to both Confucianism and Christianity. The question is how the contextualized concerns of one might be related to the contextualized concerns of the other at this particular time in world history.

In the language of Confucianism, it is the problem of *li-i -fen-shu* (“principle is one and particularizations are diverse”). Several Confucian scholars touched on the issue. What is interesting is that there are Confucian thinkers (quoted, if not in attendance) who want to go beyond Confucianism. If Confucian teachings have some things universal to offer, they are offered to all humankind; not humankind in the abstract, but human communities in their given concrete situations. Human communities in the present age are faced with realities unforeseen before (e.g. modern technology, democratization, demand for gender equality, etc.). The present realities may vary from situation to situation, yet they may overlap in different parts of the world. It is nothing new if Confucians say that the problem of being “truly human” is universal, but it is reiterated anew, and the Confucian and Christian participants seemed to agree that Confucian teachings have something to contribute here.

What can the Christian theologians say in regard to Christianity’s role here? As we noted in references already mentioned, the Christian spokesmen were not interested in promulgating Christianity as a religion, but they addressed themselves to issues of universal relevance, to which Christian beliefs would have a word of significance to say. If the issues are of a social nature or are seen contextually, that does not necessarily mean that they are of penultimate interest only. These issues can be approached as matters of life and death insofar as the Christian faith has ultimate concerns.

Is a super-universal religion in the offing, then? The participants did not bring up such a question. But if we may take a hint from a modern Confucian view that what is at stake is not the perpetuation of the Confucian tradition but the survival of humanity or enhancement of humanness, can Christian theologians think in terms of losing Christianity as a religion for the sake of the world or humankind? If so, is there an ultimate Ground of Being or the One Principle? How is this related to the God named by Christian believers? The participants did not explicitly take up these metaphysical and theological questions. But it was to the credit of the conference that issues and questions like these were raised, at least implicitly, if not explicitly.

Indeed, the value of the Confucian-Christian Conference at Berkeley lies primarily in its raising of significant questions. Hopefully, some of these questions will be taken up at the next conference. In the meantime they may also be followed up in post-conference exchanges of ideas by correspondence or in local discussion groups, and perhaps these exchanges will be included in a book to be published later.