

Response to “The Kingdom of God as the Christian Image of Harmony”

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Before I comment on Professor Sung-Hae Kim’s paper, I want to mention that my background is in Japanese Buddhism so I am neither a Christian theologian nor a Confucian scholar. My perspective is partially from a Japanese Buddhist point of view influenced by Confucian morality and it is both critical and appreciative of the Confucian ethic of harmony in contemporary society. Even though I know there is a difference between what the holy scriptures say and what people do, my main concerns are with the ethic’s practical social implications. Professor Nobuyuki Kaji says that Confucian morality tends to be seen as a suppressive and coercive ethic, but it is a prejudiced view which has been distorted under the historical and social conditions.¹

I feel that I am not the person to judge the complexities of Professor Kim’s argument. The paper illustrates her deep understanding and special care for Confucianism. Having said this, I feel that Professor Sung-Hae Kim’s paper provided me with valuable insight. Her thesis focussed on an interpretation of the Christian image of harmony in the “Kingdom of God” and a discussion of its relationship with the Confucian image of harmony.

First, she presented parallels between the notion of harmony in Confucianism and Christianity. Even though the notion of harmony in the Western philosophical and theological tradition is less important than in the Confucian tradition, she made the comparison on three levels: the personal level (harmony through self-cultivation), the social level (social reality as relational and institutional harmony) and the cosmic level (an understanding of cosmic harmony).

1. Nobuyuki Kaji, *The Silent Religion: Confucianism* [沈黙の宗教—儒教] (Chikumashobo, 1994) p.193

Second, she illustrated some differences between Christianity and Confucianism, and suggested the need to rehabilitate the image and practice of Confucian harmony.

Third, she interpreted the Kingdom of God as the Christian image of harmony.

I want to discuss the following seven points:

- * First, the possibility of rehabilitating the Five Relations and the Three Bonds in terms of fundamental respect or reverence.
- * Second, the positive and negative value of the Confucian ethic of harmony in a liberal democratic society .
- * Third, the importance of decision making and accountability and their absence in traditional Confucianism.
- * Fourth, the possibility of extending altruistic reciprocity in a small community to a much larger community.
- * Fifth, the Confucian ethic of harmony from the perspective of ecological feminism.
- * Sixth, re-appreciation of ancestor veneration.
- * Seventh, the ethic's compatibility with Buddhist ideals.

1. THE PROBLEM OF AUTONOMY AND HETERONOMY

Professor Kim points out that we need to reconsider “the one-sided code of the ‘Three Bonds of Tung Chungshu.’” I think that “The Five Relations” (the affection between father and son, the relationship between ruler and subject, the distinction between husband and wife, the precedence of the old over the young, and the fidelity between friends) needs to be reinterpreted.

First of all, we have to appreciate the concept of *jen* (benevolence) as the fundamental virtue of human relationships within the family, community and society. *Jen* is one of the ‘Five Relations’ and, in this context, shows us that the codes do have a positive contribution to make. However, the ‘Five Relations’ are usually understood as negative and authoritarian and most often seen as suppressing people. Despite this, the ethic can work and have value in an intimate and durable community. In the absence of major conflict within a community, harmony is always present and unconsciously presupposed. It is maintained and relied on in a community where altruistic reciprocity is more predominant than the conflict relationship. People also take it for granted that it is their duty to help others who are in trouble and serve others in everyday life.

This traditional ethic of harmony has contributed to stable and durable relationships in families and communities where ideals, behavior,

and moral norms are transmitted via word and ritual from father to son, mother to daughter, generation after generation. Diligence and thrift are respected as virtues of success but they are not for the sake of the individual's aspiration (ambition) or security. They are for the service of others or the community. Here people identify themselves with the community and therefore do not feel self-sacrifice to be a burden. In order to realize harmony individuals must sacrifice their egoistic desires to some extent and yet they feel that the pursuit of harmony is identical to the pursuit of altruistic duty. In reality humans are not individuals but social beings. Any society, community or a family needs altruistic reciprocity and humans genuinely want to make some contribution.

However, the issue we are facing now is the problem of autonomy and heteronomy. Professor Susumu Shimazono says, "The ethic of harmony is gradually moving from obedience to the established authority to the recognition of individual autonomy which fosters one's own judgement and effort. However, in many cases the harmony of the whole is not disturbed. However, whether the harmony of the whole is justifiable or not is the matter of argument."² Heteronomous conformity appears when an order or purpose is not justifiable, yet the individual conforms his/her action to it. Alternatively, autonomous individuality appears when the individual questions the established authority for the sake of higher harmony.

The submissive character of the Three Bonds can be understood in this context but to what extent can women be autonomous and heteronomous? There is no question that the static and traditional understanding of the Three Bonds is inadequate in contemporary society.

Benevolence is the source of the Five Relations and the Three Bonds. Put simply, it signifies a considerate heart between people and, through its cultivation, people can live harmoniously. The important point is that when we reinterpret these codes, we have to find the original spirit or the fundamental perspective from which the Confucian tradition springs. In this context, it is important to note Professor Kim's suggestion of a "fundamental respect or reverence toward others"(Kim:16) because, in my understanding, it is nothing but the concept of the benevolence (*jen*). These codes are dynamic, not static, and need to be reinterpreted in the spirit of the benevolence. By returning to *jen* we can reexamine concrete expressions of human relationships and, with the spirit of the fundamental respect or reverence, find a true equilibrium (*chung*) between the sexes. In doing so, we

2. Shimazono Susumu, ed., *Sukui to Toku: shin-shōkyō Shinkōsha no Seikatsu to Shisō* [救いと徳：新宗教信仰者の生活と思想] (Kōbundō, 1992) p.48

would also be balancing the creative tension between autonomy and heteronomy. In my opinion, Professor Kim is not necessarily wrong when she says, "it is imperative to throw the image of the Three Bonds away completely." (Kim:15) If these bonds do not express the true spirit of *jen* in our world then there is a need to correct the distortions which have accumulated over time.

2. THE AMBIGUITY OF THE CONFUCIAN ETHIC OF HARMONY IN A LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Today, Confucius' moral virtues must face the challenges of democratic society. Confucius' famous saying, "Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject subject, the father a father, the son a son" (*Analects* 12:11) maintains (or preserves) an already existing order in East Asian countries where each individual is required to observe his or her own "*bun* 本[分] (duty)". The 'duty' refers to the duties, responsibilities and behavior that correspond to his or her own social class. If someone observes "本" or is obedient to "本" then he or she respects harmony. Thus, the respected virtues are the basic concepts such as *chung* (忠 loyalty) and *hsiao* (孝 filial piety). Class is passed on from generation to generation and so the basic concept of maturity means to adopt the parents' mode of behavior. Above all, the most important duty is to be obedient to the established authority and to restrict individual autonomy to within prescribed boundaries.

The book, *Habits of the Heart*, says;

Taking our cue from Tocqueville, we believe that one of the keys to the survival of free institutions is the relationship between private and public life, the harmony in which citizens do, or do not, participate in the public sphere.³

A democratic society needs all citizens to participate in the decision making process. We can not let the professionals administer by themselves. The relationship between ruler and subject which was previously based on power needs to find a better fit with modern society. Making this transformation will mean a shift away from relationships based on power to ones grounded in virtues such as experience. True authority is found in long term public approval and can stand the test of history. In the long run, a democratic society appreciates and believes in the common sense of the people. The question is how can the Confucian ethic of harmony help people have meaning in public and private life. In other words, to what extent

3. Rover N. Bellah, and Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985), p viii

can the Confucian ethic of harmony give moral support for those in public life as well as those pursuing personal fulfillment?

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF DECISION MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR THE PEOPLE IN MODERN SOCIETY AND IN THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY.

Harmony in society is “the creative formation of various relationships” (Kim:5) It is not a static law, but “justice or the right balancing of relationship is [a] prerequisite.” (Kim:5) It is essential if we are to achieve harmony in the family or in a democratic community. Professor Kim mentions that the notion of harmony is not homogeneous, but a balance among diverse opinions and values. “An ability to deal with diverse opinions without sacrificing fairness comes only from personal maturity, i.e., perfection of virtues.” (Kim:5) He quotes from *Analects*:

the mature person is in harmony with others without accommodating, while the immature person is accommodating without being harmonious. (*Analects* 13,23).

This corresponds with Aristotle understanding of *phronesis* (practical wisdom). Aristotle says a wise person can judge rightly in a concrete situation. This means that a sage can attain harmony with others without accommodation. Confucius makes the same point when he differentiates between true harmony and simple agreement.

This differentiation is also at the core of democratic society. In a democratic and liberal society the decision-making process is important. It is not so much a matter of the result of governance **for** the people, but the democratic process of decision-making **by** the people. So, how we can evaluate the Confucian ethic in the light of this?

Takeshi Umehara maintains that “the spirit of ‘harmony’ is at the same time the spirit of Reason. In other words, if there is ‘harmony,’ i.e., a mutual feeling of trust, between superior and subordinate, there is room for discussion. Active discussion produces well-founded ideas and theories which, when implemented, bring the difficult within the realm of possibility. ‘Harmony’ is thus not a compromise but a catalyst for discussion.”⁴ In this

4. Takeshi Umehara, “Junanajo Kenpo to Wa no Seishin” [十七條憲法と和の精神] *Nippon no Kokoro 1: Bunka to Dento* [日本の心1. 文化と伝統] (Tokyo: Shin-Nippon Seitetsu Kabushiki Kaisha Kohoshitsum [新日本製鐵株式會社広報室], 1992. Translated by Richard Foster. “According to the *Nihonshoki*, Japan’s oldest historical record, the Constitution of Seventeen Articles was written by Crown Prince Shotoku in the 12th. year of the reign of Empress Suiko (604 A.D.).”, pp. 34-7.

sense we find that the Confucian ethic of harmony does not contradict democratic processes.

Thus, the ethic of harmony may foster a democratic atmosphere and we cannot say that a certain communal trust necessarily leads to a denial of the democratic ethos.

I agree with Umehara in the sense that open and free discussion can be an occasion for the birth of reason. Yet, it is not necessary for this reason to become a principle or rule. To quote from Professor Kim:

The concept of justice as the foundation of harmony is not exactly same in the Judao-Christian tradition and East Asian tradition, while its functional importance is comparable. In the case of the former, justice is embodied in the law of God as the revealed corpus, while in the case of the latter, it is concretized in the ever changing interpersonal relationships according to the ritual propriety formulated by the sages. What safeguards justice from being identified with social convention, is in Christianity the sovereignty of God, while in Confucian tradition it is an orientation toward the interest of all people (*kung*) against the egoism of individuals and groups. (Kim:7)

This absence of a transcendent principle may lead to a situation where the right decision or justice can be identified with social convention. If the Confucian ethic of harmony operates without strict adherence to an ideal or principle it may become a political ideology. Prof. Hayao Kawai studied politics in Japan during the Second World War and coined the words “*chuku-kozo*” (the structure of central emptiness). The basic structure of Japanese society is “the structure of central emptiness”. In Japanese mythology there is no absolute or powerful god. The central figure takes no-willful action to mediate the balance of power among other gods. In this sense the center of decision-making is empty. This no-willful god exists in the center which constitutes the structure of central emptiness. In the field of politics, for example, there is also no center of power which can make decisions and take responsibility for foreign policy and national security.

Professor Kim mentions that in Confucian tradition it [what safeguards justice from being identified with social convention] is an orientation toward the interest of all people (*kung*) against the egoism of individuals and groups. (Kim:7)

The existing social convention tends to become a standard for consensus and this is usually the case in Japanese society where the Confucian ethic of harmony is influential. In order to maintain the harmony in a community, the atmosphere or air can be the leading factor in decision-making. A community is primarily concerned with internal affairs and all external

concerns are secondary because the primary or closer relationships tend to be more important than the others. The important thing is to encourage favor or a favorable evaluation among the members of the community rather than making contributions outside of the community.

When consensus is prevented from being realized, the failure is attributed to a lack of effort to realize *harmony* or a lack of sincerity on the part of others. As a consequence such people or groups tend to be excluded for the reason that they are not seeking *harmony*.⁵ Most people are not critical of the norms of the group but tend to accept them unconsciously and naturally. That is why they think that order within a group can be maintained and realized not through transcendent norms or ideas, but rather by the sincerity of the parties who seek peace. Those who have different opinions and ideas tend to be excluded or to be considered strange or stubborn persons.⁶ For example, at the time of decision making, the dynamics or the atmosphere of the group making a decision becomes more important than the principle on which a decision might be based. Maintaining harmony and getting a consensus supersedes the ideal. The dynamics of a decision-making body can be as changeable as the air. Therefore, people outside of the community often don't see the logic of decision-making. In this sense there is no accountability which is one of the most important factors in this international and democratic society.

In addition, no one person takes responsibility for a decision because, in reality, the air or atmosphere is responsible for the final decision. Thus, the important factor in this community is the atmosphere that contributes to getting along with others. Thus, "an orientation toward the interest of all people (*kung*) against the egoism of individuals and groups" cannot safeguard justice, unless there are wise people (sages) who hear the Mandate of the Heaven, participate in the decision making process and influence it.

4. THE PROBLEM OF COLLECTIVE EGOISM AND UNIVERSAL ALTRUISM.

We can see positive aspect in the Confucian ethic of harmony and believe that this ethic is rich in terms of service to others or altruistic actions. At a time when Western excessive individualism seems to be destroying the family and the community, we need to rehabilitate the Confucian ethic of harmony and enhance universal altruism without lapsing into collective egoism. We must try to apply the altruistic reciprocity of a small community to a much larger society.

5. Susumu Shimazono, p. 42.

Many Japanese Buddhists are optimistic that this can be achieved. Harmony can be realized in a local community, a company, a nation, and even in the international community among people of different cultures. It is the experience of selflessness or the experience of being released from the self-centered ego.

New religions vary in their opinions but “some religious groups understand the meaning of universal altruistic duty and advocate its practice, and show a new direction of altruism in a society which intensifies individualistic tendency.”⁷

Robert Kisala made a case study of Tenrikyo and Rissho Kosei-kai in terms of altruism.⁸ As far as RK is concerned, its ethic of everyday life has its doctrine of universal altruism on the basis of populace’s traditional Confucian morality. That is to say, ordinary morality is reinforced by Confucian morality and the virtues derived from Buddhism such as compassion and equality. These ethical implications are working through the teachings and actions of the founder and founderess.

“After the second world harmony, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano whose activities centered around a big metropolitan urban city advocated strengthening the solidarity of the family and local community in modern society and devoted himself to religious cooperation in order to solve social issues at an international level.” RK which is based on the international religious tradition of Buddhism tends to acquire an international character and is easily able to contribute to international aid activities. However, Kisala questions how far RK’s ethic is working to change the social structure. It does, however, work hard to tackle social issues by emphasizing the sovereignty of human beings, the meaning of life, and fostering the self-respect and self reliance of third world people who need aid. This is a little bit different from the approach that stresses the importance of social structure and theory.

5. ECOLOGICAL FEMINISM AND THE REHABILITATION OF CONFUCIAN ETHIC OF HARMONY.

The crucial difference between Confucianism and Taoism lies in the importance given to different kinds of harmony. The former emphasizes societal harmony while the latter gives priority to cosmic harmony. Even though the two emphasize the same virtue, the end results are quite different. On the one hand, the Confucianism values human effort and the culti-

7. Robert Kisala *Gendai Shyukyo to Shakai Rinri* [現代宗教と社會倫理](Seikyusha) p. 168

8. Kisala, *ibid.*

vation of moral values. Education, knowledge, ritual propriety (*li*) and the other three human relational values are all important. On the other, Taoism maintains that intentional human effort is harmful to the attainment of cosmic harmony.

Apart from the exploitation of minorities and women, modern society has also witnessed the destruction of the environment.

Professor Yayoi Aoki tries to grasp the problems of feminism and ecology from the same perspective and stresses the need for a paradigm change. She believes that the realization of feminism will be in the transformation of the relationships between men and women. At the same time ecological thought tries to transform the relationship between humans and the Nature. Without reconsidering human civilization as a whole, the paradigm shift cannot occur. Professor Kim's reference to Professor Chen Chung-ying is suggestive. One unity, *Tao*, "is not static, but creative and the basis for producing and strengthening harmony as a system of integration of differences" (Cheng Chung-ying:140) In this context, a new understanding of the Confucian and Taoist notion of *yin* and *yang* becomes more important than ever.

6. THE IMPORTANCE OF VENERATION ANCESTOR

According to Professor Nobuyuki Kaji, the idea of *hsiao* (filial piety) is the central religious notion of Confucianism. It is the connection between the morality and the religion of Confucianism. In Confucianism the veneration of family ancestors plays a significant role. It helps restore family unity and, in a practical sense, can mean remembering family ancestors, telling children the stories of our parents' and grandparents' lives and sharing family burdens and hopes with the next generation. This veneration creates what *Habits of the Heart* calls a "community of memory".⁹ In order to live a meaningful life, the individual must be related to communities of memory, because they provide a sense of history for the individual and locate him/her in the past, present and future. The book *Habits of the Heart* says,

The communities of memory that tie us to the past also turn us toward the future as communities of hope. They carry a context of meaning that can allow us to connect our aspirations for ourselves and those close to us with the aspirations of a larger whole and see our own efforts as being, in part, contributions to a common good.¹⁰

Unfortunately, in contemporary Japan, we are forgetting community and so each family is having difficulty holding onto a shared family consciousness.

9. *Habits of the Heart*, op. cit., p. 153.

10. *ibid.*

7. THE COMPATIBILITY WITH BUDDHIST IDEA

Many Japanese Buddhists see the value of harmony as one of the highest, and interprets the Buddhist ideal state, *nirvāna* (quiescence), as the dynamism of creation and harmony. In order to explain *nirvāna*, they understand it not merely as a state of mental peace and quietness, but the dynamic interplay of creation and harmony. It is like the music that results from the dynamic performance of a symphony orchestra.

The ethic of harmony is concerned with appropriate and subtle human relationships within a community. It is based upon a sense of hierarchical order and yet it is not rigidly supported by a system of normative principles. Rather it is based on a flexible sense of habits (customs) and the past experiences of a community.

The realization of harmony can be backed up by past life experiences in closer human relationships within the family, among relatives, or within a small social group to which he or she belongs.

A community has a great sense of security and belonging. The face-to-face relationship or the primary relationship is very efficient, solid and reliable for the members inside and decision making is easy and unanimous. It is extremely good as long as all goes well, and there is no crisis.

The norm of harmony functions to unite people and encourage them to develop a community sense of solidarity. On this topic Mr. Susumu Shimazono says,

This moral consciousness has an optimistic foundation in that it is built on the idea that interests and conflicts of ideas basically can be overcome. Each of us has sincerity and good will, and each of us can behave appropriately according to the situation, time and place. Modern Japanese think that a state of harmony and unity which goes beyond conflict can be realized without fail. However, this kind of harmony and unity can not be realized simply by every one following some common principles or basic rules. Instead these can be realized through being obedient to the dynamics of rationality within their own community. For the parties concerned, the point is not to be opportunistic in every situation, but to feel oneness with the current of nature which is beyond humanity.¹¹

CONCLUDING REMARKS.

The Confucian ethic of harmony is faced with major challenges in our borderless and global age. The traditional ethic of harmony is effective and can

11. Susumu Shimazono, p. 42

work for a traditional culture but may ignore the minority or make the minority become invisible. Yet, this can be overcome by the universal ethic of altruism found in the Confucian ethic of harmony. We have to awaken to the heterogeneous society of the world and learn how to get along with different cultures and races. We have to learn communication skills to gain mutual understanding in this heterogeneous and international society. We also have to make implicit and tacit customs and invisible rules explicit in order to communicate with people of different cultures and traditions. In this respect, the interaction between different cultures and races can provide a great dynamism for East Asian people. Through such cultural exchanges and communication we can find common ground and come to some reasonable agreements so that the international community can be maintained and become prosperous.