

Taoist and Confucian Contributions to Harmony in East Asia: Christians in dialogue with Confucian Thought and Taoist Spirituality.

Final Statement

1. INTRODUCTION

Between 15-19 April 1996, 52 participants from 10 Asian countries gathered at Lei Li-O, the T'ienti Chiao Research Center in Nant'ou Hsien, Taiwan , R.O.C., for a seminar on the theme: Taoist and Confucian Contributions to Harmony in East Asia: Christians in dialogue with Confucian Thought and Taoist Spirituality. The participants studied the elements of the Confucian, and Taoist traditions which provide both an understanding of cosmic, interpersonal and interior personal harmony and a way to achieve that harmony. They examined the role of popular religious traditions in offering a sense of identity and dignity to their adherents, as well as a world view to unite the human with heaven.

From this conceptual basis, the participants reflected on harmony in Christianity, Confucian thought and Taoist spirituality. Finally, they explored the ways that modern believers in East Asian societies can profit from the philosophical and religious traditions of the region to form their own personal syntheses.

2. Confucian Contribution to Harmony in East Asia

The contribution of Confucianism to harmony basically begins from *Jen*. *Jen*, benevolence, is the inner core of the human being, the origin of all human values and the perfection of virtues. It is identical with the nature of heaven. Confucianism, a discipline that may be called "the learning of life", puts special emphasis on the cultivation of one's own self. Through the realization of the inner concept of morality, *Jen* aims at mastering the self and returning to the rites, ultimately seeking a harmonious relationship between human beings. Through self-reflection and self-realization, one can possess a loving heart, extending from the individual to others, until finally all people of the world are embraced in harmony. Confucianism also emphasizes the harmony between heaven and the human. It attains its ultimate fulfillment in the unification of heaven and human beings.

Since harmony is at the core of Confucianism, the maintenance of social stability is of utmost concern. In Confucius' ideal world, everyone has a personal identity and should act according to defined ethical and moral norms. This well-defined code provides a firm foundation for building strong bonds among family members. On this basis, social stability can be achieved.

The sequential order of self-strengthening from the personal to the social dimension is hierarchical. While the code of the "Five Relations" is reciprocal and that of the "Three Bonds" is one-sided, the contemporary challenge is to reinterpret the idea of the Five Relations, preserving it as a unifying power while recognizing the distinction between men and women as valid and valuable without exploiting that difference or feeling threatened by it. Then a true harmony will be achieved between sexes and in family life. This is an area that needs further reflection and development.

3. TAOIST CONTRIBUTIONS TO HARMONY IN EAST ASIA

Throughout Chinese history, Confucianism and Taoism have played complementary roles in sustaining the mundane and trans-mundane life of the Chinese people. While the former took charge of the outer life of Chinese people by providing them with politics and a family system, the latter offered them an interior path towards harmony with Nature or *Tao*. In Taoism, whether it be philosophical or religious, harmony is the most important goal to be achieved. The *Tao* is itself the most perfect harmony, often represented in the form of *T'ai Chi* ☯. This is perhaps the most perfect symbol of establishing a harmony of the two generative forces in the universe, *yin* and *yang*.

Insofar as the path toward harmony is concerned, Taoist uniqueness lies in its emphasis on spiritual cultivation, compared to the Confucian stress on interpersonal relationships. Distinguishing between philosophical and religious Taoism (always a controversial subject), we find a slight difference between these two systems in the way each pursues harmony. Philosophical Taoists prefer to take an intellectual approach to attain an ultimate harmony, *Tao*, whereas religious Taoists choose to follow the physical and spiritual way of cultivation one's body and nature.

Becoming one with *Tao*, the ultimate aim of philosophical Taoism, can be achieved only by philosophical awakening to the virtue of *wu-wei*, which can be translated as non-action or non-striving. Practically speaking, when a philosophical Taoist reaches the state of *wu-wei*, the person is emancipated from all human-made fixations of language, concepts, and prejudices which are the main cause of disharmony. At this stage, every

action the person takes follows the way of Nature and a perfect harmony of life is achieved.

Religious Taoists tend to emphasize physical and spiritual practice as the way to achieve the ultimate state of immortality. Aside from the external way of becoming an immortal by taking an elixir compounded of many metals, the Taoist religion also offers various interior practices to refine one's bodily ch'i. When the body achieves the purity of original ch'i, one is awakened to the inner self and becomes an immortal, a new self in union with Tao. At this stage, religious Taoists achieve not only trans-physical immortality, but also the philosophical enlightenment of wu-wei.

In both philosophical and religious approaches, Taoism advocates the pursuit of inner freedom and immortality. Taoists contribute to social harmony, not by interfering with mundane affairs, by remaining in silence. According to Taoists, Confucians try too hard to lead and direct people and this makes society more chaotic. Leaving people as they are and nature as it is is the Taoist way to bring harmony to society.

4. POPULAR BELIEF AND HARMONY

Popular belief incorporates many elements of Confucian and Taoist thought and has considerable influence on the popular world view. It was, until very recently, only taken seriously by its own proponents. Modern society tends to look down on it as primitive and superstitious, and at the academic level there has been opposition to its inclusion in serious studies alongside those of established religions and philosophies. Systematic studies in popular religion begin to feature more in dialogue meetings and academic conferences.

The basic supposition of popular belief is that the human person is a spiritual being living in a spirit-filled, mutually interacting and interdependent world. The underlying aim of customs, ritual, worship, etc. is the maintenance of harmony between humankind and the natural world.

In the discussion, two approaches to the study of popular religion emerged. One postulated an underlying metaphysic, a collective consciousness, passed down from generation to generation. This can be detected at the level of attitudes and values whereby the meaning and purpose of life are addressed, though not in the explicit way of the metaphysic of the organized religions. This is not a fixed system but rather, a constantly changing entity, always assimilating new fragments and showing a collective creativity.

The other approach begins from the level of religious experience, that sense of awe and wonder which arises from one's existential experience of

spirits and nature and sharing a common destiny with them. It is this religious experience, not a set of concepts or social values, which gives rise to and maintains the impetus in popular belief.

In practice, popular belief provides for the emotional and religious needs of the human person. To its adherents, the rituals and ceremonies of popular religion helps to bring about harmony in the individual, within the community, and between the individual and nature. If for no other reason, popular religion deserves further study and elaboration.

5. CHRISTIAN CONTRIBUTION TO HARMONY IN EAST ASIA

The notion of harmony, though not the term itself, is a major theme of Christianity. Like “peace”, the term can express the sum total of salvation offered by God through Jesus Christ. Christianity teaches a threefold harmony: harmony with God, among humans, and with the whole universe. Union with a personal God is viewed as the source of all genuine harmony. Lao Tzu’s Tao is impersonal. Confucian teaching does not insist on a personal relationship with Tien. Christianity presents a God who is clearly personal even though the concept of God finds a transpersonal understanding in the mystical tradition. A harmonious relationship with this personal God is the basis for all proper relations among humans and with the world.

It is often thought that a personal god would be in conflict with human persons. A God with free will who is all powerful would exercise oppressive control over humans. This is not the case. The transcendental anthropology of contemporary theologians points out that, far from being oppressive, God is the natural fulfillment of humans. The Christian God is a loving God who created human beings in God’s image and destined them to share God’s own life in a free response. Irenaeus, one the early Fathers of the Church, affirmed that the glory of God consists precisely in rendering humans fully alive.

To prove this immense love for mankind, God gave Jesus Christ to the world so that men and women might become God’s children by participating in Jesus’ filial relationship with God. This filial relationship is the essence of Christian existence. The Christian’s filial relationship with God necessarily implies relationship with others as brothers and sisters. For this reason, the one Christian commandment of love bears a twofold aspect: love of God and love of neighbor. Negation of love is the capital sin in Christian life. In complete surrender to the Father and total dedication to his fellow human beings, Christ is the supreme example of this twofold love and the source of harmony between god and humans.

6. CHRISTIAN FAITH IN DIALOGUE WITH CONFUCIAN THOUGHT AND TAOIST SPIRITUALITY IN EAST ASIA

Coming into living contact with Confucian thought—a complex system of ethical teaching based on the benevolent design of God and expressed in an orderly scheme of human relationships—Christianity finds a friendly and mutually enriching partner in dialogue. Christians are reminded of the central value of the family and the importance of social order, which should also be an integral part of Christian life. On the other hand, Christianity makes a contribution by explicitly fostering a filial relationship to a personal God. Another contribution can be offered to the social order of Asian countries by Christianity's preferential option for the poor.

In addition to the Biblical teaching of harmony between God and humans, St. Paul teaches harmony with the whole of creation, especially through the ideal of “recapitulation” - putting all things under Christ as head. Unfortunately, due to their anthropocentric emphasis, Christians have for too long neglected the cosmic dimension of the Christian vocation. In our time, contemporary theologians have restored the idea of a cosmic Christ and stressed human harmony with the universe.

In a special way, Confucianism and Taoism contemplate the unity of the whole universe, with humanity as part of it. Lao-Tzu presents *wu-wei* (non-action) as the basic characteristic of Tao and of the true sage. Instead of manipulating and unduly interfering with the created world, one should respect and follow the natural course and rhythm of nature. Dialogue with Taoist spirituality should inspire Christians to a greater sense of respect for and harmony with nature by reducing the desire to control and through the adoption of a simple way of life. Moreover, the idea of Tao as *wu* also invited Christians to explore and rediscover the mystical tradition deeply rooted in Christianity. At the same time, the tripersonal God of Christianity that is both hidden and manifest, *wu* and *yu*, transcendent and immanent, may find resonance in some of the key concepts in Taoism and help to elucidate these concepts.

7. CONCLUSION

We, the participants from the Taoist, Confucian and Christian traditions, have spent these days together sharing the richness of our respective teachings. The main focus of the conference was at the level of systems of thought. The practical contributions of each tradition to harmony in society and the personal experience at the base of Confucian and Taoist world views must remain for another time. The following quotation from the Tao Te Ching was thought most appropriate to point the way forward:

I have just three things to teach:
simplicity, patience, compassion.
These three are your greatest treasures.
Simple in actions and in thoughts, you return to
the source of being.
Patient with both friends and enemies, in accord
with the way things are.
Compassionate toward yourself,
you bring all being in the world into harmony
(Tao Te Ching, 67)