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Essays

Sino-Christian Theology at a Crossroads:

Ku Hung-ming and James Legge

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In his Preface to the English translation of the *Analects* and his other essays including “Chinese Scholarship: Part I”, Ku Hung-ming (1857-1928) expressed respect for the work of James Legge (1815-1897), but with a note of sarcasm.¹ For him, “Dr. Legge’s judgment on the value of these works [i.e. the Chinese Classics] cannot by any means be accepted as final, and the translator of the Chinese Classics is yet to come.”² According to Ku’s own autobiographical report and textual studies by other scholars, this preface was written in 1883 or 1884, and Ku’s English translation of the *Analects* was published several years later, in 1898. Taking his personality into consideration, it is quite probable that the “yet-to-come translator” he mentioned actually referred to Ku himself.

Ku qualified his New Special Translation of the *Analects* as “illustrated with quotations from Goethe and other writers” and expressed his aim “to make Confucius and his disciples speak in the same way as an educated



Englishman would speak”.³ However, his Confucius was not really as “Western” as he wanted him to be. Let us consider his translation of 我欲仁斯仁至矣 in *Analects*, VII, 29.

Ku translated the sentence thus: “If a man will only wish to live a moral life, there and then his life becomes moral”.⁴ Strictly speaking, Ku’s translation unavoidably “altered” the meaning of the text. He rendered 仁至 (“*Ren comes*”) as “[man’s] life becomes moral”. At first glance, the phrase “become moral” might echo well the phrase “become just” in previous paragraphs, but for Westerners and especially Western theologians, this “become just” must always presuppose God’s grace, and there is a vast difference between “wish[ing] to be moral” and “becom[ing] moral”. Man can only “be justified”, “be made just” or “be considered just” by God. Here, man is only acted upon by God’s grace in a rather passive manner.

By contrast, Legge translated the sentence as “I wish to be virtuous, and lo! virtue is at hand”.⁵ The difference between Ku’s “become moral” and Legge’s “virtue is at hand” is indeed very great, so great that even their translations of 為仁由己而由人乎哉 in *Analects*, XII, 1 are also vastly different.

Ku, in the spirit of the previous example, translated the sentence not as a question, but as a positive proposition: “To be moral, a man depends entirely upon himself, and not upon others.”⁶ Here we can at least make two observations.

Ku translated the word 仁 in the same way as “moral” in both sentences. It was straightforward and there was no difficulty for him at all to regard “becoming moral” as “entirely depending upon oneself”. In contrast, Legge would have to avoid reaching such a conclusion. In fact, he translated 仁 differently, in the first sentence as “virtue” and in the second as “perfect virtue”. According to the Christian conception, what is perfect is never reachable by mere man. For example, “the Perfect” or “the Complete” in 1 Cor. 13:10 refers actually to Jesus Christ. Legge also translated 仁 as “perfect virtue” in the next paragraph, XII, 2, where Chung-kung asked about 仁, and the Master replied by stating the Golden Rule of “not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself”. Legge’s rendering 仁 as “perfect virtue” thus also affects our understanding of the status of the Golden Rule.

Furthermore, Legge, by drawing support from Zhu Xi’s Commentary, even interpreted 歸 (“to return”) of 天下歸仁 in *Analects*, XII, 1 as 與 (“to allow”) in the sense of ascribing. He rendered 天下歸仁 as “all under heaven will ascribe perfect virtue to him” instead of Ku’s “the world would become moral”.⁷ Drawing support from another commentary, Legge also interpreted 歸仁 as “[everybody] will praise his perfect virtue”. For Legge, the world could not just “become moral” or “return to the state of being moral” merely through human efforts, just as the world could not just “become justified” or “become sanctified” merely through human means. The Christian way of thinking requires that man is only acted upon by divine grace in a rather passive manner. In this regard, 為仁由己而由人乎哉 certainly ought to be understood as a genuine question: “Is the practice of perfect virtue from a man himself, or is it from others?”⁷

The translation of ideas between two cultures is subtle but wonderful, yet always accompanied by the risk of “over-interpretation”. In fact, Ku’s impulse of “interpreting Confucianism through Christianity” (以耶釋儒) was

sometimes even greater than Legge’s. For instance, Ku translated 使民如承大祭 in *Analects*, XII, 2 as “in dealing with the people, act as if you were at worship before God”, while Legge just translated it as “to employ the people as if you were assisting at a great sacrifice”.⁸

On the other hand, Legge rendered 命 (or 天命) just as “the decrees of Heaven”, or “the ordinance of Heaven”.⁹ But Ku, in order to justify his claim that “Confucius also believed in God, although he seldom spoke of it”, translated 五十而知天命 in *Analects*, II, 4 initially as “At fifty I knew the Ordinance of God” and 不知命無以為君子也 in *Analects*, XX, 3 initially as “A man without a knowledge of the Ordinance of God, i.e., the Divine Order of the Universe, will not be able to be a gentleman or moral man”.¹⁰ Nevertheless, in his final translation of the *Analects*, Ku rendered the sentences as “At fifty I understood the truth in religion” and “Without religion, a man cannot be a good and wise man” respectively.¹¹

Translating 天命 as “the Ordinance of God” is quite an over-interpretation, while translating it as “the truth in religion” is quite an under-interpretation. Between the lines of these options, how can Confucianism and Christianity really come into contact and understand each other? In my opinion, Ku’s efforts may perhaps have just created the appearance of a union between Confucianism and Christianity at the surface level, while Legge’s translation implicitly reveals his concern with the inner theoretical possibility of such a union. ■

*Translated by LO Kwun Lam

1 Ku Hung-ming, *The Discourses and Sayings of Confucius: A New Special Translation, Illustrated with Quotations from Goethe and Other Writers* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1898), pp. vii-viii.

2 Ku Hung-ming, *The Spirit of the Chinese People* (Peking: The Peking Daily News, 1915), p. 135.

3 Ku, *The Discourses and Sayings of Confucius*, pp. iii, viii.

4 Ibid., p. 55.

5 James Legge, *The Chinese Classics, with a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes*, Vol. I (London: Trübner & Co., 1861), p. 68.

6 Ku, *The Discourses and Sayings of Confucius*, p. 95.

7 Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, pp. 114-115.

8 Ku, *The Discourses and Sayings of Confucius*, p. 96; Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, p. 115.

9 Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, pp. 11, 177, 218.

10 Ku, *The Spirit of the Chinese People*, pp. 46-47.

11 Ku, *The Discourses and Sayings of Confucius*, pp. 8, 182.

The China Question of Christian Political Ethics

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As early as in the 1960s, facing the turbulence in the West, Albert van den Heuvel, former Director of Communication of the World Council of Churches, did not hesitate to point out that bureaucratic state and commercial oligarchy had become a repressive complex and were enslaving people in hidden ways. Against this background, he encouraged young people to expose these new powers fearlessly in order to live out the freedom that God has promised and fulfilled. In contemporary China, however, church leaders and scholars have paid tremendous attention to the increasingly restrictive policies by the party-state and sought strategic responses, but failed to distinguish the attributes of the powers represented by the successive political regimes and their profound influence on the public. To maintain *prophetic* concerns, we need to go beyond the policy concerns and reflect on the fundamental principles of state governance.

Christian political ethics offers a disciplinary lens to respond to the political, economic, and cultural hegemonies in the context of contemporary China in accordance with Christian normative standpoints. Researchers in this field must be familiar with the historical change from revolutionary communism to militant neoliberalism and understand its underlying rationale. They must also be concerned with the scale and impact of these two different types of regimes. More importantly, they are obligated to explore and articulate robust ethical accounts, reminding people of political and ideological traps, while at the same time cultivating civic virtues in various fields of practice.

The Sino-Christian scholarship has paid more and more attention to the above issues recently. For instance, Dr. Jason Tsz-shun LAM's *Being, History, Sacred: A Reflection on the Contemporary Sino Theologico-Political Discourses* (Logos and Pneuma Press, 2016) and Dr. Alexander CHOW's *Chinese Public Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2017) are the newest outcomes. What these two pioneering works have in common is a critical examination of the major cultural and political issues of contemporary China as well as a practical response to them from a comparative



ethical perspective. Future researchers may learn from their examples by putting emphasis on *practical concerns* and *comparative perspectives*. Furthermore, I believe that in order to respond to contemporary Chinese issues more effectively, people need to pay special attention to thinkers from different ethical traditions. On one hand, their thinking must include certain kinds of problematic parallel to the Chinese question. On the other hand, their ideas can provide inspiring and constructive ethical agenda. In my view, Christian theologian Karl Barth and Neo-Confucian philosopher MOU Zongsan have set a good example to us.

Firstly, both thinkers were the standard-bearers of the ethical traditions in their respective contexts. Barth's voluminous work *Church Dogmatics* and MOU's volumes of late works are all evidence of it. Following their distinctive paradigms, we can provide a new set of directions of ethical dialogue in the context of contemporary China, especially with respect to the methods of comparative scriptures. Secondly, as active public intellectuals, both thinkers articulated their ethical claims that responded to the most challenging issues of their turbulent times. In the social and political arenas, for instance, both were dedicated to steadfast resistance to various forms of hegemonies and shared constant concerns of democracy, freedom and justice in our communal life.

I think there is a connection between their moral beliefs and political engagement which deserves further exploration. They were committed to exploring robust forms of political ethics indebted to their religious or moral traditions. For them, a genuine sense of *responsibility* should be understood as *a free response to the supreme person(s) in contextual relationships*. This conception of responsibility implies that being a good person is not defined by a certain state of affairs or abstract principles; it is rather a self-actualizing process towards authentic moral subjectivity. For Barth, the process points to *Jesus Christ as the Word of God*; for MOU Zongsan, it points to the Confucian *sages*. It is this common pursuit that makes their moral theories of responsibility relevant and inspirational for contemporary ethical reflection.

In short, in the context of a Chinese neoliberal regime led by a strongman, it is of crucial significance for the enterprise of Sino-Christian theology to raise the question of how the Christian community can cultivate healthy public ethics and thus promote constructive internal and external dialogues. If the practitioners of Christian political ethics, a sub-field of Sino-Christian theology, can cultivate a distinct Chinese question, an open attitude towards different traditions and a comparative perspective, they will, no doubt, reach new frontiers and make new voices in our age. ■

Special Report



Prof. Jürgen Moltmann Visited Hong Kong

Our old friend and cooperating partner, renowned German theologian Prof. Jürgen Moltmann visited Hong Kong in April 2018. During his visit, we arranged a series of academic activities for him. On 23 April, we cooperated with the Centre for Christian Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong to host the public event “In Dialogue with Jürgen Moltmann: Hong Kong Expert Forum”. The opening welcome speeches were given by Prof. Simon Shui-Man KWAN, Acting Director of the Divinity School of Chung Chi College, CUHK, and Rev. Dr. LAU Tze Yui, Chairperson of ISCS’s Board of Directors. The event continued with Prof. Francis YIP as the conveyor. Prof. Jason LAM, our Academic Officer, Prof. LAI Pan-chiu, Interim Dean of the Faculty of Arts at CUHK, and Prof. KWOK Wai Luen from the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Hong Kong Baptist University presented papers in relation to Moltmann’s thought with Moltmann’s own responses following. The topics presented are as follows:

Prof. Jason LAM	On the Subject of Hope: A Reflection on the Proximity between Theology and Philosophy in Moltmann’s Thought
Prof. KWOK Wai Luen	The Chinese Church and its Mission: A Dialogue with Moltmann’s Ecclesiology
Prof. LAI Pan-chiu	In Dialogue with Moltmann on Ethics of Hope



Both the academia and ecclesia of Hong Kong warmly received this event, and the lecture hall was filled. Some people had even come from Mainland China and Taiwan to attend it. Our Distinguished Professor Dr. Milton WAN ended the day with his concluding remarks.

On 25 April, ISCS invited Prof. Moltmann to visit Tao Fong Shan and we hosted an internal seminar for him. Director Daniel YEUNG used many photos from the past to show the participants our long-term cooperation with Prof. Moltmann. In fact, we have been working with him since the establishment of ISCS in 1995. The seminar was conveyed by two former Chinese students of his: Rev. Prof. LIN Hong-hsin from Taiwan Graduate School of Theology, and Prof. HONG Liang from China Graduate School of Theology in Hong Kong, who is also our Guest Research Fellow. 20



experts from Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong of different age groups gathered together. Apart from Prof. Moltmann and the two conveyors, other speakers included Dr. YANG Huaming from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Prof. Andres TANG from Hong Kong Baptist Theological Seminary, Prof. Pilgrim LO from the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong, Prof. Jason LAM from ISCS, and Prof. Samuel CHIOU from China Evangelical Seminary, Taiwan. They explored the significance and contribution of Moltmann's thought to Chinese academia and to Chinese churches. A study group was established and will meet yearly to promote related research topics.



That same afternoon, we invited Prof. Moltmann to visit the seashore of Sai Kung. There Rev. Prof. Joshua CHO, President of Hong Kong Baptist Theological Seminary and also our Board Member, and other scholars had dinner and fellowship together.

Highlights of Activities by Our Visiting Scholars Abroad

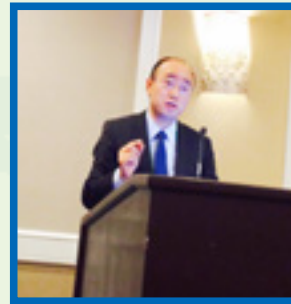
Prof. Milton WAN's Visit to Oxford

From 26 to 28 March 2018, our Distinguished Professor Dr. Milton WAN, during his research visit to England, visited the Bodleian Libraries at the University of Oxford to gather research data for his writing project on "Art and Theology".

During his Oxford visit, he also met with Prof. Markus Bockmuehl, a renowned scholar in Biblical and Early Christian Studies from the Faculty of Theology and Religion at Keble College, University of Oxford. They also discussed the arrangements of Dr. Bockmuehl's upcoming visits to Hong Kong and Beijing.



Prof. Thomas Xutong QU's Visit to Princeton



From January to June 2018, Prof. Thomas Xutong QU, our Guest Research Fellow in Mainland China, continued his one-year research visit in Princeton Theological Seminary. In mid-March, he went to Los Angeles in order to visit Prof.

Diane Obenchain at Fuller Seminary as well as to attend a seminar which was organized by the Chinese Evangelical Theological Fellowship, concerning the recent developments and trends in Sino-Christian theology. During his research visit in the United States, Prof. QU also represented ISCS and conducted interviews with renowned scholars. These included Prof. Eric Gregory from the Department of Religion at the University of Princeton, Prof. Gordon Mikoski, and Prof. Kathleen McVey both from Princeton Theological Seminary. He shared with them the current situation of ISCS, as well as the basic characteristics of the Sino-Christian Theology Movement. During this same time, Prof. QU was also working as the Guest Editor for a special issue of the Brill Yearbook of Chinese Theology on the topic "Karl Barth and Chinese Context", and for a special issue or a special section on Karl Barth with the title "Immer neu mit dem Anfang anfangen". He was also making arrangements for a visit to China by Prof. Bruce McCormack and Prof. Günther Thomas, both distinguished Barthian scholars, to take place in the first half of 2019. These academic activities are to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the publication of the first edition of Karl Barth's *Römerbrief*, and the delivery of his famous Tambach lecture "The Christian in Society".

Prof. Jason LAM's Visit to Australia

From mid-May to mid-June 2018, our Academic Officer Prof. Jason LAM visited Melbourne School of Theology as a visiting scholar. This School is one of the major members of the Australian College of



Theology, and its Chinese department is the first to offer recognized theological degree courses in Australia. Prof. LAM was invited by Rev. Dr. Justin TAN, Academic Vice-Principal of the School and a long term partner of ISCS, to participate in two conferences: the first was the "Paradosis Conference: Christian Ethics Today" on 18 May, and then "The Contemporary Meaning of the Decalogue" on 21