

Lutheran Theology and Chinese Religion

Colleagues,

Here is the second sample of Lutheran Theology tossed our way by a Singapore sling.

Peace & Joy!

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Upon reflections on what I learned from the Lutheran Distinctive course, below are what I perceived are some important pastoral applications for my parishioners who came from Chinese ethical and religious backgrounds.

I need to be constantly aware that Christians from Chinese Confucian backgrounds are often tempted to set up a code of ethical conduct, a lists of rights and wrongs for our fellow Christians to follow and abide with so that they are acceptable to God. They treat the Bible as a manual for Christian conduct and ethics, and judge others according to our own legalistic interpretation of it. On the extreme they may cast doubt on the salvation of others or pronounce them “back-slided” based on such criteria. The irony is that they may then be preaching the law without the gospel.

Chinese Christians habitually look to the Bible for rules to follow rather than to hear the gospel through it. This is

because their parents often quote from Chinese classics as norms and rules for life. In China in the past the Imperial exams for scholars were based on these classics, their understanding and practice. This is similar to the Jew who searched the Torah for rules to follow and even expanded on them until they had thousands of regulations.

They may also accentuate this problem by running to their pastors and asking “Can I do this and that,” just as in the Analects and other classics where Confucius often taught morals and ethics through answers to his students. They treat their pastors thus as Chinese sages of the past who used to dispense such advice. Pastors are therefore tempted to “dig” into their Bible feverishly hoping to give a definitive biblical yes or no. Otherwise they may be perceived to be Biblically ignorant. But the danger is that they may end up wresting scriptures out of context to do so. In the Lutheran understanding, God gave the Christians freedom. They are responsible for their own action, that is, what they do with their freedom. The role of the pastor is to provide discernment through his wider and deeper knowledge of scriptures and church traditions.

Since that is the case, I ask myself, is there any place or role for Confucian ethics and Chinese traditions in the life of Christians who are saved by God from the Chinese culture? For the Lutheran understanding there is. Such ethics can contribute towards the first use of the law – the “civil” use. They can help to preserve and organize the community in the face of sin. The Confucian Law of Reciprocity, Concept of Correspondence, Doctrine of the Mean, and sincerity can all contribute positively to preserving peace and harmony. But they must be used with proper discernment and must not hinder or destroy the proclamation of the Gospel. They may be of some use in promoting Christian sanctification.

I need to teach [my parishioners] that philosophies, ethical and religious practices, on their own do not save. This is because of two important reasons: firstly, the law despite being the perfect eternal will of God cannot save. So how can anything devised and deduced by man save? Secondly, only God, the Giver of the law, the Creator, can save his creatures. Man cannot save himself. If he thinks he can, he is trying to play God's role. So let God be God. Indeed Paul has an apt warning in Colossians 2:8: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy." Luther in his commentary on Galatians noted that "There were many excellent men among the pagans of old, men who never heard of justification. They lived moral lives. But that fact did not justify them."

In fact, man has an idolatrous tendency, to violate the First commandment—You shall have no other gods before me—leading to the notion that he can somehow contribute something to save himself, to put himself in God's role. This is the initial great sin committed by Lucifer, of exalting self in the place of God. On this point, Luther wrote in his Large Catechism "...the trust and faith of the heart alone makes both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then God is the true God. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you have not the true God... If anyone boasts of great learning, wisdom, power,...he also has a god, but not the one true God."

Another implication of the law pertains to the Chinese religious practices for personal survival and self-realization. It must be realized that such practices ultimately bring death instead of survival or self-realization. They are like the law which brings death on its own, without the gospel. The law kills not so much because it is law but that no one can fulfill its righteous demands. Chinese religious values and practices can also potentially kill because they cannot satisfy the wrath and demands of the Holy God against sin and atone for it.

Paul wrote "for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Luther explains in his sermon on 2 Corinthians 3:4-11, that "the spirit gives life...is naught else but the holy Gospel, a message of healing and salvation.... It wrests the saddened heart out of the jaws of death and hell, as it were, and transports it to the certain hope of eternal life." Another story in the Gospel also illustrates this fact in an interesting manner in Mark 2:1-13. A paralytic was brought by his four kind friends to Jesus for healing. But because of the huge crowd they could not get anywhere near him. They concocted an ingenious scheme to dig an opening in the roof above Jesus and gingerly lowered him down on an improvised stretcher. Such great faith!

But what was the first thing Jesus said to the paralytic man? For a Confucianist the answer should be "Be healed!" This is what the man needs now in this life here on earth. But contrary to Confucian thinking, Jesus said to the paralytic "Son, your sins are forgiven" after which Jesus healed him. Thus the Gospel has the power to remove the fear of damnation. When people are not fearful anymore they have the power to serve. It represents a paradigm shift to the Chinese. They need to know that true religion is not about following a way or path to a goal of self-realization or immortality. Such paths will inevitably lead to death. True religion is about what God has done through Christ for us.

Confucianism as a philosophy and ethical system is basically man-centered. It is for the cultivation and realization of the human nature and supposedly innate goodness in man. From the perspective of the law there are two major problems: firstly, the law convinces us that we are not to depend and not able to depend on our self-effort for personal survival. Let God be God. We cannot save ourselves. Secondly, Confucianism assumes that human nature is basically good and that all are born alike until they acquire knowledge. But that contradicts what the law

reveals about us. We are born sinners and by nature sinful and unclean. We need not acquire any knowledge to sin, we are sinners from the start. The Formula of Concord, Epitome Art.1.8 points out, "original sin is not a slight corruption of human nature, but is so deep a corruption that nothing sound or uncorrupted has survived in man's body or soul."

Another shortcoming of practicing Confucianism is that one may unwittingly underestimate the magnitude of sin in God's sight. Luther in his commentary on Galatians 1:4 noted:

"How may we obtain remission of our sins? Paul answers: 'The man who is named Jesus Christ and the Son of God gave himself for our sins.' For if our sins could be removed by our own efforts, what need was there for the Son of God to be given for them? Since Christ was given for our sins it stands to reason that they cannot be put away by our own efforts. This sentence also defines our sins as great, so great, in fact, that the whole world could not make amends for a single sin. The greatness of the ransom, Christ, the Son of God, indicates this. The vicious character of sin is brought out by the words 'who gave himself for our sins.' So vicious is sin that only the sacrifice of Christ could atone for sin. When we reflect that the one little word 'sin' embraces the whole kingdom of Satan, and that it includes everything that is horrible, we have reason to tremble. But we are careless. We make light of sin. We think that by some little work or merit we can dismiss sin. This passage, then, bears out the fact that all men are sold under sin. Sin is an exacting despot who can be vanquished by no created power, but by the sovereign power of Jesus Christ alone."

However I think a Christian in his Christian freedom can practice some of the Confucian principles but with discernment.

But a Christian cannot accept the basic assumptions of this philosophy.

But I need to assure my parishioners that the gospel is indeed good news to the Chinese as well as to people of other cultures. They can pass this good news to their non-Christian Chinese friends. Why is this so? First of all, a system of philosophy that stresses self-realization, morality and ethical behavior can often lead to anxiety, guilt and fear. Questions that inevitably arise in such a system—Have I done enough to fulfill the requirements of a moral person? Have I done what is actually required? These are always questions that are hard to answer by anyone, at any point in time. A sense of anxiety and guilt always lurks around the corner. There is a fear of retribution from the Ultimate “tien” [Chinese term for “heaven,” and thus “God”]. Sometimes when sicknesses and natural disasters arise—which are not uncommon in China—they can be wrongly interpreted as punishment for moral lapses or lack of ethical sincerity and neglected rituals. The gospel on the other hand promises God’s forgiveness. All that is needed is a joyous confident trust in a God who saves.

As Luther puts it so beautifully in his 1520 treatise on The Freedom of a Christian: “Here we have a most pleasing vision (Ephesians 5:31-32) not only of communion but of a blessed struggle and victory and salvation and redemption. Christ is God and man in one person. He has neither sinned, nor died, and is not condemned, and he cannot sin, die or be condemned; his righteousness, life and salvation are unconquerable, eternal and omnipotent. By the wedding ring of faith he shares in the sins, death, and pains of hell which are his bride’s. As a matter of fact, he makes them his own and acts as if they were his own, and as if he himself had sinned; he suffered, died, and descended into hell that he might overcome them all. Now, since it was such a one who did this, and death and hell could not

swallow him up, these were necessarily swallowed up by him in a mighty duel; for his righteousness is greater than all the sins of men, his life is stronger than death, his salvation more invincible than hell. Thus the believing soul, by means of its faith, is free in Christ, its bridegroom, free from all sins, secure against death and hell, and is endowed with eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of Christ its bridegroom."

I can also help my parishioners in their interaction with other Chinese philosophies and religions. One of Confucius' and also Mencius' concerns was the deterioration of morality and order in the society of their time, which they sought to rectify. Both [God's] law and Confucianists too identify the root of the problem as located in individual human beings. Confucianists sought to cultivate the individuals' moral character and realize the innate goodness in them with the help of community rituals. It is self-realization and man's effort. The gospel on the other hand provides the solution from outside of man—from God for him. Firstly, the promise of God's forgiveness through Christ to the individual and secondly, to the community by setting each person free to serve God and to serve one another in love, peace and harmony. Confucius emphasized harmony and order in the family. The gospel promised harmony and reconciliation in the family when Christ rules in their hearts and minds (Eph. 5).

The quest by Chinese Taoists to be in harmony with nature and the Ultimate "tien" often resulted in their being disengaged from society at large so that they could be in harmony with nature. The gospel on the other hand promises reconciliation with the Creator of nature. This harmony with God has already been achieved by the atonement of Christ. All people need is to receive this saving act of God. Their concept of "wu-wei" [=inaction] ironically is indeed appropriate if applied to their own self-effort with respect to God. If only it means "let God be God." But sadly their idea is to flow with the Tao's way

rather than the way of God. Taoism teaches people to empty their mind of selfish desires and to be in harmony with the Tao. The gospel however showed that love, motivated and empowered by faith (Galatians 5:6) and the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) fulfills the demand of the law and frees us from selfish desires.

For the Chinese Buddhist the gospel promises eternal life and not the extinction of life. It puts away the belief in the almost endless cycles of rebirth and sufferings, and instead to believe in only one life – this life. Buddhism started because of an Indian prince's concern with sufferings. The gospel promises the cessation of sufferings, that "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain..." (Revelations 21:4). All these are possible because of what Christ has done for us. The Buddhist is also concerned with karma – the law of cause and effects of sin. The gospel promises that Jesus has already taken all the curses of sin upon Himself. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13). The good news to Buddhists is that they can have true enlightenment in Christ, for in Christ God has revealed Himself. Jesus himself is "The Way, the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6).

Finally, the gospel is good news to Chinese Confucianists, Taoists and Buddhists as they can cease from their toilsome labor of emptying their minds, flowing with the way of the Tao, physical exercises, meditation, breath control, following ethical and religious rites for personal survival and self-realization. The gospel promises that all has been completed and accomplished for survival, for salvation, for them by Christ. If only they can hear the words of Jesus "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). Justification is through faith alone, apart from any works. Soli Deo Gloria. Amen.