Thomas Merton and Confucian Rites: "The Fig Leaf for the Paradise Condition"

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Introduction: Seeking Personal Integrity

As it has been well-documented, in the last decade of his life Thomas Merton tirelessly pointed directly to the hidden potential of ancient Asian traditions. The Christian monk had an abiding love affair with Asia and saw in the Asian a repository of an older wisdom that he felt the West lacked. Yet, however optimistically he may have felt about Asia and her hallowed past, Merton was never blind to her contemporary problems. Although he was never a Christian of the triumphalist persuasion, Merton nonetheless saw clearly the role that a revitalized Christianity might play in future cultural and spiritual revivals in the East. His concerns are clearly indicated in the following excerpt from a letter to a Chinese priest in California:

I fully realize the complexity of the problem today. The Asians have renounced Asia. They want to be western, sometimes they are frantic about being western. . . . They feel that there have been centuries of inertia and stagnation, and there is a reaction against the humiliations and misunderstandings of colonialism, calling for a defeat of the West at its own technological game. All this is dangerous but inevitable. Christianity of course has a crucial part to play in saving all that is valuable in the east as well as in the west. 1


Elsewhere, Merton appears to be echoing Mahatma Gandhi when he writes that Western man "is communicating his spiritual and mental sickness to men of the East. Asia is greatly tempted by the violence and activism of the West and is gradually losing hold of its traditional respect for silent wisdom." 2

Merton’s writings on the East show a boundless concern for nearly anything Asian. Many of his later writings and talks to his novices centered around Zen Buddhism, philosophical Taoism, and Sufism. I will examine an interest of Merton’s which up to now few Mertonian scholars have dealt with, notably, Ju Chia, or Confucianism.

I will show that Merton was able to see in Confucianism a dimension much overlooked until very recent decades. His essay “Classic Chinese Humanism,” in Mystics and Zen Masters, along with my father’s work on Confucius and Mencius, initially opened my eyes to Confucianism as an exceptional philosophy of the person aimed at social and political harmony and anchored solidly on an idea of ritual whose function is to disclose the dimension of the sacred in human society. To Merton, the main thrust of the thought of Confucius and Mencius (the latter, the greatest Confucian after the Master himself) lay in recovering one’s humanity and in restoring the order of things as they are; this, in fact, meant the recovery of what he called the "paradise condition," which I shall also examine.

In an enlightening tape appropriately entitled "The Search for Wholeness," Merton the novice master connects scriptural writings with the basic concerns of Confucius. The American monk enlists his
unique perspective by cutting through the hard-crusted, centuries-old paraphernalia surrounding the much-maligned old sage of China. He says:

The philosophy of Confucius aims at developing the person in such a way that he is a superior person. But what do you mean “superior”? It’s not that he is a Superman or any of this kind of nonsense, and it is not at all that he stands out over other people by winning. . . . Confucius doesn’t have a philosophy on how to be a winner. . . . In contrast, the superior man in Confucius is the self-sacrificing man, the man who is formed in such a way that he knows how to give himself. . . . That in giving himself, he realizes himself. This is what Confucius discovered, and this is a great discovery. . . . This is just as fundamental as anything can be.3

He goes on to say that Confucian love (jen), which we may also call humanheartedness or benevolence, implies full identification with and empathy for others. The proper carrying out of Confucian ritual or li (Merton, given his own experience as a monastic, understandably prefers the word liturgy) would in fact express the reality of human-kind’s relationship to the universe, in which we are given the insight into the way the universe is constructed; this is acted out in liturgy in both the sacred and secular realms, whose demarcation is, in fact, inseparable. Elsewhere in this same suggestive talk, Merton, compares (if not actually raises) Confucian li to Christian notions of sanctification and sacramentality.

Merton then suggests that the basic Confucian virtues (which include righteousness and wisdom) resemble what he colloquially calls the “Benedictine setup” traditionally based on an elaborate structure of formal relationships whose ultimate goal is the “fully-developed personality.” In fact, he hints that if monks live according to these basic principles, they will become complete persons. He does not elaborate as to whether he means “complete person” in the Confucian or Christian sense, or even if such a distinction ought to be entertained. Merton says the importance of Confucian wisdom is that it makes everything interior so that when one loves it is because that is the way to be. . . . This is based on a vision of reality . . . and this means really a kind of contemplation of reality, a contemplative awareness of the way things are. And this manifests itself in liturgy because a person knows how to express himself in liturgy (since it is something learned and/or handed down to him). His liturgy is an expression of. . .love.4

To the monk of Gethsemani, the Confucian vision of reality is “contemplative awareness” because he sees in it a preordained wholeness imprinted indelibly in the heart of the person at birth. Further, it is this deeply ingrained sense of wholeness, this sense of oneness of life, that informs the Confucian person’s relationships with others and with heaven. The true Confucian never goes through ritualistic movements merely to fulfill personal and social duties: rather, personal fulfillment is the perfect exchange of love and compassion, of that deep commiserate feeling of identity with the other, to wit, an exchange of humanheartedness (jen) and good will at the sacred level of being.

Confucius shared with all dialogical thinkers the belief that though the seeds of wholeness or the paradisaic condition may indeed be part and parcel of man, we nonetheless depend existentially for our completion on others. There is, hence, the implicit belief in the perfectibility of the person, that through proper study and the learning and carrying out of rituals, the person may indeed come to fulfill that original state of being for which he or she was destined from the very beginning of his or her existence.5

To my mind, it is the spiritual and contemplative dimension and not its rather prosaic ethical and social dimensions that gives Confucianism its true value and appeal. Without its given and encompassing wholeness, Ju could easily degenerate—and as Chinese history so well attested to, has degenerated—into a rigid set of mechanized social rituals whose sole aim would be to preserve a dead social and political order or, at best, be a disconnected series of moral aphorisms, both of which have been its fate since nearly its inception.

A close reading of The Four Books would convince us that these early Chinese classics were initially conceived as an organic way of life

4. Ibid. Emphasis added.
5. A thorough investigation into this question can be found in Donald J. Munro, The Concept of Man in Early China (Stanford, Calif.: University of Stanford Press, 1969), in which the author’s main thesis is that “men, lacking inner defects, are perfectible through education.” And adds, “The educational environment determines whether or not men will be good or evil, and educational reform is a key to the solution of urgent social and political problems” (preface, vii–viii).
that long centuries of intensive systematization together with state-
craft had emptied of their original energy and vision of wholeness.
Merton's approach typifies his gifted ability to see through the deadly
and choking provincialism of two millennia into what he felt was, at
its core, perhaps, humanity's most universally-conceived personalistic
philosophy.

When my wife, Terry, and I were at Merton's hermitage in June
1968, we noticed he had been reading Herbert Marcuse's One-
Dimensional Man, which I too had just read for a college course. Nearly
six months later, on the last day of his life on December 10, he was to
make prominent mention of Marcuse in his last talk in Bangkok. At the
time of our meeting, when I asked the monk why he was reading the
neo-Marxist, instead of giving me the expected answer that Marcuse
was "must reading" for his social and political thought—Marcuse then
being the absolute darling on the more radical U.S. campuses—Merton
confirmed for me what I, too, had hesitantly thought to be the real
value of the book: Marcuse's fine critique regarding the utter usurpa-
tion and destruction of language by mass society, communistic and
capitalistic. The socially prophetic Marcuse believed that society, with
technology at its disposal, could order reality according to its own
totalitarian or commercial ends, beginning with the control of the uses
and abuses of language itself. The whole enterprise becomes ever more
cylical when the services of psychology and other social sciences are
enlisted to achieve their not-so-harmless aims. As the present world
rides ever more enthusiastically on the shirttails of multinational ent-
prises that depend for their survival on the increasing utilization of
language that is locked strictly into the language of the salesperson, we
can see clearly the prophetic nature of Marcuse's warning of a coming
world whose people have become immune to the inherent subtlety and
beauty of words.

Beginning in the 1970s when I studied Confucianism in the
Republic of China, I was reminded of Merton's interest in Marcuse and
of his concern for the preservation of language, which, as I see it now,
resembles the Confucian concern for cheng ming (cheng ming) or what is
conventionally accepted as rectification of names. This was the rather
simple, common-sensical Confucian insight that the root of all social
and political ills can largely be traced to the disharmony and personal
and social alienation that ensue when we no longer give much thought
to the importance of fitting names to realities. In a nutshell, we may
say that disharmony and alienation occur when no one quite knows
for certain who he or she is supposed to be; that is, when we have lost
our identity or when, in the case of ideas, a concept such as love be-
comes for all practical purposes the dominant province of soap operas,
ad agencies, and, most absurd and tragic of all, appropriated by total-
itarian governments.

Both totalitarian regimes and capitalist societies (to which
Merton fittingly gave the nicknames Gog and Magog, respectively)6
abound with gross examples of such abuse. Societies as we know them
could not flourish without conscious linguistic manipulations either
by the state or Madison Avenue and Hollywood and, as I have sug-
gested above, by worldwide multinationals in recent decades.

Confucius was able to see the root of both social and moral
chaos in a person's inability to live according to who he or she is. The
integral person—the famous Confucian gentleman, or what Merton
calls the "superior man"—is the human being who has cultivated his
or her ability to respond in a fully human way to each and every per-
son and situation. This implies knowledge of one's identity and being
free of all external coercion, political or commercial.

But cultivation also implies the understanding that there is in
man and woman a constant growth in the realization of being, begin-
ning with one's moral and aesthetic senses and finding its completion
in spiritual fulfillment. The following well-known passage from The
Analects of Confucius illustrates wonderfully the Confucian sense of
moral and spiritual progress, perhaps the only progress that really
matters and is intrinsic to persons. It indicates quite clearly the unlim-
ited spiritual potential suggested throughout early Confucianism and

M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993) 179. Bochen writes the
following introduction to Thomas Merton's letters to the Nicaraguan poet Pablo
Cuadra:

"In 1961, Merton wrote an article in the form of a letter to Cuadra. The well-
known 'Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants' was published in
Nicaragua, Argentina and El Salvador, as well as in Merton's Emblems. In it Merton
denounced both the Soviet Union and the United States whom he labeled Gog and
Magog. 'Gog is a lover of power, Magog is absorbed in the cult of money: their
idols differ and indeed their faces seem to be dead set against one another, but their
madness is the same.... Be unlike the giants, Gog and Magog. Mark what they
do, and act differently. Their societies are becoming anthills, without purpose,
without meaning, without spirit and joy.' The letter was 'a statement of where I
stand morally, as a Christian writer.' Merton wrote to Cuadra on September 18,
1961.'

serves as a healthy counterbalance to notions of progress that govern our contemporary lives. To my mind, the progression the Chinese sage is pointing toward is a truer understanding of our being, for he is here resituating for us the entire notion of progress in the qualitative possibilities of life itself:

The Master said, At fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I had planted my feet firm upon the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ear. At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart, for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right.7

Rituals and the Wholeness of Life

Perhaps it is imprudent to lump together a monk/writer of the twentieth century with one of the paradigms of world history. Yet, one cannot help finding common ground in their thought. Like Confucius, Merton knew the importance of keeping the light of classical learning burning, which was, of course, an old monastic tradition. His talks and conferences to student novices and fellow monks are a testament of his respect for such studies. In fact, one of his main concerns with regard to his students was that, in entering monastic life, they had not sufficiently prepared themselves in either the basic classics or good literary works, past or present. To his credit, even though he was a religious, he did not find it necessary to make hard and fast distinctions between so-called sacred and secular literatures.

To Confucius, classical learning and all that it implies was the very lifeline of a race of people, the repository without which humans soon would degenerate into mere barbarians not only without social graces—which seems to have been the least of his concerns—but without any notion as to where he or she is rooted. In fact, one could conclude that his principal motivation was the very recovery of classical learning itself. For without classical learning—which Confucius considered the human person's essential didactic tool—one becomes morally and spiritually directionless. To Merton, too, an intimate knowledge and love of the classics was no less critical. Here is what he had to say regarding the relationship among classical learning,

9. Ibid., 52.
10. Ibid.
Confucianism in its purest form is a philosophy of the interior person and ought never to be associated with ideas that bespeak or are suggestive of determinism or social necessity. Merton’s treatment of Confucian rituals may indeed be an idealization, but its great advantage is that it points out certain possibilities as to what rituals—particularly those that concern human relationships—may suggest when practiced to their fullest, that is, as vehicles revealing latent human tendencies that the Confucians themselves may not have imagined existed. Merton points out the potentially rich existential content of what Confucius may have had only an inkling, but whose richly suggestive quality makes the idea worth exploring given the nature of its open-endedness.

Due to the sacredness with which Confucius regarded any ritual, religious or interpersonal, and the organic and holistic manner in which the early Confucians naturally perceived the world—indeed, as cosmos, as had the Greeks—the potential for development of a truly flourishing and open-ended personal philosophy of life would seem to be boundless. Merton helps us see the Chinese sage in an altogether new light.

The Confucian rectification of names and the notion of reciprocity in human relations, rather than suggesting rigidification of the family and social strata, can be regarded as ideas that, when carried out with deference, benevolence, and deep charity, lend themselves to the gradual actualization of those hidden qualities in all of us. How? Through an unmasking process brought about by commonplace, everyday ritual practices. It is essentially related to the understanding of human personality, not exclusively in a psychological sense within which we modernists tend to confine the whole of it, that is, as largely behaviorist phenomena, but in deeply existential, moral, and spiritual terms that emphasize the process of self-effacement and self-emptying, which are basic concerns of both the Taoist and the Zen Buddhist and of nearly all mystical traditions in the West. Further, it is related less to the absorption by the other—which is suggestive of a psychologically coercive relationship—than identification with the other at the level of being. When performed with the proper attitude, the action would naturally disclose what is deepest and, in the process, transform the participants.

Hence, the key to the progressive unfolding of the true self lies in reciprocity, which we may broadly define as the willingness of a person to allow the deepest yet most natural, expansive, and magnanimous impulses to come into play in his or her life. It says plainly to the other, I want to give to you because in the giving is revealed my true self. Further, it lies in never permitting this sacred exchange between persons—an exchange, as I have suggested above, at the level of being rather than having—to degenerate into the endless giving and returning of external favors, a social cult quite unrelated to genuine filial or fraternal feelings born fully of the spirit of benevolence and love. Surely it is not rooted in familial, social, or political pressure or coercion, that is, in the conventionally tiresome and perfunctorily carrying out of duty for the sole purpose of fulfilling an obligation, and, at its crudest form, mere face-saving.

To Thomas Merton, the person or human personality is a manifestation of human nature transformed and divinized and made hallowed by the inherent sacredness of life. But the sacred, as he learned in his monastic experience, can only be experienced through the concrete ritual act which, if performed with a sincere and humble heart and directed wholly toward the other, goes a very long way in humanizing those involved. Yet, ironically, the real boon of any ritual act that is part and parcel of this humanizing process is the natural coming together of the sacred and the secular, the experience of the wholeness of being in which we, in finding identity in the other, become one with the universe as well. This, I think, is Confucianism at its most profound and the reason Merton felt he could speak so affirmatively of classical Confucianism as having understood the meaning of true personality and universal harmony that mirror one another. Confucianists have never made any Procrustean distinctions about harmony found in people, society, and the universe.

In Merton's delightful essay "A Study of Chuang Tzu," preceding his "imitations" of the great Chinese Taoist sage, he says, "To give priority to the person means respecting the unique and inalienable value of the other person, as well as one's own" (17). No doubt "inalienable value" refers to that sacred element in the person without which rituals would be wholly empty, a mere going through the motion. In fact, the end of ritual is partial fulfillment of one's personality through a mutual exchange on a very deep level of the mystery of being informed by the guiding light of Tien (天) or heaven. The ritual act, while taking the two persons to an altogether different depth, makes the participants aware of the ground of being upon which their lives are anchored. The sacred is never "out there" as much as it is in us as a guiding principle of life; in fact, it is irrevocably there for all eternity, and the deference we show toward others in relationship is to predispose the ever-present sacred to show its face whenever it sees fit to do so. And if we understand Confucius correctly, we may infer that Tien—the sacred—when listened to "with docile ear," indeed can inform the heart in such a way that all words will find their rightful resting place in actions that will keep within "the boundaries of right," that is, within the measure and pivot of central harmony (中庸).

Perhaps for this reason the Sinologist Julia Ching has written so enthusiastically about the possible future revival of Confucianism, not as statecraft, but as perennial philosophy. As she puts it so aptly, "To survive and to be of use to modern man, Confucianism must become young again, as in the days of its first gestation."13

The material form of Confucian ritual may follow a certain well-defined pattern, but what is encountered in the ritual (for example, the lovely tea ceremony) is conditioned primarily by the right attitude of the heart the participants bring into the act. The spirit, in other words, is free and undetermined, and the degree to which this freedom roams depends very much on the freedom, maturity, and depth of the persons involved. And this is as it should be, for the ritual—seemingly stylized and rigid—is never mechanical and, if performed with correctness of attitude, is wholly personal. What is exchanged is unspeakable and beyond language; more significantly, it is never repeated. In fact, because in any true action language and the concrete act merge into one, the act is the language itself.14

Rituals, then, properly performed, can play the role of continuously helping to redefine the self in the most concrete and flesh-and-blood way, directing us to our proper place in the world and gradually...
Confucianism and the Revival of Humanism

Confucius, at least for the more progressive Chinese today, has not and perhaps never will fully recover from the onslaught of the May Fourth Movement, whose reverberations continue unmitigated to this day. In this century, no sage has been discredited and cast aside more often and indiscriminately than Confucius, first by the proponents of the May Fourth Movement, then by the Communists' ongoing polemic. How ironic it is, then, that it has taken Western thinkers such as Karl Jaspers, Donald Munro, Herbert Feingarette, Benjamin I. Schwartz, Merton, and others, or Asian thinkers trained in the West such as Wing-tsit Chan, my father, John C. H. Wu, Julia Ching, and Tu Wei-ming, to see in the Chinese sage the seeds of a future renaissance. Others, even scholars who perhaps should know better, seem to be caught in endless political squabbles over what ought to be done with Confucius. What we do know is that the old fellow refuses to go away.16

Toward the end of Mystics and Zen Masters, in the essay “The Other Side of Despair” Merton writes of the horrors of faceless or “mass man,” a perfect contrast to what he felt was the essence of Confucian humanism and personalism:

Mass society ... isolates each individual subject from his immediate neighbor, reducing him to a state of impersonal, purely formal, and abstract relationship with other objectified individuals. In dissolving the more intimate and personal bonds of life in the family and of the small sub-group (the farm, the shop of the artisan, the village, the town, the small business), mass society segregates the individual from the concrete and human “other” and leaves him alone and unaided in the presence of the Faceless, the


"The critics today judge (Confucius) to have been 'irrelevant' to his own time, indeed, a reactionary and counter revolutionary who impeded the course of history... His class-biased teachings can have no universal meaning, his thought was unoriginal, 'eclectic,' compromising, his scholarship was mediocre, and even his personal character is being assailed: he was no sage, but a hypocrite" (52).

"The fall of Confucianism as an ethical system is bringing about a total spiritual vacuum. The alternative is to be the new, still evolving Maoist ethic, with its emphasis of serving the people. But the new ethic still lacks complete structuring and comes to the people, not from below, but from above. The message of Legalism is obvious. Faith in authority, that characteristic so much criticized in Confucianism, is not being assailed in itself. But the final arbiter of conscience has changed. It is now the state" (60).

Ching asks the question, “Is Confucianism relevant?”, to which she gives the following rather upbeat comments:

"If we ... mean by it a dynamic discovery of the worth of the human person, of his possibilities of moral greatness and even sagehood, of his fundamental relationship to others in a human society based on ethical values, of a metaphysics of the self open to the transcendental, then Confucianism is very relevant, and will always be relevant.

"And if, going further, we desire for Confucianism an openness to change and transformation, through confrontation with new values and ideas coming from other teachings—such as earlier from Buddhism—through a readiness to evaluate itself critically as well, then Confucianism is not only relevant but in possession of a future" (63-64).
collective void, the public. Thus mass-man finds himself related not to flesh and blood human beings with the same freedom, responsibility, and conflicts as himself, but with the idealized typological images: the Führer, the president, the sports star, the teen singer, the space man.17

One of Merton’s chief concerns—and here I believe he was prophetic as he was in so many other areas of concern—was his fear that the milieu, “a certain cultural and spiritual atmosphere” that “favors the secret and spontaneous development of the inner self,” has disappeared. In contrast to ancient cultural traditions in both the East and the West, which “favored the interior life and indeed transmitted certain common materials in the form of archetypal symbols, liturgical rites, art, poetry, philosophy, and myth which nourished the inner self from childhood to maturity,” Merton resigned himself into believing that “such a cultural setting no longer exists in the West, and is no longer common property.”18 And we might add with some trepidation that with the dawning of modernization such a setting no longer exists in the East either. In fact, what has happened in the East would have confirmed his worst suspicions as to the direction the East has been taking since his passing.

Merton, beginning with his own student novices, was very concerned with the rediscovery and the uncovering of common cultural materials conducive to the recovery of the true self. He did not hesitate to explore geographies of the mind and heart that appeared to be esoteric and obscure to his readers. The monk was disturbed by the obsessive emphasis on discursive thought that he felt had disproportionately contributed to the problems of the contemporary West. He actively sought after more affective ways of thinking and living that would help bring us directly back to both ourselves and God.

On the first leg of his journey to Asia, while speaking at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, a think tank in Santa Barbara, California (October 3, 1968), Merton made his position rather clear with regard to a society fostering a constant reductionism of the human person. Remaining in character, he made no effort to water down what he had to say, even at the expense of touching a few raw nerves:


We are living in a society that is absolutely sick. And one of the reasons why it is sick is that it is completely from the top of the head. It’s completely cerebral. It has utterly neglected everything to do with the rest of the human being; the whole person is reduced to a very small part of who and what the person is . . . And Christianity has connived with this, you see. The official Christianity has simply gone along with this, that is, with this kind of repressive, partial, and fragmented view of the human person.19

I might add that in the West there is almost always the tendency toward one extreme orientation or another. One is either wholly mystical or intellectual or moral or practical and, as is so often the case today, even strictly psychological. By insisting on one extreme, we facilely and conveniently explain all the others away, as if it were really possible to live out of the tunnel of one of these extremes. And the East, of course, goes along with this aberration and creates its own caricatures of the fragmented self. Under such circumstances, there is rarely a healthy coming together of all the diverse elements and dimensions that naturally go into the making of the whole man and woman.

One has to wonder if there are indeed some built-in elements in contemporary life’s milieu that would make wholeness impossible and fragmentation of the self inevitable. To Merton, steeped in the existential literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, experiences of alienation and angst were commonplace, a given of contemporary life. Despite the wholeness and optimism of his own thought, he was never optimistic enough to believe that in his own lifetime such problems had bottomed out, or had even come close to it.

In the same session at the Society for Democratic Societies Center in which he spoke of monastic renewal, Merton made his ideas concerning the relationship between external restructuring of institutions and renewal of the inner self quite clear. He understood the shortcomings of trying to cure what is fundamentally interior by manipulating what is external:

You hear this talk everywhere, or you hear it in monasteries, about monastic renewal, and it is confusing because, too often, it is employed to talk about the renewal of an institution. But as soon as

people start talking in these terms, you can see that they are enveloped in what Sartre calls bad faith: if the life we are living is not meaningful in itself, how are we going to make an institution meaningful to other people?  

Rather than putting all its efforts into making its institutions meaningful and relevant to the world, true monasticism, for Merton, "is a question of renewing an age-old experience," for the "real essence of monasticism is the handing down from master to disciple of an uncommunicable experience."  

22. The opening passage to The Golden Mean, or Chung Yang, one of The Four Books, reads: "What is ordained by Heaven is called 'Nature.' Following out this Nature is called the Tao (or the natural law). The refinement of the natural law is called 'culture.'"

Mencius, as if giving a teleological form to this basic ontological insight, says: "He who has exhaustively studied all his mental constitution knows his nature. Knowing his nature, he knows Heaven. To preserve one's mental constitution and nourish one's nature is the way to serve Heaven." The Four Books, trans. James Legge (Oxford University Press, 1939) 448-49. (Book 7, Part 1, ch. 1, art. 1).

My father comments: "Thus, the mandate of Heaven, human nature and culture form a continuous series. The natural law is to be found by the mind in human nature itself, and to be further developed and applied by the mind to the ever-widening human relations under infinitely variable circumstances" (John C. H. Wu, "Mencius’ Philosophy of Human Nature and Natural Law," Christian Humanism and Christian Spirituality: Essays, Asian Philosophical Studies 2, ed. Paul K. T. Sih [Jamaica, N.Y.: St. John's University Press, 1965] 17).


24. Julia Ching encapsulates the early fate of Confucianism in her Confucianism and Christianity: "In 213 B.C. [the first emperor of the Ch'in dynasty, 221-206 B.C.] ordered the burning of all books except those which dealt with medicine, divination and..."
The writings of the sages make plain the demands they imposed on all of society, beginning particularly with the ruler down to the most humble. They called for nothing short of a total internal reconstruction, which, to Confucius and Mencius, was the only healthy and possible road toward the recovery of the lost and fragmented moral sense in the human person and of the spiritual and cultural milieu. Their sole aim was to save a society that they loved for the reason that their whole beings—the traditions and history that made them what they were and their love for the ruler down to the common folk—were inextricably bound up with the way they thought, felt, and lived. One cannot imagine their loving their people less than the way Socrates loved and wholly identified with his beloved Athenians even unto death.

agriculture. Allegedly, he also ordered the burying alive of 460 scholars, in order to put an end to criticisms of his rule. It is not known how many of these were Confucians.

"Confucianism remained underground, to be revived and dominant during the Han dynasty, where Emperor Wu (r. 140–87 B.C.) made it the state philosophy, supported by government patronage and an official educational system. But this could only happen at a certain cost to the teachings of Confucians themselves. The Confucianism that triumphed was no longer the philosophy of Confucius and Mencius. It had already absorbed many extraneous ideas... from Legalism and yin-yang cosmology and religious philosophy. It would emphasize—far more than Confucius and Mencius did—the vertical and authoritarian dimensions of the five moral relationships... . It was a triumph which has been described as a 'Pyrrhic victory'" (40).

Writing on the Legalists in his essay "The Individual in Political and Legal Traditions," in The Chinese Mind, my father says:

"By isolating the Rule of Law from the fundamental humanity of men [and women], [the Legalists] foredoomed it to a catastrophic collapse. Instead of securing the rights and freedom of the individual, as it normally should, it became actually a ruthless instrument for dehumanizing the people... . So far as China was concerned, this unhappy wedding spoiled the chance of a genuine balanced Rule of Law for over two millenniums.

"Of all these lines of thinking, the way of Confucius would seem to be the most balanced. It excels Mohism by its catholicity, and excels Buddhism by its sense of reality. It steers between the anarchistic tendencies of Taoism and the totalitarianism of the Legalists. It recognizes the need of unity, but at the same time it sees the desirability of diversity. As Confucius himself puts it, 'Men of superior quality aim at harmony not uniformity; while the small-minded aim at uniformity, not harmony.' This is in the best tradition of political wisdom, and is still a living ideal" (342–3).

Thomas Merton falls very much into this sapiential dimension so evident in the ancient sages, a wisdom centered on life as unity and harmony. In "Cold War Letter 25" to James Forest (dated January 29, 1962), a pacifist who continues to be politically active today, he talks of the necessity of "the complete change of Heart," of "inherient faith in the heart change," of praying "for a total and profound change in the mentality of the whole world," of "application of spiritual force and not the use of merely political pressure," of "the deep need for purity of soul," finally concluding that "this [and all the above] takes precedence over everything else" when one is involved in a social and political movement.25

In a later letter to Forest in the same year, Merton speaks in a way that Confucius himself might have spoken on politics were the ancient sage living today:

The basic problem is not political, it is apolitical and human. One of the most important things to do is to keep cutting deliberately through political lines and barriers and emphasize the fact that these are largely fabrications, and that there is another dimension, a genuine reality, totally opposed to the fictions of politics. The human dimension which politics pretends to arrogate entirely to themselves. This is the necessary first step along the long way towards the perhaps impossible task of purifying, humanizing and somehow illuminating politics themselves.26

The thought of the early Confucians reflects an abiding faith in the "interiority of man" that is based first on the more fundamental and implicit faith in the basic goodness of humans and, second, in the intimately personal relationship between human persons and heaven, which they regarded as a given, that is, as both preordained and inherent in the very structure of life itself.

The fact that such a vision never got off the ground and failed to materialize in Chinese society is surely less the fault of the sages than that of later Confucianists who shifted the emphasis from a remarkably balanced philosophy of life and society where rituals are constantly informed by the spirit of love and benevolence, to a one-sided emphasis upon the mere carrying out of rituals as a means of securing social and political order. Chinese humanism seemed to have quickly degenerated into a system and thought devoid of that all-important

organic feel for the wholeness of life. It substituted for this original wholeness a rather lame notion of an impersonal cosmos without a warm, throbbing heart at the center of the universe. Moreover, it was marked principally by an overwrought and obsessive emphasis on filial piety and ancestor worship that favored looking backward rather than emphasizing a dynamic present and future.

This nearly deterministic opting for a narrower notion of social order over and against what initially held great promises of developing into a potentially powerful personal, social, and even spiritual philosophy was indeed an identifying of “the fig leaf with the Paradise condition.” The cult of the family, great and important as it has been in China, alas, never seemed to have overcome the blight of the tribal and the provincial; in the end, the cult sapped whatever natural energy and inclinations the Chinese might have had for true brotherhood, which, I am convinced, was the original vision of the early sages. The Chinese Communists have tried to bring about “universal brotherhood,” but have, in its agonizing train, summarily torn the heart out of the human person. Indeed, one wonders exactly how long the new fatherland can last.

The quiet and subtle Confucian vision of true brotherhood based on a healthy sense of personalism draws each generation to re-appraise Confucianism not as a system conceived for statecraft and its preservation, but as an indispensable way of life with sacred and universal principles at its very core. Without such abiding principles that these sages fathomed at the heart of nature and heaven, Confucianism would be no more than a quaint cultural remnant from the dead past; as, indeed, Christianity would be if we were to identify its merely external structures, hierarchy, Canon Law, or moral theology as the whole of it.

In this generation, the East owes a great debt to Thomas Merton for reminding Easterners of a priceless treasure that a good number of us, anxious not to be left off the irrepressible express freight of modernization, have already abandoned. He saw in classical Confucianism part and parcel a paradise condition, the very roots of which lie dormant, yet, in fact, are very much alive in every man and woman. It remains vigorous because Confucius hit upon a principle of love that is rooted not in society, but squarely in nature, by way of Tien itself. Therefore, it is not a positivistic principle whose reality and validity are strictly dependent on social environment and reforms.

Both Confucius and Mencius were able to speak very confidently of the basic goodness of humanity only because they saw the unmistakable signature of heaven in the center of humankind’s being. Any fruitful exchanges between Confucianism and Christianity would center on an investigation between the Confucian Tien and the living God of Christianity.27

In August 1967, Pope Paul VI requested that Merton write a “message of contemplatives to the world.” What resulted was a wonderfully rich outpouring of humanistic sentiments supported by love and compassion. Like Confucius’ faith in heaven, Merton’s faith in the living God by the late sixties was so profound that he was able to see God’s epiphany everywhere. The following may indeed be seen as a beautiful flowering of Confucian humanism couched in the language of a twentieth-century monk whose sentiments would have done even Confucius proud:

If we once began to recognize... the true value of our own self, we would see that this value was the sign of God in our being. . . . Fortunately, the love of our fellow man is given to us as the way of realizing this. For the love of our brother, our sister, our beloved, our wife, our child, is there to see with the clarity of God Himself that we are good. It is the love of my lover, my brothers or my child that sees God in me, makes God credible to myself in me. And it is my love for my lover, my child, my brother, that enables me to show God to him or her in himself or herself. Love is the epiphany of God in my poverty.28

The basic message of Thomas Merton is that we are not alone and that both social and political harmony and moral and spiritual salvation demand the constant help of everyone we know.

27. For an excellent discussion on the affinities and disparities in the Confucian and Christian notions of God, respectively, see chapter four, “The Problem of God” (112-50) in Ching’s Confucianism and Christianity. Ching notes, for example, “the Confucian Classics clearly enunciate a belief in God as the source and principle of all things, the giver of life and the protector of the human race” (118).

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