

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

1. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989) 323.

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

2. "Honorable Reader," preface to the Japanese edition of *Thoughts in Solitude* in Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 115. See also *Beyond East and West* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1951) in which my father, John C. H. Wu, writing of his beloved country two years after the Communist takeover, sings nostalgically of the old China and laments the new: "Now China has changed. She has been dragged into the swirl and whirl of the world. Like a leaf in the west wind, like a flower fallen upon the ever-flowing Yangtze, she is no longer herself, but is being swept along against her will to an unknown destiny. I know she will survive all the storms and currents, and emerge victorious over all her trials and tribulations, but she will not recover the original tranquillity of her soul and sweetness of her temper. Her music will no longer be flute-like, reverberating with clear wind and running water: it will be turned into something metallic and coarse, like the Wagnerian masterpieces. To her son, she will no longer be the tender Mother that she was, but will be transformed into a stern Father, a Father who will be as severe as the summer sun. China my Motherland is dead, long live my Fatherland!" (16).

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 humankind'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 *contem-*

3. Thomas Merton, "The Search for Wholeness," Credence Cassette, Merton AA2370, Side 2.

plative 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 statecraft had emptied of their original energy and vision of wholeness. Merton's approach typifies his gifted ability to see through the deadliness 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 usurpation 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 cynical 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 enterprises 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* (正名) 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 becomes for all practical purposes the dominant province of soap operas, ad agencies, and, most absurd and tragic of all, appropriated by totalitarian 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 suggested 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 person 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, beginning 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 unlimited spiritual potential suggested throughout early Confucianism and

6. See Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine 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,

7. Arthur Waley, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Vintage, 1938)

Confucian humanism, and the human personality, on the one hand, and his debunking of the shallow, modernist attempt to come to terms with the person, on the other hand:

The foundation of [the] Confucian system is first of all the *human person* and then his relations with other persons in society. This of course sounds quite modern—because one of our illusions about ourselves is that we have finally discovered “personality” and “personalism” in the twentieth century. Such are the advantages of not having had a classical education, which would do us the disservice of reminding us that personalism was very much alive in the sixth century B.C., and that, in fact, it existed then in a much more authentic form than it does among us with our “personality tests” and “personality problems” [the ultimate carving of the Taoist uncarved block!].

Ju (Confucianism) is therefore a humanist and personalistic doctrine and this humanism is religious and sacred.⁸

Then Merton seems to draw directly from his own experience as a member of a community of monks when he says:

The society in which (men would once again be themselves, and would gradually recover the ability to act virtuously, kindly, and mercifully) must be very seriously and firmly held together by a social order that draws its strength not from the authority of law but from the deep and sacred significance of liturgical rites, *Li*.

And in the same vein, he adds almost rhapsodically: “These rites, which bring earth into harmony with heaven, are not merely the cult of heaven itself but also the expression of those affective relationships which, in their varying degrees, bind men to one another.”⁹ Finally, he reveals what to me is the quintessential humanistic Merton of the mid- and late-1960s, in which he speaks surely not only for Confucianism but for himself as well: “The Confucian system of rites was meant to give full expression to that natural and humane love which is the only genuine guarantee of peace and unity in society, and which produces that unity not by imposing it from without but by *bringing it out from within men themselves*.”¹⁰

8. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967) 51.

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 Confucianists 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 Confucianists naturally perceived the world—indeed, as *cosmos*, as had the Greeks—the potential for development of a truly flourishing and open-ended *personalist* 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 reciprocity¹¹ in human relations, rather than suggesting rigidification of the family and social strata, can be regarded as ideas that, when car-

11. As Confucius says in *The Analects*, trans. Arthur Waley (New York: Vintage, 1938): "The man of *jen* (仁) wishes to establish his own character, also helps others along the path" (VI, 28). For an explanation of the notion of reciprocity, see Y. P. Mei, "The Basis of Social, Ethical, and Spiritual Values in Chinese Philosophy," *The Chinese Mind*, ed. Charles A. Moore, 149–66 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1967), in which the author writes:

"Confucius repeatedly spoke of his 'one unifying principle,' which is also rendered as 'an all-pervading unity.' This unifying principle is generally assumed to be *shu* (恕), reciprocity, which Confucius once said was the one word that might guide one's conduct throughout life. Reciprocity was stated to be 'what you would not have others do unto you, do not (do) unto others,' and this formula has usually been referred to as the Chinese Golden Rule. . . . *Jen* is . . . the cornerstone of Confucianism, and it may be assumed that reciprocity, . . . is an expression of *jen*, and that it is just as proper to regard *jen* as the one unifying principle of all of Confucius' teachings. Historically, *jen* is a distinct Confucian concept, a concept little used before his time" (152).

See also Wing-tsit Chan, "Chinese Theory and Practice," *The Chinese Mind*, trans. James Legge, 11–30 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939). Chan writes the following regarding the Golden Mean, or what he calls "central harmony":

ried 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.¹²

"Confucius said that 'there is one thread that runs through my doctrines.' . . . The thread is . . . generally to be identical with the Confucian doctrine of central harmony (*chung yung*, Golden Mean). Indeed, the doctrine is of supreme importance in Chinese philosophy; it is not only the backbone of Confucianism, both ancient and modern, but also of Chinese philosophy as a whole. Confucius said that 'to be central (*chung*) in our being and to be harmonious (*yung*) with all' is the supreme attainment in our moral life" (35).

12. For a rather extensive but wholly interesting elaboration and documentation on the ubiquitous issue of face in Chinese society, see "Face Saving as a Way of Life" (305–376) in Richard W. Hartzell's book, *Harmony in Conflict* (Taipei, Taiwan, ROC: Caves Books Ltd., 1988).

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 (*chung yung*).

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

13. Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study* (Tokyo/New York/San Francisco: Kodansha International/USA) 63.

14. Merton himself illustrates this point of *act as language*. In responding to my father's gift of Chinese calligraphy and the poem Mei Teng ("Silent Lamp"), a Chinese sobriquet that the older man gave the younger monk, Merton in a typically playful Zen mood replies:

"So it was moving to be 'baptized' in Chinese with a name I must live up to. After all, a name indicates a divine demand. Hence I must be *Mei Teng*, a silent lamp, not a sputtering one. . . . Your calligraphy fascinates me, and of course so does the poem. . . . I wish I could reply in kind, calligraphy and all. In desperation, or rather no, in considerable joy, I resort again to the green tea, and in fact the kettle is whistling by the fire right at my elbow, and the sun is rising over the completely silver landscape. *Instead of putting all this into a poem, I will let it be its own poem.* The silent steam will rise from the teacup and make an ideogram for you. Maybe sometime I will add a poem to it as an exclamation point of my own. But are such exclamation points needed?" (Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, selected and ed. William H. Shannon [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985] 632; letter dated December 28, 1965.)

The above seems to be an extraordinary spiritual insight. Words can only serve as footnotes to what is. The action/act is always primary as long as it expresses the fullness of being. Hence the tree trees, the steam steams, man mans, brother brothers, etc. Anything less than "steam steams" is an alienation of/from being. In "man mans," man is both the substantive and the predicate, and, in the end, there is, in fact, only "man," a merging of the doer and the doing. And if we really took all this very seriously, the rest would be silence.

disclosing the latent potential that lies dormant in us, in others, and, in the process, in what is hidden in life itself. With rituals, life can assume a grace, dignity, and depth hitherto lost, even disposing us to true contemplation. For the final aim of ritual is not so much aesthetic or even moral, but realization of the deep mystery of being that unaccountably shapes each relationship.

Rituals, beginning with forgetfulness of self and informed by charity and deference toward others, remind us not to press forward aggressively with our plans and schemes, an attitude and behavior that would unwittingly shrink the possibilities of what lies before us and in us. On the contrary, in being deferential toward others, in learning to step back and refusing to impose our will—which is what interpersonal rituals encourage—we are able to see uncovering before us the full measure of dignity in each person so that in the process of discovering that dignity, we recover our own dignity as well. In that discovery lie the seeds for our transformation into our true selves, or, as it were, the Confucian gentleman, the *chun tzu*.

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,¹⁵ 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 Fingarette, 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

15. For a good historical discussion of this very important social and intellectual revolution in early twentieth-century Republican China, see Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960) esp. 300–13, on the controversies surrounding the anti-Confucian movement, which seemed to have set the intellectual, social, and moral tone for the rest of the century in China.

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

16. See Julia Ching, "Confucianism: A Critical Reassessment of the Heritage," *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study* (Tokyo, New York and San Francisco: Kodansha International/USA) 34–67. Some choice excerpts will suffice:

"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 transcendent, 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:

17. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux) 274.

18. William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987) 117–8.

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

19. Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 48. Emphasis added.

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?²⁰

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*."²¹ True education or learning in the classical sense, East and West, is, indeed, this sacred handing down of a something that is uncommunicable. Though necessarily couched in words, true words are always transparent words that point to that uncommunicable something that always is. What is authentic and vital can never live fully in cold formulas alone.

Both Confucius and, later, Mencius regarded human relationships as the very cornerstone of society, the existential lifeline of an entire culture. In their writings, it astonishes readers that there are essentially no obvious traces of either legalism or Machiavellianism (which are both manipulative and concerned with control) in their almost naive and pristine social and political schemes; we can only attribute this to their remarkable faith not only in the human person, but in that which both persons and nature are squarely rooted: upon *Tien* itself. Confucius and Mencius were wise enough to leave *Tien* undefined and to accept it as either a universal metaphysical principle or a personal or suprapersonal God, depending upon the context. More concretely, they relied on what in the West we may call natural law that emanated from an undefined and undifferentiated heaven.²²

20. *Ibid.*, 30–31.

21. *Ibid.*, 34. Emphasis added.

22. The opening passage to *The Golden Mean*, or *Chung Yung*, 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

Merton, writing of an institution of which he was an integral part for over half his life, lamented that "in the end monasticism (in the late Middle Ages) by a curious reversal that is so usual in the evolution of societies, identified the fig leaf with the Paradise condition" so that "freedom . . . consisted in renouncing nakedness in favor of elaborate and ritual vestments."²³ Here he could have very easily been speaking of Confucianism as well.

The Heart as the Basis for Social Reform

By way of parallel, when Confucianism was rationalized into a convenient vehicle and basis of statecraft in the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), it too could be likened to identifying "the fig leaf with the Paradise condition." If we examine the spirit of the *Analects* and the *Book of Mencius* carefully, especially in the light of what rituals and rites might have meant to ancient peoples in general and to the Chinese in particular, we can come to a better appreciation of these ancient books and what their authors and compilers might have had in mind even without their having spelled out in detail and depth the meaning of personal and social rites. My own conclusion is that the Chinese sages, seeing the chaos of the times throw the entire social fabric out of joint and into general confusion, thereby looked *inward* in an effort to find a solution to what nearly everyone else seemed to have felt were basically external political and military problems. Their true wisdom lay in their ability to view social and political chaos as mere symptoms of a deeper illness residing in humankind itself. This is doubtlessly what Merton meant when he spoke of Confucius's achievement: "This is a great discovery. . . . This is just as fundamental as anything can be."²⁴

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).

23. Thomas Merton, "Learning to Live," *Love and Learning*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981) 8.

24. Julia Ching capsulizes 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 "inner 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

25. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 262.

26. *Ibid.*, 272. Emphasis added.

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 reappraise 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).

28. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 157 (letter to Dom Francis Decroix).

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