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AN INTRODUCTION TO
MORALITY AND RELIGIOUSNESS IN CHINA
AND THE WEST

The great longevity of world religions and moral systems can give them the appearance of unchangeablity in cultural history, and the seemingly everlasting systems are said to have been "fixed" in their principal doctrines, identifying ways of life in specific geographical locations and historical contexts, although they have already dynamically spread to all parts of the world, and been entrenched in many layers of social life in nations and cultures. This mistake cannot be more wrong in a rapidly globalized world where dramatic social and cultural changes are being felt and echoed, and contemporary cultural landscapes are going through fast-flowing change. The past of religions, philosophies, and moral systems is resilient while new elements that are continually added to them show the importance of adaptation and deep dialogue with other systems and movements. We call "old" moral systems and religions "traditions" whose very nature presupposes change in continuity and the interconnectedness between the past and the present,[1] as Edward Shils argued a long while ago that "All existing things have a past. Nothing which happens escapes completely from the grip of the past," and at the same time "All novelty is a modification of what has existed previously."[2]

Traditions exist, traditions change, and traditions transform one another through dialogue or conversation. With an increasing exchange in economy, politics, and culture, we believe that within the present repositioning of East and West in our global world order, religion and morality in China and the West are entering a new phase of mutual engagement and conversation. It is a conversation that carries with it real responsibilities and possibilities, and has to be seen as a new moment in the ancient conversation between Chinese religions and moralities and those of the West from the earliest times through the Silk Routes to the debate between Christian Jesuits and Confucian and Buddhist believers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in China. These kinds of debate and dialogue were carried to full when

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Christian beliefs and practices were spreading in the East part of the world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More than has been the case in the past, however, the present conversation arises from an encounter between two equal civilizations, both dynamic and eager to engage, while each of them claiming to be the focal subject of our common human history. Compared with the past experience, this encounter will certainly be engaged in a new way, and most likely at a new depth.

Encounters between civilizations have a particular bearing on, or even have dramatically reshaped, human morality and religiousness wherever we live. We take other moral and religious systems as a mirror to reflect on our own conscience and faith, and we also absorb elements from them to nourish our own minds and hearts, by which our own understanding of morally good and religious faithfulness and those from the outside are integrated. This way, morality and religiousness are both singular and plural. Questions arise underlying plural moral and religious claims: are there universal values that sustain human progress in moral conscience and spiritual well-being? Will these universal elements, if any, function as the foundation of further dialogue or demand the same action by different peoples? Are transformed or "invented" traditions still the same traditions as were followed in the past? What kind of role will the entrenched religiousness and morality each play in shaping "new traditions"?

To understand the diversity of interaction between moral goodness and religious beliefs in the wider context of increasing exchanges between the East and the West, the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* and the King's China Institute jointly coordinated a special symposium at King's College London during August 14–15, 2013, under the title "International Symposium Series on Comparative Philosophy 'Morality and Religiousness: Chinese and Western' in Celebration of the 40th Founding Anniversary of *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*." The questions put in front of symposium participants include: Is morality the measure of religiousness or does religiousness transcend moral judgment? Do religious faith and nondualistic experiences of tranquility of mind realize or go beyond the categories of right and wrong, and good and evil? Does ethics exclude religiousness or does ethics presuppose it and lead to religiousness? What is the role of religiousness in relation to secular and pluralistic forms of ethics? Is religiousness a genuine and key dimension of ethical life or is it a hindrance to realizing a just or rational society?

These questions concerning the relationship between religiousness and morality are not "new" at all. They were already resounding in the minds of pioneers in religious and ethical thinking thousand years ago and were asked and answered from different perspectives. Reflecting on the topic of whether the moral or the religious has

priority, for example, Socrates posed the question of whether the good is good because the gods love it or whether the gods love the good because it is good. In China, Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist philosophers questioned ordinary conventions of right and wrong and good and evil by which faiths are judged, and in the *Analects* of Confucius, Confucius places an emphasis on the internal respect toward spirits rather than extravagant sacrificial items.

Pious religious texts always claim the primacy of faith over morality, but they also leave room for the other way around that faith must be verified or substantialized by moral qualities. In this regard, many people see Christianity and Confucianism as representatives of two different cultural orientations, due to the fact that they give different priorities to religiousness and morality. Majority of the articles included in this supplement will be arguing that both share strong commitments to the interconnectedness between religiousness and morality, examining them with fresh eyes and discerning the new possibilities of mutual learning and mutual sharing. While there is no need for this introduction to repeat what will be argued in these articles, we may benefit from a preliminary look at Confucian moral systems and Christian religiousness as follows.

Christianity is a highly diverse, widely disseminated world religion, crossing all kinds of linguistic, social, and historical frontiers. While acknowledging that normativity in Christianity is fundamentally doctrinal and confessional or creedal where faith rather than morality determines right from wrong or good from evil, Christian thinkers advanced a positive assessment of human nature in its depths, an understanding that faith in Jesus Christ is brought in the midst of life, through ethical practices in personal and communal action. In the interconnectedness of morality and religiousness, contemporary scholarship has significantly expanded the boundaries of "religion" and comfortably thrown a variety of doctrines and practicing systems into the basket of religion. Traditionally accepted substantive definitions such as E. B. Taylor's "belief in the spiritual beings" and Émile Durkheim's "moral community" are continually revised to meet the new criteria for religion. Either through phenomenological tools such as Ninian Smart's "seven dimensions"[3] or ontological concepts such as Paul Tillich's "ultimate concerns," the study of religions has been transformed from apologetic exercises on monotheistic systems to an academic discipline that is concerned with all cultural forms of beliefs, practices, and thinking styles that are of both sacred and secular significance to the people. The tendency toward universality of Christian religiousness opens the door to various kinds of typology for world religions, such as Hans Kung's "Three Great River Systems" and my own "triangular structure of religions."[4] None of these typologies

exclude morality from religiousness or religiousness from morality. Instead, all of them develop at least partially concerning how Christianity (as well as other world religions) can be seen both as a religious tradition and a moral and social system, and how these two aspects within each great tradition.

Perhaps more than Christianity, Confucianism can serve a better example of how morality penetrates religiousness and functions as a special mode of spirituality. Confucianism arose in China and spread to other parts first of East Asia and then the world, encouraging moral appreciation of good life in personal, social, and religious contexts. Confucianism is often defined as a moral system with humanism at the core of its discourse. However this humanism is not merely about secular needs and their satisfaction in human life. Its concerns are also of profound religiousness. Seeing the moral as the core of religious commitments, early Confucian masters and their followers advanced an understanding of seemingly paradoxical "moral religiousness" through systematic discourses on religious and moral matters. Confucian deliberations are holistic explorations of human nature and destiny and hermeneutical interpretations of human dilemmas which lead to conscious practices that resolve our "ultimate concerns." Confucian discourse cannot be either religious or ethical; it must be both moral and religious. Religiousness and moralness in this discourse are seamlessly combined into one organic view of the relationship between humans and humans, and between humans and Heaven (*tian* 天). While *tian* is regarded as the ultimate power that sanctions human activities, Confucians never make it distant from humans. Rather they see the immanence of Heaven in "generating" virtues in humans and in "guiding" humans in their secular businesses. The religiousness of this kind is rooted in moral awareness and achievement and is delivered through three key pathways: "virtue" (*de* 德), "reverence" (*jing* 敬), and "serving" (*shi* 事). Different from theistic religions where the meaning of life is tightly associated with "faith," the basic building block for Confucian discourses is "virtue." "Virtue" is "sacred" in the sense that its ultimate source is Heaven and that perfect virtue could lead to sagehood; at the same time it is also "secular" because virtue must be achieved through human performing their duties outwardly and inwardly; in Confucian discourses "virtue" is often identical with conscientious self-cultivation and wholeheartedly following rites/proprieties (*li* 禮). To achieve "perfect virtue," humans must hold "reverence" in their hearts. Reverence in a Confucian context applies to all aspects of life, directed either toward duties, other people, or toward spiritual powers. With "reverence" in the heart, a Confucian "moral person" serves humans by which he has also "served" spirits (*gui shen* 鬼神) and ultimately served Heaven.

Being moral idealists, Confucian masters do not blindly reject spiritual beliefs. However, spiritual beliefs are not the key for Confucian religiosity. Through the three overtly secular but implicitly spiritual concepts (virtue, reverence, and service), Confucians have successfully established their moral discourse on a solidly religious ground without necessarily resorting to the beliefs and practices associated with "spirits."[5] By creating a unique realm where religious commitments and moral conscientiousness are perfectly combined, the discourse demonstrates that Confucianism is an ethical tradition with profound religiousness. This moral religiousness does not require the separation of the divine from the human which theistic religions would normally do; rather, it requires humanity and divinity are rooted in each other and are interdependent.

The legacies of the Christian and Confucian morality and religiousness continue to shape or reshape the spiritual and moral landscapes of cultural life in China and the West. It has made it possible for Christians and Confucian followers to be strongly spiritual by being moral on the one hand, and to be conscientiously moral by being spiritual on the other. It is the interpenetration, or nonseparation, of religiousness and morality that guarantees the significance of cultural dialogue. History shows that at its core of the dialogue there is the possibility of radical regeneration in new contexts and cultures. No one can doubt that this can happen again. Although the present encounter between Confucianism and Christianity is still at its very early stages, scholars have suggested that each might learn from the other in ways that allow the birthing of a new moment in human religiousness and morality. With the emerging of new understanding of religiousness and morality, the adaptability or capacity for fundamental regeneration in cultural as well as doctrinal terms may merge with a universalist vision of what it is to be a human being. This can be achieved in such a way as to support a religious universalism that is as hospitable and inclusive as it is multifaceted and indigenous. All these will be surely a slow and complicated progress, to which we hope this collection of articles in the supplement can make a contribution.

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Endnotes

and my colleague at King's, Professor Oliver Davies, for their faithful support and hard work. In the supplement we have also included a number of articles that are relevant to the theme although were not presented at the workshop.

1. In ordinary language, "tradition" involves a wide range of contents including all cultural heritages from the past, both material and spiritual. In a narrower sense it refers to the transmission of beliefs, values, practices, and lifestyles, as defined in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 10th edition, as "the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation."
2. Edward Shils, "Tradition," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 13, no. 2, Special Issue on Tradition and Modernity (1971): 122.
3. "Since the study of man is in an important sense participatory—for one has to enter into men's intentions, beliefs, myths, desires, in order to understand why they act as they do—it is fatal if cultures including our own are described merely externally, without entering into dialogue with them" (Ninian Smart, *The Yogi and the Devotee* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1968], 104). The Seven Dimensions Ninian Smart has claimed to be central to the study of religion are doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritual, experiential, institutional, and material (Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998]).
4. Hsin-chung Yao, *Confucianism and Christianity—A Comparative Study of Jen and Agape* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 1996).
5. For example, Confucius calls a person wise who works "for the things the common people have a right to and to keep one's distance from the gods and spirits while showing them reverence" (D. C. Lau, trans., *Confucius—The Analects (Lun Yu)* [London: Penguin, 1979], 84.