# NEO-CONFUCIANISM:
# Theism, Atheism or Neither?

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There has been a quite extraordinary about-face in the study of Confucianism in the last generation. When I first began to study Confucianism, and was constantly struck by what I took to be overtly 'religious' elements in the theory and practice of the Confucian school, I felt myself a member of a defensive minority. I had on my side the earliest Western sinologists, the Jesuit missionaries of the 16th to the 18th centuries; a few missionary sinologists of the 19th century — including the great James Legge; and hardly any twentieth century authorities. Herlee Creel, of course, in the 1930's had denied that Confucius was an agnostic, but had backed off to some extent in his late work. James Ware with his uncompromising translation of *t'ien* as 'Sky' rather than Heaven, and his assertion that Confucius was an out-and-out rationalist represented the consensus position of Chinese as well as Western authorities, although the motives of the former were often more complex than those of the latter.

Today the position has been reversed, at least so far as early Confucianism is concerned. Our major Western authorities — including Tu Wei-ming, Donald Munro, Herbert Fingarette — all now take for granted that Confucius accepted and used as the underpinning of his moral and social teaching the Chou belief in a personal God, *t'ien* or Heaven; that personal spiritual development rather than political success was his aim; and that Confucianism should be seen as one of the great world religions, not in some strained or applied sense, but of right. Curiously, even in the People's Republic of China the view that Confucianism is a religion has recently been vigorously promoted, although, I suspect, for reasons that are not strictly or exclusively academic.

The religious dimension of Neo-Confucianism, however, remains more problematic. The early Jesuit position on Neo-Confucianism, adopted largely for polemic purposes, was to regard it as at best a kind of spiritual monism, at worst pure materialism and atheism. Religious practices, such as meditation, were attributed to Buddhist influence and its high moral tone to the persisting influence of an earlier Chinese natural religion. There are occasional flashes of insightful dissent from this party-line on the part of, especially, the more skilled sinologists amongst the missionaries. Some — Niccolo Longobardo and Claude Visdelou being the best known — wished to destroy what they saw as an artificial distinction between early Confucian theism and Neo-Confucian atheism. The classics and the four books, said Longobardo, are always read in the light of the Sung commentaries; whatever they might once have meant, they now are understood only in the light of Neo-Confucian materialism. Visdelou, on the other hand, at the height of the controversy over Chinese Rites i.e. the permissibility of Chinese converts to Christianity continuing to practice some at least of the domestic and public rituals prescribed by Confucianism, argued that Confucian practices were thoroughly enmeshed in Chinese superstition and idolatory. At least these Jesuit dissenters were more consistent than the arch-enemy of the Jesuits, Charles Maigrot, the Vicar-Apostolic of Fukien, who argued that seventeenth-

century Confucians were simultaneously atheists and idolaters. The majority view, however, which was shared by most 19th and early 20th century commentators was that Neo-Confucianism was materialistic, acknowledged no personal God, and was a system of practical if theoretically inconsistent atheism.

The revaluation of Confucianism that has proceeded apace in the last decade or so has been extended from earlier to later Confucianism. Again, it is the religiousness of Confucian practice that has attracted most attention. The Columbia University seminar on Neo-Confucian thought and the several conferences whose proceedings have been edited by W.T. de Bary, have placed great emphasis on Neo-Confucian 'cultivation' and 'enlightenment'; on meditation practices such as 'quiet sitting'; on the dimension of transcendence in the moral, social and even political activities of Confucian scholar-officials. Studies of individual leading Confucians by Tu Wei-ming, Julia Ching, Rodney Taylor, Irene Bloom, and, of course, Liu Ts'un-yan, have shown them to be far from the austere deistic rationalists of the French *philosophes'* view of Chinese intellectuals. They emerge as passionate, committed and, yes, — religious leaders.

Comparatively neglected, however, has been the question of the status of Neo-Confucian metaphysics. We still await a philosophical and theological reassessment of the main concepts of Neo-Confucianism. Leibniz's pioneering attempt in his *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese* has recently been revived in the form of an annotated English translation, but it suffers from second-hand (often third-hand *via* missionary commentators) knowledge of the Chinese sources. Julia Ching devotes a stimulating but tantalisingly brief chapter to 'The Problem of God' in her *Confucianism and Christianity*. Wing-tsit Chan's many essays on Neo-Confucianism in *Philosophy East and West* and elsewhere, while focusing on clarifying the metaphysical concepts, are not concerned with comparative or theological evaluation. Such a task has not been attempted since the early 1920's when John Percy Bruce's *Chu Hsi and His Masters* and his annotated translation of some chapters of Chu Hsi's collected works, under the title of *The Philosophy of Human Nature*, appeared.

This paper has no ambitions to fill the gap so lightly disclosed. It is rather concerned with establishing the state of the question, the *problematik*. I wish to suggest that it is a matter of concern not only to China specialists, but also to the general phenomenology of religion and to contemporary theology. Here we have a major system of thought and practice, flourishing over a thousand years from the eleventh century to the present day, engaging men's deepest convictions, yet apparently unassimilable under our common analytic categories. As Bruce pointed out sixty years ago, there is something eminently unsatisfactory about our understanding of a system to which such apparently contradictory labels can be given as monotheism, pantheism, monism, spiritual dualism, materialism, theism and atheism. The fault may lie as much in our categories as in the subject of investigation.

## NEO-CONFUCIANISM

For non-specialists amongst my audience, and with apologies to the experts, I must begin with a brief sketch of the origins of the system under discussion. And, in the first place, I must point out that 'Neo-Confucianism' itself is a misnomer. The Chinese have only used the term, *hsin-ju-hsueh*, 'New or Neo-Confucianism' quite recently, and then as a label for the 20th century revival of Confucianism as a philosophy of life. The Chinese themselves refer to the new metaphysical system that began

in the Sung, based on the much older Confucian tradition but incorporating new perspectives, a new language and a much wider ambit, by names such as *li-hsueh*, 'the study of li (or Principle)'; *tao-hsueh*, 'the study of *tao*, the Way'; and, in its Ming development, *hsin-hsueh*, 'the study of Mind'.

To generalize grossly, the dominance of Confucianism during the first Imperial Dynasty, the Han (2nd century BC — 2nd century AD), was challenged, during the period of division and disorder after its collapse, by a revived Taoism and an imported Buddhism. It was only in the late T'ang/early Sung (9th and 10th centuries) that Confucianism began to recapture the ground lost, and, above all, to challenge its rivals on their own ground, metaphysics and spirituality. It would be myopic to see this as their explicit motivation. The old Confucian concerns with good government, historical precedent and correct human relationship are still dominant. But there is a recognition that new questions were abroad, the answers to which could not be read off the pages of the Confucian canon, and which had to be answered if Confucianism's claims to exclusive control of the state system and the educational establishment were to be justified.

The problem, then, was how to draw on Taoist cosmology, and Buddhist spirituality and metaphysics while appearing to base the new synthesis on the classic texts. It was Chou Tun-i (1017-1073) who found the way through by a piece of creative commentary on one of the more obscure passages in the most enigmatic of the classics, the *I Ching* or 'Book of Changes'. The passage occurs in the Third Appendix to the *I*, possibly of no earlier than Han date, and, as James Legge argued, probably of Taoist origin (Introduction to *The I Ching, Sacred Books of the East*, p.12). Legge translates it as follows:

> Therefore in (the system of) the Yi there is the Grand Terminus (*t'ai-chi*, Great or Supreme Ultimate), which produced the two elementary Forms. Those two Forms produced the Four emblematic Symbols, which again produced the eight Trigrams. The eight trigrams served to determine the good and evil (issues of events), and from this determination was produced the (successful prosecution of the) great business (of life).
>
> I Ching, p.373

What we have here is a typical piece of Han cosmology, a model of the production of the physical and moral universes. All that had to be added was Taoist/Buddhist metaphysics, and this was done through a new concept, the 'Non-Ultimate' or *wu-chi*, with its echos of Taoist 'nothingness' *(wu)* and Buddhist emptiness *(hsu)*.

> So, Chou Tun-i begins his 'Explanation of the Diagram of the Great Ultimate' (*T'ai-chi-t'u shuo*):
> The non-ultimate, but also the Great Ultimate!
> *wu-chi erh t'ai-chi*

— perhaps the most commented on passage in Chinese literature. I haven't time here to go into the problems. *Chi* itself is ambiguous, meaning primarily a pivot (as of a door or gate), then the ridge of a roof, the zenith of the sky, the geographic poles, and finally the ultimate or limit. *T'ai-chi*, then, appears to be the ultimate source of all, the end of the chain of derived being. But *wu-chi*? Does it mean 'without limit' hence limitless or infinite in time and space? Or, simply, not limited, its limits indeterminate? Or absolute nothingness? and how is it related to *t'ai-chi*? The linking *erh* can mean simply 'and', 'also', 'moreover' but it may be taken in a qualifying sense as 'but', 'yet'; or as indicating temporal sequence, 'and then', and hence, here, differentiating rather than identifying *t'ai-chi* and *wu-chi*.

The 'Explanation' goes on to depict, as in the accompanying diagram, the generation by the Great Ultimate of *yang* and *yin*, which in turn generate the five agents —water, fire, wood, metal and earth — which are assimilated to *ch'i*, 'material-force' or 'matter-energy' of the universe. Hence *t'ai-chi* which is without limit, *wu-chi*, infinite, yet produces all the finite beings, and especially man.

> It is man alone who receives (the material forces) in their highest excellence, and therefore he is the most intelligent. His physical form appears, and his spirit develops consciousness. The five moral principles of his nature (humanity or *jen*, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness) are aroused by, and react to, the external world and engage in activity; good and evil are distinguished; and human affairs take place.
>
> (W.T. Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 463)

And so we are back with the Confucian concern for morality and social activity, but anchored in a new overarching framework.

Chou Tun-i's contemporary Chang Tsai (1021-1077) contributed to the conceptual armoury of Neo-Confucianism a developed concept of *ch'i*, 'material-force'. We have seen Chou's use of *ch'i* to describe the activities of the five agents. Much earlier the Han cosmologist Tung Chung-shu had written of *ch'i* as a 'limpid, colourless substance surrounding man as water surrounds a fish' (De Bary, Sources, 466) and like the ether of early modern physics, invoked to provide a physical connection and hence causal link between material objects. Like ether, too, etymologically it implies 'vapour'. Chang Tsai saw *ch'i* as in constant interaction with *li* or 'principle', which ordered this formless or disordered material-force into the myriad beings. He then identified *ch'i* with the *wu* and *hsu* of the Taoists and Buddhists, and argued that it was not in opposition to existence and existents, but their source (i.e. Chou Tun-i's *wu chi*).

The high-point of Chang Tsai's thinking was a vision of unity — cosmological, ethical and metaphysical — expressed in the famous 'Western Inscription' on the west wall of his study:

> Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst.
> Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature.
> All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.

There follows a detailed exposition of Confucian virtue, and moral examples from early Chinese history. And it concludes:

> Wealth, honour, blessing, and benefits are meant for the enrichment of my life, while poverty, humble station, and sorrow are meant to help me to fulfilment.
> In life I follow and serve (Heaven and Earth).
> In death I will be at peace. (W. T. Chan, *Source Book*, 498)

I will not comment in detail on the 'Western Inscription' since its religious tone and the note of transcendence that it strikes are self-evident. 'Heaven' and 'Earth', however, deserve some notice. The coupling of Heaven with Earth, suggests that Heaven, *t'ien*, is not the early Chou God-concept, but more cosmological. Yet, neither are they impersonal or material. It is not a 'proto-scientific' concept. The universe is personal, responsive and ultimately moral.

The decisive steps in the systematising of these inchoate concepts were taken by Chang Tsai's nephews, the Ch'eng brothers, Ch'eng I (1033-1107) and Ch'eng

Hao (1032-1085). Ch'eng I, especially, took up the hints of his uncle about *li* or Principle, and made it the key-stone of the new *li-hsueh*. It was always hard to see how, in Chang Tsai's thought, the material world could be the vehicle for ethical and spiritual values, and how *ch'i* could be the common or linking principle between man and the ultimate. But *li*, principle or law, the ordering force, logically if not actually prior to and independent of *ch'i*, could play such a role. It could serve, too, as a metaphysical foundation for the old argument of Mencius for the innate goodness of human nature. The man who understood *li* would adopt an attitude of 'seriousness' (*ching*) towards the world and other men, expressed in the extension of knowledge to the utmost (another borrowing from early Confucianism) and *jen* or benevolence.

Ch'eng Hao, in anticipation especially of the School of Mind (*hsin-hsueh*) of the Ming, took the theory of *li* a decisive (and to many a dangerous) step further, by identifying *li* with both the individual human mind and 'the mind of the universe':

> The constant principle of Heaven and earth is that their mind is in all things, yet of themselves they have no mind; and the constant principle of the sage is that his feelings are in accord with all creation, yet of himself he has no feelings.
>
> (De Bary, *Sources*, 1, 506)

This is too inchoate to be regarded as a full blown pantheism of the Spinozan variety, or even a spiritual monism. However, this universal mind or Principle is clearly contrasted with matter, is spiritual. I suspect that, were it not for the shadow cast by Buddhist monism — and invoked by the more dominant *li-hsueh* interpretation in condemnation of *hsin-hsueh* — such passages would be read, like Chang Tsai's 'Western Inscription' as no more than a vigorous affirmation of the unity of all things.

It was Chu Hsi (1130-1200) who created the final synthesis of these ideas into what became Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. In many respects Chu was both less creative and less penetrating than his predecessors. But he was more systematic (one might even say 'scholastic'), prolific in his writings, and a politician of great ability and perception in a time of perpetual political crisis, the declining years of the Southern Sung.

Chu Hsi took from Ch'eng I (hence the common label of the Ch'eng-Chu School) the idea of building the new systematic exposition of Confucian metaphysics around the concept of *li*. If there is to be any reductionism it is in the direction of *li*. *T'ai-chi* is ultimately *li*; *T'ien* is, in manifestation at least, *li*; *hsin*, 'mind', is in the final analysis *li*; and Tao is the moral facet of *li*. This raises some very difficult and fundamental problems. Is *li* a category, a label, or is it a metaphysical reality? If the latter, it is certainly not an entity i.e., it cannot exist independently of *ch'i*, yet it has a certain priority, logical, causal, and perhaps, in Chu Hsi's mind, temporal. The best known passage on this comes from the *Li/Ch'i* section of Chu Hsi's *Complete Works* (Ch. 49 of the K'ang-hsi edition, *Chu Tzu Ch'uan-shu*):

> In the universe there has never been any material force (*ch'i*) without principle (*li*) nor principle without material-force.
>
> Question: Which exists first, principle or material-force?
>
> Answer: Principle has never been separated from material-force. However, principle is above the realm of corporeality whereas the material-force is within the realm of corporeality. Hence when spoken of as being above or within the realm of corporeality, is there not a difference of priority and posteriority? Principle has no corporeal form, but material-force is coarse and contains impurities.
>
> Fundamentally principle and material-force cannot be spoken of as prior or posterior. But if we must trace their origin, we are obliged to say that principle

> is prior. However principle is not a separate entity. It exists right in material-force. Without material-force, principle would have nothing to adhere to. Material-force consists of the five agents of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth, while principle contains humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom.
>
> (De Bary, *Sources*, I, 481)

Where does *T'ai-chi* fit into this scheme?

> The Great Ultimate is merely the principle of Heaven and earth and the myriad things. With respect to Heaven and earth, there is the Great Ultimate in them. With respect to the myriad things, there is the Great Ultimate in each and every one of them. Before Heaven and earth existed, there was assuredly this principle ... The Great Ultimate is not spatially conditioned; it has neither corporeal form nor body. There is no spot where it may be placed ... However, activity is after all the activity of the Great Ultimate and tranquillity is also its tranquillity, although activity and tranquillity themselves are not the Great Ultimate.
>
> [De Bary, *Sources*, I, 484]

How does all this link up with the concept of Heaven (*t'ien*) in early Confucianism? True to his general guiding light, Chu Hsi argues that *t'ien* is Principle, is *li*. Frequently in his commentaries he glosses *t'ien: t'ien chi li ye*, (*t'ien* here means *li*). He appears, however, uncomfortable with the concepts. It cannot be dismissed since it is so centrally canonical. Yet one feels he would prefer to restrict the use of *t'ien* to the physical sky.

> Nowadays, it is maintained that Heaven does not refer to the blue sky. In my view [this interpretation] cannot be left out of account.
> [But, he goes on]
> Principle is the substance of Heaven, while destiny [t'ien] is the function of principle.
>
> [Chan, *Source Book*, 612 from *Chu Tzu Ch'uan shu* 42]
>
> [and a little further on]
> If I investigate principle to the utmost and fully develop my moral nature, then what I have received is wholly Heaven's moral character, and what Heaven has endowed me with is wholly Heaven's principle.
>
> [Chan, *Source Book*, 613 from *Chu Tzu Ch'uan-shu* 42]

Yet, despite this discomfort with the personalistic *t'ien*, he does not hesitate to attribute personality to *t'ien*:

> The production of a man by Heaven is like the command of the throne to a magistrate.
>
> [*Chu Tzu Ch'uan-shu*, 43 in Bruce, *Philosophy of Human Nature*, 117]

And when specifically questioned as to whether the Decree of Heaven (*t'ien-ming*) is not personal, but rather due to the interplay of the physical forces of the universe, he strongly upholds the traditional view:

> The phenomena may be such as would lead one to think that there is not really One imparting the Decree; but that there is a personal being above us by whose command these things come to pass, seems to be taught by the "Odes" and "Records" — in such passages, for example, as speak of the wrath of the Supreme Ruler. But still, this Ruler is none other than Law [*Li*, 'Principle'].

> In the whole universe there is nothing higher than [Principle] and hence the term Ruler.
>
> [*Chu-Tzu Ch'uan-shu*, 43 in Bruce, *Philosophy*, 147]

Again, two other key terms, Nature (*hsing*) and *Tao* (Moral Order) are reduced to being expressions of *li*. *Tao* is *li* in its ethical form: '*Tao* is the ethical principle which every phenomenon has' [Bruce, *Philosophy*, 274-5 from *Chu Tzu Ch'uan-shu*, 467] while 'Nature is the concrete expression of the Moral Law (*Tao*) [Bruce, *Philosophy* 275 from *Chu Tzu Ch'uan-shu* 46], a phrase Chu Hsi borrows from Shao Yung, and to round the circle, he quotes with approval Ch'eng I: 'Nature is Principle, and what we call Principle is really nature. [Quoted Bruce, *Philosophy*, 16].

Finally, we might look at Chu Hsi's treatment of Ch'eng Hao's theme of the 'mind of Heaven and Earth'. In a section of Ch. 46 of his *Complete Works*, he rejects the Buddhist conception of Mind as remote from human relationships and distinct from the world:

> Here we have the Mind of Heaven and Earth, the Source of the universe. There are not two sources in the universe ... Every form, produced and reproduced, has each the nature of Heaven. This is the reason for the inseparableness of the creature from its source. Receiving its spiritual essence we become man, and within the confines of the four cardinal principles it resides, inscrutable, formless, still, and, it would seem, unnameable. Tzu Ssu, having regard to the absence of any leaning to one side or the other, called it The Mean. Mencius, having regard to its perfect purity called it Good. The Master [Confucius] having regard to its life-producing substance called it Love [*jen*]. The terms differ but the thing named is the same, and is not separable from everyday life. This is why you said that its meaning is manifest without our seeking it.
>
> [Bruce, *Philosophy* 282, from *Chu-Tzu Ch'uan-shu* 46]

The 'Mind of Heaven and Earth', then, is not to be sought by abstraction from experience, but is immersed in our daily life. The spiritual life is a dimension of our everyday existence, the substance of our ethical struggle for authenticity. And, in this at least, he was thoroughly Confucian. Religion, for Chu Hsi, as for Confucius, was not a matter of worship of spirits but of service to men, as the following commentary suggests:

> When Fan Ch'ih asked about wisdom, Confucius said: "To devote onself earnestly to the duties due to men, and to respect the heavenly and earthly spirits but keep them at a distance, may be called wisdom." Let us understand those things that should be understood. Those that cannot be understood let us set aside. By the time we have thoroughly understood ordinary daily matters, the principle governing the heavenly and earthly spirits will naturally be seen. This is the way to wisdom. When Confucius said: "If we are not yet able to serve man, how can we serve the earthly spirits?" he expressed the same idea.
>
> [De Bary, *Sources*, I, 487, from *Chu Tzu Ch'uan-shu* 51]

To round off this sketch of the evolution of Neo-Confucianism I should have something to say of the School of Mind, *hsin-hsueh*, and its development by Chu Hsi's contemporary Lu Hsiang-shan and especially by the Ming dynasty thinker, Wang Yang-ming (1472-1529). However, since I am convinced, and the recent works on Wang by Julia Ching and Tu Wei-ming confirm my reading of him, that Wang differs from Chu Hsi in emphasis rather than substance, and that his key notion of discovering *li* within the mind, rather than in the external world ('the investigation of things') is implicit in Chu's synthesis, there seems no need to discuss his views in detail.

The attempts to label Wang Yang-ming a 'Buddhizer', as a proponent of Buddhist idealism and monism, or of Buddhist meditation practices, or of Ch'an Buddhist social irresponsibility are now seen as largely derived from the strains of the late Ming political crisis and a selective reading of Chu Hsi himself by Ch'ing apologists. The substance of *hsin-hsueh* was already there in the *li-hsueh*.

## A THEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

This is the point in the paper at which I firmly step right out of my depth. I am not a theologian nor a philosopher of religion, but an historian. In the last capacity I have an acquaintance with many theological systems, and their terminology, but I may be, in the eyes of the professionals, guilty of crass irresponsibility in throwing them around. I beg to be corrected.

The Jesuit missionaries in whose writings I have been immersed for so many years, when faced with the task of a theological evaluation of the *li-hsueh* instinctively attempted a comparative conceptual analysis. They had a fixed criterion for orthodoxy: the scholastic, Greek (especially Aristotelean) categories or 'attributes' of the Christian God which they sought for in the categories and concepts of Chinese thought. In the Classics they struck oil: the personalised *t'ien* and *shang-ti* appeared to be conceived of, however vaguely, as creator, sustainer, pure spirit, transcendent etc. In Neo-Confucianism, on the other hand, the classic attributes proved elusive. Was their referent, the substantive Being to whom they were attributed, *t'ien* or *t'ai-chi* or *li*? And was it a 'whom' at all? Was not this all-pervasive *li* a pantheistic concept, a fatal confusion of creator and created, the *Deus sive Natura* of Spinoza? On the whole, the Jesuits eschewed systematic discussion of Neo-Confucianism, preferring to concentrate on the safer classical Confucianism and a blanket condemnation of the modern *atheopolitici*. The only exception, Alexandre de la Charme's *Hsing-li chen-ch'uan* (1753) takes up the *hsing-li* philosophy only to parody it. *T'ai-chi*, for example, is seen as a sort of Neoplatonic Demiurge, subordinate to the real creator, and fundamentally material (*ch'i*).

The only thoroughgoing modern attempt along these lines is that of John Percy Bruce whose London University D.Litt. thesis, published as *Chu Hsi and His Masters* in 1923, constantly applies the categories of Christian theology (he was himself on the faculty of the Shantung Christian University) to Neo-Confucian concepts. He finds in the *t'ai-chi/wu chi* equation an attribution of infinity to the creative principle. *T'ien*, he argues, using the passages I have already referred to, is clearly personal, equated with *t'ai-chi* and *li*. *Li* itself is spiritual, independent of and prior to matter. But does this make Neo-Confucianism a theism? Rightly, I believe, he hesitates over labels:

> We shall perhaps arrive at a truer understanding if we content ourselves with not labelling it at all, though careful comparison may serve the useful purpose of teaching us something of what it is by showing us what it is not.
>
> [Bruce, *Chu Hsi and His Masters*, 120]

And, of what it is not, he is, again rightly in my view, certain:

> The charges, therefore, which have been brought against Chu Hsi of materialism and antitheism would alike appear to be without sufficient foundation. In the statement that Heaven is [Law: Principle], on which these charges have been largely based, he does not deny personality, but asserts the spirituality and ethical perfection of the Divine Being; and ... his assertion of personality in the Supreme Ruler is unequivocal and complete.
>
> [Bruce, *Chu Hsi and His Masters*, 300]

Logically, then, Neo-Confucianism would seem to be a kind of Theism. But what kind? Not Deism, as Voltaire and others thought, since this 'God' is very much involved in the activities of the universe. Not Pantheism, since there is a logical and metaphysical distinction drawn between the spiritual 'Principle' and 'Matter'. Not quite Monism, since there is a certain dualism; the ultimate reduction of matter to spirit is avoided.

If we must apply Western categories — and I would question the necessity — perhaps Panentheism is the best label. Hans Küng in *Does God Exist?* applies the label to the early Hegel, before what he calls his 'mind-monism' was developed.

> Hegel does not deify the empirical world, he does not make everything God, as if the finite were simply absorbed in the infinite. But we may certainly speak of a pan-en-theism in the widest sense, of a vital unity of life, of love, of all-embracing Spirit — these three notions are typical of Hegel's Frankfurt period. God as Opposite seems to be conquered by Deity as all-encompassing. Consequently, in describing the relationship between God and man, personal categories are now avoided as much as possible.
>
> [*Does God Exist?*, 136]

Certainly, there are many echoes of Chu Hsi in this description, just as the Hegelian emphasis on 'mind' and 'spirit' has resonances of *hsin* and *li*. So, too, the conflation of the ethical with the ontological; the avoidance of the language of personality. Why, then, hesitate to call Neo-Confucianism a kind of Hegelian Panentheism?

My reasons for caution lie in the very enterprise of drawing conceptual analogies, especially those based on Western categories. It is this that has bedevilled the study of Buddhism and Taoism as much as Confucianism. Leaving aside the fundamental question of the influence of the structures of the Chinese language or what can and cannot be said in Chinese, I would raise the general problem of the functional as opposed to the structural implications of key philosophical or theological categories. Does *li* function within the system as 'Spirit' does in early Hegelianism? I am not proposing to answer my own question definitively, but simply to suggest that functional analogy both gives warrant for the drawing of comparisons — enables one, for example, to speak of 'salvation' in Buddhism — and demands a different kind of analysis, one focussing on behaviour, practices, not systems; on faith, not theology.

And 'faith' there seems to be in Neo-Confucianism. W.T. de Bary in the Preface to his *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of Mind-and-Heart* draws attention to the faith dimension of Chu Hsi style orthodoxy. The school, he says, called itself *tao-hsueh* out of 'a sense of religious certitude ... [a] powerful sense of mission in the world' (p.xvi). Men endured persecution and died for the convictions imbued by Neo-Confucian teachers. The Late Ming Tung-lin school almost courted martyrdom at the hands of the eunuchs and court officials. Rodney Taylor in his study of Kao P'an-lung, the Tung-lin leader, stresses his conversion, his enlightenment experience, his embracing of sagehood as an ideal [*The Cultivation of Sagehood as a Religious Goal in Neo-Confucianism*]. Sagehood was attained primarily by studying the classics, but was only possible after a basic reorientation achieved by meditation. This pillar of Ch'eng-Chu orthodoxy, bitter opponent of Wang Yang-ming's Buddhist 'perversions' advocated and practiced meditation, quietly sitting (*ching tso*) in order to realise one's fundamental nature (*pen-t'i*).

Faith, then, but faith in what? Presumably not in a person, certainly not in a historical figure. Confucius himself was a sage, a teacher and a model, but not the object of faith. Ultimately Confucian faith was in a way of life and action, the Confucian *tao*. And the Neo-Confucian word for it was *ching*, 'seriousness' or 'reverence'. This

was what was acquired by quiet sitting, envisioned in political decision-making, embodied in the life of the true Confucian. So, the Confucian ideal was not faith in an object of worship, but 'seriousness' about living:

> The object of reverence [says de Bary] was not understood in the theistic or devotional sense as an object of worship, but as a definite form of action to which the attitude of seriousness and respect attaches. *Ching* in this sense meant collecting the mind and directing it toward one thing. Often this "one thing" represented the unity of all things in principle.
>
> [*Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy*, 14]

Philosophical discourse, in this mode, was neither pure rationalism nor pursued for its own sake. *Ching*, 'seriousness', endowed it with purpose and charged it with commitment. Tu Wei-ming, characteristically Chinese in his reluctance to call this 'religion' or 'theology' but recognising the faith elements, proposes a new term 'religiophilosophy':

> Since this form of philosophizing involves a kind of religious commitment, to distinguish it from the philosophical study of religion we shall call it "religiophilosophy", a tentative definition of which is: the inquiry into human insights by disciplined reflection for the primary purpose of spiritual self-transformation. Religiophilosophy thus defined charactizes the nature and function of philosophizing in all the major historical traditions of the East. In addition, it truthfully represents theological thinking in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
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> [Tu Wei-Ming, *Humanity and Self-Cultivation*, 84]

I doubt that we need a new word. I would argue, in fact, that this 'religious commitment' characterizes not just theological thinking but also philosophy in the European tradition, the pursuit of truth with seriousness, the 'love of wisdom'. It is when it falls away from seriousness into word-games or manipulation (the red flag for which is 'philosophy of . . .') that it abandons its own vocation.

What is the prime characteristic of this kind of philosophical reflection? Inwardness. A sensitivity to one's spiritual states; a consciousness of spiritual realities experienced within one's reflective self-consciousness; of the unity of knowledge and action. In theistic terms it is an experience of immanence rather than transcendence. But it is precisely this Eastern tradition — of Eastern Christianity, as well as Buddhism, Taoism, Neo-Confucianism, Hatha Yoga and so on — that challenges the validity of the Western Transcendence/immanence dichotomy. God, as God, must be the 'Coincidence of opposites', the point where such conceptual differentiation ceases to have meaning. Rather than the wholly other, to use Rudolf Otto's very Western formula, God is the 'not other', the *non aliud* of Nicholas of Cusa, the 'centre of the centre, end of the end, name of the name, being of being and non-being of non-being' [Nicholasof Cusa, *Directio speculantis seu non aliud*, quoted in Kung, *Does God Exist?*, 601] — or in Neo-Confucian terms, *wu chi erh t'ai chi*.

**Related works by the author of this paper**

1. *K'ung-tzu or Confucius? The Jesuit Interpretation of Confucianism*. Allen and Unwin, 1985.
2. *Mao Zedong*. University of Queensland Press, 1984.