

## **Dialogue 4: Confucian Religion**

ABSTRACT: two issues—religiosity and Confucianism as a civil religion—structure this dialogue. Emphasizing the importance of not using Western categories of religion to distort Confucianism, Angle distinguishes between religion and religiosity, and relates Confucianism to the latter. He argues that central to traditional Confucianism is an attitude of reverence for Heaven, which opens up its unique approach to religiosity. The religiosity of Confucianism is also related to contemporary Confucianism as modern society needs to find a way to accommodate it; some of the various options currently on the table include state religion, civil religion, background culture, or individual ethics. Finally, Angle cautions against excessive reliance on Confucian texts alone. All Chinese Confucians participating in the dialogue agree that Western categories do not fit neatly into an understanding of Confucian religion. Further, Chen Ming makes a distinction between traditional Confucian religion and Confucian civil religion with its practical value. Lu Yunfeng and Wang Qingxin share the view that Confucianism as an indigenous form of religion is still tacitly shaping the moral sentiment of the Chinese. While Lu emphasizes the need to recognize diverse ways in which Confucian religion manifests itself, which include both elite beliefs and folklore, Wang specifically takes on Chen’s civil religion account as he believes that the narrowing down of Confucianism to its functional utility undermines the very religiosity of Confucianism. Drastically different from Angle and Chen, who see a sharp conflict between religion and modernity, Zhao Feng take divinity as indispensable to all great civilizations, which, in turn, calls for more of an effort to religionize Confucianism and broader Chinese culture.

CHEN BISHENG: In today’s dialogue, we have Chen Ming and Steve as our featured speakers, and the topic is Confucian religion and civil religion. Steve will give his opening remarks followed by Chen Ming’s response. After that, the others present may ask questions for further discussion. If anyone has specific questions they’d like to raise, they may be asked during the two speakers’ opening presentations. Each speaker has about half an hour. The floor is yours, Steve.

STEPHEN ANGLE: Our topic today is the connection between Confucianism and religion. Admittedly, this is not my area of expertise. However, as I have done some research on contemporary as well as progressive Confucianism, I have happened to come across this topic from time to time, and I have scattered thoughts to share with you all. There are three main aspects I’ll talk about today. The first has to do with the definition of religion, especially the relationship between religion and faith (*xinyang*). The second issue is the religiosity of traditional Confucianism. The third issue is the religiosity of

contemporary Confucianism. Now, let's start with the relationship between religion and faith.

I believe that those of us here and all of those who care about contemporary Confucianism are all at least somewhat concerned about the over-reliance of contemporary Chinese thought on Western academic paradigms. I think this is a common phenomenon in all contemporary areas of philosophy: when we endeavor to understand something as philosophy, we mostly avail ourselves of Western philosophical concepts or categories. Many Chinese intellectuals hope to dispense with a rigid importing of and reliance on Western lexicons, and I think this aspiration is very positive and I wholeheartedly support it. The independent evolution of contemporary Confucianism requires such autonomy. I think that, if there is anything we can make of Confucianism or Chinese thought in order to mount profound and meaningful challenges or contributions to other traditions in the world, then it has to rely on at least some native Chinese categories and concepts to develop in a coherent fashion. With all this in mind, I have a relatively skeptical attitude towards relying on the concept of faith to understand Confucian religion.

Recently I finished reading the book *Kang Youwei and Confucianism's "New Era"* by Gan Chunsong.<sup>1</sup> In his book, Chunsong offers a couple of ways of defining religion. Although his thinking doesn't explicitly rely on Western categories, reading the book carefully reveals that it is still substantially dependent on the ways that religion has been defined in the West. He claims that an institutionalized religion should have certain elements: first, that there must be an object of religious belief, like the Buddha or Allah; second, that religious faith must be organized, as through a church or temple; third, that it needs believers and a canon. Each of these three characteristics depends on the idea of faith. Now, I don't want to be too critical here. We know that this definition is, for many religions, appropriate and effective. However, does this mean that all religious traditions must possess these three traits? I don't think that's necessarily the case. If someone wants to turn Confucianism into a Western-style religion, knowingly and intentionally modelling it on Christianity, then the emphasis on faith is not problematic. In fact, if that is your goal, it could even be mandatory to take such an approach. Although this kind of transformation of Confucianism would obviously rely on Western categories and concepts, it could still have its overall logic and coherence. That said, some scholars in China today think that only by following this path — transforming Confucianism into a Western-style religion — can Confucianism have enough power to resist Christianity. Baulking at this attempt, I personally believe that doing so would lead to many problems. To be clear, my concern here is with molding Confucianism into a Western religion. This is different from making it a "modern" religion. Modern religions are diverse. Modern Christianity is only one type of modern religion. If we actually need to rely on a

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Christianity-oriented model, then we can lean on the category and perspective of faith. If our goal is not to transform Confucianism into a Western-style religion, though, we may find that we can rely on categories indigenous to China that doesn't necessarily intersect with the idea of faith.

What I want to ask is: in the entirety of the Confucian, Buddhist, or Daoist traditions, is the importance and centrality of faith the same as that of Christianity? I think the answer is "no." It is easy to see that traditional Confucianism placed great emphasis on rituals, conduct, dispositions, and virtues. Confucianism doesn't have much principled discussion on the idea of faith. Precisely because it was not a centrally discussed issue, Confucians did not crusade against other religions, and instead accommodated other religions as they came into China and mingled with Chinese culture. It was common in China for one and the same person to celebrate both Buddhist and Daoist festivals as well as rituals associated with Confucianism. This kind of behavior would not be acceptable by congregations across the religious spectrum in the West. Now to be clear, by saying that faith is not an important concept in Confucianism, I do not mean that traditional Confucian reverence for Heaven is phony. What I mean is that faith as a concept was not emphasized theoretically. We may think of some other examples that emphasize faith. For example, there is the famous text *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* in Chinese Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, I think that even this "faith" is different from the practice of faith in Western religions. Supposing now that we don't focus on faith, what else are we left with to discuss religion and religiosity? Actually, there are many approaches.

According to Chunsong's interpretation, how does Kang Youwei understand "religion"? He suggests that we start with the instrumental value of religion — keeping in mind that this is Chunsong's interpretation, not what Kang said explicitly. He goes on to say that Kang subsumed under religion all theories that exhort people to goodness and expunge evil. Note that this way of thinking about religion is not strongly connected to "faith." To give you some context, the American philosopher and theologian Robert Neville (who is also interested in Confucianism, by the way) says that a religion must have three components: cosmology, ritual, and a path to spiritual perfection.<sup>3</sup> There are some other definitions of religion, like Frederick Streng saying that religion is a method to achieve "ultimate transformation," or Paul Tillich arguing that religion is centered on an "utmost concern."<sup>4</sup> All in all, there are many ways of defining religion, each of which differs in many ways from the Christian model we first proposed. What I'm driving towards is that when discussing the religiosity of Confucianism, we don't necessarily need to confine ourselves to religious faith. This is the premise upon which I'd like to continue my talk.

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My second main topic is now to ask how we should approach religion in traditional Confucianism. We can say that traditional Confucianism has a very strong “religiosity.” Of course, the exact shape and scope of this religiosity differs according to time and context, but religiosity in traditional Confucianism is obvious and undeniable. It doesn’t seem to me a good question to ask “whether or not Confucianism is a religion.” We can always answer this question in the affirmative, so long as we use a suitable definition of religion! However, those posing this question often seem to be asking whether or not Confucianism is *only* a religion. The category of religion itself is not native to China, and hence when posed in this way, answers to the question are not very illuminating. Instead we should ask: whatever else it is, does the Confucian tradition possess religiosity? This is something we can discuss, and my answer would be affirmative. The crucial next step, though, is to discuss what sort of religiosity Confucianism possesses. This is a complex topic, and my interlocutors here understand it far better than I do. I plan only to discuss two points, which I hope can help us in the subsequent discussion of the religiosity of contemporary Confucianism.

My two points have to do with Neo-Confucianism. The first is a response to the Canadian Sinologist Julia Ching’s discussion of religiosity in Zhu Xi’s teachings. Professor Ching thinks that Zhu Xi’s ideas on the “heartmind of Heaven and Earth” are sufficient to prove that Zhu Xi recognized a conscious “higher intelligence” that is capable of controlling the world, thus closely resembling the Christian God.<sup>5</sup> I find this interpretation to be very problematic. For one thing, when explaining passages in the Classics that seem to give Heaven agency, Zhu Xi explicitly denies that Heaven is an agent. On the contrary, he says things like “it is only that Pattern is like this.” This is not the same as a so-called higher consciousness. For another, there are many other ways of explaining the “heartmind of Heaven and Earth” and the so-called “mastery” of the Heavenly Pattern. (Or, as I would prefer to translate *tianli* in this context, “cosmic Pattern.”) We are certainly not forced to view Zhu Xi as a theist, and in fact, I have written an essay in which I specifically discuss Zhu Xi’s notion of “*tian*,” which I argue should be understood as “cosmos” rather than “Heaven.”<sup>6</sup> We have no reason to model religious ideas in Confucianism upon the idea of God in Christianity. If we do, the entire Neo-Confucian understanding of Heaven would be trapped in an intellectual understanding that is inextricably Western-centric.

Second, if Confucian religiosity is unlike that found in the West, then what is it? Several points come immediately to mind. For instance, Zhu Xi said, “Following nature and Pattern, that is called ‘delighting in Heaven.’ Daring not to violate ritual, that is called ‘being in awe of Heaven.’”<sup>7</sup> These attitudes of delight and awe are closely

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related to religion. Even more important than these passages is the idea of “reverence” (*jing*) in Zhu Xi’s thought. A few years ago Paul Woodruff wrote a book entitled *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*. The author is an expert on ancient Greece, but one chapter specifically discusses reverence in Chinese thought. This book does an excellent job of opening up the religious dimensions of reverence. Furthermore, we should of course also attend to ritual. Ritual can have a deeply religious expression. We can even include the character *xin*,<sup>8</sup> but *xin* in Confucianism is not the same as “faith.” In *Buddhism and Confucianism*, a book written in the 1950s by the famous Japanese scholar Araki Kengo, the author expounded on the idea of *xin*, especially in Zhu Xi’s system of thoughts. This was not faith, but an affirmation of one’s commitment to the “pervasive circulation of cosmic Pattern” — in other words, to the values intrinsic to the cosmos.<sup>9</sup> “Commitment” in this sense is quite different from a cognitive kind of “belief.” In fact, this meaning of “*xin*” may bear on “faith” in the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, instead of faith in the existence of God. In any event, the sense in which Confucianism is religious is too complex for me to explore in full here. To summarize, so far I’ve stressed two main points. First, we should not use the Western understanding of God to misread Neo-Confucian concepts. Second, there are rich and distinctive indigenous religious materials within Neo-Confucianism.

Now we’ll come around to my third main topic: the sense in which contemporary Confucianism is religious in nature. I’ll touch on three points. First, what kind of framework should we use to understand the religiosity of contemporary Confucianism? Then my second and third points will touch on the role of the state and the status of the Classics, respectively. When I speak of an appropriate framework, what I mean to ask is: what are the possible forms that Confucian religion can take in contemporary China? There are at least four possibilities or frameworks, and probably more. The first is that of a “state religion,” which I believe we are all familiar with, and which doesn’t warrant too much attention here. Perhaps I only need to stress that, if there is a state religion, even though other religions still exist in the country, they must recognize its authority. In other words, making Confucianism the state religion points to placing it atop all other religions. For the second framework, we can borrow John Rawls’ idea of “comprehensive doctrine” in our explanation. Rawls suggests that there are various kinds of comprehensive doctrines in a diverse contemporary society. This means that several religions can co-exist while none of them have special status. The state and the constitution treat all religions equally. These comprehensive doctrines don’t have to fit into the framework of Christian “faith,” but a given comprehensive doctrine must certainly be identified with in its own way by its participants. If we use Rawls’ framework to examine the religiosity of contemporary Confucianism, we might then say that there is one (or perhaps more?) Confucian community, made up of Confucian practices and institutions (such as academies),

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which coexists with other comprehensive doctrines. The third framework is understanding Confucianism as a civil religion. I won't say too much about it now — if we wait a bit, Chen Ming can further expand on it. Fourth, we may also take Confucianism as an element of a *Chinese* civil religion. In his famous “Civil Religion in America,” Robert Bellah expanded on the connection between the American civil religion and Christianity, concluding that some Christian concepts and values are part and parcel of a broader civil religion.<sup>10</sup> A few weeks ago, at a meeting in Hong Kong, P.J. Ivanhoe from the City University of Hong Kong argued that any Chinese civil religion should be based on a variety of religions, not just on Confucianism. This is another framework with which to understand the religious function of Confucianism in contemporary China. The first framework grants Confucianism the highest public status, and the fourth the lowest. The second liberal framework has no tension with either of the two frameworks of civil religion as they can be perfectly in sync. Anyway, these are four possible frameworks. These frameworks at least point us to the sense in which Confucianism can be religious today. Of course, Confucianism has other functions: it may play a constitutional role, a moral role, and so on. These in turn may also be related to religion. What we need to be clear on is that these four frameworks specifically target the issue of religiosity.

Next let me turn to another issue: the relationship between contemporary Confucianism and the state. One important starting point is that both Bellah and Chen Ming have said that free and equal citizens are a necessary prerequisite for civil religion. A civil religion is not something that can be found in past traditions, but rather is a product of modernity. For both thinkers, civil religion provides a set of values that can be used to assess the legitimacy of the state. For that to be the case, the citizenry must have some measure of independence from the state. If the state tells us what the standards are, then we cannot use the criteria of the civil religion itself to judge the legitimacy of the state. In addition, we should note that Chunsong says in his book that Kang's Confucian religion failed both as a constitutional edifice and as a philosophical ideal.<sup>11</sup> Its constitutional failure is very clear: no constitution of the Republic of China ever stipulated that Confucianism was the state religion. Its conceptual failure lies in the fact that no one carried on Kang's work and used his concepts to decipher Confucianism. Chunsong's analysis suggests that the reason for the conceptual bankruptcy of Confucian religion rests with Yuan Shikai and other warlords who maliciously traded on Confucianism to legitimate their unseemly regimes. As a result, May Fourth intellectuals came to the conclusion that democracy and religion are absolutely opposed. When we think about the relationship between Confucian religiosity and the state, I think we must consider these two points.

My last point is about what to include and exclude as Confucian texts or in other

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words as Classics. This is not only an important issue for Confucian religion, but also for contemporary Confucianism and for progressive Confucianism. This is a large topic that leads to several questions: What is the canon? What is the legitimate way to justify the Confucian canon? Are some canonical texts more reliable than others? Can we, as moderns, deviate from canonical views? What if the ancients were mistaken or opaque? To what extent are canonical texts are still relevant and sacred under modern conditions?

If we do a brief comparison between Confucian Classics and the Islamic canon, we may easily find that there is one, most important difference between them. According to the Islamic doctrine, the *Quran* is the word of God directly given to Muhammed; it is a “revelation.” The *Quran* thus has a special status: the text cannot be mistaken, as it reflects and conveys the words of Allah. This is different from the *Sunnah*, another part of the Islamic canon, which relates to the practices and stories of Prophet Muhammed. Historically and even today, different sects of Islam have different views on what are legitimate stories to include in the *Sunnah*. However, the *Quran* cannot be parsed in this way. The thorny issue is that some very obvious contradictions exist in the *Quran*. Since these are the words of Allah, you might think that there shouldn’t be any contradictions or inconsistencies. How can this be explained? Well, tradition holds that Muhammed received Allah’s revelations twice: once in Mecca and then again in Medina. Muslims often appeal to this circumstantial gap to resolve the inconsistencies within the *Quran*. Because of what the circumstances demanded at the time, Allah said such-and-such in Mecca, and there were new circumstances later on, which led Allah speak differently in Medina. Moreover, the traditional way of interpretation is that if there are inconsistencies in the *Quran*, one should follow the later (Medinan) revelation. In the mid-twentieth century, a Sudanese thinker by the name of Mohammed Taha proposed a new way of interpretation. He argued that the earliest revelation was the most universal, as it was aimed at ideal conditions. Later, in Medina, when Muslims became more powerful, Allah in effect says, “Use these for the time being, as they are more practical.” It’s not to say that the original ideal is not relevant anymore, but just that Muslims needed to wait until the time is right for the earlier, more universal ideals to be put into practice.<sup>12</sup>

Taha believed that, in his time, that day had arrived, and that Muslims should start implementing the more universal, ideal values. The Sudanese government disagreed and sentenced Taha to death. Now, what does this have to do with the Confucian Classics? Taha’s method of interpretation resembles Kang’s. Kang’s interpretations of classics not only differentiated between the Small Tranquility and the Grand Union, but also depended on the words of the ancients as he conjectured. Hence, perhaps Kang’s interpretation is as contrived and complicated as the interpretation of the *Quran*. Now, the *Quran* comes directly as a revelation from Allah, and so perhaps the

faithful need to use such an interpretive method. However, considering the position of the Confucian Classics, is it also necessary for us to explain them in this complicated and contrived fashion? Perhaps because Kang's approach seems to make such complex hermeneutics necessary, Chunsong's book dubs Kang "the man who buried the Classics." I don't know if Chunsong will agree with what I'm saying! Anyway, having seen Kang's interpretation of the classics, we should question whether we need to follow in his footsteps. Therefore, at last, I can ask Chen Ming a question: what is the view of civil religion on its classics? Are we required to use complicated, forced interpretations? Or is it that we only pay attention to some anecdotes and do not bother with the rest? And with that I'll end.

CHEN BISHENG: Thank you, Steve. He touched on the relationship between religion and faith and the senses in which traditional and contemporary Confucianism can be rendered religious. The three issues are closely intertwined. Many Chinese scholars today are concerned with the relationship between Confucianism and religion, especially the issue of religiosity in the contemporary reconstruction of Confucianism. Many years ago, Chen Ming proposed Confucianism as a civil religion. However, I think that the last question Steve asked really hit the crux of Chen Ming's argument. What Classics should we use in constructing a civil religion? This itself invites many complex issues. Next, we'll invite Chen Ming to respond.

CHEN MING: Bisheng is truly a great host! He's created some conflict here, saying that Steve's question hit me where it hurts. Shall I begin there? In any case, he's successfully piqued my interest in this conversation.

Let me start from the perspective of civil religion. No one who has discussed civil religion, from Samuel Huntington, Robert Bellah, and Rousseau all the way back to the ancient Greeks, really touched on the question of Classics. They avoided confronting this issue for good reason: civil religion is not a religion. Civil religion is mainly a concept pertaining to religious sociology and political philosophy, which pivots around the role it plays in people's social and political lives. Civil religions must depend on one or more actual religions in order to exist, but it is only these religions themselves that face the question of choosing classics and ideals. When I say that Confucianism is the civil religion in today's Chinese society, I say this from the perspective of its function and significance — its position in the present or future of Chinese society. My stance stands in stark contrast to those of Kang Youwei or Jiang Qing.

As for the system of Classics in traditional Confucianism itself, I do have some thoughts, which pivot mostly around this question of a theoretical-cum-theological system for Confucian religion. I think it is comprised mostly of the *Ten Wings of the*



*Book of Changes*, *The Doctrine of the Mean* and *The Great Learning*. *The Ten Wings* represents the Heavenly Way; *The Doctrine of the Mean* is the theory of man and Heaven; *The Great Learning* is the actualization of the Heavenly Way in human experiences as it unfolds in both public and private spheres. One article of mine briefly touched upon these, and I'm further discussing them in a book I'm writing now. These are very important for Confucianism as a religion, but not so important for Confucianism as a civil religion because these ideas mainly function in the public sphere through the intermediary of fundamental values and ritual forms. They have a kind of cultural significance, position, or influence that other religious values, symbols, and rituals lack. However, as theories, they are quite shallow, since they have been selected out from Classics. But still, they are crucial and have a foundational value. The civil religion put forward by Rousseau is the "religion of the citizen" which serves nation-building. Both of my claims — that Confucian religion is the civil religion of China and that Confucian religion had many manifest functions for Chinese empire-building and social cohesion — convey similar meanings to that of Rousseau. However, at the same time, I still stress that Confucian religion is cultural in nature and not deliberately established by individual sovereigns. Therefore, it also has the power to restrain and limit state power. This is a point of divergence from Rousseau and other foreign scholars' discourse on civil religion. It is not a union of church and state like that of Islamism, nor is it like Rousseau's making the nation the center of everything. It is also not rooted in society in the way described by Bellah or Huntington. Heaven is the highest existence, but Confucius as a sage did not have any executive power. He is the so-called "uncrowned king," reflective of Confucian religion's unique qualities. This is my first point.

Second, Confucian religion regards Heaven as the highest object of faith (*xinyang*). It is not only good but also has a higher status than humans, and it is the wellspring of humanity and its institutions. Bisheng once said that Dong Zhongshu is very important, second only to Confucius. I agree wholeheartedly. Why is Dong important? First, Dong came up with a theory that expanded earlier beliefs into a full-blown political discourse. For example, he said, "the three cardinal guides of the Kingly Way can be sought from Heaven,"<sup>13</sup> and "names are the means through which sages promulgate the Heavenly will."<sup>14</sup> Second, Dong wedded his discourse to real politics, bestowing divine and moral qualities upon a regime founded in violence, thereby rendering Chinese civilization complete and mature. If Confucian religion, serving as the Chinese civil religion, has a canon, then it may just be the *Bai Hu Tong*.<sup>15</sup>

Viewed from the outside, contemporary discussion on the issue of Confucian religion is inextricably connected to Kang Youwei. Kang as a Confucian, I think, should be

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understood through his action rather than writings. For him, works were more of an expression and practice than theoretical research. Kang's primary concern was nation-building. Political reform was the prerequisite of the survival and revival of the nation. Protecting the emperor was a means to, a stage in, nation-building. This is clearly explained in Chunsong's book.<sup>16</sup> By comparison, Kang's effort to make Confucian religion the national religion was secondary. His understanding of China was different from that of the anti-Manchu revolutionaries in the sense that his Greater China included Manchus, Mongols, Muslims, Tibetans, and Han. Therefore, he realized that the empire needed Confucianism to serve as a shared cultural identifier, and that required the rendering of Confucianism as the state religion in order to stabilize society and sustain civilization. This bears on the national construction that we just mentioned but has notable differences. Let's call it ethno-nation building. That's my understanding.

Mainland New Confucianism has been called "New Kang-Youwei-ism" because of its emphasis on Kang. Within this group, Zeng Yi and Chen Bisheng primarily interpret Kang from the perspective of Classical Studies. This is a long-standing practice within academic circles. As I see it, when we understand Confucianism through Classical Studies, we're taking a theocratic understanding of Confucianism for granted. Han Dynasty Classicism did away with this approach, as evinced by its rendering of Confucius as an "uncrowned king." Despite the fact that he was a sage he did have the authority of the real kings, unlike earlier sage-rulers such as King Wen, King Wu, and the Duke of Zhou. Although Dong believed in Confucius and his political ideals, but Dong emphasized that Confucius was "uncrowned" because the actual power of real kings in his day could not be challenged. His job was primarily about acting on the political goals of Confucianism within the framework of the empire, which led to pragmatic cooperation with hereditary kings. As the Song dynasty scholar Ouyang Xiu put it, the difference between the political systems of the three ancient dynasties – Xia, Shang, and Zhou – and those of the Qin and Han Dynasties was that "in the Three Dynasties, rule came from one; after the Three Dynasties, rule came from two."<sup>17</sup> We can understand history after Qin as the separation of state from religion.

Unlike the revolutionaries in his day, Kang Youwei was similarly pragmatic and realist. He knew that it was impossible to deliver on the political goals of Confucianism outside the existing political system. On this question, it may seem that he failed, and the revolutionaries succeeded. However, did the revolutionaries really emerge victorious in the end? How should we look at the cost of this victory? These questions aside, the topic of national religion has emerged once again, which speaks to the depth of Kang's thought. Modern China was a direct heir of the Manchu Qing Empire. With its vast territory and diverse population, it's incumbent on China to

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address issues of societal integration and cultural affirmation. A (political) nation (*guozu*) is an imagined community, and it must appeal to a collective political vision. This ideational fabrication must find a way to connect to the cultural memory and the religious ideals of these peoples, which requires us to transcend cultural differences and tensions for the sake of the common good. I believe that Kang was proposing Confucian religion as a way of addressing deep schisms in Chinese society.

Scholars like Mou Zongsan are called Hong Kong-Taiwan New Confucians, but I think they are actually Modern New Confucians, and the mainland New Confucians should be called Contemporary New Confucians.<sup>18</sup> For Mou and his ilk, their historical context is either May-Fourth or post-May-Fourth, both molded under the influence of Western culture triggered by a series of political crises. In contrast, what I call “contemporary” starts with the end of the Cold War, i.e., from the 1990s till now. We are facing, not the triumph of liberal democracy, but the clash of identities and civilizations, with the real significance of culture and civilization becoming apparent.

Why would I suggest the idea of Confucianism as a civil religion? I have a two-track narrative of Confucianism: Confucian learning as a religion and Confucianism as a civil religion. Let me briefly talk about how these narratives came about. The end of the ten-year-long Cultural Revolution offered new possibilities for understanding the tradition. Previously, Confucianism was entirely understood as the ideology of the ruling class. An ideology only serves to legitimize political power. This ideologized understanding has deep roots and wide appeal. Ren Jiyu, the former chair of the Institute of Religious Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, even understands the Cultural Revolution as a variant of Confucianism. He felt that the era’s personality cults were religious in nature, which he traced back to Confucianism. This is the application of the ideological approach to Confucianism, and he once told me that he considers this insight to be his most important contribution. I’ve been influenced by him to some extent. Ren established a “Confucian Religion Research Center” in the Institute of Religious Studies. I was a doctoral student there and, later, stayed on to work for another thirteen years. This experience brought me into contact with religion, and I gradually realized that religion is a better approach than philosophy for describing, understanding, and envisioning Confucianism.

Since May Fourth, Confucianism has been subject to the sway of Western philosophical perspectives, but does it make sense to continue the philosophical approach? My advisor Ren was a student of Feng Youlan. They didn’t see eye to eye, however. He said that Feng didn’t like him, even though they were related. I don’t know if Ren’s proposing a theory of Confucian religion is one of the reasons for this? In any event, the key thing we need to realize is that for Ren and others like him, religion is a bad thing, a kind of feudal ideology. He identified Confucianism with

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religion only as a means to more thoroughly discredit the tradition and toss it to the curb of modern China. Now whether religion is good or bad is a large question that we could discuss, but in China it has typically been seen in a negative light. At the same time, I have witnessed all kinds of efforts and attempts to understand Confucianism from a philosophical perspective. They don't so much demonstrate as conceal and are ultimately unsatisfying. This is because the concept of philosophy is Western-centric. It is an objective field of intellectual study that uses rationality as its methodology. On the other hand, although Confucianism also has concepts and systems, its point of departure and ultimate objectives concern the demonstration of meaning and are fundamentally practical; emotions and beliefs play very significant roles. It is tightly bound together with our lives and it has thus played a major role in our historical development. We don't so much study Confucianism as practice it. My doctoral dissertation, *The Historical-Cultural Function of Confucianism*<sup>19</sup>, explored precisely this topic. Writing it made me aware that Confucianism had played significant political, social, and cultural roles in China. These functions, if we take the West as a point of comparison, are obviously closer to those of religion than philosophy.

Supposing that religion is a more plausible framework for understanding Confucianism than philosophy, what kind of religion should it be? In the West, there is a theory of theistic evolutionism, which suggests that monotheism is the highest level of religious development. Additionally, a religion must talk about afterlife, life and death, and so on. As a result, we have to think about how to deal with these issues when we talk about Confucian religion. My dissertation drew on sociological functionalism in order to avoid being trapped in Western discourse. I believed that we could initially put aside the problems that come with the category of "religion" and explore Confucianism through its historical and cultural functions. My hypothesis was that if we could show that these functions resembled what Rousseau, Bellah, and Huntington had characterized as a civil religion, then we can logically conclude that such a civil religion in China owes its existence and development to the prior existence of Confucianism as a religion. This was my thought process starting from the very beginning. We first prove that Confucianism functioned like a civil religion, and then we can prove that it can be a religion. After that, we establish its future role in the Chinese society using the definition of civil religion.

So far, I've been elaborating on my own views, which is an indirect response to Steve. Now, I will engage with him directly. You discussed whether or not our understandings of Confucian religion can break free from the influence of Christianity. I say yes. When compared with Islam and Christianity, what is the theology, organizational type, and social function of Confucianism as a religion? We need to answer these questions sooner or later. These are questions I am working on right now

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from the perspectives of systematic theology and religious cultivation. I hope this effort will bear some fruit at some point. In terms of Neville's cosmology<sup>20</sup>, I actually understand Confucianism as a theory of God or a theory of the Mandate of Heaven. Moreover, rites as religious rituals, from sacrifices all the way to daily practices, constitute the theoretical relationship between humans and God – and I believe this ought to include the Confucian theory of becoming a sage.

Finally, I want to thank you for reminding us about the question of faith, and especially for your emphasis on reverence. Christianity originated from Judaism. The Jewish faith in God stemmed from the Israelites' abandonment or transcendence of polytheistic beliefs. There was a cultural break, and people had to appeal to faith and also rely on something like a contract. Judaism's historical pedigree contributed to defining the rational and transactional nature of "faith," which must be maintained through conscious control and rational construction, instead of directly nurtured emotions. Therefore, crucial to Judaism is the role of the covenant. As for Christianity, the covenant becomes less important, and the religion came to fully rely on faith instead. This is because they needed to proselytize people of foreign lands. As for the Heaven of Chinese Confucian religion, it has always been the object of the Chinese (*Huaxia*) nation's worship and awe. Its sublimation and transcendence was a natural process. In other words, it has always been in people's hearts, habits, and mores. The real issues are the extent to which you understand it, the ways in which you deepen your relationship with it, and how you make it part of your self-consciousness. That is reverence. A sage has self-awareness, which reveals "intelligence resulting from sincerity" in the *Doctrine of the Mean*; whereas ordinary people need to be taught to be enlightened, which is "sincerity resulting from intelligence."<sup>21</sup> Etymologically speaking, reverence is solemnity, and solemnity means fear and trembling.<sup>22</sup> The Cheng brothers said, "Focusing on the One is called reverence" and "not being distracted is called the One."<sup>23</sup> Master Zhu Xi went a step further saying, "reverence is focusing on the one and not being distracted."<sup>24</sup> Song Dynasty Confucianism was influenced by Chan Buddhism, and therefore, had a tendency of turning inwards, which meant placing inherent reality inside the heart-mind. Some in the Ming Dynasty said that "the One" must refer to *something*. Combining the stanzas "revering the anger of Heaven" and "revering the changes of Heaven" from the *Book of Poetry*, we can understand "the One" from the vantage point of Heaven, which in terms of the history and theory of Confucianism is more precise. According to scholarly research, the Chinese character "one, 壹 (*yí*)" is derived from the character "vase 壺 (*hú*)," which connotes pregnancy and nourishment. "There is an intermingling of the genial

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influences of Heaven and Earth and the transformation of the myriad things in life.”<sup>25</sup> That is the beginning of the great life of the cosmos and the Great Virtue’s life-generativity. As for reverence: “there are three things of which the gentleman stands in awe.”<sup>26</sup> For its part, sacrifice expresses reverence with ritual and objects, and awe drives behavior in practice. As Wei Liaoweng pointed out, “benevolence in Confucianism cannot be understood independent of reverence.”<sup>27</sup> As Dong Zhongshu once said, “benevolence is the heartmind of Heaven.”<sup>28</sup> As Zhu Xi averred, “benevolence is the heartmind with which Heaven and Earth give life to the myriad things.”<sup>29</sup> These statements can jointly explain the inherent connection between reverence and benevolence. The purpose and end state of reverence is benevolence. Reverence points to the self-consciousness of virtue and the establishment of one’s relationship with the One, or Heaven. The English word “religion” initially meant a re-connection between humanity and the divine. We can find in all this various aspects of Steve’s account of Confucian religiosity.

Distinctive features of Confucian religion today, such as the personification of Heaven, can be discussed in terms of spirituality. From the perspective of religious studies, the status of the divine is superior to our own, so we should not use personification to refer to its “personality.” Perhaps “spirituality” and “intentionality” are more suitable. In general, Confucian notions of the personification of divinity are quite weak....

STEPHEN ANGLE: I don’t think Confucian notions of personification are weak; at least in Neo-Confucianism, there’s no hint of it at all!

CHEN MING: In Neo-Confucianism, Heaven was deconstructed and became the Supreme Ultimate, the Heavenly Pattern, and ultimately, the heart-mind. Even the Jesuit missionaries back then sensed a departure from classical Confucianism. I think such criticism makes sense. In another of these dialogues I quoted, “the ordinances of Heaven, how profound and unceasing they are!”<sup>30</sup> Heaven is a creator of life that takes life-generativity as the basis and destination of the world. None of this is left in Neo-Confucianism. You just mentioned Mecca and Medina. In desert oases like these, the boundaries between various ethnicities and cultures were clearer, the relationships more tense. Comparing Confucian religion to Judaism brings forth many features pertaining to each. I’m inclined to think that Jehovah is an ascendance of their

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ancestral god, and such ascendance has to do with the political power held by Jewish priests and rabbis, the competition within the oases, and the multiple defeats of Israel. The monarchy was destroyed, and the group could only rely on the kind of social solidarity that only religion can provide. That soft, rabbi-centered power structure, however, made the society's vitality and influence especially strong and deep. On the other hand, Confucian religion, since the establishment of the Qin-Han Empire, could only function by being embedded in the imperial political system. This distinction is clear from the perspective of comparative religious studies.

The question of whether and in what ways Confucianism is a religion is an academic topic, whereas Confucianism as a civil religion is a practical question. It has to do with the kinds of functions that the Confucian tradition could perform today and how it will realize those functions. We should go back to Dong Zhongshu and Kang Youwei. Dong particularly stressed the value basis of politics, while Kang focused on the stability of the social organization. Hannah Arendt suggested that, if politics itself has only a secular goal, it is easily replaceable and stops short of any power to persuade. Therefore, politics must appeal to transcendental existence. China must address problems including social integration, cultural identity, the provision of the common good, to which only Confucian civil religion can provide answers.

Historically, those problems were undoubtedly solved by employing Confucian resources. Emperor Han Wudi did so, and the Yongzheng Emperor of the Qing Dynasty did so as well. In fact, substituting "Pattern" for "Heaven" was Zhu Xi's way of taking up Han Yu's warning of Confucianism's diminishing social status resulting from the challenge of Buddhism. It was the hard work of defending the sage's doctrine and resisting barbarian customs. Nowadays, we talk about the great revival of the Chinese nation. That inherently includes the solution to the problem of constructing the state and the nation. That is also a problem that Mainland New Confucianism has to consider. We don't know what the authorities think or what they will do. Still, as Confucians, from a purely scholarly perspective, the revival of Confucian religion must resolve the following problems. The first is the legitimacy crisis. The second problem is institutional. Confucian temples have been turned into museums and tourist spots. Private academies are trying, but they face many difficulties. The third is the issue of theological theory, which is what we are doing.

In short, religious issues in Mainland China are undergirded by real concerns.

CHEN BISHENG: Now let's begin the discussion with Prof. Lu Yunfeng of Peking University.

LU YUNFENG: My expertise is in religious sociology. Therefore, I'm interested in both the question of Confucianism as a religion and as a civil religion.

Let's start with Confucianism as a religion. First, I still need to begin with Confucianism as a civil religion, which Chen Ming talked about. According to my understanding, he wants to define Confucian religion in terms of the relationship between civil religion and the construction of a modern nation-state. At the turn of the twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals were concerned with preserving the nation, the state, and (Confucian) religion. The first two pursuits have been successful, while the third is still in progress. Preserving the Confucian religion is aimed at extending the life of Confucianism, which has real significance even today, and Kang tried to achieve this through the Confucian Religion Movement. When Samuel Huntington asks, "Who are we?" The Chinese translation reads, "Who are the Americans?" In the same way, we may ask, "Who are the Chinese?" For instance, America may be called a Christian society, Saudi Arabia an Islamic society, and Israel a Jewish society. [To Steve:] What kind of society do you think China is?

STEPHEN ANGLE: Well, I'd say it's diverse.

LU YUNFENG: To put it simply, it is a socialist society.

STEPHEN ANGLE: Perhaps we could say it has diversity with Chinese characteristics.

LU YUNFENG: Socialist society is certainly the correct answer. However, in another respect, we should be aware that Confucianism as a kind of cultural resource is still nurturing the society as a whole. Many Chinese parents ask their children to read *the Three-Character Classic*, *the Thousand-Character Classic*, *Standards for Disciples* and *the Book of Family Names*, which are all Confucian classics for children. This means that, judging by the practices of education, the resources which we employ are still, to a great extent, the knowledge and ethical systems of traditional Confucianism. There are many other similar examples. For instance, one Muslim friend of mine is working as a professor in Dubai. She told me that Chinese Muslims use *Standards for Disciples* to teach their children in elementary education. As a cultural resource, Confucian teachings have their vitality. Yang Qingkun distinguished between "mixed" and "independent" religions but was unsure about where Confucianism fits in. In his analysis, the Confucian religion of traditional China had an independent and superior status, but it was also simultaneously entangled with family, community, and nation.



Wach<sup>31</sup> speaks of Confucianism as a “quasi-religion” while Yang tends to see it as a “super-religion.” Even though the end of the Civil Service Examinations caused an institutional crisis for Confucianism, Confucianism survived many social upheavals due to its root in social habits and mores. The social basis for Confucianism is still there. For example, the restoration of ancestral halls means that Confucianism is still alive and flourishing among ordinary people. I think that is the social basis for the restoration of the Confucian teachings.

Additionally, I have never understood Confucianism in singular terms. There are only Confucianisms with many different branches and versions. Chen Ming belongs to “the civil religion” group while Jiang Qing pertains to “the national religion” group. There are also groups emphasizing “rural reconstruction” and “Classical Studies” aspects of Confucianism. There are also folk religion versions of Confucianism, such as the San-yi Teachings popular in Fujian. What unites them all is the belief that Confucian teachings can successfully deal with the challenges of modernity.

CHEN MING: I also think that Confucian religion is, to use Yang’s terminology, an independent one, though it’s also internally diverse. I agree that all you listed are also Confucian. We have many Confucianisms. Even Confucianism as a civil religion denotes a family that subsumes under it different meanings depending on how interpreters make sense of it.

CHEN BISHENG: Now please welcome Zhao Feng from the Central Party School of the Chinese Communist Party.

ZHAO FENG: I’ll discuss several issues on the religiosity of Neo-Confucianism. First, speaking of the sacredness of Heaven, it’s true that Zhu Xi’s Heaven did not have intentions or personification. However, he did not deny Heaven’s authority. This has to do with the changes of faith in the divine after Confucius. To understand what changed, we need to grasp the following: first, at the time of Zhu Xi, Buddhism was the ideal form of religion, not Christianity nor Islam. There is no personified, chief deity in Buddhism. There are many Buddhas, but they are all symbolic. This is especially true of Chan Buddhism, whose saying “kill the Buddha and insult the ancestors” is a clear denial of personification. As I see it, Neo-Confucianism is an upgraded version of Confucian learning built on the wisdom of Buddhism. From here, we get to the related point: why did Confucianism have to be updated in the Song Dynasty? According to Jaspers, the Axial Period is a time of awakening to rationality,

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which which in turn was employed to establish empires and create religions.<sup>32</sup> After the Axial Period, all empires collapsed under the assault of the world's disparate nationalities, after which followed a new period of reintegration, this time with religion at its heart. Why did ancients employ rationality to create religion? I think it has to do with finding a way to ground the ultimate foundation for human civilization on a divine faith that simple rationality cannot deconstruct. When Buddhism first came to China, it dealt a blow to the native culture partly because of its nature as a religion grounded in rationality which represented the heights of civilization. Therefore, by the Song Dynasty, Confucianism needed to upgrade itself to catch up with the development of human civilization.

Furthermore, Confucianism upgraded its doctrine in a way that comported with Confucius' original approach of "revering ghosts and spirits but avoiding them." You obviously need to have the paramount divine agent, which is Heaven. Heaven is not God, and it does not matter whether or not it is personified. What matters is that it is an ultimate power that rationality cannot reach and the ultimate origin of divinity. It's not like the biblical God or Allah who opens Their mouth and issues commands. Chinese Heaven is an unseen divine power. The Will of the Heaven depends on human understanding. "What would Heaven say?"<sup>33</sup> People must figure out the will of Heaven by themselves, which preserves a great deal of human agency. Having established the foundational authority of Heaven, Neo-Confucians turned to placing their emphasis on the connection between divinity and secular life in a way that carves out space for the sage. Now we talk about the sage as a moral exemplar who has nothing but moral zeal. This is ridiculous. Without the divine base, morality is powerless and rationality is dangerous. The nature of self-transformation is religious though its content is secular. Confucianism needs to rely on people's rationality as a path, linking nobility to divinity. It does not rely on mysterious revelations to achieve the upgrade from a commoner to a sage. This is the difference between Chinese and Western religious cultures. Confucianism metamorphosed into Neo-Confucianism in a way that is unique.

Next, let me discuss faith. It is true that we cannot simply adopt the Western concept of faith. What Steve just said mainly deals with the purity and exclusivity of faith. A faith that is not exclusive is not pure, and a pure faith must be exclusive. That is a kind of faith that emphasizes the form while Confucian faith focuses on the content. According to Tillich, the object of faith is the ultimate.<sup>34</sup> Who or what is this ultimate being, then? Is it God, Allah, or the Buddha? Confucianism does not think it's important. What is important is the ultimate's authority over us, which manifests itself in the Heavenly Mandate, the Heavenly Way, and the Heavenly Pattern. As for the

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intention of the ultimate, Confucianism does not have a definitive answer. People's understandings must be different, and we need to discuss when differences emerge. We may arrive at a consensus through discussion, but no one can monopolize the truth. I think that Confucian religion is such that it precludes religious conflicts. From a Confucian perspective, no one could monopolize the explanation of the intention of the ultimate. Everyone must use their entire life to independently understand its call.

Finally, I have some thoughts on civil religion. I once criticized Chen Ming for lacking "religious flavor." You cannot get the religious flavor through logical reasoning. A religion must have religious spirituality and transcendental concern, whose sacredness would be lost if we follow the path of civil religion. To obey Heaven, to be in awe of Heaven, and to revere Heaven all have sacred connotations. We mentioned "the happy place for Confucius and Yan Yuan," but we cannot understand it without firsthand experience. We talked about "fear and trembling," but we cannot even come close to it without reverence for sacred power. Many today studying Confucianism are influenced by the West, mainly by Enlightenment legacies. We prioritize Enlightenment rationality and belittle religion. Even when we touch on religion, we care about the way in which the divine can be used instrumentally to educate the people. In Max Weber's terms, we have taken secularity as the norm. We forget that, without divinity, human civilization cannot but fall apart.

Confucianism has always been pliable in choosing and affirming ways of life that are not at the whim of rationality. It worked through the times of change and survived. It is even silently supporting us while we fiercely rebel against the tradition and embrace Western civilization. We have such good resources, but we ignore them. Today, people have lost sight of Confucianism's sacredness. Therefore, we come around it but cannot get to the core. This is where Chen Ming's account really turns controversial. The most urgent task that we face today is not so much its defense as its renewal. We need to thoroughly study Western civilization the same way Neo-Confucians deeply immersed themselves in Buddhism. The renewal of Confucianism opens up many opportunities, but only scholars can make theoretical contributions. That is where our jobs lie.

WANG QINGXIN: I want to add another point. What Confucianism now has to do is face the challenge of Christianity. Many speakers present today are working on Confucian classics. It is perhaps worthwhile to compare Confucian classics to Christian theology and see what comes up.

STEPHEN ANGLE: I'm not saying that Chinese Confucians should turn a blind eye to the Western civilization. Zhao Feng said that we need to look around and create our own things, which is great. However, if we do everything by Western categories, that

makes people think that all concepts and theorists are still Western. That is strange. Given the West's unique history, some concepts are especially prioritized. One of them is faith. I don't need to expand on it now. Of course, there are many "beliefs" in Confucianism, but they are akin to folk beliefs. The word "believe" (*xin*) in Confucianism translates into, say, the sense in which "I believe this is a cup." This is not the same as Christian faith. Do we need to go over Western categories first? That is a necessary step, but we must go beyond the West. We must understand that we are not simply copy-pasting Western categories. Zhao Feng said that Heaven does not have a personality and so on, and, therefore, it does not resemble a religion. I think this is still defining religion in Western terms. Heaven in Zhu Xi's work, for example, has strong religiosity, but his ideas of religious authority are very different from those of the West. One can't say that Christianity has a superior understanding of God than Confucianism does--it could even be the opposite. Of course, that is up for debate.

CHEN MING: I'm very glad that Zhao Feng is paying attention to the issue of the Confucian religion and reminding us to read Western theology, but he must be aware that any renewal of Confucianism is a response to pressing issues at the present, which reveals its practical nature. You said that my functionalist understanding of Confucianism is shallow. How misguided that is! That an approach can render Confucianism functionally essential to the real world speaks volumes about its value. Your approach cannot be exempted from the test of its functional value, either.

CHEN BISHENG: Now please welcome Dr. Ren Wenli of the Research Institute for Eastern Ethics of the Beijing Youth Political Institute.

REN WENLI: I will continue Zhao Feng and Steve's discussion of faith. Steve said that Confucianism rarely engages with matters of faith, or at least does not engage with them in ways that Christian theology does, which I believe makes sense. However, if we say that there is absolutely no discussion of faith in Confucianism, that is not necessarily true. Steve just mentioned an example of faith, *Awakening Faith of Mahayana*. Something similar can be found in Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism including Wang Yangming's work. For example, Luo Jinxi interpreted Mencius' "having [goodness] in the self" as faith in the people, Heaven, the inherent goodness of human nature. Luo Jinxi gave an example to explain the power of faith. A person has fallen gravely ill. If a fine doctor tells him that he is okay, he will believe it, and the illness will seemingly disappear. That is one point that I would like to make. In traditional mainstream Confucianism, discussions on faith itself may be relatively rare, but one cannot say there are none.

Now I will turn to Chen Ming's civil religion. Zhao Feng's charge that Chen Ming is completely functionalist may be too farfetched. What you discussed today has more to do with religion per se, which is not completely functionalist. The functionalist claims, as you said, are strategic. When I wrote the article "A Directed Examination of Confucian Religion as a National-Civil Religion," I also noticed some of your changes. Yes, I have proposed what I call "national-civil religion," but I did not intend to introduce a new concept but clarify some issues. If we say it in English, my national-civil religion may still be "civil religion." Can this English term, "civil religion," also be translated into the "cultural doctrine" that Gan Chunsong and Qiu Feng emphasized? When we refer to it with different Chinese words, perhaps we are focusing on different aspects of it. In terms of translation, there is a lot of flexibility. Chen Ming's overwhelming concern is with politics and political order.

Why did I say what Chen Ming suggested makes sense? His point, as he just said in response to Zhang Feng, that religion is a practical issue rather than a completely academic issue, is really crucial. I then come to wonder what forms Confucianism may take in reality. For instance, Kang Youwei and Jiang Qing's theories on national religion are greatly influenced by Christianity. Despite their creativity, what Steve just said perhaps makes sense. When you use something as a reference, you lose yourself and become something else.

The reason I proposed the concept of the national-civil religion is, as Yunfeng just said, it is pragmatic as I'm considering ways in which Confucian teachings could exist in reality. Can Confucianism exist as a universal object of faith among the Chinese today? Or can it be a universal basis of values? I tend to believe that there's a realist possibility that it can. Although Confucianism has gone through ups and downs in the past century, it still exists as a basis of common social values for the Chinese. The ancestral hall widespread in villages is an example. One article in *People's Daily* suggested that family is the church of the Chinese. Of course, there are many such "churches" or religious centers such as Confucian temples and academies, all of which Chen Ming has just touched on. These are the diverse physical embodiments of Confucian religion's "soul." The ideas of family and ancestral reverence also bear on fundamental issues of life and death, which are still deep-rooted in the minds of the Chinese.

Take holidays for example. My teacher, Meng Peiyuan, said that the Spring Festival is a religious festival for the Chinese. In fact, if you look at traditional Chinese festivals, say, the Chinese New Year's Eve, the Qingming Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival, and even the Winter Solstice Festival, practically none of them are non-religious. These religious holidays are closely tied to our habits and mores, and they are also closely related to Confucian religion as a civil religion. Local chronicles from the Song and Ming Dynasties suggest that how ancients back then celebrated the Spring Festival and the Qingming Festival is not so different from how we go about

celebration today. For example, in local chronicles from all over the place we usually see one important custom of worshipping Heaven, Earth and ancestors during the Lunar New Year's Eve. I wondered how exactly people go about worshipping. Then, one day in class, I talked to a student from a rural area of Shandong. The ritual, she said, is placing the ancestors' memorial tablets in the courtyard on the eve of the Lunar New Year and performing sacrificial rites. My wife is Hakka, and they still offer sacrifices to their ancestors. Apart from the sacrifices in ancestral halls, there are also some simple rites for making sacrifices to the ancestors. It's nothing more than placing an altar in the yard, placing candles and tributes on it, and bowing. This is how they make sacrifices to Heaven, Earth, and their ancestors. While we scholars are debating who is qualified to make sacrifices to Heaven, it doesn't really matter. Aside from the memorial tablets of Heaven and Earth, the ruler, the parents, and the master, the common people also have their own specific rituals to perform.

Today, the way Confucianism lives on the mind of the Chinese today is tacit and implicit—people act on it without being aware that they're acting on it. If you ask Chinese what their religious beliefs are, most would answer that they have none. We can make them self-conscious and recognize that their religious belief is Confucianism. If this doesn't work, we can work on rituals and music that help people cope with challenges in their daily lives or important events. Of course, Confucian rituals should be flexible enough to answer to modernization and urbanization. Still, I believe that Confucian religion, whether as a national-civil religion or a civil religion, has an enormous role to play.

CHEN BISHENG: Now let's turn to Prof. Wang Qingxin of Tsinghua University's Institute for Public Administration.

WANG QINGXIN: I would like to respond to Steve's take on Confucianism as a religion and its relationship to Christianity. Those questions are important but I don't really agree with Steve's views. I agree with Julia Ching's interpretation, that Confucian thought, or, perhaps, Confucian religion, has some similarities with Christianity. Confucianism does not only include internal but external transcendental faith. In fact, aside from Julia Chin, many modern Western scholars thought that Confucianism was a religion similar to Christianity. Matteo Ricci said there was no transcendental faith in Confucianism in order for Christianity to rule over Confucianism. Leibniz used the same records written by the Society of Jesus on Confucian teachings, but had views that completely contradict Matteo Ricci's. He thought that Confucianism was very similar to Christianity. Both are monotheistic religions, and both include the idea of external transcendence. Nineteenth century British Sinologist James Legge also thought that Confucianism has transcendental faith. The late and famous Harvard Sinologist Benjamin Schwartz also shared similar views. He thought that Confucian

Heaven and Christian God all existed externally in the natural world and were the creators of the myriad things in the universe.

In his book *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, Schwartz made the following points<sup>35</sup>:

1. Many Stoic philosophers, Jewish priests, and Christian saints were like Confucius. They thought they had special missions bestowed upon them by Heaven or God and appealed to divine moral or ethical principles to save the suffering the common people from the abyss of misery and from the disintegration of society and its mores;

2. Confucius believed that the Heavenly Way has manifested itself during the reign of the “Three Dynasties” but then disappeared; he thought that he had taken up the divine mission of making the Heavenly Way manifest in the human world once more;

3. The spirit of Heaven manifests itself in the various rules and principles of Nature with little difference from the God of *Genesis* although Heaven does not speak while God does frequently;

4. The phrase “serving Heaven” in Mencius’ “preserving the heart-mind and fully manifesting the nature to serve Heaven”<sup>36</sup> means completing the divine mission endowed by Heaven--this is not merely an analogy but is rather close to the Christian idea of fulfilling the mission bestowed by God.

On the other hand, Mou Zongsan was greatly influenced by *the Awakening of Faith* in Buddhism. He reconstructed Wang Yangming’s theory and argued that Zhu Xi’s account defied Confucians before him. He made great contributions to Confucianism, but his work has a major disadvantage. According to Mou, there is no transcendental external god but only the internal transcendence called “the infinite heart.” However, he does not have a cosmology or transcendental ontology, and therefore cannot explain whence comes the infinite heart-mind, the kind of relationship it has with the creator who bestowed humans with the infinite heart-mind, nor can he explain whither goes the infinite heart after the death of the flesh. Therefore, he cannot help assuage people’s heart-mind. Besides, he has no good answer for where villainy comes from and cannot explain the rules with which the free and infinite heart-mind manifests. If Mou holds the free and infinite heart-mind to manifest itself all the time, that is exactly where it is subject to Yu Yingshi’s critique. Mou’s free and infinite heart-mind suggests that everyone can be God, and that is an overly flattering statement. Therefore, it has the disadvantages of Wang Yangming’s works. It is inconsistent with the reality, too, since we know that there are many petty people in the real world. Even cultivated persons are hard to find, to say nothing of God. Nevertheless, Zhu Xi’s doctrine has a cosmology and a transcendental ontology, which is the theory of

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the Pattern and Vital Essence. It explains the relationship between people and the Heavenly Pattern. Also, there is the theory of manifestation of Vital Essence to explain the conditions for distinguishing good from bad human nature. Moreover, he thought that the soul continues to exist after death. His theory is better than Lu and Wang's study of the heart-mind, so it is not surprising that his doctrine lasted for eight-hundred years.

I grew up in a traditional Confucian environment. I used to go back to the ancestral hall in my hometown and make sacrifices to the ancestors with my parents. At school, I was educated in an orthodox, atheistic Marxist way. After my graduation from college, I went to study and live in the United States for over ten years. Back then, I was influenced by Western civilization. Sometimes, I went to the Christian church on weekends. I then went to Singapore and Hong Kong, living there for over ten years. Therefore, I can understand the internal conflicts and struggles that they have been through. In Singapore, ethnic Chinese comprise the vast majority of the population. They grow up in a Confucian environment that venerates the ancestral spirits but nevertheless need to choose from Christianity, Confucianism, and Islam, or they choose to blend and intermingle. They need to choose a faith that both their heart-minds and the social environment can accept. It is the same in Hong Kong, which is why many say Hong Kongers and (even more so) Singaporeans are "bananas" – yellow skin with "white" spirits. They face an environment where the Chinese and the Western civilizations clash and meld. In the future, China will be even more open, and the Chinese will face even more challenges from Western and Islamic civilizations. Even now, in the north-west of China, people are facing challenges from Islam. One student of mine from the Northwest said that Muslims are very powerful in Ningxia and that it is difficult for Han Chinese to live there. There are similar conflicts in Xinjiang. Therefore, I strongly agree with Chen Ming's proposal of re-constructing the Chinese nation.

Now, we are facing a twofold challenge from Christianity and Islam. This challenge is not only adding great pressure to our borderlands but spreading all across the Chinese society. Therefore, we need to establish a new kind of national identity to combat the challenge from Western civilization. This nation answers to and tolerates not only modern secular cultural values that mainly esteems Western values, such as democracy, freedom and reality, but also Christian and Islamic beliefs. This means that this new nationality must respond to and tolerate modern secular universal values *and* different religions. In other words, we need a religion, not just the civil religion that Chen Ming usually talks about. This religion needs to use all available avenues, requires us to theologically embrace and digest Christianity and Islam. This religion is Confucianism, the religion upon which most Chinese have relied for their very survival for over two-thousand years. It's just like Zhu Xi's time, when Confucians needed to reconstruct Confucianism to resolve the challenge from



Buddhism. Such a new national identity can effectively help us to resolve these pressures and conflicts from both inside and outside China.

The challenge that we now face is very similar to that faced by Zhu Xi back in his times. We cannot just close our doors and brood over a new Confucianism without considering challenges from without. Ordinary people face many choices from Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, folk religions like the Yi-guan religion. They are facing a “free market” of faith. Each person acts on one’s own judgments. If Confucian principles can be reconstructed, I think most Chinese will naturally identify with and choose the Confucian teachings. After all, most Chinese are still deeply soaked in Confucian habits and mores. They are filial to their parents and take education seriously.

CHEN BISHENG: Next, let’s invite Gan Chunsong from the Department of Philosophy, Peking University.

GAN CHUNSONG: I’ll start with Qingxin’s stimulating remarks. In the exchange of letters between Chen Huanzhang and Liang Qichao, Chen said that he was triggered when he studied at Columbia. The Westerners believed that the Chinese were atheists. He asked Liang, “Well, should we rustle up a religion?” This is very interesting. In ancient times, Confucian culture was deeply pragmatic and said nothing about spiritual beings. Folk religions were just a façade of Chinese society that played no primary role. How could there suddenly be a need for religion? After Christianity came to China, Western missionaries were the first to debate whether the Chinese veneration of Heaven and emulation of the ancestors can be considered a practice of religion. This became the core concern in the debate on ritual that occurred in the late Ming/early Qing. Afterwards, the Chinese themselves were also triggered. “Why do we not have religion, why do we not have faith? What sort of life have we been living?” This of course also had to do with the military and economic presence of Western powers in China. We now face many religious controversies including questions on whether Chinese culture has faith and religion. The crux of the matter hinges on whether Confucianism, the driving force of Chinese culture, is a religion.

Whether Confucianism is a religion had never been an issue before the dawn of the modern era. Partly because of the powerful discourse of Christianity and its challenge to the Chinese society, we moderns are subconsciously subscribing to the Christian way of thinking when we think of the relationship between Confucianism and religion.

Next, whether we consider Confucianism a civil religion, like Chen Ming suggests, or a national-civil religion, we must ask what this wave of Confucian (religious or otherwise) revivalism reviving. Is it the revival of a religion, a lifestyle, or a political

system? In other words, are we trying to solve the problem of faith or the problem of political identification by proposing a civil religion? If we don't know the answer to this, we may not be able to understand the essence of civil religion. I turned to Kang's Confucian religion quite long ago. I divide his thinking into three stages. The time before the Hundred Days Reform is the first stage when Confucianism modelled itself on Christianity in response to the challenge from Christianity. The second stage is after the Hundred Days Reform or the time of exile, when he appealed to the categories of human religion and divine religion like Buddhist humanism and Shinto. The third stage is his idea of national religion after the founding of the Republic of China. In fact, the way Kang appreciate the nature and scope of Confucian religion differed at every stage though he consistently believed in the importance of Confucian education, self-identification and Confucian lifestyles.

Next is Steve's question. I'm flattered that he read my book. I did admit that Kang's efforts, including constitutional governance and national religion, all failed. We have to admit this defeat. However, it's not success or failure that make a hero but the questions he asked. Whether the problems he tried to address have been successfully solved today should be the focal point of us all.

Anyway, what should be included and excluded from the canon still matters. We can talk about democracy, science, philosophy, and so on, but we need to know by what standards we think of their relationship to Confucianism. We cannot count somebody as Confucian if they only read the *Three-Character Classic*.<sup>37</sup> People like Kang and Zhang Taiyan were facing the challenges from the West and attempted to address the problems through the classics. However, their solutions never established the authority of the Confucian texts but rather served to destroy it. We are left with two subsequent problems. First, is classical Confucianism at a dead end? To what extent can we still go back to Confucian texts in order to address problems facing the nation and ordinary Chinese today?

We may also say that Kang and Zhang were misguided. Bisheng thinks that Zhang's approach was problematic, isn't the same true of Kang's? But still, we don't think that we dispense with the classics altogether. We cannot talk about Confucianism without the classics. Those working on classics are seriously considering whether this whole commentary tradition can be revived. We are facing a crisis unprecedented in the three-thousand years' history of China. I don't think there's a way forward *within* the commentary tradition and I am always suspicious of those who say that they have a straightforward solution.

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CHEN MING: Let me raise a technical issue. Steve, you said just now that we should not be approaching Confucianism from the perspective of faith to avoid Western-centrism. What I say is that whether the idea of faith is Western-centric depends on the meaning of the term and how it relates to different religious traditions. Faith points to the relationship between humans and God in Christianity and Judaism, which is a form of revelation. You need to believe that death and resurrection wait in the end. God and empiricism are diametrically opposed to one another, which is why faith is heavily stressed. We don't need that in China, but we still need to build up a channel of communication between Heaven and humanity. Where is that channel? It lies in "grasping the nature of things." We realize and experience the life-generativity of Heaven and its virtues as well as the benevolence of the ten-thousand things' being one through materiality. The point is to act on the Heavenly nature that exists inside the heart-mind and our internal relationship with Heaven.

CHEN BISHENG: Confucian religion, in a sense, speaks to the direction in which we want Confucianism to go. Thank you all for participating in today's discussion.