

Confucian-Christian Dialogue Revisited(Ⅱ)*

— A Contemporary Korean and Comparative Inquiry —

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This paper examines “Confucian-Christian dialogue,” one of the significant topics in the advancing area of comparative religion and interreligious dialogue. Its dual purpose is to raise certain questions about Western scholarship on the topic and my own comparative reflections on the phenomenon of Confucian-Christian interaction in Korea and its crosscultural implications for interreligious dialogue. One major reason for my interest in this topic is that Confucianism continues to remain a living tradition of moral-spiritual, educational and social inspiration in East Asia. Confucianism has also been interacting with Christianity in Korea; therefore, modern Confucianism in East Asia is not only significant in itself, but also embodies certain implications for the growing topic of interreligious dialogue. Furthermore, during the past several decades, Christianity grew into an influential and popular religion especially in South Korea. We also cannot ignore the central role of Vatican II and the World Council of Churches in making the issue of “ecumenical movement” and “interfaith dialogue” a globally legitimate one. In other words, all of these facts compel us to consider Confucianism in contemporary Korea as a significant paradigm for interreligious dialogue in the twenty-first century.

My approach to this topic is bilateral and hermeneutical. In the first section of the paper, I critically examine some of the major theoretical

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and methodological issues debated in the Western scholarship on the topic. This can help us to see if there is enough justification for the basic goal of the dialogue. I shall argue that there are certain limits of the current models of Confucian-Christian dialogue especially in dealing with the practical and experiential dimensions of the dialogue. Moreover, these models do not seem to address the practical and experiential dimensions of the dialogue that are evident in Confucian-Christian interaction among contemporary East Asians. The second section will support these two arguments by presenting 1)certain paradigms of Confucian-Christian interaction among Korean Christians; 2)my own crosscultural reflections; and 3)their apparent implication for the current Western scholarship on interreligious dialogue as well as on Confucian-Christian dialogue.

The paper concludes by considering relevant questions and issues. For example, How does the Korean paradigm of Confucian-Christian interaction relate to Confucian-Christian dialogue? What can Christian circles in the West learn from it? What about the current issue of “Confucian identity” and “Confucian religiosity”? Do these questions have any direct or indirect effect on the pedagogy and methodology of religious studies and comparative religion/ theology?

III. Implications for Confucian-Christian Dialogue**

What does Confucian-Christian dialogue mean in the Korean and comparative context? In general, the theological interpretations of Confucianism or Confucian religiosity and their corresponding models do not contribute to developing a fruitful dialogue of mutual understanding. Just because Confucianism is not a membership or organized religion, one

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cannot say that it is neither religious nor relevant to the interfaith dialogue. I have discussed elsewhere (Chung 1998a, 1995a, and 1995b) that Confucianism, on both doctrinal and practical levels, lacks most conventional categories of Western religions, including “God,” “divine creation,” “divine revelation,” “prophet,” “divine judgment,” “salvation,” “church,” and so on. Nonetheless, the question is: Are believing and worshipping a personal deity relevant to all religions? In the growing world of religious diversity and interaction, this is one of the most common questions that are raised by not just most undergraduate students taking a course on world religion but also any Confucian in East Asia. To specialists in comparative religion and interreligious dialogue, this question has been significant for interreligious dialogue.

Here we can agree to John Hick’s comparative understanding of transcendence: “religion (or a particular religious tradition) centers upon an awareness of and response to a reality that transcends ourselves and our world, whether the ‘direction’ of transcendence be beyond or within or both” (1989: 3). Similarly, W. C. Smith recently reminded us, in his comparative study of world scriptures, that the scriptural-spiritual tradition of Confucianism, like other traditions, embodies the fundamental human wish (faith) that expresses the transcendent reality of immanence, for which reason Smith is determined to use “the notion ‘transcendence’ to include immanence” (1993: 10).

“Dual religious citizenship” is one of the key questions debated in the current scholarship on interreligious dialogue. In the West, it has been inconceivable or impossible for someone to be both Christian and Jewish, Christian and Muslim, or Catholic and Protestant, at the same time in terms of membership and participation. Moreover, an average Christian would not have a dual or multiple Christian identity. To most Christians of European and American origins, religious participation in Christianity and another or more religions not only contradicts but also betrays Christian faith; in fact, many Korean churches and pastors emphasize this

view. Is dual religious citizenship theoretically and practically feasible for an East Asian to be simultaneously a Christian theist-worshipper as well as a Confucian humanist-moralist? It is important to note that this issue did not come directly from the East Asian attitudes toward religious diversity. It seems to have originated from recent scholarly or ecumenical-Christian concern for interfaith dialogue. On the other hand, Koreans and other East Asians(whether Confucians, Buddhists, Shintoists, and shamanists) would wonder why dual religious citizenship is such an important issue among Western religious or theological circles.

Comparative religionists/theologians such as Hans Küng and John Hick generally agree that a religious devotee can have a true identity or real membership in only one religion at a time. This appears to be true especially for Western religions including Christianity. For example, Küng(1989: 281) maintained that the conversion from one tradition to another “represents not a mere change of paradigm, but rather a change of religion.” As he said,

“...the truth of every religion extends to a depth that ultimately challenges every person to a yes or no, to either-or. This is not just the case for the primarily exclusive prophetic religions of Semitic origin. It is also valid for...the more wisdom-oriented religions of Chinese tradition... Therefore...a religious dual citizenship in the deepest, strictest sense of faith should be excluded by all the greatest religions.”(281-82; emphasis added)

In my view, if this thesis of “one religion at a time” is the absolute case for all peoples and cultures, then dual religious citizenship or multiple participation would not be a worthwhile topic for us to discuss any further. Küng’s model is that religious dual citizenship “should be excluded” and the global “inculturation of the spirit of Jesus Christ” must be the key answer to the dialogue(1989: 282). In my view, however, this is a Christian-centered or Christocentric argument that does not do

enough justice to the Korean case of Confucian-Christian interaction. Confucian-Christian integration (or whatever we call it) has been working out in a reasonably harmonious way on the personal and cultural contexts. However, this phenomenon of integration, including my personal Confucian-Christian experience, does not seem to accord with not just Küng's rejection of "dual religious citizenship" but also his theological commitment to the "inculturation of the spirit of Jesus Christ."

As we know, for many centuries, the general unfolding of religion and thought in East Asian countries indicate a historical and cultural legacy of pluralistic awareness as well as mutual interaction and influence, pertaining to Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, shamanism, and folk religion. Some saw it as part of their daily reality of religion and culture, and others accepted it as something that could lead to a fruitful ethico-spiritual integration. The Korean case of Confucian-Christian interaction embodies several significant implications for Confucian-Christian dialogue. Ching correctly argued that "cultural and possibly religious integration in contemporary East Asia" is "a process of important implications for Christianity, as a new generation of East Asian Christians, whether Korean, Japanese or Chinese, assert themselves as Christians of Confucian background and values"(1989: 89). Contemporary Koreans, except Protestant fundamentalists and evangelists, would not see anything terribly wicked about learning or appreciating two or more traditions of spiritual teachings in a positive and constructive manner. To add a personal note here, a Korean Confucian-Christian would not worry about his/her Christian faith when participating in Confucian values or ancestral rites; i.e., his or her Christian faith and life are not claimed to be hampered or hindered by the Confucian moral-cultural heritage.

This phenomenon of assimilation and harmony — which should not necessarily viewed as a "religious syncretism" — is commonly shared by many Korean Christians as well as by Chinese and Japanese Christians, whom I have known in East Asia and North America. Therefore, to East

Asian Christians, dual religious citizenship is not a contentious theoretical (or practical) matter for the Confucian-Christian dialogue, for they naturally assimilate the two traditions in one or another way and do not see Confucianism as an organized, membership religion of faith and dogmas. For this reason, Kūng's mere theological rejection of it seems to contradict his openness to the ethical-cultural integration of the two traditions.

In her comparative study of Confucianism and Christian, Ching gave a relevant but ambiguous point that Confucius for Confucian Christians serves as a "model for behaviour and as sources of inspiration, but only as secondary to Jesus Christ"(1976: 6). Embedded in this assertion seems to emphasize Jesus Christ as the "primary" norm for Confucian Christians as well as for Confucian-Christian dialogue. Accordingly, we may question the extent to which it applies to the Korean and other East Asian Christians. In other words, it might be up to the practising Confucian-Christians themselves, not the scholars and theologians of Confucian-Christian dialogue, to make any judgement or assumption that Christianity is primary and Confucianism is secondary, or vice-versa.

Berthrong's model called for a dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity should focus on the notion of "dual transcendence," making the link between "process theology" and the "New Confucianism" of contemporary Confucian scholars (such as Mou Tsung-san and Tu Wei-ming in particular). In the strict sense, however, it appears to be highly sophisticated both philosophically and theologically. So it would be difficult to apply this model directly to the practical moral and cultural dimensions of Korean Confucian-Christian integration (including Christian faith and Confucian ancestral rites, for example) and its theoretical implications for the dialogue.

East Asians such as Korean Confucians and non-Christians would raise several simple questions, pointing directly to the Christian circles. First, can one be Christian and Confucian at the same time? Similarly,

can he/she be a Confucian Christian or Christian Confucian? If so, what does this mean in the practical context? For example, is it acceptable if an East Asian Christian maintains his/her partial or full commitment to Confucian ethos, customs, and rituals (especially ancestral rites)? Second, can a Korean/East Asian Confucian be converted to Christianity if he/she does not wish the central doctrines and symbols of Christianity to entirely replace these living elements of Confucianism? Third, can there be a Confucian Christianity and/or Christian Confucianism? These are crucial questions to be discussed on the common, practical level of interreligious interaction in contemporary Korea, indicating certain implications for various forms of the Confucian-Christian dialogue.

There is definitely some dilemma of Confucian-Christian dialogue or Christian-Confucian dialogue. The most difficult part of this dilemma seems to relate more to Christian side of the dialogue. The historical Jesus' teaching is the central norm for Christian faith and Christian life; however, Christianity may go beyond Jesus' life and teaching, depending on the diversity of churches and denominations. What should we do with the Christ, the central symbol of Christianity, referring to the redeemer, the sanctifier, the justifier, and the saviour? Moreover, the confessional, ecclesiastic, and soteriological teachings of Paul and other early and medieval fathers (e.g., Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and others) in terms of "original sin," "divine grace," "confession," "sanctification," "salvation," etc. are just as important for practical purposes (depending on different churches and denominations). Most Christian theologians, pastors, and devotees (not to mention Koreans) emphasize these categories of Christian faith and worship to various degrees, expressing in terms of "incarnation," "redemption," "church," "salvation," and so on. For Confucian-Christian dialogue, it is not possible to ignore these categories of Christian faith. How do we explain them in the Confucian-Christian context? Or is this actually necessary if they are accepted fully or partially by Confucian-Christians themselves who naturally assimilate

them with their Confucian background and values?

There are other kinds of obstacles concerning the Confucian-Christian dialogue in South Korea. For example, many Protestant churches and pastors (especially evangelical and conservative ones) in this country have a general tendency to maintain the outdated claim that Christianity is the only true and universal religion, although they are aware of not just global religious pluralism and but also their own Christian diversity. They often maintain the exclusivist truth claims and symbols of Christian faith, which have no absolute pan-Christian consensus either. Regarding Christian diversity among themselves, Korean Christians and others feel uneasy about its impact on the competition among churches and denominations as well as its link to certain economic and social matters.¹⁾

More educated Koreans including Confucians are better informed about the burden of Christian diversity in South Korea. Accordingly, Korean theologians and Christians should neither neglect their own religious-cultural heritages like Confucianism nor blindly accept the Western theologies and their ethical standards. It is my personal-scholarly conviction that Korean Protestant pastors' hostility to Confucian and other non-Christian beliefs, rituals, and customs as "damned," "sinful," or "idolatrous" will not do good to the further development and indigenization of Christianity in Korea. Similarly, their attitudes of the superiority, exclusiveness, or universality of Christianity are the fundamental stumbling block to the dialogue between Christianity and other Korean religious-cultural heritages such as Confucianism.

In the Korean context, one key issue has to do with Korean

1) In this climate of churchism and competition, they might not be interested in developing any workable form of Confucian-Christian dialogue that will put them in touch with their living Confucian heritage. They can also raise the question, Why should we? After all, one may say that their main job is to preach the gospel according to their own forms of Christian faith and to expand their own congregations.

Confucianism itself as well. The general attitudes of Koreans (including Christians) toward Confucianism vary according to generational, occupational, economic, social, and religious factors.²⁾ However, most Koreans including Christians would respect the Confucian-based value system as the essential part of their daily ethico-spiritual culture. For this and other reasons mentioned above, they are naturally Confucian, despite their various religious affiliations. The key question is then about the (religious) identity of Korean Confucians and how we should apply it to the Confucian-Christian dialogue. I do not intend to propose any specific model for Confucian-Christian dialogue, considering all of these and other issues discussed so far. I shall draw certain conclusions in light of the Korean phenomenon of Confucian-Christian interaction.

IV. Conclusion

The enterprise of Confucian-Christian dialogue should proceed in the context of addressing the basic practical issues of faith and action, while assimilating the relevant theological and philosophical issues. We need to address the basic paradigms of Confucianism and Christianity in terms of conflict and assimilation. On the whole, there are more questions than answers at this stage of Confucian-Christian dialogue. We have to be more specific on the fundamental, practical purpose of the dialogue, rather than being confined to the different theories and methods of it. The dialogue must integrate the mutual understanding and transformation of the two traditions. What or who are we really talking about for practical purposes? Each tradition has its distinctive features according to its own worldview, language, history, culture, and values. After all, every major religious tradition of the world continues to exist in its way, interacting

2) I have discussed this topic elsewhere (Chung 1998b, 1996, 1995a, and 1995b).

with other traditions. If this is the case, what are we, as historians of religions or scholars of comparative religion, trying to search for? Are we not just imaging certain academic (theoretical or methodological) ways of promoting the Confucian-Christian dialogue? We need to be more attentive to the needs and concerns of practicing average Confucian-Christians. These kinds of questions have to be debated further.

The current scholarship on Confucian-Christian dialogue tends to underestimate the practical and experiential paradigms of Confucian-Christian interaction (if not integration) that have been occurring many Korean and East Asian Christians. Furthermore, it does not clearly explain the insider/outsider barriers and dichotomies in terms of theory and methodology. I have tried to support this and other points by making reference to both Christian/Western and Confucian/East Asian ideas and perspectives, presenting my own comparative and crosscultural experience and reflections. We can develop some possible bilateral model for addressing practical and methodological issues on the basis of the Korean case of Confucian-Christian conflict and assimilation.

Confucianism, a living tradition of ethics and spirituality, offers a open faith in the ultimate reality of humanity, affirms the fundamental worth of human nature, and emphasizes the reflective and creative role of the *hsin* (*tao-hsin* or *pen-hsin* in the Mencian and Neo-Confucian context) in one's journey of intellectual, moral, and spiritual fulfilment. It conveys the universal transformability of the ordinary self into the undifferentiated, virtuous and illuminated being. This engaged way of life points to a potentially universal path of pursuing the goodness and truth of humanity in response to its transcendent world. The "ultimate concern" of all humankind — to use the systematic theological terminology of Paul Tillich and other comparative theologians -- is that every human existence ultimately has an ontological and existential *telos* to fulfil; i.e., to realize and extend one's moral and spiritual nature

bestowed by the Heavenly Way (or Heaven's Mandate) for Confucians, or that by God and redeemed by Jesus Christ for Christians. Confucianism integrates an attentive, active, and disciplined way of life. As demonstrated by contemporary Confucians as well as by traditional Confucians, this integrated life is not about attaining a divine power/nature; nor is it intended to be an ascetic-mystical life detached from the secular human world of the self, family, community, and society.

In this regard, Confucianism is compatible with Christianity. Confucian life engages not only learning and moral self-cultivation but also a reflective and responsible life of self-transcendence and social transformation. From a comparative and crosscultural standpoint, the Confucian project of religion and ethics, like its Christian counterpart, takes the Heavenly way/image of human nature as the intrinsic foundation of universal goodness, penetrating truth, and illuminating virtue. Accordingly, it does not oppose other beliefs and practices, including those of Christianity. For this reason, as I have discussed in the second section of this paper, there seems to be a large number of Korean Christians both inside and outside South Korea, who assimilate certain complementary moral-spiritual aspects of the two traditions in the basic context of human faith and action. Perhaps, this is a crucial point of the existential-experiential convergence for Confucian-Christian dialogue as a whole, one that will contribute to the development of a fruitful model of the dialogue.

Both Confucianism and Christianity emphasize a regulated and engaged faith. The Confucian and Christian concerns for this world here and now are similar in an essential context. I agree to Hans Küng's comparative understanding of Confucius and Jesus that the core of Confucianism is an "anthropocentric" (humanistic) vision with "an entirely religious emphasis," one that is compatible with the basic moral-spiritual teaching of the historical Jesus (1989: 109). The authentic Christian, like any true

Confucian, would have a virtue of sincere and reverential commitment to maintaining the human world in peace and harmony. Like Confucian optimism about the binding relationship with Heaven and humanity, the Christian meaning of God's good world and its biblical realism — which is revealed and renewed through Jesus Christ — can inspire many Confucians and Confucian-Christians (whether Koreans or Westerners). Confucian faith and Christian faith demand us to transform this world according to the “covenant” imparted to human beings by the Mandate of Heaven and its sagely model (for Confucians) or by the Will of God and the Jesus Christ model (for Christians). Perhaps, this is another relevant point of the idealistic moral-spiritual convergence for the Confucian-Christian dialogue.

I basically agree on Kang-nam Oh's view that “If any society can be considered a particularly favourable laboratory for the Confucian-Christian dialogue, it must be Korea”(1993: 316). This is partly because Confucianism continues to influence Korean Christians' daily attitudes toward the common moral and social dimensions of Korean culture. Undoubtedly, the on-going process of Confucian-Christian interaction among Korean Christians is therefore significant for the whole enterprise of Confucian-Christian dialogue with far-ranging implications for various Christian and academic circles in both Korea and the West. Christian churches and theologies should continue to broaden and strengthen the three-fold question of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit as well as that of the Bible, church, and salvation from a global perspective, while utilizing the Confucian and other non-biblical traditions. Some theological and cultural opening of Christianity has been occurring during the past several decades; however, it can be facilitated by fruitfully through its dialogue with East Asian traditions such as Confucianism. If Christianity is a true, universal religion for all humanity, as revealed in the New Testament, then various Christian circles in Korea as well as in the West need to understand the essential paradigms of Confucian-Christian

interaction among Korean and other East Asian Christians of Confucian background. In the academic context of methodology and pedagogy, this is a significant point with certain implications for our endeavour to advance the Confucian-Christian dialogue in the growing field of religious studies.

Korean Christians need appreciate more seriously that they share the same Confucian heritage with their fellow Koreans including Confucians, Buddhists, and others. The Christians and Confucians can transform themselves into better Christians and better Confucians by learning from each other and by sharing the moral-spiritual commonality of the two traditions. If we can use Karl Rahner's Catholic thesis of "anonymous Christians" that everybody is potentially an anonymous Christian, then I suggest that most Koreans are "anonymous Confucians" who are more or less influenced by Confucianism and that all Christians are potentially Confucian. I do not mean to use this Christian metaphor in the conventional theological sense, but rather in the general context of religion, ethics, and spirituality. If good Korean Confucians are anonymous Christians, then good Korean Christians are anonymous Confucians as well.

In the final reflection, both Confucianism and Christianity continue to offer us the relevant moral, spiritual, and philosophical resources for the pluralistic and interacting world of religion and culture. To conclude, our broader understanding of Confucianism and our deeper appreciation of the Korean phenomenon of Confucian-Christian interaction will contribute to the development of comparative religion and interreligious dialogue.

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