

God and Heaven: A Theological Encounter with Tu Wei-ming's Confucian Thought

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It is my aim in this paper to attempt a theological encounter with Tu Wei-ming's Confucian thought around the topic of the ultimate reality. This encounter will be carried out mainly with the following question in mind. What is the relationship between the ultimate reality and the world? Christian understanding of the relationship between God and the world can be summarized this way: God is the Creator and the Redeemer of the world, and God is always in a personal relationship with the world. Tu Wei-ming, on the other hand, presents a quite different view of the relationship between the ultimate reality and the world. The main idea in Tu's Confucian answer to the question concerning the relationship between the ultimate reality and the world can be found in the following statements.

In a strict sense, the relationship between Heaven and man is not that of creator and creature but one of mutual fidelity (Tu, 1985: 73).

But *Chung-yung* never contemplates the possibility of an almighty creator, qualitatively different from, if not wholly other than, human reality. In fact, the lack of a creation myth is not only a prominent feature of Confucian symbolism but also a defining characteristic of Chinese philosophy...“Heaven” of the Confucian tradition is not a personal God or an omnipotent creator (Tu, 1989: 69).

Tu's Confucian vision of reality expressed here is quite different from the Christian theistic vision of reality.

I

1. Christian faith confesses God as the one who “calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17). “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ” (Gen. 1:1). The symbol of God the Creator can have several meanings. Its primary meaning is that God is the ontological ground of “the heavens and the earth,” that is, of the whole world. By the ontological creativity of God, I mean the divine power of being by which everything that exists comes to be and remains in being. God's ontological creativity can be called in Paul Tillich's terms as “being itself” or “the ground of being” or “the infinite power of being” (Tillich: 235 f). The conception of God as the ontological creator finds its classical expression in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. The basic meaning of the doctrine of creation out of nothing is that every

existing thing depends upon God for its existence, and that there can be nothing apart from God. Against dualism, Christian faith believes that there is no independent primordial stuff out of which God created the world. God is the sole ontological ground of whatever is and might be, of all things visible and invisible. Creation out of nothing is creation from God. According to Alfred N. Whitehead's ontological principle, "no actual entity, then no reason." "Thus the search for a reason is always the search for an actual fact which is the vehicle of the reason" (Whitehead: 19, 40). Together with Gregory of Nyssa, I understand creation out of nothing as creation from God.

It is by this use of the term "nothing" in the sense of "the negation of all that can be spoken of or thought of" that Gregory of Nyssa, we imagine, would explain his interpretation of the traditional description of creation as being "from nothing" to mean that it is "from God," for God, as it is commonly believed by the Fathers, is in His essence ineffable and incomprehensible (Wolfson: 60).

The Christian confession that God created heaven and earth out of nothing does not mean that there was a time when God was not creating. God is creative by nature. I agree with Charles Hartshorne when he precludes "the idea of an absolute beginning of the creative process" (Hartshorne, 1984: 62). As God is always creative, there must be some world always instead of no world.

In contrast, Tu claims that Confucian thinkers "would feel uncomfortable with the idea of a willful God who created the world out of nothing" (Tu, 1985: 36). Tu, following Chang Tsai (1020-1077), explains the origin and meaning of the world through the concept of *ch'i* (氣). *Ch'i* is understood as "matter-energy," "material force," "vital force," "vital power," or "creativity." *Ch'i* is "the most basic stuff that makes the cosmos" (Tu, 1985: 36 f.). A contemporary Confucian scholar, Siu-chi Huang, identifies *ch'i* with "being itself" (Huang: 66).

Ch'i is said to have two principal aspects, the aspect of "*t'ai-hsü* (太虛, the Great Vacuity or Great Void)" and the aspect of "*t'ai-ho* (太和, the Great Harmony)." *Ch'i* as *t'ai-hsü* or the Great Vacuity refers to "the original substance of material force (*ch'i*)" (Tu, 1985: 38, 158). *Ch'i* as the Great Vacuity in itself has no shape (Fung, 1953: 480). "All modalities of being are made of *ch'i*" (Tu, 1985: 45). *Ch'i* as the Great Harmony, on the other hand, refers to "the cosmos," or "a continuum" outside of which there is nothing (Tu, 1985: 38, 41). In other words, the Great Harmony is the whole. The cosmos is viewed "as the unfolding of

continuous creativity” (Tu, 1985: 36). The cosmos is “an organismic process” or a “spontaneously self-generating life process” (Tu, 1985: 38). Chang Tsai identifies Heaven with *ch’i* as the Great Vacuity and the Great Harmony (Yao: 152).

“Vacuity” or “void” (虛 *hsü*) in *t’ai-hsü* (the Great Vacuity) is in a way comparable to “nothing” in the Christian doctrine of “creation out of nothing.” According to Siu-chi Huang’s interpretation of Chang Tsai, “vacuity” is not the nonbeing in the sense of “*ouk ón*, the nonbeing that negates being,” or “nothingness, nonexistence, privation, emptiness, nonentity, or unreality,” but the nonbeing in the sense of “*mē ón*,” “a positive entity” (Huang: 63 f.). The positive entity that “vacuity” refers to is *ch’i*. Chang Tsai and Tu’s ontological concept of *ch’i*, particularly *ch’i* as the Great Vacuity, is still different from the theistic concept of the ontological creativity of God. Tu’s metaphysics of *ch’i* is monistic. Tu says:

If the world were created by an intelligence higher than and external to the great transformation, it would, by definition, fall short of a manifestation of holism...On the contrary, if genuine creativity is not the creation of something out of nothing, but a continuous transformation of that which is already there, the world as it now exists is the authentic manifestation of the cosmic process in its all-embracing fullness (Tu, 1985: 38).

Tu’s monistic thought of *ch’i* has no place for a divine reality who, in some respect though not in all respects, is transcendent to the world. Tu’s monistic thought does not allow for the distinction between the Creator and the created that is called for by Christian faith.

2. God of Christian faith is not only the one who calls into existence the things that do not exist. God is also the one who makes all things new and who creates new heavens and a new earth (Rev. 21:5; Is. 65:17). God is the Creator not only in the ontological sense but also in the cosmological sense. If God as the ontological creator answers the question, why is there something at all, God as the organ of novelty answers the question, why has the world the inescapable nature of creative synthesis and processual advance? God is, in Whitehead’s expression, “the organ of novelty” (Whitehead: 67). Potentials are required for the emergence of novelty. According to Whitehead, “the primordial mind” of God is the locus wherein “the general potentiality of the universe” exists (Whitehead: 46). God in the primordial nature makes unrealized potentialities relevant to the emerging new entities (Whitehead: 32 f., 343 f.). Thus God is indispensable for the incessant emergence of creative novelties in the world.

The assertion that God is the ontological creator as well as the organ of novelty is far from meaning that God is the sole determiner of everything that comes to be. God creates

every being to be its own creator. God empowers and inspires every creature to be a maker of its own life. The idea of God as the organ of novelty means that God is inescapably responsible for the emergence of novel forms of being, but it does not mean that God wholly determines everything. As Schubert M. Ogden says, “*nothing whatever, not even God, can wholly determine the being of something else*” (Ogden, 1989: 63). Every emerging entity is given from God both the power of being and the possibilities for novelty. But it is the emerging entity itself that is finally responsible for the making of its own concrete and unique form of being. Within the milieu of the prevenient and ever-present divine creativity, every emergent finite being is self-creative.

To see the ultimate reality as the organ of creative novelty for the world requires a distinction between the ultimate reality and the creatures. It also requires freedom of both the ultimate reality and the creatures. Can the Confucian Heaven also be understood as the one who makes all things new, as the organ of novelty for the world? Let us consider the following statements by Tu.

The organismic process as a spontaneously self-generating life process exhibits three basic motifs: continuity, wholeness, and dynamism. All modalities of being, from a rock to heaven, are integral parts of a continuum which is often referred to as the “great transformation” (*ta-hua*). Since nothing is outside of this continuum, the chain is never broken. The continuous presence of *ch'i* in all modalities of being makes everything flow together as the unfolding of a single process. Nothing, not even an almighty creator, is external to this process (Tu, 1985: 38).

I attend especially to Tu’s claim that the cosmos is “the unfolding of a single process,” “a spontaneously self-generating life,” to which “even an almighty creator” is not external. Tu’s *t’ien*, in the end, is that kind of Heaven who, according to David Hall and Roger Ames, “is wholly immanent, having no existence independent of the calculus of phenomena that constitutes it” (Hall and Ames: 207). Tu views the single cosmic process in such a way as to deny any genuine distinction between the cosmic single process and the finite entities within the single cosmic process. There is only one reality, the one cosmic process. Tu’s ultimate reality is, in no aspect, external to the one cosmic process. And no finite being can have a genuine freedom of its own through the exercise of which it can, in a real and significant sense, be distinct from the one cosmic process. Tu’s concept of “the continuity of being” (Tu, 1985: 36) is incompatible with the idea of a divine reality as “the organ of novelty.”

3. God of Christian faith is not only the Creator, but also the Redeemer. “For from him and through him and to him are all things” (Rom. 11:36). As all beings are united in having God

as their ultimate origin, they are also united in having God as their final end. “Divine power is adequate both to insure that there be a world and to possess whatever world there is” (Hartshorne, 1952: 183). God is the cosmic whole who includes all things.

Tu, together with Chang Tsai, also has a conception of the cosmic organismic unity of all beings or all concrete forms of *ch'i*. Chang Tsai calls the cosmic organismic unity of all concrete forms of *ch'i* as “the Great Harmony (太和).” The Great Harmony is “the one,” “the Supreme Ultimate,” i.e. the ultimate reality (Fung, 1953: 479). The Great Harmony or Heaven is “so vast that there is nothing outside of it” (Tu, 1985: 163). At first sight, it appears that the Great Harmony or Heaven is similar to God as “the Whole,” “the highest possible form of the inclusion of others in the self” (Hartshorne, 1967: 20 f; 1984: 110).

However, there is an important difference between the God of Christian faith and the Great Harmony of Tu’s monism. As Hartshorne points out, God in its actuality includes the cosmos, but the essential character of God is independent of the cosmos. God has its own inalienable freedom and subjectivity. And every finite being included in the actuality of God also has its own freedom and subjectivity (Hartshorne, 1948: 89). There is both continuity and discontinuity between God the Redeemer and the creatures. However, as pointed out above, the Great Harmony of Tu Wei-ming’s monism is simply identical with the cosmos, being in no respect independent of it. There is only continuity between the Great Harmony and the cosmos, but no discontinuity between them. Therefore Heaven cannot be a redeemer in the genuine sense of the word.

4. According to Christian faith, God who is the Creator and the Redeemer is also the inescapable participant in the ongoing communion between God and the world. The concept of communion and the concept of person belong to one another. Being a person means having the capability of a reciprocal I-thou relationship with other beings. Every finite creature who comes into being by God is also called into a free and responsible relationship with God. If “the image of God” refers to the possibility of being God’s “counterpart” with whom God “will speak and have communion” (von Rad: 82), then each and every creature is created to be the image of God. The humankind is a representative case of being the image of God. God who calls all creatures into a personal communion with Him or Herself cannot but be a person, a supreme person. The personal relationship between God and human beings is paradigmatically expressed in worship. “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (Mt. 4:10). Worship is an event of loving communion between God and the worshipers.

Tu’s “Heaven” is not “a personal God” (Tu, 1989: 69). Tu’s view of the ultimate reality is “atheistic” and “impersonal” (Tu, 1985: 22, 40). Tu’s denial of personal conception of Heaven is closely connected with his monistic view of reality. While the possibility of a

personal relationship between Heaven and the world requires both connection and distinction, continuity and discontinuity, between the two parties, Tu's monism of "the continuity of being" asserts only one aspect of the pairs, i. e., connection and continuity of Heaven and the world. It denies the other aspect of the pairs, i.e., distinction and discontinuity between the two. It is impossible for Tu's monism to conceive a personal relationship between Heaven and the world.

II

There are some reasons for which I suggest Tu reconsider his atheistic monism. Let us first consider the problem of evil. I do not know how Tu with his atheistic monism can explain adequately the reality of evil. If everything is understood in terms of a single cosmic process, then no other being than the single cosmic process is finally responsible for the existence of evil. Then there is no meaning in our efforts to overcome evil. This does not accord with our common sense view of the reality of evil and our sense of responsibility to overcome it.

Human beings also have confidence in the meaning and worth of life in general and the meaning and worth of our quest for authentic human existence in particular. Christian faith understands God as "the objective ground in reality itself of our ineradicable confidence in the final worth of our existence" (Ogden, 1966: 37). "The Lord loves righteousness and justice, his love unending fills the earth" (Ps. 33:5). What Confucians call *jen* or what Christians call love is the ultimate truth of life. God who is love in itself empowers, inspires, and calls us to life of love. And all our joys and sufferings, successes and failures, doings and undos with regard to love are ultimately redeemed by God who is the inclusive cosmic love, and thereby acquire immortal meaning in God.

I see that Tu has a great concern for "self-realization" and "the development of his moral life" (Tu, 1989: 67). Tu acknowledges "the falsehood of self-centeredness," and is concerned about "learning to be more authentically or more fully human" (Tu, 1985: 27, 52). Every human being is under the solemn responsibility to realize "ultimate self-transformation" which consists in overcoming "the private ego" and attaining "the true self" (Tu, 1989: 94, 108). In my judgement, however, Tu's atheistic monism does not accord with his concern for ultimate self-transformation. If the cosmos as an organismic process is the sole genuine ultimate subject, then every state of affairs will be considered as what it should be because it is the sole ultimate subject's doing and therefore will be considered all right. Then there is no meaning in our effort for ultimate self-transformation in quest of true self, because there finally is no

distinction between the true self and the false self.

Finally, I doubt that the Confucian classics generally support Tu's monistic interpretation of reality. According to Fung Yu-lan, the references to *T'ien* (Heaven) in such Confucian classics as *Shih Ching* (詩經), *Shu Ching* (書經), *Tso Chuan* (左傳) and *Lun Yü* (論語) "seem generally to designate the ruling or presiding anthropomorphic *T'ien*" (Fung, 1952: 31). Xinzhong Yao also says, "Many of Confucius' references to Heaven point to the supreme being who controls the world and determines the destiny of human affairs, because 'Heaven is the greatest in the world' (*Lunyu* [*The Analects*], 8: 19)" (Yao: 145). Confucius himself most likely had a personalistic understanding of Heaven when he said, "It is Heaven that knows me" (*The Analects*, 14:37; Chan: 43) Confucius also said, "He who commits a sin against Heaven has no god to pray to (*The Analects*, 3:13; Chan: 25). The beginning sentence of *Chung-yung* (中庸, *The Doctrine of the Mean*) runs as follows: "What Heaven (天, *T'ien*) imparts to man is called nature." This sentence also implies distinction as well as connection, discontinuity as well as continuity, between Heaven as the personal one who imparts the nature and every human being who is imparted his or her original nature by Heaven. It is also noteworthy that Chung-ying Cheng's interpretation of the Confucian classics leads him to see some similarity between the Confucian conception of the Great Ultimate and process theism (Cheng: 226 f.). Thus, reconsideration of Tu's atheistic monism is called for not only with respect to its credibility to human existence but also with respect to its appropriateness to the basic tenor of the Confucian classics themselves.

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