

Virtue Ethics, Confucian Moral Teachings, Wesleyan Spirituality: In a Changing Asian Context

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Context

The context of this paper is Hong Kong taken to be a window through which to view a predominantly Chinese-peopled world,¹ including mainland China and Taiwan, in a changing Asian setting. Hong Kong, a former British colony, has since 1997 changed over to be a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China under a "one country, two systems" principle. It is a small, economically thriving metropolis adjoining the land-mass of China and opening by sea and air to other parts of Asia, Taiwan being a near-by island-state (whose political status in relation to the People's Republic of China remains unresolved).

The Chinese-peopled world, or the Chinese people's cultural world, is not the unchangeable culture they have inherited from ancient China. The Chinese people in various places are in interaction with other peoples from Western and other cultures through traveling, commerce, studying, telecommunication, and so forth.

Indeed the Chinese people's cultural world is in the *modern* age—enjoying the fruits of modernization (modernized management, high technology, globalized economy, etc.); catching up with modern forms of democracy (with varying degrees of success); but experiencing the limits of modernity (air pollution, environmental destruction, ecological crisis, wealth-poverty disparity, etc.). Some avant garde intellectuals think that the Chinese are entering into the *postmodern* age—unguarded subjectivism and bewildering cultural pluralism, suspicion of authority and destruction of structures, over-flooding of information and submersion of individuality. At the same time there are *pre-modern* or *traditional* cultural and religious elements surviving—both reactionary forces (authoritarian, paternalistic, bureaucratic mentality) and resources (from the religions and classical teachings) for realignment or remaking of some sort.

Concern

It all started with a small group of academic colleagues (in ethics, cultural studies and theology) and clergy friends (Protestant and Catholic) getting together in informal conversation showing concern over the moral morass and ethical confusion

1. What I call a "Chinese-peopled world" is technically speaking a Chinese peoples' world, there being more than fifty peoples or ethnic groups that are subsumed under the nomenclature, "Chinese." I do not mean to be concerned about anthropological technicalities regarding the Chinese peoples except to say that all these ethnic groups are bound together by the Han (漢) written language (though there are many spoken dialects), the Hans being the largest ethnic group, and through the same written language with the Han scripts they have a common literate cultural heritage (though there are innumerable sub-cultures). But for practical intents and purposes we may now just as well speak of the "Chinese people," meaning by that they are bound by the same written language and share the same literate cultural heritage.

that emerge under the impact of the criss-crossing of cultural currents.. These colleagues and friends did not merely lament and sigh; they wanted to analyze and understand; moreover, they wished to see some light and find some way out of the woods. Informal conversations led to the convening of a seminar under the title “Is Morality Dead?—Ethics Re-considered” (“Morality & Ethics Seminar” in the following), meeting once every week over a period of six weeks, with two persons speaking each time in dialogue and group discussion following.

What arise from the vortex of cross-currents, Chinese and Western, postmodern-modern-premodern (traditional)?² The following characteristics were noted:

- Loss of self-identity
- Confusion of ethical standard
- Cultural disorientation
- Social order in disarray
- Wealth-poverty disparity
- Deadening of moral sense
- Spiritual debilitation

It is this kind of syndrome of moral degeneration and spiritual morass which is at the heart of the group’s concern. But the group are not persons easily dejected but ones with religious and social commitment, and they are in search of ways out of the dark.

Certain valuable insights did come out of the seminar-discussions. When I knew I had the opportunity to participate in the 12th Oxford Theological Institute, I thought I would carry forward the concern I and the group had, and link it up with the Wesleyan heritage which I wish to extend beyond the two shores of the Atlantic by contextualizing it in the contemporary Asian scene, focusing on the Chinese-peopled world as viewed through Hong Kong. It is really not over-stretching the point in linking up the group’s concern with the Wesleyan heritage, for, as a matter of fact, my concluding talk at the Morality & Ethics Seminar was a personal pilgrimage in search of the depth-meaning of humanity, morality, spirituality and divinity, revealing my Wesleyan theological and spiritual lineage—in dialogue with Confucian moral teachings as well as certain Western ways of ethical thinking, especially Virtue Ethics. I write this up (I was the convener of the Seminar) and get ready to present it as a specimen of group process of reflection-praxis, contextualized, and carried on in a cross-cultural and ecumenical mode, rather than as a one-person intellectual exercise.

Virtue Ethics Revisited

Rediscovery of Virtues and Virtuous Persons. After giving some consideration to the given context, one of the questions that came to mind was: What is the nature of morality (in Chinese, 人之德性, the moral nature of human beings)? I gave a short recollection of my own search, dating back to my undergraduate days in America as a college student in the early 1950s taking a course in “Types of Ethical Theory.” The

² One session of the Seminar was devoted to “Postmodern, Modern, and Premodern Culture,” led by Dr. Kai-Ming Kwan of the Hong Kong Baptist University.

course covered classical and modern periods. I got an “A” grade in the course, but at the end I had a flat taste in my mouth, for after all the discussions on ethics and morality, I missed the taste of what it means to be human and of what the moral life is. Aristotle stood out as an exception who impressed me for his human sensibility and practical wisdom. I was particularly intrigued by his idea of moral excellence (*arête*) in terms of functional performance, his theory of the mean (striking a mean between two extreme by discerning judgments), and his portrayal of the noble-minded person being a reasonable and honorable figure serving the state for the well-being of all.

The next semester I turned to Chinese philosophy to see if I could satisfy my quest for what morality is about. I was assigned to give a report (two papers) on Confucian ethics. I immediately wired my father in Hong Kong to airmail me an English-Chinese edition of **The Four Books of Confucianism**. I read the Confucian classics carefully for the first time in my life. The books are rich in aphoristic sayings describing virtues as exemplified by human personalities. What I did for my assignment (the first paper) was to compile sayings from Confucius’ *Book of Analects* selected topics like *jun-tse* (君子, “gentleman” or “the superior person”), *ren* (仁, “benevolence,” “human-heartedness,” or “perfect virtue”), *yi* (義, “righteousness”), *li* (禮, “propriety”), etc. A whole new world of moral teaching was opened before my eyes. Now I could see that morality and virtuous persons are not separable. “The way of the *jun-tse* is threefold: virtuous, he is free from anxieties; wise, he is free from perplexities; bold, he is free from fear.” “What is *ren*? It is to subdue the self and return to propriety.” “Where *ren* prevails there you have a beautiful neighborhood.” “What is *ren*? It is, when you go abroad behave as though you meet an important guest, and when you employ people, take them as though they are assisting in a great sacrificial offering.”

If morality cannot be separated from human qualities like virtues, what about ethics that pertains to principles of living? I found out that *The Works of Mencius* is fond of using narratives to bring out ethical principles (my second paper). There is the case of the king who found delight in watching the geese on the pond and deer in the park because he had happiness in his heart. Moreover, he wanted the people to be happy and to share his pleasure in watching the geese and the deer. Because the people knew about the king’s benevolence, they all joined in building the pond and the park. The principle of good governance is clear in this case: to share happiness with the people and the people in turn are happy to work together for the kingdom. Those stories told by Mencius were my first lessons in narrative ethics.

Thus, in exposing myself to Confucius and Mencius’ thoughts at first-hand, I had my first self-taught lessons in Confucian moral teachings, which brought back for me a human savor of morality and a sense of the practicality of ethics in concrete cases.

Alasdair MacIntyre: After Virtue, Then What? Years later I read Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (1981, revised 1984), and what I had stumbled upon about virtue and morality was reassured by the book. MacIntyre, who was born in Dublin and educated in England and in mid-career moved to the U.S., knew that the Enlightenment was of justifying ethics was bound to fail because it depended on

private preferences and left out the human person. He earnestly sought after the meaning of virtue, as in his high praise for Aristotle's teaching on virtuous qualities and personalities, and for Thomas Aquinas's working out a Catholic-Aristotelian framework of virtues. In MacIntyre's other book, *Whose Rationality? Which Rationality?* (1985) he is concerned about justice, as a moral practice related to people and as a principle explainable in rational terms. He discusses various types of rational ethics using justice as a case in point, e.g., the Athenian tradition, the Thomistic tradition, the English tradition, the Scottish tradition, etc. MacIntyre would certainly link up virtue with ethical principles, and in some instances, Christian theological considerations as well.

In MacIntyre's system, several key concepts are important: *practice*, *narrative*, and *tradition*. A practice is a pack of human activities which can be socially extended, having internalized values and recognized standards of excellence. Consider, for example, medicine as a practice. It is not difficult to understand that a doctor in the medical practice has certain skills that are recognized as excellent and certain qualities that are called good. A narrative tells the story of a persons' life. It is not just a haphazard happening but explains the unity of a life. When narratives—stories of persons' lives—are interwoven into the fabric of communal life, you have a communal narrative. A tradition, as defined by MacIntyre, is constituted by “historically extended and socially embodied” arguments, arguments about what are good, just, virtuous, etc. Virtues are not simply felt by an individual but can be reasonably argued and practiced to form a cultural tradition.

MacIntyre had no knowledge of moral philosophy outside the Western traditions, but his *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* was translated into Chinese,³ and he wrote an author's preface, in which he expressed his appreciation of the fact that his writings have crossed over to the Chinese borders, showing interest in knowing more about the Chinese traditions of ethics and morality. That gave me personal encouragement to expand the horizon of virtue ethics to include the Chinese cultural world.

Stanley Hauerwas: *Ethics of Character*. A younger colleague of Alasdair MacIntyre (first at Notre Dame University in Indiana, and later on in other institutions), Stanley Hauerwas developed MacIntyre's ethics framework further to emphasize the importance of the self's *narrative* in the *community* and having a *vision*. My friend Joshua Tso, of the Hong Kong Baptist Theological Seminary, presented Hauerwas' thinking in the Morality & Ethics Seminar. What follows is excerpted from Tso's presentation.

Hauerwas would rather speak of *character* than *virtue*, though character includes virtues. Character is a self-agent who has self-determination, with a story to tell and to act out. Instead of virtue ethics he calls his ethical system an “ethics of character,” and it is theologically grounded, as the title of one of his earliest books, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio: Trinity Press, 1975) suggests. The ethics of character is not only concerned with what one ought to do but presupposes one's moral character. Character involves the will, which makes choices according to a value orientation, and which is formed, together with

³ Published by Beijing Press, 1992.

action and habitual tendencies, and communal influences. Character is nurtured, and enfolds itself, in a community of people. In Christian terms the church is the community in which Christian character is developed. Hauerwas speaks and teaches as a Christian theologian, and he pays a great deal of attention to New Testament ethics. One of the themes he likes to highlight is the vision of a Christian disciple. Vision is one's view of life and the world. In Christian terms vision is based on historical faith, yet it looks to the future. It shapes a Christian believer's character and indeed the life and vitality of the church.⁴

I am not attempting to summarize Stanley Hauerwas' thought as I am interested in pointing out his notable effort to lay a Christian foundation for virtue ethics by linking up virtue (especially from New Testament sources) with ethical thinking.. His Gifford Lectures in 2001 is a testimony to his achievement as a contemporary Christian theological ethicist. I am delighted to see his allowance for "natural theology" in his theology.⁵ I have said to Joshua Tso that next time he gives a course on Hauerwas, invite me to be a guest speaker, and I will argue for giving Confucian virtues a place under the category of natural theology.

On the same panel discussion after Tso spoke, with reference to Hauerwas' "Peaceable Kingdom,"⁶ which is a New Testament-based peace ethic, a Catholic priest, Luke Tsui, countered by way of the Confucian package of "cultivation of the self—regulation of the family—governance of the nation—peace under heaven." That was a good example of Protestant-Catholic-Confucian dialogue on peace. The interesting feature of the interchange is that whereas the direction for Confucian hierarchical structure is to go from up to down, for Jesus' teaching it starts from below, the humble and lowly.

Virtue Ethics, which I first met up with by tripping up on Aristotle and Confucius along with Mencius, and which was developed in Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas, has given me personally, and my colleagues and friends, a sturdy stance to cope with a morally confusing and spiritually debilitating world. At the Seminar I called Virtue Ethics the first line of defence against the onslaught of moral deterioration and social disintegration. Virtues are not abstract concepts talked about in lectures and textbooks but can be enduring dispositions and behavior patterns of persons with formed character. At the same time some norms or standards are called for. We need not have "grand narratives," which postmodernists distrust, but some narratives, told and lived by individuals and a community, that can have a strong hold on the heart and mind of people and of society. Summing up a discussion on virtue ethics, Dr. Ping-Cheung Lo, of the Department of Religion and Philosophy at the Hong Kong Baptist University, said something to the effect that virtue is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for sound ethics, and that normative considerations are necessary, though by themselves not sufficient, to make ethical thinking complete. He gave the example of a course in medical ethics he taught for a Chinese Herbalist

⁴ Ref. Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Character: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflections* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1974).

⁵ Ref. Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: the Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Beozod Press, 2001).

⁶ Ref. Stanley Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1984)

Doctors' Association, in which the character of the practitioners and ethical rules are equally indispensable.

Justifying-Sanctifying Grace

There is one basic dictum about the human condition that has been skipped over thus far in our discussion and reflection, and that is human sinfulness.

Adopting a self-narrative style (encouraged by MacIntyre and Hauerwas' narrative approach), at the Seminar I back-tracked to the days after college graduation when I thought I had something firm to stand on in my ethical concerns, namely, the classical philosophy of Aristotle and the Confucian classics. At that time I became active in a United Methodist congregation (having switched over from the Episcopal Church), and I liked its warm fellowship and social action activities. Thanks to a theological student's introduction to me to Reinhold Niebuhr's thought on human vulnerability to sin, I woke up to the realization that even warm-hearted church folks and liberal-minded social activists are not free from such vulnerability. I then chanced to read up on Charles and John Wesley's accounts of their experiences of justification. The accounts in their journals (first, of Charles' experience and a few days later, of John's, revolving around their conversations with the Moravian leader Peter Bohler) touched me gently but vividly. Sinfulness is indeed a pervasive fact in human life, even in pious persons like the Wesley brothers. But human unrighteousness (sometimes in disguised form as self-righteousness) can be pardoned, as the two Wesleys testified. When I came to realize that I, even I, was justified (declared to be just in spite of unrighteousness) by grace through faith-- grace as forgiving spirit, and faith as trust--that was really a liberating experience. (I felt as though Peter Bohler was talking to me as he did to Charles and John Wesley long ago.) I further learned from the Wesley brothers, justification does not stop there, but is followed by sanctification, again through grace and with a sense of trust and assurance. I found that to be true in my life experience, and there was a pull to become a better and better person, not by my own will alone but by a higher power. I had missed the chants which I used to sing in my youth as a chorister in the Anglican Church, but now in the Methodist worship services I resonated with added joy every time I sang Charles Wesley's hymns on the theme of sanctification and perfection. Soon afterwards I entered a Methodist School of Theology and eventually was ordained a United Methodist minister. I did not feel unnatural at all about changing from the Anglican to the Methodist tradition because I had John and Charles Wesley as my role-model!

It was later on in a course in Methodist theology that I understood more of how Wesley thought about human sinfulness. Like all preachers of his time, he took the Genesis account of Adam and Eve's Fall as an explanation of the origin of the fallen human state. Whether Wesley followed the traditional line of thinking that humankind subsequently inherited original sin, he was not very clear or consistent. He vacillated between a Western juridical view and an Eastern Orthodox therapeutic "inbeing view."⁷ I thought that the issue was interesting, but at that time I rested content when I grasped the point that human beings have an inbred self-centered tendency, to the point of cutting themselves off from God and other beings. That is the

⁷ See Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace, John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), pp.73-82.

root of human sinfulness, with all the bad consequences that follow. In Wesley's words, this is the kind of human tendency that "accounts for the wickedness and misery of mankind in all ages and nations, thereby experience and reason do so strongly confirm this scriptural doctrine of original sin."⁸ But Wesley was opposed to the doctrine of total depravity. In the "Original Sin" sermon, the image of God is lost in fallen humanity and is replaced by the "image of the devil." Wesley listed what resulted therefrom: pride, self-will, pleasures of the eye, of the world, the desires of praise...evidenced even in the refined heathens. I thought that Wesley's list could be applied to 20th century America (and Hong Kong today)! Wesley also spoke of "actual sin" as being willful transgression of known laws of God. I could see that actual sins are committed by believers and non-believers as well, who in one way or another have some notions of "higher laws." I thought, though, by limiting actual sins to conscious acts, Wesley left out the unconscious where sinful acts are committed—yes, even by professed Christian believers.

In the mean time I was greatly intrigued by the Wesleys' teaching and practice regarding the unity of justification and sanctification in God's grace. That continuity was driven home to me unforgettably by a series of lectures given by the venerable Dr. Albert C. Outler. It was he also who said that John Wesley's thinking was in part influenced by Eastern Orthodoxy, for instance, as regards *synergism* and *theosis*. Since then I have continued to test the viability of such a neatly-tied theological linkage of justification-sanctification-by-grace, or the link-up of justifying-sanctifying grace.

Speaking of justification and sanctification, Stanley Hauerwas, if I may refer to him again, in one of his books, has a long section on "Sanctification and the Ethics of Character," in which he takes John Calvin and John Wesley's dual emphasis on justification and sanctification seriously, and then builds his character ethics as a part of the process of sanctification following justification, referring again to Wesley and to Jonathan Edwards as well.⁹ Thus virtue or character ethics, via Hauerwas, nicely fits into John Wesley's motif of justifying-sanctifying grace.

To go on further discussion, the fact that for some years I taught at a Lutheran theological seminary put me in a situation where Wesley's teaching on perfection has to contend with Luther's belief of *simul iustice et peccator* ("justified and at the same time a sinner"). I usually wiggle out of the horns of dilemma—if I succeed—in this manner. On the one hand, I say to my Lutheran friends that Luther was realistic enough about human sinfulness but that I wouldn't want to be "hung up" with the name of sinner for the rest of my life; on the other hand whenever I have the chance (as when I am coaching ministerial candidates) I prod my younger fellow-Methodists to keep to the path of "perfection" (which requires constant clarification), not just giving lip-service to it, but in fear and trembling cooperating with God's grace (recalling Wesley's sermon "Working Out Our Own Salvation by Fear and Trembling").

⁸ Quoted in Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *John Wesley's Message Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), p.18.

⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life*, op.cit., pp.183-187; pp.195-208.

At the same time, both in my teaching experiences and in real life situations, I was constantly confronted by the apparently irreconcilable differences between the biblical view of human nature being fallen yet restorable, and the Confucian concept of human perfectibility by self-cultivation. Again it is Wesley's teaching on justification and sanctification by grace which gives me some leeway to work my way through. I must be careful here lest I should allow myself to accommodate freedom of the will too readily. I sometimes jokingly ask my more orthodox Lutheran and Reformed friends if they would permit me to be a "one-quarter Arminian," if not a "semi-Arminian," as John Wesley is said to have been called, meaning I do leave room for human responsibility in responding to divine grace. I do take the idea of "responsible grace"¹⁰ seriously, whether in referring to the responsibility to accept God's forgiving grace or growing toward greater maturity.

Moreover, if grace is John Wesley's leading motif in his understanding of God's design of salvation for humankind, it is indeed an all-embracing and remarkably versatile kind of grace.¹¹ Grace is all-embracing--prevenient, justifying, sanctifying, sacramental, perfecting. Grace is remarkably versatile—it empowers, heals, saves, reconciles, restores, redeems, regenerates, and generates responsibility.

Prevenient grace is a distinctive Wesleyan theological concept I have learned to treasure. I had my first glimmer of it in reading John Wesley's sermon, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation." The sermon says salvation begins with what is termed "preventing grace" (or "prevenient grace, as it is also called). It includes "the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning the will and the first, slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some feeling toward life, some degree of salvation, the beginning of a deliverance from blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God." Scholars give different versions of the source of prevenient grace and offer nuanced interpretations of its substance. In summing up, Maddox says that Wesley understood prevenient grace to be "God's initial move toward restored relationship with fallen humanity," and there are several dimensions to it.¹²

Recalling the syndrome of the sense of lostness, moral insensibility, spiritual debilitation, etc. referred to earlier in my account of the context of Hong Kong and related areas, it strikes me that there could be individuals who are visited by prevenient grace before they know who God is. Touched by prevenient grace, they feel the need for restoration and thereby make their first move toward God. I think that such is an underlining assumption of the group of friends and colleagues in their unwillingness to abandon hope for some kind of redress of the low moral and spiritual state the Chinese cultural world has sunk into.

A Confucian-Wesleyan Interlude

¹⁰ Now more and more widely used by Wesleyan scholars: John B. Cobb, Jr., Randy L. Maddox, etc. to name a few.

¹¹ Randy L. Maddox's coverage of the subject of John Wesley's thinking on grace in his *Responsible Grace*, op.cit., is as comprehensive as any recent work on Wesley's theology I know of.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.90.

With the conjoined justifying-sanctifying grace relationship in mind, let us move on to consider Confucian moral teachings and see how this relationship may work. I would like to address the proposition at three levels.

(1) At the level of false righteousness. There is a kind of Confucian moralism which is really false righteousness. The Confucian scholar Professor Shu-hsien Liu first alerted me to the corrupted human trait called *xiang-yuan* (鄉愿, a kind of “country-folk moralism” displaying mere external righteousness). Interestingly convention-minded Confucians seldom mention it, but both Confucius and Mencius disliked people with this *xiang-yuan* trait, calling them “thieves of virtue” (德之賊).¹³ *Xiang-yuan* is a symptom of lifeless moralism that breeds inhumanity. This is the kind of moralism which the noted novelist Lu Xun of the New Culture Movement period of the 1920s called “humanity-killing ritualized moralistic teaching” (吃人的禮教). These “thieves of virtue” remind us of the Pharisees and Scribes whom Jesus denounced as hypocrites, like clean on the outside of a cup but inside full of filth. When you meet such people of false righteousness, what should you do? Lu Xun in his satires ridiculed them. Jesus lashed out at them. Can they be changed by such a sharp-edged approach? Probably not. But perhaps a few will be awakened, and that would be a turning point. Turning toward what? Toward inward, authentic goodness, and that is what Wesley would call the beginning of “holiness.” But even if the false righteous ones themselves are not awakened, others who witness the sharp criticism might be shown a vision of inner integrity or authentic goodness or godliness, toward which they would be drawn. I have no knowledge if Wesley ever dealt with cases of false righteousness. He probably would not go all out to be hard-hitting, but would leave room for grace for the other to turn around. His sermon “The New Birth” has Nicodemus, who happened to be a Pharisee, to be the featured figure. When Jesus was talking to Nicodemus about “being born” again, the latter, taking the words literally, asked how a grown person could enter one’s mother’s womb and come out of it a second time. Jesus answered that he was talking about spiritual birth, not physical birth. At this point Wesley the preacher, following Jesus, did not score a point over Nicodemus by argument but graciously lead the hearers of the sermon to see that spiritual space is allowed for Nicodemus the Pharisee to receive the Spirit for rebirth, that is, the turning around for a new life. This is what Wesley called the work of justifying-sanctifying grace.

In late Ming dynasty in China, under the impact of the Jesuit mission, notable scholar-officials turned from traditional Chinese learning and way of life to Catholic Christianity. There are well-documented cases of real conversion and further growth in sanctity and wisdom.¹⁴ In Wesley’s language, this would be the work of justification-sanctification grace (though the Catholic and Wesleyan interpretations had their differences, yet recent developments in Protestant-Catholic dialogue show that there is room for rapprochement.¹⁵).

¹³ *The Works of Mencius*, Book VII, Part 2, Section 37.

¹⁴ Xu Guangqi (徐光啓), Li Zhizhao (李之藻), and Yang Tingyuan (楊廷筠) are illustrious names in the annals of Catholic history in China. These three (all living between 1560s and 1630s) were high-ranking scholar-officials in the Ming Court converted to Catholic Christianity. Their conversions

¹⁵ Reference The World Methodist Council’s decision in Soule, 2006, to join in with the Lutheran-

(2) At the level of transgressing/fulfilling the Law. The Law here is not just the Law of God stipulated in the Bible, but the “Natural Law,” representing a sense of right and wrong, generally recognized by human beings everywhere. We need not be theologically exact here. Confucianism certainly posits such a universal moral consciousness. *Shu* (恕, “reciprocity”), “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others,” said to be the Golden Rule in negative form, is arguably universally valid as the New Testament Golden Rule, “Do to others as you would want others do to you.” At Christian-Confucian dialogue meetings, whenever the two forms of the Golden Rule come up for discussion, it often ends up with a general agreement that they are complementary, certainly not contradictory to each other. Both forms involve “the will of heaven,” as a Confucian as much as a Christian would see. Thus when certain actions go contrary to “the will of heaven” according to a Confucian point of view, it would not be far-fetched for a Christian to see the point.

(3) At the level of growth toward perfection. This leads us to *perfecting grace*. “Perfection” is a distinctive Wesleyan claim, which is not always well-understood. Without repeating the arguments, pro and con, what matters first and foremost is full-hearted love of God and fellow human-beings, everything else being secondary. Can that be fully realized in the realistic world? John Wesley himself did not give a clear and incisive answer. Nevertheless Wesley’s followers honor him for his relentless, single-minded drive toward perfection (not perfectionism). Interestingly, perfection language is not altogether foreign to the Confucian world. The Book of Great Learning begins with the words: “What the Great Learning teaches is—to illustrate illustrious virtues; to renovate the people; and to rest in the highest excellence (or perfection) (止於至善).” This is not static perfection but growth toward perfection or moral excellence. The main difference between Wesleyan and Confucian perfection is that, whereas one is by divine grace, the other is by human cultivation. That would be diametrically opposite to each other but for Wesley’s provision of synergism, i.e. divine-human cooperation, or divine initiative and human response (with the accent placed more on the divine side). So some leeway is open for Christian-Confucian interaction. My experience is that Christian-Confucian encounter is mutually edifying. Confucians’ conversion to Christianity is not inconceivable, and Christian lives’ enrichment by Confucian moral teaching is entirely feasible. It is my view that there is a place for Confucian morality in the sanctified life in the Christian sense.

An important coda must be included in this interlude. At the Morality & Ethics Seminar someone cited Mencius’ characterization of the “man of great character” (大丈夫, literally “the great husbandly man”) who is not corrupted by riches, not crushed by poverty, not covered by force. A woman professor, Ellen Zhang, who, sensing the male-chauvinistic overtone of the expression, countered by the expression 女中豪傑, meaning “note-worthy ones among women.” These women figures meet the same qualifications as the men of great character to be persons of great character. She went on to cite cases from both ancient China (from the classic, *Lieh-nu-zhuan* < 列女傳 >, “Life Stories of Women of Great Character”) and contemporary China (like the “Tiananmen Square Mothers” who, subject to persecution by the government, have worked hard to complete the list of students killed in the June 4th crackdown of

1987). Indeed, the note-worthy ones of great character, whether men or women, are an inspiration to Christian believers. Conversely, if only Christians can in their lives testify to the truth of the words of the Apostle Paul (speaking in the context of justification and God's love), "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who love us." (Romans 8:35-39) Those who thus confess Christ will surely lend comfort and support to those worthy sons and daughters of China.

Human Nature and Divine Image

I owe it to the eminent Methodist theologian, Theodore Runyon, during a visit to Hong Kong for calling attention to the threefold image of God in John Wesley's sermon, "The New Birth"—the natural image, the political image and the moral image. His book, *The New Creation, John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) has stimulated me to use the threefold image liberally to convey my theological understanding of human nature and the created order.

In his "The New Birth" sermon Wesley but briefly touched upon those three images as they are originally implanted in human beings. The *natural image* calls up "a picture of his [God's] own immortality, a spiritual being endowed with understanding, freedom of will, and various affections." The *political image* refers to human beings as "the governor of this lower world, having dominion over the fishes of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth." The *moral image* as the Apostle [Paul] would say, "righteousness and true holiness." Wesley placed the greatest emphasis on the moral image, which reflects that "God is love, . . . full of mercy, justice and truth, . . . spotless purity." . . .

The divine image in fallen human beings is disfigured or distorted, but, to Wesley's way of thinking, not destroyed as to be beyond repair. Thus he spoke of restoration of the divine image in human beings, and of rebirth, of being born anew in Christ Jesus, and of re-creation and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

I find the threefold image of God figure of speech eminently suitable if we recognize the worthy gifts in human beings even if they are often misplaced and misused by human sinfulness—yet not to the extent of beyond the hope of redemption. . . . I like to think of the natural image in terms of humans' endowment of reason and freedom of will . . . and of sensibility, imagination, creativity, sense of beauty, sense of wonder, and all the qualities which give men and women unique dignity as children of God, reflecting God's immortal nature. I appreciate the aptness of the political image to remind ourselves of human beings' unique place in the created order. This is particularly important in the face of the present ecological crisis. I would add to humans' responsibility toward the created order, though, their responsibility to build a livable political order. The moral image is of vast importance certainly. This image has far-reaching implications for our concern for moral excellence, ethical principles, and spiritual life.

In fact, in my personal pilgrimage "In Search of Humanity, Morality, Spirituality and Divinity," given at the conclusion of the Morality and Ethics Seminar, I made use of the threefold image of God to speak of the divine sparks, in their

manifold-splendor, which I see as though in the precious stones that human beings are, even if the sparks may oft-times be dimmed or covered up by human flaws, but there is the possibility of carving on, and polishing up, the precious stones to give a brighter glow. Ah, yes!--if we will let our imagination go--the glow is a reflection of a mysterious Light. Didn't the Apostle Paul in one passage play on the motifs of "glory of Christ, the image of God, and the light shining out of darkness"? That very God "has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4:5,6).

That gets us close to the theme of divinity (or *theosis*, if we wish to speak the language of Eastern Orthodox theology), and we can do better by being poetical and mystical rather than preachy or dogmatic. It is here that John Wesley had something to learn from the poetical and lyrical "Macarius Homilies." I have not read the whole corpus of Macarius' homilies, but thanks to fellow-Asian Methodist Hoo Jung Lee's prompting,¹⁶ I intend to do so at the first available chance, in order that I may write something along the line of a Wesleyan-Macarian experiential-holistic-metaphorical spirituality, as appropriated by a Chinese Methodist. I should add that, not only John Wesley but his brother Charles has important contributions to make here, through his rich poetic language in the hymns.

Wesleyan Spirituality

Let me press on further toward Wesleyan spirituality, against the background of the context of the Chinese-peopled world. The "Large Minutes" of the 1763 Methodist Conference contain the following sentences:

"How do we reasonably understand God's purpose for raising up the Methodist preachers?"

"To reform the nation, especially the church, and spread scriptural holiness over the land."

To this day these words have become a standard charge to Methodist ministers gathered at their annual conferences world-wide. I would like to test this charge in the light of the ministry of the Methodist church in Hong Kong. today to see how she measures up to Wesley's classic injunction.

"To reform the nation, especially the church, . . ." A conservative Tory by nature, John Wesley was no radical social reformer. It is debatable to what extent the Wesleyan revival achieved reform of the nation. But there is no question that he had a keen social conscience. It is well-known that he instigated or supported reform mission in such areas as the following: the poor, slavery, prisons, liquor, education, war, and political involvement.¹⁷

The Methodist churches in Hong Kong and the adjacent areas are typically middle-class in value-orientation. Most of them carry on social service work, more in

¹⁶ I wish to register my appreciation of Hoo Yung Lee's paper, "Experience the Spirit in Wesley and Macarius," in *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, ed. By Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998). Lee thinks that Macarius' experiential and lyrical spirituality would have special appeal to Asian Methodists to broaden the Wesleyan global perspective.

¹⁷ Weems, op.cit., pp.64-72.

the manner of binding wounds afflicted by social ills than for structural transformation, with little thought of the need to restructure the church to facilitate social reform with a social conscience. Only in rare cases do we hear a prophetic voice or see prophetic action coming from the churches. Let me just cite a case or two.

Case 1: Greater local autonomy vs. centralized power-structure. Under the “one country, two systems” concept, Hong Kong is supposed to be granted a high degree of autonomy under the sovereignty of the People’s Republic of China. How much autonomy for the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong and how tight the control by the Central Government is a continuous tug-of-war in terms of political wrestling and ideological contention for the past ten years since the take-over in 1997—and will continue to be so for some years to come—between the autocratic ruling powers (and their followers) and the more democratic-minded elements of the S.A.R. The tension can be understood purely as a matter of political struggle or ideological strife. Yet a theological perspective can be added to the contest. Such a perspective in arguing for democracy can be stated in the language of the image of God planted onto men and women (bestowing the dignity of every individual citizen) and of the scarred image due to human sinfulness (hence the need to prevent the usurping of power by any monopoly of authority). Such a perspective (Niebuhrian) is well-understood by the more liberal-minded clergy and theological teachers in Hong Kong. The ministers of the Methodist Church, Hong Kong as a group can usually be counted on, to be on the democratic-minded side. Besides reasoned arguments and public opinion expressed through established channels, the common but enlightened Hong Kong people (a number of Methodist ministers and laypeople included) have learned to voice themselves by mass demonstration in the streets—peacefully. There have been occasions against high-handed imposition of power which have shown to be effective (as in the withdrawal of a national security law forced on the community and in the resignation of inapt high government officials).

Case 2: Free trade vs. fair trade. Hong Kong was the venue for the World Trade Organization meeting in 2005. Strong public protest was mounted by farm-labor groups from certain Asian countries against what was seen to be to be unfair trade practices imposed by the economically developed nations which subsidized their farmers, thereby creating an income imbalance from a supposedly free trade of farm products, to the disadvantage of the counterparts in under-developed nations. The street protests were noisy enough to arouse public attention even among the Hong Kong populace, to the realization that free trade can become unfair trade. Finally the message got to the floor of the WTO assembly. At first the representatives of the rich countries resisted giving in, but in the end a compromise was reached, thus easing somewhat the farm-labor’s income imbalance. The labor groups by themselves could not have succeeded but for sympathetic NGO’s helping on the side. Here was a case of siding with the victims to show the injustice of the strong over-powering the weak. The established churches took little part in the episode (except for the Catholic bishop going to the streets to see that the demonstrators were not harassed by the police). Some church folks, however, were among those who were awakened to the unfair trade practices. After the WTO meeting, a small gathering was held by some church representatives (Methodists among them) to follow up on the resolutions concerning labor, tourism, and the service professions. They saw that from a Christian ethics perspective some conscientization work could be done in cooperation with other NGOs.

“ . . . *spreading scriptural holiness over the land.*” The mood of these words is that of evangelistic reaching-out. There was no question about the impact of this injunction in Wesley’s days. It was his conviction that through the scripture-based holiness of the heart and mind of the people, the whole land—the British Isles and beyond—would be evangelized, i.e., to receive the good news of salvation. As to the situation in the part of the world I come from, Christians are in a small minority, and when will scriptural holiness spread over all the lands? We need to do some pondering. Again, we can only consider some instances.

Instance 1: Phenomenal church growth in mainland China in the past thirty years. I am not interested in the numerical growth guessing game (30 million, 50 million, or 100 million?). But anyone would be struck by the crowds of people who flock to the churches (the officially recognized churches as well as “underground” churches), in the cities or rural areas, among grass-root folks or intellectuals.. For what reasons? Many reasons, too many, in fact, to be explainable in a few words. But I would like to lift up one point for you to consider. I was talking to a number of Chinese intellectuals now scattered abroad about the issue of human nature, and I apologized for the Chinese translation of for the word “sin” as *zui* (罪, which means crime), for presumably it is hard for an educated person in China to admit that he or she has committed a crime. Besides, the Chinese sages, like Confucius and Mencius, teach that human beings are basically good. When I agonized over finding a more suitable word than *zui* for sin, one after another the Chinese intellectuals said in effect, “Whatever Chinese word you come up with, we know only too much that sinful deeds (罪行) or sinfulness (罪性) or evils (罪惡) or crimes (犯罪) are plain realities all over Chinese society.. What draws us to Christianity is that there is supposed to be a Savior who can save sinners. Just tell us more about this Savior and how he can really save people from sin or evil or what-have-you.” I think that points to the secret of the phenomenal growth in church attendance—or, rather, half the secret. What is the other half of the secret? Growth in goodness of character. Indeed the congregations are overwhelmed by the problems of Christian nurture. I have no wide acquaintance with the congregations in the mainland. One situation I know is that a Chinese Methodist minister having retired from his ministry in America and his spouse almost accidentally started gathering a group of children in a village (where they originally came from), and they were amazed at the children’s responsiveness to the most basic steps of Christian nurture. Now they are busy at work to produce improved teaching materials for children. One is reminded of the forming of the class-meetings as a means to nurture spiritual growth for those who had responded to the call for repentance after a revival preaching. I am not suggesting we need to revive the early Methodist class-meeting approach; what I am saying is that, how to enhance spiritual or character growth is a great need in China today. So it seems as though in mainland China today there is an echoing of the claim of “spreading scriptural holiness over the land.”

Instance 2: Moral integrity in politics. Taiwan in recent years has made great strides in the direction of democracy, achieving universal suffrage ahead of Hong Kong, and, unlike mainland China, moving away from one-party to multi-party politics. Corruption, however, is widespread, in all political parties and in business joining hands with politics. In the most recent development the President and his first

family members are suspected of graft and dubious ways to cover up misdeeds. Huge masses took to the streets to demonstrate their distrust and grievance. Still, the national leader and his political allies resort to all kinds of means to protect themselves. Where do the churches come in here? Some churches are divided in party loyalty, while the rest stay away from any involvement in politics. Nevertheless, it is not only politics but ethical issues that are at stake. The moral nature of the whole situation has been brought home by words in a placard carried by the demonstrators in a march: loss of propriety, righteousness, integrity and shame. Those words seem to have touched the nerve of a great many people (in including some onlookers from Hong Kong). Why? Propriety (禮), righteousness (義), integrity (廉), and shame (恥) are called “the four bindings” (四維, meaning “the four binding virtues”) in traditional Confucian moral teaching. The words are apparently deeply edged in the Chinese collected cultural memory, so that the thought of the reversal of those virtues would cause a moral shock to the multitude. This time more church people than before are emotionally involved in the moral crisis. There is more soul-search among church leaders. “Shame,” especially, rooted in a sense of right and wrong, in the Chinese cultural context, involves a collective (familial, racial, even national) consciousness which has wider implications than an individual’s feeling of shame and therefore has a powerful social force. Yet shame, along with integrity, righteousness and propriety, do not touch the religious consciousness as deeply in the Christian sense, for they do not have an ultimate reference to God, to *tian* (天, “heaven”) perhaps, but not to a personal God, to whom humans can confess their sin (not just to feel sorry) and be transformed. So unless something startling happens in the political scene, no new horizon can open up for Taiwan society at large. It is just possible that, by the grace of God, persons of basic moral integrity (廉潔), if not of “holiness” or “perfection” as John Wesley would have it, will enter the political arena and be tested and will relentlessly combat with corruption—and then a greater mass of people in Taiwan will rally behind them. Is this just a pious wish? Kam-hung Lee, Editor-in-Chief of *Christian Times*, at the Morality and Ethics Seminar talked about Max Weber’s concept of people entering into politics as a calling, and he entertained the thought that it is just possible that certain candidates for high offices are persons of exemplary integrity will get elected, and this time they will really get into the political arena to let themselves be examined before the public in combating corruption and other social abuses. That would be a new chapter in Taiwan politics. Even if this is not “spreading scriptural holiness over the land,” it is setting examples for clean politics.

Concluding Words.

What began as a group process in dealing with the downward moral and spiritual conditions of the Chinese cultural world as looked through the window of Hong Kong, has fed into this writer’s journey of exploring further into the meanings of humanity-morality-spirituality-divinity, in which cross-cultural linkages (Western and Chinese) with the Wesleyan heritage (his ecclesiastical background) are forged. Coming to the end of the journey, I, the writer, am obliged to acknowledge John Wesley as a remarkably resourceful theological and spiritual mentor. A good mentor is one who has a lot to teach his/her students, while he/she encourages them to grow, allows them to raise questions, and gives them freedom to expand their horizon. Even

as I have indeed learned a great deal from the Wesley brothers, I do feel free to stretch my mind, in good company across cultural and ecclesiastical boundaries, at times even peering into uncharted territories. In all this, linking-up Wesleyan thought and wisdom with other teachings, particularly, under the present circumstances, virtue ethics and Confucian morality, is not only edifying and enriching to one's mind and spirit, but may also give guidance to those concerned, in dealing with matters in a world of moral discourse as well as for the life and mission of the Church, the Methodist Church for one--and beyond also, if you wish.

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