

Globethics Repository



A Comparative Analysis of the Confucian and Christian Worldviews

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository.
More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy
of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Chang, Peter T.
Publisher	Globalization for the Common Good Initiative
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-09-21 11:00:09
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/173641

ISSN 1931-8138 | [Contact](#) | [Search](#) | [Home](#)

[Home](#)
[About JGCG](#)
[Vision & Mission](#)
[Advisory Board](#)
[Editors](#)
[Contact Us](#)

[Current Issue](#)
[Archives](#)
[Book Reviews](#)
[Bookshelf](#)
[Commentaries](#)

GCGI:
 - [Arabic](#)
 - [Chinese](#)
[Mainland](#)
 - [Chinese](#)
[Traditional](#)
 - [English](#)
 - [German](#)
 - [Japanese](#)
 - [Persian](#)
 - [Turkish](#)
[Common Good](#)
 - [Conferences](#)
 - [Future & Past](#)
[Conferences](#)

[Call for Papers](#)
[Submission](#)
[Guidelines](#)
[Paper Review](#)
[Form](#)
[Future Issues](#)

[Related Links](#)
[Site Search](#)

A Comparative Analysis of the Confucian and Christian Worldviews

Peter T. Chang

[La Trobe University](#), Bendigo, Australia

Abstract

This paper addresses the trepidations and challenges pertaining to the Confucian East and the Christian West delicate relationship. Do the two venerated traditions share sufficient commonality for a peaceable co-existence? Are their moral assumptions so diametrically divergent as to pose threats to each other's worldviews? To explore these issues, I will compare the works of two historical figures, the Neo-Confucianist Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529) and the Anglican bishop Joseph Butler (1692–1752). The paper begins with an overview of Wang's Confucian and Butler's Christian moral vision (Part A). Part (B) then examines Wang and Butler's reaction to the challenges of religious pluralism. In 16th C Ming China and 18th C England, while Confucianism and Christianity were then the dominant traditions respectively, the moral landscapes were also coloured by an array of competing moral visions. This section will explore how Wang and Butler dealt with these diverse and often times conflicting moral traditions. In Part (C) Wang and Butler is placed in an imaginary encounter where Wang's hypothetical assessment of Butler's project, and vice versa, is presented. I will analyse how the two thinkers would evaluate each other's moral vision. Drawing on Wang and Butler I then argue the case for a Confucian East and Christian West mutually deferential relationship. While there are conspicuous differences Confucianism and Christianity also share critical core beliefs. It is these common values I submit that enable them to tolerate some divergences and accept each other's moral vision as fundamentally sound, form the basis for an amiable co-existence.

Introduction

While the Middle East remains the epicentre of cultural conflicts, India and China's recent re-emergence has shifted the dynamics eastward. In China's case, its growing economic and political clout is being supplemented by a deft rehabilitation of Confucianism as a corollary component of soft power. This has raised the ante in China's competitive relations with the world at large, even portending a possible rivalry of civilizations. Indeed, concerns have been raised about whether new cultural flashpoints could erupt, this time in the Asia-Pacific region. This paper examines these trepidations by specifically addressing the relationship between the Confucian East and the Christian West. Do the two venerated traditions share sufficient commonality for a peaceable co-existence? Are their moral assumptions so diametrically divergent as to pose threats to each other's worldviews? To explore these issues, I will compare the works of two historical figures, the Neo-Confucianist Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529) and the Anglican bishop Joseph Butler (1692–1752). The paper begins with an overview

of Wang's Confucian and Butler's Christian moral vision (Part A). Part (B) then examines Wang and Butler's reaction to the challenges of religious pluralism. In 16th C Ming China and 18th C England, while Confucianism and Christianity were then the dominant traditions respectively, the moral landscapes were also coloured by an array of competing moral visions. This section will explore how Wang and Butler dealt with these diverse and often times conflicting moral traditions. In Part (C) Wang and Butler is placed in an imaginary encounter where Wang's hypothetical assessment of Butler's project, and vice versa, is presented. I will analyse how the two thinkers would evaluate each other's moral vision. Drawing on Wang and Butler I then argue the case for a Confucian East and Christian West mutually deferential relationship. While there are conspicuous differences Confucianism and Christianity also share critical core beliefs. It is these common values I submit that enable them to tolerate some divergences and accept each other's moral vision as fundamentally sound, form the basis for an amiable co-existence.

A) Overview of Wang and Butler's moral vision

A1) Wang's Confucian Vision

To begin the Confucian vision may be put succinctly as: *Tien*, the Heavens, has set a *Tao* for humankind. The obvious questions that follow are: who is *Tien* and what is the *Tao* humanity is expected to actualize?

The *Tien*, in the Confucian worldview, is the divine power and authority presiding over the cosmic order. The ancient *Book of Odes* depicted *Tien* as being involved in the natural order and also the human realm, specifically by expressing concern in the affairs of the House of Chou (1111-249 BCE)

“*Tien* produces the teeming multitude. As there are things, there are their specific principles. When the people keep to their normal nature, they will love their excellent virtue. *Tien*, looking down upon the House of Chou, sees that its light reaches the people below. And to protect the Son of *Tien*, gave birth to Chung Shan-fu [to help him].” (*Book of Odes*, quoted in Chan, 1963, p. 5)

Classical Confucianism encapsulates *Tien*'s desire in the *Tao*, often expressed as the quest for oneness. In the human realm, the doctrine is translated as the mission to realize the harmonious co-existence of all as one family.

“When the Great *Tao* was practiced, the world was shared by all alike. The worthy and the able were promoted to office and men practiced good faith and lived in affection. Therefore, they did not regard as parents only their own parents, or sons only their own sons. The aged found a fitting close to their lives, the robust their proper employment; the young were provided with an upbringing and the widow and widower, the orphaned and the sick, with proper care. Men had their tasks and women their hearths . . . This was the age of Great Unity.” (from *Ta-T'ung*, quoted in *Confucianism and Christianity*, Ching, 1977, p. 203)

Centuries later, Wang rearticulated this familial theme, describing the Sage as embarking on a personal quest to embrace all humanity as kindred.

"He looks upon all people of the world, whether inside or outside his family, or whether far or near, but all the blood and breath, as his brothers and children. He wants to secure, preserve, educate and nourish all of them, so as to fulfill his desire of forming one body with all things."
(Wang, 1985, p. 118)

Wang then explained that humankind is not left unaided in the quest for this grand vision. A governing principle called the *Tien Li* (天理, Heaven Principle) has been set in place to empower the cosmic and human orders.

"It is the nature of man and things, it is the *Tien Li*. Only with this nature can there be the principle of regeneration . . . when this creative principle of the nature of man and things emanates . . . All this is the growth and development of the *Tien Li*." (Wang, 1985, p. 47)

And the *Tien Li*, Wang added, resides in the human self, specifically in *hsin* (心, heart/mind).

"The essence of *hsin* is nothing other than *Tien-Li*. It is originally never out of accord with *li*. This is your true self. This true self is the master of your physical body. Without the true self there is no physical body. With it, one lives, without it, one dies." (Wang, 1985, p. 80-81)

Wang's assertion of *hsin* as the repository of *Tien Li* is another rendition of the fundamental Confucian doctrine of humankind's innate moral potential. For Wang, the human quest to decipher *Tien* and to fulfill the *Tao* begins from deep within oneself, the *hsin*.

"If one knows how to search for the *Tao* inside the *hsin* and to see the substance of one's own mind, then there is no place nor time where the *Tao* is not to be found. It pervades the past and present and is without beginning or end . . . The *hsin* is the *Tao*, and the *Tao* is *Tien*. If one knows the *hsin*, he knows both the *Tao* and *Tien*." (Wang, 1985, p. 47)

In Wang's vision, humankind's role is distinctively critical.

In summation, the Confucian vision may be understood as *Tien* setting a *Tao* for humankind. And the goal is to achieve harmonious co-existence of all humanity. And the Confucian regards the *Tao*'s realization is as much *Tien*'s prerogative as it is contingent upon human cooperation. If every person conforms to the *Tien Li* in their *hsin*, harmony will reign. And if people transgress the *Tao*, chaos will then descend on earth.

A2) Butler's Christian Vision

The Christian vision begins with the creation story where out of nothingness God made the heavens and earth. And in their genesis all things were divinely coordinated in perfect constellation. Alas, in 18th C England skepticism has begun to cast doubt on such rendition of the world's origin. Thus Butler the apologists sought to defend the Christian worldview. He begins by asserting that the natural order did not come about by chance. It is the expression of a divine Author's deliberate will.

"These things are not, what we call accidental, or to be met with only now and then; but they are things of every day's experience: they proceed from general law . . . by which

God governs the world, in the natural course of His providence." (Butler, 1900, V2, p. 42)

Nature is God's creation. And to refute specifically the Deists' view of God as remote and removed, Butler argued that the Creator is also a moral governor concerned with and engaged in the ongoing affairs of the human realm.

"Upon the whole: there is a kind of moral government implied in God's natural government; virtue and vice are naturally rewarded and punished as beneficial and mischievous to society; and rewarded and punished directly as virtue and vice. The notion then of a moral scheme of government is not fictitious, but natural." (Butler, 1900, V2, p. 66)

For Butler, this divine scheme serves a telos, i.e., the vision of a harmonious co-existence of all things. In the human realm, with its plurality of races, humankind is envisioned as living as one family. Against his contemporary Thomas Hobbes' contrarian view that the state of nature was fissiparous and warlike, Butler appealed to St. Paul's body metaphor (Romans 12:4-5) to press the Christian vision:

"The relation which the several parts or members of the natural body have to each other and to the whole body, is here compared to the relation which each particular person in society has to other particular persons and to the whole society; and the latter is intended to be illustrated by the former." (Butler, 1900, V1, p. 26-27)

Butler extends Paul's analogy of the body to include the vision of all people as tied to one human community. He then reasserts the critical moral implication of this parts-and-whole relationship.

"And if there be likeness between these two relations, the consequence is obvious: that the latter show us [we were intended] to do good to others, as the former shows us that [the several members of the natural body were intended to be instruments of good to each other and to the whole body]." (Butler, 1900, V1, p. 27)

As the disparate body parts tend to the whole person's wellbeing so the individual life is to be lived, in the end, for the collective good. The human telos, for Butler, is to contribute to the welfare of all. And to set this process in motion God has installed a body of law in nature.

"Consider then, upon what ground it is we say, that the whole common course of Nature is carried on according to general foreordained law." (Butler, 1900, V2, p. 180)

The law of nature, Butler explained, is not a set of abstract rules imposed from on high but is rather integral to the human anatomy.

"It is the inward frame of man considered as a system or constitution." (Butler, 1900, V1, p. 52n)

And it functions to hold the diverse parts together.

"Whose several parts are united, not by a physical principle of individuation, but by the respects they have to each other; the chief of which is the subjection of which the appetites, passions, and particular affections have to the one supreme principle of reflection or conscience . . . Thus the body is a system or constitution: so is a tree; so is every machine." (Butler, 1900, V1, p. 52n)

In a separate exposition, Butler described these laws as inscribed in human hearts and ascribed with moral authority.

“What that is in man by which he is *naturally a law to himself*, is explained in the following words: ‘which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another.’” (Butler, 1900, V1, p. 44)

The notion of God’s law as carved into a person’s innermost being is a rendition of the Genesis depiction of Adam created in God’s image. In the bigger scheme of things, humans are an integral factor in the historical progression of the Christian vision. If human beings act in accord with their innate moral constitution, then harmonious co-existence will be maintained. Alas, Adam sinned and shattered the idyllic Eden, unraveling nature’s pristine design and human affable relationship. Nevertheless God remains faithful to his creation, becoming incarnated as Jesus Christ, to guide humankind towards a recovery of the lost Eden. Butler recounts the divine intercession this way:

“Revelation teaches us . . . and that He hath mercifully provided, that there should be an interposition to prevent the destruction of human kind; whatever that destruction unprevented would have been. ‘God so love the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth,’ not, to be sure, in a speculative, but in a practical sense, ‘that whosoever believeth in Him, should not perish.’” (Butler, 1900, V2, p. 191)

For the Christians, Eden’s peaceful reality has been interrupted by sin. Yet with divine providence humankind retain the potential to restore the original state of tranquillity.

To sum up the Christian vision depicts God as setting in creation a telos, i.e. the peaceable co-existence of all things. While humankind has committed early missteps there is redemption and the task at hand is to recover and reinstate nature’s order. In Butler’s parlance, if each person would obey the divinely guided dictates of conscience the vision of harmonious co-existence will once again be realized.

B) Analysis of Wang and Butler’s Response to Pluralism

While the 16th C Ming dynasty and 18th C England’s worldview were predominantly Confucian and Christian respectively, the broader Chinese and English moral landscapes at that time were by no means monochrome. They were coloured by a wide range of viewpoints some advocating stances opposing the Confucian and Christian outlook. How did Wang and Butler respond to these competing schools of thoughts? Are the different schools allowed to expound doctrines different from their own? Do Wang and Butler have space for heterodoxical viewpoints?

B1) The General Framework

Wang and Butler’s reaction, I submit, is guided by a framework consisting of two orders: primary and secondary.

The former represents norms considered as foundational. These are derived from the challenges Wang and Butler assume as more-determinate, i.e. humankind are capable of resolving with certainty. For example, they believe people have an unambiguous perception of the transcendent existence. Wang and Butler treat these more-determinate beliefs as core doctrines whereupon infringements are harshly penalized.

The latter represents norms regarded as important but supplementary. These are derived from the less-determinate challenges that Wang and Butler concede cannot be settled definitively. For example, they see the human effort to depict the transcendent specific features as inevitably tainted with ambivalent. For this reason Wang and Butler treated these less determinate beliefs as provisional, enforcing them tentatively with allowance for divergence viewpoints.

Thus in the face of competing moral opinions, Wang and Butler's task, I submit, is to respond according to types of errors, prohibiting those that violate the primary order and tolerating others that contravene the secondary norms.

B2) Historical Reactions

B2.1) Wang and 16th C Ming Pluralism

Historically Wang had to contend with opponents of assorted stripes, these include the likes of Chu Hsi, Buddhism, and Mohism lingering influences. Wang's reaction, I will show, is governed by whether these schools' deviation violate the primary or secondary orders.

In the first instance we see Wang's criticism of the Mohists as an example of the primary genre. In Confucian orthodoxy the sanguine theory of human nature is a core doctrine. And in Wang's judgment the Mohists melancholic interpretation of humankind contravened this belief hence was severely censored for a primary violation.

Others of Wang's reactions may be classified as secondary responses, examples of which are his disputes with Chu Hsi and the Buddhists. Broadly the contentions relate to the role of reason and sense in moral cultivation. In Wang's assessment Chu's methodology was overly rationalized, resulting in rigid formality devoid of spirit. Conversely he was critical of the Buddhist indiscretion with the senses leading to confusion and disorder. While clearly perturbed, Wang treated Chu and the Buddhist imbalance as secondary aberrations, i.e., divergences that do not undermine the primary order. Indeed compared to those meted out against the Mohists, Wang's rebuke of Chu and the Buddhist were relatively milder. In fact, he continued to recognize Chu and the Buddhist as credible counterparts in the divine scheme.

Thus in Wang, I submit, we see two types of reaction to pluralism. The first is a stern refutation of diversities that contravened the primary order and then a more lenient response to violations of the secondary order.

B2.2) Butler and 18th C England Pluralism

In 18th C England Butler was also confronted with pluralistic challenges in the likes of Hobbes, the Deists, the Methodist, etc. While similar to Wang in his basic response, i.e., contingent on whether diversity violates the primary or secondary order, Butler's framework contains an additional classification.

Butler's two-tiered orders, I submit, is based broadly on the Christian category of general revelation (GR) and special revelations (SR). The primary contains beliefs drawn on GR criterion that all people are assumed to possess awareness. These are treated as foundational, with no compromises allowed. The secondary represents knowledge base on SR that not all, but only some, have access to. And these are treated as supplementary insights with allowances for differences of opinions. Butler then subject the various schools to these categories, i.e. assessing whether they violate the primary GR or secondary SR norms.

To begin, Butler's refutation of Hobbes, I explain is one example of the primary reaction. Like the Confucian, Butler regard the sanguine view of human nature is a core doctrine, one common to all through GR. And in Butler's assessment Hobbes' melancholic theory violated this basic teaching and was censured accordingly for committing a primary error.

There are some of Butler's reactions that may be classified as of the secondary genre, e.g., his arguments with the Deist and Methodist. Broadly the dispute is over reason and sense's role in deciphering SR. On the one hand Butler was critical of the Deists perceived over-confidence in reason and their (Deists) eventually dismissal of SR. On the other hand he chastised the Methodist for excessive sense induced 'enthusiasm', unchecked by reason when asserting claims about the SR. While clearly perturbed, Butler treated the Deists and Methodist excesses as secondary aberrations, i.e., they do not unduly compromise the primary GR norms. Indeed compared to those leveled against Hobbes, Butler's chastisement of the Deists and Methodists were less harsh. In fact, he continued to regard them as worthy compatriots in the God's divine plans.

Thus in Butler, I submit, we also see two types of reaction. First the categorical disapproval against those violating the primary GR principles and the milder response towards those that disagree on the secondary SR based beliefs.

In summation, Wang and Butler's reaction to religious pluralism is guided by a two-tiered framework. It (the framework) allows them to tolerate some less critical secondary deviations and prohibit others deemed as undermining the primary order. Thus in a pluralistic world Wang and Butler do affirm individual's liberty to hold diverse viewpoints yet at the same time expect people to conform to certain basic precepts.

C) Confucian and Christian Relationship

As contemporary world wrestle with its pluralistic challenges I will now draw on Wang and Butler for insights, addressing specifically the Confucian East and Christian West relationship. In the past decade the Confucian tradition has enjoyed a sort of renaissance in China. With its rejuvenation came an increased interest to understand how Confucianism would impact the 21st C moral landscape. At the global arena the Confucian and Christian interaction has attracted particular attention. How would these two venerated traditions regard

each other? To explore this question I will set Wang and Butler in a hypothetical encounter to examine how they would evaluate each other's project, and by proxy how the Confucian East and the Christian West could relate to each other.

C1) Wang's Assessment of Butler

Section (B2.1) has shown that Wang's reaction to diversity is contingent on whether traditions contravene the primary or secondary norms. In the following I will examine how would Wang judge Butler's Christian project. Could he regard Christianity as conforming to the Confucian primary order?

First, Wang, I submit, could identify in Butler's Confucianism shared beliefs of vital importance. Three tenets in particular are noteworthy. The first is Butler's theistic vision. The Chinese worldview has always been anchored on belief in a transcendent. For this reason, Wang would see Butler's vigorous defense of God as a crucial affirmation of the basic Confucian credo, i.e., revere the Heavens. The next tenet pertains to Butler's telos. It corresponds with Wang's rendition of the *Tao* as *Tien's* desire for humankind to co-exist as one harmonious family. Wang, I argue, would applaud Butler's similar Christian vision of the quest for the good of all humanity. And finally Wang would find affinity in Butler's theory of human nature. He would endorse the latter's refutation of Hobbes and see in Butler an important reaffirmation of human moral capability. In Butler, I submit, Wang would recognize a set of vitally important shared moral assumptions.

To be sure, the two thinkers also have striking differences in their respective worldviews. Some of these could posit considerable challenges for Wang. One underlying and conspicuous contention pertains to the disparity in their descriptions of the divine order, i.e., Wang's plain rendition against Butler's intricate elucidation. Wang, I believe, would critique Butler's portrayal of God as being overly speculative. Some of the latter's pronouncements, e.g., on Christ's incarnation, the Trinity, and the afterlife, could, in Wang's view, be deemed as bordering on myth. Beyond these larger disputes are other more subtle differences that may present further points of conflict. Wang, for instance, would criticize Butler's comparatively weaker attention to the dialectic of *li* and *jen* (form and spirit), which might cause Christians to be more susceptible to the fault of insincerity. Wang could also raise objections over the Christian church's overextended role in self-cultivation, seeing it as undermining the traditional family unit. Notwithstanding these additional probable disagreements, Wang's main reservation with Butler, I submit, would ultimately be tied to the exclusive claims of Christianity to Special Revelation (SR). SR-inspired pronouncements on the divine order would be, in Wang's view, too esoteric. Thus, he would also be perturbed by aspects of Butler's Christian moral vision.

Wang would see in Butler certain reassuring similarities but also some disconcerting differences. How would he reconcile these shared values as well as disparities with Butler? In the first instance, I suggest that Wang would judge those common beliefs identified above as indicating Butler's compliance with Confucianism's primary order. And then more significantly, I argue, he would treat the discords with Butler, specifically the Christian's SR claims, as secondary deviations. That is to say, these speculative excesses do not undermine the Confucian primary order. For this reason, he would be critical of some of Butler's pronouncements but would yet regard the Christian project as fundamentally sound and compatible with the *Tao*.

This proposition has historical premises. Wang's relationship with the Buddhists is a case in point. The Confucians' main argument with Buddhism was the latter's over-reliance on extra-rational religious perceptions that result in the neglect of social responsibilities. Nevertheless, one notes that Wang's reprimands of the Buddhists were relatively restrained compared to those he meted out against the Mohists. This was because the Mohists' theory of human nature was judged by Wang to be an error of the primary order and was thus censured accordingly. The Buddhists' excesses, however, were treated as secondary deviations. And for this reason they were generally tolerated by Wang and the Confucian tradition as a whole. Butler's case, I submit, has some parallels with that of the Buddhists. For starters, the perceived flaw in Butler is not unlike that of the Buddhists, i.e., excessive confidence in dispensing certain pronouncements on the divine order. And like the Buddhists, Butler's deviation may also be regarded as of the secondary order. As discussed earlier, the case for the Buddhists' status was made by contrasting them with the Mohists. That is to say the Buddhists' error was not of the same magnitude as that of the Mohists and hence was tolerated. (Elsewhere I have analyzed Butler's critique of Hobbes and also revealed remarkable similarities in Hobbes and Mo Tzu's viewpoints, especially their melancholic theory of human nature.^[1]) Based on these corresponding facts, I submit it is reasonable to infer that Wang would not fault Butler for committing wrongs to the Mohists' degree, i.e., primary violations. Therefore, as with the Buddhists, he would treat Butler's flaws as secondary deviations. I thus surmise that there is historical basis to postulate that Wang would accommodate Butler's views. If the Buddhists' excesses are tolerated, then it is reasonable to suggest that Wang would accord similar acceptance to Butler's SR-based Christian worldview.

In sum, Wang would have some distinct trepidation over aspects of Butler's moral assumptions, particular the SR-related proclamations. Nevertheless, he would also see in Butler deeply shared values considered to be foundational to any moral order. Therefore, I submit that there is conceptual justification and also historical precedence to assert that Wang would regard Butler's project as essentially sound and would deem the English bishop to be a worthy player in realizing the *Tao*.

C2) Butler's Assessment of Wang

Section (B2.2) has presented Butler's reaction to diversity as dependent on whether traditions violate the primary or secondary norms. In this section I will examine how would Butler evaluate Wang's Confucian project. Could he regard Wang's Confucian tradition as in compliance with the Christian primary order?

For starters, I submit that Butler would recognize in Wang some shared core values. Three doctrines specifically are of vital importance. The first is Wang's stance on the transcendent. For Butler, the theistic presupposition is the anchor of any human order. Hence, Wang's exhortation to revere *Tien* would be in Butler's view an important affirmation to counter the emerging atheism he saw in 18th century England. The next tenet pertains to Wang's *Tao*, conceptualized as the quest for a common humanity. This comports with Butler's *telos*, which envisions all humankind, as God's children, regardless of ethnicity or race, on a pilgrimage towards harmonious co-existence. Butler, I suggest, would regard Wang's moral vision as affirming this divine goal. The final precept relates to

Wang's theory of human nature. As mentioned above, Wang's rebuttal of Mo Tzu contains intriguing similarities with Butler's refutation of Hobbes, namely, a rejection of the melancholy perception of the human person. Butler would also regard Wang's theory as seconding the critical Christian doctrine of human innate moral capability. In these tenets, Butler would, I surmise, recognize in Wang important common core beliefs.

Without question, Butler and Wang also have significant differences. Some of these divergences would cause Butler serious consternation. One obvious contention pertains to the disparity in their descriptions of the divine order, i.e., Butler's elaborate descriptions against Wang's bare interpretations. Butler, I believe, would critique Wang's portrayal (or the lack thereof) of *Tien* and the heavenly scheme as being too mundane. Beyond this main reservation are other differences that could posit additional points of disagreement. For example, Butler may take issue with Wang's emphasis on concentric circles that give priority to one's innermost relationships, regarding this as feeding parochialism. Butler could also criticize Wang's extensive employment of rituals encompassing the religious and civil realms as excessive and as stifling creativity. In spite of these additional possible contentions, the issue that would most concern Butler, I submit, is Wang's comparatively bland and uninspired elucidation of the heavenly scheme. Therefore, Butler would indeed be perturbed by aspects of Wang's Confucian project.

Considering both his vital affinity and also serious consternations with Wang's views, how would Butler resolve this dialectic? To begin, he would take their shared beliefs as a sign of Wang's compliance with the primary order. That is to say, Confucianism is a moral tradition that meets the criteria of GR. Then on contentious issues, specifically Wang's mundane moral outlook, Butler could treat the problem as essentially a Confucian lack of SR, a secondary deficiency that does not undermine the primary order. Therefore, in Butler's assessment Wang's project is deficient on account of SR but fundamentally sound for its compliance with natural religion's criteria. And for this reason, I submit, Butler would accommodate Confucianism as passable for the *telos*.

This hypothesis has historical justifications. Butler's dealing with Deism is an apt example. The Deists were chastised for their irreverent dismissal of SR. Yet one notices a milder tone in Butler's rebuke of the Deists vis-à-vis that vented against Hobbes. Hobbes' theory of human nature, in Butler's account, presents a more serious offence that violated the primary norms and hence warranted a harsher penalty. By contrast, the Deists' skeptical disregard of SR was deemed a secondary fault, that is to say it did not violate GR criteria. For this reason, in spite of some pointed criticisms, Butler generally accommodated the Deists. Wang's case, I suggest, has analogous features with that of the Deists. In the first instance, like the Deists, Wang's deficiency is related to the lack of SR. He is also not guilty of a primary order violation. As discussed above, the case for the Deists' standing was made by contrasting them with Hobbes; that is to say the Deists' error was not of Hobbes' severity and was hence tolerated by Butler. I have discussed Wang's refutation of Mo Tzu and also described how Mo Tzu and Hobbes shared surprisingly similar assumptions on human nature. These parallel facts, I submit, offer plausible ground to conjecture that Butler would not charge Wang with Hobbesian types of errors, i.e., those of the primary order. And as with the Deists, he could treat Wang's deficiencies as secondary and acknowledge Confucianism as meeting the GR criteria. If Butler accommodated the Deists in spite of their shortcomings, there is good reason to assume a similar acceptance

would be extended to the Confucians. Indeed, there is additional historical evidence to support this assumption. As mentioned elsewhere, Butler made reference to those “most learned, polite nations” of the East and I have argued that this is suggestive of Butler’s broadly conciliatory view of Eastern moral traditions, presumably including Confucianism.^[2] I thus surmise that there is historical precedence to postulate Butler’s toleration of Wang.

To summarize, Butler’s main concern with Wang’s project is the latter’s want of SR. Nevertheless, he would identify in Wang vital shared values that affirm the criteria of GR. For this reason, I submit that there is conceptual basis and historical justification that Butler would accept Wang’s Confucianism as fundamentally sound and compatible with the quest for the telos.

D) Conclusion

To conclude, base on Wang and Butler, I argue that the Confucian and Christian traditions do have a number of conspicuous disagreements yet they also share fundamental convictions. These commonalities I thus submit allow the Confucian East and Christian West to co-exist peaceably and to tolerate some differences without unduly compromising their respective worldviews.

References

I) Works on Joseph Butler and 18th C England

Butler, Joseph. 1900. *The works of Bishop Butler. V1 and V2*. Edited by J.H. Bernard. N,Y.: MacMillan Co.

1896. *The works of Joseph Butler V1 and 2*. Edited by W.E. Gladstone. Oxford, UK.: Clarendon Press.

Broad, C. D. 1971. “Butler” in *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, N.Y.: Humanities Press. pp. 53-84.

Carlsson, P. Allan. 1964. *Butler’s Ethics*, The Hague, Netherlands.: Mouton & Co.

Carpenter, S. C. 1959. *Eighteenth Century Church and People*. London. John Murray (Publishers) Ltd.

Cunliffe, Christopher. eds.1992. *Joseph Butler’s Moral and Religious Thought. Tercentenary Essays*. Oxford: Oxford U Press.

Gay, Peter. 1968. *Deism, An Anthology*. Princeton, NJ.: D.V. Nostrand Co, Inc.

Gilley, Sheridan and Sheils, W. J. eds. 1994. *A History of Religion in Britain*. Cambridge, MA. Blackwell Publishers.

Green, V. H. H. 1961. *The Young Mr. Wesley: A Study of John Wesley and Oxford*. London: Edward Arnold.

Hobbes, Thomas. 1996 (Richard Tuck edited) *Leviathan*. Cambridge, UK.: Cambridge University Press.

Mossner, E.C. 1936. *Bishop Butler and the Age of Reason*. New York: Macmillan.

Norton, William, J. 1940. *Bishop Butler: Moralism and Divine*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.

Penelhum, Terence. 1985. *Butler*. London, England.: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Prall, Stuart E. 1993. *Church and State in Tudor and Stuart England*. Arlington Height, IL. Harlan Davidson.

Rack, Harry D. 1993. *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 2d ed. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press.

Schneewind, J. B. 1998. "Joseph Butler" in *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*. Cambridge: Cambridge U Press/

Stephens, William. 1696 *An Account of the Growth of Deisms in England*

Stromberg, N. Roland. 1954. *Religious Pluralism in 18th C England*. Oxford, UK.: Oxford University Press.

Waring, E. Graham. 1967. *Deism and Natural Religion*. New York.: Frederick Ungar Pub Co.

Whorten, J. F. 1993. "Joseph Butler's Case for Virtue." *Journal of Religious Ethics*. Fall. pp. 239-261.

II) Works on Wang Yang-ming and Confucianism

Bethrong, John. 1994. *All under heavens: transforming paradigms in Confucian – Christian dialogue*. Albany, NY.: SUNY Press.

Behuniak Jr, James. 2005. *Mencius on becoming human*. New York. State University of New York Press.

Brook, Timothy. 2005. *The Chinese State in Ming Dynasty*. New York. RoutledgeCurzon.

Chan, Albert. 1982. *The Glory and Fall of the Ming Dynasty*. Oklahoma.: University of Oklahoma Press.

Chan Wing-tsit. 1985. (trs.). *The Instructions for Practical Living and other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-ming*. N.Y.: Columbia University Press.

Ching, Julia. 1993. *Chinese Religion*. N.Y.: Orbis Book.

1976. *To Acquire Wisdom: The Way of Wang Yang-ming*. N.Y.: Columbia University Press.

Cua, Antonio S. 1982. *The Unity of Knowledge and Action: A Study in Wang Yang-ming's Moral Psychology*. Honolulu University Press/

De Bary, Wm. T. 1989. *The Message of the Mind in Neo-Confucianism*. N.Y.: Columbia University Press.

1992. *The Trouble with Confucianism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

De Bary, Wm. T. and Bloom, Irene. (comp.) 1999. *Sources of Chinese Traditions, From Earliest Times to 1600*. New York, N.Y.: University of Columbia Press.

Fung Yu-Lan. 1953. *History of Chinese Philosophy Vol II*: Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press.

Ivanhoe, Philip J. 1990. *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mencius and Wang Yang-ming*, Atlanta, Georgia.: Scholar Press. 1990.

Lau, D.C. 1979. (trs.). *Confucius: The Analects*, Penguin Classics. 1970. (trs.). *Mencius*, Penguin Classics.

Li, Chenyang. 1999. *The Tao Encounters the West: Exploration in Comparative Philosophy*, Albany: SUNY Press.

Needham, Joseph. 1951. *"Human Law and the Law of Nature in China and the West."* London, Oxford University Press.

Schwartz, Benjamin. 1985. *The World of Thought in Ancient China*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.

Wang Yang-ming. 1972. *Wang Yang-ming Ch'uan-hsi Lu Hsiang-chu chi-ping*. Taipei: Cheng-chung Book Co.

[1] See Chapter 2 and Chapter 4 of unpublished dissertation: Comparative Study of Conscience: Wang yangming and Joseph Butler.

[2] See Chapter 2 of unpublished dissertation: Comparative Study of Conscience: Wang yangming and Joseph Butler.

[Return to Home](#) | [Return to Top](#)

Copyright 2006 - Journal of Globalization for the Common Good - www.commongoodjournal.com

Copyright 2006 - Journal of Globalization for the Common Good - www.commongoodjournal.com