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A New Approach to Ecological Theology in the
Frame of Confucian-Christian Dialogue:
*On Confucian-Christian Dialogue
and Ecological Concern*

SUN XIANGCHEN

Lai Pinchao (Lai Pan-chiu) 賴品超 and Lin Hongxing 林宏星. *Ru Ye duihua yu shengtai guanhuai* 儒耶對話與生態關懷 [Confucian-Christian dialogue and ecological concern]. The Second Axial Age Series 第二軸心時代文叢. Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2006. 4 + 2 + 2 + 4 + 328 pp., ¥25, ISBN 9787801237842.

Ecological crisis has become more and more striking in the contemporary world, having a great impact on our life. It gave rise to the birth of ecological theology after the 1960s. Generally speaking, ecological theology was not popular in academia or theological circle in China, but is now attracting more attention. Many scholars begin to pay attention to it. Outside theological circle it is very hot arousing even the interest of Marxists. Whereas in Hong Kong and Taiwan, scholars have started to study ecological theology earlier. Here I am going to comment on the work by Prof. Lai Pan-chiu and my colleague Prof. Lin Hongxing. The former has published lots of works to introduce this topic to Chinese theology and encourage students to

study it. The latter is an expert on the philosophy of Song and Ming Dynasty. What attracts me most is their special approach to the topic. With the title *Confucian-Christian Dialogue and Ecological Concern*, the book aims to develop Chinese ecological theology within the frame of Confucian-Christian dialogue. I do believe that this is a real dialogue. As we know, in the field of philosophical-religious studies, dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism or between Christianity and Taoism is more popular than Christian-Confucian dialogue. This paper emphasizes this kind of dialogue, showing both insight and significance in this field.

I. TWO APPROACHES IN ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY: HUMANOCENTRISM AND ECOCENTRISM

In ecological theology there are various types and schools of thought. According to Michael S. Northcott, three main types of ecological theology are worth noting: humanocentrism, theocentrism and ecocentrism.¹ Prof. Lai introduces them in details, but he also has his own classification: 1) ecological theology based on the idea of stewardship (human being makes a covenant with God and cares for nature); 2) theology that regards redemption as a cosmic event (the perspective of Orthodox theologians); 3) process theology; 4) creation spirituality (proposed by Matthew Fox); 5) eco-feminist theology; 6) Jurgen Moltmann's theology, *God in Creation*; 7) Paul Knitte's inter-religious dialogue. Among all these types of ecological theology, what is the key issue to which Prof. Lai pays attention? I think it is the tension between humanocentrism and ecocentrism. For humanocentrism, human beings are authorized by God to have dominion over the earth. However, they are not the real master of the earth. They look after it on behalf of God. In this respect the interest of human beings is the basis for everything and the motive for their actions, and they would easily forget the fact that they need to depend on nature. Though there seems to be something wrong in this theology, even Moltmann, whose theology is theocentric, thinks that only human being has responsibility for nature, and

¹ Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chapter 4, quoted in Lai and Lin, *Ru Ye duihua yu shengtai guanhuai*, 49.

nature has no inner value in itself. For ecocentrism, especially deep ecology, people are required to give up humanocentric world view and stress on biocentrism and biocentric egalitarianism, that is, every creature in nature has its own inner value and is not means for human benefit. Thus ecological crisis is not a problem of technology but a problem of ideology. There is something wrong in human heart and some values are distorted. Nevertheless, this theory also encounters some challenges, including the conflict among various forms of life.

Both humanocentrism and ecocentrism have shortcomings. Facing the tension between these two kinds of ecological theology, the way Prof. Lai's deals with it is admirable. He is open on this issue and tries to leave room for Confucianism. In this way, Confucianism enters a dialogue with ecological theology. Comparing with Buddhist-Christian dialogue and Taoist-Christian dialogue, this kind of dialogue is more important to China. It is because Confucianism has always been a mainstream ideology and value system in Chinese history. The other reason is that Confucianism could offer resources to ease the tension between humanocentrism and ecocentrism. According to Prof. Chen Lai, as quoted by Prof. Lai in his book, in Confucian philosophy human in some sense is the centre of cosmos, but in another sense human has no privilege in nature, which should not be exploited by human. Confucianism believes in human reason and human responsibility for the creatures. It wants to keep a balance between humanocentrism and ecocentrism.² Prof. Lai takes it as a new starting point to construct Chinese ecological theology. Human is special but basically human life is in harmony with nature. This is a new idea for the theology of ecology. I totally agree with Prof. Lai, however, that there should be more Confucian ideas than he mentions that could contribute to the theology of ecology.

² Chen Lai 陳來, "Daode de shengtai guan: Song Ming Ruxue ren shuo de shengtai mianxiang ji qi xiandai quanshi" 道德的生態觀——宋明儒學仁說的生態面向及其現代詮釋 [The Ecology of Ethics: The Ecological Dimension and Modern Interpretation of Neo-Confucian Jen], *Zhongguo zhexue shi* 中國哲學史 2 (1999): 3-9, quoted in Lai and Lin, *Ru Ye duihua yu shengtai guanhuai*, 102.

II. CONFUCIAN-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE THROUGH THEORY OF HUMAN NATURE

The concrete path through which Prof. Lai approaches this topic in the frame of Confucian-Christian dialogue is the theory of human nature. It is because this theory has a strong tradition in the history of Confucian-Christian dialogue. Another reason is that some ecological theologians also adopt this approach. Anna L. Peterson is an example. She thinks that “human beings should be regarded as a part of nature, and at same time they are the creator of culture.”³ The most important reason, of course, is that Confucianism has plentiful reflections on human nature, thus offering a possibility to develop new ecological thoughts from Confucian perspective. However, I doubt, without the consideration of modern social factors, if it is possible to resolve ecological problems through the theory of human nature.

Human exceptionalism regards human being as an exception of nature. According to the Bible, humankind is created in God’s image and so they are superior to any other creatures. Prof. Lai agrees to Peterson’s criticism of this viewpoint and thinks that Confucianism may provide an alternative view of human nature and form another theory regarding the relationship between human being and nature. Firstly, according to Confucianism, human being is not an isolated self but a socially constituted self. Furthermore, Confucianism emphasizes that human is not only a part of nature, but the highest part of it, and human is able to live in harmony with nature. *The Doctrine of the Mean* says:

It is only he [human] who is possessed of the most complete sincerity that can exist under heaven, who can give its full development to his nature. [Being] able to give its full development to his own nature, he can do the same to the nature of other men. [Being] able to give its full development to the nature of other men, he can give their full development to the natures of other creatures. [Being] able to give their full development to the natures of creatures, he can assist the nourishing development of heaven and earth. [Being] able to assist

³ Anna L. Peterson, *Being Human: Ethics, Environment, and Our Place in the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

the nourishing development of heaven and earth, he may with heaven and earth form a ternion.⁴

This is the Confucian view of the relationship between human being and other creatures, between human being and nature.

Prof. Lai points out that Western theologians often have a misunderstanding about Confucian thoughts. They think that Confucianism only focuses on social relation and neglects the relationship between human and nature. On the contrary, comparing with Taoist *wuwei*, Confucianism has a positive attitude towards such relationship. As we have seen, Confucianism stresses on human assistance to the nourishing development of heaven and earth. Therefore, culture is not opposite to nature, but has a harmonious relationship with nature. It nourishes and maintains the harmonious natural system.

Though this is an interesting view of human nature, I am concerned that Prof. Lai's idea is just a literal solution from the Bible or other religious texts without hitting the root of ecological crisis in the modern world. There are many sayings in various religious texts. Some are bad for ecological concern and some are good for it. On the one hand, it is said that human is created in God's image. On the other hand, human is formed from the dust of the ground. If we lose ourselves in these confusing words, the real root of ecological crisis will be concealed, thus hindering reflection on modern life. Probably this kind of literal study is necessary for the construction of theology. Ecological theology especially needs a biblical ground: There are stewards of nature who are higher than nature. No matter what reason you give from the religious texts, we must note that the context is the modern world and there must be something wrong in modern life. It also applies to those who want to draw from Confucian wisdom: Literal discussion on human nature is fruitless. For the same reason Confucianism will get into difficult position. So the discussion in the frame of Confucian-Christian dialogue should avoid abstract discussion and need to be placed in the social context.

⁴ *The Doctrine of the Mean*, Chapter 22, on the results of sincerity.

III. HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE MODERN RELEVANCE OF CONFUCIANISM

Quoting several times from Tuan Yi-fu's article,⁵ Prof. Lai wants to say that, though Chinese tradition has a friendly attitude towards nature, history shows that Chinese people bring huge damages to nature. Thus ecological crisis did exist in traditional society. Prof. Lai seems to agree to this view: "Though Chinese philosophy and religion stress harmonious relationship with the nature, the damage to nature existed in pre-modern society."⁶ He even thinks that this problem may originate from the evil of human nature. Just as James A. Nash said, "In view of the wide-ranging ecological problems, the root of ecological crisis is not based on theology, but on human nature."⁷ The former statement that the root of crisis is not based on theology maybe right, but the latter that the crisis is based on human nature is, I think, maybe too simple.

There are two points which we need to clarify: Firstly, is natural disaster in traditional society a kind of ecological crisis? In a sense it is an ecological crisis, it is only a partial phenomenon in traditional society. For example, the reason why the old city Loulan disappeared in history might be due to ecological weakness. However, this phenomenon is not an ecological crisis in a global scale like today. We cannot infer an ecological crisis in history from traditional natural disaster, and mix up different types of ecological problem. These two kinds of problem cannot be mentioned in the same breath; no comparison can be made between them. The problem in history is not a problem in the modern sense. The view of Tuan Yi-fu substantially conceals the underlying cause of modern ecological crisis. This crisis is a new problem in human history. Based on a fundamental outlook of the modern world and a special way of life, Jay McDaniel calls it "economism." The ecological crisis in modern Chinese society has nothing to do with tra-

⁵ See Tuan Yi-fu, "Our Treatment of the Environment in Ideal and Actuality," *American Scientist* 58 (1970): 244-249, quoted in Lai and Lin, *Ru Ye duihua yu shengtai guanhuai*, 63.

⁶ Lai and Lin, *Ru Ye duihua yu shengtai guanhuai*, 76.

⁷ James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 89, quoted in *ibid.*, 76.

ditional ideas, but is attributed to this kind of economism which worships endless economic growth, treats competition as a great virtue, and regards consumption as redemption. In fact, more than one hundred and fifty years ago, Karl Marx had a correct understanding of such capitalist system. It is a totally new way of life which he called “commodity fetishism.” Though we discuss the issue from a theological perspective, we should not ignore the new situation in the present time. This way of living is the chief cause of ecological problem. It is no doubt that the East-Asian cultural tradition could benefit environmental protection. The ecological problem of modern Asian societies originates from modern values coming from the West and has nothing to do with Asian tradition. Asian society has the responsibility to deal with the problem in its own way.

Secondly, reductionism is not a good way to find out the cause of ecological problem. Prof. Lai states that the widespread of ecological crisis makes us doubt if human nature is good or evil. He says, “Ecological crisis has a close connection with consumerism, and consumerism stems from human greed. So the root of ecological crisis is not only a matter of value, but also owing to human nature.”⁸ This is a typical way of reductionism. I do not think that there is a certain kind of human nature which should bear full responsibility for it. Confucianism tells us, “Human nature is similar, and customs are different.” Various ways of life will lead to different potential of human being. It is not a certain kind of human nature that leads to ecological crisis, but the modern way of life—capitalism, consumerism, commodity fetishism—that stimulates greed in human nature. If one goes further and regards the selfish gene as the cause of the problem, then one will lose his focus and go towards a wrong direction. As the tides of modernity involve all humanity, we need to draw on the wisdom of all humanity to resolve the problem.

In this sense, dialogues are needed not because Christianity and Confucianism have different views on human nature. For me, it is the widespread of ecological crisis that calls for various wisdoms to deal with the big challenge. Prof. Lai thinks that the purpose of Confucian-Christian dialogue should not be restricted to the benefit of the Chinese society but for that of the whole humankind. He says, “When we think about ecological issue in Confucian-Christian dialogue, we need to do so from a global perspective. As a result,

⁸ Lai and Lin, *Ru Ye duihua yu shengtai guanhuai*, 78.

Christian tradition is not owned by the West but of the whole mankind.”⁹ In other words, the dialogue does not mean to serve the indigenization of Christianity but for the improvement of human culture. Both Confucian *ren* (benevolence) and Christian *agape* (love) will benefit the well-being of the whole humankind. It requires a broadening of horizon in Confucian-Christian dialogue with a global perspective in place of Chinese perspective. The emphasis of Prof. Lai on this point is very insightful making a breakthrough in the old way of dialogue. In fact, historical Confucianism is an oriental type of universalism. It concerns the whole humankind aiming to create soul between heaven and earth and striving for perpetual peace for the whole humankind. Basically Confucianism opposes nationalism, especially racism. It concerns the well-being of the whole humankind rather than a nation. The modern system of nation-state makes Confucianism a national ideology for Chinese. So the revival of Confucianism is not a renaissance in China, but a revival of the concern for the whole humankind. The destiny of Confucianism in modern society depends on its ability to respond to the challenges faced by the whole humankind and to bear responsibility for the whole world, not just for the uprising of China. If the revival is only for a nation and not for other nations, it will be dangerous, especially when the nation is under the influence of such a weak modern global system. In this sense, Prof. Lai’s standpoint deserves commendation. The dialogue should not only serve the missionary or the revival of Confucianism, but for the common responsibility of the whole humankind. Just as Prof. Lai says, we must lift from the narrow missionary purpose of “Confucianizing” Christianity to drawing on the wisdom of Confucianism. Besides this, I want to add that when we face common challenges and discuss about various cultures, we have no right to say this is a universal culture and that is a particular culture, no matter it is Japanese culture or Confucianism or other culture. All these are spiritual wealth for all humankind. That is an important foundation for cultural dialogues. Otherwise it will be a fake dialogue, a monologue in a mask of dialogue.

⁹ Ibid., 80.

IV. WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM CONFUCIANISM

The co-author of this book and my colleague, Prof. Lin Hongxing, is specialized in the philosophy of Song and Ming Dynasty. The arrangement of the whole book embodies a real dialogue between Christianity and Confucianism. Drawing on the ecological wisdom of Zhang Zai, Chen Hao and Wang Yangming, Prof. Lin borrows some of their principles, such as organism of cosmos, the way of *tian tao* (heaven) which is similar to the way of *ren*, the nourishing development of heaven and earth, the right virtue of life, and etc. All these principles belong to two fields, that is, the way of *tian tao* and the theory of heart-nature. Of course they have a close connection.

The main standpoint about the way of *tian tao* is: Nature is not a neutral world. It has its own virtue. The great virtue of heaven and earth is living or producing. Thus we should respect nature and conform to natural tendency. The theory of heart-nature is under the way of *tian tao* and is called “completing one’s nature.” In addition to what Prof. Lin has said in this book, I want to add that much more can be learned from the classical canons of Confucianism, which will help us to widen our outlook on the world.

Here I just mention two Confucian approaches to ecological issues which worth consideration. First, in Confucian thoughts the opportune moment is strongly emphasized. In traditional canon *Yi* the most important thing is to learn from the way of nature by focusing on the opportune moment and to take every opportunity that is available. In Confucian tradition, opportunity is very important. Whether we can or cannot do something depends on opportunity. This means ecological actions have to be taken with respect to the rhythm of nature. And in *The Doctrine of the Mean*, it is said that if human has the same rhythm as nature, there is harmony and identity between nature and human being. This kind of equilibrium is the great root from which grows all human actions. Such harmony is the universal path which all human should pursue. If the states of equilibrium and harmony exist in perfection, a happy order will prevail throughout heaven and earth and all things will be nourished and flourish. This is why the opportune moment is important in ecological thoughts.

Another important way is about autonomy or heteronomy. Prof. Lai says that Confucian is autonomy and Christianity is heteronomy.

Comparing with Christianity which is based on God, Confucianism, especially Neo-Confucianism, seems to be autonomy. However, if compared with modern individualism, Confucianism, especially classical Confucianism (Pre-Qin), is not a typical autonomy. It pays more attention to family and emphasizes developing healthy strength from family while family provides us with a pattern to understand the whole world. The etymology of “ecology” is “eco,” which means “family” in Greek. I think this is a good hint for developing a new theory of ecology. In Confucian thoughts, family is a mini cosmos being made up of *yin* and *yang*, which is the same as nature. So when you get married, you should first worship heaven and earth and then your ancestors and finally your spouse. This ritual shows the relationship between nature and family. Family is a pattern to understand the relationship among creatures in the world. Both humanocentrism and ecocentrism have their own problems. For the former, human is the centre. The Confucian view of family will help one know the relationship with other people. For the latter, everything in nature is the same. We must face the conflict caused by the diversity of life form. Confucianism will help one make judgments on building a close or distant connection with them. This is also an important contribution to ecological thoughts.

To conclude, Prof. Lai and Prof. Lin have done a big job in Confucian-Christian dialogue. They have made a great effort to explore some similar thoughts between them providing a solid basis for dialogue. On the other hand, we must respect the heterogeneity of each other. Either “Confucianizing” Christianity or “Christianizing” Confucianism is dangerous. Maybe heterogeneity is more important as people can learn from each other.