Business Ethics in the Perspectives of Christian Social Teaching and Confucian Moral Philosophy

BUSINESS ETHICS IN THE PERSPECTIVES OF CHIRISTIAN SOCIAL TEACHING AND CONFUCIAN MORAL PHILOSOPHY: TWO SHIPS PASSING IN THE NIGHT?

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Abstract: In what follows I will offer a comparison between Christian social teaching (common to both Protestant and Catholic communities) and Confucian moral philosophy, showing basic convergences as well as diversity in their views of morality in the marketplace, what it is and what it ought to be. Inasmuch as business ethics naturally unfolds in three dimensions focused on individual, corporate, and social concerns, the comparisons will highlight basic moral expectations for each of these dimensions: from Christian social teaching, I will discuss the meaning of "vocation," "covenant," and "stewardship"; from Confucian moral philosophy, "the Mandate of Heaven" (天命, *tianming*), "the constant Mean" (中庸, *zhongyong*) and "People as the basis" (民本, *minben*). The comparisons are meant to map a space for mutually beneficial reflection, in both China and the West, on the nature of moral excellence and leadership in business.

Keywords: business ethics, Christian social teaching, Confucian moral philosophy; individual, corporate and social responsibility

"Ships that pass in the night…", I've chosen this metaphor as my subtitle because I think it helps dramatize the curious modesty that has so far characterized the encounter between Christian social teaching and Confucian moral philosophy. Though I have been involved in the study of Christian social teaching—particularly the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic church—for over forty years, and have been a student of Confucian moral philosophy for nearly half that time, rarely have I found scholars either in the Chinese or the English speaking worlds interested in serving as matchmakers in order to bring these two perspectives into a mutually illuminating conversation. And yet I can't help urging them once more to become more than two ships passing in the night. Such a fruitful outcome is precisely what the poet leads us to expect, for the lines just quoted only foreshadow what might have been, had Longfellow's Elizabeth Haddon never revealed her heart to John Estaugh, and had John not been moved to return to the Wayside Inn and marry her once his mission overseas had been accomplished. Christian social teaching and Confucian moral philosophy, will they one day be wed like Elizabeth and John? Their courtship, if that is what their dialogue turns out to be, goes back at least as far as Matteo Ricci's (利瑪竇, *Li Madou*) sojourn in this city. He, for one, certainly hoped they would not end up like ships passing in the night.

But how, one might wonder, can two parties enter into fruitful dialogue and collaboration, if they have nothing in common? However unlikely, Longfellow's Elizabeth and John at least have their Quaker spirituality in common.[1] By contrast, Christian social teaching[2] is one of the younger and more impetuous daughters of European (and American) Christianity. Confucian moral philosophy, on the other hand, is an old man, a "laoshi" (老師) no doubt still seeking wisdom. Christian social teaching was born out of the struggle to develop a normative sociological basis for resisting the economic and social injustices that accompanied the

advent of modern industrial capitalism. Confucian moral philosophy[3] was born out of the struggle among the Chinese to overcome the administrative chaos and corruption identified initially with the Warring States period. Christian social teaching sought to extrapolate from the basic Christian moral principles—the Natural Law, the Ten Commandments, the virtues of faith, hope and charity—a vision of social transformation in which achieving social justice and the common good might approximate the ideals of the Kingdom of God. Confucian moral philosophy sought to apply the wisdom of the Chinese people—with their age-old reverence for benevolence, reciprocity, and the achievement of personal integrity—to the challenge of governing consistently according to the Mandate of Heaven (天命, *tianming*).

Christian social teaching assumed that government was part of the social problem, and not in and of itself the solution, unless it submitted to the rule of Law, that is, democratically enacted laws meant to insure the accountability of rulers as well those over whom they rule. Confucian moral philosophy sought to support the powers of government by training government officials in the proper Way of ruling which was evident to all in the universal and ordinary practices of filial piety. Christian social teaching has tended to identify its practical consequences with the struggle for universal human rights; Confucian moral philosophy has tended to focus on internalizing moral duties and cultivating virtues through social practices that enable people to fulfill these more or less spontaneously and generously. Christian social teaching, though clearly humanitarian and socially progressive in its intentions, is emphatically theocentric, inasmuch as it seeks to discern the will of God in and for public affairs; while Confucian moral philosophy, like the teachings of Socrates—and, of course, Confucius himself at best is agnostic about any moral claims based on the alleged will of God.

What reason is there to hope, then, that Christian social teaching and Confucian moral philosophy can be anything more than two ships passing in the night? On closer inspection, they actually have much in common. Both believe that human progress is possible and both seek social improvement, primarily through moral education. Both assume that since good government is indispensable for social progress, moral education should also be focused on the responsibilities of rulers, or, in contemporary terms, on the responsibilities of politicians and the professional, social and economic elites, whose practices help determine whether or not the common good is achieved. One important area where there is a high degree of moral consensus is in their specific perspectives on the role of business in society and the ways in which the business ethics can be developed constructively. In what follows, I hope to suggest some points regarding where and how their specific perspectives on business ethics can be brought into harmonious convergence.

Let us begin with an overview of what Christian social teaching has to say about the role of business in society and, in particular, its general orientation to business ethics. As I indicated earlier, Christian social teaching is a relatively recent development in the history of Christianity. Though in retrospect, the ancient and medieval traditions of Christian theology, beginning with the Bible, can be reinterpreted as contributions to Christian social teaching, the fact is that Christian social teaching as such emerges only after Christian theologians became painfully aware of the so-called social problem. I refer, of course, to the emergence of a Western civilization that seemed aggressively post-Christian in its commitment to modern science and technology, with their profound consequences for the social organization of politics (democracy) and the economy (capitalism and/or socialism), and their transformative impact on religion and the family. In short, Christian social teaching emerged as a response to the processes of industrialization, urbanization, and modernization that accompanied the rise of market capitalism. As a response to these processes, Christian social teaching in the late 19th century—a European world in which the unity of Christendom was already a

distant memory—became conceptualized primarily in distinctively Protestant and Catholic forms, as the Social Gospel and as Catholic social doctrine. In either form, Christian social teaching exhibited an unstable mix of reactionary and progressive elements, giving birth either to social protest movements seeking to restore certain pre-modern idealized social conditions, or to revolutionary experiments, often utopian that sought to realize peoples' perennial dreams of justice and peace.

Within Christian social teaching the moral meaning of business was itself controversial. As Max Weber memorably argued, the Protestant ethic gave rise to the spirit of capitalism. By offering a religiously significant interpretation of business as a vocation, or "calling" from God, the Protestant ethic idealized the prudent and thrifty entrepreneur seeking to serve God and provide for his family through diligence and hard work. But once the waves of industrialization began to transform Europe, praise for the Christian entrepreneur—which still reverberated in John Wesley's 18th century sermon, "On the Uses of Money"—soon was drowned out by the Social Gospel preachers, who denounced "Big Business" and the "captains of industry" who organized and managed the newly emerging industrial corporations designed to exploit the economies of scale made possible by advances in science and technology.

These "robber barons" became fabulously rich, apparently at the expense of their workers, whose families—often immigrant laborers uprooted from their ancestral villages—seemed to be sinking deeper and deeper into poverty, illness, ignorance, and desperation. Since both the Social Gospel and Catholic social doctrine began in protest against the appalling social conditions that "Big Business" apparently brought in its wake, both were hard pressed to see businessmen and women as anything more than greedy hypocrites determined to put profits ahead of any residual moral concern for either their workers or the common good. Both generally supported the Progressive Era reforms that relied upon government regulation to curb the abuse and exploitation of working people, as well as upon government social programs to provide benefits, such as quality education, health care, and social security, beyond the reach of even the most benevolent of businesses.

Nevertheless, however skeptical Christian social teaching may have been about the possibilities of appealing to business leaders to reform themselves voluntarily, neither Catholic social teaching nor the Protestant Social Gospel advocated class struggle as the appropriate road to progress. Marxist social philosophy was repudiated in principle because it was atheist, and therefore incapable of analyzing correctly the moral and spiritual dimensions of the human condition. By demonizing business leaders and corporate executives as class enemies, Marxism only further polarized the situation and thus ensured that it could not be resolved except through revolutionary violence. It is useful to recall that even when the struggle between "labor and capital" was at its height in Europe and the USA—during the years leading up to World War II—Christian social teaching held out hope that business people—the capitalists, or if you will, private investors and the managers who worked for them—would discover that "enlightened self-interest" would lead them to align their own goals with the common good, with economic justice and peace.

However greedy and short-sighted their practices may have been in the past, business people were still human, and thus capable of repentance and reform. It therefore made sense, when the Christian churches sought to establish labor unions, settlement houses, hospitals, schools and orphanages, and other institutions seeking to improve the desperate conditions of the poor, they were careful to ensure that these efforts were open to participation of all people of good-will, regardless of their class background. Inspired by the basics of Christian social teaching, the churches continued to promote various forms of philanthropy as well as innovative programs in corporate social responsibility at a time when many dismissed such efforts as both

dangerously naïve and counterrevolutionary.

When international business ethics as we know it today first took shape, it did so at a time when the reforms of the Progressive Era seemed to have outlived their usefulness. In China, as well as in Europe and the USA, the late 1970s witnessed a shift away from government regulation, in the hope that deregulation might make business and industry more competitive in the emerging global economy. Business ethics slipped out of the shadows of corporate social responsibility, as once again it was hoped that businesses could reform themselves, and thus, with moral values internalized within the corporate governance system, they would contribute to the common good in a more cost-effective way than was possible through rigorous enforcement of external government regulation.

Not surprisingly, there was a corresponding shift in public attitudes toward business men and women. Once again, they were respected as leaders, as heroic innovators, and indeed, as moral exemplars. While the shift was hardly as dramatic in the way Christian social teaching regarded business people, it was clear that the churches once again were appealing to them as partners and collaborators, making their own indispensable contribution to the common good. One important indication of this shift was the pastoral letter of the Roman Catholic bishops of the USA, "Economic Justice for All" (1986), which adopted a common Biblical terminology, long familiar to Protestants, in acknowledging that business itself was a "vocation," and thus as such, on the same plane, theologically and morally, as other worldly occupations.[4]

The American bishops' pastoral letter was also significant for adopting two other Biblical terms, "covenant," and "stewardship," to underscore the theology that they believed Catholic social teaching provided for international business ethics. The three terms are not only interrelated, but as an ensemble they are emphatically theocentric. God's relationship to individual persons was highlighted in the notion of "vocation"—each human being is made to the image and likeness of God—an affirmation that lies at the root of Christian social teaching's modern emphasis on "human dignity" and its advocacy of universal "human rights." The Biblical language of "vocation" now common to both Protestant and Catholic perspectives illuminates the moral agency of business people, their personal responsibility for their decisions, policies and practices in the workplace.

Working for a corporation does not absolve people of responsibility, it actually heightens it. People embarked on careers in management, or aspiring to become business leaders are not mere cogs in a machine. However difficult it may be to untangle the complexities of corporate decision-making, ultimately it is people who make those decisions. They cannot excuse themselves by saying that "Business is business." What the notion of "vocation" adds to common sense expectations of moral agency and accountability is the awareness that each person's decisions, attitudes and actions, are directly involved in their unfolding personal relationship with God, a relationship in which they stand equal with all other human beings as "children of God," no more and no less.

This assumption not only affirms the moral dignity of going into business and the legitimacy of attempting to succeed in business, now experienced by Christian believers as a personal "calling" from God, it thereby also raises expectations about a business person's standard of morality. Aspiring to business leadership in response to a "calling" from God means becoming the kind of person capable of exemplary moral leadership. Going into business no more exempts people from moral responsibility than does assuming any other role in society. No one stands either above the law of God, or beyond God's personal invitation to fellowship or partnership with God, for the sake of the common good.

What recognizing business as a "vocation" may mean in the specific challenges of one's own career or occupation is not immediately obvious or strictly entailed in the notion itself. "Vocation" simply defines one's career or occupation as the venue in which one's personal encounter with God will unfold. One's ordinary work routines thus are included among the situations where Christian believers must seek an answer to the question, "What is God enabling me (us) to be and to do?" Nevertheless, the Bible also gives some general indications of what may be required in business. The other two terms that are now common in both Catholic and Protestant forms of Christian social teaching, "covenant" and "stewardship," provide further orientation.

"Covenant" refers, of course, to the Biblical paradigm of social and institutional relationships historically identified with God's rescue of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and creation of a homeland of their own in the territories once known as "Canaan" or, in contemporary terms, Palestine. Given the perennial instabilities of politics in west Asia and north Africa—the territory familiar from textbooks as "the Fertile Crescent"—it is not surprising that the Israelite kingdom(s) suddenly appeared and just as suddenly disappeared from the historical atlases. But during their existence, they provided an ongoing experience of how and why God's will can and should be reflected in human institutions as well as in personal decisions. "Covenant" becomes an extended metaphor suggesting that the creation of institutions should respond creatively and affirmatively to the acknowledged presence of God. In the English-speaking world, "covenant" is contrasted with "contract," and signals the intent to institutionalize business relationships on the basis of values higher than short-term profitability. While "covenants" share with "contracts" the elementary moral structure of creating mutual obligations through promise making and keeping, they are motivated by a range of ethical considerations not normally defined by "self-interest" or through narrow interpretations of "mutual consent."

Marriage, for example, involves a "covenant" between two parties as well as God, undertaken in order to establish a new family in response to God's "calling" them to do so. "Covenant," when applied to businesses, can mean many things, ranging from the experiments of Christian entrepreneurs who dedicate their businesses to God, or name God as their C.E.O., to the development of policies, particularly in human resource management, that seek to honor the human dignity of all employees by setting exemplary standards for humane treatment, including an end to any form of employment discrimination, the establishment of fair compensation practices, innovative efforts to preserve and enhance occupational health and safety policies, educational benefits, profit-sharing schemes, as well as programs designed to advance the long-term social and economic development of all employees and their families—all, of course, consistent with their overall business plan. While none of these practices are unique to "covenantal" businesses, one or more of them are usually recognized as signs of committing one's enterprise to the "kingdom of God."

If "covenant" signifies the institutional implications of a theocentric business ethic, "stewardship" illuminates its larger social possibilities. The language of "stewardship" emerges primarily from the New Testament parables of Jesus, where Christian discipleship—or a commitment to following the Way revealed in one's sense of "vocation"—is compared to the role and responsibilities of a household manager. The steward (*oikonomos*) is neither a lowly servant (*doulos*) nor the owner of the estate; but he does have fiduciary responsibility for managing the household's resources for the benefit of its owner(s). Beyond noting Jesus' apparently paradoxical attitude toward stewards, whose shrewd business practices are praised in order to challenge his disciples to go deeper in their attempts to dispel—even and especially in themselves—the worship of Money (*mamona*), the term, "stewardship," has been expanded to convey a general orientation to

the proper attitude toward and usage of material resources.

Here, too, the theocentric logic of Christian social teaching is evident. As the Creator and Lord of the Universe, God is the only One who literally and exclusively owns anything. Human beings hold anything they possess in trust, as a gift from God. Accepting gifts—as was so clearly understood in traditional Chinese culture—inevitably incurs obligations. We have been entrusted with the resources of this earth, in order, like stewards, to manage them consistently with their Owner's will, which urges us to glorify God by serving not only the people, but all living creatures. "Stewardship" thus suggests an attitude toward managerial responsibility that includes care for the environment, and respect for the needs of animals and plants, as well as past and future generations of all living things. Clearly, if "stewardship" were a governing ideal in business it would require a basic change in orientation from short-term to long-term thinking, and a shift in priorities from an exclusive emphasis on return on investments (ROI) to a more inclusive understanding of a firm's responsibilities to all its stakeholders, including the so-called "silent stakeholder," namely, the natural environment of life on this planet.

"Vocation", "covenant", and "stewardship"—such are the semaphore flags flying from the mast of the ship bearing the registry of Christian social teaching. How, then, might these signs be acknowledged from the wheelhouse of that other one registered under the name of Confucian moral philosophy? Do these ships pass each other in silence or can they converge on a single path toward a safe harbor that is hospitable to both of them?

We have already recounted the reasons why a useful comparison between Christian social teaching and Confucian moral philosophy is highly unlikely. If Christian social teaching is a relatively recent development, responding to the moral challenges and social disruptions of modernization, urbanization, and industrialization in the English-speaking world, Confucian moral philosophy is almost timeless in its antiquity, with origins that predate the establishment of an imperial China, yet also with possibilities not yet exhausted, even in a self-consciously post-imperial phase of China's ongoing development. Confucian moral philosophy is a living tradition that is older than the Bible. The tradition is codified in classics, not just the collections claiming the authority of Confucius, but also the scholars and commentators whose contributions ensured that the philosophy lives on, and not simply as an artifact of a distant past. Nevertheless, Confucian moral philosophy may be compared with Christian social teaching, not only because the basic concepts characteristic of that teaching are rooted in the Bible, but also because both traditions are currently being explored as possible ways forward for international business ethics.

Let us begin, as in our sketch of Christian social teaching, with the shifting attitudes toward people who earn their living by routinely engaging in business, the merchants, familiar to all who visit the marketplace, if only occasionally. One may begin by observing that Confucian moral philosophy is even more wary of merchants than is the Bible. The basic attitude is similar to that expressed by Aristotle, who regarded buying and selling as a dishonorable way to make a living since the habits of the heart engendered by business activity are motivated by greed (*pleonexia*), a passion for possessing things that knows no inherent limits. Similarly, in Confucian moral philosophy, what makes the small-minded person (小人, *xiaoren*) small is precisely the dominance of this attitude—the habit of approaching any situation with a narrow focus on what I stand to gain from it. The large-minded or exemplary person (君子, *Junzi*) is exemplary precisely to the extent that following the Way (道, *Dao*) progressively liberates oneself from greed and enables him to practice the virtues, particularly Humanity (仁, *Ren*), and Righteousness (義, *Yi*). The first question to take up in reconstructing a

Confucian perspective on business is whether, on account of the way merchants make their living, they can ever become "Junzi."[5] Though the degree of skepticism about the moral capacities of business people varies from one era to another, the tendency is to assume that only exceptional business people—such as Confucius' own disciple, Zi Gong, who had great success as a merchant, could achieve the degree of self-cultivation required to overcome greed or selfish desire. Nevertheless, Confucian moral philosophy does not condemn wealth and profit-seeking as such. These are permissible, provided they have been attained in the proper way. Here is the governing text from the Analects (論語, *Lunyu*) of Confucius:

> Confucius said, "Riches and honors are what all men desire. But if they cannot be attained in accordance with the Way they should not be kept. Poverty and low status are what all men hate. But if they cannot be avoided while staying in accordance with the Way, you should not avoid them. If a Gentleman departs from ren, how can he be worthy of that name? A Gentleman never leaves ren for even the time of a single meal. In moments of haste he acts according to it. In times of difficulty or confusion he acts according to it." (Analects 4.5)[6]

The proper Way, of course, is in a manner consistent with the cultivation of the virtues characteristic of a "Junzi." Over the centuries in which Confucian moral philosophy was the primary influence upon Chinese imperial policy, merchants and business people were heavily regulated to one degree or another with increasingly favorable attitudes becoming more prevalent in periods such as the Song (960-1279 CE) and Ming (1368-1644 CE) dynasties when commerce was valued for its overall contribution to the Empire's prosperity.

Despite the virtually inevitable distrust between merchants and the Confucian government officials who regulated them, Confucian moral philosophy did not—and arguably could not—condemns business people as such without contradicting some of its most basic principles. Three of these are relevant here, because they help convey the close parallels between Confucian moral philosophy and Christian social teaching. They are "the Mandate of Heaven" (天命, *tianming*), "the constant Mean" (中庸, *zhongyong*) and "People as the basis" (民本, *minben*). Let us attempt to understand how these might be resources for business ethics.

Tianming (天命), or "the Mandate of Heaven" is usually thought of in political terms. The Emperor, as the Son of Heaven (天子, *tianzi*), enjoys the Mandate of Heaven, which confers legitimacy on his rule. It is a sign, recognizable by the Chinese people, conveying that they will prosper—be kept safe and secure—because the Emperor is acting benevolently, consistent with Heaven's "Mandate." The Emperor is not above Heaven, for the Mandate can be lost. Malfeasance in office, particularly the failure to conduct the rituals (禮, *li*) appropriate to his office, is prima facie evidence of corruption, and indicates a departure from the path of self-cultivation by which exemplary moral leadership is exercised. Such moral failure may be made visible through the occurrence of natural disasters—like earthquakes, famines, and floods—that tell the people that Heaven's Mandate has been withdrawn, and a new "tianzi" will soon emerge. The relevance of "tianming" should be clear to anyone exercising executive leadership.

The authority of top management ultimately expresses a Mandate of Heaven, but the legitimacy, and hence the stability, of any leader's rule can easily be undone by failing, so to speak, to "walk the talk." Given the nature of "Tian" (天)—as it is made clear in the Neo-Confucian classic, the Zhongyong (中庸), chapter 12—each person has a "Tianming", insofar as each person by nature is capable of apprehending and following the "Dao" (道). In principle, if even the lowliest of human beings is gifted with "Tianming," then clearly even merchants or business people are capable of recognizing it within themselves and beginning the processes of

self-cultivation by which it might be realized fully. "Tianming," then, is a quasi-metaphysical or ontological concept implying that everyone has it within themselves to do whatever it takes to cease being a "xiaoren" (小人) and start becoming a "junzi" (君子).

Understood in its universal moral implications, "tianming," then, appears to be a useful parallel in Confucian moral philosophy to the notion of "vocation" in Christian social teaching. To be sure, though both concepts affirm the dignity—and hence the moral accountability—of all human beings, they do so in different ways, and with possibly different practical implications. The greatest divergence occurs at the level of ultimacy. Heaven is not God, at least, not God as understood in the Biblical tradition, the One who revealed Himself to Abraham and the Patriarchs, to Moses, to the Hebrew Prophets, and—in Christian perspective—finally and exhaustively to Jesus Christ who taught us to regard God as our Heavenly Father. While "tian" is often described in anthropomorphic terms—and is clearly a living reality capable of interpreting and intervening responsively in human affairs—it is not regarded as a person, or worshipped as a god or goddess.

Thus, while there is personal interaction between a Christian believer and God, as he or she attempts to discern an answer to the vocational question—"What is God enabling me (us) to be and to do?"—the process of Confucian self-cultivation by which one's personal "tianming" is exercised is not centered on interpreting the will of an ultimate Other, but on going further along the path of self-realization. The practical difference this makes is roughly analogous to the difference between west Asian modes of prayer—as understood and practiced by the great Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam—and east Asian modes of meditation—as understood and practiced in Daoism, Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism, as well as the Vedantic traditions of India.

If making one's living by going into business, in principle, presents no ultimate obstacle to the cultivation of humanity (仁, *ren*), and righteousness (義, *yi*), then the question shifts to precisely how this process of becoming a "junzi" may go forward. Here our second concept from Confucian moral philosophy, "the constant Mean" (中庸, *zhongyong*), may help us along. "Zhongyong", apparently, is untranslatable. The title to one of the classics canonized by the Neo-Confucian sage, Zhu Xi (朱熹) (1130-1200 CE), "Zhongyong" has been translated variously as "The Doctrine of the Mean" (James Legge), "the Constant Mean" (A. Charles Muller), and more recently and controversially as "Focusing the Familiar" (Roger Ames and David L. Hall)."[7] It is this new translation that enables me to see clearly the parallel with the Biblical "covenant" in possible convergences between the approaches to business ethics given in Christian social teaching and Confucian moral philosophy.

"Covenant," you will recall, is a metaphor that focuses our concern on the role of institutions, and the prospects for establishing policies and practices within businesses, which seek to embody the moral expectations discerned within a Biblical faith perspective. A covenantal approach to business ethics seeks to go beyond the minimum required by law and common sense, and thereby aspires to the kind of moral leadership implicit in surrendering oneself to the will of God. By focusing the familiar, "zhongyong" specifies the Way in which the moral exigencies of acknowledging one's "tianming" can be realized, particularly, in positions of administrative responsibility. To appreciate how the focus shifts from personal processes of self-cultivation to the establishment and maintenance of ethical business practices, we have to recall that the Confucian self that is cultivated—even in discovering its "tianming"—is always already and primordially relational. There is no self to be discovered apart from the relationships from which it emerges, beginning with the family. Focusing the familiar is simply an attempt to penetrate more deeply the Confucian logic of "the rectification of names"

(正名, *zhengming*). The names are the familiar five basic relationships—parent\child, older sibling\younger sibling, husband\wife, older friend\younger friend, and ruler\subject. Each of these describes one of the five primary relationships from which a person's sense of self and his or her moral responsibilities emerge. The list is meant to be expansive, and can be extended to the point where all of a person's roles and responsibilities can be acknowledged under Heaven. While each of these is both natural and conventional, they all need to be rectified in the sense that their inner moral logic is easily obscured and distorted, thus disrupting the natural harmony that Heaven intends and consequently sliding headlong into chaos. The "rectification" (正, *zheng*) involves bringing the actual situation into line with its ultimate completion, symbolized in its own proper name (名, *ming*). The"names"or social roles that we assume in life are familiar—they constitute, in Ames and Hall's apt phrase,"the ordinary business of the day,"[8] Such business, if it is to be accomplished in ways that promote social harmony rather than chaos, in Confucian perspective must be governed by the rituals (禮, *li*) appropriate to each relationship.

As in every other walk of life, etiquette is important in business. How things get done is at least as significant as what gets done. "Zhongyong" assumes that institutions—like business organizations—are constructed of rules and roles, in which responsibilities are assigned and performances monitored. "Zhongyong" means learning how to get things done properly, with the implication that the most effective Way is one in which the "rituals" appropriate to a particular role are observed, so that the action undertaken can be understood and properly responded to.

That the Zhongyong, like much of Confucian moral philosophy, was intended as a moral education or instruction for government administrators is evident from the passages that comment specifically on the Way of governing properly. Here is perhaps the most memorable of such passages:

> 12. "All who have the government of the kingdom with its States and families have nine standard rules to follow;-- viz. the cultivation of their own characters; the honoring of men of virtue and talents; affection towards their relatives; respect towards the great ministers; kind and considerate treatment of the whole body of officers; dealing with the mass of the people as children; encouraging the resort of all classes of artisans; indulgent treatment of men from a distance; and the kindly cherishing of the princes of the States."

After showing how following each of these rules brings specific benefits to both rulers and ruled, the text concludes with an affirmation of the process of spiritual self-cultivation required to practice any of them effectively.[9] Though Confucian moral philosophy gives no definitive treatment of the rituals appropriate to the conduct of business, that is, those that ought to govern the ordinary affairs of business people, it seems reasonable to assume that such a discussion can readily be extrapolated from a study of the Zhongyong's meaning for government administrators.

How, then, are we to make a comparison with the covenantal interpretation of business ethics that may be supported by Christian social teaching?[10] What "zhongyong" allows us to see is that both traditions take seriously the question of institutionalizing ethics in the ordinary routines of business. Both "covenant" and "zhongyong" are open-ended metaphors allowing us to focus on the familiar, that is, to focus on the task of designing institutional structures—rules, roles and responsibilities—that embody a moral vision of business relationships that goes well beyond the minimum standards enshrined in business law and genuinely seeks to foster practices conducive to human flourishing, or as Confucian moral philosophy terms them, the virtues of

humanity (仁, *ren*), and righteousness (義, *yi*). Where they differ, once again, lies in the divergence between their quasi-metaphysical or ontological presuppositions. Like "vocation," "covenant" discovers clues to propriety in our institutional routines in the Biblical interactions between God and His people, starting with the paradigmatic experiences of ancient Israel.

The Ten Commandments, for example, are a good place to begin the discernment process as to what a covenantal ethic for business would entail. The commandments are the stipulations, or mutual promises enacted between God and Israel, that will be regarded as tokens of their love and loyalty to Him who liberated the people from slavery in Egypt. In various places, the Biblical narratives are quite specific about what business practices are and are not compatible with a serious intent to keep one's promises to God. By contrast, "zhongyong" is both the way and the outcome of Confucian self-cultivation. The stipulation of practices—rules, roles, and responsibilities—consistent with a "junzi's" Way of becoming an exemplary moral leader, as well as a success in business, is not rendered in specific detail, though it can be inferred from what is specifically recommended for good and effective governance. What is clear is that these specifics do not follow the structure of promise making and keeping that is presupposed in the logic of covenantal business ethics.

Promises may be made and kept, but not with God, though possibly with one's deepest Self, and more likely with the various stakeholders with whom one's business seeks to maintain and develop an ongoing relationship. Zhongyong, like the Biblical covenant, means deliberately seeking to go beyond the minimum requirements of law or common sense or what the market will bear. Zhongyong, like the Biblical covenant, involves a rectification of existing or otherwise conventional relationships, in an attempt to complete these consistent with what they were meant to be.

The third feature of Confucian moral philosophy that facilitates comparison with approaches to business ethics oriented to Christian social teaching is the notion, classically explored by Mencius[11], of "minben" (民本, translated as "popular consent" or "the People as the basis"). As with our previous two terms, "minben" originally emerges in Confucian political philosophy. Mencius is asked how the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*) actually can be known. He makes it clear that the Mandate is not something that the Emperor can withhold or confer, but it must be recognized as such by all. The way in which this occurs is indirect, since Heaven does not speak. Nevertheless, when the gods (or spirits) and the People agree to something, say in their acceptance of a new Emperor, one can safely infer that Heaven's Mandate thereby is manifest through their harmonious concurrence. Mencius supports his opinion by quoting from an apparently lost book of the Classic of History (書經, *Shujing*):

> "The T'ai shih says, 'Heaven sees with the eyes of its people. Heaven hears with the ears of its people.' This describes well what I meant." (Mencius, Book V, Part A, Section 5)

The notion of "minben" then, conveys the idea that the dispositions of the People are the basis for knowing and acting consistent with the Mandate of Heaven. To be sure, appeals to "minben" can be problematic, for it may legitimate appeals to a "mass line" in which the immediate concerns of the vast majority are allowed to drown out the voices of minorities and unpopular individuals. Mencius' formulation has its own defense against demagoguery, insofar as the People and the gods must be in agreement. The consent must be genuinely harmonious or it is not consent. As a concept, "minben" would first of all address the People's need for safety and economic security. It can safely be assumed that the People want peace so that they and their families may flourish. Any government that makes economic and social development for the

common good its top priority will find favor with the People and, through them, with Heaven. The lesson for business ethics should be obvious: enterprises that are genuinely benevolent, that do well while doing good, will naturally be favored by the People, so long as they stay on that path.

One could easily illustrate this point by examining the changing nature of public opinion about Wal-Mart—China's main retail outlet for selling its consumer products in the USA. Wal-Mart has generally gotten a very positive response for its commitment to lower prices as well as its convenience and its generally welcoming attitude toward its customers. But as the downside of Wal-Mart's business plan has become increasingly apparent, so has the resistance of the People, particularly in communities where Wal-Mart hopes to open more stores. It is now well documented that in the USA, at least, Wal-Mart is destroying local businesses that can no longer compete with its prices, and is generally having a depressing effect on wages and salaries among retail employees. Furthermore, Wal-Mart's policies, especially its refusal to provide health insurance or other benefits to its ordinary employees has resulted in an increase in the overall burdens of state and local governments attempting to address the needs of the working poor. One might well ask the question whether the People, once they are aware of Wal-Mart's negatives, remain willing to accept these costs in order to get the benefit of the firm's lower prices.

The organized opposition that Wal-Mart is beginning to encounter in many local communities illustrates the relevance of "minben" to business ethics. Without the People's consent, no business can survive for long. But what must be done to earn the People's consent? A Confucian approach to business ethics would advise Wal-Mart and other enterprises to look within themselves to rediscover the Way that perhaps they have somehow lost. What "minben" may specifically contribute to business ethics—as it clearly was meant to do with reference to the ethical challenges of governing an Empire—is a sense of the importance of acknowledging and responding to the People's demands for corporate and social responsibilities. Not only are these responsibilities as urgent as they are real, they cannot be addressed by trying to deceive or short-change the People. Eventually the People will realize that they are being manipulated, patronized or lied to, and then they make take their vengeance out upon the businesses that are abusing them. If you need another lesson about the relevance of "minben," think of what has happened this past year to BP (British Petroleum) after the disaster in the Gulf of Mexico.

Such examples, I hope, will suggest why and how a comparison between "stewardship" and "minben" is both possible and appropriate for international business ethics. The Biblical "stewardship" concept, like "vocation" and "covenant" is emphatically theocentric. But its theological orientation should not hide the fact that it is also profoundly social, for the love of God does inevitably, for Christians, require the love of neighbor. "Stewardship" requires Christians to manage resources, as if they were held in trust from God, for the sake of His people. Similarly, "minben" suggests an approach to business that must be responsive to the needs of all stakeholders, and ultimately to the People (as well as the gods and spirits) through whom Heaven is aware of our activities. "Minben" and "stewardship," though diverging in their quasi-metaphysical or ontological presuppositions, both provide powerful incentives for businesses to take seriously their social responsibilities, and to enact policies and practices that genuinely advance the common good of all stakeholders, including all things under Heaven (as represented by Mencius' appeal to the gods and spirits) with whom we share our common home on earth.

What I have offered here is but a preliminary sketch of possible convergences between two different traditions of moral philosophy, both of which are rooted in religious and/or metaphysical concerns that defy

modern rationalistic analysis. Christian social teaching and Confucian moral philosophy need not be as two ships passing in the night. There are signals to be shared, and mutual illuminations to be explored. Anyone who embarks upon such an intellectual adventure is likely to find the task as daunting as trying to cross over between two ships when the water between them is anything but calm. The comparisons made in such crossings will inevitably reveal that the voyagers involved are at home on one ship, while being strangers on the other. While it is obvious that I am but a student of Confucian moral philosophy, and thus likely to make mistakes that someone more familiar with it would never make, I'm hoping that even my blunders here will at least be sufficiently interesting to provoke further discussion. It has long been my view that Confucian moral philosophy and Christian social ethics, despite their substantive differences over the nature of ultimate reality, have more in common with each other than either of them has with the narrowly secular rationalism of applied ethics as we know it. As we continue our conversation, now safely deposited on a distant shore, perhaps we will find a path through the forest, dark and damp, that leads to an inn, generously lit as well as warm in its hospitality, such as the one that John Estaugh found when he returned to claim his Elizabeth Haddon.

NOTES

1. Even considered as an allegory Longfellow's poem can only take us so far. The "Theologian's Tale" about Elizabeth and John is a Christian romance. Elizabeth first notices John at a Quaker meeting where he had spoken with an eloquence that gave her the confidence that one day, in God's own design, they would meet again. Meanwhile as Elizabeth had managed her household so that all strangers found a welcome there, the day came when John arrived looking for shelter overnight. They, of course, remembered each other from that earlier meeting, and spent the evening in friendly conversation, with Elizabeth retelling the story of her own spiritual conversion. The next morning when John was about to leave, he promised to return for the quarterly meeting in May. Upon his return, Elizabeth took him aside and revealed that "I have received from the Lord a charge to love thee." John in turn, seemingly unperturbed by this revelation, confides that "I have yet no light to lead me, no voice to direct me." Nevertheless, he promises to look for a sign, once "the Lord's work is done…." Not at all taken aback by his cautious response, Elizabeth will wait for John, believing that God will enlighten him, even as he begins his mission overseas. It is at that point that Longfellow makes his observation about ships that pass in the night. For he knows, as we all do, that such promises rarely are fulfilled. Nevertheless, John receives a sign and, upon his return, they are reunited and married. The tale, then, is not primarily about the serendipity of cross-cultural encounters and their usually disappointing outcomes, but about discerning the will of God and responding faithfully to it, no matter what the obstacles may seem to be. No doubt, Li Ma Tou and his disciples love China and Confucian moral philosophy much as Elizabeth loves John, but China may be forgiven for being even more cautious than John was in responding to this offer of love coming from foreigners as impetuous as Elizabeth.

2. For purposes of this presentation, "Christian social teaching" refers to the body of official statements issued by both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches focused on questions of economic justice and social reform, as well as the body of academic literature offering further critical reflection on these statements. Christian social teaching, therefore, is inclusive of both the series of Papal social encyclicals that began with Pope Leo XIII's Rerum novarum (1891), and the various declarations of the World Council of Churches beginning with its 1st Assembly in 1948, as well as the occasional declarations of various Christian denominations on these same questions, for example, the USA's National Conference of Catholic Bishops' 1986 pastoral letter,

"Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the US Economy," and the United Church of Christ's 1987 statement, "Christian Faith and Economic Life." While Christian social teaching is not reducible to this extensive collection of documents, they do form a crucial reference point for the treatment of the issues raised in them by the scholars who work in the field of Christian social ethics. Key statements from both the Catholic and the Protestant traditions of Christian social teaching form part of the collection edited by Max L. Stackhouse, Dennis P. McCann, and Shirley J. Roels, *On Moral Business: Classical and Contemporary Resources for Ethics in Economic Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).

3. For purposes of this presentation, "Confucian moral philosophy" refers to the body of Chinese reflections on the ethics of human relationships inspired by the canon of Confucian classics, beginning with the Analects (*Lun yu*) of Confucius, and including the Book of Mencius (*Mengzi*), the Doctrine of the Mean (*Zhongyong*), and the Great Learning (*Da Xue*). The four canonical books are supported by five other classics, notably, the Book of Changes (*Yi Jing*). Confucian moral philosophy consists of various scholarly commentaries and additional reflections that seek to interpret the meanings of these texts as a living tradition that remains relevant as an authoritative orientation to the ethical and social questions of China today. The various debates and divisions among scholars doing Confucian moral philosophy, such as ongoing controversies over the meaning and authenticity of "neoConfucianisms" of various sorts, is beyond the scope of this brief presentation. Attempted here is merely a preliminary sketch of the ways in which certain themes found throughout the traditions of Confucian moral philosophy may be compared critically and constructively to certain equally salient themes in Christian social teaching, the both of them converging on the question of what basic moral attitude one should take toward business and the responsibilities of those who engage in business.

4. Cf. Dennis P. McCann, "Business as a Vocation: A Catholic Contribution toward a Global Ethic?", a paper presented to the 5th International Symposium on Catholic Social Thought and Management Education, Bilbao, Spain, July 15-18, 2003

5. This question was the point of departure for the study on Confucian business ethics that I co-authored with Joanna Lam Kit Chun, "Markets, Merchants, and Government Regulation: Resources for Business Ethics from the Comparative Study of Premodern Confucian and Western Philosophy." It was published in Chinese in *Shichang Jingji Yu Shangye Lunli (Market Economy and Business Ethics)*, edited by Ip King-tak, Shanghai: Fudan University Press., 2003. ISBN: 7-309-03433-3, pp. 16-46.

6. Cited from Analects of Confucius, Translated by A. Charles Muller, available online at http://www.acmuller.net/con-dao/analects.html#div-5#ixzz12bnxj3fS.

7. Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, *Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the Zhongyong*. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2001 (ISBN: 0-8248-2460-1)

8. Ibid., p. 86-87.

9. Cf. *Zhongyong*, Chapter 20, Sections 10-15. Quoted from James Legge's translation of the *Zhongyong,* which is available online at http://www.nothingistic.org/library/confucius/mean/

10. For an example of what specifically a covenantal emphasis might entail, see Stewart W. Herman, *Durable Goods: A Covenantal Ethic for Managements and Employees*. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998 (ISBN-10: 026800885X)

11. Cf. *Mencius* (translated by D. C. Lau). London: Penguin Books, 1970. See in particular, Book V, Part A, Section 5.