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Personality and Rites: A Comparative Study of Christian Liturgical Thought and Confucian Ideal of Rites

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1 Introduction

Past comparative studies between Christian and Confucian thought have been focusing on a wide range of topics such as human nature, the concept of God and morality^[1]. One aspect that seems to be missing is what we might call a “philosophy of the rites”. Both of these traditions emphasize the rituals and their relation to one’s human nature. This paper intends to investigate the possibility of comparing the thoughts on “rituals and personality” in these two traditions, wishing to delineate the similarities and differences that exist between the two and to offer reflection for future studies.

The first part of the paper will give a brief examination of our method and material, mainly to answer the question concerning religion and philosophy. The second part deals with the concept of person and personality in the Catholic and Confucian traditions. The third part compares how rites elevates the human personality in these two traditions and how each of them shows its own particularities. The last part offers an reflection on their differences and how they might profit from each other.

2 On Methodology

Why Christian liturgy and the Confucian idea of “*li*”? One apparent reason could be that the term *li* is often translated into English as “rites” or “rituals”. In this sense we would be comparing two kinds of rituals, but this is not what this paper intends. The concept of *li* goes far beyond mere rubrics, even though it originated from religious ceremonies. For the early Confucians, *li* can be seen both as religious conduct towards the spirits and as ethical

1 See for instance, Aaron Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercise in Xunzi and Augustine* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006), Lee H. Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage*, (Albany: SUNY, 1990) and Vicent Shen 沈清松, *Shilin Zhexue yu Zhongguo Zhexue* 士林哲學與中國哲學 [Scholastic Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy]. (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2017).

conduct towards others. In fact, as Confucianism develops, this latter sense became more dominant than the previous. In a sense the secular came to be the imitation of the sacred. We can also perceive in Christian liturgical thought, that Though the term “liturgy” certainly denotes specifically religious ritual, nevertheless Christian philosophers have developed rich reflections on the relationship between the liturgy and personality, and subsequently ethics. It is under this perspective that we believe by comparing the two traditions, there could be a chance of discovering something common to all humanity.

There may be an objection to this comparison. After all, while studies on the Confucian concept of *li* is very common, in the general panorama of the philosophical discipline, few have regarded Christian liturgy as material for philosophical discourse. Is not religion or theology a better place where this matter should be treated? Are we not placing a theocentric religion besides a humanistic philosophical tradition? After all, didn't Confucius state in the *Analects* that it is better to “*have respect but keep a distance from the spirits*”^[2]?

To this objection, it would be useful to remind ourselves that the dichotomy between “philosophy” and “theology” came to a certain completion only in the Middle Ages. At that time, philosophy was seen as the search for the ultimate causes of things independent of Revelation, while theology relies on the divinely revealed data^[3]. Since there is no clear-cut distinction between supernatural revelation and natural reasoning in Confucianism, the above dichotomy is quite one-sided. In the second place, concerning the term “religion”, it is no longer a rare opinion to take regard of the religious aspects of Confucianism. Professor Kaji Nobuyaki's work on Confucianism argues strongly for the religious origin *and continuity* of Confucianism^[4], Professor Antonio Cua's work on the *Xunzi* also deals extensively on the religious aspects of the *li* through funeral and ancestral worship rites^[5]. In fact, we believe to return to a more ancient usage of the term “religion” will help us greatly in this aspect. The Latin word *religio* in classical Rome could denote a certain “bond or obligation”, possibly from the verb “*religo, religare*”, to

2 *The Analects*, 6, 22. From here on the citation from the *Analects*, the *Mengzi* and the *Xunzi* all come from Chinese Text Project (www.ctext.org), translations are my own.

3 On this point, see an excellent exposition by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI on Thomas Aquinas and his synthesis of philosophy and theology: Benedict XVI, General Audience, Wednesday, 16 June 2010.

4 Kaji Nobuyaki, *Lun Rujiào 論儒教* [The Confucian Religion], trans. Yu Shihua. (Jinan: Qi Lu Shushe, 1993).

5 Antonio S. Cua, “The Ethical and the Religious Dimensions of Li”, in *Human Nature, Ritual, and History*, (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), p. 160-190.

bind. It could also mean observance of a set of ritualistic rules, providing, for a strong social purpose of maintaining order and tradition^[6], and hence very similar to the *li* that we are dealing with here. Therefore, to treat early Confucian concept and practice of the *li* as a sort of *religio*, makes this comparison contextually relevant. However, this is not to diminish at all the philosophical dimension of our research. Ethics deals with human choices that relates to the meaning of being human, and this certain “bond”, even when it is related to a deity, certainly exerts its force and shapes the human character of individuals living in it. Thus what is supposedly “religious” is inseparably linked to what is “ethical”, there is therefore the exteriority of forms and the transformation wrought by it in the interiority of the human person.

Concerning the scope of the present research, we will limit ourselves to the liturgical thought of the Western tradition of Christianity, most essentially that of the Catholic tradition. We will consider in particular the thoughts of Dietrich von Hildebrand, whose concept of personality and phenomenological approach to the liturgy is of particular importance, not only for its originality, but also for its openness towards the wider world of ethics. On the other hand, for Confucian thought concerning the *li*, we will focus mainly on the text of the *Analects*, the *Mengzi* and most especially the *Xunzi*, because it is the text in pre-Han China that best synthesized the thoughts on the *li*.

3 Person and Personality

The concept of “person” was first largely employed in Western Christianity to solve an exclusively theological question: The Trinity and the Incarnation. In this process, it was Boethius (477-524) who gave us a substantial definition which was later accepted by Thomas Aquinas several centuries later: *individua substantia rationalis naturae*, an individual substance of rational nature^[7]. Yet, even when we look at this ancient definition, it is still revealing to us today in building up a solid view of the human person. Individuality holds two things, that it is divided from everyone else, meaning that no one replaces its uniqueness, and that it is undivided in itself, meaning that it holds a central unity encompassing various character traits. Being substantial gives weight on its irreplaceableness, as opposed to an accident which is changeable according

6 See Sarah F. Hoyt, “The Etymology of Religion”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 32, No.2 (1912), pp. 126-129.

7 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-I, q.29, a1.

to time and circumstances. It is of a rational nature tells us that persons are beyond their mere materiality, capable of discerning logic and reason in their abstract reflection.

Nevertheless, due to its historical context, one particularity deeply relevant to our discussion seems to be missing: maturity. It is true that we have here an idea of the personal self, rational and substantial, but this trait is at the same time shared with divine and angelic persons. Nor God nor Angels ever needed growth and maturity, but humans do. Going on to the second half of the Twentieth Century, a growing awareness of “human dignity” took place within Catholic philosophy. Under the influence of Jacques Maritain, Pope John Paul II and others, personalism came to become the dominant view in the Catholic world. Under this tenet, a person is now considered in its being the “*Imago Dei*”, a being with inviolable dignity and at the same time “called” to engage in the giving of oneself to another. This latter point even made itself into the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council^[8], and has hence forth become one of the guiding principles in Catholic teachings.

To our particular interest, we look at the figure of Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889-1977). As a student of Edmund Husserl, he had a keen interest in the relationship between the interiority of human beings and the objective, exterior value that is presented to him. Von Hildebrand was not satisfied with focusing merely on the concept of “personhood” or “being person”, he distinguished the idea of “personality” as the matured stage of a person’s personhood. Thus, “*every man is a person in that his being is essentially conscious; and he is a subject who enters into relations with others, and who knows, wills, and loves... But every man is not a personality. Only persons can be personalities, but in order to be a personality it is not enough just to be a person*”^[9]. For von Hildebrand, it is the dynamic part of life that attracts a person to fully live out his essence. Von Hildebrand distinguishes the “normal man” from the “average man”. For him, the fact that the most numerous amount of people is of a certain kind does not necessarily mean that is the way people ought to be. While average man is the result of static, “*the normal is that which most closely corresponds to the essence of man. That man is a personality who most fully develops this essence, who realizes entirely all the essential personal values*”^[10].

In what consists a true personality? Ultimately it has to do with appreciating value in

8 Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 12.

9 Dietrich von Hildebrand. *Liturgy and Personality*. Hildebrand Press. Kindle Edition, p.13.

10 *ibid*, p.14.

things as it objectively is. For von Hildebrand, the criterion of maturity of a person, the criterion to see how much of a personality he is, is to see how he is able to respond valuably to a thing that is objectively valuable. *“Two main components of personality must here be distinguished: in the first place, the fullness of the essential spiritual ‘organ,’ the faculty of loving and knowing, the power of will, the natural potential of the person, the intensity of life which flows in him—we might say his “essential endowment,” as distinct from special talents; in the second place, the organic link with the world of values and of truth, the perception of them, the response to them, the living in truth, in tune with the objective logos, and the absence of all subjective deviations from the meaning of being. Neither of these two elements, taken separately, is sufficient for the constitution of personality”*^[11]. In a sense our project of research deals with this second part of human personality that von Hildebrand speaks about, this “organic link”. For him the most empowering towards this organic link is the liturgy, which elevates the value-response our persons and connects them with a higher realm.

So far we have given an overview about the development of the concept of “person” and “personality” in the Catholic tradition. Essentially we have examined the more static, dignity-oriented view of human personhood later joined to a more dynamic, value-oriented view of personality. We will take a brief look at the Confucian tradition and see to what extent a sufficiently similar concept of personality can be found.

In contrast with Boethius’ definition of person as an individual substance, the Confucian tradition, having in view certainly the distinctive aspects of the self, never lost sight of the relational aspects of the person. For Confucius, persons are complementary: *“to practice the virtue of ren, is to help others to establish themselves as one would like himself to be established, and to help others to enlarge themselves as he would himself be enlarged”*^[12]. This specific character also means an openness towards values specially situated by the environment in which one is born in, in and through which a person will grow and becomes more complete. From these two perspective we can look at two fundamental texts, the *Mengzi* and the *Xunzi*.

In the *Mengzi* we already find specific enumeration of “roots” of virtues that makes human truly human. *“All men are born with a compassionate heart... from this it seems that, if a man does not have a compassionate heart, he is not a man. If a man does not have a heart*

11 *ibid*, p. 15.

12 *Analects*, 6.30.

that knows of shame and honor; he is not a man"^[13]. And so on with reverence and justice. To say that a man can possibly be not a man, is to say that man might not, but needs to live up to his essence, his humanness. Mencius expresses clearly that these roots need to be developed in order to achieve great things, so much so as to "*holding the world in peace*"^[14].

While the *Mengzi* has a tendency to look at the essences of man as containing features peculiar to man, the *Xunzi* takes on a tendency towards formal education and environment. Men from different countries are born the same, but it was education and environment that made them civilized or barbarians. Prof. Masayuki Sato points out, that in the *Xunzi* human nature by itself indeed has the capacity to make distinctions and become sagely, differing from the tradition interpretation of Xunzi as a proponent of "human nature is evil"^[15]. The *Xunzi* distinguishes *Xing* (what comes from our material nature) from *Wei* (what we can decide to do and exercise, such as virtues), and it is through study and practice of the *li* that virtues can outgrow and complement the *xing*.

4 The Growth of Personality through the Rites

A God and Objective Value

For von Hildebrand, the great difficulty in the formation of personality lies in the lack of response towards the objective value presented to the person. This is where liturgy comes in to fill that gap between the ordinary person and the world of values. This is done through aspects such as communion, reverence, awakendness, and the so-called *discretio*, among others. There is no doubt that for von Hildebrand, the liturgy has a proper *end*: the glorification of God. This is in line with what we have seen earlier in Thomas Aquinas' view of *religion* as a virtue: that of the right relationship between man and God. Liturgy being the most sublime act, points toward God who is seen as the originator of all values, in a similar way to how in Plato, the Idea of the Good is the radiator through which all the forms can be seen. Indeed, he opens his course on liturgy and personality with the following words: "*The meaning of all creation is the imitation and glorification of God, the inconceivably glorious and holy One... in fulfilling*

13 *Mengzi*, Gongsunchou Shang 3.6

14 *Mengzi*, Jinxin Xia, 14.78.

15 Masayuki Sato, *Xunxue yu Xunzi Sixiang Yanjiu* 荀學與荀子思想研究 [Xunzi Studies and Research on Xunzi's Thought]. (Taipei City: Wanjuanlou Books, 2015), pp. 13-24.

the divine idea in its regard, and simultaneously bringing to fruition the fullness of values to which it (all creation) is ordained"^[16]. The *telos*, so to speak, lies in the foundation of Christian ethics in which von Hildebrand's thought form a part. What he tries to emphasize, however, is that by following this order, everything, indeed even a mere piece of rock, bears fruit in its fullness of value. This is achieved in the liturgy because not only does it bring down graces (the own life of God) to men, but it raises men towards the ultimate value of all things. This strongly theo-centric and hierarchical attitude will dominate the extending reflection on the values presented in his book "Liturgy and Personality".

Do we find a similar domination of theocentric value in Confucianism? There are certainly good arguments made concerning the primordial monotheistic mentality of the earliest Confucians, towards the *Tian*. In our view and concerning our present paper, we believe it is not necessary to hold up to such a clear concept of supreme value. Rather, what we need to have in mind is the *objectivity of hierarchical value* in Confucianism. In the *Xunzi* we find description about how the ruler *participates* in the heaven and earth, from which he was born, and through which he must rule the people as a parent: "*therefore the Heaven and Earth engendered the ruler (Junzi), the ruler has a relationship of order with Heaven and Earth. The Ruler is that in whom Heaven and Earth dwell, where all creation gather; the parent of the people*"^[17]. With the ruler in his place properly, and *li* well established, all human relationships between parents and children, rulers and subjects, brothers, spouses will be settled as they ought to be settled.

B Communion

Von Hildebrand starts his discourse on the transformative power of the liturgy by looking at the idea of *communion*. Communion certainly has its theological note, but within that context he mentions specifically the unifying power of values of the liturgy: "*liturgical prayer possesses an incomparable communion-forming power. For we must not forget that values possess a unifying power; and the higher the value in question, the greater this power. In beholding a value, in grasping it, the soul of the individual is not only "recollected," drawn out of "distraction," but the barrier isolating him from other men is lifted*"^[18]. When a person enters

16 Dietrich von Hildebrand. *Liturgy and Personality*. Hildebrand Press. Kindle Edition, p.7.

17 *Xunzi*, 9, 18.

18 Dietrich von Hildebrand. *Liturgy and Personality*. Hildebrand Press. Kindle Edition, p.26.

into the liturgical setting, his first impression is “being set apart”, in a space that is dedicated not to anything else but to a Supreme Being that is deemed to be worthy of all the best of material creation. Nevertheless, paradoxically it is this being set apart that dismantles the barriers of all kinds, that persist in the ordinary daily existence, setting him apart from others. The liturgy, through its chants and incense, light and darkness, and the multiple layers of mysteries brings the person into a unifying existence with other things. It is in this experience that von Hildebrand spells out the difficulty that he finds in individualistic ethics: “*It is a specific error found in liberalism, and also found widely in Protestantism, to believe that the more a thing is peripheral, the more it leads toward the spirit of communion, and that, on the contrary, the more deeply we are moved by something and the higher the value in question, the more we are plunged into solitude. The opposite is true. Those goods isolate which are merely subjectively satisfying. The world of authentic values, on the contrary, unites*”^[19]. Values unite because they bring inner order, and also because they connect the person with the outer world, thus breaking the isolating ego.

From the Confucian tradition, communion achieved by the *li* also has a transcendental value that allows the person to go beyond himself and reach towards others. Tu Weiming points out that *li* always provides *relation*, which is sealed with a kind of affection permeated in the exercise of the *li*. In the *Mengzi* it is said that the *li* is the mind of reverence^[20]. That mind has a presupposition, which is someone objectively outside of my own existence, to whom my affection and thought can be poured out in accordance with the *li*. As Tu Weiming later explains in the same text, the self-realization of man in Confucius’ view lies inside his own essence, yet that essence needs to be transformed through relations with others^[21]. But that kind of unity is not the demolition of characters, but the assembling of a variety of traits that work together to maintain each other’s humanity. Hence by the exercise of *li*, each one knows his proper position to stand, and his proper reaction with each other in the language of signs and gestures. We can say that this is the core of *li*’s function in bringing about harmony in society: the good order of exterior human relations spelled out by the *li* informs the order of the person’s interiority. From here we may understand the words of Confucius in

19 *ibid*, p.26-27.

20 *Mengzi*, 11, 6.

21 Tu Weiming 杜維明, ed. Guo Qiyong 郭齊勇 and Zheng Wenlong 鄭文龍, Du Weiming Wenji 杜維明文集 第四卷 [Works of Tu Weiming, vol 4.]. (Wuhan: 2002, Wuhan Chubanshe), p. 29.

the *Analects*: to conquer one's own ego and recover the *li*, that is *ren*^[22]. Precisely it is in setting a limit to the *hubris* of my own desires and wants, to conquer one's ego, and recovering the proper exercise of *li*, can the greatest virtue *ren*, humanity, be achieved.

C Discretio

Von Hildebrand uses a particular term, the spirit of *discretio*, to describe “the sense of distinguishing as applied to the world-structure. In the first place, it is a specific sense for the structure and the dramatic rhythm of being, of preparation, ascension, fulfillment, and decline”^[23]. The word basically means “separation” and “discernment”, here it is applied to periodicity and levels of human depth. For von Hildebrand, a person who is immersed in the liturgy is able to see growth of the inner self as a process that requires time and unfolding. The same applies to relations, as all relations have their inner law and rhythm to be followed. And indeed here he enters into an observation of etiquette, explaining that the lack of which is the manifestation of the lack of spirit of *discretio*. If etiquette, good manner, and this is part of what *li* means, is lacking or not appreciated, there is a detriment for a person to experience fully the “now” of his inner development, because he is not able to capture where he is and therefore trapped in his own ego. Besides the “now”, one who lacks this spirit also ignores the “depth”: “a true personality has such a sense of the different levels in himself that he approaches a good only at the depth suitable to it; he is incapable of speaking of deep things while preserving a peripheral attitude; he feels the inner impossibility of shifting onto the peripheral plane those things which belong to the depths”^[24]. One particular thing about the liturgy is that it has its own gradation and levels. Von Hildebrand observes how the Mass continues on slowly, with every detail carefully carried out, deepening ever more into the culmination of the Consecration: “Truly we behold in the Holy Mass the primary image of the entire dramatic rhythm of being: stages must be traversed, there must be a ‘going-up,’ and an inner preparation for the utterance of an objectively genuine ‘Word.’”^[25]. This dividing, separating, appreciating the different layers of values present in our lives is achieved in a silent way through the liturgy being carried out

22 *Analects*, 12, 1.

23 Dietrich von Hildebrand. *Liturgy and Personality*. Hildebrand Press. Kindle Edition, p.79.

24 *ibid*, p.84.

25 *ibid*, 88.

genuinely, and it helps the person to penetrate more deeply into those things that are objectively good, so that they can nurture his life, forming his personality.

Li is also nurture. The *Xunzi* sees the beginning of *li* from the perspective of an *oeconomia*. People had desire but could not satisfy them and therefore quarrels, the Sage makes *li* to establish order^[26]. But *li* goes beyond that, it nurtures the senses, it elevates. The nurturing of the senses gave rise to distinguishing between different ranks of persons. The *li* exercised by the emperor differs from that of the lords, and that of the lords differ from that of the common people. Only till then, when things are distributed according to an order linked with the universe, can every value begin to grow and to deepen in each and every person. *Li* gives limits and sets up levels in order that a person can develop himself according to a certain order and within proper time.

Antonio Cua observes that the two most important rites described in the *Lilun* chapter of the *Xunzi* is ancestral sacrifice and funeral, and that these two rites lie on the two polar of a person journey from life to death. The ancestral sacrifice reminds us of where we come from, and funeral where we shall go. Life on earth is therefore a journey between these two points. These so-called “rites of passage” help a person discern and see the different levels of his life and with the help of *li*, he is able to appreciate the before, during and after of all activities^[27].

5 Difference and Final Reflection

What can we make of this comparison so far? There are undoubtedly similarities within these principles, they both call the individuals participating in it to go beyond one's self-centeredness, opening themselves to the reality objectively outside of themselves. In the process those participants in the rituals are also formed and transformed. At the same time there is separation and discerning the different levels and periods of one's growth and appreciation of value. Separation duly conducted brings out order, both in the exterior society and in the interior human being. However, there is always a disquieting question all along this putting together of the two traditions: what is the ultimate purpose of rites? Must we hide the *telos* that could be seen as overly religious? If the purpose of Christian rituals is the religious worship of God, isn't it different and even distant from the

26 *Xunzi*, 19, 1.

27 Antonio S. Cua, “Dimension of Li (Propriety)”, in *Human Nature, Ritual, and History*, (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), p. 58-59.

Confucian tradition in its very core? On the contrary, if the purpose of rites is just the formation of personality and making a better world, is there anything peculiar to the Christian worship and to the Confucian *li*, giving thousands of years of differing paths?

Behind the theology of the liturgy, there is the central idea that the liturgy is the manner through which the Redemption brought by Jesus Christ is communicated to humans in a supernatural way. Indeed, even for von Hildebrand the theocentric vision is not foreign at all “*The conscious, fully awakened act of performing the Liturgy imprints upon the soul the Face of Christ. In taking part in the Liturgy, we make our own the fundamental attitudes embodied in it*”^[28]. We believe that this is the major point that differs this tradition from the Confucian tradition. Concerning this we offer here some brief observations to end our research

First of all, there is no Christ who operates and communicates with the participants of the liturgy. For the Confucian tradition it was much simpler. *Li* was a way of communication without words, it was the unifying of the diversified, it was the expression of affection in an orderly way, it was making separations and leveling and ultimately joined to the ruling of a country. It was broader and not limited in a sense to an awe-inspiring master plan.

Our second observation is that, precisely because no barrier of faith is needed. The Confucian discourse of the *li* could be taken into the world of Christian liturgy, but not the opposite. It is not difficult to foresee Christian thought to take in the Confucian ideal of *li* and perhaps develops and broadens the effects of the liturgy. In fact, Professor David Fagerberg is already developing a similar idea, giving it the name of “mundane liturgical theology”. In a well exercised Christian liturgy we find all of Confucian ideal *li* present in those settings, and the effects, no matter ethical, aesthetical or cultural, could well have been realized in the real world. Perhaps it is just that such connection had not been made. In fact, a reverse comparison and study could yield fruit in the discipline of Christian thought proper.

On the other hand, how would a Confucianist take in from the insights given by thinkers like von Hildebrand? Two different responses might be given. First, that since there is no acceptance of religious dogma, no foundation to a so-called “transformation in Christ” could be realized, hence it has nothing whatsoever to do with the Confucian exercise of *li*, even in its own sacred rituals. It would only be a matter of a different god. Nevertheless, it

28 Dietrich von Hildebrand. *Liturgy and Personality*. Hildebrand Press. Kindle Edition, p.11.

was also possible that the Confucianist looks at the observation that Christian thinkers have made concerning the effect of the sacred rites upon the participating persons and reflect further on the *li*, and see that perhaps more can be grasp in their already ages long tradition.

Lastly, we can always remind ourselves that no matter it is *li* or the liturgy, it is always a *lived, experienced* reality. Christian liturgies are celebrated in every single moment around the globe and the Confucians, perhaps with less exercise of sacred rites as before, still live their lives surrounded by the *li*. The wordless communications, the signification behind gestures, positions, vestments, are a living reality. We believe that unless this reality be preserved, there can be no advancement in our understanding of such an important part of human civilization.

6 Conclusion

We have briefly compared some elements that both the Christian tradition and Confucian tradition share in their thought on sacred rites or the *li*. We have also reflected on their major differences and how they might profit from one another. We hope that with this initial attempt, we might open up a greater dialogue in the future in this area.

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