INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Interreligious Dialogue in a World of Conflict and Violence: A Critical Exploration of Confucianism

Issue 4: May 2019

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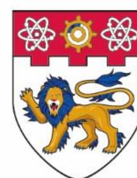
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore



NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY
SINGAPORE

INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Occasional Papers of
The Studies in Inter-Religious Relations
in Plural Societies Programme

Interreligious Dialogue in a World of Conflict and Violence:
A Critical Exploration of Confucianism

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ISSN: 2661345X

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Abstract

"Harmony in Diversity" (*hé ér bù tóng*) is a rather famous Confucian motto. It is widely regarded by many Chinese as a valuable ideal or guiding principle to be upheld in order to preserve peaceful relations among the religions as well as among nations. This paper aims to go beyond this rather preliminary impression by exploring further the possible contributions of the Confucian approach to dialogue in a world of conflict and violence. Through a brief comparison with some other views in Chinese culture, this paper argues that Confucianism is relatively more capable than other Chinese traditions to address a world of conflict and violence. It further proposes that a Confucian approach to cross-cultural dialogue can be derived from the Confucian virtues of benevolence (*rén* 仁) and reciprocity (*shù* 恕), the concept of *zhongyong* (中庸) rationality, and ethical guidelines concerning retribution and reconciliation. This approach will benefit not only the avoidance of conflict and violence, but also the inter-group reconciliations which are particularly needed in a post-conflict context. Although there are also certain limitations to the Confucian approach to inter-religious relations, these limitations can be overcome partially through dialogue with other cultural or religious traditions.

Introduction

Some decades ago, many scholars, especially sociologists in the West, attempted to understand the role of religions in the contemporary world mainly in terms of secularisation, assuming that the overall trend of development is the decrease of religious influence on social and political issues. However, in the last few decades, there has been a phenomenal global resurgence of religions which increasingly exercise tremendous influence on social and political issues. Even if one continues to understand the relevant phenomena in terms of secularisation with certain revisions,[1] more and more scholars and policymakers have begun to realise the important role played by religions in international relations.[2]

Probably due to the impact of mass media, most of the news coverage on the role of religion in international relations is rather negative, focusing only on violent conflicts among religions and on terrorist attacks which are associated with – but not necessarily motivated by – religion. It is rather unfortunate that the positive role played by religion in conflict resolution and their promotion of world peace are seldom mentioned. In fact, there are some concrete cases illustrating the positive role of religion in peacebuilding, including how interfaith dialogue contributed to reconciliation.[3] However, the majority of these studies are related to Western perspectives or contexts.[4] As a person living in Asia, I ask the question: how about Asian perspectives? Given the huge diversity of Asian cultures, it is basically impossible to cover all Asian perspectives in this study. I thus would like to narrow down my scope and concentrate on the Confucian perspective for the following two reasons.[5]

First, Confucianism emerged and developed mainly during the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770-255 BCE), also known as the Spring and Autumn (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States (475–221 BCE) periods, a time when China was in socio-political turmoil and torn apart by civil wars. In order to rectify this situation, Confucius (551-479 BCE) proposed the cultivation of some relevant virtues, e.g. benevolence (*rén* 仁), and the restoration of the ritual (*lǐ* 禮) developed during the Western Zhou dynasty (1016-777 BCE), when China was more unified and supposed to be in order. It is thus possible to say that in contrast to the ideal of cosmic harmony advocated by Daoism, the Confucian ideal is characterised mainly in terms of social harmony. In terms of strategy, Daoism emphasises "non-action" or "no intervention" (*wú wéi* 無為), which may practically mean staying away from politics and conflicts as much as possible in order to achieve some sort of natural harmony; whereas Confucianism aims to restore proper social and political order through active involvement in the cultural, political, and social spheres. Moreover, in comparison with Mohism, which advocates for a pacifist position and appeals to some supernatural beliefs about gods and ghosts, Confucianism endeavours to address a post-conflict or even post-violent situation, and is based on a particular understanding of the human being. With this extremely brief sketch, one may understand why, in comparison with Daoism and Mohism, Confucianism was more influential in the social and political spheres of pre-modern China, and is thus expected to be more relevant to dialogue in a world of conflict and violence.

Second, it is rather well known that Confucianism exercised a tremendous impact on the development of traditional Chinese culture and also shaped, to a certain extent, East Asian responses to modernity. Regarding dialogue in a world of conflict and violence, it is noticeable that the Chinese government proposes replacing confrontation (*duì kàng* 對抗) with dialogue (*duì huà* 對話) in order to deal with the divergences among nations or countries. It also promotes the strategy of "seeking convergence and preserving divergence" (*qiú*

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[1] Pippa Norris & Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

[2] Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

[3] David R. Smock ed, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding*, Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002.

[4] For examples, see Raymond G. Helmick & Rodney L. Petersen eds, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy & Conflict Transformation*, Radnor, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001, and, Pauline Kollontai, Sue Yore and Sebastian Kim eds, *The Role of Religion in Peacebuilding: Crossing the Boundaries of Prejudice and Distrust*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishing, 2018.

[5] Some parts of this article are derived from Lai Pan-Chiu, "Confucian Understanding of Humanity and Rationality in Conversation: A Chinese Christian Perspective," in *Rationality in Conversation: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives*, eds Markus Mühling et al, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016: 321-35, and Lai Pan-Chiu, "Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Peace-Building: A Sino-Christian Perspective," in *The Role of Religion in Peacebuilding,* Kollontai et. al.: 35-51.

tóng cún yì 求同存異) when dealing with political or cultural differences, and repeatedly emphasises the slogan "harmonious society" (*hé xié shè huì* 和諧社會) which is identified as one of the ideal characteristics of socialist China. All of these seem to be inspired by Confucianism, especially the motto "harmony in diversity" (*hé ér bù tóng* 和而不同) found in the *Analects* (*lùn yǔ* 論語). Though "harmonious society" is merely a political slogan, which may be abused as a pretext for the suppression of dissident voices, it is important to examine its relationship with the motto "harmony in diversity", including the question of whether Confucianism itself has the resources to resist this abuse.

There are some studies concerning the implications of the Confucian motto of "harmony in diversity" for intercultural or inter-religious dialogue. However, most of them tend to spell out positively the potential contributions of the motto without critical evaluation of its inadequacy for a post-conflict context or exploration of better alternatives.[6] The aim of this study is to go beyond these prevalent studies by: (1) offering a critical evaluation of the limitations of the approaches associated with the motto "harmony in diversity"; and, (2) exploring how Confucianism may cast light on dialogue in a world of conflict and violence in a more adequate way. Needless to say, Confucianism is a very rich and complex living tradition, which involves many texts and differing interpretations, but it does not have a well-established theory about inter-religious dialogue in a world of conflict and violence. What is presented in this paper is merely one of the possible ways to explore the implications of Confucianism for this rather contemporary issue, and this alternative approach itself has some problems that need to be addressed.

Reconsidering Harmony in Diversity

With regards to the motto "harmony in diversity", it is important to note that it is quoted from Confucius' saying "*jūn zǐ hé ér bù tóng, xiǎo rén tóng ér bù hé*" (君子和而不同, 小人同而不和) recorded in *The Analects* (13.23), which has many English translations.

- D. C. Lau translates the whole verse as: "The Master said, 'The gentleman agrees with others without being an echo. The small man echoes without being in agreement.'"[7]
- According to Arthur Waley, it is to be translated as: "The Master said, 'The true gentleman is conciliatory but not accommodating. Common people are accommodating but not conciliatory.'"[8]
- Wing-tsit Chan's translation reads: "Confucius said, 'The superior man is conciliatory but does not identity himself with others; the inferior man identifies with others but is not conciliatory.'"[9]

Admittedly, the motto "harmony in diversity" itself is an admirable ideal. According to the motto, the true or valuable harmony should include and preserve diversity instead of homogeneity. It respects diversity rather than disregards it or suppresses divergent voices. In other words, the Confucian idea of social harmony is not to be understood as – or reduced to – achieving a certain agreement or uniformity in opinion; instead, harmony involves certain tensions.[10] One may perhaps assume that based on this principle, if everybody can respect each other's distinctiveness or voice, there could be no conflict nor violence. However, there are several critical questions to be raised against this motto:

- In its original context, "harmony in diversity" characterises the personal attitude of the "gentleman" / "superior man" / "noble person" (*jūn zǐ* 君子). One may ask the question whether this principle of

[6] This includes Xin Ru, "'Harmony in Diversity' and Dialogue among Cultures," in *Intercultural Dialogue: In Search of Harmony in Diversity*, ed. Edward Demenchonok, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014: 181-90, and Yao Xinzhong, "From Conflict to Harmony: A Confucian Response to Interfaith Dialogue," lecture delivered at the International Interfaith Centre, Mansfield College, Oxford (14 November 1996), available at: http://iicao.org/iic-resources/lectures/from-conflict-to-harmony-a-confucian-response-to-interfaith-dialogue/.

[7] Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. D. C. Lau, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1979, 122.

[8] Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Arthur Waley, London: Unwin Hyman, 1988 [1938], 177.

[9] Chan Wing-Tsit, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969, 41.

[10] For the Confucian understanding of harmony, see Li Chenyang, *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.

"harmony in diversity", which seems to be primarily a matter of personal attitude, is applicable to the sphere of international, intercultural or inter-religious relations.

- The original context of the motto contrasts the attitude of the "noble person" with the "sameness without harmony" practiced by the "inferior person" or "small man." The question then is: is it realistic to expect all persons or parties involved as "noble persons" or "ladies and gentlemen" who practise "harmony in diversity"? Is it practical (or too naïve) to assume that all people or nations behave like "noble persons"?

- How far can the principle of "harmony in diversity" be practised in a world of conflict and violence? The principle, if practised well by all the parties involved, may contribute to the prevention of conflict, but the problem is whether the principle can be upheld and practised in a post-conflict situation that has involved violence. Does it mean that a noble person may simply say: "I respect the others' violent ways of life, though I do not identify myself with them"? Can this attitude of "harmony in diversity" contribute to post-conflict reconciliation?

- The translation "harmony in diversity" may convey an ideal which is not only too high-sounding but also potentially totalitarian. The term "harmony" can be associated with the musical understanding of the word. This implies that though there are different voices, they complement each other nicely and contribute to a harmonious whole in their respective ways. In order to discern how the diverging voices from all the constituent parts will eventually fit together to form a sort of harmony, one has to assume a rather dubious "transcendent" position, which is above all the constituent parts. The question is not only whether there is such a position or viewpoint, but also who or what can represent this "transcendent" position or viewpoint.

- In a context of conflict and violence, there will be some dissenting voices demanding justice rather than simply accepting the prevalent "harmony" or status quo. How do we deal with these voices of disharmony? In the political sphere, it is quite possible that under the pretext of "harmonious society", any dissenting voice of protest not in harmony with the leitmotiv or melody of "harmonious society", will be suppressed or "harmonised out" in a hegemonic way. Eventually the dissenting voices may be excluded from dialogue or harmony altogether. Is this a proper approach to deal with dialogue in a world of conflict and violence?

In short, the attitude of "harmony in diversity", even if it is applicable to the public sphere, may be too idealistic, optimistic, or even naïve, considering (1) the concrete post-conflict situation; (2) the actual situation of humanity where not all human beings are "ladies and gentlemen"; and (3) the difficulty of discerning or achieving harmony in an idealistic sense.

Considering the possible limitations of "harmony in diversity", one may have to explore if Confucianism can offer an alternative approach to dialogue in a world of conflict and violence. In comparison to the approach based on "harmony in diversity", any alternative approach should be more realistic in three aspects.

- First, its primary aim is to achieve, negatively, the absence of conflict and violence, rather than "harmony" in a positive and idealistic sense.
- Second, it may have to respect the reality that not all people are noble persons and it is possible that the majority are not "ladies and gentlemen" at all.
- Third, this alternative approach should address not merely how to prevent conflict and violence, but how to deal with the conflict and violence that has already taken place. In other words, in order to prevent an escalation of conflict, one has to deal with post-conflict reconciliation.

Regarding the first aspect, this more realistic approach can also be in line with the letter as well as the spirit of the motto "Harmony in Diversity." As the translations of Waley and Chan indicate, it is not necessary to translate and interpret the word "*hé*" (和) in terms of "harmony" (*hé xié* 和諧). Instead, it can be translated as

"conciliatory" which is associated with "reconciliation" (*hé jiě* 和解) or "peace" (*hé píng* 和平) which can be interpreted as co-existence without conflict or violence. This more realistic approach differs from the prevalent approach mainly in the second and third aspects. These are based on the Confucian understanding of the human being, including, respectively, the related understanding of inter-personal conversation, and the Confucian understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation.

The Human Being in Confucian Perspective

The Confucian understanding of the human being differs from the mainstream modern western understanding by emphasising relationality, which is embodied in (1) its emphasis on the social relationships among human persons, and (2) its understanding of the relationship between body and heart/mind (*xīn* 心).

Regarding social relationships, Confucianism advocates a radically relational understanding of being human and emphasises that one's personhood is constituted primarily by one's social relationships. As Henry Rosemont, Jr. puts it, the Confucian understanding of human personhood is mainly in terms of "role-bearing persons" rather than "rights-bearing individuals" which is often associated with modern Western culture.[11]

Regarding the relationship between the body, mind and heart, it is noticeable that early Confucianism used a variety of words to describe the human phenomena, including body (*tǐ* 體), desire (*yù* 欲), emotion (*qíng* 情), will (*zhì* 志), and heart/mind (*xīn* 心).[12] The usage of these terms, especially "body" and "heart/mind", indicates that Confucianism does affirm the distinctive role the heart/mind plays in human personhood and makes a terminological distinction between "body" and "heart/mind". However, unlike the Western mind-body dualism, what Confucianism advocates is a holistic understanding of the human being. As we will see, these two concepts actually refer to two different aspects of the human person, and should not be understood dualistically as two different entities belonging to two separate realms.
The word "heart/mind" refers primarily to the internal organ commonly called the "heart", which, according to Confucianism, is part of the human body and under the influence of the vital force (*qì* 氣) from other parts of the body, including the sense organs such as the ears and mouth, but heart/mind also has the ability to reflect on one's own life and can direct, through the will, the vital force and thus affect our body, especially our facial appearance.[13] Given these considerations, the Chinese word *xīn* 心 is usually translated into English as heart/mind, mind/heart or "heart/mind" in order to reflect the Confucian view that: "The activity of mind cannot be divorced from the feelings of the heart; the cognitive is inseparable from the affective. There are no rational thoughts devoid of feeling, nor any raw feelings lacking cognitive content."[14] Though Confucianism tends to assume that all human beings share this heart/mind equally, heart/mind refers functionally to the cognitive, emotional and evaluative activities of the human person, rather than metaphysically as an eternal soul which is separable and functions independently from the body.[15]

As some contemporary scholars of Confucianism have noticed, this understanding of the human person does not only make Confucianism different from a Cartesian mind-body dualism, but it is also comparable to the contemporary understanding of the relationship between the brain and mind implied in recent scientific developments, especially neuroscience.[16] It is suggested that according to Confucianism, our cognitive function, including moral cognition, is "embodied cognition" because "most ordinary moral judgments and actions are based on moral emotions deriving from involuntary and reactive states of the body."[17] The Confucian emphasis

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[11] Henry Rosemont, Jr., "Rights-bearing Individuals and Role-bearing Persons," in *Rules, Rituals, and Responsibility: Essays Dedicated to Herbert Fingarette*, ed. Mary I. Bockover, La Salle: Open Court, 1991: 71-101.
[12] Shun Kwong-Loi, "Conception of the Person in Early Confucian Thought," in *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy and Community*, eds Kwong-loi Shun and David B. Wang, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 184-186.
[13] Shun, "Conception of the Person in Early Confucian Thought," 188-189.
[14] Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2011, 127.
[15] Donald J. Munro, *The Concept of Man in Early China*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969, 49-83.
[16] For example, Tu Weiming suggests that human knowledge is "embodied knowledge," and the heart/mind in Confucianism is comparable to the "brain" in contemporary science. See Tu Weiming, *Tǐ zhī rú xué: rú jiā dāng dài jià zhí dè jiǔ cì duì huà* 體知儒學：儒家當代價值的九次對話 *[Embodied Knowing: Conversations on the Modern Value of Confucianism]*, Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2012, 241.
[17] Seok Bongrae, *Embodied Moral Psychology and Confucian Philosophy*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013, ix.

on embodied emotion as a necessary or even essential component of the moral mind and moral dispositions is very much in line with the recent scientific studies of moral cognition that show that our moral judgments and emotions are dependent on or affected by the body.[18]

Confucian Virtues for Dialogue

The Confucian relational understanding of human personhood is reflected in its understanding of moral reasoning. It is noted that Confucius actually gave three different answers to the question of what benevolence (*rén* 仁) is. The first one is "[to] love people" (*rén zhě ài rén* 仁者愛人), and the second is "Do not do to others what you would not desire others to do to you" (*jǐ suǒ bù yù, wù shī yú rén* 己所不欲, 勿施於人), which is considered a negative expression of Confucius' own more positive formula that "If one desires to establish oneself, establish others; if one desires to attain a good end, help others to attain their good end" (*jǐ yù lì ér lì rén, jǐ yù dá ér dá rén* 己欲立而立人, 己欲達而達人). The third one is "to control oneself and restore/practice proprieties (*lǐ* 禮) is *rén.*" (*kè jǐ fù lǐ wéi rén* 克己復禮為仁).[19] Putting these three answers together, one may find that Confucian moral rationality implies not only a universalisation principle that all people should wish and work for the well-being of all people, but also a principle of reflective transcendence, which involves self-reflection and thus self-control towards moral actions.[20]

Perhaps one may also note that in line with the Confucian understanding of human personhood outlined above, desire plays an important role in Confucian moral reasoning, not only explicitly in the second answer, but also implicitly in the first and third answers. Etymologically speaking, the word "love" (*ài* 愛) in the first answer includes "heart/mind" (*xīn* 心) at its centre in the traditional Chinese character (though not in the contemporary simplified character 爱) and is thus implicitly associated with desire. The "self-control" in the third answer may include the control of one's desire in regard to the other (including the other's desire) and/or the relevant propriety. This other-regarding character of Confucian ethics is particularly embodied in the Confucian virtue of "reciprocity" (*shù* 恕), which is explained in terms of the so-called "Silver Rule" or "Negative Golden Rule" that "what you yourself do not desire, do not impose on the others" (*Analects* 15:24). The word *shù*, which may be translated as "reciprocity", "altruism", and "other-regarding", may refer to "putting oneself in the other's place."[21] It may also be interpreted as "empathetic understanding of others" because etymologically speaking, the word *shù* 恕 in Chinese consists of two parts – the upper part is *rú* 如 (sameness or likeness) and the lower part *xīn* 心 (heart/mind), and the combination of these parts means placing one's heart in a position similar to that of another person.[22]

Roger Ames succinctly summarises the Confucian relational understanding of the human being in the following way:

> In this Confucian model of the constitutive relations of role-bearing persons, then, we are not "individuals who associate in community," but rather because we associate effectively in community we become distinguished as relationally constituted individuals; we do not "have minds and therefore speak with one another," but rather because we speak effectively with one another we become like-minded and thrive as a family and community; we do not "have hearts and therefore we are empathetic with one another," but rather because we feel effective empathy with one another we become a whole-hearted, self-regulating community.[23]

Given the Confucian relational understanding of being human outlined above, one may understand why Confucianism emphasises social harmony, which is believed to be not only good for society as a whole, but

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[18] Seok, *Embodied Moral Psychology and Confucian Philosophy*, x.
[19] Cheng Chung-Ying, "Confucian Reflections on Habermasian Approaches: Moral Rationality and Inter-humanity," in *Perspectives on Habermas*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Chicago, IL.: Open Court, 2000, 195-233, see especially 206-207.
[20] Cheng, "Confucian Reflections on Habermasian Approaches," 208.
[21] Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 194-200.
[22] Li, *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony*, 139.
[23] Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 75-76.

also vital for the human persons involved. Furthermore, according to the Confucian understanding of the human being, human beings should have the empathetic and communicative ability to form a harmonious community.

A Confucian Approach to Inter-Cultural / Inter-Religious Dialogue

For Confucianism, human rationality is embedded in the human body and thus affected by the bodily emotions and moral dispositions. Human rationality is also tremendously shaped by concrete social relationships. However, this does not necessarily imply a sort of nihilistic relativism or relativistic nihilism that excludes the possibility of cross-cultural and inter-personal communication. This is because according to Confucianism, human rationality in a sense originated from Heaven (*Tiān* 天), who or which endowed people with the virtue of benevolence as well as the capacity for moral reasoning so that they can respond to other people with empathy. All this may imply that even though people have diversified values, cultures, religions, etc., there are certain affinities among human beings as persons who are endowed with the capacity for feeling empathy, sympathy, and compassion. This may be illustrated by making references to the Judeo-Christian tradition. What I would like to mention is not merely the Golden Rule that "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:12 RSV) which echoes the Confucian Silver Rule, but also the teachings in the Hebrew Scriptures that say we should be good to the strangers because we (our ancestors) were strangers in Egypt (e.g. Deut. 24:14-22). Although Christianity has often been intolerant towards some other religions throughout its history, with these scriptural or spiritual resources, together with its experience of being persecuted, Christianity can develop a tolerant and sympathetic attitude towards people of other religious identities.[24] It is noticeable that the reasoning behind this advocacy for tolerance also echoes the Confucian Silver Rule: "Do not do to others what you would not desire others to do to you."

The implications of the Confucian relational understanding of the human being for inter-cultural, including inter-religious dialogue can be summarised below:

- Based on the Confucian understanding of the embodied and relational characteristics of human persons, it is understandable that our rationality is so relational as well as contextual that human cultures can be radically diversified. For this reason, inter-cultural dialogue is necessary.
- Based on the Confucian understanding of the virtues of love and reciprocity, which refer to the capacity of empathy common to all human beings, inter-cultural dialogue remains possible.
- Based on the previous two points, the aim of inter-cultural dialogue is not to achieve uniformity of opinion, but to maintain the harmony in which we can preserve our diversity and thus respective identities. This does not assume or require that all human beings are equally rational or with equal intellectual ability. It is because the aim of inter-cultural dialogue or conversation is to find out not the most rational or convincing argument through rational debate, but the most acceptable solution which may benefit the largest number of people.
- In order to achieve this aim, a sort of propriety (*li*) should be observed and certain self-control or self-discipline is required in the process of dialogue. In the context of inter-religious encounter or dialogue, this propriety or self-control may include respect for the other's basic human rights as well as the practice of tolerance and respect.

Resolving Conflict Through Dialogue

This approach to dialogue is not merely a theory reconstructed by scholars, but also an approach practised by ordinary people which has contributed to the maintenance of social harmony. In 2003, a small group of social scientists conducted a research project on how conflicts were resolved in rural China. Summarising their findings from their field observations, they proposed a term, "*Zhongyong* rationality", which

[24] Lai Pan-Chiu, "Religious Conviction and Tolerance: Fragmentary Reflections on the History of Christianity," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 17:2 (2007): 153-170.

is distinctively informed by Confucianism and yet separable in principle from Confucianism.[25] The word "*zhongyong*" (*zhōng yōng* 中庸) consists of two parts: *zhōng* 中 means literally "the middle", and *yōng* 庸 "commonplace". Since it is reminiscent of Aristotle's "doctrine of the mean", when one of the four books of Confucianism, the book *Zhongyong* 中庸, was translated into English, it was titled *The Doctrine of the Mean*. However, it is quite necessary to clarify that the Confucian advice to "adhere to the middle" does not mean, spatially, the middle point of two poles, but rather to take an appropriate position that avoids extreme measures; in a similar vein, "mean" implies situation-specific and timely rather than the mathematical mean, and the word *yōng* 庸 refers to usefulness, and application.[26] The researchers found that:

> In deliberating upon the most appropriate course of action possible, the individual with a *zhongyong* mode of orientation pays special attention to interpersonal dynamics, weighs the possible consequences of different actions, and strives to maintain harmony in the social world. With this holistic perspective in place, the individual is ready to exercise self-discipline even in seeking personal satisfaction.[27]

This *zhongyong* mode of action or rationality is both "instrumental" and "communicative." On the one hand, it requires a certain calculation and aims at achieving social harmony effectively, but:

> To engage in *zhongyong* action, on the other hand, entails the ability to stand outside of oneself. The Confucian expression is to extend oneself towards others. Viewed from this perspective, *zhongyong* rationality shares at least one common ground with communicative rationality, namely to assume a dialogic mode in social interaction.[28]

It is important to note that this kind of communication is different from the communicative action suggested by some Western philosophers who advocate for a rational debate which aims at arriving at the most logical solution. In contrast, the Confucian approach aims to find a solution acceptable to the parties concerned and thus maintaining social harmony, through understanding not only the reasoning but also the feelings or desires of the parties concerned.

Perhaps I may add that though the research project makes use of the term *zhongyong* to describe this approach to conflict resolution, similar views can be found in some other early Confucian texts. For example, the book of *Xunzi* (荀子) also mentions the proper procedure for reaching some sort of rationality or reasonableness through conversation, including: the expression of one's opinion without hurting the partner's feelings; not taking winning the debate as the goal; and, maintaining a humble, open and fair manner throughout.[29]

The "*zhongyong* rationality" outlined above may be quite useful in preventing conflicts, and to a certain extent can resolve tensions or even some minor conflicts, but it remains unclear as to whether, and how it can properly address a context that is full of violence.

The Confucian Approach to Forgiveness and Reconciliation

In order to address a violent post-conflict situation, especially dialogue among partners already involved in conflict, we may have to consider first the more fundamental issues concerning reconciliation as well as related issues such as apology and forgiveness.

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[25] Cheung Tak-Sing, H. M. Chan, K. M. Chan, Ambrose Y. C. King, C. F. Yan and C. Y. Chiu, "On Zhongyong Rationality: The Confucian Doctrine of the Mean as a Missing Link Between Instrumental Rationality and Communicative Rationality," *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 31:1 (2003): 107-127, esp. 108, 116, 118-124.
[26] Cheung et al, "On Zhongyong Rationality", 113-116.
[27] Cheung et al, "On Zhongyong Rationality", 116.
[28] Cheung et al, "On Zhongyong Rationality", 117.
[29] Shuo Dongfang <<東方朔>> (pen name of Lin Honxing 林宏星), *Hé lǐ xìng zhī xún qiú: Xúnzǐ sī xiáng yán jiū lùn jí* 合理性之尋求：荀子思想研究論集 [*Searching for Reasonableness: Studies of Xunzi's Thought*], Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2014, 247-283.

According to Samuel P. Oliner's analysis of some representative cases of inter-group reconciliation, there are several important elements contributing to reconciliation, including altruism, apology, and forgiveness.[30] According to Oliner's research findings, "there seems to be a linear relationship between empathy, altruistic behavior, love, apology, and forgiveness that frequently leads to reconciliation and a restoration of harmonious relationships."[31] In fact, Oliner has published rather extensively on altruism before.[32] He suggests that altruism manifests in different religious traditions, including Confucianism's Silver Rule.[33] For Oliner, closely related to altruism is empathy, which is the cognitive and/or emotional reaction to the other's pain or danger and plays an important role in the process of reconciliation.[34] In his words,

> Empathy seems to be a crucial ingredient; no real apology or forgiveness, or indeed reconciliation, is possible if it is based on self-interests. Taking the place of the other is what allows people to take the risks necessary for repairing human relations, on both interpersonal and intergroup levels.[35]

Oliner's research seems to indicate that Confucianism, with its emphasis on the virtues of benevolence (*rén* 仁) and reciprocity (*shù* 恕), which may be translated as altruism and empathy respectively, should be very relevant to reconciliation. However, it is equally important to note that Confucianism takes a rather cautious approach to forgiveness.

Concerning the Confucian position on forgiveness and revenge, a *locus classicus* is the conversation in *Analects* 14:36, where Confucius was asked "What do you think of repaying hatred with virtue?" (*yǐ dé bào yuàn* 以德報怨), Confucius' reply was "In that case what are you going to repay virtue with? Rather, repay hatred with uprightness (*yǐ zhí bào yuàn* 以直報怨) and repay virtue with virtue (*yǐ dé bào dé* 以德報德)."[36] Confucius' reply seems to reject not only the position of "repaying hatred with hatred" associated with the principle of "eye for eye and tooth for tooth" (found in the Hebrew Scriptures / Old Testament) but also the position of "repaying hatred with virtue" associated with the Christian advocacy for forgiveness and "love thy enemy" in the New Testament. Confucius' idea of repaying hatred with "uprightness" (*zhí* 直) seems to emphasise justice or righteousness more than forgiveness.

In fact, other than the option of "repay[ing] hatred with uprightness", Confucianism is also open to the other options of "repay virtue with virtue" and "repay hatred with hatred." The *Book of Rites* (*Lǐ Jì* 禮記), a Confucian classic with some parts ascribed to Confucius, records some further details on the supposed rites and social customs of the Zhou dynasty which were treasured by Confucius and his followers as the norms for a harmonious society. In its Chapter 32, it reads, "The Master says: if we repay virtue with virtue, the people are counselled (*mín yǒu suǒ quàn* 民有所勸); if we repay hatred with hatred, the people are reprimanded (*mín yǒu suǒ chěng* 民有所懲)" (translation is the author's own).

Regarding this openness to revenge, there were a number of traditional commentaries on the *Book of Rites*, elaborating how revenge should be carried out. According to a study of these texts and commentaries, Confucianism deals with revenge largely within the framework of the five cardinal relations, which include not only those associated with family or blood relationships (namely parent-child, husband-wife, and brothers, but also the relationships with those not genetically related (namely emperor-subject and friends). If anyone of those who are within the boundary of the five cardinal relations is killed, one has the responsibility to seek revenge on behalf of the deceased. Among these relationships there is certain priority, and the revenge should be done in different ways accordingly. If the revenge is for one's parent, one should proactively chase after the killer and seek revenge anytime and at any cost. If it is for one's brother, one should make oneself ready by carrying a weapon at all times and take revenge whenever the opportunity comes. If it is for one's friend, one

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[30] Samuel P. Oliner, assisted by Piotr Olaf Zylicz, *Altruism, Intergroup Apology, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation*, St Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2008.
[31] Oliner, *Altruism, Intergroup Apology, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation*, 3.
[32] For example, see Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*, New York, NY: Free Press, 1988.
[33] Oliner, *Altruism, Intergroup Apology, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation*, 54-56.
[34] Oliner, *Altruism, Intergroup Apology, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation*, 13-14, 142-150.
[35] Oliner, *Altruism, Intergroup Apology, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation*, 3.
[36] Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 42.

should not risk one's own life for revenge as long as one's parents are still alive or the killer is living in another country. Other than the variety of appropriate approaches to revenge in accordance with the five cardinal relationships, the circumstances of the killing should be taken into consideration as well. Firstly, if it is due to a lawful/ just killing, no revenge is allowed. Secondly, if it is due to an unlawful/ unjust killing, one should let the government arrest the killer and handle them according to the law. However, if no arrest is made, revenge is allowed. Thirdly, if the killing was by mistake, one should try to reconcile first; but if reconciliation is not successful and the killer does not escape to another country, revenge is allowed.[37]

These rather elaborate guidelines on revenge seem to suggest that Confucianism does not have a hard and fast criterion or universal principle on revenge. Instead of taking forgiveness as a "categorical imperative", Confucianism takes maintaining or restoring the social order or harmony as the ultimate aim, and considers forgiveness and revenge in a more practical manner.[38] It affirms that, without excluding the possibility of revenge, one should be open to the possibility of reconciliation when applicable. Although whether, and how revenge may occur depends on a specific situation and the exact relationship involved, the basic principle of justice should be observed and law and order should be maintained whenever possible. It is thus quite fair to say that what Confucianism looks for is basically restorative justice, which takes reconciliation as the ultimate aim of revenge and forgiveness.

Concluding Remarks on Dialogue for Reconciliation

When considering the Confucian approach to reconciliation, perhaps one may recall the Confucian concept of *shù* (恕). In modern Chinese, the word *shù* (恕) is often used to form the expressions meaning "forgiveness", including "*kuān shù*" (寬恕) and "*ráo shù*" (饒恕). However, as is mentioned earlier, the meaning of *shù* (恕), instead of being restricted to the meaning of forgiveness, actually relates to the "reciprocity" in the Silver Rule, which includes on the one hand an empathetic understanding of the other, especially the other's desire and suffering, and on the other hand it is a sort of critical reflection on oneself, particularly one's own desires as well as one's actions. Through this empathetic understanding of others, one may understand deeply the actual inflictions experienced by them, or the reasons behind their inflictions on themselves. Through critical self-reflection, one may examine sincerely whether and how one might have inflicted others—intentionally or not. Based on the Silver Rule, if one desires to be forgiven (or not to be un-forgiven), one has to be forgiving (or refrain from being unforgiving of others). In a similar vein, if I desire to receive a genuine apology I feel I am owed by someone, I should not hold back the genuine apology I owe them. This may lead to a genuine apology as well as its acceptance, fair consideration of appropriate compensation leading towards restorative justice, and effective ways of avoiding future conflict. In short, the virtue of reciprocity (*shù* 恕), which is advocated by Confucianism and can be found in ordinary human beings, can contribute to the formation of a forgiving atmosphere or culture which may benefit the process of peace-building or reconciliation.

Of course, Confucianism is not a panacea. It has its possible limitations and drawbacks. Due to certain historical reasons, the Confucian understanding of human society was quite hierarchical and patriarchal, and this hierarchical relationship may negatively affect conversation or communication among human persons. It is noticeable that the five cardinal relations emphasised by Confucianism, with the exception of the relationship among friends, are hierarchical relations, which will usually make apologies from those of the higher positions (e.g. emperor or father) much more unlikely or difficult than the apologies from those of lower positions (e.g. subject or child). This inequality within the relationship may apply to the relations between husband and wife, or even between males and females in general. The irony is that more often those who have power and authority will hurt those who are inferior in terms of power and position. The forgiveness from the powerless will be easily ignored or even abused by those who are in power. This makes dialogue on a free and equal basis among citizens rather difficult, not to mention the "dialogue" between the ruler and the ordinary people. This sort of

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[37] Li Longxian <<李隆獻>>, *Fù chóu guān dē shěng chá yǔ quán shì: Xiān Qín Liǎng Hàn Wèi Jìn Nán Běi cháo Suí Táng biān* 復仇觀的省察與詮釋：先秦兩漢魏晉南北朝隋唐篇 [*Review and Interpretation of the Views of Retribution: From Pre-Qin to Tang Dynasty*], Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2012, 1-53.

[38] The Confucian cautious approach to forgiveness and reconciliation is supported by some inter-disciplinary studies on the relevant topics. See Lai, "Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Peace-Building," 42-44.

hierarchical or even patronising attitude associated with Confucianism may make dialogue within a society dominated by Confucianism very problematic, but perhaps less so in the inter-cultural or inter-religious dialogues among cultures or religions of equal status in a pluralistic setting. Different from the hierarchical or patronising attitude associated with Confucianism, some religions suggest that the person of the higher status should take the initiative to be humble or to "empty" oneself in order to communicate effectively to those of lower status. This can be found not only in the Christian message of Divine incarnation or accommodation, but also in the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of skillful means, meaning that based on his/ her compassion as well as wisdom, the Buddha or bodhisattva will communicate in different ways in accordance with the levels of understanding of the sentient beings concerned.[39] Perhaps through dialogue with these religions in the global context, Confucianism may be able to overcome some of its own limitations and contribute in a more significant way to the dialogue for reconciliation in a world of conflict and violence.[40]

[39] For a preliminary comparative study of these two concepts from Buddhism and Christianity, see Lai Pan-Chiu, *Dà chéng jī dū jiào shén xué* 大乘基督教神學 [Mahayana Christian Theology], Hong Kong: Logos & Pneuma Press, 2011, 69-102.

[40] An earlier draft of this essay was presented at the 4th SRP Distinguished Lecture and Symposium, organized by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, on 22 September 2018. The author would like thank the conference participants and the anonymous reviewers for their responses and comments.

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