

## Middle Eastern Worldviews Impact China Part 2: Legacy of Proto-Christian and Christian Ideas

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### Abstract

The activities of the Chinese sages operating around the time of Daniel the prophet and after contain information indicative of knowledge about the Divine. The ethical principles advocated by Confucius have a close resemblance to those outlined in the Old Testament and as affirmed and expanded on by the teachings of Christ. There also are the intriguing prophecies of Mencius, which seem to point to a coming Deliverer. Indeed, his birth-star is noted in Chinese astronomical records. The echoes of Judeo-Christian thought contained in folk mythologies and dominant non-Christian religions present themselves as springboards to encourage devotees to experience eternal truths and acknowledge the Creator God.

**Keywords:** Church of East, border ceremony, Chinese sages, Confucius' *jen*, festivals

### Introduction

In the previous paper, the entry of Jewish and Christian influences into China was outlined. In the first century of the present era, Christianity began to impact the region with a rise in influence being felt after the mission of Alopen in CE 635. It had to contend with the well-established indigenous religions (Confucianism and Taoism) and with Buddhism that had entered in the first century too.

Evangelism was spearheaded and supported by the Church of the East, which was located for many years in Iraq. Being found in territories antagonistic to Roman rule, the Christians experienced levels of persecution first under the urging of the Zoroasterism magi. Part of antagonism also was political in that, since the Christianisation of the Roman Empire, Christians everywhere were considered to have allegiances to that empire.

The links with the West were waning on account of the persecution experienced and also because the Roman emperors declared on or influenced doctrinal decisions. Those not subscribing to the declarations were driven from the empire. The opposition endured tended to keep the Church of the East pure and to sustain its missionary spirit. When Muslim rule prevailed over the headquarter territories of the Eastern Church, a different dynamic came to bear, which was not always pleasant.

In China the church adapted to the culture and progressed. However, as seems almost inevitable, militant anti-Christian rulers arose on more than one occasion causing havoc to the church. The first wave of horror was presided over by the Tang dynasty (CE 840-846) and the second by the Ming dynasty (commenced CE 1368). The latter efforts, when combined with the cruel reign of Timur, the Muslim ruler in the homeland territories of the Church of the East, effectively destroyed early Christian influence in China by the end of the fourteenth century.

Remnant groups persisted in border mountainous areas, and Confucianism continued its evolutionary pathway, but carried with it significant content of moral substance that resonated with Christian thought.

The basic position taken towards other philosophies discussed in this essay is dictated by their relationship to Christian concepts in the areas of being, knowing, and acting. Daniel, the prophet, was critically interested in these concepts and spoke of powers that would clash with heaven's principles (Shipton, 2006, pp. 19-37). Many philosophies contain elements of similarity to Christian thought. An insistent question is, Where did these thoughts originate? In this paper, I especially compare Confucianism

and proto-Christian and Christian thought, and seek to identify other traces of contact with God-inspired ideas held in Chinese culture.

### **Proto-Christian and Christian Ideas**

Those Christians accepting both the Old and New Testaments as a valid record of God's dealings with humanity, identify the information given to the Jews as part of their heritage. Hence, Jewish witness and understandings, as far as they reflected those of their Giver, are proto-Christian ideas. It is alleged often, by those of other persuasions, that Christianity was late in appearing. It is true that, in its purest form, it appeared during the ministry of Jesus Christ. However, since He was the Giver of the information recorded in the Old Testament (*The Holy Bible*, 1 Corinthians 10:1-4), the argument loses its force.

Some philosophies undoubtedly have incorporated in their teachings and religious practices remnants of Judeo-Christian thought. Creating a coherent story often must be considered an imaginative construct rather than one supported by heavily documented information. Borrowed ideas are evident in various Asian philosophies, ceremonies, and symbolic representations. Zhi Ming Yuan has illustrated this in a video where he attempts to show parallels between Chinese teachings/stories and the biblical account (seven day week, immortality connected with a tree of wisdom, and lastly divine judgment through a flood in the story of Gong Gong, the God of Water)—(Brandner, 2011, pp. 216-236; Yuan, 2009). I have added a few more examples.

### **Concepts Concerning the Supreme Deity and the Way**

The question of Heaven and the Supreme deity is a concept of considerable significance. The Western Zhou dynasty (1111-771 BCE) replaced the *Ti* (God) of the Shang people (1766-1112 BCE) with Heaven to represent the Supreme deity. The spirits of former kings were seen to be by the side of God, and were considered to have authority to bless and protect their descendants. In time, the status of these former kings grew, and they were even honoured with the title of *Ti*, irrespective of their morality. The God of the ancient Chinese was considered transcendent and the author of absolute justice, and the Giver of revelations in books that predated Confucius. The following quotations illustrate these ideas: **Transcendent** (*Odes*): "Great is *Ti* on High, beholding this lower world in majesty. He surveyed the four quarters [of the kingdom], seeking for someone to give settlement to the people." **Revelation** (*Odes*): "Heaven made its determinate appointment, which [our] two sovereigns received." **Judgment** (*History: To-shih*) "There was the charge to them, 'Cut off Yin.'" And further (*History Chao-kao*) "Great Heaven, *Ti* on high, has changed his decree in favour of his eldest son, and this great dynasty of Yin" (Chiangyin & Fan, 2003, p. 255; Kim, 1991, pp. 213-222).

The Tao (Way) also has some interesting aspects to it and will be commented upon briefly. The sage Lao Zi (possibly contemporary with Confucius and associated with Taoism) called "Dao" [=Tao] by the term "The Almighty" (Feng & English, 1989, p. 27). The word Dao also has the meaning of "the word" and "the way." Both are used in Christian Scripture to describe Jesus (John 1:1, 14; 14:6; Acts 9:2). Lao Zi regarded the Dao as "intangible" or "indefinable" and of ancient origin; in fact, its existence was "before heaven and earth." This entity was considered the creator (Wang & Nelson, 2002, pp. 61-71). We notice in passing that this information corresponds with the statements of the apostle John (John 1:1-4). "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men."

Confucius also called the Dao the Supreme deity and gave alternative names as "love" and "wisdom." Notice as follows: "Yin [visible] and Yang [invisible] are called the Dao; the loving one discovered it, and calls it love; the wise man discovers it, and calls it wisdom." And further "That which

cannot be fathomed in terms of Yin and Yang is called God” (Wang & Nelson, 2002, p. 98). We remember that the Scripture also uses these terms ‘love’ and ‘wisdom’ to refer to God (Proverbs 8; 1 John 4:8). In a somewhat different context, Jesus is called the “Just One” (Acts 22:14), and as such we know him as the Author and Giver of the Decalogue. Taking Jesus as the Just One, we can understand C. S. Lewis equating the Tao with “the sole source of all value judgments,” and which others also have called Natural Law. The absolute values identified by the Tao provide guidelines for “common human law” action, and are the means by which both tyranny and slavery can be avoided, and constitute the means by which we can continue to experience true humanity (Lewis, 1973, pp. 56, 84-86, 95-121). Some examples will be given later on the meaning of the Tao from both ancient Chinese and Hebrew/Christian sources (Table 1).

### **Virtues Taught by the *Classics***

Confucius urged human beings to live a virtuous life for the sake of achieving peace of mind and for the sense of the satisfaction that this would bring through the knowledge of helping others. He said: “A gentleman, in making his plans, thinks of the Way; he does not think of making a living. Even if one tills the soil, he may sometimes suffer hunger; and if one studies, he may be able to earn a high salary. But the concern of the gentleman is about the progress of the Way; he does not worry about poverty” (Creel, 1949, p. 117). Now the Confucian follower placed faith in the Way, as opposed to the Christian, who places faith in a personal God. The former had no need for revelation as he considered that Heaven was immanent in humanity (Lee, 1991, pp. 68-81).

### *Fundamental Concepts*

The wise behaviour approved by Confucius was found in the sage kings (Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties, and particularly the latter). It is described principally by the concept of *li* (proper, acceptable, and prescriptive behaviour according to a standard). This feature is derived from Heaven, which Confucius spoke of as representing a Being capable of meaningful interaction with humans. Obedience to the mandate of heaven meant that one followed the Way. The most significant function of *li* is to achieve harmony (internal and external). As a consequence joy, peace, and comfort could be experienced within and without. The observance of *li* essentially comes from the convinced mind, because the individual has internalized the values it represents. This means that joy arises spontaneously from observing its ways (Lee, 1991, pp. 32, 37, 52-59).

Confucius recognized those who followed the Way as gentlemen. The outward expression of the gentleman or superior man was referred to as *li*, and the inner ideal as *jen* (goodness, humaneness, love). Confucius advocated allegiance to principle and valued education, which was for the cultivation of character and the development of virtues such as loyalty, truthfulness, sincerity, good faith, justice, and kindness (Lee, 1991, p. 129).

The supreme value in the Confucian system is humanness or humane behaviour leading to responsibility and harmony with others. This can be understood more fully by considering its supporting components: loyalty (*chung*) and reciprocity (*shu*). These two principles deal with the individual and society, respectively. *Chung* relates to loyalty to one’s moral nature and *shu* deals with the relationship of the individual to society (reciprocity). Now in the Confucian system, loyalty is offered to family and to rulers. The moral standard adopted was very high, being expressed in fairness, modesty, right action, faithfulness, and preferring others rather than oneself. In reciprocity there is magnanimity in giving and receiving, which is expressed in the Confucian version of the Golden Rule: “Not to do to others what one does not want done to oneself” (Bush, 1997, p. 15; Eliade, 1987, pp. 15-24; Lee, 1991, pp. 389-398). The fundamentally good person is concerned for the welfare of others and is ready to help; such people are benevolent and act altruistically (i.e., through love). Confucius did not agree with the principle advocated by Lao Zi that injury should be repaid with kindness. His motto was rather “Recompense injury with justice,

and recompense kindness with kindness” (Aitken, 1908; *Analects* 14:34). In this respect, he had not reached the ideal taught by Christ (Matthew 5:38-42). He said: “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (verse 44).

Confucius regarded filial piety and brotherly respect as the greatest virtue arising from *jen*. Serving the parents in this life and honouring them in death according to the proper rites (*li*) should come, he considered, from an answering sincerity from within. At all times, respect, parental reverence and rejoicing at the gift of continued life were regarded as appropriate actions. Any advice offered to parents was to be given in meekness and respect (Bush, 1997, p. 14; Eliade, 1987, p. 17).

Confucius taught that sincerity of action was the hallmark of the superior man. Such action sprang from inner thoughts focused on virtue, and was expressed irrespective of those present. In practical terms, this meant that speech was truthful, promises were kept, and duties were discharged faithfully so as to achieve harmonious living (Aiken, 1908).

Proper outward behaviour (*li*) has been dealt with briefly. This covered human conduct involving obligations, rules, rites, and ceremonies involving all aspects of life. Neglect of these was considered impious and ultimately against the will of Heaven (Aiken, 1908). For Confucius, keeping these guidelines was the mark of the superior man. In summary, respect for these universals had as its goal “harmony of the natural and social order, respect for the past, and the sanctity of family life” (Lee, 1991, p. 393).

#### *Comparisons of Principles Taught in the Classics and Proto-Christian and Christian Scriptures*

Knowledge of a Divine being may come through promptings of conscience, reason, the principles evident in nature (Romans 2:14-16; 10:16-18), through allusions to a Supreme Being made in traditional religions (Acts 17:22, 23), or through the words of their great thinkers (White, 1940, pp. 464, 465). The latter may have unwittingly spoken words inspired by the Source of wisdom (Proverbs 8:1, 22-28). I will develop this idea using Confucius as an example, and taking the fundamental principle on which he constructed his philosophy—*jen* or benevolence (please see Table 1).

The observance of *li* means that one already possesses *jen*, or desirable attitudes and behaviours. And it follows that if one has *jen*, then *li* will be demonstrated in action. This is because actions arise from the attitudes and values espoused (character traits). *Jen* motivates and directs an individual to think and feel the right thing, whereas *li* guides and regulates one to think and feel the right in the correct way. Even sacrificing life to achieve *jen* is commendable. Confucius considered filial piety (*hsiao*) was a foundational expression of *jen*, as was brotherly love (*ti*). All the values, attitudes, and behaviours of *jen* are harmonized in *li*, which is at the centre of realizing proper relationships with the family, community, and the world (Cheng, 1991, p. 300; Tan, 2013, pp. 74, 76–78, 80, 81, 95, 99, 101).

The instruction given by the apostle Paul to be conscious of and responsive to one another’s problems represents a compassionate attitude, and indicated that actions come from an empathetic base. Those travelling this pathway are fulfilling the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2), because they are being led by the Holy Spirit. Confucius appears to have been travelling along the pathway lighted by Christ, which has been commented on by others (Wang, Nelson & Shipton, 2014, pp. 180-193). He reflected a “shadowy” monotheism, and his teachings contain all the great ethical teachings found in the words of Christ (Giles, 1976, pp. 18, 25, 46). This idea is illustrated by observing the parallels between the concepts of *jen* and *agape* (Table 1).

The concept of *agape* is foundational to Christian thought. It is an unselfish love that originates from God (Lee, 1991, pp. 258-273). *Agape* represents a divine quality (1 John 4:8, 16), which we experience as a consequence of Christ’s sacrifice. We then act as channels to transmit this understanding to others (White, 1911, p. 601; 1941, pp. 328, 419). Confucian *jen* has some connection to

**Table 1. Comparison of Characteristics and Attitudes Displayed by Individuals with *jen* and *agape*\***

<b>Characteristics and Close Associates of <i>jen</i></b>	<b>Characteristics of <i>agape</i></b>
<b>Essential Qualities: “Brotherly Love” and “Filial Piety”</b>	<b>Essential Qualities: “Loving God and Others”</b>
1.	1. Kind, gentle, courteous. Emotions under control of reason
2. Respect others and count as important—means show empathy, sincerity, reverence, dutifulness, deferential behaviour • Live according to the roles and responsibilities assigned to you • Desires to benefit others and help reach goals	2. Not jealous/envious • Empathetic and seeks to promote happiness in others
3. Shows courage, strength, decisiveness, simplicity and deliberateness in speech	3. Not boastful
4. Not selfish	4. Not proud, conceited or selfish
5. Tolerant, trustworthy, diligent, generous. Contented in all circumstances	5. Longsuffering/patient. Not irritable or given to anger
6. Practices reciprocity—Golden Rule	6. Puts best construction on acts and statements of others
7. Is not associated with a ‘glib tongue’ and ‘ingratiating appearance’	7. Puts others first
8. Not anxious or afraid	8. Gentle and calm
9. Shows filial piety, reverence, trustworthiness	9. Do not expose weaknesses of others. Defends them
10. Promotes the right (the Way)	10. Shows pleasure in others’ virtues
11. Helps others to become good and not evil	11.
12. Do not compromise beliefs and principles to achieve harmony	12. No pleasure found in unrighteous attitudes/acts, but pleasure found in goodness

Note: \* Analysis based on Cheng (1991), Tan (2013), and Nichol et al., (1957) on 1 Corinthians 13.

Heaven, but essentially comes from within the human sphere. It is connected with the development and expression of other virtues, especially filial piety. This love is channelled to others too (Lee, 1991, pp. 263-264). Hence, it is similar to – but not identical to – *agape*. The imperfect individual, in the Confucian system, on realizing the problem, can become perfect by discipline, and hence express his/her true identity (Cheng, 1991, pp. 297, 301).

Confucius also made great statements about beneficence, mercy, magnanimity, justice, good faith, and veracity and love (Table 2). It is significant to note that all these are illustrated in the Old Testament Scriptures, which were written prior to his life activities.

It is readily observed from this comparison that there are some striking similarities in emphasis made by Confucius and by those writing as God’s appointed messengers. The meaning of some of the comparisons may differ in emphasis, but the general tenure of the statements is similar.

Admitting that much information had been lost by the time of Confucius, I will nevertheless briefly outline some of the qualities ascribed to the Heavenly Source of wisdom in the *Classics* under several headings in order to highlight sections in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Comparison of Principles Supported by Ancient Chinese Classics and Hebrew/Christian Sources (modified from Lewis, 1973)

Ancient Chinese Quotes	Hebrew/Christian Quotes
<b>Law of General Beneficence</b>	
<p>“Zi Gong asked, saying, ‘Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one’s life?’ The Master said, ‘Is not RECIPROCITY such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.’” <i>Analects</i> bk 15, chap. 24.</p>	<p>“Love thy neighbour as thyself.” Lev. 19:18.*  “Love him [the stranger] as thyself.” Lev. 19:33, 34.  “Do for others what you want them to do for you.” Matt. 7:12, GNT.</p>
<b>Law of Special Beneficence</b>	
<p>“The Master replied, ‘That parents, when alive, be served according to propriety; that, when dead, they should be buried according to propriety.’” <i>Analects</i> bk 2, chap. 5.  “The Master said ... regard to the young, to treat them tenderly.” <i>Analects</i> bk 5, chap. 26.</p>	<p>“Rise up before the hoary head and honour the face of the old man.” Lev. 19:32.  “Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.” Col. 3:21, NKJV.</p>
<b>The Law of Justice</b>	
<p>“Now the man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others.” <i>Analects</i>, bk 6, chap. 30.</p>	<p>“But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people, and took from them bread and wine .... Yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so, because of the fear of God.” Neh. 5:15, NKJV.</p>
<b>The Law of Good Faith and Veracity</b>	
<p>“... four of the characteristics of a superior man—in his conduct of himself, he was humble; in serving his superior, he was respectful; in nourishing the people, he was kind; in ordering the people, he was just.” <i>Analects</i> bk 5, chap. 16.</p>	<p>“You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.” Exod. 22:28, NKJV.  “‘You shall not swear falsely, but perform your oaths to the Lord.’” Matt. 5:33, NKJV.</p>
<b>The Law of Mercy</b>	
<p>“Zeng Zeng said, ‘The rulers have failed in their duties, and the people consequently have been disorganized, for a long time. When you have found out the truth of any accusation, be grieved for and pity them, and do not feel joy at your own ability.’” <i>Analects</i>, bk 19, chap. 19.</p>	<p>“Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles.” Prov. 24:17, NKJV.  “Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Execute true justice, show mercy and compassion everyone to his brother.’” Zech. 7:9, NKJV.</p>
<b>Law of Magnanimity</b>	
<p>“The Master said, ‘With sincere faith he unites the love of learning; holding firm to death.’” <i>Analects</i> bk 8, chap. 8.</p>	<p>“For wisdom is a defense as money is a defense, but the excellence of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to those who have it.” Eccl. 6:12, NKJV.</p>
<b>Law of Love</b>	
<p>“The Master said [about benevolence], ‘It is to love men.’” <i>Analects</i>, bk 12, chap. 22.  “This is what is called love: to establish oneself in Dao and desire to establish others in Dao as well.” <i>Analects</i>, bk 12, chap. 2.  “Now love is the most honourable dignity conferred by Heaven, and the safest home in which man should dwell.” <i>The Works of Mencius</i>, bk 2, pt I, chap. VII, 2.</p>	<p>“Therefore love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Deut. 10:19, NKJV.  “Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy ... does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil....” 1 Cor. 13:4–8, NKJV.  “Master, what is the great commandment in the law? ‘... love the Lord thy God ... and thy neighbour as thyself.’” Matt. 22:36–39.</p>

Note: Quotes from the *Analects* were taken from the Chinese Text Project website using the translation by James Legge (<http://ctext.org/analects>). \*Where the Bible version is not specified, the KJV is quoted.

### *Heaven Loves*

The most fundamental characteristic defining God is that He is love (1 John 4:8, 16). This is the *agape* type, which uniquely belongs to God. Those who recognize this quality are channels of such love in their commitment to God and relations with their fellow travelers (Matthew 22:36-40). God's love for humanity was expressed in His giving of himself, through Jesus, to rescue individuals from the penalty of sin (John 3:16). Unmistakably related thoughts appear in the *Classics*. The following statements are made: "Heaven loves the people, and the sovereign should reverence this mind of Heaven." And "There is the great God, does He hate any one? God does not hate any man" (Legge, 1983a). In the traditional Confucian thinking, both heaven and earth are filled with *jen* (principle of benevolence). This means that when the human mind is in tune with heaven and earth, love and filial piety will prevail (Cheng, 1991, p. 300; Lee, 1991, pp. 159-170). This is a great concept if we think of the God of heaven as the source of love. The Law of Love outlined in Table 1 reinforces the thoughts expressed.

### *Offenses Pardoned/Mercy*

The pardoning of offenses is the work of a merciful God. Mercy flows from compassion and finds its true basis in the *agape* type love (Ephesians 2:4-6). God's love as expressed in his compassion and mercy find their true companion in justice (Isaiah 54:7, 8, 10; White, 1940, p. 762). In fact, mercy and justice are the foundations of God's throne and cannot be separated (Psalm 89:14). In ancient Chinese thought, forgiveness was talked about briefly in the *Yi Jing* under the heading of deliverance and the work of the Holy Man. "Thunder and rain set in: the image of deliverance. Thus the Son of the King pardons offenses and forgives sins." And later speaking of the Holy Man, it is recorded: "It is only the Holy Man who understands how to press forward and how to draw back. He knows life and death as well, yet does not deviate from the righteous Way. The Holy Man alone can attain this." The superiority of this Holy Person is explained further: "The Holy Man teaches with the Dao [Word] of God, and all under heaven surrenders to Him" (Wu, 1996, pp. 14, 50, 86).

Neither Confucius nor Mencius accepted identity with the Holy Man (Wang & Nelson, 2002, p. 106). They also did not entertain the thought that humans needed to be redeemed or required help from a supernatural entity. Confucius did not comment on the nature of humans specifically. Mencius held that human nature was basically good and that sagehood could be achieved through individual effort (Creel, 1949, p. 133; Lee, 1991, pp. 159-170). In contrast, the sage Hsün Tzu (298–238 BCE) asserted that humankind was evil and that goodness could be acquired through training (Creel, 1949, p. 208). This development illustrates the evolution taking place in Confucian thought that has continued to the present day. In contrast, the Christian sees The Holy Man as Christ.

One is left to wonder whether these imperfect expressions were remnants of the truth that had been lost by the Chinese from the dawn of time and that the apostles enunciated in later years. The apostle Paul said: "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him" (Ephesians 1:7-10).

It is instructive to learn that the ancient Chinese pictographs are full of information familiar to Christians. They tell us of the fall of the progenitors of the race and of God's rescue plan in magnificent and imaginative ways that are in accordance with the biblical record (Nelson & Broadberry, 1982, pp. 13-15, 65-90).

### *Law of Righteousness/Justice*

In *The Shu Jing* the advice was given: "If we [who] are charged with government do not treat parties who proceed to such wickedness as offenders, the law given by Heaven to people will be thrown

into great disorder or destroyed” (Legge, 1983b). The nature of this law was not understood precisely, but it was held that there was a code of justice. It was thought that sincere scholars could understand these virtues; for the fundamental truths of the universe could be found in “our hearts, in traditional ethical codes, and in the physical universe as well” (Schmidt et al., 1999, pp. 398, 402). The apostle Paul recognized similar thinking among the philosophers of his day when he recorded: “For when the Gentiles, who do not have the law, are a law to themselves, and who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them” (Romans 2:14, 15, NKJV). Indeed, the elements of the law of justice listed in Table 1 show a nice correspondence with those in the Ten Commandments, where love and consideration of one’s fellows is the essence (Deuteronomy 10:12-19).

When we consider the ancient Chinese and Confucian system of thought, there are many challenges for the Christian, but there also are many connecting points. Christ and the prophets made many statements that can be linked to Confucian concepts. The approach taken by some practitioners, in identifying and using similarities between Confucian and Christian thought, can be illustrated by taking an example (others exist).

Comparisons can be made regarding those who discount or throw away *jen*. “If the princes do not set their wills on benevolence [*jen*], all their days will be in sorrow and disgrace, and they will be involved in death and ruin.” The ruin of those who neglect benevolence is similar to those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit. “Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy *against* the Spirit will not be forgiven men” (Matthew 12:31). Further advice given by Confucius was: “Heaven produced the virtue that is in me.” And “Now the man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to enlarge himself, he seeks also to enlarge others. To be able to judge of others by what is nigh in ourselves;—this may be called the art of virtue.” These quotes contain similar thoughts to those spoken of in Scripture as being the work of God. The Holy Spirit moves the believer to forgiveness: “However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). And further, “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (Matthew 6:14). In this and related ways, L. C. Wu sought to establish that the Confucian concept of *jen* (humanness) and the ministry of the Holy Spirit share similarities. The Christian life can begin only after the inspiration of the Spirit, which is unseen; this is the same for humanness (*jen*)—a change inside the individual must take place first before outward evidence is seen (Sumiko, 2000, pp. 281-286; Legge, 1983c).

The similarities noted between Confucian and proto-Christian and Christian thought is explained by one writer as follows. “That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.’ The world has had its great teachers, men of giant intellect and wonderful research, men whose utterances have stimulated thought, and opened to view vast fields of knowledge; and these men have been honored as guides and benefactors of their race. ... as far as their teaching is true, do the world's great thinkers reflect the rays of the Sun of Righteousness. Every gem of thought, every flash of the intellect, is from the Light of the world” (White, 1940, pp. 464, 465).

### **The Border Ceremony**

In the time of the Babylonian kings, Daniel the prophet reminded Belshazzar “the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever He chooses” (Daniel 5:21). So, too God had his hand over the kingdom of China. It appears that the sage Mencius may have recognized this when he said: “They who accord with Heaven are preserved, and they who rebel against Heaven perish.” He continued to comment about the first three dynasties as follows: “It was by love that the three dynasties gained the thrones, and by not being loving that they lost them.” Then, in a concluding remark he said: “To revere and honor the way of Heaven is the way ever to preserve the favoring of Heaven” (Legge,

1983d). In speaking of Heaven, Mencius, like Confucius, considered it an “impersonal intelligence;” (Creel, 1949, p. 114). However, this was not a consistent view.

Well before the time of Confucius, the rulers of China had honoured God in the Border Sacrifice by offering an unblemished bullock to ShangTi, the Heavenly Ruler. This sacrifice ostensibly had been offered since before the first dynastic rule began in 2205 BCE, for the Emperor Shun is said to have sacrificed to ShangTi. [The term ShangDi (Ti), or Heavenly Ruler, is the earliest Chinese name for God and is similar to the Hebrew word for God, Shaddai (the Almighty)—(Nelson, Broadberry & Chock, 1997, p. 115).] The sacrifice location was moved to the outskirts of Beijing in the fifteenth century and housed in specially constructed edifices that still stand. In the Temple of Heaven, no idol was (or is) found, but an inscription proclaimed “Heavenly Sovereign ShangTi.” At the winter solstice (about December 22) a magnificent ceremony took place (until 1911) with associated animal sacrifices. The true significance of the ceremony had been lost in its fullness even by the time of Confucius (Nelson & Broadberry, 1982, pp. 13-15). However, its continuance showed a basic reverence for maintaining harmony through acknowledging a superior spiritual force (Schmidt et al., 1999, p. 398). There is evidence that this impersonal view of God did not always exist. For example, in the Zhou dynasty (1111-256 BCE; Western and Eastern), Heaven was thought of as the name for the revered ancestors, who influenced the fortunes of the living (Creel, 1949, pp. 116, 117).

The record of the recitation of the singers at the Border Sacrifice (presumably of great antiquity) indicates the attitude of the worshippers towards ShangTi. “To Thee, O mysteriously-working Maker, I look up in thought. How imperial is the expansive arch (where Thou dwellest) .... With the great ceremonies I reverently honour Thee. Thy servant, I am but a reed or willow; my heart is but as that of an ant; yet I received Thy favoured decree, appointing me to the government of the empire. ... Oh that Thou wouldest vouchsafe to accept our offerings, and regard us, while we worship Thee, whose goodness is inexhaustible!” (Legge, 1852, pp. 24, 25). In speaking of Heaven and ShangTi in these terms, we need to understand that Confucius was not speaking of a personal God, but rather of the source of life and moral order in the universe. The sacrifice did however commemorate the “origin of life itself,” about which Confucius unfortunately declined to talk (Lee, 1991, pp. 182–212).

It has been noted by some that the ceremony is reminiscent of sacrifices made at the entrance to the Garden of Eden by the first human family. Many years ago, it seems that the ceremony was restricted to the emperor, so that the common people were denied the privilege of worshipping God, and other practices developed (Giles, 1976, pp. 18, 25; Nelson & Broadberry, 1982, pp. 13, 14, 20, 21, 94, 95; Richardson, 1985, pp. 63, 64). Despite this, the Chinese *Classics* hold many useful ideas about a Creator God, His good laws, and how to live a virtuous life. Undeniably, much God-associated knowledge about the God of Heaven had been lost by the time of Confucius and Mencius.

## **Ideographs**

The connection between ideas expressed in ancient Chinese ideographs with the biblical record has been noted by scholars in considerable detail (Nelson & Broadberry, 1982, pp. 27-131). This should not be surprising since the world-wide flood was not more than an estimated several centuries before the beginning of Chinese history (2205 BCE).

The ancient Chinese pictographs appear to carry their own significant account of a basal understanding that a personal God created humankind using His own hands and then spoke life into the clay model (Nelson & Broadberry, 1982, pp. 29-31). For example, the concept of a beginning is featured as two individuals in addition to the symbol for glorious; the ideograph for robe is made of two elements, clothes, and God (Nelson & Broadberry, 1982, pp. 49, 83). The creation of the progenitors of the race is evident in the words “jen tan” meaning “the day of creation of man” and the expression “ling ch’en” referring to the time when the “soul or breath of life was infused into the mortal form of man.” Even the

rest day memorial of creation is remembered in the words “jin jih” referring to “the birthday of mankind.” Significantly, in the New Year’s holiday remembrance season, this event coincides with the seventh day of the first lunar month (Oss, 2012, pp. 92, 93).

Greed is illustrated by a woman standing under two trees; a big boat is featured as one with eight occupants; and justice has the individual connected with the symbol of a lamb (Brandner, 2011, p. 223; Nelson & Broadberry, 1982, pp. 49, 83). One of the two sacrifices regularly held was to the “Supreme Being” (Oss, 2012, p. 105). Other parallels with the Christian story have been noted.

## **Prophets/Sages**

Jesus’ purpose in coming to the earth at His first advent was to offer salvation to all peoples. Isaiah the prophet indicated this in the following words: “I will give You [His servant] as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6). In trying to answer the question whether this ‘light’ came to the ancient Chinese, we might usefully analyze the Chinese words ‘to understand or know.’ The relevant pictographs mean ‘to understand the Dao [the Word, the Way].’ A further analysis of the characters ‘to understand’ indicates that it is represented by an arrow coming from a speaking mouth, perhaps God’s mouth. When the sages prefaced their remarks by ‘Heaven [God] said’ or ‘ShangDi [God, the Heavenly Ruler] said,’ this could be taken to indicate a prophetic message. Those involved in transmitting these messages have been recorded by Han Yu (CE 768-824) in his article “On the Dao” as follows: “What I call the Dao [Way] is this: Yao taught to Shun; Shun taught Yu; Yu taught Tang; Tang taught the Duke of Zhou; the Duke of Zhou taught Confucius; Confucius taught Mencius. When Mencius died, the Dao [Way] is no longer taught in full anymore” (Wang & Nelson, 2002, pp. 12-14). This can be taken to mean there was an unbroken line of witness from Yao to Mencius. The meaning of the term Dao or Tao for Confucius was simply the ideal way or road for a wise individual or ruler to take. The task of following the Way was accomplished by using high moral principles to avoid antagonism, suffering, and bitterness, so as to achieve harmony and to benefit society. The term took on metaphysical connotations in its later development (Creel, 1949, pp. 112, 123-125).

The term ShangDi (Ti) is the earliest Chinese name for God, and is similar to the Hebrew word for God, Shaddai (the Almighty)] (Nelson, Broadberry & Chock, 1997, p. 115). The connection with the biblical record is strengthened further when we consider that for some experts, the world-wide flood was not more than an estimated several centuries before the beginning of Chinese history (2205 BCE). This could help to explain why the pictograph for ‘boat’ is a vessel with eight people in it. Furthermore, the Chinese legendary person Nu-wa (similar pronunciation to Noah) is considered by some as the progenitor of humanity, and two following patriarchs on their honour roll are Shen Nong and Fu Xi. These patriarchs can be thought to correspond to the two honourable sons of Noah, Shem and Japheth (Lin, 1993, p. 15). Now Shen Nong has been credited by some with inventing agricultural tools and useful herbal remedies, whereas Fu Xi is credited with discovering the art of fishing with nets and of being the author of *Yi Jing*, the oldest written record of the Chinese. It was not long after these events that the crisis at the Tower of Babel occurred and those speaking the same language were scattered to the ends of the earth (Wang & Nelson, 2002, pp. 16, 17). While these speculations are attractive, there are variant views on the subject, with no settled conclusion (Hutton, 2008, 518-526).

Since God seeks to reach all people groups, is it possible that He spoke to the Chinese through their own sages? Jesus’ purpose in coming to the earth at His first advent was to offer salvation to all peoples, as indicated in His introductory sermon (Luke 4:18, 19). Some have held that Confucius foresaw the coming of Christ in words he uttered to the effect that “in the west the most holy” would be found. It is argued that this statement helped Emperor Ming-ti arrange an expedition to the West some six decades after the birth of Christ, in search of the golden man seen in his dream (Ward, 1823, p. 108). However, the truth of this belief perhaps cannot be assessed realistically.

This speculation aside, Mencius is considered the greatest of the sages who studied under a disciple of Zi Si, Confucius' grandson. He spoke of the sacred doctrines handed down by previous sages. He went on to produce a time line of events from Yao (c. 2253 BCE) to Wen or Chang (1132 BCE), and then commented that around 500 years after Confucius' death (479 BCE), a significant King would arise. This prophecy ran until around CE 22 and has parallels to that of Daniel of biblical fame (Wang & Nelson, 2002, pp. 31-35).

Some believe that Mencius was saying that if the God of Heaven never failed in the past to raise up someone to transmit his Tao, He would surely send another King to teach His Way in the future after the passing of Confucius. In the year CE 22, the last emperor of the Western Han dynasty was reigning and the dynasty was not great. This leads some to conclude that Mencius was perhaps unwittingly referring to the coming of another King, Christ the Saviour, as prophesied by Daniel who lived at the same time as Confucius (Wang & Nelson, 2002, p. 34). Indeed, the recognition that there were both unsolvable mysteries and corrupt practices in society perhaps led Mencius to say: "It is said in the Book of History [*Shu Jing*] 'We have waited for our Prince. When our Prince comes, we may escape from the punishments under which we suffer'" (Legge, 1983e). This appears to echo Zechariah's words "Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). Jesus affirmed the scope of this prophecy in his answer to Pilate's question: "Are you a king then?" He said, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." (John 8:37). The promise of a king is to everyone, including the Chinese.

We well remember that the wise men (rich noblemen and philosophers) that came to honour the birth of Christ were from the East, and came in response to the guidance offered by a celestial sign (Matthew 2:2). Now I am not suggesting these wise men were Chinese. In the astronomical records of China (5 BCE), it is recorded that a comet was clearly visible for over 70 days, and its appearance was associated with unusual alignments of other heavenly bodies. Tradition has it that the wise men visiting Jesus were Magi who came from northern Persia or other areas under Zoroastrian influence (Humphreys, 1995; Some Notes ... Chinese star). The news of their visit to Bethlehem could have gone to China, bearing in mind the mutual strong interest in astronomy. Tradition has it that the apostle Thomas baptized the wise men and also introduced the gospel to the Chinese (Baum & Winkler, 2003, p. 46).

## **Folk Mythologies**

The masterful efforts of Alexander Hislop (1916) form a reasonable foundation for the proposition that movement of uninspired ideas have flowed into the Christian church as a contaminating stream. The opposite trend is also a real possibility. Several examples will be offered, but without conclusive proof.

### *The Maitreya to Come*

The concept of Maitreya, the merciful one, arose in India where images appeared around 350 BCE (Gordon, 1993, pp. 27). The prophecy of his coming is contained in the Diamond sutra, which has been variously translated and interpreted (Dhyana Master Hua, 2014; Gordon, 1993, pp. 31, 32; Zürcher, 1982, pp. 1-75). It is believed that this Buddha will appear after an immense period of time. His actual appearance will coincide with the commencement of the era of the golden age of acceptance of his teachings. Hence, he is a symbol of hope. Those who hear him preach then will be saved (Overmeyer, 1988, pp. 110-134; Zürcher, 1982, pp. 23-47).

In China the Maitreya Buddha (Mi-li Fo or Mi-lo) is classically the Laughing Buddha who made his appearance around the end of the first millennium CE as this representation. He has experienced many incarnations in China, the most famous being during the Tang and Wu-Tai Dynasties (CE 907-1060). Ideas of his imminent return inspired popular rebellions among the people. Most now hold he is in the Tusita

Heaven, as he has not yet entered the final stage of his journey (Eberhard, 1986, pp. 100, 101; Mi-Lo-Fwo; Overmeyer, 1988, p. 114; Seidel, 1984, pp. 161-174).

The teachings about Maitreya have been influenced by Taoist eschatology, so that marvellous accounts about the end of the world have been invented involving scenes of apocalyptic battles, salvation of a minority, judgment, and the establishment of an ideal dwelling place (parallels to Christian thought). In medieval China, the teachings took on the aspect of an imminent messiah in periods of temporal turmoil and decay, and to serve political purposes (Zürcher, 1982, pp. 2-6, 13, 14).

The Buddhists were not the only group seeking salvation from the chaos being experienced. Taoists traditions about the coming of great harmony began in China in 3 BCE with the worship of the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwang mu—Goddess of Immortality), although the date for the emergence of more serious messianic traditions often is placed much later (second century). The coming of a true king bringing harmony can be traced to Confucian thought, but it was taken on by popular movements within the Taoist tradition in times of political uncertainty and stress. Some dynasties sought to make their rule legitimate by adopting messianic beliefs (Mollier, 2013, pp. 94, 95; Monaghan, 2014, p. 73; Seidel, 1984, pp. 161-174).

Thoughts of a coming Messianic figure may ultimately have derived from concepts expressed in Christian literature (e.g., Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 61:1-3), but remains conjectural.

### *Festivals*

The Chinese observe many festivals. Some of these, such as the Ghost Festival, contain linkages to the beliefs held by certain Christian faith communities. Some of these beliefs are based on tradition rather than biblical advice. For example, the Feast of the Assumption (Catholic) and the Ghost Festival are both held on August 15 (Ghost Festival; Holweck, 1907). The popular use of decorated eggs at festivals and times of rejoicing in China has its associates in some Christian circles, where at Easter the use of hot cross buns and eggs are familiar associates (Painting Eggs, 2012; Eberhard, 1986, pp. 90, 91; Hislop, 1916, pp. 104-109). However, both these practices have non-Christian origins (Holweck, 1907; Ruthven, 2013, chap. 3).

Nevertheless, there are elements associated with the Ghost Festival that have parallels to some biblical understandings. The Ghost Festival is distinct from other festivals where the living pay homage to the dead (Qingming—spring and Chung Yeung—autumn). These grave sweeping festivals can be used to reinforce belief in filial piety, which is so important in Chinese society and upheld fervently by informed Christians (Ng, 1994, pp. 69-78). The ceremony can be used to show how filial piety can be strong, rooted in *agape*, without the interfering crutch of the doctrine of life after death. It echoes the filial piety shown by the Heavenly Parent for His earthly children.

### **Concluding Remarks**

It does not seem preposterous to suggest that in the ceremonies, ideographs, and even some festivals the Chinese people preserved imperfect remembrances of a covenant with Heaven, which pointed to the coming of the King. There is great encouragement to think along these lines, as it is observed that those holding to ancient Confucian beliefs give a more ready response to the gospel (Huang, 2009, pp. 267-271).

God calls all people through conscience, reason, and the witness of nature; special appeals can be made through their own philosophers and prophets/sages who may be unwitting ambassadors for Him. There perhaps never has been a time when the true Light, Jesus, has not been shining in China. Finding effective ways to utilize traditional stories and historical details to lead modern hearers to the God of all knowledge is the real challenge. It is an endeavour that will deliver positive results, as the apostle Paul

demonstrated at Mars' Hill (Acts 17:16-34). On seeing the unknown god's altar, he referred his audience to the legendary story of Epimenides of Crete, who supposedly rid Athens of a plague by offering sacrifices of all the sheep (in a selected flock) that lay down in a meadow. An altar was erected to commemorate the deliverance by a god not named. Paul then preached to them about the true God, and finished by quoting from the poet Aratus ("For we are also His offspring"—v. 28). The pagan poet was speaking about Zeus or Jupiter, but Paul interpreted his saying to mean that the quote was properly attributed to the true God (Bulkley, 1802, pp. 453-461). There are many sayings and springboards in Chinese culture/philosophy that could be used to serve a similar purpose.

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