



# Global Faculty Initiative

**The Faculty Initiative  
seeks to promote the integration  
of Christian faith and academic disciplines  
by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars  
across the spectrum of faculties  
in research universities  
worldwide.**

[www.globalfacultyinitiative.net](http://www.globalfacultyinitiative.net)

Disciplinary Brief

**THE CREATED UNIVERSE AND NATURALISTIC COSMOS: A CROSS-CULTURAL CONVERSATION WITH A CHINESE THEOLOGIAN**

K. K. Yeo

Harry R. Kendall Professor of New Testament at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary

Affiliate Professor, Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois

---

I find Prof. Biggar's "Order" essay enlightening and evocative as it relates to my cross-cultural field of Pauline and Confucian studies. [ 1 ] Biggar's thesis that, "Modern Western culture warms to freedom and shies away from order... Different histories, however, produce different biases," is invigorating. As he briefly mentions:

In China, ... whose past is replete with periods of bloody anarchy, "order" tends to mean political stability, the absence of the threat of arbitrary non-state violence, and the peaceful opportunity to plan and build a prosperous material life. By the same token, 'freedom' is disturbing and suspect. Confucian philosophy embodies this perspective in its high esteem for tradition and convention, and its subjection of the individual to the requirements of the community.

As part of the GFI mission to promote cross-disciplinary conversation, I examine Confucian "order" and ethics from the perspective of a Pauline Christian theology. Given the misunderstanding, divisiveness and, at times, toxic geopolitical reality today, my essay aims not only for clarity on different understandings of order, but it also seeks a meaningful cross-cultural conversation that is complementary and offers constructive counter-points, hopefully in the spirit of Biggar's "tense consensus." I locate this paper and its implications for our current geopolitical world by alerting us neither to adopt a binary view of East-West nor a simplistic view of the Bible as a product of the West, just as I resist assumptions that Confucianism is relevant only to the East. In cross-cultural conversation I find unhelpful the uncritical use in many academic writings (without quotation marks and without qualifications) of the word "West" or "Western" because such usage blurs nuances of both the geographic and ideological aspects of the "Christian" West, and spawns an equally naïve exaggeration of "East-rise West-demise" (*dong-shen-xi-jiang* 東升西降) propaganda as a supposed new world order today.

The dialogue between the two orders depicted in the Bible and by Confucius is possible because Confucius is "religious but not theistic," as Loudon concludes. [ 2 ] Loudon explains that, "... [Confucius's] *tian* 天/heaven is part of the cosmos itself and thus naturalistic. But *tian* also serves as the ground of moral norms, and the wise feel a sense of awe in contemplating it. In this latter sense, *tian* is both transcendent and religious." [ 3 ] Additionally, a constructive conversation is possible because I pick up a hopeful cue from Biggar:

The body of moral rules is the moral law ... the natural law is the created, natural law to which St Paul alludes, when he writes that 'Gentiles, who do not have the (revealed) law (of Moses), do by nature things required by the law ... they show that the requirements of the (Mosaic) law are written on their hearts' (Romans 2:14-15a NIV).

Likewise, I hope the Confucian order and ethic can be similarly received by Christian theology, and vice versa, although Confucius' understanding of *tian*/heaven is surely different from that of the biblical monotheistic God.

## Two Narratives on the Origin of the Universe: Different understandings of "heaven"

In the creation of the universe biblical narrative, history begins with God, specifically the creation of order as God's speech, light, and love overcome void, formlessness, and chaos. It is a divine story of God's power whose Spirit infuses in his creation, including human creatures. In Confucian China, however, history begins with the order (*li*<sup>1</sup> 理) of things, but that order does not overcome chaos. There is neither beginning nor ending in this order of the universe, as it has always been there—the "self-so" (*ziran* 自然) cosmos, the world as *it is* and exists by *itself* according to the principle of changes and creativity therein. Thus, "all things" (*wanxiang* 萬象), including chaos, can co-exist with order because chaos is a part of the order. In other words, in an ancient Chinese cyclical worldview of viewing all things in constant change, chaos and order are thought to exist in a dynamic relationship of yin and yang whose mutual interaction (and transformation termed *hua* 化) brings forth all life forms and their harmony.

The God of the Bible is often referred to as "Heaven," as a metonym (i.e., an expression used as a substitute for which it is closely associated such as "crown" signifying "king"). But in classical Chinese, heaven (*tian*) is the world or the cosmos. Ames and Rosemont rephrase this Confucian idea that "*Tian* is both *what* our world is and *how* it is ... *Tian* is both the creator *and* the field of creatures. There is no apparent distinction between the order itself and what orders it..." [4]

Yet Confucian thought does view the transcendent nature of heaven as benevolence or humaneness (*ren*<sup>2</sup> 仁) of the moral order, and heaven's immanent nature is expressed in human nature as virtues. [5] *Tian*/heaven in Confucianism is as "natural" as the natural world is, but less personal than the human world. Heaven is the Creator but it does not spring from a creative and redemptive narrative. Perhaps, because of such connotations of *tian*/heaven, Chinese Bible translators never use the word *tian* for God except for the phrase "Kingdom of *tian*/heaven" which is understood as a metonym.

A more precise and common Chinese word that speaks of "order" is *dao* 道 (the way), made popular to present-day Chinese readers by the translation of the Greek word *logos* into *dao* in the Gospel of John. Here the cross-linguistic translation works better than *tian*, because cross-cultural expression and interpretation are able to complement what is lacking in another language or culture. For example, "the way," conceived both as *dao* and *logos*, is not a static entity, but is relational. The Confucian and Daoist understanding of *dao* is similar to the Greek understanding of *logos* in that both view the cosmos as an organic orderly whole. *Dao* and *logos* are used to designate the creative principle, or wisdom, that generates that way of life which is harmonious and fulsome.

The Chinese understanding of *dao* as the concrete way to express the transcendent can offer a corrective to a biblical faith that divides belief and practice ("faith without works," James 2:14). The Chinese understanding of *dao* as the way which originates in the ultimately timeless and unknown reality can be counterpointed and even completed by Paul's

assertation that God has been made known in Christ. Yet, when a Christian interpretation comes short of the cosmic vision of God's works (such as, "God so loved the *cosmos*" in John 3:16, which is commonly understood outside Confucian thought as "God so loved human beings"), then the Chinese Christian perspective of *dao* (way) is helpful. It views freedom as being in tune with the universe by overcoming powers of bondage, sin, and death through reconciliation with God and people, as ordered by *dao*/Jesus Christ (John 1).

## The Transformation of Political and Moral Orders

Confucius is able to transfer the "mandate of heaven" from being the highly political prerogative of the ruling family to one that is universally appropriate within Chinese societies. Confucius seeks to democratize the elitist political mandate of *tian* so that that political leaders cultivate virtues as the way to rule and to underwrite their legitimacy to power. Common people may also attain the virtuous life in honor of *tian*. Such a hermeneutical strategy of inverting and equalizing "the elect, the predestined" with outsiders, the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, "the civilized" and "the barbarians," can be found in the biblical narratives as well, most vividly in Paul's theology of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12) and the democratization of the spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12-14) that affirm the egalitarian vision of a believing community. Paul's understanding of apostleship (Rom 1:5: "Through Christ we receive grace and apostleship . . .") points to that, yet Paul's hermeneutic seems to bring laity up to the higher status of "ambassadors" of Christ's Kingdom. This stands in contrast with Confucius' hermeneutic of *requiring* the sage rulers to be virtuous like any human being should. [6] Unfortunately, in Chinese history, Confucius' teaching is often ignored or abused, and the opposite result obtains among the ruler-cults of later dynasties, such that a "Confucian" ethic is coopted by imperial ideologies. Thus, Chinese Christian theology needs to recover the Confucian ideal of *zheng* (政 to govern) and *wuwei* (無為 without force), to follow Confucian thought that government is a form of ruling by means of virtue (*de* 德) rather than by force. This is consistent with Paul's political theology in Romans 13 that requires governing authorities to be "deacons" (*diakonos*, 13:4) of God to serve *the people* and to be "liturgists" (*leitourgoi*, 13:6) in praise of the glory of God for the *common good* in the Roman empire.

In response to the problems of violence, fallenness, and brokenness, Confucius urges an *ethical* response to be benevolent (*ren* 仁), respectful (*jing* 敬), trustworthy (*xin* 信), and empathetic (*min* 憫). In Paul's *theology* the problem with the world is not the moral order, but sin, a broken relationship with the Creator, God. That relationship can only be restored by faith, which itself is a gift of divine grace. A Chinese Christian understanding of order is *theological-moral*, that is: to begin with Paul's theological understanding of evil as opposing good in God's created order, and then follow with Confucian moral order. While Paul does not say human nature itself is evil, he believes the power of sin holds humans captive and therefore human beings by themselves are impotent to will and realize good. In Pauline theology, "Adam's (first) sin" is the representation of human depravity and of the captivating power of sin in the fallen world. In the Chinese Bible, though, sin is translated as *zui* 罪 ("crime" or criminal behavior or "fallen" relationship), begging the question as to whether the definition is ethical or theological, or both. To Confucianists, sin refers to social conflicts, wrong-doings, and insincerity toward heaven, but sin does not refer to one's existential estrangement with *tian*. [7] The "fall" for Confucius is ritual impropriety, moral collapse, decadent music, that is, the fallen culture that drifts away from the cosmic order of life. Thus a Chinese Christian *theological-moral* understanding of cosmic order would explain more fully both humanity's falling away from God and fallen cultures as the departure from God's created order.

Moral order and theological order need each other. There is ample evidence in the Bible that monotheistic faith still easily slips into faithlessness, disobedience and vice (see the prophetic books in the Old Testament); sacrifices and rituals do not necessarily bring about virtues and mercy and justice (Hosea 6:6). A Confucian ethic can be helpful to Christians, for Confucius understands the cosmic order (*tianli*<sup>1</sup> 天理) as a moral law, and he emphasizes throughout his ethical teaching the necessity of *ren*<sup>2</sup> (仁compassion) and *li*<sup>2</sup> (禮rites) in being human. Paul likewise points out the danger of (especially monotheistic) religious faith and zeal without a neighborly-love ethic: he was “extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers . . . [and yet] violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it” (Gal 1:14), and “as to zeal, a persecutor of the church . . . though blameless under the law” (Phil 3:6). For Chinese Christians, a Confucian ethic is a constant reminder that religious piety and moral order are on the same horizon and significance—“the second is like the first” in the two commandments of love God *and* love one’s neighbor (Matt 22:39).

## Ritual, Music, and Moral Order

Besides transforming the mandate of heaven from a political idea to a moral privilege of all people, Confucius also transforms the meaning of *tian* and its mandate into a moral principle of goodness and beauty, as seen from the two key Confucian semantics: *li*<sup>2</sup> (禮ritual or propriety) and *yue* (樂aesthetic delight or music). On this point, a cross-cultural conversation can be most amicable. The biblical text has a wealth of wisdom on rituals in worship or social lives (Psalms, Proverbs, prayers, Baptism, Eucharist, etc), [ 8 ] and the Confucian deliberation on how *li*<sup>2</sup> and *yue* play in forming individual and community is prevalent.

It is fruitful for Chinese Christians to theologize their Confucian resources on *li*<sup>2</sup> and *yue* in order to reinforce the construction of a Christian order that embraces worship, social life, and justice, as Biggar also advocates from his Christian tradition:

The confession of sins, participation in the eucharistic reprise of the Last Supper ... and prayer for the final coming of God’s kingdom will be viewed as essential spiritual remedies, which enable sinners to defend and promote goods... In particular, contemplation of the Cross will make patience in suffering, not martial valour, the paradigm of the virtue of fortitude; and receiving the bread of fellowship ... will dispose the communicant to put forgiveness at the heart of doing justice.

Confucius’ understanding of *li*<sup>2</sup> (rituals) reflects his concern for a particular order within a patriarchal society. Confucius believes that music and rituals can harmonize heaven and earth and bring about the moral order called *dao* (the way). Thus, the *Book of Ritual* reads, “Those who know music will integrate with rituals. Once one has music and rituals, one has virtue (*de*德). ” [ 9 ]

The pentatonic music of ancient China emulates the order and sound of nature. [ 10 ] One of the oldest Chinese musical instruments, *qin* 琴—a zither with five or seven strings tuned to the pentatonic scale (*gong, shang, jiao, zheng, yu* 宮, 商, 角, 徵, 羽)—is thought to be capable of producing natural pitches. [ 11 ] The ancient *qin* in China was customarily played in the progression of listening with the ears (*erting* 耳聽, hearing) to listening with the heart (*xinting* 心聽, sensing) to ultimately listening with *qi*/energy (*qiting* 氣聽, be transformed). [ 12 ]

In ancient China, harmony is understood as a cosmic *ordering* and *union*, for there is a patterning or structure in relationships that produces harmony and joy in the social and spiritual world within the universe. Likewise, the word “harmony” in Greek means “fitting together,” and originally refers to joining pieces of wood. Musical harmony is the agreeable adjustment of opposites (e.g., high and low pitches), of different tones (such as the triad to create the consonance of the octave). By analogy, social harmony, such as the church community, is the agreeable adjustment of opposing interests and diversity of gifts among the community. When believers or mixed ethnic groups sing in a choir, the experience of producing a harmony and still hearing different unique voices is not only musically but also a bodily expression of diversity in solidarity. That is one example of how music can cultivate the virtue of empathy for each other as we contemplate how to co-exist in a world of differences.

I wonder why Christians are suspicious or even reject popular music of their day (such as jazz, rock, African drum beat as the “devil’s chord”) rather than engaging in a cross-cultural understanding of what they are hearing. Confucius uses music and musical metaphors to illustrate the life of virtue, since music plays a significant role in shaping human nature: “A person (*ren*<sup>1</sup> 人) without *ren*<sup>2</sup> 仁 (humaneness) has nothing to do with music” (*Analects* 3:3; my translation). Confucius also uses music to express beauty and goodness in the *ritualizing process of becoming human*. Goodness is based on moral propriety; beauty is expressed in the musical style of propriety. Music can cultivate a person toward perfection, as *Analects* 8:8 reads, “Be stimulated by the *Odes* [the *Classic of Poetry*], be established in the rites (*li*<sup>2</sup>), and be perfected in music (*yue*)” (my translation). [ 13 ] Music and rites cannot go without each other.

Chinese Christians name Baptism and the Eucharist as “holy rites 聖禮,” bringing together a Confucian ethic and Pauline theology. In Pauline Christianity, the acts of disrobing, immersion, and robing in a baptismal rite symbolize the believers’ “dying and rising with Christ” (Gal 2:19, 5:24, 6:14). Through baptism that symbolizes the new world-order ushered in by Christ, “religious and social distinctions between Jews and Greeks, slaves and freemen, men and women” [ 14 ] are abolished, thereby celebrating the moral and theological identities of the early church as one in Christ, that is, diversity in unity, and separate parts brought together in harmony.

## Conclusion

It seems to me that the two orders, Confucian and biblical, are radically different in their own histories. Nevertheless, a mutually helpful conversation exists between them and needs to be promoted. It may be that rather than seeking to mesh the two orders into one, or rejecting one or the other, they can mutually qualify and strengthen each other. Confucian *tian*/heaven does care for the creation, but it acts without direct involvement with humanity. This seemingly “weak” human agency is reflected in the lack of personhood of *tian*/heaven—thus making its religious meaning implicit or absent. Yet, one can find explicit human agency in the prevalent discussion of Confucian ethics. The mandates of heaven (*tianming* 天命) in Confucian thought are heavenly rules and moral principles in accordance with the natural order of things. For Confucius “inner virtue is not always rewarded with external goods, which means that, the true servant of heaven should focus solely upon his virtue and leave its recompense to fate [*ming* 命] (4:9, 4:14, 4:16, 11:18, 12:4 – 5, 14:36; 15:32). ” [ 15 ]

This essay does not have space to discuss whether *tianming* as *fate* is a nihilist idea or is rooted in *tian* as the source of

---

benevolence (*Analects* 9:12)? In Pauline theology, though, there is a profound clarity that one speaks of the sovereign will of God as predestination (in-Christ and God as “All in all”) but not predeterminism (Rom 8:28–30) of God’s will as salvation and sanctification (1 Thess 4), and of God as love (Rom 5:8). [\[ 16 \]](#)

## End Notes

- [ 1 ] For more, see K. K. Yeo, *Musing with Confucius and Paul: Toward a Chinese Christian Theology* (Oregon: Cascade Books, Wipf & Stock, 2008), chap. 1.
- [ 2 ] Robert B. Loudon, "What Does Heaven Say?: Christian Wolff and Western Interpretations of Confucian Ethics," in *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, edited by Bryan W. Van Norden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 79: "I do not see any evidence that Confucius' *tian* is anything like the 'personal God' . . . Confucius' *tian* is clearly not [simply] a naturalistic concept but a religious one ..."
- [ 3 ] Loudon, "What Does Heaven Say?," 91, n. 33.
- [ 4 ] Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Random House, 1998), 47–48.
- [ 5 ] Cf. Biggar likewise says of God in the biblical theology: "... the benevolence of God generates a created moral order whose basic elements are human good."
- [ 6 ] See *Great Learning* 1:1 (James Legge and Yang Bojun, trans. [Chinese to English], 四書 *The Four Books* [Changsha: Hunan Publisher, 1995], 2–3). See Biggar's argument: "Morally right conduct promotes the goods; morally wrong conduct detracts from them."
- [ 7 ] In the *Analects*, the word *zui* ("sin") occurs only once, and it means offending the will of Heaven (3:13: "If one offends against *tian*, he has nowhere to pray").
- [ 8 ] Paul asks Christians to believe that God, the Creator of the universe, has acted in Jesus Christ, revealing his nature and will as forgiving love. But Paul is also adamant that those who have faith in Christ are asked to die to their "old self" and rise as a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17), symbolized in the ritual of baptism, sustained by the Eucharist to be a changed person spiritually and ethically.
- [ 9 ] My translation. *Liji* [*The Record of Rituals* (Taipei: Shangwu, 1979)], 112.
- [ 10 ] See Liang Mingyue, *Music of the Billion: An Introduction to Chinese Musical Culture* (New York: Heinrichshofen, 1985), 47. See also Jiang Wenye [Ko Bunya], *Kongzi De Yuelun* [*Confucius On Music*], Yang Rubin trans. (Taipei: Himalaya Foundation, 2003), 22–23 on the myths of how Chinese musical instruments came into being.
- [ 11 ] Jiang, *Kongzi De Yuelun*, 102.
- [ 12 ] See Liang Mingyue, "Shi lun guqin jinqing de shenjing xinli gongneng xue yu qigong yangsheng shu" ["Implications of the De-sensationalized Mental State in *Qin* Music for Health Preservation through *Qi* Energy Transmission"], *Hanxue Yanjiu* 19 (1, 2001), 409–26. The music instrument *qin* was not played for aesthetic performance, but often used for self-cultivation.
- [ 13 ] See also *Liji*, 111: "Ritual, music, law and government, their goals are one" (my translation).
- [ 14 ] Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia series; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 189–90.
- [ 15 ] Edward Slingerland trans., *Confucius Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Hackett Classics series; Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), xxiii.
- [ 16 ] See K. K. Yeo, "The Rhetoric of Election and Calling Language in 1 Thessalonians," in *Rhetorical Criticism and the Bible*, Stanley E. Porter and Dennis L. Stamps eds. (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 526–47.



**For more information**

**[www.globalfacultyinitiative.net](http://www.globalfacultyinitiative.net)**