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A Bridge Too Far? Comparative Reflections on St. Paul and Confucius

Abstract This paper is a personal reflection on a lifetime experience of bridging the values and ideas of two distinctive faith traditions: the Christian and the Confucian. The author has chosen to focus on the lives and beliefs of two great teachers: St. Paul in Europe of the first century CE and Confucius in China of the 5th century BCE. First the context in which they lived their lives is sketched out and then their core messages are abstracted from the texts they left behind and juxtaposed. Of particular interest is the way in which they viewed the end of life, given the fact that neither could have known the enormous influence their teachings were to have on future generations.

Keywords faith traditions, peace, justice, core values of education

Introduction

This paper was written around the time of my being conferred the title of Honorary Fellow of the Comparative and International Education Society on May 1, 2011, at the Society's annual meeting in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. It was first presented at a special celebration dinner, hosted by Mr. Fang Jun, the Consul and Director for Education of the Chinese Consulate General in Toronto, following the conference on Education and Global Cultural Dialogue held on May 6, 2011, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Colleagues, friends and students honored me by coming to this special conference and presenting more than forty papers, some of which are being published in a book edited by Karen Mundy and Qiang Zha (in press), others of which appear in this special issue of *Frontiers of Education in China*. This was a very special moment in my life and I felt deeply grateful to all who had come to Toronto to celebrate with me. Although I have been hesitant about dealing explicitly with matters of faith in my scholarly writing for reasons explained in my memoir (Hayhoe,

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2004), this seemed to be the right moment to share some reflections on the importance of the spiritual dimension in my journey of scholarship.

The paper thus develops some comparative reflections on two individuals who laid the foundations for the faith traditions that have most influenced my life: St. Paul and Confucius.¹ While they lived in different times and different contexts, each made a lasting contribution to educational thought and practice in the European and Chinese worlds respectively. St. Paul carried the message of Shalom, peace with justice, from Judea through Asia Minor, on to the Greek cities of Corinth and Athens, then finally to Rome itself, at a time when Pax Romana, a peace based on military subjugation, was beginning to falter (Crossan & Reed, 2004). Five centuries earlier, Confucius carried a message of love with justice in his extensive travels among the surviving kingdoms of the late Zhou dynasty, shortly before the period known as the Warring States in Chinese history (Qu, 1996). Both lived an intense devotion to the mission they were called to fulfill, nurtured disciples and followers, and faced the end of their lives in circumstances where there was no clear evidence that their mission had been achieved. That was left to the disciples and followers they had mentored, and the stories, letters, and texts they left behind.

Given that an honorary fellowship is recognition of a life-long contribution in the areas of teaching, mentoring, scholarship and service to the Comparative and International Education Society and the wider educational world, it naturally comes at a stage of life when one is facing retirement. This is a time when energy for new ventures and projects is waning. It thus becomes important to think carefully about how best to garner one's time for what is most important, and to reflect on how to pass on the insights, experiences and precious opportunities of a lifetime. I have begun to think about this as a transition from a productive to a more contemplative and connective mode of life. I have also felt it was important, while still active and healthy, to reflect in depth on the reality we all face of the end of life.

In these reflections, I would thus like to turn to the lives and convictions of St. Paul and Confucius, asking how these two great teachers viewed the later stages of their lives, how they prepared for the inevitable passing into the next life, how they mentored their followers, and what core elements of faith and value they upheld for us. As all good comparativists know, it is important to begin with context, and so I first sketch out a picture of the life and times of Paul in the first century C.E., and then go back five hundred years to Confucius and his life in China of the late Zhou dynasty. After setting the two in context, I go on to identify a few texts which express the ways in which they defined the later part of their lives, and the sense that they had about the meaning of those lives.

¹ Confucius, the Latinized form of Kong Fuzi, the Master Kong, incorporates the respect that is accorded to the apostle Paul in addressing him as St. Paul.

Finally, I turn to the core messages that we have been privileged to receive from their teachings, and identify some values in common that have supported my efforts to bridge the educational worlds of China and the West. I wish also to pay tribute to the mentors who have blessed and inspired me every step along the way, mentors from both the traditions of the West and of East Asia.

The Context

Given that Christianity is the faith tradition in which I was raised, I begin with St. Paul. Born in the city of Tarsus in Asia Minor (now Turkey), he came to Jerusalem as a young man, determined to further his education in the School of Gamaliel. He was soon drawn into some of the intense debates going on between members of the Temple, the Pharisaic schools, and the disciples of Jesus, including Peter and James. His dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus and his subsequent period of reflection in the Arabian desert set the direction for a life in which he moved in ever widening geographical circles, taking the Christian gospel to Antioch in Syria, to various parts of Asia Minor, to Macedonia and Greece and finally to Rome itself. He probably did not make it to Spain, but it was on his agenda! (Chiltern, 2004).

The phases of his career were marked by controversy, disagreements with James and Peter over the question of who the message was intended for and how far the widening constituency he reached should adhere to Jewish law alongside salvation by grace alone, major breakups with such companions on his journeys as Barnabas and Silas, periods of imprisonment in Ephesus, Caesarea and Rome. In his later days, his rich correspondence with members of the congregations he founded in Philippi, Corinth, and Ephesus indicates close and deep attachments, and there is evidence that several followers stayed close by up to the time of his death in Nero's Rome in 64 CE. Prime among these was Timothy, whom he described as his loyal child in the faith, and who stayed with him to the end of his life and carried forward his mission (Chiltern, 2004).

Never married, Paul has often been viewed as a woman-hater, due to the strictures against female leadership in the church and instructions on obedience found in some of his letters. Recent scholarship suggests, however, that the letters in which these passages are found may have been later texts, written under Paul's name, with the intention of ensuring the Christian community was seen to conform with Roman custom (Crossan & Reed, 2004). The prominence of such women leaders as Priscilla, Phoebe, Lydia, Claudia and others in Paul's missionary efforts suggests how fully Paul acted out his belief that "in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3: 28).

While Paul emphasized the gift of grace and the futility of Greek wisdom, there can be no doubt about his understanding of Stoic philosophy and the richness of educational thought and argumentation expressed in such unquestionably authentic letters as *Romans* and *1 Corinthians*. These give evidence of the universality of his vision: “for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (*Rom.* 8:19). Crossan and Reed (2004, pp. 135–177) give a compelling picture of the Roman empire in the time of Paul, rapidly dissolving into disorder under successive emperors, yet seeking to impose the moral codes of Augustus wherever military victory buttressed their authority. A peace imposed from above by force is thus contrasted with the Shalom peace—or peace with justice—that was central to Paul’s vision of Christianity as a world religion, they suggest.

From this brief depiction of the life of St. Paul, I now turn to the life of Confucius, five centuries earlier in China’s central plains. It was a time when the Chinese Empire already had major achievements in terms of codified law, the development of bronze technologies, and a rich literature in its own unique writing system. A number of states were contending strongly with each other for hegemony over the central plains as the Eastern Zhou dynasty gradually unraveled. Confucius grew up in the state of Lu. Forced out of his paternal home at a very young age, he was brought up in poverty. Conditions in Lu, however, enabled him to pursue an insatiable quest for knowledge through reading ancient texts, also to deal with the tragic loss of his mother at the age of 17. Although he married and had a son and daughter, little is known about his wife, and he lived out his teaching and traveling mission alone. He had many disciples and a few faithful followers, who accompanied him on his travels (Talley, 1996).²

Confucius’s brief autobiography (*Analects* 2:4) indicates that at 15 he set his heart on learning, at 30 he took his stance and at 40 was no longer of two minds. Unlike Paul, there was no visitation of the Divine, simply a deepening awareness of something he was to call “the mandate or bidding of Heaven.” This was a call to reform society and bring about justice and love through education, which he felt he had come to know at 50.

In 521 BCE, when he was just 30, Confucius had started a school and begun to nurture disciples. His highest goal was to attract rulers into his school, such that the precepts of love and justice, and the idea of a society based on ritual could be realized in action for the social good. Finally, the opportunity came, when Duke Ting of Lu employed him as advisor, from 501 to 497 BCE, and he put in place such social programs as support for the poor and elderly from state granaries.

² This excellent DVD from the “A & E Biography” series depicts the life of Confucius in a clear and compelling way, with input from Julia Ching, Tu Weiming, Roger Ames and other well known scholars of classical China.

However, after a brief four years serving under Duke Ting he was forced into exile by enemies opposed to his teaching and influence.

For 14 years he traveled among the warring kingdoms, sometimes staying two or three years in one place, and often finding himself in difficult and even desperate circumstances. There were times when he and his few loyal followers were surrounded by an enemy and denied access to shelter and food, coming close to starvation more than once (Qu, 1996, pp. 414–419). Nor was he able to find any single ruler among the various kingdoms who was inclined to listen seriously to his teachings and put them into practice.

It is a fascinating exercise to compare Confucius' calling as an educator and missionary for moral and social transformation with that of St. Paul. He believed that "Heaven does no speaking," (Analects 17:19) yet he was prepared to travel widely for 14 years, seeking to take a message that he knew to be transformative to any kingdom that would accept him. His message was a universal one, focused on two qualities that he saw as essential for human flourishing. Trust (*xin*) is a character that indicates how the words proceeding from one's mouth must be true, a tacit rule that is essential to the maintenance of social order. Benevolence (*ren*) suggests that "whenever two human beings come face to face there comes into being a code of ethics which those two must mutually observe" (Inoue, 1989, p. 49). This idea of goodness is also explained as "putting oneself in the other's position and thinking about things."

After his 14 years of exhausting and apparently fruitless travel, Confucius returned to his home state of Lu at the age of 68, and lived out his remaining four or five years as a teacher and advisor, without being able to have a measurable influence over any ruler. His favorite disciple, Yan Hui, died at 41, and his own son had died a year earlier. When Confucius himself died at the age of 73, the last words on his lips were "Will no ruler come forward and take me as his advisor?" (Talley, 1996). Apparently his efforts had been in vain, except for the disciples who outlived him and carried forward his teachings. While St. Paul was known to have written a number of the letters accredited to him, with others possibly coming from the pen of later followers, Confucius left no written texts. His teachings were collected into ten thin books by various disciples during the first century after his death, and another 100 years later these were compiled into the *Analects* (Ames & Rosemount, 1998, pp. 7–10), a book that would be recited by heart by generations of learners in East Asia thereafter.

Like St. Paul, Confucius has often been depicted as a woman-hater, and unlike Paul there is no clear record of women who collaborated closely with his educational mission. However, considerable research done in recent years indicates that it was possible for many Chinese women to create meaningful lives for themselves within a Confucian world order, and that the holism and integration of Confucian epistemology is fundamentally compatible with the

“women’s ways of knowing” that have been identified in feminist scholarship (Hayhoe, 2006, pp. 37–38).

Core Messages

What are the core messages of these two great teachers and their missions? Are they as different as they appear to be, with one focusing on sharing a direct encounter with the Divine, as revealed in the historical person of Christ, and the other insisting that “until we know how to serve human beings, how can we serve spirits?” (Analects 11:12).

What are some of the threads that might be seen to tie them together? Love is at the heart of both messages, as is peace with social justice, something very difficult to attain in times of war and conquest. There is also a shared sense of social responsibility and of the value of each person’s contribution, no matter how small or how overshadowed by implacable forces of nature or egregious abuses of political power. Both had a strong commitment to learning and the accumulation of knowledge. Many commentators on Paul’s writing suggest that he incorporated ideas from Stoic philosophy as well as Jewish law and history into his texts and arguments, while Confucius built his understanding of how humanity could flourish on the basis of the social order and rituals passed down in the classical texts of the early Zhou Dynasty.

I have obviously opened up a very large subject in this tentative and exploratory comparison of two great teachers and thinkers whose heritage has shaped the civilizations that I have tried to bridge in my educational work. One of the concerns that arose from the fundamentalist Christianity of my early years was how the emphasis on distinctions—both within different Christian traditions and between Christianity and other religions—led to a painful sense of conflict. For this reason I am deeply thankful that my life pathway brought me into longstanding contact with a faith tradition that has no explicit theology, yet acknowledges the working of Heaven in human lives and embraces many of the same values as Christianity.

I am also deeply thankful for mentors from both traditions who have enriched and guided my life, bringing me to this point. On the Western side, I was blessed by Christian teachers, such as Grace Irwin, who combined a passionate faith commitment with outstanding intellectual and literary achievements, and by Christian women close to me who had not been privileged to benefit from higher education yet shared with me a profound wisdom that arose from the spiritual discipline of their lives. In addition there were academic scholars and mentors—both women and men—in the United Kingdom, France, Canada and the United States, who gave generously of their time, modeled the highest

standards of scholarship and supported me through the struggle to achieve goals I had embraced at the time of China's opening up in the later 1970s. These include Brian Holmes, my doctoral supervisor, Cicely Watson, my postdoctoral advisor, Marianne Bastid-Bruguère, Hans Weiler, Philip Altbach and many many others. I have tried to pay tribute to them in the memoir I wrote some years ago (Hayhoe, 2004). It took a little longer for me to put together a tribute to the mentors who enriched my life on the Chinese side, the scholars who have been profiled in *Portraits of Influential Chinese Educators* (Hayhoe, 2006). Although not all of them became close personal connections, I found myself constantly challenged and encouraged by their life stories since working on that book. I often reflect on the ways in which they handled the traumas of external invasion and internal political strife as their scholarly careers unfolded in the turbulent conditions of China's 20th century. This truly modeled for me a kind of "Confucian word made flesh" (Hayhoe, 2006, p. 371).

So what are some of the important values common to these two faith traditions? The first for me is the importance of humility. This is evident in Paul's life, in spite of his strong personality and apparent love of contention. It can also be seen in his depiction of the kenotic Christ, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness ..." (Phil. 2:6-7). It is also very clear in the life of Confucius, and of his favorite disciple, Zi Gong, whom Inoue describes as "never projecting his ego in the questions he directed at the Master" (Inoue, 1989, p. 142). Japanese theologian, Masao Takanaka, has used the Asian symbol of bamboo to reflect on Christianity and Asian religions, and one of his books ends with a meditation on the spiritual significance of the emptiness of the bamboo stem, set against its extremely strong roots (2002, pp. 58-61).

A profound understanding of one's own emptiness and indebtedness to grace can thus be seen as a value that bridges the Christian West and the Confucian East. Paul's image of the care and mentorship he owed to the Christians he had brought to birth—of his life being poured out as a "libation"—provides a vivid depiction of this self-emptying. And my sense is that as one becomes older and enters into the final stage of life, the greatest gift we can give is the gift of ourselves, including gifts of time lavished upon those whom we can encourage, guide and support. Then we can celebrate, in turn, the ways in which their scholarship and service rises above and beyond our own.

The second important value is the necessity of social responsibility. With the scientific revolution, European scholarship adopted the idea of "knowledge for its own sake" and service to society was for a time, and not without reason, pushed to a secondary level of importance in the mission of the university (see

Wilshire, 1990; Schwehn, 1993).³ This idea would certainly have been foreign both to St. Paul and Confucius. Both evinced a tremendous sense of their obligation to apply the knowledge they had been given for the human and social good. Inoue expresses this well for Confucius in the following quote from his purported disciple: “The charisma I sensed about the Master lay in his love for humanity, in his passion for uprightness and in his will—more like tenacity of purpose—to reduce the number of unhappy people, even if only by one.” He went on to depict his mission as “the cultivation of people who would strive diligently to create a society in which those who were born into this world would be glad that they had been born” (1989, p. 99).

Paul’s passion for social justice during a time of great oppression has been described in the following way by Crossan and Reid (2004, p. 170): “The parousia of the Lord was not about destruction of earth and relocation to heaven, but about a world in which violence and injustice are transformed into purity and holiness. And, of course (...) a transformed world would demand not just spiritual souls, but renewed bodies.” They go on to say, “Loving as a fair and equitable sharing of a world that belongs to a just God is what gives content to Paul’s assertion to the Galatians that ‘a new creation is everything’” (p. 175). The call for a scholarship that is socially responsible, and indeed seeks to be socially transformative, is thus common to both traditions. It gives all of us cause for reflection on smaller and larger issues in our teaching and scholarship.

Finally, let me close with some reflection on Confucius’ statement that at seventy, “I could have whatever my heart desired without overstepping the mark” (Analects 2:4). In spite of the disappointments, in spite of the bitter trail of tears, the failure to find rulers who would listen, the continuing disorder of his world, there was a sense of unity with Heaven, such that his personal wishes and desires were entirely in accord with those of Heaven. This was not an easy complacency or a comfortable sense of goals achieved, but it was an awareness of heart, mind and life having come into connection with Heaven, such that his personal desires never “overstepped the mark.” Paul’s simple statement, “I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7), expresses a similar sense of quiet assurance in his last days that he had reached a place where his personal wishes and his Heavenly calling had come together, and there was no more striving.

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³ These two authors give vivid expression to how this idea has been played out in American higher education.

heart are nurtured and challenged.

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