

Catholicism and Confucianism in Dialogue for Corporate Social Responsibility

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“Seek first the kingdom (of God) and his righteousness.”(Matt 6: 33)

“The gentleman worries about the Way, not about poverty.” (Analects 15:32)

Introduction

Catholicism and Confucianism have many elements to share with each other in their views on social issues, although predicated on basically different anthropology. Confucianism, containing no deity, but moral code of conduct, has been influential especially in East Asia. While having no large scale institutional ‘church’, it does not compete with other religions in modern age and aims at solving the problems of this world through the actions of people in this world. There exists spacious room for dialogue and solidarity between Catholicism and Confucianism to build a better world to live in.

In the Confucian worldview, “Human being is (the product of) the attributes of Heaven and Earth.” Therefore, “Human being is the heart and mind of Heaven and Earth.”¹ Confucianism takes the human being as the center of cosmos. Human beings, who are interconnected to others, to nature, and to Heaven, are the subject, not the object, of the cosmic management. This management, based on *li* (convention or ritual) and *jen* (benevolence, humanity, or righteousness), is directed towards the realization of Confucius’ utopian vision of the *Ta-tung* (Grand Unity),² which prescribes the world where peace prevails, order abounds, and the social and natural harmony results in material well-being for everyone.

This view is in consonance with the Catholic worldview, which perceives human being

¹ *The Book of Ritual*, Chapter IX *Li Yun*.

² “When the Great Tao[Way] prevailed, the world was a common wealth; men of talent and virtue were selected, mutual confidence was emphasized, brotherhood was cultivated. Therefore, men did not regard as parents only their own parents, nor did they treat as sons only their own sons. Old people were able to enjoy their old age; young men were able to employ their talents; juniors respected their elders; helpless widows, orphans, and cripples were well cared for. Men had their respective occupations, and women their homes. They hated not to use their energies, and they used their energies not for their own benefit. Thus evil schemers were repressed, and robbers, thieves, and traitors no longer appeared, so that the front door remained open. This was called the *Ta-tung* (Grand Unity).” *Ibid*.

as “the source, the center, and the purpose of all economic and social life.”³ Based on such a perception, Catholicism intends to build a world that has the common good --- the good of all people and of the whole person --- as its primary goal. This requires the right to the common use of goods as “the first principle of the whole ethical and social order”.⁴ Quite distinct from Confucianism which is only interested in affairs of this world, Catholicism is interested in the realization of the common good of society not as an end in itself but as a means to attain the ultimate ends of the person, attaching the transcendent dimension to it. While Confucianism focuses on the social relationship of human being at this-worldly dimension, Catholicism attaches transcendent dimension to this relationship. Thus, the former presents the *Ta-tung* (Grand Unity) as the ideal society, whereas the latter sees it as a means to achieve the ultimate ends of the human being.

Such a difference may not stand in the way towards dialogue and solidarity between Catholicism and Confucianism. This paper intends to research into the common elements shared by Catholicism and Confucianism with a view to promoting a dialogue between them for the sake of better realizing the corporate social responsibility.

Confucian View of Economy

Basic Needs

In the Confucian worldview, government consists of “sufficient food, sufficient armament, and sufficient confidence of the people.”⁵ In good government, “the rectification of [the people’s] virtue, [the tools and other things] that supply the conveniences of life, and the securing abundant means of sustentation must be harmoniously attended to.”⁶

“The business of the people,” said Mencius, “must be attended to without delay. The *Odes* say,

In the day time they go for grass;
At night they make it into ropes,
They hasten to repair the roof;

³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 63.

⁴ *Laborem Exercens*, 19.

⁵ *The Analects of Confucius*, 12:7.

⁶ *The Book of History*, Book II, 1.

Then they begin sowing the crops.
(Ode 154)⁷

Confucians argue:

If the mulberry is planted in every homestead of five *mu*⁸ of land, then those who are fifty can wear silk; if chickens, pigs and dogs do not miss their breeding season, then those who are seventy can eat meat; if each lot of a hundred *mu* is not deprived of labour during the busy season, then families with several mouths to feed will not go hungry. Exercise due care over the education provided by village schools, and reinforce this by teaching them the duties proper to sons and younger brothers, and those whose heads have turned hoary will not be carrying loads on the roads. When those who are seventy wear silk and eat meat and the masses are neither cold nor hungry, it is impossible for their prince not to be a true King.⁹

Thus, Confucianism views economy as an essential element of politics and insists that economy should be harmonized with ethics. “Virtue is the root, while wealth is the branch.”¹⁰ It also regards economy as a necessary condition for morality. Confucians argue: “Those with constant means of support will have constant hearts, while those without constant means will not have constant hearts.”¹¹ They believe that sufficient provision of the basic needs of the people is the basis of a good society. This would mean that economic policy must be geared to realizing economic equality, which, in turn, would necessitate regulation of economic activity. In their view, “If there is equal distribution, there will be no poverty.”¹²

On Profit

Confucianism regards as ideal the harmony between profit and justice. Profit (or wealth) *per se* is not regarded as immoral, but it should be in harmony with justice.¹³ As Confucius puts it, “One who, on seeing profit, thinks of righteousness, may be

⁷ *Mencius*, Book III, Part A, 3.

⁸ *five mu* : equivalent to somewhat less than 200 square metres.

⁹ *Mencius*, Book I, Part A, 3.

¹⁰ *The Great Learning*, Pt.10:7.

¹¹ *Mencius*, Book III, Part A, 3.

¹² *The Analects*, 16:1.

¹³ Cf. *The Book of Changes*.

considered a perfect man,”¹⁴ on the one hand, and, on the other, “Wealth and high station are what men desire but unless I got them in the right way I would not remain in them.”¹⁵ In fact, Confucius himself says, “If the search for riches is sure to be successful, though I should become a groom with whip in hand to get them, I will do so. As the search may not be successful, I will follow after that which I love.”¹⁶ He thus mentions upon the uncertainty of pursuing riches in the right way.

It can be said, therefore, that what Confucians warn against is the violation of morality in the profit-making process. The desire for profit or for personal gain may promote social conflict, whereas profit harmonized with justice may promote social harmony. This underlines the importance of returning a proper part of the company’s profits to society and fulfilling the social responsibility of the company.

Organic Unity of Nature, Human, and Society

This view is further intensified by the Confucian conception of nature, human, and society. In fact, Confucianism perceives that nature and human constitutes the organic unity and considers the individual, his or her family, society and the State as the one organic body. In the Confucian worldview cultivating oneself is a precondition to harmonizing one’s own family, which is, in turn, a precondition to well governing one’s own State, which is, in turn, a precondition to bringing peace to the entire world.¹⁷ It means that one needs first to cultivate oneself so as to bring peace and security to his/her extended family, fellow citizens, and eventually to the people of the entire world.¹⁸ Confucianism does not consider an individual and society to be separate from each other. It perceives that totality is as important as individuality.

This implies that employees should never pursue their own interests to the disregard of the company’s survival, and employers should never neglect the interests and welfare of the employees for the sake of their own interests, on the one hand, and employers and

¹⁴ *The Analects*, 14:12 ; 16:10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4:5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7:11.

¹⁷ Cf. *The Great Learning, The Text* 4-5.

¹⁸ “Tzu-lu asked about the gentleman.

The Master said, ‘He cultivates himself and thereby achieves reverence.’

‘Is that all?’

‘He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to his fellow men.’

‘Is that all?’

‘He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to the people. Even Yao and Shun would have found the task of bringing peace and security to the people taxing.’ (*Analects*, 14:42)

employees alike should never pursue their company's interests to the detriment of the common good, on the other hand.

Social Harmony

In Confucianism priority is attached to creating harmony¹⁹ in human society. Harmony is essential in relationships among humans, among nations and the relationships between humanity and nature. In Confucian societies, considerable attention is paid to the effects of and the need for harmony. "In the application of the rituals, harmony is most valuable."²⁰ Even during the war, Confucians believe: "Cosmic timing is not as good as favorable earth conditions, and favorable earth conditions are not as good as human harmony."²¹

For the Confucian entrepreneurs and business executives organizational harmony is a primary goal to pursue. The idea of tension between the enterprise manager and the worker is abhorred. Business is likewise expected to maintain harmony with the society at large. "What you do not wish for yourself, do not impose on others."²² "A man of humanity is one who, wishing to establish himself, helps others to establish themselves and who, wishing to gain perception, helps others to gain perception."²³

Material Sharing

Confucianism emphasizes the importance of sharing among the people as a way to attain "*jen* (benevolence, humanity)," which is one of its core values. Especially a ruler should sympathize with the people in their joy and sorrow, sharing with them even his fondness of money.²⁴ "When a ruler rejoices in the joy of his people, they rejoice in his

¹⁹ Confucianism defines the harmony: "Before the feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy are aroused, it is called equilibrium (*chung*, centrality, mean). When these feelings are aroused and each and all attain due measure and degree, it is called harmony. Equilibrium is the great foundation of the world, and harmony its universal path. When equilibrium and harmony are realized to the highest degree, heaven and earth will attain their proper order and all things will flourish." *The Doctrine of the Mean*, 1 in Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), p.98.

²⁰ *The Analects*, 1:12.

²¹ *Mencius*, Book II, Part B, 1.

²² *The Analects*, 12:2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 6:30.

²⁴ Cf. *Mencius*, Book I, Part B, 5. "King Hsuan of Ch'i asked, 'May I hear about Kingly government?' ... 'I have a weakness. I am fond of money.' [Mencius said] 'In antiquity Kung Liu was fond of money, too. The Odes say,
He stocked and stored;
He placed provisions/In bags and sacks.
He brought harmony and so glory to his state.
On full display were bows and arrows,
Spears, halberds and axes./Only then did the march begin. (Ode 250)

joy; when he grieves at the sorrow of his people, they also grieve at his sorrow. A sympathy of joy will pervade the kingdom; a sympathy of sorrow will do the same:—in such a state of things, it cannot be but that the ruler attain to the royal dignity.”²⁵

Only in this way is he able to win the support of the people. This is true not merely for the one in authority over the people, but also for everyone, including especially businessman/woman. Thus, in the business world, too, an egoistic behavior to pursue solely their own interests to the neglect of other people’s interests should be avoided.

Confucians argue:

In antiquity, the market was for the exchange of what one had for what one lacked. The authorities merely supervised it. There was, however, a despicable fellow who always looked for a vantage point and, going up on it, gazed into the distance to the left and to the right in order to secure for himself all the profit there was in the market. The people all thought him despicable, and, as a result, they taxed him. The taxing of traders began with this despicable fellow.²⁶

It can thus be said that it is not a pure coincidence that the East Asian countries have the most equitable distribution of income in the world.²⁷

Familism

Confucianism presents the family as the model for the entire society, stressing moral obligations of family life as the basic building block of society. It emphasizes that if the family is well ordered, the local community will be well ordered, and if the local community is well ordered, the whole nation will be well ordered. Filial piety (*hsiao*) was taught as the highest value, surpassing even the loyalty to the ruler. In fact, Confucius considered it to be more important than the law.²⁸

It was only when those who stayed at home had full granaries and those who went forth to war had full sacks that the march could begin. You may be fond of money, but what is it to you so long as you share this fondness with the people?”

²⁵ *The Works of Mencius*, Book I, Pt. II, Ch. IV, 3.

²⁶ *Mencius*, Book II, Part B, 10.

²⁷ G. Lodge, “The Asian Systems,” in M. L. Stackhouse et al., ed., *On Moral Business* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), p. 754.

²⁸ The Duke of Sheh informed Confucius, saying, “Among us here there are those who may be styled upright in their conduct. If their father have stolen a sheep, they will bear witness to the fact.” Confucius said, “Among us, in our part of the country, those who are upright are different from this. The father

In traditional Confucian societies an intense familism took precedence over all other social relations. Here an individual seldom thought of himself/herself as an isolated entity. He/she was a concrete individual person who moved, lived and had his/her being in the natural milieu of the family.

The family(*jia*) extends to lineages and larger kinship groups; the local community and the nation are seen as a kind of family of families that unite all its members into a single social entity.²⁹ Communitarianism has thus developed in Confucian societies, functioning as an informal system of social security, as well. Traditional Confucianism emphasizes the community over the individual, and responsibility over rights. In Confucian ethics everyone has a proper responsibility to his/her community on the basis of the five moral disciplines: “Love between father and son, duty between ruler and subject, distinction between husband and wife, precedence of the old over the young, and faith between friends.”³⁰

In the industrialization process the Confucian notion of family was adapted for the business realm. In Confucian societies business tends to be family-orientated. A great majority of enterprises are family-owned and family-managed small businesses. Business is operated and managed in a family-like setting. Many businessmen/women take it as their obligation to treat employees as members of the family and employees are, in turn, expected to reciprocate by devoting loyalty to the company. A paternalistic relationship is fostered between employee and employer. Great importance is attached to *guanxi* (connection, relationship) both inside and outside the company. *Guanxi* is made stronger by family ties, friendship and intangible concepts such as trust, on the one hand, and serves as a criterion for appointment and promotion, on the other. For the Confucian entrepreneurs and business executives trustworthiness and loyalty take precedence over efficiency and productivity, and organizational harmony is a primary goal to pursue.

The purpose of business is invariably to enrich the family. However, distinct from the Western notion that considers business enterprise strictly as an economic entity which aims mainly at profit-seeking through the efficient production of goods and services, the

conceals the misconduct of the son, and the son conceals the misconduct of the father. Uprightness is to be found in this.” (*Analects* 13:18)

²⁹ Cf. F. Fukuyama, “Confucianism and Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 6.2 (1995), p. 24.

³⁰ *Mencius*, III, Pt. A, 4.

East-Asian firm also seeks profit, but not at the expense of human relations.³¹

Catholic View of Business Enterprise

Brotherhood of humankind – the counterpart of the fatherhood of God – is one of the fundamental truths of Christianity. It places brotherly relationship between human beings in a much closer and stronger tie than the subsidiary ties uniting narrower groups such as the family, the clan or the nation. All humans belong to the same family. Worldly goods are family goods, which are ordained for the needs of all the members of the human family. This notion leads to the Catholic principle of the universal destination of material goods. All of us should be “our brother’s keeper”.

In addition to serving the common good through fulfilling the economic function, business enterprise also performs a social function. For a business enterprise “the economic dimension is the condition for attaining not only economic goals, but also social and moral goals, which are all pursued together.”³²

“A business cannot be considered only as a ‘society of capital goods’; it is also a ‘society of persons’ in which people participate in different ways and with specific responsibility, whether they supply the necessary capital for the company’s activities or take part in such activities through their labor.”³³ Therefore, the Catholic social thought emphasizes that “the active sharing of all [employees and employers] in the administration and profits of business enterprises in ways to be properly determined is to be promoted.”³⁴ Every effort must be made to ensure that the enterprise is indeed a true human community, concerned about the needs, the activities and the standing of each of its members.

The Catholic social thought recognizes the profit as an economic indicator of the health of a business which enables its development and modernization. At the same time, it emphasizes that the legitimate pursuit of profit should be in harmony with the protection of the dignity of the workers.

³¹ Cf. H. Tai, “The Oriental Alternative: An Hypothesis on Culture and Economy,” in H. Tai, ed., *Confucianism and Economic Development: An Oriental Alternative?* (Washington, D. C.: Washington Institute Press, 1989), p. 15.

³² *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 338.

³³ *Centesimus Annus*, 43.

³⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, 68.

The Catholic social thought perceives the business enterprise as a community of solidarity, which should not be closed within its own interests, but should move in the direction of a “social ecology” of work, and contribute to the common good also by protecting the natural environment.

The Catholic social thought stresses that work and capital must complement each other. “Capital cannot do without labor, nor labor without capital”.³⁵ It emphasizes that there must exist between them a relationship of harmony and cooperation, instead of antagonism, while recognizing the worker’s rights to association, collective bargaining, and collective action.

The Catholic social thought insists on the need for business to structure work in such a way as to promote the family; to accede to the demand for the quality of the goods and services, of the environment and of life in general; to create job opportunity for the people.

Conclusion

We have examined the views of economy Catholicism and Confucianism share in common, which are relevant for corporate social responsibility. It should be mentioned, however, Confucian views, quite old as they are, have remained merely as moral principles, whereas Catholic views have continuously developed into a systematic body of social thought presenting to the world with principles of reflection, criteria for judgment, and directives for action in response to the industrial development for more than one hundred years. And in the face of the industrial development that has accelerated since the mid-20th century, Catholic social thought made inroads into East Asian countries where Confucianism has exerted a sweeping influence in every aspect of human life.

Here in East Asia Catholicism has encountered a favorable condition for the application of its social thought, as Confucianism is equipped with many elements akin to the Catholic social thought. Hence, there can be a successful dialogue and solidarity for corporate social responsibility, which is one of the keys to realizing the ideal society. In fact, Confucian views of economy and its role in the realization of the ideal society

³⁵ *Rerum Novarum*, 19.

(Grand Unity) are in line with the Catholic social thought which focuses on the realization of the universal common good. In this the Catholic social thought prescribes a pivotal role for business to fulfill proper social responsibility in satisfying the basic needs of the people, sharing material goods with them, attaining social harmony both inside and outside the company.

The Catholic social thought that defines the business as a “society of persons”, stressing the mutual dependence of capital and labor, can serve the enlargement of familism circle to embrace all the members in Confucian corporations. At the same time, the Catholic vision of the business can further be supported by the Confucian ethics of social harmony, while cooperation between capital and labor can further be fostered by the Confucian Golden Rule.³⁶

The Confucian idea of the organic unity of nature, human, and society can be adapted for the business realm, thereby reinforcing the Catholicism in the field of corporate social responsibility in the East Asian context. In fact, it can be said that just as nature, human, and society are an integral one, so are business and society. Then, familism can be extended beyond the boundaries of business into the society at large, and eventually into the globalized world.

The idea of “all within the Four Seas are [one’s] brothers”³⁷ can serve as a conceptual basis for the extension of the familism into the global dimension. And this can be complemented by the Catholic belief in brotherhood of humankind, thereby leading further to the realization of corporate social responsibility.

The Confucian emphasis on the need to harmonize the profit with righteousness is also conducive to the corporate social responsibility. In the framework of idea which defines that “business and society are an integral one”, altruism turns into self-interest. Profiting others is to result in profiting one’s self. In other words, fulfilling the corporate social responsibility is to result in fostering the interest of the business, in addition to attaining the righteousness, the benevolence, and the humanity.

Thus Catholicism and Confucianism complement each other in the matter of social

³⁶ Cf. Footnotes 22, 23.

³⁷ *The Analects*, 12:5. “The gentleman is reverent and does nothing amiss, is respectful towards others and observant of the rites, and all within the Four Seas are his brothers.”

concern such as corporate social responsibility. The former can make a great contribution to creating a culture of responsibility in the business world. On the one hand, it can conscientize the people, the so-called stakeholders, and the “indirect employers” toward their proper responsibility in fostering the corporate social responsibility in the East Asian context, and on the other, it can conscientize those directly involved in decision-making process in the business world towards their own responsibility in fulfilling the corporate social responsibility. While pursuing dialogue and solidarity with Confucianism, Catholicism can greatly contribute to creating a business culture, a culture of responsibility in the East Asian business community.

Undoubtedly most adherents to Catholicism and Confucianism accept the aforementioned views and principles as a general statement. Yet, these are too often evaded through self-deception, omission, or sheer inertia. Therefore, while engaging in dialogue and solidarity with Confucianism, it is of utmost importance for the Church to animate Catholics and Confucians alike with its social thought with a view to promoting the corporate social responsibility, thereby realizing the social reform for the common good of people. These will facilitate the inculturation of Catholic social thought in the sphere of the Confucian culture, on the one hand, and the development of Catholic social thought itself, on the other.