

LI, EUSEBEIA, TORAH

A Response to Towner and Yeo

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I want to thank both writers for their careful study of Confucian and Christian concepts of piety and for what I learned from preparing to comment on them. I will respond briefly to each in turn, raising some questions about how we do comparative work and what significance their comparisons might have for us.

My uneasiness with Mr. Towner's approach I have tracked down to his taking the part for the whole, developing what is a very interesting comparison of *li* in *Confucius' Analects* and *eusebeia* in the Pastoral Epistles into a comparison and contrast of Confucianism and New Testament thought as a whole, even, he says, of Chinese and Christian thought. Perhaps this sweeping aim was forced on him by the planners of the dialogue. Or perhaps his own focus is on religions as long-term cultural phenomena that contribute to social cohesion and maintain their basic character throughout. I tend to focus instead on the brief or recurrent critical spark that a religion can introduce into a culture, providing breath, life or divine spirit. This interest may be closer to that of Professor Yeo. Because of this orientation, I think we first need to compare the different stages in a religious tradition, not primarily as a continuity but often as contrast, in order to see how each stage functions in its setting and whether certain stages are comparable in different religious traditions.

For purposes of discussion, let me say briefly where I come out in comparing Confucian and Christian thought, focusing on *li* and *eusebeia*. Although there is a long previous tradition in each religion—and many revivals—the spark that gives rise to these two named traditions is Confucius and Jesus respectively, men of two very different worlds and social situations. Both men are tantalizing for their lack of systematic presentation of thought, speaking (according to the earliest collections) largely in response to issues around them and more in questions than answers. Confucius insists that life in the *dao* or way respects *li*, ritual, as well as *ren*, humaneness, and *wen*, elegance. But he contrasts this *li* to having a proper spirit wall at one's gate and inverting one's drinking cup, just as Jesus puts down tithing and fasting.

On the other hand Confucius is serious about practice and does criticize a pupil who cannot keep the three-year mourning period after his father's death. Similarly, Jesus ridicules the leaders who do not keep the law defending widows but instead confiscate their livelihood. Both men claim to keep the tradition as they critique it. Even Jesus' "let the dead bury their own dead" and "hate your mother-in-law," which could not have been spoken by Confucius, are combined by Jesus with "Whoever does God's will is my mother and sister and brother," showing that respect for God and related people continues to be what counts. For Confucius the parents' care for the child during the three years of infancy is returned in the three years of mourning, again, the respect among those who are related.

The enumerating of the five relations of subordination as the summary of *li* does not appear until the *Li Ji*, as Towner recognizes and quotes. This stage of Confucianism seems to me somewhat parallel to the Pastoral Epistles. At this point the respective traditions are being used by later generations, not with the focus on self-discipline of a teacher and disciples, but in order to keep a socially-recognized order in a community by requiring traditional structures of subordination and leadership. These fall very differently on the slave girl, daughter-in-law and widow than on the householder who can outgrow his childhood subordination and become the flock's teacher or bishop. These restrictions on most participants are seen by the Pastoral writer to be transmitting God's love which in the long run may, as Professor Towner says, "wear down unjust or unbalanced relational structures." I do not see this to be different from the role of similar restrictions in realizing the Confucian "Mandate of Heaven." On neither side is the theology any excuse for the two thousand and counting years of injustice that it so well legitimates.

Further stages also can be delineated, as for example that of comprehensive Christian metaphysics on the one side and the encoding of *li* in Confucian ritual as an eternal and cosmic principle of world order on the other. But in the latter case I wonder if Towner's sources—at that point Dubs and the article in the Allinson collection—have confused the two characters sounded *li*, so that *li* as "ritual" in classical Confucianism is being identified with the different Neo-Confucian *li* meaning "principle," which is very like the Stoic's "world soul." But here we must remember that people who oppose this order because it is oppressive for themselves or for others are readily excluded from its benefits.

In any case, what I find intriguing about the early Confucius of the *Analects* is that *li* or ritual is not universalized but is expected to change as an age changes. In fact, it sounds quite close to what we might call custom. This time of year I seem to be in charge of arranging the rituals in our family, and when my local nephew responds to my invitation to Thanksgiving dinner with "I think I'll pass that one up," I ask myself if, in Confucius' chronology, he has not yet reached the age of 30 when one must stand on one's own feet and accept responsibility for family rites—or if, perhaps, the age is changing and the rites need to catch up.

de Bary says in his book *The Trouble with Confucius* that we think we want Confucius' "humaneness" and "cultivation" without his "rites," but in fact these rites—this civility—may be what we in modern society most need to regain. Towner's work may be helpful to us on this score. We need more discussion of whether this civility is an important value and, if so, how we can best read the classical texts of our traditions to reclaim it.

My other question can be put very briefly. In Towner's exegesis of the Pastoral letters he says that *eusebeia* does not mean just socially-accepted conduct but includes true faith. Of course, the author presents the conduct he advocates as true to Paul and to Christ and to God, but don't we have to ask whether we are persuaded by the Pastorals writer's theological claims? Is he advocating the way of Christ? Only such a process of critique takes his argument seriously. In 1 Timothy 4:7–8 *eusebeia* is opposed to "old wives' tales," in 5:4 to people who do not keep their widowed mothers at home. These polemics show at least that widows are a problem for the author. Our challenge as I see it is to tease out the concrete conflicts concerning conduct that gave

rise to these letters and ask whether the conduct being advocated by the author in fact benefits the spiritual life of the widows, of the women who are visited at home, of the heirs of Lois and Eunice. Can we determine whether this *eusebeia* fosters Christ's work in them or restricts that work? This requires a reconstruction of the rhetorical situation such as Linda Maloney develops in her chapter on the Pastorals in Fiorenza's newly released New Testament commentary, vol. 2 of *Searching the Scriptures*.¹

Let me turn now to Professor Yeo Khiok-khng's paper. I affirm his beginning with "situation" as the key to intertextual reading, and my response to his interpretation comes out of my different situation as an American teaching in New Testament Studies with long-term interests in Chinese thought. Because I live in a world where Judaism is a major religious community today—and in the century of the Holocaust fuelled by Christian prejudice—I would emphasize more strongly than Yeo Paul's continued Jewish faith in God.² For example, I see his interpretation of Christ in terms of Law in Romans 8:2 as an incorporation of Christ into the righteousness of the law rather than as moving away from Judaism. His critique I read as an inner-Jewish critique, since the inclusion of Gentiles was nothing new in Judaism. This allows me to seek new ways of theological dialogue with Jewish believers today within our common affirmation of the one God. Yeo comes close to this when he speaks of Paul as a reformer of Torah, as Confucius was of the ancestral tradition of *li*.

I particularly appreciate the explication of *Ti'en* as both transcendence and immanence and its significance for those whose commitments make them, can we say, both Confucian and Christian. Also particularly fruitful may be Yeo's attempt to delineate the parallel (though not identity) of Confucian and Pauline understandings of communal experience as the core reality of religious life. Western reading of Paul, especially in the Protestant tradition, has tended to reduce true religion to individual experience of sin and salvation and make social

¹Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures, A Feminist Commentary*, vol. 2 (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 361–80.

²See my "Since God is One: Rhetoric as Theology and History in Paul's Romans." In *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament*, eds. E. S. Malbon and E. V. McKnight (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 210–27.

expression a mere secondary result, threatening the roots of our life in faith.

Yet it is hard to know how much the close proximity of Tu Wei-ming's Confucius and Yeo Khiok-Khng's Paul in affirming dynamic and open transformation is a product of twentieth century readers at work—but then why not? But let's be sure at the same time that we read our ancient texts very closely and allow them to resist us and each other when and where they choose.