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JESUS, THE CRUCIFIED AND RISEN SAGE CONSTRUCTING A CONTEMPORARY CONFUCIAN CHRISTOLOGY

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This paper seeks to reflect on Jesus' profound question to his followers: "Who do you say I am?" (Mk 8:29, cf. Mt 16:15, Lk 9:20), as it is directed to the peoples from the Confucian world of East Asia, viz., China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. More precisely, it seeks to explore possibilities for articulating a Christology that will be meaningful to peoples from the Confucian tradition. Although J.V. Taylor, a missionary to Africa, made the following comment in the African context, it is just as pertinent, if not more, to the peoples of East Asia:

Christ has been presented as the answer to questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?¹

This essay is a slightly emended and updated version of the paper "Jesus, The Crucified and Risen Sage: Towards A Confucian Christology," which was originally presented at the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Office of Theological Concerns (FABC-OTC) Theological Colloquium, "Asian Faces of Christ," held from 11-15 May 2004 at Baan Phu Waan (Archdiocese Pastoral Center) in Samphan, Thailand, and published in *Asian Faces of Christ*, ed. by Vimal Tirimanna (Bangalore 2005), pp. 49-87.

Note on Transcription of Chinese terms: The *pinyin* transliteration system is used throughout this essay, except the names of Chinese authors who publish in Western languages and have chosen to transliterate their names in a specific way, and those Chinese terms that have been transliterated using the Wade-Giles system in quoted texts and titles of works.

¹ John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion* (London 1963), p. 16.

Paraphrasing Taylor, one could also ask: if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that the Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese peoples have been asking, what would he look like? Clearly, Jesus is not so much interested in the abstract and impersonal "Who do people say I am," (or, to paraphrase the question in the East Asian context: "Who do Europeans say I am? Who do the Christians of European Late Antiquity say I am?"), as he is in the question, "who do you [viz., a Chinese, a Korean, a Japanese, or a Vietnamese] say I am?"

Hence, this paper seeks to investigate the prospects for articulating a distinctive Confucian Christology which would uncover the significance of Jesus for Confucian East Asians, as well as engage in a dialogue with their philosophical-religious traditions, socio-cultural institutions, existential concerns and life experiences, on the basis that

Christology is never final, but always in dialogue: with the early Church, with the religious and mythical presuppositions and commitments of the Jewish and Hellenistic world, and perhaps most important, with the world-views of our own age and time.²

First, it reviews the historical developments of Christology in the European world, exploring the transition from classicist-universalist European Christologies to contextual Asian Christologies, as well as the implications of this transition. Second, it surveys the context of the Confucian world of East Asia, presenting an overview of its historical developments, philosophical-religious worldview, and ethos. Third, it presents a critical evaluation of the possibilities of using the powerful and evocative image of the sage (*sheng*) as a Christological image for East Asian Christians, with an emphasis on articulating the foundational principles drawn from principal Confucian texts, e.g., the *Analects*, the *Book of Mencius*, etc., which would undergird this Confucian Christology, its principal elements, resources, and interpretive matrix.³ Finally, it concludes with an investigation of the possible implica-

² Robert Berkey and Sarah A. Edwards, *Christology in Dialogue* (Cleveland 1993) 24.

³ This paper seeks to complement earlier endeavors at exploring the possibilities for articulating a Confucian Christology. Two notable examples of these earlier endeavors include Kim Heup Young, "Jen and Agape: Towards a Confucian Christology," in: *Asia Journal of Theology* 8 (1994), pp. 335-364, which investigates the potential for constructing a Confucian Christology based on the Confucian virtue of "humanity" (*ren*); and Peter C. Phan, "The Christ of Asia (An essay on Jesus as the eldest son and ancestor)," in: *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996), pp. 25-55, which seeks to construct a Confucian Christology by "situating Christ within the context of the Confucian teaching on family relationships, especially on the role of the eldest son, and the Asian practice of veneration of ancestors" (p. 27).

tions that the image of Jesus as the "crucified and risen sage" would have for East Asian Christians.

I.

From Classicist-Universalist European Christologies to Contextual Asian Christologies

If there is one thing which Christian theologians and believers of all stripes and colors could agree on, it would be the assertion that Jesus the Christ stands at the center of the Christian faith. Christology, or the "theological interpretation of Jesus Christ, clarifying systematically who and what he is in himself for those who believe in him,"⁴ is one perennial topic of theological inquiry that began when the crowds around Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth, wondered who he was, and which has continued unabated ever since. To the age-old question "Who do you say I am?" the answers in different historical epochs are diverse and varied, as Jaroslav Pelikan stresses in his landmark survey *Jesus Through the Centuries*.⁵

Christianity's chequered history offers us a good glimpse of the diversity of responses to the question of Christ's identity by different communities of followers. Clearly, Christians of all ages and places have been confronted with a diversity of images of Jesus in the New Testament, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the pronouncements of ecumenical councils. Indeed, there is no unanimity in the understanding of Jesus' identity even in the primitive Church. Generally speaking, the New Testament writers eschewed static, metaphysical concepts in favor of dynamic concepts to explain the significance of Jesus. For example, on the one hand, Paul rooted his Christological discussion in terms of the dynamic movement of the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of the pre-existent Logos, followed by its exaltation in the resurrection (e.g., in Phil 2:6-11). But on the other hand, Luke chose to begin with the human life of Jesus of Nazareth, his suffering and death, followed by his ascending to his glorification in his resurrection (e.g., Acts 2:22-36, 5:30-32, 10:36-38). Nonetheless, whatever the differences in the various New Testament writers' portrayals of Jesus' significance might be, what is clear and unequivocal is the fact that the various portraits of Jesus in the New Testament reveal an accurate depiction of the early Christians' under-

⁴ Gerald O'Collins, S.J. and Edward G. Farrugia, S.J., *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, rev. and expanded ed. (New York - Mahwah, NJ 2000), p. 42.

⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven 1985). Pelikan's underlying thesis is that Jesus cannot be understood outside of human cultures, and that it is human cultures that shape the diverse images and understandings of Jesus in human history.

standing of Jesus and his significance for their faith life. In addition, one also sees a diversity and plurality of images of Jesus, e.g., as "Son of Man," "Son of God," "Teacher," Messiah (*Christos*), Word (*Logos*), Lord (*Kyrios*), and Savior (*Soter*) in the New Testament. These images reveal what was the significance of Jesus for the apostolic Christians in messianic and soteriological terms.⁶ In this vein, J.B. Chethimattam suggests that "the missionary discourses of the Acts of the Apostles clearly show, the divinity of Christ was not the focus of the early Christian understanding of the salvation brought by Jesus," but rather, it "was principally the work of the Father, the one God of the Bible, who in fulfilment of his promise of salvation to humanity sent Jesus as a new Moses, a new David and a new Solomon to lead humanity in the faithful carrying out of the Covenant with Yahweh."⁷

The fourth and fifth century Christological debates on the relationship between the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ in the Hellenistic-Roman world of Late Antiquity introduced a paradigm shift from soteriology to ontology, viz., from his salvific significance for believers to abstract, philosophical musings on the nature and person of Christ in and of himself, as well as his position as the second person of the Trinity. Thus, Nicaea I proclaimed that Jesus the Christ is of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father, and Chalcedon professed:

[the] one and the same Christ, Lord, Son, unique, acknowledged in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation – the difference of the natures being by no means taken away because of the union, but rather the distinctive character of each nature being preserved, and [each] combining in one Person and *hypostasis* – not divided or separated into two Persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ ...⁸

One should remember that when the ecumenical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries fashioned these Christological formulations, they were motivated, not by questions of Jesus' significance for human salvation, but by

⁶ For a more in-depth analysis, see, e.g., James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia 1980); Earl Richard, *Jesus, One and Many: The Christological Concept of New Testament Authors* (Wilmington 1988); John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York 1991); N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis 1996); and Ben Witherington, III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis 1990).

⁷ J.B. Chethimattam, "Asian Jesus: The Relevance of Jesus Christ in the Asian World of Religious Pluralism," in: *Jeevadhara* 27 (1997), p. 300.

⁸ English translation taken from *The Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. by Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia 1954), p. 373.

the highly polemical debates on this contentious issue between the Alexandrian and Antiochene theologians. Indeed, the council fathers pursued a defensive stance throughout, seeking to bolster doctrinal statements on the integrity of Jesus' divinity and his humanity against what were being perceived as heterodox statements.

Clearly, the classical Christological formulations of the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era focused exclusively on defining the person of Jesus Christ, the relation between his humanity and divinity, as well as his relationship to the Father, rather than his salvific work and significance for people, a fact which does not preclude new explorations of Jesus' salvific work and significance for people in later socio-cultural contexts. Hence, in the early Middle Ages of Europe, the old-Saxon epic *Heliand*⁹ and the Anglo-Saxon verse *The Dream of the Rood*¹⁰ presented Christ as an all-powerful Teutonic warrior-king within the context of a wider medieval germanization of Christianity. According to James Russell, this development arose because:

For Christianity to be accepted by the Germanic peoples, it was necessary that it be perceived as responsive to the heroic, religiopolitical, and magico-religious orientation of the Germanic world-view. A religion which did not appear to be concerned with fundamental military, agricultural, and personal matters could not hope to gain acceptance among the Germanic peoples, since the pre-Christian Germanic religiosity already provided adequate responses to these matters.¹¹

Although scholars critique the image of Christ the Teutonic warrior-king as a departure from the pacifist Jesus of Nazareth, it is undeniable that this image of Christ as a powerful, majestic, and triumphant king persisted through much of the Middle Ages into modernity. This triumphalistic image of Christ the King (*Christus Rex*) was brought by European missionaries to Asia, Africa, and the Americas, and used as justification for massacres, economic plunder, and socio-cultural destruction. As Michael Amaladoss points out,

the preferred image of Jesus in the West, at least as presented to the East, seems to have been that of Christ the King who seeks to extend his kingdom

⁹ For English translation and commentary, see *The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel: A Translation and Commentary*, transl. by G. Ronald Murphy (New York 1992). For a critical analysis, see G. Ronald Murphy, *The Saxon Savior: The Germanic Transformation of the Gospel in the Nine-Century Heliand* (New York 1989).

¹⁰ See Bruce Dickins and Alan S.C. Ross (eds.), *The Dream of the Rood* (New York 1966).

¹¹ James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation* (New York 1994), p. 4.

all over the world, not hesitating to use merchants and armies in the process.¹²

More importantly, the classicist model of *missio ad gentes* is predicated upon a Christology of a triumphant "Christ the King" leading an army of missionaries to conquer pagan lands and rescue pagan souls from ignorance. Not surprisingly, such an assertive "Christ the King" is resented by many non-Christians.¹³ More significantly, while the image of "Christ the King" continues to resonate in the minds and hearts of many Christians in Europe and North America today, the very same Christians would have difficulty understanding the abstract classical Christological professions of Nicaea and Chalcedon, let alone explain in plain, coherent terms what these classical Christological professions really mean.

This brings us to the situation in Asia. Taking the Anselmian axiom *fides quaerens intellectum* as the starting point, then there will invariably be a continuous growth in an appreciation of Jesus Christ when he is understood and appropriated by people in new socio-cultural contexts. The Indian theologian Stanley J. Samartha explained it well when he pointed out that Christology was not about "a frantic search for an alternative 'substance,' whether home-made or imported from elsewhere, in order once again to understand Christ's nature," but an endeavor to answer the question, "what is the reality that we encounter in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord?"¹⁴ On the question of Jesus' significance for others and his salvific work, the New Testament, the writings of the Church Fathers, and conciliar pronouncements are always the starting point and not the end, since these sources can never exhaust the range of people's experiences and questions in diverse *Sitz-im-Leben*. The preaching of Jesus Christ to every age and culture necessarily results in new understandings, responses, and experiences by people in new socio-cultural settings, all of which in turn lead to new insights about Jesus' meaning and significance for these people. One is reminded by Pope John XXIII, who noted in his opening *allocutio* to the Second Vatican Council, "[t]he substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another."¹⁵

¹² Michael Amaladoss, "Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia," in: *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 56 (2001), p. 10.

¹³ See discussion in William Burrows, *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation* (Maryknoll 1993), pp. 243-244.

¹⁴ S.J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ* (Madras 1974), p. 41.

¹⁵ "Pope John's Opening Speech to the Council," in: *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. by Walter M. Abbott (New York 1966), p. 715.

A good starting point for studying the origins and developments of Asian Christologies is the pioneering book *Asian Faces of Jesus*, a collection of essays exploring the various images of Jesus for different Asian communities by Asian theologians and edited by R.S. Sugirtharajah. In the prologue to this work, Sugirtharajah points out the "misgivings and ambivalence Asian Christians feel about the images of Christ that were first introduced to them by foreign missionaries and still dominate their thinking," and highlights the "desire of Asian Christians to discover for themselves the evidence of his presence in the midst and his place among other savior figures of the region."¹⁶ Hence, Asian Christians have searched for ways to "re-Asianize and refashion Jesus on Asian terms to meet the contextual needs of Asian peoples":

They fiercely resist any attempts to apply well-established and timeless truth about Jesus. For them, all understandings of Jesus arise out of particular contextual needs. ... Asian Christians continue the hermeneutical tradition created by early Christian writers. ... they weave a wide variety of cultural symbols, philosophical insights and social concerns of Asia into their Christological articulations. ... The point of the Asian articulations of Jesus is that if the Christian Church in the fifth century was successful in delicately maintaining the enigma of Jesus in the language, mood and the spirit of the Hellenistic period, why should not Asians draw on their own hermeneutical reservoir to fashion Jesus for their own time and place?¹⁷

In other words, Asian Christians in general, and Asian theologians in particular, seek to explore how Jesus is relevant and meaningful to the Asian peoples and their existential realities and concerns. Their interests are primarily pastoral and pragmatic – they want to ascertain what Jesus means to the masses of Asian people struggling to cope with contemporary existential life issues, rather than abstract, theoretical, or metaphysical expositions about Jesus' pre-existence or his ontological relationship to the other two Persons of Trinity, or even speculative discussions of how the human and divine natures relate in his person, because such rational deliberations are often divorced from the Asian peoples' daily living experiences.¹⁸ Often,

¹⁶ "Prologue," in: R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Faces of Jesus* (Maryknoll 1993), p. viii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

¹⁸ M. Thomas Thangaraj is surely correct when he points out that "a Christology that uses the concept of Logos to explicate the significance of Jesus is relevant or meaningful only in the context of a conversation with those who know what Logos signifies." See M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology* (Nashville 1994), p. 139. Thus, a Christology that speaks of essence and substance, nature and person, *homoousios*, and hypostatic union makes

Asian Christians do not begin their reflections on who Jesus is from the Nicene and Chalcedonian formulations. Rather, they are more interested in the Jesus of the New Testament, how he can bring them hope and new life, and how they can encounter his saving reality in their daily lives. Christological reflections cannot be done using an essentialist language and an abstract metaphysical thought-form which emerged as a response to specific Christological controversies that center on the difficulty of relating the human (profane) and divine (sacred) realities in Hellenistic mindsets, a non-issue as far as Asians, with their diverse relational and cosmological worldviews, are concerned.

Hence, an important characteristic of Asian Christologies is that they are by definition contextual theologies, that is to say,

[a] way of doing theology in which one takes into account: the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people; the culture in which one is theologizing; and social change in that culture, whether brought about by Western technological process or the grass-roots struggle for equality, justice and liberation.¹⁹

On this same issue, the Taiwanese theologian Shoki Coe (a.k.a. Ng Chiong Hui) noted that the emergence and growth of contextual theologies in the Third World is the result of a growing concern of the need for the Christian Gospel to be made relevant to the needs and concerns of actual human living in the contemporary world, in reaction against the universalist-positivist approaches of traditional classicist theological methodologies.²⁰ Not surprisingly, the world has witnessed a spectacular growth in new contextual theologies in general, and contextual Christologies²¹ in particular.

sense only to those who have some understanding of the intricacies of classical Greek philosophical thought, something which most Asians have not.

¹⁹ This definition of contextual theology is taken from Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll 1992), p. 1. In contrast to classicist theologies which focus primarily on the two *loci theologici* of scripture and tradition, Bevans points out that contextual theology adds a third theological locus, viz., human experience. Accordingly, "theology that is contextual realizes that culture, history, contemporary thought forms, and so forth are to be considered, along with scripture and tradition, as valid sources for theological expression" (*ibid.*, p. 2).

²⁰ Shoki Coe, "Contextualization as the Way Toward Reform," in: Douglas J. Elwood (ed.), *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes* (Philadelphia 1980), pp. 48-55.

²¹ Examples of Asian contextual Christologies include: *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. by R.S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll 1993); Stanley J. Samartha, *One Christ - Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll 1991); M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology* (Nashville 1994); A. Alangaram, *Christ of the Asian Peoples: Towards an Asian Contextual Christology Based on the Documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* (Bangalore

In relation to Asian contextual Christologies, Asian theologians shy away from static, ontological, and metaphysical ruminations, beginning their theological reflections in dialogue with the Asian peoples and their diverse *Sitz-im-Leben*, seeking to discern what Jesus is doing within their lives, concerns, aspirations, and dreams, and ensuring that Jesus is not a stranger in Asia, and his clear and life-giving message of hope and love is not muddled by the speculative and metaphysical language of a by-gone era. On this basis, M. Thomas Thangaraj criticizes the "false sense of universalism" and "Christological positivism" of European theologians who "had assumed that their Christological articulations were context-free and thus applicable to global situations," insisting that "a Christology that does not realize its contextual character of its articulation promotes a false sense of universalism and thus assumes that it is applicable to all situations, times, and places" – a problem which runs deep throughout the Christologies which have been formulated in Europe.²² As he puts it, "in the New Testament, the collection of our most primitive documents concerning Jesus, [there is] not one standardized Christology but various and differing visions of Jesus' significance," and hence, "there is no perennial Christology that is applicable and relevant to all contexts and all ages."²³ While it is true that Thangaraj may be speaking from an Asian Protestant perspective, nevertheless, Asian Catholics would agree with his point of view. Thus, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India explains in its response to the *Lineamenta* of the 1998 Asian Synod:

*Christology is never a finished product but always in process, even while admitting the normative characteristics of the liturgical, biblical, patristic and conciliar Christologies. The lived experience of the Christian community, following the indispensable rules and diversities of time, space and cultural conditioning, has an important role in this process.*²⁴

Similarly, in its response to the *Lineamenta* of the 1998 Asian Synod, the Japanese Catholic Bishops' Conference also took a comparable stance:

We should try to discover what kind of Jesus will be a "light" to the peoples of Asia. In other words, as the Fathers of the early Church did with Graeco-Roman culture, we must make a more profound study of the fun-

1999); C.S. Song, *Jesus: The Crucified People* (Minneapolis 1990); Peter C. Phan, "The Christ of Asia: An Essay on Jesus as eldest son and ancestor," in: *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996), pp. 25-55; Peter C. Phan, "Jesus the Christ with an Asian Face," in: *Theological Studies* 57 (1996), pp. 399-430; and *Asian Faces of Christ*, ed. by Vimal Tirimanna (Bangalore 2005).

²² Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru*, p. 25.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

²⁴ *East Asian Pastoral Review* 35 (1998) 1, pp. 121-122 (art. 5.2). Emphasis added.

damentals of the religiosity of our peoples, and from this point of view try to discover how Jesus Christ is answering their needs. Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life, but in Asia, before stressing that Jesus Christ is the TRUTH, we must search much more deeply into how he is the WAY and the LIFE.²⁵

At the same time, in a continent where the percentage of Christians stands at about 4% of the total population, and where East Asian Christians live and interact very closely with their non-Christian family members, friends, and neighbors, there is a need to ensure that Asian Christologies in general, and Confucian Christologies in particular, are not parochial in orientation and limited merely to a specifically Christian audience. Taken as a whole, the diverse and pluralistic character of the East Asian region, the proximity of non-Christians to Christians, as well as their close interaction, all demand that the Christological task has to transcend confessional boundaries and enter into a dialogue with East Asian religious and cultural traditions within a wider context.²⁶ More importantly, this is more than mere pastoral pragmatism, because on a deeper and more profound level, the Asian Catholic Bishops have insisted in the Final Statement of the First Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) Plenary Assembly, that the great Asian religious traditions should be given reverence and honor, acknowledging that "God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them" (FABC I, 15).²⁷ In their words:

we accept them [i.e., the great religious traditions] as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasuries of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations (FABC I, art. 14).²⁸

²⁵ *East Asian Pastoral Review* 35 (1998) 1, p. 89.

²⁶ This insight is taken from Michael Amaladoss, who asserts that the desire of Asian Bishops to rediscover the Asian countenance of Jesus would not be fruitful unless it is carried out "in dialogue with Asian cultural and religious traditions." See Michael Amaladoss, "Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia," p. 10.

²⁷ *For All The Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents From 1970-1991*, ed. by Gaudencio B. Rosales and C.G. Arévalo (Maryknoll 1992), p. 14.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Elsewhere, the FABC's Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA) has affirmed that "it is an inescapable truth that God's Spirit is at work in all religious traditions" (BIRA IV/12, art. 7)²⁹ because

it has been recognized since the time of the apostolic Church, and stated clearly again by the Second Vatican Council, that the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church (BIRA II, art. 12).³⁰

In addition, the "great religions of Asia with their respective creeds, cults and codes reveal to us diverse ways of responding to God whose Spirit is active in all peoples and cultures" (BIRA IV/7, art. 12).³¹ For the FABC, it is

the same spirit, who has been active in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church, who was active among all peoples before the incarnation and is active among the nations, religions and peoples of Asia today (BIRA IV/3, art. 6).³²

In contrast, theologians in Europe and North America, where Christians form a significant majority at least nominally, have usually theologized within confessional boundaries without any interaction with non-Christian minorities. Nevertheless, in Thangaraj's words,

Christology is not simply the Christian community of believers having a dialogue within itself, but also the carrying on of a conversation with those who do not share their vision of the decisive significance of Jesus for one's view of and orientation to human life.³³

On a practical level, there is a need for these East Asian Christians to interpret the received Christian tradition in dialogue with the other religious traditions of their fellow neighbors, if the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to have any impact in the wider society. The alternative is for East Asian Christians to cultivate a fortress mentality and withdrawing into a self-imposed ghetto.

²⁹ *For All the Peoples of Asia*, p. 326. See also art. 8.5 of BIRA IV/2, which states that "the Holy Spirit is operative in other religions as well" (*ibid.*, p. 253); and *Theological Consultation*, art. 43, which states that the religious traditions of Asia "are expressions of the presence of God's Word and of the universal action of his Spirit in them" (*ibid.*, p. 344).

³⁰ *For All the Peoples of Asia*, p. 115.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 259.

³³ Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru*, p. 139.

II.

The Confucian World of East Asia

The Chinese civilization, which is still very much alive and vibrant today, arose contemporaneously with the Egyptian, Babylonian, and Indus Valley civilizations, and before the birth of the Greek civilization, the cradle of European philosophy. For thousands of years, the Chinese civilization has prided itself as the "Middle Kingdom" (*Zhongguo*), the center of the inhabited world, "a civilised oasis surrounded by what was thought to be a cultural desert."³⁴ Undergirding the Chinese civilization and shaping the worldview of Chinese people for more than two millennia is the Confucian tradition.³⁵ The impact of the Confucian tradition has been felt far beyond the borders of China as it spread under the influence of the Chinese literate culture into the East Asian region as a whole, as well as East Asian *émigré* communities in Southeast Asia, Europe, Oceania, and the Americas.³⁶ More significantly, Tu Wei-ming highlights the fact that Confucianism has "exerted profound influence on East Asian political culture as well as on East Asian spiritual life," leaving "an indelible mark on the government, society, education, and family of East Asia," such that "the Sinic world (including industrial and socialist East Asia – Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, mainland China, North Korea, and Vietnam) has been characterized as 'Confucian'."³⁷ Thus, the Confucian tradition is still very much alive and influential in East Asia, intertwined within the socio-cultural and political lives of millions of East Asians, and nourishing their spiritual needs.

³⁴ Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (Maryknoll 1993), p. 1.

³⁵ Strictly speaking, there is no exact Chinese equivalent of the term "Confucianism," a term which was originally coined by 16th century Jesuits missionaries to China as a neologism for the venerable, all-encompassing tradition rooted in the Chinese *Weltanschauung* which in Chinese is variously referred to as *rujia* (School of the Literati), *rujiao* (Traditions of the Literati), *rujue* (Teachings of the Literati), or simply as *ru* (Literati). While the vision and ideas of Confucius (Kongzi, ca. 551–479 B.C.) and his later followers such as Mencius (Mengzi, ca. 371–289 B.C.) and others played a key role in animating and enriching the *ru* tradition, the *ru* tradition itself predated Confucius. The efforts of Matteo Ricci and his companions to canonize Confucius as the "founder" of Confucianism had more to do with missiological exigencies than being an accurate description of the *ru* tradition in its socio-historical setting. In the absence of other more appropriate terms, the terms "Confucian" and "Confucianism" will be used in this essay as convenient labels for the *ru* tradition accordingly.

³⁶ Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions*, p. 1.

³⁷ Tu Wei-ming, "Confucianism," in: *Our Religions*, ed. by Arvind Sharma (San Francisco 1993), p. 146.

Confucianism continues to be regarded as a manifestation of East Asian spirituality,³⁸ albeit diffused, that has shaped and continues to shape the life-orientation of the Sinic worldview. On the one hand, it is true that the institutional Confucianism which formed the 2000-year Chinese state orthodoxy from the Han Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty was accused by early 20th century Chinese reformers of the May Fourth New Culture Movement (1919), Chinese Marxists, and Western feminists for promoting patriarchy, misogyny, authoritarianism, formalism, and hindering socio-scientific progress. On the other hand, the late Julia Ching asserted that Confucianism continues to show much vitality in East Asia, "as a new generation of Asian Christians, whether Korean or Chinese, assert themselves as Christians of Confucian background and values."³⁹ She explained that Confucianism, like other religious-philosophical systems, has its strengths and weaknesses:

If we mean by Confucianism a backward-looking ideology, sterile textual studies, a society of hierarchical relationships excluding reciprocity, the permanent dominance of parents over children and of men over women, and a social order interested only in the past and not in the future, then Confucianism is not relevant and may as well be dead. But if we mean by it a dynamic discovery of the worth of the human person, of the possibilities of moral greatness and even sagehood, of one's fundamental relationship to others in a society based on ethical values, of an interpretation of reality and a metaphysics of the self that remain open to the transcendent – all this, of course, the basis for a true sense of human dignity, freedom, and equality – then Confucianism is very relevant and can remain so, both for China and for the world.⁴⁰

Before moving ahead with the task of constructing a Confucian Christology, one would do well to heed the caution of Benoît Vermander that theologizing in the Chinese context is fraught with pitfalls because the morphology of the Chinese language does not lend itself well to precise distinctions and well-defined grammatical categories, such that "basic Western concepts such as soul, substance, modality are often translated in a rather clumsy way, whereas finding equivalents for some basic Chinese categories is a painstaking

³⁸ For a thorough discussion of this point, see the excellent collection of essays in *Confucian Spirituality*. Volume One, ed. by Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York 2003).

³⁹ Hans Küng and Julia Ching, *Christianity and Chinese Religions* (New York 1989), p. 85.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

ing endeavour."⁴¹ As Cheng Chung-ying explains, the phonetic nature of the Greek language, which separates the sensible from the non-sensible, "tends to present a world of meanings in separation from a world of concrete things," thereby leading to conceptual metaphysical abstractions more readily than the visual nature of Chinese ideographs with its "cohesion of the sensible and non-sensible," and therefore, Chinese philosophy is "non-metaphysical in the sense in which Greek, and hence Western metaphysics, is metaphysical, since what is metaphysical in the Western sense is predicated upon the separation of the sensible from the non-sensible, the practical from the transcendental."⁴² Robert Allinson puts it succinctly when he asserts that the Western culture, being "a culture that could learn to function with an alphabet language would both be more theoretically inclined and *ex post facto* conditioned to think abstractly than a culture that was inclined to, and accustomed to, thinking in terms of concrete images," as is the case with the Chinese culture.⁴³

More specifically, while Vermander is thinking of the general task of theologizing, his caution hits home in the Christological task too, because there are no specific equivalents in the Chinese philosophical-religious tradition in general, and the Confucian tradition in particular for Greek metaphysical categories which are used in classical and scholastic Christological formulations, e.g., substance, essence, nature, and person. This dilemma arises because of the fundamental differences between Western and Chinese philosophies in general, and Greek and Confucian philosophies in particular. On the one hand, the central focus of Western philosophers is the quest for Truth with a capital "T," viz., the quest to discover the true reality, essence, and substance of things. Similarly, Western theologians have endeavored to discover the true reality, essence, and substance of Jesus Christ, the ontological integrity of his divine and human natures in the one person, etc. in the context of their Christological inquiry. On the other hand, in the Sinic world, the major existential, philosophical, and religious questions always center on discovering the ultimate values which shape human living: "What

⁴¹ Benoît Vermander, "Theologizing in the Chinese Context," in: *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996), p. 120. [See also the contribution of B. Vermander in the present volume, pp. 1421-1430. (Ed.)]

⁴² Cheng Chung-ying, "Chinese Metaphysics as Non-metaphysics: Confucian and Taoist Insights into the Nature of Reality," in: *Understanding the Chinese Mind: The Philosophical Roots*, ed. by Robert E. Allinson (Hong Kong 1989), pp. 167-168. See also Chad Hansen, "Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy, and 'Truth'," in: *JAS* XLIV (1985), pp. 491-520.

⁴³ R.E. Allinson, "An Overview of the Chinese Mind," in: *Understanding the Chinese Mind*, p. 8.

does it mean to be human as opposed to barbarians or animals?"; "What makes life worth living as humans?"; "What are the ideals and virtues that are needed to inspire everyone from ruler to ordinary citizen to participate in the creation and maintenance of a harmonious and civilized society?"; "Where are these ideals and virtues to be found?"; "What is the Way (*dao*) to these ideals and virtues?"; "How does one seek and attain the Way?"

In his characteristic blunt style, the late Angus C. Graham argued that the crucial question for the Chinese "is not the Western philosopher's 'What is the truth?' but 'Where is the Way?'"⁴⁴ David Hall and Roger Ames have coined the terms "Truth-seekers" and "Way-seekers" to describe the Western and Chinese philosophical worldviews respectively. According to them, Western Truth-seekers "want finally to get to the bottom line, to establish facts, principles, theories that characterize the way things are," while in contrast, Chinese Way-seekers "search out those forms of action that promote harmonious social existence," because "for the Way-seekers, truth is most importantly a quality of persons, not of propositions."⁴⁵ In particular, Confucius and his successors perceived human living as a constant striving for the Way (*dao*), calling for a dynamic and relational approach to "knowing" (*zhi*)⁴⁶ that is not concerned with discovering the Truth via abstract, essentialist, and metaphysical conceptualizations, but with knowing how to be adept in one's relations with others, how to make use of the possibilities arising from these relations, and how to trust in the validity of these relations as the cornerstone for familial and social harmony. Hall and Ames explain it succinctly when they point out that "in the West, truth is a knowledge of what is real and what represents that reality," while "for the Chinese, knowledge is not abstract, but concrete; it is not representational, but performative and participatory; it is not discursive, but is, as a knowledge of the way, a kind of know-how."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Ill. 1989), p. 3.

⁴⁵ David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany, NY 1998), p. 105.

⁴⁶ Interestingly, the ideograph 知 (*zhi*, "knowing") comprises the characters 矢 (*shi*, "arrow," which is derived from an arrow pointing upwards) and 口 (*kou*, "mouth"). In other words, *zhi* 知 ("knowing") means "speaking which hits the target," a metaphor pregnant with significant relational implications. In the Sinic mind, "knowing" is not a privatized, solitary, or even psychological act of apprehension in the abstract, but a relational act – one truly knows only when one is able to "speak" aptly or appropriately about the matter to the people around oneself.

⁴⁷ Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, p. 104.

Hence, in any quest to construct a Confucian Christology of Jesus as *sage* (*sheng*), one would do well to eschew a Western-Greek "Truth-seeker" approach in favor of a Sinic-Confucian "Way-seeker" approach. This would mean that such a Confucian Christology might be less inclined, not only towards issues which classical and scholastic Christology deem important, e.g., essence, substance, nature, person, unicity, uniqueness, and pre-existence, but also towards overarching, universalist concepts such as the Cosmic Christ, the Pre-existent Logos, etc. Rather, it would be interested in discovering the "Way" (*dao*) of Jesus the *sage* (*sheng*), what this Way entails, as well as how one can participate in and attain this Way.

III.

The Sage (*sheng*) in the Confucian Tradition

Within the Confucian tradition, the figure of the *sage* (*sheng*) occupies a special place as an exemplar of the perfection of human nature and the mediator between Heaven and Earth.⁴⁸ In standard Chinese-English dictionaries, the term *sheng* is typically translated as holy, sacred, wise, sagacious, sage, or wise man. Etymologically, the Chinese ideograph for the word *sage* 聖 comprises the characters 耳 (*er*, "ear," viz., "to hear," "to listen," or "to discern") and 呈 (*cheng*, "to speak," "to manifest," "to disclose," "to present a message," or "to proclaim"), which – in turn – comprises the characters 口 (*kou*, "mouth") and 壬 (*ting*, an archaic ideograph depicting a person, 人, standing on the ground, 土, viz., a person standing in one's place of office). The late Zhou text *Erya* characterizes the term *sheng* as "to present, exhibit, show, to be prominent" (*xian*).⁴⁹ The Han text *Baihutong* (ca. A.D. 80) depicts the *sage* as "possessing a Way which penetrates everywhere, a

⁴⁸ Important English language studies on the *sage* in the Confucian tradition include Rodney L. Taylor "Scripture and the Sage: On the Question of a Confucian Scripture," in: *ibid.*, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism* (Albany, NY 1990), pp. 23-37; *ibid.*, "The Sage as Saint: A Study in Religious Categories," in: *ibid.*, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism*, pp. 39-52; *ibid.*, "Neo-Confucianism, Sagehood and the Religious Dimension," in: *JCP* 2 (1975) 4, pp. 389-415; *ibid.*, *The Cultivation of Sagehood as a Religious Goal in Neo-Confucianism: A Study of Selected Writings of Kao Pan-lung (1562-1626)* (Missoula, Mont. 1978); Tu Weiming, "The Confucian Sage: Exemplar of Personal Knowledge," in: *ibid.*, *Way, Learning, and Politics: Essays on the Confucian Intellectual* (Albany, NY 1993), pp. 29-44; Ning Chen, "The Etymology of *Sheng* (Sage) and its Confucian Conception in Early China," in: *JCP* 27 (2000) 4, pp. 409-427.

⁴⁹ Cited in David L. Halls and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany, NY 1987), p. 258.

brilliance which radiates everywhere,"⁵⁰ and goes further to define the *sage* as follows:

Sheng (*sage*) means *t'ung* (to communicate, to connect, to penetrate through), *tao* (the process of becoming and the mode in which it unfolds, to speak), *sheng* (to sound, sound). There is nothing that is not in communication by virtue of his *tao*; there is nothing that is not elucidated by virtue of his understanding. Hearing the sound he knows a thing's nature and conditions. He is one in potency (*te*) with heaven and earth, one in brilliance with the sun and moon, one in order with the four seasons, and one in propitiousness with the gods and spirits (*Baihutong* 6/23/5b).⁵¹

Unlike dictionaries of European languages which define words by appealing to their "essential" meanings, in the *Shuowen jiezi*, the classical Chinese language lexicon compiled by the Eastern Han Dynasty scholar Xu Shen, the word *sheng* is defined rather by an appeal to its semantic and phonetic association to the word *tong* ("to communicate with," "to pass through," or "to penetrate"):

Sheng 聖 means *t'ung* 通: to communicate with, to commune with, to be conversant with, to penetrate, to connect. It derives semantically from *erh*, "ear," and takes its pronunciation from the *ch'eng* 呈 component.⁵²

The original meaning of the term *sheng* has been the subject of much debate. According to the *Shuowen* lexicon, this term is a *xinsheng* (logographic) character,⁵³ viz.,

deriving semantically from the ear graph *er* [耳] which has something to do with hearing, and phonetically from the *cheng* [呈] component, which often denotes the meaning of "to manifest" or "to reveal" in classical Chinese.⁵⁴

Using the insights gleaned from William G. Boltz's research on the Ma-wangdui *Laozi* manuscripts,⁵⁵ where the character 聖 is written as *sheng* 聲

⁵⁰ Cited in Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study* (Tokyo 1977), p. 80.

⁵¹ English translation taken from Halls and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. 258. See also Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, p. 80.

⁵² The English translation of the *Shuowen jiezi* is taken from Halls and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. 257.

⁵³ Logographic characters are the most common Chinese characters, combining both semantic and phonetic components which suggest the meaning and the sound respectively.

⁵⁴ Ning Chen, "The Etymology of *Sheng* (Sage)," p. 409.

⁵⁵ See "The religious and philosophical significance of the *Hsiang erh Lao Tzu* in the light of Ma-wang-tui silk manuscripts," in: *BSOAS* 45 (1982), pp. 101-102.