

# Christian 'Vocation' and Confucian 'Tianming' (天命): Negotiating the Boundaries of Transcendence and Immanence in International Business Ethics

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## **Abstract**

*Because the topic of transcendence and immanence and their relationship is so vast and highly abstract, I have chosen to make a comparison of two terms, Christian “vocation” and Confucian “tianming,” both of which seem to illuminate concretely how transcendence and immanence are related in their respective contexts. While Christian vocation discourse may seem to represent one extreme of Divine transcendence, and Confucian tianming discourse may seem equally extreme in conveying the logic of immanence, there is considerable overlap between the two – or so I will argue in this paper. There are significant patterns of immanence in Christian vocation discourse and conversely significant indications of transcendence in Confucian tianming. Furthermore in their respective intellectual traditions, the two terms have been progressively universalized, so that Christian vocation no longer symbolizes a religious life withdrawn from the world, and Confucian tianming no longer can be regarded as exclusive to the Emperor as “tianzi” or Son of Heaven. To be sure, the ultimate meaning of each term depends on the reality of God in Biblical religion, on the one hand, and the significance of Heaven in Chinese culture, and there are irreducible, non-negotiable differences between these two.*

*Nevertheless, there is a degree of overlap that remains very promising for clarifying the basis for a universal humanism whose emergence in a Global Ethic is one of the defining characteristics of our time. I hope to show the promise of this emerging consensus about the ultimately spiritual presuppositions regarding our common humanity and its importance for the field of international business ethics. Beginning with Max Weber's seminal work on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904), the significance of Christian vocation discourse for business ethics within a capitalist political economy has been commonly recognized. The burden of my paper is to show that an ethic of “tianming” might be equally significant in a Confucian perspective on international business ethics. Without a solid foundation recognizing a depth-dimension to human nature, programs of business ethics will not succeed in having a positive impact on the ways in which we can and must do*

*business together.*

*This paper is an expansion of the argument I sketched in an essay published in the Journal of International Business Ethics (Volume 3, Number 2, 2010), "Business Ethics in Christian Social Teaching and Confucian Moral Philosophy: Two Ships Passing in the Night?" Major portions of the argument had also been presented previously in an unpublished essay, "Business as a Vocation: A Catholic Contribution toward a Global Ethic?" a paper I presented to the 5th International Symposium on Catholic Social Thought and Management Education, Bilbao, Spain, July 15-18, 2003.*

The Christian concept of vocation, as Max Weber persuasively argued, may have its origins in the Bible, but it awaited the emergence of Protestantism to be fully realized as providing the key to a practical Christian ethic of public life, or the meaning and truth about our worldly occupations. As philosophers have learned to say after Hegel, much of this development was "*hinter den Ruecken*" (behind the back), or unintended. Luther's motives were strictly religious, and not at all focused on creating a new Christian ethic, or offering moral advice to people doing business. Nevertheless, his Biblical interpretations, beginning with the Book of Sirach 11:20-21, "*bleibe in deinem Beruf*" (English: "remain in your vocation (or calling)") identifies a person's worldly activities with his primary relationship with God<sup>1</sup>. As Weber himself points out, Luther's translation had little if any impact on Calvinism, whose role in developing the so-called "Protestant ethic" was decisive, because the Book of Sirach was regarded as apocryphal, that is, as part of the Greek Septuagint translation of the Bible that had no authority for Calvinists who relied exclusively on the Hebrew text, which did not include it among the canonical books of Scripture. That Calvinism eventually produced what Weber regards as the modern Christian understanding of vocation (*Beruf*), with all its fateful consequences for the ideology of capitalism and the moral legitimacy of going into business is a long story filled with ironies and complexities of early modern European history. That, however, is the story that Weber means to tell in his seminal work on the Protestant ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Whether he tells it well and truly remains a matter of controversy; nevertheless, his basic insight into the religious significance of vocation discourse, and its fertility in shaping Christian approaches to business ethics remains unshaken.

In a previous effort, I attempted to highlight the enduring importance of the concept of vocation in Christian social teaching, in order to show how it can and ought to establish the theological basis for a Christian contribution to international business ethics<sup>2</sup>. Like the following, that initial effort (2003) was focused on the use of vocation discourse in Catholic social teaching (CST), the tradition of Papal and other official documents addressing various social, political and economic concerns in light of Roman Catholicism's ongoing attempt to understand the meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. At that time, while

vocation discourse appeared intermittently in CST, its reference to people doing business was explicit only in the Pastoral Letter on the US Economy, "Economic Justice for All," issued by the United States Catholic Conference in 1986<sup>3</sup>.

Since that time, vocation discourse has become much more prominent in CST. Pope Benedict XVI's important encyclical letter, *Caritas in veritate* (English: "Charity in Truth," 2009), advances the trend of universalizing the idea of vocation by identifying it with "integral human development," a concept elaborated from Pope Paul VI's earlier encyclical, *Populorum progressio* (English: "On the Development of Peoples," (1967), whose anniversary *Caritas in veritate* was intended to commemorate<sup>4</sup>. Most recently, the head of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Cardinal Peter Turkson has issued a statement, "Vocation of the Business Leader: A Reflection<sup>5</sup>," which focuses the general perspective of *Caritas in veritate* toward the specific challenges faced by business men and women in the globalizing economy. This statement, by far, is the culmination of the development of vocation discourse in CST, and is designed to serve as a template for further research and teaching in the field of international business ethics.

Rather than analyze its specific details, let me focus on the contribution it makes to understanding the topic for discussion at this conference, namely, the relationship of immanence and transcendence in various religious and cultural traditions, particularly in a Chinese context. As our acknowledgement of Max Weber's insights should have made clear, both in Latin and in English, to speak of vocation is to speak of a "calling." Calling suggests a personal relationship, a context of I-Thou interactions (Buber, et. al.) in which anyone said to have a vocation has received a call from someone else. To acknowledge that one has a vocation is to recognize that one has been called. That recognition is already a response to the call, which itself is creative of a new relationship, which itself may redefine the role(s) that a person sees herself filling in the situation in which she has been called. All this could be said, of course, of many mundane relationships, such as accepting an appointment in some institutional setting, but in this particular case, since the idea of a calling is deliberately mimetic of Bible stories like the calling of Samuel to be Yahweh's prophet, the one who is called may be seen as responding to God's invitation to participate in some larger purpose or plan of God's own making. This clearly confirms the dialectical relationship between immanence and transcendence at the heart of Biblical religion, and its constitutive meaning for all integrally human relationships.

Functionally, then, vocation discourse in CST is designed to highlight the religious significance of what otherwise might be regarded simply as a worldly pursuit, and designated as such in strictly secular terms like "job" or "career." To regard one's worldly work as a "vocation" is to place it in a semantic field designed to highlight its spiritual significance. One's worldly work becomes religiously meaningful insofar as it is

understood as a response to God's specific call to that individual person. Such a claim to meaningfulness in work may be regarded as “intrinsic,” in contrast to “instrumental” considerations that conventionally are believed to make work meaningful, such the various material incentives of wealth, fame, and power. (Cf. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*) If making money is my ultimate purpose, for example, whatever I am doing to make money remains “instrumental” insofar as there are a vast number of ways to achieve that end. Work, of course, might be regarded as intrinsically meaningful for reasons unrelated to vocation discourse. Perhaps I find what I'm doing intrinsically pleasurable, and consistently so. I never tire of it. Then work becomes more like play, a category distinct from, but often surprisingly overlapped with vocation discourse.

The intrinsic meaningfulness highlighted by vocation discourse represents one's worldly work as participating in one's primary and ongoing conversation with God throughout one's life. Since the grammar, as it were, of this Divine conversation is inscribed in the Bible and in the sacramental-devotional life of the church, a vocation discourse informed by these thus functions not only to make worldly work intrinsically meaningful, but also to provide an extended series of rhetorical templates or scripts by which to render them intelligible and negotiable. Theologically, we might identify this function as the process of “sanctification,” in which something ostensibly secular or profane is set apart as God's own portion, made holy, rendered fit for sacrifice, and ultimately transformed by participation in the mystery of God's communion with all living beings whom God has created and redeemed. Within the church as the community of faith, vocation discourse thus functions to place worldly work in a context of religious rituals by which those who participate in them continually rediscover the meaning of all things human.

Only within this ritualized process of symbolic construction, is it possible to link vocation discourse with business ethics, or business ethics construed as included within the larger arena of Christian ethics. Though the links may be functionally necessary, their specificity remains contingent. Business, understood as another term for work and our worldly pursuits, may become morally significant on all sorts of different presuppositions, but it is only a Biblically oriented vocation discourse that links business to the specific expectations of Christian faith and practice. Construed now within the circle of Christian faith and practice, business ethics will tend to be shaped by a not-so-hidden higher agenda, as common business morality gets scrutinized *sub specie aeternitatis*<sup>6</sup>. Attitudes and behaviors that might otherwise pass muster as commonsensical, or accepted as “par for the course,” may now be subject to prayerful reexamination, based on the Christian's overriding concern to discern concretely “what God is enabling me (us) to be and to do.” (Cf. James M. Gustafson) Thus, a functional model of what is actually accomplished by vocation discourse in business will include a mapping of the ways in which the ethical dimension is construed and, possibly, transformed. The model itself will predict a certain intensification

of ethical concern in and for business, without necessarily sanctioning any single way of identifying, adjudicating or resolving those heightened concerns.

One useful way to summarize the chief features emergent in this functional model of vocation discourse in business is to recall anthropologist Clifford Geertz's functional definition of religion<sup>7</sup>. If what is accomplished through a recognition of “business as vocation” can be mapped usefully in terms of Geertz's general definition, then the way might be opened for a search for the functional substitutes by which nonBiblically oriented religious traditions apprehend or fail to apprehend the moral seriousness of business people and their business practices. Moreover, such a functional approach as Geertz recommends enables us to do comparisons between one worldview expressing the relationship of immanence and transcendence, and another. By bracketing, for example, the specifically theocentric logic of Biblical religion, Geertz's approach allow us to look deeper than the obvious differences between a worldview in which God is ultimate and one in which God is not. Honest and insightful comparisons of Christianity and Confucianism, for example, can thus go forward without prejudice to either worldview's metaphysical assumptions.

Geertz defines religion as (1) A System of Symbols which acts to (2) Establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in [women and] men by (3) Formulating conceptions of a general order of existence, and (4) Clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) The moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. I will assume that this definition is familiar, though hardly uncontested. It is meant to be neutral in reference to any specific religious tradition or its claims of truth or epistemological privilege. Its underlying assumptions are philosophically pragmatic, insofar as it is meant to be descriptive of a certain range of human social practices, that are themselves intelligible as answers or solutions to basic existential questions or problems more or less commonly encountered by all human persons and societies. The definition is obviously circular in character and deliberately so, since religion as a cultural system is—in Geertz's view, as well as my own—impressively heuristic and hermeneutical in character.

Christian theological discourse inviting us, as in CST, to explore “business as [a] vocation” thus (1) presupposes a system of symbols—namely, the larger Biblical vision of who we are, what we are to do, and what we may hope for as Christians—which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations—namely, that those sharing this vision selectively cultivate a new self-image and a higher standard of best business practices—by (3) affirming a faith and hope that situates business activity toward the center of their personal and social relationship with God, and (4) experiencing personal confirmation through prayer and worship that just and loving practices based on that faith and hope, are (5) a uniquely realistic approach not only to any definition of business success worth pursuing, but the key to integrating their business experience with their overall sense

of personal integrity as a response to God's invitation to live life in abundance.

Functional models are inherently perspectival in character, and thus remain tentative and never definitive. (Cf. Max Black, Paul Ricoeur, David Tracy, Clifford Geertz, et. al.) This model of “business as vocation” discourse, distilled through Geertz's general definition of religion, emphasizes some features of Christian business experience while obscuring others. Given the focus of this paper, the most important of these is the way the model highlights the inner dimension of one's personal relationship with God. Given such an emphasis, the outer dimension of social interactions enabled by vocation discourse may seem obscure. This difficulty may be overcome, as soon as one reflects on the general dynamics of the larger Biblical vision, in which the processes of personal and social transformation are constitutive of each other. As the model suggests, the nexus between them runs through ritual, in other words, the church's practice of liturgical prayer and worship. Good liturgy, in short, is constitutive of the church's social ministry in our common struggle for economic and social justice. Nevertheless, vocation discourse, narrowly construed, may not be sufficient to carry the full range of religious meanings that may illuminate Christian business experience. Other discourses, for example, covenant and stewardship, may be usefully linked with vocation discourse to render fully explicit the socially transformative dynamics of the larger Biblical vision.

“*Tianming*”:

How “Business as a Vocation” might be construed in Confucianism

Confucian tradition, for purposes of this paper, refers to Chinese philosophy as preserved primarily in the texts of the four great Classics: The Analects (*Lunyu*), The Great Learning (*Daxue*), The Doctrine of the Mean (*Zhongyong*), and the Book of Mencius (*Mengzi*). Of these, only the Analects is directly linked by Chinese tradition with Confucius (Kongzi) himself (551-479 BCE). The others are regarded as works compiled by his major disciples, beginning with Zeng Cen (505-436 BCE), whom tradition links with the *Daxue*, as it does Zisi or Kongji (483-402 BCE), Confucius' grandson, with the *Zhongyong*, and Mengzi (371-289 BCE), with the book of *Mengzi*. From the time of the great Southern Song dynasty philosopher, Zhu Xi (1130-1200 CE), the four books were regarded as canonical not only in the sense of the being the definitive expression of Confucian wisdom, but also as the required subject matter for the examinations by which scholars qualified for appointment as Imperial administrators until the fall of the Qing dynasty and the advent of the Republic of China in 1911 CE.

In the sketch that follows I will rely primarily on a new translation of the *Zhongyong*, the notable work of Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, suggestively titled, Focusing the Familiar (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001) instead of the usual, “Doctrine of the Mean,”

as it is rendered in the pioneering English translation of James Legge (1893). My reason for following Ames and Hall, beyond the basic credibility of what they have achieved, is as follows: In order to make a comparison with the vocation discourse in CST, I need a reading of Confucian teaching that remains open to its religious significance while respecting the “otherness,” as it were, of Chinese religion and philosophy.

There is a growing tendency in China today, as the various schools of Chinese philosophy are rehabilitated as part of the enduring legacy of Chinese civilization, to regard Confucian teaching as a form of secular humanism. Kongzi is regarded as more or less parallel to Socrates, and both of them are conventionally regarded as secularizers whose inquiries and methods of rational analysis undercut the religious “superstitions” inherited from previous culture. There are passages in the *Lunyu* that support this interpretation of Kongzi (cf. Book V, Number 13; Book VII, Number 21), just as Plato's early dialogue, the *Euthyphro*, has been used to support a similar view of Socrates.

By contrast, Ames and Hall's translation highlights the religious presuppositions of Confucian moral philosophy, by showing how religious concerns are central to understanding the *Zhongyong* as inviting those who would learn from Confucius to the spiritual discipline of focusing (“*zhong*”) the familiar (“*yong*”), i.e., cultivating a proper self-understanding in which “the ten thousand things”—the “interactive field of processes and events”—can be responded to harmoniously, or resonant with humanity's own role in the dynamic unfolding of Heaven and Earth. Regarded as such, the *Zhongyong* seems to map out an agenda that contains an impressive number of points of fruitful comparison or “functional substitutes” for CST's vocation discourse, yet one based on an entirely different understanding of ultimate reality. In what follows, I hope to give a sufficient taste of what is both familiar and unfamiliar in the *Zhongyong*, so that the otherness of CST's theological presuppositions might be more clearly understood in China.

While “focusing the familiar” is a discourse that models a religious way of being in the world it is also, in Ames and Hall's interpretation, emphatically nontheistic. The very first sentence of the *Zhongyong* is a fitting summary of its overall perspective:

“What *tian* commands (*ming*) is called natural tendencies (*xing*); drawing out these natural tendencies is called the proper way (*dao*); improving upon this way is called education (*jiao*).” (Ames and Hall, p. 89)

*Tian*, of course, is the Chinese word for “Heaven” which Western missionaries were all too quick to identify with “God.” Nevertheless, though Heaven commands (*tianming*), it is not to be regarded as a being with personal characteristics similar to those attributed to the One whom Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesus and their followers have experienced in God.

How the otherness of *tian* may be understood depends upon a critical appropriation of the “correlative cosmology” generally presupposed in all schools of Chinese philosophy. Within this cosmology there is a continuous and primordial “creativity” (*cheng*) operative in the myriad things that make up this world, but it cannot be abstracted from “interactive field of processes and events” or apprehended as some ultimate and personal form of Divine transcendence, as in the Biblical tradition's affirmation of God as “Father, “Creator,” or “Lord of the Universe” (*melek ha olam*). Despite its nontheistic status or because of it, *tian*, nevertheless, is the source of *ming*, those “specific conditions that define existence in the world, such as one's lifespan, one's social and economic status, one's physical health (Ibid., p. 71) which must be responded to and brought into harmony (he), as one takes up one's Way (*dao*) in the world.

Those who apprehend the Way, and seek to improve, i.e., cultivate themselves properly, through education (*jiao*) are regarded as wise (*shengren*) and, to the extent that they make progress along the Way, they may achieve the status of “exemplary persons” (*junzi*). Making progress means achieving one's own full humanity (*ren*), which is constituted by the cultivation of certain basic virtues (*de*), which are always construed relationally (as in the “five ways forward”: “ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brother, friend and mentor”) and the three methods of advancing on them: wisdom (*zhi*), authoritative conduct (*ren*) and courage (*yong*). (Ibid., p. 102) The point is that the Chinese “correlative cosmology” establishes both the ultimate basis, i.e., the Way (*dao*), for authentic development, but an objective theory of virtue stipulating the roles and relationships, the objective expectations specific to each, according to which that development may be realized.

Here are some quotations from the Zhongyong that may help convey the general features of the Way:

“Confucius said, 'Exemplary persons (*junzi*) focus (*zhong*) the familiar affairs of the day; petty persons (*xiaoren*) distort them. Exemplary persons are able to focus the affairs of the day because, being exemplary, they themselves constantly abide in equilibrium (*zhong*). Petty persons are a source of distortion in the affairs of the day because, being petty persons, they lack the requisite caution and concern. (Zhongyong 2; Ibid, p. 90)

“Putting oneself in the place of others (*shu*) and doing one's best on their behalf (*zhong*) does not stray far from the proper way. 'Do not treat others as you yourself would not wish to be treated.' (Lunyu, 12:2 and 15:24) Of the four requirements of the exemplary person's proper path, I am not yet able to satisfy even one. I am not yet able to serve my father as I would



expect a son to serve me. I am not yet able to serve my lord as I would expect a minister to serve me. I am not yet able to serve my elder brother as I would expect a younger brother to serve me. I am not yet able to first treat my friends as I myself would wish them to treat me. Where in everyday moral conduct and in everyday attention to proper speech I am lacking in some respect, I must make every effort to attend to this; where there is excess in some respect, I must make every effort to constrain myself. In speech pay attention to what is done, and in conduct pay attention to what is said. How could an exemplary person not but earnestly aspire to behave in such a manner?" (Zhongyong 13; Ibid., p. 94)

"The Master said, 'Being fond of learning is close to acting wisely (*zhi*); advancing on the way with enthusiasm is close to acting authoritatively (*ren*), and having a sense of shame is close to acting with courage (*yong*). Those who realize these three realize how to cultivate their persons; those who realize how to cultivate their persons realize how to bring order to others; those who realize how to order others properly realize how to bring order to the world, the state, and the family.'" (Zhongyong 20; Ibid, p. 102)

"Creativity (*cheng*) is the way of *tian*; creating is the proper way of becoming human. Creativity is achieving equilibrium and focus (*zhong*) without coercion; it is succeeding without reflection. Freely and easily traveling the center of the way—this is the sage (*shengren*). Creating is selecting what is efficacious (*shan*) and holding onto it firmly." (Zhongyong 20; Ibid, p. 104)

Only those of utmost creativity (*zhicheng*) in the world are able to make the most of their natural tendencies (*xing*). Only if one is able to make the most of their natural tendencies is one able to make the most of the natural tendencies of others; only if one is able to make the most of the natural tendencies of others is one able to make the most of the natural tendencies of processes and events (*wu*); only if one is able to make the most of the natural tendencies of processes and events can one assist in the transforming and nourishing activities of heaven and earth; and only if one is can assist in the transforming and nourishing activities of heaven and earth can human beings take their place as members of this triad." (Zhongyong 22; Ibid., p. 105)

The triad, of course, is the harmonious interrelationship of heaven, earth, and humanity (*tianren heyi*) by which the *Dao* is constituted, and continually reenacted in ritual (*li*). (Ibid, p. 50)

Enough has been shown to suggest that the Confucian Way (*Dao*) of self-cultivation can be construed as a powerful and possibly compelling answer to the three great existential questions, Who am I, What am I to do, and What shall I hope for, and thus taken up as a possible candidate for critical comparison with the way vocation discourse functions in CST. A major question as yet unanswered is whether and how an understanding of business ethics might be developed within the Confucian paradigm of self-cultivation. While the obstacles to such a development are formidable, they are no more insuperable than similar difficulties that occur within, for example, the Aristotelian tradition of moral philosophy<sup>8</sup>.

The *Mengzi*, for example, begins with a pointed exchange between the sage and King Hui of Liang, in which Mengzi makes a strong contrast between profit (*li*, not to be confused with *li* as “ritual propriety”) and righteousness (*yi*):

“Your majesty,’ answered Mencius, ‘What is the point of mentioning the word “profit”? All that matters is that there should be benevolence and righteousness.” (Book 1A, Number 1)

Though Mencius' point is made with reference to seeking profit or advantage for a particular state, and thus applies in the first instance to the scholar-officials who are seeking to emulate the ideal of the exemplary person (*junzi*), it seems easily extended to merchants and others who live by profit-seeking, whose goal in life presumably would make them prime candidates for criticism as petty persons (*xiaoren*). Indeed, throughout the history of Imperial China merchants or business people, as opposed to scholar-officials, landowners, peasants and religious functionaries, are usually regarded as low in status, amoral, antisocial, and in need of often punitive government regulation.

The Confucian classics, however, do not ever explicitly declare that it is impossible for a merchant or business person to become a *shengren* or *junzi*. Indeed, one of Kongzi's eminent disciples, Zi Gong (Tzu-kung), known for his unusually filial piety toward the Master, was a successful businessman and diplomat. The *Lunyu* offers at least one passage in which Zi Gong, here referred to as Ssu, is also given somewhat reserved praise (Cf. Book XIV, Number 29) for his skill in business:

“The Master said, ‘Hui is perhaps difficult to improve upon; he allows himself constantly to be in dire poverty. Ssu refuses to accept his lot and indulges in money-making, and is frequently right in his conjectures.’” (Book XI, Number 19)

While admittedly obscure, this passage suggests that the problem is not with money-making as such, but with the petty ways in which it is usually undertaken, presumably at the expense

of society as a whole. If Zi Gong's fortune consisted only in ill-gotten gains, not only would there be nothing to praise him for, but he would hardly have been included among Kongzi's exemplary disciples.

Seeking the proper harmony in the relationship of profit (li) and righteousness (yi), however, requires the cultivation of moral and intellectual virtues that assume neither the glorification of business nor its fundamental depravity. Fortunately, the *Lunyu* is studded with passages that show the proper Way, some of these conveying snatches of conversations remembered between Zi Gong and the Master:

“The Master said, 'Wealth and high station are what men desire but unless I got them in the right way I would not remain in them. Poverty and low station are what men dislike, but even if I did not get them in the right way I would not try to escape from them.’” (Book IV, Number 5)

“The Master said, 'In the eating of coarse rice and the drinking of water, the using of one's elbow for a pillow, joy is to be found. Wealth and rank attained through immoral means have as much to do with me as passing clouds.’” (Book VII, Number 16)

The Master said, 'The gentleman (*junzi*) is easy of mind, while the small man (*xiaoren*) is always full of anxiety.’” (Book VII, Number 37)

The Master said, 'It is not easy to find a man who can study for three years without thinking of earning a salary.’” (Book VIII, Number 12)

“Tzu-kung (Zi Gong) said, 'If you had a piece of beautiful jade here, would you put it away safely in a box or would you try to sell it for a good price?' The Master said, 'Of course I would sell it. Of course I would sell it. All I am waiting for is the right offer.’” (Book IX, Number 13)

“The Master said, 'The gentleman (*junzi*) is easy to serve but difficult to please. He will not be pleased unless you try to please him by following the Way (*Dao*), but when it comes to employing the services of others, he does so within the limits of their capacity. The small man (*xiaoren*) is difficult to serve but easy to please. He will be pleased even though you try to please him by not following the Way, but when it comes to employing the services of others, he demands all-round perfection.’” (Book XIII, Number 25)

“Hsien asked about the shameful. The Master said, 'It is shameful to make salary your sole object, irrespective of whether the Way prevails in the state

or not.” (Book XIV, Number 1)

“The Master said, 'It is quite a remarkable feat for a group of men who are together all day long merely to indulge themselves in acts of petty cleverness without ever touching on the subject of morality in their conversation!’” (Book XV, Number 17)

“The Master said, 'The gentleman (*junzi*) has morality as his basic stuff and by observing the rites (*li*) puts it into practice, by being modest gives it expression, and by being trustworthy in word brings it to completion. Such is a gentleman indeed!’” (Book XV, Number 18)

“The Master said, 'What the gentleman (*junzi*) seeks, he seeks within himself; what the small man (*xiaoren*) seeks, he seeks in others.’” (Book XV, Number 21)

“The Master said, 'The gentleman (*junzi*) devotes his mind to attaining the Way and not to securing food. Go and till the land and you will end up by being hungry, as a matter of course; study, and you will end up with the salary of an official, as a matter of course. The gentleman worries about the Way (*Dao*), not about poverty.’” (Book XV, Number 32)

Taken cumulatively and interpreted for the insight they open up mutually in relationship to one another, these and the other aphorisms of the *Lunyu* suggest that it might be possible to do business in a manner consistent with the Confucian Way of self-cultivation. The familiar (*yong*) to be focused (*zhong*) would, of course, be the ordinary activities of the marketplace, organizing and managing the mundane transactions of buying and selling, in such a way that these might help strengthen the virtues of wisdom (*zhi*), authoritative conduct (*ren*) and courage (*yong*) (Cf. *Lunyu*, Book XIV, Number 28), for both buyers and sellers. Given the advice that Kongzi gives, in the last passage just quoted, to aspiring scholar-officials, namely that one's material goal (“the salary of an official”) is likely to be fulfilled “as a matter of course,” so long as one remains devoted to attaining the Way, it seems likely that he would offer a similar hope to his disciples in the business community. You are more likely to fulfill even your business goals, by following the proper Way of focusing your familiar routines and activities, than by focusing—as the petty person invariably does—exclusively on the pursuit of profit for its own sake.

Precisely how such “focusing the familiar” is to be maintained may seem somewhat elusive, but only until one considers the extraordinary significance of ritual (*li*) in the Confucian Way of self-cultivation. It is also ritual (*li*) that embodies Confucianism's authentic dialectic of

immanence and transcendence. By observing and practicing *li*, we come to know not only the Dao prescribed in the basic harmony of heaven, earth, and humanity, but also our own *tianming*. The proper practice of self-cultivation affords us access to the specific ways in which our own lives unfold in a dialectic of immanence and transcendence. The *Lunyu*'s final aphorism, for example, points out:

“Confucius said, 'A man has no way of becoming a gentleman (*junzi*) unless he understands Destiny (*ming*); he has no way of taking his stand unless he understands the rites (*li*); he has no way of judging men unless he understands words.'” (Book XX, Number 3)

Perhaps the biggest obstacle for Kongzi's disciples in the business community would be to so order their daily routines that they, in fact, made time for the many rituals, invariably religious as well as social, by which the basic fabric of the moral and spiritual life is preserved and enhanced. Nevertheless, if one is to follow the Way, it is precisely one's commitment to living in and through the rituals, particularly those of one's ancestral family, that is most likely to yield an increase in the virtues of wisdom (*zhi*), authoritative conduct (*ren*) and courage (*yong*). Insofar as the Way is thus successfully traveled, even the lives of business people may exemplify the harmonious interrelationship of heaven, earth, and humanity (*tianren heyi*). Tianming, after all, is as universally present in humanity, as understood in Confucian tradition, as is the “calling from God” universally recognized in Christian tradition.

### **Conclusion: No Easy Convergences**

Just as CST was able to develop an affirmation of “business as vocation” that rendered business both religiously significant and morally demanding, so the Confucian Way of self-cultivation appears to contain resources for a similarly transformative perspective on business ethics. Whether any closer comparison between this preliminary inquiry into Confucian business ethic and CST's vocation discourse can be realized, seems to depend on approaching certain metaphysical questions that must, for now, remain at least partially unresolved. Since the specific tendency of vocation discourse is to situate ordinary business activities squarely within a Christian's ongoing personal relationship with God, the search for a basis of comparison ultimately leads to a consideration of the significance of “Destiny” (*ming*) and/or the mandate of Heaven (*tianming*) in the Confucian ethic of self-cultivation. The appeal to Heaven may be a functional substitute for Christian God-talk, but the two are not easily compared let alone mutually intelligible.

Nevertheless, despite the lack of convergence, there are uncannily parallel developments worth considering. The most intriguing of these is the trend toward universalization. Just as

the Biblical basis for vocation discourse seems originally restricted to the experiences of the great prophets, starting with Abraham, but later extended to all human persons, so the Chinese classics seem to reflect the transition from an idea of *tianming* restricted to intermittent episodes of political change, paradigmatically, the dramatic fall of the Shang and the rise of the Zhou dynasties. By the time the Lunyu is collected, discerning *tianming* seems to have become part of the agenda for all *shengren* seeking to become *junzi*. Becoming a *junzi*, thus, in principle, is no longer restricted to members of a specific social class, insofar as each human person may be understood as responding to a distinctive *tianming*, which he or she must seek to discern by focusing the familiar. The universalization of *tianming* thus is parallel in function to CST's recognition of the universality of lay vocations, a dramatic shift that became evident in the documents of Vatican Council II (1962-1965). Business people, as such, are now no more excluded from the one religious Way than from the other.

Given this parallel, is there anything to be gained by making further critical comparisons? Perhaps there is. The Confucian Way of self-cultivation, properly understood, should underscore, even for Christians, the indispensable role of ritual in maintaining, preserving, and enhancing business ethics. Liturgical prayer and worship thus ought to become more visible within the ethical space opened up by CST's vocation discourse. Similarly, the intuitions of many Christian business people who know that genuine success consists in achieving a proper balance between business, family, church, and other legitimate personal and social concerns are easily reinforced by a respectful consideration of what the Confucian Way still has to offer its disciples.

Reciprocally considered, is there anything that CST's vocation discourse might offer as a friendly challenge to business people embarked upon the Confucian Way of self-cultivation? I think so, but it is not easily summarized. In my own attempt at a respectful reading of the Confucian Way, I can't seem to get beyond certain issues that are central to Christian faith and practice as such. Those issues are parallel to the one's defined by Jesus' and Paul's immanent criticism of Pharisaic Judaism and Augustine's struggle with Pelagianism. Confucian self-cultivation, however grandly conceived, still holds out the promise that self-help is the ultimate path to moral and spiritual development. But is that really so? What about "grace" and "faith"? Where are the resources by which I might be forgiven my sins and given a second chance (or third, or however many as necessary) to find myself once again well upon the Way? If the presence of grace is the sine-qua-non of Christian faith, hope, and love, how specifically is it realized, illuminated, and more effectively operative in the space opened up by CST's vocation discourse? I feel that I must ask myself that question<sup>9</sup>, before I presume to ask Confucius' disciples to provide an account of what, so far, I may find missing in their model. Nevertheless, I believe I can anticipate some part of their answer, for what Christians acknowledge as "grace" may be successfully

communicated in the rituals by which the true depth of the familiar effectively comes into focus. Such grace, they might say, is in the small things that petty persons (*xiaoren*) unflinchingly ignore. Such grace can yet be apprehended simply by following the Way. It need not be restricted, as if to a single source, namely, the indispensable mediation of a single Divine Man, Jesus, whom Christians believe, really changed everything....

### *Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup>Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Chapter III, footnote 3, as accessed online (16 May 2012) at Moriyuki Abukuma's Weberian Sociology of Religion: [http://www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukuma/weber/world/ethic/pro\\_eth\\_frame.html](http://www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukuma/weber/world/ethic/pro_eth_frame.html).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Dennis P. McCann, "Business as a Vocation: A Catholic Contribution toward a Global Ethic?", a paper presented to the 5th International Symposium on Catholic Social Thought and Management Education, Bilbao, Spain, July 15-18, 2003.

<sup>3</sup>Though the adoption of this usage by the American bishops may seem like a logical extension of a trend toward recognizing the specificity and diversity of lay vocations that is first evident in John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* (1961), it is more plausible to interpret this innovation as a reflection of the ecumenical context in which Christian social ethics has developed in the USA since the great social struggles of the 1960s. The pastoral letter is explicit in acknowledging the need to "learn from the strong emphasis in Protestant traditions on the vocation of lay people in the world" where, at least within the Calvinist tradition, the idea of business as a vocation is well established. A major focus of that 2003 paper was to demonstrate the convergence between Catholic and Protestant uses of vocation discourse, including the emerging ecumenical consensus on the vocation of business people. That this breakthrough should have occurred in the USA may have less to do with the American "spirit of capitalism" and more with the pervasive influence of "the (Calvinist) Protestant ethic" on the USA's dominant culture and institutions, and the extent to which Roman Catholicism has been successfully integrated into the overall pattern of American religiousness.

<sup>4</sup>Explain the role of anniversaries in the development of CST.

<sup>5</sup>The full text of Cardinal Turkson's "Vocation of the Business Leader: A Reflection" (2012) is available online at the University of St. Thomas' Center for Catholic Studies webpage: <http://www.stthomas.edu/cathstudies/cst/VocationBusinessLead/>.

<sup>6</sup>This is precisely what is accomplished in Cardinal Turkson's "Vocation of the Business Leader." Within a Christian theological horizon deliberately echoing Benedict XVI's

interpretation of humanity's ultimate relationship with God—signified as “charity in truth”—Turkson highlights four main challenges and opportunities for business leaders today, namely, globalization, the revolution in communications technology, the financialization of the economy, and the cultural changes flowing in the wake of these trends. He then seeks to encourage ethically responsible choices in addressing these, oriented to the basic principles of CST, symbolized as “human dignity” and “the common good.” The burden of his statement is to show how specifically these principles can inform innovative efforts in the development of businesses consistent with them. In order to plant such general reflections into the hearts and minds of business leaders, Turkson advocates a return to the basic structure of Catholic Action—“See-Judge-Act”—that over the history of CST has provided orientation to those who seek to realize these ideals in constructive programs of economic and social reform. At each step in the process of moving from envisioning the ideals of CST to implementing them in business, the dialectic of immanence and transcendence, as construed Biblically, plays itself out in innovative policies and practices. Or so the theory goes....

<sup>7</sup>Clifford Geertz's essay, “Religion as a Cultural System,” was first published in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). The essay is available online at the following website:

[http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic152604.files/Week\\_4/Geertz\\_Religion\\_as\\_a\\_Cultural\\_System\\_.pdf](http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic152604.files/Week_4/Geertz_Religion_as_a_Cultural_System_.pdf).

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Dennis P. McCann, and Joanna Lam Kit Chun, “Markets, Merchants, and Government Regulation: Resources for Business Ethics from the Comparative Study of Premodern Confucian and Western Philosophy.” A paper presented at a conference on “Business Ethics in China,” (Hong Kong Baptist University, 1999), excerpts of which are published as “Premodern Confucian Perspectives in Business Ethics,” and “Aristotelian Perspectives on Business Ethics,” in Timothy Shanahan and Robin R. Wang, *Reason and Insight: Western and Eastern Perspectives on the Pursuit of Moral Wisdom*. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003) pp. 449-454 and 432-439. The full text was translated into Chinese characters and published in 2002 as “Markets, Merchants, and Government Regulation: Resources for Business Ethics from the Comparative Study of Premodern Confucian and Western Philosophy,” in Shichang Jingji Yu Shangye Lunli, edited by Ip King-tak, Fudan University Press., 2003. ISBN: 7-309-03433-3, pp. 16-46.

<sup>9</sup>CST's own answer to this question, that is, the presence of “grace” in our actual experience of living and working in this world, has been reopened by Benedict XVI in *Caritas in veritate* (2009). I believe and I have argued elsewhere that his innovative reflections on the social and economic significance of “the principle of gratuitousness” opens up a way, within CST and its theocentric logic, to explore the reality of “grace” in ways that could make a



practical difference in how people do business together. Cf. Dennis P. McCann, 2012, “The Principle of Gratuitousness: Opportunities and Challenges for Business in *Caritas in Veritate*” in *The Journal of Business Ethics*. Springer: DOI 10.1007/s10551-011-1187-0. (Published online, January 2012).