

Paulos HUANG, *Confronting Confucian Understandings of the Christian Doctrine of Salvation. A Systematic Theological Analysis of the Basic Problems in the Confucian-Christian Dialogue*, Brill, Leiden – Boston, 2009, 319 pp. ISBN 978 90 04 17726 0

Doctor Paulos 黃占竹 Huang Zhanzhu, author of this impressive book published by the world famed academic publishing house E.J. Brill (Leiden-Boston, 2009), is equally well known among present day Chinese philosophers of the Confucian traditions. The study under review is the result of years of research aimed to address a personal inquiry and a contemporary challenge: at the time when China rises up in the international community, how a convinced Christian intellectual (of Lutheran tradition) can keep his Confucian esteem and practice for human cultivation when so many of his pairs see in such a convergence so great difficulties? This explains the importance of the central topic on which the study has been build: “the Confucian understandings of the Christian doctrine of salvation”.

To add an information on the context, it is worth noting that the book under review is what was presented in 2006 as an “Academic dissertation to be publicly discussed, by due permission of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki in Auditorium XII, on October 28th” 2006 (Department of Systematic Theology, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, 2006, © Paulos Huang, ISBN 952-92-0895-2, Printed by Edita Prima Oy; see <http://ethesis.helsinki.fi/julkaisut/teo/syste/vk/huang/confront.pdf>). This early publication includes bibliographical references (Primary Sources p. 307-319 and Literature p. 319-343) and an Index (pp. 343-352). In the months that followed this public discussion, a Chinese translation of the “academic dissertation” was done and in 2009 published in China with 18 reviews as critical appreciations of the author’s work (see 黃保羅 [Paulos Huang], 《儒家、基督宗教与救赎——附十八篇汉语学术神学对话与述评》 [Confucianism, Christianity and Salvation – And 18 Sino-Christian Academic Theological Dialogues], 北京, 宗教文化出版社 [Beijing, Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe], 2009, pp. 521; these 18 contributions to the dialogue are listed in Chinese and English by title and scholars names on <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/10598506/>).

This is to say that Paulos Huang’s “Theological Analysis of the basic Problems in the Confucian-Christian Dialogue” has already had, even before world publication, a wide impact in the Chinese academe. How then is the analysis developed?

The Introduction states first the aim, the sources, the method (conceptual analysis), the previous research, and the twin motivation of the book: in contemporary China, Confucian thinkers are the main dialogue partners with Christianity in a cultural regenerative agenda.

The structure of the book will then regularly interweave two main patterns: starting with Matteo Ricci’s early approaches of the age long Confucian traditions, the first pattern (chapter II) is the distinction of various generations of Confucian thinkers: the Ancient Confucian Classics (Confucius, Mencius and Xunzi), then Confucian thinkers who have commented on the Christian doctrine of salvation: the Neo-Confucians of late Ming–early Qing period (late 16th and 17th centuries), the Cultural Nationalist Confucians (1920-1980) and the Modern Confucians (1980 on...including “Boston” Confucianists). A second pattern is the analysis of the concept of “salvation” in Christianity, focusing mainly on: 1. the author of salvation, 2. the object of salvation and 3. the means of salvation. It is by “confronting” (as the title of the book says) the Confucian ideas on each of these tenets of Christian salvation that the author successively examines, in each of the following chapters III, IV and V, the negative or positive arguments advanced by the most representative thinkers and their writings of the various generations of Confucian schools.

With such a structure, the presentation of the arguments supporting the Confucian understandings of Christian salvation were exposed to some repetitions, for instance on the Chinese names to be given to the author of salvation, on its transcendence and/or its immanence, or on the state of the human being, object of salvation and “*imago Dei*”, or also on the means of this salvation “in Christ”, etc. Obviously, the book retains the academic characteristics of its original text as a careful examination and assessment of the “Basic Problems in the Confucian–Christian dialogue” as the concluding chapter VI states briefly: differences in ways of thinking about Heaven and humanity, the role of spiritual needs, their place in society and the bridges offered by common ethics.

One may wonder if these repetitions would have been more easily avoided if the Confucian understandings of Christian salvation had been, not “confronted” as the title of the book says, yet presented in their own historical development and in a more dialogical manner, as one of the early reviewers had hoped. The historical setting of the discussions presented in the book is obviously absent although it would have added some depth to their development from Ricci’s time till these present days in China. It is a matter of fact that in the Christian world, between post-Tridentine anathematic theology and contemporary oecumenical research, many more avenues have been opened for a broader dialogue between various philosophical and spiritual traditions. In other terms, more historical

contextualisation would have shown a progression in the encounter of the Confucian understandings with Christian salvation in the face of a now common “cultural” predicament.

Another reviewer of the 2006 version of the book (and listed in the 2009 Chinese edition) mentions that the revised English version would be republished by E.J. Brill.” It is sad to remark that it has not been the case as the many typos of the original ‘academic dissertation’ of 2006 have not been amended before printing the “revised” edition. Unfortunately also, the Index has not been updated nor included. No doubt, many readers will regret both facts.

Peter Mauceys