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## JESUS, THE CRUCIFIED AND RISEN SAGE: TOWARDS A CONFUCIAN CHRISTOLOGY

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This paper seeks to reflect on Jesus' profound question to his followers: "Who do you say I am?" (Mt. 16:15), 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 which 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 worldview, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic

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Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) are taken from *For All The Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents From 1970-1991*, eds. Gaudencio B. Rosales & C.G. Arévalo (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. I*) and *For All The Peoples of Asia Volume 2: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, eds. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. II*).

Abbreviations used: BIRA = FABC Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs

FABC = Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences

FAPA = *For All The Peoples of Asia*, Vol. I (1970-1991), Vol. II (1992-1996)

**Note on Transcription:** 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 which have been transliterated using the Wade-Giles system: in quoted texts and titles of works.

Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?

Paraphrasing Taylor, one could also ask: if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions which the Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese peoples have been asking, what would he look like? Undoubtedly, East Asian Christians are able to repeat what European missionaries have told them who Jesus was and is. Now, the time has come for them to say for themselves who Jesus is and what is his significance in their lives today. It is clear from Mt. 16:13-15 that Jesus is not so much interested in the abstract and impersonal "who do people say I am,"<sup>2</sup> as he is in the question, "who do you [viz., a Chinese, a Korean, a Japanese, or a Vietnamese] say I am?"

On this basis, 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.<sup>3</sup> First, it surveys 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 ethical ethos. Third, it presents a critical evaluation of the possibilities of using the powerful and evocative image of the *sage* (*sheng* 聖) as a christological image for East Asian Christians, with an emphasis on articulating the

foundational principles which would undergird this Confucian christology, its principal elements, resources and interpretive matrix.<sup>4</sup> Finally, it concludes with an investigation of the possible implications which 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 colours could agree on, it would be the assertion that Jesus the Christ stands at the centre 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,"<sup>5</sup> is one perennial topic of theological inquiry which 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*.<sup>6</sup>

Christianity's chequered history offers us a good glimpse of the diversity of responses to the question of Christ's identity by different

4 This paper seeks to complement earlier endeavours at exploring the possibilities for articulating a Confucian christology. Two notable examples of these earlier endeavours include Kim Heup Young, "Jen and Agape: Towards a Confucian Christology," *Asian Journal of Theology* 8 (1994): 335-364, which investigates the potential for constructing a Confucian christology based on the Confucian virtue of "humanity" (ren 仁); and Peter C. Phan, "The Christ of Asia (An essay on Jesus as the eldest son and ancestor)," *Studia Missionaria* 45 (1996): 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).

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

6 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 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.

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

2 Or, to paraphrase the question in the East Asian context: "Who do Europeans say I am? Who do the Christians of European Line Antiquity say I am?"

3 In this regard, it has been argued that "if 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 worldviews of our own age and time." See Robert Berkeley and Sarah A. Edwards, *Christology in Dialogue* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1993) 24.

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, a point which manifests itself if one contrasts the so-called "low" christology of the Gospel of Mark with the so-called "high" christology of the Gospel of John. What is clear is the fact that the various portraits of Jesus in the New Testament are not so much a reflection of the historical Jesus, as these churches' understanding of Jesus and his significance for their faith life. Hence, one 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 Saviour (*Soter*) in the New Testament. These images reveal what the apostolic Christians perceived the significance of Jesus was for them in messianic, soteriological terms.<sup>7</sup> In this vein, J.B. Chethimattam suggests that "the missionary discourses of the Acts of the Apostles clearly show, like divinity of Christ was not the focus of the early Christian understanding of the salvation wrought by Jesus," but rather, it "was principally the work of the Father, the one God of the Bible, who in fulfillment 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."<sup>8</sup>

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

7 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: Westminster, 1980); Eral Richard, *Jesus, One and Many: The Christological Concept of New Testament Authors* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988); John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991); N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); and Ben Witherington, III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

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

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 God and only-begotten Son, Word, Lord Jesus Christ. ...<sup>9</sup>

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 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*<sup>10</sup> and the Anglo-Saxon verse

9 English translation taken from: *The Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954): 373.

10 For English translation and commentary, see *The Saxon Gospel: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. G. Ronald Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). For a critical analysis, see: G. Ronald Murphy, *The Saxon Version: The Germanic Transformation of the Gospel in the Nine-Century Heliland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

*The Dream of the Road*<sup>11</sup> presented Christ as an all-powerful Teutonic warrior-king within the context of a wider medieval germanisation 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, religio-political, 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.<sup>12</sup>

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 all over the world, not hesitating to use merchants and armies in the process."<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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 in understanding the abstract classical christological professions of Niceene 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 endeavour to answer the question, "what is the reality that we encounter in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord?"<sup>15</sup> 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 *Sitzzeit-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."<sup>16</sup>

11 See Bruce Dickins and Alan S.C. Ross, eds., *The Dream of the Road* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1966).

12 James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociological Approach to Religious Transformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 4.

13 Michael Amaladoss, "Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia," *CTSA Proceedings* 56 (2001) 10.

14 See discussion in: William Burrows, *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993) 242-244.

15 S.J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unborn Christ* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1974) 41.

16 "Pope John's Opening Speech to the Council," in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: America Press, 1966) 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."<sup>17</sup> 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?<sup>18</sup>

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 peoples struggling to cope with contemporary existential life-issues, rather than abstract,

<sup>17</sup> "Prologue," in R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Faces of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993) viii.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

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.<sup>19</sup> 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 which centre 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 theologising; and social change in that culture, whether brought about by western technological process or the grass-roots struggle for equality, justice and liberation."<sup>20</sup> As early as 1974, Shoki Coe noted the emergence and growth of contextual theologies in the Third World

<sup>19</sup> 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 Gari: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 139. Thus, a christology that speaks of essence and substance, nature and person, homoousios and hypostatic union makes sense only to those who have some understanding of the intricacies of classical Greek philosophical thought, something which most Asians are not.

<sup>20</sup> This definition of contextual theology is taken from Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992) 1. In contrast to classicist theologies which focus primarily on the two loci (theology 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.*, 2).

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.<sup>21</sup> Since that date, the world has witnessed a spectacular growth in new contextual theologies in general, and contextual christologies<sup>22</sup> in particular.

In relation to Asian christologies, Asian theologians shy away from static, ontological and metaphysical ruminations, beginning their theological reflections in *dialogue with the Asian peoples* and their diverse *Sitzen-in-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 criticises 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.<sup>23</sup> As he puts it, "in the New Testament, the collection of our most primitive documents

21 See the discussion in Shoki Cae, "In Search of Renewal in Theological Education," *Theological Education 9* (Summer, 1973) 233-43, reprinted as "Contextualization as the Way Toward Reform," in Douglas J. Elwood, *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980) 48-55.

22 Examples of Asian contextual theologies include: *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993); Stanley J. Samarita, *One Christ - Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991); M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Gauri: An Experiment in Cross Cultural Christology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); A. Alangam, *Christ of the Asian Peoples: Towards an Asian Contextual Christology Based on the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* (Bangalore: Asian Tending Corporation, 1999); C.S. Song, *Jesus: the Crucified People* (Manneapolis: Fortress, 1990); Peter C. Phan, "The Christ of Asia: An Essay on Jesus as eldest son and ancestor," *Studia Missionaria* 45 (1996) 25-55; and Peter C. Phan, "Jesus the Christ with an Asian Face," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996) 399-430.

23 Thangaraj, *The Crucified Gauri*, 23.

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."<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India explains in their response to the *Lineamenta* of the 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 (*emphasis added*).<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, in their 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 fundamentals 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.<sup>26</sup>

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 neighbours, 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

24 *Ibid.*, 139.

25 *East Asian Pastoral Review* 35 no. 1 (1998) 121-122 (art. 5.2).

26 *East Asian Pastoral Review* 35 no. 1 (1998) 89.

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.<sup>27</sup> 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 FABC Plenary Assembly, that the great Asian religious traditions should be given reverence and honour, acknowledging that "God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them" (FABC I, 15).<sup>28</sup> In their words:

we accept them [=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 treasures 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).<sup>29</sup>

Elsewhere, the FABC has affirmed that "it is an inescapable truth that God's Spirit is at work in all religious traditions" (BIRA IV/12, art. 7)<sup>30</sup> because "it has been recognized since the time of the apostolic

27 This insight is taken from Michael Amalados, 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 Amalados, "Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia," *CTSA Proceedings* 56 (2001): 10.

28 *FAPA Vol. I*, 14.

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*, 326. See also art. 8.5 of BIRA IV/2, art. 8.5, which states that "the Holy Spirit is operative in other religions as well" (*ibid.*, 253); and *Theological Clarification*, 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.*, 344).

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).<sup>31</sup> 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/1, art. 12).<sup>32</sup> 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).<sup>33</sup>

In contrast, theologians in Europe and North America, where Christians form a significant majority at least nominally, have usually theologised within confessional boundaries without any interaction with non-Christian minorities. Nevertheless, in Thangaraj's words, "[c]hristology 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."<sup>34</sup> 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 neighbours, if the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to have any impact in the wider society. The alternative is for the East Asian Christians to cultivate a fortress mentality and withdrawing into a self-imposed ghetto.

## II. THE CONFUCIAN WORLD OF EAST ASIA

The Chinese civilization arose at a time when the Egyptian, Babylonian and Indus Valley civilizations were in full bloom, and before the birth of the Greek civilization, the cradle of European philosophy. In contrast to Egypt, Babylon, the Indus Valley, Greece and Rome, whose glorious past have long been consigned to the dustbin of history, the Chinese

31 *FAPA Vol. I*, 115.

32 *Ibid.*, 310.

33 *Ibid.*, 259.

34 Thangaraj, *The Crucified Gown*, 139.

civilization is still very much alive and vibrant today. For thousands of years, the Chinese civilization has prided itself as the "Middle Kingdom" (中國, *Zhongguo*), the centre of the inhabited world, "a civilised oasis surrounded by what was thought to be a cultural desert."<sup>35</sup>

Undergirding the Chinese civilization and shaping the worldview of Chinese people for more than two millennia is the Confucian tradition.<sup>36</sup> 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 emigre communities in Southeast Asia, Europe, Oceania and the Americas.<sup>37</sup> 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 Sinitic 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'."<sup>38</sup> 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.

35 Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993) 1.

36 Strictly speaking, there is no exact Chinese equivalent of the term "Confucianism," a term which was originally coined by 16th century Jesuit missionaries to China as a neologism for the venerable, a far-encompassing tradition rooted in the Chinese *Wéizhānshūyǎng* which is variously referred to in Chinese as *rujia* 儒家 (School of the Literati), *rujiào* 儒教 (Traditions of the Literati), *ruxiue* 儒學 (Teachings of the Literati) or simply as *ru* 儒 (*literati*). While the vision and ideas of Confucius (Kongzi A3, ca. 551-479 B.C.) and his later followers such as Mencius (Mengzi Tu T., 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 canonise Confucius as the "founder" of Confucianism had more to do with missionary 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.

37 Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions*, 1.

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

Without a doubt, Confucianism is rightfully regarded as a manifestation of East Asian spirituality, albeit diffused, that has shaped and continues to shape the life-orientation of the Sinitic worldview. On the one hand, one has to acknowledge that the institutional Confucianism which was the 2000-year-Chinese state orthodoxy from the Han to the Qing Dynasty stands accused by May Fourth-New Culture reformers, Chinese Marxists and Western feminists for promoting patriarchy, misogyny, authoritarianism, formalism, and hindering socio-scientific progress. On the other hand, Julia Ching points out that the 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."<sup>39</sup> She explains that Confucianism, like any 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.<sup>40</sup>

Before moving ahead with the task of constructing a Confucian christology, one would do well to heed the caution of Benoit Vermander that theologising in the Chinese context is fraught with pitfalls because

39 Hans King and Julia Ching, *Christianity and Chinese Religions* (New York: Doubleday, 1989) 85.

40 *Ibid.*, 90.

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 endeavour."<sup>41</sup> 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 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.<sup>42</sup>

More specifically, while Vermander is thinking of the general task of theologising, 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

41. Benoit Vermander, "Theologizing in the Chinese Context," *Studia Missionaria* 45 (1996) 120.

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. Robert E. Allinson (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989) 167-168. See also Chad Hansen, "Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy, and 'Truth,'" *Journal of Asian Studies* XLIV (1985) 491-520.

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

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 endeavoured 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 centre on discovering the ultimate values which shape human living: "What 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* 道] to these ideals and virtues?" "How does one seek and attain the Way [*dao* 道]?" In his characteristic blunt style, A.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?'"<sup>44</sup> 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."<sup>45</sup>

Clearly, Confucius and his successors perceived human living as a constant striving in the Way (*dao* 道), calling for a dynamic and relational approach to "knowing" (*zhi*, 知)<sup>46</sup> which is not concerned

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

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

46. Interestingly, the ideograph 知 (*zhi*, "knowing") comprises the characters 失 (*shi*,

with discovering the Truth via abstract, essentialist and metaphysical conceptualisations, but rather, 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."<sup>47</sup>

Hence, in any quest to construct a Confucian christology of Jesus as sage (*sheng* 聖), one would do well to eschew a Western-Greek "Truth-seeker" approach in favour of a Sinitic-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, unity, 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* 道) of Jesus: the sage (*sheng* 聖), 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 聖 occupies a special place as an exemplar of the perfection of human nature and the mediator between Heaven and Earth.<sup>48</sup> In standard Chinese-English dictionaries, the term *sheng* 聖 is typically translated as holy, sacred, wise, sage, or wise man. Etymologically, the Chinese ideograph for

"arrow," which is derived from an arrow pointing upwards) and 口 (*kou*, "mouth"). In other words, 知 (*zhi*, "knowing") means "speaking which hits the target," a metaphor pregnant with significant *relational* implications. In the Sinitic mind, "knowing" is not a privatised, 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*, 104.

48 Important English language studies of the sage in the Confucian tradition include R.L. Taylor "Scripture and the Sage: On the Question of a Confucian Scripture," in *ibid.*, 77e

the word sage 聖 comprises the characters 耳 (*er*, "ear," *v.iz.*, "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 王 (*ting*, an archaic ideograph depicting a person 人 (*ren*) standing on the ground 土 (*tu*), *viz.*, a person standing in one's place of office). Within Chinese language lexicons, the term has been variously translated. For example, the late Zhou text *Erya* 爾雅 characterises the term *sheng* 聖 as "to present, exhibit, show, to be prominent" (xian 獻).<sup>49</sup> The Han text *Baifutong* 百虎通 (c. A.D. 80) depicts the sage as "possessing a Way which penetrates everywhere, a brilliance which radiates everywhere,"<sup>50</sup> and goes further to define the sage as follows:

*Sheng* (sage) means *t'ung* 通 (to communicate, to connect, to penetrate through), *dao* 道 (the process of becoming and the mode in which it unfolds, to speak), *sheng* 聖 (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 (*Baifutong* 6/23/Sb).<sup>51</sup>

*Religious Dimensions of Confucianism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990) 23-37; *ibid.*, "The Sage as Saint: A Study in Religious Categories," in *ibid.*, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism*, 39-57; *ibid.*, "Neo-Confucianism, Sagehood and the Religious Dimension," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 2 no. 4 (1975) 389-415; *ibid.*, *The Cultivation of Sagehood as a Religious Goal in Neo-Confucianism: A Study of Selected Writings of Kao Pao-lung* (1562-1626) (Missoula, Mont.: Scholar's Press, 1978); Tu Weiming, "The Confucian Sage: Exemplar of Personal Knowledge," in *ibid.*, *Way, Learning, and Politics: Essays on the Confucian Intellectual* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993) 29-44; and Ning Chen, "The Etymology of Sheng (Sage) and its Confucian Conception in Early China" *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27:4 (2000) 409-427.

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

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

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