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THE TROUBLE WITH CONFUCIANISM

Wm. Theodore de Bary. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1991.

132 pages, bibliography, index.

Wm. Theodore de Bary's approach to Neo-Confucian studies is often characterized as a "sympathetic" interpretation.¹ It is usually not meant as a compliment. But for many scholars of religion it is a methodological necessity to have a certain level of sympathy—or better, empathy—with the tradition one studies.² For if one does not take seriously the world view one studies—by granting it legitimacy, if only provisionally, as a meaningful way of experiencing the world—one will then be less likely to understand fully its human meaning or its inner dimension. In the study of such complex human phenomena, according to this view, it is an advantage, not a disadvantage, to be able to put oneself in the place of the object of one's study and to imagine what it is like to be part of it.

Nevertheless, there is the real danger of such an approach being compromised by a personal agenda, and some of de Bary's past work has been criticized on this score.³ In *The Trouble with Confucianism*, whether intentionally or not, de Bary in effect responds to some of that criticism by addressing both sides of the issue: the "successes and failures," the "good and bad points of Confucianism," which he sees as "mirroring each other in a convoluted historical process, as constants and continuities in the midst of discontinuities and difficulties" (p. xii). He acknowledges that "Confucianism was a problematical enterprise from its inception" (p. xi). His title refers to "the different kinds of trouble Confucianism either fell into, made for itself or created for others" (ibid). But it also alludes to the incredible longevity of Confucianism, despite its problematic nature and repeated attempts to bury it: "Like Harry in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Trouble with Harry*, Confucius has refused to stay buried" (p. ix).

The major trouble, according to de Bary, is the problematic relationship between the ruler and the “noble man” (*chün-tzu*). This in turn hinges upon de Bary’s view of the “prophetic” role and moral responsibility of the *chün-tzu*—a major theme of this book, to which I shall return later. Simply put, on the one hand there is the “ungovernable reality of imperial rule” (p. 1), based upon a received “myth and reality of unitary rule” (p. 2) that was never questioned by Confucius. On the other hand there is the *chün-tzu*, the central focus of Heaven’s Mandate (*t’ien-ming*), which formerly (e.g., in the *Odes*) was directed at the ruling house. For Confucius’s audience, “members of an educated elite with a high calling to leadership and public service, even when they hold no power”:

the Mandate has been reconceived as an individual mission and personal commitment to the service of humankind in the broadest sense. . . . For them Heaven’s imperative (*t’ien-ming*) is no dynastic commission but a claim on their individual political and moral conscience (p. 4).

Unlike the Biblical prophets, who were speaking to a community with whom God had established a covenant and who were held accountable individually and collectively to it (p. 18), the Confucian Mandate of Heaven makes no demands directly upon the people (*min*). It is the ruler’s responsibility to provide political and economic security for the people (who will then be able to express their innate goodness), and it is the *chün-tzu*’s responsibility to make sure that the ruler does so. Thus:

The trouble with Confucianism at this level—and it was the chosen arena as well as the given level of Confucian thought and activity—was not that it gave too little scope or importance to the noble man as an individual but that it gave perhaps too much. It put upon him all the burden of responsibility that the prophets of Israel had laid on the whole people. If the noble man and the ruler were a trouble to each other, it was in large part because Confucius and Mencius held them accountable together for the troubles of the people (pp. 22-23).

The trouble was further complicated by the fact that in imperial China there was no social or political infrastructure from which the *chün-tzu* could exert the kind of “leverage” that in theory could “transform” society. Consequently, neither the increased power of local elites after the Sung, nor the occasional “heroic” individuals who demanded “rightness,” nor the messianic movements that occasionally made such tremendous impact—none of these succeeded in making significant changes in the structure of power.

In the absence then of any significant infrastructure between family and local community on the lower level, and the political and cultural organizations of the educated elite on the higher level, there were few channels that could serve as organs of “public opinion” to communicate between the two or support the noble man at court in his service of the public interest (p. 97).

Thus the Confucian minister, acting ultimately for the people but without any help from the people, was effectively prevented from fulfilling his allotted role. "Reformers [at the end of the Ch'ing] were prophets without a people" (p. 102). Or, as Sun Yat-sen put it, the Chinese people were "a heap of loose sand" (ibid.)—making the *chün-tzu's* task a kind of Sisyphean struggle (or worse, with the mountain crumbling under his feet!).

Theoretically, of course, the *chün-tzu's* transformative power was a function of his *te*, his moral power or potential, to which people are spontaneously attracted because of their innate but less fully realized goodness, and which they naturally emulate. This is the idealistic basis of the Confucian theory of government, which de Bary critiques:

The question here is whether transformative power can be understood solely in relation to the ideas and ideals propounded by prophets and carried forward by traditional elites, or as a tension between the transcendent and the mundane, without also considering how "prophets" have related historically to "a people" or "a public" (p. 88).

By attributing the failure of the tradition to "show more transformative power" (p. 87) not to the moral cultivation of rulers and ministers but to the social-political structure, de Bary's argument suggests a weakness in the Confucian theory.⁴ But in making this point de Bary is at the same time defending the tradition against the modern assumption that

the fault lay with the Confucians for their alleged elitism—their unwillingness to share literacy and learning with the masses, and their alleged tendency to reserve education to the upper classes. This, the prevalent theory went, prevented the great majority of Chinese from any significant participation in public affairs. There is some truth in this idea but it fails to credit the actual intention of the Confucians to do quite otherwise—to share learning as widely as possible with the people (p. 89).⁵

In such fashion de Bary—for the most part successfully—presents "both sides now," the successes and the failures and their organic interrelationships. Occasionally he may go too far in putting a good face on aspects of the tradition that few would consider admirable. For example:

Reverence for Heaven, to Confucius, meant reverence for life, caring for the things of this world as Heaven's offspring. If the Confucian "lifestyle" seemed unduly cautious and constrained, and this set Confucians apart from ordinary men, it was because they cared more for life. And if the critics of the Confucians found their style fussy, pedantic, or irritating, at least the Confucians did not let standards go by default (p. 42).

While reverence for life is certainly a part of the tradition, from the *Chung-yung* to the Neo-Confucians, it does not work well here as an explanation for excessive caution and constraint. Nor is the comment about standards especially helpful. Similarly, in a discussion of the way in which Confucianism during the May Fourth movement was, often ahistorically, "made to stand for all that was backward and benighted in China," he describes the relevance of foot-binding to Confucianism as follows:

[F]oot-binding, far from being a mark of subjection inflicted on the lower classes, represented a high fashion among the upper classes, and bespoke the extraordinary measure of sacrifice and self-discipline “noble women” might be expected to accept in order to “keep up,” supposedly to maintain high standards in society (p. 104).

Surely the more pressing issue is Confucianism’s implication in the subjection of women, whether high or low class. de Bary raises the question of the tradition’s failure to apply its principles of humaneness and mutuality to women, but defers judgment: “[G]iven the limits of the present inquiry, [it] must be left for some further and more balanced reassessment of the trouble with Confucianism, both in the light of history and in view of the modern critique of tradition” (p. 105). While I respect his reluctance to make a blanket statement on an issue that demands fuller treatment, I nevertheless found this disappointing.

Let us return to the topic of prophecy. de Bary first made the observation that there was something like a “prophetic” dimension to the Confucian tradition (to my knowledge) over a decade ago, in *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart*.⁶ He quotes that passage in the present book:

“Prophetic” I use here to indicate an extraordinary access to and revelation of truth not vouchsafed to everyone, which by some process of inner inspiration or solitary perception affords an insight beyond what is received in scripture, and by appeal to some higher order of truth gives new meaning, significance, and urgency to certain cultural values or scriptural texts. Confucian tradition does not customarily speak of such a revelation as “supernatural,” but it has an unpredictable, wondrous quality manifesting the divine creativity of Heaven (pp. 9-10).

The theme has been carried through his subsequent books, which have all, in various ways, been attempts to redress the static, incomplete, one-sided view of Confucianism that still prevails both in Asia and the West.⁷ In *The Trouble with Confucianism* de Bary develops and defends the notion of Confucian prophecy much more thoroughly than he had before, particularly in chapter one, “Sage-Kings and Prophets.” Here he engages in some comparative phenomenology, drawing on several scholars of Biblical prophecy to argue that, despite the clear differences between the two traditions (pp. 12-13) and despite the Biblical baggage of the term, the category of prophecy sheds useful light on the Confucian tradition. He summarizes the argument as follows:

These, then, are the elements in the prophetic role of the Confucian noble man which give him some resemblance to prophets of the Semitic world: direct, individual perception of the Way as a transcendent value; the inspired utterance of the noble man as witness to a Heaven that does not itself speak [this of course being one of the differences from the Biblical context]; the noble man’s sense of mission—indeed, commission by Heaven and the warning to rulers lest they bring destruction on themselves by disobeying Heaven’s Mandate (pp. 11-12).⁸

In subsequent chapters he presents two examples of “a radical critique of the established order being generated from within the tradition” (p. 59), in the classical prophetic mode: Lu Liu-liang (1629-1683), an “orthodox Neo-Confucian radical” (chapter four), and Fang Tung-shu (1772-1851), “a prophetic voice in the early modern age” (chapter five).

Scholars of Asian and other non-Western religions are generally and justifiably cautious about using categories, such as prophecy, taken directly from the Biblical tradition.⁹ The danger is that the selection of the category itself will predetermine what kinds of questions can be asked and what kinds of answers can be given. While we have progressed far beyond the stage of routinely imposing the paradigms of Biblical religion on Asian religions, this does not eliminate the need for a self-aware and self-critical methodology. But neither should we blindly impose on ourselves inflexible rules and prohibitions. In some cases, categories may in fact be transportable across the great divide between the Biblical traditions and those of East Asia, or South Asia.¹⁰ This should be done cautiously and at first experimentally, but when it works there is no reason to eschew it. The test of its utility is whether or not it is found to introduce specific interpretive distortions into our understanding of the tradition to which it is newly applied.

“Prophet” would seem to be one category that works, and de Bary is to be commended for introducing it to the discussion of the Confucian tradition. He is working here in a basically Weberian mode, although he reverses Weber’s conclusion that “[i]n China the notion of ethical prophecy was altogether lacking in the ethics of the class that exercised the greatest influence in the society.”¹¹ He has done his homework by grounding himself in recent literature on prophecy in the Biblical traditions. He bases his analysis on an understanding of prophecy (see above) that is neither too broad nor too narrow; it cogently expresses what the Biblical prophets were doing while also focusing on a crucial dimension of the Confucian tradition, and it maintains enough flexibility to allow for the clear differences between the two traditions to be enumerated. In short, this discussion of the “prophetic voice” in Confucianism is illuminating and thought-provoking. Although it is bound to have its detractors, I recommend it highly.

Concerning the production values of *The Trouble with Confucianism*, the overall design of the book is quite pleasing. But the editors at Harvard University Press have committed the unpardonable sin of omitting Chinese and Japanese characters from a book that clearly needs them. Not only are there numerous Chinese words and names in the text, but a full twenty-five percent of the items in the list of Works Cited (pp. 123-126) are Chinese or Japanese. The editors have not even taken the economical route of limiting characters to a glossary. For a press with a long history of publishing Chinese and Japanese studies, this is inexcusable.

To conclude: Confucianism is generally understood to fall at the extreme right end of the overlapping continua of self-society, liberal-conservative, dynamic-static, and

critical-supportive (of the status quo). de Bary's ongoing work has attempted to redress this imbalance by illuminating the opposite end of the spectrum. The problem inherent in any such attempt to redress an imbalance is that one's efforts are necessarily directed toward one end of the scale, while one's intention is in fact to reach a balance. While de Bary may not always express that balance to the satisfaction of all, in *The Trouble with Confucianism* he has come close to the Mean.

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ENDNOTES

1. See Thomas A. Wilson, *Genealogy of the Way: Representing the Confucian Tradition in Neo-Confucian Philosophical Anthologies* (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Chicago, 1988), p. 24, no. 24.
2. Ninan Smart, *Beyond Ideology: Religion and the Future of Western Civilization* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), pp. 66-67; and *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Scribners, 1983), p. 16.
3. See Paul Cohen, "The quest for liberalism in the Chinese past: Stepping stone to a cosmopolitan world or the last stand of Western parochialism?" Review of *The Liberal Tradition in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), in *Philosophy East & West* 35, no. 3 (1985), pp. 305-310. See also de Bary's response and Cohen's reply, *ibid.*, 35, no. 4, pp. 399-412 and 413-418. The exchange of views is quite remarkable for its civility.
4. Similar points were made by various Confucian "prophets" from the Sung onward (see, e.g., pp. 72-73, 98-99), but without lasting effect.
5. See Wm. Theodore de Bary and John W. Chaffee, eds., *Neo-Confucian Education: The Formative Stage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
6. de Bary, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 9.
7. *The Liberal Tradition in China* (1983), *The Message of the Mind in Neo-Confucianism* (1989), and *Learning for Oneself* (1991).
8. Note that the common usage of "prophecy" as a synonym of "prediction" is reflected here, in the last clause, only as a corollary of the primary meaning. This is fully consistent with contemporary scholarly usage.
9. The applicability of the category of prophecy to the Buddhist tradition has recently been the subject of debate on the Buddha-L Internet discussion list (BUDDHA-L@ULKYVM.BITNET, June 29-July 12, 1993).
10. Ninan Smart, for example, has pointed out that *bhakti*, or devotion, makes a good rubric by which non-Asian religions may be compared with South Asian. See, e.g., *Worldviews*, p. 20.
11. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (1922; trans. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 56. de Bary defines the category somewhat more broadly, and of course has much more access to the history and texts of the tradition. According to Weber, "the proclamation of a religious truth of salvation through personal revelation" is a necessary part of his usage of the category (p. 54).

CHINESE FOOTNOTES FOR BOOK REVIEWS

Adler

chün—tzu 君子

t'ien—ming 天命

min 民

te 德