

# HOPE IN THE MIDST OF TWO WORLDS: REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL SCIENCES, CONFUCIANISM AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Boyung Lee  
Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, CA

Hope arises out of head and heart, so it is inward. Hope also points to a new world or way of life, so it is outward. It is both, simultaneously. However one of the major obstacles for religious educators is that we proclaim the gospel to a constituency that sometimes is focused solely on its affect. One of my hermeneutics is that hope ever pulls one's *inward* into discussion and debate with the *outward*. Otherwise it is seldom more than armchair therapy.

Robert Bellah summed up *Sheilaism* back in 1985 as, relative to religious faith, "just [one's] own little voice" (Bellah, 221). Each individual determines the content and scope of her or his personal theology. Effectively, then, the modern landscape is populated with the "possibility of 220 million American religions, one for each of us" (Bellah, 221).

My first focus is the world in which *Sheilaism* thrives and how it undermines hope. Here I turn specific attention to the social sciences, arguing that they paradoxically narrow moderns' worldview by promulgating a not-very-sophisticated *Weltanschauung*. My second focus is Confucian ancestor worship. Finally, I re-evaluate Christian religious education relative to Confucian thought. There I discuss comparative cosmology and multiculturalism.

Here I am interested in eschatology because it's integral to discussion about God's reign. I also am interested in Confucianism because it largely is a way of life, a philosophy. Lest religious education fall prey to emotivism, I submit that discussion about hope must be shaped by religion and philosophy. Part of Sheilaite's shortsightedness is that moderns have trouble conceiving of the sacred and the secular together, which is the topic to which I now turn.

## I. SOCIAL SCIENCES' METAPHYSIC

In Matthew 14:22-33, Jesus walks on the water. So does Peter: "So Peter got out of the boat and started walking on the water to Jesus" (Today's English Version, 1976). But then Peter became frightened by the wind. He went under. Presumably Peter would have drowned had Jesus not kept him afloat.

One can be headed for God, and still get balled up. Arguably Jesus is ever present to give today's disciples a hand, but I submit that today's winds are more incapacitating than those of St. Peter.

There are all sorts of distractions for the modern mind. Admittedly life is easier because of conveniences, at least for some. But the conveniences themselves can be the problem: We become dependent on them such that when any one gives way, time

devoted to fixing it becomes all-consuming. I am painting with broad strokes here, but a computer virus often intensifies gusts into hurricanes.

This brings me back to Peter's wind and the social sciences. The modern mind is narrowly focused on interpretive rubrics that, rightly or wrongly, help to chart economies and human interaction. My interest is not in the rightness or wrongness of decision-making; rather it is whether there is an important element missing here. More precisely, is there something that helps us *not* to institutionalize hopelessness? There are plenty of psychological, sociological and economic bugaboos that get media attention. Often these take on widespread significance, not because they are widespread, but because of the hysteria that these "winds" can foment.

One of the great achievements of the modern world is focus. The ability to focus on specific problems keeps one from getting lost in the amazing complexity of life. Systems have been developed whereby particulars (e.g., resources) are allocated, systems are honed, and an administrative overlay arises whose purpose is to maintain the status quo. The problem, then, is that the system narrows new approaches. Should something not be within a system's hegemony, it effectively does not exist. If it is, one utilizes it toward an end whereby its benefit is primarily utilitarian, thus giving new meaning to the Golden Calf phenomenon.

The preeminence of the social sciences dovetails with technological development. The latter's processes -- systems, schema, input and output -- have taken on human dimensions. Economics is a system. Psychology is a system. Sociology is a system. Actually each is an umbrella for sundry systems. This highlights their shortcoming: When systems, say of production, become a human system, choice and alternative frameworks are given short shrift. Single interpretive systems sometimes are canonized.

This is not to attack systems' methodologies; rather the problem is that sometimes a broad constituency of methodological laity get stuck. The methodology quickly becomes the reality that it interprets. Alan Greenspan *fiats* and markets respond. Not only that, but individual's and institution's worth and self-worth are determined therefrom. This is where a little knowledge can be dangerous. Moreover, sometimes the system pivots on gross error, which framework cannot be challenged because the wrongness cascades into far-reaching changes, many of which would then have to be undone.

Back in 1992, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that school-organized prayers at public school graduations were unconstitutional under the Establishment Clause (*Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992)). The holding is unremarkable except that it is based on bad science. The Court's holding relies on outdated psychological studies, each of which stated either the opposite or it was not on point.<sup>1</sup> The arguable aftermath is less tolerance toward religion in the public forum, and bad precedent for other cases. The more dubious achievement is that secularism and its social scientific handmaidens now reign supreme. The law is decreed, not based on statute, precedent and jurisprudence; rather it is decided based solely on psychologists' interpretation of qualitative and quantitative data. Or as Justice Scalia sighed in his dissent:

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<sup>1</sup> See Landon Summers, "The Justices and Psychological Research: But Is It Really Science?" in *Law & Psychology Review*, 94-137 (1997), for an analysis of the research on which the Court's opinion is based.

Interior decorating is a rock-hard science compared to psychology practiced by amateurs. A few citations of “[r]esearch in psychology” that have no particular bearing on the precise issue here . . . cannot disguise the fact that the Court has gone beyond the realm where judges know what they are doing. (*Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577, 636)

Here I do not attack the social sciences; rather my point simply is that, ironically, they do not have to be scientific because their findings are blindly accepted; they enjoy a fideistic following, one that, before the Enlightenment, belong to organized religion.

Maybe I am overreaching by pivoting my social science comments on one case. On the other hand, it is telling that the nation’s highest Court bases law on pop psychology. Although the studies were not freewheeling, they became pop psychology when the Court misapplied them to give them force of law. Even more telling is that this phenomenon largely goes unnoticed by the media and public. Popular opinion may support the Court’s holding, and the holding may even make for good public policy, but we need not have a court should public opinion and the law be one. Nor, when the courts decree public policy, do we even need a legislative branch.

These are complicated issues, but what is not so complicated is that the jurists misinterpreted psychological data, and then applied it nationwide. I submit that the reason is because moderns’ worldview is dependent on musings about affect, so much so that reasoned inquiry is trumped by armchair psychology. I am not suggesting that the studies themselves were slipshod; rather it is that the Court used them cavalierly.

One thrust of religious education is to frame discussion about the reign of God. The reign of God involves individuals, which individuals are part of a larger whole. But as it now stands, our world is disjointed. At least in America it is disjointed, so that secular and sacred are at odds, even though each one’s epistemology is largely faith-based. Some even suggest that today’s social sciences are secularism’s metaphysics, because they appeal to the unproven thus to dogmatize popular fancy:

The curious result of *Weisman* is that the majority put “subjective evaluation” into the “driver’s seat” by uncritically accepting an argument based on misinterpreted psychological data. In doing so, however, it transfigured secularism into a religion-like category. Jurists may carve out a special niche for secularism merely because it is not supernatural. Even so, this philosophically does not prove their point. It does just the opposite, in fact; namely, it doctrinally promulgates in the public forum a positivism that paradoxically is metaphysical. (Summers, 129)

Donald W. Oliver and Kathleen Waldron Gershman opine that, “Western enculturation . . . leads people to believe that there are two kinds of people -- those who live in a world of universal truth and those who are closed or trapped in parochial or ‘cultural’ beliefs” (Oliver and Gershman, 210). These two worlds are really one, as I now discuss with reference to Confucian thought.

## II. CONFUCIAN ANCESTOR WORSHIP

Confucianism is “an all encompassing humanism,” one that views the natural and heavenly as an inextricable realm (Britannica Encyclopedia, “Confucius and Confucianism”). Everything in the universe is interconnected. Nothing comes into being in isolation, and nothing survives in isolation. This harmony is life’s telos (The Doctrine of Mean, I. 4). If harmony exists, Confucians believe perfection is achieved. If any one of the universe’s interconnected parts falls from its place or is disrupted, the harmony of the whole is impaired.

The home, where the virtue of filial piety is taught and practiced, is a microcosm of the universe and more. The doings of the family, for better and for worse, influence the cosmos. Accordingly, the home is a crucial setting for learning; it is the classroom through which filial piety influences the sociopolitical order:

Filial piety is the basis of virtue and the source of culture<sup>2</sup>....The body and the limbs, the hair and the skin, are given to one by one’s parents. And to them no injury should come; this is where filial piety begins. To establish oneself and practice the Tao is to immortalize one’s name and thereby to glorify one’s parents; this is where filial piety ends. Thus, filial piety commences with service to parents; it proceeds with service to the sovereign; it is completed by the establishment of one’s own personality. (The Hsiao Ching, ch. I)

That is, when these are practiced in each family, extended to government and all society, the ideal society of grand harmony and unity will be fulfilled. In such a society the people will live “in peace and harmony; neither superiors nor inferiors has any complaints.”<sup>3</sup> On this Confucius comments further, “When love and reverence are marks of one’s relationship with one’s parents, one’s moral influence transforms the larger community, and one becomes a patterns to all within the four seas” (The Hsiao Ching, ch. II).

Hence as one manifests filial piety at home, one gains insight from the heavens. One’s perspective then becomes increasingly open to universal harmony, which then reshapes one’s locale, which then influences larger realms, too:

Filial piety is the basic principle of Heaven, the ultimate standard of earth, and the norm of conduct for the people. Men ought to abide by the guiding principle of heaven and earth as the pattern of their lives, so that by the brightness of Heaven and the benefits of earth they would be able to keep all in the world in harmony and in unison. (The Hsiao Ching, ch. III)

Most of this is easy for Westerners to accept: That the home is important; that it’s where children are acculturated; that what one does locally can benefit the world, or that acting locally is key to thinking globally. The distant leap is to heaven or eschatology.

Children’s obedience to parents extends from the realm of the living to that of the dead (The Doctrine of the Mean, XIX, 4). For three years after the death of, for

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<sup>2</sup> The Chinese word for culture 文 also can be translated as religion and education.

<sup>3</sup> Confucius points to the reigns of sage-like rulers like Yao, Shun and Tang, as ideal models.

instance, one's father, one is required to mourn.<sup>4</sup> Through daily and annual memorial rituals, one's children reenact the presence of dad. The Hsiao Ching clearly says that the purpose of memorial ritualization is to keep parents' memory fresh in children's minds (The Hsiao Ching, ch. XVIII). The Li Ki (The Book of Rites) describes the mindset of children in the process as follows:

The severest vigil and purification is maintained and carried on inwardly; while a looser vigil is maintained externally. During the days of such vigil, the mourner thinks of his departed, how and where they sat, how they smiled and spoke, what were their aims and views, what they delighted in, and what things they desired and enjoyed. On the third day of each exercise he will see those for whom it is employed. (The Li Ki, XXI, I. 2)

These rituals have a fourfold purpose: First, to remind children of their parent's contributions. Second, to make children conscious of their own new role. Third, spiritually to enable deceased parents to continue their work as one of home's teachers. Fourth, to affirm that the past (memory of a parent) and future (speculation about parents' reactions to present situations) shape the present.

The benefit of pursuing the first two purposes shapes the local community. Dutiful children are the models for exemplary citizens, ones who know their obligations to others, obligations whereby youth move beyond self-centeredness toward a life of service (The Great Learning, IX and X). Although grief and personal reflection are parts of mourning, so too are pursuit of service to family and community.

Regarding the other two purposes, they point to realized eschatology. No one is ever absented from pursuit of harmony, not even the dead. This world and the next are inextricably bound. This relationship is most keenly experienced through the death of a loved one, or, of course, through one's own death.

So how does one mourn for three years? During the three-year mourning period, children continue to reflect on how their parents lived, acted, thought and so on (The Analects, I: XI). Every attempt is made to maintain the status quo:

In mourning for [one's] parents, [one] weeps without wailing. [One] observes funeral rites without heeding [one's] personal appearance. [One] speaks without regard for eloquence. [One] finds no comfort in fine clothing. [One] feels no joy on hearing music. [One] has no appetite for good food. All this is the innate expression of grief and sorrow. After three days, [one] breaks [one's] fast, so as to teach the people that the dead should not hurt the living and that disfigurement should not destroy life. This is the rule of the sages. Mourning only extends to the period of three years, so as to show the people that sorrow comes to an end. (The Hsiao Ching, ch. XVIII)

The three-year mourning period is continued in the form of memorial ritualization

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<sup>4</sup> In short, Confucianism teaches that when parents are alive, they are served with love and reverence, and that this piety should continue after parents die: "This is the performance of [a citizen's] supreme duty, fulfillment of the mutual affection between the living and the dead, and the accomplishment of the filial [children's] service to [their] parents." (The Hsiao Ching, Ch. XVIII)

throughout the rest of one's life. Daily offerings are made to the deceased parents at the family shrine, and spring and autumn sacrificial rites are performed. Birthday and memorial day rituals are observed.

Through continuous symbolic interactions with a deceased ancestor, children cultivate their morality and personhood, and eventually realize their humanity. By extending this symbolic interaction to other relationships, Confucians assert that universal harmony can be achieved.

### III. THE PROBLEM OF GOD 101

Religious educators are generalists. By necessity, we are conversant across a host of topics. But on the other hand, we live in a world that tolerates us as eccentrics from the attic. One reason is because moderns' separation between the secular and the sacred is huge.

A problem with the social sciences is that they reference subjectivity so much that they have trouble taking metaphysics seriously. On the other hand, those systems of thought are still built upon statements of faith -- assertions about human actors that transcend individuals and particularities. Franz Kafka wrote in his diary, "That I recoil from no ignominy can as well indicate hopelessness as give hope" (Kafka, 277). Sheilism blurs ontology and epistemology so that "as" becomes Herculean.

Over one hundred years ago, Hermann Cohen bemoaned religion's treatment at the hand of academics. Cohen observed that neither religion nor philosophy had currency among early nineteenth-century academics; to wit, "Modern academicians view philosophy and religion with equal coolness, particularly with regard to the problem of God" (Jospe, trans., 44). Then he commented on the tendency to reduce religion to how-toisms:

We prefer to talk exclusively of our moral teachings because they seem to provide legitimate proof that we are decent people. But decent morals do not, by any means, constitute sufficient grounds on which to base a religion. A religion's right to exist is derived from its concept of God. And this concept must be constantly reaffirmed and perfected. (Jospe, trans., 45.)

At the outset I referenced hope, but first I talked about modernism's world-view. Then I mentioned the specifics of one law case to suggest that the social sciences, generally, and psychology, particularly, has a *Weltanschauung*, but not a very convincing one. Next I touched upon Confucian thought and ancestor worship. Thus far the thrust of my argument is Monty Python-like, making nonsequiturs into sequiturs. But this, in my opinion, sums up the relationship between epistemology, ontology and hope.

The nature of Sheilism is that autonomy is the ontogenesis of good deeds. Sometimes maybe it is. The sometimes-when-it-is-not is the locus for debate about morality. Neither instance suggests God.

Morality helps regulate relationships; however one does not have a personal relationship with precepts, any more than does one with Nash equilibrium. They help make sense of one's interactions, but they are not the interactions.

Tu Wei-ming comments that, "Unlike Christian symbolism, which tends to undermine the significance of familiar relationships in its soteriology with Jesus as savior, Confucian salvation, as it were, takes the basic dyadic relationships in the family as its point of departure" (Tu, 123). I am not convinced that Tu Wei-ming is correct regarding Christianity, but he makes an excellent point about Confucianism.

Relationships between one and other, living and dead, draw us out of ourselves ever to consider new ways of looking at the world, and at new possibilities. To "constantly reaffirm [and perfect]" the reality of God presumes a relationship, one that is ever changing, which is the nature of the family (Jospe, trans., 45),

Individuals age, get new ideas, tolerate one another's eccentricities, fuss at one another, and set and renegotiate hopes and dreams. Confucius and Cohen, then, are soul mates when it comes to emphasizing a dialectic between religion and philosophy, the first which posits a relationship (ontology), and the latter which necessitates ongoing reflection thereon (epistemology).

In Kafka's *The Trial*, K talks with the painter about the law. The painter observes that, "We must distinguish between two things: what is written in the Law, and what I have discovered through personal experience; you must not confuse the two" (Kafka, p. 153). It is metaphysics, plain and simply, to decree these realms severable, but that does not mean that they are separate. Our challenge as religious educators is to cultivate ways to talk about the interconnections between these two worlds. Otherwise hope loses its steam.

Hope engages one in a drama larger than oneself; it involves engagement with others lest one become ensnared by affect's rage. In George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, individuals rebuild in the wake of a flood. New life, new possibilities arise except for those that cannot see for what was no more: "To the eyes that have dwelt on the past, there is no thorough repair" (Eliot, 656).

One way to put past and what-is-known in relationship with what-might-be is fish bowl pedagogy. The goldfish is the last to realize that it lives in water; that is until it is removed from it. So too, religious educators should study -- whether it be through formal classes or informal readings -- comparative cosmologies. Above, I briefly highlighted Confucianism's ancestor worship as one means to think anew about modern epistemology and ontology. There are many other ways to do this.

Moderns have remarkable exposure to other cultures. Multiculturalism is one of today's buzzwords in both church and public education. It has many benefits, which I need not list here since few question its benefits.

On the other hand, one of its shortcomings is the extent to which it reduces culture to the observable. Rice cakes and Cinco de Mayo are nice, but to what do they point? What are the culture's hopes and dreams, and how so does any one ritual or occasion say something about them? Inasmuch as these hopes and dreams transcend particularities yet remain the same, do they make ontological and epistemological assertions, and what might those be? One of our missions as religious educators is to engage others about their hopes and dreams so that we can develop cultural fluency and new ways to frame our own; it is to bring together universal truth *and* what appear to be "parochial or 'cultural' beliefs" (Oliver and Gershman, 210).

Hope is inward and outward, and this is true of the person *and* societies. The extent to which we enable students to catch glimpses of God's presence and to wrestle

with its significance has much to do with whether today's Peters and James will keep their heads afloat on life's seas. I do not question whether Jesus is there to give wayfarers a hand; rather and lest they get blown away by today's metaphorical winds, it is whether we are there, too, helping individuals to reframe their lives and world relative to the unfolding drama of salvation.

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