

Eric Voegelin's Thought on Civil Theology and Its Potential in Reinterpreting Some Aspects of Confucius' Political Thought

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The communist ideology in China has gone a decline. There are no "clothes" to wear for "the people" now. Most critiques to the regime from several strands of liberalism do not penetrate to its spiritual essence and failed to provide the philosophical foundation for transitional politics and the minimum morality needed for Chinese people. And so-called conservative thinkers, including Gan Yang, who is a professor in Hong Kong University and had studied American politics in Chicago University for nine years but hold no Ph.D., are blind to the distinction between primary reality and secondary reality, and try to embrace both within one. His three-in-one agenda (liberalism, socialism and Confucianism) is welcome by most intellectuals but, in my mind, it is just another utopian lie. My friend Daniel A. Bell, a Canadian, now is a fulltime professor in the Philosophy Department of Tsinghua University, seems to propose a replacement or transition from Marxism to Confucianism in political-ethical discourse, I agree with his proposal but may disagree in what respects Confucianism may be appraisable. Dr. Chen Ming, a middle-aged scholar in Beijing, appraising Confucianism as civil religion, but his argument mainly from Rousseau and Durkheim and civil religion in American under Robert Bellah's thesis. Though he agrees that Confucius' *realissimum* is transcendent, but there are some contradictions in his argument. But I think Voegelin provide me resource in rethinking Confucianism in reference to civil theology in its classical sense.

Civil theology is a term Eric Voegelin used first in his famous lecture *New Science of Politics* and in what sense it was used was explained by himself in a letter to John Hallowell:

◆ Concerning civil theology. The phrase is Varro's. It designates the Roman civil religion as distinguished from the natural theology of the philosophers. A society exists concretely, with regard to space, time and human beings. Their organizational form and its symbols are sacred in their concreteness, regardless of their speculations about their meaning. According to the Declaration of Independence all men are born free and equal--that is part of American political theology--even if the very author of these words knew quite well that the successful existence of the society which he helped to found dependant on the social effectiveness of a "natural aristocracy" which gave

the lie to the phrase "free and equal". One can, of course, honor the expounding of political theology with the name of political philosophy--and that is what merrily done all around us, with horrible consequences for political science--but one has ruined thereby the meaning of philosophy in the Plato-Aristotelian sense. In philosophy the symbols in political theology are unacceptable, because a political philosophy must be based on a theory of the nature of man. And that would be an extraordinary accident, if the symbols of political theology happened to be critical propositions of theory; at least no such accident has ever happened in history. There will be more on this subject in the previously mentioned study on "the Oxford Political Philosophers", who turn out to be political theologians. (From *Selected Correspondence 1950-1984*, p.140)

In *NSP*, Voegelin seemed used it for criticizing modern attempts, especially Gnosticism, in filling the vacuum left by the failings of Christendom in which there are no civil theology for the mass. But his insight is from Plato and the Stoics. In the essay "Industrial Society in Search of Reason", Voegelin provided an explanation similar to Leo Strauss' about the tension between life of reason and mass belief:

- (a) The psychic tension of the life of reason is difficult for the majority of the members of a society to bear.
- (b) As a result, any society in which the life of reason has reached a high degree of differentiation has a tendency to develop, along the life of reason, a "mass belief".
- (c) -----Plato was aware of the problem when, for reasons of political expediency, he made concessions to the "popular myth" and accepted it as a parallel to existence in philosophical form.-----
- (d) Coexistence of mass beliefs and the life of reason in society has, since the Stoics, been classified under the headings of *theologia civilis* and *theologia naturalis*. (CW 11, p.181)

We can then know, Voegelin's use of civil theology is neutral, especially when he listed five systematic efforts in the West, namely, the Gelasian System, the Minimum Dogma, Sectarian attempts, the Civil Government in the Lockean sense, and Constitutional Democracy. The last effort may be seen by Voegelin as positive since he is in defense of the government *of the people, by the people and for the people* in his lecture *Democracy in New Europe* (CW 11, pp.59-69), which wined endorsement from Leo Strauss (see his letter to Eric Voegelin in 1960, included in their correspondence), and I have translated the lecture to Chinese and will be published in next year's *Classics and Interpretations*.

Last year I have read the essay written by Professor Ellis Sandoz, The Civil Theology of Liberal Democracy: Locke and His Predecessor (*The Journal of Politics*, Feb. 1972). I found it interesting and meaningful when I considering in the Chinese context. In Sandoz analysis, Locke's work was not so successful in contrast with Plato's insight. I know Dr. Sandoz may still confirms the term later since the paper is included in his book *A Government of Laws: Political Theory, Religion, and the American Founding* (Louisiana State University Press, 1989). Here is a passage in the paper, which was also cited by Jeffrey C. Herndon, in his Dissertation *Eric Voegelin's History of Political Ideas and Christian Order* (2003):

Civil theology consists of propositionally stated true scientific knowledge of the divine order. It is the theology discerned and validated through reason by the philosopher, on the one hand, and through common sense and the *logique du Coeur* evoked by the persuasive beauty of mythic narrative and imitative representations on the other hand. (p.26)

This is the more positive description. But there may be several positive cases in practical politics. When Professor Klaus Vondung visited Shanghai last year, we talked about the civil theology. He mentioned a positive case in the article 20 of Basic Law of Federal Republic of West Germany, it run: "the dignity of man is inviolable". It is inviolable just because man is *Imago Dei*. But I don't know whether the *happiness* in Declaration of Independence can be seen as a positive case. In an editorial notebook of *New York Times*, July 27, 2008 , Eduardo Porter's talking on happiness is just related with polling data about money, gender, marriage, etc. But there are several meanings when "in pursuit of happiness" was written down (see *Happiness: a history*, by Darrin M. McMahon, Chapter 6).

Outside from Western civilization, Voegelin also mentioned that Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism were chosen successively as civil theology in ancient China . But Voegelin didn't give his comments in detail. Next, I will try to talk about Confucius' *Tian* as a symbol under the perspective of civil theology.

Before I discuss Confucius' *Tian*, I would like to tell the life story of Lou Tseng-Tsiang.

Lou (1871-1948) was born in Shanghai , whose father, Lou Yong Fong, was a lay catechist for a Protestant mission in Shanghai . Before he entered the School of Foreign Language in Shanghai at the age of 13, Lou learned Chinese sacred texts at home. He continued his education at the school for interpreters attached to the Foreign Ministry, and in 1893 he was posted to St

Petersburg as interpreter to the Chinese embassy. At that time the diplomatic international language was French, but Lou also gained fluency in Russian. Lou married a Belgian citizen, Berthe Bovy, in St Petersburg on February 12, 1899, and eventually converted to Roman Catholicism in 1911.

Lou was a legendary person in that he was a famous professional diplomat and attained high position as a Foreign Minister, but, at the death of his wife he retired from an active life, and in 1927 became a postulant in the Benedictine monastery of Sint-Andries in Bruges, Belgium. He was ordained priest in 1935. During the Second World War he gave lectures about the Far East in which he propagandized for the Chinese war effort against Japan. In August 1946 Pope Pius XII appointed Lou titular abbot of the Abbey of St Peter in Ghent.

When I read Lou's biography written by Bishop Luo Guang (1911-1993), what impressed me deeply is Lou's father's one-word will gave to Lou when he prepared for leaving. Let me try to translate Lou's memorial words:

In 1891, when I was going to Tianjing, my father talked to me: "My son will leave, but I have nothing to give you but one word engendered from my life experience, a word for your life-long cultivation. Others may have Scriptures, I have only one word---it's *Tian*. If you deem this word as a Scripture or one thousand pounds of gold, my one-word gift may not be seen as little, and I can find certain solace.❖"

When I remembered these words now, my tears fall down. In my speculation, *Tian* is righteous for it is really great. (From appendix II to *A Biography of Lou Tseng-Tsiang* in *Collected Works of Luo Guang*, Vol.27, pp.545-6)

We may wonder that, why Lou's father gave only one word *Tian* for him, the sole beloved son? And why Lou was so thankful to his father even that he wins fame as a filial son (*xiao zi*)? Nearly every Chinese says the word *Tian* in their ordinary life, but not every one speculates upon its deep meanings. I am not intended here to provide a translation for it, because no one word in western languages corresponds to it exactly. Generally, it is versed as Heaven. But *Tian* has been interpreted from a naturalistic view very early in ancient China, even in Xunzi (ca.312-210BCE), a major figure in early Confucianism, so, its multi-layered symbolic meanings are not transparent for many scholars. For example, there is a new book published by Blackwell Publishing in 2006, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy*, which has an endorsement from Ying-shih Yu. The author Jee-Loo Liu doesn't discuss *Tian* in related to transcendence. And in a new translation *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (Ballantine Books, 1998), Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. seem denied the presence of transcendence in Confucius (see p.35-6). We have to try to recover *Tian*'s symbolic or analogical meanings.

The case of Lou Tseng-Tsiang may motivate us to look at the experiences of transcendence from a cross-cultural perspective. As I mentioned above, Lou was educated traditionally in home,

though his father was a Protestant. When he was thirteen years old, he had learned *Analects*, *Mencius*, *The Great Learning*, and *The Doctrine of Mean*---four scriptures in China since Song Dynasty until the Republic Revolution. But he finally became a Benedictine monk! In his autobiographical speech (published in French as *Souvenirs et Pensees*) he claimed he was born as Confucian and remained so for all his life. Here we witness that in such a person, Confucianism and Christianity are both lived out. How we understand this? I think Confucian experience of transcendence and its main symbol *Tian* can be an interpretative device.

Now let's try to understand *Tian* in the *Analects*. The following delineation in English language is based on the several sources, including the essay by Professor Robert B. Louden in the Philosophy Department at the University of Southern Maine ("What Does Heaven Say? ♦ in *Confucius and the Analects*, ed. by Bryan W. van Norden, Oxford Univ. Press, 2002).

Literally, *Tian* combines oneness and great. Confucius said, "It is *Tian* that is truly great and it was *Yao* who modeled himself upon it ♦ (The *Analects*, 8:19). We can say *Yao* , one of the greatest kings or sages in ancient China , represented *Tian*. Reading into this passage, there can be deducted four properties of *Tian*: it is the highest, the unique, the greatest and the perfect. But another passage shows that in Confucius thought *Tian* is not theistic or anthropomorphic:

What does *Tian* ever say? Yet there are four seasons going round and there are the hundred things coming into being. What does *Tian* say? (*Analects* 17: 19).

How to read this verse? There are different opinions among sinologists. I am not the person to discuss it academically, but I think *Tian* in 17:19 have to be understood in its symbolic and analogical meanings, which in turn are dependant upon experiences of transcendence of the readers (that's why I beginning my discussion from Lou and his father. In some respect, Lou's experiences as Christians help them rediscovering the meanings behind *Tian*). Some may regard it as "the source of all phenomena and of the processes of natural change ♦ (David Hall and Roger T. Ames, in their famous *Thinking through Confucius*, p.206); or even that the "spirit of Heaven is still very much present in the regularities, routines, and generative processes of nature, even though *Tian* does not speak. ♦ (See Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, pp124-25). But I am inclined to agree Professor Louden's insight that " Confucius is implying that through the harmony, beauty, and sublimity of its natural processes *Tian* communicates a great deal about how human beings ought to live and act, at least to those who have learned to listen carefully to it ♦ (*Confucius and the Analects*, p.79). Though *Tian* does not speak, but Confucius maintained that its Decree can be understood and feared:

At fifty I understood the Decree of *Tian*. (*Analects* 2: 4)

He (the gentleman) is in awe of the Decree of *Tian*. (Analects 16: 8)

Here we should notice that Confucius' symbol *Tian* was differentiated from the symbol *Tian* in the Book of Songs. In Voegelinian terms, experiences expressed in the *Book of Songs* are more compact, and those in Confucius are more differentiated and we can even classify Confucius as a *mystic* philosopher. This *mystic* dimension is also illustrated by his attitude to gods or spirits:

❖ 'Sacrifice as if present' is taken to mean ❖ 'sacrifice to the gods as if the gods were present.' (Analects 3:12)

The topics the Master did not speak of were prodigies, force, disorder and gods. (Analects 7:21)

I think such an attitude is similar to Jean Bodin's, which is introduced by Voegelin in his *HPI* vol.5 and was emphasized in his *Autobiographical Reflections* (p.138). And more than that, I even think Confucius' attitude to gods and ghosts can be compared to and in similar with Plato's attitude to traditional cosmological myths.

When I pay attention to symbol *Tian*, one of the practical problems is the situation of religions in China and what kind of legislation needed to deal with the relations between different religions and between religion and politics. We all know Marx's theory of religion has traumatic results in socialist regimes; we have to find the solution to allow religions function positively in post-communist society, which is especially urgent in China . But we can not put unfamiliar symbols such as God or Nous upon populace but should rather try to rediscover traditional symbols and their meanings for citizens. My discussion on *Tian* can be seen as such attempt.

How to deal with religions from a political science in pursuit of the transition from a politics based on ideology to a one with philosophical foundation? It's a very important question. Last year, I have translated into Chinese the paper "The Concept of ❖the Political' Revisited❖ by Professor Gebhardt. It was published recently in *Classics and Interpretations*, a Chinese academic Journal in book form with a purview in political philosophy, co-edited by Dr. Xiaofeng Liu. Some of us may have been known the fact that professor Liu had introduced Carl Schmitt's work during the years from 1999 to 2002. I know Dr. Liu didn't stand by Schmitt even then. Based on my reading, his intention may be just providing a case for criticizing the dogmatic liberalism in modern China . But the effects are not favorable, because Carl Schmitt's works, especially the *Concept of the Political*, are welcome by many young, including those nationalists and so-called neo-conservatives. Most of the intellectuals in mainland China are incapable of

looking at politics beyond the perspective of interests, and Carl Schmitt's concept of the political can not help them get out of *realpolitik* thinking but rather motivate them to be indulged in Maoism (such as enemy/friend divide). In Gebhardt's paper, one paragraph from Voegelin struck me very much and become a guiding principle in writing my paper:

Voegelin always complained about political scientists lacking "the most elementary knowledge of religious experiences and their expression, they are unable to recognize politico-religious phenomena when they see them; and are unaware of their decisive role in the constitution of political theory. (See *Philosophy, Literature, and Politics*, ed. by Charles R. Embry and Barry Cooper, University of Missouri Press , 2005, p.219)

Because my lack of historical knowledge both in West and China , I cannot deal now with the styles of truth thesis in Voegelin's paper on *Anxiety and Reason* (in CW 28, pp.52-110). I think it will be important to study further the transcendence/immanence problems in rethinking Confucianism as civil theology. For example, more than ninety years ago, Gilbert Reid, a renowned and active American missionary in China, written in an essay the following observation: "The great underlying, all-important principles of Confucianism have become known to all, the illiterate as well as the learned ♦ Its vital teachings ♦ are adapted to high and low, to ruler and people, and therein show their divine inspiration and origin in *Tian* ♦ (Confucianism, an Appreciation, *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol.9, No.1, pp7-20). I think this phenomenon should be explained or re-explained from Voegelinian political theory. There are several important symbols related with *Tian*, one of which is *Tian-Xia* (all under *Tian*), which is being discussed recently in mainland China, and more importantly, it is also discussed with some length by Eric Voegelin in his monument *The Ecumenic Age*. I wish I will be able to talk about it next time.