Zhihe Wang
Process and Pluralism
Chinese Thought on the Harmony of Diversity

PROCESS THOUGHT

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Zhihe Wang

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FOREWORD

Dr. John B. Cobb, Jr.

Chinese religion has not played much of a role in discussions of religious diversity and how this is to be viewed from the perspective of the Abrahamic traditions. Because of the deeply entrenched habit of thinking of different traditions in their separate distinctiveness, when Chinese religion comes into the discussion, it is usually in terms of Taoism, or Confucianism, or Buddhism. Buddhism, of course, is taken very seriously in all such discussions, but Chinese Buddhism is only one of its forms and not the original one. Confucianism is viewed as hardly a religion at all. And Taoism, while its original writings are admired, is not often taken seriously as a living religion.

Yet the Chinese culture is a great one, and religion has played an important role within it throughout history. Maoism, in an important sense, became the official religion or substitute for religion, and it was quite effective in this role for a few decades. But as it faded from relevance and effectiveness, other aspects of Chinese religious culture resurfaced to contest the field with a newly important form of basically Western, or post-Christian, secularism. Christianity, which had previously been seen generally as a foreign religion, reappeared in a more indigenous, or at least, independent form, ready to assume a larger, but still minor role. Nevertheless, it became clear that the dominant religiousness of China was what it had been for many centuries. As the religiousness, if not the religion, of hundreds of millions of people, it can no longer be ignored in interreligious discussion.

Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism all make their contributions to this Chinese religiousness, but its roots are still broader and deeper in the culture. It was those deeper roots, still expressed in popular religiousness, that have enabled these three great traditions to live together, in relative harmony, through most of their history without forcing choices on most of the Chinese people. The deepest values of this religiousness are inclusiveness, tolerance, and harmony. Any religion that can accept these values and contribute to the well-being of individuals and/or communities is welcomed.

This Chinese harmonism offers an alternative to all of the options that have arisen out of the Western traditions. It allows but does not demand syn-

cretism. It places first the well-being of human beings, and it recognizes that many ideas and communities can contribute to this in diverse ways.

Its ability to deal with the broader challenges that elsewhere have led to conflict between religion and the state and among the religions, has not yet been fully demonstrated. Religion, broadly speaking, tends to make claims to an ultimate reality the importance of which transcends that of particular human authorities and cultures. This is, of course, true especially of all the Abrahamic traditions. Can they be embraced by harmonism?

In practice the answer seems to be affirmative as long as the structures of human authority are internal to China. They can be fully tolerated even if they stand apart from the harmonious relations among Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. The spirit of harmonism can give them space. This works today for Muslims, for most Protestant Christians, and even for some Roman Catholics.

On the other hand, the Chinese state is less able to deal with those for whom authority is humanly, as well as transcendently, beyond the Chinese government. In this respect the Chinese government is currently less tolerant than those in the West that have long dealt with such problems. Roman Catholics who are obedient to the Pope are not free to act on their beliefs. Tibetan Buddhists, loyal to the Dalai Lama, and members of Falun Gong, who look to a leader outside of China, despite the affinities of the teaching and practice to traditional Chinese harmonism, are not tolerated.

To evaluate harmonism as an ideal that would solve the problem of interreligious conflict, we must ask whether its current limitations in China are simply the result of contingent political situations that are fully separable from its religious meaning. Can harmonism include toleration of religious beliefs and activities that limit the authority of the state? Or would the acceptance of harmonism as the ideal toward which all traditions move involve abandoning claims to extra-national authority? Is it possible only in a context in which the deepest loyalty is to the nation?

I do not know the answer to this question. For Christians, and many others, this answer is crucial to how they respond to Zhihe Wang's important proposals for the way forward. Our belief in God necessarily recognizes, but also relativizes, the importance of local communities and of nations as well as the authority of states. Whitehead speaks of world loyalty. Although this does not prevent one from loving one's nation and giving provisional loyalty

to its leaders, it also allows one to give a considerable measure of loyalty to other groupings of people and to other leaders. Is this compatible with the deepest values of harmonism?

I am writing as a foreword what perhaps should be an afterword. It expresses my own response to the work of Zhihe Wang. I experience his proposal as a serious challenge to my own thinking about the problem of religious diversity and an inspiration to think further. For this I am truly grateful to Dr. Wang. I hope that many other Western thinkers will also experience both this challenge and this inspiration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

much more than these scant lines can say. I am also truly grateful to the supportive and affirmative love of my son, Alex Binghung Wang, whose curiosity and sense of humor are sources of grace in my life. He embodies the spirit of consciousness of others that is at the heart of this work.

My final word of appreciation goes to my cherished wife, Meijun Fan, who has been my companion on this project. Without her sacrifice, boundless love and selfless support, this project, as well as many others, would have been insurmountable. It is to her and my parents that I dedicate this work.

Claremont, CA   April 18, 2012

INTRODUCTION

This book has two purposes. The first is to show how, using the resources of Whiteheadian Pluralism, we can both critique and correct the contemporary Western discussion concerning religious universalism and pluralism. The second is to offer a uniquely Chinese contribution to those discussions that builds upon an emerging school of thought among Chinese thinkers that presents us with a characteristically Chinese variant of Process Thought. These two purposes converge in this book, especially at the end, as I offer a process-oriented perspective which I am going to called harmonism. Although the concept of harmony has had a long and illustrious career in Western literature, it has not gained footing in Western philosophy. Still, the literary tradition is certainly worth noting. The Horatian phrase that entitles this book has been appropriated and used by many authors, moving from its citation by Montaigne and its elaboration in a famous passage in Wordsworth's The Prelude:

> Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
> Like harmony in music; there is a dark
> Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
> Discordant elements, makes them cling together
> In one society.

Yet, the dialectic between harmony and discord never achieved any programmatic expression in the Western philosophical tradition. In order to give it force not only as a concept but a programmatic concept, we need to return to the position of harmony in traditional Chinese ways of thinking, and then instill these insights into our discussion of Whiteheadian process. In the remainder of this introduction I will explain aspects of the concept of harmony in Chinese thought, discuss the more general importance of addressing issues of pluralism today, and outline the contents of the book.

One of the greatest challenges facing humanity today is the task of resolving the conflict among religions. Today, "finding a viable way of accepting and appreciating religious diversity" is regarded as "one of the great mor-

al issues of our time."[1]   My suggestion that we should look at this discussion from a point of view shaped, in part, by the long tradition of Chinese reflection on harmony represents a distinctively Chinese contribution to the question of how to maintain the coexistence of discordant religious points of view on the global stage. Given the revitalized role of China in world affairs today, and given the probability that, over time, religion will reclaim its role as an important influence within China itself, it is important that Chinese voices to be included in these global conversations.

Chinese traditions can enrich such pluralism by offering a model of creative relationships among religions modeled after those existing among Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. The heart of these creative relationships is a way of living and thinking I am going to call "Harmonism." The key features of the Chinese tradition of harmonic thought are: peaceful co-existence, mutual transformation, and openness to change. I have sought to use these rudiments from the Chinese tradition to mediate a dialogue with Whiteheadian process thought, with the aim of providing a middle way between particularism and universalism, showing how diversity can exist within unity. While harmonism is open to similarities among religions, it is not a call for some kind of syncretism. Rather, under this concept I will attempt to show that differences among religions can ultimately be complementary rather than contradictory.

Thus, harmonism takes from Chinese thought the possibility of complementarity and develops an attitude of respect for others and a willingness to learn from others without losing one's own identity; that is, without reducing difference to uniformity. A process-oriented harmonism tries to deconstruct the dichotomy between universalism and particularism that has shaped the idea of pluralism. In this book, I have used John Hick to represent the Western notion of universalism (with its neglect of the uniqueness of the particular) and S. Mark Heim as the advocate of particularism (with its failure to understand the historical process encoded in any particular religion and their historically demonstrated capacity for learning and borrowing from other traditions). My harmonism offers a third and more promising alternative by showing how constructive relationships can be built in the course of dialogue. Ultimately, the practical goal is to get people from different religious tradi-

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[1] Rita M. Gross & Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Buddhist-Christian Conversation*. London: Continuum, 2001, 7.

tions to begin to recognize in dialogue each with the other that the difference in their points of view may be treated as complementary, and that in each religion there are resources that can be called upon to adapt an attitude of co-existence, posited rather than different but contradictory. The philosophy of Whitehead shows how such complementariness is possible, because it speaks of different kinds of ultimate realities, to which different religions may be attuned, and because it also points to different ways of living in the world, each of which can have its own kind of beauty.

A uniquely Chinese approach to religious pluralism contravenes one of the common Western pluralist assumptions about religion, which reveals a bias shaped by Christianity. It is that religion is primarily about beliefs that can be verbalized and defended against alternatives. In the Chinese context religion pertains more to attitudes and behavior than to formalized beliefs. Thus, a person's religion, for the Chinese, is understood through how he or she feels and acts, not simply what he or she believes. While beliefs are important, they are not central. Accordingly, in a Chinese context, an encounter with religious diversity requires that we are attuned to the feelings, actions and customs of people, not simply their doctrines. This means that when a Taoist enters into dialogue with a Buddhist, the Taoist will not engage simply with what the Buddhist believes, but in the Buddhist's attitudes and feelings; that is, in how the Buddhist is present in the dialogue. The spirit, in which the Buddhist engages in dialogue, as expressed in a generosity of the heart and an openness of the mind, will be what is most important. The Taoist will meet Buddhism in this spirit. And, of course, the Buddhist will be equally interested in how the Taoist approaches the dialogue. A Whiteheadian approach helps us recognize the importance of feelings and attitudes by giving us a vocabulary for affirming them. In Whiteheadian terms, the Taoist and Buddhist are interested in the "subjective forms" and "subjective aims" of the participants in dialogues, and also in the "past actual worlds" that are carried with them in their discussions. These three realities are just as important, sometimes more important, than the intellectual positions they espouse.

Another frequent Western assumption is that religions, understood as social realities, are self-contained and permanent. In the Chinese context social realities are not self-contained. They emerge in relation to other social realities; they can exhibit common patterns over time, but they are also subject to alteration. According to *Yi Jing,* it is change that leads to be open to others

and communicate with others, and it is this openness and communication that leads to permanent prosperity."[2] Such a perspective tells us that reality is made up not simply of what already is, but of what is not yet actual. It allows us, therefore, to see that this world, as given, can change over time and become a different world. That is, we can mold our own future. Accordingly, an encounter with religious diversity from the perspective of Chinese tradition allows us to understand religions as shaped things, perpetually involved in modifying their beliefs and practices through the influence of other schemas of thought, religions, cultures, etc. When, for example, a Buddhist enters into dialogue with a Confucian, the result may be that the Buddhist understands Buddhism differently, and that the difference he takes away he may impart to the Buddhist tradition of which he or she is a part, so that it, too, quietly, in small increments, also changes.

A third assumption often made by Western theologians and philosophers is that if one religion contains insights and practices conducive to human fulfillment, its insights and practices must be superior to those of other religions. However, the Chinese perspective takes it for granted that different religions can contain different insights and practices, each of which serves different human needs, the sum total of which can be conducive to human fulfillment or "salvation." The point is put succinctly by Zhuang Zi, the co-founder of Taoism:

> *To love people and benefit all things means humanity (jen).*
> *To identify with all without losing one's own identity means greatness.*
> *To behave without purposely showing any superiority means broadness.*
> *To possess an infinite variety means richness.*[3]

Following this train of thought, the Chinese tradition encourages people to uncover and explore the commonalities of experience that underlie different points of view while respecting those differences. "In Chinese thought, harmony does not signify the imposition of uniformity, but rather the emergence of concord out of the allowance of discord. This creates a new set of

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[2] The Appended Remarks on *Yi Jing*. In *Selected Readings from Famous Chinese Philosophers*. (Vol.1) Ed. Shi Jun. Beijing: People's University of China Press, 1996, 198.

[3] Zhuang Zi, *Zhuang Zi • Tian Di*. In *The Current Note and Translation on Zhuang Zi*. ed. Chen Guying. China Publishing House, 1983*, 298.*

tacit assumptions for dialogue. Thus, when a Taoist and a Confucian speak to each other, they need not assume that, if one is "right" about some important matters, then the other must be "wrong." Instead they can assume that being "right" is a matter of dimensions, degrees, nuances and contexts.

A Chinese approach to religious diversity will, therefore, have a different tone than a Western approach. My hope is that the perspective can help increase the openness of participants in inter-religious dialogue. Rather than a set of doctrines, my proposed harmonism takes an open attitude and mindset toward other traditions. It is an attitude of respecting others and of being willing to learn from others without reducing the other to one's own identity; that is, to uniformity. It also encourages participants in different religions to learn from others while they value what is important in their own. This work is not written as a defense of any particular faith, but rather as an exploration of religion from a process perspective that is enriched by a Chinese tradition that has historically developed a sophisticated set of philosophical assumptions that recognize not only the ethos of the harmonic co-existence of religions, but, as well, the historical fact that different religious traditions borrow from each other and change over time. Harmonism seeks to leverage this historical fact into a morally significant insight on the global scale: it is possible to imagine a world in which religions are open to and enrich each other.

Many people say "religious pluralism is a special challenge facing the world religions today."[4] From the Chinese perspective developed in this work, there is something lacking in the word **"challenge,"** which speaks only to religion as a problem. In this sense I prefer the Chinese term "Weiji**,**" which means both crisis and opportunity. Religious pluralism is not only a crisis for traditional forms of religion, it also provides an opportunity to learn something new from other traditions, to reorient or transform them into more creative ways of living in the world, which in turn contribute to the common good of the world. My hope is that taking seriously the Chinese philosophical concept of harmony will facilitate a genuine openness and do justice to the culturally and religiously "other." Thus, it will offer a way beyond current religious clashes.

Chapter one examines the developmental history of religious pluralism in the modern Western world and provides a background for understanding

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[4] Harold Coward, *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions*, Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books, 1985, 94.

the contemporary discussion on pluralism. I briefly introduce four philosophers of religion in the nineteenth century: Schleiermacher**,** Hegel, Troeltsch, and Toynbee**,** each of whom had enormous influence in shaping the pluralistic mentality**.** In this chapter, I also briefly present new developments since the 1960s.

Chapter two offers an appreciation and assessment of Hick's point of view, leading to the problem of overcoming the limitations of Hicksian pluralism. My thesis is that Hick's limitations can be transcended using some of Whitehead's processional notions. This, in turn, prepares us for the turn to harmonism. For Hick, religious universalism is an antidote to forms of religious particularism that disguise an **exclusivist** attitude. Hick is right to urge us to go beyond religious exclusivism and embrace interfaith dialogue. However, as I indicate in a later chapter, he fails to appreciate the concrete and genuine differences among religions.

Chapter three presents and evaluates the views of S. Mark Heim – particularistic pluralism. Heim disagrees with Hick's claim that there can be only one religious object, which Hick calls "the Real." Heim recommends a more pluralistic approach, emphasizing that "there can be a variety of actual but different religious fulfillments, salvations."[5] As I explain, Heim's intention is to move beyond the limits of the pluralistic agenda, but in so doing he overshoots. He fails to resolve the problem at the heart of the pluralism debate: the conflicts that arise when religious institutions are so constituted that the believers of a given religion assume that their religion is superior to the others. And he does not allow for the possibility of mutually fruitful interaction among the religions. Thus the impasse between Hick's universalistic religious pluralism and Heim's particularistic religious pluralism calls for a new approach, which can transcend both universalistic emphasis on a substantial common essence of all religions and particularistic emphasis on the superiority of each religion. I propose that a Whiteheadian Religious Pluralism, the features of which mesh with a harmonism derived from the Chinese tradition of religious thought, gives us our best candidate.

Chapter four suggests a Religious Pluralism based on Whiteheadian process philosophy**,** which serves as corrections to their approaches. The version I advocate is indebted to the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, as

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[5] S. Mark Heim, *Salvations—Truth and Difference in Religion*, Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books, 1995, 131.

developed by John B. Cobb, Jr., and David Ray Griffin. We have seen that Hick's pluralism is only partly pluralistic because, although he affirms generic pluralism, his specific version of pluralism argues that all the post-axial religions share a core of beliefs. Unlike Hick and Heim, the approach advocated by Cobb and Griffin is an attempt to fulfill the promise of pluralism by going beyond the mere formal disjunctions characteristic of religions: preserving a sense of the uniqueness of different traditions, Cobb and Griffin show how participants in a given tradition can be thoroughly open to other religions, allowing themselves to be creatively transformed by insights from traditions other than their own. This openness is possible because the distinctive insights of different religions are often complementary rather than contradictory. This means that, in affirming the wisdom of another religion, one need not deny the wisdom of one's own.

Chapter five presents a Chinese approach to religious diversity, taken broadly from the Chinese religious tradition. The approach based on harmony is based on key features of the Chinese religious imagination, realized in practices that have developed in Chinese society: peaceful co-existence, mutual transformation, openness to change. My aim is to show how harmonism provides a uniquely pragmatic pluralistic point of view, which is rooted in distinctly Chinese insights and yet easily interpreted within the scope of Whiteheadian ideas. From an organic Chinese point of view, essentialist universalism and isolating particularism both rely on dualistic or either/or thinking. Harmony is beyond this dualism. Thus a Chinese Harmonism complements the Western Whiteheadian pluralistic perspectives developed by John Cobb and David Ray Griffin.

Chapter six further develops seven key ideas that inform meeting points for process philosophy and the philosophically rich idea of harmony within the Chinese tradition: the notion of process, that of openness, the primacy of *yin-yang* thinking, the concept of harmony, the unity of transcendence and immanence, the appreciative consciousness of others, and the doctrine of following two courses at the same time.

I conclude by pointing out that harmonism is not a dead tradition from the past, but is still a vital element in Chinese culture and, in as much as the idea of that discord and harmony are not opposites, in the larger world as well. As the Chinese recover their cultural and religious heritages, the concept of harmony can guide the encounter between Confucians, Buddhists, and Taoists

as they recall their parts in panorama of Chinese history.   At the same time the concept has resonances with a persistent element in the way Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and other religions have been shaped and reflect up-on themselves and their relations with others, even if this element has been historically submerged in the institutions into which beliefs and practices flow. Even in cases such as that of Christians and Muslims in China, harmonism can guide a fruitful rapprochement.   Indeed, the virtues that are encoded in harmonism can add to the perspectives of people outside organized religion, enabling them to appreciate the value of many religions. My hope is that the provisional formulation of a philosophy of harmonism I offer here will be a starting point for its development in the community of Chinese scholars seek-ing a mode to identify and promote a uniquely Chinese philosophy that can help China and, as importantly the larger world.

Chapter 1

The Road toward Religious Pluralism:
A Historical Survey

> The Place Where We Are Right
> *From the Place where we are right*
> *Flowers will never grow*
> *In the spring.*
> *The Place where we are right*
> *Is hard and trampled*
> *Like a yard.*
> *But doubts and loves*
> *Dig up the world*
> *Like a mole, plow.*
> *And a whisper will be heard in the place*
> *Where the ruined House once stood.*
> ---Yehuda Amichai [1]

While religious exclusivism has continued to be dominant over the past hundred years, it has also been contested by a pluralistic trend, advocated at first by only a few theologians and philosophers and gradually becoming more widespread.

There are social reasons for the rise of the pluralistic attitude: advances in mass communication, increased opportunities for travel, the emergence of economic inter-dependence, and the dynamics of immigration that have increased the average person's awareness of religious diversity more than at any previous time in world history. The diversity has always has been present, but the awareness has increased, and this awareness has given rise to a trend

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[1] Adam B. Seligman, *Modest Claims: Dialogues and Essays on Tolerance and Tradition.* Notre Dame Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004, v.

among religious thinkers to develop theologies and philosophies of pluralism. This work seeks to contribute to this development.

It is important to distinguish diversity and pluralism. David Ray Griffin puts the point clearly: "Whereas 'religious diversity' refers to a simple socio-logical fact that there are many religious traditions, often within a single country, 'religious pluralism' refers to beliefs and attitudes."[2] Religious plu-ralists do not believe that their religion is the only legitimate one. They be-lieve that other religions can provide positive values and truths, even salva-tion – however defined – to their adherents.

Exclusivism, then, is the view that one religion contains all the truth relevant to salvation or genuine human fulfillment. In this view, people are excluded from this fulfillment unless they belong to one particular religion and adhere to its truth. By contrast, pluralism is the view that many traditions contain truth or truths relevant to salvation.

As we will see, there are many kinds of pluralism. Some philosophers and theologians of pluralism believe that there is only one kind of salvation or truth to which all religions point, but that there are many paths toward this one kind of salvation or truth. Their pluralism is of a limited nature, because they typically model it on some central vision of salvation or truth that is easi-ly identified with the religious tradition they come from, even as they seek to include others in an non-exclusivist way. Others propose that there are differ-ent forms of salvation that come from different truths that people have en-countered, and that these forms of salvation and truth are complementary ra-ther than contradictory. This pluralism is of a broader nature. David Ray Grif-fin calls it "deep religious pluralism;"[3] and it is this kind of pluralism that I will be defending in this work.

Whether one's pluralism is deep or shallow, though, the embrace of pluralism illustrates a trend in world history toward affirming religious diver-sity as something desirable and good, rather than as an obstacle to the advent of one particular global faith. Paul Knitter is one of the leading Christian proponents of pluralism, and he describes it as "a new turn" in world history.[4]

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[2] David R. Griffin, "Preface." *Deep Religious Pluralism*. Ed. David Griffin. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, xiii.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Paul F. Knitter, "Preface." In *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*. Ed. John Hick and Paul Knitter, New York: Orbis Books, 1987, vii.