

Comparative Theology as a Liberal Art

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*Theorists of comparative theology (CT)'s reluctance to fully recognize the CT of Keith Ward's type as theology derives from their conception of theology limited by the Thomist model of "faith seeking understanding." By investigating Aristotle's theology as integral to philosophy as a way of life in ancient Greek thought, we can rediscover the disciplinary nature of CT as a liberal art. This resource of CT alternative to the dominant Christian models furnishes general terms and concepts to pursue CT from a non-Christian perspective such as Ruism (Confucianism). The Ruist view on inter-traditional learning, which can be portrayed as a "seeded, open inclusivism," provides an enriched vision to advance the contemporary study of CT as a genuinely global enterprise.**

Key Words: philosophy as a way of life, theology, Aristotle, liberal arts, "seeded, open inclusivism," Wang Longxi, Ruism, Confucianism, Comparative Theology

Theorists of comparative theology (CT) are concerned with resources of CT alternative to the dominant Christian models.¹ As a CT theorist and a scholar working on comparisons of Ruism (Confucianism) and Christianity,² I cannot help asking the following question: how does a Ru do CT today?

The question can be furthermore elaborated as follows: if scholars identify themselves with Ruism, a comprehensive way of life, what is the significance and method for them to learn from comprehensive traditions other than Ruism? To answer it, Ru scholars need to present a Ruist project similar to the Christian theology of religions in order to provide a general framework for a Ruist CT. Within this framework, a cluster of minor issues need to be clarified such as what "theology" means for Ruism, how comparative a Ru theology can be, and of what significance theological comparison is to Ruism.

The general approach I tackle these questions is to locate Ruism within general terms and concepts which scholars are currently utilizing to map the new and growing discipline of CT, and then, highlight the specificity of Ruism in the map. As indicated by the following analysis, these terms and concepts are still contested by CT theorists, and not all of them are fit for a Ruist CT. In fact, for the sake of accommodating non-Christian traditions within the increasingly global discipline of CT, CT theorists have an opportunity to explore alternative resources within the western tradition so as to enlarge the map.

¹ See Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 5–6, and Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective* (Brill, 2017): 4–5.

² "Confucianism" is a misnomer devised by early Christian missionaries in around the 19th century to refer to the Ru (儒, civilized human) tradition with a primary purpose of religious comparison and conversion, just as Islam was once called "Muhammadanism" in a similar historical context. A detailed explanation of the history on the nomenclature of "Confucianism" can be found at Swain Tony, *Confucianism in China: An Introduction* (Bloomsbury, 2017): 3-22, and Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013): 45-76. Following the reflective scholarly trend upon the nomenclature, and in line with my other publications, "Confucianism" will be written as "Ruism" or "the Ru tradition," and "Confucian" or "Confucianist" will be written as "Ru" or "Ruist" in this paper.

Comparative Theology as Theology

Contemporary scholars’ discussions on the disciplinary nature of CT normally start from defining “theology,” and then, reflect on why and how a comparative endeavor is integral to it. Francis X. Clooney’s stellar works normally anchored these discussions in the sense that a variety of approaches to CT have been presented by scholars via their agreement, disagreement or nuanced engagement with Clooney’s version of CT. Accordingly, this anchor serves a convenient starting-point for us to envision a possible Ruist CT, and to ask whether Clooney’s version’s CT fits a Ruist case.

The CT of Clooney’s type requires two operational premises: firstly, a state of individual human consciousness called “faith” towards some definitive form of divine revelation needs to exist beforehand. Henceforth, a need of “understanding” this given faith is engendered because human beings inevitably live in a specific culture and history, and thus, have to employ languages, symbols and concepts characteristic of that culture and history to live out their faith. As rooted in the Catholic scholastic tradition, theology is therefore for Clooney a given “faith seeking understanding,” and the need of CT is justified by the fact that nowadays, those cultural devices whereby a theologian lives out their faithful life are no longer constrained by one culture and history.³ Notably, Clooney are sharply aware of the fact that those prevalent cultural devices may be affected by other faiths which can be no less specific and captivating to their own devotees, so the way of positioning his own faith vis-à-vis many other faiths becomes integral to his given faith seeking understanding. Secondly, as implied by the first premise, the CT of Clooney’s type requires a pre-existing clearly-bounded faith community, which is called “home tradition.” Although studying other traditions is expected to shed new light upon their own faithful life, the comparative theologians to follow Clooney’s example need to indicate “continued loyalty” towards their home community during the process of comparison, and to constantly confirm the significance of the “fresh theological insights” obtained via comparison to their home tradition.

It is hard to discern the nature of these “fresh theological insights” merely from Clooney’s theoretical exposition of CT. However, from many of Clooney’s concrete comparative works, we find that these “fresh theological insights” are not fresh in the sense of being able to revise or modify pre-existing faith statements in his home tradition. Instead, derived from a deep sympathetic understanding of the other tradition, these insights serve to enhance Clooney’s awareness towards how specific his own faith is. In a recent work which analyzes the *Garland* of Madhava (1279–1388), a teaching text of the Mimamsa ritual thinking of the Vedic and Hindu tradition, the following words of Clooney’s can be thought of as illuminating the typical result of his study of CT:

There is no larger significance that excuses us from the specificity of Jesus, no meaning apart from or behind the narrative about him. The particular does not give way to more general meanings..Jesus remains at the core of any interpretation of Christ; chapters (in the *Garland*) such as III. 5 remains inherent in the dharma. While juxtaposing such singularities forms an odd paring that does not easily yield

³ Clooney’s general idea of comparative theology analyzed by this paragraph refers to Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology, Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Hoboken, N.J: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), especially its page 7–9, and 61.

generalizable insights of wider application, it is the right place for us to stand: the singular alongside the singular, intensified and not lost sight of in the comparison.⁴

Given the two operational premises of Clooney's CT, it is highly understandable why the result of his comparative study tends to "intensify" the singularity of each compared tradition. The faith that Clooney holds dearly is upon a determinate and unalterable form of divine revelation, as it is articulated by orthodox council creeds (such as Nicaea and Chalcedon) in the Catholic tradition. Since it is thought of by the comparative theologian in question as given, no matter what other cultural devices the theologian may bring from varying traditions, they cannot modify that foundational expression of faith in his home tradition to any considerable extent. If the theologian does not intend to subsume other faiths within his own, then, the only conceivable result of comparison is to highlight the specificity of each of these faiths alongside one another. In this sense, the project that Clooney pursues is more about "comparing theologies," rather than "comparative theology," since cultural devices brought in by Clooney from outside his home tradition cannot do constructive work to substantially modify the established understanding of his faith. Instead, these cultural devices, with Clooney's close exegesis and analysis, serve to illuminate the specificity of the other faith vis-à-vis his own⁵.

However, Keith Ward and Robert C. Neville proposed alternative understandings of "theology" and "comparative theology," and both of them are landmark figures in the contemporary study of CT. Because I have published a detailed analysis of Neville's methodology of CT,⁶ I will concentrate on Ward's work here. Ward differentiates "comparative theology" from "confessional theology" in this way:

One can therefore distinguish two types of theology. One is confessional theology; the exploration of a given revelation by one who wholly accepts that revelation and lives by it. The other may be termed "comparative theology"—theology not as a form of apologetics for a particular faith but as *an intellectual discipline which enquires into ideas of the ultimate value and goal of human life, as they have been perceived and expressed in a variety of religious traditions.*⁷

⁴ Francis Clooney, "Difficult Reminders: Seeking Comparative Theology's Really Difficult Other," in *How to Do Comparative Theology*, ed. by Francis Clooney and Klaus von Stosch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008): 224.

⁵ A similar analysis of Clooney's work can be found at Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 16.

⁶ Bin Song, "Robert C. Neville: A Systematic, Nonconformist, Comparative Philosopher of Religion," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Sep. 2020): 11-30. In this article, I argue that Neville's CT defies the general standard set by Clooney and Cornille to distinguish CT from comparative religion, and in particular, it defies the standard set by Cornille to distinguish the subtypes of CT, such as confessional, meta-confessional and inter-confessional CTs. Because firstly, Neville's CT seeks religious truth not pre-established in any home tradition, and secondly, Neville is an ordained Methodist minister and consistently proclaims to be both a Christian and a Confucian (Ru), the CT of Neville's type can be described as a rooted, impartial and non-confessional endeavor to seek religious truth. As will be demonstrated later in the article, this makes it warranted for me to put Neville's CT in the same type of Keith Ward's.

⁷ Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions* (Oxford University Press, 1994): 46. Italics my own.

In spite of juxtaposing the two types, Ward thinks that “there is nothing to prevent a comparative theologian from being committed to one religious tradition, even a very authoritarian one, unless that authority prohibits such a study (CT).” The CT of Ward’s type does require “being prepared to revise beliefs if and when it comes to seem necessary.” Therefore, although Ward is writing “from within one (Anglican) strand of the Christian tradition,” he intends to “articulate that tradition in a global context,” and explore what light other traditions in turn shed on his Christian beliefs.⁸

Obviously, Ward’s CT operates upon a quite different understanding of “theology” from Clooney’s. The following statement by Ward points at the difference:

If theology is based on disclosure rather than on doctrine, that may give it a more imaginative and exploratory nature than the Thomist account suggests. . . It (theology) is more like the contemplation of a mystery initially given to the religious community at a particular point of space and time but still a living and developing reality, than it is like the exposition of a settled and completed set of “correct” beliefs.⁹

Ward defines revelation as “a Divine communication shaped to the interests and values of a particular society at a particular time. Its ultimate content is the existence and nature of a suprasensory good, a final goal of supreme worth. This content is expressed within a culture and history which facilitate a specific form of development.”¹⁰ Understood as such, “divine revelation” for Ward involves both indeterminate and determinate aspects: an ultimately indeterminate mystery pertaining to the final value of human existence is revealed through a determinate expression of it in a specific linguistic community and history. Since no determinate expression exhausts the mystery, “theology” is summoned to explore all available cultural devices to contemplate the living and developing reality of the once partially revealed mystery in a global context.

Theology in this sense is intrinsically comparative since no single determinate expression of the mystery is treated as final and complete. This does not mean that the work of a comparative theologian cannot start from a baseline, because a determinate manifestation of the mystery in a linguistic community needs to be set in an initial position to point the theologian to the mystery. Nevertheless, the ever expanding and diversifying manifestations of the mystery do demand the theologian to be ready to revise his previous specific understanding of it. In my view, the revision in question would not bring too much concern of “conversion” for Ward since no determinate revelation exhausts the mystery, and all revisions would be just to add up to his original exposure to divine revelation without completely abandoning it¹¹.

⁸ Quoted words from *ibid.*, 48–49.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 30–34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹¹ A notable revision that Ward made to traditional Christian doctrines of Trinity is in one of his most recent books: Keith Ward, *Christ and the Cosmos: A Reformulation of Trinitarian Doctrine* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015). At the beginning of this book, Ward calls on “much traditional Christian imagery of the Trinity” to undergo “radical revision” (xi) in light of what humanity nowadays know about the universe. He therefore urges to “reformulate” the established anthropomorphic and anthropocentric concepts of God into one Ward calls “cosmic,” since “it conceives of God in relation to a hugely expanded cosmos and not just to humans on this planet.” (221) For such a constructive reformulation of traditional Christian doctrines, Ward employs the outcomes of the study of CT in his earlier career, and draws on resources in other cultures and religions (see 20–21, 75–76, 93, 136, 194, 247).

In a word, for Clooney, doing theology is to have faith towards a determinate form of divine revelation beforehand, and then, seek cultural devices to understand it. In the study of CT, the established determinate faith will be enhanced vis-à-vis other determinate expressions of faithful human life in a global context. However, for Ward, faith and understanding transpire simultaneously in any sort of divine disclosure. In Ward's view, critical theological reflection is integral to any determinate expression of faith, and theology is therefore intrinsically comparative because of the aforementioned dynamic between the indeterminate and determinate aspects of divine revelation.

Both Clooney and Ward identify themselves religiously as Christian, albeit belonging to different denominations. Given the detailed self-portraits of their own comparative works, they are supposed to be both strongly accepted as types of "theology" in general, and "comparative theology" in particular. However, oddly enough, their works are treated unevenly in the scholarship of CT, and a number of voices have emerged to doubt whether the CT of Ward's type can be counted as theology. Paul Hedges, one of the most prolific CT theorists, represents these voices. In a recent book charting the terrain of CT, Hedges emphasizes that he opts to "follow the tradition and understanding of comparative theology as founded and promoted by Clooney" because "Clooney grounds his method in the 'faith seeking understanding' principle, which as far as anything is may be said to be the *sine qua non* of any definition of theology as a first order discipline."¹² On the other hand, says Hedges, "the paradigms of Neville and Ward are to some degree forms of comparative religion or philosophy and so somewhat distinct."¹³ Hedges' characterization of Ward's work is striking because Ward himself insists that his work is "primarily concerned with the meaning, truth, and rationality of religious beliefs," thus should be distinguished from "religious studies," which objectively observes religions and does not seek truth central to one's faith.¹⁴ Hedges also accepts a similar standard to distinguish comparative theology from comparative religion in that the former "asks the question of truth and validity," while the latter does not.¹⁵

So, what exactly precludes Hedges from fully recognizing Ward's work as comparative theology? This is because the principle of "faith seeking understanding," as it is articulated by Clooney, is thought of by Hedges as a *sine qua non* of theology. In other words, per Hedges, no matter whether comparativists seek religious truth or not, as long as they are not faithfully committed to an unalterable set of expressions of divine revelation, and accordingly, have no clearly-bounded community to speak to as an insider, their work is not theology, let alone comparative theology.

It is remarkable that such a fine intellectual endeavor of Ward's to seek all available cultural devices to contemplate truth concerning the ultimate value of human life cannot even be counted

Interestingly enough, such a reformulation, according to Ward, is "in no way a rejection of Christian faith as stated in the Nicene Creed or the formulae of the Council of Chalcedon" (xv), but to restate these doctrines in a new post-Enlightenment and post-modern context. In other words, Ward's theological revision to Christian doctrines of Trinity in light of inter-religious encounters conforms to the nature of his CT which I characterize in the text.

¹² Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective* (Brill, 2017), 19, 24.

¹³ Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective* (Brill, 2017): 24 and 19.

¹⁴ Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 40.

¹⁵ Hedges, *Comparative Theology*, 11.

as “theology.” Because Hedges’ works operate consistently on a reflective and objective meta-level of CT scholarship, I do not think his judgment represents any religious bias. Instead, it does indicate an assumption prevalent in the current English-writing academy about how to define “theology.” My following argument is that in the West, this assumption of “theology,” defined as a Thomist “faith seeking understanding,”¹⁶ exists only after the historical division between philosophy and theology, viz., after the established Christianity in medieval Europe. However, this definition of theology cannot represent adequately how “theology” was envisioned by ancient Greek philosophers. This misrepresentation leads to two consequences: first, CT theorists, such as Hedges, cannot discern that a project of Wards’ type is congenial to “theology” integral to ancient Greek philosophy. Second, this blind spot on the origin of theology hinders reflective CT theorists and first-order CT scholars from discovering alternative resources to do CT today. The second point is of special significance to my thesis because to envision a Ruist CT, we need to ensconce the key term “theology” and its related ones such as “revelation” and “home tradition” in a more hospitable resource so that contemporary readers can readily comprehend the nature of a Ruist CT. Emphatically, the expansion of the vista of “theology” to its Greek cognate resonates with the emphasis of contemporary CT to decenter, albeit not abandoning, Christianity, and thus, to explore historical resources to transform CT into a genuinely global discipline.

Theology from Ancient Greece to Medieval Europe

To my claim that ancient Greek philosophy provides an alternative resource to enrich the contemporary understanding of theology, it is conceivable for CT scholars to have an initial reaction as such: Was “theology” not just part of philosophy back then, thus a purely argumentative and rational discourse aiming for intellectual truth, pursued in a way which is anything but religiously significant? Did it not lack the very existential grip by ultimate religious truth and the consequential transformation of people’s whole personality, two indispensable implications of “theology” understood today?

Unfortunately, this reaction commits an error of anachronism when assuming the relationship between philosophy, theology and religion as such. The conception that philosophy is merely an argumentative discourse on intellectual matters deprived of religious significance is possible only after Christian scholasticism took hold, thus treated philosophy as a subservient tool to parse out the Christian theology whose authority ultimately derives from divine revelation in the biblical scripture as elaborated by the orthodox doctrines of the Church. In other words, this subordinate role of philosophy transpires simultaneously with the conception of theology as “faith seeking understanding” discussed above. To argue for an alternative resource of CT in ancient Greek philosophy, we need to transcend the concerned period of medieval Christianity, and see into how philosophy, theology and religion were apprehended in the ancient world.

In this regard, Pierre Hadot’s meta-philosophical work on ancient philosophy as a way of life, together with Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s genealogical study of religion, helps contemporary

¹⁶ I term the conception of theology as “faith seeking understanding” as being “Thomist” in order to keep abreast of the use of the term by Keith Ward in a similar context quoted above. It was Anselm of Canterbury who phrased this conception, and evidently, this conception was also influenced by even earlier Christian theologians such as Augustine of Hippo. However, since Thomas Aquinas was the most systematic theologian in medieval scholasticism, and his thought still holds a great influence upon contemporary Catholic thinkers such as Francis Clooney, I think the depiction of the way to conceptualize theology as “faith seeking understanding” as being Thomist is legitimate.

readers to understand the origin and evolution of each contested term (philosophy, theology and religion) before the established Christianity.¹⁷ I will present my understanding as follows:

Philosophy in the ancient world is primarily a way of life, the nature of which is best manifested by varying spiritual exercises aiming to transform people's vision of the world and metamorphose people's whole personality. These spiritual exercises pertain to the training of attention, ways of dialogue, how to read, how to live in the face of death, etc. Philosophical discourse is the abstract and conceptual aspect of these exercises; it is inseparable from the latter, but in the final analysis, it is not the focus of philosophy as a way of life. Theology, as indicated by Aristotle's example which I will analyze later, is integral to philosophy as a way of life. It utilizes rational devices to investigate the cosmic truth which reveals ultimate values of human existence, and the resulting awareness of the truth is incorporated into spiritual exercises practiced by schools of ancient Greek thought.

Religion in the ancient world connotes primarily the innermost feeling of devotion and piety, and the accompanying awareness towards what is mightily incumbent for one to do when they are performing rituals, ceremonies, taking oaths, or other cultic observances designed to bind an individual and community to some transcendent reality. It is more about doing, feeling, and existential states of those ritual performers, rather than concepts, doctrines, or rational persuasions.

Before the established Christianity, the comparison between philosophy and religion can be conducted as follows: they aimed at largely the same target, but relied upon different means. Rites played a less prominent role in philosophers' life, and accordingly, philosophers did not make of the assistance of divine grace the most necessary exercise, and did not make of humility, penitence and obedience the most important virtues. Accordingly, philosophers after Socrates in ancient Greece never formed exclusive membership communities, and schools built by philosophers, such as Plato's Academy, were "a place for free discussion, and that within it there was neither scholastic orthodoxy nor dogmatism."¹⁸ Despite all these differences, both philosophical and religious practices aim to connect human beings to some cosmic, transcendent reality that reveals ultimate values of human life, and thus, to transform their whole personality.

Because of this shared commitment of philosophy and religion in the ancient world, when Christianity was rising, it was possible for Christian thinkers such as Augustine to state that "philosophy, that is, an assiduity for wisdom, is not something different from *religio* (the worship of God)."¹⁹ However, the establishment of Christianity in medieval Europe radically changed the meanings of philosophy, theology and religion. Per the established view, Christianity is the genuine religion, viz., the right way to the worship of God, and its authority upon humans' faithful life is based upon God revealed in the biblical scripture and articulated by orthodox doctrines of the Church. Henceforth, the need of "theology" arises to understand the specific divine revelation in cultures and histories; for this reason, "philosophy" serves as a necessary analytic tool to help theology seek the understanding of an established faith. Therefore, the radical change of meanings

¹⁷ See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. by Arnold Davidson (Wiley-Blackwell, 1995); and Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. by Michael Chase (Belknap Press, 2004). See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (First Fortress Press, 1991).

¹⁸ Hadot, *Ancient Philosophy*, 64

¹⁹ J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, vol. 8, col. 126 (Paris, 1861), which is translated and quoted by Smith, *Religion*, 212.

of “philosophy” vis-à-vis “theology” is visible: in ancient Greece, theology was part of philosophy as a way of life which had rich spiritual and religious significances. However, per their transformed meanings in the Christian world, philosophy was deprived of these significances, and treated instead as an intellectual enterprise to focus upon concepts, argumentation and rationalization. In turn, theology was no longer as open to competitive or complementary views from plural resources, as philosophy as a way of life once meant it to be. This innovated form of theology utilized available cultural devices to preach or defend an established set of faith statements enshrined as orthodoxy within a clearly bounded religious community. Here, how Clooney’s understanding of theology stands within the evolutionary history of the term should become comprehensible.

Should contemporary scholars of CT not pay attention to the alternative meaning of theology in ancient Greek philosophy that has such a rich spiritual and religious implication? In the following sections, I will analyze one concrete example of this type of theology in Aristotle’s works, and explain why this theology is more amenable to our understanding of the CT of Ward’s type, and more importantly, why it is more conducive to the Ruist CT.

Comparative Theology as a Liberal Art

In Aristotle’s architectonic philosophy, theology is located in metaphysics, and implicates itself extensively in biology, physics, ethics, politics and education. I will briefly describe the structure of the philosophy before reflecting upon its theological nature.

After using four causes to explain natural phenomena in the celestial and sub-lunar worlds in *Physics* and *On the Heavens*, Aristotle starts to investigate the first cause, the Unmoved Mover, for the entire chain of explanatory causes in his *Metaphysics*. By the same token, after enumerating five elements in the universe, their respective natural positions and natures in *Physics* and *On the Heavens*, Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* explores what it means to be a substance in general in addition to attributes predicated on a substance such as qualities, quantities, relatives, etc. Thus, metaphysics, per Aristotle and its various expressions in later western philosophy, can be defined as an inquiry into the most generic features of beings so as to define the boundary conditions of a worldview. With the guidance of this inquiry, humans can inquire further into concrete domains in the world.

Metaphysics construed as a rational and open inquiry into generic traits of beings leads to an interesting idea of “theology (*theologike*).”²⁰ For Aristotle, theology is necessarily part of metaphysics. While metaphysics defines the boundary conditions of a worldview, theology can be seen as lying at the cusp of these boundaries. In other words, taking the Unmoved Mover (which is the first cause of the existing world) as theology’s unique object of inquiry, Aristotle’s theology transformed the idea of deity prevalent in ancient Greek folklore and mythology into an ultimate Being which attracts the same extent of rational investigation as all other domains of human knowledge. In a further analysis, this first Unmoved Mover is identified as *Nous* (thought or intellect), a pervading energy (*energeia*) of pure activity, which moves the other parts of the world

²⁰ The word appears in Aristotle, *Metaphysics* VI, 1026a 18-22. English translations of Aristotle’s works discussed in this paper are from Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Volumes I and II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). A detailed analysis of the term “theology” can be found at Stephen Menn, “Aristotle’s Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aristotle*, edited by Christopher Shields, online version (Oxford University Press, 2012): 1-45.

like an object of perception triggering perception while itself remaining unmoved²¹. As the ultimate efficient cause, Nous is involved in a perpetual process of contemplation upon itself, and all existing beings in the world, while moved by it, change, grow and strive for it as their final cause.

The practical wisdom (*phronesis*) propounded by Aristotle in his ethics also has a final cause. Following his teacher Plato, Aristotle defines the Unmoved Mover of Nous as the ultimate “Good,” and thinks the purpose of practical wisdom, which adjudicates good or bad in concrete situations, is to create conditions of human life that resembles the divine life of Nous as much as possible. Therefore, for Aristotle, the best life of human beings is pure contemplation upon all beings in the world. However, the union between human life and its final cause, Nous, is mysterious and beyond what any philosophical discourse can describe. It happens momentarily and instantaneously, and hence, can never achieve the state of divinity unique to the perpetual self-contemplative life of Nous²². So, human life on the earth unfolds as a ceaseless process of self-perfection guided by both practical wisdom and its ultimate holy cause.

Politics should be organized according to the same principle prevailing in ethics. For Aristotle, an ideal state creates conditions for its citizens to enjoy leisure so as to practice the best life of contemplation. The education fit for the citizens should be genuine “liberal arts” defined in the senses that first, nothing useful is downplayed. This is because practical wisdom is required for human beings to live through concrete situations to create conditions for the noblest way of life in contemplation. Second, useful subjects cannot be taught merely because they are useful. Otherwise, they would make humans a machine, and thus, be deprived of full intellectual and personal growth²³. An education of liberal arts should therefore enlighten citizens of all subjects necessary for humans’ full flourishing (*eudaimonia*). Since good human life is envisioned in Aristotle’s ethics as a ceaseless process, education is also a life-long project that a human would ever pursue. Since the Aristotelian theology is understood as such, it should be comprehensible why I think the CT of Ward’s type is closer to Aristotle than to Aquinas.

Aristotle’s theology is intrinsically comparative. This is not only indicated by the facts that, first, Aristotle’s investigation of the ultimate cosmic cause starts from discussing previous theologians, natural philosophers, and mythologists in varying areas of the world known to him²⁴. Second, his theological conclusions succumbed to further scrutiny and debate within the schools he created or influenced. Also, all beings in the world are worth knowing as a goal of contemplation because the continually unfolding divine reality of Nous is manifested in every nook and cranny of the existing world. Through contemplating them, human life enjoys its highest good while striving for becoming the self-contemplative Nous. In other words, Aristotle’s theology contains an internal impetus to go outside for comparative and comprehensive studies of all beings in the world.

²¹ About Aristotle’s God as Nous, please refer to Stephen Menn, “Aristotle and Plato on God as Nous and as the Good,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Mar., 1992): 543-573.

²² Aristotle’s Mystical tendency and mysticisms in ancient Greek philosophy are analyzed in Hadot, *Ancient Philosophy*, 88, 157-163

²³ About Aristotle on liberal arts, please refer to Wayne Willis, “Liberating the Liberal Arts: An Interpretation of Aristotle,” *The Journal of General Education*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (1988): 193–205. I will analyze the Aristotelian idea of liberal arts in more detail in next section.

²⁴ About Aristotle and his antecedent theologians, please refer to John A. Palmer, “Aristotle on the Ancient Theologians,” *Apeiron*, Vol. 33, Iss. 3 (2000):181–205.

It is evident that Aristotle’s theology is not a purely intellectualist endeavor, but has its rich religious import²⁵. The dynamic between the ultimate Nous and humans’ endless self-perfecting activities towards it is comparable to visions of human life shaped by spiritual exercises in many religious traditions. In particular, although the language of “divine revelation” does not prevail in the Aristotelian philosophy, Aristotle’s longing for the mystical union with Nous, and his awareness towards the radical limitedness of philosophical discourse in understanding the union make that language not completely alien to his philosophy. In terms we once utilized to analyze the difference between Clooney and Ward, we can say: the ultimately indeterminate and ineffable Nous is revealed in Aristotle’s architectonic philosophical discourse. The discourse is determinate, yet keeps unfolding, revisable and perfectible as human contemplation of world phenomena deepens and expands.

Nowadays, the theology of Aristotle’s type is normally characterized as “natural theology” or “philosophical theology,” and accordingly, is thought of merely focusing upon human reason. Based upon the above analysis, I conclude that this is a mischaracterization of Aristotle’s work, and is possible only after the established Christianity took away the rich spiritual and religious significance of ancient Greek thought, and accordingly displaced philosophy as a subservient analytic tool. In contemporary discussion of CT, we do not need to hold on to this mischaracterization.

Conceivably, the remaining hesitance from contemporary readers of CT to fully recognize Aristotle’s theology as theology seems to be this: apparently, Aristotle’s theology did not have a clearly-bounded community to speak to. However, whether a faithful community can only be built upon the theological model of “faith seeking understanding” remains controversial²⁶. Aristotle built his school, and included theology as part of liberal arts education; following this Aristotelian model of liberal arts, faithful, noble-minded and open-minded learners can flourish simultaneously their spiritual and intellectual life within varying educational communities. These educational communities of liberal arts are indeed not equivalent to any exclusive membership community based upon unalterable faith statements; however, seen as a whole, they are an anchored, long-standing and growing community. In particular, per the Aristotelian model, this community of liberal arts does not exclude overt religious affiliates as long as these affiliates do not absolutize and reify their own determinate understanding of faith, and hence, would like to incorporate the practice of their faith and the learning of the world into an organic way of life. I believe when Ward states that comparative theology is compatible with one’s religious commitment, and he writes comparative theology as an Anglican Christian, the community he envisioned is close to the one I just described.

Now, let me summarize my major claims and arguments before we move on to the possibility of Ruist CT.

²⁵ An advocacy on the religious significance of Aristotle’s philosophy refers to *Theo Gerard Sinnige*, “Cosmic Religion in Aristotle,” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, Vol. 14, Iss. 1 (1973): 15–34.

²⁶ See Stephanie Corigliano, “Theologizing for the Yoga Community? Commitment and Hybridity in Comparative Theology,” in Clooney, ed., *How to Do Comparative Theology*, 324–50 and in particular, Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin, ed., *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries* (Routledge, 2016).

- The CT of Clooney’s type follows a definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding,” and thus, pivots upon faith towards a determinate form of divine revelation pronounced in a clearly-bounded home tradition. This is essentially a Thomist project, which results in the intensification of the specificity of each faith understood similarly in varying traditions.
- The CT of Ward’s type conceptualizes theology as a continual human endeavor of utilizing available cultural devices to contemplate ultimate reality. It may start from a determinate form of divine revelation in one tradition, but intends to revise, enrich, and advance this form while continually learning other traditions. This is essentially an Aristotelian project, which enables Ward to embed his overt religious affiliation within a broader consciousness of human community portrayable as one of liberal arts.
- Contemporary scholars find it uneasy to fully recognize Ward’s work as theology because their understanding of “theology” is shaped by how this term is understood after the established Christianity in medieval Europe. In tandem with the establishment, philosophy is divested of its rich spiritual and religious imports, and degraded as a purely intellectual endeavor. However, in contemporary discussions of CT, it is important to recover the pre-Christian conception of theology. Firstly, this conception is conducive for us to grasping other theologies in non-Christian traditions. Secondly, it broadens the audience of CT into all people who cherish the value of liberal arts, and hence, seek the truth of ultimate reality from plural perspectives. An important caveat is that this pre-Christian understanding of theology is not incompatible with Christianity. Quite contrary to this, Aristotle’s theological thought has been absorbed into the Christian tradition of philosophical theology, and more importantly, as indicated by the case of Ward, a Christian can still embed their religious affiliation within this general Aristotelian framework of theology as a liberal art, and thus, practice CT as a Christian.

Ruist Theology as a Liberal Art

There is not much controversy in characterizing Confucius as an educator. It is also an easy argument to make that the Ruist pedagogy which Confucius’s thought helped to incubate is similar to the Aristotelian “liberal arts.” Just look at how strikingly similar these two statements on the purpose of education are: “Any occupation, art, or science, which makes the body, soul or mind of the freeman less fit for the practice or exercise of excellence, is mechanical” (Aristotle).²⁷ “An exemplary person does not learn to be a utensil-like thing (君子不器)” (Confucius).²⁸ For Aristotle and Confucius, anything of education that precludes the broad and continual intellectual and personal growth of individuals will make them either a “machine” or a “utensil,” viz., be illiberal or ignoble, and thus, less than a human. However, the question remains whether “theology”

²⁷ Aristotle, *Politics* 1137 b3. Trans. by Barns, *Aristotle*, v.2, 2121. The term *banauos* (mechanical) could also be translated as “vulgar.”

²⁸ Confucius, *Analects* 2.12. Translation adapted from multiple sources. The notation of verses refers to Peimin Ni, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius: A New Translation of Lunyu with Annotations* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2017).

registers prominently in Ruist liberal arts. After all, as one Analect indicated, when a student urged Confucius to touch upon the topic, Confucius was particularly reticent:

The Master said: “I wish to say nothing.” Zigong said, “if you, Master, do not speak, what shall we disciples have to implement?” The Master said, “Does *Tian* (天, cosmos) say anything? Yet the four seasons rotate, and hundreds of things grow. Does *Tian* say anything?”²⁹

However, Confucius’s reticence about the ineffable nature of *Tian*’s abundant creativity can be well interpreted as initiating a mystical vein of Ruist theology. Scholars’ occasional mischaracterization of the Ru tradition as solely focusing upon ethics and politics, without a substantive metaphysical dimension, is due to their overlooking that the *Classic of Change* (*Yijing*), to which Confucius contributed his own interpretative thought,³⁰ has an everlasting influence upon Ruist metaphysics. Regarding the question whether Ruism has its own theology, it is therefore desirable that our answer to it starts from an analysis of the *Classic of Change*. In the following, I will briefly discuss the classic to lay out a basic vocabulary for considering a Ruist theology.

Metaphysics is translated into Chinese as 形而上學 (xingershangxue), literally “a learning about things beyond shape.” This translation derives from a verse in the *Appended Texts* of the *Classic of Change*, “What lies beyond shape is called the Dao, and what lies within shape is called the utensil-like things.”³¹ The underlying idea of this verse is that concrete things have a shape and can, therefore, be studied like a utensil since each of them, with its concrete characteristics, serves a specific relationship to the human world. However, if this kind of study is also seen as a kind of art or technology that is constrained to a specific domain of worldly phenomena, then there is another sort of learning that delves into how things in general originate, evolve, change, and, thereby, dynamically and harmoniously fit together. In a Ruist term, a learning delving into these more generic features of things in the world takes “Dao,” or the Way, as its objective. Its major task is to investigate layers upon layers of “principle” (理, li) in order to understand how things in varying worldly domains dynamically and harmoniously interrelate. For instance, from the most to less generic, terms used to characterize these principles are yin/yang vital-energies, four seasons, five phases (metal, wood, water, fire and earth), eight trigrams (each of which represents one pattern of

²⁹ Analects 17.19.

³⁰ The received standard version of *Yijing* was compiled by Ru scholars around East Han (25-220 C.E). among whom Fei Zhi (?), Zheng Xuan (127-200 C.E) and Wang Bi (226-249 C.E) did the most significant work. It consists of the original divination book of *Zhouyi* (*The Zhou Book of Change*), and ten later commentaries called “Ten Wings.” Among the ten wings, the *Appended Texts* (繫辭, also called “The Great Commentary”) was considered as philosophically the most significant by later Ruists. Although contemporary scholars continually debate the authorship of the *Great Commentary*, it was traditionally ascribed to Confucius. In my view, scholars can at least reach a consensus that the philosophical connection of the *Great Commentary* to Confucius’s thought is conspicuous. About the formation of the received version of *Yijing*, please see Zhang, Shanwen 张善文, *Image-number and Meaning-principle 象数与义理* (Liao Ning Jiao Yu Chu Ban She, 1995): 152-161. The received version of *Yijing* upon which this paper’s research is based refers to Wang Bi 王弼, Han Kangbo 韩康伯, and Kong Yingda 孔颖达, 《十三经注疏 周易正义》 (Commentary of Thirteen Classics: the Correct Meanings of the Zhou Book of Change) (北京：北京大学出版社, 1999).

³¹ “形而上者謂之道，形而下者謂之器，” Wang, *Correct Meanings*, 292. Translations of this text in this essay are my own.

evolving harmonies in the world, such as *Qian* [creativity], *Kun* [receptivity], and *Kan* [Risk]), and sixty-four hexagrams, etc. In a word, notwithstanding being embedded in a different linguistic and cultural system, Ruism has a metaphysical system which delves into the most generic features of things in the world and, hence, defines the boundary conditions of a Ruist worldview. In this sense, Ruist metaphysics can be compared to its western counterparts, which are influenced by Aristotle.

Is there a “theological” dimension of Ruist metaphysics? While investigating the most generic features of things in the world, the aforementioned Ruist metaphysical text is also immensely interested in probing the origin of the world. For instance, one verse tells us that there is a sequence of ontological dependence among the aforementioned principles. “Among cosmic changes there is something called Ultimate Limit (太極, taiji). Ultimate Limit generates two modes. Two modes generate four images. Four images generate eight trigrams.”³² In other words, the change of eight patterns of evolving harmonies in the world (eight trigrams) depend upon one of the four seasons or five phases (four images). The changing of the four seasons or five phases is furthermore conditioned by one of the yin/yang vital energies, and the yin/yang vital energies ultimately derive from an ontological creative origin called Ultimate Limit³³. In the long-standing commentarial tradition of the *Yijing*, there are two major conceptions of Ultimate Limit. One says it is the all-pervading cosmic field of vital-energy (氣), the self-movement and further differentiation of which generate all things in the world. Another says that it is the supreme ontological principle which generates both cosmic vital-energy and all other secondary principles accounting for how vital energies unfold and change in pattern.

Regardless, both interpretations see Ultimate Limit as the Dao of the cosmos, which, per the literal meaning of Dao as “the Way,” makes the cosmos take place and start to work. Can this Ruist discourse of Ultimate Limit (or the cosmic Dao) be counted as theology?³⁴ As a rational inquiry into the ultimate cause of the cosmos, it surely can. Nevertheless, theism does not register prominently in the Ruist intellectual history of metaphysics initiated by the *Yijing*. Dao, albeit a constant signifier of ultimate reality, is not typically conceived of by Ruist thinkers as a creator deity, standing behind the cosmic scene and dictating its unfolding. Because of this, a more appropriate term to describe the mode of theology in Ruism may be “dao-logy,” rather than “theology.” However, we also need to remember that even for Aristotle, his idea of God is very different from the one prominent in ancient Greek folklore and mythology. In the history of Christian philosophical theology, we also frequently encountered thinkers who modified the theistic idea of God into a de-anthropomorphized abstract force, such as Aquinas’s “pure act to be,” Tillich’s “ground of being,” and other mystical conceptions of God. Therefore, if modified to include a non-theistic mode, “theology” is surely suitable to describe that dimension of Ruist metaphysics which

³² Wang, *Correct Meanings*, 289.

³³ The translation of Taiji as Ultimate Limit is inspired by my conversation with Dr. Michael Ing, to whom I express my gratitude here.

³⁴ Yong Huang once summarized three historical models of “Confucian Theology” in Yong Huang, “*Confucian Theology: Three Models*,” *Religion Compass* 1/4 (2007): 455–78. They are (1) the theistic model in pre-Confucian classics, (2) the transcendent immanence of *Tian* in contemporary New Confucian thinkers, and (3) the life-giving activity of *Tian* transcending the world within the world. Slightly different from Huang’s typological approach, I submit that there is a great continuity of “theology” (understood in the comparable Aristotelian sense) within the Ru tradition starting from its earliest commentaries of *Yijing*. In this way, I see types (2) and (3) are along the same lineage of Ru theology.

investigates the ultimate cause of the world and its intricate relationship to concrete worldly phenomena.

Noticeably, the vigor of broad and continual learning expressed by the Ruist pedagogy of liberal arts represents the spirit of “ceaseless self-strengthening” of an exemplary person’s³⁵, and in the *Yijing*’s metaphysical-ethical system, this spirit furthermore manifests the “birth birth (生生, sheng sheng)”³⁶ constantly creative power of the cosmic Dao. Therefore, Just as Aristotle’s theology presents the first cosmic principle for human ethical deeds, and ultimately grounds his vision of liberal arts education, we find a similar ideological continuum between theology, metaphysics, ethics and pedagogy in the Ruist case.

My argument in this section can be summarized as follows: For the clarification of whether Ruism has a theology, we had better not take the Thomist conception of theology as “faith seeking understanding” as a comparative point. This is because the Thomist conception requires a loyal allegiance to a determinate form of divine revelation established as “faith” at first, and then, to use human devices to understand it, a language which Ruism does not quite speak. However, Aristotle understands theology as an open and rational inquiry into ultimate reality, and it is integral to philosophy as a way of life with liberal arts as its pedagogical emphasis. We find that this Aristotelian theology is conducive to our characterization of Ruism (as Ruism is represented by the rich interpretative and commentarial tradition of the *Classic of Change*) as being equipped with a rich theological dimension. Because the key component “theo-” in the Aristotelian case does not prioritize any theistic conception, theology as such is particularly fit to depict the dimension of Ruist discourse that addresses the ultimate origin of the cosmos and human society. Therefore, in the remaining parts of this paper, whenever a Ruist theology is mentioned, theology will be meant by the analyzed Aristotelian fashion.

Nevertheless, since Ruism has a theology practiced as a liberal art, the crucial question remains: how comparative is it? Since we interpret it using an Aristotelian term fit for Ward’s Christian CT, has Ruist theology indicated features similar to the CT of Ward’s type? What attitude did Ruism indicate to other peer comprehensive traditions in the ancient Chinese context? To answer these questions, I will use one very concrete example, Wang Longxi (1498-1583 C.E.)’s understanding of the relationship among three teachings (Ruism, Daoism and Buddhism), to present a Ruist theology of religions as a “seeded, open inclusivism.”

Seeded, Open Inclusivism

Wang Longxi learned with Wang Yangming (1472-1529 C.E), a landmark Ruist in Ming Dynasty, and is considered as the founder of the “Middle Zhe” school (Wang’s hometown was located in the middle part of Zhe Jiang province) of Wang Yangming’s followers. Wang Longxi’s thought continues his teacher’s instruction on the pivotal significance of “conscientious knowing” (良知), an innate moral awareness, to Ruist self-cultivation, and emphasizes the spontaneous and liberating nature of the awareness. Here, what interests us the most is Wang Longxi’s thought on the relationship between Ruism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Wang Longxi’s reflection on the relationship took place in a very special time: that was in the late stage of the Daoxue movement

³⁵ Wang, *Correct Meanings*, 10.

³⁶ Wang, *Correct Meanings*, 271.

(in English, this movement is normally titled “neo-Confucianism”), while the three mentioned teachings all had established their long lineages. Therefore, how to envision the relationship from a theological perspective became an urgent topic for Ruist thinkers. In my view, Wang Longxi’s thought on this topic distinctively represents the spirit of Ruist theology as a liberal art, and thus, can be used to instantiate how Ruist theology comparatively looks at other traditions. In the following, I will present my original translations of Wang Longxi’s three key writings³⁷ on this topic before laying out my final analysis. Because Wang Longxi’s words in these writings are philosophically dense, I will provide my brief annotation to them whenever needed.

Text (1): A Response to the “Hall of the Three Teachings”.

The Three Teachings all arose long ago. Lao spoke of “void,” yet the teachings of the sages (i) also speak of “void.” The Buddha spoke of “tranquility,” yet the teachings of the sages also speak of “tranquility.” So what distinguishes them? Today’s Ru do not consider the original similarities between these [Three Teachings], treating the other two as heretical, but this is not a sensible view.

At the time of the Spring and Autumn Period, Buddhism had not yet entered China. Lao, however, witnessing the decadence of late Zhou culture and seeking to restore its foundations, regarded the practice of ritual as a sign of inadequate loyalty and trustworthiness (ii). This approach is similar to that of Kongzi who once said that when it came to adopting rituals, he would rather follow the example of commoners than aristocrats. (iii) Kongzi, furthermore, went to the Zhou capital and asked questions of Lao, for he later said that he had heard Lao Dan speak about all sorts of things. He therefore did not consider Lao an interloper.

Xiangshan (iv) once said: “We Ru have our own heretics, for anyone who does not follow our original lineage [of teaching], but searches beyond it in the company of strange teachers, is a heretic.” Yet Kongzi said, “Do I have any knowledge? No, I have no knowledge,” meaning that one’s conscientious knowing is initially without knowledge; and, “When a commoner asks me a question, I am completely blank” (*Analects* 9:8)—the expression “completely blank” referring to void and tranquility. Yanzi was an excellent student of Kongzi’s; he said [of Yanzi]: “He’s almost there, isn’t he? For he frequently empties himself” (*Analects* 11:19). This was high praise! Ru of the Han dynasty made etiquette, formalities, rules, and procedures the subject of their learning and thus ignored their true goal: “complete emptiness” (as it is called). (v)

When Buddhists started to enter into China, they took charge of instructing the people, seeking to transform the disorder of their Five Aggregates and restore their purity. (vi) They

³⁷ All three texts are from Wang Ji 王畿, *龍溪王先生全集* (Complete Works of Wang Longxi) (明善書局, 光緒八年1882). They are “三教堂紀” in Vol. 17, pp. 4-5. “三山麗澤錄”, in Vol. 1, pp. 9-10. “南遊會紀”, in Vol. 7, pp. 3-4. My understanding of Wang Longxi’s thought is indebted mostly to Peng Guoxiang 彭国翔, *良知学的展开: 王龙溪与中晚明的阳明学* (The Unfolding of the Learning of Conscientious Knowing: Wang Longxi and the Learning of Yangming in middle and late Ming) (三联书店, 2005). I thank Paul Blair for his editing assistance in the translations.

cultivated their three virtues completely, (vii) they passed through the Six Realms exhaustively, (viii) and they concentrated everything into a single thought. (ix) They demonstrated the nature of emptiness constantly, and used every difference between the sages and the common people as an occasion to advance their particular instructions. In its lowest form, however, Buddhism withers human initiative and sets out to discard ritual and law, sinking utterly into nihilism and oblivion. This is a gloomy sort of emptiness, accepted only by second-rate disciples, and was not part of Buddhism’s original teachings.

From birth, humans are endowed by Heaven and Earth with a certain centeredness, each sharing a common nature. They do not begin life divided into sects, with some born Ruist, some Daoist, and others Buddhist. They are, however, all endowed with conscientious knowing, which is the genius of human nature. It brings together Heaven and Earth and everything in between into one reality, thereby encompassing all the Three Teachings. It does not submit to conventions or standards, nor is it mired in thoughts and deeds. Nothingness and being give rise to one another, and yet, [conscientious knowing] cannot be said not to exist. Stillness and motion follow one another, and yet, [conscientious knowing] cannot be said to be extinct. It likes what the common people like and dislikes what they dislike, nor is it detached from the affections and reciprocities at the heart of human relationships. From it the achievements of the sages are derived. Those who learn from the Buddha or Lao in order to restore their human nature as their foremost aim, and do not fall prey to illusions or fantasy, are simply Daoist or Buddhist Ru (道釋之儒). Among us Ru, any who would use their wisdom selfishly, failing to embrace all things and manifest the aims of our tradition, would be a Ruist heretic (儒之異端). Like the difference between one *hao* and one *li*, (x) the distinctions between these schools are very subtle. If our own Ruist teachings are understood clearly, we can confirm what is true of the other two traditions. We must get to the marrow [of Ruism], which cannot be fathomed by mere words or thought. Yet some of our Ruist confrères cannot get to the foundations of our own teachings or understand them, and so they vainly set out to castigate others with senseless clamor. This will only incur disrespect from the other two traditions and prove that we have no grasp of our own. The gentleman of Lu Yuzhong composed “The Hall of the Three Teachings” and asked for a word of approval from me in support of his teachings. I have therefore written this response and send it to him.

Notes:

- (i) Ruism is also referred to as “the learning of sages” (聖學) in Wang Longxi’s writing. “Lao” refers to Laozi, the legendary author of the *Dao De Jing* (道德經), a founding text of Daoism.
- (ii) Wang Longxi understands Laozi’s famous criticism of ritual as implying that when people are not intrinsically loyal and trustful, then they will emphasize ritual to discipline themselves from without.
- (iii) See *Analects* 11:1.
- (iv) Xiangshan refers to Lu Jiuyuan (1139-1193 C.E.), a Ru contemporary of Zhu Xi.
- (v) Per Wang Longxi’s understanding of Wang Yangming’s “conscientious knowing,” the innate moral consciousness is the manifestation of the constantly creative cosmic Dao in human mind, and thus, its function pervades the entire universe and is not constrained by any concrete reality. Wang Longxi understands further this all-pervading nature of

“conscientious knowing” as hinted by Kongzi’s word “complete emptiness,” and thus, he views that Ruism from its beginning addressed metaphysical issues that Daoism or Buddhism seem particularly elaborated on.

(vi) Buddhism holds that there are five basic components of sentience called the Five Aggregates. In Chinese, they are 色 (*se*, “form”), 受 (*shou*, “sensation”), 想 (*xiang*, “perception”), 行 (*xing*, “disposition”), and 識 (*shi*, “consciousness”).

(vii) The Three Jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma (Buddhist teaching), and the Sangha (Buddhist monasticism).

(viii) Buddhism identifies six realms into which beings are reincarnated.

(ix) This refers to the “Consciousness-Only” school of Buddhism.

(x) *Hao* and *li* are among the shortest units of length used in ancient China.

Text (2):

A friend asked: “Even though Buddhism is unavoidably skewed, its theories on the heartmind and human nature are nevertheless quite refined and subtle, for metaphysical realities are their principal concern. We Ru speak of rectifying human relationships, and so we cannot avoid discussing material realities, but because Ruist teachings on the heartmind and human nature have been buried and disregarded for so long, it is currently difficult for us to transcend our materialistic tendencies. If we could borrow from their way in order to galvanize our own understanding, this would not necessarily be unhelpful for our learning.”

Master Wang answered: “What you have just said may seem true, but it is not. Reality cannot be separated into either metaphysical or material parts, nor have we Ru have ever failed to speak of void, of tranquility, of subtlety, and of mystery, all of which have been passed down by countless sages who guarded these esoteric teachings. (i) If we follow and comprehend these, our ultimate aim shall be that which encompasses all of the Three Teachings. Ever since the learning of the sages was obscured, subsequent Ru have rejected the essentials laid down by their countless sages, believing that such topics belong to the Buddhists. Whenever emptiness and tranquility are mentioned, they consider it heresy and refuse to have any more to do with them. They do not realize that what the Buddhists speak of was originally the great Ruist way, but instead they want to adopt the way of Buddhism to enter into [wisdom]. What a great pity!

“Both the Immortalists and the Buddhists furnish learning for life beyond this human world. Although Buddhism arrived in China much later, during the Tang and Yu dynasties, men like Chao and Xu were already living a similar way of life. (ii) But the learning of the sages prevailed during the Tang and Yu dynasties, and so while Chao and Xu dwelt in the mountains like common trees or rocks and were left to live and mature on their own, they were still part of the great unity fostered by Yao and Shun. There is, after all, in every generation that type of person who is simple, quiet, and detached, and cannot bear worldly matters; nor would the likes of Yao and Shun ever force them to. Because the learning of the sages was later obscured, however, the Ru of the Han dynasty insisted on debating abstract theories, miring themselves in models, classifications, formalities and

paradigms, and holding these up as the highest truths. They lost sight of the living substance of human nature which is ever changing and flowing, and thus they were criticized and mocked by the Daoists and Buddhists who thereby managed to expand their own influence. We Ru are unaware of the great patrimony which was originally ours, and instead we willingly yield it to others. What a terrible tragedy!

“My late teacher (Wang Yangming) used to compare this to a house with three rooms. Originally, during the Tang and Yu dynasties, all three of the rooms were in our possession, and even people like Chao and Xu resided therein. In subsequent generations the learning of the sages was no longer able to maintain its preeminence, and so it was left with only the central room, having willingly yielded the rooms on the left and right to Buddhism and Daoism. As our Ruist teachings declined day by day, while Buddhist and Daoist teachings flourished day by day, we Ru willingly conceded our inferiority and hoped that by borrowing from the others we might still endure. Later, even our one central room was imperiled by our inability to ensure even our own survival, for many left and affiliated themselves with the other [two rooms]. Thus we gradually lost our patrimony without ever having realized it.

“For us Ru today, is the situation really any different? Occasionally there arise bold and exceptional scholars who cannot bear to lose everything so willingly, and so, as a matter of personal duty, they strive to uphold the truth and put the Buddhists and Daoists in their place. Such persons, however, are unable to seek the roots of things or entertain subtleties, nor can they cultivate themselves from within. They merely wish to strike up a reputation for righteousness and to triumph through sheer willfulness. With respect, all this does is to fuel the criticisms of the Daoists and Buddhists.

“My late master’s teaching on conscientious knowing is the wondrous crux of all the Three Teachings. If we can start realizing this now and no longer adulterate it with any other bits of knowledge, then the others will obediently return to us, for—as they say—true teaching and heresy cannot coexist. This cannot be achieved through quarrelsome talk.”

Notes:

(i) I have translated “秘” here as “esoteric” because there is a crucial component of Ruist self-cultivation which is deeply experiential and cannot be transmitted through words alone. This esoteric side of Ruism, however, does not tend to segregate itself from the mundane world. Rather, the salient feature of Ruist spirituality—in contrast to many other spiritual traditions—is that it always situates its mysticism in the depth of (rather than beyond) daily life in the here and now. In Wang Longxi’s experience, the interactive process with his late teacher, Wang Yangming, on the bridge of Tianquan, may have been one of these esoteric moments. See the opening text in Wang, *Complete Works*, Vol. 1.

(ii) The Tang and Yu dynasties were those of Kings Yao and Shun, two of the earliest Ruist sage-kings. According to ancient Chinese texts such as the *Biographies of the Great Worthies* (高士傳), Chao and Xu were hermits who refused to serve the state even while it prospered and was ruled by the most enlightened of kings.

Text (3):

A gentleman, Lu of Wutai, asked about Buddhism and Daoism, to which Master Wang replied: “The teachings of these two traditions are different from our Ruist ones. However, they can still be taught alongside Ruism and are not being abandoned because they too have the Way within them.

“Everyone has a heartmind. Buddhism maintains that it arises before one is conceived by one’s parents, and thus they have sayings such as, ‘before being born to one’s parents,’ and, ‘free from the slightest entanglement.’ They call their approach to self-cultivation, ‘illuminating the heartmind and perceiving one’s nature.’ Daoists maintain that [the heartmind] arises before an infant is delivered from its mother’s womb, and thus they have sayings such as, ‘at the infant’s first cry, even Mount Tai lost its footing,’ and ‘one’s heartmind was once formed in liveliness and purity, but now it has forgotten the breath of infancy.’ They call their approach to self-cultivation, ‘mending the heartmind and refining one’s nature.’ We Ru, however, maintain that [the heartmind] arises during one’s childhood, and thus we have sayings such as, ‘in childhood we come to know love and reverence ... without studying or thinking about them,’ and, ‘a great man has not lost the heartmind of his ruddy youth.’ We call our approach to self-cultivation, ‘preserving the heartmind and nourishing one’s nature.’ (i)

“To consider the heartmind before birth is Buddhism, with its teachings of immediate enlightenment and returning to the void. To consider the heartmind after delivery from the womb is Daoism, with its teachings on refining essences, vital-energies, and spirits in order to return to the void. Two words: ‘conscientious knowing’—these encompass all the Three Teachings. The embodiment of conscientious knowing is essence, its diffusion is vital-energy, and its wondrous operation is spirit; there are not three positions on this. Conscientious knowing is the void; there is no ‘Oneness’ to return to. This is the learning of the sages!

“If we fixate on the period before birth, we neglect the infant’s delivery from the womb. If we fixate on the moment of the infant’s delivery from the womb, we neglect its childhood. Childhood, however, provides a complete picture—of Heaven and Earth, and everything in between whenever we nurture and guide, raise and arrange them—yet without excluding those moments on which the Daoists and Buddhists have latched. Any other approach cannot help but resort to false assumptions: either striving to conflate the Three Teachings as one and the same, or to reject them as essentially different, neither of which is our understanding of the relationship between them.

Notes:

(i) All these Ruist sayings are from the *Mengzi*.

These three included texts aim to illustrate Wang Longxi’s understanding on the relationship between the Three Teachings (*sanjiao*): Ruism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Here is my analysis of it concerning the questions asked by this paper.

The Way generates everything in the universe and it endows a heartmind to each human being with a distinctive human nature. This is a basic fact that Wang Longxi thinks is acknowledged by all traditions. As such, when Wang expresses his view that Daoism and Buddhism also have the Way in their own distinctive modes, he reveals a profoundly pluralistic awareness shared by many other Ru and other spiritual practitioners of his day: different traditions cultivate human relationships with the Way in different ways.

Nevertheless, Wang believes that Ruism has become the most comprehensive tradition whose insights into the Way potentially encompass all valuable insights furnished by the other two traditions. This characterizes Wang’s view on the inter-traditional relationship as a Ruism-centered inclusivism.

We must note a significant qualifier for this Ruist inclusivism: Wang does not believe that classical Ruism has exhausted all possibilities for further growth. Rather, Ruism continues to change and transform over time. On the one hand, great Ruist philosophers (such as Wang Yangming) furnished new paradigms for the tradition, thereby enriching and developing it. On the other hand, as admitted by Wang Longxi himself, Ruism continues to incorporate elements from the other traditions through a prudent judgement of their efficacy in articulating the universal and ultimately ineffable Way, thereby synthesizing them into a growing, organic body of human wisdom which nevertheless maintains continuity with classical Ruism. In short, the “inclusivism” Wang Longxi envisions is dynamic and open, rather than static and closed.

By way of comparison, this type of inclusivism is different from two most studied cases of inclusivism in the Christian tradition. Karl Rahner’s (1904-1984 C.E.) theory of “anonymous Christianity” presumes that any valuable element from other traditions make them anonymously Christian. Jacques Dupuis’ (1923-2004 C.E.) inclusivism, on the other hand, acknowledges the possibility for Christianity to learn new insights from other traditions, although he still maintains an historical “eschaton” towards which all traditions must strive. In other words, in Jacques Dupuis’ vision, all traditions are supposed to fit into a ready-made Christian framework of world history so as to achieve ultimate salvation³⁸. These two types of inclusivism are essentially “closed” in the sense that both believe that ultimate truth has already been achieved within one tradition, and with respect to this truth, the tradition need not develop.

In Wang Longxi’s vision of Ruist inclusivism, however, he neither entertains an idea of an eschaton where human efforts to know and follow the Way can stop, nor does he believe that any valuable insight from other traditions is necessarily already present within the Ruist tradition.

In a word, Wang Longxi’s understanding on the relationship between Ruism and other traditions can be described as a “seeded, open inclusivism,” undergirded by a pluralistic consciousness: there are multiple traditions in the world addressing the same cosmic and human Way. Ruism, however, from its earliest origins, has generated seeds of thought which have the greatest potential to encompass all valuable insights from the plurality of traditions. In time, Ruism

³⁸ Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the non-Christian Religions,” in *Theological Investigation*, Vol. V., trans. by Karl-H. Kruger (Darton: Longman & Todd, 1966). Jacques Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Orbis Books, 1999). A fine summary and analysis of their theologies of religions can be found at Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Toward a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2011).

continues to change and transform, so as to incorporate more and more elements from other traditions in order to better know the Way and tackle new challenges in human society³⁹.

A Ruist Comparative Theology as a Liberal Art

Wang Longxi's theology of religions characterized as a "seeded, open inclusivism," together with our previous discussions on the CT of Ward's type and Aristotle's theology as a liberal art, equips us with concepts and historical instances to elaborate the nature of Ruist CT. A Ruist CT conducted in the contemporary context would be a liberal art *par excellence*. It starts from the study and practice of the rooted tradition of Ruism, including all its historical and geographical expressions, and then, continually incorporates wisdom from all over the world as evolving objective situations require and its intrinsic impetus urges. I deliberately use the term "the rooted tradition" rather than Clooney's "home tradition" because a "root" is an anchored living-being, always undergoing adaptation, revision and growth, which is very different from the image that a bulwarked "home" evokes. In this sense, no determinate manifestation of the cosmic Dao, as articulated by varying thinkers and texts in historical Ruism, would be treated by contemporary Ru as final and complete; yet, while intrinsically longing for learning new determinate manifestations, Ru would not completely abandon their previously learned ones either. Neither dogmatism nor conversion. All they try to achieve is to organically inherit, sustain and grow the tradition through cultivating themselves a creative, meaningful, and fulfilling individual human life within the community of humanity in varying and evolving life situations.

Since no determinate expression of the cosmic Dao is treated as an unalterable final disclosure, a Ruist CT is not confessional. This implies that a rooted Ruist way of life does not preclude "impartiality" as an achievable goal in comparative studies. In more concrete terms, a Ruist scholar of CT should and can understand compared theses accurately, and evaluate compared points unbiasedly. However, the aimed "impartiality" here does not derive from any transcendent bird-view decoupled from concrete perspectives initiated by traditions. Rather, as I elaborated elsewhere⁴⁰, "impartiality" in the study of CT is achievable through a hypothetical process of cross-traditional reading using a method similar to the pragmatist one of "vague category." This method does not prohibit scholars from perceiving a certain issue from a traditional perspective, including a Ruist one, but it does lead to the revision of the perception when new perspectives are learned and incorporated.

This rooted, impartial and non-confessional nature of Ruist CT also implies that while comparing with other comprehensive traditions, Ruists, as inspired by Wang Longxi's words translated above, would neither strive to conflate varying traditions as one and the same, nor to

³⁹ Cornille in Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 53-60 distinguishes "closed inclusivism" and "open inclusivism" using examples mainly of Christian comparative theologies. Per terms defined in this essay, the "open inclusivism" conducted by confessional Christian comparative theologians discussed by Cornille is still closed, because it assumes an unalterable norm of truth, albeit minimal, within their home tradition. In the case of Wang Longxi, the inclusivism he conducted per a Ruist mindset is genuinely open because nothing stated by Ruism has been absolutized. Using the biological metaphor of "seed," I would say for a Ruist comparativist, insights from other traditions may modify the genetic code in the "seed" so as to develop new epi-genetic traits of Ruism in time.

⁴⁰ Song, "Robert C. Neville," 11-30.

reject them as essentially different. In other words, no judgment about “similarities” or “differences” will be delivered before an actual comparison is rigorously conducted. In certain cases, a Ruist comparativist may encounter views from other traditions that they disapprove of. As long as it is based upon an accurate understanding of those views, well-argued and susceptible of scholarly debate, the disapproval is a legitimate result of comparison. In other cases, a Ruist comparativist may encounter the genuine uniqueness of theses or motifs in compared traditions, which they cannot find any comparable counterpart in the Ru tradition. At this moment, the ineffable, continually unfolding nature of the cosmic Dao will prepare the Ruist comparativist well to accept and marvel at the genuine novelty that emerges from the process of comparative studies. However, whether and how to organically incorporate the novelty into the historical body of Ru wisdom will depend upon Ru scholars’ continual efforts.

Finally, while doing CT, a Ruist scholar is surely writing for anyone that can comfortably identify themselves as a Ru. However, per the above analysis, since Ruism is not an exclusive membership tradition, the identity of “Ru” is not entailed by the commitment to any unalterable faith declaration or performance. Rather, the identification depends upon whether one would like to study, practice and wrestle with all historical and contemporary expressions of Ru wisdom as one irrevocable component of their own way of life. Since I characterize Ruist CT as a liberal art *par excellence*, the sustainable, yet fluid identity of Ru will be immersed into the broader community of whomsoever are intrigued by shared problems and issues in human lives. In a more concrete term, this community will be potentially extended to the entire humanity, and include anyone who cherish the value of liberal arts education.



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