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Religious/Cultural Ethics as Living Traditions

Gender Equality in Catholic and Confucian Traditions

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Introduction

It is a great honor and pleasure to contribute to the celebration of the academic achievements and leadership of Professors Judith Berling and Arthur Holder in the area of religion, spirituality, and theology across cultures. Judith was my academic adviser when I started my doctoral program at Graduate Theological Union (GTU) and directed my dissertation on Catholic and Confucian social ethics in dialogue. Dean Arthur was the academic dean during my five-year study at GTU. I studied Chinese Social Thought and Seminar on Interdisciplinary Studies with Judith in which I deepened my understanding of Chinese philosophy and ethics, particularly Confucianism, and widen my perspective and methodology in doing cross-cultural theology and interreligious ethics. She often reminds us that we need to find out the relevance of ancient philosophy and religious traditions to the contemporary world and how they affect people's lives in contemporary society.

In her scholarly works, on the one hand, Judith points out that there is a conservative side in religion and philosophy. On the other

hand, she stresses that we should not neglect the reformist and transformative aspect. In the case of Confucianism, she argues that there are both a conservative side, serving to bolster established institutions and long-standing social divisions, and an idealistic and spiritual side in its inner pole.¹ These two aspects – its conforming and reforming sides – were in tension throughout Chinese history, serving as a conservative state orthodoxy and a stimulus for reform. She manifests that great Confucians, like religious leaders everywhere, seek from time to time to revive and renew the moral, intellectual, and spiritual vigor of the tradition.

Moreover, Judith emphasizes conversational approaches to learning and understanding others across the lines of difference. She encourages students to speak from their own experiences and to reflect their religious identity in the context of religious pluralism.² As a Chinese from Hong Kong and my religious affinity as Roman Catholic, I appreciate very much Judith's teaching and learning philosophy or approaches – conversational, collaborative, and understanding differences.³ I also appreciate her cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approach in doing academic work.⁴ This affirms in me the importance of conducting intercultural or interreligious dialogue in my academic work. She is not only a great scholar, she is also well-known to be a good and

¹ Judith A. Berling, "Confucianism," *Focus on Asian Studies*, Vol. 2 no. 1: Asian Religions (1982): 5-7.

² I experienced this in class and Judith also shared her own experiences in class. See also Judith A. Berling, "A Confucian Episcopalian," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, vol.15 no.1 (2015): 89-96; Judith A. Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds: A Guide for Interreligious Education* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2004), x; Judith A. Berling, "Student-centered Collaborative Learning as a 'Liberating' Model of Learning and Teaching," *Journal of Women and Religion*, Vol.17 (1999): 43(12); Judith A. Berling, "Getting Out of the Way: A Strategy for Engaging Students in Collaborative Learning," *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 1998, Vol.1(1), pp. 31-35

³ Judith A. Berling, "Multifaith/Multicultural Collaborating Groups," *Teaching Theology & Religion*, vol.16 no. 4(2013): 393.

⁴ Judith A. Berling, "Is Conversation about Religion Possible?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 61 no. 1 (1993): 1.

caring mentor to international students who studied Chinese religion and comparative religious studies with her. As my academic adviser, she gave me valuable advice and comments whenever I had to present a paper at a conference or submit an article for publication. Her careful editing helped me a lot in improving my writing skills.

Concerning Dean Arthur, although I did not take any course from him, he greatly encouraged me whenever I had to apply for grants to attend a conference and teaching, submitting application on essay award on religion or my dissertation proposal. I would not forget the pleasant surprises he bought to me when I received letters from him. As the dean of GTU, he has to read all the students' proposal and research papers for review. His attitude of appreciating diversity and pluralistic approaches in doing academic work is worthy for all of us to learn.

As a GTU alumna, I would like to take this chance of contributing a humble essay on religious and cultural traditions as living traditions in order to express my heartfelt gratitude to both Judith and Arthur. Since I am a Chinese Catholic from Hong Kong, interested in Christian and Confucian social ethics and its relevance to the contemporary world, I will explore how these two traditions are compatible with modern liberating values, particularly feminist ethics. This article is based on what I learnt and worked on during my study at GTU, the insights I get from Judith and Arthur, as well as my ongoing reflection.

Importance of Gender Equality to Religious and Cultural Traditions

Gender equality and feminism is significant for the future of many religious and cultural traditions because so many members of these traditions are concerned about the equal social opportunities available to both women and men, and the values and teachings of

these traditions affect the worldview and behavior of many people which, in turn, affect justice for women. Although there are various schools of thought within feminism, in general, feminism endorses a solid conviction of gender equality and is committed to reforming society, including religious institutions, so that the full equality of women is respected, which also requires reforming the thought systems that legitimate or even reinforce the present unjust social order.⁵ It is based on women's experience of exclusion from social opportunity and power; and it aims at social change. As more and more women gain access to public roles and men become aware of the importance of gender justice, people are concerned whether their affiliated traditions provide justice for women. Here, justice for women means regarding women as the moral and social equals of men and to support their equal participation in the social roles that contribute to the common good, as well as their equal shares in those benefits comprised by it.⁶

I believe that most religious and cultural traditions in the world have their own vision of good life and understanding of good society. All religious and cultural traditions are living traditions and are subjected to renewal and change if they speak to contemporary women and men. Through dialogue, with other modern thoughts and other religious or cultural traditions, they can shed light on each other and bring renewal and reform to their own tradition. It is true that both Confucian and Catholic traditions have been criticized that certain teachings and practices are incompatible with some modern concepts and ethical discourses, such as feminism. However, I suggest that they can be liberating ethics under renewal and reinterpretation in different context.

⁵ Anne E. Patrick, "Feminist Theology," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol.5, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2003, p.675-681. Gale Virtual Reference Library. <<http://find.galegroup.com/ips/start.do?prodd=IPS>>

⁶ Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Feminism and Christian Ethics: Moral Theology," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 212-213.

In this article, I will mainly focus on discussing the compatibility of Confucianism with the notion of gender equality. I will bring in the development of feminist ethics in the Catholic tradition for dialogue.

Revival of Confucianism

Confucianism has a long history of over 2,500 years.⁷ During the long history of development, Confucianism has been used in many different ways. It has been considered as an idealistic ethic of transcendent humanism, but it has also been identified with the imperial political system, oppressive authoritarianism, and rigid social hierarchies. It has also been considered as outdated and not suitable for modern societies by the anti-traditionalists or iconoclastic reformers in the early twentieth century.⁸ At other times, it has been manipulated by rulers or people of power to justify the status quo of a society, emphasis on authority and set of relationships, lacking due respect to an individual person, associating with conservative values, and reinforcing patriarchal and oppressively hierarchical measures. Can Confucian ethics be considered as a social ethics that show care to or even bring liberation to men and women?

Some people query the relevance of Confucianism to the contemporary world as they consider it outdated and not influential

⁷ Confucianism is a translation of *rujia*, a movement of thought that aimed at ways of restoring order as well as offering ideal ways of life for human beings in the face of chaotic social and political situation from 6th century B.C.E. onwards. Confucius (551-479 BCE) is regarded as the first and most important thinker of the movement. There are various stages of development, usually divided into early Confucian (from 6th century), neo-Confucian (9th to 16th century), and modern Confucian periods. For details, please refer to See Tu Wei-ming, "Confucianism," in *Our Religion*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New York: Harper San Francisco, 2993), 141-227.

⁸ Chinese thinkers who were under influence of Western education in the early twentieth century believed that Confucianism was mainly responsible for inhibiting creativity and destroying individual initiative and freedom in China's desperate attempt to modernize. They argue that there was no salvific or liberating potential in the Confucian project; ritual appeared as an artificial set of externally imposed rules, outmoded and hypocritical. See Tu, "Confucianism," 215. Also see Liu Shu-hsien, "Confucian Ideals and the Real World: A Critical Review of Contemporary Neo-Confucian Thought," in *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity*, ed. Tu Wei-ming (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 99.

anymore.⁹ It is true that Confucianism experienced severe attacks during the May-Fourth New Cultural Movement in the twentieth century and the anti-Confucian movement by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1960s and 1970s. However, the Chinese government has tried to revitalize Confucianism and prioritize this tradition as an important cultural tradition in recent years. Top officials acknowledged the need to learn from the past cultural and moral traditions of China when “building a harmonious society” and “putting people first” were the main concepts of China’s socialist core value system put forth by the Chinese government since 2006.¹⁰ Many scholars also examine the relationship between Confucianism and the notion of a harmonious society.¹¹

Moreover, the Confucius Institute was established in 2004 for the promotion of Chinese language and the spread of Chinese culture abroad with standardized teaching materials.¹² The institutes operate in co-operation with local affiliate colleges and universities around the world, and financing is shared between the Office of Chinese Language

⁹ Some contemporary western thinkers argue that the way Confucianism conceives of a fully human life in terms of relationships to others may suppress the self and neglect individual rights and autonomy. See Kwong-Loi Shum and David B. Wong, “Introduction,” in *Confucian Ethics*, ed. Kwong-Loi Shum and David B. Wong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-2.

¹⁰ The concept of “socialist core value system” was publicized for the first time at the Sixth Plenum of the 16th Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee in 2006, at which the CPC highlighted the importance of creating a “socialist harmonious society.” The Party explained the value system should consist of Marxism, socialism with Chinese characteristics, patriotism, the spirit of reform and innovation and the socialist sense of honor and disgrace.

¹¹ Academics at the provincial level are enthusiastic in promoting the study of the traditional Chinese philosophies and conferences have been organized on the revival of Chinese traditional ethical thought. One attempt is a world conference on “The Concept of Harmony in Confucianism and the Building of a Harmonious Society in China” in October 2008. Papers of the conference can be found <http://theory.people.com.cn/BIG5/40555/8208671.html>. Moreover, Confucian ethics have been incorporated into the curriculum for primary and secondary schools students since the 1990s.

¹² The Confucius Institute is overseen by the Office of Chinese Language Council International (*Hanban*) whose top-level members are drawn from the [Communist Party of China](#) leadership and various state ministries. For further information about the Confucius Institute, please refer to the official website of the Office of Chinese Language Council International: <http://english.hanban.org/>

Council International and the host institutions. Furthermore, Confucianism is still influential in some areas of East Asia and among Chinese people living in other parts of the world. In the academic world, more and more western scholars are interested in examining Confucianism as philosophy and religion and its impact in ancient and contemporary times. With the rising of China as a great power, more and more people in the Western world are also interested in learning Chinese culture, ancient and modern. Equally important, as a Chinese from Hong Kong myself, I have studied Chinese philosophy and literature since I was a youth and I still appreciate many of the key values in Chinese philosophy, including those in Confucianism. Thus, it is worthwhile to examine the compatibility of Confucianism with modern values, in this case, gender equality and feminist ethics.

Confucianism in a Patriarchal Society

Confucianism has a reputation for its degrading and repressive attitude towards women and for its history of women-oppressive practice among some people.¹³ In Confucius' sayings, among the few texts mentioning women, the most controversial passage on women in the *Lunyu* (the *Analects*) is probably stated in Book 17, "Only *nuzi* (women or young girls) and petty people are hard to rear. If you are close to them, they behave inappropriately; if you keep a distance from them, they become resentful."¹⁴ By saying that women are hard to cultivate without saying the same thing about men, some scholars suggest that Confucius implies that women are harder to nourish than men and thus inferior to men. This saying has been used to degrade women in later days and has been regarded as evidence for Confucius' opinion that virtuous men were superior to women and petty men.

¹³ Chenyang Li, "Introduction: Can Confucianism Come to Terms with Feminism?" in *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender*, ed. Chenyang Li (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 1-3.

¹⁴ The *Analects*, Book 17:25. The *Analects* is a collection of Confucius' sayings and is considered the most important classic of Confucianism.

However, given the few mentions of women in the *Analects* and the uncertainty as to whether these few mentions were really Confucius' sayings, some scholars think that it is difficult to come to any decisive conclusion about Confucius' view of women.¹⁵

Besides, some scholars point out that Mencius also seems to give more importance to men than to women in *Wulun*, the Five Relationships which include love between father and son, duty between ruler and subjects, distinction between husband and wife, precedence of the old over the young, and trust between friends. It is suggested that in the Five Relationships, particularly the husband-wife distinction, with the idea that the husband's function is external whereas the wife's is internal, reinforce patriarchal and hierarchal relationships.¹⁶ In another passage, Mencius says:

The father teaches sons the way of good men; the mother teaches daughters about marriage. [When the mother] sends her daughter to the wedding, she would say, "After getting married, you must be respectful and diligent, and do not go against your husband's will. Women's way is to obey."¹⁷

This passage is regarded to be the most sexist one in the entire book of Mencius. Mencius teaches that the attitude of compliance is the correct way for a wife or concubine. Both passages mentioned above seem to reinforce the traditional division of gender roles.

Some scholars argue that the idea of distinction between the husband and wife is not particularly Confucian or Mencian. It is argued

¹⁵ Xinyan Jiang, "Confucianism, Women and Social Contexts," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* (2009): 231-32. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/enhanced/doi/10.1111/j.1540-6253.2009.01516.x>

¹⁶ Mencius, *The Book of Mencius*, Book 3A.4. English translation is adopted from: Mengzi, translated by Bryan W. Van Norden, *Mengzi. With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2008).

¹⁷ Mencius, *The Book of Mencius*, Book 3B.2.

that sexism became characteristic of Confucianism only after they died. With the teaching of *yang* and *yin*, the Han Confucian master Dong Zhongshu teaches that the husband who represents *yang* is superior whereas the wife who represents *yin* is inferior. The degrading attitude toward women became extreme during the period of Song-Ming neo-Confucianism. Moreover, the Three Bonds which emerged first not in Confucian classics, but in *Han Fei Zi*, and was advocated later by neo-Confucian Zhu Xi who states that the husband's right position is outside the home and the wife's position is inside the home.¹⁸ The Three Bonds asserts the ruler's authority over the minister, the father's over the son, and the husband's over the wife. It reinforces the practice that the husband is superior and the wife is inferior. This degrading and oppressive attitude toward women turned into oppressive practice in reality. The doctrine of "chaste widowhood" became an official institution in the Ming Dynasty. The degradation of women seems to have correlated with a long-held Chinese belief that there should be distinction between men and women. However, is it accurate to say that the Confucian attitude toward women has been solely degrading and repressive? Is Confucian oppression of women a necessary implication of its general philosophy? Are there enough common grounds between Confucianism and feminism so that they may render support to each other in pursuing their causes?

Confucianism and Feminist Ethics

Although there are some passages in the Confucian classics that are regarded as sexist, we should understand them in context. Moreover, apart from the above specific passages about women, we should look at the main values and themes in Confucian texts and examine its attitudes towards humanity and equality or reciprocity when

¹⁸ Li, "Introduction: Can Confucianism Come to Terms with Feminism?" 4-6.

assessing its compatibility with gender equality and feminist ethics in context.

Roles Relationship and Gender Equality

As seen above, the Five Roles relationship and the virtue of obedience for women are often regarded as designating an inferior role to women. The nominal subjugation of women by Confucius and Mencius, as Chinese religions scholar Terry Woo points out, may need an alternative interpretation when seen through the assumption that society can be harmonized through stable relationships and the importance of a sensitive heart for compassionate government. The way I read him, Confucius can be understood to reject gender hierarchies because man and woman both belong to one family, which in the Confucian tradition is the basic unit of society and politics. Guided by benevolence and humaneness in the web of interrelated obligations, harmony between family members can bring peace and stability to society. Hence, my reading would claim that Confucius does not accept acts of cruelty and inhumaneness coming from any member of the family because each member of the family holds clear responsibilities for maintaining relational harmony between members, even between spouses.¹⁹

Moreover, to play one's role well and to handle relationships with others properly is required for all Confucian virtues and is imperative to being a Confucian moral person. Gender is primarily a functional distinction assigning to women to inner/domestic duties, and men to outer/public duties, in the context of the Confucian relationship role system. Confucius and Mencius do not hold an explicit conception of gender, nor they appeal to the conception to justify the subordination

¹⁹ Terry Woo, "Confucianism and Feminism," in *Feminism and World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 115.

of women.²⁰ Xinyan Jiang argues that once a philosophy that emphasizes role-playing and hierarchal distinctions among people combines with a social context in which women's inferiority is taken for granted, this philosophy will serve the oppression of women. However, she also suggests that as long as Confucians today abandon those sexist assumptions about women from patriarchal societies and accept the idea of sexual equality prevailing in modern societies, their philosophy will be beneficial to sexual equality.²¹ Thus, Confucius may be considered as uncritical to the traditional norms of sexual segregation and male authority but not a calculated advocate of sexism.²²

Confucius did teach equality, such as the opportunity to learn,²³ moral progress or the development of *ren*.²⁴ However, as Terry Woo argues, these egalitarian notions are not applied in reality. In early Confucian teachings, Confucius and Mencius taught that everyone can be a sage through moral self-cultivation. As teachers, they believed that all human beings could benefit from self-cultivation. Confucius upheld the principle "in instruction there is no grading into categories."²⁵ He designed and started a humanities program for potential leaders in his thirties, opening the doors of education to all. He defined learning not merely as the acquisition of knowledge but also as character formation and an important way to acquire virtues.²⁶ Mencius also advocated an educational system that instructs people in how to live up to the human

²⁰ Henry Rosemont, "Classical Confucian and Contemporary Feminist Perspectives on the Self: Some Parallels and Their Implications," in *The Sage and the Second Sex*, 63-82; Sin Yee Chan, "Gender and Relationship Roles in the Analects and the Mencius," in *Confucian Political Ethics*, ed. Daniel Bell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 147-173

²¹ Jiang, "Confucianism, Women and Social Contexts," 235, 237.

²² Woo, "Confucianism and Feminism," 116-117.

²³ Confucius, *The Analects*, 15:38.

²⁴ Confucius, *The Analects*, 15:35, 3:3.

²⁵ Confucius, *The Analects*, Book 15:39.

²⁶ Confucius, *The Analects*, Book 17:8.

roles, such as being a good parent, child, ruler, minister, spouse and friend. The primary function of education or moral cultivation for the two Confucian masters was to provide the proper way of training a complete person or *junzi*, a process that involved constant self-improvement and continuous social interaction. Therefore, I believe that for the Confucian masters, women also have the ability to be virtuous. Mencius speaks of women as wise counselors²⁷ and productive members of society as silk weavers and caretakers.²⁸ With Mencius's core teaching that all people with sensible heart would be affected by the suffering of others, he probably was not a misogynist.

Furthermore, although yin and yang are sometimes used to degrade women, contemporary Confucian scholar Sin Yee Chan points out that it can be seen as complementary force instead of subordinate force, as shown in *Liji* (the Book of Rites) that "music comes from yang, rituals come from yin, when yin and yang harmonize, myriad things are fulfilled" (2:5). Since rituals are of utmost importance in Confucianism, to conceive of yin as their source is indeed to accord yin a very respectable status. Chan proposes that of the yin-yang distinction implies a fluid distinction in the sense that there is no fixed rule in assigning weight to its features of complementarity and hierarchy. Thus, it does not imply granting male significant practical advantages. Rather, it implies a dynamic way of interaction between various roles.²⁹

Besides, a new trend of Chinese women scholarship started to take shape in the 1980s and 90s. They argue that Chinese women should not be characterized as mere pitiful victims who contributed nothing in history.³⁰ Some Confucian ideas have actually helped

²⁷ Mencius, *The Book of Mencius*, Book 3B.2.

²⁸ Mencius, *The Book of Mencius*, Book 7A.22.

²⁹ Sin Yee Chan, "The Confucian Conception of Gender in the Twenty-first Century," in *Confucianism for the Modern World*, ed. Daniel A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 316-321.

improve women's position because Confucianism did not attach importance to birth or social background, and everyone could improve through education and self-cultivation. They contend that some of the privileged women actively embraced Confucian values and took it as their own duty to resuscitate the Confucian way and to transmit it to the next generation. They also believed that the rule of *li* (propriety) should be adjusted to changing times and circumstances, the respective roles of men and women were subject to change as conditions changed.³¹

Human Relatedness and Other-directed Dimension

Some scholars rightly point out that the feminist demand for gender equality is compatible with the basic insights and precepts of Confucian ethics which emphasizes other-directed nurturing and interconnectedness between each other.³² Chenyang Li proposes that there are parallels between Confucian ethics and care-oriented feminist ethics. The notion of *ren* in Confucian ethics has a strong care orientation with a tender aspect of human relatedness.³³ In the *Analects*, in certain cases and in following the traditional understanding, Confucius takes *ren* as a particular virtue, translating it as benevolence, kindness, love or humanity. This contains the sense of affection. Confucius claims *ren* is love.³⁴ Mencius also emphasizes “*ren* is to love others”³⁵ or “*ren* is to love all.”³⁶ Understanding *ren* as love and

³⁰ Priscilla Ching Chung, “Power and Prestige: Palace Women in the Northern Sung (960-1126),” in *Women in China: Current Directions in Historical Scholarship*, ed. Richard Guisso and Stanley Johannesen (Youngstown, NY: Philo Press, 1981)

³¹ Li Yu-ning, *Chinese Women Through Chinese Eyes* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe Inc, 1992); Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

³² Rosemont, “Classical Confucian and Contemporary Feminist Perspectives on the Self,” 63-82; Chan, “Gender and Relationship Roles in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*,” 147-173; Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

³³ Chenyang Li, “The Confucian Concept of *Ren* and the Feminist Ethics of Care: A Comparative Study,” in *Confucian Political Ethics*, 175-197.

³⁴ Confucius, *The Analects*, 12:22.

³⁵ Mencius, *The Book of Mencius*, Book 4B.28.

affection, Mencius says, “All human have hearts that are not unfeeling toward others...The heart of compassion is the sprout of benevolence.”³⁷ Employing the story of a child about to fall in the well, Mencius demonstrates that all have the heart of compassion.³⁸ He also points out that *ren* is applicable not only to close personal relationships but to everyone. Confucius and Mencius’ conception of *ren* through the attitude of sincerity and loyalty and the principle of reciprocity show no clear case of misogyny or intent to oppress women.

Moreover, both Confucian and feminist ethics emphasize the social dimension of human person with a sense of interconnection and mutuality. Among the many sayings about *ren* in the *Analects*, Wing-Tsit Chan suggests that the most important ones are: “to master oneself and to return to propriety” (12.1), the Golden Rule “do not do to others what you do not wish them to do to you” (12.2), and “wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, also helps others to be prominent” (6.30). To master oneself and to establish one’s character means self-perfection, and to restore propriety and to establish the character of others means to bring about a perfect society. Obviously the virtue of *ren* involves the perception of others as well as of oneself. The Golden Rule has the meaning of reciprocity. It is also a principle of fairness – it asks a person to imagine being in the place of the other on the basis of the actor’s generalized wants.³⁹

³⁶ Mencius, *The Book of Mencius*, Book 7A.46.

³⁷ Mencius, *The Book of Mencius*, Book 2A.6.

³⁸ To show innate goodness, Mencius used the example of a child falling down a well. Witnesses of this event immediately feel alarm and distress, not to gain friendship with the child’s parents, nor to seek the praise of their neighbors and friends, nor because they dislike the reputation [of lack of humanity if they did not rescue the child]. The feeling of commiseration is the beginning of humanity. Mencius, *The Book of Mencius*, Book 2A.6.

³⁹ Chan, “Chinese and Western Interpretations of Jen (Humanity),” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 2 (1975): 107-129.108.

Contemporary Confucian scholar Tu Wei-ming argues that Confucianism perceives human relationships in terms of a set of expanding concentric circles: wishing to cultivate personal life, one must not fail to serve his parents; wishing to serve his parents, one must not fail to know human beings; wishing to know human beings, one must not fail to know Heaven. Therefore, self-cultivation is not only an isolated quest for inner spirituality but also a continuous attempt at interpersonal communication.⁴⁰ It is an integral part of a relational self because the degree of one's achieved humanity is measured in terms of the success that the self has in building a balanced, harmonious network of human relations. Apart from forming oneself, a virtuous person is also helping others to establish themselves. The virtue of *ren* as the culmination of one's personhood can only be actualized in each particular relation governed by a particular social excellence appropriate to that relation.⁴¹

Furthermore, both Confucianism and feminism agree that human persons with social selves have obligations toward other people. Understanding *ren* as love and affection, early Confucian scholars suggest that it must rest on the foundation of affection to relatives, and particularly one's parents, but is not limited to it. They express love in gradation, starting from people around them, then expanding to people further away.⁴² Although one should have good will towards all, one loves first of all those nearest to him. It is the application that has degrees or grades, not love itself. The substance does not vary but its operations differ in different situations.⁴³ To be specific, Mencius

⁴⁰ *Zhongyong* (Centrality and Commonality), 20:7. See Tu Wei-ming, "The Fiduciary Community," in *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness. A Revised and Enlarged Edition of Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Chung-yung*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 54.

⁴¹ Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 42.

⁴² Li, "The Confucian Concept of *Ren* and the Feminist Ethics of Care: A Comparative Study," 175-197.

distinguishes between love, *ren* or humane, and affection. “A profound person loves things but is not humane to them. He is humane to people in general but is not affectionate (*qin*) to them. He is affectionate to his parents, humane to people, and loves all things.”⁴⁴ Thus, one does not exclude humanity for other people.

With the features of other-directed nurturing, inter-connectedness between each other, obligations towards other people, and the meanings of love and reciprocity in the prominent virtue of *ren*, I affirm that Confucianism is a cultural tradition that highly respects every person and shows love and affection towards other people, both women and men, rather than discriminating against or oppress women. These values should be highlighted in affirming gender equality.

Gender Equality in Roman Catholic Tradition

The above discussion reminds me that Christianity, like Confucianism, has been considered as legitimizing women’s suppression through its hegemonic codes and law in different periods of the church’s history. However, at the same time, women have claimed their religious agency through playing important roles in the church and many scholars have continued to retrieve the liberating texts and teachings in the Scripture as well as church documents. In this section, I would like to discuss briefly the development of gender equality in the Roman Catholic tradition in order to conduct dialogue with Confucianism. Due to limited space, I will mainly focus on how Catholic theologians retrieve resources from Catholic tradition and demonstrate the important role of women in the Scripture and contemporary society in spite of the long suppression of women’s role as leaders in the Church. This is to try to show that we should not just focus on a few

⁴³ Wing-tsit Chan, “Chinese and Western Interpretations of Jen (Humanity),” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 2 (1975): 111.

⁴⁴ Mencius, *The Book of Mencius*, Book 7A.45.

particular texts of a tradition that are regarded as sexist and argue that that tradition cannot support gender equality. Instead, we should find out the key principles and values of the Scriptures or classics of that tradition and reinterpret them in light of contemporary contexts.

Catholic feminist ethicist Lisa Sowle Cahill suggests that tradition should always be discerned with a threefold hermeneutics of appreciation, suspicion, and praxis. In examining the trend of feminist discourse and movement in the Catholic Church, she asks: How does wisdom from the past give life today? (appreciation); how do traditions mediate dominant ideologies that continue to oppress some community members? (suspicion); and how can our traditions be embodied in just relationships now? (praxis) Feminist theology asks these questions in light of the experience of the risen Christ and the Spirit within the Church, and in light of the Church's complicity in the oppression of women.⁴⁵

In the past, women's leadership had been unacceptable in Christianity and the Church was misogynistic during the patriarchal Greco-Roman world since the fourth century. Some scholars point out that the reason is based on the role of Eve in the Fall, as told in the Scriptures. Women were considered to be more easily led astray and, thus, were inferior to men. In some of Paul the Apostle's writings, it is clear that women were being excluded from roles that involved teaching and authority over men.⁴⁶ These passages in the Scriptures have been quoted frequently as support for the inferior status of women in the Church. This misogynist attitude persisted after New Testament times.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Catholic Feminists and Traditions: Renewal, Reinvention, Replacement," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 34.2 (2014): 28.

⁴⁶ Paul's ethical and spiritual undervaluation of women (1 Corinthians 11:3,13-16; 2 Corinthians 11:3) which were pieces of advice addressed to his community in a particular situation have been turned into abstract laws. See Raming, "From the Freedom of the Gospel to the Petrified 'Men's Church'," 7.

⁴⁷ In the second century Tertullian, said of woman: "*You are the devil's gateway*"; in the 3rd century Origen wrote: "*What is seen with the eyes of the creator is masculine, and*

As a consequence of these influences, over the centuries the Church continued to be shaped by cultural bias that women were inferior to men both by nature and by law.⁴⁸ Women are not allowed to be ordained as priests and deacons, thus, traditionally they are excluded from many leadership positions of the hierarchal Church.

In spite of this development, since 1960s, with the renewal and reforming spirit of the Second Vatican Council and the influence of feminist movement in the West, women in the Catholic Church have reflected on their role and status and advocated for gender equality both in the Church and society. Feminist theology has also emerged and flourished. Employing different biblical methods and tools, feminist theologians and biblical scholars rediscover the role of women in the early Church and the attitudes of Jesus towards women. A number of scholars argue that Jesus vigorously promoted the dignity and equality of women amid a very male-dominated society.⁴⁹ Women in Palestine at the time of Jesus were treated as inferiors, being subordinated first to their fathers, then to their husbands.⁵⁰ However, according to the New Testament, Jesus welcomed women and broke the conventional boundary between women and men.⁵¹ Jesus chose women to bear

not feminine, for God does not stoop to look upon what is feminine and of the flesh"; in the fourth century Epiphanius said: "*The devil seeks to vomit out his disorder through women*". Quotes taken from Leonard Swidler, *Jesus was a Feminist*. See also Henderson, "Tradition and the Status of Women in the Catholic Church," *Australia E-journal of Theology* 2 (Feb 2004): 4.

⁴⁸ This attitude can be seen in the work of medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas. As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active power of the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of a woman comes from defect in the active power. (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Q92, art. 1, Reply Obj. 1). See Robinson B. *The Status of Women in the Bible*, 1997-2002, http://www.religioustolerance.org/fem_bibl.htm

⁴⁹ Swidler, *Jesus was a Feminist*;

⁵⁰ Ruth Henderson, "Tradition and the Status of Women in the Catholic Church," 1-2.

⁵¹ Jesus allowed women to travel with him (Luke 8:1-30), ignored ritual impurity (Mark 5:25-34), talked to foreign women (John 4:7 to 5:30), taught women students (Luke 10:38-42), expressed concern for widows. The Gospel of Luke alone contains 6 references to widows: (Luke 2:36, 4:26, 7:11, 18:1, 20:47 and 21:1). See Henderson, "Tradition and the Status of Women in the Catholic Church," 2. Also see Rudolf

witness to his resurrection based on the Resurrection accounts, reflecting women's equal call to discipleship, for it was upon the testimony of women that the proclamation of the Resurrection depended.⁵² This equal call to discipleship implies that the mission of prophecy and evangelization was given to both male and female disciples.⁵³ Even if Jesus had called only men as his apostles, there was no evidence of an explicit and deliberate act of Jesus in the sense that he wished to restrict the official appointment to men only.⁵⁴ After the death of Jesus, the early Christian Church continued to live out Jesus' example of equality by giving leadership roles to women. The responsibility for ministry was shared by the community as a whole.⁵⁵ It is only later that the Church turned sexist.

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, one of the most well-known feminist biblical scholars, introduced a hermeneutics of suspicion that applies to both contemporary androcentric interpretations of the Bible and the biblical texts themselves. She maintains that certain texts are patriarchal texts and therefore can serve to legitimate women's subordinate role and secondary status in patriarchal society and church.⁵⁶ In her book *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, Fiorenza argues for the retrieval of the overlooked contributions of women in the early Christian church. She rejects the notion that Paul the apostle was misogynistic and reexamines the biblical stories in order to find the true Paul and his relationship with

Schnackenburg, "The Attitude of Jesus toward Women and the Family," *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament* (Herder and Herder, 1965), 132-136.

⁵² This can be seen in Jesus' Resurrection accounts as shown in John 20:11-18; Luke 24:1-12; Matthew 28:1-10. In fact, it was women who remained at the cross before Jesus died (Luke 27:55-56) and were present at his burial (Luke 27:61).

⁵³ The Acts of Apostles 2:17.

⁵⁴ Raming, "From the Freedom of the Gospel to the Petrified 'Men's Church'," 5.

⁵⁵ See Linda L. Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 47.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), xii.

women. She discusses the many encounters Paul has with women and proposes that Paul saw the women as equals both as people and in ministry. The key verses for this reconstruction of gender equality can be found in the letter to the Galatians 3:28 in the Scriptures: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."⁵⁷

In discussing the renewal of Catholic tradition and feminism in recent decades, Lisa Cahill delineates the varieties of Catholic feminism since the Second Vatican Council, including the Augustinian, neo-Thomistic, neo-Franciscan, and the Junian.⁵⁸ The Augustinian Catholics are more counter-cultural and faith-community oriented. They embrace gender complementarity and the theology of the body. Neo-Thomists emphasize the basic human dignity of women whose spiritual equality has been recognized, and the goodness of human nature of both women and men. Neo-Franciscan are interested in grounding justice commitments, including gender equality, in local Christian community, liturgy, prayer, and personal moral virtues formed in closed relationships. Non-Western ethics of gender, including Latina, womanist, Asian and African present more radical approaches to tradition, suggest a Junian stream (the apostle Junia of Romans 16). These four streams have different focuses and employ different strategies in affirming gender equality and women's dignity and status. In spite of the differences, Cahill suggests that they share common commitments, namely difference in unity, moral realism, social meliorism, human equality, preferential option for the poor, and interreligious dialogue.⁵⁹ They retrieve resources from the Catholic

⁵⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

⁵⁸ For details, see Cahill, "Catholic Feminists and Traditions: Renewal, Reinvention, Replacement," 29-41.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 41-45.

tradition and reinterpret them in order to bring renewal to Catholic tradition, especially in the area of gender equality.

From the evolution of the understanding of gender equality and feminist ethics in the Catholic Church, we can see that living traditions can learn from others and develop or change. They can have an important impact on upholding human dignity, human flourishing and the building of a better world.

Cross-Cultural Insights and Implications to Contemporary Women

From the above, we can see that ancient cultural tradition and religion can be compatible with modern values such as gender equality. I would like to raise a few points for discussion and examine their implications to their adherents today.

Although it is true that there are some sexist passages in the classical texts of the Confucian tradition and the Scriptures in the Catholic tradition, they should be interpreted in context and not to be generalized in all situations. These texts may be misinterpreted and manipulated by people with power in the past, using them to oppress and discriminate against women, or taking away from women the chance of serving in a higher position. The dehumanized practices against women do not necessarily mean that these traditions cannot bring liberation to women in the contemporary world. Women and men who affirm gender equality and feminism should not ignore the fact that all traditions can be living tradition. They can be renewed and reformed and bring liberating values to people. In both Confucian and Catholic traditions, women experienced suppression because of the traditional interpretation of certain texts. These texts have their own historical and cultural contexts as background and can be reinterpreted in another different historical conditions.

Moreover, some overarching values and principles in these traditions indeed affirm women's dignity and help improve women's position. This can be seen in the concept of *ren* or benevolence, compassion, human relatedness, and reciprocity in Confucianism and human dignity and human rights in Catholic social thought. Both traditions also believe in equality of human person disregard of social background and everyone can lead a flourishing life through self-cultivation or formation. With these fundamental values, women should not be treated as inferior and they should enjoy equal opportunities in roles and status as men.

Furthermore, there are many different ways of supporting or expressing gender equality or feminism in different traditions or within one tradition. As shown in the Catholic tradition, different models of theology show their support to gender equality through employing different resources in the tradition and have different focus. Catholic women and men also practice feminism in many different forms. This is difference in unity and is also true in non-Western cultures. In Asian and Chinese societies in which Confucian culture plays an important role, adherents of Confucian tradition who also affirm feminism are trying to reinterpret certain values and retrieve useful resources so that this tradition can speak to women nowadays who are active in both public and private realms and play many different roles at the same time. The Confucian concept of *ren*, with the meanings of love, care, compassion and reciprocity, is an important value in upholding gender equality.

With the past record of sexism and suppression of women in cultural or religious practices, it is true that some people think that certain traditions cannot bring liberation and equality to women. However, we should not let certain people dominate the interpretation of a particular tradition and impose suffering on others. Rather, we should

take an active role in bringing renewal and reform to the cultural and religious traditions that affect many people, especially to Confucian and Catholic traditions that are influential in my own context. Appropriating cultural theorist and postcolonial critic Edward Said's idea on human rights, I concur with Said that for the intellectual to be for human rights, or gender equality in this case, means "to be willing to venture interpretation of those ideas in the same place and with the same language employed by the dominant power, to dispute its hierarchy and methods, to elucidate what it has hidden, to pronounce what it has silenced or rendered unpronounceable."⁶⁰ It is always possible for any living tradition to bring life-giving values to people if more adherents or intellectuals involve in the work of reform and renewal of the tradition.

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⁶⁰ Edward Said, "Nationalism, Human Rights, and Interpretation," *Raritan* 12 no.3 (winter 1993): 43.

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