

Is LIANG Shuming 梁漱溟 Ultimately a Confucian or Buddhist?

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Abstract LIANG Shuming has been proclaimed the forerunner of Contemporary Neo-Confucianism. However, assessing Liang’s identity appears a much more complicated task. Taking a closer look at his copious writings on religion, this paper shows how Liang conceived the role of religion at the different steps of humanity’s quest. Applying this frame of understanding to twentieth century China, Liang saw a discrepancy between the task required in our present time and what the future was holding. Therefore, while he engaged the world in a certain way, he was still holding privately another belief. This “secret” of Liang reshuffles traditional boundaries between the secular and transcendence.

Keywords Neo-Confucianism · Yogacara · Transcendence · LIANG Shuming

1 Introduction

In twentieth century China, the concept of religion occupied an important position in the intellectual debate. Imported from the West through Japan at the end of the nineteenth century, it stirred up many discussions, and the main intellectual currents developed a discourse on religion, either embracing its values, or, more often, rejecting it. The New Culture Movement and Chinese Marxism saw religion as anti-rational and anti-scientific. Contemporary Neo-Confucianism had a much more nuanced understanding, claiming that while the concept as such could not be directly applied to Confucianism, the derivative concept of religiosity could still be used to describe the spiritual dimensions of Confucianism.

LIANG Shuming (1893–1988) is probably one of those who developed the deepest and most original understanding of religion.¹ While Liang never attempted to develop a

¹Academic study on Liang started with the pioneer book of Alitto (1979). Other studies have analyzed its philosophy (see Guo and Gong 1996 and Zheng 1999).

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complete philosophy of religion as such, he wrote extensively about it, analyzing it from the perspectives of the social sciences (psychology, sociology, politics), and most importantly for our topic, as a product of the mind. His thought is primarily inspired by Buddhism and Confucianism and secondarily by Christianity. Most of the studies that have appeared in Mainland China analyze Liang's thought from the standpoint of Confucianism, concentrating on selected writings. They consider Liang's core and mature thought to be Confucian and usually reject his earlier Buddhist writings, before his shift to Confucianism, as works of youth. Those same studies, problematically, disregard Liang's own claim, at the end of his life in the 1980s, of being a Buddhist. The identity of Liang as a Buddhist has not yet been taken seriously by the academic world at large.² In my view, however, understanding the notion of religion in Liang's thinking is the key to knowing his true identity.

Religion for Liang functions on three different levels. At the most basic level, it works as an organization, enabling society to develop and filling the social need for efficient cooperation. In his view, Christianity represents this level at its best. On a second level, exemplified by Confucianism, religion provides consolation to the individual faced with existential questions and fosters a spiritual harmony within the individual and within a group. Finally, religion addresses the transcendental quest through a radical renunciation of the world. This transcendence is best expressed by Buddhism. These three functions of religion—social, psychological, and transcendental—represent cultural models found in three different parts of the world—the West, China, and India. Moreover, they also correspond to three different stages in the development of humanity with their respective problems. Christianity first helps to solve the question of collective survival by organizing society under one God and one Church. Then, Confucianism finds the spiritual balance between the individual and the group, allowing the individual greater freedom. Finally, Buddhism helps to solve the ultimate questions of the meaning of life, by asserting a radical transcendence. We should make it clear that these three religions, Christianity, Confucianism, and Buddhism, serve mostly as illustrations of three different stages or types and should not be narrowly understood as concrete historical religions.

2 The Ambivalence of the Christian Path

2.1 Christianity as a Social Religion

Liang considers religion as the most influential reality shaping human history: "As the world's history shows, it [religion] is the most powerful activity in social life" (Liang 1986: 162). This social impact of religion can be best observed in Western society, whose foundations have been shaped by the Christian religion. Even though Liang acknowledges that Christianity has lost most of its hold on the whole of society with the advent of modernity, he still considers that modern Western society has inherited the cultural patterns of this sociological religion. In *Essentials of Chinese Culture*, Liang analyzes the strengths of Western culture based on Christianity, which he categorizes under five headings: social cohesiveness, social dynamism, universality, social progress, and group psychology.

First, Liang, like Hobbes, considers the origin of society to be of dispersed individuals or clans. However, unlike Hobbes, the unity is not realized through submission to an

²Recent studies have started to expound the core of Liang's thinking as Buddhist (see Feng and Bai 1999 and Hanafin 2003).

authoritative political order, but through the persuasion of a common faith (Liang 1949: 98). Therefore, the social function of religion is to gather and to agglomerate (Liang 1949: 97). The morality, customs and rites, laws and regulations come to complement a primordial unity enacted in religion. In his last work, he returns to this same idea: “Only when the faith and the worship are established inside a unified group can the life of the group become stable and able to progress” (Liang 1984: 696).

Second, social dynamism comes from regulated conflicts. While religion strives to realize a spiritual unity at the level of all humanity, it still imposes clear doctrinal boundaries. In the case of Christianity, there is a clear consciousness about orthodoxy, working not only *ad extra* but also *ad intra*: “Christianity is not content erecting its own altar but needs to destroy the altar of the heresy.... A community needs its own opponent or competitor in order to stimulate its own life and to tense up its organization” (Liang 1949: 57–58). The internalization of the fight against heresy inside the religious group does not lead to its weakening, but on the contrary is able to energize Christianity as a powerful social unity: “More than one thousand years of frequent and fierce fights have contributed to train and to shape the root of the collective life of the Westerners in a way abnormally important” (Liang 1949: 58). Since it is believed that truth is one and indivisible in a monotheistic religion like Christianity, the tribunals in which the truth is argued, disputed, and validated contribute to the establishment of strong social organizations. This conception of the necessity of internal fights to foster social progress was an idea shared by many Chinese intellectuals of the time, such as YAN Fu 嚴復, LI Dazhao 李大釗, and ZHANG Dongsun 張東蓀.

Third, religions have proven to be effective forces of universality. Liang recognizes the success of great monotheistic religions to transcend national boundaries: “For a great collectivity not to be centered anymore on the family, we have to wait for religions like Christianity and Islam to be constituted” (Liang 1949: 55). The rivalries between nations can be overcome by a religious faith. While national borders create division, religion works as a unifying force able to overcome those boundaries. Therefore, Liang acknowledges the function of Christian monotheism in the creation of a common identity in Europe.

Fourth, religion, as exemplified in Christianity, has enabled social progress by fostering science, democracy, and capitalism, all rooted in religion. Accordingly, science was made possible because of the metaphysical and epistemological dualism of the Greeks, inherited by Christianity; as humanity relies on God, nature follows principles decreed by Him. This explains, for Liang, why Christianity has financially and institutionally supported the works of scientists, who could extract themselves from other worries and dedicate themselves quietly to the *theoria* of the universe, continuing the work of the Greek philosophers (Liang 1949: 276). To support his view, Liang refers to the scientific contributions of the Jesuits in China in astronomy, mathematics, physics, geography, and medicine at the end of the Ming 明 and beginning of the Qing 清 Dynasty. Concerning democracy, Liang considers it to be rooted in the equality before God: “While men and women find their position inside the religious structure, in relation to God they are all equal, nobody being greater than anyone else. In this context, majority rule becomes obvious” (Liang 1949: 252). Concerning capitalism, Liang maintains, in a very Weberian style, that Christianity made capitalism possible by its stress on the collective life that has resulted in the building of urban society, preparing the concentration of manpower, capital, and learning necessary for the industrial revolution. Therefore, Liang stays at the antipode of Karl Marx when he states: “I consider that human spirit is the one able to decide the economic phenomena” (Liang 1949: 375).

Finally, religion contributes in building a group psychology oriented toward the public good. At times of anxiety, religion provides consolation and peace to society. A common

faith can also in the long term provide a spiritual direction and sustain strong social movements. Religion contributes to the shaping of public virtues by separating good from evil. For Liang, certain public virtues are especially relevant: public concern, habit of discipline, capacity of organization, and spirit of legality. Without the support of a religion, such public virtues are very hard to keep, especially at the level of the common people. Liang contrasts the Chinese Han who became addicted to opium with the Chinese Muslim who never smoked because it was prohibited by their religion (Liang 1949: 109). Liang also refers to the religious spirit of asceticism and sacrifice as important elements in the building of public morality (Liang 1949: 88).

These five elements above explain how Christianity has shaped Western society. It has been a progressive force that has built a strongly structured society. Religion surely brings many divisions and tensions between the world and God, orthodoxy and heresy, body and spirit, instinct and reason, but it is precisely through and by those divisions and tensions that a densely complex and unified social body is constantly being shaped. On the contrary, China had the insight of moral reason early on but, lacking the structure to sustain it, has been stopped in its social progress.

2.2 Drawbacks of a Social Religion

While Liang recognizes the positive aspects of Christianity in terms of social development, he measures some basic flaws compared to the two other models of religion, the moral religion of Confucianism and the transcendental religion of Buddhism. In regard to the former, the price to be paid for the advantages gained in social life may be too high. Liang recognizes ambivalence in any religion: “Religion is a strange thing. On one side it contains a part of moral reason, and on other side it obscures the moral reason. It makes people to realize here mutual connections and at the same time makes people to separate apart” (Liang 1949: 302). The major criticisms Liang addresses to this social religion are: a mechanical collective life, an exaggerated exclusivity, and an outward seeking.

First, Liang considers that the frame of religious institutions does not help the development of a reflexive morality: “The psychology of the gathering of masses entails a great mechanicity, blindness, impulse, and difficulty to reflect” (Liang 1949: 200). Religion as a long-term social body holds some rigid and immutable truths that are enforced upon the lives of the individuals; but life itself, especially the moral life, is seen as a continuous process of changes upon which rigid truths are irrelevant. By holding onto those sedimented truths, people set themselves apart from the reality of life, which is an ever-changing reality. They create attachments to false ideologies, preventing themselves from developing a true morality.

The second major defect of religion is an exaggerated exclusivity. While the spirit of religion goes in the direction of universality, believers unconsciously adhere to a social organization, developing “a feeling of stupidity and crankiness” and “a spirit of violence and impulse” (Liang 1949: 111). Third, Liang criticizes Christianity’s lack of true introspection: the faithful checks his moral life against the outside standards of the sins decreed by God, preventing him from developing a true morality based on himself. The moral judgment ultimately comes from the outside, from God. For Liang, this externality of morality based on Christianity has developed in the modern West into another externality: morality based on external profits or advantages, as exemplified in the utilitarian traditions where the standard of the good is measured quantitatively, mostly in material terms: “What has changed is that the [standard of] profit and loss has replaced the [standard of] sin and beatitude, law replacing the religious commandments. However, the conception of profit

and loss and the conception of sin and beatitude have the same origin, changing without having really changed” (Liang 1949: 278). For Liang, the problem is to seek for something outside, be it divine, political, or economic. Because of its external nature, Christianity cannot fully develop the internal essence of humanity; it rather leads to a partisan and mechanical attitude, failing to fully understand the inner heart.³

Also, Christianity, as any conventional religion, is ultimately unable to answer the deep quest of the meaning of the individual and provide peace of mind. Religion may present itself to the individual as an absolute objective aim, setting an ultimate standard of meaning, but this objective aim will unavoidably end up being questioned, creating more doubt and frustration for the disillusioned individual.

3 Ultimate Liberation of Buddhism

3.1 Buddhism as a Transcendental Religion

Even though Liang observed in detail the social influence of religion, this factor, as powerful as it is in the shaping of human society, does not account for two points in the definition he gives of religion:

“First, religion inside human reason constantly has a tendency of going against reason, which means tending toward mystery and radical transcendence; it has always to establish its proof beyond reason and against reason. Second, religion inside the human affection and will constantly gives rise to a function of consolation and encouragement; when the human affects are shaken and the will is quite weakening, it stimulates again in order to continue to live. It is what we call the peace of heart and the stability of life” (Liang 1984: 693; see also Liang 1921: 418 and Liang 1949: 98).

While Liang recognizes that all religions have those two defined characteristics, what really makes a difference among them is the realization of a true transcendence, as stated in the first characteristic. For Liang, even though many Indian schools neared this realization, only Indian Buddhism has fulfilled it to its greatest extent (Liang 1919: 33–45). The Buddhist quest for a radical transcendence is not spurred primarily by a theoretical reason inquiring about metaphysical reality, but from true feelings: existential feelings of frustration and moral feelings of shame and compassion.

Liang first expounds the first Noble Truth, related to suffering, in its existential dimension of a double impermanence, of life itself and of human will. Impermanence of life causes suffering, since we have to leave what we are attached to, and cannot find a permanent state in this life. At the level of human will, individuals are constantly switching to new desires, to new purposes, which reveal themselves as empty, thus creating more anxiety. People cannot succeed in keeping one single goal in their lifetime. In his *Treatise on Finding the Foundation and Resolving the Doubt*, Liang described this human condition of exhausting “oscillations” (*panghuang* 彷徨). Therefore, life should go beyond purposes. A life freed from definite purposes, freed from concrete aims, would be the pure freedom corresponding to the Chinese concept of “non-action” (*wuwei* 無為): “Acts without purposes are considered commonly as unconscious movements, without any value, but should in fact be called the highest and the freest amid thousands of years of humanity”

³However, despite all its shortcomings, Western religion was still able to concretely shape a society where moral reason was enhanced (see Liang 1949: 309).

(Liang 1916: 15). The first existential reality dealt by Buddhism is this continual feeling of frustration due to our own finitude and the impermanence of our will's constant search for new aims.

3.2 Moral Feelings of Shame Toward Oneself and Compassion Toward Other's Suffering

While the first set of feelings is due to our own mistaken relation to ourselves, other moral feelings arise in relation to others. There is in this world an unavoidable mutual cruelty among living beings. The resulting feeling of human misery and impotence is even more overwhelming than impermanence. We experience that our own survival is necessarily at the expenses of other living beings (animal or vegetal). The suffering inherent to life makes it impossible and unbearable: "Even one's life cannot always avoid hurting other things. How can the instincts of the birds, insects, and animals be changed? Therefore, the Buddha cannot bear to live one more day in this world. This life cannot continue as it is. He has only one requirement toward life and toward the world: to renounce it" (Liang 1921: 428). Since life implies the negation of other people's lives and happiness, humans can still make the free choice of renouncing this kind of life, recreating a moral sphere in which unity is restored. We can clearly see that behind this attitude lies a deep moral feeling of shame, impotence, and culpability, which may find an echo today in the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas.

While the structural cruelty of this world makes life unbearable, the death of the other provides the decisive occasion for making the decision to leave the world. True suffering is never primarily physical, but moral; biological death should not cause anyone grief, since death is only one link in the cycle of reincarnations. True suffering is ethical, in relation to the other, bearing witness to the fear of the other, the family member or the friend, facing his/her death, in the anxiety of leaving this world. Here is the ethical problem addressed to the sensitive human being by the other in psychological and spiritual anguish. How can the sensitive human being respond to that crisis in a way that helps the other to overcome his or her crisis? At this point, Liang feels a deep anxiety for the other facing death with fear, since the other still shows him/herself to be prisoner of the *samsara* and unable at the decisive moment of biological death to operate an even more radical breakthrough. Liang says that "it is the fear of not dying completely, of dying and yet being not finished. To die is not so easy; it needs to cut what life produces and what death obtains. Therefore one, in a long-enduring and laborious way, is searching to renounce the world, which means that he is searching for his death. It is not that he fears death, but in fact he fears life" (Liang 1921: 431). Only the one who has cut every attachment to this worldly life as well as renounced any desire for the after-death can in a real way "die," leaving this world and getting the final liberation.

Therefore, for Liang, when the sensitive person, filled with a compassionate heart, witnesses the psychological suffering of the other dealing with his/her own death, he is spurred by a "true and real feeling" (*zhenqing shigan* 真情實感), an "affective requirement" (*qinggan yaoqiu* 情感要求). The sensitive person makes one's own the suffering of the other. Even knowing that the anxiety of the other is ill-based, unnecessary, and ultimately empty, the sensitive person still feels the pain of the other to be very real and is overwhelmed by it. The sensitive person is now compelled by his or her own inner feelings to renounce the world at once. Only this extreme decision, this honesty toward his or her own feelings of compassion, this attitude of self-sacrifice, can awaken the other at his final hour and allow them to communicate together at the deepest level of reality, beyond life and death. At this point, we may clear up a misunderstanding. Liang is not advocating any easy escapism in

the form of a nihilistic attitude. He does not say that life is meaningless; rather he invites us to discard all the “meanings” we ascribe to it, even the religious ones, and stay in this vacuity in order to find there its true meaning, as a reality already present and yet always escaping us.

3.3 A Buddhist Liberation Spurred by Confucian Moral Feelings

So, for Liang, it is not knowledge about the impermanence of the world but an inner feeling of compassion that is at the root of Buddha’s decision to renounce the world. Because Buddha could not bear the psychological and moral suffering of a dying person, he himself decided to renounce the world. At a practical level, this compassionate feeling is very close to Mencius’ “mind which cannot bear the suffering of others” (*buren zhixin* 不忍之心). At a more theoretical level, Liang interprets this ability of compassionate feelings in neo-Confucian terms: our minds have an “original moral intuition” (*zhijue* 直覺), unobstructed by the calculative mind which always implies self-interest, and are therefore able to transcend the individual self.

Liang sets a new order for the sequence of the Four Noble Truths. In the classical explanation, the decision to renounce the world comes only at the third step with the extinction of suffering or at the fourth one with the Eightfold Path. Liang expedites the process and brings it right to the start, at the First Noble Truth. There is an immediate decision springing from the experience of suffering in the other. This kind of ethical intuitionism goes back to Mencius, in the famous example of the true feelings of compassion experienced by anyone who saw a child falling into a well. In a very Confucian way, Liang wants to show that the decision to renounce the world is rooted in immediate moral feelings. Therefore, there is no need to go through the rational analysis contained in the Second Noble Truth, the cause of suffering. The means of Buddhist illumination is explained in Confucian terms: it is not primarily the man of wisdom, but the sensitive man who can attain liberation. Instead of rationally enquiring about the nature and the workings of human cravings and attachments, Liang wants to show that inside the excess of moral feelings there is already a way to realize the final awakening at once.

We can talk here of a “Confucianization” of the First Noble Truth. Even though suffering itself is empty, the feeling of compassion which arises from it is real and has the highest moral value, expressing the real nature of humanity and of the cosmos. The First Noble Truth does not lead into a rational enquiry about the reality of this world as empty, but stays at the level of the moral feelings of humaneness in which renunciation is felt as the only solution. It is true that Mahayana Buddhism puts a strong emphasis on compassion, placed at the same level of importance as wisdom. However, the bodhisattva’s compassion in Mahayana is still the logical deduction of the negation of a permanent self. For Liang, however, compassion is the consequence of a direct experience with suffering, an a priori experience, anterior to wisdom. Nonetheless, Liang acknowledges that the treatment of the feelings themselves goes beyond the Confucian way. While Confucianism tries to harmonize feelings and keep them in check, the compassionate heart spurs “feelings going to their extreme” (*zou jiduan de ganqing* 走極端的感情) (Liang 1921: 429). Only going to the extreme can it bring the definitive decision of renouncing the world. We can see here a strong sentimentalization at work, which can easily imply some risks of subjectivism, risks Liang was aware of, since he would also try to give more rational and objective grounding to his decision of renouncing the world.

3.4 Buddhism as the Religion of Radical Transcendence

While facing suffering, many people have recourse to religious beliefs, betraying their fear for their own existence. Their faith makes them believe they can change the events of this world to their advantage, or find a realm of happiness and bliss after this life, imagined in analogical terms with this world. However, by doing so, they exert pressure on their human nature, consigning their existence to a narrow egoistical sphere. For Liang, facing the question of suffering, only Indian people, and especially Indian Buddhists, have found the correct attitude. They are not concerned about their life, enclosed by their suffering, but display the highest courage: “In other regions, most people are cowards and they necessarily deform their nature. Most Indians do not seek support to preserve their life, but they usually and normally seek to leave the world—they call it nirvana” (Liang 1921: 437).

Radical transcendence is expressed in Chinese by Liang with the word *chaojue* 超絕, which means “to surpass” (*chao* 超) by “cutting through” (*jue* 絕) (Liang 1921: 419). I propose to translate *chaojue* as “radical transcendence.” This concept differs from *chaoyue* 超越, which means “to surpass” by “going beyond” (*yue* 越). This second transcendence is understood in analogical terms of continuity, prolongation of the world, still marking an existence prisoner of the *samsara*. A religion resting on this kind of soft transcendence is unable to achieve final liberation: “Even though religion leaves this world, it establishes that world, unable to be a religion really leaving the world” (Liang 1919: 60). While Liang acknowledges that all historical religions deal with transcendence or the supernatural, most of them still are attached to this world. The popular religions expect from the supernatural some concrete benefits for this worldly life. Even more elaborate religions such as Christianity establish an ultimate reality or an after-life that they model after the world: God is thought of in the analogical category of being, person, will, etc; paradise is thought of in terms of a space. Also, as we have shown above, Christianity engages in the world to transform it, to make it a better place, thereby creating more attachments to it.

Therefore, at the normative level, only Buddhism can be called a true religion, whose essence is “leaving this world” (*chushi* 出世). It is Liang’s understanding of Buddhism that gives him this normative definition of religion. Liang looks at the *via negativa* as the only solution: “The Indians fundamentally reject the worldly life. Therefore their renouncing is not only about this life, but they consider all the life and reject it all; that is what means to cut and to extinguish” (Liang 1919: 60).

After his conversion to Buddhism, Liang started to study Yogacara, one of the two schools which, with Madhyamika, dominated Indian Buddhism for centuries. In the first half of the twentieth century, Yogacara became very popular in China. First, there was a circumstantial reason: the rediscovery of texts brought back from Japan, which had been forgotten in China for centuries. Also, Yogacara appeared for many Chinese intellectuals a legitimate intellectual resource because of its very logical analysis, which could stand comparison with Western standards. Liang thoroughly studied the Chinese texts transmitted and commented on by Xuanzang 玄奘 and Kuiji 窥基, when this school was first introduced into China in a systematic and comprehensive way. At a personal level, Yogacara allowed Liang to explicate in a rational way his previous spiritual experience, which was, as we have seen above, more affective than intellectual.

According to Yogacara, the basic problem lies in our double attachment, to the self and to the world. This attachment itself comes from an epistemic mistake, i.e. we construct a dualism between the self and the world, between the subject of knowledge and the object of knowledge, between the subject as a “grasper” (*nenqu* 能取) and the object as a “graspable” (*suoqu* 所取). Once we have built this mistaken conception of existence, we think and act as

graspers, striving to grasp the world to fulfill knowledge and desire. However, in fact, there is not such a distinction between the self and the world, and therefore nothing to know, nothing to grasp. Yogacara develops a very refined analysis of cognition, in order to liberate us from all the cravings created by erroneous cognitions and desires.

The mind thus has two obstacles to overcome, first the “nature of existence according to the discriminating mind” (*fenbiexing* 分別心) and the “nature of existence as dependently arisen” (*yitaxing* 依他性). In both instances, the mind is mistaken by the illusory discriminations it creates. However, while in the first hindrance, the illusions are created by the defilements of the mind in the present moment, the illusions of the second hindrance do not come from the present working of the mind but from deep-rooted conditioning in one’s own past deeds and previous lives; therefore, this second nature of existence is called dependently arisen, forming a kind of unconscious structure. The first hindrance is much easier to overcome than the second, since we can train the discriminating mind to return to a stage where no differentiations arise. The dependently arisen existence is much more difficult to overcome, since it constitutes the foundation of the physical and mental world. Yet it is only by rejecting this last illusion that the mind can be liberated from itself.

3.5 Transcendence with Ontology

Yogacara works on two different levels: on the first, it claims that we do not know external objects as such, but that we know only what appears in our consciousness. Also, our mental projections become so dense that nothing else is experienced: we experience consciousness only; there is nothing but a constitution in the act of knowing. Everything is known in consciousness; nothing exists outside consciousness. This closure of the mind encloses the human horizon. At the second level, consciousness itself can be overcome. Consciousness is not the ultimate reality but the root problem. Yogacara describes at length the structure of consciousness only to overturn it. This overturning transforms the basic mode of cognition from “consciousness” (*shi* 識) into “direct knowing” (*zhi* 智). This direct knowing is defined as non-conceptual, i.e. devoid of interpretive overlay. This affirmative moment does not set up a metaphysical reality, only a mode of experience beyond cognition and consciousness.

Until that point of our exposition, Yogacara had developed a transcendence without ontology. It is transcendental, since all the thinking process is analyzed in detail to be ultimately discarded, opening to an extra-conceptual experience. Even though nothing exists outside consciousness, Yogacara does not claim that the world is created by the mind. Rather we mistake our projective interpretations for the world. Correct cognition is the removal of obstacles that prevent us from seeing dependent causal conditions in the manner they actually become. Those conditions are cognitive, not metaphysical. This approach has been the most widespread in Indian Buddhism, even though ontological claims of an ultimate being can still be found here and there. Also, in China, the interpretation of Yogacara by Xuanzang rejects any ontologization and stay at the pragmatic level of a radical critic of any cognitive conception (see Lusthaus 2002).

Liang could have stayed at this level of a phenomenological understanding described by Yogacara Buddhism, refusing any transcendentalism that would hypostatize an ultimate reality of the cosmos or the universe in the direction of a substantial ontology, and leaving the radical transcendence as a movement out, an action of leaving behind, or reaching beyond. However, Chinese Buddhism, with the Huayan and Tiantai schools, developed in a quite different direction, claiming the existence of a positive ultimate essence, named and described as the “womb of the *tathāgata*” (*rulaicang* 如來藏), “Buddhahood” (*foxing* 佛性),

or the “mind of the cosmos” (*yuzhouzhixin* 宇宙之心). This ultimate reality tends, therefore, to be interpreted as objective, present under two modes, actual and potential. As actual, it is absolutely transcendental, independent from the world; as potential, it is present everywhere in the phenomenal world. Liang therefore still reads the Yogacara texts in the context of Chinese Buddhism, where it is not mainly the epistemological concern at the front stage, but the ontological preoccupation, which was more congenial to Chinese culture. It is the belief that the epistemology of Yogacara, in which the process of negation would have been pushed to its extreme, could still open to the ultimate stage of *nirvana* that would be defined not purely in negative terms but also as an ontological reality. Liang’s thought is unusual in the sense that he combines a radical transcendence of leaving the world, typical of Indian Buddhism, with an ontological frame, typical of Chinese Buddhism.

In *Human Mind and Human Life*, Liang develops his understanding of the “mundane” (*shijian* 世間) and the “supramundane” (*chushijian* 出世間). He clearly talks of the supramundane in ontological terms: “The mundane and the supramundane are what the philosophers call the phenomena (*xianxiang* 現象) and the essence (*benti* 本體)” (Liang 1984: 705). The supramundane is the permanent ontological foundation of a physical and mental world in constant flux and change. In other words, while primitive Buddhism interpreted the mutual interaction between *samsara* and *nirvana* in terms of an epistemic difference (delusion–enlightenment), it is interpreted here in terms of an ontological difference (potentiality–actuality). The epistemic difference between *samsara* and *nirvana* of classical Yogacara is transformed here in an ontological difference, a difference in the degree of being: “If we acknowledge that the *samsara* is real, then the *nirvana* is even more real” (Liang 1984: 706). Undoubtedly, this line of thinking goes in the direction of an ontology, in which the phenomena are considered the reflections of a higher reality. Liang establishes the ultimate reality in line with Neo-Confucian idealism when he talks about the “mind of the cosmos.” Liang fully understands that the purpose of Yogacara is ultimately to deny concrete human consciousness ultimate reality, but the notion of “cosmic mind” still tends to integrate the concrete human mind into a supreme reality.

However, Liang never falls into the trap of purely leveling off the tension between the mundane and the supramundane, of fusing them into one metaphysical entity: “Samsara and nirvana are neither identical nor distinct” (Liang 1984: 705). The quest of Liang for a radical transcendence has always prevented him from the pantheistic temptation. Even though “samsara is the support of nirvana” (Liang 1986: 157), still there is a real dissymmetry between the two: only nirvana is the transcendental reality encompassing all reality, human and physic, eternally tranquil.⁴

3.6 Buddhist Awakening Waiting for the End of History

Liang acknowledges that in present times, not everyone is ready for the radical solution of renouncing the world, as he himself has done. In fact, most people are still insensitive to the suffering in the world, ignorant about the reality of the world as empty. Therefore, the awakened, by compassion for humanity, still decide to stay in the world, like the bodhisattva, being present in the world in such a way that they can effectively lead the people toward final liberation. At this point, Liang brings something very new and very surprising: he is not teaching Buddhism, but Confucianism. Already in his earliest writing,

⁴At this point, some may wonder what distinguishes it from the concept of *atman* in Hinduism or God in Christianity.

Liang envisioned two ways for awakening: an immediate renouncing of the world and a patient insertion inside the world. All his subsequent works aim at developing the second way, in which Confucianism is the Way to bring mankind to the final Buddhist awakening. Liang does not believe that Buddhism fits the needs of our present age, since escapism from the real world can only lead to a passive attitude toward the world and toward society. Liang, as a good Mahayanist, considers any “skillful mean” (*upaya* 方便法門) conducive to final enlightenment as legitimate. In the present age, Confucianism is that expedient mean to prepare for the Buddhist awakening. Of course, Liang’s position was attacked by institutional Buddhism, led by the monk Taixu 太虛.

Liang’s Buddhism is original in another very significant way: he incorporates into the Buddhist mind the notion of evolution. Many Chinese intellectuals were much impressed by the theory of evolution, introduced to China by YAN Fu 嚴復 at the end of the nineteenth century. Liang adheres to the theory of Edward Jenks that human society advances by stages: totemic, patriarchal, military, and socialist (Liang 1949: 17). However, contrary to the naïve optimism of sociologists, scientists, and Marxists, in the quest for the betterment of the world, Liang leaned toward an eschatology in which a transcendental realm would emerge at the end of history. Already before Liang, this naïvely optimistic belief in a happy future had been contested by ZHANG Taiyan 章太炎 with his theory of “the simultaneous progress of suffering and happiness” (*kule pianjin* 苦樂聯進) (Zhang 1985: 386). Even though happiness increases because of the progress of civilization and knowledge, suffering also increases at the same rate, creating more frustration. Liang sides with Zhang in this realistic conception of progress: “The more the intelligence advances, the more desires become excessive” (Liang 1916: 18). Though the number of choices is multiplied, people are still limited in what they can realize, generating acute frustrations. Therefore, the frustrations will offset what has been gained, deepening an even sharper consciousness of failure. For Liang, some very sensitive people have already experienced this misery, and fallen into despair, including suicidal actions.⁵

Therefore, the progress of civilization is not unilaterally good: it brings both liberation and alienation in excessive forms. Yet here Liang brings something new compared to Zhang, since for Liang the historical unfolding is not open-ended. The progress and the suffering will progress to its maximum, when they finally collapse. Liang states: “The intelligence of humanity having reached its peak, the suffering will also reach its extreme. After all the methods of liberation from suffering are exhausted, the great law of Buddha will then arise” (Liang 1916: 19–20). In other words, it is only after everything collapses that the liberation of humanity can be seen. It seems as though suffering has a purifying function, to prepare the world for the final liberation. The world needs to be caught in this form of extreme violence in order for the solution, renouncing the world, to become self-evident. Liang interestingly takes the example of the renewal of interest in Buddhism in Europe, during the First World War’s atrocities, to prove his point: Buddhism can only emerge as the solution amid the worst tragedies of history. Here we find in Liang’s thought the conjunction of the eschatological with the apocalyptic, a conjunction more familiar to the Western Christian world than to the East Asian world.

Therefore, Liang draws a very important conclusion: since the final outcome of human history in the Buddhist awakening is certain, everything that can hasten the process is welcome. The solution for the present age is not to withdraw from the world, but on the contrary to engage the world: “To engage the world today accelerates the progress and therefore pushes toward the success of Buddhism” (Liang 1916: 20). Following the world

⁵In 1911 and 1912, Liang himself tried twice to commit suicide.

does not hinder the coming of final liberation; on the contrary, by being actively involved in the movement of civilization's progress, little by little, we help the approach of the final moment when the Buddhist solution of a total renouncing will become self-evident. The new reality will rise from the ruins of the old. For Liang, the end of the world in itself is not scary, since it will bring about the universal Buddhist awakening.

Renouncing is not putting an end to biological life, but cutting all attachments to life and to the world, and even to all the ideological constructions of the mind about *nirvana*. Through this process of discarding, an intuitive experience of reality can be achieved, which cannot be expressed in terms of analytic thinking. For Liang, the compassionate feelings toward a suffering mankind provide the best way to realize the final enlightenment, since those feelings not only induce a negation of the selfish orientation of the self, but, more importantly, postpone one's own enlightenment for the sake of others. In that sense, the commitment to serve first the worldly needs of mankind through Confucianism performs two functions. First, it is a reminder that the self-centeredness involved in the quest for one's own enlightenment must be overcome by active involvement for the present needs of others. Second, by fulfilling the psychological and social needs of the people, it may help to show their own fundamental limitation, preparing mankind to face the next step, the necessity of Buddhist ultimate liberation.

4 The Confucian Path Toward Buddhist Liberation

4.1 Confucianism as a Moral Religion

We have seen how Liang developed his own original discourse on two types of religion: the religion of social development, represented by Christianity, and the religion of radical transcendence, represented by Buddhism. However, it is in developing a third type of religion, Confucianism, which stands at the middle point between Christianity's engagement in the world and Buddhism's escape from it, that Liang best shows his creativity and originality.

In Yogacara's epistemology, mind constructs knowledge through two cognitive functions: "direct perception" (*xianliang* 現量) and "intellection" (*biliang* 比量). Direct perception is the pure perception of objective sensitive data, such as color, sound, smell, etc, without any interference from conceptualization. At this level, there is only a perceptive knowledge of the object, without any reflexivity, not being aware of knowing it, and also without any meaning added to it. This perception is discrete, enclosed in the moment and the context of the occurrence. For example, through the contact of the tea with my tongue, there is a unique and direct perception of it, without image, language, or idea. The second cognitive function, intellection, is the knowledge built on concepts, constructed through an abstract process of comparing and classifying through the past experiences of direct perceptions. Following the same example, previous experiences of drinking tea allow me to construct the concept of tea, which is different from wine.

These two cognitive functions, direct perception and intellection, when working correctly, seize reality as it is. Erroneous perceptions and intellections can occur, but it is precisely the aim of Buddhism to be aware of the correct working of our cognitive functions so that we may not be mistaken. The mind therefore has to purify itself from all misconceptions to see the real as it is, to be transparent to the reality, without adding or eliminating anything. Correct knowledge should operate therefore as an apprehension of reality as it is. Awakening itself does not change reality; the reality is still the same, but captured in a radically different way, without any error.

However, Liang is not entirely satisfied with this epistemology on two grounds, one theoretical and the other moral. On the theoretical level, Liang considers that since direct perceptions are only discrete and encapsulated in unique and discrete moments of consciousness, they have no duration and therefore cannot be used by the intellection to construct concepts by comparing them through a period of time. Also, on the moral level, direct perception and intellection function ideally in a pure corrective and somehow passive mode. The mind strives to correct its cognitive errors, but nothing should be added to reality by the mind. The mind is therefore reduced to a cognitive and mechanical process, cut from the moral realm of meaning and value, so important in the Confucian tradition.

Therefore, Liang feels the necessity to hold another mode of cognition, *zhijue* 直覺, which can positively add something to reality, i.e. the moral meaning brought by the subject to the objective reality. This meaning is the pre-conceptual basis for the conceptual construction of the intellection. Therefore, this cognitive mode is both objective and subjective (Liang 1921: 400). Liang departs here from Buddhism since he holds that this intuition is not necessarily flawed; it is the realm of true morality. This intuition, in line with Confucian tradition, is an intuition made of moral intentions (*yi* 意), which gives meaning to the world. Starting from around 1937 onward, Liang developed this concept of intuition, as a special mode of cognition, which he calls *lixing* 理性, and can be best translated as moral reason (see An 1997: 337–362; Hanafin 2003: 202). This change of terminology from intuition to moral reason manifests Liang's switch from epistemological problems to ethical issues, applying Buddhist epistemology to Confucian ethics.

4.2 Confucian Ethics Justified by a Buddhist Epistemology

We have seen above that Buddhism had to deal with two major obstacles, which hinder the mind in seeing reality as it is: the nature of existence according to the discriminating mind and the nature of existence as dependently arisen. Buddhism has developed techniques to overcome these two obstacles. However, according to Liang, Confucianism is perfectly able to solve the first hindrance by cultivating a moral mind and operating in this world but without any attachment to it. Accordingly, Confucianism still looks at reality, especially human society, as being structured by differences. The discriminating mind still recognizes distinctions between the noble person and the petty person, or between the five basic ethical relations. Yet the moral mind recognizes those distinctions for what they are, not enacting divisions but expressing a basic relational unity. Perfectly free, the mind can communicate beyond the distinctions and realize unity: "People following the forms cannot avoid distinctions between this and that, but the mind becomes one entity with everything, making the cosmos despite its vastness communicating without separation" (Liang 1986: 159). Most especially, in the moral metaphysics of Confucianism, the self can go beyond the distinctions made between it and the world, as it is recorded about Confucius: "There were four things from which the Master was entirely free. He had no foregone conclusions, no arbitrary predeterminations, no obstinacy, and no egoism" (*Analects* 9.4). Precisely because Confucianism has realized the ontological unity between human mind and the cosmos, it can overcome what the mundane distinctions usually brought in terms of egoism.

However, Confucianism is still unable to solve the second obstacle, because a purely detached mind still exists and takes support from the physical and mental world. Only Buddhism can bring the final liberation by cutting through the nature of existence as dependently arisen, allowing one to reach the ultimate nature of existence.

4.3 The Attachment to the Self as Creativity

The attachment to the self (*zhiwo* 執我) is not utterly negative as in Buddhism, but it is ambivalent. On the one hand, consistent with Buddhist doctrine, attachment to the self hinders the final awakening, leaving people prisoner of *samsara*, by creating the illusion of a permanent self. On the other hand, attachment to the self is understood by Liang in terms of a creativity shaping the world: “attachment to the self is source of life activities” (Liang 1984: 709). Liang sees the apparition of the self as positive in creating the world: “From the origin of life up to the apparition of human, there is nothing which has not appeared as a development of the self” (Liang 1984: 712).

Therefore, Liang opens a space where the self can develop itself in the world. This space is not the material world shaped by humans, but the moral realm where human beings express their inner nature. For Liang, this inner nature is developed in line with the philosophy of the mind of WANG Yangming 王陽明. The moral mind works innately, knowing good and evil without having to think about it. It is established as a metaphysical reality encompassing the whole universe, both natural and human. For Liang, Confucianism does not seek to break the last attachment, the attachment to life itself, but lets its attachment to life, now devoid of any selfishness, deploy itself in the human mind and in the cosmos as an ever new creative force.

Liang departs from Yogacara by considering that consciousness as intuition is not necessarily flawed. He interprets intuition as a positive moral force creating the world: “The mind is the whole entity of life and all life activities come entirely from the moral intention” (Liang 1984: 709). So, the attachment to the self is not entirely flawed. When the self opens itself to the principle of creativity at work in the cosmos, it has already vanquished its fundamental egoism.

4.4 Confucianism as the Quasi-religion we Need in the Present Time

Confucianism is not a religion like Christianity, since it does not build up a strong social cohesiveness, nor a religion like Buddhism, since it does not address the ultimate question. Still, Confucianism, for Liang, is very similar to a religion since it performs the psychological and moral functions for the individual and the community. Through moral reason, human beings can apprehend the whole of the cosmic life in movement and embrace its flux. Through balance between their inner moral feelings and reason, people can express themselves in the social life and be associated with the pace of the cosmos: “We cannot but distinguish between two aspects: the essence of the cosmic life in the state of flux and its essence in the state of tranquility, of unconditionality, without arising and ceasing. The two aspects are not identical, neither distinct, two but still one, one but still two. Confucianism deals mainly with the first and Buddhism with the second” (Liang 1984: 660). While history is marching toward the final Buddhist awakening, Confucianism is the best way for the present, since it can positively prepare the path for the transcendental question to arise, first by rejecting the impasse of too worldly religions and second by insisting on the cultivation of the mind.

Surely, Confucianism cannot overcome the inborn attachment, since it is powerless to cut through the support of natural and mental life on which it relies to develop. Yet, Confucianism enables humans to find a spiritual harmony inside the world. First, it overcomes the fundamental egoism of self by establishing a wide communication between itself and the cosmos. Second, it overcomes the attachment of the discriminating mind to the mistaken ideas of a self and of the world, by reestablishing the basic unity of the mind

between itself and its experience. For Liang, Confucius set a middle path between Christianity and Buddhism. Only Confucianism can truly know the inner heart. The Confucian proposal is at the same deep level of questioning as a religion, and as religion providing intellectual and affective answers. However, it is not yet a religion in the sense that it does not postulate any external revelation or realm from the outside (Christianity), nor does it lead to a radical transcendence from the inside (Buddhism). So Liang sees the religion established by Confucius as a quasi religion, “not a religion, but yet similar to a religion” (Liang 1921: 417). In his writings, Liang has developed this very profound religious view, drawing mainly from Song and Ming neo-Confucianism. Accordingly, the personal inner heart can be enlarged to the dimensions of the moral cosmos, enabling humans to achieve a real freedom inside this world.

5 Conclusion

Liang’s novelty was to develop Confucianism as a skilful means adapted to modern times, which would ultimately lead to final enlightenment. No wonder he has rarely been fully understood, or, if partially understood, his ideas have been criticized. On the side of Modern Neo-Confucianism, he has been acclaimed as the father of the movement. His ideas on religion have helped the movement reclaim the spiritual tradition of Confucianism (Bresciani 2001: 83). However, XIONG Shili 熊十力 and MOU Zongsan 牟宗三 have laid the transcendental mind in a very rationalistic system, far away from the practical life and the social structure (community and rituals) which could support it. This hyper-rationalization in twentieth century China was certainly due to the challenge brought by Western philosophy. However, contrary to those scholars, Liang always refused to consider his thinking as a purely theoretical activity limited to the arena of academics. For him, the ultimate reality could not be grasped by philosophical reason. The mistake of modern Neo-Confucian scholars was in trying to solve philosophical questions outside its scope. Therefore, Liang invites them to look in the direction of a necessary practice, both individual and communitarian, recognizing its own limitation and opening itself from within to a radical transcendence. The quest for transcendence in Liang led him to a strong personal commitment and to social engagement. It is precisely because of the radicalism of his transcendental quest that he was able to become such a powerful and influential social activist and politician. His participation in the rural re-construction movement and in politics, in the garb of Confucianism, should be rightly understood as an expression of his Buddhist faith.

On the other side, his interpretation of Buddhism was judged unorthodox. His stress on radical transcendence and on the final renouncement of the world was opposed by the movement of *Humanistic Buddhism*, led by Taixu, who tried to insert Chinese Buddhism into modernity. However, by advocating Confucianism for the present time, Liang was still truthful to the Mahayana conception of skillful mean, according to which everything that helps toward enlightenment can be called Buddhist. At a personal level, Liang himself always remained a devout Buddhist, believing that Buddhist enlightenment was the ultimate reality. Even though he kept a distance from institutional Buddhism, he committed himself to a constant religious practice by reading Buddhist sutras, maintaining a vegetarian diet, and abstaining from alcohol and tobacco.⁶ It can be said that his ascetic way of life, his

⁶I rely on the oral testimony of Professor WANG Shouchang 王守常 of Peking University.

commitment to transmitting the Way, and his readiness to become a martyr of the Way during the Cultural Revolution, all denote the religious dimension of his personal life.

However, all his life, Liang kept his Buddhist faith a secret, with the result that all believed him a Confucian, and even “the last Confucian.” Liang did not deny being a Confucian since he considered Confucianism the best solution at this stage of Chinese society, which could ultimately lead to the Buddhist enlightenment. Liang’s best kept secret was finally revealed at the end of his life. In August 1980, Guy Alitto interviewed him in Beijing and asked his position about Buddhism. Liang answered: “I consider myself a Buddhist, but on the standpoint of society, it is better to say that I am a Confucian. I admit this point” (Liang 1980: 1178). A few years later, in the spring of 1985, Liang declared in the same vein to WANG Zongyu 王宗昱: “I converted to Confucianism because Buddhism is an other-worldly religion, which does not coincide with the human world. However, I have still held Buddhism in my heart. I have never changed this” (Wang 1988: 67). While Liang was promoting a Confucian program for improving society and for bringing psychological peace to individuals, he was in fact looking beyond the material and social world and even beyond the mental world. For him, the ultimate liberation could come only from Buddhism, from completely renouncing all our attachments of body and mind. The silence on his ultimate commitment and faith made people mistakenly believe him a Confucian and Liang did not try to correct this.

For some, the thought and life of Liang would appear too eclectic and too extremist. However, despite appearances, he was not an eclectic, but a real syncretist. Even though some issues in his thought may still remain unsolved, he has really shown a remarkable coherence in his understanding of a Buddhist-type religious transcendence, unfolded into the Confucian-type life of mind and the Christian-type social life. It needs no less than those three types of religions to bring the final awakening to its term. Surely, Liang held an elitist view of Buddhism: he considered the mass of the people not yet ready for Buddhist enlightenment. However, he attempted to map a road toward final liberation for all, by integrating positive elements of Christianity and Confucianism that could effectively prepare society and culture for it. This theory of stages should not strike us as unfamiliar. After all, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the West, people such as Kierkegaard and Freud have expounded similar theories. However, we may have touched here the most problematic aspect of Liang’s thought. First, the theory of stages goes against the more holistic approach we are now familiar with, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the different aspects of economy, politics, society, culture, and spirituality, which need to be addressed at the same time for a maximization of results. Also, by keeping silent the transcendental orientation of his action, Liang may have deprived it of the spiritual energy that would have appealed to many. Despite those limitations, Liang’s religious thinking remains remarkable by its breadth and depth and may stimulate new ways of understanding the growing cross-fertilization between different cultural and spiritual traditions at work in a global world.

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