

*Back to the Sustainability! Seeking the Common Vision of Ecological  
Reconciliation in Christianity, Ren, and Tao*

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**Abstract**

From the 20th century to the 21st century, environmental problems have become the most difficult issues for the human beings. Many have noticed the weakness of capitalism and the failure of free market system which assume there is no limit of the earth, but the truth is exactly opposite. Many have also realized that that the warning from the environmental scientists could not solve problems alone, but the spiritual movement and action is required for the true environmental renewal. In Asia, we probably have even more religious tradition for the Sustainability. For example, it has been illustrated clearly that the ideal status of Ren is living in an ecological way that the heart can extend to take care of all things (Zhang Zai and Cheng Hao). Interestingly, those thoughts could also be found in the Christian tradition - both Pierre Teilhard De Chardin and Thomas Berry have indicated that status as the ecological communion with Christ. Moreover, as the scholar of Taoism, Wang Bang-Xiong (王邦雄) has explained that the highest Tao is about creating and sustaining life. It is time to connect the faith and tradition among Christianity, Confucianism, and Taoism for putting those ecological thoughts into policies and practice. After all, the environmental problems is probably even more serious than the social issues in the Axial Age, and we could absorb those great thoughts for the great fight.

Keywords: Ecological Theology, Sustainable Development, Christian-Confucian-Taoism Dialogue

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**Introduction**

According to the Nature, the environmental signal nowadays is not Green, no yellow, but **red** (Rockström et al., 2009). Many environmentalists have noticed that the place we live is in a dangerous condition (Global Footprint Network, 2013; Meadows, Randers, & Meadows, 2005). However, most countries do not really put their national sustainable development strategy into practice, but the short-term economic growth usually override the long-term sustainable development (Carter, 2007, p. 2; Chou, 2016).

## **Christianity**

Even though the slow progress for the sustainability in reality is discouraged, there is no doubt that western countries may find the great spirit for the ecological sustainability in Christianity (White, 1967, p. 1207). The advantage of Christianity is the long-term perspective of life, from creation, through incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the heart of Christianity, to the new creation (see the diagram in Wright, 2009, p. 332 ).

From Old Testament, it was clear that God created human beings for this world, but not the other way around (See Genesis 1 and 2). In addition, God made the day of rest Holy (Genesis 2:3), not only for human being but for all creation:

Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, ***nor your animals***, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. ***Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*** (Exodus 20: 8-11, NIV, emphasis added)

In addition, the Sabbath Law is not only for the seventh days, but also the every seventh year – those are the years that the land can fully rest, and the ecological rebirth can happen:

For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year ***let the land lie unplowed and unused.*** Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and ***the wild animals may eat what is left.*** Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove. (Exodus 23: 10-11, NIV, emphasis added)

Surprisingly, Bible is not that humancentric (anthropocentric), but offers the spirit as dark green ecology (Curry, 2011). According to the following verse, human is not allowed to cut any fruitful tree, even at the life-dangerous condition.

When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, ***do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them,*** because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people, that you should besiege them? (Deuteronomy 20:19, NIV, emphasis added)

The context of the Old Testament helps us to understand the reason why Jesus came to the world, not to change, but to sustain (Matthew 5: 17), sustain the life on earth:

through Him to *reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood*, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:20, NIV, emphasis added)

It reminds us that in John 3:16, ‘God so loved the world ...’ therefore, ‘He gave His one and only Son (NIV). The vocation of Christ and Christians is truly about the ecological reconciliation. The ecological theologian, Thomas Berry, has well said:

Confucian thought gave the clearest expression to the intimacy of beings with one another in its splendid concept of ren, a word that requires translation according to context by a long list of terms in English: humaneness, love goodness, human heartedness, affection. All beings are held in ren, as in the epistle by St. Paul (Colossians 1:17), where he notes that ‘all things are held together in Christ’. (Berry, 2014, p. 95)

## Ren

The above thought of Thomas Berry lead us to rethink the ecological meaning of ren. One may therefore think of the popular word 民胞物與 (mín bāo wù yǔ), from the remarkable Confucian scholar 張載 (Zhang Zai, 1020-1077), who has a clear creation theology in mind:

乾稱父，坤稱母；予茲藐焉，乃混然中處。故天地之塞，吾其體；天地之帥，吾其性，民，吾同胞；物，吾與也。(西銘)

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. *Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature.* All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. (From West Inscription, the English translation can be seen in Neville, 2000, p. 105, emphasis added)

Not only Zhang Zai, but also 程顥 (Cheng Hao, 1032-1085), who has the ecological understanding of ren:

學者須先識仁。仁者，渾然與物同體，義、禮、智、信皆仁也。識得此理，以誠敬存之而已。(識仁篇)

The man of jen [ren] forms one body with all things without any differentiation. Righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness are all expressions of jen. One’s duty is to understand this principle and prederve jen with sincerity and seriousness. (From To Know Ren, the English Translation can be seen in Neville, 2000, p. 155)

From this perspective, the highest meaning of life (天命) is not merely for the social order of human society as some thought of Confucianism, but seeking the integration and harmony between human beings and the nature. One therefore should not really

separate the body of human beings from the ecosystem, regarding to Ren, but have to feel the great connection as a whole, which is exactly the ecological perspective of life.

The words of Zhang Zai and Cheng Hao may seem old, but meaningful for the industrial world today. Following this tradition, the current Confucian scholar also provides the excellent vision about sustainability (杜維明, 2016) and offers the common understanding of the ecological vocation between Christianity and Confucianism:

在本體論上，自我，我們原初的本性，為天所賦。因而，就其可涵潤萬物而言，是神聖的。在這個意義上，自我既是內在的，又是超越的。它為我們所固有；同時它又屬於天。這個概念看起來似乎類同於基督教把人性視為有界限的神性。依據類比，儒家所說的自我，或人的本性可以看成是在人的身上所體現的上帝的形象。(杜維明, 2014, pp. 143-4)

Ontologically, selfhood, our original nature, is endowed by Heaven [Tien]. It is therefore divine in its all-embracingfullness. Selfhood, in this sense, is both immanent and transcendent. It is intrinsic to us; at the same time, it belongs to Heaven [Tien]. So far, this conception may appear to be identical to the Christen idea of humanity as divinity circumscribed. By analogy, Confucian selfhood, or original human nature, can be seen as God's image in man. (The English version can be found in Tu, 1985, p. 125)

## Taoism

It is true that Taoism can be taken as the greenest religion or philosophy in many ways, because the core message of Taoism is really about the nature and how the world can function in a sustainable way. For example, in the section seven, Dao De Jing (道德經) indicates how this world can last long, and what human beings should learn from that for a sustainable world:

天長地久。天地所以能長且久者，以其不自生，故能長生。  
是以聖人後其身而身先；外其身而身存。非以其無私耶？故能成其私。  
Heaven is long-enduring and earth continues long. The reason why heaven and earth are able to endure and continue thus long is **because they do not live of, or for, themselves**. This is how they are able to continue and endure. Therefore the sage puts his own person last, and yet it is found in the foremost place; he treats his person as if it were foreign to him, and yet that person is preserved. Is it not because he has no personal and private ends, that therefore such ends are realised?  
(The English translation is from Chinese Text Project, 2018)

As one of the leading scholar in Christian and Ecological theology, Moltmann also enjoys reading Dao De Jing. He actually read Dao De Jing while he wrote his most important book of ecological theology – *God in Creation*, which really share the spirit of Taoism - instead of focusing on the work of God, it put more emphasis on the rest of God (Moltmann, 2008a). In speaking of Chinese culture, Moltmann love to quote the section 10 of Dao De Jing (Moltmann, 2008b, p. 34, p. 59):

生而不有，為而不恃，長而不宰，是謂玄德。

(The Dao) produces (all things) and nourishes them; it produces them and does not claim them as its own; **it does all, and yet does not boast of it**; it presides over all, and yet does not control them. This is what is called 'The mysterious Quality' (of the Dao). (Chinese Text Project, 2018)

The Taiwanese Taoism scholar 王邦雄 (Bang-Xiong Wang) has noticed that 老子 (Lao Tzu) understood the way through observing water, which is the fundamental element for life:

老子是通過水來詮釋天道，天道無所不在，它[祂]跟所有的萬物在一起，才能夠支持萬物成長。

Laozi interpreted Tao of Heaven through Water. Tao is everywhere, it [He] lives with all things, therefore, all things could be grown in a sustainable way. (Wang, 2011, English translation by the author)

This thought can also be seen in the book of Job in the Bible (chapters 38-41), where God indicated His providence to the every detail of the creatures, the land, the ocean, and even stars.

## Conclusion

To sum up, it is found that Christianity and Confucianism are both within very strong creation theology which encourage everyone to fulfill his or her ecological vocation, and Taoism and Christianity both notice that there is a sustainable natural order which can keep the ecosystem function well.

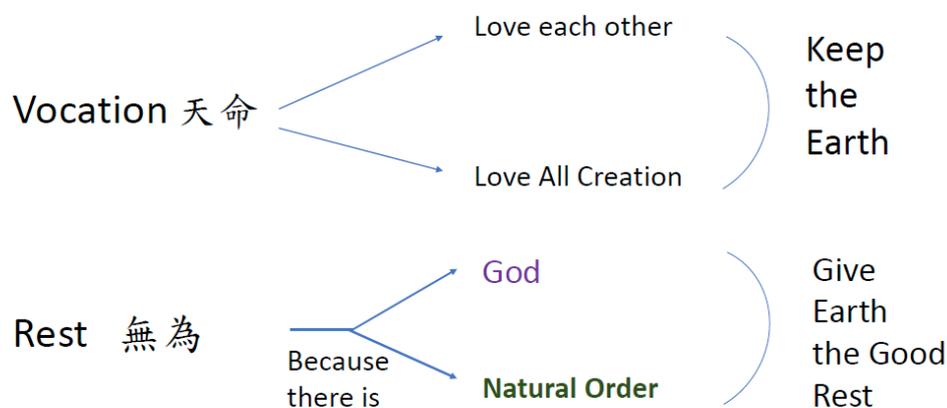


Figure 1: Common vision for the ecological reconciliation.

This world can be very different if the human society is with this ecological vision of vocation and more of us can understand the ecologically holy meaning of the sabbath.

The words of 孟子 (Mencius) in 離婁上 (Li Lou I, section 17) is still very encouraging: 「天下溺，援之以道」('When the world is drowning, it is needed to save it with Tao', translated by the author), and we should continue thinking about 'the way we must walk and those things we must do' (Exodus 18:20).

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