Tillich’s Thoughts and New Confucians’ Arguments on the Religiousness of Confucianism

Tillich has correlated Christian notions and symbols with the existential questions of modern people in his existential theology. Moreover, Tillich has been concerned with inter-religious encounter and dialogue while he devoted to the relation between Christianity and other world religions in his late years. Finally, Tillich has redefined “religion” based on humans’ concern about the ultimate (ultimate concern) and included Confucianism in its category.

On the other hand, some contemporary New Confucian scholars have constructed the discourse on the religiousness of Confucianism as their agenda of asserting the uniqueness and strength of Confucianism in comparison with Western culture, as well as putting it on the platform of inter-religious dialogue. This paper will point out and analyze how Tillich’s thoughts have inspired or can be linked with the New Confucians’ arguments on the religiousness of Confucianism.

First, perceiving the serious spiritual crisis of modern people and inspired by Tillich’s notion of “ultimate concern”, New Confucians thought “anshen liming” (attaining spiritual stability, establishing the meaning and value of life) must be linked with “ultimate concern” and the transcendent. Since “Heaven” (tian) is the transcendent in Confucianism, they suggest that Heaven can be the ultimate concern and means of solving the spiritual crisis of modern people. There is a parallel between New Confucians and Tillich’s attempt to link humans with the "transcendent" ("Heaven" in Confucianism and "God" in Christianity) to deal with the spiritual unrest with existence and to establish the meaning of life.

Second, in asserting the uniqueness of Confucian transcendence, New Confucians have stressed the contrasts between the perception of Heaven as metaphysical, impersonal and internalised in human in Confucianism in contrast with the perception of God as anthropomorphic, personal and external to human in Christianity.

I will point out that although the New Confucians’ views on the characteristics of Christian “external transcendence” match with traditional Christian doctrines and theologians’ interpretation, Tillich’s interpretations of God as both transcendent and embodied in human show similarities with the characteristics of Confucian “immanent transcendence”.

Third, due to his view that there is similarity between religion and secular culture, there is need for a concept of religion which shows how systems of secular thought and life can be religious in their very depths, as well as his idea on how existential questions lead to humans’ concern and quest for the ultimate, Tillich proposes to redefine religion with the notion of “ultimate concern”.

Based on this, Tillich regards Confucianism as a religion since he thought there is “ultimate concern” in the Confucian’s relation to the ancestors and
Confucianism has religious elements of a universal character due to the cult of the ancestors in every family. Tillich’s views can be linked with the New Confucians’ refutation of Chinese culture’s lack of religiousness, as well as their arguments that religiousness and sacredness can be manifested through secular activities in Confucianism.

In the conclusion, I will point out how my paper has contributed to the study of Tillich’s thoughts by highlighting the links between Tillich and New Confucians’ perception of the transcendent, their attempts to solve the spiritual crisis of modern people by linking humans with the transcendent, as well as their views on the religiousness of Confucianism.

Biographical note

I (Dr. Ivan Hon) obtained my PhD in Religious Studies from the University of Wales (U.K.) with the dissertation “Contemporary New Confucians’ Interpretation of the Religiousness of Confucianism”. I am currently the associate editor of China in Comparative Perspective (CCPN) Global, a research society which organizes academic activities, undertake research projects and publishes a journal on the study of China in comparison with other countries and regions. My research interests include Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity, comparative religion and moral philosophy, East Asian traditions’ interactions with modernity and modern capitalism.