

**Theosis and Sageliness:
Regaining Humanism through
a Christian-Chinese Thought Synthesis**

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Abstract The humanism of modernity, in its exclusive reliance on rationality and the scientific method, has been viewed as a pejorative understanding of 'man' that deliberately isolates it from the divine. This paper attempts to regain humanism from its position that seems to jeopardize the human tendency for the Transcendent through a synthesis of Chinese philosophy and the major tenets of Christianity. A close analysis of the predominant Chinese thought in Lao Tzu and Confucius shows that its entire history is characterized by humanism, defined, not as that which denies the divine but as one that "proposes the unity of man and Heaven." This consilience between man and Heaven is realized in the *sage*. Similarly, Christianity, albeit the antagonism of humanism, is in fact "the greatest humanism that has ever appeared [and] that could ever appear," manifested by its adherence to *theosis* – God becoming man, so that man might become God. From this standpoint, humanism still proves to be relevant for those with religious inclinations in the light of its fuller understanding through its dialectic with Chinese and Christian philosophy.

Keywords *theosis (deification), sageliness, humanism*

Humanism in Western History

Know thyself – This ancient Greek aphorism, inscribed on the walls of the temple dedicated to Apollo in Delphi and often attributed to Socrates, perhaps idealizes how

philosophy transitioned its concern towards anthropology. As philosophy traversed history, it evolved along with the gradual change in the culture and context of Ancient Greece that transpired during the epochs of transition. It is said that Stoicism began this metamorphosis in the Greek mind due to their interaction with ‘barbarians.’¹ It was in this context that Plotinus espoused Neo-Platonism, and in which the birth of Christianity took place. The striking parallelism between these two systems of thought, which would dominate Western philosophy later on, is the emphasis on ‘other-worldliness’ rooted in Plato’s predominant thought. The period eventually succeeding Alexander’s dominion over Greece and major Asian regions was that of the Roman Empire which imperialized regions that Alexander had left unconquered. Israel was already under Roman occupation during the ‘Christ-event,’ and it was during this time that philosophy further accentuated the human desire for ‘other-worldliness.’²

Although humanism was technically unknown to the Christians of the time, Christianity’s influence on its adherents’ self-perception as transient beings of this world cannot be overlooked. They understood themselves as humans vis-à-vis their assent to the belief that Jesus Christ, although God, humbly assumed humanity. This central tenet is significant for the development of anthropology during the medieval period.³ It is along this line of thinking that Wolfhart Pannenberg notes how “Christology has always been influenced by man’s changing understanding of himself,”⁴ and where the fundamental Christian claim that “true humanity [has been seen] and made possible to all mankind in the figure of Jesus Christ”⁵ is also plausible.

¹ The Greeks considered ‘barbarians’ those who were not natives of Greece and are incapable of speaking Greek.

² Perhaps the greatest exemplification of this was the fidelity of the early Christians to what has been taught to them as followers. See the Gospel according to Matthew, 16:24: “If any of you want to come with me, you must forget yourself, carry your cross, and follow me, for whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

³ It is notable that the philosophical notion of “personhood,” according to Etienne Gilson, is especially put forth by ‘Christian philosophy,’ the philosophy of the Middle Ages that emphasized a “metaphysic of the person” through the foundations laid down by Plato and Aristotle (Cf. Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, trans. A.H.C. Downes. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940, 190).

⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, “The Christological Foundations of Christian Anthropology,” in Geffré, C. (ed.) *Humanism and Christianity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1983), 86.

⁵ Ibid.

Eventually, the rediscovery of Aristotle's works by the middle of the twelfth century influenced the development of the scholasticism that is said to have characterized the apogee of the medieval intellectual tradition, instrumental in the foundation of universities and organization of classical works into textbooks. More, its progenitors became attached to its method that promoted the "harmony of natural and Divine law and the possibility of applying both to the ordering of society."⁶ This is why although theocentric, the philosophy that emerged through scholasticism was concerned with a renewed outlook for man, his nature, and the nature wherein he is situated. The rediscovered Aristotle was found to be the best companion to the rational and scientific view of man and nature – "God's order was revealed in nature as in revelation."⁷ Such intellectual reform prepared the dawn of the Renaissance in the fourteenth century, during which a transformed perspective on man came to the fore as a movement inclined towards the revival of interest for antiquity and classical studies.

The fact that the term 'humanism' is "not attested for the period of the Renaissance itself, but began...only in the early nineteenth century"⁸ does not entail the absence of humanistic ideas in this era. Renaissance humanism's chief concern was "the language and literature of classical antiquity," and though its humanists "were not philosophers," they were "men and women of letters."⁹ It was through this literary movement that philosophical humanism found its way to prominence, conceiving man apart from spirituality, and "[reducing] the divine to the human."¹⁰ Perhaps the best critique of scholasticism was given by the 'father of humanism' himself Francesco Petrarca but apart from his criticism of the scholastic treatment of Aristotle's philosophy as the sole intellectual authority, he argued that humanistic literature and well-spoken philosophy are both capable of implanting virtue as well. While it is true that Aristotle's ethics through scholasticism have had an immense impact on Christian morality, humanism for Petrarca far surpasses such a system in terms of its effectivity in "changing the heart."¹¹

⁶ James Hankins, "Humanism, scholasticism, and Renaissance philosophy," in Hankins, J. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 34.

⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁸ Ibid., 30.

⁹ Ibid., 31.

¹⁰ Ibid., 30.

¹¹ Ibid., 43.

What Petrarca stood for, therefore, is that an intellectual culture must be specified for the demands of human life; autonomous as humans are, they need not rely on divine intervention to make society and their lives better. It is in this perspective that the humanists during the Renaissance studied classical works, which preserved excellence, especially in the fields of rationality and morals. They believe that such writings and those which are of their own, accomplished through their renewed interests, could make men wiser and morally upright. Humanistic studies were geared towards a specific goal, that is, the betterment of man *qua* man.

This beginning of humanism as we know it now could be described as revolutionary within a predominantly Christian milieu. Conceivably, Petrarca posed no real threat to religion because deep within, "[his] master is Christ,"¹² and the bases for what he believed were definitely outside the realms of the philosophy that he proposed. The succeeding thinkers centuries ahead, however, did not share Petrarca's religious sentiment.

Atheistic Humanism

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the humanism that was begotten by the Renaissance turned into the complete antithesis of what it was during the medieval period.¹³ Henri De Lubac makes it a point that "modern humanism...is built upon resentment and begins with a choice,"¹⁴ a humanism that he notes to be described by Pierre Proudhon as an 'antitheism.'¹⁵ Humanism, thus, was not only defined by doctrines which stress individual autonomy but more so by its opposition to theism. This radicalized humanism paved the way for twentieth-century thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre to say that "humanism is the necessary

¹² Ibid., 42.

¹³ Among others, Corliss Lamont's seminal work that deals with humanism gives ten propositions that for him characterize twentieth-century humanism, foremost among which is the first which states that "humanism believes in a naturalistic metaphysics or attitude toward the universe that considers all forms of the supernatural as myth," and that "in any case the supernatural, usually conceived of in the form of heavenly gods or immortal heavens, does not exist" (*The Philosophy of Humanism*, 8th Ed. New York: Humanist Press, 1997, 13, 15).

¹⁴ Henri De Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 25.

¹⁵ Ibid.

consequence of atheism – only the death of God gives man the right to become a value for man."¹⁶ Having examined these humanistic trends, De Lubac presents the figure of Ludwig Feuerbach as the one largely responsible for the aforementioned conceptions of humanism through his attacks against theism, particularly the Christian concept of man's identification with God.

He opines that the secularism already in motion since the Enlightenment attained its fullness towards the outset of the nineteenth century in the "most daring and destructive form of modern atheism: absolute humanism."¹⁷ It was through Feuerbach's inspiration that many heeded the urge to stray away from religion; the humanism that Christianity proposed is nothing but absurdity to man. Christianity's idea of man in reference to Christ, his humility and sufferings, became burdensome; God, in whom man's greatness is supposedly rooted, seemed antagonistic to man's dignity. Feuerbach's atheistic humanism centers on the idea that God is nothing but a myth through which man's many aspirations are realized, a projection beyond the self.¹⁸ Inspired by Hegelian alienation, Feuerbach claims that man attributes to God those which he thinks he cannot attain, qualities such as will, wisdom, justice, and love – he “denies as to himself only what he attributes to God.”¹⁹

In such self-estrangement man “withdraws from himself, what he renounces in himself, he only enjoys in an incomparably higher and fuller measure in God.”²⁰ Belief in God, becomes burdensome to man, for through it he becomes "dispossessed of something essentially belonging to him for the benefit of an illusive [i.e., illusory] reality."²¹ The completion of Feuerbachian humanism, therefore, is obtained by divinizing man, not by elevating him to a higher status but by bringing God down far below him. God is pitted into

¹⁶ Ibid., 22. Thus, Jean-Paul Sartre describes an 'existentialist humanism' where “there is no legislator other than [man] himself and that he must, in his abandoned state, make his own choices. Even if God were to exist, it would make no difference” (*Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. C. Macomber. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2007, 53).

¹⁷ Henri De Lubac, “Ludwig Feuerbach, Protagonist of Atheist Humanism,” in *Theologians Today: Henri De Lubac SJ*. (New York: Sheed and Ward 1972),71.

¹⁸ “Religion must be understood at a deeper level: man himself is the beginning, center and end of religion; religion is man’s self-worship” (Hans Küng, *Does God Exist? An Answer For Today*. Collins, 1980, 203).

¹⁹ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. G. Eliot (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), 27.

²⁰ Ibid., 26.

²¹ Cf. De Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 28.

the position where he is the one who becomes dependent on man. This seeming reversal of God and man, more than anything, emphasizes Feuerbach's humanistic perspective and contempt for Christian theism. The 'essence of man' for Feuerbach then is the 'supreme being,' from which his celebrated humanistic axiom stems: "*Homo homini Deus est.*"²² Man need not look above and beyond but instead must realize and see divinity in his very self, thus, Feuerbach proclaims:

God as a morally perfect being is nothing else than the realized idea, the fulfilled law of morality, the moral nature of man posited as the absolute being; man's own nature, for the moral God requires man to be as he himself is.²³

Furthermore, it is still not enough for man to step over God and claim divinity for himself, which is why it is important for man to get rid of God "in order to regain possession of the human greatness which...is being unwarrantably withheld by another."²⁴ The annihilation of God is the key to man's full realization. In our time, this mindset would undoubtedly portray an atheist, yet for Feuerbach, the true atheist is not the one who denies the existence of God but he "to whom the predicates of the Divine Being, such as love, wisdom, and justice, are nothing."²⁵ Such was Feuerbach's impact that De Lubac considered him to be the protagonist of atheistic humanism. Regardless, his points are significant in the development of humanism generally, for then, it realized its conception even from contradictory perspectives.

Theosis: From the Classical Mind to Augustine and Thomas

The opposite side of this spectrum, thus, elucidates how Christianity's conception of man *qua* man drew from the springs of Platonism. The dichotomy of Platonic metaphysics between the corporeal and the spiritual provides *mimesis* as an important element in Christianity's conception of deification. *Theosis*, then, is the likeness of an image to its *archai*.

²² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 271.

²³ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁴ De Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 24.

²⁵ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 21.

In relation to man, Plotinus opines that "our concern...[is] to be god,"²⁶ to realize our 'divinity' as part of the universal journey towards the 'One.'²⁷ Drawing upon Plato's conception of *daimons* as mediators between humans and the gods in the *Symposium*,²⁸ Plotinus proposes that humans enter a *daimonic* state after death wherein although corporeally non-existent, an "element of involuntary impulse" is still possessed.²⁹ Once this impulse had been removed and the dependence on God had ceased, one "will be simply a god."³⁰ This removal, then, is attained through a means of purification referred to by Plotinus as 'virtue.' Still bound to bodily impulses after death, the soul is purified and becomes "Idea and Reason, wholly free of body, intellectual, entirely of that divine order."³¹ Deification, then, is ultimately achieved in man's assimilation into Intellect itself.³²

The paramountcy of Neoplatonism when Christianity was rising to the fore set the tone for its harmonious integration with the latter through Augustine. In this setting, therefore, *theosis* found its way prominently into the core of Christianity, especially in the Eastern tradition.³³ For a Christian, to understand *theosis* is to understand one's true dignity and ultimate destiny as a human being. Man *qua* man does not affect God's already perfect divinity, contrary to the claims of atheistic humanism elucidated previously. Rather, it is man

²⁶ *Enneads*, I. 2.6.

²⁷ Cf. David Litwa, *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013), 102-16.

²⁸ Diotima explains to Socrates that rather than being "a great god," 'Love' is rather a "great daemon," "halfway between mortal and immortal...between god and man" (*Symposium*, 202d-3).

²⁹ *Enneads*, I. 2.6.

³⁰ Litwa, *Becoming Divine*, 108.

³¹ *Enneads*, I.6.6.

³² "By the act of self-intellection, he has the simultaneous intellection of all: in such case self-intuition by personal activity brings the intellection, not merely of the self, but also of the total therein embrace. In such a state there is no question of stage and change...for it has become one simultaneous existence with the Supreme" (*Enneads*, IV.4.2)

³³ *Theosis* is the Greek term for 'deification' and is especially commonplace in Eastern Catholic and Orthodox theology. For St. Basil, man has received "the order to become a god," making us worthy of true union with the Creator while maintaining our personal, individual integrity, for even the body, united to the soul, is involved in this process. Moreover, deification is "not a solitary but a 'social' process," for it enjoins the entire human community to live in the manner of the divine life, which is a communion of Persons (Cf. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*. Middlesex: Penguin Books. 1964, 236-242). There are arguments, however, that point out the lack of references to this doctrine in Augustine's corpus but in retort, "while the term *deificare* itself may be minimal, the reality of such transformative union with Christ in the Holy Spirit abounds [in his thought]" (Cf. David Vincent Meconi, *The One Christ: St. Augustine's Theology of Deification*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013, 283).

who truly gains from this relationship with the divine and realizes his highest value through his propensity towards the ‘other-worldly.’³⁴

Augustine adopts the idea that deification is the likeness of an image to its archetype, but what sets Augustinian deification apart is its directedness to ‘salvation.’ Just as after its entombment in the body, the soul would then return once more to its source, so, too, for Augustine, the created immortal soul would be reunited with God when the earthly human life ceases to be. Hence, insofar as a human being has the soul, it is in the likeness of God, *imago Dei*. This kind of deification remains incomplete, however, due to original sin through which man has arrogated what belongs properly to God. It is in this reality that Christianity’s drama of salvation through Christ is hinged, for what sin denigrates in humanity, Incarnation restores through *theosis*.³⁵

Theosis, then, does not simply pertain to man’s likeness to God; it goes beyond man’s striving for perfection through his imitation of God. Through the atonement of Christ made possible by his humanity, man has attained adoption wherein we are made “sons and daughters of God,” thus, capable of incorporation into the Church, his mystical Body. *Theosis* is also expressed in terms of our creaturely dependence on the Creator, for in finding happiness in the providence of God, one manifests his real status as man – he is not what God is.³⁶ These themes, inasmuch as they have been granted to us by grace, suggest the ‘this-

³⁴ The atheistic claim on God’s dependence on man for his divinity, I would say, is already abashed head-on by a classic Christian adage attributed to Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, as it aptly puts how God, in his absoluteness, need not create the universe, most especially man, yet did so for the sake of manifesting his very essence, i.e., love: “*Gloria Dei est vivens homo* – The glory of God is man fully alive.” It would then make sense to propose that “Christianity is the greatest humanism that has ever appeared...[and] that could ever appear. No philosophical or political or religious program in history...has ever made a claim about human destiny as extravagant as Christianity’s. We are called not simply to moral perfection or artistic self-expression or economic liberation but to what the Eastern Fathers called *theosis*, transformation into God” (Robert Barron, *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith*. New York: Image Books, 2011, 2-3).

³⁵*Expositions on the Psalms*, 52, 6 (53, 5 in other translations). Cf. Litwa, *Becoming Divine*, 123. Interpretation of what he has written in *De Trinitate* also makes this clear: “He wanted to convince his readers that salvation and spiritual growth are connected with knowing themselves as images of the Triune God, from whom they came and toward whom they go, with a dynamic tendency to union realized by likeness to God who is Love” (Mary T. Clark, “De Trinitate,” in E., Stump and N., Kretzmann (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 91). God’s prerogative for salvation, therefore, has been initiated climactically in the Incarnation of Christ: “The Son of God was made a sharer in our mortal nature so that mortals might become sharers in his Godhead.”

³⁶ This particular theme, however, presents the paradox in Augustinian deification: deification is truly attained in rejecting one’s divinity. Cf. Litwa, *Becoming Divine*, 128-30.

worldly' dimension of Augustinian deification and are only partial to its completeness: "so we are in hope, but not yet in reality."³⁷ For as long as we live the "thrust of a trembling glance," is what is in hope for us in this world.³⁸

Beyond death and in our immortal state, "the human mind shall be in a way, lost [in God],"³⁹ and the mind will become "like Divine."⁴⁰ As for the Angelic Doctor, the Catholic Catechism's reference to him presents a concise *summa* of his doctrine of deification: "The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods."⁴¹ Almost a millennium separates Thomas from Augustine, yet the primary idea of Christian deification espoused by the latter remains intact in Thomas' thought. He adopts the centrality of grace in Augustine's doctrine wherein grace itself is a partaking of the divine nature of God – it "surpasses every capability of created nature."⁴² It enables man to go beyond the natural limitations and possibilities of his faculties without instilling anything other than what he already possesses: "Grace does not destroy nature or set it aside; rather grace always perfects nature."⁴³

In this scheme, human nature, far from being trampled upon by divine intervention, is ennobled to its highest potentiality. Although both Augustine and Thomas share the prevalence of grace in their conceptions of *theosis*, Thomas radicalizes grace itself in that it is not just a necessary prerequisite more than being deification *per se*. Even in Thomas' *quinque viae*, a key understanding of Thomistic *theosis* through the doctrine of analogy is being presented.⁴⁴ The 'five ways' indicate being, goodness, and perfection as God's attributes that he deems man to partake of, and so we come to realize our participation in God's life through the experience of this reality.

³⁷ *Expositions on the Psalms*, 49, 2 (50, 2 in other translations).

³⁸ *Confessions*, VII, 17.

³⁹ *Expositions on the Psalms*, 35, 14 (36, 12 in other translations).

⁴⁰ "When this image therefore has been renewed by this transformation, and thus made perfect, then we shall be like to God, since we shall see him not through a mirror, but just as he is, which the Apostle calls face to face" (1 Corinthians, 13:12), Cf. Clark, "De Trinitate," 100.

⁴¹ *Opuscula*, 57, 1-4. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 460.

⁴² *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 112, 1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, I-I, q. 8 ad 2.

⁴⁴ Cf. A.N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 42-43.

The aforementioned attributes are divine, insofar as they are predicated on God, yet though they designate God primarily, they pertain to things that we experience as well, including our very humanity. By analogy, man, along with the entirety of creation, shares in the divine attributes which originally designate God. It is man alone, however, who has the capacity and knowledge to recognize in reality including in his own, being, goodness, and perfection as flowing from the Source of which they can be predicated. More than this mere apprehension of reality, Thomas shows that knowledge is also a form of participation in God’s divinity on two grounds: i) man’s ultimate perfection is found in his essence which is knowledge, for “a thing is perfect so far as it attains to its source,”⁴⁵ and; ii) whereas this very knowledge of God is deification *per se*, created by God as the means through which we might come to behold him as an end and “author, both of intellectual power and that which the intellect can see.”⁴⁶

Thus, the completion of man’s perfection lies in his knowledge of God which is *theosis* in itself in that “the intellectual power of the creature...is some kind of participated likeness of Him Who is the first intellect.”⁴⁷ On this ground, the complete sense of knowledge as deification is understood: to become ‘like God’ is to ‘know’ God as he really is; our knowledge of God is God’s very own knowledge of himself. God is knowable only to himself, yet through our knowledge of him made possible for us, we come to know him as he knows himself. This “knowledge of God’s essence...by grace”⁴⁸ for which we hope, however, as in Augustine, could only be fulfilled *post-mortem*. This final and complete knowledge of God where “we shall see Him as He is,” is, for Thomas, our ultimate end, our *beatitudo perfecta*.⁴⁹ These themes that contemporary culture looks down at as religious, far from denigrating man, have been shown by Christianity’s foremost thinkers, Augustine and Thomas, to be vibrantly humanistic.

⁴⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 12, 1 resp.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, I. q. 12, 12 ad 3.

⁴⁹ 1 John 3:2; *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 12, 5 resp.

Humanism and Chinese Thought

Likewise, for Chinese thought, it is said that humanism is “more pervasive and more significant in China than in any other philosophical tradition,” given that “the ethical, the intellectual, the aesthetic and the social” are said to characterize its tradition.⁵⁰ Many scholars agree that humanism is a predominant doctrine of Chinese thought and culture, if not central itself; it is “evident in all aspects of Chinese life.”⁵¹ What must be considered, however, is the tradition wherein humanism is idealized, for it has been falsely presumed that humanism can only be observed in the Confucian tradition. Indeed, the brilliance of Chinese thought lies in its synthesis of the transcendent and this-worldly reality – “it is both of this world and of the other world.”⁵² This seeming complementarity points to the realization of “the highest achievement of man *qua* man [that is] the transcendent sphere.”⁵³

As mentioned, Confucius takes the role of being the humanist of Chinese philosophy, and commentaries tend to sum up his humanism in this aphorism: “Human beings can broaden the Way – it is not the Way that broadens human beings.”⁵⁴ Nevertheless, to emphasize Confucius’ humanism “is not to deny that the sage showed a reasonable interest in religion.”⁵⁵ On the other hand, Taoism’s equally influential tradition is often characterized by an attitude of “world-shunning” which roots from the recluses who aimed to preserve their lives by escaping society and the world.⁵⁶ Its teaching on *wu-wei*, often translated as ‘non-doing,’ represents the Taoist perception of human action, thus, giving off seeming negativism, which is inaccurately attributed to Taoism. It is because of these misunderstood characterizations that the contrast between Confucianism and Taoism arises in terms of their being humanistic.

⁵⁰ Charles A. Moore, “Introduction: The Humanistic Chinese Mind,” in C.A. Moore (ed.) *The Chinese Mind: Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1967), 15.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵² Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 8.

⁵³ Fung Yu-Lan, *The Spirit of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. E.R. Hughes (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 3.

⁵⁴ *Analects*, 15.29.

⁵⁵ Wing-Tsit Chan, “The Story of Chinese Philosophy,” in C.A. Moore (ed.) *The Chinese Mind: Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1967), 32.

⁵⁶ The *Analects* recalls an encounter between Confucius and these recluses in 14.38-39. Cf. Edward Slingerland, “Effortless Action: The Chinese Spiritual Ideal of Wu-wei,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, 2 (2000): 330.

Contemporary scholarship suggests that *wu-wei* is understood, not literally as lack of action but rather as effortless action; spontaneous and in keeping with what is natural in us as humans as endowed by the *Tao*.⁵⁷ *Wu-wei*, then, when attained, is the perfected action. Such attainment is tied to the highest stature possible for man, that is, the state of the *sage*; in relation to which, *wu-wei* is the proper action. In the case of Confucianism, therefore it is easier to say that it is humanistic in theory and practice, while the same cannot be said, however, for Taoism. There is, however, a variety of suggestions when it comes to the religious aspect of Confucian humanism, particularly in the ‘Absolute’ principle that can be found in its teachings. On the other hand, Taoism doesn’t share this problem at all.

From the name itself, Taoism’s foremost preoccupation is with the transcendent *Tao*, which may be why it is often classified, not just as a philosophy but even more as a religion.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, some consider Taoism as “the only humanistic religion among all the world’s major religions that has human life as its direct caring object.”⁵⁹ Indeed, Taoism’s humanism is peculiarly intensified by its other-worldliness, and in relation to the *Tao* present in man as *te* (virtue), his individuality is not eliminated but fulfilled.⁶⁰ The epitome of such is personified in the sage.

Sageliness: Confucius and Lao Tzu

Before proceeding to the concept of the ‘sage’ as it is held, at least in classic Confucianism, significant points must be made first in distinguishing it from the similar concept of the *junzi*, the model of morality who exemplifies the four virtues – *ren*, *li*, *yi*, and

⁵⁷ Here I am following Edward Slingerland’s conception of *wu-wei* as ‘effortless action’ which is, up until now, a subject of dispute for those who are studying the Chinese classics.

⁵⁸ Lao Tzu was responsible for contriving its Six Images. The *Tao* is the “Unnamable,” wherein the term *Tao* is but a designation (Lao Tzu wrote, “The *Tao* that can be told is not the eternal *Tao*”; *Tao Te Ching*, I). The *Tao* is the “Origin,” the ultimate source of all reality (Ibid., 25). The *Tao* is the ‘Principle,’ wherein it is the fathomless unity of all reality and is in every single thing (Ibid., 10, 25). The *Tao* is ‘Function’ enacted in the world as *wu-wei* (Ibid., 48). The *Tao* is ‘Virtue’ is naturally inherent in our being as *te* (power or virtue; Ibid., 59). Finally, the *Tao* is ‘Technique’ insofar as it is emulated in the person of the sage who rules and governs by *wu-wei* (Ibid., 22).

⁵⁹ Ru-Song Yu, “Taoist Humanities and Re-enlightenment,” *Journal of Literature and Art Studies* 8, 2 (2018): 330.

⁶⁰ In the prior discussion of atheistic humanism, the elimination of man’s individuality by the Divine or the spiritual is a significant contention.

zhi.⁶¹ The idea of the sage shares the same description but in the face of this comparison, the idea of *junzi* looks up to the sage insofar as it is conceived as a path to sageliness. This precedence of the sage over the *junzi* is taken seriously by scholars to the point that the attainability of sageliness is being questioned in contrast to that of the *junzi*. The sage even surpasses the supposed moral loftiness of the *junzi*, by being virtuous, not only for himself but more so for others, extending his *ren* to them. As such, the sage surpasses even the highest Confucian virtue - “Why stop at Good? such a person should surely be called a sage!”⁶²

Having considered this distinction, let us return to the religious scheme implicit in Confucianism. How did commentators consider that Confucianism, albeit humanistic, is considerably leaning towards religiosity? Perhaps the salient factor is there is “something within the tradition that is regarded as an *Absolute*...the end point and goal...that [is] the source of meaning and motivation.”⁶³ This “absolute” pertains to *tian* or heaven. Confucius’ conformism directly involves the upholding of ancient culture which highly prizes the worship of their ancestors and, more importantly, *tian*.⁶⁴ Now, it is one thing to point out the centrality of the *tian* to Confucianism; it is another to relate it to the individual human as the subject of humanism. This particular relationship between man and *tian* wherein man is led to his transformation toward his highest potential implies that because the goal of such transformation is the Absolute, the transformation in view of such a goal should be absolute as well. In the sage, therefore, is the full knowledge of the Absolute *tian*, “thus the sage’s understanding penetrates all things, Heaven, Earth, and humanity.”⁶⁵ The sage, insofar as he is also a *junzi*, “stands in awe...of the Mandate of Heaven”⁶⁶ which is essentially directed

⁶¹ Humaneness, ritual propriety, righteousness, and practical wisdom. The superiority of the *junzi* (or ‘gentleman’) is to be found in his being principled, and it is in this denotation that *ren* gains profundity: “To be humane is what it means to be human” (*Mencius*, 7B: 16). While it is true that the character of *ren* concerns morality, it goes beyond so as to transcend it, being the source of all the other virtues of which morality is but a part. While it is virtue *per se*, it is, at the same time, a process of honing virtue.

⁶² *Analects*, 6:30.

⁶³ Rodney L. Taylor, “The Religious Character of the Confucian Tradition,” *Philosophy East and West* 48, 1 (1998):87.

⁶⁴ There have been several variations in the interpretation of *tian*, on whether or not it is a transcendent principle that serves a purpose similar to the idea of a transcendent deity in the Western mind, as well as debates on its similarity to the Chou dynasty’s religious conception of it. Regardless of what is most likely, *tian* is inevitably attached to the Confucian valuation of morality and the highest aspirations of man.

⁶⁵ Taylor, “The Religious Character of the Confucian Tradition,” 90.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 16:8.

towards the understanding of the *Tao* and the attainment of *wu-wei*. This purview is typified in the sage who is in total harmony with *tian*, insofar as his actions are in concordance with *zhi*.

In fact, Confucianism recognizes *tian* as “the ultimate source of value.”⁶⁷ Recalling the Confucian emphasis on human relationships, not only is the individual defined by a relationship with other humans but also with the natural world and the *tian*. In this relationship, one allows the *tian* to govern the role appropriate to him as a human. When it comes to society, only a sage can become a true ruler. There seems to be a paradox, however, in the realization that Confucianism recognizes the ‘transcendence’ of the sage. This ‘transcendence’ though is not to be understood in the Taoist’s other-worldly sense but in the sage’s being a ‘citizen of the universe,’ for this is where the traditions of Chinese thought converge in view of sageliness.⁶⁸

The sage identifies with the universe by serving society; in his ‘transcendence, he realizes his duty, not just as a citizen of a community but at the same time and more importantly, as a citizen of the universe.’⁶⁹ Similarly, in Taoism, the sage’s identification with the universe is reached by transcending human ego and limitation. Just as how the *Tao* is itself transcendent, so too, the sage should be in such a transcendental state in his exemplarism. In his disdain for any worldly accumulation, selfishness, and distinctions that contradict the simplicity of the *Tao*, the sage transcends this world all the same. It is noteworthy to mention that parallel to how Plato imagined that only philosophers could comprehend the ‘idea of the Good,’ Lao Tzu also held that the *Tao*, as it is, is intelligible only to the sages as people of supreme wisdom.

⁶⁷ Stephen C. Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.

⁶⁸ Cf. Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, 6.

⁶⁹ It might be fitting to give attention to the accounts of Mencius, known to represent the idealistic wing of Confucianism. Here, the religiosity in Confucianism becomes more apparent. Man’s path to sageliness is in “knowing Heaven,” and in achieving this knowledge of *tian*, the sage becomes one with it and simultaneously becomes the “acme of human relations.” Hence, it is in knowing *tian* and identifying with it that a person attains the highest achievement in sageliness. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

In manifesting the *Tao* for the world, the *te* expressed by the sage is the highest, following nothing but the *Tao* itself. Hence, everything, in as much as it possesses *te*, possesses naturally, a semblance of the *Tao* itself that sustains it. More still, the paradoxes in the *Tao*'s attributes are also exhibited by the sage in his transcendence. In the sage's disinterest in material accumulation, he attains the plenitude of being. In going beyond his ego and prejudices, he takes, as his own, the minds of the people, uniting their divergent minds into a single, wholesome mind. In this selfless act, he gets rid of their distinctions, restoring them to the *Tao* and manifesting its simplicity.

Most of all, in his unity with the *Tao* and his identification with the universe, his ruling by non-ruling – *wu-wei* – is shown. In this scheme, other-worldliness is understood, not in terms of detachment from the world but in governance that follows the *Tao*. For Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, the sage is the ideal being who does not withdraw from the world but instead employs *wu-wei* in his dealings with the world: "By taking no action is not meant folding one's arms and closing one's mouth."⁷⁰ The sage, then, is the enlightened leader upon whom the people can rely, emulating the workings of the *Tao* in the world. The people's dependence on the sage is akin to a child's relationship with parents – he may not wholly understand their workings but his reliance, nevertheless, remains undefiled.

Although the sage is in the midst of government, his mind seems to be in the mountain forest...His abode is in the myriad things, but it does not mean that he does not wander freely.⁷¹

Kuo Hsiang, thus, gives a rightful *summa* of the ideal characteristic of the sage, envisioned for every individual who forms a part of society: "sageliness within and kingliness without."⁷² This internal sageliness is the sage's nurturance of spirituality, while kingliness the exhibition of ruling functions as a leader. This may give the impression that although this

⁷⁰ Wing-Tsit Chan, "Chinese Theory and Practice, with Special Reference to Humanism," in C.A. Moore (ed.) *The Chinese Mind: Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1967), 19.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷² This ideal in Chinese thought first appears in the thirty-third chapter of *Chuang Tzu*. Cf. Y.P. Mei, "The Status of the Individual in Chinese Social Thought and Practice," in C.A., Moore (ed.) *The Chinese Mind: Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1967), 338.

ideal is intended for the populace, the character is exclusive solely to the sage but this is not the case. What it means, in truth, is that anyone who cultivates his spirit with nobleness in mind is fit for ruling society. And by immersing in the affairs of this world, one moves toward self-fulfillment that reaches its pinnacle in sageliness: “His is a life that is in the world and yet not of the world.”⁷³

We see, finally, that sageliness, whether in the Confucian or the Taoist tradition, is understood in relation to man’s greatness as an individual situated in society. The sage is the apogee of being a human, actualized only by being identified with the universe or *tian*.⁷⁴ The humanism of Chinese thought, then, lies, not so much in its disregard for what lies beyond the practicality of daily life, nor in its world shunning and reclusion, but in the “unity of man and Heaven” realized in the person of the *sage*.⁷⁵

Theosis and Sageliness: Regaining Humanism

These brief expositions provide considerable perspectives that show how ‘humanism’ is not inimical to the ideals connected with religiosity and other-worldliness. Unfortunately, humanism in our time bids one abandon them, to consider oneself as one’s sole authority capable of bringing about the changes so desired for society, and to eliminate things divine from the mind. They are not real, after all, so it is said, and they have no legitimate bearing on worldly affairs in that it is more probable to reap pessimism by waging on such illusory and false hopes. In the previous sections, the concordance of humanistic and religious ideals has already been alluded to; the task now is to present parallelisms that fortify and warrant

⁷³ Ibid., 327. Note how this seems to echo the Augustinian view of man’s completeness through *theosis*, wherein man is both of the world and not of this world.

⁷⁴ ‘Universe,’ translated as *t’ien*, is a variation of *tian* used to refer to ‘heaven.’ Cf. n. 66. Chuang Tzu says: “Truth comes from heaven...so the sage follows heaven as surely as water flows downhill and finds value only in truth.... The stupid run against this...they can’t follow heaven. Their hearts overflowing with ‘humanity,’ they don’t know the value of truth so they follow along after every change in custom, and never get enough. Now, the Tao is that of which all the ten thousand things are followers. All things that get it live; all things that lose it die. To turn from it in your work is to be defeated; to follow it is completion. So: where there is Tao, the sage reveres it” (*Chuang Tzu*, 31).

⁷⁵ Cf. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963), 3.

the synthesis of *theosis* and *sageliness* as humanistic paradigms. Therefore, one who adheres to either Christian, Confucian, or Taoist teachings and is also attracted to humanism's contemporary impact, realizes that one need not abandon either to pursue that which calls a whole-hearted allegiance.

A question is hence necessitated: If *theosis* and *sageliness* are humanistic indeed, how does this congruence reinvent the contemporary understanding of humanism, or at least, regain how the concepts related to religiosity and other-worldliness also constitute an understanding of humanism? It will help us to see this harmony in the glaring mysticism of the Augustinian tradition, drawing from the springs of Neoplatonism, and Taoism. Adumbrated above is the primacy of grace in Augustinian deification, one that is rooted in his conception of the reality of sin and the Incarnation which, then, gives us the hope of our future glorification, our *theosis*. To him, the other ways in which we partake in divine likeness – justification, incorporation, beatitude – only become possible if God had already preceded it by assuming human nature.⁷⁶ At once, it becomes apparent how the elevation of human nature, although stemming from God, is a 'this-worldly' affair that necessitates the human response.

Augustine invokes the human capacity to go deep within himself, the 'great abyss' of his interiority whereupon the realization of depravity is to be found. There is an appeal for something more that man innately recognizes, one that Augustine himself experienced, and so his call is to return to journey inward and call forth for the restoration of what once was there that has since been marred by sin. The invocation of grace is an admission of "the divine presence in the human soul" which maintains our adherence to God.⁷⁷ Consequently, to lose ourselves in the way towards our very self, that is, to be self-alienated, is to be distant from God as well, and vice versa.⁷⁸ To be in touch with who we truly are according to the consciousness of our very depths is to be one with the "more inward of our most inward."⁷⁹

⁷⁶ From another perspective, this 'wondrous exchange' can be first seen in the light of man's rebellion, the sin of seizing something which belonged to another, i.e., the divinity of God, and so Christ "let go of that which was rightfully his for the sake of others, 'exchanging' his humanity for our divinity." Cf. Meconi, *The One Christ*, 67.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁷⁸ Cf. Benedict XVI, *The Fathers* (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2008), 188.

⁷⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*

Lao Tzu also implores this ideal of returning to, preferably keeping in touch with, our most natural endowment for in doing so “the way is revered and virtue honored.”⁸⁰ Simply put, honor *Tao* and cherish *te*, and this is performed through nothing less than the perfected action *wu-wei*.⁸¹ In the person of the ruler who has attained sageliness, the *te* translates to the accomplishment of tasks not by himself but by his subjects would take on such – nothing is left undone even if nothing was done by the sage, for his nonaction vivifies the action of others.⁸² What the sage enacts, in the most abiding way, is the deliverance of the *Tao* in his very nature: “man models himself on earth, Earth on heaven, Heaven on the *Tao*, and the *Tao* on that which is naturally so.”⁸³ And so just as how Augustine conceives grace as our participation in the divine life, indeed, God’s very indwelling in us, so too, in the same fashion, *te* is that which nourishes whatever is generated by the *Tao* and is the “basic virtue in each thing as derived from *Tao*.”⁸⁴

Complementary to the connection between these two mysticism-tinged currents is the realist and practical character of the intersections of Thomas Aquinas and Confucius. Like Augustine, Thomas grants the primacy of grace in *theosis*, specifically pointing out that grace *per se* is deifying and not merely an instrument to deification. More than the supernatural bestowal of this divine endowment, grace is enacted in the moral and intellectual life of a person: “grace and virtues form a natural coupling.”⁸⁵ While he believes that the ultimate end of grace is the vision of God, its immediate effect on the recipient is the natural integrity of the human nature open to the cultivation of moral and intellectual virtues. Although the strivings of man remain in the natural order, through grace they are nevertheless supervened by the supernatural order that anticipates our completion through the practice of virtues.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ *Tao te Ching*, LI.

⁸¹ Cf. Chen Guying, *The Humanist Spirit of Daoism*, trans. H.G. Moeller (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018), 208.

⁸² Cf. Hans-George Moeller, *Daoism Explained: From the Dream of the Butterfly to the fishnet Allegory* (Chicago: Open Court, 2006), 121.

⁸³ *Tao te Ching*, XXV.

⁸⁴ Cf. Meconi, *The One Christ*, 114.

⁸⁵ Aidan Nichols, *Discovering Aquinas: An Introduction to His Life, Work, and Influence* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2002), 91.

⁸⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 94-97.

Moral virtues, insofar as they contribute to human flourishing and even happiness, are essentially proper to the rational being whose ultimate end is beatitude. To be morally upright, that is, to abide by the natural moral principles obtained for us by reason is to strive for the perfection of the human nature itself – that to which our being *imago Dei* points.⁸⁷ Intellectual virtues, by their nature, stem from the intellectual faculty responsible for knowledge which is itself deifying participation in the divine mind. Confucius likewise gives premium to virtues – *ren*, *li*, *yi*, and *zhi* – that find the sage as their cynosure. If for Thomas, the cultivation of virtues is enhanced supernaturally and in view of a supernatural end, for Confucius, sageliness, “whose intelligence and virtue have been manifest to the utmost,” is to be attained “through spiritual cultivation in one’s secular life.”⁸⁸

Like Thomas, Confucius, too, gives utmost credence to knowledge and the course of learning through which it is developed. Although it is a power natural to all humans, only one “with an unperturbed mind and the most determined will could sustain...the demand for learning.”⁸⁹ Indeed while humans share a common essentiality, it is “learning and practice that set them apart.”⁹⁰ This is what makes the call to sageliness universal, just like how the invitation to *theosis* in Christianity is universal.⁹¹ The path to sageliness, how lofty it may sound, is the same moral platitude resounded by humanisms of every time and place: “learning is a method for improving one’s own character...a process of transformation pursued by one’s self for one’s self.”⁹²

More than this, since sageliness is the core of Confucian humanism, its proximate end is not terminated with oneself; it extends into the larger human community that requires the sage’s moral guidance, for “the task of being virtuous must first come from the ruler.”⁹³ This exactly is the purpose of being a ‘citizen of the universe’ for Confucius, yet still, there is

⁸⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 97.

⁸⁸ Xinzhong Yao, *An introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 216.

⁸⁹ Alfred P. Co, *Across the Philosophical Silk Road: A Festschrift in honor of Alfredo P. Co (Vol. 1: The Blooming of A Hundred Flowers: Philosophy of Ancient China)* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2009), 119.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Cf. Yao, *An introduction to Confucianism*, 216.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 213.

⁹³ Co, *The Blooming of A Hundred Flowers*, 120.

something more, as with Lao Tzu, Augustine, and Thomas. The sage, as the epitome of moral cultivation and human learning, seeks only *Tao* “even if his doing so brings him into poverty” – he aspires to be one with *tian*.⁹⁴ In Confucianism’s innermost and utmost aim, along the path of sageliness and the formation of the sage, in its formulation of humanism, one finds the yearning “to understand *tian* and to apply this understand to social, family and personal life.”⁹⁵

At the outset, humanism was presented as the chief concern in the transitioning paradigm of the Western world, albeit implicitly. It has seen a radical change in the face of the ‘divine,’ the ‘other-worldly,’ but even then, it maintained an inner significance that finds fulfilment in the wholly Other. The humanism of modernity stepped up to challenge what it deemed to have caused the repression of humanity’s expression of its worth – it did set man ‘free,’ but only for the price of an eventual separation from what was once its unconditional and necessary part. In the East, the same interest and import has been duly given to man; humanism is the Eastern tradition’s defining portrait. Nonetheless, this did not hinder its expression of affinity for that which transcends humanity.

At best, this paper offers no direct refutation of the contents of modern humanism, particularly its atheistic variation. What is proposed instead is a humanism regained for a religious consciousness that antagonizes neither humanity nor divinity but promotes a harmonious concordance between them. This kind of humanism exists in the great traditions of Christianity and Oriental thought through their respective ideals of *theosis*, the deification of man, and *sageliness*, the unity of man and *tian*. Needless to say, even with these parallelisms and the initial synthesis, certain elements cannot just be set aside to suggest a total reconciliation of the two systems.⁹⁶ Still, in the end, this should not hinder us from suggesting a complementary relationship that promotes, not the opposition between man and heaven, but the stark opposite that genuinely elevates man.

⁹⁴ Cf. *Analects* 15.31; Cf. Yao, *An introduction to Confucianism*, 214, 216.

⁹⁵ Cf. Yao, *An introduction to Confucianism*, 216.

⁹⁶ For instance, the gap that separates the Western ‘god of the philosophers’ from the revealed ‘God of faith’ reflects the gap that must be crossed from *Tao* to God, and vice versa. Cf. Moeller, *Daoism Explained*, 138-148.

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