

China: Ethical Challenges for Church and Society in a Globalised World

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1. The call for ethics in China

China with its very long history and profound culture has a highly developed moral basis in its society. This culture is influenced by different, impressive value systems, especially Confucianism, but also Buddhism, Christianity, Chinese socialism and others. With the fast economic development in this country – as in other countries in this modernized world –, the question has become urgent of how do we relate these value systems to maintain a common ethical basis in a society and how to allow at the same time freedom of thinking, religion and values. Today, I hear a strong call for ethics in China. Let me mention four eminent and credible sources:

Bishop K. H. Ting impressed me when he said, already in 1989, at the Memorial Meeting on the 10th Anniversary of the Death of Y. T. Wu: “For the church to emphasize service in her works, our theology ought to hold high ethics and morals. ... The starting point for a contextualization seems to be the restoration of the ethical and moral content of Christianity. Christianity is a religion that emphasizes ethics and morals.”^{1[1]} And in the same year he confirmed: “Religion has its ethical dimensions and these play a positive and supplementary role in socialist society.”^{2[2]}

Other high representatives of the Chinese church express the same call for ethics in China. Rev. S. Cao, President of CCC and also teacher of ethics, underlined the importance of ethics when we had a consultation between CCC and the Swiss Federation of Protestant Churches in May 2003 in Switzerland: “Christian ethics is a major task to teach in seminaries today and in future.” Presbyterian J. Ji, president of TSPM and Vice-president of the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, said in the same consultation: “I hope there will be an exchange on Christian ethics and social ethics between Switzerland and China on an academic and regular basis” and he formulated the vision of a “department of ethical studies on the planned new campus of the Nanjing Christian University”.

^{1[1]} Ting, K.H.: Love never ends, Yilin Press, Nanjing 2000, p.334.

^{2[2]} idem, p. 354.

A Chinese delegation of the Jiangsu Provincial Overseas Friendship Association and the Bureau of Religious Affairs visited Swiss officials and the Federation of Protestant Churches in March 2003 for a consultation on “Church and State Facing New Religious Needs”. During the consultation, the head of the Chinese delegation, Mr. Lin Xiangguo, expressed the hope and expectation, “that religions and churches can support the search for ethical orientation in modern socialist China.”

A collection of statements of pastors from CCC under the title “Chinese Christians Attach Importance of Ethics” was recently published in the Amity News Service. The editor notes that “the Chinese government has repeatedly voiced the need to develop a [socialist] spiritual civilization.”^{3[3]}

2. The meaning of ethics for the Christian faith and the churches

Is ethics important for the Christian faith? If yes, why? I discussed this question yesterday with Bishop K. H. Ting, because it seems that in China as well as in Europe and America, there are people who think that ethics has no role to play for the faith – because salvation only comes by faith, and this justification by faith makes moral behavior and ethics meaningless. I give seven reasons why ethics is important for Christian faith:

- 2.1 God acts first. The tri-unite God, in which we believe as Christians, creates as Creator, liberates as Jesus Christ and reconciles and loves as Holy Spirit before we as human beings start doing anything. So, we do not start with our own action, because our action is only a re-action to God’s action. It is very important for Christian ethics to underline that God acts long before we do anything.
- 2.2 The second reason for the importance of ethics is the following formula: Grace + Faith + Behavior = Salvation. That means: we as human beings make the distinction between faith and behavior, first we believe and then we act, but for God that is one. So it is only our human limitation that makes the distinction. Of course, we confess “justification by faith”, but the ethical behavior is the logical consequence of God’s grace and our faith. Faith without a corresponding behavior is an empty faith, a meaningless faith.
Let me say one more word about grace. Grace is what God offers to us. It includes forgiveness. Forgiveness is an important part of liberation. With forgiveness, we are free to act and take responsibility even if we cannot act according to God’s will. So there are some Christians who fear they could make mistakes here and there: “I don’t want to act because I could become guilty.” That’s wrong! God invites us to have ethical behavior as consequence of his grace and forgiveness.
- 2.3 Many Christians, especially fundamentalists, believe that eternal life will only be possible by confessing faith in words. That is only half of the truth. As I said, grace plus faith plus behavior brings eternal life. I would even say that God’s grace offers us the freedom not to care about our personal salvation. That is a very important sentence! God liberates us from being concentrated on our own salvation, always

^{3[3]} Amity News Service ANS, April 2003, p.2.

thinking about how I can get eternal life; that is also a kind of egoism and sin. No, God offers us grace and then I am free not to care about my eternal life but to care about the needs of my neighbors. I know that my life is in God's hands, and that makes me free to care for the poor, the weak, those who need us, and to care for the society and the earth.

- 2.4 A fourth reason why ethics is important and an integral part of faith: The Greek New Testament word "metanoia" means to turn around, to reverse. It means a new orientation of the whole life in all its dimensions. It means that we change the direction of our thinking, our spirit, our body and our material existence. A new existence means: all that we are is new, also our behavior.
- 2.5 Preaching the liberating gospel and healing through diaconal work are two sides of the same coin, in the life of Jesus as well as in the life of the church. They cannot and should not be separated.
- 2.6 The Bible gives a lot of indications for Christian ethics. The Old Testament professors and the New Testament professors at the Nanjing Theological Seminary know a lot about it. The Bible is very rich in teaching ethics. Of course, there are different ethical positions: the ethical call of prophet Isaiah is different from the Deuteronomic ethics or the wisdom literature in the OT, but all these authors express an ethical re-action to God's action and revelation. The Bible is not abstract on ethics. Augustine once said: "Love – and then do whatever you want." In a way that is a very true sentence: love is the most important expression of Christian ethics. If we love, we will behave in a right manner. But then, immediately the question follows: love – what does it mean? In today's China, in Nanjing, in Switzerland, in Britain or in South Africa? We therefore need help to know what it means to love. The Bible gives very concrete examples for it: With the Ten Commandments (Ex 20), with the Sermon on the mountain (Mt 5-7) and with a lot of other texts. That also includes that the "old law" in the Old Testament is transformed by the "new law" of Jesus Christ, but remains at the same time in this transformed way still valid for Christians as I recently explained in more details⁴[4].
- 2.7 The seventh reason may be the most important one for the role of ethics in Christian faith. As Christians we believe that God is creator and king of all that exists. That means no sphere of life can be excluded from being responsible to him. Every aspect and minute of my life is part of that responsibility where we respond to his grace. Every aspect is under his kingdom. God invites us to be his co-workers for his kingdom.

Let me conclude this first issue with the following remark: Christian Theology has to emphasize the importance of ethics for Christian faith and the church. But on the other hand we must avoid to think that theology is only ethics! There is for example the German professor of ethics Trutz Rendtorff who reduces theology to ethics by teaching an "ethical

4[4] Stückelberger, Christoph: Le rôle de « La Loi et des Prophètes » pour l'éthique chrétienne selon Matthieu 5, 17-20, Nanjing Theological Review (China), No 54, 1/2003, p. 97-107.

theology”⁵[5]. That is in my view wrong because to praise God in worship and liturgy is crucial for Christian faith and cannot be reduced to an ethical behavior. So we have to find the right balance: Faith is more than ethics. But faith inevitably leads to ethics.

3. All theological disciplines can contribute to Christian ethics

Within theology, all theological disciplines can and should contribute to Christian ethics. Old Testament, New Testament, Dogmatic, Philosophy, Church history, Science of Religion, Practical Theology, Sociology etc. all of them contribute to Christian ethics. They can show the biblical diversity and contextual ethics, warn and enlighten us by historical analysis, systematic reflection or empirical data about existing moral behavior in today’s society.

4. Ethical Challenges in the globalized world

Today’s world is – at least partially – globalized and in many parts of the world fast changing.

4.1 Characteristics of the – partially – globalized world

- *Interdependence.* If there is an economic crisis in China, we feel it⁴in Switzerland. If there is a climate change, everybody on earth is affected.
- *Mobility.* There are a lot of people moving around the world as tourists, as business people, as migrant workers within countries and internationally. That is only possible because of the non-renewable and renewable energy sources that we exploit. I was recently in Congo in Africa in an area where there are only about five cars in a region as big as Switzerland, almost no roads and no possibility to move by bicycle. So, mobility means nothing but walking. The other extreme is to be able to be almost everywhere on this globe at any time.
- *Open borders.* Global trade is only possible because goods and services are exchanged across borders.
- *Centralization* in some fields and *de-centralization* of activities in others. For example, the media-ownership is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few. A few globally acting companies in the world control very big parts of the international Internet market and new technologies. So there is a lot of power concentration in a few hands. But we also face de-centralization: Internet and other communication technologies can – theoretically – be used by everybody which leads to decentralized knowledge.
- *Technological revolutions.* Globalization is to a great extent influenced and enabled by technological innovation. Especially information technologies, bio-technologies, transport technologies, nano-technologies and new instruments of the financial markets play a vital role.

⁵[5] Rendtorff, Trutz: Ethik, Vol. 1, Kohlhammer Publishers, Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln 1980.

- *Acceleration.* Everything goes faster and faster. This creates also ethical problems. The technological and economic globalization is very fast, the political integration in continental or global structures is of course slower because political processes need time. And the ethical globalization is the slowest process because changing behavior and value systems often needs one generation or more.
- *Pluralism.* To have open borders means we are confronted with different value systems, with different ethics, with different worldviews. This may also provoke value confusion.

4.2 Ethical chances and risks of the globalized world

Chances

- More wealth
- More consumerism
- More information/knowledge
- Mutual enrichment
- More mobility
- More personal comfort
- Faster technological revolutions
- More freedom

Risks

- Deeper gap poor-rich
- Less solidarity
- More confusion
- Vulnerability/instability
- More broken relations
- Less environmental sustainability
- More technological risks and destruction
- More individualism

Interdependence offers opportunities for more wealth because we can exchange goods. We can buy Chinese goods in Switzerland and you can buy Japanese cars, whatever. But it also creates instability, because if something is happening like the Asian crisis, then not only Indonesia, Thailand and there economies were heavily affected, but at the same time also those of Europe and America. So it is like a storm. A crisis starts in one corner of the globe and can affect the whole world. On my way to Nanjing I found a book in an airport shop with the shocking title “The Coming Collapse of China”⁶[6]. If China’s economy really collapsed – because of a banking crisis or for other reasons – a worldwide economic depression would inevitably follow.

4.3 Challenges for the diaconal task and ministry of the Church

Fast changing societies are confronted with manifold ethical and diaconal challenges. The “State of China Atlas”⁷[7] shows charts about equality and inequality, employment, agricultural, industrial changes, the development of traffic, environment, energy and investments in China. Especially the development of social security systems represents a huge ethical and social challenge in fast changing societies when traditional family systems brake down and new social security systems are not yet established.⁸[8] Also, the rapid changes in family relations, sexual behavior, drugs and prostitution calls for diaconal services and ethical answers from the side of the Churches. Growing inequalities between poor and

⁶ Chang, Gordon, G.: The Coming Collapse of China, London 2002.

⁷ Benewick, Robert/ Stephanie Donald: The State of China Atlas. A dramatic visual survey of the World’s fastest growing economy, Penguin Reference, London 1999.

See: Wang, Huijiong: Integrated Study of China’s Development and Reform. Preliminary Exploration of Social System, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing 2003.

rich challenge the Churches teaching the just distribution of wealth and the equal dignity of all human beings as God's image. Fundamentalist tendencies add additional ideological, political and social tensions. Fundamentalism means to reduce the complexity of the world to a few very simple answers. This is an attempt at overcoming insecurity and confusion provoked by the fast changes. All these developments bring additional tasks for the social service work and ethical responsibility of the churches as well as of the governments.

4.4 Challenges for the different themes and sectors of Christian ethics

If we believe that God is king of the whole world (see above 2.7), no sphere of our life can be excluded from responsibility to God and to his world, that means from ethical responsibility. All spheres of life are affected by today's challenges and are subject to Christian ethics⁹:

We distinguish six main domains of ethics:

Life ethics includes specific domains like health ethics (what kind of medicine should we take or not take), medical ethics (what kind of treatment, e.g. gene therapy, is allowed or not allowed), ethics of sexual relations (procreation, forms of sexual behavior), bio-ethics (the beginning and end of life, children's mortality, longevity etc.)

Community ethics is the second main domain. As human beings we do not live alone. We are always related to others. What life-style do we have in community? Marital and family ethic. Whether homosexuality is allowed or not is a controversial and hot question in Christian debate. The question of ethnic communities or minorities in a community, and also what we call the inter-generational ethics. That means the community between us, the living generations, and the future generations.

Environmental ethics: God's creation includes human and non human life and the whole non-living environment. Resource ethics asks: how much energy are we allowed to use in order to allow future generations to still have natural resources and in order to maintain God's environment? Ethics of bases of life, biodiversity ethics, animal ethics (for example, is it allowed to genetically modify a cow or other animals?) Or is that not allowed?¹⁰[10] In addition, all these questions have a global dimension in a globalized world: for example, if the Swiss government says no to research or production of genetically modified animals or plants, the Swiss company who wants to produce or use genetically modified material, threatens to do it in France or China. We as Christian churches are therefore confronted with the question: What is our response in Switzerland and in China? How can we communicate about this, exchange our arguments and concerns. That is an important task of common academic ethical research and ethical networking on an international level.

⁹[9] Graphic from: Stückelberger, Christoph: Global Trade Ethics, WCC publications Geneva 2003, p. 2. Chinese edition: ..., Nanjing 2004.

¹⁰ The Swiss Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology ECNH of the Swiss government, where I am member, has to answer questions such as: Is it ethically justified to create animals which produce medicine in their milk or a blue-colored dog just for fun or to genetically modify rice? See the website www.ekah.ch.

Economic ethics is very important today because in a market economy the individual economic actor (companies, traders, consumers etc.) has to find ethical guidelines in his freedom of decision. Corporate ethics or business ethics deals with responsibility of companies. Labor ethics with labor standards and rights. The working hours, salary systems, level of profit, investment policies are questions of business ethics. The ethics of economic policy which can be justified by Christian ethics – or probably also qualified or criticized if necessary –, deals with the macroeconomic order. Trade ethics¹¹[11] becomes very important with today's fast increasing international trade. Consumer ethics – does it really care about the wellbeing of consumers? Professional ethics sets standards for the professional activities of a medical doctor, a researcher in a specific field etc.

Political ethics: How can we find a political order where Christian values are put into practice? The ethics of legal systems. The government ethics, peace ethics or land ethics (how to distribute land in an equitable way?) are in many countries very crucial ethical issues.

Ethics of cultural and religious life: media ethics (what is the responsibility of media?), sports ethics etc. Christian ethics became very specialized in order to be able to give concrete and helpful answers for all these challenges.

5. Basic Christian values

Christian Ethics in itself is pluralistic because the different biblical authors express different sides of the same coin of God's revelation, according to their respective context. But at the same time, we can find common Christian values behind these different approaches of the Deuteronomist, the prophets, the wisdom literature, Jesus' and Paul's teaching. These fundamental values are independent of context and possess long-term validity. On a second level, they then need to be confronted with a concrete context. This process of transformation and contextualization of fundamental values leads to practical standards (they are often called maxims) which, context-related, can be modified according to the specific situation.

I see eleven fundamental Christian values as the basis of Christian Ethics relevant for the individuals as well as for the society:

- Preservation of life
- Justice
- Freedom
- Sustainability
- Peace

¹¹ See: Stückelberger, Christoph: Global Trade Ethics, WCC publications Geneva 2003, Chinese edition: ..., Nanjing 2004.

- Solidarity
- Dignity
- Partnership
- Trust
- Responsible use of power
- Forgiveness

All these values have different dimensions which I further develop in my book on “Global Trade ethics”¹²[12] but cannot be done at this place.

6. The relationship between Christian Ethics and Socialist Ethics

Bishop Ting expressed – after 50 years of leadership in the year 2000 – the relationship between Christian faith and socialist ethics as follows: “Our future vision of the Chinese church is one that is rich in a theology that respects reason and is more suited to Chinese socialist society.”¹³[13] Christian Ethics in his view should be reasonable so that also Non-Christians can understand it, and it should be committed to the society, in the Chinese case the socialist society.

Each Church has the task to define its relationship to its own society. As Swiss Churches, we face the challenge to formulate (economic) Christian ethics in the context of a socially regulated market economy which becomes more and more an economy of Manchester capitalism – without social regulations and responsibility and global free trade as its highest principle. The Chinese Church faces the challenge to formulate Christian ethics in the context of a socialist society which integrates elements of the market economy in a fast process of transformation.

The first task and goal of Christian Ethics is not to defend existing economic models, neither socialist nor capitalist ones. Christian ethics has to define and defend the Christian core values such as justice/equity, community, peace, freedom and sustainability, that means caring for the poor and the weak, using freedom for the benefit of the community and not for egoistic exploitation of others, being responsible for the environment and social and political peace. If we then compare these Christian values and ethics with socialist ethics we see that there are many similarities between them. I mention some of them:

¹² Explained in detail in: Stückelberger, Christoph: Global Trade Ethics, WCC Publications, Geneva 2003, chapter 3, p. 41-70 [add the Chinese title of the book]

¹³ Ting, K.H.: My view of these fifty years (Tian Feng Monthly July 2000) in Janice and Philip Wickeri (eds.): A Chinese Contribution to Ecumenical Theology. Selected Writings of Bishop K. H. Ting, WCC Publications, Geneva 2002, 111-113 (113).

- justice, especially the distributive justice and justice as equality
- the golden rule of mutual respect (Matthews 7,12)
- The community-centered approach: our behavior should strengthen community
- The people-centered approach. The people, especially the weaker members of the society should be in the midst of our concern
- The common goods which are as important as the private property.

At the same time, Christian ethics can contribute to deepening and sharpening socialist ethics, and has to take a critical standpoint, where human dignity is not respected. There was a very intense dialogue between Christian and socialist ethics in Europe when I was a student in the seventies.¹⁴[14] It could be helpful to analyze if that dialogue could stimulate the efforts of the Chinese church to redefine its role in the modern socialist Chinese society.

A dialogue means to identify common convictions but at the same time to identify differences and to make them bear fruit. Christian ethics therefore can support socialist ethics and challenge it by emphasizing how the faith in Jesus Christ as the foundation of Christian ethics can contribute to a human society and a socialist spiritual society.

7. The relationship between Christian, Confucian and Buddhist Ethics

An other challenge is to clarify the relationship between the Christian, Confucian and Buddhist ethics in order to find “A Global Ethic”¹⁵[15] and common ethical grounds for the Chinese society; and at the same time the challenge is to increase mutual respect for the differences in these value systems.¹⁶[16]

¹⁴ See e.g. Lochman, Jan Milic: *Christus oder Prometheus? Die Kernfrage des christlich-marxistischen Dialogs und die Christologie*, Furche Verlag, Hamburg 1972; Gollwitzer, Helmut: *Die marxistische Religionskritik und der Christliche Glaube*, Siebenstern Taschenbuch Verlag, München/Hamburg 1970; Brakelmann, Günter: *Abschied vom Unverbindlichen. Gedanken eines Christen zum Demokratischen Sozialismus*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gütersloh 1976; Zwiefelhofer, Hans: *Christen und Sozialismus in Lateinamerika*, Jugenddienst Verlag, Wuppertal 1974.

¹⁵ See Küng, Hans and Kuschel, Karl-Josef: *A Global Ethic. The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions*”, Sichuan People’s Publishing House, 1997 (Edition in Chinese)

¹⁶ See Küng, Hans/Ching, Julia: *Christentum und Chinesische Religion*, Piper Verlag, München/Zürich 1988 [add the Chinese Title and year!!]; Weber, Max: *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen. Konfuzianismus und Taoismus*, Schriften 1915-1920, Tübingen 1991 [add the Chinese or english title: Webers book on Confucianism and economic ethics]

The profound community-orientation is common in Confucian¹⁷[17] and in Christian ethics. Even if modern Western Christianity seems to be rather individualistic, Christian faith in Asia, Africa and Latin America is based on the community. Christians can also learn from the important concept of respect for all living beings in the Buddhist value system and can compare it with God's call, "to till and to keep/conserve" the garden of Eden and therefore the whole creation (Genesis 2,15).

But there are also differences between these value systems which cannot and should not be denied and which have to be discussed. An example: The famous Theologian Hans Küng (of Swiss origin and teaching in Germany) mentions as the main difference between Confucius and Jesus, that "Confucius was backward oriented, to the past and the better past of the early empire" whereas "Jesus was forward oriented, to the better future, the coming kingdom of God."¹⁸

8. Ethics as the basis of the diaconal services of the churches

Ethics is not just a theoretical or metaphysical exercise. The goal is to help people to find orientation for their daily decisions as father and mother, in professional life, as politician, worker or company CEO and up to national and international decision making processes. Ethics is the basis of the diaconal services of the churches. It tries to understand God's love for humankind and his whole creation and tries to translate it into the modern context. In Swiss and other European churches we describe the diaconal work of the churches in seven dimensions which respond to the ethical needs of our people:

- Diaconia for *disabled people*: the sick, the handicapped, the prisoners etc.
- Diaconia for *different ages*: old and retired, young, single people etc.
- Diaconia for *relationship and integration*: women's and men's groups, integration of migrants in a society, family counselling etc.
- Diaconia by *media work*: orientation by information and analysis etc.
- Diaconia for *worldwide solidarity*: development cooperation, solidarity between churches etc.
- *Environmental* diaconia for the integrity of creation etc.
- *Economic* diaconia for fair economic relations
- *Political* diaconia for peace in a society and between societies etc.

17 De Bary, WM Theodore: Asian Values and Human Rights. A Confucian Communitarian Perspective, Cambridge/London 1998.

18 Küng, Hans, idem, p.134 (German edition).

Diaconia in all these dimensions is the concrete and visible result of Christian ethics. Both need each other.