

*The 8<sup>th</sup> Asan Distinguished Speaker Series*

## “Confucianism and Cosmopolitanism”

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The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

The Asan Institute for Policy Studies held the 8th *Asan Distinguished Speaker Series* with Fred R. Dallmayr, professor of the departments of philosophy and political science at the University of Notre Dame on June 5, 2012, with a presentation titled “**Confucianism and Cosmopolitanism.**” Professor Dallmayr focused on how cultures and civilizations encounter and interact with one another, how Confucianism “fits in,” and whether Confucianism can be a viable partner in the global *cosmopolis*. This lecture was originally written for the First Níshān Forum, held in China near the birthplace of Confucius, as part of a “dialogue of civilizations,” originally proposed by former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami.

*How do civilizations relate to one another?*

Professor Dallmayr believes that there are three main forms of relations between civilizations, the first of which is ‘isolationism,’ the deliberate avoidance of contact between cultures. This form of rejectionism is caused by fear or arrogance and concentrates on native or indigenous legacies. While outsiders are not necessarily vilified, they may simply be considered insignificant or inferior. The perceived advantage of this is the exclusion of harmful or destructive influences, especially those that would debilitate traditional ways of life. Isolationism may, in some cases, offer protection for comparatively weaker societies from being overrun. The disadvantage is the danger of cultural stagnation, the stifling of impulses toward innovation and cultural reform. In

China's Qing Dynasty, isolationism led to scientific stagnation, unequal treaties, and different forms of outside control. Isolationism had less detrimental results during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the United States, largely due to the country's dynamism.

The second form is through 'imperialism' or 'unilateralism', the total or partial imposition of one culture on another, which can be more in terms of subliminal processes of cultural contagion than political design or deliberate strategy. Contemporary examples of the former include 'Westernization' or American movies. When this form of cultural interaction is backed by administrative or military powers, it is called 'hegemony' or 'colonialism'. This form of interaction is a temptation of large civilizations, but can serve in small-to-medium sized powers seeking to create a form of 'greatness'. The perceived benefit of imperialism is the acquisition of geo-political power. The disadvantage is the lack of legitimacy, the bane of all forms of unilateralism. It also comes with the danger of cultural autism and the retardation of empires, as witnessed in ancient Macedonia, Rome, and modern Britain. It can also be found in the histories of Japan and Islamic empires. China historically found a sense of fullness within its own borders – the Middle Kingdom – which mitigated the impulse for hegemony. The West, by contrast, has historically been marked by a certain restlessness and drive to impose order.

The third form is through a 'dialogue among civilizations', where cultures do not ignore or reject one another, but undergo a process of developing mutual understanding. Unity of culture is not presupposed. Harmony, if it exists, is tentatively anticipated to require constant work, questioning, and the testing of one another's sincerity. Dialogue does not aim at mutual enmity or destruction, but recognition of valid and valuable opponents, as in the Olympic Games. Encounters such as these are rare, but include 1<sup>st</sup> Century encounters between Christian theologians and Greco-Roman thought; intellectual interaction between the traditions of Islam, Christianity, and classical Greek thought within the Abbasid Caliphate of the 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> Centuries; and between Buddhists, Taoists, and Confucians in the Far East. This is the form of interaction between civilizations that is the most worthy of being pursued.

*How does Confucianism “fit in”?*

For Professor Dallmayr, Confucius is the epitome of the idea of being ‘civilized’. Confucianism, now making a significant “come back” in China, comes in many forms. One Taiwanese scholar distinguishes three versions of Confucianism: the philosophical-spiritual; the public-political; and popular grassroots beliefs and practices. One mainland Chinese scholar distinguishes philosophical from public-institutional forms of Confucianism. Dallmayr posited that if Confucianism is to be considered in a public-institutional light, then it can only ever have regional relevance.

In past Chinese dynasties, Confucianism was an official ideology, a backbone of political regimes, as it was in *Chosun* Korea. In contemporary East Asia, and more particularly in China, political Confucianism is not absent or defunct. Some Chinese scholars see Confucianism as the answer to “corrosive” Western influences – globalization, liberal democracy, etc. – which they claim are rooted in “selfish impulses.” Other prominent Chinese thinkers, fearing the undermining of the fabric of Chinese identity, see Confucianism as instrumental to the political regeneration of China. These scholars argue that human desire must be constrained by “heavenly law.” They focus on a form of Confucianism that emphasizes human salvation and the emergence of a “sage king,” thereby attributing a distinctly religious character to their understanding of Confucianism.

According to one contemporary Chinese social theorist, opposed to modernity and desiring to restore China’s ‘Chinese-ness’, Confucianism is the vehicle for returning the legitimacy that was tarnished by China’s Cultural Revolution and providing justification for a “benevolent authoritarianism.” Leaders schooled as Confucian scholars would here be fit to rule because they alone would “know the will of heaven.” The re-Confucianization of China envisioned here involves three agendas: to Confucianize the Chinese Communist Party, to Confucianize Chinese society, and to spread Confucianism around the world.

Dallmayr then discussed the 1958 *Manifesto for a Re-appraisal of Sinology and*

*Reconstruction of Chinese Culture*, signed by four prominent Confucian scholars of the time. The manifesto both criticized Western scholars' tendency to look down on Chinese culture from "towers of rationality and modernity" and called for receptivity to Western trends, envisioning a cultural and political reconciliation between East and West. The manifesto called for all cultures to be taken seriously and to retain what is best from each. To Dallmayr, the 1958 manifesto charted a more promising line, which didn't support expansionism or retreats into national identity, the two great temptations in inter-cultural dialogue.

### *Can Confucianism be a viable partner in the global cosmopolis?*

Confucianism has much to offer dialogues among civilizations. Confucian ontology, if it exists, is not arrogantly triumphalist or self-enclosed. Chinese philosophical traditions oppose ontologies of substance and pursue studies of philosophical *relationism* or *relationology*. According to Chinese philosopher Tu Weiming, selfhood does not exist in isolation but acts as a center of relationships that ultimately embraces the wider world community. Confucianism captures this thought in its descriptions of the five basic relationships, which are not simply empirical or sociological facts but ethical realities, possessing distinct obligations and responsibilities on both sides that are to be found in all societies. Though Confucian understandings of relationships need to be rethought in light of modern experience and democratic aspirations to overcome their reliance on unequal hierarchies, Confucianism's emphasis on *relations* has much to contribute to inter-cultural dialogue.

An even more significant contribution that Confucianism can make is the importance it places on the 'ethical inspiration' that undergirds Confucian teachings. This is exemplified in the Confucian cardinal virtues, especially in the Confucian virtue of *Ren*. In *Analect 6.28*, Confucius says, "To advance, help others to advance." Tu Weiming emphasizes that this is not a Kantian abstraction, but a virtue that acts as a "governing living metaphor" in human relationships that demonstrates a willingness to establish others, rather than focusing on narrow self-identity. Openness must be cosmopolitan in

direction. Tu Weiming believes that Confucianism in our time has two interdependent trajectories: to deepen appreciation of one's subjective understanding, and to broaden one's sensitivities and approaches to others. Confucianism teaches one to de-center oneself without erasing the willingness to learn, to struggle to eliminate egoistic desires and instead nurture one's receptivity and the broadening of one's understanding of others. Confucianism fundamentally compels one to learn and repeat what one has learned of the relations between oneself and others.

Finally, Confucianism as a partner in the dialogue among civilizations may contribute to reaching for the "promise of democracy," the eminently ethical goal of attaining mature, popular self-rule. To Dallmayr, liberal democracy – driven by self-interest and modern capitalism – has not yet achieved this goal. Communism commits the error of overly deemphasizing the individual. But Confucianism teaches the importance of community and communal identity. He concluded that the task of contemporary political philosophy is to overcome the conceptual division between radical individualism and communitarianism – a byproduct of the Cold War mentality – and to rethink complementarity, the freedom of each being co-dependent on the freedom of others, and ethical responsibility.

\* The *Asan Distinguished Speaker Series* delivers insightful and stimulating public lectures by prominent researchers and policymakers on a wide variety of topics in global politics, economics and society. Such lectures offer unparalleled opportunities for audience members to meet many of the world's movers and shakers in the intimate setting of the Asan Institute's auditorium.