

BEIJING FORUM 2010: Inter-faith Dialogue between Jürgen Moltmann and Tu Weiming

Peking University, Nov. 8, 2010

-- What is the meaning of heaven in Confucian tradition?

-- My own understanding is that heaven is the most powerful creative force in universe; in other words, heaven can be understood as creativity in itself.

The concept of heaven was the starting point of a dialogue between two of the world's most renowned thinkers—Jürgen Moltmann, Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology from the University of Tübingen in Germany, and Tu Weiming, Professor of Harvard University and Director of the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies of Peking University.

On the afternoon of Nov. 6, the Christian-Confucian dialogue between the two was held at Peking University Hall as part of Beijing Forum 2010. The dialogue themed “Ecology and Culture of Peace” aimed at probing philosophical and theological issues prompted by the ecological crisis and rethinking the human-earth relationship.



Prof. Tu Weiming



Prof. Jürgen Moltmann

Heaven and Earth; Life and Death

Ancient sages' exploration of the relationship between heaven, earth and humans seems to indicate a new way of development for the modern world. It is a way in which the Earth and humans co-exist and grow together in harmony. The concept of heaven and earth can be found in various cultures such as the ancient Greek culture and the Chinese culture, according to Prof. Moltmann who asked Prof. Tu the question about Confucius' notion of heaven.

“Heaven is everywhere in Confucian tradition; human beings depend on heaven”, Prof. Tu explained. He admitted that when trying to expound heaven/earth and life/death in Confucian tradition, he was also inspired by the Christian theology.

Prof. Moltmann commended that the understanding of death was helpful to understand heaven and earth, and he wondered how humans rely on heaven in light of Confucianism since the Confucian tradition focused more on life than on afterlife.

“Confucius once said, ‘If you don't understand life, how will you understand death?’” Prof. Tu responded. But he soon pointed out that Confucius also cared about death. There was a chapter in *The Analects*, which taught people how to treat death. “To understand the full meaning of life, you have to understand death. To understand humans, you have to understand ghosts and spirits,” said Prof. Tu.



Photographed by: Wang Hanyu

Naturalization of Human Beings

“We have a new concept of earth today,” Prof. Moltmann said. “Human is created in the image of God, but he is the last creature. In the beginning, God created heaven and the earth. So human depends on nature, other creatures and other human beings. He is actually the most fragile creature.” In his eyes, human is not the ruler of nature; human should listen to nature, which treated us so patiently. He put forwards the idea of naturalizing human beings.

Prof. Tu replied that the notion that humans were empowered to do everything overspread due to the advancement of science and technology since the Enlightenment. “The power over everything can be abused,” said Prof. Tu. “Nature is regarded as an object.” Hence, the utilization of natural resources was gradually turning into the abuse of nature, which was the main cause of the unprecedented ecological crisis. Afterwards, Prof. Tu used the story of “Yu the Great Subdues the Flood” as an example for the ideal relationship between human and nature in which human tried to understand nature and the two co-existed harmoniously. He criticized human’s arrogance shown in the story of “The Foolish Old Man Who Wants to Move the Mountain.”

Prof. Moltmann then talked about Noah’s Ark in the Bible, and commented that nature and human were not totally incompatible though the conflict between them was inevitable. At bottom, nature and human were intertwined with each other as a whole. When nature was humanized, human should also be naturalized.

Equal Rights and Reciprocity

From the concept of heaven and earth, life and death, to the relationship between nature and human, Prof. Tu soon raised a challenging question to Prof. Moltmann. “Everyone has the right to have a home, to work, to social welfare. This is not just an American Dream; it is a universal dream. But if we apply this principle to Europe, then all the resources on the earth will be exhausted, let alone applying it to all the people. How can we solve this problem?”

Prof. Moltmann replied that it was true that humans’ basic needs for life, work and security should be met, yet the problem Prof. Tu mentioned had its own diversity. Humans lived in community and changes of groups were needed. In his view, China’s idea of building a harmonious world, for instance, would be a good solution.

As to the interpersonal relationship, Prof. Tu explained it vividly by metaphors. He believed that human beings were not as distant from each other as islands, but were connected to one another, and every individual was also not fixed, but was in the course of continuing evolution, just like streams.

Prof. Tu and Prof. Moltmann also agreed on the principle of coexistence of human beings. Prof. Tu said that the common grounds of various civilizations did exist. For instance, Confucius's famous quote “Do not do to others what you don't want to be done to you” is in common with Christian notion “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” “Reciprocity was the Golden Rule of

coexistence of human beings;” and Prof. Moltmann responded with the Christian idea of “universal love.”

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