

Neo-Confucians Confront Theism: Korean Reaction to Matteo Ricci's Arguments for the Existence of God

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Matteo Ricci is remembered and respected today as an early pioneer in freeing Christianity from unnecessary Eurocentrism. Ricci was among the first to realize that the Christian message could be stripped of western apparel and clothed in Asian robes without damage to the body of religious truths that made it Christian. Ricci, however, did not himself totally escape cultural bias. Despite his external accomodation to Confucian customs and costumes, he continued to think like the European he was.

Recognition of Ricci's residual Eurocentrism does not belittle his accomplishments in China or his influence on Korea. Considering the obstacles he faced, that he gained as many converts as he did, and that those converts were of such high intellectual and spiritual caliber, is an impressive achievement. Ricci came closer to bridging the vast linguistic, conceptual, cultural, and moral gap between East and West than almost anyone else at that time. Nevertheless, the gap remained and would remain as long as Neo-Confucianism continued to be a viable and dominant force in East Asia.

When Ricci wrote *T'ien-chu shih-i* (K. *Ch'önju silüi*) to convert Neo-Confucians to a belief in God, he opened with a series of dry, logical arguments largely drawn from the Thomistic tradition of medieval Europe. He assumed his proofs for God's existence were based on self-evident principles which no rational man could disallow. Ricci's naive

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trust in the universality of western logical categories and assumptions left him unaware that many of his premises with which he constructed his proofs were open to dispute in the Neo-Confucian philosophical universe. What appeared self-evident to Ricci did not necessarily appear so to Chinese or to Koreans.

Most of Ricci's arguments were based on assumptions of transcendence which Korean Neo-Confucians, oriented toward immanence, did not share. He assumed that neither infinite regress nor self-causation were logically possible or even rationally conceivable. Ricci, true to his European heritage, saw the world as temporally closed and ontologically open. His Christian universe had a true beginning in time. Moreover, before that universe could spring into existence, there had to already exist some being not of the universe which could serve as the cause of the existence of the universe. That being was God. Without a supernatural Creator, beyond space and time and yet reaching out with His will to create and sustain space and time, Ricci's universe would lack the external support essential to its production and maintenance.

Neo-Confucians assumed the converse. Their universe was temporally open and ontologically closed. For them the world had always existed and had not emerged out of nothing at some specific point in time. Consequently they saw no need to look beyond the universe for any external cause of its existence. In fact, there could be no beyond to look into. The universe was all there was or had ever been and thus served as its own foundation.

Matteo Ricci presented the Thomistic position in eloquent Chinese:

Nothing can create itself. An external cause is essential. For example, if you see a building, you know it did not construct itself. In every case, you know that building was built by some workmen. It is the same with the universe. It could not have simply created itself. Something must have created it. That Creator is the Lord of Heaven I speak of.¹⁾

1) Matteo Ricci, *Ch'ŏnju sil'ŭi* (Seoul: Kwangdoksae, 1972), reprint under Korean title of *T'ien-chu shih-i*, p.51.

Ricci expected that argument to be universally recognized as logically compelling. He failed to perceive that the limits his European linguistic and cultural heritage placed on his thought processes were absent in the Confucian intellectual tradition. He could not conceive something creating itself and he could not imagine anyone else who was rational and clear-headed conceiving of self-creation, either. He could not prove that nothing could create itself, of course, anymore than he could disprove the opposing Neo-Confucian contention that self-creation was conceivable. By the same token, a Neo-Confucian could neither invalidate Ricci's reasoning nor present an iron-clad argument for his own assumption. Both positions reflect conceptual stances toward the world that are as logically unassailable as they are empirically undemonstrable.

A similarly irreparable rift between European and Neo-Confucian approaches to ultimate reality vitiated Ricci's argument that because an infinite regress of causes is impossible, God must exist. Ricci wrote that, whenever men looked around them they saw that living things were all produced by other living beings, whether through embryos, eggs, or seeds. If they searched for those beings which generated those embryos, eggs, and seeds, they would find still more embryo-, egg-, and seed-producing beings.

Eventually we must reach back before there were any particular species and locate that which was the first to give any life at all. This primal source of life is the Lord of Heaven I speak of.²⁾

Both arguments ran up against the stone wall of Korean Neo-Confucian assumptions of the ontological self-sufficiency and temporal infinity of the cosmos. The twin pillars of Korean Neo-Confucianism, T'oegye Yi Hwang (1501-1570) and Yulgok Yi I (1536-1584), despite their famous disagreement over the relationship between *i* (principle) and *ki* (material force), agreed that *i* and *ki* alone were sufficient to account for the existence of the cosmos and the order it displays.

2) *Ibid.*, pp. 55~56.

T'oegye wrote in a 1568 letter to a friend,

Both movement and quiet in the Great Ultimate are caused by the Great Ultimate moving and stopping itself. Likewise, the widespread implementation of the will of heaven is caused by the will of heaven implementing itself.

True, when we observe how the Ultimate of Non-Being, yin and yang, and the Five Elements mysteriously cooperate, intertwine, and coagulate to produce the myriad entities, it certainly seems as if some Lord is directing the whole process....But this is nothing more than...the mysterious functioning of *i* and *ki* working together to produce things.

There is nothing superior to *i*. *I* directs what things are and nothing directs *i*.³⁾

A few years earlier Yulgok had written,

The myriad transformations all have their roots in yin and yang. *ki* in motion is yang. *Ki* at rest is yin. The alternation of yin and yang is *ki*. That which moves *ki* and stops *ki* is *i*....The sun, moon, and stars, so beautiful in the skies; the snow, rain, dew, and frost fallen on the ground; winds and clouds, thunder lightning; these are all nothing but *ki*. But the reason why snow, rain, dew, and frost cover the ground; the reason why the sun, moon, and stars beautify the skies; and the reason why clouds appear, winds arise, and thunder and lightning occur; for all of these, the reason why is none other than *i*.⁴⁾

Neither T'oegye nor Yulgok addressed the question of when *i* began to operate as the directive force molding *ki* into the myriad entities that comprise the universe. Since they assumed the universe to be of infinite duration, reaching as far back in time as it reached ahead, the question of when it all began did not arise.

Almost two centuries later, in 1724, a young Confucian student named Sin Hudam (1702-1761) read Ricci's *T'ien-chu shih-i* from a

3) Yi Hwang, *T'oegye chŏnsŏ*, 13 : 17a.

4) Yi Ik, *Yulgok chŏnsŏ*, 14 : 55a~b.

standpoint shaped by the writings of T'oegye and Yulgok. Sin summarily dismissed Ricci's thesis that men know, when they observe the order and regularity of the universe, that it must have been created by some Great Craftsman since they have never encountered any house that was not constructed by intelligent workmen. In Sin's view, "the creation of the universe is not at all like the building of a house. And the Supreme Ruler Above can not be compared with a mere craftsman."⁵⁾

When Sin Hudam referred to the Supreme Ruler Above, he was not referring to any transcendent personality consciously creating and governing the universe. Sin used that anthropomorphic term figuratively as Chu Hsi had defined it—as simply one way of referring to the unconscious functioning of impersonal principle.⁶⁾ In orthodox Korean Neo-Confucianism, principle, *i*, formed a universal normative pattern of appropriate interrelationships. *I* linked *ki*, primal matter and energy, in an all encompassing network which rendered Ricci's transcendent Creator superfluous. *I* defined those functions which gave entities their identities and prescribed the proper functioning of each entity in the cosmic order, supplanting God as the author of design in the universe.

Ricci was aware of the challenge the Neo-Confucian concept of *i* posed to his arguments for the existence of God the Creator. He argued, however, that *i* could not be the creative force Neo-Confucians said it was. As he saw it, principle was not itself an independent entity. It could only exist in conjunction with some concrete object. In Thomistic terminology, *i* was an attribute, a secondary characteristic of an entity, rather than a substance, the core entity itself. Before the universe began, there were no principles. After all, when no things exist, there can be no attributes of things. Only after God created the

5) Sin Hudim, "Sōhakpyōn", in Yi Manch'ae, ed. *Phōgwip'yōn* (Seoul: Yokhwadang, 1971), p. 75.

6) For example, see Chu Hsi, *Chu-tzu ch'uan-shu*, 49 : 25a. "The Lord is principle functioning as principle."

universe did principle appear. God, not principle, was the Creator and Organizer of the universe.⁷⁾

Besides, principle was unconscious and incapable of self-movement or volition. Therefore it could not have created on its own the world which contains the conscious and moral mind of man. "Principle can not give other things what it itself does not have. The true source of all things must have a mind capable of conscious knowledge and able to make moral decisions."⁸⁾

Sin Hudam and a fellow eighteenth-century Korean critic of Catholicism An Chongbok (1712-1791), agreed with Ricci that there could be no object without its principle nor could there be a principle without its object. In Western philosophical language, the two were ontologically inseparable. Yet Sin and An went on to claim this ontological unity did not contradict the logical priority of principle. After all, *i* was by definition that by which things were what they were. Queried Sin, "If you say that before an object exists, its principle does not exist either, then how could such an object come into existence?"⁹⁾

An objected that even the Catholic God could not create something without a clear notion of what he was going to create.¹⁰⁾ In human terms, how could a carpenter make a chair before he knew what a chair was? How could the Christian God create heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures that dwell therein before there were any principles defining what the universe—and God Himself—was? Beings did not accidentally or arbitrarily become what they were. The principles which assigned them their specific characteristics and functions give them their identity. No temporal priority of *i* over *ki* was necessarily implied. Both were eternal. These defining *i* were, however, *logically* prior to their concrete embodiment in the union of principle and material force

7) Ricci, *Ch'ŏnju silŭi*, pp. 76~84.

8) *Ibid.*, p. 81.

9) Sin, "Sŏhakpyŏn," pp. 79~80.

10) An Chŏngbok, *Sunamjip*, 17 : 22a~b.

that formed an actual concrete entity. Therefore they, not God, were responsible for the order that prevades the universe.

When Ricci derided *i* as a subordinate property incapable of creative activity, he was thinking of *i* as comparable to the white color on a white horse. The horse may be truly white, yet he would still be a horse if he were brown instead. Therefore in no way could whiteness be deemed essential to the horse's existence nor could whiteness be credited somehow with any role in the creation of horses.¹¹⁾ Neo-Confucian principle, however, governed more what something did than what it looked like. As Donald Munro has explained,

(Principle) accounts not only for the properties of a thing but for the task it must perform to occupy its place in the natural order....The Neo-Confucians take no interest in the properties of a thing, only in its function.¹²⁾

Examples frequently used to explicate principle were the behavior expected of a subject toward his superior and of the ruler toward his subject or the duties of a son toward his father and the obligations of a father toward his son. Function rather than appearance determined an entity as defined by principle.

Korean Neo-Confucians, like their counterparts in China, pictured objects primarily in terms of their roles in the universal immanent natural order of the cosmos, with those roles allocated according to *i*. For that reason, principle could not be dismissed as a dispensable attribute. In the function-based ontology of Neo-Confucian metaphysics, eliminate the functions of anything and you have cast that thing into an abyss of nothingness. Sin found ludicrous Ricci's description of principle as a non-essential, secondary characteristic. Sin complained that Ricci treated principle as though it were some tumor that suddenly appeared out of nowhere and attached itself like a parasite to some

11) Ricci, *Ch'ên-jü sil'üi*, p. 76.

12) A.C. Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers* (London: Lund and Humphries, 1978) p. 18.

already existing object.¹³⁾ Unstated in Sin's criticism, because the obvious did not need to be stated for his Neo-Confucian readers, was the explanation Ch'eng I, the Initiator of Neo-Confucianism, had provided: "That which is inherent in things is principle."¹⁴⁾ Such a conception of principle does indeed render Ricci's presentation ludicrous. It is only to be expected that Sin would conclude, "Ricci does not understand principle at all."¹⁵⁾

When principle was understood as Ricci understood it, *i* could not be the sculptor of the universe. Under the Neo-Confucian definition, *i* could not be otherwise. Principle, of course, was not the creator in the Christian sense of a conscious supreme being who constructed the universe out of nothing at a specific point in time. As was pointed out earlier, Neo-Confucians did not believe that the universe had a temporal beginning. Sin was willing to admit that perhaps this particular universe he lived in was not eternal. But, he cautioned,

The productive and formative work of *i* has never stopped for a moment. Even before this heaven and earth that we know existed, another heaven and earth existed, and there will be another one after this one. If you look into the past, you can not see where this process first began. Nor, if you look into the future, can you see where it all will end. The transformations that give birth to men and other creatures and the alternation of summer and winter will necessarily be the same from universe to universe....How could there ever have been a time when things were not being produced?¹⁶⁾

Sin saw *i* as the author of the universe since it was principle which infused *ki*, the material content of the universe, with determinate shape, form, and direction. Believing *i* and *ki* had always been, Sin felt no

13) Sin, "Sōhakpyōn," p. 79.

14) Wing-tsit Chin, trans., *Reflection on Things at Hand, compiled by Chu Hsi and Lu Tsu-cheng* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 16.

15) Sin, "Sōhakpyōn," p. 80.

16) *Ibid.*

need for a transcendent Creator temporally or spatially separate from the material world.

Ricci's promise that no thing can create itself presupposed the existence of God. Combine that assumption with the insistence that the universe arose in time, out of nothing, and the conclusion that God the Creator exists is undeniable. Deny either one of those presuppositions, as the Korean Neo-Confucians did, and the edifice Ricci erected is seriously damaged.

Conversely, the opposing assertions presuppose the denial of God's existence. Once the possibility of self-creation is conceded, God is no longer necessary, since self-creation is only conceivable in a universe in which a separate and distinct Creator is not required. Moreover, self-creation implies that the universe did not begin at a specific point in time. In fact, it would be unreasonable to believe that the universe suddenly starting creating itself rather than that it is the very nature of the universe to create itself and to have always been doing so.

The Thomistic God was thus alien to the Neo-Confucian conceptual stance toward the world. The Neo-Confucian ability to ascribe ontological self-sufficiency and temporal infinity to the cosmos emasculated Ricci's proofs for the existence of God. Logical argument is impotent against those who do not share the assumptions on which that logic is based. Most Neo-Confucians in eighteenth-century Korea were satisfied with their self-sufficient, self-created, self-organizing, and self-sustaining universe. God as Creator was an unnecessary, and therefore dispensable, hypothesis which even the eloquence of Matteo Ricci could not persuade them to accept.

A careful study of Korean Neo-Confucian reactions to Catholicism indicates that Ricci may have erred in assuming that because belief in God was reasonable that is to say, compatible with logical thinking it was therefore unreasonable to believe the opposite. He underestimated the role of faith. Both Christian theism and Neo-Confucian non-theism are positions taken ultimately on faith. Both positions may be presented

as the logical conclusion to certain rational premises, but differences in what Christians and Neo-Confucians believed about the possibility of self-causation, for example, determined which premises they accepted as rational and which they rejected as irrational. A choice of one from two or more equally supportable but contradictory presuppositions (in other words, a leap of faith) preceded any logical argument for or against theism. Matteo Ricci and his Neo-Confucian opponents both believed in the rational invulnerability and compelling logical power of certain premises which supported them in their affirmation or denial of the existence of God. Neither realized that those premises were premises they had chosen to believe, not premises iron laws of reasoning had forced them to accept.

Conceptual barriers to logical persuasion were not the only obstacles Ricci encountered. To bring Korean Neo-Confucians to Christ, Ricci had to not only reverse the fundamental assumptions which channeled the thinking of orthodox Korean scholars, he also had to change their fundamental values.

The Catholic concept of God, as presented by Ricci, challenged Confucian morality to its core. Neo-Confucians placed the highest value on man's interaction with his fellow man and on the integration of mankind with heaven and earth. The aim of Neo-Confucian morality was the realization of total harmonious cooperation within society and within the cosmos, with each element playing its assigned role within a hierarchically ordered universal pattern.

Neo-Confucian moralists strove to eliminate all divisive selfish interests and biases so that heaven, earth, and man could form a unified organism animated by the moral network of interrelationships they called principle. Catholicism, because of its stress on individual salvation earned by obedience to a God who transcended human society and the natural world, threatened this Neo-Confucian vision of morality. To orthodox Neo-Confucian eyes, the doctrines of Catholicism encouraged a rejection of the earthly community and an attachment to individuality

that would lead to a fragmented universe in which men would be turned from their society and alienated from nature by greed for other-worldly rewards.

Catholicism reminded An Chongbok of those secret Buddhist societies which, emboldened by their belief in the imminent appearance of the Maitreya, the Buddhist messiah, had often rebelled against the government in China. He recalled that as recent as 1758 Korea had suffered a similar disturbance. A shaman had proclaimed herself the living incarnation of the Buddha and incited thousands of peasants throughout central Korea to riot and destroy their ancestral tablets and their shrines to local gods.¹⁷⁾

An feared that if Catholics were allowed to proclaim that their Lord of Heaven had appeared in the West as Jesus Christ, then men would grow accustomed to hearing such "fantasies" and soon the peasant masses would be led this way and that by tricksters crying out that God had materialized here or there. He expected Catholics to protest that it was unfair to liken them to shamans and self-professed Buddhas since Catholicism was the true religion and posed no threat to society or morality. An was ready with the rejoinder that there was no objective criteria for distinguishing the Catholic claims from those made by other believers in supernatural beings. He bemoaned the blindness of his friends and disciples who had become infatuated with Catholicism without realizing that their talk of God and Jesus was "like the whirring arrows that signal the start of a bandit attack." He decried their failure to see that "they have become like maggots eating away at Confucianism."¹⁸⁾

Even if Catholicism was not guilty of inciting such upheavals, An still felt he had sufficient moral grounds to condemn the assertion that God was a concrete entity endowed with a personality. He believed that such a doctrine distracted men from the obligatory ethical tasks

17) An Chongbok, *Sunamjip*, 17 : 12b~13a.

18) *Ibid.*, 17 : 13a-b.

facing them. Because Catholics apparently believed in an anthropomorphic deity, they "wasted" their time in rituals and prayers of no real benefit to themselves or to others. An asked rhetorically if Catholics were truly concerned only with serving Heaven, as they claimed, then why did they advocate abstaining from meat every seventh day, loud praying to beg God's forgiveness for past sins, and other superstitious activities. To serve Heaven properly men needed only discipline their minds so that they could preserve and cultivate their innate goodness through proper self-restraint. Rituals and practices which aimed at currying favor with some imaginary divinity were of no real purpose and took up time and attention better spent on self-cultivation.¹⁹⁾

More pernicious than the waste of time and effort a belief in God encouraged was the threat theism posed to morality's dominion. In Neo-Confucianism, morality reigned supreme and tolerated religion only in the role of a servant encouraging adherence to accepted moral values. An recognized that Catholicism reversed that relationship by treating morality as merely one of many manifestations of the will of God. He feared that men who believed in a conscious and purposeful deity might be more concerned for toadying to the whim of their God than for doing good.²⁰⁾

An and Sin represent the mainstream of orthodox Korean Neo-Confucianism. For most of their contemporaries as well, Ricci's portrayal of God as a transcendent personality, existing totally separate and apart from man and his material environment, had little appeal.

There were exceptions, however. One particularly important exception was Chŏng Yagyong (1762-1836), better known as Tasan. Tasan was one of the most prolific writers and original thinkers in the entire history of Korean Neo-Confucianism. Sandwiched in among the many volumes of his musings on subjects that range from smallpox vaccination to county administration are commentaries on the Confucian

19) *Ibid.*, 17 : 9a~b.

20) *Ibid.*, 2 : 16n.

Classics. Those commentaries provide an alternative vision of Confucianism, one more compatible with Catholic teachings.

Tasan is evidence that Ricci could reach some Neo-Confucians and might have reached even more if he had aimed more for the heart than for the head. The intellectual presentation of God as the Creator and Designer of the universe moved few Korean scholarly minds. A shift in emphasis to the moral implications of the divinely ordained cosmic order may have been more effective.

For example, that the stars and the planets followed a regular course through the skies had little emotional impact on Korean Neo-Confucians. A recognition of mathematical order in the universe did not stimulate a search for an external author of that order. However, if Ricci had presented the regularity of the heavens as an example of cosmic cooperation, of how God has so arranged the universe that all its elements work selflessly together, he would have struck a cord that would have resonated with the Neo-Confucian concern for selfless universal harmony.

If Ricci had gone on to present God as the wellspring of selflessness and impartiality in the universe, he would have drawn a picture with great appeal to Confucians. Instead of the Thomistic argument from design in the universe to the existence of God the Creator, Ricci could have used instead an argument that God was perfect selflessness and impartiality, and that, as such, God supplied the personal grounding for Confucian morality which Neo-Confucianism lacked.

Confucian ethical ideals of selflessness could have been combined with the Christian theology of God as infinite Personality. God portrayed as totally objective subjectivity, uniting subjective interest—His Divine will—with the interests of the whole, is consistent with both Christian doctrine and Confucian values. Sidestepping differences over the origins and longevity of the universe, Ricci could have chosen to stress attributes of God's Divine Nature more likely to address Confucian concerns. In fact, such an argument for the existence of God is

sketched in faint outline, not in Ricci's writings, but in the Confucian commentaries of Chǒng Tasan.

Tasan created what may be deemed a form of Confucian theism. He downgraded the role of *i* and restored an independent identity to *Sanje*, the somewhat anthropomorphic deity of the *Odes* and the *Book of History*. Tasan read *T'ien-chu shih-i* in his youth and it is likely that Ricci's writings influenced his thinking.²¹⁾ However, it is unlikely that Ricci's Thomistic arguments with their roots in western logical presuppositions, had much effect. More effective was Ricci's charge that the Neo-Confucian identification of principle with the God of the Classics was a distortion of the original Confucian message. Tasan, too, wished to recover the personal moral orientation of pristine Confucianism.²²⁾

Tasan denied the Neo-Confucian premise that the ultimate aim of moral action was integration into the all-pervasive cosmic network formed by *i*. He defined morality instead as the first Confucians had envisioned it, as selfless interaction within the human community. He therefore could appreciate what more orthodox Neo-Confucians denied the moral efficacy of belief in the actual existence of God above personally watching and judging the thoughts and behavior of men below.

At the root of Tasan's attraction to theism was a recognition, possibly reinforced by reading Ricci, of moral frailty as an inescapable part of the human condition.²³⁾ Tasan argued that living virtuously required more effort than Chu Hsi and those Korean Neo-Confucians who followed Chu and his theory of inherent virtue had realized. Tasan rejected the Neo-Confucian assumption that the first step toward a virtuous life is to recover the innate virtue of the mind. Neo-Confucians argued that virtue could best be recovered and fostered by focusing inward with serious concentration, keeping the mind calm and unmoving

21) Chǒng Yagyong, *Chǒng Tasan chǒnsǒ*, I, 15 : 42a.

22) *Ibid.*, II, 4 : 2b.

23) *Ibid.*, I, 13 : 37b~38a : II, 2 : 23a.

and free of responses to external stimulation, eliminating emotions of pleasure, anger, sorrow and joy. Tasan charged that such quietism was nothing more than Zen Buddhism disguised in Confucian language. Rather than trying to clear the mind of thought and feeling, men should instead maintain a sense of caution and apprehension, remaining ever aware of how difficult it was to be consistent in the pursuit of virtue and how easy it was to fail.²⁴⁾

With this shift from inner composure to caution and apprehension as the fundamental moral stance, Tasan signaled his intention to extricate man from the universe.²⁵⁾ Chu Hsi had described man as he believed men should be fully integrated into a cosmic network. In Chu Hsi's organic vision, men were encouraged to still emotion in order to eliminate all self-centered drives. Emotion contained dangerous seeds of individuality which threatened to isolate man from nature and the human community and to blind him to the moral principles which lay within his mind. Those principles had to be protected from the distortions of passion and self-interest in order to preserve man's linkage with the universal normative pattern.

Tasan, on the other hand, described men as he believed they actually were, not as they might be perceived hypothetically or ideally. He saw men alienated from nature through their unique possession of moral sensitivity and alienated from each other through the concomitant ability to ignore that conscience and do evil.²⁶⁾ Tasan explicitly rejected the Neo-Confucian doctrine that the universe forms one substance. "None of the ancient Classics talk of all things being one substance....How can plants, trees, and wild birds be one substance with me?"²⁷⁾ Therefore Tasan believed that, rather than stilling emotion in a vain effort

24) *Ibid.*, II, 3 : 6a~7b : 4 : 5b~8b.

25) Michael Katton, "Chǒng Tasan's Philosophy of Man" A Radical Critique of the Neo-Confucian World View." *Journal of Korean Studies* 3(1981), p. 18.

26) Chǒng Yagyong, *Chǒng Tasan Chǒnsǒ*, III, 5 : 34b~35b : 6 : 19a~b.

27) *Ibid.*, II, 4 : 8b~9a.

to remove barriers to linkage with that illusionary universal substance, man should recognize his own autonomous subjectivity by nurturing and preserving a feeling of caution, apprehension, and awe before the external moral power that governs the universe.

Caution, awe, and apprehension combined in Tasan to produce an attitude of *kyŏng*. In previous Neo-Confucian writings, *kyŏng* was a major term rendered into English by various translators as earnestness, seriousness, mindfulness, composure, attentiveness, and prudence.²⁸⁾ *Kyŏng* in that sense referred to a mental state of total but relaxed concentration in which thoughts did not wander nor feelings stir and attention was solely directed toward one thing. "Often this one thing represented the unity of all things in principle."²⁹⁾ In other words, *kyŏng* joined man to principle and protected him from distracting selfish entanglements in the particulars of the material world.

In earlier Chinese texts, however, *kyŏng* is best translated as reverence and refers to the attitude men outwardly display toward another or toward heaven. Tasan revived that original meaning of *kyŏng*. He called for men to reinforce a stance of cautious apprehension of their own moral frailty through a feeling of awe and reverence for *Sangje* the God of the Confucian Classics.

Tasan's introduction of God at this point was not, on the surface, a radical departure from Neo-Confucianism. In his *Admonition on Seriousness*, Chu Hsi had proposed the cultivation of a calm and focused mind as though always in the presence of *Sangje*. Chu Hsi placed the presence of God in the hypothetical because, to him, God was not a person. *Sangje* was merely another name for the impersonal *i*, the normative principles that gave order to the universe. T'oegye, though

28) Wing-tsit Chan, ed. *Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 785.

29) Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind and Heart*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 14.

he too talked of God, supported Chu Hi's "as if."³⁰⁾ Tasan repudiated that interpretation, pointing out that in the earliest Confucian texts there are terms for God which clearly referred to an intelligent personality governing the universe.³¹⁾

Tasan identified a significant contradiction in Neo-Confucian thought and practice. Confucianism was built on social morality, with ethics defined in terms of man's relationship with his fellow man. Men were considered virtuous only if they displayed the proper attitudes and behavior toward superiors and inferiors, parents and children, older and younger siblings, and spouses and friends. Yet Neo-Confucianism demanded in addition that men maintain an attitude of *kyōng*, and *kyōng* could most easily be cultivated by withdrawing from the distraction of the external world of men and objects. Though *kyōng* was intended to be a means to an end, the necessary mental preparation for moral action, Tasan feared that for some it had become an end in itself. Men who achieved inner peace often, like the Buddhists, hesitated to risk that pleasant state in encounters with the real world. He believed that the danger of such a lapse into quietism could be lessened by replacing the abstract metaphysical terminology of Sung Neo-Confucianism with the concrete anthropomorphic language of the Classics.

Tasan feared that the Neo-Confucian turn inward threatened to undermine the tie between internal moral attitudes and external ethical behavior that was the mark of earlier Confucian morality. He sought to revive that tie by reversing the Neo-Confucian orientation and reclaiming an external object of reverence from the original Confucian tradition. Just as men should show respect for their elders, loyalty to their superiors, and filial piety to their parents, when they were alone they should display respect and reverence for God so that they would always remain in a proper moral frame of mind even when no other man was around. Always and everywhere morality for Tasan involved

30) Yi Hwang, "Chin sŏnghak shipdo," in *T'oegye chŏnsŏ*, 7 : 31a.

31) Chŏng Yagyong, *Chŏng Tasan chŏnsŏ*, II, 3 : 4b~5b.

a relationship with another. He rejected the Neo-Confucian concern for disinterested attentiveness to impersonal principle and substituted reverence for God in its place.

Tasan reasoned that only if men were conscious that God watched their every move and knew their every thought would they be able to maintain constant attention to propriety. Abstract impersonal *i* had no power to instill righteous fear into the hearts of men. But awe of God's unlimited vision would keep men from relaxing their guard against selfish desire for a single moment. Men could be persistent and consistent in watching over themselves even when alone only if they remained aware that God, too, was watching them.³²⁾

The God Chŏng Tasan believed in was not yet the Christian God. Tasan called God the ruler of the cosmos, not the creator. His God combined the objectivity of impersonal principle with the intentionality of a personal deity. *Sangje* was credited with the implantation and management of the principles of selflessness and impartiality which provided the order in the universe. In Tasan's Confucian cosmos, however, material force appears to have had no beginning in time and needed no creator. Nor did his God appear directly to men to impart revelation. Tasan wrote that man could learn the will of God only by listening to his own conscience. Furthermore Tasan said nothing of God passing judgment on the souls of the dead and passing out reward and punishments for the deeds of this life. In fact, Tasan said little about God's nature or activities, except that God was to be held in awe as the intelligent governor of the normative principles which directed the universe. Tasan did not bother with the detailed description of divine attributes that occupied so much of the attention of Scholastic theologians. His God was solely a moral force. That was what made him a Confucian God.³³⁾

32) *Ibid.*, II, 4: 22b~23b.

33) Ch'oe Tonghui, "Tasan ūi sin'gwan" (Tasan's concept of God), *Han'guk sasang*, 15 (1977), pp. 106~34; Han Chongman, "Tasan ūi Ch'ŏn'gwan"

Chong Tasan's theistic reinterpretation of the Confucian tradition may be representative of what Yi Pyok, Yi Sunghun, and a few other pioneer Catholic *yangban* were thinking in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Those men took their basic Confucian values seriously. But their determination to be faithful to their moral principles in their relationships with their fellow men led them to conclude that a morality centered on personal interaction was ill supported by a metaphysics of impersonal principle. Tasan replaced principle with a conscious personality ruling the universe and had that God provide a solid foundation for personal ethics. Others went even further and were inspired by the central role of filial piety in Confucian ethics to accept the Catholic vision of God as the father not only of all mankind but also of the cosmos: God the Creator.

Orthodox Neo-Confucians assumed that morality referred primarily to a state of mind. The heart had to be cleansed of selfishness before selfless moral principles could direct interaction with others. The first Korean Catholics were more inclined to stress the ultimate object of moral attitudes and actions. Selflessness for them was not truly selfless unless it was oriented toward an external object of reverence, awe, and apprehension. They did not at first realize that by thus altering the focus of their moral endeavors they were placing themselves in deadly opposition to those who maintained the orthodox Neo-Confucian conception of morality. The shift from an immanent, impersonal normative network to the transcendent, personal substance that was God pulled Confucian theists away from the assumption that social morality was its own justification. When a vision of the human community as morally self-sufficient was replaced by the image of individual souls utterly dependent on God, some were led to wonder if man's

(Tasan's concept of Heaven), *Tasan hakbo*, 2(1979), pp.121~49: Ha Ubong, "Chŏng Tasan ŭi sŏhakgwan'gae ŭi taehan ilgoch'al" (A look at Chŏng Tasan's relationship with Catholicism). *Kyohoesa yŏn'gu*, 1 (1977), pp. 71~112, esp. pp. 97~101.

relationship with God might be more important than his relationships with his fellow men. The result was a bloody persecution of Catholics that cost the lives of Paul Yun Chich'ung and James Kwŏn Sang'yŏn in 1791 and took the lives of hundreds more of Korea's Catholics in the decades that followed.

To men who were content with the non-theistic philosophy of immanence and ontological self-sufficiency that was Neo-Confucianism, to men who defined morality as overcoming selfish interests and divisive individuality in order to become attuned to the universal flow of events which should guide all behavior, Ricci's writings lacked persuasive power. The Catholic concept of God, no matter how well cloaked in Confucian language, appeared to them to encourage a selfish orientation toward the individual instead of humanity and to inspire men to act as though they were apart from the cosmos rather than acting as a part of the universal natural order. These Neo-Confucians feared that if Catholicism were allowed to take root in Korea, men would turn their backs on their parents, their ancestors, their communities, their society, and their government to serve their supernatural deity. Under Catholic influence, men would grow blind to the ties that joined them to the world around them and would be unable to recognize the principles that should govern their actions in that world.

Any Yi dynasty official who feared Catholicism could have a corrosive effect on basic societal bonds was obligated to use the political instruments at his disposal to eradicate the Catholic threat. When basic moral values are involved, toleration is not a viable alternative. When the ethical underpinnings of the state are at stake, the government can remain neither passive nor permissive. Despite Matteo Ricci's mastery of the Chinese language, and despite his skillful borrowing of elements from the Confucian tradition to bolster his arguments for the existence of God, his writings were unable to attract more than a minimal audience in Korea. He based his arguments on assumptions so foreign to the way most Neo-Confucians thought that only a dissident minority

could be convinced by them. As long as Neo-Confucianism dominated the thinking of the ruling elite on the peninsula, and as long as the socioeconomic system which supported Neo-Confucianism remained undamaged by Western and Japanese commercial advances, Korean Catholicism was doomed to remain a persecuted minority in an alien land. It was not until the twentieth century that the seed sown by Matteo Ricci in the seventeenth century and fertilized by martyrs' blood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could grow into the sturdy tree that bears fruit in abundance today.

〈國文 要約〉

韓國 儒學者의 마테오 릿치 神論에 대한 反論

도널드 베이커

필자는 본고에서 「天主實義」에 나타난 마테오 릿치의 神論에 대한 한국 유학자들의 反論을 검토해 보고자 한다. 릿치는 그의 論議의 근거를 중세 유럽 아퀴나스의 전통에 두고 있으며 그는 그러한 이론이 합리적으로 옳으며 반박의 여지가 없는 것이라고 생각하였다. 릿치는 논리적 범주나 개념이 그 자체로서 명백한 것이어야 한다고 생각하였는데 예를 들면 끝이 없는 根源溯及은 불가능할 뿐만 아니라 계속 유지될 수도 없으며, 또한 “無”는 그 자체의 存在理由가 될 수 없다고 하고 있다. 사실상 이러한 전제는 유교(특히 性理學)의 철학과 전통에 완전히 背馳되는 것이었다.

한국 유학자들의 論議는 우주의 本體論의인 자기충족과 현세에 있어서의 무한성을 주장한 退溪 李滉(1501~1570), 栗谷 李珥(1536~1584)의 가르침을 따른 것이었다. 이 전통을 좇아 愼後聘과 安鼎福은 모두 릿치의 이론이 정통 유교의 철학과 반대된다고 하여 받아들이지 않았다.

丁茶山은 유교 경전뿐만 아니라 릿치의 저술을 읽은 후에 카톨릭으로 改宗한 유학자였다. 그는 기독교의 神이 릿치가 옹호하고 있는 유교 경전의 글자 그대로의 뜻과 일치하는 것이라 하여 그 존재를 믿고 있었다. 丁茶山은 또한 神의 존재에 대한 믿음이 道德的 規範을 일관성있게 준수하기 위한 필요조건이라고 주장하였다. 그것은 릿치의 이론이 茶山을 납득 시킨 것이라기보다는 그가 이미 믿고 있었던 것을 재확인 시켜 준 것이었다. 그는 당시의 정통 儒敎와 많은 점에서 반대되는 것을 주장하였다. 그의 儒敎에 대한 神論的 해석은 18세기 末의 李麟·李承薰 등 몇몇의 선구적인 兩班 카톨릭 신자들이 생각하고 있던 것을 잘 대변하고 있다. 그

러나 사실상 릿치에 의해 제시된 神論과 유교 전통에 대한 이해는 당시의 사람들에게는 거의 받아들여지지 않았다. 대부분의 한국 유학자들에게는 릿치가 가르쳐 준 기독교는 그들이 가장 소중하게 여기는 儒敎의 道德的 價値에 대한 위협이자 도전으로 받아들여졌던 것이다.

<Reaction>

Donald N. Clark

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Prof. Donald Baker's paper is about eighteenth century Koreans' attitudes toward Chinese scholars' interest in Matteo Ricci's ideas concerning the compatibility of Christianity and Confucianism. Given the second, third, and fourth-hand nature of these interpretations, I'm not sure a fifth-hand comment will shed much light on the subject, but it may be worth an attempt.

Matteo Ricci, as we all know, was a superbly educated western intellectual, gifted with uncommon talent and sensitivity to his surroundings. His open-minded approach to Chinese civilization set a standard which few others, notably missionaries' have been able to meet. He also came to China at a time of intellectual ferment, when Chinese scholars were not at all in agreement about man's nature and his relationship to the universal order.

Ricci came out of a western rational tradition which trusted in the universality of certain logical categories. He brought this logical approach to China, intriguing many with his scientific knowledge, especially. But when it came to religion—the ultimate purpose of his mission—it appeared to many Chinese that his systematic logic broke down and he was trying to peddle superstition, which is illogical.

One of Ricci's main problems was the transmission of Christian concepts in the Chinese. Certain Biblical ideas were easier than others. Christ as teacher was not difficult. But Christ as the Son of God through a virgin birth was not something explicable by human logic. Neither was the Creation, which assumes the existence of God before all

other things. Chinese Neo-Confucians had cooked up their own metaphysics during the Sung, responding to a need already being met by Buddhism in particular. The interrelationship of *i* and *ki* was a difficult problem for Chinese intellectuals ever after. When Ricci came along he tried hard to fit the Judeo-Christian God into the Chinese scheme of things, but for many Chinese scholars, and especially for later Korean scholars who got the entire business second hand, there may have been points of correspondence in Christian doctrine, but the ultimate sovereignty of an anthropomorphic God was too strange a concept to accept.

How do you fit God into a Confucian world view? Ricci went backward in a regression of causes looking for origins and ending up with the Creation. Perhaps he would have made good use of nuclear physics if it had been available, with modern theories of how matter and energy are related. And yet ultimately, someone or something would have had to set the first electron in motion, and even nuclear physics would have failed to provide a scientific explanation for the original bits of matter and force. Ricci, like all Christians, had to accept some things, at least, on faith.

Confucianists in Korea, as in China, thought of *i* and *ki* as complementary, with neither having priority over the other. Baker tells us that Ricci conceived of *i* as an attribute: the *i* of a white horse is the color white. This was contrary to the Confucian concept of *i* which connoted more the *way* of being, or acting, than the shape or attributes of the white horse. *I* suggests propriety of role and function—the way things should be—which is why understanding of *i* was essential to harmony among people. How could this understanding be achieved? The right balance of *i* and *ki* had to be studied and understood through example and intuition. *Sirhak* (實學) scholars in Korea studied the nature and meaning of things and wrestled with the problem of harmonizing nature and humankind. Ricci's idea that God was behind it all was too easy: it begged the really important questions. Worse, it diverted

people from the struggle to stay in harmony with each other by encouraging them to focus on an external deity. Neither Sin Hudam nor An Chŏngbok could accept the idea of God without asking where the *i*, or defining principle, of God came from, and Ricci didn't provide an acceptable (i. e., logical) answer.

Much is made of Matteo Ricci's flexible and sensitive approach to Chinese tradition. And we know that not all Christians approved of the extent to which he adapted. At bottom, however, Christians believed then as now in a supreme and personal God, and Ricci, like all Christian missionaries, was asking the Chinese to take God on faith. "In the beginning was the word (*logos*) and the word was with God and the word was God... Through Him everything came into being and without Him nothing that exists came into being (John I: 1 & 3). In Korean it's "태초에 말씀이 계시니라, 이 말씀이 하나님과 함께 계셨으니 이 말씀은 곧 하나님이시니라... 만물이 그로 말미암아 지은 바 되었으니 지은 것이 하나도 그가 없이는 된 것이 없느니라." Generations of translators have struggled to convey this meaning of *logos*, Christ Jesus in God the Father preceding all things, and have fixed upon *malssum* to carry the meaning. Sermons are necessary to explain *logos*; more sermons have been necessary to explain *malssum*. Can anyone define God? what is the *i* of God? Christians have to reject this question because *i* defines *and limits*, and God is *limitless*. There can be no reconciliation of these concepts without faith.

In Korea there was no one to argue these points. Ricci did not get to Korea, and even if someone with Ricci's qualities had won the respect of the Korean *yangban*, ministers, and king by formidable displays of knowledge, it is not likely that Ricci's religion would have had much appeal. Chu Hsi orthodoxy was much more rigid in Korea than in China, perhaps (as some scholars have suggested) because the Koreans felt they lacked the right to tamper with Chinese orthodoxy and make innovations on their own. Koreans also "kept the lamp of civilization burning" after China was subjected to barbarian rule, and

the openness of K'ang-hsi's court to western contact was not necessarily a commendable trait.

Chông Yagyong (Tasan) took up these questions again in the early nineteenth century. He went back beyond Sung Neo-Confucianism to the original intent of Confucian doctrine and thought about man's nature, his corruptibility, his unique differences from lower animals, and his ability to become attuned to moral power. Much of the Christian life—as Christians are supposed to live it—seemed consistent with the Confucian life. It was conceivable to Tasan that these rules for living could emanate from the same moral authority, a Supreme Entity, and that it could be understood through a focus on *Sangje*, imperfectly translated as “Lord-on-High.” But meditation on *Sangje* diverted people from the task at hand—harmonizing relationships with other people. It was anti-social, selfish, and unorthodox.

Was Tasan's *Sangje* the Christian God? Church historians are fascinated by this question. It is sufficient to recall that Christianity was leaking into Korea at the time seducing common people into adherence to an alien creed. Perhaps if Christianity had had a broker like Matteo Ricci at that time, the history of the Korean church (and of Korea itself) might have taken a different course. As it was, the orthodox reaction had to be to suppress the Christianity and its ideas, with their clear appeal to the spiritual yearnings of the Korean people.

The fundamental point, as Prof. Baker points out, remains that despite Ricci's attempts to express the tenets of Christianity in a language to East Asian intellectuals he had to take God on faith himself. He went a long way toward answering Chinese (and Korean) questions, but he had to leave it up to individuals to take the final steps themselves.