

Comparative Metaphysics and Theology as a Scientific Endeavor: A Ruist (Confucian) Perspective

An Invited Position Paper By

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Editor's Note: The "Invited Position Paper" segment is a unique feature to SHERM journal where hand-selected scholars are invited to write their particular standpoint or attitude on a specific issue. While the position paper is intended to engender support for the paper's line of reasoning and overall conclusion, the paper is not intended to be a simple op-ed piece. Rather, each essay must be academic in nature by deriving its position from verifiable data and/or the author's training and experience as a scholar in a particular field of study.

In this particular case, the author was asked to answer the following question:

"Can the study of theology and/or metaphysics be classified currently or ever qualify in the future as a scientific endeavor? Why or why not? If yes, what criteria or methods would need to be in place and practiced to make them scientific? If no, what is it about 'science' that prevents theology and/or metaphysics from qualifying?"

Abstract: Understood as being nothing more than fallible assumptions about the boundary conditions of an inquisitive worldview, this article seeks to argue that metaphysics and theology can, in fact, be pursued as a scientific endeavor. If we broaden our understanding of how perceived realities furnish feedback in order to refine preestablished human discourses, Ruist (Confucian) metaphysics and theology especially can be recognized as being historically pursued as a science by its own right. Eventually, the distinction of Western and Ruist traditions of metaphysics and theology, as well as the imperfections in each of them, speaks to the need of mutual learning for constructing a more robust metaphysical worldview in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Metaphysics, Theology, Science, Ruism, Confucianism, Kant, Luo Qinshun

Introduction

DURING A BUSY TIME near the end of my first college teaching year in the United States (2018–2019), I received an invitation from the journal of *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* (SHERM) to write a position paper on the following question: "Can the study of theology and metaphysics

be classified currently or ever qualify in the future as a scientific endeavor?" The decision for me to accept the invitation was easily made because I just finished defending my dissertation on a similar subject one year ago.¹ Here, I argued for a scientific method of comparison to tackle a metaphysical and theological debate in the history of Christian-Ru (Confucian) interaction, yet with no one on the dissertation committee having ever asked me this question on the day of defense!²

The reason why I was not asked the question, I think, is that key members on the oral defense committee, such as Robert Neville (Boston University), Wesley Wildman (Boston University), and Kimberley Patton (Harvard University), are all scholars in the field of comparative religion who understand and practice comparative religion as a scientific endeavor.³ In other words, they all emphasize that a comparativist's interpretation of religions should be based on an objective description of comparative data from religions, with "objectivity" here construed as being achievable through continuous critiques and mutual corrections by a scholarly community. In particular, Neville and Wildman's comparative studies are elaborate in metaphysical and theological themes. Therefore, the committee may have gathered with a default position which implies a very positive response to the inviting question: yes,

¹ Bin Song, "A Study of Comparative Philosophy of Religion on 'Creatio Ex Nihilo' and 'Sheng Sheng' (Birth Birth, 生生)" (PhD diss., Boston University, 2018).

² As noticed by scholars in the field of comparative philosophy and religion, "Confucianism" is a Western misnomer of the Ru (儒) tradition. The term Ru means a generally educated person dedicated to social harmony, and the Ru tradition existed long before Confucius. A detailed explanation of the history on the nomenclature of "Confucianism" can be found in Tony Swain, *Confucianism in China: An Introduction* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 3–22 and Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 45–76. Following the reflective scholarly trend upon this nomenclature, "Confucianism" will be written as "Ruism" or the Ru tradition, and "Confucian" or "Confucianist" will be written as "Ru" or "Ruist" in this essay. Accordingly, "Neo-Confucianism," which normally designates new developments within Ruism during the Song and Ming Dynasties in ancient China (960–1644 CE), will be referred to as Ruism in the concerned area and period.

³ See Robert Cummings Neville, ed., *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001); Wesley J. Wildman, *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010); and Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, eds., *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

manifested in East Asian countries and constituted the foundation of their modernization. More importantly, I believe the third synthesis of Ruism is underway because of its encounter with Western philosophy and religion beginning around the sixteenth century.

Given the distinction and imperfections of the compared traditions, I believe what is urgent for the agenda of Western metaphysical and theological study is to regain the unity of human knowledge and human praxis without undermining its scientific sharpness. During the process, non-Western traditions such as Ruism can undoubtedly provide further insights that will be integral to a new era of global wisdom. On the other side, Ruists need to think about how to incorporate the Platonic conception of an intelligible world into their own lexicon about world principles so that a mandate of harmonization between the West and the East can be carried out more fully in this new era.

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[*Bin Song*](#) is an assistant professor of philosophy and religion at Washington College. He has a PhD of Philosophy (2009) from Nankai University, focusing on cartesian metaphysics and philosophy of science, and a second PhD of Religious Studies (2018) from Boston University, the dissertation of which addresses Christian-Ru (Confucian) comparative philosophy, religion and theology. Broadly drawing upon the historical treasure of human wisdom, Bin Song desires to tackle impending intellectual and societal issues of humanity across disciplinary and cultural boundaries. You can read more about Dr. Song and his work on his website: binsong.live.

MORE FROM THE AUTHOR



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