

The Rectification of Names and Comparative Theology

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「正名」與比較神學

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[ABSTRACT] A name or title does not only designate a person's position but also frames mutual relations. Thus there is a profound intrinsic relationship between language and the truth it intends to convey. Followers of Confucius have long valued Zhengming or the rectification of names as an indispensable quality for living the good life. In interreligious relationships, names can heal or harm; they can express and shape healthy relationships or distorted ones. The traditional Confucian virtue of naming persons rightly offers helpful guidance for one of the crucial concerns in interreligious dialogue, speaking to and about others in terms that acknowledge and respect their perspectives.

The Power of Language

Forty years ago Bernard Lonergan wrote that it was language, above all, that allows for the development of understanding.¹ Sixty years earlier, Martin Heidegger spoke more boldly about the power of language. It is language that speaks, he argued, not human beings.² Nineteen hundred years earlier the evangelist John would write with seemingly even greater brashness, In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God (Jn 1:1). Yet it was over a thousand years prior to John that the greatest claim would be made about the power of words. The Rig Vedas are believed to have emerged from eternal Sanskrit hymns whose time had now ripened to be revealed. These words not only conveyed truth, they literally were truth, corresponding to eternal reality, and whose power could be experienced even in their very vocalization. While one need not embrace all of these claims, they highlight the perduring value of an authentic relationship between language and the truth it intends to convey.

Some religious traditions are hesitant with words and their correlation to reality. According to Laozi's Dao De Jing the dao is nameless (1; 25), and the introduction of names is a perilous venture, even if necessary (32). For the Buddha, Nirvana is *avisayasmim*, beyond any real naming as it is beyond conceptual range. While appreciating the fact that utterly transcendent reality would never correspond exactly to concepts or names that are grounded in the human condition, other religious traditions find words and thoughts

¹ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 70. Interestingly, as this article is about the rectification of names, Lonergan writes, "Prizing names is prizing the human achievement of bringing conscious intentionality into sharp focus and, thereby, setting about the double task of ordering one's world and orientating oneself within it."

² Timothy Clark, *Martin Heidegger*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 74-75.

critical to understanding transcendent truth. We might consider this associated to the analogy of being, that while God transcends concepts and qualities as we would know them, God also corresponds to those concepts and qualities rightly named. Grace builds on nature, Thomas Aquinas taught, and there is a correspondence between the two.³

The Rectification of Names

Naming turns out to be crucial in the Bible, for names reflected something of the very nature of the person. Jacob was renamed by God as Israel, literally “he who wrestles with God” (Gen 32:28). This new name reflected something of Jacob’s very nature. Jesus also renamed his disciple Simon as Peter (rock): “And I tell you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church” (Matt 16:18). The new name Jesus gave to Peter here corresponded not to Peter’s nature, but his crucial role in the community of believers. Perhaps most astounding is the account of God giving Moses God’s own proper name:

But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, the God of your ancestors has sent me to you, and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ What shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Ex 3:13-14).

This name in Hebrew, Yahweh, is so important and personal that God later reminds Moses, “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but my name ‘Yahweh’ I did not make myself known to them.” (Ex 5:2-3)

³ *Summa Theologiae*, Ia2ae.62.1.

Naming things rightly is an important quality in a Confucian worldview. This is known as *zhengming* or the rectification of names. In the Analects (Lunyu) XIII.3 we read:

Were the Lord of Wei to turn the administration of his estate over to you, what would be your first priority?" asked Zilu. "Without question it would be to insure that names are used properly (*zhengming*)," replied the Master. "Would you be as impractical as that?" responded Zilu. "What is it for names to be used properly anyway?" "How can you be so dense!" replied Confucius. "An exemplary person defers on matters he does not understand. When names are not used properly, language will not be used effectively; when language is not used effectively, matters will not be taken care of; when matters are not taken care of, the observance of ritual propriety and playing of music will not flourish; when the observance of ritual propriety and the playing of music do not flourish, the application of laws and punishments will not be on the mark; when the application of laws and punishments are not on the mark, the people will not know what to do with themselves. Thus, when the exemplary person puts a name to something, it can certainly be spoken, and when spoken it can certainly be acted upon. There is nothing careless in the attitude of the exemplary person toward what is said.⁴

On one level, this important text tells us that knowing the right names of things and then labeling them correctly is crucial for political and social order. Xunzi understood *zhengming* exactly, perhaps exclusively, in this manner. In his essay on *zhengming*, Xunzi was primarily concerned with proper language and how clarity both in titles and the roles they reflected was critical to a

⁴ The translation I am using is Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998).

well-functioning society. He was also interested in investigating how one might skillfully invent new names as a changing culture required them. It was a question of precision and order.⁵

It is doubtful that by the rectification of names Confucius only meant naming titles accurately. It seems he had something deeper in mind, that is, living authentically according to one's name or title. For Confucius, the rectification of names required an authentic alignment between what the name or title meant and the behavior that corresponded to that title. This being the case, to the English ear the "rectification of names" may sound like a misnomer. We might ask, "Aren't you really referring to the rectification of behavior?" Such a question would reflect Western language sensibilities rather than a more nuanced understanding of Chinese or Chinese culture. English tends to be a language of substance or essence. If one is a father, for example, then this designates something substantive about the individual. Whether one is a good father or a bad father is another issue; regardless of the quality of acting as a father, one is still a father.

In the Chinese ethos, reality is less understood as referring to concrete essences and more about fluid events within relationships.⁶ Confucius, for example, thought that humans express their unique personhood not by individuation—how one is different from others—but by the creative ways they interact with others. Persons are not agents who stand independently from others; they are primarily considered according to their relationships. These relationships ought to be infused with Confucian virtues, such as sympathy or consideration (*ren*), propriety (*li*), reciprocity (*shu*),

⁵ See Book XXII of *Xunzi*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

⁶ Roger Ames and David Hall, *Daodejing—Making this Life Significant: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), pp. 15-19.

devotion to family and ancestors (*xiao*), and aesthetics (*wen*). In a Confucian worldview, one learns the art of becoming a morally, relationally cultured person. Of course, the status of someone is not lost on the Oriental mind, nor is proper behavior ignored as if unimportant in the Occidental mind. Still, in the West you *are* a father, regardless of how you behave. In Confucianism, however, behavior is primary. This is deeply important in what determines the true name of things.

Confucius saw the political and social institutions of his day in a morass. Those who wielded power were often not only unworthy of these positions, they also simply did not have the appropriate understanding of what such positions required of them in order to discharge their duties in the most beneficial way. They failed both morally and practically. In the chapter just before the discussion of the rectification of names, we find: "Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about governing effectively. Confucius replied, 'The ruler must rule, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son'" (12:11). The transliterated text reads: *jun jun, chen chen, fu fu, zi zi*, thus literally "ruler ruling, minister ministering, father fathering, son soning." Unless this would be a tedious tautology, one ought to include after each clause "properly;" a ruler must rule *properly*.

What we might conclude here is that if a ruler is not ruling well then not only will society flounder, but the name "ruler" does not match the person holding the title. To rectify the name would be for the ruler to rule skillfully, justly and be in appropriate relationships to those relevant to his reign. Without such a rectification, it is not merely that a bad ruler is guilty of poor ruling, he fails to be a ruler at all. In an interesting parallel, Mencius writes about a king who fails to show compassion: "Therefore, that king is not a true king because

he does not do it.”⁷ Does Mencius merely mean the king was not a good king? No, the very failure of a king to perform his duties justly revokes the very term “king.” On the event of the slaying of the tyrant ruler Zhou by one of his ministers, Mencius was asked if a minister is ever justified in killing his ruler. Mencius replied, “One who offends against humanness is called a brigand; one who offends against righteousness is called an outlaw. Someone who is a brigand and an outlaw is called a mere fellow. I have heard of the punishment [slaying] of the mere fellow Zhou, but never of the slaying of a ruler.”⁸

The Rectification of Names in Interreligious Dialogue

If we may sum up the discussion above, the Confucian idea of the rectification of names includes three dynamics. The first is that what we name things ought to correspond accurately to the reality they signify. Second, names are not merely titles but relationships; names refer to a dynamic interdependence among those relevant to the name or title. Finally, rectifying names ought to act as a constant challenge or encouragement to be aligned with what the name or title represents. Can the Confucian concept of rectifying names assist us in interreligious matters? Can Christianity also apply this Confucian concept in order to more fully express its own truth? As we will see below, the rectification of names becomes very useful on both counts.

One of the crucial concerns in interreligious dialogue is speaking to or about the religious other in terms that reflect the religious other’s own perspective. Consider this value aligned with

⁷ Irene Bloom, trans., ed. Philip Ivanhoe, *Mencius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Xunzi's understanding of *zhengming* as striving for respectful accuracy. Take, for example, even the term "religion." Some Western scholars still ask whether Confucianism or Daoism ought to even be considered a religion. There is no God, they point out, no clear spiritual path, no ultimate horizon to strive for, and so on. Some Asian traditions do, of course, provide a sense of the divine, paths to the divine, and a kind of ultimate endgame for the soul. In some Hindu traditions, for example, the ultimate is called Brahman and the religious quest is to escape the wanderings of rebirth and attain the union of Brahman. Compared to the great three Western traditions and even the Asian Hindu tradition, Confucianism and Daoism seem to be missing important pieces. Perhaps they are, and this can be addressed in a respectful dialogue. The point, however, is that the very question presumes a Western understanding of religion, and thus a Western assessment that does not engage these Chinese traditions from their own perspective.

While many Chinese do not embrace an exclusive religious community with specific notions of God and revelation, most of the Chinese population thinks of itself as very religious.⁹ In the Chinese culture, life is an aesthetic act. Living richly and artfully in ways that elevate the soul and give it meaning is being profoundly religious. Chinese people are grounded in tradition, community, family, and history, all of which are sacred.¹⁰ Chinese religiosity addresses questions such as: How does the universe work? What is the nature

⁹ Torri Gunn, *Defining Religion with Chinese Characters: Interrogating the Criticism of the Freedom of Religion in China* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 2011), 17-50. See also Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Religion in China on the Eve of the 2008 Beijing Olympics" 1 May, 2008

<<http://www.pewforum.org/Importance-of-Religion/Religion-in-China-on-the-Eve-of-the-2008-Beijing-Olympics.aspx>> [2013-05-17]

¹⁰ Ames and Hall, p. 11.

of a human being? What does human flourishing mean? These are religious questions indeed.

True appreciation of these venerable Chinese traditions requires a Western self-critical rectification of names. The *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuangzi* offer a metaphysics that does not correspond to traditional Western metaphysics. Western thinkers often assume God (*theos*), from whom comes an underlying creative principle (*logos*) that reflects the divine order and law (*nomos*). Plato believed that morality, natural law, and aesthetics transcended cultural customs. Rather, they are grounded in universal, divinely ordered truths. In contrast, the Chinese Daoist point of view is virtually *acosmic*; that is, there is no concept of a coherent, single-ordered universe. The closest Chinese word for *cosmos* is *yuzhou*, which expresses the interdependence between time and space. And instead of a permanent, changeless, transcendental reality behind appearances, Daoism imagines the ceaseless flow of life. To imagine this tradition as merely a philosophy and not a religion is to ignore the religious reality behind such Chinese perspectives in favor of an imposed metaphysics it wouldn't embrace.¹¹

In Leonard Swidler's classic essay, "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue," his fifth commandment insists that each participant must be allowed to define one's tradition on its own terms. Swidler goes on to explain that not only must the religious insider be allowed to express his own tradition, it is also the case that when that tradition is being discussed by the religious other or "outsider" it is recognized as authentically accurate by the adherent or "insider."¹² Without embracing this rule, dialogue is bound to fail. Robert Florida reports on a Zen practitioner in a

¹¹ Ames and Hall, pp. 13-15.

¹² Leonard Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 20:1 (1983), pp. 1-4.

dialogue stating that he never felt so far from Zen as when Christians were describing it.¹³

An example in taking one's own religious sensibilities and applying it to the religious other can be seen in Pope John Paul II's *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. Here John Paul makes an unfortunate statement that "Buddhism is in large measure an *atheistic system*."¹⁴ This is a broad brush stroke that doesn't attend to the many variations among the schools of Buddhism. Many Mahayana traditions understand the universe as essentially theistic, with bodhisattvas who advocate and care for the human race. Pure Land Buddhism, for instance, focuses much of its energy on devotion to and reliance on the grace of Amitabha Buddha. My point is not to now claim Buddhism as actually theistic, but rather to highlight that naming or characterizing a religious tradition from outside its conceptual paradigm is already creating an error in procedure.

Here in the West, we regularly use names that the religious other does not recognize as accurate. In my college days Muslims were referred to as Mohammedans, a term no Muslim would ever endorse.¹⁵ Are they not followers of Muhammad? They would surely retort something like, "I am a follower of God and believe Muhammad (peace be upon him) is his greatest prophet and sits alongside of many other prophets God has sent."

Even among co-religionists many designations would be inappropriate because they simply do not correspond to how those members understand themselves. Take, for example, the term

¹³ Robert Florida, "What Does Comparative Religion Compare? The Buddhist-Christian Example," in *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* Vol. 19:2 (1990): pp. 163-171 at p. 165.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vittorio Messori, trans. Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 86.

¹⁵ This term is sadly still used in some vitriolic political conservative publications, e.g., the online journal *Red State*.

“fundamentalist.” This term originally referred to a theological position started among conservative theologians at Princeton Theological Seminary in the late nineteenth century. As the movement developed, it broadly embraced five fundamentals: the inerrancy of scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, Christ’s atonement on the cross, Christ’s bodily resurrection, and the historicity of Christ’s miracles.¹⁶ While the vast majority of Christians embrace all but the first of these fundamentals, and while the first fundamental involves a rather complex critique of a liberal Protestant biblical deconstruction project, today the term is used to designate people who are religiously closed-minded. The rectification of names challenges us to reconsider them, their movement, and the values that generated this theological tradition from its own perspective.

Another example within the Muslim community is that of “Wahhabi.” This term is used to designate “Islamic fundamentalism” in Saudi Arabia, even by other Muslims. Saudis do not use this term for themselves, nor would they embrace the idea that they are “Islamic fundamentalists.” Rather, they might argue that their expression of Islam follows the theological sensibilities of Salaf and the further conviction that Islamic society ought to be modeled on and in some sense mimic the historic expressions of the sayings of the Prophet (*hadith*). They might refer to themselves as *Salafi* or *ahl al-hadith* (people of hadith). The issue here is not simply replacing one name for another as if non-Saudis ought to simply stop calling them “Wahhabi” and now call them “Salafi.” Rather, the issue is using names that reflect the religious other in ways that are accurate, respectful, aligned with the intuitions of the religious other, and, most importantly, draw one to engage the religious other without the prejudice of one’s own perspectives. Such a rectification of names

¹⁶ See Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 373-385.

does not mean, of course, that this form of Islam ought not to be questioned or even critiqued. After all, to dialogue with essential openness includes the possibility that one may find the other's perspective troubling.¹⁷ It does, however, keep us from dismissing the religious other before our engagement even begins. Interestingly, Swidler's tenth and final commandment is that each participant eventually must attempt to experience the partner's religion or ideology *from within*.

The Rectification of Names in Intrareligious Discourse

As we have seen, one of the central issues in the Confucian understanding of the rectification of names involves the Chinese assumption of inter-relationships. A name or title does not merely designate a person's position; it frames mutual expressions of relationality. Such an understanding can help Catholics understand our own faith and the relationship we have with one another. Happily, the Second Vatican Council regularly references the mutually informing relationships within the church, and this is quite a contrast with earlier styles of magisterial teachings. Take, for example, Vatican I's document on the Church (*De Ecclesia*). It is dominated by the pope's jurisdiction over the whole church and this jurisdiction as expressed in terms of primacy and power. Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) refocuses our attention on how the church interrelates to itself. At the time, Cardinal Montini (soon to become Pope Paul VI) discussed this difference:

Yesterday the theme of the Church seemed to be confined to the power of the pope. Today, it is

¹⁷ I discuss this in my book *Christianity Looks East: Comparing the Spiritualities of John of the Cross and Buddhaghosa* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2006), pp. 10-11.

extended to the episcopate, the religious, the laity, and the whole body of the Church. Yesterday, we spoke of the rights of the Church by transferring the elements of civil society to the definition of the Church as a perfect society. Today, we have discovered other realities in the Church—the spiritual gifts of grace and holiness, for example—which cannot be defined by purely juridical ideas.¹⁸

Another example from Vatican II comes from its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*). Here we read, “There is growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on. This comes about in various ways. It comes through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts. It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience. And it comes from the preaching of those who have received, along with their right of succession in the episcopate, the sure charism of truth” (DV 8).¹⁹ While bishops are authentic interpreters of the Word of God (DV 10), this interpretation can only come from intimate knowledge of and engagement with the faithful who all receive it the Word of God. In fact, in the document on the church, the receiver of revelation is the whole church. This is the people of God who have a supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) given to them by the Holy Spirit, and thus the sense of the faithful (*sensus fidelium*) can be trusted. All are instruments of the Holy Spirit, mutually infusing each other with insight (LG 12).

¹⁸ Cardinal Giovanni Montini, “Il mistero della chiesa nella luce di S. Ambrogio,” in *L'Osservatore Romano* (December 10-11, 1962), p. 6.

¹⁹ I am using here *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (revised), ed. Austin Flannery (Northport: Costello Publishing, 1975).

Following Confucius' genius, the rectification of names in the church regarding "bishops" and "laity" would mean at the core a respectful mutual engagement. Such an engagement would recognize that the name "bishop" involves the role as authoritative successor to the apostles (LG 20, 25). This authority, however, can only be understood in light of the fact that the hierarchical priesthood is derived from and ordered to the primary priesthood of baptism (LG 10, 32-35). It is understood in light of respecting the radical equality and dignity of all the members of the church (LG 32) where a diversity of gifts and insights are to be respected and celebrated (LG 12, 31; PO 2, 9),²⁰ where all are called to the same sanctity and share an equal privilege of faith (LG 32, 39-41) and all collectively share the spiritual gift of infallibility (LG 11-12).

Vatican II's understanding of the church is one of communion and mutuality where there is an ongoing conversation between the laity and magisterium as well as a respectful conversation between theologians and both the magisterium and the people of God. All of these conversations mutually inform each other.²¹ In contrast to this vision, this kind of rectification of names in light of Confucian virtues and the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, we are experiencing a time in the Catholic Church where dialogue and full, mutual consultation tends to be lacking and magisterial interventions are increasingly without dialogue and often quickly punitive.²²

The rectification of names also includes, as we have seen, a challenge to strive toward the ideal designated by that name. What

²⁰ PO here stands for Vatican II's *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests.

²¹ See Richard Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Sense of the Faithful* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), pp. 138-145.

²² Richard Gaillardetz, ed., *When the Magisterium Intervenes: The Magisterium and Theologians in Today's Church*.

does it mean to be called “Christian?” According to the scriptures and tradition of the church, being a baptized member of the church ought to be realized as a daunting reality. The way of Jesus is the way of the cross: “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matt 10:38-39, see also Mk 8:34; Lk 17:33; Jn 12:25). Jesus’ way is also the way of extraordinary service. In Jesus’ parable about the last judgment, he divides the sheep from the goats, those who will enter paradise from those condemned. On what criterion does the Jesus decide? It is on whether we fed, welcomed, clothed, visited, and so on, Jesus in those in need. Service to the least of our brothers and sisters is service to him (Mt 25:31-46). Finally, Christian discipleship is infused with a spirituality of compassion; this dominated Jesus’ ministry and his demands on his disciples (Mt 5:6-7, 9:13, 23:23; Mk 6:34; Lk 10:37).²³

While it is the case that Christians and indeed other religious believers are more generous, tolerant, and moral than non-religious, they are not dramatically so.²⁴ Robert Wuthnow, in his analysis of Christian spiritual trends in America from 1950-2000, demonstrates that the popularity in each of the trends includes seeking spiritual comfort with little cost demanded.²⁵ Even more striking is Christian Smith’s book *Soul Searching* whereby he concludes that Christians operatively have the following faith: *moralistic, therapeutic deism*. This term he devised reflects the following five assumptions: God

²³ Paul likewise challenges Christians to embody the compassion of Christ (Phil 1:8; Col 3:12).

²⁴ This is certainly true in the United States. See Robert Putman and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010). A case can also be made for Muslims world-wide. See John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?: What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007).

²⁵ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

exists; God wants people to be nice and fair; the goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself; God is not involved much in our lives unless we need him to resolve a problem; and nice, non-evil people go to heaven when they die.²⁶ The rectification of names challenges us to realign ourselves with the very ideals that the name "Christian" really means; perhaps a Confucian "Christians Christianing."

Confucian rectification of names is a profound framing of proper order and harmony. It represents using language rightly so as to ensure clarity and order. It challenges us to speak well and accurately with and about others in ways that are respectful and sympathetic. Finally, it invites us to reconsider the necessary interrelationships that any name or title implies, and the daunting task to operate skillfully in those relationships. It helps us understand more deeply the responsibilities that go with interreligious dialogue and how to ensure what we say about ourselves represents what is truly the case.

For Further Reading

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²⁶ See Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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[摘要]名字或稱銜不但劃定一個人的位置但也築構一個人的
人際關係，因此語言和它所帶出的真實之間存在著深刻而內在的
關係。孔子的追隨者一向著重「正名」，即是名謂正確與否；他
們認為正確的名謂對一個人如何活出好生命不可或缺。在跨宗教
關係中，名字能益能損；它可表達及塑造健康或扭曲關係。跨宗
教對話中的其中一個重要議題是在與他人談話或談及他人時如
何認同及尊重他的角度，而正確稱謂他人這個傳統儒家美德就能
在這議題上給予啟導。