

De Bary, Wm. Theodore. *The Great Civilized Conversation: Education for World Community*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. 416 pages. \$35.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-231-16276-0.

In 2014 President Obama presented Professor William Theodore “Ted” de Bary with the National Humanities Award. In doing so, he gave ritual form to a judgment that many had long held: Ted de Bary is a national treasure, a teacher and scholar who has made the world a better place by deepening understanding between West and East. He can justly be called the founding father of Asian Great Books, which recognizes the invaluable ways that philosophers, historians, and poets from China, Japan, and Korea have enriched our common human understanding. *The Great Civilized Conversation: Education for World Community* offers an excellent introduction to the life’s work of this great man and an overview of a vocation fulfilled.

Early in his book, de Bary relates the genesis of his vocation. In 1937, a first-year Columbia student, he was “attending [his] first class in the core course Contemporary Civilization taught by Harry J. Carman (later Dean of the college), [and] almost the first thing he said was, ‘Of course you realize that when we talk about contemporary civilization, it is just Western civilization. Some of you should start to think about how we can expand this to Asia.’ I took him up on that suggestion, and almost everything on this book flows from it” (vii). How deeply de Bary has lived out his vocation! The book’s Appendix provides an overview of his “Life in Consultation and Conversation,” from his graduate studies, interrupted by service in Naval Intelligence during World War II, to his ongoing work at the age of 96, where he continues to teach, *pro bono*, as Special Service Professor in Columbia’s Core Courses.

In Part One, de Bary presents essays in which he argues for carefully integrating Asian great books into the core curriculum of undergraduate education. Each essay sharply reasoned, and marked by clarity and good sense—the reader can imagine de Bary tactfully and persuasively making his case on the many Columbia curricular committees on which he served. In a 1964 essay, he presciently warns that the term “non-Western studies” “tends to perpetuate whatever isolationism or parochialism we have suffered from by suggesting that the significance of other civilizations lies primarily in their difference from European and North American civilization” (14). He reminds his readers that the classic works that comprise the “great civilized conversation” are never static, but perennially read within the context of change: “‘liberal learning’ has always been conscious of change yet at its best has responded to it without being swept away by it” (4). And yet he is well aware that saying “yes” to those classic works that speak enduringly to the human condition will mean saying “no” to others that will likely prove ephemeral: “Education in the twenty-first century [...] will find itself constrained to make choices within the much stricter limits [...]. Education will have to [make hard choices]—make judgments as to what is most

essential. Without closing the door on intellectual growth, we will have to prepare people to make qualitative judgments as to what is most conducive in the longer run to ‘the good life’ and to what human goods are sustainable” (39). Twenty-five years ago, as a new professor at Christ College, the interdisciplinary honors college of Valparaiso University, two young colleagues and I were charged with presenting a rationale for integrating Asian classic works into the first-year “Texts and Contexts” curriculum. We successfully made our case: Mencius and Zhuangzi remain part of that splendid curriculum. But back in 1991, I wish we’d had ready access to de Bary’s essays, now gathered coherently in this book.

Part Two, “Liberal Learning in Confucianism” brings us to the heart of de Bary’s scholarly work on Neo-Confucian thought. Most prominent among these is Zhu Xi (1130–1200), who himself developed the core “Four Books of the Confucian Tradition”: *Analects*, *Mencius*, *Great Learning*, the *Mean*. Zhu’s wisdom and contemporary relevance become increasingly evident, as de Bary highlights the *personalist* dimension of his thought. As did Socrates, Zhu Xi taught through discussion and interpersonal interaction, rather than lecture, and emphasized the way the learner must inquire, “weigh and sift” the words of the master until she feels they have become her own. In the Confucian tradition, learning is always a matter of the intellect *and* emotions—“the thinking heart”—and the moral compass provided by the Tao leads one from “individual perceptivity” (108) to disciplining selfish desires through ritual to heartfelt service of others, be it governmental or familial. Confucius affirms “this concept of fully realized personhood” in one of the most famous passages of the *Analects*:

At fifteen I set my heart on learning.
 At thirty I was established [stood on my own feet].
 At forty I had no perplexities.
 At fifty I learned what Heaven commanded of me.
 By sixty my ear had become attuned to it.
 At seventy I could follow my heart’s desire without transgressing. (138)

The personalist dimension of Zhu Xi reminds me of Jacques Maritain’s Thomist classic *The Person and the Common Good*. As de Bary explains, “‘personalism’ expresses the worth and dignity of the person, not as a raw, ‘rugged’ individual but as a self shaped and formed in the context of a given cultural tradition, its own social community, and natural environment to reach full personhood” (139). In writing this review, I was delighted to discover a new book by Catherine Hudak Klancer, *Embracing Our Complexity* (SUNY Press: 2015) which brings St. Thomas Aquinas and Zhu into dialogue, highlighting their mutual emphasis upon “humble authority.” Surely Zhu would have agreed with his Christian contemporary, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who wrote: “There are many who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge: that is curiosity. There

are others who desire to know in order that they themselves might be known: that is vanity. But there are those some who seek knowledge in order to serve and edify others: that is love.” For Zhu Xi, service to others remain the *telos* of “learning for the sake of one’s self”; “self-cultivation [is] the starting point for reaching out to others” (111).

A later thinker, Wang Yangming (1472–1529) shied away from the comprehensive complexity of Zhu, and “long[ed] for the simplicity of the ancient sage” (213). Wang suffered banishment, and, “pushed to the limit of his spiritual resources” (215), brought Confucian ideas into critical dialogue with the mysticism of Taoism and Chan Buddhism (both of which Zhu saw as corrupting). Wang avoids facile syncretism, yet forges a more contemplative Confucianism, avowing the value of non-attachment and “quiet sitting.” Nevertheless, for both Zhu and Wang, “the role of the mind as self-critical and self-renewing” is vital; both “call for man to achieve utmost discrimination and oneness of mind in order to keep himself morally and spiritually attuned to the Way” (105), and thus more effectively serve others.

Later in Part Two, de Bary addresses “the almost revolutionary impact of Neo-Confucianism on the rest of East Asia ” (229), especially in Korea, where the implementation of “Zhu Xi’s political and social thought often [went] beyond anything attempted in China and Japan” (276). Two essays illumine the way Confucian precepts can enrich our understanding of universal human rights and liberalism. These are especially pertinent given China’s increasingly restrictive regime in which, for example, many human rights lawyers and activists have been arrested. Xi Jinping might be inclined to temper his authoritarian impulses by reflecting upon this dialogue between Mencius and King Xuan regarding the fate of tyrant Zhou:

King Xuan of Qi asked, “Is it true that Tang banished Jie and King Wu marched against Zhou?”

“It is so recorded,” answered Mencius.

“Is regicide permissible?”

“A man who mutilates benevolence is a mutilator, while one who cripples rightness is a crippler. He who is both a mutilator and a crippler is an ‘outcast.’ I have indeed heard of the punishment of the ‘outcast Zhou,’ but I have not heard of any regicide.” (286)

In Part Three, de Bary presents four essays, each drawn from lectures he was invited to give on distinguished scholars, teachers, and friends. The fourth of these, “Thomas Merton, Matteo Ricci, and Confucianism,” will be of special interest to the readers of *Expositions*. De Bary knew the slightly older Merton during his Columbia days; they hung out in jazz clubs and shared a mutual admiration for Dorothy Day. And, as the young men matured, both shared a deep love for Asian thought and literature. And here is where de Bary critiques Merton, who “did not engage [world religions] too much on other levels than the contemplative” (353), and, in a “striking omission”

(354), never engaged Confucianism with the attention he gave to Taoism and Buddhism. Merton *did* acknowledge Confucianism's "personalist doctrine" (357) and, in an essay entitled "The Jesuits in China," credits "the sympathetic efforts of Matteo Ricci to achieve a genuine understanding of Confucianism" (359). But as de Bary observes, Ricci, unlike Merton, "did not just dismiss or sidestep [the educated Chinese leadership]" and, in his "extraordinary effort to learn and master classical Chinese," even "attempt[ed] to reconcile Confucianism and Christianity at the highest level" (360).

I wonder if the same might be said of Ted de Bary. In his Preface, he implies his own Christian commitments in paying tribute to his wife, Fanny, and his mother, Mildred, both of whom "were notable exemplars of keen intelligence, generosity of spirit, leadership ability, and Christian self-giving in service to family and community" (viii). In the brief time that I spent with Professor de Bary, at a conference at Columbia in 2008, I discerned his practice of these Christian virtues. One of the happiest (and surprising) moments in my own academic career occurred a couple of years later, when Ted generously invited me to contribute an essay on the Taoist writer Zhuangzi (beloved by Merton) to his edited collection *Finding Wisdom in East Asian Classics* (Columbia University Press, 2011). I do not read or speak Chinese, but Ted wanted an essay that reflected the experience of teacher and students encountering the existential claims works like these make upon the reader. Each essay in this fine book offers rich evidence of de Bary's own nearly century-long encounter with these classic works, and the countless students whom he has guided, sagely, along the way.

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