

Chapter 1

An Objectively Moral Universe

The world is a looking-glass, and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face. Frown at it, and it will in turn look sourly upon you; laugh at it and with it, and it is a jolly kind companion; and so let all young persons take their choice.

—William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*

As I noted in the Introduction, people are often torn between the desire for hard and fast rules on which they can depend, and the wish to be able to meet new and sometimes unprecedented challenges as they arise. These often conflicting desires can pull people toward the extreme of either clinging to the rules they know, even when doing so subverts the very values the laws were put in place to promote and uphold, or, in confusion, exasperation, or weariness, of refusing to acknowledge any fundamental values at all. As this chapter will make clear, the religious traditions of Confucianism and Christianity provide lessons about how to harmonize the tensions between these opposing urges, as they explicitly recognize not only objective and enduring standards of value deeply embedded in the world around us, but also the need to continuously re-interpret these standards. Moreover, the attitude that they counsel toward this dual process of recognition and re-interpretation encourages the kind of intense and ongoing effort necessary to ethically meet the challenges and surprises that a complex world has to offer: a strength of their approach that is arguably missing from secular attempts to understand the natural world, and that informs their theories of what authority should look like.

What's Your Proof? Limitations of the Scientific Model

When I presented the basic ideas of this book to an audience of area scholars of Chinese philosophy, one of my listeners persistently demanded to know why any reasonable person would buy into my project. Even given that we need an intelligent and moral way of dealing with questions of power, what reason is there for subscribing to Thomas's and Zhu's views of reality? Where was my *proof* that either was right about his conviction that the universe is morally and sacrally charged?

My colleague's reaction, of course, was not all that surprising. The idea that all claims must be rationally or empirically proven is commonsensical in contemporary society. As the poet and author Kathleen Norris has pointed out, in today's society,

. . . religious narratives, images, and metaphors, such as those used to convey the Christian mysteries, [seem] suspect, unsuitable for rational adults, the province of the gullible, the overemotional, immature, ignorant or stupid. This attitude is so prevalent in American society that when the Episcopalian church recently ran some newspaper advertisements to attract baby boomers, one of them depicted the face of Christ with the slogan, "He Died To Take Away Your Sins, Not Your Mind."¹

Clearly, although a significant number of Americans still report regularly attending religious services,² for the many people outside of religious communities, it may well seem that the acceptance of the former entails the loss of the latter. Moreover, the relationship between faith and reason may also be viewed as fraught within religious communities themselves. Martin Luther (1483–1546), for example, claimed that "reason in no way contributes to faith . . . For reason is the greatest enemy that faith has; it never comes to the aid of spiritual things—but, more frequently than not—struggles against the Divine Word, treating with contempt all that emanates from God."³ While Luther admitted in calmer moments that reason, when enlightened and informed by faith, can "further and advance" the latter,⁴ his rhetoric has undoubtedly influenced the wariness of many in Fideist traditions toward human reason, most particularly when it seems to lead to positions that contradict those of the Christian Bible.

While there are many reasons for the often uneasy relationship between contemporary thought and religious belief, such as the collapse of the belief in a cosmological order discussed in Chapter 2, it may be argued that one of the most crucial involves Sir Isaac Newton's (1643–1727) work in the natural sciences. In the first of his classic four rules of philosophy, Newton says, "*we are to admit no more causes of natural things than such as are both true and sufficient to explain their appearances.*"⁵ Such a rule *prima facie* excludes trusting or placing faith in authoritative religious teachings supported by scriptural claims or subjective personal experience when other causes are manifestly available. Rather, according to Newton, the way forward to understanding the world around us is empirical and objective in character: "the whole burden of philosophy seems to consist in this—from the phenomena of motions to investigate the forces of nature, and then from these forces to demonstrate the other phenomena."⁶

It is in texts such as Newton's that we find the birth of the scientific method, which is based on collecting data through observation of things and events, and experimentation, leading to the formulation and testing of hypotheses. While philosophers of science such as the great Karl Popper remind us that the practitioners of this method once had much more sweeping ambitions and views,⁷ today, scientific observations are characteristically limited and focused in scope, for the aim is to come to a defensible hypothesis of one thing or event rather than one concerning reality at large. (This is arguably a significant enough project in itself, given that there remains an element of uncertainty in all scientifically generated results: the fourth of Newton's rules, "*in experimental philosophy we are to look upon propositions inferred by general induction from phenomena as accurately or very nearly true, notwithstanding any contrary hypothesis that may be imagined, till such time as other phenomena occur, by which they may either be made more accurate, or liable to exceptions,*"⁸ points to the provisional nature of all scientific knowledge.) In short, with its specialized character and demand for empirical proof, the scientific method has neither room nor use for belief in the sacred nature of the universe as a whole.

As we all know, this mode of framing the epistemological project has proven to be highly effective. Narrowly focusing on one problem or question can and has led to real improvements in the daily lives of millions of human beings around the world, and the knowledge produced by the scientific method has benefited the human race in a dazzling

variety of ways. From advances in pharmaceutical research, to progress in agricultural production, to new technologies of communication and transportation, the gains produced by applying the scientific method, while by no means solely positive (we must remember here, for example, developments in military technology that make it easier to kill far more people far more quickly than ever before), have nonetheless helped to make the human experience a less perilous and oftentimes richer prospect.

Hence, it is hardly surprising that industrialized science has become, as sociologists of science Richard Harvey Brown and Elizabeth L. Malone put it, “the dominant mode of knowledge production.”⁹ This is true not only in explicitly scientific disciplines, but also in some areas of religious study. So, for example, a century ago, William James explored the individual and social psychology of religious feeling and belief in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Today, efforts of creationists to scientifically prove the literal accuracy of the Genesis account of the beginning of the world are representative of this trend (for an online example, see the Edinburgh Creation Group, “an active forum where scientifically minded people meet to discuss evidence supporting the biblical account of creation.”)¹⁰ On a related note, many philosophers display the tendency to believe that the existence of God can and moreover *should* be rationally, if not empirically, proven without a doubt.

Nonetheless, the scientific method, like all other forms of engagement with the world, has its limitations. As philosopher of science Steven Toulmin points out, “how we view any aspect of nature or ‘domain’, as scientists—in what terms (using what ‘concepts’) we frame our questions about it—decides what questions we shall ask about it, and so predetermines what propositions we can put forward at all for verification/falsification/corroboratorion or whatever. (Recall Kant on ‘putting Nature to the question’ . . . but it is always our question!)”¹¹ This state of affairs has an impact not only on the answers we seek but also on those we don’t: in a society that places great emphasis on the scientific method, emotional or spiritual knowledge can come to seem rather insubstantial or untrustworthy. I do not mean to suggest that this is always the case: as noted in the Introduction, fundamentalist religion is as much a part of the contemporary era as secularist science. Moreover, the success of New Age publications, bookstores, and workshops point to a strong valuation of alternative forms of knowledge in American society. Nonetheless, to the extent that the scientific method as traditionally understood is held up as the ultimate paradigm of human knowledge

retrieval and production, emotional or spiritual knowledge will continue to be slighted. Moreover, as discussed below, even rationality itself can become too narrowly defined.

First, the scientific method promotes an exclusive focus on those rational powers that observe and deduce, and attempts to control for personal bias based on previous experience, expectations, emotions, and even hope.¹² While this is certainly a defensible project, it does tend to have a pinched understanding of rationality, one that cuts off knowledge that can be gained through other venues. For example, as the sociologists Colin Jerolmack and Douglas Porpora have argued, there is more than one kind of rationality: they differentiate between instrumental rationality (means-end rationality), normative rationality (deontological rationality, concerning conformity and commitment to a moral value or ideal), and epistemic rationality, the last of which they explain by saying that “it is [epistemically] rational to hold a belief if there are good conceptual and evidentiary grounds for considering the belief true.”¹³ Such rationality, moreover, is not limited to the intellect; in fact, with regard to the human person, it may be more “rational” to have a more comprehensive approach to information gathering and knowledge production:

. . . there are both rational and irrational emotions, just as there are both rational and irrational beliefs. Rationality is itself in turn dependent on certain emotional postures. Emotions therefore are not apart from rationality but inseparable from it . . . Insofar as human chess masters, unlike computers, rely primarily on intuition, neither can intuition be regarded as something other than rationality. It is different from calculation, but that is the point. It is only an outmoded positivism—still peculiarly strong in the sociology of religion—that equates rationality solely with calculation.¹⁴

While, as discussed above, such calculation has been of enormous benefit to humanity, embracing it requires neither slighting other forms and sources of rationality, nor deploring the fact that rationality is socially and physiologically conditioned—a fact increasingly obvious to intellectuals working in fields ranging from cross-cultural studies to medicine. So, for example, Thomas Metzger notes that rationality varies from culture to culture: “when I told a learned visitor from Taiwan that, for us Americans, it is irrational to expect a government to be uninfluenced by selfish interest groups, he replied that this American willingness

to accommodate political immorality appeared to him as irrational.”¹⁵ Meanwhile, the neurologist Antonio Damasio has written extensively on the inseparability of emotion and reason within the human person.¹⁶ To return to the Thackeray quote with which I opened this chapter: our proclivities, whether cultural, professional, physical, moral, intellectual, or emotional, and the ways in which we exercise and control them in relation to our surroundings, will certainly have an impact on what we select out of the world for consideration, and how we respond to it.¹⁷ This basic premise granted, the world begins to look a lot more complex and even more interesting, as different people seek to answer different questions for different purposes.

This leads us to our second point: not only can we use other mental powers, but we can use them to address questions left aside by the scientific method and its cold, clear calculation. For example, in her work on the tragic poems of ancient Greece, Martha Nussbaum notes that “dealing, as they do, with the stories through which an entire culture has reflected about the situation of human beings and dealing, too, with the experiences of complex characters in these stories, they are unlikely to conceal from view the vulnerability of human lives to fortune, the mutability of our circumstances and our passions, the existence of conflicts among our commitments.”¹⁸ On a related note, the famed author and philologist J. R. R. Tolkien held that some truths may *only* be grasped by means of story.¹⁹

Such truths are of more than academic interest; according to some, coming to terms with them is the main and most characteristically human task of life. As Pope John Paul II puts it, “born and nurtured when the human being first asked questions about the reason for things and their purpose, philosophy shows in different modes and forms that the desire for truth is part of human nature itself. It is an innate property of human reason to ask *why* things are as they are.”²⁰ Questions of meaning and purpose loom large enough in his imagination so that he claims, “one may define the human being, therefore, as *the one who seeks the truth*.”²¹

Nor should this be viewed as a peculiarly religious way of conceptualizing things. For social theorists working in the symbolic interaction school, like Herbert Blumer, the study of social life rests on “three simple premises”: “human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them . . . the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction one has with one’s fellows . . . these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he

encounters.”²² In this school of thought, “to ignore the meaning of the things toward which people act is seen as falsifying the behavior under study.”²³ While realities such as social status are important to members of this school, they are nonetheless merely a subset of social meaning.

Moreover, paying attention to meaning and significance has hefty pragmatic value. The ability to interpret available information, assigning different weight to different data, so that disparate pieces of information may be organized into a cohesive and significant whole, is implicitly required by even the scientific method, which obliges its users to decide, for example, which experiments are worthwhile or reasonable to pursue. It is also of enormous importance in everyday life. As virtue ethicist Linda Zagzebski points out,

. . . we each know in the propositional sense an enormous number of facts about a person with whom we are intimately acquainted, yet the knowledge of such facts does not constitute knowing the person. To understand a person’s motivation or character we often need to be able to pick from the profusion of information about him stored in our memory certain facts that become salient in particular contexts. The juxtaposition of one bit of knowledge with another—say, his susceptibility to jealousy and fearfulness of other sorts—can produce insights that extend and deepen our understanding of his psychic makeup. And, of course, this same ability is crucially important in our knowledge of ourselves.²⁴

She adds, “no specifiable procedures tell a person how to recognize the salient facts, how to get insight, or how to think up good explanations, much less how to use all three to get to a single end.”²⁵ Rather, what is needed is a kind of learning that involves propositions but then goes beyond them. Such skills may be found among the members of musical ensembles,²⁶ sports teams, construction crews, or any group of people who successfully live and/or work together. In all these cases, more than rational knowledge is required for intra-group success; similarly, while empirical knowledge of other people’s predilections, strengths, and weaknesses is crucial, knowledge of how to work smoothly within the context constituted by such elements is just as important.

Hence, the choice to explore questions outside the purview of science is inherently no more irrational than the choice to leave such questions aside in favor of more objectively verifiable prospects. In fact,

making the decision to engage with reality as a whole, in a full-bodied way that requires the participation of the entire human person, is an inherently rational project, and provides the seeker with more forms and sources of rationality on his quest.²⁷

Unlike many academics today, Thomas Aquinas and Zhu Xi made the rational decision to address questions of sacred value and meaning from a position of religious faith. In addition, unlike contemporary specialists in both the sciences and the humanities, rather than focusing on one aspect of reality in isolation, they grounded their wide-ranging work in the conviction that all of reality is worthy of study, and in so doing engaged not only their readers' intellects, but their desires and values as well. Their approach also takes into account both enduring realities and new insights, guarding against moral rigidity on the one hand and relativism on the other. The next section shall look at Thomas's and Zhu's religious faith, taking especial care to unpack this term, straightforward in a Christian context, in Zhu's Confucian milieu, before exploring the universe as they saw it and explaining what their comprehensive approach has to offer to discussions of human power.

A Different Way of Thinking: The Mind of Faith

Thomas Aquinas—Faith Informed by Reason, Reason Informed by Faith

Schisms between knowledge and faith, religion and science, are so familiar as to seem almost commonsensical. Well-publicized debates between fundamentalists and scientists over issues such as teaching evolution to schoolchildren, which have continued well into the twenty-first century, seem to underscore the incompatibility of informed logic and spiritual belief. Nonetheless, the conversation between religion and science, or faith and reason, does not necessarily have to be quite so contentious. Indeed, in Thomas Aquinas, discourse between the mind and the spirit turns out to be quite harmonious.²⁸

According to James Weisheipl, "Thomas was very much a man of his age and his environment."²⁹ As even a cursory glance at any history of the period will demonstrate, the Europe of Thomas's lifetime was decidedly Christian, and in a way almost unimaginable today. While contemporary Western philosophers look at the world in a vast diversity of different lights, this was not the case in the medieval period.

At that time, as Frederick Copleston explains, “owing to the common background of the Christian faith, the world presented itself to the medieval thinker more or less in a common light. Whether a thinker held or denied a clear distinction between the provinces of theology and philosophy, in either case he looked on the world as a Christian and could hardly avoid doing so.”³⁰ As Maurice de Wulf diplomatically puts it, “in the Middle Ages no one openly opposed dogma, but everyone explained it in his own way.”³¹

Saint Thomas was certainly no exception to the rule: he was nothing if not a follower of Jesus of Nazareth. In addition to the markedly Christian character of much of his writing—found not only in the themes, but also in the source material on which he relies: in the *Summa theologica*, he cites Scripture more than any other source, and Biblical references are to be found in all of the questions³²—stories of his intense spirituality and reliance on prayer abound. For example, Jacques Maritain tells us that

. . . on his return to Naples after the death of Thomas, Reginald [his *socius*, or personal assistant] was to exclaim: ‘As long as he was living my Master prevented me from revealing the marvels that I witnessed. He owed his knowledge less to the effort of his mind than to the power of his prayer. Every time he wanted to study, discuss, teach, write or dictate, he first had recourse to the privacy of prayer, weeping before God in order to discover in the truth the divine secrets, and, though he had been in uncertainty before praying, as a result of his prayer he came back instructed.’ When doubtful points would arise, Bartolommeo di Capua likewise reports, he would go to the altar and would stay there weeping many tears and uttering great sobs, then return to his room and continue his writings.³³

According to Brian Davies, Thomas “thinks as a Christian, and he uses his ability to think in a way which, in his view, does all that it can to show that the revelation given in Christianity is not just a creed for those who cannot think and give reasons for what they believe.”³⁴ In fact, in Thomas’s estimation, Christianity offers opportunities for the exercise and development of reason unavailable outside of it.

To begin with, Thomas, as is indicated by his lifelong study of the decidedly un-Christian Aristotle, places a very high value on reason.

Saint Thomas would simply not recognize the sort of picture often drawn by creationists and scientists battling over evolution, in which reason counteracts religion. In his *Summa contra gentiles*, traditionally understood to have been written for missionaries in the Muslim field, Thomas famously writes, “although the truth of the Christian faith which we have discussed surpasses the capacity of the reason, nevertheless that truth that the human reason is equipped to know cannot be opposed to the truth of the Christian faith.”³⁵ Thomas has no doubt that the process of reasoning produces real knowledge: “man forms a sure judgment about a truth by the discursive process of his reason: and so human knowledge is acquired by means of demonstrative reasoning.”³⁶ Moreover, the rational powers within the human intellect are understood to be very helpful in exploration of sacred doctrine:

. . . [since] grace does not destroy nature but perfects it, natural reason should minister to faith as the natural bent of the will ministers to charity. . . . Hence sacred doctrine makes use also of the authority of philosophers in those questions in which they were able to know the truth by natural reason, as Paul quotes a saying of Aratus: “As some also of your own poets said: For we are also His offspring” (Acts 17:28).³⁷

Given his understanding of the importance and power of the human intellect, it is hardly surprising that, for Thomas, reasonable arguments are valuable as they remove obstacles to faith,³⁸ and empirical observations are key in both developing faith and correcting errors.³⁹

However, this does not mean that human intellectual power can of itself lead to the kind of truth Thomas is most interested in: “the researches of natural reason do not suffice mankind for the knowledge of Divine matters, even of those that can be proved by reason.”⁴⁰ Surprising, in view of statements like these, is the commonly accepted notion that Thomas believes it possible to develop definitive rational proofs for the truths made known in Christian Revelation. According to Davies, “it has [recently] been suggested that, in his view, faith, at least for some, is a matter of being convinced by evidence. The idea is that those with faith, or at least some of them, are rationally convinced of the truths stated in the classical Christian creeds, and that this is enough to give them what Aquinas means by ‘faith.’ They are like a judge who is forced to admit that X murdered Y because the facts cannot be otherwise interpreted

or because the balance of probability comes down in its favor. But this reading of Aquinas needs to be contested.”⁴¹

Additional support for Davies’s position is available in the *Summa contra gentiles*:

the sole way to overcome an adversary of divine truth is from the authority of Scripture—an authority divinely confirmed by miracles. For that which is above the human reason we believe only because God has revealed it. Nevertheless, there are certain likely arguments that should be brought forth in order to make divine truth known. This should be done for the training and consolation of the faithful, and not with any idea of refuting those who are adversaries. For the very inadequacy of the arguments would rather strengthen them in their error, since they would imagine that our acceptance of the truth of the faith was based on such weak arguments.⁴²

Moreover, such weak arguments pose more dangers than exposing Christian doctrines to ridicule by unbelievers: they may lead the unsuspecting Christian to thinking that he or she has all the answers.⁴³

In the end, it turns out that faith, which Thomas defines as “the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that appear not,”⁴⁴ while never *opposed to* reason, is always *more important than* reason. For Thomas, faith is not opposed to knowledge; rather, it is a kind of knowledge⁴⁵ that is necessary for full development of the human person: “since man’s nature is dependent on a higher nature, natural knowledge does not suffice for its perfection, and some supernatural knowledge is necessary.”⁴⁶ The supernatural knowledge of faith raises the knower above the limitations of reason, logic, and intellect: “in many respects faith perceives the invisible things of God in a higher way than natural reason does in proceeding to God from His creatures. Hence it is written (Sirach 3:25): ‘Many things are shown to thee above the understandings of man.’”⁴⁷ Thus, Thomas sees faith as *empowering* reason, and contributing to its full development. Hence, while revelation can indeed be rationally understood to a point, it can never be fully comprehended by any one individual or even institution. This doctrine flows very smoothly into the realization that, while not all of the answers have been provided to us, we have been given fundamental principles and values on which we can depend. When accepted, this realization supports the search for

a middle ground of commitment and flexibility between the extremes of rigidity and relativism.

In all, the knowledge of faith is more comprehensive than that of intellectual reason alone, embracing more of the human experience and person. While Thomas did not consider the passions to be rational in themselves, nor did he believe that they were immune to reason as exercised by the intellect: rather, along with Aristotle, he is of the opinion that “it is manifest that the sensitive powers are rational, not by their essence, but only by participation” (*Ethic. i, 13.*)⁴⁸ In Thomas’s understanding, coming to grasp the divine truth in any measure will require properly directed passions: in other words, a properly ordered will. “To believe is an act of the intellect inasmuch as the will moves it to assent. And this act proceeds from the will and the intellect, both of which have a natural aptitude to be perfected in this way. Consequently, if the act of faith is to be perfect, there needs to be a habit in the will as well as in the intellect.”⁴⁹ One’s desires, passions, intellect, and the will are all addressed by Saint Thomas’s approach. Indeed, as Fergus Kerr points out, for Thomas, “theological activity is a form of sharing in God’s being, a form of union with God, an anticipation of the divine beatitude.”⁵⁰ With such an end in mind, Thomas, while never disparaging the intellectual exercise, or, for that matter, the human mind,⁵¹ assigns a greater deal of significance to the virtue of faith than to the arguments that support it—“the light of faith makes us see what we believe”⁵²—and far more agency to God than to the believer: “since man, by assenting to matters of faith, is raised above his nature, this must needs accrue to him from some supernatural principle moving him inwardly; and this is God. Therefore faith, as regards the assent which is the chief act of faith, is from God moving man inwardly by grace.”⁵³

This latter process is not conceived to be one of coercion, domination, or struggle. Rather, Thomas understands that divine grace, which he defines as “the effect of the Divine love in us . . . whereby a man is made worthy of eternal life,”⁵⁴ cooperates with the human mind and person: “grace does not destroy nature but perfects it.”⁵⁵ Thus, rather than conceiving of a relationship in which divine grace struggles with and against a wholly alien human nature, Thomas conceives of grace as a wonderful gift that elevates the human person who accepts it. As Kerr explains, for Thomas, “the gift of grace that is God’s self-disclosure, the basis of all theology then, as well of course of all prayer, means that not only are we not frustrated in our desire to know what lies infinitely beyond us but we are drawn to a destiny we could never of ourselves

have imagined.”⁵⁶ For Thomas, the human person is enabled by grace to behold the face of God after death, and to spend eternity in the rapt contemplation of the beatific vision: “final Happiness consists in the vision of the Divine Essence, Which is the very essence of goodness.”⁵⁷ With grace, such a destiny becomes imaginable, if only faintly, to our powers of intellect, which themselves will be expanded and sharpened. That Thomas believes that our intellects are developed in this process is beyond a doubt. As Aidan Nichols points out, “to Thomas’ way of thinking, human salvation and the perfection of man as an intellectual being are one and the same.”⁵⁸

Given this understanding of the precious, but finite, character of rational and intellectual inquiry, and the joys of contemplating the blessed infinity of God, it is hardly surprising that Thomas combines reason and feeling in his discussions of the divine. As Aidan Nichols notes, “in the course of giving a brief answer to a couple of objections to some thesis, Thomas is perfectly capable of switching from the most austere metaphysical analysis to some extravagant metaphor taken from a Greek Father or a Carolingian monk.”⁵⁹ The Thomistic system provides us with more of a continuum of experience than that available in more scientific disciplines, or in more exclusively rational thinkers such as Kant—rather than divorcing faith from reason and setting each in a separate mental space, Thomas allows them to cooperate. In fact, it is eminently possible that Thomas would understand Kant’s failure to approach the highest truths of creation with his intellect as a result of his refusal to allow his faith to work together with his reason.

Thomas looks beyond the intellect, beyond the material world, and beyond the realm of empirical observation, seeking that which is greater than all of these, yet without forsaking any of them: teaching those of us who read him today how to balance and harmonize the complexity of our own experience, rather than succumbing to the tone-deafness that can result from focusing solely on one aspect of our nature—such as our intellect—or one method of dealing with things—such as rule following or spontaneous intuition.

In closing, this section, rather than being an exercise in Christian apologetics or a defense of Thomas’s understanding of reason, has been an exploration of the kind of thinking that leads him to conclusions of practical import and emotional relevance; the question of whether or not his religious faith is necessary to reach those conclusions will be explored in greater detail later in the book. For the present, we will turn to Zhu for his religious views.

Zhu Xi—An Intellectually Rigorous Faith

That Saint Thomas turns out to have a profound religious faith in that which surpasses human understanding is hardly surprising. But what about Zhu Xi? It is unquestionably the case that he does not see himself as a person of faith in the same sense that Thomas does, and that faith is not the cardinal concept for the former as it is for the latter. Nonetheless, as this section will endeavor to show, both he and his tradition subscribe to a particular kind of religious faith.

To commence: from the very beginnings of his tradition, it has been associated with a worldly, practical focus and lack of interest in the afterlife. Hence, it makes sense to ask the question: Is Confucianism a religion? The early Jesuit missionaries to China answered this question in the negative—as Julia Ching puts it, “where the Jesuits were concerned, Buddhists were idolaters whereas Confucians were potential allies and converts”⁶⁰—but their reading of the Confucian tradition as more humanistic than religious cannot even be said to be the “early modern Catholic” analysis of the situation, as Rome rejected their interpretation. A similar lack of consensus surrounds the tradition today, one that involves differing definitions of religion. Below, I review some of the literature surrounding this question before arguing that Zhu and his tradition are in fact religious.

Given the theocentric nature of their own tradition, the Jesuits had good reasons for their construal of Confucianism as something “other” than a religion. Perhaps most important, none of the educated scholar-officials around them had anything to say about God. Obviously, in the Christian Trinity, knowledge of the Second Person is based on the divine Incarnation of Jesus; perhaps as obviously, Confucius was no Christ. (As I tell my students, while Jesus was reported to have been fathered by God himself, Confucius came into the world in the usual way. Where Jesus turned water into wine, Confucius turned ancient texts into something read by the young, and where Jesus miraculously rose from the dead, Confucius died.) Moreover, the First Teacher is well known for his reticence on speculative matters; for example, the *Analects* tells us that “Confucius never discussed the uncanny, feats of strength, disorders, or spirits,”⁶¹ while the great Classic *The Doctrine of the Mean* records him as saying, “there are those who seek for the mysterious, and practice wonders. Future generations may mention them. But that is what I will not do.”⁶² Nonetheless, as further discussed in Chapter 2, Confucius did understand himself as having a relationship with divine elements in the

cosmos, and, moreover, believed that these elements have revealed certain great truths to humankind. As Julia Ching points out, “one cannot just say that there has been no historical ‘revelation’ in the Confucian tradition. The truth is much more complex. While the knowledge of God as Lord-On-High and Heaven had come to the Chinese people through ‘natural hierophanies’, these in turn appear to have been largely mediated through sage-kings and other charismatic, almost prophetic, individuals.”⁶³ However, as Ching is careful to emphasize: “Confucianism, even in its early form, only *came close* to being a prophetic religion.”⁶⁴

A further question then arises: Need a religion be prophetic in order to be called a religion? Xinzhong Yao says no, identifying Confucianism as a “humanistic religion.” Such a religion

. . . takes the world as a unity of human beings and spirits or Spirit. While it does not deny the existence and the importance of the Transcendent, it does insist that the human world and the spiritual world, this life and that life, are inseparable. Further, their unity can be understood only from the point view [sic] of this world and this life—that is, from the point of view of human endeavor to transcend the limitation of life—in contrast to a theistic religion, which insists that their true relation can be revealed only by God and through God’s grace.⁶⁵

The recognition of the possibility of “humanistic” religion makes it possible to recognize the religiosity of much of the Confucian tradition; for example, as Ren Jiyu notes, “‘honoring the honorable and being kind to kindred,’ and ‘revering virtue and safeguarding the people’ all bore the traces of the primitive religion. The Confucian Classics have always had a strongly religious character.”⁶⁶ More expansively, Benjamin Schwartz claims that

. . . there is no reason whatsoever to believe, in the case of Confucius, that a heaven which is immanent in the regularities, routines, and generative processes of nature may not also possess attributes of consciousness and spirit. Such a notion may be La Place’s “superfluous hypothesis” from the point of view of the theoretical and technical concerns of modern science but not from the view of a Confucius eager to find in Heaven’s way in the cosmos a model for human behavior.⁶⁷

As Schwartz's reference to regularities and routines suggests, Confucianism also provides an example of a religion that is profoundly rational. As de Bary points out,

Confucian rationalism does not involve a conscious exaltation of reason as opposed to faith or intuition (none of the early masters seems to have acknowledged such an explicit dichotomy). It derives rather from three basic attitudes found in Confucius and the classical Confucians: *first, that the universe is characterized by order, regularity, and a harmonious integration of its parts; second, that it is possible for man to discern this order underlying things and events; and third, that to devote oneself to what the "Great Learning" calls the systematic study of "things" . . . is the high calling of the "noble man" (chün-tzu [junzi]).*⁶⁸

In fact, like the Christians who believed in the harmonious relationship between reason and revelation, the Confucians saw nothing incongruent about the happy coexistence of rationality and religion; indeed, they highly resented seeing the latter without the former. Again, de Bary:

. . . over the long course of history the [Confucian] schools served the ruling elite better than the general populace, and its rationalism served scholarship better than popular religion, which Confucianism dealt with at arm's length with great skepticism and notable diffidence. Hence, for all the efforts of Confucians historically, and especially the Neo-Confucians, to revive the old-time religion of the Zhou aristocracy and resurrect the classic rituals, they had little success in winning over the general populace and experienced almost constant frustration, if not despair, over their failures to wean the masses from their seeming bewitchment by the magic of Buddhist and Daoist liturgies and religious spectacles.⁶⁹

To return to Confucius's core goal, arguably both practical and rational—to find a model for human behavior—is to uncover perhaps one of the elemental differences between the Christian and Confucian traditions. According to Xinzhong Yao,

. . . in Christian spirituality, ethical matters are expressed in theological terms and in a creational context. The source and resource of moral growth is therefore God and the fundamental question is the relationship of humans to God. In Confucian spirituality, however, [the] transcendental ideal is described by an ethical terminology and in a moral context. To be transcendental is to be moral and to cultivate one's virtue.⁷⁰

In Ching's succinct reading: "Christianity would seem to be God-centered where Confucianism is man-centered."⁷¹ (N.B.: this is not to say that Confucius was an atheist: a topic discussed later in the chapter, and in Chapter 2 as well.) Nonetheless, Ching identifies Zhu's Great Ultimate with the Christian God,⁷² and is of the opinion that "for the dialogue between Christianity and Confucianism, an understanding of faith in man as openness to the transcendent remains the most promising starting point."⁷³

That there is such an openness in both traditions gives credence to the definitions of Confucianism which address its religious elements, even if such definitions do not call Confucianism a religion per se. Peng Guoxiang prefers to call Confucianism "宗教性的人文主义, *zongjiaoxing de renwenzhuyi*," or "religious humanism." Pointing out that "religion" and humanism" are terms that have more to do with the history of modern Western philosophy than anything else,⁷⁴ Peng writes,

. . . first of all, if we use the original meaning of the two words "humanism (人文, *renwen*)" and "religion (宗教, *zongjiao*)" in the historical linguistic background of Chinese as the standard, well, then we are able to say without harm that Confucianism is a kind of "humanism," that it gives expression to a focus on the "human spirit." We may also say that Confucianism is a kind of "religion," given that, historically, it was once regarded as a kind of "religion," without the slightest doubt, along with Buddhism and Daoism. Secondly, even if when we use the two words "*renwen zhuyi*" and "*zongjiao*" we are corresponding to the "humanism" and "religion" of the West, as long as we do not limit our understanding to modern mainstream "secular humanism (*shisu renwenzhuyi*)" or only use the monotheism of Western Asia

as the standard for “religion,” well, we can then look at the Confucian tradition equally as a kind of humanism, and also as a kind of religion. Thirdly, even if we use “*renwenzhuyi*” and “*zongjiao*” in situations where we are strictly corresponding to mainstream Western secular humanism and using only Western Asian monotheism as a standard, we will still be able to see that the Confucian tradition simultaneously possesses elements of “humanism” and “religion.”⁷⁵

Tu Weiming thinks that such an inclusive approach is the most useful of all, as it helps to prevent the danger of focusing on one or two elements of the tradition to the exclusion of others:

. . . philosophically, as well as historically, Confucianism symbolizes a very complex spiritual phenomenon. The scope of its involvement defies simple categorization. Even broad terms such as *religion*, *social philosophy*, and *ethical system* are too narrow to encompass the diversity of Confucian concerns, especially if the terms are used in a restrictive sense. For example, if Confucianism is described as a religion and by religion is meant a kind of spiritualism purportedly detached from the secular world, the whole dimension of sociality in Confucianism will be left out. If Confucianism is described as a social philosophy, its central concern of relating the self to the most generalized level of universality, or *t'ien* [tian] (heaven), will be ignored. If the spiritual aspect of Confucian self-cultivation is emphasized exclusively, its intention of complete self-fulfillment, which must also embrace the whole area of corporality, will be misunderstood. On the other hand, if the Confucian insistence on man as a sociopolitical being is overstated, its ideal of self-transcendence in the form of being one with Heaven and Earth will become incomprehensible.⁷⁶

In short, Confucianism is certainly religious, if not a religion in the sense that Christianity or Islam is a religion, because it recognizes and has faith in the moral relevance of the material universe, which, moreover, endures during the long ages when people ignore it. Confucius himself certainly did not believe that Heaven depended on him for its continued survival or relevance, saying, “‘I do not wish to speak!’ Zigong said, ‘Master, if you do not speak, then what will we disciples pass on?’”

Confucius replied, ‘What does Heaven say? The four seasons pass one into the other, the hundred things are born; what does Heaven say?’⁷⁷

Having explored the question of the religiosity of the Confucian tradition as a whole, our next question is more specific in focus. Again, however, the issue of Zhu Xi’s religious proclivities is complex.

To begin with, Zhu states that “the mind of heaven and earth is to produce things.”⁷⁸ To those who would rush to identify this fecund mind with a creator God, Chung Tsai-chun offers the warning that “the concept ‘the Mind of Heaven’ must not be identified with God, for the Neo-Confucianists were never theists.”⁷⁹ Zhu himself is very clear on what the mind of Heaven and Earth is *not* (a lord in the sky or elsewhere), although he is rather more unclear as to what it *is*: “someone asked: ‘Is the mind of heaven and earth a spirit? Or is it just unresponsive and without action?’ [The Master] answered: ‘You cannot say that the mind of heaven and earth is *not* a spirit; however, it does not deliberate as a person does. Yi Chuan [Cheng Yi, 1033–1107] said, “Heaven and Earth do not have mind but transform things, the sage has a mind and does not act.”’⁸⁰ Unlike Thomas, who dedicates most of his life in an attempt to understand the mind of the Christian Heaven and Earth as clearly as possible (always with the caveat that such a project has inherent limitations, as discussed further below), Zhu Xi gives deliberately ambiguous and evocative answers to those who seek to expand their knowledge of this dimension of reality. As Yü Ying-shih points out, “as a matter of fact, the absence of theology in the Chinese tradition is something that no intellectual historian can possibly fail to notice. Chinese speculations on heaven or cosmos from the third century B.C.E. on led only to the rise of the *yin-yang* cosmology, not theology.”⁸¹ On the basis of similar thinking, Roger Ames goes so far as to claim that “Classical Confucianism is at once a-theistic and profoundly religious. It is a religion without a God, a religion that affirms the cumulative human experience itself.”⁸² While I certainly agree with Ames’s premise that Confucianism affirms the human experience, I disagree with the atheistic conclusion that he draws from it, a theme I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2. I limit myself here to noting that scholars including Julia Ching⁸³ and Deborah Sommer⁸⁴ challenge Ames’s reading of the early tradition, and, that, in any case, in the Neo-Confucian era of the tradition, such a lack of divine person(s) does not necessarily translate to what we might construe as a secular worldview.

In his *Recorded Conversations*, or 語類 *Yulei*, Zhu is quoted as saying, “Confucius said, ‘Unable to serve people, how can you serve spirits! Not

knowing life, how can you know death!’ This says it all.”⁸⁵ Reflecting a true Confucian spirit, he adds, “Nowadays we need to go to understand those affairs which are right in front of us. The affairs of ghosts and supernatural beings have no shape and no shadow; you don’t want to vainly waste your mental energy [on them].”⁸⁶ Nonetheless, it is possible that Zhu protests too much: an entire chapter of the *Yulei* is devoted to the discussion of such affairs, and Zhu never denies the existence of supernatural beings; to the contrary, he defines their substance: “supernatural beings are merely *qi* [material force].”⁸⁷

Zhu’s practical or pragmatic attitude toward a more or less accepted supernatural realm is seen in his *Family Rituals* [*Jiali*, 家禮]. As Patricia Ebrey notes in the preface to her translation of this work, “none of the ceremonies described in Chu Hsi’s [Zhu Xi’s] *Family Rituals* departed very far from ordinary life. They involved no weird symbolisms or improbable juxtapositions, no dancing, trances, or violence. No one did anything that could not be done in non-ritual contexts.”⁸⁸ Nonetheless, despite the “ordinary” character of the rituals, they are designed to reach out to a realm unseen and unheard. For example, Zhu instructs his readers to make “grave goods” as if the dead would need them.⁸⁹ This task is not viewed merely as an expression of filial piety, or as psychologically fulfilling for the people left behind in grief, because Zhu’s handbook also instructs people to offer goods to *gods* and *spirits* at certain times.⁹⁰ Such instructions, given without apparent irony in a ritual handbook, lend credence to the idea that Zhu was not a strict materialist: he believed in beings he could not see, and in an order about which he could not be certain.

Like Thomas, he counsels a robust intellectual searching of the moral deposits of the cosmos. As a follower of Confucius, Zhu believes in the presence of a moral element to the universe that is in no way dependent on the will of human beings and endures despite all human folly, pointing to the sacred, non-negotiable nature of this element when he muses that, in his own day, “although there are no sages to [explore the principle (*li*, 理) of the Way], this heavenly principle is still of itself in the midst of Heaven and Earth.”⁹¹ Rather than conceiving of morality and the sacred in anthropocentric terms—up to humans to conceive, construct, and lay to rest at will—Zhu clearly believes that principle stands outside of human control. Moreover, as will be discussed further below, he also, to use Rodney Taylor’s phrasing, clarifies the relationship of the individual with the principle in which he believes:⁹² in Zhu’s understanding, *li* is forever available for communion and cooperation