A NEO-CONFUCIAN ENGAGEMENT OF CENTERING PRAYER IN TRANSFORMING THE SELF[1]

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ABSTRACT

Based on teachings about human nature and the quiet practice advocated by Thomas Keating (1923-present) and Zhu Xi 朱熹(1130-1200), this paper attempts to draw Neo-Confucian insights (e.g., the *li-qi* theory*, the *zhong-yong* principle, and complementary-polarity), into the teaching on Centering Prayer and forming the self. I argue that viewed through the lens of Neo-Confucianism, contemplative practice is indispensable for the transformation of selfhood.

Introduction

This paper explores how Thomas Keating's teaching on Centering Prayer can be supported by and expanded upon with Zhu Xi's cosmology and teaching on quiet-sitting. New insights for Christian anthropology are inspired by three foundational concepts in Zhu's cosmology: a) that the impersonal *li* and *qi* are the two basic cosmic entities; b) that quietude and activity are the two basic modalities of these cosmic entities; and c) that bipolarity and *zhong-yong* are the two basic cosmic rules for maintaining harmonious existence and creativity in this cosmos. Drawing on Zhu's Neo-Confucian insights, I argue that quiet practice is indispensable, because quietude offers an organic connection with human nature and with the Ultimate.

While the methods of quiet practice are widely known both in Asian and Western cultures, and comparative studies are on the surge, the comparative study of quiet practice between these two cultures is only in its initial stages (Eifring 2012, 1). With this article I seek to contribute to this new venture.

Christian-Confucian dialogue reflects Francis Clooney's framework for comparative theology.[2] According to Clooney (2010), comparative theology is a "practical response to religious diversity" (10), whereby people are motivated to "venture into learning from other faith traditions for fresh theological insights" (69). Clooney urges the reader to read a text "in its own terms," and to be attentive to textual and historical context with the aid of commentators (59-61). Following this principle, I draw on textual, historical and theological analyses of the Centering Prayer literature in order

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[1] This paper is an extract from my doctoral dissertation, entitled "From Solitude to Solidarity: A Neo-Confucian Appropriation of Centering Prayer in the Transformation of Self."

[2] Clooney is a respected and recognized author in the field of interreligious dialogue.

to understand what is meant by the self, as well as the benefits of contemplation in transforming the self. To understand Zhu's teaching on human nature and quiet-sitting, I draw on the textual and philosophical analyses of recognized scholars of Zhu.

Thomas Keating and Zhu Xi

I take Thomas Keating (1923-present) and Zhu Xi 朱熹(1130-1200) as the principal representatives of this religious dialogue, because they both made a significant contribution to quiet practice in their respective traditions. As a Trappist monk, Keating is the co-founder of the Centering Prayer Movement and of Contemplative Outreach. In 2010, the Pitts Theological Library of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, US, established the *Father Thomas Keating Collection* to support scholarly research and promote contemplative spirituality (Emory Pitts Theology Library, 2016). In 2013, a documentary film entitled "Thomas Keating: a Rising Tide of Silence" won the Audience Choice Award. All these achievements indicate the Western world's increasing interest in the practice of silence, and Keating's significant role therein.

As for Zhu Xi, he played a key role in the "completion" of Neo-Confucianism through his teaching and writing (Chan 1986, 1). Neo-Confucianism is a reconstructed form of Confucianism and was the dominant ideology in China for 800 years until the early twentieth century. The influence of Neo-Confucianism has stretched also to East Asia to the present day (Berthrong and Nagai 2000, 4-6, 21-22; Chan 1986, 1). Zhu's teachings present a profound spiritual vision of human life, which is manifested uniquely in his teaching about quiet-sitting as a vital means of self-cultivation. According to Wm. Theodore de Bary, Zhu's two most significant contributions are the development of quiet-sitting and the compilation of *Sishujizhu* 四書集注 (Zhu 1998).[3] Together with *Sishu*, quiet-sitting spread to the rest of East Asia as the gem of Neo-Confucianism (de Bary 2011, 45-46). Zhu is the most important theorist of Neo-Confucian quiet-sitting, and is responsible for extending the practice to other East Asian countries, such as Korea and Japan (Yang 2004, 68).[4] I believe this Keating-Zhu engagement offers fruitful insights for Christian anthropology and Centering Prayer, or for Christian contemplation in general.

Keating's Christian Anthropology and Centering Prayer

The Human Condition: False Self vs. True Self

Today the contribution of the social sciences is critical for understanding the human person (Ruffing 1993, 48). Unlike those Christians who view the relationship between social science and Christian faith as a binary dichotomy, Keating chooses to appreciate and utilize the former in order to enrich the latter. At the same time, Keating's anthropology is solidly in line with the Christian tradition, particularly that of the Eastern Orthodox Church.[5] Based on Scriptural support and the doctrines of Creation, Christology, and the Trinity, he argues for human oneness and the divinization/evolution of consciousness (Keating 2013, 2; Keating 2004, 1-2). He also emphasizes inner freedom as the essence of the image and likeness of God in which

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[3] By putting the Confucian classics (*Analects of Confucius* 論語, *Mencius* 孟子, *Daxue* 大學, and *Zhongyong* 中庸) into *Sishu* 四書, and synthesizing their commentaries into coherent interpretations, Zhu structured a new Confucian canon. Both *Daxue* and *Zhongyong* are originally from *Liji* (Book of Rites) 禮記. *Sishu* became the official text for civil service examinations from 1313 to 1905.

[4] Yang is a professor at the Department of Chinese Literature in National Tsing Hua University. One of his research interests is Neo-Confucianism, and he has published extensively.

[5] For more information on Christian anthropology related to Keating's viewpoints, see Anderson 1993, 8; Behr 2005, 1:51; Blocher and Dyrness 2008, 43.

humanity is created, with spiritual evolution as the path of liberation from the false self to restore this freedom (Keating 2013, 1-2).

The notion of false versus true self is a significant and unique feature of Keating's anthropology, and is drawn mainly from modern psychology. The psychological concepts of unhealed and repressed childhood wounds/trauma, the unconscious, and defense mechanisms/compensatory strategies are all crucial in Keating's idea of false/true self. Keating (1997) defines the two in this way:

> True Self—the image of God in which every human being is created; our participation in the divine life manifested in our uniqueness. (147)
>
> False self—the self developed in our own likeness rather than in the likeness of God; the self-image developed to cope with the emotional trauma of early childhood, which seeks happiness in satisfying the instinctual needs of survival/security, affection/esteem, and power/control, and which bases its self-worth on cultural or group identification. (146)

In Keating's opinion, all persons are deeply distorted by the false self and hindered from manifesting the true self capable of fully participating in the divine life. The concept of false self has two major implications for the human condition. According to Keating, unhealed wounds with unresolved negative emotions beginning in childhood are firstly repressed and stored in the unconscious, and secondly, develop into emotional programs that center around the unmet instinctual needs for security/survival, esteem/affection, and power/control. In desperate attempts to satisfy these unmet instinctual needs, the false self develops various strategies to cope with emotional trauma or perceived threats, and bases its self-worth in cultural or group identification (Berger 2006, 35; Keating 2003, 3, 139). He calls these strategies "emotional programs for happiness." The energy behind these "emotional programs" is addictive, and is aimed at compensating for childhood wounds (Bourgeault 2004, 95). The result is human misery, with the false self programmed to react in harmful ways.

In signifying his model is in line with Christian teaching, Keating explains how "emotional programs for happiness" are the human condition described by classical theology as "original sin." According to Keating, the doctrine of the Fall or original sin was the early Christian theologians' attempt to explain the universal human affliction from the beginning. Other religions or schools of philosophy have their own ways of explaining the universal phenomena of human affliction (Keating 2003, 26). In integrating psychology with theology, Keating understands human suffering through the concepts of "false self" and "emotional programs for happiness." Therefore, he replaces the concept of original sin with ideas of the human condition strained by the false self. In Keating's opinion, change is only possible with divine grace. And he advocates that Centering Prayer, as a divine therapy, helps to transform the false self into the true self.

Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is basically a period of solitude and silence, as well as inward stillness, to be practiced for twenty minutes, twice a day. During the time of prayer, one centers attention on God's presence within. Participants choose a sacred word as the symbol of God's presence and as an anchoring point, so that they are able to focus on the Divine presence and not be distracted by the ordinary flow of thoughts. Whenever the participant realizes that s/he is being distracted by other thoughts, s/he simply returns to this sacred word/symbol (Keating 2015). For Keating, consenting to God's presence and action within is the essence of Centering Prayer (Keating 2012, 1).

This simple consent to God's presence and letting go of all mental activities to rest in God is closely connected with the contemplative and *apophatic* tradition. The method of Centering

Prayer, based primarily on *The Cloud of Unknowing* (fourteenth century), is an attempt to present the contemplative tradition in an updated format (Keating 1994, 45). *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Walsh 1981) teaches in this way:

> For a simple reaching out directly towards God is sufficient, without any other cause except himself. If you like, you can have this reaching out wrapped up and enfolded in a single word…This word is to be your shield and your spear, whether you are riding in peace or in war. With this word you are to beat upon this cloud and his darkness above you. With this word you are to strike down every kind of thought under the cloud of forgetting… (133-134)

The use of a "word" to fight against distracting thoughts while focusing on God's presence reminds one of the "sacred word" used in Centering Prayer. Besides *The Cloud of Unknowing*, earlier contemplative practices including *Lectio Divina*, the pure prayer of Evagrius of Pontus (345-399), the silent prayer of John Cassian (365-435), and the prayer of the heart, are also sources of Centering Prayer (Keating 2003, 144; Keating 1986, 7).[6] Keating (2000) concludes that Centering Prayer is "a blending of the finest elements of the Christian contemplative tradition" (1).

The *apophatic* approach in the Christian tradition can be understood in two ways: a philosophical-theological position to see the incomprehensible God, and a mode of spiritual practice to ascend to God.[7] An appreciation that God is beyond human comprehension is found in several of the Greek Fathers, including Clement of Alexandria (150-215) and the Cappadocian Fathers (fourth century) (Louth 2012, 138). Both the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and the First Vatican Council (1869-70) affirmed that God's essence is incomprehensible (Egan 1993, 701).

As a mode of ascent to God, the essence of the *apophatic* way is abandonment. Cynthia Bourgeault, an acknowledged scholar of Centering Prayer, understands abandonment as a Christ-centered spiritual practice because it models itself on Jesus' life of self-emptying (*kenōsis*) and teaches dying to self. Bourgeault argues that in Centering Prayer one experiences losing life and finding life through letting go of the false self and awakening to the true self (Bourgeault 2004, 81). More importantly, these skills developed in meditation can be transferred to daily life so that one can be freed from unhealthy attachments (Bourgeault 2004, 82-83). In short, Centering Prayer is a contemplative practice rooted in the Christian *apophatic* tradition, but put into a contemporary form and language. Centering Prayer enables a person to consent to God's presence and be open to the Divine Therapy of transforming the false self into true self.

Zhu's Cosmology and Quiet-sitting

The essence of Neo-Confucianism is learning to be a sage in harmony with the Principle of Heaven through a self-cultivation that leads to moral acts in the world. By claiming that everyone is born with a good nature, and therefore has the capacity for sagehood, Mencius (372-289 B.C.) set the foundation for attaining sagehood as the goal of learning and self-cultivation for everyone. Zhu Xi is arguably the most influential interpreter of Mencius' teaching. To understand Zhu's teachings on human nature and quiet-sitting as a form of self-cultivation, it is first necessary to comprehend his cosmology.

Cosmology and Human Nature

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[6] The booklet (Keating 1986) plus a series of video cassettes was published as a teaching tool for Centering Prayer, and is still used in the 10-days intensive retreat for Centering Prayer held at St Benedict Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, USA.

[7] This understanding of the two aspects is derived from Egan (1993, 700) and Howells (2005, 117).

Zhu's idea is that li and qi are the Ultimate Reality in the cosmos. They are two different entities, but complementary to and never separate from each other:

天下未有無理之氣，亦未有無氣之理。(《朱子全書》卷 49:1a) In the whole universe there has never been any qi without li, or li without qi. (*Zhuziquanshu* 49:1a). (Zhu 1987, 363; translation adapted from Chan 1969, 634).[8]

所謂理與氣決是二物。(《朱子全書》卷 49:5b) What are called li and qi are certainly two different entities. (*Zhuziquanshu* 49:5b). (Zhu 1987, 366; translation adapted from Chan 1969, 637)

According to Zhu, the existence of all distinct things and events in the universe is constituted by various combinations of *li* and *qi*. While *li, which is also called dao or taiji, has* no form, but gives each thing, person or event its specific nature and principle, *qi* gives things their specific form:

天地之間有理有氣。理也者，形而上之道也，生物之本也。氣也者，形而下之器也，生物之具也。是以人物之生必稟此理，然後有性，必稟此氣，然後有形。(《朱子全書》卷 49:5b) Throughout the universe there are both *li* and *qi*. *Li* refers to *dao*, which exists before physical form (and is without it) and is the root from which all things are produced. *Qi* refers to material objects, which exists after physical form (and is with it); it is the instrument by which things are produced. Therefore in the production of humans and things, they must be endowed with *li* before they have their nature, and they must be endowed with *qi* before they have physical form. (*Zhuziquanshu* 49:5b). (Zhu 1987, 366; translation adapted from Chan 1969, 636)

Qi is the matter and energy of which the entire universe and all things in it are composed. The particular purity of qi endowed in each thing, *person, or event* gives each one a specific form and characteristics (Chu 1990, 90). On the other hand, each thing, person, or event has its own nature and principle, which is a manifestation of the fundamental *Li*.

Building on his *li-qi* theory, Zhu asserts that the human mind and human nature are also a production of *li and qi, and* are identical with the universal *Li*, capable of knowing the basic principle of reality. However, one's endowment of *qi* may be impure. As a result, the human mind is filled with selfish desires and emotional attachments, obscuring the principle and the original good nature (Chu 1990, 9; Poceski 2009, 201).[9] To restore human nature and actualize its goodness, the mind must be cultivated. Zhu illustrates his mind theory concisely in this paragraph:[10]

學者須是求放心，然後識得此性之善。人性無不善，只緣自放其心，遂流於惡。「天命之謂性」，即天命在人，便無不善處。發而中節，亦是善；不中節，便是

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[8] Regarding to text numbering for *Zhuziquanshu*, 49 refers to the number of juan (chapter), followed by the folio number divided into either a or b. Chan and I follow the same numbering system.

[9] Innate human nature includes four senses of morality in humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom, 仁義禮智 as stated in *Zhuziquanshu* 49:1b; Chan 1969, 634.

[10] Zhu's human mind theory is also well illustrated in "A Treatise on the Examination of the Mind" 觀心說 and "First Letter to the Gentlemen of Hunan on Equilibrium and Harmony" 與湖南諸公論中和第一書.

惡。(《朱子語類》〈學六〉〈持守〉卷 12) Students must seek their lost minds, they'll then understand the goodness of their nature. Human nature is in all instances good; it's simply because one has let go of the mind that one falls into evil. "What heaven has conferred is called human nature" means that the heavenly mandate exists in the human being, and that human nature is completely good. When the feelings have been aroused, and they attain their due measure and degree—this is goodness. When the feelings don't attain their due measure and degree—this is evil. (*Zhuzi yulei* 12.4.4). (Zhu 1986, 1:203; translation adapted from Chu 1990, 165-166).[11]

This statement indicates two significant points in Zhu's theory of mind and human nature. First, with a fully developed mind, one can know one's nature and know Heaven, because the nature of mind is not clouded and one is equipped to search for *li* in its natural state. With a restored mind, one can serve Heaven because one can follow *li* in its natural state. It is worth noting that this basic teaching on human nature and human mind is very much in line with the teaching of Mencius in《孟子》〈盡心上〉(*Mencius*, "Jin Xin I"). Second, in the process of cultivating the mind, Zhu urges people to keep feelings in check so that they might attain their "due measure and degree." This advice is rooted in the teaching of *Zhongyongj* chapter 1. *Zhong* literally means equilibrium or centrality while *Yong* means harmony. When dealing with feelings, the goal is to be in equilibrium/harmony with the Principle of Heaven in both states of mind, i.e., before and after feelings are aroused in the mind (Adler 2008, 62; Chan 1987, 187; Taylor 1997, 46; Taylor 1988, 37). Should the mind permit the feelings to get out of control, human nature will become obscured. Preserving and nourishing the mind in equilibrium or harmony is of ultimate concern in Zhu's program of self-cultivation.

Self-cultivation and Quiet-sitting

While Zhu's self-cultivation is intended to purify the mind, its ultimate goal is sagehood in moral perfection, in which a person's experienced mental functioning and moral activity will authentically reflect the Heavenly Principle endowed *in human* nature (Adler 2008, 59-60).

Quiet-sitting is one form of self-cultivation frequently discussed in Zhu's writings. In his teaching, he is cautious in seeking a balance of meditative practice with other forms of learning and self-cultivation (Taylor 1997, 45). For Zhu, there is a risk of falling into quietism by focusing too much on the unmanifest mind in quietude, and thus ignoring its manifest state, as well as one's moral responsibility in the world. Moreover, a low profile teaching on quiet-sitting might have been intended to prevent criticism against him as a Buddhist or Daoist follower (Taylor 1997, 48-49; de Bary 1989, 232). Nonetheless, Zhu clearly endorses quiet-sitting in his writing as a practice with a wide range of benefits. From a detailed and critical investigation, Rodney Taylor categorizes these benefits into four themes, namely: aiding study, developing *jing* (a state of abiding in reverence), facilitating moral action, and penetrating into the interior mind (Taylor 1988, 33). While all four benefits are crucial to Confucian ideology, the last is of particular importance in understanding quiet-sitting as a spiritual practice. The following statements by Zhu illustrate this point:

近覺讀書損耗心目，不如靜坐省察自己為有功。(《朱子文集》續集，卷 2〈答蔡季通〉第 54 條) Recently I have felt that study and reading are harmful to mind and

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[11] Regarding the text numbering for *Zhuzi yulei*, only the traditional numbering of chapters is offered in the Zhonghua shu ju edition used here. Gardner's set of three numbers is based on the Ch'uan ching t'ang edition. The first digit refers to the chapter, the second is the folio leaf, and the third is the opening line of the translated page. See Chu 1990, 87.

eyes. Quiet-sitting as a way of examining the self is more beneficial. (*Zhuzi wenji*, Sequel, 2). (Zhu 2002, 25: 4686-4687; quoted in Yang 2006, 242; translation mine) 且靜坐，教他心平氣定，見得道理漸次分曉。(《朱子語類》〈學五〉〈讀書法下〉 卷 11) … the practice of quiet-sitting can calm down one's mind with focus, so that one may gradually see the principles of dao clearly. (*Zhuzi yulei* 11). (Zhu 1986, 1:178; translation mine)

Here Zhu claims that quiet-sitting makes possible a fuller manifestation of the Heavenly Principle within. In quiet-sitting, a person is gathered together inwardly, calming all emotions, examining the conscience, and filling the mind with principles of right actions. In other words, quiet-sitting helps a person attain sagehood by restoring their innate nature and coming to know the Principle of Heaven. Why does quiet-sitting make such a critical contribution? The answer lies in the cosmology of Zhu Xi. In addition to the two basic cosmic entities, *li* and *qi*, Zhu also points out two primal events in the cosmos, namely quietude and activity:

天地之間只有動靜兩端，循環不已更無餘事。(《朱子全書》卷 52:45a) There is no other event in the cosmos except activity and quietude, succeeding each other in an unceasing cycle. (*Zhuziquanshu* 52:45a). (Zhu1987, 468; translation mine) 而其動其靜，則必有所以動靜之理焉，是則所謂太極者也。……太極者所以指夫 天地萬物之根也，周子因之而又謂之無極者，所以著夫無聲無臭之妙也。然而無 極而太極，太極本無極。(《朱子全書》卷 52:45a) For this activity and quietude, there must be li (the principle) which make them possible. This is the *taiji* …. *Taiji* is the root of myriad things in the cosmos. Master Zhou also calls it *wuji* for it is without sound and smell. Hence, *wuji* and *taiji*, *taiji* is *wuji*. (*Zhuziquanshu* 52:45a). (Zhu1987, 468; translation mine) 當初元無一物，只有此理。有此理便會動而生陽，靜而生陰。靜極復動，動極復 靜，循環流轉。其實理無窮，氣亦與之無窮。自有天地便是這物事在這裏流轉。 **(**《朱子全書》卷 49:10a) In the beginning there is nothing, only this *li. With this li there will be* movement that generates the *yang*, and there will be quietude that generates the *yin*. When quietude reaches its ultimate, activity resumes; when activity reaches its ultimate, quietude resumes. One after another they keep circulating. In fact, *li* has no end, *qi together with it has no end either. Since the existence of heaven and earth, this event has been circulating here.* (*Zhuziquanshu* 49:10a). (Zhu1987, 368; translation mine)

Here, the concept of polarity is critical. Both *li* and *qi* have their poles in quietude and activity respectively. Implicit in Zhu's cosmology, *Wuji* is the principle of quietude, while *Taiji* is the principle of activity; *yin* is the energy of quietude, while *yang* is the energy of activity. All things in the universe are sustained and produced by li *(in wuji-taiji)* and qi (in *yin-yang*) through their endless combinations and interaction in the polarity of quietude and activity.

Clearly, the importance of quietude cannot be minimized. The perception of quietude as one of the two basic modalities of *li-qi* in the cosmos is the answer to why it is necessary to cultivate a quiet mind. No wonder Zhu said that the practice of quiet-sitting helps to nourish one's original foundation by providing a resting place.

始學工夫，須是靜坐。靜坐則本原定，雖不免逐物，及收歸來，也有箇安頓處。 譬如人居家熟了，便是出外，到家便安。如茫茫在外，不曾下工夫，便要收斂向 裏面，也無箇著落處。(《朱子語類》〈學六〉〈持守〉卷 12) The effort of

learning at the beginning should be quiet-sitting. Quiet-sitting nourishes the original foundation by settling it down. Even though one does not avoid worldly affairs, there is still a collecting together and a return to a point of rest. It is similar to a person who has been out for a journey. When he returns home, he finds it restful because he has been familiar with this restful dwelling. If no effort has been made (to the nourishment of the original foundation), even when one wants to collect together inward after wandering outside, one still lacks the dwelling place to rest in. **(*Zhuzi yulei* 96:12a-b.). (Zhu1986, 1:217; translation adapted from Taylor 1997, 67)**

This metaphor of journey effectively illustrates the complementary relationship of activity and quietude in the cosmos. We need both in order to nourish our very nature and existence. After activity, it is in this place of restful quietude that one is nourished and transformed to know the Heavenly Principle. The unique organic connection of quiet-sitting with cosmic quietude makes it a supreme practice in Zhu's program of self-cultivation.

Neo-Confucian Insights for Centering Prayer

As reflected in the above discussion, both Keating and Zhu's teachings on human nature and quiet practice are deeply rooted in their spiritual traditions of Christianity and Confucianism respectively. The valuable contributions they have made owe much to their successful integration of new knowledge into their heritage. In Keating's case, the new knowledge is mainly psychology; while in Zhu's case, it is Buddhist and Daoist teaching. History has informed us of the value of integrating new knowledge to expand tradition in meeting the challenges of a new generation. This paper is another attempt at such an integration.

When engaged in comparative theology, Clooney prefers to work with similarity rather than difference, considering the former a ripe and comparable area for fostering theological conversation (Clooney 2010, 75-76). However, scholars like Judith Berling consider differences and gaps as sources of inspiration (Berling 2004, 40). Instead of seeing the two methods as opposed to each other, I find insights from Zhu's quiet-sitting complement Keating's Centering Prayer. Hence, in the following sections, both similarities and differences between quiet-sitting and Centering Prayer are revealed in order to draw out meaningful insights for the transformation of self in the latter.

Zhu claims that *li* and *qi* constitute all realities in this cosmos, including humanity, which is designated for moral acts according to the embodied heavenly principle, *li*. To be fully human is to be a sage in harmony with *li* and everything under heaven. This foundational understanding of human nature implies that to be fully human is not simply to be an independent individual, but to have a harmonious relationship with the transcendent, as well as with all others in this cosmos, be they human or otherwise. As stated by Wei-ming Tu (1989), "Three interrelated dimensions are involved here: the person, the community, and the transcendent" (94). In dialogue with this core teaching of Neo-Confucianism on human nature, the following paragraphs attempt to enrich Christian anthropology in relation to these three dimensions. The focus is on the way quiet practice can contribute to each of these relational aspects of humanity.

Insights of the Self in Relation to the Ultimate

Neo-Confucian speculation on the origin of humanity and its destiny shares remarkable similarities with the Christian account. According to Genesis 1, God is the Creator of all, and humanity is created in God's image. In the understanding of Eastern Orthodoxy, as well as in the Christian mystical tradition, the noblest call of humanity is to act according to God's will and ultimately be one with God. This process is called divinization. Apparently both Neo-Confucian and Christian traditions consider human nature comes from and assembles the Ultimate Reality in

a certain way, and is intrinsically good. In addition, the highest calling of a human in both traditions is to be in accord with the Ultimate. Such similarities in the foundational understanding of humanity and its relationship with the Ultimate across Eastern and Western traditions are noteworthy. They enhance a universal perspective on human transcendence, human dignity and human potential for goodness.

On the other hand, there are also obvious differences between the two traditions when articulating the human relationship with the Ultimate. Zhu's concepts of *li* and *qi*, as well as their polar modalities in quietude and activity, are utterly foreign to the Christian comprehension of God. Yet these contrasts are precisely the points of inspiration needed to stretch Christian ideology on the Divine, and to germinate new insights concerning human-divine relationship. Through the metaphysical lens of Zhu Xi, I argue that quietude is needed for humanity to deepen its relationship with God, and to be in tune with God's will. This is for two reasons. First, if quietude is one of two basic divine modalities, it would be obligatory to encounter God in quietude. Second, Zhu tends to perceive the Ultimate as an impersonal *li* (principle) and *qi* (energy), while quiet-sitting is a helpful means of nurturing one's endowed *li* and *qi*. Hence, quiet-sitting enhances the connection between the practitioner and the Ultimate Reality. The following sections provide further elaboration on these two hypotheses.

Quietude as One of the Two Basic Divine Modalities

The Bible is an authoritative source for Christians in understanding God. Based on the Bible, some Christian theologians attempt to articulate the nature of God and come up with various concepts. For example, there are the famous three O's: omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience, suggesting that God is all powerful, all present, and all knowing. Alternatively, God is perceived as Triune, i.e., one Being in three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Then there are the less philosophical descriptions, such as God is love and faithful, or the Creator and Savior. This list of the attributes of the divine nature can go on and on, making a sharp contrast with the four elements grasped by Zhu Xi when framing the Ultimate, namely *li* and *qi*, and their polar modalities of quietude and activity.

To understand God in terms of activity is certainly familiar to Christians. The Bible is filled with stories of God's actions relating to creation, salvation or revelation in this world and in human lives. However, to understand God in terms of quietude is alien for most Christians. Compared to action, the Scriptural record on sacred silence is scarce, although not void. With critical analysis of Scriptural exegesis in Jewish tradition, Benjamin Sommer (1999) has made a convincing case for divine revelation through silence at Sinai in Exodus 19-20: "[A]t Sinai, Israel heard nothing, but it did experience a revelation, a wordless, inarticulate signification of God's commanding presence" (440-441).

Encountering God in silence is also noted in Elijah's mysterious account in 1 Kings 19:9-13.[12] The accounts of Abraham (Gen 22:2-3), Moses (Exod 3:5-6), and Job (Job 40:3-5), also shed insight into sacred silence, which is considered the root of meditation and the springboard to action (Bryson 2009, 2).

In addition to Scriptural evidence of the importance of divine silence, there are also teachings in the *apophatic* tradition that assemble divine quietude. The extended history of monastic and contemplative traditions since the desert fathers is a strong support for Christians who are drawn by divine silence. As for recent theological attempts on this subject, Raimundo Panikkar's (1989) *The Silence of God*, and Karl Rahner's (1975) *Encounters with Silence* are two noteworthy works. In the field of interreligious dialogue on silence, Sung Hei Kim proposes that God's revelation as emphasized by Christianity, and the silence of Heaven as stated by Confucius,

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[12] See NRSV, 1 Kings 19:12 translation; Sommer 1999, 441-444; God's stillness is translated as a murmur, whisper or small voice by some translators; see Waldman 1994, 228.

can be viewed as two ends of a pole, complementing one another (Kim 1991, 206; quoted in Chen 2005, 130-131).

In spite of all these attempts to explore the divine silence, hardly any Christian theologians have explicitly stated that quietude is the fundamental nature of the Ultimate, as understood by Neo-Confucians such as Zhu Xi. The few exceptions include Ignatius of Antioch (first century), and John the Solitary (fifth century). Both identified God with silence in their teachings (*Letter to the Magnesians*, 8.2; and *On Prayer*, 4), implying that silence is God's primary nature, or characteristic (Brock 1979, 86, 98; Schoedel 1985, 118, 120). Nonetheless, the visions of Ignatius and John in seeing God as silence have scarcely been noticed in the Christian tradition. To identify God as silence is almost unheard of, at least in mainstream theology. No wonder that when Bernard McGinn (2008) traced the Christian *apophatic* tradition, he did not include this stance as one of the identified forms of negation.[13] What if quietude is indeed a fundamental aspect of the nature of God? Zhu's cosmology challenges Christians to take God's silence more seriously in theological thinking as well as in spiritual practice. A silent God points out that stillness is essential for encountering the Divine, as stated explicitly in Psalm 46:10, "Be still, and know that I am God."

The Ultimate as Immanent and Impersonal

In claiming that everything under heaven is produced by *li* and *qi*, which are impersonal, Zhu sends another challenge to the Christian understanding of the divine-human relationship. Such cosmology indicates that the Ultimate Reality is both immanent and impersonal in relation to humanity.

To see God as impersonal is particularly challenging and may even be blasphemy for some Christians, whose God image is strongly colored by the personal Triune God. Keating is one who emphasizes a personal God supported by the Scriptures, the doctrine of incarnation, and particularly the doctrine of Trinity. However, this traditional emphasis on divine personhood is challenged by some scholars. For example, Chung-ying Cheng (1991, 459; quoted in Chen 2005, 320) and Mark Heim (2001, 34-40) have proposed seeing the Ultimate as both personal and impersonal at the same time.

The Confucian emphasis on the immanent *Dao* in humanity is in contrast with the transcendent emphasis of classical Western theology, which is in turn deeply influenced by Greek philosophy. Again, this traditional emphasis on divine transcendence, which inevitably shapes a distant God, has come under criticism (Torrence 1997, 17-93; quoted in Chen 2005, 340). Keating is one of those who embraces the Orthodox tradition to highlight the doctrine of incarnation for the immanent Word.

As more and more scholars become dissatisfied with the dominant and binary view of the Ultimate as transcendent and personal, Zhu's *li-qi* theory and *zhong-yong* principle can contribute to this debate. Inspired by Zhu's principle of harmony in polarity, God can be seen as both personal and impersonal, transcendent and immanent. This discussion on God's nature is beyond the scope of this paper, however, and would require another project. A better focus here is to investigate the relationship between quiet practice, self-cultivation, and the Ultimate as immanent and impersonal.

The cultivation of the embodied *qi* has long been valued by Confucianism, as testified by Mencius' famous statement: "I'm good at cultivating the vast, flood like *qi*!"《孟子》〈公孫丑上〉(*Mencius*, "Gong Sun Chou I") Building on Mencius' claim, Hyo Dong Lee explains how the cultivation of *qi* may connect one to the cosmic *qi*, and contribute to the growth of humanity

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[13] The three forms of negativity mentioned by McGinn are: a) the conviction that God is beyond human speech; b) an inner detachment and release; and c) divine absence when God withdraws.

(Lee 2014, 64). Although Mencius did not connect quiet-sitting with the cultivation of *qi*, it is possible that the two became intimately related in Zhu's time, given the widespread influence of Daoism. Daniel Gardner (2003), who recognizes *qi* cultivation is important for Neo-Confucianism, concludes that meditative reading is a Neo-Confucian method to cultivate *qi* and realize the authentic self:

> Through attentiveness and meditative reading, the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism is advocating the cultivation of one's *qi*, one's psychophysical endowment. Body and mind together are to be refined and transformed. The aim of such transformation is transcendence, but not to an "other" realm; rather it is a transcendence of our normal, chronic condition, to realization of our authentic self. (114)

Although meditative reading is not the same as quiet-sitting, Gardner has noted that its methods are similar in certain ways to *Lectio Divina*, an ancient Christian prayer that prepares one for contemplation, according to Keating. In this case, meditative reading may at least be seen as a form of quiet practice to cultivate *qi*.

Keating emphasizes that the goal of Centering Prayer is to deepen a personal relationship with the Personal God who dwells within the individual. This explanation is confusing to those who find it senseless to develop a relationship in silence or even "emptiness." The Neo-Confucian perspective helps to explain this delicate relationship, because the Ultimate is perceived as an impersonal principle and energy. Hence, the deepened "relationship" with the Ultimate is taken as a "deepening understanding" of the Principle and "cultivating the vast, flood like *qi*."

Insights on the Self in Relation to Others and to the Cosmos

"Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:39) is an indisputable Christian teaching. Yet its application, particularly in relation to social-political issues, is subject to debate. Keating is very clear in embracing societal concerns in his teaching. In his opinion, transformation or transforming union with the Divine is "a restructuring of consciousness in which the divine reality is perceived to be present in oneself and in all that is" (Keating 2003, 172). Implicit in this teaching is the conviction of the sacredness of all creation. Accordingly, Keating is concerned about the practice of compassion and justice, as well as caring for the earth (Keating 2003, ch.6, 17-18, 20-21). In his response to the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States, and in his concern about escalating violence in this world, he advocates Christian love in the following ways:

> Thus the attack is a denial of what is most fundamental about human beings, namely, their common unity, a oneness rooted in our common Source. We are individual and social in our very being, manifesting the unity and diversity of the Trinity and its boundless creative activity. (Keating 2004, 2)
> …the practice of mutual love in personal relationships and among nations, even to the point of dying for the sake of the survival, enhancement, and transformation of the whole human family, past, present, and to come. (Keating 2008, 3)

Here, Keating's belief in human oneness in the Triune God, and his conviction about the value of mutual love in fostering human prosperity, is clear. According to Keating, the effects of contemplative prayer include bearing spiritual fruit, experiencing oneness with God, and communion with all creatures in Christ (Keating 1985, 20). All these contribute to holistic health and provide a solid base for any human endeavor, especially the pursuit of social justice and peace (Berger 2006, 36-37). However, the fact that he emphasizes human sickness and uses "Divine Therapy" to describe Centering Prayer, has magnified the dimension of personal healing in contemplative practice. As a result, human creativity and the responsibility to build a better

world is overshadowed. In this case, Zhu's ontological structure that emphasizes the organismic unity of humanity with nature, and a profound sense of oneness among human beings, can enrich Keating's teaching on human connection, and extend it to the cosmic realm.

Ultimate Expression of Humanity in Ren

The theme of human relatedness is found in chapter one of *Daxue*, one of Zhu's *Four Books,* which proclaims self-cultivation is at the root of regulating the family, governing the state, and establishing world peace. Implicit in this renowned statement is a relational self, rather than the independent and somewhat isolated individual often emphasized in the West. It is plain that Confucian self-cultivation is not simply a program aimed at personal benefit, but rather a matter of forming one's humanity for social service (Tu 2003, 149). As noted by de Bary (2003):

> [T]he Confucian sense of mutuality, reciprocity, and responsiveness to others was seen as fundamental to the virtue of humaneness, with its empathetic feeling for the interrelatedness of all being…(83)

Among the four moral characteristics of humanity, *ren* signifies its fullest manifestation. Confucian *ren* is comparable with Christian love or agape (Yao 1996). To love one's neighbors involves an active social concern in Keating's view. This concern is strengthened by the Confucian emphasis on human relatedness taught in *Daxue* and embraced by Zhu.

Humanity as Co-creator in this Cosmos

In relation to the themes of human-relatedness and social service in *ren*, Wei-ming Tu further emphasizes that human beings, whose nature, abilities, and purpose have been imparted from heaven, have a responsibility to assist the transformation and nourishment of heaven and earth. In Tu's (1989) celebrated commentary on *Zhongyong*, *Centrality and Commonality*, he illustrates how humanity is a co-creator in this cosmos:

> It is true that human nature is imparted from heaven, but human beings are not merely creatures and heaven alone does not exhaust the process of creativity. In an ultimate sense, human beings, in order to manifest their humanity, must themselves fully participate in the creative process of the cosmos. They do not create *ex nihilo* (nor for that matter does heaven), yet they are capable of assisting the transforming and nourishing process of heaven and earth. (78)

Here Tu asserts that humanity has a significant and active role in the continual cosmic creativity. This shows a very high regard for human potential and identity. Moreover, it supports and expands Keating's positive regard for the true self in exercising its natural energies in "loving one's neighbors." The teaching of *Zhongyong* as articulated here by Tu is a stimulating enrichment of Keating's notion of true self.

The Socio-cosmic Self and Quiet Practice

How is this socio-cosmic aspect of humanity related to quiet practice? First, quiet-sitting helps one to have a deeper understanding of human nature, of which human-relatedness is a significant element. Second, quiet-sitting enables one's moral actions in society.

One benefit of quiet-sitting, as stated in the previous section on Zhu, is to penetrate into the original mind and deepen the understanding of human nature, which comes from and is a manifestation of the Ultimate *Li*. This implies that quiet-sitting may deepen one's appreciation of human relatedness, which is an essential element for the Confucian understanding of human

nature. Tu (1989) eloquently describes how penetrating one's inner self can realize the true nature of one's human-relatedness:

> [S]ince a person in the Confucian tradition is always conceived of as a center of relationships, the more one penetrates into one's inner self, the more one will be capable of realizing the true nature of one's human-relatedness. (27)

Tu and Zhu demonstrate a correlation between quiet-sitting and penetration into one's inner self or original mind, as well as realizing *li* and one's true nature, which includes human-relatedness. In this case, it is fair to say that quiet-sitting helps to enhance the social-cosmic self. In addition, this social-cosmic self is meant to contribute to the world through moral acts.

In short, Zhu's emphasis on the organismic unity of humanity and the contribution of quiet-sitting to this, functions as a good complement in strengthening Keating's socio-cosmic concerns. In healing the false self and awakening the true self, Centering Prayer is a valuable practice for building up human society and the cosmic world at large.

Insights on Quietude as a Spiritual Practice to Transform the Self

In comparing Confucianism and Christianity on humanity, Heup Young Kim points out that both traditions are concerned with how to be fully human, and claim that Jesus Christ is the model to exemplify *dao* in life (Kim 1996, 188). In fact, Zhu's Neo-Confucian teaching can also shed light to Christians on how to be fully human. Below are three insights Christians may learn from Zhu's teaching.

Quietude as an Intrinsic Human Need for a Thriving Life

As argued above, if quietude, as framed by Zhu, is a fundamental modality of the Ultimate Reality, it is inevitably also a required condition for humanity to be in tune with the Ultimate. Similarly, quietude will also be a prerequisite for becoming fully human and leading a thriving life, because humanity comes from the Ultimate and shares its very nature in quietude. Implicit in Zhu's ontology is the simple logic that quietude is an intrinsic human need for a thriving life. Quietude is needed to nurture and preserve humanity. This explains all the benefits quiet practice brings to humanity, as perceived by Keating and Zhu.

The need for quietude is particularly urgent in this twenty-first century. Advanced technologies in communication, computer science, and transportation have intensified interactions and globalization. Busyness and restlessness have become marks of contemporary people, who are overloaded with activities in life, and information in mind. Zhu's cosmology inspires Christians to take contemplation seriously in order to get in tune with God, as well as with our own nature in quietude.

The Principle of Zhongyong: Harmony between Activity and Quietude

While quietude is needed for a thriving human life, so is activity. It is important to cultivate equilibrium and harmony between the two, as stated in the last line of the first chapter in *Zhongyong* (Berthrong 2003, 430; Tu 1989, 8), John Berthrong (2003) further ties this in with the spiritual dimension of humanity:

> [T]he specific spiritual dimension of the human response to the *Dao* as immanent or embodied human nature is linked to the cultivation of the states of equilibrium and harmony. Equilibrium and harmony are characterized as the roots of the cosmos and the way the cosmos ought to function when things are in proper balance. (431)

As rightly noted by Berthrong, the states of *zhong* and *yong* are the roots of the cosmos. Therefore, cultivating equilibrium and harmony plays a significant role in self-cultivation. One exercises equilibrium to fit into a specific time and situation, so that one is in harmony with the world, or even contributes to the harmony of the cosmos (Li 2014, 79-80).

This principle of *zhong-yong* is probably the foundational concept that grounds Zhu's teaching in polarities and their balanced interaction. Zhu teaches the modalities of activity and quietude in the Ultimate Reality of *li* and *qi*, claiming that they interact and balance one another perpetually in their cosmic existence and creativity. Likewise, humanity needs to hold both activity and quietude delicately in balance.

The wisdom of *zhong-yong* and its application by Zhu to quiet-sitting is not unknown in the Christian tradition. Although a concern for "balance" and "harmony" is not explicitly stated, major figures of *apophatic* spirituality do embrace the *kataphatic* way at the same time (Johnston 1995, 22). A characteristic of Pseudo-Dionysius's *apophatic* teaching (late fifth to early sixth century), is its complementary existence alongside *kataphatic* theology (*The Divine Names* 7.3.872a-b) (Pseudo-Dionysius, the Areopagite 1987, 108-109). Gregory the Great (540-604) teaches the two complementary aspects of contemplation and action (Butler 1966, 171). Teresa of Avila (1515-82) talks about prayer of quiet, and in the end urges her readers to imitate Christ in "good works." (*Interior Castle* VII: 4, 4-6) (Teresa of Avila 1979, 81).

This inclusive Christian tradition of active and quiet, *kataphatic* and *apophatic*, echoes the advice of *zhong-yong*. Endorsed by the ancient wisdom across East and West, an inclusive approach to activity and quietude becomes compelling. While pursuing Centering Prayer, or other contemplative practices, one should neither neglect active social involvement nor dismiss other *kataphatic* devotions. As stated by Contemplative Outreach, "Centering Prayer is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer" (Keating 2015). *Zhong-yong* encourages us to be an active contemplative just as Keating does. It is not just a response to the call of loving our neighbors in active service. It is a holistic way of actualizing our humanity for a balanced life, both in activity and quietude.

Inborn Temperament as Reason for Human Predicament

The third Neo-Confucian insight for self involves the major reason for the human predicament. Inspired by Zhu's *li-qi* theory, I propose that inborn temperament, rather than unhealed emotional wounds as suggested by Keating, could be the major reason for the tendency to sin instead of seeking the good. While both Keating and Zhu believe that everyone has the potential to realize the ideal self of goodness, Keating concludes that it is the emotional program of compensation geared by the false self that hinders a person from realizing the true self as designated by God. In Zhu's opinion, the impure *qi* embodied in the individual upon its production is decisive for the problem of evil. I think Zhu's theory can enrich Keating's in the sense that it explains why certain people act in more destructive ways as a result of unhealed wounds.

Zhongyong chapter 20 acknowledges that although each person is endowed with Heavenly *Dao* for moral action, there are differences in awareness or abilities among people, depending on the clarity of *qi* embodied in the individuals (quoted in Tu 1989, 58). This provides a sensible explanation as to why certain people are more impelled to goodness, while others to evil deeds. Inborn temperament is a logical reason for evil inclination, and unhealed traumas could intensify this tendency. Despite this inequality among human beings in their ability for good deeds, *Zhongyong* claims that once the knowledge is acquired, or the achievement is made, the result is the same. This means one can always improve oneself through self-effort, no matter how adverse the context or how feeble one's natural endowment may be (Tu 1989, 74-75).

Zhu has highlighted the benefits of quiet-sitting in aiding self-examination, the manifestation of *li*, and the actualization of moral acts. Hence, Zhu's insights indicate the value of quiet-sitting in enhancing one's self-awareness, and thus support Keating's claim that Centering

Prayer as a quiet practice can expand consciousness by dissolving the self-defense mechanism, and thus contribute to the emergence of the true self. Again, both Eastern and Western traditions affirm the transformative power of quiet practice in enhancing self-awareness, or self-consciousness.

Conclusion: Contemplation as Indispensable to Transforming the Self

As shown in the above discussion, Zhu's Neo-Confucian teaching on human nature and quiet-sitting has immense insight for Centering Prayer in its claim to transform the self. In summary, these insights are rooted in three important cosmological concepts: a) *li* and *qi* as the two basic cosmic entities; b) quietude and activity as the two basic modalities of cosmic entities; and c) bipolarity and *zhong-yong* as the two basic rules of cosmic relational existence. Such cosmological concepts lay the cornerstone for quiet-sitting to be an indispensable method in Zhu's self-cultivation program. Contrasting these with Keating's teaching on Centering Prayer and true self, we may come up with new insights for the true self in three dimensions, namely with oneself, with others, and with the Ultimate Reality that Christians call God. The major challenge cast by Zhu to Christians is to take quietude more seriously in theological speculation and spiritual practice.

Viewed from Zhu's cosmological perspective, quietude is a fundamental nature of God. Following this line of thinking, quietude becomes an intrinsic nature of a humanity that is created in the image of God. Accordingly, human beings need quietude to be in tune with God and to nourish their own wellbeing so as to participate in harmonious creativity with others in this cosmos. Thus, by applying Zhu's teaching, contemplative practices like Centering Prayer become indispensable for Christians in the transformation of selfhood, because they offer an organismic connection with a person's own nature, with God, and with everything else in this cosmos created by God.

Although quietude is indispensable, activity should not be neglected because the two are poles of a continuum. The principle of *zhong-yong* teaches a harmonious balance in life events, and the principle of bipolarity requires two interrelated poles to complement one another in cosmic existence and creativity. Hence, in Zhu's program of self-cultivation, quiet-sitting as a form of quiet practice is complemented by other activities. It is only one method among many. In addition, Zhu has stated repeatedly that moral acts and one's responsibilities in life should not be neglected while practicing quiet-sitting. Likewise, while undertaking contemplative practices such as Centering Prayer, Christians are reminded not to neglect their other spiritual practices or social responsibilities, and thus fall into quietism.

To claim that contemplation is indispensable and should be in a harmonious balance with activity may make some Christians uneasy. After all, the suspicion of quiet practice by church authorities was in full force from the seventeenth century, until a renewed interest in contemplation began in the late twentieth century, partly due to the challenge of Eastern meditation. As proposed by Clooney, by reviewing two similar realities (quiet-sitting and Centering Prayer in our case) in comparative theology and coming to understand each differently, we begin to comprehend related matters differently, and finally we see ourselves differently. But most of all, we are opened up to greater knowledge of God and more intimate encounters with the Divine (Clooney 2010, 11, 152).

If Christians are serious about the challenge of interfaith dialogue in an era of globalization, serious about learning from one another about transforming individuals and henceforth the world, as designated by God, they need to review the value and practice of Centering or Contemplative Prayer.

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