CHAPTER 4

New Confucianism – Relevant Elements for a Contextualization of the Doctrine of Justification

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 Introductory Remarks

Confucianism has been the dominant intellectual tradition in China for more than two thousand years, and in the rest of East Asia for centuries. During the Zhou dynasty (1100–256 BC) the word *ru* had become a term to designate an emerging class of literati being experts on history, ritual, poetry and music.¹ The Han historians named as *ru* the scholars who reckoned Kong Fuzi or Kongzi (Confucius) as their master and accepted the Confucian classics as their canon. The tradition and teaching of these scholars was named *ru jia* (the *ru*-tradition, used particularly in the pre-Han period), or *ru jiao* (the *ru*-teaching, used particularly about Confucianism as the state religion), or *ru xue* (the *ru*-learning, preferred by intellectuals today).² It was the Jesuit missionaries to China at the time of the Ming dynasty who Latinized Kong Fuzi to “Confucius,” named the *ru*-scholars and scholar-officials “Confucians,” and their teaching “Confucianism.”

As introduced, the contextual target for this project of contextualization is delimited to features of the revitalized movement of New Confucianism. Tu Weiming, one of my four main sources for the presentation of New Confucianism, regards Confucianism as an “ethico-religious philosophy,” as mentioned in 1.3.3.1. Another of my sources, Xinzhong Yao, characterizes it as a “religious humanism.” A third of my sources, Cheng Chungying, writes: “Confucian morality is essentially a philosophy of human self-transformation, self-transcendence, and self-delivery, and thus a philosophy of human self-understanding and self-perfection rooted in the fundamental experience of being human.”³

New Confucianism (also called “Contemporary Neo-Confucianism” or “Modern Confucianism”) is a Confucian attempt to respond to the challenges of Western modernism and late-modernism. Given the size and status of the East Asian countries, the entry of Confucianism into the world arena of philosophical and religious dialogues is of great importance. As previously mentioned, the relation between New Confucianism and Christianity is by scholars on both sides regarded as particularly interesting to develop more extensively. As also mentioned, some scholars regard themselves as both New Confucians and Christians.

4.1.2 Disposition, Delimitations, and Emphases
John H. Berthrong divides the history of the Confucian tradition into six epochs: (1) The classical period, before the time of the Han dynasty (ca. 520–221 BC). (2) The consolidation of Han dynasty Confucianism (206 BC – 220). (3) The challenge of Daoism and Buddhism (ca. 220–907). (4) The renaissance in the time of the Song dynasty and the flowering during the Ming, named Neo Confucianism (960–1644), with emphasis on Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming. (5) The “evidential research” during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). (6) The development of New Confucianism in the modern world (1911 to the present).

First (in 4.2), as a basis for the systematic presentation of New Confucian teaching in 4.3, it is indispensable to present an outline of the early history and teaching of the tradition as it developed in China in its first and formative period. It is also necessary to outline how the tradition has developed among New Confucian scholars the last sixty years. Regarding the periods from the beginning of the Han dynasty till the end of the Qing, I refer to the overview given in my doctoral dissertation, Chapter 4.2. Just a brief outline of the Song-Ming Neo Confucianism will be included here (in 4.2.1.6).


6 See 1.3.3.2. Those particularly applied in this study are John H. Berthrong, Julia Ching and Robert Cummings Neville.


8 As Robert Cummings Neville emphasizes, “To understand a tradition is to follow out its historical lines of treatment of the core texts and motifs in varying historical circumstances, ....” Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World (New York: SUNY Press, 2000), 110.