

# Humans can Broaden the Way, Sages can Continue and Carry Out the Working of *tian* 人能弘道，聖人能繼天立極\*

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## *Abstract*

When Christian missionaries—first Jesuit Matteo Ricci, Protestant James Legge and then down to the present day—have been introducing Chinese culture into the Western academy, they have been motivated to close the distance between these traditions by interpreting the Chinese world through a heavily Christianized language. Indeed, over the last four centuries of cultural encounter, the vocabulary established for the translation of classical Chinese texts into Western languages has been freighted by a patently Christian framework, and the effects of this “Christianization” of Chinese texts are still very much with us.

*Li* 禮 as an achieved propriety in roles and relations is perhaps the most important term in giving voice to the Confucian human-centered religiousness. It is within this context that the ancestral/numinous/cultural/natural notion of *tian* 天 has a role. The familiar mantra invoked to describe Confucian religiousness, *tianren heyi* 天人合一, describes the inseparability of the relationship between the numinous and the human experience, the inseparability of the relationship between the cultural and natural context and human thinking and living. Like the heavens and the earth (*tiandi* 天地), the

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numinous and the human (*tianren* 天人) too are one and two at the same time. We are thus concerned about the “depth of coalescence” (*du* 度) that can be cultivated and achieved in their first order relationality. It is thus that such correlative expressions are not simply descriptive, but are also prescriptive. The relationship is fecund and generative, with *tian* and *ren* working together collaboratively to build the connector for their own time and place, and to extend the cosmic order (*hongdao* 弘道, *dadao* 達道) in doing so. *Tian* and *ren* in their relationship are also to be understood as doing and undergoing, shaping and being shaped, in this dyadic yet resolutely constitutive relationship.

It is clear that human beings in this relationship derive much benefit from the ancestral/numinous/cultural/natural resources denoted by *tian*. *Tian* certainly provides human beings with a context for flourishing, and serves us as a model to emulate and revere, but since the relationship between *tian* and human beings is irreducibly collateral, we have to ask: What through personal cultivation can be made of this *tianren* relationship? And what does *tian* get in this relationship from human beings? My argument will be that in these classical Confucian canons, not only does human sagacity introduce epochal transformations in the human experience, but it also has a transformative effect on the moral content of *tian* and the cosmos broadly. In other words, it is my claim that the relatively vague notion of *tian* as it is expressed in these texts is amplified and made explicit through the specific lives of our human sages. I want to suggest that not only can “human beings broaden the way”, (*ren neng hongdao* 人能弘道), but “sagacious human beings can broaden *tian*” (*shengren neng hongtian* 聖人能弘天).

#### The Argument:

1. Confucian philosophy introduced into the Western academy by missionaries has been made into an “Eastern Religion”—a second rate Christianity.
2. In saving Confucian philosophy from this cultural reductionism, we do not want to rob it of its own unique religiousness.
3. Emerson’s pantheistic “transcendentalism” with its inseparability of God and man can be useful in taking us one step in the direction of non-dualistic religiousness.

4. But the status of the individual as a cosmic co-creator is unclear in Emerson.
5. In order to appreciate the radicality of Confucian religious sensibilities, we need to establish a clear distinction between transcendental Abrahamic religion and Confucian religiousness.
6. As a “human-” rather than a “God-” centered religiousness, Confucian religiousness is centered on an “achieved propriety in one’s roles and relations” (*li* 禮) rather than on some term identified inappropriately as a Confucian equivalent of “God” such as *tian* 天 or *shangdi* 上帝.

### Emerson’s “Transcendentalism”

A young Ralph Waldo Emerson, having graduated from Harvard Divinity School in 1834, was invited back by the class of 1838 to give the commencement address. In what is called the “Divinity School Address”, Emerson unleashed an assault on historical Christianity that in its own time was so scandalous that this increasingly famous orator, in spite of living his whole life within the proximity of Cambridge, was not invited back to his *alma mater* until after the Civil War. In this address, Emerson accused historical Christianity of having two defects that had immediate association with his own rejection of the doctrine of strict transcendence and its assumptions about a world-independent source of meaning.

The first defect for Emerson is the false assertion of the established Church that Jesus was a God rather than a man. In advancing this claim, the clerics had sought to empower themselves by making Jesus into a deity detached from human life and a remote object of worship by supplicating Christians. For Emerson, Jesus, in being the historical person he was, stood as a source of inspiration for every man with a soul to aspire to the magnitude of this human exemplar. The Church in thus co-opting Jesus had robbed human beings of their own divinity. In Emerson’s words:

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty,