THE CONFUCIAN *TIĀN XIÀ* (‘ALL UNDER HEAVEN’) AND MEISTER ECKHART’S ETHICAL UNIVERSALISM: A NEW KIND OF EAST-WEST DIALOGUE IN A DIVIDED WORLD?

PAPER

It is impossible to live in today’s world without a clear sense both of the importance and at times the challenge of the encounters and conversations between China and the West. In this paper I want to try to cast new light on *how* we are different and *why* we are different. I want to begin in Part One by briefly reviewing how we understand the human today, in the light of significant breakthroughs in the science of our human sociality, drawing upon very recent work in evolutionary science and social neuroscience. In Part Two I want to move on to consider the nature of our respective traditions, the Western and the Chinese tradition, and reflect upon the causes of these differences. And in Part Three, I want to look at the universalist politics of the Confucian concept of the *tiān xià* and the universalist ethics of the highly influential medieval Western figure of Meister Eckhart, as possible cultural resources for enhancing our capacities for global cooperation and mutual understanding in today’s world.

**PART ONE**

Understanding the Human

The human story is a constantly changing one of course but it is one which has recently taken a significantly new turn. This is a story that begins some two million years ago when our species was being formed in ways that continue to influence us deeply today. One of the primary questions has been to ask when do we see distinctively human practices emerge (which remind us of ourselves today) and what is it that might have caused them? We have to ask then: how do we define the human? In a recent influential book, Agustin Fuentes has argued that we are defined by what he calls the ‘creative spark’. This creativity is the product of something that has been very distinctive to us, from very earliest times. From the very beginning it seems we have been creatures who are both social and technological.

It is not easy for us to understand what this really means today however. [PUT UP SLIDE ONE, zebra] What we see here is both our social and our technological side. I want to call our social humanity *homo socius* (following Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s usage in ‘The Social Construction of Reality’, 1966). Our technological humanity is what we conventionally call *homo faber*. It is in the interplay between these two aspects of ourselves – *homo socius* and *homo faber* – that there appears a primary structure of both unity and tension. We need to note firstly that this is a *creative* interplay. Each element has its own creativity: the social self (*homo socius*) sees another immaterial self with her own intentions, dreams and memories, in the material face of the human other, while *homo faber* sees the shape of the desired tool hidden in the stone. In each case, something hidden is being seen, through an imaginative power. This imaginative power is distinctive to humans, and there has been an emphasis in the scholarship on the ways in which these two fundamental aspects of our humanity – the social and technological – combine. Their combination, as our sociality feeds off our technology and our technology off our sociality, is seen again to be central to who we are. This *creativity* of both face and hand has ‘created’ modern human beings, if you like (the so-called ‘ratcheting effect’).

[TALK TO SLIDE ONE, zebra]

Somewhat boldly, I am going to call this ‘significant new turn’ in the human story a ‘second enlightenment’. Evolutionary anthropology tells us about our past and how we have become. It tells us that we are fundamentally altruistic and social creatures who have lived for some 2-3 million years in relatively small, highly cohesive, collaborative groups, in which both technology and sociality have played a fundamental part. It tells us that human beings have cared for one another. But while evolutionary anthropology can record our sociality and note the relative absence of violence for instance until the very late period, it cannot tell us much about the deep nature or structure of this sociality. For this we need another field, that of contemporary social neuroscience or more specifically the neuroscience of social cognition, as it is called. This is practiced across the globe, and it is a clinical hospital-based discipline which deals with problems in human relating (typically autism). It has only very recently been brought into dialogue with evolutionary anthropology. The neuroscience of social cognition can tell us about the present: who we are now.

[PUT UP SLIDE TWO-THREE, SOCIAL COGNITION]

The chief contribution of social neuroscience to this discussion is its discovery of what is called the human ‘social cognition system’. This a deeply embedded and ancient system which structures how our body relates to other bodies. We can think of this as the human ‘face-to-face’, in which all fundamental human relationships seem to be formed. This social cognition system is what the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk refers to as ‘the species-wide, interfacial, greenhouse effect’. In the past, no one has spoken about this human capacity to bond in terms of reason and intelligence. Rather the language of affect or feeling has been used, and sometimes of instinct. One of the great breakthroughs with respect to our understanding of the human has been the identification of this ‘interfacial’ system which is in fact constituted as a form of highly intelligent *information exchange*. This is an interactive exchange of information (like a conversation or a rhythmic dance), which is occurring at massive speeds (far beyond what our modern consciousness can perceive). It is complosed of interactive reflexes, as well as phase symmetry of heart and brain, and at the centre of this physical exchange of information of quite unparalleled density are extremely powerful processes of *evaluation*. We learn about each other in a process which one neurological school refers to as ‘participative sense-making’. And this learning about each other is itself a powerful form of human bonding: it is indeed *the* form of our human bonding.

What contemporary neurology asks us to understand then is that our human capacity to bond with each other is bound up with very particular processes of reasoning and discernment. Our bodies have evolved to be walking social computers, with unparalleled power. The social cognition system is the default system of the human body and it is what every one of us carries into the encounter with every human being we meet during the day. We can get some idea of the power and importance of this system for us when we consider that it is the bedrock of all our close relationships. And if for some reason we are cut off from contact with the human face, then we will find that we rapidly decline psychologically and physically. It is as if the human body has evolved to be most deeply activated and alive when we engage with the human other. We can also say of this social cognition system that it is how we are most deeply in the world. It is in fact, for all of us, the strongest, most vital and alive point of contact we have with the universe in which we find ourselves. The way this is sometimes stated is that if the human brain is the most complex system found in the universe (with its 13 trillion moving parts), then two human brains are even more so. And we have to consider that the human brain has evolved in very close connections with other human brains throughout our evolutionary history. [TALK TO SLIDE TWO-THREE, SOCIAL COGNITION]

Different Reasoning

[PUT UP SLIDE FOUR]

So what new insights into the nature of the human, ourselves, do we gain from this project of asking evolutionary anthropology and social neuroscience to work together? It tells us that *homo socius* and *homo faber* are very closely bound together in the human body, but it also tells us that *they reason differently*. The social cognition system (or what we can also call the ‘in-between’) shows a person to person orientation of the face rather than the person to world orientation of the hand that we associate with technology and *homo faber*. The reasoning involved in our social imagination is the capacity to engage with and to understand another. Of course, this is pre-thematic, pre-linguistic reasoning (we still feel this today – our bodies do a lot of the work in relating to other bodies without us knowing very much about it consciously). Here we communicate very powerfully in reflex-based exchanges of information which allow our bodies as it were to ‘dance with one another’ in a rhythmic exchange which tells us whether we can get on with one another or not. But for all the physical reflexes, rhythms and harmonisations of one body with another, this remains a deeply *evaluative* exercise.

What is apparent is that we cannot understand the other in this live, interactive way without wholly opening up to the other. *We are ourselves the instrument for discovering who the other is and whether we can bond and so also work with them.* Our body opens up to theirs therefore in a *participative* way. The reasoning here is open-ended, process-centred and tolerant of difference. It is in fact a form of reasoning which is accepting of complexity and which renounces the mechanisms of control that allow us to survive in a complex world. In the social cognition system we don’t/the body doesn’t seek to control the other (we don’t instrumentalize our friends - rather we make ourselves vulnerable to them through our openness and availability). This entails enormous vulnerability of course, and we can see here the degree of self-risk that is built into our mutual human bonding and, with that, we can see in evolutionary terms that bonding with the human other has the very highest priority since it has been and probably still is absolutely essential for species survival.

So much for *homo socius*  (our family, friend or companion). But what of *homo faber*? The contrast with our technological or indeed scientific reasoning could not be greater. If the social reasoning of face-to-face contact is participative, then that of *homo faber* is the reasoning of an *observer*. This is the reasoning of someone who naturally wants to survive in the world though gaining control over it. It is objectifying, instrumentalizing, reductive reasoning that our genus has used every day over some two million years in order to get by. The reasoning of the hand presents distance and a clear calculating view (it becomes scientific reasoning). The reasoning of the *face* presents proximity and bonding. The reasoning of the *hand* is product or goal-orientated as it seeks to carry forward its intentionalities in the world. The reasoning of the *face* is process-orientated, as it seeks to harmonize or share intentionalities. The reasoning of the *hand* reduces complexity. The reasoning of the *face* embraces it.

[TALK TO SLIDE FOUR]

What also becomes clear from this paradigm is that there is always a potential tension between our sociality and our technology. This is not only a far-reaching interaction which gives us our intelligence and imagination: the creativity that defines us as human beings. But it is also the possibility of conflict between the two. If the hands that guide the tools are goal orientated and concerned to carry out our intentionalities in the world, through objectifying and instrumentalizing objects, then it follows that there is the possibility that tools will also be used *to objectify and instrumentalize other human beings*. What happens if we turn our tools against other human beings, turning *them* into objects, according to our own intentionalities? Of course, then someone will get hurt.

The Neolithic Crisis

[PUT UP SLIDE FIVE]

One of the strangest things that evolutionary science shows us about our own past is that if we mean by violence the pre-meditated killing or maiming of other human beings, of both genders, and all ages, which is fairly commonplace in our modern world (so called ‘ethnic cleansing’), then this is something we find only very late on in our evolutionary history (the first massacre is recorded in modern Kenya, some 10,000 years ago). The answer to this question of what is happening in the recent Neolithic period to cause these massacres has to concern the sudden rise in populations which occurred some 10-15,000 years ago, through settlement and agriculture. These were times when populations suddenly grew, from several hundreds to several thousands, and for the first time clear boundaries were created (which would become walled townships). This led to a collective power of self-defining. Advanced language was now certainly in place, and with that, what we understand to be advanced linguistic consciousness, which is to say all those capacities for reflexivity and for understanding ourselves and the world that we associate with modern human beings such as ourselves. [TALK TO SLIDE FIVE]

We need to note the following: With the leap in population size which occurred during the Neolithic, the social cognition system, by which we bonded then (as we do today), became overwhelmed. As Robin Dunbar has calculated, any one individual can maintain face-to-face links with around 150 other persons). A community of 3000 however is an entirely different proposition.

From this then we can conclude:

*Our vulnerability then lies in the size of our group in ratio to the power of the social cognition system.*

[PUT UP AND TALK TO SLIDE SIX summary as below]

[1. *Our vulnerability then lies in the size of our group in ratio to the power of the social cognition system.*

2. *The sudden increase in population size in the Neolithic led to de-stabilisation and increased violence, with new territorial boundaries.*

3. *We are currently living through a comparable change in the ratio of group size and the power of the social cognition system, through processes of globalisation (return to territorial boundaries).*]

4., *Karl Marx correctly observes that changes in technology can compromise our capacity for the social reasoning that builds community, leading to instrumentalization of the human subject. ('Results of the direct production process’, 1864, publ. 1933)*

Let us summarize then: It was not only the size of the populations which was a factor in the Neolithic but also the fact that what we can recognize then what we know today as fully advanced linguistic consciousness, with its different levels of reflexivity. This advanced language had emerged from two sources: the social cognition system (*homo socius*), with its sophisticated bonding, and the technological system (*homo faber*), with its sophisticated tool-making (the brain thinks words are tools). Perhaps we can say that words are *social tools*. And so, like tools, words can become weapons. Commenting on the early Neolithic massacres, Vittorio Gallese has suggested that this particular kind of violence is unthinkable without advanced language, since such killing means that we have learned to override the natural empathy one human body has for another, through learning to name the other as non-human.

THIS BRINGS US TO A CRUCIAL QUESTION PERHAPS THE KEY QUESTION REGARDING OURSELVES TODAY: NAMELY HOW DOES *HOMO SOCIUS* RESPOND TO THE LOSS OF ITS POWER WITH THESE INCREASED POPULATIONS DURING THE NEOLITHIC, AND WHAT LESSONS MIGHT THERE BE IN THIS FOR US TODAY?

I think we can state the answer to this question in summary form: we begin to see *the cultural and external ‘performance’ of the internal and biological social cognition system* (which we are calling here *homo socius*). *Homo socius* becomes externalized and spreads through culture. [PUT UP SLIDE SEVEN]. We can see this 1) the development and prominence of ritual (the early origins of which are pre-linguistic and predate the Neolithic). The rhythmic elements both in ritual and the arts closely correspond with the rhythms and harmonies of the social cognition system, which is pure rhythm, harmony and movement, at very high speeds. We can call this (Lĭ) 2) The element of *evaluation* (or discernment) which is at the very heart of the social cognition system will reappear in the form of moral imperatives such as the Golden Rule. Imperatives of altruistic action, associated with religions or traditional philosophies, demand engagement with complex and vulnerable other human beings in dynamic, constantly changing situations, in which we have to learn to think ‘situationally’, ‘inclusively’ and in an open-ended way as process: the process of discovering the other (Yì). 3) The social cognition system is both species-wide and egalitarian, and some echo of that seems to be found in early societies, such as early Confucian society, in which ‘mutual obligation’ becomes the principle of egalitarianism operating within recognized social hierarchies (Dé). 4) this leads also to an emphasis upon the unity of the self, especially through the unity of heart and mind: our emotional, affective life together with our rational life. This too appears in Confucian texts, in various contexts of course, as Xīn. 5) The scientific discourse on the social cognition system strongly stresses that it is a ‘self-organizing’ material system of unparalleled complexity. It thus has a claim not to be us but rather to be *world*: part of the world indeed which became so deeply activated or real, so informationally dense, some hundreds of thousands of years ago that human consciousness began to be generated by it. One of the signs of the externalisation of the social cognition system are the cosmologies we associate with world religions. These envisage us as being at home in the world in its *ultimacy*, whether as liberation through meditation, or salvation, or the full unity of body and mind within the world, or indeed through the presence of ‘heaven’ (Tiān).

[TALK TO SLIDE SEVEN]

These are big perspectives here of course, leading to further key questions. How does culture mediate the social cognition system? How does the social cognition system permeate culture (and which way round is it?). In the following, we shall focus upon one fundamental dimension to this, which is the role of advanced language itself: the creative child of our human creativity which, as we have suggested, is caught between the imperatives of sharing which it receives from the human face and the imperatives of dynamic action in the world, which it receives through the human hand.

**PART TWO**

It is commonly said that Chinese identity, as focused in the Confucian theme of the *tiān xià*, is relatively indifferent to borders, while Western identity is strongly focused on borders, on who is in and who is out. Recent work by Ge Zhaoguang has emphasized the extent to which Chinese identity historically radiates from the centre and is based in ‘language, ethics, customs and the political system’ and is in a sense ‘placeless’ with ‘mobile borders’. The work of Zhao Tingyang has pointed to the potential political and institutional possibilities of such a centredness without firm borders. The idea that *tiān xià* reflects a Chinese identity as civilisation here is key.

But we are in a position today to understand the underlying structure which makes this possible, and so to make potentially illuminating comparisons with the West. As we have seen, we know from an evolutionary point of view that true human language acquisition is very late on in our evolutionary story. It is likely to be within the last 50,000 years and perhaps as something species-wide is much more recent than that. Moreover, we know that the critical factor here is the *internalization of sounds*, akin to the internalization of stones as tools. It is this internalization of thousands of meaningful sounds which re-programmes the brain to support advanced linguistic consciousness. This gave birth to you and me. We *are language*. Of course, we are many other pre-linguistic or non-linguistic things as well: heart, mind, body, feeling, instinct. But this self-aware subject who is speaking to you is linguistic.

What makes this even more complex of course is that being linguistic, we are also *free*. It is in the very nature of having language, that we are able to choose the words we wish to use. At this moment I am choosing individual words from all the words available to me in the English language and am using just *these* words in *this* sentence. Of course, I may not choose them very well (we may both think) – I could have chosen my words better – but you hold me absolutely responsible for what I am saying now to you since you know as I do that to be human is to be free to speak as I want (whether I choose to exercise that freedom or not). Our legal systems presuppose this freedom in word and act. Human communication, and science, presuppose this freedom as responsibility.

This is a freedom that the rest of our body does not know. Only this part of us is free. And because I am free, free to choose the words I speak, I am also free to choose whether, as mind, I am willing to affirm my own materiality or not. Words are always material: whether as sound or shape. They are material form that communicates immaterial meanings. But as advanced linguistic consciousness, who is free, how do I feel about that?

**[PUT UP AND TALK TO SLIDE 8]**

And here we come to several very important points. Firstly, how I view myself as material form, the material form of language, will depend in a very high degree on my culture. In the West, for instance, we have a strong modern tradition – from Hegel to Husserl in phenomenological tradition and from Locke to Frege and Daniel Dennett, in analytical tradition – which specifically *denies* the materiality of the sign. This is seen to be limited by context, while scientific knowledge is expressly *universal*. The rationalists actually saw the overwhelming or removal of the materiality of words as part of the *victory* of reason. This was also of course the eradication of *context*.

But of course it is not just philosophies that are in play here, though they can be influential and indicative of broader cultural attitudes within society. We have to think also of those many embedded, social and linguistic practices which effectively perform our relation to language. Some of these very richly highlight the materiality of words: through song, music, dance, poetry, calligraphy, or various kinds of repetitions and ritual, for instance. We need to think also of those occasions when we gather with friends. We like to laugh with friends, we like to sing with others, to speak in affectionate ways, recalling past episodes of enjoyment, or we like to learn each other’s stories, to encourage and console one another. I think here we can recognize our old friend *homo socius*. In short, the social application of language uses language not to order and control but primarily to *share*. The reality is however that not all languages allow us to share equally.

Two Global Languages

I want to take by example of this the two truly global languages in the world today: Chinese and English. They can often appear to stand over and against each other. And the sense in which they are global is very different. Global English is the language of international commerce and all that goes with that, while global Chinese, we could say, is more a language of the heart. Each is of course a language of civilisation. But in the case of global English, I would associate that with institutions, ideas and to some extent values, as well of course as history, probably bound up with the history of the British Empire. There is a ‘commonwealth’ of interest here, and the ‘special relationship’ of a Washington-London axis, but at the same time, the kind of Christian moral consensus which informed that imperial period has substantially broken down. With little in terms of a common morality or vision to hold it together, even the idea of Great Britain seems to be breaking down, under the pressures of globalization, and it is an ancient English Viking or Norseman identity that is now emerging, with its origins in the Plantagent dynasty of the thirteenth century.

Now we need to note that there is very little emphasis on the materiality of the sign in the global English language. So we have lots to talk about but we don’t much have that sense of deep sharing which comes uniquely from having the same identifiable pattern of sounds (of speech) or shapes (of writing) in our heads: from having a shared linguistic materiality which can ground a deep, visceral or structural sense of community. Speakers of de-contextualized global English do share issues of history, politics, ideas, institutions and in some contexts law, of course, but these are not the same as the shared materiality of a deeply traditioned language which has structurely become part of our own consciousness.

And here the contrast with global Chinese is quite striking. Of course, the Chinese language absolutely presupposes the materiality of the sign (*hànzì*), which is at the centre of Chinese culture, education and tradition. Characters are so fundamental to communication in Chinese that the meaning of the word can often be determined by its written form rather than its sound. So in Chinese culture we can say that the materiality of the sign is actually prioritized. Far from being the mind’s escape from context, as in the modern Western philosophical tradition, the Chinese mind is constantly led back to its *contexts*, not least to the social contexts in which particular characters can and have been used. We can even say perhaps that some Chinese characters can have their own history, personality even. And they are often reproduced through calligraphy. It may be easy to communicate conceptual meanings quickly and simply in English, but if we consider that language can also communicate what we share, what we have in common, and what makes us distinct, then it is clear that the Chinese person is much more able to communicate this rich sense of belonging to one another, of sharing a culture, than the English speaker can. The Chinese language itself does the work.

From this we can derive an important principle. *It is through the materiality of the sign – the shape of written words and the unique sounds of speech - that language is deeply shared, not through its immaterial meanings.*

**[Put up Slide 9]**

So where we freely use language together in ways that highlight its material form, we can say that we who are mind are celebrating the materiality – the material signs of language - that we also are. Let us contrast for a moment this Chinese emphasis on the materiality of the linguistic sign, and so also always its *contextuality*, with the Western rationalist philosophical traditions which hold that scientific knowledge actually *de-contextualizes* the material sign since scientific knowledge is properly universal. In the Western model, the material sign is a tool to be used in order to communicate meaning and then thrown away. In the Chinese model, the tool word is to be celebrated and so disarmed.

The paradox here is that contemporary science supports the Chinese model as being based in the human truth that the materiality of the sign *never disappears*. Scientific observation shows that even advanced mathematics is encased in the materiality of the sign. So in social terms to celebrate the materiality of the sign is to integrate body and consciousness, self and community. It is perhaps to be culturally more fully human.

*tiān xià*

I think perhaps we can now understand why the *tiān xià* of Chinese tradition is relatively indifferent to borders. Western cultural identity is weak with respect to the shared materiality of the sign (as in global English), and so we need to have robust borders to establish our own communal identity. Those many features of shared intellectual, political and cultural life in the West cannot function as the kind of ‘sharing in depth’ which happens through the materiality of language, the materiality of the sign. As we have argued, contemporary science shows that it is this materiality of the sign more than anything else that makes us advanced linguistic consciousness. Chinese speakers therefore already contain an *inner* ‘border’, which is constituted by the shared strong materiality of the sign which is a function of the Chinese language itself.

Let us for a moment recall the primary argument here. Our early history as human beings shows us that culture varies in how well it communicates the power of the social cognition system once we are living in groups of above 300. The viability of our societies however hangs in the question of the extent to which our culture can communicate it as a stabilizing force. What we seem to be seeing in the Chinese context is an adaptation which extends viability (making the Chinese a very powerful, long term and extended identity that can function without clear borders). *tiān xià* reflects that viability, in terms both of the long term Chinese past and of its potential adaptability towards a rapidly approaching future.

**Part Three**

If the two-million year old human social cognition system is a stable and species-wide phenomenon, and if culture is highly mobile and variable, then we should be prepared for surprises. Just such a surprise happens, I think, in the early fourteenth century in a series of sermons that the leading Dominican thinker, Meister Eckhart, gave to religious women in Cologne and the southern Rhineland. This was a time of the more active integration of high-spirited and dedicated religious women into the medieval Church, many of whom wanted to initiate new forms of female religious life. It was a time too of a major new evangelisation of the countryside, widely neglected in earlier times. Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) was a man of extraordinary gifts, who also studied Latin translations of Arabic, Hebrew and NeoPlatonic texts. He can be said to have lived in a time of what we might call internal ‘European’ globalisation.

The element that is most distinctive in his life and work, quite uniquely so in fact, is that Eckhart addressed his sermons to the religious women in the German language (since they did not know Latin). He is the first high level thinker in the German language. And he communicated very differently in German than he did in Latin. In his German sermons, he performed language in accordance with his understanding that how we use language is key to how we are in the world. A deconstructive language use will determine that we are in this cosmos as deep participants (through what we are calling the social cognition system and what he called ‘the ground of the soul’). If we use language in a highly regulative way, to control and order the universe, then we shall be an observer of the cosmos, looking at it from outside as it were. Luther, Hegel and Heidegger all sought out and learned deeply from Eckhart’s German texts. Eckhart has to be considered one of the great artists of European culture, licensed – as was his Italian contemporary Dante – to do radically new things through being one of the very first to turn to the vernacular as a medium of philosophical thought.

But what is it that he does? Meister Eckhart is well known as one of the leading apophatic thinkers in the Western tradition (often compared with Buddhist parallels from the East). He is committed to ‘negative theology’ which constantly disrupts the very stable and authoritative theological language of tradition, in terms of its meanings, even as it is being spoken or written. The sermon of course was a perfect vehicle for this.

But what is really distinctive about him is what he has to say about the social cognition system or ‘in-between’, or what he called ‘the ground of the soul’ – and the cultural world around him. Eckhart’s claim is that the cosmos within us (the ‘ground of the soul’ which has both height and depth at the same time) is *productive*: it constantly seeks to *reproduce* itself in us, flowing out through language into the social spaces between us and around us: into culture in fact. Eckhart offers us an extraordinarily detailed account of the social cognition system as the world in us through which *tiān* – himmel – flows in its own self-birthing or self-reproduction as what he calls ‘the birth of God in the soul’, or the ‘birth of God in the ground of the soul’. This is summarized in the following passage:

**[PUT UP SLIDE 10]**

The earth can never flee so far from heaven that heaven cannot flow

into her, impressing its power upon her and fructifying her, whether

she wishes it or not. It is just the same with us. We think that we can

get away from God but we cannot escape him, for every corner

reveals him. We think that we are fleeing from God, but we run into

his arms. God gives birth to his only begotten Son in you, whether

you like it or not. Whether you are asleep or awake, God does his

work.

What is striking here from a theological point of view is that he does not name Jesus, which is in fact typical of his work. His focus is on cosmos, creation and the self-emptying of the self. More precisely his interest lies in the production or reproduction of the cosmos, through the social cognition system (which again he calls ‘the ground of the soul’) in a way that makes it seem that this process is irresistible. Eckhart uses language here which suggests that he believes, with the rest of medieval Christendom, that Jesus lives and is in heaven, but doesn’t want to name him or draw our attention to his earthly life and its narratives. But typically Eckhart does place the ‘birth of God’, the birth of God in the soul, at the centre of his sermon.

Meister Eckhart was seamlessly part of medieval Christendom. Medieval Christendom, generally, had no borders. Its boundaries were an internal reality and formed medieval civilisation in the West, which was a deeply communitarian one, which, for Matteo Ricci at least, paralleled the civilisations of the East. There is the sense that because he lived when he did, when modern Europe, as it were, took its first breaths in these sermons of his which were the very first use of the German vernacular to convey sophisticated thought, because of this Meister Eckhart may have expressed that cultural unity in a uniquely powerful way. Whether this could have become a normative new expression of that medieval community civilisation we will never know, since William of Ockham was already active and the European reformation, bringing European modernity in its wake, was already in the air.

The question we would like to ask is could there be a conversation between the spirit of *medieval* Catholic Europe, as this is represented in Meister Eckhart, perhaps with a unique power and certainly with very close parallels with our own contemporary science? Could there be a conversation between his version of *tiān xià* and *contemporary* Chinese culture? Would they find that they had much in common, not least in the light of the increasing commitment of our contemporary science to the view that we are as human beings seamlessly one with this cosmos? *Should* there be such a conversation?

These are questions for another time and place.

Oliver Davies, International Professor in Philosophy, Religion and Ethics, Renmin University of China, Beijing.

King’s College London