

Confucian *Ren* and Jesus' *Agape* as a Basic Virtue toward a More Ecumenical World

William Chang and John Prior

PRECIS

The equivalence of the Confucian *ren* and *agape* in Jesus' commandment of love is clearly expressed in the fundamental values of humanity, love, the moral virtues, and goodness. These values motivate human beings to live in a more sisterly and brotherly communion. *Ren* in the *Analects* signifies to do good, not to disturb or hurt others. Jesus' *agape* includes not only the humanist dimension but also a religious and transcendental dimension. However, the similarity between Confucian *ren* and Jesus' *agape* can bridge a sociocultural gap in multicultural societies such as those found in Asia. The following comparative research shows us that Confucian *ren* and Jesus' *agape* are so basic to human virtue that Confucius's followers and Christians can work together to build a more ecumenical world.

Introduction

In Confucius's *Analects*, one of the most important concepts is *ren*, which is often translated as love. The purpose of this essay is to explore whether Confucius's teaching about *ren* (*Analects* 12:2; 15:23)¹ is identical with Jesus' commandment of love (*agape*, Jn. 13:34–35). The followers

¹See Arthur Waley, *The Analects: World Classics* (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2009), pp. 145 and 207.

of the school of ethical autonomy in Germany, which maintains that there is no unique content in Christian morality, claim that *agape* is identical with the morality of the Golden Rule and is found outside of and prior to the teaching of Jesus. They show that it is widely adopted by secular ethicists. Bruno Schüller explicitly rejected the idea that *agape*, even love of enemies, depends solely on Christian revelation—something fundamentally intelligible to reason. In his analysis of the Golden Rule, Schüller found purely anthropological elements that in themselves convey ethical values. The Golden Rule is formulated in such a way that it is relevant to all people in their daily relationships. This rule helps people as moral beings to keep good and meaningful relationships between themselves. Such interrelationships respect the basic principle of the ethics that love of human beings fulfills with the basic standard of goodness.² This brief survey of some contemporary approaches to ethics helps us to see that the different versions of the Golden Rule (including the Golden Rule of Confucius) can be seen to be identical to the *agape* of Jesus.³

Meanwhile, Bernhard Stoeckle of the school of “faith ethics” claimed that it is only the experience of God’s love that enables us to discover the duty of love or *agape*. For him, the meaning and substance of *agape*, its very foundation, depended on revelation. He also saw revelation as giving more compelling reasons for neighbor-love and emphasized the imperative of divine love. The self-realization of human beings is God’s will for us. It is achieved in God and through love. The human being finds the basis of human love in the love of God (that “has been poured into our hearts,” Rom. 5:5, N.R.S.V.). Only God is the true foundation of human love.⁴

²See Bruno Schüller, *Die Begründungssittlicher Urteile: Typen ethischer Argumentation in der Moraltheologie* (Dusseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1973), pp. 89–90.

³See A. Boyd Craig, *A Shared Morality: A Narrative Defense of Natural Law Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), p. 255; and Ben Duprè, *50 Ethics Ideas You Really Need to Know* (London: Quercus Editions Ltd., 2013), p. 8.

⁴See Bernhard Stoeckle, *Handeln aus dem Glauben: Moraltheologie konkret* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1977), pp. 24–29.

Similarly, Leo Sherley-Price, in his comparative study, did not agree that Confucian “*ren* as love,” either in theory or in practice, could be regarded as identical to Jesus’ *agape*, although he accepted the similarity between them.⁵

The above opinions regarding Christian *agape* and non-Christian love urge us to compare Confucian *ren* as love with Jesus’ commandment of love and to see it as an essential virtue for building a more ecumenical world. What values in *agape* and *ren* can promote ecumenism as a new way of life?

I. The “Humanistic” and “Religious” Character of Love

One of the most important themes in Confucius’s ethics is *ren*.⁶ At least thirteen percent of the *Analects* is devoted to the meaning of *ren*. Professor Wing-tsit Chan has pointed out that fifty-eight of the 449 chapters in *The Analects* are devoted to the discussion of *ren*, and the word appears 105 times. As love, *ren* is humanistic,⁷ because it is concerned with the problems of human beings and is a central part of an ethics of “human-centeredness” (*Analects* 11:11).⁸ Its role is in the relationship between human beings. It is a love that presupposes a social structure where it can be

⁵See Leo Sherley-Price, *Confucius and Christ: A Christian Estimate of Confucius* (London: Camelot Press Ltd., 1951), pp. 138–140.

⁶See Karyn Lai, “Understanding Confucian Ethics: Reflections on Moral Development,” *Australian Journal of Professional and Applied Ethics*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2007), pp. 24–25. Cf. Joseph A. Adler, “Confucianism in China Today,” *Pearson Living Religions Forum New York*, April 14, 2011, p. 1.

⁷See Lin Yue-sheng, “The Evolution of the Pre-Confucian Meaning of *Jen* and the Confucian Concept of Moral Autonomy,” *Monumenta Serica*, vol. 31 (1974–75), p. 184; and William Chang, “*Jen* in Confucius’ *Analects*,” *Jurnal Ledalero* 10 (December, 2011): 283.

⁸See Sherley-Price, *Confucius and Christ*, p. 135; and Ernst Schwarz, *Konfuzius: Gespräche des Meisters Kung (LunYue)* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991), pp. 214–215.

realized concretely.⁹ In Confucius's teaching on *ren* we cannot find the concept of *Tian* (Heaven), though he does not reject the supernatural dimension of human beings.¹⁰ Confucius stresses the love between human beings.¹¹

For Confucius, the source and origins of *ren* are in human beings themselves, because human nature is originally or potentially good. Being human presupposes the potential to love. The point of departure of Confucian love is the "I," which serves as norm and balance of our love toward our neighbor. The intensity and depth of affection for others is measured by the love that we have for ourselves.¹² The essence of *ren* as love is the love of human beings for one another. It is because of *ren* that we do good to other human beings and that we do not disturb or hurt them in any way. The realization of social justice and peace depends greatly on the application of *ren* in daily life.

The human being with *ren* will act with consideration for other human beings, largely from a utilitarian sense of expediency. If I do not treat others with *ren*, others will not treat me with *ren* (*Analects* 15:23). Consequently, a happy, stable, prosperous, and harmonious social order will not come into being.¹³ In summary, the Confucian *ren* that is presented in the *Analects* is a strong, immanent love because it is love between human beings.

⁹See Huston Smith, *Agama-agama Manusia*, tr. Saafroedin Bahar (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 1991), pp. 204–205.

¹⁰See Timothy Havens, "Confucianism as Humanism," in *CLA* [College Language Association] *Journal*, vol. 1 (2013), p. 34; available at <http://uca.edu/liberalarts/files/2016/02/Confucianism-as-Humanism.pdf>. Most of the contemporary researchers on Confucianism emphasize the supernatural dimension of Confucius's teachings.

¹¹See H. G. Creel, *Confucius and the Chinese Way* (New York: Harper, 1960), pp. 34–40.

¹²See Stanislao Lokuang, *La sapienza dei Cinesi: Il Confucianismo*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Officium Libri Catholici, 1957), p. 109; and Eddie R. Babor, "Confucius on Virtues: Paradigm of Social and Moral Order," *IAMURE: International Association of Multidisciplinary Research Journal* 1 (May, 2011): 2–3.

¹³See Sherley-Price, *Confucius and Christ*, pp. 140–141.

After Confucius delivered his teaching on *ren*, Jesus proclaimed his “new commandment,” as recorded in the Gospel of John (Jn. 13:34–35). This commandment is “new” because it is not found in Jewish tradition (Lev. 19:18) but in the self-offering of Jesus (1 Jn. 3:16). The love taught by Jesus is *agape*, which comes from God, who is understood to be love and the source of love. Love here has a spiritual and religious meaning. God is its source, since God loves first, and the human being’s love is in response. God abides in the Christian community through the mutual love of its members. The perfection of a Christian’s love for God is tested by one’s love for one’s sister or brother.¹⁴ What Jesus means by “love” in Jn. 13:34–35 is not only the love between disciples and other human beings, but it is also the love that is directed toward God. John expresses this clearly in his theology of love.¹⁵ God is love and is the source of both our love of neighbor and our love of God (1 Jn. 4:7–8).

The meaning of the love commandment is further detailed in Jn. 15:12–17, which moves beyond the vine-branches metaphor without leaving it behind. The vine metaphor illustrates the close-knit, organic relationship that Jesus desired with his disciples.¹⁶ Jesus’ expression of love in the washing of their feet (John 13) is the exemplar and motive for Christians to love one another. The highest and noblest form of this love is to give one’s life for one’s friends.¹⁷

¹⁴See J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John: The International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), pp. 758–760.

¹⁵See Karyn L. Wiseman, “Commentary on John 13:31–35,” *Revised Common Lectionary* (April 28, 2013); and Vincent MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics: Recent Roman Catholicism* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1985), pp. 64–65.

¹⁶See Andreas J. Koestenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), pp. 150–151.

¹⁷See Victor Paul Furnish, *The Love Commandment in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 140.

The idea of mutual love between human beings who are in relation with God can also be seen in 1 Jn. 4:20, where the motivation of love finds its deepest source in the extraordinary affirmation that God is love and love is God. According to the Johannine understanding, love faces in two directions, toward God and toward human beings. John also insists that only love grounded in God is *agape*, which surpasses every natural *eros*. The realization of this love is expressed in the obedience of the will and the observance of Jesus' words and commandment (1 Jn. 2:5; Jn. 14:15–23). The basis of this love is not the human person but God. This *agape* is the core of the new communion with God (1 Jn. 1:3–7). The culmination of John's concept of love is that God and love are one. Love is a participation in God's life, the love that is born of God.¹⁸

Confucian *ren* as love has no explicit transcendental dimension comparable to Jesus' teaching on love in Jn. 13:34–35. The love of the Christian is understandable in relation to Christ.¹⁹ The love that characterizes the Christian life is not the human response to a commandment of Jesus but has its basis in the spontaneous love of Jesus—and especially in his love of his enemies. It is a sharing in this same love. The Christian loves as God loves, without expecting a return, offering a blessing and a prayer for her or his persecutors.²⁰

II. Ren Is "Limited," but Jesus' Agape Is Universal

¹⁸See Anders Nygren, *Eros e Agape: La nozione Cristiana dell'amore e le sue trasformazioni*, tr. Nella Gay (Bologna: Società Editrice il Mulino, 1971), p. 132.

¹⁹See Gérard Gilleman, *The Primacy of Charity in Moral Theology*, tr. William F. Ryan and André Vachon (London: Burns and Oates; Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1959), p. 202.

²⁰See MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, pp. 148–149.

Ren, according to Timothy Lin, is “limited,”²¹ because the source and norm of Confucian *ren* is the individual self or “I,” who is also a limited creature. Confucius explains that *ren* is the love between human beings, especially love for the family and kin (*Analects* 9:22). Family is indispensable for an understanding of the nature of *ren*. The love between near neighbors is a deeper and more active love than that between others who live far away.²² Confucius and his followers insist that Confucian *ren* begins at home. The realization of *ren* as love depends on the merit and the virtue of those upon whom it is bestowed. Not even Confucius himself reached the concept of the brotherhood/sisterhood of all human beings. The giving of love is always in relation to the merits of the one loved and with the motives for one’s loving.²³

So, there are grades in the intensity and the realization of *ren*. The Confucian idea of *ren* is sometimes called a “graded love,” because the realization of *ren* depends on certain conditioning factors, such as blood kinship, age, familiarity, and physical distance. But, it is necessary to remember that Confucius did say that all people from West and East are brothers/sisters (*Analects* 12:5)—yet *ren* never reaches them.

Is Jesus’ commandment of love in Jn. 13:34–35 also as limited as Confucius’s teaching of *ren*? If not, how can we find the universality of Jesus’ commandment of love? We can approach an answer to this question by looking back to John’s writings about love. Jesus’ commandment of love is the commandment of mutual love. The Johannine ideal of love cannot be reduced to the community’s loving itself and at the same time being hostile to the world. We need to have a

²¹Timothy Tian-min Lin, “The Confucian Concept of Jen and the Christian Concept of Love,” *Ching Feng*, vol. 15 (1972), p. 167.

²²See Lokuang, *La sapienza dei Cinesi*, p. 110; cf. Havens, “Confucianism as Humanism,” p. 36.

²³Luigi Magnani, *Il Libro delle Sentenze di Confucio* (Parma: Istituto Missioni Estere, 1927), pp. 27–28.

correct understanding of the concept of “world” in this context. What John means by “world” is all humankind that is opposed to God. Yet, this does not put a limit on God’s love or prevent God from loving all people (Jn. 1:9; **1:5, 29 [should the second 1 be a different chapter?]**). The universality of the concept of love in John is highlighted here. This warns us about the care we must take in seeing the early church as solely normative.²⁴

What Jesus means by “love” in Jn. 13:34–35 is not “limited love.” Here, we find at least four important arguments. First, Jesus’ commandment of love elaborates on the first Mosaic commandment to love God and adds a new task of loving our neighbors. The love of God not only relates with love of neighbors, but it also invites us to love all others. Second, the basis for love of others is God’s universal love for those in misery. Like God, who is merciful and loving, we are called to love all other human beings. In his ethical teaching, without doubt, Jesus stresses the particular importance of forgiveness and reconciliation as is articulated in the Lord’s Prayer. Third, the love demanded by Jesus is not limited. Jesus does not prescribe a “self-limitation” but a “self-giving.” He himself shows how to love in this way.²⁵ Fourth, Christian love is extended to all, without exception, taking no account of color, class, creed, or whether the recipients of that love are in any way worthy of it.²⁶

The universality of Jesus’ love can be seen in the following two examples. The first shows Jesus’ love is universal and comprehensive. All the commandments are summed up in the one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mk. 12:31). Who is my neighbor? The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25–37) shows that my neighbor is not limited to my co-believers. My neighbor

²⁴See Simon Légasse, “Interhuman Love: New Testament Limits and Promise,” *Theology Digest*, vol. 27 (1979), p. 9. **[this needs a full date or an issue number]**

²⁵See Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Il messaggio morale del NuovoTestamento (II): I primi predicatori cristiani*, tr. Francesco Tomasoni (Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 1990), pp. 118–119.

²⁶See Sherley-Price, *Confucius and Christ*, p. 141.

is my brother or sister for whom Christ died, which includes everyone. Their mere presence is an appeal for me to love them. My love should be toward all, without discrimination. The second character of this universality is Jesus' teaching of love of enemies (cf. Mt. 5:43–48; Lk. 6:27–36).²⁷ Up to now this love for the enemy remains the greatest sign of Christian love, because it asks for nothing: The enemy need give the lover nothing in return. Christian love for others, including enemies, does not depend on what they can do for us.²⁸ The poor and the enemy are the two great tests of the authenticity of one's love. One cannot imitate God's love and share in it if one is unwilling to be a peacemaker, to forgive, and to heal on both an individual and a collective level. Love of enemy is a healing love in the power of *agape*, the love of benevolence that we experience in Christ. This is also absolutely central in the Christian economy of salvation and is truly binding, although sometimes very difficult to achieve.

We are to be like Christ, who died for us when we were sinners; we are to bless those who revile us and to pray for our persecutors.²⁹ Jesus' love is the model of universal love, for it has been realized unconditionally. Briefly, we can conclude that the universality of Christian love is actually based on the personality of Jesus Christ, who is Incarnate Love as John described in his first letter (1 Jn. 4:8, 16). Jesus also sees every human being as a son or daughter of God. All human beings have the same Creator. This concept cannot be found in Confucius's teaching on *ren* in the *Analects*.

III. The Role of Virtual Community in Realizing Universal Love

²⁷See Bernhard Häring, *Das Gesetz Christi: Moraltheologie—dargestellt für Priester und Laien* (Freiburg: Erich Wewel Verlag, 1954), pp. 444–446.

²⁸See Charles E. Curran, *Themes in Fundamental Theology* (Notre Dame, IN, and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. 7–8.

²⁹See MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, pp. 64–66.

The universal dimension of Jesus' love influences its realization. John 13:34–35 emphasizes the virtual community aspect between Christians, although this does not mean that the realization of Christian love is limited, because John also insists that the love between Christians reaches out to influence the wider community,³⁰ whose essence is to be a “family,” where God is the Parent and Creator of the Christian community. Membership in this community is not determined by blood or nation but embraces everyone who follows and lives in an intimate communion with Jesus Christ. Membership is actually a grace and gift of God. The concrete adhesion to Jesus Christ and his word depends on the realization of his commandment of love (Jn. 14:15, 21). The union of all members of the community is the fruit of the death of the Son of God (Jn. 14:51–52). Jesus' blood has gathered many people from different nations to the unity of the children of God.

There are two concrete roles for this community. First, the community is the place where Christians can realize their sisterly/brotherly love by “washing each other's feet” (cf. John 13). The realization of this love also shows us the social nature of Christian love, which is analogous to the relationship of Christ to God.³¹ Second, this community has the task of bringing testimony to the world regarding the importance of sisterly/brotherly love. Thus, the community is a proof of the new life given by Jesus Christ.

In Confucius's teaching on *ren* as love in the *Analects*, however, we do not find any clear indication of the community of love as John describes it, although Confucius also stresses the role of the “family” as the place where *ren* is realized. The “family” in the *Analects* is also an essential element of communal life. There is no explicit divine concept of the family in the *Analects*. The

³⁰See Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, tr. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 318.

³¹See *ibid.*, p. 319.

unifying device of this family is blood and clan. Although this concept of family is not as universal as Jesus teaches, the role of the family as a vital element of a multicultural society cannot be denied. The seed of goodness based on love can be planted in a family.³²

IV. The Similarity between Confucian Ren and Jesus' Agape

What is meant by “similarity” here is not “equality” but, rather, what is “equivalent” in the real content of the two concepts. It is very difficult to find “equality” between them, because the starting points of Confucian *ren* and Jesus' *agape* are not the same. As noted previously, in his commandment of love, Jesus gave his disciples the “new commandment” with a “new dimension” and a “new content.” By searching for similar elements, we will try to enter into an ethical dialogue between them.

Confucian *ren* and Jesus' *agape* are the root of all moral virtues. *Ren* produces and includes all ethical virtues, while Jesus' *agape* generates all moral virtues. *Ren* gives meaning to all the other ethical norms that perform an integrative function in a Confucian society. *Ren* is thus both the moral and ontological basis of self-cultivation. It is, on the one hand, conceived as a driving force behind moral living, and, on the other hand, it provides a good basis for moral conduct. *Ren* is also a unifying concept. This means that it not only gives meaning to other important Confucian concepts but that it also shapes their characteristics and unifies them into a comprehensive whole.³³

³²See Havens, “Confucianism as Humanism.” [page? See URL at n. 10 above.]

³³See Tu Wei-ming, *Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 6–10.

Confucian *ren* empowers all other traditional virtues: filial piety, rightness, faithfulness, loyalty, courage, and wisdom.³⁴

Christian love, in the sense of *agape*, is the ethical norm. Love is the central norm of the Christian life, but it is not an abstract principle. Instead, it is a specific type of experience—the experience of God’s distinctive way of loving as manifested in the history of Jesus Christ and continued through the Holy Spirit in the Christian community. Jesus’ love for his disciples establishes the norm and motivation for Christians’ love of others.³⁵

Jesus centered morality around love. Love is the first and the greatest commandment, which appears to relativize everything else. Love is the heart of the gospel message and the primary tenet of Christ’s teaching. It means that all ethical response is some expression of love.³⁶ Love here is more than all the laws and commandments. Jesus himself has given absolute priority to the commandment of love of God and neighbor (Jn. 15:12–17). Love in the Christian tradition becomes the supreme unifier of all laws and moral virtues. In other words, all moral teachings are unified in the love taught by Jesus. In Christian ethics, love is not just a virtue like all the other virtues but the principal virtue. In his teaching that “charity is the form of the virtues,” Thomas Aquinas showed us that love has two important roles: First, love gives the “special purpose” to each virtue; second, love becomes the efficient principle of the virtuous will. Each virtue is a participation in love.³⁷

³⁴See Kim Sung-hae, *The Righteous and the Sage: A Comparative Study on the Ideal Images of Man in Biblical Israel and Classical China* (Seoul: Sogang University, 1985), p. 61.

³⁵See William C. Spohn, *What Are They Saying about Scripture and Ethics?* (New York and Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), pp. 106–108.

³⁶See MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, pp. 81–85.

³⁷See Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica* II–II, q. 23, arts. 8 and 4.

As the unifying concept of all Confucian moral teachings, *ren* is similar to the Christian concept of love, because it is the central axis, the supreme unifier of all moral values, as love is for Christian theology. Confucian *ren* and Christian love have the same role of centralizing the moral teachings of each tradition. Both *ren* and *agape* are considered to be the “root” of all the moral virtues.

V. Ren and Agape Are Directed to the Realization of Goodness

Ren has an intimate relationship with goodness, human interrelationship, and respect. In the *Analects* 12:2 and 15:23, Confucius is talking about humans doing “good” for others. This goodness is not understood in the scholastic sense, but it is concerned with the warm heart of all human togetherness, and it really touches all of a human being’s existence. Everyone struggles for this human goodness. *Ren* as love and moral virtue can be expressed in the form of attention to others, respect for elders, harmony with others, faithfulness, and “doing good.” In his interpretation of *ren*, Ernst Schwarz noted that the root of *ren* is very similar to children’s love or children’s obedience to parents. He projected this teaching to the larger society, so that it can be broadened.³⁸ Answering Fan Ch’ih’s question on *ren*, Confucius says that *ren* can be found in private life as courtesy, in public life as diligence, and in relationships as loyalty (*Analects* 13:19). This indicates that *ren* exists in the atmosphere of goodness.

The active and dynamic dimension of Christian love cannot be denied. It is always realized in relation to others in the community. Tradition has rendered this by saying that love requires that we seek the good and welfare of the other—and of ourselves. Love is a sincere concern for others.³⁹

³⁸See Schwarz, *Konfuzius*, pp. 23–24.

³⁹See David E. Pratte, *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Bible Study Notes and Comments* (Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), p. 244.

Christian love is a form of “doing good.” According to Vincent MacNamara, the realization of Christian love is related to what one does. However, it will mean not only *doing something* but also *doing nothing*. At times it will mean being silent, supportive, staying with or suffering with another. The value of the performance of a loving act for the doer in the Christian sense is that it requires a conscious intention that the relationship is concerned more with another’s welfare than with one’s own. This means that any act intended to be an act of love requires on the part of the doer a conscious awareness of the love dimension in the performance. Love demands sympathy, sensitivity, and imagination from us. Love of others is not necessarily a matter of granting their desires, because there can be a conflict between what we desire and what morality calls us to do, between what we desire and what is good for us.⁴⁰

In his treatment of the ethics of love, Joseph Fletcher insisted that love is not a property of a person; *love is what one does*. Love to be authentic cannot remain simply as a good intention but must be expressed practically in deeds. Jesus’ exhortation to “do love” is an exhortation to “do good,” to do whatever maximizes consequences.⁴¹ In his analysis of love, Bernard Häring also stated that love is directed toward goodness, but, if love is understood only in terms of goodness, without giving any attention to the proper value of love in itself, then it would seem that love has no intrinsic or substantive content. Actually, true love begins when there is an appreciation of the internal value of love.⁴²

John 13 describes Jesus’ love as not just a teaching or concept but as something real and embodied in an activity. Here, John points to Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet as a concrete

⁴⁰See MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics*, pp. 68–78.

⁴¹See Donald Evans, “Love, Situations, and Rules,” in Gene H. Outka and Paul Ramsey, eds., *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1968), pp. 373–374.

⁴²See Häring, *Das Gesetz Christi*, p. 661.

expression of his love. An even more concrete expression of Jesus' love is the self-giving of his own life for the salvation of all human beings.⁴³ Washing his disciples' feet and self-giving (John 13) are the clearest proofs that goodness is something done by Jesus to demonstrate his love for his disciples and all human beings. His doing good as the expression of love can also be seen when he healed the sick, fed the hungry, fulfilled the needs of the people, and restored the dead to life.⁴⁴

VI. Toward a More Ecumenical World

As an essential virtue, the Confucian notion of *ren* and Jesus' *agape* can play an important role in creating a more ecumenical world. The basic values of humanity, love, goodness, and the moral virtues are a strong unifying force that determines the relationship between and among individuals and social groups in society. The followers of both Confucius and Jesus can work together to build a more ecumenical world based on universal love. True love strengthens the richness of social diversity. Individual and social conflicts can explode because human beings are not always able to live in a spirit of ecumenism based on love. Without true love it will be difficult to have peace. Such true love is not an abstract doctrine but a reality that is translated into acts of goodness in daily life.

One of the most important elements in an ecumenical world is mutual understanding, based on deep sympathy. The real needs of the poor and the marginalized are not always material, but a large number of them need help of a more personal kind. Sometimes what is needed is love.⁴⁵ Those who are living in a conflict situation can reach a peaceful outcome if they can understand

⁴³See Schnackenburg, *Il messaggio morale*, pp. 47–48.

⁴⁴See Pratte, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, pp. 243–244.

⁴⁵See John-Paul Flintoff, *How to Change the World* (London: Macmillan, 2012), p. 101.

each other. Mutual understanding here presupposes an open heart for others without any prejudices. Therefore, an academy of *ren* and *agape* is needed for our modern world, where people can meet, live, work together, and understand one another in the spirit of collaboration. The spirituality of such an academy would foster true love among people.

Our world needs communities based on love, justice, wisdom, simplicity, and courage. These basic moral virtues will help bring about a better world for human beings to share because it emphasizes interreligious or interfaith dialogue. A just social system can facilitate good communication and collaboration in a peaceful society. Through the experience of true love, people will also sense the order of justice and be moved to fulfill the law and to comply with the demands of justice beyond the letter of the law. Justice is not a theory, but it is the good way of being together in society.⁴⁶ True justice should be based on the spirit of mutual love between human beings as found in *ren* and *agape*.

Conclusion

Research has shown that the essence of Confucian *ren* in the *Analects* has its specific characteristics, such as being “humanistic.” *Ren* is concerned with the problems of human beings and the relationships between and among them. For Confucius, the source and origin of *ren* are not in God but in the human being, because human nature is originally or potentially good. *Analects* 15:23 shows us that the human being with *ren* will act with consideration toward other humans

⁴⁶See Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, vol. 3: *Moral Theology for Priests and Laity* (Middlegreen, Bucks., U.K.: St. Paul Publications, 1981), pp. 468–480.

largely from a utilitarian sense of expediency, that is, because if one does not do so, others will not treat one with *ren*. The immanent dimension of *ren* can be strongly felt in Confucius's world.

The love commandment of Jesus in Jn. 13:34–35 has a rich meaning, which brings a new perspective into human history. What Jesus means by *agape* is love for all without distinction, not just for an exclusive group. This universal love includes all human beings, even our enemies. Jesus' love not only consists in the "humanistic" dimension but also includes a religious and a transcendental dimension. "To love" here means to do as Jesus has done, for instance, when he washed his disciples' feet, but the most distinctive and definitive act of Jesus' love is his self-giving on the cross for the salvation of all human beings. Christian love is not merely to "do good" but is primarily to practice self-sacrifice for others without reserve.

From one side Confucian *ren* and Jesus' love are similar, but on the other side they are different. Similarities between *ren* and *agape* can motivate human beings of good will to promote a more ecumenical world. A good bridge for dialogue in a multicultural society can be built by true love as the basic moral value. The notions of Confucian *ren* and Christian *agape* are essential and universal elements for the followers of both Confucius and Jesus to work together for a more ecumenical world. It is time for us all to celebrate the spirituality of ecumenism in our daily life. Confucius and Jesus can help us to learn how to love one another as human beings in a more ecumenical society.