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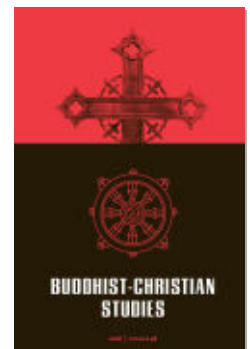
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Finding the Self or Losing the Self: Authority and Allegiance in Stoicism, Early Christianity, and Ruism (Confucianism)

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ABSTRACT

Spiritual authority and allegiance take strikingly different forms in Stoicism and Ruism (Confucianism) in comparison to early Christianity. Drawing on Pierre Hadot's account of philosophy as a way of life and Michel Foucault's analysis of the "care of the self," a pre-Christian vision of philosophy emerges as transformative spiritual practice rather than mere analytic discourse. Within this horizon, Stoicism locates authority in a disciplined community of teachers and texts, yet ultimately in the autonomous exercise of reason capable of examining doctrine and experience alike. Early Christianity reconfigures authority through obedience to divine revelation mediated by ecclesial structures. Ruism articulates a distinctive model: while affirming hierarchies of heaven, earth, sovereign, parent, and teacher, it subjects all authority to the cosmic Dao as discerned through the conscientious heartmind of each self-cultivating person. Despite significant differences—especially regarding the relation of reason and emotion—Stoicism and Ruism converge in placing final authority within a genuine self transformed through sustained practice. On this basis, a trans-religious theology of religious diversity becomes possible, integrating experiential exclusivity, nonconfessional particularity, and relational openness beyond standard typologies of exclusivism, particularism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

KEYWORDS: Ruism (Confucianism), Stoicism, Hadot, Foucault, philosophy as a way of life, care of the self, spiritual authority, transreligious theology, religious diversity

To understand religiosity in general, and the modes of authority and allegiance in particular, within Ruism (alternatively known as Confucianism), Hellenistic philosophy as interpreted by Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault offers a productive point of reference. Hadot and Foucault sought to recover an alternative mode of spiritual life in the West before Christian orthodoxy in medieval Europe reshaped the meanings of "philosophy," "religion," "theology," and "spirituality." Their work thus carries significant metaphilosophical implications and urges scholars to recognize the diverse

forms of spiritual life that the West has offered.¹ For scholars of interreligious studies, these variations within the West provide a broader range of comparative categories and help prevent the unjust imposition of one particular strand of Western spirituality onto non-Western traditions. Bringing Ruism, a living non-Christian and non-Western tradition of comprehensive spirituality, into conversation with Hadot's and Foucault's work therefore enables new ways of conceiving authority and normativity on today's global stage of interreligious learning.

In what follows, I first present Hadot's and Foucault's analyses of the distinction between Hellenistic spirituality and early Christianity with respect to authority. I then highlight the affinities between this Hellenistic vision of spiritual authority and the Ru tradition, while also reflecting on the important nuances that emerge. Finally, I conclude briefly with a nonconfessional and transreligious theology of religious diversity constructed in light of this comparative analysis. Although Buddhism is not a focus of this analysis, readers may notice that the nonconfessional character of Ruist faith bears resemblance to certain major Buddhist traditions in their understanding of the relationship between human and ultimate authority—traditions that have, in various historical contexts, merged with ancient East Asian culture and continued to interact with the Ruist heritage. In this way, the essay also seeks to open a conversation with Buddhist–Christian comparativists about the question of authority and allegiance within the broader horizon of interreligious learning.

PIERRE HADOT

Hadot posed two central questions: What might philosophy be in light of what ancient philosophy was? Why did the concept of philosophy change over time, particularly from antiquity through the medieval to the modern, and what was lost in these transitions?

In response to the first, Hadot argues that ancient philosophy as a way of life (PWL) grounded in spiritual exercises aimed at achieving the good life.² Drawing on examples such as training attention, reading, dialogue, view from above, and living in the face of death, he identifies four key elements of being “spiritual” in philosophical “spiritual exercise”: (1) the exercise is “voluntary and personal”;³ (2) it engages all dimensions of personhood, including the “physical,” “discursive” and “intuitive”;⁴ (3) it transforms one's worldview and character; and (4) it leads to an ideal state of human existence within the cosmic whole.⁵ For Hadot, the transformative effect of spiritual exercises justifies the language of conversion: “Philosophy . . . took the form of an exercise of thought, will, and the totality of one's being, the goal of which was to achieve a state practically inaccessible to mankind: wisdom. Philosophy was a method of spiritual progress that demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of being.”⁶ Hadot's notion of “spiritual” thus includes the physical and aligns with the phrase “spiritual but not religious”⁷ that designates emerging trends in Western spirituality.

To the second question, Hadot observes that the rise of Christianity drastically altered the self-directed nature of PWL: “Obedience—the renunciation of one's own will in complete submission to the orders of a superior—completely transformed

the philosophical practice of spiritual direction.”⁸ In the medieval period, philosophy was stripped of its spiritual dimension and reduced to an analytic tool for parsing Christian doctrines, functioning as a servant to theology. In the modern era, the dominance of objective science overshadows the “lived experience of the concrete, living, and perceiving subject,”⁹ and philosophy remains largely discursive and analytical, serving as a servant to scientific research.¹⁰

However, since spiritual exercise lies at the core of PWL, religion occupies a distinctive, though not oppositional, relationship to philosophy in the ancient world. This dynamic is particularly evident in Hadot’s reflections on the role of discourse in ancient philosophy.

With respect to that role that discursive reasoning plays in PWL, Hadot decisively prioritizes practice over theory, because self-transformation toward the good life is inherently practical. In this process, discourse describes and justifies the inner experience generated by spiritual exercises, some of which possess a mystical dimension beyond language.¹¹ For instance, when commenting on Aristotle’s view that human happiness consists in the contemplation of the cosmic *Nous*, Hadot stresses that “the mystical experience demonstrates another aspect of the philosophical life. It is no longer a decision for or choice of a way of life; instead, it is an ineffable experience, beyond all discourse, which invades the individual and overthrows all self-consciousness by means of an inexpressible sensation of presence.”¹²

Even if the ultimate value of discourse is to serve the practical goal of self-transformation in PWL, Hadot does not consider it dispensable from the philosophical life; rather, “the philosophical way of life must be justified in rational, motivated discourse, and such discourse is inseparable from the way of life.”¹³ As the example of Aristotle’s exercise of contemplation shows, discursive reasoning itself forms part of spiritual exercise; accordingly, “philosophical discourse is one of the very forms of the exercise of the philosophical way of life, as dialogue with others or with oneself.”¹⁴

In general, we can summarize Hadot’s thought on the role of discursive reasoning in PWL as: reasoning is necessary but not sufficient for good living. Given his distinction between Christian and philosophical spiritual exercises, discursive reasoning, which involves inferring from premises and scrutinizing worldviews from diverse perspectives, remains a defining feature, though not an opposing or incommensurate one, of philosophy in relation to religion. There is therefore no conceptual obstacle for PWL philosophers to participate in religious rituals or engage in contemplative practices that evoke mystical experience. Yet they continue to subject such experiences to rational examination. Philosophers may remain receptive to what these experiences disclose at the phenomenal level; however, when describing and justifying them within an integrated way of life, they still rely on rigorous reasoning as an indispensable exercise.

The decentered yet indispensable role of reason in ancient philosophy, as interpreted by Hadot, has been challenged by other historians of philosophy. For example, John Cooper (2012) offers a widely discussed critique of Hadot’s characterization of ancient philosophy. He identifies three assumptions about reason that were central to philosophy at the time: that reason motivates action, that philosophy perfects reason,

and that perfected reason guarantees success in action.¹⁵ In Cooper's reading, the capacity for reasoning alone suffices for living well. Hadot's broader portrayal of philosophy as encompassing spiritual exercises that include but extend beyond rational discourse is, in Cooper's view, an overstatement. It risks rendering philosophy indistinguishable from "a religious way of life" grounded in a sacred text or tradition and validated through intense personal feeling.¹⁶

Recent scholarship supports Hadot's position regarding the relationship between religion and philosophy in the ancient world. Petrovic offers numerous examples of ancient Greek philosophers who took part in religious rituals yet integrated these experiences into their philosophical activity.¹⁷ Cohoe and Grimm likewise present ample evidence from ancient philosophy that reason alone could not motivate transformative action, identifying three conditions for living philosophically: "commit to a worldview, structure your life around it, and engage in truth-directed practices (that are responsive to reasons of inference and alternative perspectives)."¹⁸ Since religious ways of life fulfill the first two conditions *par excellence*, philosophy and religion may combine to form a distinctive type of spiritual life. In other words, only when an existentially committed religious worldview upholds an authority that remains unresponsive to rational scrutiny conducted by individuals who examine the coherence of that view and draw on alternative worldviews is that way of life religious but not philosophical. If there is no such authority, a way of life can be both religious and philosophical, as the ancient PWL philosophies demonstrate.

MICHEL FOUCAULT

Under Hadot's influence, Foucault in his final decade turns to ancient Greek and Roman ethics, a tradition he identified as beginning with Socrates's call to "care of the self" (*epimeleia heautou*) in Plato's *Alcibiades*, which Foucault construed interchangeably with "the cultivation of oneself" or the "formation of the self."¹⁹ This turn shows continuity with Foucault's earlier thought.

First, Foucault's early work examined semantic shifts of vocabulary and discourse alongside dynamics of social and political power. By the 1970s, while writing *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault identified three dimensions of power: external control; internalized control through self-identification with external structures; and self-transformation as resistance to such control. Without the third, the first two may produce "dominance," where power lacks reciprocity and flows unilaterally from one party to another.²⁰ Practices of self-cultivation constructs "the relationship one has to oneself" and can create an "ethical distance" between personal identity and established power structures, preventing one's aspiration to overstep boundaries and demand dominance. In this sense, self-cultivation constitutes the "first or final point of resistance to political power."²¹

Second, Foucault situated himself within the European tradition of critical philosophy, pioneered with Kant and extending through the phenomenological movement, which sought to ground and delimit the objectivity of modern science in lived human experiences. He explicitly acknowledged the influence of Husserl's

The Crisis of European Sciences and Heidegger. As an example, Stoic discourse in Foucault's reading was not intended to construct abstract truths but served as a practical tool that is "ready to hand" for confronting life's uncertainties.²² Foucault then traced the modern psychiatry's method of treating human thought as an object of empirical research back to early Christianity's appropriation of Stoic self-examination, which played down the Stoic ethic of self-empowerment and instead promoted self-renunciation.²³ This recalls Heidegger's analysis in *Being and Time*, where the scientific concept of space arises once tools in a smith or peasant's workshop are no longer ready-to-hand.

Foucault's overarching thesis is that the practice of care of the self, expressed through various "technologies of the self,"²⁴ is fundamental to the origins of philosophy in ancient Greece and to conceptions of truth and of human beings as subject. The entire Western philosophical tradition, he argues, can be understood as variations on this central theme, within which he outlines four distinct models.²⁵

Both the Platonic model (Plato and later Neo-Platonists) and the Hellenistic model (Epicureans, Cynics, and especially Stoics) illustrate the Greco-Roman culture of care of the self, in which philosophy and spirituality were not separated. Intellectual pursuit of knowledge ultimately served the self-transformation of personhood. The Platonic model emphasized "knowing oneself" through "recollection" to anchor personality in a transcendent and intelligible realm. The Hellenistic model instead did not absolutize knowledge in the soul's salvific journey. Through practices of "meditation," it aimed to transform all dimensions of life, aligning them with rationally examined arts of living to realize transcendent ideals within immanent realities.²⁶

The Christian model, through its early practice of "confession,"²⁷ scrutinized the divine or demonic powers behind one's inner thoughts. Its goal was to renounce self-will and submit completely to the authority of God revealed in the scripture and mediated by priesthood, thereby stripping philosophy of its self-directed power of spiritual transformation. In the medieval era, this despiritualization of philosophy was reinforced by scholastic theology, which came to rest on the assumption that knowledge alone, in the form of faith-based understanding, was sufficient for salvation.²⁸

The scientific model begins with the "Cartesian moment," when "method" that aims at constructing coherent discourse corresponding to objective reality became philosophy's central practice.²⁹ This model extended the medieval conviction that knowledge alone suffices for truth, but without its religious, salvific framework. As a result, philosophy became entirely divorced from its spiritual function. In modernity, humanity possesses many truths, yet none that can save.

Among the four, Foucault places the most emphasis on the Hellenistic model, highlighting its potential to furnish alternative ways of spiritual living and to champion freedom in the post-enlightenment modern era. Foucault stresses that the Hellenistic model avoids treating humans as objects, since it aims to "make" individuals through the self-directed pursuit of freely and rationally chosen goals. Unlike scientific, moral or divine laws that demand obedience of human will, the Hellenistic

philosophical discourse is fundamentally pragmatic, serving the “constitution of the subject as final end for himself through and by the exercise of truth.”³⁰ Referring to Seneca’s practice of self-examination in his letters, Foucault emphasizes that truth in Stoicism does not primarily mean correspondence to realities whether externally measured or internally hidden in the psyche. Instead, truth draws individuals toward an ideal of the good life, exerting a “magnetic force” that transforms both the practitioner and those in contact. In teacher–pupil or friendship relationship of wisdom transmission, individuals thus retain autonomy in willing themselves to be who they wish without yielding to the commanding force of universalist authorities.³¹

According to Hadot’s and Foucault’s studies of Hellenistic spirituality prior to the rise of Christianity, one can see how a tradition that exemplifies such a mode of spiritual life par excellence, namely Stoicism, could constitute a spiritual lineage with a distinct salvific orientation. With respect to authority and allegiance, the defining features of this mode of spiritual life may be summarized as follows: First, the authority of the tradition emerges through a dynamic balance of multiple factors: mentors and teachers, communities of co-learners, historical texts and precedents, and the demonstrable pragmatic efficacy of aligning human life with the cosmic order. Yet under the ultimate regulating power of the cosmic Logos, final human authority rests in the individual’s autonomy, specifically in the innate capacity of Reason to determine whether and how to accept philosophical teachings that interpret the cosmic order and the corresponding methods of self-cultivation. In this sense, the genuine self constitutes the decisive source of authority within the human sphere.

Second, autonomous agency in Hellenistic spirituality, including Stoicism, remains open to mystical experiences of self-transformation generated through diverse practices of self-cultivation, including participation in religious rituals. In other words, while such experiences carry receptive and revelatory dimensions, once the practitioner seeks to articulate, justify, or scrutinize them, spiritual activity becomes self-directed within a philosophical community.

Third, examining alternative visions of the good life—both within and beyond one’s own tradition—forms an active core of this philosophical and spiritual way of life. Although spiritual transformation often calls for devotion and dedication to a particular lineage or school, intrinsic elements within that lineage foster self-critique and renewal by anticipating the invention or incorporation of alternative visions of how best to live.

RUISM

Classical Ruist texts articulate the significance of three major sacrificial rituals: sacrifices to heaven and earth, to ancestors, and to meritorious sovereigns and teachers. Such discussions appear in works such as the *Xunzi* (荀子) and the *Records of Rites* (禮記).³² Building on these classical formulations, by the late imperial period, especially during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911), the hierarchy of authority in the Ru tradition was increasingly expressed as “heaven, earth, sovereign, parent, and teacher” in a socially institutionalized form.³³ “Heaven and earth (天地)” signify

the cosmic Dao (道, the Way)—the ever-generative power of the universe that brings all things into being and becoming. “Sovereign (君)” denotes the head of a political order who, in ancient East Asian societies, presided over the highest civil examinations and appointed accomplished Ru scholar-officials to office. “Parent (親)” represents the authority of one’s ancestral lineage and bloodline. “Teacher (師)” conveys the authority of those who transmit the ancient teachings, with Confucius honored as the foremost among them.

Due to complex historical reasons that cannot be elaborated here, a prevalent public misunderstanding persists in both contemporary East Asian and Western contexts. Ruism is often portrayed as a tradition that demands one-dimensional obedience from those in lower ranks within hierarchical relationships. Nevertheless, anyone who has seriously studied the works of exemplar Ru philosophers, whom the tradition recognizes as constituting a Ruist lineage of Dao (道統), will find a different picture.³⁴ What is distinctive about the Ruist configuration of authority is that, although hierarchical distinctions are regarded as necessary for maintaining civilizational stability, power within these hierarchies is not meant to be one-directional but reciprocal. When a sovereign, parent, or teacher errs in ways that violate the cosmic Dao of heaven and earth, those lower in the hierarchy, such as ministers, children, or students, bear the duty of “remonstration” (諫) in order to realign human order with the cosmic order of all-pervasive life and harmony. In other words, only when those in higher positions represent the human instantiation of the cosmic order should their authority be followed with consent.³⁵ The earliest Ru classics are replete with examples of revered teachers illustrating how to approach those in higher authority with moral discernment. A few examples will suffice to clarify this point.

Regarding the authority of sovereign and parents, Xunzi, the third most important Ru master of the pre-Qin era, states, “One should follow the Dao rather than a sovereign; one should follow what is right rather than one’s parents.”³⁶

Regarding the authority of teachers, Confucius instructed his disciples: “When the question of being humane is at stake, do not yield to your teacher.”³⁷ Since humanness (仁) is the cardinal virtue in Confucius’s teaching, he urged his students never to relinquish their moral judgment in matters of self-cultivation and human transactions.

Because the authorities of sovereign, parent, and teacher are enshrined in the ancient Ru classics, Mencius’s remarks on canonical texts further illuminate the distinctive Ruist understanding of power. Mencius says, “If one were to believe everything in the *Documents*, I would prefer that there be no such book.”³⁸ As the second most esteemed Ru teacher after Confucius—and as the compilation of the *Documents* itself was traditionally ascribed to Confucius—Mencius’s point is clear: under the ultimate authority of the cosmic Dao, even the authority of the ancient classics remains secondary.

However, if the cosmic Dao serves as the highest authority for adjudicating all other forms of authority, who can legitimately speak on its behalf? Because the cosmic Dao pervades all beings and every human life, the Ru tradition ultimately locates this highest authority in the innately good human nature, namely the conscientious and

discerning heartmind (心) of each self-cultivating person. To clarify this point, I will still draw on exemplars from the recognized Ruist lineage of the Dao as expressed in the second millennium of imperial East Asia, alternatively known as Neo-Confucianism, in order to highlight its emphasis on individual moral autonomy in discerning which authorities deserve allegiance.

In the exchanges of instruction and inquiry between Zhu Xi and his students, who is deemed by many to be the most important Ru philosopher of that period, there are abundant examples of how he instructed them to rely upon their autonomous heartmind in reading books and learning from Ru predecessors and teachers. For instance:

The way of learning has been clearly and fully set forth by the sages and worthies of old. . . . In reading, one must return to the text again and again, attending to each paragraph, each sentence, each word, and striving to grasp its meaning. One should also consult the commentaries and transmitted explanations, clarifying the teaching until it becomes lucid and coherent. *The principles of the Dao must accord with one's own heartmind.* Only then is it truly attained.³⁹

This method of learning from past examples, classics, and commentaries in reliance upon one's own judicious heartmind is clearly indicated by Zhu Xi's own way of composing the *Collective Annotations on the Four Books*, the most influential Ruist work in late imperial East Asia:

In earlier days, reading texts required my great effort. When studying the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, I kept a whole chest filled with commentaries. Each time I read a passage, I would consult many of them, tracing the thread of meaning through their various explanations. Only after discerning where each interpretation truly settled would I judge what was right and what was wrong. . . . At times others said something was correct, and through this I realized what was mistaken in my own understanding. At other times, though ten people all declared something wrong, I would, because of this, come to see what was right in my own view. Thus, at times this point becomes clear, at times that point becomes clear, and before long everything becomes clear. *In the end, everything depends on the reach of one's own insight and discernment; there is no other method.*⁴⁰

Consistent with Zhu Xi's and other Ru predecessors' view of the autonomous capacity of the human heartmind, Wang Yangming (1472–1529), the leading master of the Ming-dynasty lineage of heartmind learning, articulated this Ruist understanding of authority and normativity with particular force:

Learning pivots upon the conviction from one's heartmind. If words are examined in my heartmind and found to be wrong, although they have come from the mouth of Confucius, I dare not accept them as correct. How much less for those words from people less worthy than Confucius! If words are examined in

my heartmind and found to be correct, although they have come from the mouth of ordinary people, I dare not regard them as wrong. How much less for those words of Confucius!⁴¹

The classics are the enduring Dao. The Six Classics are nothing other than the constant Dao within my own heartmind. . . . For a person of virtue engaging the Six Classics: seeking the waxing and waning of yin and yang within his heartmind and responding in due season—this is why he honors the *Change*; seeking the patterns and structures within his heartmind and giving them timely manifestation—this is why he honors the *Rites*; seeking the joy and harmony within his heartmind and allowing them timely emergence—this is why he honors the *Music*; seeking the sincerity, falsity, uprightness, and depravity within his heartmind and discerning them in due time—this is why he honors the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Thus the Six Classics are the records of my heartmind, and the true substance of the Six Classics is fully contained within my heartmind.⁴²

In sum, authority in the Ru tradition accords with the major features of Hellenistic spirituality as articulated by Hadot and Foucault, particularly in their reading of Stoicism. Although individuals cultivate themselves toward the salvific goal of a good life within an intricate network of human authorities, including political, societal, familial, and educational structures, the ultimate authority guiding these practices is the cosmic order of the universe, understood as either the Logos or the Dao. This order is discerned through the autonomous awareness of each practitioner, expressed as either Reason or the conscientious Heartmind.

A closer analysis reveals important differences between Ruism and Stoicism regarding how the components of the human psyche contribute to ultimate self-transformation. For Stoicism, emotions and the will must conform to rationally scrutinized ethical precepts in order to transform the person as a whole; in this regard, Stoicism maintains a strict dualism between reason and emotion. By contrast, in Ruism, reason arises from within emotion and remains inseparable from it. In other words, Stoicism relies on the individualized Reason distinguished from emotion, whereas Ruism relies on the individual Heartmind—the experiential core of consciousness in which reason and emotion are mutually intertwined.⁴³ Nevertheless, in taking the autonomous self as the final locus of adjudication and interpretation regarding one's understanding of the cosmic order, as well as in engaging human authorities such as teachers, predecessors, and classical texts within a tradition, the two traditions ultimately converge.

Since Stoicism and Ruism share the same structural characteristics regarding authority and allegiance as spiritual traditions, major semantic shifts in key terms within interreligious studies, when applied to the Hellenistic spirituality as analyzed in the two sections above, should also apply to Ruism. In other words, if Ruism is categorized as a philosophy, then it is a PWL type of philosophy that relies on rational reflection to facilitate diverse exercises of self-transformation oriented toward an ultimate cosmic goal. If Ruism is understood as a religion, it does not organize itself

around institutionally authorized doctrines or creeds that constrain one's religious expression. Rather, it is a living tradition of experiential encounter with ultimate reality, in which such experience undergoes continual articulation and rational scrutiny within lineages of subtraditions. If Ruism has a theology, it would be an Aristotelian type of theology that inquires into the boundary conditions of a metaphysical discourse integral to PWL. And if Ruism may be described as spiritual, such spirituality includes the physical and indeed encompasses all dimensions of human life, especially the ordering of family, society, politics, and civilizations under discerned principles that govern the whole cosmos.⁴⁴

NONCONFESSIONAL TRANSRELIGIOUS THEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Based on this unique conception of spiritual authority uncovered above through Hadot's and Foucault's metaphilosophical works on ancient philosophy, together with the comparison of these accounts with Ruism, we may pose a further question: What significance does this conception of spiritual authority hold for contemporary interreligious studies and learning?

In my other publication,⁴⁵ I have traced the genealogical origin of the concept of "confessional" as it is used to categorize a confessional type of comparative theology, a dominant approach within current academic discourse. Rooted in early Christian beliefs that the Scriptures are revealed words of truth about God, distinct from and superior to pagan classics such as Greek philosophy, and in the pre-Nicene use of doctrinal tenets to recapitulate scriptural readings in declaratory or liturgical rituals, this confessional approach to theology was quickly shaped by what I call a "creedal attitude" after the formal establishment of Christianity in the medieval Europe. Within such an understanding of theology, human expressions of religious experience must first be shaped by a determinate set of articles of doctrine that are meant to be unalterable; only then does a theologian of this type employ rational tools to articulate the implications of those determinate creeds in varying circumstances. In today's context of global religious diversity, this model calls for a specific approach to comparative theology that seeks to incorporate outsiders' insights in order to enrich or enhance one's original confessional commitment to religious truth within one's home tradition. In the process of engaging non-home traditions, various modes of the theology of religions have been constructed, including the familiar typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and particularism.

However, as the above analysis has indicated, some Hellenistic traditions such as Stoicism and certain non-Western traditions such as Ruism understand authority along a distinctively nonconfessional trajectory. Accordingly, their approach to engaging other traditions must be reconfigured. To address this need, I have proposed an alternative mode of engaging religious diversity, which I call a *transreligious theology of religious diversity*, for nonconfessional spiritual traditions, in contrast to the traditional Christianity-based theology of religions. Without repeating arguments published elsewhere on this topic,⁴⁶ I will briefly summarize the conclusions of that research here in concluding this paper.

If we accept the rooted yet nonconfessional PWL type of theology (such as the definition of theology in Aristotelianism, Stoicism or Ruism) as one distinctive form of theology that lacks a confessional basis, what kind of transreligious theology of religious diversity should we adopt after reexamining the traditional Christianity-based theology of religions? In other words, if one's spiritual and faithful life is rooted in a nonconfessional religious tradition, how can one recognize and appreciate the value of other traditions? Do the conventional categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and particularism still suffice? If so, to what extent? If not, how might they be modified? Drawing on my Ruist sensibility, I have offered four major claims and tentatively construct a new theory of religious diversity fit for nonconfessional religious traditions.

I have examined several major Christian thinkers, each representing one of the aforementioned theologies of religions: George Lindbeck for particularism, Jacques Dupuis for open inclusivism, John Hick for parallel pluralism, and Karl Barth for confessional exclusivism, together with related interlocutors. My thesis is that because the transreligious theology of religious diversity does not rely on a confessional understanding of faith shaped by traditional Christianity, it need not fall into any of these established categories. Rather, it can appropriate legitimate insights from each while revising certain core elements.

Such a transreligious theology begins with the private and exclusive moment of an individual's encounter with ultimate reality. No linguistic apparatus can fully convey the phenomenal nature of such an experience to others; hence, this encounter bears a structural resemblance to exclusivism whenever it is articulated to other individuals or traditions.

The stimulation, expression, and justification of that experience are normally and ideally rooted in a comprehensive world tradition. Such a tradition forms a linguistic and cultural system; in order to assess any claim within it as true, one must cultivate an embodied understanding of the tradition as a whole. This holistic character means that the linguistic, communal, and generational expression of religious experience shares the feature of particularism.

However, motivated by a deep desire to understand one's own tradition, which has long interacted with others, and by the search for new ways to sustain and express religious experience that bridges the distance between ultimate and human reality, this seeded way of life within a particular tradition remains open to new insights from both within and beyond itself, while seeking to relate to truths discoverable across pluralistic traditions. In doing so, such a tradition remains in a perpetual process of "including," without arriving at any final moment of "inclusion," and without evaluating or ranking other traditions as wholes.

Understood in this way, a seeded yet continually including spiritual tradition may relate to other traditions on the assumption that all address the same ultimate reality, while recognizing that each may disclose different features of that reality from distinct perspectives. Only through a careful process of interreligious learning may the rooted tradition discern whether and how to incorporate insights from traditions substantially different from its own. In other words, it seeks to engage pluralism while critically including it.

In sum, this transreligious theology of religious diversity represents a subtle synthesis of the major categories of traditional theologies of religions: a nonconfessional particularism, driven by and sustaining experiential exclusivism, integrated with a seeded open inclusivism that embraces relational pluralism.

NOTES

1. A recent effort to summarize and advance the current stage of the study of Hadot's concept of "philosophy as a way of life" is found in Matthew Sharpe, ed., *Philosophy as a Way of Life: New Research Directions* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2025), especially the introduction, 1–14, which stresses the metaphilosophical implications of PWL. The current study of PWL remains largely confined to philosophers and historians of philosophy, and its impact on scholars of religious or interreligious studies has yet to emerge. In this regard, I hope that the analysis offered here can open broader conversations within religious studies on longstanding debates, such as the definition of religion.

2. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002).

3. Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, trans. Marc Djaballah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 87.

4. Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy*, 6.

5. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 273.

6. *Ibid.*, 265.

7. For a discussion of the semantic shift in "spirituality" within Western intellectual history, see Bin Song, "Introduction to the Special Issue: Spiritual but Not Religious (SBNR) and Theology Without Walls (TWW)," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 34 (2022).

8. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 139.

9. *Ibid.*, 273.

10. Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy*, 260.

11. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 212.

12. Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy*, 163.

13. *Ibid.*, 280.

14. *Ibid.*, 175.

15. John M. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 11–14.

16. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, 18.

17. Andrej Petrovic and Ivana Petrovic, *Inner Purity and Pollution in Greek Religion, vol. 1: Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

18. Christopher M. Cohoe and Stephen R. Grimm, "What It Takes to Live Philosophically: Or, How to Progress in the Art of Living," *Metaphilosophy* 51, nos. 2–3 (2020): 101. Explanatory words brackets are my own paraphrase.

19. Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Frédéric Gros (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 30, 46.

20. Michel Foucault, "The Ethic of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 298.

21. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 252, 540.

22. Ibid., 325, 489.
23. This is a major theme of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* as analyzed below. Also refer to Michel Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), especially 53–92, where Foucault draws on his analysis of John Cassian to indicate the transition from Stoic to early Christian techniques of self-examination.
24. Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18.
25. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 254–258 and 460–462.
26. Ibid., 258, 460.
27. Ibid., 409.
28. Ibid., 26.
29. Ibid., xxiv, 460.
30. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 318–319. A caveat in Foucault’s reading of the Hellenistic model is that he did not simply set a pragmatic conception of truth, oriented toward a final cause, against the objective truth of modern science grounded in efficient causality and dismiss the latter. Instead, he shows that technologies of the self such as recollection, meditation, confession, or method reshape the framework of discourse about truth and human agency, so that empirical knowledge is organized and used in different ways. For example, Foucault notes that Epicureans still saw knowledge of principles governing the world and the gods as indispensable for human flourishing. (Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 498.) Likewise, the fact that the rise of psychiatry within the scientific model was entangled with social and political power “in no way impugns the scientific validity or therapeutic effectiveness of psychiatry: it (the fact) does not endorse psychiatry, but neither does it invalidate it” (Foucault, “The Ethic of the Concern,” 296). Thus, advocating Hellenistic philosophy’s pragmatic truth does not dismiss other modalities of truth. Given Foucault’s deconstructive method in service of continual enlightenment and freedom, no single modality of truth is fundamental. His interest in ancient ethics therefore aligns with his broader view of philosophy as an “exercise of oneself in the thought (of alternatives)” (Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, xxvii).
31. Foucault, *About the Beginning*, 9, 34.
32. For a philosophical analysis of these texts concerning the three sacrificial rituals, see Bin Song, “‘Three Sacrificial Rituals’ (三祭) and the Practicability of Ruist (Confucian) Philosophy,” *APA Newsletter on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies* 17, no. 2 (April 2018): 2–5.
33. An accessible account of this process can be found in Li Honglei 黎红雷, “‘Heaven, Earth, Sovereign, Parent and Teacher’: The Modern Transformation of the Ruist Thought of Spirituality and Faith” “天地君亲师”: 儒家精神信仰思想的现代转化, *China Kongzi* 中国孔子网, April 25, 2017, accessed February 2026, https://www.chinakongzi.org/rw/xszj/lihonglei/201704/t20170425_128170.htm.
34. I have explained the concept of the “lineage of Dao” and argued that a contemporary Ruist lineage of Dao should include at least five significant figures in the tradition: Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, Zhu Xi, and Wang Yangming. See Bin Song, “Significant Figures in Confucianism (Ruism),” in *Routledge Research Encyclopedia of Chinese Studies: Chinese Religion and Philosophy*, ed. C. Shei and Z. Lu (Routledge, 2023) (doi: [10.4324/9780367565152-RECHS7-1](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367565152-RECHS7-1)). Based on this constructed lineage of Dao, I draw on the sayings and writings of these five

figures in the remainder of this article to demonstrate succinctly the Ru tradition's view of authority and normativity.

35. The duty of "remonstration" is embedded in a canonical system of reciprocal obligations known as the "three guides and five constant virtues" (三綱五常). For a discussion of this system's historical evolution and its contemporary Japanese and American expressions, see Bin Song, "Contemporary Business Practices of the Ru (Confucian) Ethic of 'Three Guides and Five Constant Virtues' (三綱五常) in Asia and Beyond," *Religions* 12, no. 10 (2021): 895 (doi: [10.3390/rel12100895](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100895)).

36. *Xunzi*, chapter "Zidao" (The Way of Filial Conduct). All translations of classical Chinese texts are my own. For pre-Qin texts, I rely on the received versions and provide only the chapter title for reference.

37. *Analects* 15.36, chapter of "Wei Ling Gong" (Duke Ling of Wei).

38. *Mencius*, chapter of "Jin Xin II" (Reflecting Exhaustively on the Heartmind II).

39. Zhu Xi, "Classified Dialogues of Master Zhu 朱子語類, vol. 10," in *The Complete Works of Master Zhu 朱子全書*, vol. 14 (上海古籍出版社, 2010), 314. Emphasis is my own.

40. Zhu Xi, "Classified Dialogues of Master Zhu, vol. 120," in *The Complete Works*, vol. 18, 3773–3774. Emphasis is my own.

41. Wang Yangming, *The Complete Works of Wang Yangming 王陽明全集* (上海古籍出版社, 1992), 76.

42. *Ibid.*, 254–255.

43. For the difference between Ruism and Stoicism regarding emotions, see Chen Lisheng 陳立勝, *From "Self-Cultivation" to "Gongfu": The Manifestation and Transformation of the Confucian Learning of Inner Sageliness 從「修身」到「工夫」：儒家「內聖學」的開顯與轉折* (Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2021), esp. chap. 5, "Ways of Managing Anger and Two Kinds of Unperturbed Mind," 138–177.

44. Exploring such semantic shifts in basic vocabulary in religious studies when applied to Ruism is a major objective of Bin Song, "Comparative Theology as a Liberal Art," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 31 (November 2020): 92–113; and *Debating Transcendence: Creatio ex nihilo and Sheng Sheng* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2026), esp. chap. 1, 14–38.

45. Bin Song, "Is There or Shall We Need a 'Home' for Comparative Theologies? A Ru (Confucian) Response to Francis X. Clooney," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Comparative Theology: A Festschrift in Honor of Francis X. Clooney, SJ*, ed. Axel Takacs and Joseph Kimmel (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2023), 491–500.

46. Bin Song, "Nonconfessional Inclusivism Embracing Relational Pluralism: Toward a Transreligious Theology of Religious Diversity," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* (2026): forthcoming.