Forum on
“Confucius’ Ethics and Christian Philosophy”

Wednesday, Oct. 22

For UWRF’s “Year of China” celebration, who better to talk about than perhaps the greatest sage of China — Confucius? China is the continually living oldest civilization on this planet, and Chinese works on astrology, religion and poetry extend a good thousand years before Confucius. But for the sheer clarity and depth of vision and philosophical ideas, Confucius towers over those who preceded him. The historical period of half a millennium before Christ is regarded as being the “axial period” of humanity, because at that time coincidentally great enlightened figures arose almost simultaneously in many parts of the earth, figures who had astonishing impact, like Confucius in China, Buddha in India, Thales and the Presocratics in Greece, Zoraster in Persia, etc. No single person has so strongly stamped the general bent of Chinese character as has Confucius. Confucius was central to the state ideology in China, until Mao and the Communist Party repudiated his philosophy in the middle of the Twentieth Century.

Let us get together, and see what Confucius has to offer us moderns! This forum will compare and contrast our modern Western ethical perspectives with those of Confucius. Come and participate. We look forward to your questions and comments, after two brief talks (of 20 minutes each), of Dr. Imtiaz Moosa (organizer) and Dr. Walter Wietzke, and a five-minute introduction by the moderator, Dr. Zhiguo Yang. Imtiaz will focus primarily on Confucius, and Walter on Christian perspectives, especially of Kierkegaard. The following are the summaries of the two speakers:

Imtiaz Moosa:

“Given the brevity of my talk, I focus primarily on one key element of Confucius’s ethics, namely, why Confucius regards “Li” so very central to any ethical outlook; and how this puts him at odds with Western point of view, and especially with Christian philosophy. Like almost everything else, in the West, ethics is given an individualistic bent. For example, being good for Plato leads to harmony within our own souls, by not letting temptations and appetites take over; heeding the ethical imperative for Kant leads to exercising our free will; and for Jesus an ethical and religious life is an individual’s relation with God, entirely independent of what others do (hence, ideally we ought to be able to love even our enemies). Confucius, on the other hand, brings out the social dimension of ethics. For him, both the very activity and the telos of being good or ethical have to do with others or the society in general. Being ethical is being good or performing our Li to others; and without others reciprocating, we cannot be good, properly and in its full sense. And the point and telos of ethics is the communal good, because we are nothing for him without the community. I also have a few things to say about what Confucius has to offer us modern Westerners.”

Walter Wietzke:

One of the issues this discussion attempts to gain some clarity about is the question of whether a life of ethical existence (i.e., one that aims to fulfill ethical ideals) could fully account for what an authentic human existence is (i.e., one that can answers what it means to be a human being). My talk will examine this issue from the perspective of the 19th Century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard thinks that a strictly ethical view of existence cannot satisfactorily explain how human beings
understand themselves as free but finite beings who must make existential choices. More importantly, this limitation to ethical existence stems from a deeper conception of human nature. For Kierkegaard the human self is a composite of body, soul, and spirit, whose ultimate task is to achieve a harmonious synthesis between these elements. This harmony is what it means to be authentic. But Kierkegaard also takes this view of the self to be a central and distinct component of religious existence (namely, Christianity). Kierkegaard’s view of authentic human existence, then, is a view of life that cannot be fundamentally explained through the fulfillment of ethical or moral claims. Finally, the crucial point for this discussion is that Kierkegaard defines authentic existence in more concrete terms as that of a single individual relating directly to God, which stands in clear contrast to the virtuous, communitarian life put forward by Confucius.