

Confucius

by Pat Zukeran

The Life of Confucius

Of all the eastern philosophers, Confucius, born in 550 B.C., is considered the greatest. His teachings are foundational to Asian cultures. *The Five Classics*, a collection of ancient Chinese literature, and *The Four Books*, a compilation of Confucius' and his disciples' teachings, was for centuries the standard curriculum for Chinese education.

Confucius' teachings and biography were recorded and edited many years after his death by his disciples. Although historians present various accounts of his life, there are some basic facts that we are reasonably sure of, and from which we can outline the major events of his life.

Confucius was born in the province of Lu, in northern China. He was born into a family of humble circumstance, and his father died at a young age. He began studying under the village tutor and at the age of fifteen devoted his life to study. At twenty, he married but later divorced his wife and had an aloof relationship with his son and daughter. In his twenties, he became a teacher and gathered a group of loyal disciples.

Confucius lived during the Chou Dynasty (1100 B.C. to 256 B.C.). At this time, the land was divided among feudal lords. The moral and social order was in a state of decay. Confucius sought a way to restore the cultural-political order. He believed that reform would come through educating the leaders in the classics and in his philosophy. He therefore sought a political position of influence, from which he could implement his principles.

Tradition teaches that the Duke of Lu appointed him to a cabinet position at the age of fifty. Several historians believe he eventually ascended to higher positions of public office. Due to political disagreements and internal conflicts, he resigned his post at fifty-five and left the province of Lu. He then traveled for thirteen years from state to state seeking to persuade political leaders to adopt his teachings. Although many lords respected him, no one gave him a position. Discouraged from the response, he devoted his final years to teaching and writing. Before his death in 479 B.C., he expressed his discouragement and disillusionment regarding his career.

However, his disciples were able to gain significant positions in government after his death. They modified his teachings and added their own insights. Centuries later, Confucianism became the official religion of China, shaping Chinese culture. The values he espoused: education, family loyalty, work ethic, conformity to traditional standards, honoring of ancestors, and unquestioning obedience to superiors, remain entrenched in Asian culture.

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There is much to appreciate regarding the life and teachings of Confucius. Christians would agree on several points with his philosophy of ethics, government, and social conduct. However, there are some major differences between Christianity and Confucian thought, which we will investigate in the following sections.

The Metaphysics of Confucius

Confucianism, as its founder taught, is not a religion in the traditional sense. It is an ethical code. Chinese culture was steeped in the religion of animism, a belief that gods and spirits dwell in natural formations. Along with an animistic world view, there was a belief in ancestor worship. The spirits of the dead needed to be honored and cared for by the living family members.

However, in his teachings, Confucius avoided spiritual issues. He can be categorized as an agnostic who believed in spirits and the supernatural but was not interested in them. He was humanistic and rationalistic in his outlook. "His position on matters of faith was this: whatever seemed contrary to common sense in popular tradition and whatever did not serve any discoverable social purpose, he regarded coldly."¹ The answer to the cultural and social problems was found in humanity itself, not in anything supernatural.

A disciple of Confucius wrote, "The master never talked of prodigies, feats of strength, disorders or spirits." (*Analects*, 7:20) Confucius himself stated, "To devote oneself earnestly to one's duty to humanity, and while respecting the spirits, to keep aloof from them, may be called wisdom." (*Analects*, 6:20) "Our master's views concerning culture and the outward insignia of goodness, we are permitted to hear; but about man's nature and the ways of heaven, he will not tell us anything at all." (*Analects*, 5:12)

Confucius occasionally mentions the "Mandate of Heaven." He appears to interpret this to mean the natural law or moral order within things. Men must seek to live within this order. One must be careful not to violate the will of heaven. Confucius wrote, "He who put himself in the wrong with Heaven has no means of expiation left." (*Analects*, 3:13)

In the Confucian system, a divine being does not have a significant role, his philosophy is man-centered and relies on self-effort. Man is sufficient to attain the ideal character through education, self-effort, and self-reflection. The goal of life was to live a good moral life. After his death, Confucianism evolved, combining with Chinese traditional religions and Buddhism to add a spiritual component.

In contrast, Christianity is God-centered. It is built on a relationship with a personal God who is involved in the world. Confucius focused on life here on this earth. Jesus focused on life in eternity. For Jesus what happens in eternity has ramifications for life here and now on earth. In Matthew 6:19 Jesus stated, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasure in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal." Here we see the basically different perspectives of Jesus and Confucius.

The Ethics of Confucius

Three key principles are emphasized in Confucius' teachings: the principles of Li, Jen and Chun-Tzu. The term Li has several meanings, often translated as propriety, reverence, courtesy, ritual or the ideal standard of conduct. It is what Confucius believed to be the ideal standard of religious, moral, and social conduct.

What I have learned is this, that of all things that people live by, Li is the greatest. Without Li, we do not know how to conduct a proper worship of the spirits of the universe; or how to establish the proper status of the king and the ministers, the rule and the ruled, and the elders and the

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juniors; or how to establish the moral relationships between the sexes; between parents and children, and between brothers; or how to distinguish the different degrees of relationship in the family. That is why a gentleman holds Li in such high regard.²

The second key concept is the Principle of Jen. It is the fundamental virtue of Confucian teaching. Jen is the virtue of goodness and benevolence. It is expressed through recognition of value and concern for others, no matter their rank or class. In the *Analects*, Confucius summarizes the principle of Jen in this statement, often called The Silver Rule: “Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you.” (*Analects*, 15:23) Li provides the structure for social interaction. Jen makes it a moral system.

The third important concept is Chun-Tzu, the idea of the true gentleman. It is the man who lives according to the highest ethical standards. The gentleman displays five virtues: self-respect, generosity, sincerity, persistence, and benevolence. His relationships are described as the following: as a son, he is always loyal; as a father, he is just and kind; as an official, he is loyal and faithful; as a husband, he is righteous and just; and as a friend, he is faithful and tactful.

If all men would live by the principles of Li and Jen and strive to the character of the true gentleman, justice and harmony would rule the empire.

The Christian would find himself in agreement with many of Confucius’ ethical principals and virtues. A Christian would also agree with many of the character qualities of the true gentleman and seek to develop those qualities.

What accounts for the similarity in ethics in Confucianism and other religious systems is what Paul states in Romans 2. Within every man there exists a God-given conscience or natural law that guides our moral conduct. This is because we are created in the image of God, and so we reflect His character. However, similarity in ethical codes does not mean the religions are the same.

The key difference can be illustrated this way. Confucian law is summarized by The Silver Rule. Jesus summarizes His teachings this way, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:38) Confucius believed that in order to achieve truly the principles of Li, Jen, and the character of the true gentleman, one must look within oneself. Jesus takes His teaching a step further. All His principles revolve around a relationship with God first. Only then can we truly love our fellow man.

Nature of Man

The Confucian philosophy is built on the foundational belief that man is basically good. The *Analects* state, “The Master said, ‘Is goodness indeed so far away? If we really wanted goodness, we should find that it was at our side.’” (*Analects*, 7:29) Confucian disciple, Mencius, further develops this, stating, “Man’s nature is naturally good just as water naturally flows downward.” (*Mencius*, 52) This innate goodness could be developed and actualized through education, self-reflection, and discipline. Study in the six arts, which include ceremony, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and mathematics would develop one’s character.

However, despite man’s natural goodness, Confucius faced reality honestly. He questioned if it was possible to ever truly attain the level of the true gentleman. Confucius stated, “I for my part have never yet seen one who really cared for goodness, nor one who really abhorred wickedness.” (*Analects*, 4:6) He said of himself, “As to being a divine sage or even a good man, far be it from me to make any such claim.” (*Analects*, 7:33) “The Master said, ‘The Ways of the true gentleman are three. I myself have met

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with success in none of them.’” (*Analects*, 14:30) However, if man by nature is good, why can we not attain what should be natural to us?

The Bible is built on a contrasting view of man. It teaches that man is created in the image of God, and that man was originally good. However, because of the Fall in Genesis 3, man is now sinful and in rebellion against God. Therefore, his natural tendency is to disobey the commandments of God, and he is driven to please himself. Paul states in Romans 7:18, “I have the desire to do good, but I cannot carry it out.”

Of the two views, Confucius and the Bible, which one represents the true reality of human nature? Do we naturally think of pure and holy thoughts, or if left to wander, do our minds naturally lust in the flesh and crave material riches? Which comes naturally to us, the tendency to dwell on noble things or selfish things? What has personal experience and history shown?

According to the Bible, good education is a positive step toward helping man change, but it stops short. Man is in need of a heart transformation. Life transformation occurs when a person enters into a personal relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ. One’s nature is transformed because God’s Spirit indwells an individual. Although the Christian is not capable of living out the principles of God’s law flawlessly, he is not left to himself to live a holy life. God provides man with the indwelling of His Holy Spirit to enable man to live in obedience to His law.

Relationships

Central to Confucius’ teaching are relationships and social roles. There are five great relationships:

- 1) Kindness in the father and obedient devotion in the son
- 2) Gentility in the eldest brother and humility and respect in the younger
- 3) Righteous behavior in the husband and obedience in the wife
- 4) Humane consideration in elders and deference in juniors
- 5) Benevolence in rulers and loyalty of ministers and subjects

If these attitudes are practiced, there will be harmony among all.

The most important relationship is the family, the basic unit of all humanity. Consistent with the pantheistic world view, he did not believe in an individual self or soul. One’s roles and relationships define that person. The goal of living is to achieve harmony through acting appropriately in those roles and relationships. Our family relationship is projected into the life of the community and the world.

In the family unit, the father is the key figure. He must be a good example to his sons. It is the son’s duty to obey without questioning and honor his father, even after death. When the father dies, obedience is given to the oldest brother. Confucius’ disciple states in the *Analects*, “Meng I Tzu asked about the treatment of parents. The Master said, ‘Never disobey! . . . While they are alive, serve them according to ritual. When they die, bury them according to ritual and sacrifice to them according to ritual.’” (*Analects*, II:5)

Confucius taught that government should be for the people. Feudal lords are to be responsive to the needs of the people at large. If the rulers lived by the highest principles, the people would then follow and there would be reform from the greatest to the least. The duty of those in subordinate positions is to be unquestioningly loyal to their superiors. Confucius states, “It is said that if good people work for a country for a hundred years, it is possible to overcome violence and eliminate killing. This saying is indeed true.” (*Analects*, 13:11) Confucius believed that a good society would be achieved through education.

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There are points of agreement here between Confucius and the Bible. Confucius believed the virtues he espoused are lived out in relationships. The same is true for Christianity. Our relationship with God is reflected in our relationships with one another. The truth of the Christian life is lived out in a community, not in isolation. The family is the key social unit, and the father is the leader of the family. However, Christianity takes relationships one step further than Confucius. Not only can we have the five relationships espoused by Confucius, we can have a personal relationship with God. It is from this connection that our earthly relationships find their greatest meaning.

A Final Critique

Most people of Asian descent may not be strict adherents to Confucianism, but they are all influenced by his philosophy. Anyone seeking to serve in Asian cultures would find it worthwhile to read his works. Confucianism preaches many good principles of ethics. It is very adaptable and fluid in its structure. That has been a weakness but also a strength of the system, since it allows itself to join other inclusive religious systems. However, there are some deficiencies.

What Confucius taught was very pragmatic and utilitarian. However, people are not able to survive for an extended period in this kind of system. Soon they will need a metaphysics that supports the ethical system that gives them ultimate meaning for their existence, and offers them hope when facing unjust suffering and evil. Confucianism falls short as a comprehensive life view, because it fails to address several key issues. First, the Confucian system leaves one spiritually void because it does not answer the question of the nature of the religious ultimate. Man is a spiritual being. Augustine stated that within every man there is a God-shaped vacuum that only God can fill. The longing for spiritual answers is not a western issue, but is essential to all men. Chinese culture has always shown a desire to fill this spiritual void. Chinese animism and ancestor worship has never been erased. Confucian thought eventually combined with Chinese animism. When Buddhism introduced the cosmology of reincarnation, it was eagerly adopted into Confucianism.

Second, the Confucian system does not answer the key question of “Why does the universe exist, and what explains its origin?” A related question is “Where did I come from?” This leads to the following questions, “What is the meaning of mankind’s existence in the universe?” and “What is the ultimate meaning of my existence?”

Third, the Confucian system does not answer the question “What happens after death?” Death is a universal dilemma for all mankind, and this question must be answered. What happens after death has tremendous ramifications as to how we will live here on earth. Is there a reward or punishment after life on earth? What determines the state of a person after death? Without any explanations on this, Confucianism cannot offer any real hope to those who have experienced evil or unjust suffering.

Finally, Confucianism is built on a faulty foundation that man is innately good. Experience, history, and the Bible make it clear: man by nature is sinful and naturally seeks to please himself.

Christianity offers a comprehensive life view, for it explains the nature of God, our relationship to Him, the origin of creation, and what happens after death. Jesus offers us meaning in life and an eternal hope that death cannot overcome.

Notes

1 John Noss, *Man’s Religion*, p. 392.

2 Lin Yutang, *The Wisdom of Confucius* (New York: Random House, 1938), p. 216.

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