

Confucian Foundations Resemble Genesis Truths

The Confucian way of life is founded upon two profound truths: 1. Heaven decreed a good human nature, and 2. People express their humanity best in community. These correspond to two principle truths of the Bible: “So God created man in His own image . . . Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good.”, and, “It is not good that man should be alone . . .” (Gen 1:27,31; 2:18 NKJV). These basic truths may have contributed greatly to the East Asian mainstream acceptance of Confucian thought, which then became the foundation for East Asia’s rich cultural achievements.

Won Yong Ji writes that the Confucian way of life was “the most important vital single force to have dominated Chinese culture for 2000 years, and those of Korea and Japan for almost as long.”¹ From 135 B.C. to A.D. 1905, the Confucian books were the basis of education in China. Confucius has come under attack in the twentieth century, yet East Asian society still remains heavily influenced by Confucian values.²

Of the many sages in East Asia, why did Confucius emerge as such a defining figure? Confucius himself said that he was “A transmitter and not a maker, believing in and loving the ancients . . .”³ Confucius was attempting to personally step aside and put forward the best Chinese moral examples from the past: “Traditional standards of conduct are the very essence of Confucianism . . . seven names, Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu and Duke Chou, are repeated again and again as paragons, whose deeds are models of virtuous conduct.”⁴ These six rulers lived in ancient China, ca. 2400-1100 B.C. Although his modest attitude (“a transmitter and not a maker”) has been very influential, Confucius *was* a creator since he used discernment in choosing these few examples from the many rulers of ancient China. His modesty and discernment contributed toward making him a towering figure. The profound truths he discerned brought acceptance of his understanding into mainstream East Asian thought and have deeply influenced it to the present day.

For Confucius, the core virtue is *Ren* (仁). This Chinese character is composed of two radicals: 1. *Human* (人), and 2. *Two* (二)(i.e. more than one person). First, there is something special about humans. Second, humans are meant to be in relationship with others.

¹Won Yong Ji, “Challenge of Eastern Spiritualities to the West,” *Concordia Journal* 17 (April 1991): 135.

²Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study* (New York: Kodansha International, 1977), 40-53.

³James Legge, *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning & The Doctrine of the Mean*, Chinese text; translated with critical and exegetical notes, prolegomena, and dictionary of all characters by James Legge (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), 195.

⁴Frederick Starr, *Confucianism* (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1930), 108-109.

Of the nine ancient books of Confucianism, *Zhong Yong* is recognized as the systematic

heart.⁵ The first sentence of *Zhong Yong* cuts to the foundation: “What Heaven has decreed is called human nature.” By context it is easily seen that human nature is regarded as something unique and good. Without a deep sense of the Fall (Genesis 3), the Confucian attitude toward human nature harkens back to Genesis 1-2.⁶ It is vaguely akin to what is confessed in the *Apology*: “We for our part maintain that God requires the righteousness of reason. . . . To some extent, reason can produce this righteousness by its own strength, . . . We freely give this righteousness of reason its due credit; . . . God even honors it with material rewards.”⁷

The core virtue, *Ren*, is expressed in reference to other people. It is translated into English with the words *humaneness*, *benevolence* or *love*. The relationship starts with the first relationship in which one begins life, the family. It extends from family to friends, society and world. Prominent among Confucian values is honor for parents, which then extends to teachers, rulers and others. Confucius would agree with Luther when he says of the commandments regarding other people that, “Among these the first and greatest is: ‘*You shall honor your father and mother.*’”, and:

Honor includes not only love but also deference, humility, and modesty, directed (so to speak) toward a majesty hidden within them. It requires us not only to address them affectionately and reverently, but above all to show by our actions, both of heart and of body, that we respect them very highly and that next to God we give them the very highest place. For anyone whom we are whole-heartedly to honor, we must truly regard as high and great. Young people must therefore be taught to revere their parents . . .⁸

Regarding the extension of this commandment to government, “The same may be said of obedience to the civil government, which, as we have said, is to be classed with the estate of fatherhood, the most comprehensive of all relations.”⁹

⁵Lin Yutang, *From Pagan To Christian* (New York: The Word Publishing Company, 1959), 17: “In this book [*Zhong Yong*], we see the philosophic basis for Confucianism.”

⁶Ching, 79.

⁷Philip Melancthon, “The Apology of The Augsburg Confession,” in *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 110.

⁸Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 379.

⁹*Ibid.*, 385.

Thus, the Confucian way of life resembles the Biblical teachings regarding relationships with other people. One’s relationship with God is not the focus of most Confucian texts. Confucius said, “While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve spirits?” and “While you do not know life, how can you know about death?”¹⁰ This Confucian horizontal perspective

¹⁰Legge, 240-241.

probably accounts for the fact that East Asia has given more emphasis to shame and loosing face before other people, in contrast to the Western focus upon personal guilt. When Isaiah was in the presence of God, he was struck with a knowledge of his guilt (Isaiah 6). In the agony of such deep guilt before God, one sees the need for His forgiveness which faith receives along with a restored relationship with God. The Confucian absence of a deep sense of the Fall (Genesis 3) contributed to its lack of emphasis upon relationship with God. Nevertheless, an onlooker cannot help but compliment Confucius for his honesty in not speculating about things about which he did not know.

Confucius taught about what the *Apology* calls “civil righteousness”:

The human will has freedom to choose among the works and things which reason by itself can grasp. To some extent it can achieve civil righteousness or the righteousness of works. It can talk about God and express its worship of him in outward works. It can obey rulers and parents. Externally, it can choose to keep the hands from murder, adultery, or theft.¹¹

Ji, who grew up in the Confucian way of life, notes that “The Confucian writings offer us much practical wisdom which can be helpful for our reflection even today.”¹² He further observes that the Confucian teaching “may sound like too much ‘Law,’ with hardly any ‘Gospel’ and grace. In fact it is. That is what Confucianism is all about and what makes it different from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹³ Melanchthon wrote in the same vein when he praised civil righteousness but warned that “It ought not be praised at the expense of Christ.”¹⁴

In conclusion, a few observations. First, in light of contemporary theories regarding the origin of the moral nature of humanity, it is refreshing to see that ancient Confucian thought reasoned that human personality comes from a high source. Ancient Confucian thought was closer to Biblical thought than much present day thought which holds that human personality is a chemical combination which evolved from lower forms. Second, the Confucian value for interpersonal relations is indeed valuable, down to the very core virtue, *Ren*. It approximates the Biblical commandments regarding person to person relationships. This Confucian way of life has brought much glory to East Asia.

¹¹Melanchthon, 225.

¹²Won Yong Ji, “The Concept of CHUEN-TZU in Confucianism and Its Significance Today,” *Concordia Journal* 17 (April 1991): 146.

¹³*Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁴Melanchthon, 110.

2 Corinthians 3:7-18 speaks of this glory. It is the glory of the law¹⁵, which *is real glory*.

¹⁵Paul here speaks of the law of Moses about which Luther writes, “The whole transmitted law is nothing but the natural law, . . .” *Luthers Works* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House,

To the extent that it is observed, real glory is apparent (e.g., the deep riches of East Asian culture). Yet, “even civil righteousness is rare among men, as we see from the fact that even philosophers who seem to have wanted this righteousness did not achieve it.”¹⁶ The *Zhong Yong* also recognized this: “Rare have they long been among the people, who could practise it!”¹⁷ In addition, the glory of the Law is a glory that passes away (dynasties rise *and fall*): “For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.” (2 Corinthians 3:11). This “much more glorious” eternal glory is that of Christ.

1972) 25:180.

¹⁶Ibid., 225.

¹⁷Legge, 387.