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Confucian Spirituality

What "spirituality" can a down-to-earth practical morality like Confucianism have? This is the kind of question a Christian may pose, out of ignorance for a foreign system of thought which he or she may associate with a humanism without God. This shows the ignorance of the West regarding Confucianism, an ignorance which has not been overcome by four centuries of encounter, starting especially with Jesuit missionaries in China, Matteo Ricci and his confreres, who were the earliest Western interpreters of Confucianism.

True, even in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were people who disagreed with those Jesuits who admired the spiritual values of Confucius (551-479 B.C.) and Confucianism. There were those—Jesuits, Franciscans, and others—who believed rather that Confucianism was pure materialism, without a spiritual dimension. They played a negative role in the history of Western interpretation of Confucianism, leading to much misunderstanding and even misdirection of the missionary effort. And their effects are still with us, in the popular confusion regarding the nature and value of Confucianism, and regarding whether Christians have anything to learn from this tradition. Their misapprehension is frequently the result of ignorance, of a superficial understanding of Confucianism, coupled with a sense of Christian superiority and arrogance.[1]

To overcome this ignorance, we need to introduce something of Confucius himself as well as the tradition which he helped to shape and transmit. After that, we would like to show how spirituality lies

1 On the subject generally of Confucianism and Christianity, readers may also read my book : *Confucianism and Christianity* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1977). This is a number in the East Meets West series Published by the Institute of Oriental Religions, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan.

at the *heart* of Confucianism, even though the tradition remains very much a humanistic one—which is, however, open to the transcendent, even if it does not define itself on the basis of theistic belief. A Confucian may be a theist, or an agnostic, or even an atheist. A Confucian *must* be a moral person, and a Confucian is usually a scholar. But the *model* Confucian has to be a seeker of wisdom and virtue, a *spiritual* person.

1. Confucius the Model

There are similarities, as well as differences, between Confucius and Jesus. Jesus' claims were mainly religious: his *kingdom* was not of this world. Confucius' claims were mainly moral, but his was a morality grounded in a spirituality. Confucius did not claim to be Messiah or Son of God. Like Jesus, however, Confucius taught a doctrine of reciprocity and neighbourliness: "What you do not wish others to do to you, do not do to them" (Analects 15:23)[2]—what has come to be called the *negative* Golden Rule. Like Jesus also, Confucius personified his message—he *was* his message. He talked about the greatness of ancient sages, and he came to be called the greatest of Chinese sages. And he remains the model and inspiration to successive generations even though his philosophy is no longer enjoying the protection of the political establishment.

Confucius' philosophy is clearly grounded in religion—the inherited religion of the Lord-on-high or Heaven, the supreme and personal deity, although he was largely silent on what regards God and the after-life (Analects 9:9). From the evidence we have, Confucius appears to have been a theist. He makes it clear that it was Heaven who protected him and gave him his message (Analects 7:23). He believes that human beings are accountable to a supreme being (Analects 3:13), even if he shows a certain scepticism—what we may regard as healthy scepticism—toward ghosts and spirits (Analects 6:20).

2. Devotion to Ritual (*li*)

Confucius is devoted to rituals, to those that govern worship to Heaven, the ancestral cult, as well as human relationships. The Chinese

2 The English translations from the Analects are all my own, sometimes adapted from James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, (Oxford, Clarendon, 1893), vol. 1.

word for ritual *li* is related etymologically to the words "worship" and "sacrificial vessel" with a definite religious overtone. The ancestral cult was surrounded with ritual; so was the worship offered to Heaven as Supreme Lord. But the term came to include all social, habitual practices, partaking even of the nature of law, as a means of training in virtue and of avoiding evil. And it refers also to propriety, that is, proper behaviour. Propriety carries a risk of mere exterior conformity to social custom, just as a ritual might be performed only perfunctorily, without an inner attitude of reverence. But Confucius is careful to emphasize the need of having the right inner dispositions, without which propriety becomes hypocrisy (Analects 15:17). He insists that sacrifice is to be performed, with the consciousness of the presence of the spirits (Analects 3:12).

Confucius shows a profound reverence for Heaven as the supreme deity, saying that "he who sins against Heaven has no one to whom he can pray" (Analects 3:13). He regards a just life as the equivalent of constant prayer. Once, when he was very ill, his disciples expressed the desire to request special intercession for him. Confucius replied, "My prayer has been for a long time" (Analects 7:34).

3. Spiritual Guidance

As a teacher of disciples, Confucius practised the art of spiritual guidance, exhorting his followers to moderate the excesses of their temperaments by certain efforts of self-control aided by the practice of self-examination. He gives this general advice: "When you meet someone better than yourself, think about emulating him. When you meet someone not as good as yourself, look inside and examine your own self" (Analects 4:17). And his disciple Tseng-tzu describes three counts of daily self-examination: "In my undertakings for others, have I done my best? In dealing with my friends, have I been faithful? And have I passed on to others what I have not personally practised?" (Analects 1:4).

The Analects, which is the collection of conversations between Confucius and his disciples, as recorded in writing several generations later, contain many passages in which Confucius gives personal advice to particular disciples: Tzu-lu, who was counselled to temper his impulsive and pugnacious nature, and Tsai-wo, who was rebuked for

going to sleep in the day-time. The Analects also give touching witness to Confucius' special regard for his favourite disciple, Yen Hui, a man of both intelligence and virtue, who found joy in learning, and was always content, even in abject poverty. Yen Hui's early death provoked his Master to cry out, with bitter tears, as did Job in the depths of his tribulations: "Alas, Heaven is destroying me, Heaven is destroying me!" (Analects 11:8).

The following passage gives us the description of Confucius' own spiritual evolution:

> At fifteen I set my heart on learning (to be a sage). At thirty I became firm. At forty I had no more doubts. At fifty I understood Heaven's Will. At sixty my ear was attuned to truth. At seventy I could follow my heart's desires, without overstepping the line (Analects 2:4).

This is the description of a man who consciously cultivated an interior life, who trained his mind to apprehend the truth and his heart to grasp the will of Heaven, until his instincts were also transformed, and learnt to appreciate the things of the spirit.

4. The Meanings of Jen

Confucius had a definite sense of mission, considering himself a transmitter of the wisdom of the ancients, to which he gives new meaning. His focus was on the human: not just as given, but with the possibility of self-improvement, of becoming *perfect*. His central doctrine is that of the virtue of *jen*, translated variously as goodness, benevolence, humanity and human-heartedness. This was formerly a particular virtue, the kindness which distinguished the gentleman in his behaviour toward his inferiors. He transformed it into a universal virtue, that which *makes* the perfect human being, the sage. The meanings of this word may especially be discovered through the conversations between the master and his close disciples.

Confucius tells Yen Hui that *jen* means self-conquest for the sake of recovering propriety. When asked further how this is to be achieved,

he gives a teaching of abnegation or self-denial with these famous words on putting a guard over our senses: "Look not at what is contrary to propriety; listen not to what is contrary to propriety; speak not what is contrary to propriety; make no movement which is contrary to propriety" (Analects 12:1).

In a similar context, Confucius explains *jen* to another disciple in these words (Analects 12:2):

> To regard every one as a very important guest, to manage the people as one would assist at a sacrifice, *not to do to others what you would not have them do to you..*

5. *Jen* as Love

Confucius clearly says also that *jen* means love—*universal* love (Analects 12:22). But it is also a love which takes into account special relationships: the love of one's family, for example, takes priority over the love of strangers. At first sight, this may seem very different from Christian charity, which preaches a kind of radical altruism, the love of the neighbour which refers to every human being as one's neighbour. But we all know that it is impossible to *love* each and every individual as though he or she is our close kin, our best friend. For this reason, Christian love is usually described as wishing others well, desiring the good of all, while the spontaneity of the *feeling* of love, and the obligations of special care, are reserved for special relationships. This is hardly different in Confucianism. The difference is rather in the motivation for such love. For the Christian, the love of others is prompted by the love of God—and the commandment of God. For Confucius and his followers, such love is what *constitutes* the authentic human being, the *humane* person.

If the natural feelings underlying kinship calls for special consideration, the natural feelings aroused by the neighbour's—*any* neighbour's—need for help are also recognized. This is especially underlined by Mencius (371-289 B.C.?), the great follower of Confucius. who gives the example of a man witnessing a child falling into a well (Mencius 2A:6). The *natural* first impulse is to rescue the child, and this impulse comes before any desire for praise or fear of blame. The

following of this natural impulse is an act of commiseration, or love of neighbour. This example serves as a kind of Confucian parable of the Good Samaritan, illustrating the meaning of universal love.

Natural feelings serve also as an experiential guide. For the follower of Confucius, parental love for children can be extended to cover other people's children, just as filial respect for the aged can be extended to cover other people's parents and elders, so that the natural order serves as a starting point and an experiential guide in achieving universal love.

6. Political Responsibility

Much more than Christianity, Confucian teachings are oriented to improving the political order, as a means of achieving universal love. Confucius actively sought a position of influence in the state, although his goals were never attained. His teaching of *jen* is extended to the political order, where it is defined as benevolent government, a government of moral persuasion, in which the leader gives the example of personal integrity, and selfless devotion to the people. The Confucian legacy is very much of *relevance*, spiritual as well as political relevance. It is this teaching that prompted generations of scholars to strive for participation in government, not necessarily by regarding oneself as a kind of political messiah, but rather by assuming the responsibilities of a *pastor*, a good *shepherd*, a spiritual leadership which comprehends political concerns. Here, more than anywhere else, the Confucian holistic mentality is clearly seen. For the human is never regarded as dualistic, as matter and mind, body and soul. It is always accepted as *one*, as existing in society, as striving as well for physical well being, for social harmony, and for moral and spiritual perfection. The Confucian sage has been described as possessing the qualities of "sageliness within and kingliness without". In other words, he has the heart of the sage, and the ability of the king.

In leaving behind the teachings of moral and spiritual striving, as well as of political responsibility, Confucius has given us a legacy that is universal and perennial, even if his cultural assumptions have their inherent limitations. The ideal political order is no longer that of benevolent monarchy, just as the ideal human being is no longer *only* that of a filial son. But the teachings of humanity and justice, of love

and compassion and sincerity, remain valid, as do the practical instructions regarding how these may be achieved. In our own times, as Christians grow in the realization of the importance of finding God in one another, of seeking the renewal and improvement of our society and our world, the message of Confucius becomes all the more relevant.