

Introduction to Philosophy

Comprehending the Confucianist

by John R. Himes

INTRODUCTION: Confucianism is a philosophy developed by Confucius (孔子, 551-479 BC) long before Christ's birth. It is impossible to fully understand the modern cultures of China, Korea, and Japan without understanding Confucianism. The social structures of these countries are all built on Confucian principles to one degree or another.

While originally a social philosophy, not a religion, a religion based on it developed later, while it remained a social philosophy. "Confucius has, in the main, been worshipped by the scholar-class only, and that worship seems to have developed in the schools."¹ Furthermore, its doctrine of filial piety has led to various Asian religions developing ancestor worship.

I. The Teachings of Confucius

- A. Confucius recognized *Shang Ti* (上帝, "upper emperor"²), the monotheistic God of the original Chinese religion, though he called him by another name.³ This recognition later degenerated into idolatry as various spirits originally similar to angels came to be revered, so that over the years Confucianism turned from a philosophy into an idolatrous religion.
- B. Many consider Confucius to have been a humanist with little thought for religion, but his writings prove otherwise. His name for God was *T'ien* (or *Tian*, 天), meaning "Heaven." "To suggest, as many scholars do, that Confucius found a satisfying solution in pure humanism, and that his ethics did not finally rest on deep religious insight and personal faith in *T'ien* is to discount many of the most pregnant sayings attributed to Confucius in the *Analects*."⁴
- C. Confucius taught five essential relationships: ruler and subject, father and son, friend and younger friend, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife. Besides that, the teacher and student relationship is historically very important in Confucian societies, as well as the employer and employee relationship in modern Confucian societies.
- D. There are a number of other important teachings in Confucianism that help us understand the modern social structure of Confucianist countries.
 1. *Jen* (仁), or benevolence. This teaches that Mankind is essentially good, and that there are various human virtues to be acquired.

¹ D. Howard Smith, *Chinese Religion* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 145.

² This lecture uses Wade-Giles Romanization for Chinese words. Pinyin Romanization would say *Shang Di*.

³ For more information about *Shang Ti*, see Chan Kei Thong, *Finding God in Ancient China* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

⁴ *Ibid*, 35.

2. *Li* (禮), or propriety. This refers to the proper way things should be done, including the five relationships mentioned above. These two teachings, *jen* and *li*, form the ethical foundation of Confucianism.
 3. *Yi* (義), or righteousness. This is similar to the idea of conscience in the Bible. Some things are morally right to do, and should be done just for that reason.
 4. *Hsiao* (孝), or filial piety. It is this doctrine which leads to ancestor worship in the Confucian societies.
 5. *Chih* (智), or moral wisdom.
 6. *Chun Tzu* (君子), or the “ideal man.” According to Confucius, each person should strive to represent the ideals of kindness and sincerity and diligence by which the “ideal man” may be known.
- E. While Confucianism is not special revelation from God, as a social philosophy there are some of its teachings which embody the natural revelation by which God may be known through human conscience (Rom. 1:18-21, 2:14-15). This is due to the original Chinese worship of *Shang Ti*, which had sacrifices for sin, which may be seen in the Chinese character for “righteousness” (義), representing a sacrificial sheep (羊) over one’s self (我), which has the radicals for hand plus axe (手+斧). This may be thought of as the worship Noah brought on the ark, which is made of the Chinese character for “ship” (船): eight mouths (八+口) on a boat (舟).
- F. Thus, the members of a Confucian society may be deceived into thinking themselves to be righteous without Christ and His righteousness.
- G. Though there are no “holy books” per se in Confucianism, there are some important works purporting to be by the sage, or just recording his wisdom, chief among them being *The Analects* and *The Doctrine of the Mean*.
- H. Again, because of the ancient origin of Confucianism being close to Noah’s religion, a Confucian society may look outwardly to be more pure morally than Islamic or other societies. However, under the surface will be found rank immorality, due to the depravity of man as taught in the Bible (Jer. 17:9, Rom. 1:21-23).

II. The Social Structure of Confucianism

- A. Confucianism began in China, but entered Japan through the *samurai* warrior (侍; also called 武士, *bushi*) educational system. The warrior caste of Japan up into the 20th century was educated with the Chinese classics, especially the Confucian classics. This led to a top-down implementation of Confucian principles into Japanese society which exists to this day.
- B. On the other hand, though parts of wider Chinese society (Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Macau, etc.) are ostensibly Westernized to one degree or another, yet Confucianism still holds sway in those places, even if it remains unrecognized by many average Chinese.
- C. A Confucian society is stratified vertically. Japanese say that while Americans value equality, their society is vertical, with not all equal. In Japanese history, there was even a caste system until the Meiji Restoration

of the late 19th century. From the bottom, the castes were: *Eta* or *Burakumin* (doing the dirty work), serf, merchant, craftsman, farmer, samurai, noble. This caste system is largely gone, but to this day the *Burakumin* are discriminated against in Japan, as are what is left of the *Ainu* tribes. Practically speaking, Japan still has a stratified society, especially in business, though upward mobility is possible.

- D. While Westerners highly value personal independence, people in a Confucian society value teamwork much more, and individualism is frowned upon. A Japanese proverb is, “The nail that sticks up will get hammered down.” (「出る釘は打たれる。」 *Deru kugi wa utareru.*)
- E. In a Confucian society, the students seldom ask questions of the instructor, whether in a traditional art (martial art, tea ceremony, Japanese chess, etc.) or a modern classroom. The instructor or master is all-knowing in the students’ eyes. However, this relationship is breaking down in modern Japan and China, and bullying is now prevalent in Confucian societies.

III. The Ceremonies and Rituals of Confucians

- A. Following Confucius, the Chinese emperor had a ceremony honoring the great God *Shang Ti*. “The whole service was a thanksgiving to *Shang Ti* and to the great dynastic ancestors, and to the host of heaven for the blessings bestowed from above during the year, as the sacrifice to earth was a similar thanksgiving for the favours it had bestowed.”⁵
- B. In traditional Chinese arts influenced by Confucianism, to become a full or “indoor” disciple the student must go through a ceremony in which he kowtows (physically bows in a kneeling position) to the master and the spirits of the previous masters. He also must give a gift at a Confucian altar to the master-teacher to be accepted as a full disciple. He will also serve tea to the master. The master then becomes a father figure, and the student may even live with the master while he trains and learns.
- C. Confucianism exists in various countries in the form of ancestor worship. In Japan this takes the following form:
 - 1. A photograph of the deceased relative to which obeisance is made will be displayed at the funeral. Speeches will be made directly to the deceased relative praising them.
 - 2. There will be a Buddhist or Shinto altar in the home or business, at which one worships daily.
 - 3. The family altar will have a photograph of the deceased relative.
 - 4. Offerings of green tea, fruit or other edibles will be made to the deceased at the family altar.
 - 5. Prayers to the ancestor for blessings or protection will be made.

CONCLUSION: As has been seen, Confucianism has had wide influence in East Asia. In particular, it has resulted in ancestor worship among people who do not even realize the origins of their worship. For further study: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/confuciu/>.

⁵ Smith, 143.