

An Outline Review
of
Huston Smith's
The World's Religions

(Our Great Wisdom Traditions)

Chapter IV. Confucianism

Part One: The First Teacher.

Born around 551 B.C.

Prompted as if by call - "At fifty I perceived the divine mission" - he gave his next thirteen years, with many a backward look and resisting footsteps, to "the long trek," in which he wandered from state to state proffering unsolicited advice to rulers on how to improve their governing and seeking a real opportunity to put his ideas into practice. The opportunity never came.

Only a small band of faithful disciples stood by him through rebuff, discouragement, and near starvation.

He spent his last five years quietly teaching and editing the classics of China's past. In 479 B.C., at the age of seventy-two he died.

With his death began his glorification. Within a few generations he was regarded throughout China as "the mentor and model of ten thousand generations."

Part Two: The Problem Confucius Faced.

By Confucius' time interminable warfare had degenerated from chivalry toward the unrestrained horror of the Period of the Warring States.

The old mortar that had held society together was chipping and flaking. Unreflective solidarity was a thing of the past.

Part Three: Rival Answers.

As the alternative to tradition, the United States has proposed reason. Educate citizens and inform them, and they can be counted on to behave sensibly - this is the Jeffersonian-Enlightenment faith on which the United States was founded. It has not been fulfilled. Until recently the world's leader in education, the United States leads likewise in crime, delinquency, and divorce.

One option that ancient China proposed was put forward by the Realists. What do you do when people don't behave? Hit them. The Realists' philosophy of social order proceeded by way of an elaborate mechanism of "penalties and rewards".

A social philosophy as different from the Realists' as fire from ice existed alongside it in Confucius' China. Known as Mohism, it proposed as the solution to China's social problem not force but love - universal love. One should "feel toward all people under heaven exactly as one feels toward one's own people, and regard other states exactly as one regards one's own state."

Neither of these rival answers to the problem of social cohesion impressed Confucius. He rejected the Realists' answer of force because it was clumsy and external. As for the Mohists' reliance on love, Confucius agreed with the Realists in dismissing it as utopian. The West's current approach to the social problem -

through the cultivation of reason - probably did not occur to Confucius. If it had he would have dismissed it as not thought through.

Part Four: Confucius' Answer.- Deliberate Tradition

Confucius was all but obsessed with tradition, he saw it as the chief shaper of inclinations and attitudes.

Spontaneous tradition- tradition that had emerged without conscious intent had ruled villages without dissent but could no longer be counted on.

The most appropriate solution must be continuous with the past and at the same time must take a clear-eyed account of developments that rendered the old answer unworkable.

The shift from spontaneous to deliberate tradition requires a power of suggestion that can prompt society's members to behave socially even when the law is not looking. The technique pivots around "patterns of prestige."

The interminable anecdotes and maxims of Confucius' *Analects* were designed to create the prototype of what the Chinese hoped the Chinese character would become.

A. The Content of Deliberate Tradition.

Deliberate tradition requires attention first to maintain its force and second attention to the content of that education. The character of the social life Confucius intended to engender can be gathered under five key terms:

1. *Jen*.-

The ideal relationship that should pertain between people

Involves simultaneously a feeling of humanity toward others and respect for oneself

Expressed in courtesy, unselfishness, and empathy

"Do not do unto others what you would not want others to do unto you."

2. *Chun tzu* - The mature person

Opposite of a petty person, a mean person, a small-spirited person

Armed with self-respect that generates respect for others

Speech free of coarseness and vulgarity

Person who is entirely real

3. *Li* - Has two meanings:

a. Propriety, the way things should be done - Confucius taught this mainly by:

the Rectification of Names - the creation of a language in which key nouns carry the meaning they should carry if life is to be well ordered.

the Doctrine of the Mean - the way that is "constantly in the middle" between unworkable extremes

the Five constant Relationships - those between parent and child, husband and wife, elder and junior sibling, elder friend and junior friend, and ruler and subject -It is vital to the health of society that these key relationships be rightly constituted.

the Family - "The duty of children to their parents is the fountain from which all virtues spring.

Age - Confucius saw age as deserving veneration by reason of its intrinsic worth.

b. Ritual - When right behavior is detailed to Confucian lengths, the individual's entire life becomes stylized in a sacred dance, leaving little need for improvisation.

4. *Te* - the power by which men are ruled

No state, Confucius was convinced, can constrain all its citizens all the time, nor even any large fraction of them a large part of the time. It must rely on acceptance of its will, an appreciable confidence in what it is doing.

This spontaneous consent arises only when people sense their leaders to be people of capacity, sincerely devoted to the common good and possessed of the kind of character that compels respect.

For the process to work, however, rulers must have no personal ambition. Only those are worthy to

govern who would rather be excused.

5. *Wen* - The arts of peace as contrasted to the arts of war

Music, art, poetry, the sum of culture in its aesthetic and spiritual mode

Ultimately, victory goes to the state that develops the highest *wen*, the most exalted culture - the state that has the finest art, the noblest philosophy, the grandest poetry.

B. The Confucian Project. - how life would appear to a Chinese set within it

As a never-ending project of self-cultivation toward the end of becoming more fully human

Apart from human relationships there is no self. The self is a center of relationships. It is constructed through its interactions with others and is defined by the sum of its social roles.

A notion very different from Western individualism - the human self as a node, not an entity.

Ascent means becoming a fully realized human being through expanding one's sympathy and empathy indefinitely.

The expansion is in concentric circles that begins with oneself and spreads from there to include successively one's family, one's face-to-face community, one's nation, and finally all humanity.

In shifting the center of one's empathic concern from

oneself to one's family one transcends selfishness. The move from family to community transcends nepotism. The move from community to nation overcomes parochialism, and the move to all humanity counters chauvinistic nationalism.

Inside and outside work together in the Confucian scheme.

Always the practice field is the Five Constant Relationships. Mastering a role in one of the five sheds light on the other roles. To improve as a parent throws light on what being a good child (of one's own parents) entails. The nuances of the other roles likewise illuminate one another.

C. Ethics or Religion?

If religion is taken in its widest sense, as a way of life woven around a people's ultimate concerns, Confucianism clearly qualifies. Even if religion is taken in a narrower sense, as a concern to align humanity with the transcendental ground of its existence, Confucianism is still a religion.

To understand the total dimension of Confucianism as a religion it is important to see Confucius shifting his people's attention from Heaven to Earth without dropping Heaven from the picture entirely.

The Confucian project of becoming fully human involves transcending, sequentially, egoism, nepotism, parochialism, ethnocentrism, and chauvinistic nationalism and (we now add) isolating self-sufficient humanism.

D. Impact on China.

For over two thousand years Confucius' teachings have profoundly affected a quarter of the population of this globe. Confucian values merged with the generic values of the Chinese people to the point where it is difficult to separate the two.

The features mentioned below pretty much blanket East Asia as a whole, for Japan, Korea, and much of Southeast Asia deliberately imported Confucian ethic.

1. Confucius' social emphasis produced, in the Chinese, a conspicuous social effectiveness - a capacity to get things done in a large scale when need arose.
2. Unique among the world's civilizations, China syncretized her religions. Traditionally, every Chinese was Confucian in ethics and public life, Taoist in private life and hygiene, and Buddhist at the time of death, with a healthy dash of shamanistic folk religion thrown in along the way.
3. The importance of the family in China - Strong family bonds can smother, but they also bring benefits, and these work for East Asians right down to the present.
4. East Asian respect for age borders on veneration.
5. Confucius' Doctrine of the Mean continues to this day in the Chinese preference for negotiation, mediation, and the "middle man" as against resorting to rigid, impersonal statutes.
6. China honors Confucius' conviction that learning and

the arts are not mere veneer but are powers that transform societies and the human heart.

7. The East Asian economic miracle of the last forty years, shaped by the Confucian ethic, constitutes the dynamic center of economic growth in the latter twentieth century.

8. The courtesy for which Orientals have been famous echoes the Confucian spirit.
