

A Comparison between the Christian and Confucian Major Doctrines:

a Survey

LA COMPARAISON DE DOCTRINES MAJEURES CHRISTIANISTES ET CONFUSCIANISTES :

UNE ENQUETE

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Abstract: Many people wonder about the differences between Chinese people and the Westerners especially in their thinking patterns. As a matter of fact, the influence of Confucianism and Christianity has played a very important role in cultivating the people's ideas. Although Christian doctrines share a lot of common cores with Confucian theories, a great many differences still exist particularly in beliefs, human nature and life. This paper is aimed to make a comparison between the two systems.

Key Words: Confucianism, Christianity, Jesus, Confucius, religion, cultural differences

Résumé: Beaucoup de gens s'intéressent aux différences du peuple chinois avec les Occidentaux, surtout en ce qui concerne leur modèle de penser. En effet, l'influence du confucianisme et du christianisme a joué un rôle très important dans la formation des idées du peuple. Malgré de nombreux noyaux communs entre eux, il existe quand même beaucoup de différences, notamment sur la foi, la nature humaine et la vie. L'article présente une comparaison de ces deux systèmes.

Mots-Clés: confucianisme, christianisme, Jésus, Confucius, religion, différences culturelles

It is well-acknowledged that both Christianity and Confucianism are great. Their teachings have helped to form the value systems of Western and Eastern cultures, which have guided millions of people in spirit, behavior, mind and relationships. Go through their doctrines, we can find something in common. However, if we take a close look, we can see that the whole systems of their philosophies are quite different. In this essay, I am going to compare the major doctrines between the two religions, mainly about the differences.

It is true that Christianity and Confucianism share a lot in common in their doctrines. The first big similarity in the two philosophic systems is about love. We all know that the essential teaching of Christianity is "Love all people as yourself". We are told to love God more than anything else; love your neighbor as yourself. What's more, we are also taught to "love your enemies

and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be the children of your Father in heaven." The definition of love has been extended, so love can apply to anyone in any occasion in people's life. Tuning to Confucianism, one of the main themes in Confucian teachings is called ren, which is frequently translated as love, goodness, or human-heartedness. "The Master said, To rule a country of a thousand chariots, there must be ...love for men". According to Confucius, only the great sages of antiquity truly possessed ren, but it was a quality that all should seek to develop. Thus, Confucius taught that people should love each other and practice respect and courtesy towards each other in their daily life. We can see that love in the teachings of Jesus is almost the same as ren in Confucian doctrines, both served as the core of the two philosophic systems.

Actually many detailed doctrines in the two systems

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have a lot in common. For example, Jesus taught us to "treat others as you would like to be treated." But we find the golden rule in the Chinese traditions 500 years before him: Don't do to others what you do not want to have them do to you. In addition, we can find lots of similarities in their teachings about humanity: not to murder, not to steal, not to lie, not to abuse sexuality. Generally speaking, Christianity "respects order, reveres the past, holds the family sacred, and yet is able also to make continual progress in science, in art, in literature, in the comfort of the whole community. It therefore accepts the good and the truth in the doctrines of Confucius, and adds to these another element of new life."

Although the ethical standards are almost the same, there are many profound differences between the two systems, which make the two religions diverge much. That's why throughout the history, many priests made great efforts to try to preach the teachings of God to the Chinese people, but ended up in failure.

One of the most striking differences is about their beliefs. Christians believe in one God, who created the universe and all that is in it. God is a person, but of a somewhat different type than human beings. "Great is Thy power, and Thy wisdom infinite." But "man, a particle of Thy creation; man, that bears about him his mortality, the witness of his sin, the witness that Thou resists the proud". Unlike humans who have both physical and spiritual elements, God is entirely spiritual. He exists in a sphere outside the normal physical universe. In other words, God is beyond our world. Christianity has drawn a clear line between God and humans. Someone may argue that God and humans do not have tremendous differences in that in *Genesis*, God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness". In this way, the focus is on the similarities rather than the differences. In order to explain this point, we have to bear it in mind that humans were created in the image and likeness of God does not imply that God has a physical nature. The "image" conferred to the human being represents the personal character of God. Humanity is defined primarily by the ability to have communion with the creator and other people. The "likeness" is defined as a way of being. It corresponds to a free will relationship of obedience to the creator, an attribute that has to be built up through exercising the relationship with God. In order to follow God, we have to leave our real world to reach the holy land, the Heaven.

Different from Christian belief, Confucians have no specific beings as their gods. Confucius himself has never talked about gods, ghosts, or even afterlife. Because of this, whether we should take Confucianism as a religion is a controversial issue. Many scholars hold the view that Confucius did not establish a new religion for a lack of god. All his efforts were channeled into finding an ethical system that could improve the Chinese society of his time. His main concern was social life and the principles that should govern it for

society, family, and personal life. Although Confucius respected the existent Chinese religious traditions, he gave them a mere ethical interpretation. However, some other scholars think that Confucianism do have their belief that is Tian, which is translated as Heaven. Tian is the upholder of the moral law. Nothing can escape from his control. It seems that Heaven is something intangible, but actually it is everywhere. All the natural phenomena and living things on Earth are part of Heaven. What's more, Heaven also lies in the basic principles of the world as well as morality which will guide people's mind and behavior. In a word, Heaven is within the world. To obey the laws of Heaven, we have to focus on the presence, the physical universe. In this case, Confucianism can be regarded as a religion.

Besides beliefs, the second major difference I am going to talk about is their ideas about human nature. To Christian eyes, the sin nature is in every one of us. Human beings are all born with a sin nature that can be traced back through our ancestors to Adam and Eve. In the Garden of Eden, God told Adam not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Soon after that Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the fruit of the tree. This disobedient act toward God was the original sin. This tendency for us to disobey God, our sin nature, continues till today. It represents a natural tendency toward evil and manifests itself through the conscious sins we commit with our thought, speech and deeds. Here I want to reemphasize that we inherit neither the particular sins of our ancestors, nor sins we have done in alleged previous lives, but the sinful nature of mankind, which can be found in the Bible,

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil thoughts come, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from within, and they defile a person. (Mark)²

According to the Jesus' saying, the attitude of relying on inner resources in order to find a "true inner nature" is a result of spiritual pride, the very cause of the fall. The Bible teaches that humans do not possess an intrinsic divine nature, and thus are incapable of saving themselves from sin. The only "true inner nature" humans possess is a sinful nature. In order to be forgiven and to be saved, humans have to make efforts, to open their heart and receive the free gift of God, through faith. It requires complete trust in God's promises. Faith is the proper human response to God's initiative, not a mere form of positive thinking.

On the contrary, Confucians believe that man is naturally good. We are born with benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. While Confucius only implied the natural goodness of man, another great philosopher, Mencius, stated clearly that human beings possess innate knowledge of the good as well as the

² *Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version*, Amity Printing Co.ltd, National TSPM & CCC,1995, P74 The Gospel According to St. Mark

innate ability to be good. Mencius was born in 372 BC, just over a century after the death of Confucius in 479. He dedicated his life to the promulgation of the teachings of Confucius. In his teachings, he stated that,

“The tendency of man's nature to good is like the tendency of water to flow downwards. There are none but have this tendency to good, just as all water flows downwards.

Now by striking water and causing it to leap up, you may make it go over your forehead, and, by damming and leading it you may force it up a hill;-- but are such movements according to the nature of water? It is the force applied which causes them. When men are made to do what is not good, their nature is dealt with in this way.”³

He affirmed that evil is caused by people's inability to avoid the negative influences of their environment. He believed that we can be taught to recapture our original goodness, and that the end of all learning is the recovery of our "lost mind." Sympathy, shame, reverence, propriety, humanity and wisdom are natural attributes of human beings and are found universally. In this way, we have to pay much attention to self-cultivation in order to be a gentleman. So we can see, the two philosophic systems share different attitudes towards human nature.

Finally, I am going to talk about the third main difference— ideas about life. In the beliefs of many Christians, the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to convict mankind of their sin and unrighteousness, to bring to those who accept God's free gift of eternal life, to empower the life of the believer. The Christian view is that we live only once in this physical world, and then follows the judgment of God. After death, humans either enter into a close and eternal communion with God, or into a state of total isolation from him, which is called hell. If someone persists in rebellion toward him, manifested through indifference or desire for independence, God does not force him to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Hell is the result of one's choice to be independent from God and reject his offer. But if one chooses to follow God, God can enable him to live a Godly life in obedience to his Lordship. All believers

will be resurrected to eternal life. That's why in view of the eternity of afterlife, some even consider regular life as relatively unimportant, except for determining one's fate in the afterlife. Life is just a provisional situation. Eternal life is not the annihilation of soul and personhood, but an embodied existence of perfect and eternal communion with God. Therefore, the highest experience human beings could have is not merging with an impersonal Ultimate Reality but entering into a perfect communion of reciprocal love with God.

However, in Confucius's teachings, there is no such a statement about the eternity of life. Instead, he emphasizes on this world, on the presence. In *The Analects of Confucius*, Chi Lu asked about serving the spirits of the dead. The Master said, "While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve their spirits?" Chi Lu added, "I venture to ask about death?" He was answered, "While you do not know life, how can you know about death?" From this quotation, we can see that Confucius's focus is very practical. He encouraged people to live in harmony and to help other people through government service, teaching, or just being a good family member instead of worshipping. The meaning of life lies in what one can do in his limited life. He has to devote himself to the family, to the emperor. In this way, he can be a real gentleman.

In conclusion, we may to some extent understand why it was quite difficult for the Chinese people to accept the teachings of Jesus Christ in history. The two teaching systems, although of which some of the doctrines are almost the same, have many fundamental differences about beliefs, human nature and life, which finally lead to the ideological differences between western people and Chinese people. But does such a conclusion mean that since people have so many different religious beliefs, people of different religions or races cannot live in harmony? As a matter of fact, as long as we can understand our differences and respect their beliefs, we can make friends with and show our love for anyone in the world. What we need is not a war, not a conflict, not bombs or bullets, but a dialogue, a handshaking and an olive branch.

³ James Legge, *The Works of Mencius*, Dover Publications; Reprint edition, June 1, 1990, P317 Part5 Gao Tsze, Chapter2

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