

# **CONFUCIANISM, a perspective**

## **By Parviz Dehghani**

This ancient Chinese Religion is named after Confucius (551?-479? B.C.), the most brilliant moral, political, and social philosopher who changed the landscape of his and later on other cultures of the Eastern hemisphere. If Socrates (470?-399 B.C) laid the foundation of Western civilization as the father of moral philosophy, Confucius revived the lost and forgotten moral tradition of the early Chou dynasty going back to 500 years before him and built the hierarchy of values among children and youngsters. Being confronted by the moral chaos of his day and the war among the feudal lords, he felt it was his moral duty to stop the systematic destruction of thousands years of Chinese civilization. Socrates who walked on the stage of the Greek culture, roughly a century later, faced a similar situation. Athens was in ruin, thanks to the Peloponnesian war, namely, the war between Athens and Sparta. He felt that Pericles, the Greek statesman, orator, and general during the Golden Age was mostly blamed for what had happened to Athens. Therefore, he came to the conclusion that Athens needs a philosopher king. He was unhappy with the democratic system which advocated majority rule. He believed Athenians lost the wars to the Persians and Spartans because of their beliefs in their gods, which represent many and their loyalty to their leader Pericles. Athens ought to have a wise monarch. It should leave the tyranny of majority representing many and go to the oneness of a king. This king can even be a female, as long as she is qualified.

The God of Chou or Zhou dynasty was called Tien or Heaven. Confucius revered this God, but he always kept his distance from it, lest he might be worshipping the God of his own creation. He warned people not to get too attached to their Religion for which they might be

tempted to commit atrocities. So he kept God out of people's life. When it came to morality, feelings and sentiments were the foundations of his ethics. However, he knew he would face relativism. Because not everyone's feelings are the same. Confucius, on the other hand, realized he could not rely on the Heaven to know the difference between right and wrong. He also knew he was not able to infer "Ought" from "Is". In other words, he could not join those who lacked moral fortitude in his society. His culture was on the verge of collapse. Anarchy and chaos were defying law and order. The hierarchy of moral values had disappeared from China. The relation of man and nature did not exist any longer. Thus, the natural law had not been followed. In the golden age of Chou dynasty people looked at nature and saw the hierarchy of respect among the animals. Therefore, they emulated what they observed and implemented those values in their society. Nature, however, was suffering tremendously at the time of Confucius because of constant wars among the warlords. As a result of this destruction, the family structure had been destroyed too. The absence of security was deeply felt. There was no longer a law enforcement to stop the criminals from looting and theft. People were literally robbed and their houses were broken into. Confusion and disorder were present everywhere and people were terrorized. Murdering of the innocent mass was everyday news. More than 40,000 people had been slaughtered for no reason. Who could stop this insanity? No form of government could function when the national security was in jeopardy. Confucius, traveled to different parts of China and spoke to many leaders of communities warning them concerning the instability threatening the very existence of Chinese culture. Unless something was done immediately to put China back on the right track, there would not be any hope his society was going to survive this catastrophe. Unfortunately, he was not able to convince them effectively to save his culture. After years of nonstop traveling, he finally decided not to be mobile anymore and instead he began studying the

chronicles in order to find out what was the best course of action to revive the culture he loved so much. He was a man of vision and had a mission to perform for the future of China. He felt education, law, and love had to be reinstated in his society so it could recover

from the moral calamity it had been facing for quite a long time. However, he did not think those projects were enough. He knew historically, Chinese had always been ancestor worshippers. After all, Shang di, or Shang ti, the God of Shang dynasty before Chou dynasty, was "Anthropomorphist ["a changing into human form, New world dictionary] (Supreme Emperor or Ruler on High, who as highest authority, presides over an elaborate hierarchy of spirits; the supreme object of veneration used interchangeably with the above."(Runes, p. 290). Having studied the history of China and consulted the philologists, he decided to probe the Golden age of Chou dynasty's traditions. He then selected the best in order to teach the youngsters, knowing the fact that children were more prone to grasp those values than the adults whose mind were already set in certain ways. However, before he began his journey, he made sure his culture was still responding and was not dead. Once he heard a heart breaking news regarding a woman whose house was on fire and she still refused to run for her life because she had no chaperon. He then realized some people were still holding on to the ancient traditions. A century later, Socrates told his followers that he was like a gadfly going around Athens to annoy those who think they are wise though they are not. They simply do not know that they do not know. He was perhaps like a gadfly biting the livestock of Athens to make sure they were not dead and were still alive. Utopia is a Greek word which is made of "ou, not and "topos, a place. It is an imaginary island in T. More's Utopia (1516), with a perfect political and social system. (Webster's new world dictionary). Confucius did not believe there was such a place in this world. He knew this world was not the realm of perfection. He knew this world was the abode of change and becoming. It was not absolute but relative. The future was unknown but the past depending on how we interpret it is reachable. And when he compared the past history to the present, he noticed that there was a time when people lived in harmony with nature. The question was: "What did go wrong? " Why the gap between "is" and "ought" did not exist in the early Chou? Why was the hierarchy of respect in place back then? The reason why he searched in the chronicles for answers to his questions was to find out for himself whether there was a dawn ward trend in history. He then came to the conclusion that history of mankind is not linear, which progressively and gradually moves forward towards the future when the world will be a paradise politically, socially, and economically. Things rather have a tendency to go from good to bad, from bad to worse. Perhaps the analogy would be the formation of the surfs as they get closer to the shore. They first move to reach a pick, which we call it the golden age, then there is a curve. While history goes through this process, it is at the same time moving forwards till it reaches the shore. However, this is where our analogy can only take us so far. Because while the history is going through these picks and valleys, it is also moving toward a final destination or the end of time. Confucius, who was a great wise man knew that these temporary ups and downs of the river of time were themselves parts of a greater project which is curving to the end of our time in the universe. In other words, this evolutionary idea of the 19th century which was based on complete misunderstanding of the Judo- Christian providence of God in history was absent in Confucius' philosophy. This philosophy of history was originally put forward by the great German thinker, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) which later gave rise to another remarkable German philosopher and economist Karl Marx (1818-1883). Charles Darwin (1809-1882), the great British naturalist was also the beneficiary of Hegel's ideas along with the other two we just mentioned. It is true that in the Biblical records we read a day will come when lions and lambs live together in harmony. However, one can say that this event will definitely take place but not before the end of time. In other words, with the new universe we will have a

relative period of equality, peace, and happiness. However, this will not happen, unless our history has reaches its end. Given his philosophy of

history, Confucius, however, went back to 500 years before his time. This was a return to the early and golden age of his dynasty. He studied this period and chose the best of the values in their tradition. The values which had been lost and forgotten. These values were carefully selected so they would help him restore the hierarchy of respect which had disappeared in his society. He wanted to inculcate youngsters with a respect for the law and order. It was a lot easier to teach these values to children and young people than the old and the elderly. Because, as we know, old habits die hard. Once they're set in their ways, they would have difficult time to change. But young minds could grasp his teachings much faster. Therefore, he started with them at an early age.

When he was young himself, he used to look at nature very deeply and would see the hierarchy of respect among the animals. There were those who ruled like lions and those who were ruled like the rest. With the hierarchy in place came inequality. He reestablished this hierarchy of respect in his culture. Of course, with inequality comes freedom, which is quintessential part of a healthy economy in both business and commerce. However, to control this freedom from getting out of the orbit, he needed to stress ethics. When we adopted a similar method 240 years ago in the United States of America, Thomas Jefferson, with the help of some prominent figures, wrote the Declaration of Independence in 1776. In this document we read all men are equal. So as we can see, the founding fathers of America had two concepts to deal with: inequality and equality. If we do not keep a balance between the two, there will be a gap between the rich and the poor in the society. This would eventually lead to the destruction of the middle class. For example, this gap has been significantly widening since the end of the 60's in the United States which has caused the middle class to shrink. Aristotle, who came couple of centuries after Confucius, believed that the middle class was extremely important in a healthy polity. The two extremes are very dangerous and detrimental to a nation which is geared toward economic stability and justice for all.

Confucius, was confronting similar situation in his project. Inequality engendered freedom. However, to control the freedom, he had to come up with moral laws. When he was asked whether the belief in the Heaven could help people live an ethical life, he told them to have reverence for it and yet they ought to keep their distance from it. Religion is a good source of morality as long as we do not create our own gods and worship them. Majority of people tend to do exactly that. Therefore, we should keep the deities out of the worldly affairs. Then how was he supposed to monitor the established freedom? His answer simply was that our feelings and sentiments of humanity, fairness, justice, empathy, and goodness, which are universally the same everywhere, must be able to guide us when it comes to freedom. Even though we all have these sentiments, we need to educate, the mass about them. In the language of Aristotle, Plato's student, we ought to bring these sentiments from the realm of potentiality to actuality.

Confucius said: " Let youth practice filial duty...." " While his father lives, observe a man's purposes; when the father dies, observe his actions. If for three years [ of mourning] a man does not change from the ways of his father, he may be called filial." Today when people call a man filial They mean that he is supporting his parents. But he does as much for his dogs and horses! If he does not show respect for his parents, how is he differentiating between them and the animals? " I am not concerned that a man does not know of me; I am concerned that I do not know of him". (The sayings of Confucius, trans by R. Ware, pp, 22-26)." At fifteen I thought only of study; at thirty I began playing my role; at forty I was sure of myself; at fifty I was conscious of my position in the universe; at sixty I was no longer argumentative; and at seventy I

can follow my heart's desire without violating custom."(p. 25). "... Manner presents the difficulty. The mere assumption of burdens and the mere

allowing of elders to be the first to eat or drink do not constitute filial duty." "Great Man, being universal in his outlook, is impartial; Petty Man, being partial, is not universal in outlook." "... first he sets the good example, then he invites others to follow." (p.27). "Great Man's attitude toward the world is such that he shows no preferences; but he is prejudiced in favor of justice." "Great Man cherishes Excellence [Virtue]; Petty Man, his own comfort. Great Man cherishes the rules and regulations; Petty Man, special favors." (p.35). "Excellence according to the golden mean is indeed supreme. For a long time, however, few among the people have been capable of it." (p. 48). "I transmit but I do not create; I am sincerely fond of the ancient. I would compare myself to our Old P'eng who was fond of talking about the good old days." "I take note of things in silence, to retain curiosity despite much study, never to weary of teaching others: no one surpasses me in these three things." "Not to improve my Excellence, not to pass on all that I have studied, to be taught what is proper but be unable to change, to be unable to rectify me in competencies: these are my worries." "I shall always teach, even if but a pittance be offered me." (p. 50-51). "I wasn't born knowing what I teach you. Being fond of the past, I sought it through diligence." "You all think that I am hiding something from you! I have no secrets! I do nothing that I do not share with you. I am that kind of person." (p. 53). "It has not been my fortune to meet a sage, but perhaps I shall meet with Great Man. It has not been my fortune to meet a competent man, but perhaps I shall meet one possessed of constancy. But when a man pretends to possess something which he lacks; when, knowing nothing, he claims omniscience; when, being petty, he claims to be great: such a man does not possess constancy." (p.54). "Am I a wise man? No! But if a lowly person asks me a question in complete ignorance, I tell him all I know about it from beginning to end." (p.61). "I have yet to meet a man as fond of Excellence as he is of outward appearances." (p.63). "Chung Yu inquired about the proper treatment of spirits and divinities. [Confucius answered:] You cannot treat spirits and divinities properly before you are able to treat your fellow-men properly. When he [Chung Yu] inquired about death, the reply came, you cannot know about death before you know about life. (pp.71-72). ... "Do not do to others what you would not desire yourself." (p. 76). "Great Man neither worries nor fears. If upon self-examination one is found free from fault, what is there to worry about or to fear?" (p.77). Great Man develops the virtues in others, not their vices. Petty Man does just the opposite." (p. 79). "If the official is himself upright, the people will play their roles without orders. If he is not upright, even under orders the people will be disobedient." (p. 83). "If there were a true king upon the throne of China, unquestionably Manhood-at-its-best would prevail within one generation." (p.84). "If a man has rendered himself correct, he will have no trouble governing. If he cannot render himself correct, how can he correct others?" (p. 85). "The Excellent man will always have something to say, but those who do speak are not necessarily Excellent. Man-at-his-best will be courageous, but all the courageous are not necessarily Man-at-his-best." (p. 89). "Formerly men studied for self-improvement; today men study for the sake of appearances." (p.93). "The end has indeed arrived! I have yet to meet a man as fond of Excellence as he is of outward appearances." (p. 100). "Great man complains about his own inabilities, not about people's ignorance of himself." "Great Man's concern is that he may die without a good name." "Great man demands it of himself; petty Man, of others." "...is there one word that will keep us on the path to the end of our days? "Yes, Reciprocity! What you do not wish yourself, do not unto others." (p. 101). "I once went all day without food and all night without sleep to enable me think. I found no advantage in it; it is best to study." (p. 102). Chuan-sun Shih asked about Manhood-at-its-best. "He who in this world can practice five things may indeed be considered Man-at-his-best." "What are they?" "Humility, magnanimity, sincerity,

diligence, and graciousness. If you are humble, you will not be laughed at. If you are magnanimous, you will attract many to your side. If you are sincere, people will

trust you. If you are diligent, you will be successful. If you are gracious, you will get along well with your subordinates."

Given the above saying of Confucius, we can now understand we need education to inculcate the sentiments of humility, magnanimity, sincerity, diligence, and graciousness, which are universally true, among people in order to control and monitor the freedom at hand. This freedom, which was the result of the inequality, had to be ethically administered. Rationality which comes with education is to show how important these feelings are to make sure there is a balance between inequality and equality which stands for justice.

Confucius never looked towards a future utopia in his philosophy of history. " It is estimated that as many as fifty million people were murdered to further the cause of communism, to bring about a "better world" in Russia, China, and other countries. This is a chilling example of how belief in a future heaven creates a present hell."(The power of Now, E. Tolle, p.59). He never said " To me, the present moment is very unhappy; it is not liberating at all. What keeps me going is the hope or possibility of some improvement in the future." (p.62). Instead, he looked back to the golden days of the Chou dynasty. After all, unlike the future, the past has already happened, and all we can do is, interpret it the right way. The future is unknown and unpredictable. Someone like David Hume would say we cannot predict the future based on the present and the past. We know that only the great prophets could have done so due to their power of prophesy. Confucius never claimed that he was a prophet. Therefore, he relied on the past to find a solution for the problems of his generation. With the Communist revolution of the early part of the 20th century, Marxism was introduced to China. Marxist philosophy of history was influenced by the German thinker called Hegel. There is absolutely no doubt that this futuristic attitude towards history was against everything Confucius had taught. Karl Marx was to replace Confucius. After several decades, however, Confucius is back in schools in China. Being a culture of Yin and Yang, China has been able to integrate this foreign ideology and has been able to manage to keep these totally different ways of looking and time and history so far. Taoism, on the other hand, emerged as a great spiritual force to challenge Confucius's ideas and project around 2500 years ago. Whether Lao Tzu, the founder of this Religion, came before or after Confucius or perhaps they were contemporaries, we really do not know.