

FEATURE

Confucianism

By Sri Swami Sivananda

Introduction

Confucius was born in 551 B.C. in the feudal State of Lu, a portion of what is now the province of Shangtung on the north-eastern seaboard of China. The name of Confucius in Chinese is Kung-fu-tse, i.e., the statesman-philosopher Kung. The first European scholars who visited China found that name hard to pronounce. So they turned it into Latin and called him Confucius.

There are three religions in China, viz., Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Confucius and Lao-Tze founder of Taoism, were contemporaries. They are sages and philosophers. They are not regarded as Saviours. Lao-Tze was fifty-three years older than Confucius. They met each other. Socrates and Buddha also were the contemporaries of Confucius.

Confucianism is not a religion in the customary sense. It has neither priesthood nor any monastic order. It existed in China long before the time of Confucius. In one of his recorded sayings he speaks of himself as a 'transmitter' and not a 'maker' or 'originator'. He did not give a new religion to the world or a new ethical code. What he gave to the world was only a powerful restatement of the fundamental principles of human morality or ethics. He issued a new and improved edition of the old one. The moral code he framed was most admirable. It contained grand ethical truths.

Some say that Confucianism is no religion in reality, because Confucius is a philosopher, moralist, statesman and educationist, but no religionist. They say that the thoughts and teachings of Confucius are ethical philosophy, political and educational principle, but not religious philosophy.

Confucius had a deep study of his country's literature and history. He had a strong conviction that just and righteous rulers only can protect the State and make the people virtuous. His ideal was to create a race of wise rulers like King Janaka. It was with this view he wandered from State to State in search of a good ruler.

Confucius devoted himself to the improvement of Society. He ever thought of the well-being of the Society. He tried his level best to contribute much to the social welfare. 'The Analects' or collection of sayings treats mainly of social welfare, human peace and harmony in Society. He strained his every nerve in giving moral training to people. He laid very great emphasis on cultivation of ethical virtues. He tried to remove the discordant or disturbing elements in Society. He had a strong conviction that if the superiors and elders had a blameless character, others would follow them and there would be love and universal peace everywhere. As these social thoughts ever occupied his mind, he had no time to discuss on God and life after death. Moreover, he did not find it necessary also to dwell on these subjects.

Books

The following four books are intimately concerned with the principles of Confucianism, TaHsueh, the Great Learning or learning for adults; Chung Yung, The Doctrine of the Mean; Lun Yu, the Confucian Analects in twenty books; and Meng Tzu, the Philosophy of Mencius.

Ta-Hsueh is a politico-ethical treatise. Chung Yung was written by Kung Chi, a grandson of Confucius. It is a purely philosophical book. It treats of some general principles that concern the nature of mean and right conduct. Lun Yu, the Confucian Analects,

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contains sayings and conversations between the Teacher and his disciples. Meng Tzu, the philosophy of Mencius, is written by an ardent Confucianist. It deals with various questions raised by his disciples. It gives advice to rulers of feudal states. It treats of psychology, political theory and economics.

Sayings

What the superior man seeks is in himself; what the small man seeks is in others. The superior man is dignified, but does not wrangle; social, but not a partisan. He does not promote a man simply because of his words, nor does he put good words aside because of the man.

Have sufficient self-control even to judge of others in comparison with yourself, and to act towards them as you would wish them to act to you. This is what one may call the 'doctrine of humanity', and there is nothing beyond this.

The way to become a superior man is to set one's affections on what is right, to love learning, which is the source of knowledge and virtue, with which nothing else can be compared. When righteousness is pursued with sincerity and a mind free from self-deception, the heart becomes rectified.

Up to this stage the individual has been busy only with his own improvement; but the cultivation of the person influences primarily those around him, and ultimately the whole empire. Everyone, therefore, should carefully cultivate his person, having a due regard for others besides himself. Each man must guard his words and watch his conduct. He must fly all that is base and disquieting, and must take benevolence as his dwelling-place, righteousness as his road, propriety as his garment, wisdom as his lamp, and faithfulness as his charm. Dignity, reverence, loyalty and faithfulness make up the qualities of a cultivated man. His dignity separates him from the crowd, being reverent he is beloved; being loyal, he is submitted to; and, being faithful, he is trusted.

Teachings

Confucius gave a great impetus to education and learning, and the study of rules of right conduct with a view to their practical application. According to his teaching, man's chief end is to know and make the most of himself as a member of Society. He preached to his disciples and the people the principles of good life and social harmony.

His teaching was largely concerned with the problems of good government. He said, "The Ruler himself should be virtuous, just, honest and dutiful. A virtuous ruler is like the Pole-star which, by keeping its place, makes all other stars to evolve round it. As is the Ruler, so will be the subjects."

What was Confucius' idea of virtue? His word for it was '*Jen*'. The proper understanding of his ethical doctrine chiefly depends on the implications of *Jen*. There is no single English equivalent of *Jen* in all its shades of meaning. The essence of all his teachings may be summed up under this one word '*Jen*'. The nearest equivalent to this difficult word is "social virtue". All those virtues which help to maintain social harmony and peace like benevolence, charity, magnanimity, sincerity, respectfulness, altruism, diligence, loving kindness, goodness are included in *Jen*.

Confucius said: "A virtuous man has three awes:—(1) Awe for Heaven's decree, (2) Awe for great men and (3) Awe for saints' words. When worshipping God, one must feel as if He were visibly present."

The teaching of Confucius is that the entire world and every being are constantly changing and that the most essential aspect for human life is the present Reality.

Confucius held that Society was made up of five relationships, viz., those of husband and wife, of parent and child, of elder and younger brother, or generally of elders and youngsters, of Ruler and Minister or subject, and of friend and friend. A country would be well-governed when

all the parties performed their parts aright in these relationships. Confucius said: “There was Tao (a way or road of righteousness) only when fathers were fathers, when sons were sons, when Rulers were Rulers and when ministers were ministers.”

Confucius laid great stress on the cultivation of character, purity of heart and conduct. He exhorted the people to develop a good character first, which is a priceless jewel and which is the best of all virtues.

The nature of man, according to Confucius, is fundamentally good inclined towards goodness. Perfection of goodness can be found in sages and saints. Every man should attempt to reach the ideal by leading a virtuous life, by possessing a very noble character, and by doing his duty unselfishly with sincerity and truthfulness. He who is endowed with a good character and divine virtue is a princely type of man. The princely man sticks to virtue, and the inferior man clings to material comfort. The princely man is just while the inferior man expects rewards and favours. The princely man is dignified, noble, magnanimous, and humble while the inferior man is mean, proud, crooked, and arrogant.

In the “Great Learning” Confucius revealed the process, step by step, by which self-development is attained and by which it flows over into the common life to serve the state and bless mankind. The order of development which Confucius set forth is as follows:

- Investigation of phenomena,
- Learning,
- Sincerity,
- Rectitude of purpose,
- Self-development,
- Family-discipline,
- Local self-government, and
- Universal self-government.

“The ancients”, he said, “when they wished to exemplify illustrious virtue throughout the empire, first ordered well their states. Desiring to maintain well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their



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families they first rectified their purposes. Wishing to rectify their purposes they first sought to think sincerely. Wishing to think sincerely, they first extended their knowledge as widely as possible. This they did by investigation of things.

“By investigation of things, their knowledge became extensive; their knowledge being extensive, their thoughts became sincere; their thoughts being sincere, their purposes were rectified; their purposes being rectified, they cultivated themselves; they being cultivated, their families were regulated; their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed; their states being rightly governed, the empire was thereby tranquil and prosperous”.

Conclusion

Confucius has had a great part in moulding the history of China and his influence is to this day a dominant factor in the public and private life of that country.

Confucius has rendered immortal the Sixth Century B.C. He was a born ruler of men. He would have shone as one of the world's greatest monarchs, if circumstances had been favourable. He had a highly developed moral sense and a profound realisation of the supreme importance of morals in human life. His greatness has been universally recognised for many centuries. He is held in the highest reverence by hundreds of millions of the world's inhabitants.

Glory to Confucius, the great moralist,
statesman and social reformer of China.

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Swami Sivananda Saraswati (September 8, 1887— July 14, 1963) was a Hindu spiritual teacher and a well known proponent of Sivananda Yoga and Vedanta. He studied medicine and served in Malaya as a physician for several years before taking up monasticism. He is the founder of The Divine Life Society (1936), Yoga-Vedanta Forest Academy (1948) and author of over 200 books.

Editor's Note: It is our wish to present Confucianism through an essay of a world-renowned teacher from India.