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The Controversy behind Confucianism

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The Controversy behind Confucianism

Abstract

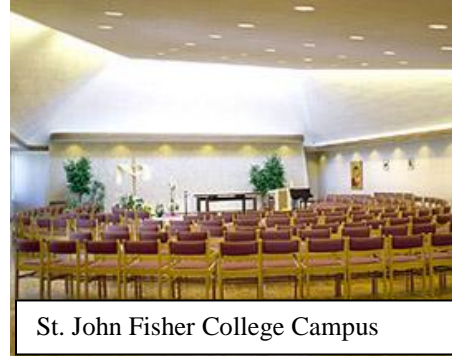
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

“Learning is the key constituent of the human mind and family is the core of the social-relational structure” (Galia 243). This is the main point of Confucianism, a philosophic religion founded by Confucius. Confucianism was viewed in China as a moral code for how one should live their life.”

* Prize provided by:



Janelle Johnson



***The Controversy behind Confucianism**

Introduction

“Learning is the key constituent of the human mind and family is the core of the social-relational structure” (Galia 243). This is the main point of Confucianism, a philosophic religion founded by Confucius. Confucianism was viewed in China as a moral code for how one should live their life.

Throughout history, Confucianism has flourished and fallen. The strong support of followers diminished as dynasties fell and other religions entered the Chinese culture. The teachings of Confucius have been admired and criticized. While some view Confucius’s Five Relationships as a way to maintain order in society, many find them to be the cause of gender inequalities.

In this paper I will be discussing the history and teachings of Confucianism, as well as refuting the argument that this religion is sexist.

The Rise and Fall of Confucianism

Confucius was born in 551 B.C.E. in the feudal state of Lu, located on the northeastern seaboard of China. However, Confucian thought held sway in China for many years prior to the existence of Confucius. For this reason, Confucius spoke of himself as a “transmitter” rather than “a maker” (Sivananda 14). Confucius was also considered a “philosopher, a moralist, an educationalist, but no religionist” (Sivananda 14). Confucianism is looked at more as a moral code rather than a religion; it was used “primarily as a system of ethical precepts for the proper

management of society” (“Confucianism” 1). The main teachings of Confucianism consisted of the Five Relationships, filial piety, the Three Bonds, peace, the importance of learning, and an overall goodness of character.

Jen, a term meaning “humanity” or “human-kind-ness” is expressed in the Five Relationships of Confucianism (See Confucianism 1). The Five Relationships consisted of those between sovereign and subject, parent and child, elder and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend and friend. Filial piety is a term meaning respect for one’s elder, and it is stressed in each of the Five Relationships. If followed, the Five Relationships were believed to maintain order in a society. The Confucian philosophy of maintaining respectful relationships can be summarized into the character Ren, which signifies the relationship between two people. Ren represents goodness, benevolence, and humanity. The Chinese use the word “Ren” to “say that a man has to have goodness in his heart” (Shen 12). The Three Bonds work in accordance with the Five Relationships, confirming the authority of the ruler over the subject, the father over the son, and the husband over the wife. Along with ensuring that social order is maintained, Confucianism also promotes the well-being of individuals.

“Learning and teaching have a communal, spiritual aspect in Confucianism. Through learning one creates oneself as a better community member, a better disciple, and a moral person” (Galia 245). In a sense, learning is an obligation to those who follow Confucianism. Confucius claimed that an educated human being was a better human being. He also believed that, although learning new concepts was important, learning about traditions was more beneficial to individuals as well as a society. Confucius was quoted saying that “a morally perfected person perfects his way through learning” (Galia 246).

Confucius also expressed that one should follow the Golden Rule; treat one as you wish to be treated. It became a main belief in Confucianism that if one shows respect, one shall receive respect. This was a common theme related to the Five Relationships. If the subject wished to be treated with respect, he must respect their ruler. Confucius believed that men are fundamentally good, and should live their life to reach their ideal being. “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 favors. The princely man is dignified, noble, magnanimous, and humble while the inferior man is mean, proud, crooked, and arrogant” (Sivananda 16). This quote of Confucius expresses that a good man is one whose practices are virtuous, dignified, and noble, rather than selfish and materialistic.

Although each of these aspects of Confucianism aimed to better a society, support of Confucius’s teachings declined. Confucianism battled for superiority over the previously established religions of Taoism and Buddhism.

Christianity challenged Confucianism in China during the Industrial Age, although the belief in Confucianism was not effected by Christian teachings. The overthrow of the Ming Dynasty of China in 1911 led to the “disintegration of Confucian institutions and a decline of Confucian traditions” (“Confucianism” 1). During the May Fourth Movement of 1919, frustrated Chinese citizens and intellectuals cried out "Down with the Confucian store!" (Mooney 13) The transition away from Confucianism was accelerated by the Communist Revolution in 1949, when “Confucianism was liquidated” (Shen 11). During the Cultural Revolution, which occurred from 1966 to 1976, “Confucian temples throughout China were damaged by rampaging young Red Guards, and Confucian scholars were frightened--and often beaten--into silence” (Mooney 13). Despite the consistent efforts to be rid of Confucian beliefs and teachings, “elements of Confucianism persisted in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao, and among Chinese emigrants” (“Confucianism” 1).

Confucianism as a gender biased model

Although Confucianism survived attempts of destruction, criticism surrounding this religion still holds today. The main criticism is that this religion is against females. It is a common argument that Confucius himself had sexist views.

The strong emphasis on the importance of learning is argued by many to be directed toward men; “It is clear that while Confucianism reserves the centrality of learning for men, for women, it is limited to learning of housekeeping and family-caring, while allowing men to pursue the rest” (Galia 244). This quote expresses one’s belief that women could only learn about taking care their household and family, whereas men could acquire knowledge on anything else. A common criticism of the Five Relationships and the Three Bonds is that the husband has control over the wife. However, these criticisms fail to acknowledge or take into account that the Chinese culture was and still is a patriarchal society. It is the culture to have men be in charge while the women tend to the house. Critics also say that the Five Relationships are favorable towards men because they fail to mention a relationship for mother and daughter and elder sister and younger sister. However, the Five Relationships are not specific to gender in the case of father to son and elder brother to younger brother; instead, these relationships focus on the general idea of showing respect to one’s elder.

Learning was believed by Confucius to be the foundation of tradition, and filial piety was the foundation of the Three Bonds and Five Relationships. In Confucianism, tradition was a key component to the well-being of a

society. The power of a woman is held in maintaining tradition; “the tradition is to be kept through marrying within it, giving birth to descendants who will be able to continue the line, and taking care of their proper education” (Galia 244). Women are essential to the continuation of a family’s name, and providing a proper upbringing to those children is essential for the maintenance of respect. In reference to the Three Bonds, “A Confucian wife is not ‘owned’ by her husband, and while the husband is crucial in extraordinary decisions, the wife is the one who has power in daily life” (Galia 250). This quote explains that the Three Bonds did not deny women power; a woman’s power was held in keeping the household happy and functional. The respect given to male members of a family was simply part of the culture and supported the Confucius notion of filial piety.

It was said that Confucius “maintained that between the two principles that govern the universe, the yang and yin, yang is superior and yin is inferior” (Li 187). He was also quoted saying that “The husband is yang even if he is from a humble family, and the wife is yin even if she is from a noble family” (Li 187). These quotes may be interpreted as a man is always superior no matter what his background, whereas a woman is always inferior even if she is from a wealthier upbringing. However, one can argue that in relation to the Five Relationships, sexual differentiation is essential for social harmony. If all people were given the same authority, there would be no obligation to give respect to others. The depiction of the Taoist symbol of the yin and yang also show that the two figures coexisted together as complements. In Confucian thought, this differentiation between roles was “not as subjection but as a harmony of relationships” (Li 189). Men and women must exist together for a society to be complete.

Confucianism was also believed to be a gender-biased religion because of the traditions common during the Ming Dynasty. The way of life can, to a great degree, explain the way Confucianism functions in China in regard to women’s status. The most known of these traditions is foot binding, which lasted through the 20th century. Also during this dynasty, the institution of chaste widow-hood was established. This institution stated that “women who kept their widowhood were officially honored and their families were exempt from official labor service” (Li 189). Consequently, tremendous pressure was put on widows to never remarry. It was also a custom that the woman would prepare meals for the guests, and then sit somewhere else while the guests enjoyed the meal.

Conclusion

Confucius believed that every person was fundamentally good, and learning was the path that would lead to a perfect being. Learning instilled tradition, which was believed by Confucius and his followers to be key to an individual's happiness as well as a society's. The Five Relationships and the Three Bonds set the foundation for a harmonious society.

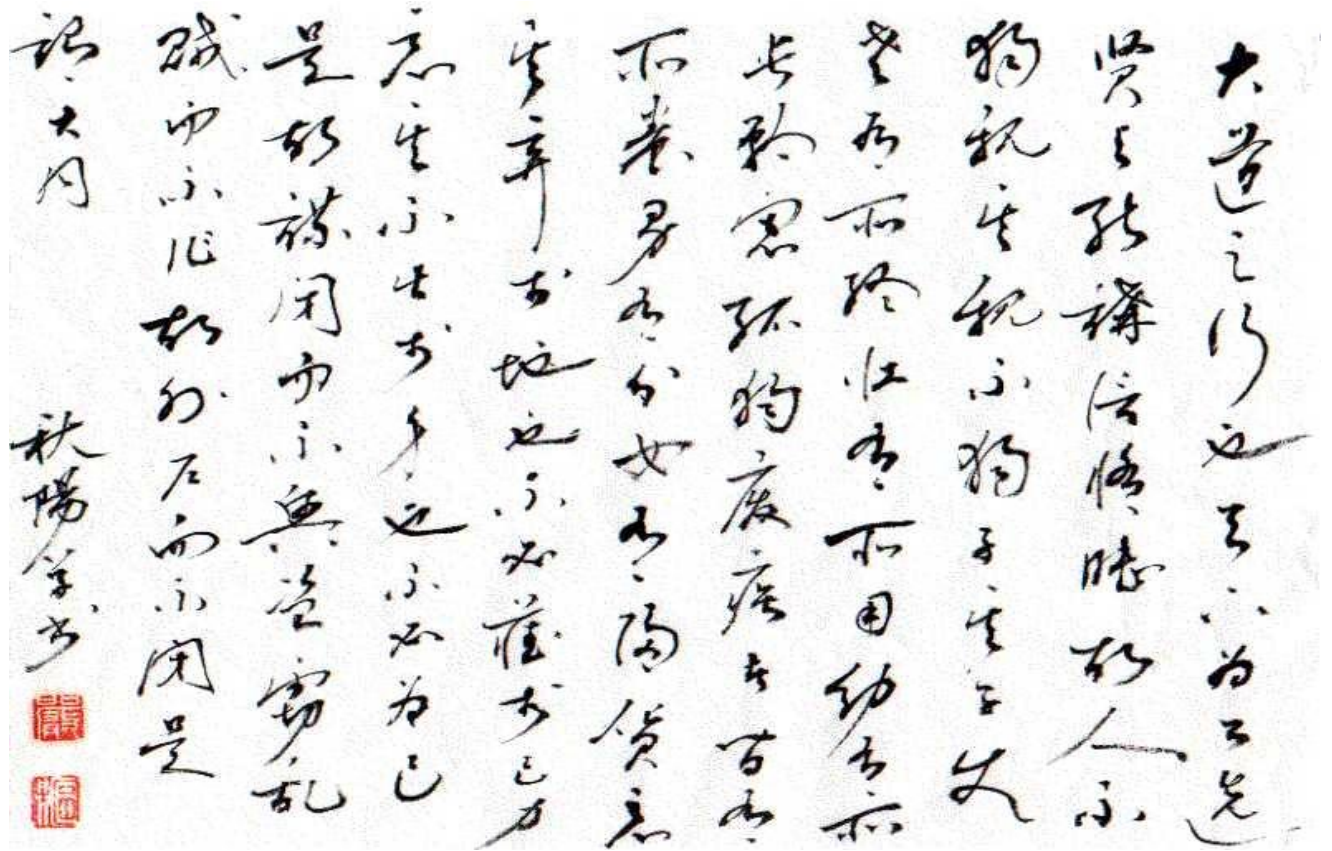
I disagree with many critiques of this religion with respect to the issue of Confucianism being gender biased towards men. Learning was an obligation to all those involved in Confucianism, whether they were a man or a woman. A woman's main focus was taking care of the household, whereas men served as the support system. Because China was and still is a patriarchal society, it was normal for men and women to have different roles among society. The Five Relationships served as a moral code for a society as a whole, not men specifically.

Confucianism as a philosophical religion serves as a moral code for a society and promotes the wellbeing of each individual. It should not be looked at as a gender-biased model for the Chinese culture.

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Confucius' Great Harmony



Calligraphy by Dr. Ernest Chu Yen

Translation:

When the Great Way prevailed, the world community was equally shared by all. The worthy and able were chosen as office-holders. Mutual confidence was fostered and good neighborliness cultivated. Therefore people did not regard as parents only their own parents, nor did they treat children only their own children. Provision was made for the aged till their death, the adult were given employment, and the young enabled to grow up. Old widows and widowers, the orphaned, the old and childless, as well as the sick and the disabled were all well taken care of. Men had their proper roles and women their homes. While they hated to see wealth lying about on the ground, they did not necessarily keep it for their own use. While they hated not to exert their effort, they did not necessarily devote it to their own ends. Thus evil scheming was repressed, and robbers, thieves and other lawless elements failed to arise, so that outer doors did not have to be shut. This was called the age of Great Harmony (Ta Tung)

This English translation is by Dr. Shih-shun Liu.