

Ritual, Myth, and Moral Code in Confucianism and Roman Catholicism

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

In European history the denomination of Christianity that dominated was Roman Catholicism. It was arguably the most important religion in Europe. In China the most important religion was Confucianism. Roman Catholicism centers on the worship of a single God and the study and guidance of the *Bible*, the inspired word of God. Christians believe that God loved all men so much that he sent Jesus Christ, his own son, down to earth in the flesh, to live for a short time among man, and then to die to pay for the sins of all men. Confucianism was actually a philosophy or code of ethics based on the teachings of Confucius, a traveling scholar. According to Confucius, an individual's ultimate goal should be to live according to virtue, particularly the virtues of propriety, ritual, benevolence, charity, humanity, love, and kindness. Roman Catholicism emphasizes the importance of a believer participating in certain customs, rituals, and behaviors. Confucianism emphasizes extensive practical teachings for achieving human happiness or self-control in the natural world with a lesser focus on the supernatural. Examining the two religions from a sociology aspect reveals similarities and differences in their use of ritual, myth, and moral code. The differences between Confucianism and Roman Catholicism are perhaps most exemplified in the examination of ritual.

Confucius taught about the importance of rites which, to him, meant moral conventions and common decency. These rites or rituals take on an almost mystical quality in his dialogues. In chapter four, paragraph 4.13 of *The Analects of Confucius* he says, "Of one can govern the country by observing ritual and showing deference, there is no more to be said. If one cannot govern the country by observing ritual and showing deference, what's the use of ritual?"

An objective of the *Analects* is that Confucius' disciples had a good understanding of justice as the single most important factor of political life. Confucius was suspect of laws, believing that they invite people to become, in his words, "tricky." He believed that laws brought out the worst in people. According to Confucius:

A king leads by his moral power. If he cannot set a moral example – if he cannot maintain and promote rituals and music, he forfeits the loyalty of his ministers and the trust of the people. The ultimate asset of the state is the trust of the people in their rulers: if that trust is lost, the country is doomed.

This idea centers on the concept of universal truths. In other words, laws are not needed because there are morally right and morally wrong activities. If one does what is morally right, then laws are not needed. Confucius taught that politics is an extension of ethic. He said, "Government is synonymous with rightness. If the king is righteous, how could anyone dare to be crooked?"

Simon Leys explains Confucius' statements about practicing the ritual, "the rites represent a fundamental Confucian value, more or less equivalent to our concept of civilization. On the formal level, they constitute a sort of liturgy, but like our own liturgical rites, these forms, when properly understood and performed, are not hollow: they are efficient and operative, they

regulate and teach. When ritual practice becomes loose, civilization is eroded and barbarism creeps in." Roman Catholicism also teaches the importance of rites. Because Catholics believe in a single triune God, their rituals revolve around the worship and participation in sacraments. The Latin word *sacramentum* means "a sign of the sacred." According to the Catholic Encyclopedia:

The seven sacraments are ceremonies that point to what is sacred, significant and important for Catholics. They are special occasions for experiencing God's saving presence. Sacraments, like initiation ceremonies, are performance in the sense that they actually accomplish something; they change the status or condition of the participants. Though not every individual receives every sacrament, the sacraments as a whole are seen as necessary means of salvation for the faithful, conferring each sacrament's particular grace, such as incorporation into Christ and the Church, forgiveness of sins, or consecration for a particular service.

In *A Concise History of the Catholic Church* Thomas Bokenkotter writes:

The Christ-centered self-image of the early Church is revealed clearly in its two most important rituals. First was the Eucharist, which was celebrated by repeating Christ's words at the Last Supper over bread and wine in obedience to his command to remember him and in the firm conviction that he was present as their risen Lord. A wealth of meaning was attached to this simple rite: It was the proclamation of the Lord until he comes; it was a sharing in his body and blood; it was a sacrifice, the re-creation of Christ's sacrifice, which inaugurated a new covenant between God and man. The second act was the initiation rite of baptism, a cleansing with water; this was regarded as an essential part of conversion to Christ and admission to the community.

Although the Eucharist and Baptism were accorded special importance, other rites of the Church were also considered sacraments instituted by Christ. By the middle ages the seven sacraments were officially listed. Added to Eucharist and Baptism were Confirmation, Penance, Anointing the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. All of these rituals, in some way, are pertinent to the worship of God.

Confucianism did not teach or even encourage the practice of worshiping one's ancestors or a deity. Confucianism's closest concept to that of a deity was Heaven, but even that was a principle rather than a deity. Heaven represented the moral order of the universe. The idea of ceremony delighted Confucius. He promoted it as a means to serve as a visual and behavioral reminder of rank. The external signs or rituals of society were to regulate both day to day interactions as well as the ceremonies of State. Rank was dignified by rituals as well as advantage. Each rank would have specific roles in religious and political ceremonies and would be limited to certain ceremonies they could conduct. Included in the idea of ceremony were the clothes that one was to wear and the insignias on the clothing. One's carriage, the style of hat worn on special occasions, where one could and could not walk, and even the colors one was allowed to use in clothing and decoration were part of ritual. For example, only the Emperor was to use and wear certain colors of gold, crimson, and purple.

In *Catholic Christianity* Peter Kreeft describes the purpose of sacraments, “Catholicism professes that only through faith in Jesus Christ and God can anyone find salvation and eternal life. The Catholic Sacraments are visible signs believed to be instituted by Christ in order to transmit and confer grace on a willing soul. Thus, they are divine helps to aid the human soul on its journey through life, in order that the soul can become closer to God and participate in His divine life, and ultimately attain heaven.”

While the Confucian concept of ritual is much than that of Catholicism, ritual is a central theme in both religions and provides guideposts for the followers of each. In Confucianism, ritual represents the ways in which we interact and perform in society. In Catholicism, ritual represents the way to salvation. While different in ritual, they are both similar in their use of myth.

The word myth has two meanings, according to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary: “...a person or thing having only an imaginary or unverifiable existence; a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon.”

Confucius was born in approximately 551 B.C. Considered by many as a master; he was a teacher and political advisor in pre-imperial China. He lived in a time of transition. He saw his world sinking into violent behavior and barbarity. Confucius believed that he was chosen by Heaven to become the spiritual heir to the Duke of Zhou who had established a universal feudal order five hundred years before him, unifying the civilized world. While he is best known as a teacher, Confucius’ true occupation was politics. He advised government officials on foreign affairs, diplomacy, finances, administration, and defense. Chinese emperors have promoted the official cult of Confucius for more than two thousand years. It became a sort of state religion. His teachings became the spiritual foundation of the Chinese world (Ley xxi). *The Analects of Confucius* are a patchwork of short dialogues, anecdotes and brief statements, mostly attributed to Confucius. Some of the statements are attributed to his disciples or rulers of the time. They were compiled around 400 B.C., about seventy years after Confucius’ death, by two consecutive generations of his disciples and became what is considered the teachings of Confucius. Bokenkotter writes about the origins of the Catholic Church:

The Catholic Church is the oldest institution in the Western world. It can trace its history back almost two thousand years. It began in Jerusalem as a small nucleus of disciples who shared faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, their crucified leader, and it spread quickly to countless cities of the Roman Empire. Its inflexible opposition to Roman culture, morals, and religion aroused the savage fury of the state, and many of the Church’s members perished when they refused to conform. But its spiritual power was only magnified by persecution, and its progress remained constant. Finally it won a decisive victory over the old paganism when it drew to its side the Emperor Constantine himself, who in 312 attached its emblem, the monogram of Christ to the banners of his troops and granted it complete religious liberty. For nearly a thousand years then, the Catholic Church presided over the total life of Christendom and animated its laws,

institutions, customs, literature, art, and architecture with its faith in Jesus Christ, God and man.

There is continuing debate about the origin of the Bible and its Gospels. Many scholars agree that the first written scriptures did not appear until the time of Constantine, about 313 A.D.

Simon Leys writes, “The *Analects* is the only place where we can actually encounter the real, living Confucius. In this sense, the *Analects* are to Confucius what the Gospels are to Jesus.” Disciples of both Jesus and Confucius have promoted their namesake be a true and living individual. We may never know for certain if either actually existed. However, just as Jesus Christ did not write the Bible, the Christian canon, neither did Confucius write the *Analects*. An important difference between the Confucianism and Catholicism myth lay in the fact that while Jesus Christ claimed to be a deity, while Confucius did not claim to be a god. God or not, both religions use the aspect of myth to promote and support their religion. In this sense, they are very similar. The final comparison of Confucianism and Catholicism is in moral code.

Turning once again to the dictionary, we find the definition of moral code: “...a series of agreements to which a person has subscribed (agreed, consented) to guarantee the survival of a group.” According to Leys:

There are three key principles emphasized in the teachings of Confucius: the principles of *Li*, *Jen* and *Chun-Tzu*. Having several meanings, the term *Li* is often translated as propriety, reverence, courtesy, ritual or the idyllic standard of conduct. This is what Confucius believed to be the ideal standard of religious, moral, and social conduct, and is often referred to as *The Silver Rule*. The principle of *Jen* is the second key concept. *Jen* represents the fundamental virtue of Confucius’ teaching. *Jen* is the virtue of goodness and benevolence. No matter their rank or class, *Jen* is expressed through recognition of value and concern for others.

In the *Analects*, the principle of *Jen* is summarized by Confucius in this statement, often called The Silver Rule: “A gentleman does not approve of a person because he expresses a certain opinion, nor does he reject an opinion because it is expressed by a certain person.” This statement has been accepted as the concept: “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” *Li* provides the structure for social interaction. *Jen* makes it a moral system. Leys continues:

The third important concept is *Chun-Tzu*, the idea of the true gentleman. It is the man who lives according to the highest ethical standards. The true gentleman displays the virtues of: self-respect, generosity, sincerity, persistence, and benevolence. His associations are described as the following: as a son, he is always loyal; as a father, he is just and kind; as an official, he is loyal and faithful; as a husband, he is righteous and just; and as a friend, he is faithful and tactful. If all men would live by the principles of *Li* and *Jen* and strive to the character of the true gentleman, justice and harmony would rule the empire.

Of the similarity to Christianity, Kreeft writes:

The Christian would find himself in agreement with many of Confucius' ethical principles and virtues. A Christian would also agree with many of the character qualities of the true gentleman and seek to develop those qualities. What accounts for the similarity in ethics in Confucianism and other religious systems is what Paul states in Romans 2. Within every man there exists a God-given conscience or natural law that guides our moral conduct. This is because we are created in the image of God, and so we reflect His character. However, similarity in ethical codes does not mean the religions are the same.

According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, "The Ten Commandments are precepts bearing on the fundamental obligations of religion and morality and embodying the revealed expression of the Creator's will in relation to man's whole duty to God and to his fellow-creatures." They condemn hatred and calumny as well as murder, enjoin even love of enemies, and condemn indulgence of evil desires as fraught with the same malice as adultery. In many ways they are similar to Confucius' principles. The key difference between Confucianism and Catholicism with regard to moral code can be illustrated this way. Confucian law is summarized by *The Silver Rule*. Jesus summarizes his teachings directing the follower to love God with all their heart, with all their soul, and with their entire mind. This is the first commandment. The second is similar: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leith 44). Confucius believed that in order to truly achieve the principles of *Li, Jen*, and the character of the true gentleman, one must look within oneself. The teachings of Jesus take the concept further. The principles of Jesus revolve around a relationship with God first. Catholics believe that only then can man truly love his fellow man.

While Confucianism and Catholicism are similar they have not interacted well, especially in China. Nivison describes actions of the Jesuits in China during the 18th Century:

One of the religious debates in 18th century Catholicism focused on the issue of Chinese rites. The Society of Jesus (Jesuits) was successful in penetrating China and serving at the Imperial court. They impressed the Chinese with their knowledge of astronomy and mechanics, and in fact ran the Imperial Observatory. Other Jesuits functioned as court painters. The Jesuits in turn were impressed by the Chinese Confucian elite, and adapted to that lifestyle. The primary goal of the Jesuits was to spread Catholicism, but here they had a problem. The Chinese elite were attached to Confucianism which provided the framework of both state and home life. Part of Confucian practice involved veneration of the ancestors. The Jesuits tried to argue, in Rome, that these Chinese rites were social, not religious, ceremonies, and that converts should be allowed to continue to participate. European commentary on China has continued to be claim that Confucianism is a philosophy and not a religion because it does not conform to the model of western religions.

The last sentence Nivison's statement may provide the answer to why two religious philosophies, with many similarities, have had a difficult time blending and complementing each other. Catholicism has the supernatural element of a singular God, while Confucianism focuses on the individual. This difference can be seen when examining the results of two

interviews: one of a devote Roman Catholic and the other of someone who believes in the teachings of Confucius.

The most devote Roman Catholic I know is my eighty year old mother so, I asked her about her understanding of the ritual, myth, and moral code as they relate to the Roman Catholic Church. She has a high school education and has practiced her faith all of her life. On the subject of ritual, she was quick to point out that the Sacraments of the Catholic Church are not rituals but, devotional practices, designed to keep the individual free on sin so that he may find his way to heaven. She finds these practices a perfectly natural expression of her faith and things that must me faithfully done it one is to expect to get to Heaven. When I asked about myth I was expecting a total rejection of myth in the Catholic Church. I was surprised when she equated myth with the mystery of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To her myth and mystery are the same as it relates to her belief. Her comment about moral code was directly related to the Ten Commandants. She does not see any other pertinent code. She said, "If we all obeyed the Ten Commandments, there wouldn't be a need for laws. People would treat each other with respect." Her personal understanding of these characteristics is the same as the formal doctrine of the Church. She said, "After all, this is the teaching of the Church."

I found it interesting that Confucius said something similar. He believed that by study and inquiry people could discover how to act so as to serve Heaven and their fellow man. If they did these things, laws would not be necessary. In *The Analects*, chapter six, paragraph 6.27, Confucius says, "A gentleman enlarges his learning through literature and restrains himself with ritual; therefore, he is not likely to go wrong."

I could not locate anyone to interview who follows Confucianism so; I will share my own beliefs. I am probably closest to Confucianism in my thinking. As far as ritual is concerned, I believe that if we can practice the "moral conventions or common decency" as taught by Confucius, we can all live together with understanding and respect for each other. I do believe, as he did that, "The true cohesion of society is secured not through laws: laws invite people to become tricky, and bring out the worst in them." After all, we have many laws in this country that are broken every day. People make a career of trying to figure out how to break laws. Confucius said that if one could be educated, he would see the sense in not committing an act and alter his behavior on his own. While this may seem to be a naive statement in the context of today, it deserves further examination. In my judgment, the basic challenge is determining what type of education and who will teach it. As an example, recent statistics show that smoking cigarettes among children is down. This is undoubtedly due to the increased emphasis on smoking education in the elementary grades.

The subject of myth is interesting to me since I was raised in the Roman Catholic faith. I remember many references to the "mystery of the faith." I can also see how many use the idea of myth to give them something to answer the questions of after life, as an example. I personally do not believe in gods, myths, ghosts, or superstitions but understand the need some have for them.

The concept moral code, for me, is closely related to the Confucius' teachings. The principles of *Li*, *Jen* and *Chun-Tzu* resonate with me and as a result of studying them more closely; I am thinking about how to apply them in my daily life. My personal understanding and beliefs are not verbatim to the teachings of Confucius but are very similar.

In summary, after examining Confucianism and Catholicism many similarities and some differences in their use of ritual, myth, and moral code are evident. Their rituals are meant to provide guideposts for their followers. The significant difference between two rituals is the existence of God in one and only the individual in the other. Both religions use myth to assign the teachings to an individual and to support their religion. The characteristic that is the most similar is moral code. Both religions teach kindness, generosity, and love, offering the follower a way to either salvation or to completeness in life.

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