

DIVINE CALL AND HUMAN RESPONSE

God in Confucianism, 1

IT IS GENERALLY agreed that Confucianism is not a religion but rather a type of humanism. Nevertheless this humanism has this particular quality, that it is not necessarily closed in on itself to the extent of refusing to acknowledge a spiritual dimension. In order to understand confucian attitudes to what we call God, we need, therefore, to place ourselves within the framework of chinese thought.

In 1958, a group of four chinese philosophers produced a *Manifesto to the world on behalf of chinese culture* in a Hong Kong journal.¹ Although written in Chinese, this document was addressed to the West to remind it that in chinese culture there exists a deep current that is essentially spiritual. What in fact is the essence of this 'spiritual life' for the authors of the *Manifesto*? The answer is given later in the article:

There is a widespread notion that chinese culture stresses the moral relationship between man and man, but not the religious relationship between man and God. Essentially this notion is correct. From this, however, many argue that owing to its stress on morality, chinese culture only knows a quest for the harmonization of actual relationships between men in order to maintain the social and political order. Simultaneously they hold that there is no transcendent religious feeling in chinese culture, that chinese ethical thought consists of some rules for outward conduct without any spiritual foundation. *This latter view is gravely mistaken.* It probably originated from the biased notions of those westerners who came to China first or who did not primarily aim at a true understanding of China, or possibly had no occasion to establish intimate contact with true representatives of the spirit of chinese culture. Thus they never discovered that the inner spiritual life behind the ethical rules also contained religious feelings (part 1, section 5).

The authors of the *Manifesto* blame the missionaries whose views on chinese culture were coloured by their desire to convert the Chinese to Christianity. Now, after some decades, the mentality of at least some missionaries has changed. They want to understand the religious values of different cultures without judging them *a priori* from principles drawn from a totally different religious and cultural context. It is in this spirit that the

Church, since Vatican II, calls upon us to appreciate the religious attitudes that are characteristic of other cultures.

This spiritual sense of Chinese culture, for practical purposes identified with Confucianism, is presented in an identical way by Lin Yu-t'ang in his book *The Wisdom of Confucius*:

To put it briefly, Confucianism stood for a rationalized social order through the ethical approach based on personal cultivation. It aimed at political order by laying the basis for it in a moral order, and it sought political harmony by trying to achieve the moral harmony in man himself. . . . The strongest doctrine of this particular type of humanism, which accounts for its great enduring influence, is the doctrine that 'the measure of man is man', a doctrine which makes it possible for the common man to begin somewhere as a follower of Confucianism by merely following the highest instincts of his own human nature and not by looking for perfection in a divine ideal.²

However, this moral and social order is caught in a complex of relations which is much vaster and which encompasses the whole universe. Whence the importance for Confucianism of what is called *li* or ritual. This term is of great importance for understanding the relationship between the social order and the cosmic order. It is through this idea of *li* that Confucianism shows itself to be open to what we call the supernatural. This character can stand for 'propriety', 'ritual' and also simply 'good manners in social life'.

In its highest philosophic sense, it means an ideal social order with everything in its place. . . . To adhere to the philosophic meaning, Confucius was trying to restore a social order, based on love for one's kind and respect for authority, of which the social rites of public worship and festivities in ritual and music should be the outward symbols. Of course, the rituals of worship lead straight back to primitive religious rites and ceremonies, and it is clear that this so-called 'religion of *li*' was truly semi-religious in character, being related to God at one end in the sacrifice to Heaven by the emperor, and related to the common people at the other end by the teachings of affection and discipline and respect for authority in the home life.³

So Lin Yu-t'ang in his analysis of the system reaches the same conclusions as the authors of the *Manifesto*. Confucianism, taken here as representative of Chinese culture, contains a spiritual element expressed in the recognition of a relationship with heaven which is either the deepest expression of human nature, or the recognition of a supreme power that is called Heaven.

An elaboration of confucian humanism. 'Jen' and 'Li'

In speaking of Confucianism it is normal to begin with Confucius. It is possible to call Confucius an agnostic as some people do in the West. Yet it remains true that he had a religious sense. That does not mean to say that he practised a religion in the way that we would understand this in the West. Moreover, if one wished to be more precise about the religious position of Confucianism in general perhaps one should say that it is an almost perfect example of a secularized religion. It is, in effect, a type of humanism which remains profoundly conscious of the relationship of man to Heaven.

In order to understand Confucius's position with regard to Heaven it is good to consider the development that took place in China on the religious level from the end of the Shang dynasty (which was succeeded by the Chou around the year 1100 B.C.) to the time of Confucius (551-479 B.C.). Under the Shang the religious attitude was one of submission to supernatural powers who were consulted through divination, as they were thought to be all-knowing. Little by little that attitude changed. The more cultivated people quickly came to the conclusion that the gods did not have an answer to all problems and very frequently they did not know more than human beings. So, little by little, the educated became conscious of what man could achieve and sought to organize the empire without too much reliance on the heavenly powers. Nevertheless, the basic idea of a harmony of Heaven, earth and man remained one of the underlying principles of Chinese thought.

Should one say that people kept the ceremonies (*li*) without believing in them very much? Certainly not — at least in the case of Confucius, as we shall see later. The *li*, rites, ceremonies and rituals remained the expression of a profound awareness, innate to the Chinese soul, of the harmony that was to be established and maintained between the government of the empire, social life, morality and the being called Heaven. If these rites are the expression of a respectful distance between Heaven and man, they express even more a bond that is essentially religious. The 'rites' of Confucianism by their very character express this dual aspect: the religious bond, and the distance between the human world and the other world. In the *Book of Rites*⁴ there is a very important text:

The people of Yin⁵ honour spiritual beings, serve them, and put them ahead of ceremonies. . . . The people of Chou honour ceremonies and highly value the conferring of favours. They serve the spiritual beings but keep them at a distance. They remain near to man and loyal to him.⁶

This text is highly indicative of the prevailing attitude in cultured circles in China at the time of Confucius. Wing-tsit Chan, the historian of Chinese thought, after citing the text of *Li-chi*, comments:

Similarly, the belief in the Lord underwent a radical transformation. In the Shang he was the supreme anthropomorphic deity who sent blessings or calamities, gave protection in battles, sanctioned undertakings, and passed on the appointment or dismissal of officials. Such belief continued in the early Chou but was gradually replaced by the concept of Heaven (*T'ien*) as the supreme spiritual reality. This does not mean that either Heaven or spiritual beings did not continue to be highly honoured and greatly respected. But their personal power was supplanted by human virtue and human effort, and man, through his moral deeds could now control his own destiny (p 4).

This attitude towards the gods and spiritual powers developed slowly in official circles. It tended to give man an autonomy with regard to higher powers, whether the Heavenly Sovereign, lesser gods or ancestors. What was asked was that they should not interfere with human affairs. The principle expressed in the *Book of Rites* to 'serve the spiritual beings but keep them at a distance' was to be adopted by Confucius himself and remained one of the principles of Confucianism. That is why the religious ceremonies of Confucianism are so hieratic. Relations between the two worlds are regulated by a ritual code which maintains the necessary distance. Given this perspective, it is a grave fault to entertain excessively personal relationships with the higher powers. Heaven and earth should not mix. Each should keep its proper place.

In this way Chinese humanism was elaborated and Confucius made himself its protagonist. The whole doctrine of this humanism can be summed up in the Chinese character *jen*. It is composed of two parts. The first represents a man (also pronounced *jen*) and the second signifies 'two'. The meaning of the character is simple. It expresses the relation of a man with his fellow man. Thus it is the virtue of humanity or more correctly, 'being a man for another man'. The concept has been translated in many ways: benevolence, humanity, mercy, kindness and charity. Nowadays Christians like to translate it as 'love'. It says all these things. However, because 'being a man for another human being' entails my perfection as a man, the term also signifies the perfection of man in relation to Heaven, since 'what Heaven (*T'ien*) imparts to man is called human nature'.

We will see that the relationship to Heaven develops in two directions: outwards and inwards. According to the first, man is inserted in a perfectly structured universe. The second direction which can be traced back to Mencius (Meng-tzu: 371-289 B.C.?) emphasizes that man is by nature in relation to Heaven. These two currents continue side by side in Confucian thought. The first tends towards rationalism and the second is open to mysticism. Both courses must lead man to realize the ideal of the spiritual culture of China which is the unity of Heaven and man.

The position of Confucius

According to tradition, Confucius made a legitimate selection from the ancient Chinese writings and commented on them as the basis of his teaching. He said himself that he had invented nothing but had only passed things on. There is no difficulty in believing this. Moreover, his aim was not to start a school of speculative philosophy but to educate his compatriots in the practice of fundamental human virtues. His genius is precisely this, that he was pleasantly practical and humane in his teaching. But how did he see his relationship to higher powers and especially to Heaven?

The humanism and rationalism of Confucius have been much discussed. Some people have triumphantly proclaimed that he had no 'religion'. That is not far short of calling him an atheist. But to read what he has left us gives the impression of a man who had precisely that religious sense spoken of by the authors of the *Manifesto* mentioned at the beginning of this article. This religious sense is shown not in ritual nor in prayers but in a very humane way of living out his relationship with Heaven.

In ancient China there were two very widespread terms to describe the supreme being, or what we call God. The first was *Shang-ti* or 'the Emperor above' or 'the Lord on high'. This term always indicated a personal God. This was the main deity of the Shang dynasty. The second term was *T'ien* or 'Heaven'. This was the main deity of the Chou who defeated the Shang around 1100 B.C. For many people, especially the intellectuals, God was a supreme but impersonal power. For others he was a personal power. Confucius understood the supreme being in this latter sense and moreover he always used the term *T'ien* and never *Shang-ti* because it seemed to him that the latter had a much more 'religious' connotation.

In a very beautiful passage, Confucius describes the different stages of his human development. But we can see here in the context of a very self-assured humanism, a relationship with Heaven that he affirms ever more strongly as he advances in human experience:

At fifteen I set my mind upon the pursuit of Wisdom. At thirty I stood firm. At forty I was free from perplexities. At fifty I knew the biddings of Heaven. At sixty I heard them with docile ear. At seventy I could follow the desires of my heart without out-stepping the boundaries of right.⁸

This text is very important because it reflects not only the attitude of Confucius but also that of a great number of Confucianists regarding Heaven. The term translated here by 'the biddings of Heaven' is the well-known *T'ien-ming* which ordinarily means the 'mandate of Heaven'. The meaning given to the term depends much on the philosophical and religious perspective of the writers. Wing-tsit Chan writes (p 23):

In general, Confucianists before the T'ang dynasty (A.D. 618-907) understood it to mean either the decree of God, which determines the course of one's life, or the rise and fall of the moral order, whereas Sung scholars, especially Chu Hsi⁹ took it to mean 'the operation of Nature which is endowed in things and makes things be as they are'. This latter interpretation has prevailed. The concept of *T'ien-ming* which can mean 'Mandate of Heaven', 'decree of God', 'personal destiny', and 'course of order' is extremely important in the history of Chinese thought. In religion, it generally means 'fate' or personal order of God, but in philosophy it is practically always understood as moral destiny, natural endowment, or moral order.

If we study Confucius through the eyes of commentators of the mentality of Chu Hsi the relation of the Great Sage to Heaven will be viewed from a rationalist and non-religious perspective. In his teaching he was in fact very discreet about matters of the other world. One day one of his disciples asked about serving the spiritual beings. Confucius said: 'If we are not able to serve man, how can we serve spiritual beings?' 'I venture to ask about death'. Confucius replied: 'If we do not know about life, how can we know about death?'¹⁰ This text continues to resonate in the spirit of millions of Chinese. For the greater part of the moderately cultivated Chinese it justifies a clearly defined attitude to death and the spirit world.

However, we must look at another aspect of the religious psychology of Confucius revealed in the *Analects* and quoted by Wing-tsit Chan. If he talked of keeping a distance from spirits, he nevertheless believed in their presence:

When Confucius offered sacrifice to his ancestors, he felt as if ancestral spirits were actually present. He said: 'If I do not participate in the sacrifice, it is as if I did not sacrifice at all' (p 25).

Confucius certainly respected spirits and still more Heaven. To someone who asked him: 'What is meant by the common saying "It is better to be on good terms with the God of the kitchen (who cooks our food) than with the spirits of the shrine (ancestors) at the south-west corner of the house?"' Confucius replied: "It is not true. He who commits a sin against Heaven has no god to pray to" ' (p 25).

This 'Heaven' was for Confucius a being whose ways he could not know. This is why he did not speak of the 'way of Heaven'. One of his disciples said: 'We can hear our Master's views on culture and its manifestations, but we cannot hear his views on human nature and the way of Heaven'.¹¹ This saying reveals the attitude of the Master. He had no wish to throw wide open the door of the way of Heaven any more than the inner door of human nature. It seems that he deliberately kept his teaching within very

precise limits which do not allow mystical enthusiasm or religious fervour.

Nevertheless he had a profound sense of a vocation from Heaven. This vocation or mission he felt to be very personal. So we read in the *Analects*:

When Confucius was in personal danger in K'uang, he said: 'Since the death of king Wen, is not the course of culture in my keeping? If it had been the will of Heaven to destroy this culture, it would not have been given to a mortal (like me). But if it is the will of Heaven that this culture should not perish, what can the people of K'uang do to me?' (p 35)

Confucius found security in the sense of a personal vocation from Heaven. There are other texts in the *Analects* which perhaps show more explicitly what was Confucius's attitude to Heaven. When Yen Yuan, his favourite pupil, died aged thirty-two, Confucius said: 'Alas, Heaven is destroying me! Heaven is destroying me!' (p 36). This recalls another text full of the idea of a personal relationship. 'Confucius said: "Alas! No one knows me!" Tzu-kung said: "Why is there no one who knows you?" Confucius said: "I do not complain against Heaven. I do not blame men. I study things on the lower level but my understanding penetrates the higher level. It is Heaven that knows me"' (p 42). Perhaps one can treat this passage as the expression of his spirituality. Confucius was completely attentive to things of this world, 'lower level', but his intellect from his human experience could understand the ways of Heaven and he was aware that Heaven knew him.

Lin Yu-t'ang, commenting on the texts which show Confucius's spiritual attitude, writes:

Confucius had a deep religious sense and feeling of awe before the gods whom he frankly declared that he could not know. He was, in any case, deeply concerned over the ceremonies or religious worship and he also prayed, not in words, but apparently by a silent attitude. For when he was seriously ill and one of his disciples asked him to pray by going to the temple, he replied that he had been praying for a long time.¹²

This silent prayer of Confucius follows the logic of his thinking. 'Prayer' was to be expressed by his attitude in the face of the mystery of the other world. With regard to this other world, he was not what one would call an 'agnostic' but rather a man aware of mystery.

Confucius said: 'I am going to remain quiet!' Tzu-kung (one of his disciples) remarked: 'If you remain quiet, how can we ever learn anything to teach to the others?' And Confucius said: 'Does Heaven talk? The four seasons go their way in succession and the different things are produced. Does Heaven talk?'¹³

It is clear that Confucius 'did not make Heaven talk'. Here we see the very opposite of what is understood as revealed religion, yet the lesson which Confucius could draw from events in the world and from the deep resources of human nature was for him the language of Heaven.

If, instead of considering his everyday sayings or the practical utility of his teaching, one tries to penetrate to the heart of his experience, one comes upon a marvellous world. But the problem is precisely how to penetrate his experience. When someone declared that Tzu-kung, a disciple of Confucius, was much better than his master, Tzu-kung replied in a very imaginative way:

It is like the matter of house-walls. My house-walls come up only to the shoulder, and the people outside are therefore able to see my beautiful house, whereas the wall of Confucius is twenty or thirty feet high and unless you go inside you do not see the beauty of its halls and the grandeur of its furniture. But there are few people who can penetrate inside that household.¹⁴

Among the disciples of Confucius, some (very few it seems) were able to get 'inside his household'. These were the ones who explained the thought of the Master and passed it on. They also developed certain ideas which were no longer the Master's but within the general confucian framework. Thus Confucianism began a process of reflection which was later to pervade the whole culture of China.

Early developments of confucian thought

According to Lin Yu-t'ang, Confucius's disciples were a varied group:

We have Yen Hui, a quiet thoughtful person, the oldest of the disciples whom Confucius admired and praised in superlative terms. On the other hand we have Tzu-lu . . . who constantly questioned the Master's conduct. This man receives very rough handling in the *Analects* because he was dead and there were no disciples to defend him at the time the *Analects* were recorded. There were also garrulous, fluent Tzu-kung, the very much younger but philosophic Tseng-tzu (who later became probably the most important interpreter of Confucius), the more literary-minded Tzu-hsia, and the practical politician Jan Ch'iu whom Confucius finally disowned from his circle of disciples. Confucius was therefore broad enough to be a teacher of all types of persons and it is said each disciple was one 'limb' of the body of the Sage.

The *Analects* which have been frequently mentioned are a collection of sayings gathered by different disciples. To understand them, they must be put in context whenever that is possible. They are a collection of comments

on different people and events. They also contain the disciples' questions and the Master's answers. There is nothing systematic in them. The comments and answers are expressions of what is most profound in the personality of the Master. The link between the sayings is not a question of externals but rather an inner unity of thought and a well-defined attitude of which Confucius himself was conscious. His wisdom did not consist in having learned many things and memorized them. 'Confucius said: "Ah Tz'u, do you suppose that I merely learned a great deal and tried to remember it all?" "Yes, isn't that what you do?" "No", said Confucius "I have a system or central thread that runs through it all"'.¹⁵

In Confucius's thought we find many of these 'threads' which his first disciples had grasped. They developed the basic intuitions in some very brief works which were nonetheless much more systematic than the *Analects*. The two most important works for an understanding of the first developments of his thought are the *Chung-yung* and the *Ta-hsüeh*. These two works together with the *Analects* and the *Book of Mencius* (Meng-Tzu) constitute what are called *The Four Books* — the basis for confucian teaching ever since the neo-confucian philosopher Chu Hsi collected and commented on them.

Chung-yung, usually translated as *The Doctrine of the Mean*, or *The Golden Mean*, is translated by Lin Yü-t'ang as *Central Harmony*.¹⁶ Each of these translations expresses one aspect of the meaning, for the doctrine of *Chung-yung* is complex and constitutes an excellent approach to the study of confucian thought. According to the most ancient traditions, the work was composed by Tzu-szu the grandson of Confucius. Thus the link between the *Chung-yung* and the thought of the Master was established. As Tzu-szu was the master of Mencius we can see the importance of *Chung-yung* in the development of confucian thought. The chain is simple: Confucius (*Analects*), Tseng-tzu, Tzu-szu (*Chung-yung*) and Mencius.

The opening sentence of *Chung-yung* is very different from the sayings of the Master. However, it is an accurate expression of his personal experience. Moreover, it is a marvellous introduction to the thought of Mencius. 'What is God-given' (literally, 'Heaven-given') 'is what we call "human nature"'. To fulfil the law of our human nature is what we call the moral law. The cultivation of the moral law is what we call culture'.¹⁷ The relationship is here expressed between human nature and Heaven, this became one of the important points of Mencius's thought.

Chung-yung clearly reaffirms and develops the relationship of morality to universal order:

Confucius remarked: 'The life of the moral man is an exemplification of the universal moral order (*Chung-yung*, or 'mean'). The life of the vulgar person on the other hand is a contradiction of the universal moral order'.¹⁸

Such a text shows us how the confucian moral order is not closed but 'open'. Nevertheless, Confucius was well aware of the difficulty of attaining that ideal. Hence he remarked: 'To find the central clue to our moral being which unites us to the universal order, that indeed is the highest human attainment. For a long time people have seldom been capable of it'.¹⁹

Difficult though such a goal is, it is possible through an appropriate education. This is the purpose of *Ta-hsüeh* ('Great Learning' or 'Higher Education'). Traditionally the work is attributed to Tseng-tzu by some people, and to Tzu-szu (the grandson of Confucius) by others. This is hardly important. This short work has had an amazing influence since Chu Hsi introduced it into the *Four Books*, the basis of Confucianism.

What Confucius had in mind was an education reserved for an élite whose ideal was the *chun-tzu*. Originally the word meant 'prince' but Confucius wanted to make the 'princes' men of absolute moral perfection. The education envisaged by the book *Great Learning* was meant to contribute to this ideal. The opening sentences set the tone for the book:

What the Great Learning teaches is: clearly to exemplify illustrious virtue, to love the people, and to rest in the highest good. The point where one should rest being known, the object of pursuit is then determined; that being determined, a calm unperturbedness may be attained to. After that calmness will follow a tranquil repose; there will be careful deliberation; and that deliberation will be followed by achievement. Things have their roots and their branches. Affairs have their end and their beginning. To know what comes first and what comes last is to be near to the way (Tao).²⁰

Like the rest of the book this is excellent psychology. One of the great confucian thinkers of the Sung period said of this work:

This *Ta-hsüeh* is a book in the surviving tradition of the confucian school and constitutes the gateway through which the beginners enter into the path of virtue. The fact that we can see now the order and sequence in which the ancients proceeded in their education, depends entirely on the existence of this essay with the *Analects* and the *Book of Mencius* coming next. All students should begin their studies with this essay. Then it may be hoped that they will not go far wrong.²¹

In the two essays, *Chung-yung* and *Ta-hsüeh*, we witness the first developments of the thought of the Master. We will pursue its later history in a subsequent article.

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NOTES

¹ *Manifesto to the world on behalf of chinese culture*. Chang-Chün-mai, T'ang Chün-i, Mou Tsung-san and Hsü Fu-kuan. Chinese text in *Democratic Review* (Hong Kong, January 1958). Trans. by Robert P. Kramers in *Quarterly Notes on Christianity and Religion*, Series II, no 2 (Hong Kong, May 1958). Also translated by Carson Chang (Chang-Chün-mai) in his *The development of neo-confucian thought*, vol 1 (New York, 1962), pp 462-64.

² *The wisdom of Confucius*, ed. and trans. by Lin Yutang (Lin Yü-t'ang) (New York, 1938), p 6.

³ Lin Yü-t'ang, *op. cit.*, p 13.

⁴ The *Li-chi* or *Li-ki*, one of the classics.

⁵ Yin: another name for the final period of the Shang dynasty, c. 1765-1122 B.C.

⁶ *Li-chi. Book of Rites. Record of examples*, part 2. Trans. Legge. *Li-ki*, vol 1, p 342. Quoted in *A source book in chinese philosophy*, trans. Wing-tsit Chan (Princeton, 1963), p 3.

⁷ Wing-tsit Chan, *op. cit.*, p 98.

⁸ *Analects*, 11,4. Trans. James Legge in *The chinese classics*, vol 1, p 146.

⁹ Chu Hsi (1130-1200).

¹⁰ *Analects*, XI,11. Wing-tsit Chan. *op. cit.*, p 36.

¹¹ *Analects*, V,12. Wing-tsit Chan. *op. cit.*, p 28.

¹² Lin Yü-t'ang, *op. cit.*, p 93.

¹³ Lin Yü-t'ang, *op. cit.*, p 173.

¹⁴ Lin Yü-t'ang, *op. cit.*, p 166.

¹⁵ Lin Yü-t'ang, *op. cit.*, p 163.

¹⁶ Lin Yü-t'ang, *op. cit.*, p 101.

¹⁷ Trans. Ku Hung-ming. Quoted by Lin Yü-t'ang, *op. cit.*, p 104.

¹⁸ Trans. Ku Hung-ming. Quoted by Lin Yü-t'ang, *op. cit.*, p 105. The 'universal moral order' is another translation for *chung-yung*.

¹⁹ Translated Ku Hung-ming. Quoted by Lin Yü-t'ang, *op. cit.*, p 105.

²⁰ *Ta-hsüeh*, ch. 1 and 2. Trans. Derk Bodde, in *A history of Chinese philosophy* by Fung Yu-lan, vol 1, p 362.

²¹ Ch'eng (or Ch'eng I-ch'uan), quoted by Lin Yü-t'ang, *op. cit.*, p 135.

Note.—To avoid confusion, I have unified the romanization of chinese terms and names.