

The Comparison of Confucian Benevolence and Christian Love

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Received 15 April 2014; accepted 26 June 2014
Publish online 27 August 2014

Abstract

Benevolence and love are the core concepts and the fundamental principles of Confucianism and Christianity respectively, which are two different types of spirit. Confucianism emphasizes benevolence, which renders it a human-centred religion, whereas Christian values love, which makes it a God-centred religion. Yet there are both differences and similarities between them. They both reflect the deepest concerns of human value on the one hand; on the other hand they provide different ways of self-perfection and transcendence¹.

Key words: Confucianism; Christian; Benevolence; Love

Ma, L. (2014). The Comparison of Confucian Benevolence and Christian Love. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 9(1), 145-148. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/5492>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/5492>

INTRODUCTION

Confucianism is widely regarded as a kind of benevolence with humanity as the core concept while Christian can be called the religion of love with love as the center.

¹ As for whether Confucianism is a religion, there are many arguments both at home and abroad. Most domestic scholars believed that Confucianism has many elements and features of religion and so is very similar to religion; while many foreign scholars believed that Confucianism is a religion. This article interprets Confucianism benevolence and Christian love on the base of the latter.

Benevolence and love are the cores and the highest principles of Confucianism and Christianity each of which is like a masterstroke linking moral teachings within each religion and embodies the fundamental beliefs respectively, at the same time establishes the ultimate goal. There are both similarities and differences between Confucian benevolence and Christian love, which the article tries to address.

1. BENEVOLENCE—CORE OF CONFUCIANISM

Chinese feudal society was a patriarchal society which took the family blood as the basic social units and changed in the form of family development with the world as home. Confucianism was born in such social background thus being adapted to the particular social situation and served it as well. Consequently, it produced a set of feudal patriarchal ethics system based on lineage.

Confucius as the inaugurator of Confucianism first gave benevolence an extremely important significance and finally set it as the foundation of the Confucian tradition. Confucius Ren tends to be very extensive, which can be mainly summed up as the following three points: One is the benevolent love, which is the core and the principle of benevolence; two is “filial piety also, the essence of Ren” (*the Analects of Confucius· Science*) this is the foundation and the path of benevolence; three is “deny self and return to propriety as Ren” (*the Analects of Confucius · Yan Yuan*) this is the kernel of means and ends.

Ren, viewed from etymology might derive from the person’s behavior criterion, the self understanding, which owned a strong humanitarian spirit. Confucius first proposed the “benevolent love” which could be divided into two aspects: “love” and “people”. “Love” means a kind of attitude for itself and also towards others which constructs the whole human society, because people are driven together by love, thus forming society. Because

of love, the society personnel can be benevolent and the conditions to realize the “no litigation” society can come true. So, when addressing Ren, Confucius first of all wanted to emphasize “love” as the crucial factor.

As for how love is to participate in human activities and make the society become more harmonious the Confucian tradition holds that everyone has a moral duty and obligation to others and human society is a common spiritual realm where one can realize mutual love spirit. Confucius thought that “The person who is of Ren, let others stand if he wants to stand himself, and let others better off if he wants to be better off himself” (*the Analects of Confucius· Yong Ye*). Gong once asked: “Is there any maxim that could be followed forever?” Confucius said: “What is called to forgive is not to impose on others that yourself do not want” (*the Analects of Confucius · Yen yuan*). Here is clearly pointed out this spirit how to deal with the relationship between “to stand” and “to be better off”. If someone wants to stand, he is to help others stand; and he will not impose on others what he himself does not want. Only in this way, everyone can realize the responsibility and obligation to others of the moral. All those can be called “love”.

“People” is “another important factor of love”, it refers to the ultimate receiver where love is addressed. In Confucius theory, the interpersonal relationship which social person is to deal with can be divided into two types: dear relationship and affiliation. Specifically there are the following five types: the relationship between ruler and subject, the relationship between father and son, the relationship between brothers, the relationship between husband and wife and the relationship between friends. The five kinds of relationships can be divided into two categories: “filial piety” and “loyalty”. That is to say, the social relations the traditional Confucian deal with are mainly society “filial piety” and “loyalty” problem. Filial piety is the kernel of this, which defines the basic Confucian ethics “filial piety”, but the scope is not limited to the consanguine family. This kind of love is the love of blood relationship as the basic, and a generalized love extended to the other gender (female) and the whole society. “Benevolence” is the most profound source of blood family affection of love, without love, the benevolent love becomes rootless duckweed, dry wood. Love of families gives birth to love for other people. Love for people is an expansion of love for families, which is the so-called “Love your own olds and also love others’ olds, love your own children and also love others’”. That is Confucius universal love.

To be noted that the Confucius universal love is to serve the entire society. Any person’s accomplishment is to tackle the relationship with others and social problems like that. Thus it addresses the Confucian political ethics purpose, which can be presented as “to restore social order through self-control”. Confucian doctrines follow such a path: First one needs self-control and then social order

will be restored thus achieving the ultimate “Ren”, which allows people to practice and follow a “self-cultivation” and advocates that one must first realize “self-control” and then help others to realize it.

From “benevolence” to the filial piety and fraternal duty, one can achieve the goal of self-control and the restoration of society order. To establish universal love through blood dear, and then apply it to one’s country, the “little house” is extended to “big house”. All those are the basic characteristics of Confucius political ethics, which contains inclusion and transcendence and has formed the basic characteristics of Chinese culture which includes family and social harmony.

2. LOVE —THE PILLAR OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

If “Ren” is the heart and the soul of Confucianism, then love is the maxim of Christianity. Among Christians, there is the belief that God is the God of love, and Jesus Christ is the manifestation of love. Christianity is a religion of love, and Christian theology and philosophy is based on the spirit of love.

“Love” in “Bible”: Because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been fathered by God and knows God. The person who does not love does not know God, because God is love. By this the love of God is revealed in us: That God has sent his one and only Son into the world so that we may live through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, if God so loved us, then we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God resides in us, and his love is perfected in us. (1 John)

“love’ is love or affection, which in Christian doctrine is a two-way process, the love from God and the expression of love to God in man” (Zhang, 2005, p.154). Thus, the Christian love has three aspects: one is the God to human love; two is the love of God; the three is the love between people. But the three are not parallel, but a causal relationship. First, “Love from God” is the cause, prior to the existence of the latter. God loves the people in many aspects: God expresses love in the process of creating, both man and all things. Love from God is also expressed in covenant with people. And ultimately, Son of God in Christ sacrifices himself for man’s sake. Love comes from God and God gives human love, sowing the seeds of love the world. Love in the world is all from God. And as the people of God, not only receive the love, but also want to return the love and the most appropriate return are the sincere faith and the love to God, which form the second level of love. But people cannot see God so that express the return indirectly, thus the third level of love appears—people love each other. Because the one who does not love his fellow Christian whom he has seen cannot love God

whom he has not seen. (1 John) Love returned to God is realized in the mutual love between people, and the return from people to God reflects the love which God has given to man.

Love between people in the Christian is a response to the love of God, which is actually philanthropy. It is very similar to Confucianism benevolence, and also contains several different sets of relations: One is the family relationships, including the relationship between husband and wife, brothers, the relationship between young and old etc.. Two is the relationship between me and other people outside the family. The Bible says: Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet," (and if there is any other commandment) are summed up in this, "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Romans) Three is the relationship between master and servant. "Be subject to every human institution for the Lord's sake, whether to a king as supreme or to governors as those he commissions to punish wrongdoers and praise those who do good". (1 Peter) Four is the struggle of the relationship between my enemies and me: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. To the person who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other as well, and from the person, who takes away your coat, do not withhold your tunic either". (Luke)

There are both interpretation of moral norms and the summary of love. It says:

Love is patient, love is kind, and it is not envious. Love does not brag, it is not puffed up. It is not rude, it is not self-serving, and it is not easily angered or resentful. It is not glad about injustice, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never ends. But if there are prophecies, they will be set aside; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be set aside... And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians)

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith excellence, to excellence, knowledge; to knowledge, self-control; to self-control, perseverance, godliness; to godliness, brotherly affection; to brotherly affection, unselfish love... For by doing this you will never stumble into sin. (2 Peter)

Christian love is a "unity" of love which is the "unity" of God and man, man and man in one, and a combination of man and God, man and man, man and love. Christian emphasize on the return to God's love which is divine creation, so giving others love is to increase the glory of the Lord and to return the love of God which justify man's holiness. Over the past 2000 years, Christianity has united enormous believers through such a fraternity mind full of divine aura to make them believe that they are bathed in the love of God, and work hard to practice this love.

3. "BENEVOLENCE" AND "LOVE" SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

These two religions are similar in that: They are both very concerned about self-transcendence. Yet the explorations of ways associated with different things, one calls for virtue, the other response. Ren is understood as the origin and foundation of all the virtues, such as justice, filial piety, courtesy, wisdom, etc.. In this sense, the kernel is higher than virtue and virtue itself. Man develops these virtues by self-control and consequently restoring the social order and achieve self-perfection, meeting the requirements of "benevolence". But Christianity was turned to God; believing that people are incapable of action, so humans can do only positive response to the call of God, sacrifice the body and mind to God. And the way to transcend is completely attributed to god. However, the claim about transcendence in the two religious don't draw further apart. It can be said that virtue exists in both approaches and plays an important role. Virtue in Confucianism ideology is not only a narrow sense of "morality", but also a kind of transcendence way. The source of this mode is the kernel, all virtue must be subordinate to the kernel requirements. Ren is not only about the human daily life, but also about the basic principle of the universe, the foundation of morality and good. Ren unifies all aspects of virtue. Ren as a supreme virtue beyond the moral boundaries becomes the combination of cosmic forces and the fate of the body of the universe. In this sense, Ren as benevolence fully enters the "religious kingdom", similar to a religious principle. Similarly, the love of Christ includes all virtues of the life, and is the bonding force of the virtues. Man's love is sincere response to God. It is the response to teach people to do well, and grants people virtue. It is believed that all virtues are different ways of expressing human love, such as humility, patience, loyalty, justice, forgiveness, which are also regarded as the incarnation of Christ's love. People must practice those virtues to realize the transcendence. Therefore, when emphasizing ethics supremacy Confucianism benevolence is against the separation of transcendence and ethics. While the love of Christ makes the ethical requirements obey the ultimate command, the absolute opposition between religion and morality does not exist. In this sense, there are similarities in differences.

The important leading role of benevolence in Confucianism and that of love in the Christian tradition is similar, but there are also differences between them: one is "human centered", the other "God centered". They are two different types of spirit, and show the implementation of two different roads to transcend. To achieve transcendence, westerners chose "religion", while Chinese chose "philosophy", as Mr Feng Youlan observes: "Chinese pay less attention to religion, because they are too concerned with philosophy. Their religious

consciousness is not strong, because they have too much philosophical consciousness. They found transcendence that exists in philosophy, expressing, appreciating and experiencing it in philosophical life” (Feng, 2004, p.5). Confucianism benevolence expresses in ethical terms how to reach it, which is to be a moral person and to cultivate their qualities. Its transcendence lies in the human nature. The issue of the relationship between people goes through the Confucianism basic problems. While love as the central theme of Christianity means that transcendence can only be achieved in the grace of God in Christianity. In the Christian spirit, ethics content is expressed with theological language. God is the source of moral growth and the basic problems of Christianity is the relationship between man and god.

CONCLUSION

Finally to add is: after full awareness of the difference of Confucian benevolence and Christian love, there should come the attention that this difference is not essential. Their difference lies in the different focuses in transcendence, but not the ultimate spiritual pursuit. Both of them are concerned about human life beyond their limits and how to achieve eternalness and realization

of their own value. Both of them emphasize the transcendence can only be achieved through unity of God and man. Moreover, Confucian benevolence and Christian love both advocate care about others, doing things for others, treating others as one, which all have a common feature of human love.

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