



# THE THOUGHT OF CONFUCIUS AND ITS PARALLELS WITH ISLAMIC IDEAS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief introduction to the thought of Confucius and analyses some of his ideas through the lens of Islam, highlighting the points of convergence and key differences, and occasionally drawing attention to the ways in which Chinese Muslim thinkers have proclaimed their compatibility with and even embeddedness in Confucian culture. A historical overview is followed by the examination of the concepts of *li* (rituals), Dao (way), *wu-wei* (non-coercion), *junzi* (a perfect gentleman), filial piety, which is compared with such ideas in Islamic tradition as *fiqh*, Sharia, Sunna, reign of philosopher-king, the respect accorded to parents. The paper ends with a discussion of the role of metaphysics in the thought of the Chinese sage, which stands in stark contrast with the vision of Islam.

**Keywords:** Confucianism, Islam, rituals, Dao, metaphysics

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Confucianism is undoubtedly the most well-known philosophy (whether it can be called religion is a disputable question whose answer depends on one's understanding of what religion means and how it relates to metaphysics) of China which is sometimes described as Confucian civilization. Whereas the fundamental role of Confucian thought in laying the foundation of the Chinese way of thinking, perceiving the world and forming Chinese identity cannot be denied, it is also important to acknowledge two points. First, Confucianism itself is not a monolithic discourse: it has developed and changed over time so that the actual words of Confucius (who lived in the 6-5<sup>th</sup> century BCE) as recorded in the *Analects* ("Selected Sayings") and the views of his later followers (who might be separated from their proclaimed teacher by centuries and even millennia), while sharing the same core, might significantly differ. Second, China is best described as the country of the Three Teachings (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism) accompanied by traces of popular religion.<sup>1</sup> The Three Teachings, although clearly distinct and, at first glance, holding different and even incompatible worldviews, over time and through constant interaction have influenced each other to the point of interpenetration,<sup>2</sup> hence Neo-Confucianism (which emerged around the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE and became the dominant strand of Chinese thought in the 13<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> CE<sup>3</sup>) combines Confucian thought and a heavy dose of Buddhist and Daoist accretions. In this paper, however, I will limit myself to the examination of the original thought of Confucius. I will also attempt to analyze Confucian ideas through the lens of Islam, highlighting the points of convergence and key differences, and occasionally drawing attention to the ways in which Chinese Muslim thinkers successfully proclaim their inherent embeddedness in Confucian culture.

To start with, I will sketch out the key events in the history of Confucianism since historical context is essential to understanding the specificities of the teaching of the Chinese sage. Chinese history is believed to have started with pre-dynastic sage kings (most likely mythical) who were followed by the first three dynasties (Xia, Shang, Zhou). The flourishing of the Shang dynasty came to an end due to its last evil ruler who, due to his wrongdoings, lost the mandate from Heaven and was eventually dethroned by the people who therefore started a new dynasty, Zhou. The Heaven-given mandate to rule passed to the virtuous new dynasty whose first period is considered to be a golden age of ancient Chinese civilisation lived

in full compliance with the rituals and the Heavenly Way (this belief is repeatedly reiterated by Confucius). However, the state gradually disintegrated, becoming a conglomerate of de facto independent fiefdoms, waging wars against each other and characterised by internal chaos. It is at that time that Confucius lived (551 – 479 BCE) deploring the reigning chaos, the lack of order, instability, widespread corruption, the deterioration of morals, and the neglect of rituals. The acute realization that he needed to look for solutions to address the pressing issues of the time and find a remedy for the political and social problems of his society can be considered as a starting point of Confucius' philosophy. As is often the case, new ideas emerge in troubled times which are also characterized by falling morals (the birth of Islam during the period of the *Jahiliyyah* illustrates the point well). Not being able to attain a significant post during his lifetime (both in his native state of Lu and in other regions that he visited during his extended travels), Confucius concentrated on teaching (he mentions to have personally taught 77 disciples<sup>4</sup> some of whom occupied key positions in the Lu administration), and it is thanks to his devout students that the sage's ideas gradually gained ground. Eventually, at the time of the Han dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE) Confucianism became the official ideology of the state, however it was soon eclipsed by Buddhism which entered China in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, the subsequent backlash against the "imported ideology" led to the reestablishment of "native" Confucianism (in the form of the above-mentioned Neo-Confucianism) during the Song dynasty in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. From that time till the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese imperial examinations were based on Confucianism with the *Analects* being committed to memory by aspiring bureaucrats.

Given that the point of departure for Confucius is his urge to overcome chaos in society and lead it to social order and harmony, he searches for a common denominator that could unite people and finds it in rituals (*li*) which call for respect for established hierarchy. In Confucian thought ritual is understood in a broad sense as etiquette or the way to properly conduct different aspects of one's life: with everyday rites numbering 3000<sup>6</sup> and covering areas ranging from an interaction between a minister and a subordinate to the way one eats, drinks and moves<sup>7</sup>, *li* is an all-encompassing structure guiding one's life. What is especially interesting

1 Mark Meulenbeld. "Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Chinese Popular Religion", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, accessed December 22, 2019, DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.126.

2 Consider a once popular slogan "the Three Teachings share one source", *ibid.*

3 Foster, Robert. "Neo-Confucianism." *Oxford Bibliographies*, accessed December 22, 2019, DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780199920082-0101.

4 Confucius, *Analects: With Comments from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Singerland, Indianapolis / Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003, 112.

5 Bryan W. Van Norden. "Introduction" in *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, edited by Bryan W. Van Norden (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 7.

6 Confucius, *Analects*, 58.

7 *Ibid.*, 90.

in Confucius' understanding of rituals is his emphasis on performing them consciously and sincerely, with pure intention and without looking for any profit or gain. Far from being mechanical actions, rituals are imbued with meaning and possess transformative power. It might be enlightening to draw a parallel between *li* and Islamic *fiqh*, both of which are not only all-encompassing, regulating literally all sides of human life, but are also profoundly linked to the right intention and utmost sincerity. The words of Confucius "do not look unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not listen unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not speak unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not move unless it is in accordance with ritual"<sup>8</sup> immediately bring to mind a famous hadith *qudsi* about Allah and His servant: "...and when I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he seizes, and his foot with which he walks"<sup>9</sup>. As Islam commands Muslims to follow Allah's commands in all their actions, Confucius instructs his disciples to stick to the rituals at all times of their lives.

Another key concept of Confucian and, wider, Chinese thought is Dao: given the prominence of this concept in various currents of Chinese philosophy, it can even be called a Dao civilisation. Literally, Dao means a way or a path, but in different contexts, it can also refer to "the road upon which one travels, the act of wayfaring or travelling down a road, or even the act of way-making by leading someone down or constructing a road."<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to compare the linguistic analysis of the words "Dao" and "Sharia", both of which are cardinal for their respective traditions and both of which literally indicate a road (a trodden path to a source of water in the case of Sharia). Therefore, the idea that these teachings lead their followers, who adhere to prescribed ritual actions, to a well-defined destination that imbues human life with meaning is shared in Islam and Confucianism. But Dao can also be understood in a narrower sense as a certain tradition of thought: Confucius talks about the Dao of ancient kings and sages, whereas Neo-Confucian philosophers claim to revive the Dao of Confucius. In this meaning, Dao appears to correspond to the notion of Sunna in Islam, or the Dao of Muhammad (and this is how it has been interpreted by Chinese Muslim scholars<sup>11</sup>). According to the *Analects*, Dao is a moral path outlined for human beings by Heaven and embodied in

the example of the righteous kings and sages of old that is abandoned by the contemporaries of Confucius and needs to be revived<sup>12</sup>. Much later, Chinese Muslim scholars write extensively on the Dao of Islam, claiming that the original way of Chinese sages (meaning, primarily, Confucius) has been corrupted and lost over time, however, Islam has succeeded in preserving the authentic universal Dao, therefore, the Dao of Islam is in full agreement with the extinct Dao of ancient sages and should be followed.<sup>13</sup>

Having understood the importance of the rituals and the Way as the means of effecting social transformation, one embarks on the path of self-cultivation: one of the major ideas of Confucius is his belief that social change starts from sincere individual improvement whose positive effect results in the gradual transformation of society. What is more, transformation, both individual and social, can only succeed if it occurs in *wu-wei* fashion, i.e. non-coercively, intuitively, selflessly, and unselfconsciously. Whereas *wu-wei* literally means "non-action", what it implies is the ability to internalize virtue and goodness to such an extent that they become manifest in all actions without any effort on the part of their possessor. Once one fully focuses on internal development, they will notice that external things come to them naturally and the change occurs without any struggle.

The result of continuous self-cultivation is the birth of a perfect gentleman (*junzi*) who, for Confucius, represents a sort of moral aristocracy (in pre-Confucian times the word "*junzi*" used to refer to a son of a lord), someone who embodies goodness and virtue, acts in *wu-wei* fashion, is unconcerned about public opinion and material gain, and combines good natural substance further polished by cultural refinement. Confucius argues that "the gentleman is free of anxiety and fear"<sup>14</sup> clarifying that the reason lies in the absence of faults within himself. Interestingly, the same idea virtually verbatim is expressed in the Qur'an about believers ("... there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve"<sup>15</sup>), however, the context is very different: whereas Confucius believes that what gives inner peace is one's certainty that they

12 A brief mention of Daoism whose very name indicates the importance of Dao for its philosophy is due here: according to this tradition which emerged a little bit before Confucianism and which calls for the embrace of naturalness and the rejection of artificiality of social conventions, Dao is a sacred order pervading the cosmos and engendering and maintaining everything in it. By living attuned to nature, one learns to discern and starts following universal Dao. See, Meulenbeld, Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Chinese Popular Religion.

13 Frankel, James D. "Ritual as an Expression of Chinese-Islamic Simultaneity: Liu Zhi's Confucian Translation of Monotheism and Islamic Law." In *Rectifying God's Name: Liu Zhi's Confucian Translation of Monotheism and Islamic Law*, 2001. DOI: 10.21313/hawaii/9780824834746.003.0004.

14 Confucius, *Analects*, 126.

15 Qur'an 2:62.

8 Ibid., 125.

9 Fath al-Bari, 11.34041, hadith 6502.

10 Stefon, Matt. "Dao." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed December 22, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/dao>.

11 Ben-Dor Benite, Zhi. *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2005, 168.

have perfected themselves, Islam claims that inner peace can only be found in the faith in Allah.

The idea of a perfect gentleman applied in the field of politics describes a perfect ruler who rules non-coercively through *wu-wei* and effects change through his inner virtue. This idea is somewhat similar to Plato's and Al-Farabi's belief in the rule of philosopher-king who also brings about a virtuous society by serving as a role model which is emulated by the population. Furthermore, Confucius rejects the use of force in rulership since even if it can produce any results, they are only temporary, while the transformation through virtue is long-lasting.

One of the most known themes in Confucian thought is filial piety whose paramount importance is repeatedly emphasized in the *Analects*. Being a root virtue, it lays the foundation of one's behavior in childhood that will continue through adulthood and will define one's ability to productively function in society. As a later Confucian philosopher, Mencius, states: "If everyone simply loved their parents and respected their elders, the world would be at peace"<sup>16</sup>. Whereas respect accorded to parents is also fundamental in Islam, its extent is nowhere close to the absoluteness of filial piety and devotion in Confucianism. To illustrate, according to Confucius, even if parents commit crimes, children should cover them up, overlooking any shortcomings on their part. Islam, however, demands absolute loyalty only to Allah, granting parents the right to conditional loyalty. Another example is the demand to preserve one's body and not to harm it in any way voiced in both Confucianism and Islam but being given different rationale in the two traditions: according to the former, the human body is a gift from one's parents, therefore it should be preserved out of respect for them, whereas according to the latter, people do not have full ownership over their bodies which are given to them temporarily by Allah. Again, the utmost role accorded to parents in Confucianism is reserved for Allah in Islam.

The key difference between Confucianism and Islam lies in their approach to metaphysics: Confucius does not concern himself with the supernatural focusing only on the here and now. The reason for ignoring metaphysics lies in it being unknowable to human beings and beyond their control. The Chinese sage recognises the inexorable workings of fate calling for submission to it while focusing one's attention on self-cultivation which human beings are capable of. In the illuminating passage of the *Analects*, Confucius admonishes his disciple for asking the teacher about death, explaining that since he does not yet understand life, there is

no way he can comprehend death<sup>17</sup>. Overall, Confucius clearly recognizes the metaphysical (referring to Heaven and its mandate, advocating rituals many of which revolve around spirits, etc.), yet he himself does not engage in any discussions about it, directing his attention only to this world (interestingly, his later followers, influenced by other traditions, gradually incorporate certain metaphysical notions into their thought). On the contrary, metaphysics plays a key role in Islam which accords much more importance to the invisible and the life to come than to the here and now. This fundamental difference in turn leads to other differences, some of which have already been mentioned (for example, in certain instances the veneration that is accorded to Allah in Islam is given to parents in Confucianism). Furthermore, being concerned with action alone and denying the value of purely theoretical knowledge in general, Confucianism is concerned only with orthopraxy, whereas Islam addresses both orthopraxy and orthodoxy.

Finally, Confucius is certain that a person can realize their humanity only in society, rejecting the assertions of Daoists and other primitivists who advocate a return to nature: only in acting in accordance with their place in society can human beings fulfil their role in the cosmic order. Behaving in a virtuous *wu-wei* manner, they (and primarily the ruler who receives his mandate from Heaven) make visible the Way prescribed by Heaven and contribute to cosmic harmony. One is reminded of the Islamic idea of *al-insān al-kāmil* who unites within themselves the macrocosm and the microcosm and reflects universal harmony.

To summarize, some of the central ideas of Confucius (and I want to reiterate that, while being the core of Confucianism, they do not represent the totality of its philosophy) sound pretty consonant with Islamic views, yet, being solely concerned with this world, they are considerably more limited in scope and focus. The reasons that what made Confucius eschew metaphysics in his teaching can be debated (the deplorable state of the world he was living in, which cried for the urgent establishment of order and stability? the desire not to speculate about the unknown?), what is clear is that his philosophy can give a lot of food for thought even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a totally different context.

<sup>16</sup> Confucius, *Analects*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 115.

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