

Was Confucius a Unitarian Universalist?  
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Let's start with a few preliminary matters.

My sermon title asks, "Was Confucius a Unitarian Universalist?" In case you've been holding your breath waiting for the answer, here it is. No, Confucius was not a Unitarian Universalist. While we can claim P. T. Barnum and Thomas Jefferson as ours, and perhaps even Jesus Christ himself, claiming Confucius would take us too deep into fantasy land.

One of the Confucian sayings in the responsive reading that I put together for today's service was "say that you do not know when you do not know." In that spirit, let me confess that I know very little about Confucianism. I think I can fake it for 20 minutes, but I am hardly a Confucian scholar. I can't even read Chinese.

I got into this, a few years ago, as a result of Stephen Prothero's book *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World – and Why Their Differences Matter* (2010). I had become a fan of Professor Prothero when I read his earlier book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't* (2007). From his perspective and experience as someone who teaches college students about religion, he laments the religious illiteracy of Americans.

The provocative title of his more recent book, *God is Not One*, easily caught my attention. Many Americans – and probably we UUs more than others – are confident that if you peel away the layers of superficialities, what you are left with is an essence that all, or at least most, religions share in common. There are many paths up the mountain, but we're all climbing the same mountain. That cathedral has many windows, but we are all looking at the same reality.<sup>1</sup> God goes by many names, or by no name at all, but God and all the gods, in the final analysis, are really One. Prothero takes exception to that thinking. Religions are different from each other, he tells us, and those differences are important; they matter.

While I find a lot to like in Confucianism, we should recognize that Confucius was a sexist. I'm confident that if he were with us today he would advocate human equality, that he would not permit women and girls to be second class citizens, but he has been dead now for two and a half millennia. We cannot change who he was. But the movement that bears his name has not been static, and the Confucianism that I applaud has room for all people, with everyone seen as capable of attaining merit, and with everyone allowed to attain merit.

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<sup>1</sup> See Forrest Church, "The Cathedral of the World," chapter 5 in John A. Buehrens & Church, *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* (rev. ed. 1998).

What attracted me, a Unitarian Universalist, a UU without any substantial attachment to the religious traditions of the East, what attracted me to Confucius?

The first attraction was the absence of supernaturalism in his teachings. While he allows a vague concept of an impersonal cosmic power, called *tian*, commonly translated as *heaven*, he feels no need for supernatural explanations. There's no creation story. There's no intervention from above; there are no rules imposed from on high, no commandments brought down from the mountain top. There's no threat of post-death punishment, no promise of reward by and by. The dead are dead. Dead but not forgotten. Ancestors are held in high regard.

We UUs differ from our more traditional Christian cousins in viewing the Bible as a human document – written by humans, telling stories about humans. Likewise the basic texts of Confucianism are recognized as the products of human creativity. They were not handed down from up there; they were not dictated by a transcendent power.

There is also a parallel between how Confucianists view Confucius – as a man, a great teacher, and not divine – and how we UUs view Jesus – as a man, a great teacher, and not divine, not the son of God, or at least not the unique son of God. You might note that Confucius, unlike Jesus, was not executed. Perhaps if he had been crucified, too, there would be stories of his return.

The second attraction for me was Confucius's attitude towards humanity. He had a favorable view of humanity. We're okay, in his view. With proper education and training we can make something of ourselves. We can become *junzi*. *Junzis* are exemplary, profound, noble, superior. In the responsive reading I called them "those of merit." Status as a *junzi* is not based on heredity, wealth, physical strength, or ill-gotten power. Education is key. Those of the most humble background can rise in status. His view is very much in tune with our endorsement of the inherent worth and dignity of the individual.

You've probably stumbled across preachers on the radio preaching a very insistent message that the only way to be saved – saved from eternal damnation they mean – is to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Because of our sin, we can expect punishment, and there's only one way out. Confucius would have none of this, and neither would we.

The third attraction is the importance in Confucius's thinking of relationships and community. The solitary, self-sufficient individual is not the basic unit. Relationships, and thus community, come first. We become human by becoming social.<sup>2</sup> Relationships are two way; they involve reciprocity. Exploitation is not part of the Confucian plan. While the individualism

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<sup>2</sup> *God Is Not One*, p. 109.

of Unitarianism can sometimes get out of hand, Confucius's emphasis on relationships would keep it in check.

When Confucianists think of relationships, what they have in mind is relationships between people, not between a person and a god or the divine.<sup>3</sup>

The fourth attraction is what I think of as his subversive conservatism. Confucius was a conservative. That is certainly how he is remembered and honored. He wanted to preserve the values that he and his culture had inherited from the past. But not just preserve those values in textbooks and museums, but to use them as the basis for the structure of society. He looked back to a golden age.

The golden age of the past, however, is usually a myth, an inspiring myth, but rarely did such an age exist in reality. Thus Confucius was dedicated to the creation of a society better than what existed at the time, and better than that of the actual past, if not the mythical past. He sought to redirect Chinese culture "from a hierarchy of birth to a hierarchy of merit."<sup>4</sup> Following Confucius, we are warned, can result in "exile and hunger" rather than "honor from princes."<sup>5</sup>

The danger he saw was chaos, a society in chaos, without stability, without law and order. If everyone does things the right way, if proper relationships are maintained, we can avoid chaos. As I look at our world today, I think we could certainly stand a little more order and quite a bit less chaos.

A fifth attraction of Confucianism is its openness to syncretism. Syncretism refers to the blending together of different religious traditions, or worshiping your neighbors' gods as well as your own. You may recall that in the Hebrew Bible the great sin of the Israelites was their tendency to be led astray by other gods, not remaining faithful to their one true God. There was a reason for the first of the Ten Commandments.

In China, traditionally, syncretism has been the norm. It is frequently said that Chinese are Confucians at work, Daoists at leisure, and Buddhists at death.<sup>6</sup> They don't feel a need to choose one from among the three traditions, forsaking the others.

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<sup>3</sup> *God Is Not One*, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> *God Is Not One*, p. 115.

<sup>5</sup> R.S. Ellwood & B.A. McGraw, *Many Peoples, Many Faiths: Women and Men in the World Religions* (7th ed., 2002), p. 185.

<sup>6</sup> *God Is Not One*, p. 103.

For me, however, and this is the sixth attraction of Confucius, if I had to pick one of the three – Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism – I would go with Confucianism. But, of course, we don't have to choose. Confucianists would say that the way we should live is best found by humans “within human tradition and society;” we find fulfillment or meaning in life “through human relationships and rituals and through the use of human reason.” Daoists, on the other hand, would say that “reason and society pervert the Dao,” or the Way, and that it is “best found alone in the rapture of merging with infinite nature and the mystical and marvelous.” It shouldn't surprise you to hear that I feel more comfortable with the Confucian approach.<sup>7</sup>

If I tried to explain my preference for Confucianism over Buddhism I would only convince the Buddhists among us of my ignorance and close-mindedness. Suffice it to say that for someone whose metaphysical and epistemological foundation is in mid-twentieth century Anglo-American analytic philosophy, Buddhism would be a stretch.<sup>8</sup>

Here's one last attraction of Confucianism for me, the seventh, if you're keeping score. I like Confucius's attitude towards education. The purpose of education, he says, is to “empower students to transform themselves into complete human beings.” We often hear, most recently from Wisconsin's Governor Walker, that the purpose of education is to equip a person to earn a living, or the purpose is to provide a skilled labor force. These may be important, but how many of us would study philosophy, or French literature, or medieval history, if we were simply preparing to enter the workforce. I agree with Confucius: education is about transformation; it is about empowerment.<sup>9</sup>

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Some of you may be tempted to ask, at this point, what makes Confucianism a *religion*, and not just a way of life, or a philosophy of life. This is a question that Confucianists probably have little interest in. We can call it whatever we want. In this country, we tend to have traditional Christianity as our paradigm for what a religion is. But as we UU's, as heretics, should realize, there's more than one approach. And the label “religion” probably matters most when we're dealing with legal issues – first amendment protections and prohibitions, tax law benefits, authority to perform weddings, and the like.

Confucianists don't have much interest in theology, but they are concerned with questions of ethics and behavior, of ritual and tradition.

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<sup>7</sup> *Many Peoples, Many Faiths*, p. 183.

<sup>8</sup> See *Many Peoples, Many Faiths*, pp. 127-33 (“Basic Buddhist Teaching”).

<sup>9</sup> *God Is Not One*, p. 113.

We tend to consider some people more religious than others based on how large the gap is between their beliefs and common sense or the findings of science. Thus we may consider fundamentalist Protestants as more religious than UUs or Confucianists.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, many UUs don't consider themselves religious, when they really are, just not in the way their parents were. Thus some UUs insist that they are *secular* humanists, when their church-going behavior clearly marks them as *religious* humanists.

I should mention an important difference between Confucianism and Unitarian Universalism – at least I *think* it's an important difference; maybe it's not. We have congregations; we have local religious communities; that's our basic unit, both for governance and religious life. As far as I can tell, Confucianists do not have anything comparable. Our congregations meet weekly, as we are doing right now. Again, as far as I know, Confucianists do not have regular gatherings. What the consequences are of these two differences, I'll leave to the experts.

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I've mentioned in passing three concepts that are important in Confucianism. You don't need to raise your hand. These *will* be on the exam.

- *tian* – This apparently means heaven, but it doesn't really, since followers of Confucius don't expect to go anywhere when they die. I referred to it earlier as an impersonal cosmic power. Or you can think of it as the personification of natural law. Keep in mind that Confucius wasn't much interested in theology, so don't expect learned treatises on this.
- *dao* – This is hard to nail down, and why would you want to? *Dao* refers to the way, nature, existence, infinite reality, God. You could think of it as a synonym for *tian*. *Dao* is experienced in three realms – in nature, in human society, and in one's own inner being.
- *junzi* – I find this one more accessible. A *junzi* is an exemplary person, a profound person, a noble man, a gentleman, a superior man, a cultivated man.<sup>11</sup> We can, I'm sure, clean this up and purge it of sexism.

I need to try to describe two additional concepts that are probably even more important for Confucianism than *tian*, *dao*, and *junzi*. These two additional concepts are *ren* and *li*.

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<sup>10</sup> *God Is Not One*, p. 107.

<sup>11</sup> *God Is Not One*, p. 110; E.O. Reichauer & J.K. Fairbank, *East Asia: The Great Tradition* (1960), p. 71.

*Ren*, first of all, is one of the five virtues enumerated by Confucius. The other four are justice, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness.<sup>12</sup>

- *Ren* refers to humaneness, humanity, benevolence, altruism, love, compassion, high principle, living together in harmony, and human-heartedness.<sup>13</sup> *Ren* has been characterized as “vague but eloquent.”<sup>14</sup> The character for *ren*, so I’m told, combines the image of “human being” with the image of “two”, thus referring to right relations among people.<sup>15</sup>
- *Li* refers to rites (that’s r-i-t-e-s), proper conduct, courtesy, doing things the right way, propriety.

Recall that the threat is chaos. *Li* enables us to achieve order and avoid chaos. In ritual, everyone acts out proper relationships, and everyone fits into a structured place. The idea is that we internalize the ritual, and it becomes how we behave generally. Our behavior becomes virtuous because courtesy and propriety became second nature for us. In other words, *li* stimulates *ren*.

We UUs are pretty good at *ren*. Our lives generally reflect compassion and principle; we’re kind to animals and to children.

We probably don’t value *li* quite as highly. While we’re certainly courteous, we tend to favor the spontaneous over the ritualistic. I don’t think we give as much weight as a Confucianist would to “that’s the way our grandparents did it.” We might consider moving 10 or 20 degrees in the *li* direction for a month or two – or for the remainder of Lent, there are seven weeks left – see how it feels, see how others respond to it.

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Earlier I mentioned the treatment of women in Confucianism. It left much to be desired. Do you know what the “three obediences” are?

The woman follows (and obeys) the man:

(1) in her youth, she follows her father and her elder brother;

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<sup>12</sup> *God Is Not One*, p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> *God Is Not One*, p. 115; *Many Peoples, Many Faiths*, p. 185.

<sup>14</sup> *Many Peoples, Many Faiths*, p. 503.

<sup>15</sup> *God Is Not One*, p. 116.

(2) when married, she follows her husband;

(3) when her husband is dead, she follows her son.<sup>16</sup>

Education for the girl was practical – sewing, cooking, learning to serve her future parents-in-law, proper demeanor. Girls were not seen as future government bureaucrats. Women who did not marry were, needless to say, worse off than those who did: domestic labor or prostitution was their future.

But I don't want to leave you with that image of Confucianism. There is, according to Prothero, a revival and renewal of Confucianism in China today.

New Confucians attempt to be faithful to the core teachings of Confucianism, [Prothero explains,] but to state them in modern, universal terms, and in dialogue with world cultures. More specifically, New Confucians seek to bring the ancient wisdom of their tradition to bear on such current challenges as science, liberalism, democracy, and human rights, and to purge that tradition of sexism and patriarchy along the way.<sup>17</sup>

I understand that we cannot claim Confucius as one of us – one could hardly use or dissent from Christian theological concepts half a millennium before the birth of Jesus – but we can claim him as one of our heroes. Prothero claims that Confucius “is almost certainly one of the five most influential people in recorded history.”<sup>18</sup> He doesn't tell us who the other four were.

Confucius redirected our collective attention from the solitary individual to the person in community. [He] seeks to instill in us ever widening circles of empathy– to self, yes, but then to family, community, nation, humanity, and Heaven. [He] insisted that our measure has nothing to do with wealth or rank and everything to do with achievement and virtue.” His was “the call to speak truth to power.” “He insisted on virtue not only in subjects but also in rulers. While Confucius did say that subjects were to respect and obey their rulers, he also said that rulers should care for their subjects like loving fathers care for their sons.” Let's say “as loving parents care for their children.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Many Peoples, Many Faiths*, p. 216.

<sup>17</sup> *God Is Not One*, p. 123.

<sup>18</sup> *God Is Not One*, p. 101.

<sup>19</sup> *God Is Not One*, pp. 126-27.

No, we cannot plausibly or honestly claim that Confucius was a Unitarian Universalist, but if somehow he were among us today, and if he were invited to choose one of America's many religions or denominations, I would not be surprised if he were to decide to join with us, and we would be honored to have him among us.