

CONFUCIAN

Confucianism is a major system of thought in China. It developed from the teachings of Confucius and his disciples. Confucius lived in the period of time approximately 551 to 479 BC. He was a philosopher in China, a scholar, and a teacher who taught the principles of good conduct, practical wisdom, and proper social relationships. He taught good government with honest and educated officials. Confucianism has influenced the Chinese attitude toward life and social standards. It has spread from China into Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, and has some interest to scholars in Western countries.

Confucius established a school about 530 BC in which he taught history, poetry, government, music, divination, and socially correct behavior.

Although Confucianism became an official ideology of the Chinese state, it has never existed as an established religion with a church or priesthood. It does need to be evaluated in our question, "Is one religion as good as another?" Not as a religion, but because many have thought of it as a religion over time, it may be good to look at what it teaches. Confucius was honored as a great teacher but he was never worshipped as a god, nor did he ever claim divinity. The temples built to honor Confucius were not built to worship, but as public places for annual ceremonies such as the philosopher's birthday. Several attempts to deify Confucius have failed because of the secular nature of the philosophy.

The Confucian 'Bible' would be nine ancient Chinese works handed down by Confucius and his followers. Some existed from ancient time many centuries before Confucius. These nine writings are from two groups; the Five Classics and the Four Books.

The Five Classics include a 'Book of Changes' which is a manual of divination probably as old as the eleventh century BC. A supplement which may have been written by Confucius or his disciples is philosophical. Another of the classics is a 'Book of History'; a collection of ancient historical documents. There is a 'Book of Poetry' with ancient poems, a 'Book of Rites' which deal with principles of conduct for private and public ceremonies. There is a work on 'Spring and Summer Annals' which may be the only work compiled by Confucius. It is a chronicle of major historic events in feudal China from the 8th century BC to the days nearing the death of Confucius in the 5th century BC.

The Four Books were compiled by Confucius and Mencius, one of the followers of Confucius. The 'Analects' is a collection by Confucius that form the basis of his moral and political philosophy. The 'Great Learning' and the 'Doctrine of the Mean' contain some of the philosophical utterances of Confucius arranged with comments by his disciples. The fourth book contains the teachings of Mencius and is called the 'Book of Mencius'.

The writings of Confucius present philosophies on love, goodness, humanity, righteousness, piety, integrity, and propriety. In politics he advocated a paternalistic government in which the sovereign is honorable and benevolent and the subjects are respectful and obedient. The ruler is then a good example for the people. Confucius upheld the theory that 'in education, there is no class distinction.'

After Confucius died, Mencius continued the ethical teaching of Confucius stressing the innate goodness of man. He did acknowledge that man has become depraved by his own destructive behavior, and contact with an evil environment. In politics, Mencius advanced the idea of the people's supremacy in the state, which may also be called democracy.

Another line of thought emerged about this time represented by Hsuntsu. He contended that a person is born with an evil nature, but can be regenerated through moral education. He taught that character should be molded by an orderly observance of rites and by the practice of music.

For many centuries Confucianism was taught in varying degrees, sometimes almost neglected and sometimes restored. but always had a firm hold on Chinese intellectual and political life.

During the Song (Sung) dynasty from 960 to 1279 AD a new system of Confucian thought began blending a mixture of Buddhist and Taoism elements. This school of thought was known as Neo-Confucianism. The line of thought included interest in theories of the universe and the origin of human nature. Neo-Confucianism also split into two schools stressing 'law' in one and 'mind' in the other.

During the Ch'ing dynasty from 1644 to 1911 there was a strong reaction to law schools of Neo-Confucian thought. Ch'ing scholars advocated a return to a more authentic Confucianism before it was mixed with Buddhist and Taoist ideas.

After the victory by the Chinese Communist in 1949 many traditions based on Confucianism were put aside. The family system which was revered in the past has been de-emphasized. Official campaigns against Confucianism were organized in the late 1960's and early 1970's. During the Communist rule few Confucian classics have been published.