CONFUCIANISM

IN RELATION TO

CHRISTIANITY.

A PAPER
READ BEFORE THE MISSIONARY CONFERENCE
IN SHANGHAI, ON MAY 11TH, 1877.

BY

REV. JAMES LEGGE, D.D., LL.D.

Professor of the Chinese Language and Literature in
Oxford University, England.
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SHANGHAI.
The following essay on "Confucianism in relation to Christianity" was written at the request of the Committee of Arrangements for the General Missionary Conference held at Shanghai in May, 1877. It was read in full assembly, but the Conference by a vote decided to omit it from the printed record of proceedings, in deference to the wishes of those who regarded it as taking one side in the controversy respecting the term to be used for God in the Chinese language.

In view of the author's reputation as the translator of the Chinese Classics, his zeal and success as a missionary for more than thirty years, the sympathy he still maintains with the work of missions, and the intrinsic value of the essay itself, many of his friends, members of the Conference and others, have deemed it a duty to publish it. They do this in the belief, that, as the result of nearly forty years' study of the Confucian books, it will be found most helpful to missionaries, and to students of the Confucian teachings generally.
CONFUCIANISM IN RELATION TO CHRISTIANITY.

Oxford, March 20th, 1877.

To the Members of the Missionary Conference at Shanghai.

Dear Brethren,

It is with feelings of regret and some degree of shame, that I prefix to this paper the date on which I have commenced to write it. Mr. W—'s letter, on behalf of the Committee of Arrangements, asking me to undertake the preparation of it, was written on the 14th December, 1875; and as I replied to him soon afterwards agreeing to the application, there was abundance of time for me to put my thoughts in writing, and transmit the result to Shanghai long ere this. I may say, however, that during the past year I have been kept very busy, and that some, perhaps not more important, but yet more pressing, duty has for the most part occupied my time and my pen. At the same time, the subject which I had engaged to bring before you has often been in my mind. Writing at the last moment hurriedly, the paper may not be so complete and well digested, as if I had prepared it at once, and kept it by me, to be added to or abbreviated as prolonged reflection rendered advisable, yet the substance of what I shall now say would not have been materially different.

Let me observe in the outset, what a pleasure it would be to me if I were present in person at your conference. Looking back on nearly forty years of life, I am thankful that so long ago I was led to become a missionary to the Chinese. My experience may justify me in saying, that he who desires to be a missionary desires a good work; and he who pursues it humbly and wisely, with the consecration of all his powers, will have increasing satisfaction in reflecting on his course, and as he approaches the end of his earthly life, will bless God who called him from his country and his kindred and his father's house to go into the mission field.
Let me further say here that I most anxiously hope your conference will be productive of beneficial results. In Mr. W—'s letter to me, to which I have referred, he said, "I think there is no doubt the conference will prove a success." I must confess I have at times had doubts as to this. The history of ecclesiastical councils and conferences in the past is not encouraging. You will be enabled, however, to understand one another's views and plans better than you have hitherto done; and where there has been a difference of opinion and practice on some important subjects, if you cannot be of the same mind and the same judgment about them, you may be able to agree to differ, with as little harm as possible to a substantial co-operation in the service of our common Lord. If I were travelling from Hongkong to attend the conference, I should be schooling myself all the way to maintain a calm and dispassionate mind, and dwelling on the apostle's counsel to the Philippians, to "do all things without murmurings and contentions (χωρίς γογγυσμῶν καὶ διαλογισμῶν)." Even if happily unanimous on any point, the conference can have no legislative power to bind or control the action of others not belonging to it. Its influence will be of a nobler character, and, according to its wisdom, moral and persuasive. May "the wisdom that cometh from above" appear largely in all your deliberations.

To come now to my proper subject:—"Confucianism in relation to Christianity:"

By Confucianism I understand the subjects set forth in what are styled the Confucian books—the Five King more especially and the Four Shu; and as I am to treat of these in their relation to Christianity (which word I need not seek to define), I will eschew touching on what we find in these books, of the national history and of physical speculation. There is a great deal of this latter in the Yi (易), and in portions of the other works. What it all means, and whether there may not be some grains of truth in it, I am hardly prepared to say. I translated the Yi more than twenty years ago, and have kept the version by me ever since, often referring to it and groping about for a clue, by which I might trace my way to the object and fundamental ideas of its makers. If I think I have at length found such a clue, this is not the place in which to unfold my views. They are in antagonism to those of the Sung philosophers, which again are themselves difficult to make out, and to lay down to one's self or to present to others in a thinkable form. We are not to look for truth on questions of natural and physical science.
in the Confucian books. I do not presume to find such even in our Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Let it not be supposed, however, that I place our Revealed and the Chinese records in the same category even on those subjects. Our Scriptures speak popularly about them; the Confucian speak dogmatically and empirically. An exposure of the errors and puereilities with which the Yi and other works abound may serve the purpose of weakening the esteem in which they are held by scholars and the people at large. There is no reason why missionaries and other Sinologists should not occupy themselves with such exposure, but purely Christian objects will be secured only indirectly by their doing so.

I conceive therefore that I have to do, as my special theme, with the religious and moral teachings in the Confucian books in relation to Christianity; and I will digest what it seems necessary for me to say under three heads:—first, what the books contain about God and other objects of religious worship; secondly, what they contain about man and his nature, and about a future state; thirdly, what they contain about the moral and social duties of man.

I.—As to what the Confucian books contain about God.

First.—I feel increasingly that we, as missionaries, ought to congratulate ourselves that there is so much in Confucianism about God, of which we can avail ourselves in setting forth our fuller truth. All the members of the Conference will not agree with me, when I repeat here my well-known conviction, that the Ti (帝) and Shang-ti (上帝) of the Chinese classics is God—our God—the true God. The character Ti (帝) is one of the phonetic or primitive characters of the language. The fathers of the Chinese people had it—say at least 5,000 years ago—before they were a kingdom, when they were taking the grand step of social progress in forming their written characters. We may not be able to give the etymological significance (so to speak) of the character, any more than we can give the precise, original significance of our own term God; but all the predicates of Ti, excepting as it is now used in the imperial style, are such as we can adopt in speaking of God who in the beginning made the heavens and the earth, and who in the fulness of time sent forth His Son, fully to reveal Him to men, and to die, the just for the unjust.

In order to bring our Chinese readers and hearers to think as we do about God, missionaries must supplement largely the statements in the Confucian books about Him—more largely indeed than in dealing with Jews we have to supplement the testimony
concerning Him in the Old Testament. But is there one of ourselves who has not from year to year been adding, by various study and effort of thought, to his knowledge of God, enlarging to himself the meaning of the name? It is matter for rejoicing, that we have not to clear away from the Chinese books a multitude of passages that would present Ti to the mind as a Being other than Powerful and Supreme, Righteous, Holy, and Loving. If there be any such passages, they have eluded my observation, whereas the passages that sustain what I have said are so numerous and striking, that I may well be excused from adducing any of them to the members of this Conference.

The name T'ien or "Heaven" is, indeed, constantly interchanged in Confucianism with Ti or "God;" but such a use of "Heaven" is not unexampled even in the New Testament. In our common speech the interchange of the terms is frequent. It will continue to be so, I expect, in the future Christian literature of China; but when our revealed Scriptures come to be familiar books in the country, the impersonal "Heaven" will more and more give place to the personal name, and the fear and reverence of God that are now inculcated will have superadded to them the loving regard and childlike trust that are due to our Father in heaven, the God of salvation.

Secondly.—As to what the Confucian books contain about the worship of God, and about other objects of worship. These books do not take us back to a time when the religion of China was a pure monotheism. The earliest distinct example of religious worship which they present to us is that of Shun, related in the second book of the Shu. We read that "he sacrificed specially, but with the ordinary forms, to God; sacrificed with reverent purity to the six Honoured ones; offered their appropriate sacrifices to the hills and rivers; and extended his worship to the host of spirits." There has been in China from time immemorial, along with the worship of God, a corrupt and depraving admixture of the worship of other beings.

I need barely refer to the worship of ancestors, universally practised in China, and that more than anything else may be styled the religion of the Chinese. The committee of arrangements have set apart a special session of the Conference for its consideration. Akin to it is the worship of the departed great— the heroes and sages, and all who by their inventions have deserved well of posterity.
And we find also in the Confucian system, the worship of the powers of nature, becoming in the course of time more and more vague. All nature appears as peopled by spiritual beings, presiding over the different parts of it, and specially over the greater objects; and the goodwill of these had and has to be sought by offerings and sacrificial services. In the "Book of Poetry," there are several indications of an early Sabaism. All these things are inconsistent with Christianity and must be forbidden. As it prevails, what is of a religious nature in them will pass away. Out of them, with the co-operating influences of Taouism and Buddhism, has grown the mass of superstition and idolatry, often approaching to fetichism, by which we find the country overrun and millions of the people led astray.

But it is to be observed, that the early Chinese did not see in the various worship that they practised anything inconsistent with their ideas of Shang-ťi, and the worship which the sovereign, as the father and high priest of the people, renders to Him. The religious state of the people would be much worse and more difficult to deal with, but for the marked difference which appears in the Confucian books between Him and all other objects of worship. The reverence paid to them—immeasurably inferior to Him—did not detract from faith in Him and dependence on Him, as the Supreme Ruler of men. This is seen very clearly in the "Great Plan," one of the most perplexing books in the Shu. There is much of absurd physical speculation in it, and a recognition of divination as an important branch of government; but the whole Plan with its nine divisions is represented as the gift of God or Heaven to the Great Yü, and the most valuable part of the Plan, the royal perfection described in it, is said to be "the lesson of God." In the next book but one that follows, "The metal-bound Coffer," we have a very interesting account of the duke of Chow's sacrificing to his three ancestors, the kings T'ae, Ke, and Wän, and asking that he might himself be permitted to die instead of his brother king Woo, who was very ill at the time. The duke appeals to them in the case, believing that they have the charge in heaven of watching over their great descendant, and that his prayer might be granted through their intercession. Let me refer here also to the last piece in the first section of the "Sacrificial Odes of Chow," where we have a hymn to How-tseih, the founder of the house of Chow. I will give my version of it in English verse:*

* The She king, p. 356.
"O thou, accomplished, great How-tseih,
To thee alone 'twas given
To be, by what we trace to thee,
The correlate of Heaven.

"On all who dwell within our land,
Grain-food didst thou bestow.
'Tis to thy wonder-working hand,
This gracious boon we owe.

"God had the wheat and barley meant
To nourish all mankind.
None would have fathomed His intent,
But for thy guiding mind."

In illustration of the important point I am insisting on, I will make one more reference—to a document not found indeed in the classical books, but which I believe the members of this Conference will acknowledge as purely Confucian. What I have in mind is the preliminary prayer addressed in 1538 by the then emperor of the Ming dynasty, when about to make a slight change in the style by which Shang-ti was addressed at the solstitial sacrifice. The document is given on the 26th page of my *Notions of the Chinese concerning God and Spirits*. After enumerating the numerous spirits to whom it was addressed, the object of it is thus described: "Beforehand, we inform you, all ye celestial and all ye terrestrial spirits, and will trouble you, in our behalf, to exert your spiritual influences, and display your vigorous efficacy, communicating our poor desire to Shang-Ti, and praying Him mercifully to grant us His acceptance and regard, and to be pleased with the title which we shall reverently present." We see from this document, that the emperor of China worships one God, and many other imaginary spiritual beings, who are under Him and inferior to Him, but who may act the part of mediators between the worshipper and Him.

Of course the missionary must condemn all this worship of inferior beings; but in doing so, let him freely recognize the difference that there is in Confucianism between God and them. The worship of them will disappear when the Christian system has been fully made known throughout the empire. It is contrary to Christianity, just as the Roman Catholic worship of saints and angels is contrary to it. Possibly traces of it may long remain in the literature and directories of worship of Christian China, just as traces of the Popish errors of our forefathers in England and other Protestant countries remain in their literature and ecclesiastical directories to the present day.
II.—As to what the Confucian books contain about man.

First.—That man is the creature of Heaven or God (天生民) —that he is the head and crown of all God’s lower works, more intelligent (靈) than other beings, and especially endowed with a moral nature (惟皇上帝降衷於下民); that he consists of a mortal body and anima, and of an intelligent soul or spirit, which are separated at death (及其死，魂魄則降，知氣在上). These are truths more or less definitely stated in the Confucian books, of which the missionary can avail himself, and which he may turn to good account.

Secondly.—With regard to the moral nature which man has received from God, the doctrine of Confucianism is, that in every one coming into the world it is good, though the manifestation of that goodness will be different in different individualities. The goodness of human nature was assumed by Confucius, rather than distinctly enunciated; but Mencius entered fully into the discussion of it, and his treating on the subject has been thought by many to conflict with Christianity. I do not think so. I entered fully into an examination of the question in my edition of Mencius, published in 1861, and I have seen no reason to modify the views which I then expressed. Mencius maintains the goodness of human nature, in the same way as Bishop Butler maintains it in his well-known Sermons; —that by an analysis of that nature it is seen that man was formed for goodness, and that, when he is not virtuous, he is violating the law of his nature.

I have known missionaries who were fond in the earlier years of their services of tilting with Mencius on this point. For myself I am thankful he spoke about man’s nature as he did, and consider that he thereby did very great service to the cause of truth and virtue among his countrymen. Of course I do not maintain that his teaching about human nature is complete, and in all respects correct. When he asserted that the sages of China had always been perfectly virtuous or had become so, he was presumptuous and wrong. Much of what he says about the causes that lead men endowed with the good nature to pursue courses which it condemns, is important and valuable; but there is that in the contrariety of the actual man to the ideal, on which neither Confucius nor any Chinese thinker before or after him could throw light. It is for the missionary to supplement Confucianism in this respect. And there are not a few passages in its books, which can be appealed to in support of the Christian
doctrine however we may phrase it, that there is not, and has not
been on earth, a just man, doing good and not sinning. There are
for instance the words of Shun to Yu, "The mind of man is restless,
—prone to err; its affinity for the right way is small (人 心 惟 優,
道 心 惟 微);" the words of Confucius that "he had not seen one
who loved virtue as he loved beauty (吾未見好德如好色者也);"
and especially his confession, in the "Doctrine of the Mean," that he
had not himself attained to the conduct required by his own golden
rule. Passages of a similar character are not few.

Thirdly.—Confucianism does not teach the immortality of man,
but neither does it deny it. The practice, old as the first footprints
of history in China, of sacrificing to the spirits of the departed, is
unintelligible unless we believe that the continued existence of dis-
embodied man was an article of faith with the earliest fathers of the
people; but every one knows how Confucius eluded the question
of Tze-lu about death. In the Kea-yü (家 語)—Confucianistic
though apocryphal—there are instances still more remarkable of his
shirking similar enquiries. In this respect Confucianism is defective;
but we cannot say that it is antagonistic to Christianity. We can-
not say so, any more than we can say that the Pentateuch is anta-
gonistic to Christianity. If Moses, with whom God spoke, did not
communicate the knowledge of a future state, we cannot be surprised
that Confucianism is silent on the subject.

Giving little intimation of a future state, we cannot expect to
find in Confucianism the doctrine of a future retribution. The
classical books have a heaven, but not a hell. In the "Book of
Poetry" we find king Wan, with his father and grandfather, happy
in heaven. In the Shu, in the "Puan-k'ang," T'ang the successful,
appears acting in heaven, and apparently also other good kings of
Shang and the ministers who had faithfully served them on earth,
are with him in the spirit state. But of any suffering or punish-
than the greater portion at least of the Old Testament. It is for
the missionary, in preaching Christ and Him crucified, with the
doctrines of the resurrection and the future judgment, to call the
Chinese to behold "life and immortality brought to light through
the gospel" and to hear the solemn message, that the times of their
former "ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men
everywhere to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in which
he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he
hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that
he hath raised him from the dead."

III.—As to what the Confucian books contain about the moral
duties and social relations of man.

Here, I think, all the members of the Conference will be very
much of one sentiment. The teaching of Confucianism on human
duty is wonderful and admirable. It is not perfect indeed. It does
not start from the first and great commandment, "Thou shalt love
the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with
all thy mind;" and in speaking of the relation of husband and wife,
as the first of the human relations, it does not discountenance poly-
gamy, a thing tolerated even in the Old Testament. But on the
last three of the four things which Confucius delighted to teach,—
"letters, ethics, devotion of soul, and truthfulness," his utterances
are in harmony with both the Law and the Gospel. A world ordered
by them would be a beautiful world. With the exception which I
have mentioned, what can be more excellent than the doctrine of
the five human relations, and the five virtues pertaining to them?
—than the lessons of Mencius about benevolence and righteousness?
—than the oft-repeated inculcation of the superiority of influence in
leading men to the right course, over force?—than the exhibition of
the power of example? When Confucius made the golden rule his
own, and repeatedly enunciated it, he did the greatest service to
his country. It has been said that he only gave the rule in a nega-
tive form, but the 13th chapter of "Doctrine of the Mean," and other
passages as well, show that he understood it as a positive rule, and
held that it was then only fulfilled, when the initiative was taken in
carrying it into practice. If a hall were somewhere to be erected
to contain the monuments of the sages and benefactors of mankind,
on the statue of Confucius there should be engraved his conversation
with Tze-kung, related in the 23rd chapter of the 15th book of "The
Analects."
In writing about Mencius in 1861, I said,—"Man, heathen man, a Gentile without the law, is still a law to himself. So the apostle Paul affirms; and to no moral teacher of Greece or Rome can we appeal for so grand an illustration of the averment as we find in Mencius." For Mencius let me here substitute Confucianism.

All the members of the Conference know how Confucius failed to appreciate the sentiment, that we ought to return good for evil. What he did say about it indeed indicated no mean sentiment. That the highest point of Christian morality was, as it were, pushing its feelers backward into Chinese society in the 5th or 6th century before our era was indeed wonderful, and we are sorry that the sage did not give it a welcome into his breast, and a place in his teachings. Most of the members also will probably sympathize with the judgment which I have expressed in the 5th volume of my "Chinese Classics," about the passionless character of Confucius' notices of the events that he is chronicling, and the way in which he fails to discharge the duty of a truthful historian.

In the preceding imperfect sketch of Confucianism in relation to Christianity, I have tried to make it appear, that the former is in many important points defective rather than antagonistic, and one practical conclusion to which I come is, that missionaries should endeavour not to exhibit themselves as antagonistic to Confucius and Confucianism.

Paul tells us that "the powers that be" are ordained of God; and Mencius, quoting substantially from "the Great Declaration" in the Shu, said that "Heaven, having produced the inferior people, made for them rulers." So far the Christian doctrino and the doctrine of China are at one. The Shu and Mencius add that "Heaven also made for the people instructors, who, as well as the rulers, should be assisting to God." I am inclined to accept this saying also, and to believe that Confucius—not to specify others—was raised up by God for the instruction of the Chinese people. That his system of teaching was not complete, is only in harmony with the Divino plan in the communication of truth to mankind; for during all the ages in which God was speaking to the Jewish people and their fathers, at sundry times and in divers manners, the system which we have in the New Testament from Christ and His apostles was far from being fully shown. As to the errors of religious worship which I have pointed out under my second head of remark, we cannot tell when and how they were introduced. If we suppose that God left the wise men of China to fall into these, "that He
might bring to nought the understanding of the prudent, and destroy the wisdom of the wise," that need not interfere with our admitting that those men were specially helped by God, that He might keep up some knowledge of Himself, and of the way of duty among the millions of their race.

Whatever may be thought of the above view, that we may regard Confucius himself as a man sent of God, I do not doubt that there will be an agreement in the Conference, as to missionaries making the best use they can of what is good and true in the Confucian system, to give to the Chinese the knowledge of Christianity. The judgment of Paul about the law contained in the Old Testament was, that "it was a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ," and I think that much in Confucianism may be made to serve a similar purpose with the Chinese. Let the missionary therefore show a willing appreciation of what is good in the system; and where he can see defects in the character of the sage himself, and especially in his want of historical truth in the Ch'\u2018un ch'iu, let him lay bare his nakedness with a tender hand—even with a more tender hand and a more bated breath than he would employ in exposing the dissembling of Peter at Antioch.

How best to awaken in the minds of the Chinese a sense of sin, which is all-important to their acceptance of the doctrine of the Cross, it is not easy to determine. There is the saying in the Analects,—"He who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray (獲罪於天無所福也)"; but is it not our common experience, that to the people in the mass, and perhaps still more to the scholars of the nation, there belongs a cold and unspiritual type of character? The prevailing secularism of Confucianism has made them very much of the earth, earthy. What can we do but unfold to them, with prayers and pains, what truth there is in Confucianism about God and His moral government, and about themselves, leading them on to the deeper, richer truth about the same subjects in Christianity? Above all, we must set before them the testimony of Scripture about Christ and His redeeming work, knowing that it is by taking of the things of Christ and showing them to men, that the Holy Spirit convinces of sin and righteousness and judgment.

I will now conclude by referring to a conversation which I had not very long ago on missions, with one of the ablest and most learned men in England, a very broad churchman, and perhaps something more. "I have read and thought," he said, "about the work of missionaries, and approve of what they are doing; but I
think they might find a more excellent way than that which they generally take to accomplish their end." I asked him what way of missionaries made him express himself in such a manner, and he replied, "You dash too much into collision with the existing heathen religions, and speak too bitterly of their great teachers." I told him that so far as my knowledge of missionaries and their work went, he was labouring under a misapprehension as to their methods; that they were glad to recognize whatever was good and true in the heathen religions, and careful not to excite angry feelings in their hearers, by speaking evil of dignities, and rashly condemning the great names they had been accustomed to venerate. He would be glad to think so, he said; but he still seemed unconvinced. After leaving him, I mused on our conversation, and have often mused on it since, something in the following way:

Christianity cannot be tacked on to any heathen religion as its complement, nor can it absorb any into itself without great changes in it and additions to it. Missionaries have not merely to reform, though it will be well for them to reform where and what they can; they have to revolutionize; and as no revolution of a political kind can be effected without disturbance of existing conditions, so neither can a revolution of a people's religion be brought about without heat and excitement. Confucianism is not antagonistic to Christianity, as Buddhism and Brahmanism are. It is not atheistic like the former, nor pantheistic like the latter. It is, however, a system whose issues are bounded by earth and by time; and though missionaries try to acknowledge what is good in it, and to use it as not abusing it, they cannot avoid sometimes seeming to pull down Confucius from his elevation. They cannot set forth the gospel as the wisdom of God and the power of God unto salvation, and exhort to the supreme love of God and of Christ, without deploring the want of any deep sense of sin, and of any glow of pity in the followers of the Chinese sage. Let them seek to go about their work everywhere—and I believe they can do so more easily in China than in other mission fields—in the spirit of Christ, without striving or crying, with meekness and lowliness of heart. Let no one think any labour too great to make himself familiar with the Confucian books. So shall missionaries in China come fully to understand the work they have to do; and the more they avoid driving their carriages rudely over the Master's grave, the more likely are they soon to see Jesus enthroned in his room in the hearts of the people.

JAMES LEGGE.