

Exploring Ethical Frameworks and Human Relationships in Confucian Ideology and The Teachings of Jesus Christ: Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of the ethical frameworks and human relations found in Confucian ideology and the teachings of Jesus Christ. By exploring these two influential belief systems, the study seeks to x-ray and deepen our understanding of their respective ethical principles and shed light on their impact on individuals and societies. Drawing inspiration from ancient philosophical texts and scriptural sources, the analysis examines virtues, core principles and concepts within Christianity and Confucianism. It explores and juxtaposes the role of ren (humanness) in Confucian ethics with the centrality of compassion and love in Christian teachings. The study also investigates the significance of human relationships including the Five Relationships in Confucianism and the commandment of love in Christianity. The study will rely heavily on the analects of Confucius and the Holy bible which are mainly the books that serve as a repository for the two ideologies. The findings of this study will go a long way to foster interreligious dialogue, cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect in diverse communities. Further research in the area of exploring the influence of Christian and Confucian ethics in contemporary societies and their approaches to environmental ethics is suggested.

Keywords: Confucianism; Christianity; Human relationships; morality

Background and Significance of the Study

Inglehart (1988) referred to the Confucian Ideology as the social, ethical and philosophical teachings attributed to the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551-479 BCE) and his disciples. The period of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty in ancient China saw the development of this ideology and it has since grown into a prominent belief system which has proven to be highly influential in East African societies. Confucius lived during a time of competing schools of thought, known as the Hundred Schools of Thought, each proposing their own philosophical perspectives. However, Confucianism rose into more significant prominence and became a dominant belief system during the Han Dynasty (206BCE-220CE) , serving as the official state ideology and exerting great influence on social norms, education and even governance.

Leys (1997) discussed the major Confucian values of lí (ritual propriety), rén (humaneness) and cultivation of lofty virtues such as wisdom, faithfulness, righteousness, benevolence and propriety. It places great emphasis on the concept of harmony both within oneself and in relationships with others. Confucian ethics champion respect for constituted authority, pursuit of moral excellence, maintenance of social order, fulfilment of social roles including filial piety, loyalty e.t.c.

Christianity on the hand is a major world religion that traces its origins to the life and times of Jesus, his death and resurrection in the first century in ancient Judea. Christianity took root within the context of the Roman Empire, a period marked by a cocktail of diverse philosophical schools of thoughts and diverse belief systems. The teachings of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament form the basis of Christian doctrine. Jesus emphasized forgiveness, compassion, love and an establishment of a personal relationship with God.

Thomas (2015) noted that the spread of Christianity can be attributed to the efforts of the early Christian apostles who carried out missionary work across the Mediterranean sharing the teachings of Jesus. According to Harold (2006), the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine to Christianity in the 4th century further glorified its status and led to its adoption as the state religion of the Roman Empire. Christianity diversified over time into various denominations, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy to mention a few. These varying branches although developed their unique traditions and theological interpretations were bound by a common belief in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The global influence wielded by Christianity cannot also be dissociated from European colonialism and the spread of European powers across the world. As European nations established colonies, they infused Christianity therein leading to the fusion of Christian beliefs with local cultures, customs and traditions. Christianity has deeply

influenced music, literature, ethics, legal systems, Western civilization, art, values and even social movements such as promotion of human rights.

A comparative analysis of these two ideologies will help deepen our understanding and allow for a more comprehensive understanding of their ethical frameworks and teachings. It helps highlight the universality of aspects of human experiences and values across different cultures and religions. It is instructive to note that these two ideologies originated in distinct historical and cultural contexts yet they both address fundamental questions bordering on the purpose of life, human nature and ethics. The process of a comparative analysis will therefore identify shared ethical principles and values such as moral conduct, love and compassion which transcend cultural boundaries and inhibitions. Emphasizing on these commonalities will foster intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding.

Purpose and Objectives

This study aims to compare the ethical frameworks and teachings on human relationships in Confucian ideology and teachings of Jesus Christ for several reasons. Firstly, since both philosophical and religious traditions have shaped the ethical frameworks of the Western world and East Asia, comparing their insights on fundamental ethical questions on issues like role of rituals, nature of virtue, importance of relationships etc will go a long way in fostering cross-cultural understanding. By examining thoroughly the manner of approach of these traditions towards leadership, justice, social responsibility and the common good, scholars can gain insights into their potential contributions to ethical discourse in a globalized world. Furthermore, these comparisons aim to explore the relevance of Confucian and Christian ethics in addressing cotemporary ethical challenges and societal issues. The discussions generated by these comparisons can produce further insights on interfaith dialogue, multiculturalism and development of ethical frameworks that transcend religious and cultural boundaries.

Ethical Frameworks

The ethical foundations of the Confucian Ideology and the Christian teachings form the basis for the philosophical and religious frameworks which shapes individuals and act as a moral compass for decision-making and behaviour. An understanding of these foundations involves exploring the core principles, ethical practices and virtues which define each tradition.

Confucian ideology

Confucianism and its ideology were mostly fashioned after the teachings of Confucius and documented in the Analects of Confucius also called Lúnyǔ (论语). It places premium emphasis on the cultivation of virtues as a tool for directing ethical behaviour and promote personal and societal wellbeing it encapsulates certain fundamental principles which act as a moral compass that guides social relationships, ethical behaviour and personal cultivation.

Rén (仁) which is often translated as benevolence or humaneness is at the heart of Confucian ethics. Wang (2012) stated that Ren is the heart of Confucianism. It involves how one treats others, empathy, kindness, compassion and recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of others. It fosters social cohesion, pursuit of moral excellence and harmonious relationships. It is pertinent to emphasize the role of Ren as it is the core value around which all other virtues revolve in Confucian ideology. According to the first two lines of the three character ancient classic text san zi jing (三字经), 人之初性本善 which means man at birth is fundamentally good in nature. Rén is rooted in this belief that humans are inherently good and naturally come with a capacity to cultivate virtuous qualities. Through the practice of ren, individuals can recognize the intrinsic worth and dignity of man and hence develop a deep sense of compassion, empathy and understanding towards the needs of others. In Confucian ethics, ren is essential to the establishment of an egalitarian and just society as it promotes societal interconnectedness, social cohesion and harmony guides individuals to transcend self-interest and elevate to the realm of communal interest while essentially maintaining the balance.

Xu (2012) discussed Zhōng (忠) which is often translated as loyalty as a concept which emphasizes fulfilling ones duties within social roles and interpersonal relationships. It exalts loyalty to family, rulers, friends and the community at large. It means putting collective welfare above individual interests and expects everyone to play their part in promoting social harmony and stability.

Lǐ (礼) which is often translated as ritual propriety defers to the proper observance of social and religious rituals. Mu (1994) stated that Confucian social philosophy placed emphasis upon ceremonial rites. It encourages sets of norms governing behaviour in different contexts of family, society and community. By adhering to customs and

rituals, individuals demonstrate and understanding and respect of social order, maintaining moral standards, etiquette and being well cultured.

Babones (2016) defined the concept of tianming (天命) commonly referred to as the mandate of heaven as the core of traditional Chinese philosophy and political theory. It is the belief that a ruler is granted his authority from heaven so long as the ruler adheres to moral principles and is committed to the well-being of people. It is connected with ethical behaviour in Confucianism and has an influence on governance and expectation from rulers throughout Chinese history. It implies that when the ruler governs in benevolence and righteousness, he enjoys support and approval from heaven. The ruler is expected to be at the vanguard of promoting social harmony and upholding ethical conduct while prioritizing the welfare of the populace. Conversely, if a ruler fails in these duties, he brings suffering and chaos to his people and the belief is that the mandate may be withdrawn signalling loss of legitimacy and imminent downfall. The influence of the mandate of heaven on ethical behaviour is double-barrelled. On the part of the ruler, it emphasizes a moral framework for rulership where the ruler is expected to embody and exemplify the Confucian virtues of compassion, wisdom, humility, virtuous conduct in actions and decisions in order to ensure justice, social stability and overall well-being of the people. On the part of the governed populace, since the wellbeing and prosperity of the people are mutually dependent, it encourages the people to fulfil their roles and responsibilities to contribute to a prosperous and harmonious society. In the end, the mandate of Heaven reinforces the notion that ethical behaviour is collective endeavour in which all and sundry must play a part and not solely the responsibility of the ruler.

Yì (義) which translates as righteousness refers to the practice of moral integrity whereby one's actions and moral principles should be in tandem. Cheng (1972) stated that it involves acting in accordance with ethical norms, upholding what is just and fair and making ethical choices with integrity with the aim of contributing to a just society.

Zhì (智) which translates as wisdom encompasses critical thinking, pursuit of knowledge, understanding, sound judgement and the ability to make informed and reasonable decisions. Lu (2022) emphasizes this virtue as one that guides individuals on the path of seeking intellectual growth and contributing to a better society through wise decisions.

Xìn (信) which translates as faithfulness emphasizes the value of being true to one's word, fulfilling ones commitments and obligations and maintaining loyalty in relationships. Wee (2011) mentioned that the frequency of the usage of Xin in the analects suggests that it takes a significant place within Confucius ethics. It guides individuals to be morally responsible, build trust and cultivate strong bonds.

Xiào (孝) which means filial piety stresses the importance of giving honour and respect to those who are deserving. According to Tu (1998), Confucius sees filial piety as the first step towards moral excellence. Parents and ancestors should be respected and should as well transcend familial relations to include elders, rulers and established communal hierarchy. He opined that the first test for our self-cultivation is our ability to cultivate meaningful relationships with our family members. Filial piety does not demand unconditional submissiveness to parental authority but recognition of and reverence of our source of life.

Generally, Confucianism sprang forth in the era of warring kingdoms therefore its ideology is steeped towards cultivating moral virtues through self-reflections, education and adherence to ethical norms. In the words of Low (2011), Confucius was born when ruthless harsh or heartless tyrants call themselves noble princes. Assassins and thieves claimed to be good government workers. He wanted to dedicate his life to alleviate the pain and anguish he saw. Believing that government reform was needed and that a benevolent government would help the ordinary people make a difference, he devoted his life to making this reform happen.

Teachings of Jesus Christ

Christianity is basically a religion whose rich moral framework is primarily derived from the teachings of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament of the Holy Bible. The moral foundation and fabric of Christianity is premised on the principles of forgiveness, justice and love of every individual irrespective of their origin.

At the core of Christian ethics lies the principle of love. Jesus Christ taught his followers to love God with all their hearts and to love their neighbours as themselves as he said in Mark 12-30-31, "Love the Lord you God with all you soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love you neighbour as yourself. There's no commandment greater than these." Of course, this concept of love transcends mere affection, it includes seeking the well-being of others, selflessness and compassion.

Justice is another fundamental principle Jesus highlighted as he railed against those who didn't stand for the oppressed or neglected fairness and equity. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus lampooned religious leaders saying "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices, mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness."

Forgiveness holds a pivotal position in Christian ethics. Jesus taught in Matthew 6:14-15, "For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." Christians are called to be forgiving of others even in the face of wrongdoing, seek reconciliation and promote healing in relationships.

An inherent worth and self dignity is also a vital aspect of Christian morality. Jesus taught that man was made in the image and likeness of God and such possesses intrinsic dignity. In Matthew 10:29-31 Jesus assures his disciples, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your father's care, and even the hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than sparrows." Jesus assures us man that even his lowliest creatures have worth not to talk the ones made in his likeness.

Comparative Analysis: Ethical Frameworks

Similarities between Confucianism and Christianity

In spite of the fact that both ideologies originated from different and distinct social constructs, historical contexts and cultural expressions, it is worth of note that they exhibit several similarities in philosophical outlooks and ethical teachings.

The most prominent point of convergence of the two ideologies is the idea of benevolence and kindness in Confucianism and love in Christianity which essentially are two sides of a coin. Confucius said, 'Love your fellow people' (The Analects, XII:22) the benevolent leader takes good care of his or her followers. He looks after their needs and helps them achieve their goals. Jesus said 'And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.' (1 Corinthians 13:13) 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.' (John 15:12).

Another meeting of thoughts between the two ideologies is in regards to honour of children towards their parents. Confucius said 'When parents are alive, serve them with filial piety. When they are dead, honour their memory with sacrifices.' (Analects 2.5) 'In serving his parents, a son may remonstrate with them, but if he sees that they are not inclined to follow this advice, he should resume his reverent attitude and oppose them obstinately.' (Analects 4.18). Jesus made similar pronouncements in Matthew 19:17,19, Honour your father and mother and love your neighbour as yourself. He reiterated it more vehemently with a threat of damnation for those who would flout this rule in Matthew 15:4, For God commanded, Honour your father and your mother and whoever reviles his father or mother must surely die! The ethic of filial piety is obviously pivotal to the teachings of both ideologies and forms one of the pivots that have kept them standing.

The most interesting of similarities and seemingly a handshake between the two ideologies is the teaching of the so-called 'Golden rule'. In the King James Version Luke 6:31, Jesus said, 'Do to others as you would have them do to you.' While the Confucian version of the golden rule says '己所不欲勿施于人' which translates as 'Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you'. The eerie similarity in these teaching has generated a considerable buzz among various schools of thought who have argued if Jesus had adapted the teaching from Confucius who had lived earlier. While this is beyond the scope of this paper, it is instructive to note that the two ideologies place a premium on self love as a yardstick for love of neighbour.

Differences between Confucianism and Christianity

As much as there are points of convergence of both ideologies, there are also areas where the ideologies are parallel lines. Confucian ethics center on social harmony and the role of an individual in a community, following established norms and rituals to maintain order as well as cultivation of virtues and moral development of self. Christianity focuses on the teachings of Jesus, his relationship with God and leading a life that transforms in resonance with Christ's teachings. It emphasizes the importance of grace, love and redemption through faith.

In the aspect of relationships, Confucianism is particular about ruler-subject, husband-wife, father-son, elder-younger and friend-friend relationship. Christianity on the other hand emphasizes equality before God, acknowledges the importance of family but places more premium on spiritual kinship (brothers and sisters in Christ) which transcends biological ties.

Theologically, Confucianism downplays the worship of a divine being although respects vaguely the concept of heaven as a cosmic order. It focuses more on practical ethics and social harmony than with issues of theology or the afterlife. Christianity however propagates a belief in one God who is personal and involved in human history, the concept of the trinity (God the father, God the son and God the Holy spirit) and promise of eternal life after death for those who maintained a personal relationship with God.

Finally, on the concept of morality, the two ideologies also view it from different lenses. Morality from the Confucian prism is based on adherence to defined social roles and cultivation of values. It stresses education and self-cultivation to achieve moral excellence. It sees society as directly linked to family and each person has defined roles and responsibilities. Christian morals however are based on the teachings of Jesus under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It emphasizes the transformative power of faith, repentance and grace. As much as both Confucianism and Christianity generally aim to lead individuals towards harmonious and ethical living, they differ remarkably in their ethical frameworks, foundational beliefs and approaches to society and human relationships. A deep understanding of these divergences will provide valuable insights and profound appreciation of these influential traditions and their contributions to human thought.

Conclusion

The paper seeks to understand the ethical frameworks of Confucianism and Christianity to explore human relationships and society in order to foster mutual respect between cultures and traditions. Also, it aims to recognize the value each tradition places on community, individuals and find a common ground irrespective of diversity. Dialogues on ethical teachings foster deeper appreciation of the diversity of moral thought and practice thereby laying the foundation for more harmonious interactions and cooperation.

It is also pertinent to highlight areas for future research as this is broad topic with several niches that can be explored for a more fulfilling research experience. The impact of these ethical teachings on economic or political systems could be further explored. It would be interesting to see how much a comparative analysis can reveal about how these traditions influence governance, civic responsibility and business ethics. Another aspect that can be further pursued is to explore the historical interactions between Confucian and Christian communities to get detailed insights into how these traditions have influenced each other over time adapted. This could shed more light on the dynamism of ethical teachings and their relevance in general.

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