
Philosophical Religiosity in the Analects:
An Analysis of Discourses on Confucianism in Modern Japan

1. Religiosity in the Analects?

The death of Confucius is seldom referred in the *Analects*. Below is a rare passage that touches it:

The Master being very sick, Zi Lu asked leave to pray for him. He said, “May such a thing be done?” Zi Lu replied, “It may. In the *Eulogies* it is said, ‘Prayer has been made for thee to the spirits of the upper and lower worlds.’” The Master said, “My praying has been for a long time.” (*Analects*, 7: 35)

The interpretation of this passage is almost clear: Zi Lu, a disciple of Confucius, asked Confucius to permit his prayer to gods for the sake of Confucius’ recovery from serious illness, but Confucius rejected his proposal because the prayer was unnecessary for the illness. Confucius distanced himself from a “religious” practice like “prayer.”

Based on this interpretation, modern Japanese scholars argued that Confucianism was not a religion, but a teaching of morality. We can discern the most exemplary discourse in Watsuji Tetsurō.

2. Watsuji Tetsurō: Confucianism as a Teaching of the Way of Humanity

Watsuji referred to the above passage in his *Confucius*.

What character does the biography of *Confucius* which is found here (in the *Analects*) have in comparison with other teachers of humankind?

For this question, we can point out as a quick answer that it is a record of the *death of Confucius*. Among the nine chapters which are regarded as the older record in the *Analects*, two chapters cited on page 331 of this book seem to relate to this answer. [One is that] Confucius never dared to pray for the recovery from illness even when he was very sick. [The other is that] Confucius said to his disciples who began to prepare for the funeral ceremony when their master became very sick that “I wanted to die not as a person of rank, but as a teacher surrounded by disciples.” That is just about it. These two passages are all of what we can regard as relatively assured legends about Confucius’ death. We don’t know at all if Confucius was dead at that time. It looks that way for us, but the *Liji*, the *Zuozhuan*, and the *Shiji* do not prove it. That is to say, there is no evident record of Confucius’ death in the *Analects* as the oldest record. This is a really rare matter for the teacher of humankind. (Watsuji 1933, 337)

Watsuji read this passage as an allusion to Confucius’ death, but recognized that this was not an evident record of his death. Watsuji’s conclusion was that “there is no evident record of Confucius’ death in the *Analects* as the oldest record.” This is Watsuji’s key concept to grasp the character of Confucianism. Unlike other “teachers of humankind” such as Buddha, Jesus, and Socrates, Confucius never touched the problem of death and his biography did not include any story about his death.

What was the background of this unique attitude toward death? Watsuji imagined that “for the disciples of Confucius, it was a shameful matter to pick up such a problem [of death and soul]” and that “the doctrine of Confucius completely lacked *mysterious color*” (340). This attitude is similarly applied to the interpretation of Confucius’ thought of Heaven. Watsuji understood that Confucius’ thought of Heaven was not a faith in God, but a respect for “law.” That is why Watsuji inverted the moment of Confucius’ mention of the religious Heaven from the old part of the *Analects* to the new part.

These [phrases in chapters such as Xianjin, Xuanwen, Yanghua] seem to say that Heaven controls the life and death of human beings, knows human beings, and governs the course of nature. We can discern here an aspect of a Governor God a little bit stronger than the previous cases. Nevertheless, as long as Heaven *doesn't utter anything*, it is quite different from a Personal God. It should be suitable material for the interpretation that Heaven is somehow like an ambiguous and infinitely deep law. However, we are obliged to recognize that this sort of Heaven is very similar to the Heaven in the *Shijing* and the *Shujing*. That means the Heaven Confucius mentioned in the new part of the *Analects* rather than in the old part is much closer to the *Shijing* and the *Shujing*. We can relate this argument to the idea of Tsuda Sōkichi cited above saying that the realization of the *Shijing* and the *Shujing* was about a century newer than Confucius. The Governor God in the universe who governs the life and death of human beings and natural phenomena is far from Confucius' idea. He never preached the religious God. (343)

Using Tsuda's idea, Watsuji erased the "religious God" from the old part of the *Analects*. Finally he concluded that the core doctrine of Confucius did not consist in the "religious God," but in the "Way of humanity."

It is sufficient [for Confucius] to understand and realize the Way. The Way is a Way of humanity, neither a verb of God nor a way of enlightenment. He has no fear or anxiety, if he just follows the Way of humanity, that is, if he realizes benevolence and devotes loyalty and cordiality. That is why his doctrine has no mysterious color, and he never demands that "credo quia absurdum." All is reasonable. In this sense, the most remarkable characteristic of the doctrine of Confucius is to find an *absolute meaning in the Way of humanity*. (344)

In sum, for Watsuji, Confucianism is not a religion based on a transcendent God (Governor God or Personal God), but a doctrine to carry out human ethics rooted in everydayness. This image of Confucianism was not an isolated one, but prevalent in prewar Japan.

3. *Kaji Nobuyuki: re-religionizing Confucianism*

Contrary to Watsuji, there has existed an idea of recognizing the religiosity in the *Analects* in modern Japan. As an exemplary case, we can examine the discourse of Kaji Nobuyuki. The first chapter of his book *What is Confucianism?* is entitled the “Religiosity of Confucianism.”

If I say that Confucianism is a religion deeply connected to death, there must immediately arise many refutations not only from Japan but also from all over the world (particularly China). They will argue that Confucianism is rational and realistic, that it does not utter death, and that Confucian ancestor worship is not a religion. In any case, we can say that the common view does not recognize Confucianism as a religion. (Kaji 1990, 24)

Here it is not difficult for us to understand that Kaji criticizes Watsuji’s treatment of Confucianism as ethics. Then, what is a religion for Kaji? He defines it as an “elucidator of death and the posthumous.”

I think that a “religion is an elucidator of death and the posthumous.” If one removes the elucidation of death from any religion, what will still remain? Unexpectedly, almost only ethics and morality will. Contrary to that, if one removes ethics and morality from any religion, what will remain? Only death or the problem about death will. (33–34)

Kaji regards Confucianism as a religious doctrine to elucidate “death and the posthumous.” This is a complete negation of Watsuji’s claim that “Confucius never takes up the problem of death.” Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Kaji and Watsuji share the same view: religion should take up the “problem of death.” Watsuji said that Confucius preached “ethics and morality” because he never took up the problem of death, but Kaji said that Confucianism is a religion because Confucius discussed it.

But to support his argument, Kaji can’t extract sufficient evidence from the *Analects*. He just refers to the *Liji*. All he can do for the *Analects*

is to interpret a passage in chapter Xianjin too overly.

The original text is as follows:

Zi Lu asked about serving the spirits of the dead. The Master said, “While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve their spirits?” Zi Lu added, “I venture to ask about death?” He was answered, “While you do not know life, how can you know about death?” (*Analects*, 11: 12)

Kaji translated this part as follows:

Ji Lu (Zi Lu) asked about the worship of the spirits. The old master taught, “if you cannot serve men (in-life parents) in a proper way, how can you serve the spirits (dead parents)?” Ji Lu (Zi Lu) dared to ask, “then what is death?” The old master replied, “if you cannot understand the meaning of the in-life parents (life), how can you understand the meaning of the soul (death) in a proper way?” (Kaji 2004, 249)

By overly translating “men” and “life” into “in-life parents,” and “spirits” and “death” into “dead parents” or “soul,” Kaji intentionally reintroduces the “problem of death and soul” which Watsuji tried to avoid when discussing the *Analects*. In doing so, Kaji is eager to recover the religiosity of Confucianism in filial piety.¹

If we follow Kaji’s argument recognizing that there was a trace of religiosity in the *Analects*, why did such religiosity seldom appear in the *Analects*? Kaji’s answer is somehow ambiguous, because at the same time he has to accept the idea that it is Confucius who restricted the religiosity of Confucianism and sublimated it into ethics or morality.

The ritual to bring ancestors’ spirits to this world and to give them life

1. As for the religiosity of Confucianism, Kaji said that “the religiosity of Confucianism still survives persistently even today, which is filial piety. It is a filial piety as a theory of life which wraps three moments such as ancestor worship, respect for parents, and existence of descendants into one. Or, it is a religious filial piety reaching the liberation from the fear and anxiety of death.” (Kaji 1990, 223)

again is transformed into the ritual to unite their own real clan which worships the ancestors and inherits their blood. That is to say, the religious ritual is socialized to become the ethical ritual. (Kaji 1990, 83)

After Confucius, Confucian ethical doctrine is deepened. It becomes common for Confucianism to be overlapped by the notion of ethics. One of the reasons is that after Confucius there appears an apparent distinction between an intellectual Confucianist and a praying Confucianist. (98)

Kaji regards the former Confucianist as an “original Confucianist” who “is based on Shamanism and has an idea of filial piety” (77). Once Confucius who “is not a pure original Confucianist” appears, he excludes the “scaring, frenzy ritual for bringing in spirits” combined with the religiosity of the “original Confucianist” (79). He stresses the religiosity of “ancestor worship” and turns it into the doctrine of ritual and ethics.

Kaji claims that “filial piety” based on “ancestor worship” is not constructed until Confucius ethicalized the religiosity of the former Confucianism. In this regard, it is ironic that Kaji’s argument is getting close to Watsuji’s, because both recognize that it is Confucius who opens up a dimension of ethics/morality distinguished from religiosity. As for the figure of Confucius as well, Kaji’s argument is the same as Watsuji’s, even if he has an idea of regionalizing Confucianism. For Kaji, there is a religious Confucianism before Confucius, but Confucius is a teacher who rejects religiosity based on a personal God. On the other hand, for Watsuji, Confucius is a teacher who constitutes morality and ethics, but after Confucius, Confucianism would have a dimension of religiosity.

4. Hattori Unokichi: philosophical religiosity

Nevertheless, the religious dimension in Confucius’ Confucianism as the doctrine of ethics and morality is never overlooked. Moreover, those who advocate the doctrine of ethics and morality in Confucian-

ism tried to find the religious dimension in it. Here we are going to examine the discourse of Hattori Unokichi, a sinologist at the University of Tokyo, who talked about the religious dimension of Confucius' Confucianism as a "philosophical religiosity."

Like Kaji, Hattori also distinguished Confucius' Confucianism as an ethics from the former Confucianism as a religion.

Confucian thought before Confucius had many religious elements. After Confucius set up his teaching, it became more theoretical and ethical, that is to say, less religious. (Hattori 1939, 32)

Hattori intended to re-define Confucius' Confucianism in terms of "Confucian Teaching [孔子教]" which is distinguished from the former religious Confucianism [儒教]. But unlike Kaji, he regarded Confucianism as not so important, because the previous Confucianism was just an ethnic doctrine only for Chinese people, while Confucian Teaching after Confucius became a world doctrine spreading over East Asian countries and is very point of going to reach Western countries (Hattori 1938, 118). In other words, the Japanese can contribute only to ethical Confucian Teaching as a world doctrine, not to religious Confucianism as an ethnic doctrine for Chinese people.

In this regard, Hattori criticized then-contemporary arguments for defining Confucianism as a religion. Let us take as an example his criticism against Kang Youwei's "Confucian Teaching." According to Hattori, in the argument of the *Chinese Association of Confucian Teaching*, "to pray is the most important form in Confucian Teaching" (Hattori 1939, 9). This proposition is based on a "distortion" of the passage cited at the beginning. They did not interpret it as "Confucius believed that his behavior always accorded with the virtue of gods in Heaven and Earth, so he told Zi Lu that it was not necessary to pray in haste when he got sick now" (11). Instead, they distorted it as "Confucius really prayed" (Ibid.). For Hattori, it is a distortion to stress the religiosity of the *Analects*.

Contrary to them, Hattori wanted to use Confucian Teaching for the foundation of modern Japan. Religion is not suitable for that purpose, because a modern State needs secularization, i.e., the separation

of religion from the public sphere. It is moral or “national morality” which can support the public sphere and give legitimacy to the State. Hattori thought that Confucian Teaching as morality was useful for that purpose. That is why he insisted on distinguishing it from religion.

Even so, Hattori’s argumentation was not simple. He did not entirely reduce his Confucian Teaching into ethics or morality as Watsuji did. He tried to find a new type of religiosity in the core of Confucian Teaching.

Primitive Confucianism was quite religious, Confucius turned it into a teaching of ethics—however, Confucian Teaching is neither limited within a realm of mundane human matters nor is unknowable of what is beyond them as Huang Kan [皇侃] had asserted. Confucius’ fundamental belief is religious. (90–91)

Here Hattori referred to two types of religiosity: an old one in primitive Confucianism and a new one in Confucian Teaching. What is the difference between the two? For Hattori, new religiosity is a “philosophical religiosity.”

Nevertheless, Confucius deeply believed in Heaven’s will and was convinced that it was in him. In this regard, he is religious. That is to say, an extreme limit of Confucian Teaching is religious if we think religion as a coincidence between the finite and the infinite or between the relative and the absolute. At their extreme limit, many doctrines of philosophers often advocate the coincidence between the finite and the infinite or between the relative and the absolute, i.e., become religious. Confucian Teaching is religious in this sense, but this religiosity is different from Confucian religiosity. (Hattori 1938, 163)

For Hattori, Confucian Teaching as modern Confucianism should be ethical as well as religious. In this regard, Hattori’s attitude is quite different from Watsuji’s. Hattori was not satisfied with the separation between ethics or morality in the public realm and religion in the private realm. He tried to construct a new type of religion, “civil religion” in a Rousseauist sense, which transcends respective religions in the pri-

vate realm and is amalgamated with ethics or morality in the public realm (Rousseau 1895, 227–228). In this regard, it is useful for him to find the “philosophical religiosity” at the extreme limit of Confucian Teaching.

5. Inoue Tetsujirō: Ethical Religion

Inoue Tetsujirō was one of the founders of modern Japanese institution of philosophy. He was a professor of philosophy at the University of Tokyo. Hattori was his close colleague, and Anesaki Masaharu was also his close colleague as well as his son-in-law. We can say that Inoue was a genealogical father of Hattori, Anesaki, and Watsuji.

Inoue consistently stated that Confucianism was religious and ethical at the same time. This is because he aimed to construct a new type of religion, “ethical religion” [徳教／倫理的宗教], which should be constructed on Confucianism (Inoue 1908a, 302–303).

Since Inoue tried to seek “ethical religion” as the moral beyond former religions, Buddhism was already disqualified. Here he appealed to Confucianism or Shintoism confused with Confucianism. Confucianism was ideal, because it is never reduced to moral teaching, but still maintains its religiosity like Hattori.

In sum, Confucianism is coincident with religion as long as it respects Heaven beyond human beings. But it is quite different from religion as long as it ignores rituals and the posthumous. (Inoue 1908b, 309)

To defend the religiosity of Confucianism, Inoue dared to refute the public proposition that “Confucianism is an ethical religion, but not a religion.” Here, he referred to the passage in the *Analects* cited at the beginning and argued as follows:

It is a common view to say that Confucianism is an ethical religion, but not a religion. The reason for this common view is that Confucianism hardly has a religious ritual, and that Confucianism has an indifferent attitude to special halls to pray or preach. That is why we

call it an ethical religion distinct from Buddhism and Christianity. The distinction is not rigid, however. We distinguish them because the difference of degree is quite big, but this does not mean that Confucianism has no religious element at all. We can also find a religious ritual in Confucianism to some extent, because there is a ceremony called *Sekiten* to worship Confucius, which indicates the existence of a religious ritual. In addition, we can recognize that there was a case of building a special hall for lectures on Confucianism.

Moreover, Confucius says that “he who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray” [chapter Bayi, book 3] or “my praying has been for a long time” [chapter Shuer, book 7]. Confucius services prayer to the Heaven as a quasi-personal reality. (Inoue 1912, 337)

Here Inoue interpreted the prayer of Confucius as did Chinese members advocating “Confucian Teaching,” which Hattori criticized as a distortion. We can say that Inoue’s religiosity is somehow naïve in comparison with Hattori’s “philosophical religiosity.” But they have the same idea of finding again the new religiosity after morality. In this respect, Confucianism was a new source of both morality and religion.

Conclusion

The modern Japanese interpretation of Confucianism has two poles: religion and morality. But, what is unique for this interpretation of Confucianism is to amalgamate these two poles to constitute “civil religion” as a foundation for modern Japan. If we criticize it, we should reconsider the role of philosophy or philosophical discourse to support this amalgam. This is because “religiosity” is reintroduced into “morality” only when it becomes philosophical. In fact, philosophy in modern Japan re-appropriates a religious dimension and pretends to make itself a deeper doctrine than Western philosophy. The key phrase is what Hattori advocated: “the coincidence between the finite and the infinite or between the relative and the absolute.” Without this over-philosophizing process, it is hard to integrate religiosity and morality into one. Criticisms against Japanese “civil religion” in the prewar period depend

upon the interrogation of modern Japanese philosophical discourse. If we recognize that utilization of Confucianism is not an isolated phenomenon in prewar Japan, but a phenomenon spreading all over the East Asia in the modern age as well as in the current moment, we still need to re-examine modern Japanese philosophy to avoid the aporia of the utilization of Confucianism.

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