

A Comparison between Love in Christianity and Benevolence in Confucianism

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Abstract

Love is the nucleus of Christianity, while benevolence is a core value in Confucius thought. Both of them advocate love for all men and requires all people to practice love in order to build a harmonious society. They require the fulfillment of personal moral obligations and responsibilities to others. Nevertheless, there are still some slight differences lie in their similar propositions. This paper seeks to make a comparison between these two concepts and discusses their similarities and differences. In short, Christian love and Confucius benevolence, they hold the same golden rule in dealing with human relationships, and share a similar aim in maintaining a stable social order, although the love they advocate has different sources and functioning mechanism.

Keywords

Love; Christianity; Benevolence; Confucianism.

1. Introduction

Love is the most important concept in Christian ethics. It comes from God and men are commanded by God to love Him and their fellow men. It is a religious concept on which the Christian ethics is based, making the Christian believers love all men and practice the good. Benevolence is the core value of Confucius thoughts. It was directly mentioned 105 times in the Analects of Confucius and was discussed in 58 verses out of the total 512 verses (Yao 2002), but the Confucius (even the later generations of the Confucian school) never gave it a exact definition. It requires the virtuous men to perfect themselves, to help others and the society to be perfect, and to love all the human beings.

The Christian love and the Confucian benevolence plays a similar role respectively in the western and Chinese civilizations. They have had profound effects on the social moral standards since their coming into exist. What's more important, these two ancient ideas are still of great significance today in their own cultures. They have been interpreted as the joint of Chinese and Western cultures in the history of cultural exchange. To positively understand the connection and the distinctions between the two ideas can help understand the cultural exchange and get some enlightenment to the cultural development. In order to have a comprehensive understanding of the two ideas, this paper seeks to make a comparison between these two concepts and discusses their similarities and differences. In short, Christian love and Confucius benevolence, they hold the same golden rule in dealing with human relationships, and share a similar aim in maintaining a stable social order, although the love they advocate has different sources and functioning mechanism.

2. The Concept of Love in Christianity and Benevolence in Confucianism

Before comparing one to the other, it is necessary to know how these two ideas are understood in their own cultural communities and what influence they may have on people and the society that believe in them. The following two parts will give a detailed description.

2.1. Love in Christianity

Love in Christianity is a religious concept so that it has a strong religious function, and it stresses an equal and unconditional love for all men. God is superior to any other thing in this world. Also, love in Christianity can reflect the supreme authority of God because it comes from God and it's required by God in return. God wants the human world to be in order and peace, and most importantly, to be obedient to Him, so he command the man to love each other. In Christianity, love can be interpreted from three aspects: God loves the men and men was commanded to love God in return, and when it comes to the relationship of man to man, God requires them to love their fellow man equally, even their enemies (Tian 2014).

God loves the men in that He created human being and the world and man is made to dominate the world under the heaven, He has mercy and tolerance on man's evil conducts, and He saves the men to give them rebirth. God sends His son Jesus to help men go to the heaven in their afterlife, for He loves his children. It is said in the first epistle of St John, "And this is love, not that we loved God, but that he had love for us, and sent his Son to be an offering for our sins.(John 4: 10)"

Love is of God, and every child of God has love for God and for human being. It is stated in the Bible: "And he said to him, Have love for the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest rule" (Matthew 22:37-40). Man's love for God can be regarded as the direct response to the God's love for human. It refers to the religious devotion of human to God. The most basic explanation of this kind of love is to believe in God, to believe in Jesus Christ, to be faithful and deferential to God, to obey God's orders, and to obey God's rule.

One should love God as well as his neighbors according to God's orders. Here neighbors refer to those who you may meet anytime, anywhere, including strangers. The Bible places special emphasis on loving the vulnerable groups in society: the poor, the gentiles, orphans, and widows. Man's love for his fellow men is a command from God: "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13: 34). And man's love for God is also reflected in loving human beings.

2.2. Benevolence in Confucianism

Unlike love in Christianity, benevolence in Confucianism is not a religious idea because Confucianism itself cannot be regarded as a religion. But many scholars agree that the Confucius thoughts has the religious functions on Chinese social development (Gao 2012). It is a philosophical ethnics and the core value in this philosophical thought is benevolence (Ren). The Confucius and his followers never gave a single definition of benevolence, but they talked a lot about what could be called benevolent and how to be a man of benevolence. It is a vital principle that deals with human relationships, and it is a basic, universal virtue and the source of all specific virtues. In this paper, what is benevolence will be explained in the following three points.

Benevolence as a way of personal perfection. When Yan Yuan asked about benevolence. The Master said, "A benevolent man will control himself in conformity with the rules of propriety. Once every man can control himself in conformity with the rules of propriety, the world will be in good order. Benevolence depends on oneself, not on others."(Xu 2011). A man of benevolence restrains himself to achieve the rules of propriety. When everyone achieves propriety, the society will run harmoniously. That is to say, an ordered society relies on propriety which has to be reached by the benevolence of every man, and the key to achieving benevolence comes from oneself. The master also said: "A good man is content to be good; a wise man knows it pays to be good" and "If a man has made up his mind to be good, he will do no wrong" (Xu 2011). If a man is benevolent, he chooses to improve himself and to practice the good at all times.

Benevolence as love. The pupil of the Master asked about benevolence, the master said: "It is to love men"(cited in Chan, 1975). To be benevolent means to love people. In Confucianism, to love people starts from loving one's parents and being affectionate to one's relatives, as the Master said: "Respect for one's parents and elder brothers is the fundamental quality for a good man"(Xu 2011). The love for the relatives then extends to the love for all the people. Benevolence means to love others as one love his parents and other relatives. By saying "To establish others as you would establish yourself, and help others to develop as you would help yourself to" and "Do not do to others what you would not have others do to you"(Xu 2011), the Confucius reveals that the virtuous men treat others as they want to be treated, to love others as they love themselves.

Benevolence as a universal virtue. This is about how to be benevolent. Benevolence is not considered a specific virtue in the Confucius thought. It is universal and all other virtues are generated from benevolence. The Confucius said: "A man who is strong, resolute, simple, and slow to speak is near to *jen* (benevolence)", "One who can practice five things wherever he may be is a man of *jen* - earnestness, liberality, truthfulness, diligence, and generosity", "When one has avoided aggressiveness, pride, resentment, and greed, he may be called a man of *jen*" and "To study extensively, to be steadfast in one's purpose, to inquire earnestly, and to reflect on what is at hand - *jen* consists in these"(cited in Chan, 1975), which all show that benevolence is something go beyond particularity. It is basis of other virtues and brings forth the other good qualities.

3. Similarities between Love in Christianity and Benevolence in Confucianism

Now that the concepts are made clear, the common features or the correspondences are easy to be found. Their similarities will discussed in three aspects as followed.

3.1. A Universal Value

Both love in Christianity and benevolence in Confucianism have a universal value in regard to loving human beings. The universal love they advocate breaks the boundaries of family, class, race, nation or country. In Christianity, love one's neighbors means to love all people in the society, and it even stresses the love for the weak. In the Beatitudes, Jesus said "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they should inherit the earth. ... Blessed are you when others revile you and persecuted you...(Matthew 5:2-11)" Jesus also tells his followers to love their enemies: "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...(Matthew 5:44)"

In Confucianism, the Master said: "A young man should be filial at home and respectful abroad, cautious and trustworthy, affectionate towards all and intimate with the good"(Xu 2011). A man of benevolence should love his parents in the first place, respect the elders and then have love on all people, even those who are not good. From Mencius point of view, the love for man was even extended to the love for all in the nature, just as he advocated: "He is affectionate to his parents and humane to all people. He is humane to all people and feels love for all"(cited in Chan, 1975).

In this sense, love from Christian and from Confucian perspectives conveys the same idea that a good man should love all human beings in this world, including the enemies and the evil ones. It calls for an ideal society with the highest moral standard.

3.2. The Golden Rule

The Golden Rule or ethic of reciprocity is an ethical directive which has been expressed in many moral maxims. In the seventeenth century, the following two discourses were called the Golden

Rule: "Do to others as you would have them do to you. (Luke 6:31)" and "So in everything, do to others what you would have them to do you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets, (Matthew 7:12)". The principle of loving others as oneself is the commandment from God, He asks all men to love each other without discrimination because God equally loves every man He created.

There are two similar verses in the Analects of Confucius: "To establish others as you would establish yourself, and help others to develop as you would help yourself to", and "Do not do to others what you would not have others do to you". These two sentences can be regarded as the Golden Rule of Confucian benevolence and it is the fundamental way to realize Confucian benevolence. It shows an inner quality or virtue in which people stand in the perspective of each other and think of the way to treat others, to love others as they themselves want to be loved.

Christian love and Confucian benevolence both require the fulfillment of personal moral obligations and responsibilities to others. Whatever you need and pursue, you should also try to satisfy others; whatever you hate and deny, you should not push it to others. It means that people should not only do good things for others, but also restrain themselves from hurting others.

3.3. Social Function

Be it live in Christianity or benevolence in Confucianism, a stable and harmonious world is what they are devoted to build. They set restraints on people's conducts, praise the good qualities and try to move the evil ones with complete kindness. It is said in the New Testament that "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, ... so that your giving may be in secret, And your Father who sees in secret will reward you"(Matthew 6:2-3). The Christians believe that God will praise and reward those who do good in the heaven, and will punish the evil in the hell. They are told to treat the enemies with kindness and give to the need. Jesus said to the rich young man who was asking about good: "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."(Matthew 19: 18-19) and "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor..."(Matthew 19: 21).

Similarly, the Confucius said that a youth should be filial at home, and respectful to his elders abroad. He should be earnest and truthful, and he should overflow in love to all, cultivate the friendship of the good and employ them in polite studies after the performance of these things. Gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness, and kindness are the qualities to make people be respected and accomplished. And "If you set your mind on *jen* (benevolence)", Confucius said, "you will be free from evil".

As a universal social norm in the two cultures, love and benevolence are closely related to the good qualities, and have strict regulations on people's words and deeds. They have have a similar function in the communities, which is to try to build a society where people live harmoniously together, by putting up certain rules their believers must follow.

4. Differences between Love in Christianity and Benevolence in Confucianism

As it's mentioned before, due to the distinctive thinking mode in the Western and Chinese cultures, there are always differences lying in the similarities of the Christian love and Confucius benevolence. In this part, the differences between the two concepts will also be discussed from three perspectives.

4.1. The Divine Love and the Secular Ethics

For the Christians, the center of love is the divine God. Human beings are always dependent on God. Man's love for God is a direct response to God's love for man, and man's love for all is God's command. Love in Christianity represents the contractual relationship between God and man (Xie 2009). Man's love for God and for all has its meaning due to God's love for man. The creation of man and the covenant between God and man stand for God's love for man. It is impossible to maintain the relationship between man and man without referring to the supreme authority of God.

For the Confucians, benevolence is a human-centered idea, without any supreme deity. The emphasis of the Confucian benevolence lies in regulating the relationship between man and man. Benevolence has its source in love of human nature and originates from the filial piety of a blood relationship, which is rooted in human nature (Xie 2009). To love is an ability born in human nature. The love Confucius mentioned in "It (benevolence) is to love man" means the love of secular people. There is no god and not any supreme power involved. Confucius said that to be benevolent depends on oneself, not on any others.

4.2. Love for Equal Men and Love with Hierarchical Division

Although the God is an authority superior to any human, His love for all men is equal, and He commands the human beings to love all other men equally. When God signs the covenant with man, He does not choose any particular man of any particular race, sex or status. He makes a covenant with the whole human being without any discrimination. In the Ten Commandments, God speaks to all men, and He commands all people to rest on the Sabbath day, no matter what they do and where they are. That is, all human beings are equal to the God and to each other.

Confucian benevolence emphasizes the relationship of men, and there are hierarchical distinctions among people. There is always a consideration of family and nation in people's loving for each other. The foundation of benevolence is filial piety, the respect and love for one's parents. People are required to love all men, but it is after they have loved their parents, their relatives and their rulers. There are five cardinal relationships in Chinese culture: ruler to minister, father to son, husband to wife, elder brother to younger brother, and friend to friend. In these five cardinal relationships, the former is always superior to the latter, which means the latter should love the former first and then love other people, or the latter should love the former more than they love others.

4.3. The Law of Love and the Moral Restraints of Benevolence

With the same goal of building a harmonious society, love in Christianity and benevolence in Confucianism take different methods to reach their goals. The Christian uses law and covenant to regulate people, while the Confucian takes a moral means to restrict people.

The love from God and the love for God are all based on the covenant signed by God and man. The love from man to man is written in the Ten Commandments God says to man. It is commanded by God's Law. If man violates the law of God, they will be punished. As the Confucian benevolence emphasizes the secular relationship between people, it has never been written into any law. It never really forces people to obey it, and there is no punishment when people don't practice it. It is only a moral requirement for people, and a moral ideal that the Confucians wish people and society to achieve.

5. Conclusion

Benevolence is the foundation of Confucian moral ethics and the source of all other moral qualities; love is the basic principle of Christian ethics and requires man to do good in this life. Both of them advocate a universal love for man, and they have a pivotal position in their

respective cultures, a normative function and a strong positive impact on social harmony and stability. However, the two take effects in different ways, with different views on the relationship between people. Love in Christianity is of a divine origin that strictly regulate people's words and deeds, while Confucian benevolence is a moral standard that set limits or moral goals for all men. They shares a common ground, but there are also considerable differences lie in between. A deeper discussion on this topic in the future will help a lot in understanding the cultural exchange and getting some enlightenment to the cultural development.

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