This chapter develops three points concerning Confucianism and spiritual traditions. The first concerns the classic Confucian notion of “love or humaneness with distinctions.” The second concerns the role of ritual in Confucianism to build bridges across cultural differences. The third concerns understanding how Confucian humaneness, ren, allows the acknowledgment of what some Western philosophers have called “otherness.”

To preface the discussion it is important to acknowledge that Confucianism, like most of the other spiritual traditions of China and the world, has had a long and varied history. In this chapter Confucianism shall be identified with some ancient themes elaborated in pre-Han times. Those themes have been elaborated in many different and sometimes contradictory ways. But the concern here is to elaborate them in a contemporary way to show how a Confucian in our time might contribute to extending humaneness across rugged social barriers.

“Love with Distinctions”

The first thing to note about Confucian humaneness (ren) is its association with the Axial Age revolution that extended from East Asia through South Asia to the West Asian lands of the Mediterranean. The phrase “Axial Age” was coined by Karl Jaspers and was used to characterize the period roughly from 800–200 BCE, during which time philosophy was invented across the ecumene and there came into being the religions or religious philosophies that we now know as Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Greek philosophical paganism (Plato, Aristotle, etc.), Hinduisms, Jainism, Prophetic Judaism from which in combination with Greek philosophy Christianity arose, and
Zoroastrianism. The elements of these religions or religio-philosophies developed slowly and in many conflicting ways within each general tradition. Yet by the end of the Axial Age, that is, by about the second century BCE, the following themes were universal to them all: some conception or other of the world as a whole, conceptions of the ultimate principle or principles upon which the world as a whole exists, definitions of human identity as having more to do with the relations of individuals to the ultimate principles (for instance, Dao, Heaven/Earth, Brahman, Emptiness, God) than to local kinship settings, and imperatives to love everyone and be just to everyone (not merely those within one’s in-group). The general reason for the universality of love and justice is that all people are equally and most importantly related to the ultimate principles, and only secondarily to special relations with each other. All these themes were revolutionary relative to pre-Axial Age religious cultures.

The Confucian theme of humaneness is a version of the Axial Age theme of universal love. In contrast to pre-Axial Age cultures according to which one should be humane to one’s own people and rude or hostile to others, particularly barbarians, the early Confucians said that one should be humane to everyone, and that this trait itself is one of the ways in which a human being can become humane.

But in ancient China it would seem that Mozi’s philosophy, roughly contemporary with that of Confucius, was a more direct embodiment of the Axial Age ideal regarding universal humanity. When asked whence the “harms” of the world come, he said,

They arise out of want of mutual love. At present feudal lords know only to love their own states and not those of others. Therefore they do not hesitate to mobilize their states to attack others. Heads of families know only to love their own families and not those of others. Therefore they do not hesitate to mobilize their families to usurp others. And individuals know only to love their own persons and not those of others. Therefore they do not hesitate to mobilize their own persons to injure others.2

---
