WAS CONFUCIUS AGNOSTIC?

BY

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[The writer is deeply indebted to Professor K. T. Mei, of Harvard University, for his aid in interpreting difficult passages in texts used in this study, and for his kindness in reading and criticising this manuscript.

Mr. Arthur W. Hummel, Chief of the Division of Chinese Literature, the Library of Congress, has assisted the writer materially, particularly by his advice on matters of bibliography.

Some of the material herein was included in a paper of the same name which was read before the Conference on Far Eastern Studies, at Princeton, N.J., April 6, 1931.]

In the shifting sea of doubts on which we who study Chinese thought find ourselves, there is, if we may believe most writers on the subject, one rock of security — Confucius. It is not so much said as taken for granted that his thought, at least, we understand. If it is said, indeed, that our materials are too meager to warrant definite conclusions, that still does not shake the assumption that we have extracted, and properly interpreted, the utmost of information from the documents which we possess.

Among those certainties of which the majority of writers on Confucius are convinced, perhaps none is so unquestioned nor so
universal as the dictum that Confucius was agnostic, positivistic, limiting his view and his interests purely to the human realm, paying not the slightest heed to things “metaphysical”.

The writer began his study of Confucius in unquestioning acceptance of this, the traditional view. Soon, however, certain passages in the texts, particularly in the Lun Yu 論語, which are clearly incompatible with this position (and which have often been remarked by others), forced themselves upon his notice. Further study brought the conviction that such a position is entirely out of harmony with the philosophy of Confucius as a whole.

It is the present opinion of the writer that in making such an interpretation Western Sinologists, and many modern Chinese, have not only misinterpreted the texts, but have also lost a truer understanding of Confucius which was the general possession of Chinese scholarship up to the Sung dynasty.

A usual reaction of Sinologists, Chinese and Western, to this proposition is to ask: “What difference does it make? Of what real importance is it to determine whether Confucius was ‘agnostic’ or not?” There is a feeling that the problem, if one exists at all, is only a matter of the definition of such terms as “agnosticism” and “religion”. Beyond such lexicographical interest, the discussion is felt to have no bearing on the vital problems of Chinese thought.

This is far, however, from being the case. It is the writer’s conviction that the misreading, slight in itself, of this aspect of Confucius, has been directly responsible for an unfortunate failure on the part of many Western scholars to understand the prime motives of the sage. For it is in what the writer would venture

1) When the writer mentions “the philosophy of Confucius” he refers, of course, simply to that philosophy which is found in such texts as critical scholarship has judged to be most credibly Confucian. Whether that material be adequate is, of course, a separate problem. We must try, at least, to make the best possible interpretation of such material as we have.