

Sages and Saints: A Comparison Between Confucianism and Christianity in Terms of Canonization

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During the last ten years, I have been studying the Confucian temple as a national cult. By "national cult," I mean a system of religious worship that also has political dimensions and is promoted by rulers throughout the territories they govern. Worship in the Confucian temple, with a history of more than two thousand years, is a fitting example of a national cult. Basic to my research program is my conviction that the Confucian temple was the converging point of political and cultural power in imperial China. After offering a very brief account of the role the Confucian temple has played in traditional society, my abstract will highlight the new comparative direction to be explored in the present article.

As can easily be inferred by its name, the Confucian temple is devoted to worshipping Confucius (K'ung-tzu, 551-479 BCE), along with those who made major contributions to the Master's teachings through the centuries. While Confucius was but one, his disciples throughout history have been many. Therefore, the process of selecting faithful disciples for inclusion in the temple was of crucial importance for the continuation of the worship system. The criteria of choosing authentic disciples often changed along with the intellectual climate.

Besides changing in response to intellectual trends, the development of the Confucian temple also fluctuated along with the rise and fall of historical dynasties. Confucianism became a major factor in Chinese culture after it became the state ideology for the first time in 136 BCE, and worship in the Confucian temple eventually spread over the whole of China. Nonetheless, it took many centuries for Confucianism to achieve prominence as the state ideology. Moreover, even though it was the Han emperor who made Confucianism the state ideology, Wu-ti (141-87 BCE) paid no attention to the Confucian temple whatsoever. It was the usurper, Wang Mang (reigned 9-23 CE), who deliberately bestowed official status on the worship of Confucius. Nevertheless, the critical moment in the temple's evolution came when the T'ang dynasty set up the so-called temple-school system (*miao-hsüeh chih*). The T'ang ordered Confucian temples be established side by side with the official government schools in the capital down to local cities. The system, thus

designed, provided the Confucian temple and the doctrines it embodied with the opportunity to become the major guide for educational policy. The performance of worship in the Confucian temple was thereby advanced to the "world" (t'ien-hsia). It represented, at the same time, legitimacy for political rulers and orthodoxy for scholars; both rulers and scholars would contend to manipulate this cultural symbol for their collective interests. Yet, worship in the Confucian temple declined rapidly because of the disintegration of the Ch'ing regime at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the Confucian temple fell into oblivion.

As an aspect of a historical religion, worship in the Confucian temple might be characterized under three points. (1) It has lasted for more than two thousand years, and its influence expanded from China to penetrate all of East Asia. (2) Its institutions were in accord with the national system of the administrative units of the country, and there were more than 1500 Confucian temples within China proper by the end of the Ming dynasty. (3) Although rulers and scholar-officials exclusively performed the rites of worship, they kept the genealogy of the descendants of Confucius unbroken. Originally, the Confucian temple was a place for ancestor worship and private use of Confucius' family; therefore, rulers could claim legitimacy for their worship by preserving and supporting the descendants of Confucius. But according to my study, the genealogy of the descendants of Confucius was interrupted as early as the end of the Han dynasty. Thus, claims about an unbroken line were false.

The conclusions I previously reached are tentative; they are insufficient to show the specific characters of the cult of Confucius as a public religion because the ritual system of the Confucian temple was designed to meet the collective needs of the ruling class. It is not surprising that the masses felt remote from the temple. Hence, the weakness of my past study is obvious, for what I have done is within the context of Chinese tradition. Inevitably, my discussions can not escape the charge of being culturally bound or even ideologically loaded. In order to overcome the confines of cultural context, I undertook the present comparative study and cross-cultural research.

I am exploring the cult of saints within Christianity for comparisons and contrasts with the nature and the process of canonization within the Confucian temple system. The cult of saints appears more local and social in nature, while the Confucian temple was centralized

and highly political. To demonstrate such distinctions, four aspects of canonization within both traditions are discussed: the process of canonization, the standard of canonization, the social bases of the canonized, and their modes of beliefs. First, the central government's total control of Confucian canonization is in sharp contrast with the grass-roots movement of the Christian canonization. Second, the ruling class's strict manipulation of the Confucian canonization from its very beginning meant that Confucian sages would be far fewer in number than Christian saints. Accordingly, standards were different in kind and in quality. Third, an analysis of social origins of the canonized yields a further discrepancy between these two religious traditions. The Confucian sages—except for one member of a royal house—came entirely from the literati (shih) stratum. But, the Christian saints are indeed plural in their social origins even though most arose from the upper echelons of society. Finally, different attitudes towards relics, images and statues in the two religious traditions reflect the specific conceptions of holiness. Comparatively studying canonization systems enables us to say something about the nature and the scope of involvement by believers, as well as about the road to iconoclasm in the two traditions.

All in all, I would make the point that the investigation of the practice of the Confucian canonization reveals that Confucianism as a state religion alienated from the masses. This alienation can be observed not only by the remoteness ordinary people feel toward the Confucian temple's sacred grounds, but also by comparisons to the process of Christian canonization. In addition, the comparative history of canonization also suggests why modern Chinese intellectuals, who have been so deeply impressed with the idea of such private religions as Christianity, have found it so hard to conceptualize Confucianism as a religion or even to grasp its specific religious character.

Keywords: Confucianism, Christianity, Confucian temples, Canonization