

'Will of God' Foreign Concept to Eastern Religions

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Christians, Jews, Muslims and other theists seek to discern and follow the will of God. It may surprise them to learn that there are other religious practitioners who do not believe in a personal deity. How do you find meaning and purpose in life if you do not believe in God?

Confucius and Buddha represent two religious traditions that are non-theistic. Confucianism and Buddhism do not believe in one God, but they do believe in a purposeful life. Instead of seeking the will of God, Confucius grounded life in a moral order and the Buddha modeled seeking the liberating truth.

Confucius believed the mature person should follow the Mandate (or Will) of Heaven. Heaven (T'ien) is not a place or a deity, but a principle. It is the universal moral order. This is not the passive moral order of Western Deists, it is an active Reality which is manifest in human life, society and government and nature. The Will of Heaven was for the welfare of people. They could have harmony in life through a government with a principled ruler, appropriate social relationships and impeccable personal character. In the *Doctrine of the Mean*, Confucius said: "The life of the moral person is an exemplification of the universal moral order.... To find the central clue to our moral being which unites us to the universal moral order, that indeed is the highest human attainment."

Confucius believed his own teachings were grounded in this Will of Heaven. He said: "At 50 I knew the Mandate of Heaven" and "Heaven gave birth to the virtue within me."

One of Confucius' followers was asked: "If your master is really a sage, how does he know so many skills?" The follower replied: "Heaven has granted him sagehood as well as diverse skills."

Because of his focus on ethics and society, Confucius taught a "standoffish" attitude towards many Chinese traditional religious practices. Analects 11:11 relates: "Chi Lu asked about serving the spirits. Confucius said, 'If you can't yet serve men, how can you serve the spirits?'" The Analects also note: "The master never discussed strange phenomena, physical exploits, disorder or spiritual beings."

The Buddha shared this aloof attitude toward the traditional religion of his time. He lived in an India that worshiped many gods. He taught that the gods were caught in the same web of existence (karma) as human beings and thus were of no help in the spiritual quest. Any attachment to a deity is a hindrance to discovering the truth. One should free the mind of all such attachments and discover the way things really are.

The Buddha taught that worship of deities often springs from insecurity: "Gripped by fear men go to the sacred mountains, sacred groves, sacred trees and shrines, but these are not a secure kind of refuge." Instead of deities, Buddhists should take refuge in the example of the Buddha, the teachings of the Buddha and the community of practitioners who seek Enlightenment.

Instead of wasting time on moot points of metaphysical speculation, the Buddha advised focusing on the cultivation of Enlightenment through pursuing the Four Noble Truths. He said in his first sermon: "I have not explained these other things because they are not useful, they are not conducive to tranquility and Nirvana. What I have explained is suffering, the cause of suffering, the destruction of suffering and the path that leads to the destruction of suffering. This is useful, leading to non-attachment, the absence of passion, perfect knowledge."

For Confucius and Buddha a purposeful life is not dependent on seeking the will of a personal God. For Confucius, the Will of Heaven was expressed in the morally-ordered lives of people in a harmonious society. For the Buddha, penetrating insight into the Truth surpassed all deities and philosophies.

Resources for the article and helpful links:

Excerpts from the *Doctrine of the Mean* quoted from: Philip Novak, *The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994)

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The Mandate of Heaven

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