

Kongzi on Religious Experience

RONNIE LITTLEJOHN
Belmont University

In this scholarly note, Ronnie Littlejohn employs an internal hermeneutic to investigate Kongzi's 孔子 (Confucius's) understanding of religious experience, as illuminated by passages from a variety of classical Chinese sources.

Kongzi as a Participant in & Master of Ritual

Perhaps it is a result of the work of nineteenth-century Western scholarship on Chinese philosophy that there still remains the predominant view that Kongzi 孔子 (Confucius, 551–479 B.C.E.), was, if not a secular humanist philosopher, at least a teacher who treated religious experience as largely tangential to his project of cultivating *junzi* 君子, the ideal human. The scholars who have held and continue to hold such a view are a veritable “Who’s Who” of our intellectual lineage: James Legge, Herbert Giles, Wing-tsit Chan, Bruce and Taeko Brooks, and—arguably—even many of the authors in the very fine recent collection entitled *Confucian Spirituality*.¹ To me, it seems as if this view of Kongzi’s religious experience might rest on a neglect of some very strategic analects. In this essay, I offer a brief study of these important analects in order to see what they can contribute to our understanding of Kongzi on religious experience. In so doing, I employ an internal hermeneutic that allows one analect to direct the interpretation of another in an interdependent, mutually illuminating way.

In undertaking this project, some classical sources other than the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) have also been relevant. Although my focus is principally on analects from either Book Three or Book Ten, these passages have deep connections to the picture we get of Kongzi’s role not only as a participant in ritual but also as a master who instructs students in ritual performance and its meanings in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記). Knowing that the *Analects* was largely a redaction of earlier written and oral materials, it could be that the analects in books Three and Ten—those having to do with Kongzi’s

ritual practices—orbited in the same community that created and collected the *Liji* materials.² I have therefore frequently consulted the *Liji* for interpretive clues about Kongzi's religious experiences. Another classical text from which I have sought guidance is the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經). According to the *Analects* (1.15; 3.8; 7.15), Kongzi loved to discuss the *Odes*, and he found inspiration by singing them (8.8).³ Indeed, some analects I consider in this essay cite the *Odes*, and, even for those that do not specifically cite this text, its materials often shed light on religious practices in which Kongzi likely participated. I also made use of some passages from the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (*Doctrine of the Mean*) and the *Mengzi* 孟子 (*[Writings of Mencius]*) in order to illumine our understanding of Kongzi's experiences.

I begin this study with *Analects* 6.22: "Fan Chi asked about wisdom. The Master said, 'Devote yourself to what is appropriate *yi* 義 for the people, and show reverence [*jing* 敬] for the ghosts and spirits while keeping them at a distance, this can be called wisdom.'" This passage has historically been taken to mean that Kongzi thinks that wisdom lies in keeping one's distance from any religious beliefs about spirits, perhaps suggesting an agnosticism on Kongzi's part. But another interpretation is possible: We could understand Kongzi as saying that a wise person approaches numinous entities with careful attention to the appropriate decorum (*li* 禮) for relating to them. This reading is consistent with Kongzi's view that there is always a *li* for our behavior toward those of greater authority (e.g., a ruler or even one's father). Indeed, some help in interpreting what Kongzi means in 6.22 comes from 16.13, wherein the same character for *yuan* 遠 (distance) is used for how a son should neither be overly familiar with his father nor approach him without proper deference. For 6.22, my view is that Kongzi is extending the requirements of ritual propriety toward those in authority to cover our relationships with numinous entities.⁴ In taking this position, he is following the lead of the *Odes*. *Ode* 209 (*Chu Ci* 楚茨) teaches that the spirits admired sacrificers who were respectful, circumspect, and appropriate in relating to them. It says,

For offerings and sacrifice;
We seat the representatives of the dead, and urge them to eat:
Thus seeking to increase our bright happiness.

With correct and reverent deportment [toward the spirits],
.....
The able priest announces [the will of the Spirits],
.....
And the Spirits have enjoyed your spirits and viands.
.....
They will ever confer upon you the choicest favours.⁵

Ode 240 (*Si Qi* 思齊) says King Wen impressed spirits by following the *li* for approaching them set down from antiquity. In the *Liji*, extensive rules are described for how to approach spirits, some of which almost certainly predate Kongzi, and others of which are attributed to him.⁶ The *Liji*'s "ten most important human relationships" place the normative *li* for relating to spirits at the head of its list.⁷ And, according to the *Mengzi* (5B4), the first thing Kongzi did upon coming to hold office in Lu was to lay down the correct rituals governing sacred vessels and sacrifices. So, it seems in *Analects* 6.22 that, instead of teaching his students that there are no numinous entities and that to be wise is to recognize this fact, Kongzi is teaching them to be respectful toward spirits and to honor their power. I take this same line of interpretation to be a defensible reading of *Analects* 7.21, which says: "The Master had nothing to say about strange happenings, the use of force, disorder, or the *shen* 神 [spirits]." Following this reading, Kongzi would be taken to mean that the *li* about describing one's experiences with numinous entities required circumspection and discretion when speaking about the spirits—not that he refused to speak of them because he thought that belief in them was superstitious or only for the common and uneducated.

The *li* toward spirits is especially significant when they are approached through rituals such as sacrifice. *Analects* 3.12 says, "The expression 'sacrifice as though present' is taken to mean 'sacrifice to the spirits as though the spirits are present.' But the Master said: 'If I myself do not participate in the sacrifice, it is as though I have not sacrificed at all.'" In this passage, Kongzi is endorsing the statement "sacrifice as though the spirits are present." However, in spite of the use of "as though," he does not seem to be counseling his students to go through the motions of doing the rituals while actually believing himself that there are no such things as spirits. Kongzi never advises his students to do anything with duplicity, insincerity, or sham. In fact, in 11.21, he makes a sharp distinction between acting sincerely and pretending, warning sternly against the latter.⁸

Kongzi's comment to his students in the second half of 3.12 ("If I myself do not participate in the sacrifice. . .") is important to a well-rounded interpretation. On one level, this comment tells us that Kongzi felt he should be physically present at a sacrifice rather than sending a specialist to perform the ritual on his behalf. The practice of using a ritual specialist was widely done in the time of Kongzi, and this analect reveals his distaste for such an approach to religious life.⁹ But there is more to *Analects* 3.12 than a critique of employing ritual specialists. The text helps us notice that Kongzi is also affirming that something significant *does* take place in his religious activity. The text implies that when Kongzi practiced religious acts, he had meaningful religious experiences; consequently, he would not dream of having someone else perform the rituals for him.

Our evidence for Kongzi's participation in religious sacrifices and rituals is both adequate and clear. For example, *Analects* 3.17 bears testimony to his involvement at the beginning-of-the-month sacrifice: "Zigong wanted to do away with the practice of sacrificing a sheep to announce the beginning of the month. The Master said, Zigong! You love the sheep; I love the ritual." This passage is often taken to mean that Zigong does not see the point of continuing the ritual when sheep are such a valuable commodity, whereas Kongzi endorses ritual propriety over such pragmatic financial considerations.¹⁰ Such a reading goes well with just the sort of argument that Richard Wollheim makes in his "The Sheep and the Ceremony."¹¹ Wollheim stresses, understandably, how important the rites were to Kongzi for instantiating a particular form of life. Kongzi undoubtedly treasured the religious form of life. However, if we follow our guiding principle of internal hermeneutics not to take one analect as atomistically discrete from another, then our previous discussion of 3.12 authorizes us to make a more robust interpretation of 3.17 and understand why Kongzi valued this form of life. In short, Kongzi wanted to retain the practice of the sacrifice because he valued what happened when he participated in it, not merely because he supported the preservation of rituals as forms of life along with archery, music, and charioteering.

The fact that Kongzi's love of rituals was directly related to the experiences he had when he participated in them becomes even more obvious when we note his leadership in ritual performance. That is, Kongzi was a ritual master.¹² I am puzzled why this statement seems such an odd thing to say. Perhaps we are so conditioned to see Kongzi only as a moral philosopher that the appellation of "ritual master" seems immediately wrong. However, in early China the fusion of philosopher with ritual master in the same person was not uncommon, and the *Analects* will not let us escape the fact that Kongzi played this role. *Analects* 10.9 offers one description of Kongzi as a ritual master: "After assisting his Duke at a sacrifice, he would not keep the portion of the sacrificial meat bestowed upon him overnight. When sacrificing at home he would not let the meat sit for more than three days. If it had sat for more than three days, he would not eat it."

According to Zhousheng Lie's commentary, in the Three Kingdoms period (220–280 C.E.), there was no hygienic reason for eating the meat from the Duke's sacrifice on the same day, but the religious belief was that the spiritual benefit of the sacrifice would dissipate if was not consumed promptly. Kongzi's behavior reveals that he shared this belief. In contrast, there was no such belief about the family sacrifice, so the period of delay in eating it was subject only to the normal three-day demand of hygiene.¹³ Mengzi (6B6) reports that, while holding office in Lu, Kongzi led a sacrifice but was not given a share of the meat of the sacrificial animal. The result was that Kongzi left the state without so much as removing his ritual garments.

There is, of course, the formal insult offered to him in the host's not offering a portion of the sacrificial meat. But the omission is an affront precisely because Kongzi believed the meat was imbued with spiritual power as a result of his ritual action.

When Kongzi conducted rituals, he was not only careful with the sacrificial remains but also used only the proper pronunciations in the rites (as reported in *Analects* 7.18). But what does that mean?¹⁴ Liu Baonan thinks that this reference to proper ritual speech means simply that Kongzi used the dialect spoken in the Western Zhou capital.¹⁵ However, since we know that masters performing rituals employed formulas as performative transformations, invocations, affirmations, and confessions, it is also possible that this analect refers directly to the use of appropriate performative formulas. Such formulas were often in a special language that might not have been understood by those observing.

With respect to his private religious practices at home, *Analects* 10.11 tells us that Kongzi always took a small portion of each type of his food and placed it in the sacrificial vessels as an offering to his ancestors. Kongzi's practice of giving a little food to his ancestors gives us a background for understanding *Analects* 3.13, which begins with a question from Wang-sun Jia about ancestral offerings made in the home. He asks Kongzi, "What do you think about the saying, 'It is better to pay homage to the kitchen stove than to the corner shrine?'" In his interpretation of 3.13, Arthur Waley believes that Jia's question represents the rather cynical view that it would be much better to be well fed from the products of the kitchen stove than to waste food by placing it on the ancestral shrine.¹⁶ This reading makes Kongzi's answer all the more interesting. He replies: "Not so. Once you have incurred the wrath of Heaven, there is no one to whom you can pray for help." Kongzi's answer implies his belief in the efficacy of such small rituals and in the communion with spirits that such rituals were meant to establish.

Some analects describe Kongzi's participation in rituals that he did not lead or help conduct. One of the most interesting is 10.14: "When the villagers were performing the end-of-year exorcism [*nuo* 傩], he would stand on the Eastern steps dressed in full court regalia." The ritual referred to in this analect is probably the New Year's exorcism in which the entire populace participated and which is described in chapters 48 and 54 of the *Zhouli* 周禮 (*Rites of Zhou*). Its purpose was to drive away evil spirits and bad influences from the previous year. During the ritual, Kongzi stood solemnly in the position of the host of the house (on the east steps), but he also faced the direction toward which the spirits of the dead return to their proper place. What Kongzi experienced in participating in the ritual is unknown to us. However, in commenting on this analect, his Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) descendant Kong Anguo 孔安國 (156–74 B.C.E.) wrote that Kongzi stood on the steps of his ancestral temple (rather than his home) in order to

comfort his own ancestral spirits during the exorcism and keep them from fleeing along with the hungry ghosts and evil spirits.¹⁷ If we follow Kong Anguo's interpretation, we are offered a look into the inner intentions and experiences of Kongzi.

Kongzi was not merely a participant in rituals. Virtually the entire section entitled "Questions of Zang-Dze" of the *Liji* is devoted to a report of his role as an instructor in ritual action.¹⁸ He tells his students how to perform rituals, when to stop a ritual, where to stand, what to say and chant, and how to judge the ceremony's auspiciousness. On the other hand, Kongzi is also pictured as seeking instruction in the performance of ritual or the significance of ritual objects and space. For example, in *Analects* 3.15, he asks many questions about the Great Ancestral Temple; and the *Liji* reports that Kongzi sought instruction about mourning rituals from Laozi 老子.

Religious Experience for Illumination & Power

Up to this point in this essay, I have offered very few comments about Kongzi's actual internal religious experiences. As a partial explanation, we must remember that even the explicitly ritual texts of this period—such as the *Liji*—are virtually silent on what a practitioner actually experienced. According to Deborah Sommer, "whereas one can learn that the priests, for example, were responsible for dancing at prayers for rain and exorcising baneful influences with peach wands . . . one cannot determine their emotional or spiritual state when conducting rituals."¹⁹ This silence is certainly attributable in part to the *li* directing one's discussion of encounters with the spirits, and it may also be evidence of the ineffability of the numinous experiences themselves.

All of this notwithstanding, one additional observation about Kongzi's religious experiences is in order. He definitely believed that a religious experience could provide one with illumination and power. An evidence of such belief is in *Analects* 3.11, which is mirrored with only slight changes in *Zhongyong* 19. When Kongzi is asked for an explanation of the *di* 禘 sacrifice, he answers in 3.11: "I do not understand it. One who understood it could handle the world as if he had it right here," and he pointed to the palm of his hand. What interests me here is not whether Kongzi understood *how* to perform the *di* ritual, because I do not take him to be referring to the method of the ritual. Rather, it is his sense of the power that a practitioner could gain through a religious experience that is important. He believes that a person who has such an experience would obtain the knowledge and virtue necessary to handle the world, suggesting that he believed something transpired in ritual that was empowering and cognitively illuminating.

Noticing the close connection between *Zhongyong* 19 and *Analects* 3.11 opens the door for a final comment, this one on *Zhongyong* 16. Although

there is no parallel passage for *Zhongyong* 16 in the *Analects* as we find with *Zhongyong* 19, it is nevertheless relevant to an understanding of Kongzi's religious experiences. This text is attributed to Kongzi. In it, he offers us a fitting end to our brief study, saying:

The *de* 德 of the gods and spirits is profound. Looking, we do not see them; listening, we do not hear them. And yet they inform events to the extent that nothing can be what it is without them. Because of them, the people of the world fast, purify themselves, and put on their finest clothes in carrying out the sacrifices to them. It is as though the air above our heads is suffused with them, and as though they are all around. The *Odes* says: "The descent of the gods cannot be fathomed. How much less can it be ignored."

Notes

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¹See Lecture Two of James Legge, *The Religions of China: Confucianism and Taoism Described and Compared with Christianity* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2004; reprint of 1880 ed.); ch. 2 of Herbert Giles, *Religions of Ancient China* (London: Constable and Co., 1906); Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969); E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, trans., *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 304–6; and Weiming Tu and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds., *Confucian Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 2003).

²The work of Bruce Brooks and Taeko Brooks helps us appreciate how the formation and/or collection of these materials for the *Analects* and *Liji* may have been derived from the same source community, even if some of their reconstructions are arguable. See Brooks and Brooks, "The Kung Transition," in *The Original Analects*, 59–88.

³I am indebted to Deborah Sommer for helping me notice many of these connections and to P. J. Ivanhoe, who has reminded me the *Odes* is the only text later recognized as a classic that clearly was used in Kongzi's school.

⁴For a similar argument, see Robert Louden, "What Does Heaven Say?: Christian Wolff and Western Interpretations of Confucian Ethics," in *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, ed. Bryan W. Van Norden (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 73–93.

⁵James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics: Shijing, The Book of Odes* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Library Chinese Text Initiative, 1997), available at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/chinese/shijing/AnoShih.html>.

⁶*Liji* 1.5.8. See James Legge, trans, *The Li Ki [The Book of Rites]*, Internet Sacred Texts Archive, available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/liki/liki01.htm>.

⁷*Ibid.*, "Ji Tong" chapter, 28.245.

⁸Robin Wang has encouraged me to notice the way in which Kang Youwei (1858–1927) employed the Confucian concept of sincerity (*cheng* 诚) when interpreting 3.12. According to Kang, Kongzi's point is that, if one has sincerity, there will be a spirit; if

one does not have sincerity, there will be no spirit. See Kang Youwei, *Commentary to Analects* (Beijing: Chinese Press, 1984), 37. While I value the effort of Kang in this interpretation, I nevertheless believe the force of this passage lies in Kongzi's point about the necessity of his own personal participation in the ritual to his sense that a religious experience has occurred. On the other hand, while agreeing with me that Kongzi probably did believe in spirits, Eric Hutton has reminded me that, as the case of Xunzi 荀子 (ca. 310–238 B.C.E.) shows, it is possible to believe that one should practice the rituals even while knowing that they do not communicate with spirits—and still not regard the rituals as empty. So, Hutton does not think my appeal to Kongzi's aversion to duplicity can necessarily rule out reading the comment “sacrifice as though the spirits are present” as implying that one should go through the motions even though there are no spirits. In spite of what we take Xunzi to be saying, we must remember Kongzi's caution against “pretending” in *Analects* 11.21. Still, in short, I think the major thrust of this passage is to be found in Kongzi's insistence that religious gain comes only by direct participation; it cannot come vicariously by having someone else perform religious acts for you.

⁹Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 98. Both the *Zhouli* and the *Guanzi* 管子 (*[Writings of] Master Guan*) mention ritual specialists who function at levels from the court to the common villages. The *Guanzi* says, “People made their own offerings, and each family had a ritual specialist [*wu* 巫] and a scribe. . . . The people exhausted themselves in sacrifices and yet knew no good fortune. They made offerings without proper moderation. The people and the spirits occupied the same position. . . . There was neither respect nor reverence” (See Guoyu, the *Chu Yu*, “Xia” chap., 18.22.)

¹⁰Edward Slingerland, trans., *Confucius: Analects, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2003), 24.

¹¹See Richard Wollheim, “The Sheep and the Ceremony,” in *The Mind and Its Depths* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1–21.

¹²Even more shocking than calling Kongzi a “ritual master” is the tradition that he was a master of the reading of omens, a seer and physiognomer who could predict the future. In *Analects* 9.9, Kongzi says, “The Yellow River has not yielded its chart. The Luo River does not produce its writings. I am finished!” The omen-reading tradition practiced by Kongzi was so well entrenched that Wang Chong (27–100 C.E.) felt the need to refute it. See Wang Chong, “Asking Questions about Kongzi 問孔,” in *Readings in Han Chinese Thought*, ed. and trans. Mark Csikszentmihalyi (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 93–95: 94.

¹³Slingerland, *Confucius*, 104.

¹⁴In personal correspondence, Deborah Sommer mentioned that there were special terms for the sacrificial victims. For example, sheep were called “fuzzy ones,” and cattle, “big footed ones.”

¹⁵Slingerland, *Confucius*, 70.

¹⁶Arthur Waley, trans. *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 97.

¹⁷Slingerland, *Confucius*, 105.

¹⁸See Legge, *The Li Ki*, Book V.

¹⁹Deborah Sommer, “Ritual and Sacrifice in Early Confucianism: Contacts with the Spirit World,” in *Confucian Spirituality*, ed. Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: New Crossroads, 2002), 197–220: 214.