

Document A: The Teachings of Confucius

The following is an excerpt from Paul Kjellberg, professor at Whittier College, written on May 10th, 2005 about the life, teachings, and the influence of Confucius.

Confucius laid down a pattern of thinking followed by more people for more generations than any other human being on the face of the earth. No matter what religion, no matter what form of government, the Chinese (and most other East Asian civilizations) and their way of thinking can in some way be shown to have Confucian elements about them. The Confucian method characterizes just about all Chinese learning down to the present day; its fundamental tenet is the unwavering belief in the perfectibility of human beings through learning.

Confucius was no religious leader nor did he claim any special divine status (nor was any divine status claimed for him). He was, in fact, a relatively ordinary person. He began a startlingly successful early political career as a young man, rising quickly in the administrative ranks, but fell out of favor fast. Although his intense personal goal was to restore peace and orderliness to the province, he found himself dismissed from government early on. He never returned to public life. Instead he turned to teaching, hoping that he could change the world by changing its leaders at a young age. We have many accounts of his teaching and all his students praise his natural talent for brilliant teaching.

Confucius had one overwhelming message: if we are to achieve a state of orderliness and peace, we need to return to traditional values of virtue. These values are based entirely on one concept: jen, which is best translated as "humaneness," but can also mean "humanity," "benevolence," "goodness," or "virtue." This humaneness is a relatively strange concept to Western eyes, because it is not primarily a practicable virtue. Like his contemporaries, Confucius believed that the human order in some way reflected the divine order, or the patterns of heaven. More than anything, according to Confucius, the ancients understood the order and hierarchy of heaven and earth; as a result, Confucius established the Chinese past as an infallible model for the present.

