There exist a number of belief systems that are ordinarily regarded as being religious which, when compared and contrasted with a religion such as what is known as conventional Christianity, are wholly or substantially naturalistic (non-supernaturalistic). Those belief systems include Buddhism, Confucianism, religious naturalism, religious humanism, much of modern day Judaism, New Thought, and modern day Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism. Even Shinto has been described as a “naturalistic religion that grew out of the everyday life of the Japanese people in primitive times”.[1] The adherents of these belief systems are men and women of faith, too. Their faith is activated belief and trust in the nature of the cosmos.

Humanist philosopher Corliss Lamont (1965), referring to Buddha and Confucius, has written that “it seems most unlikely that either of them believed in supernaturalism in the sense of a personal God and personal immortality”. [2]

Insofar as Confucianism is concerned, the teachings of the Chinese sage and philosopher Confucius, who saw himself as “a social reformer, rather than a religious leader”, [3] are “almost entirely concerned with man’s moral conduct and his social relations”. [4]

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K’ung Fu Tzu (commonly pronounced Confucius in English, and also known as Master Kung) was born in 551 BCE in the state of Lu (modern day Shantung Province) and lived, for the most part in poverty, during the Chou dynasty. He wandered through many states of China, giving advice to their rulers, always aiming to bring about a solution (in terms of peace and order) to the chaos that had engulfed his country for over 2 centuries. Confucius opined that, for there to be peace and order in society, the individual must first learn to lead a correct life. Further, as the family was the basic unity of society, there could be no lasting peace or order in society unless and until the family was content and happy. Also, there needed to be order in society; everybody had specific, ordered roles from which there should be no deviation. One still sees this in Chinese society today.

Lamont notes that Confucius was “much more concerned with political and social life than Buddha and presented the idea of the noble man in the noble state.” Confucius’ teachings, which are “essentially practical”, do not even amount to a philosophy in the Western sense of the word, let alone a religion in any conventional sense. As Strathern (1999) has pointed out:

Confucius’ teachings do contain references to epistemology, logic, metaphysics, and aesthetics - the traditional categories of philosophy - but they are only passing references and form no system.

As to whether Confucianism is a religion, Strathern writes:

Confucius may have founded a religion (Confucianism), but his teachings were not religious per se. Nor, in fact, was his religion – and this Chinese puzzle has certainly contributed to its longevity.

Assuming for the moment that Confucianism is a religion, it is, as Potter (1954) points out, very much “the religion of self-help” - perhaps the first

such religion - with a bare minimum of metaphysics.\footnote{10} Potter describes the belief system as the “simple humanistic ethical religion of Master Kung”.\footnote{11} In that regard, the ethical teachings of Confucianism relate for the most part to morals and standards of right behavior towards others encapsulating the following core values:

- **Li**: includes ritual, propriety, etiquette, decorum, etc.
- **Hsiao**: love within the family: love of parents for their children and of children for their parents
- **Yi**: righteousness
- **Xin**: honesty and trustworthiness
- **Jen**: benevolence, humaneness towards others; the highest Confucian virtue
- **Chung**: loyalty to the state, etc.\footnote{12}

Confucius places great emphasis on *ren* (due consideration for humanity) and *li* (ritual and decorum), which he saw as the two basic qualities and ideals. Potter lists the cardinal ethical virtues of Confucius’ belief system as being the following:

> Wisdom is the virtue Confucius liked to emphasize. The other four of his Five Cardinal Virtues are Humanity, Uprightness, Decorum, and Truth. He was the first to make Humanism a religion.\footnote{13}

Indeed, in a manner similar to much Humanist thought, there is an emphasis on the innate goodness of every human being:

> Confucianists often speak of “perfected humanity”. It can be achieved by a person because of something the Confucianists believe to be present within each person, even at birth. This is a native goodness or kindly love that can be developed through feelings of helpfulness toward others.\footnote{14}

Tu Wei-ming, an eminent professor of Chinese history and religion at Harvard, has also written of the essential humanism of Confucius’ system of ethics:

If we have to choose one word to characterize Confucian ethics, that word would have to be humanity. The main concern of Confucian ethics is the whole process of learning to be human. This process involves a total commitment, a continuous effort of self-refinement or self-improvement and a holistic vision of the entire project of moral education.\textsuperscript{15[15]}

This is not surprising given that Confucius himself, who, unlike the founders of most of the world’s religions, claimed no divine revelation from on high.\textsuperscript{16[16]} Voltaire wrote that Confucius was “the first man who did not receive divine inspiration”.\textsuperscript{17[17]} Although Confucius did not claim to be divine, he was given the title “Duke Ni, All-complete and Illustrious” in 1 CE. Further, in 1906 he was officially deified by imperial decree as the third God of China, the other two being Heaven and Earth (although the latter were not believed to exert any appreciable influence on humanity). Until the 1949 revolution, Confucianism and the Chinese way of life were virtually synonymous. Despite systematic attempts by the Chinese Communists to eliminate Confucianism there remains “a strong undercurrent of Confucianism in Chinese thought”.\textsuperscript{18[18]}

Not only did Confucius make no claim to being divine he was also “usually reticent regarding the disciples’ enquiries about the supernatural and whatever transcends earthly existence”\textsuperscript{19[19]} and avoided speaking about spirits, even going so far as to say, “While respecting spiritual beings, … keep aloof from them.”\textsuperscript{20[20]} He was evasive at times on the question of whether he

\textsuperscript{15[15]} Dr Tu Wei-ming, quoted in Paul Strathern, \textit{The Essential Confucius} (London: Virgin Books, 1999), p 45.
\textsuperscript{17[17]} Strathern, \textit{The Essential Confucius} (London: Virgin Books, 1999), p 44.
was even religious, \(^{21}\) and “did not claim that what he was teaching was religion”. \(^{22}\)

Accordingly, some scholars have queried whether Confucianism can properly be regarded as a religion, \(^{23}\) as it contains “little speculation about the meaning and ultimate nature of life”. \(^{24}\) Perhaps the most that can be said on that matter is what follows:

If what [Confucius] taught was not religion, it was at least religious. Confucius taught his beliefs because he believed they were backed by the nature of things. His teaching was an attempt to get man in line with reality. \(^{25}\)

If that be religious, it is religious in the naturalistic sense - that much is certain.

However, the term Confucianism can also be considered to embrace not just the actual teachings of Confucius and his leading disciples \(^{26}\) but also so much of early Chinese religion as was adopted by Confucius or otherwise became incorporated into his teaching as well as the accompanying ritual that developed “around his name after his death”. \(^{27}\) That includes such practices as ancestor reverence or worship and also the postulated existence of various kinds of spiritual beings. \(^{28}\)

Thus, Charles F Aiken, writing in the 1912 edition of the Catholic Encyclopedia, describes Confucianism in the following broad terms:

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\(^{26}\) During his lifetime a small group of students came to be associated with Confucius.


\(^{28}\) Vines writes that in the religious world of the ancient Chinese one Being is pre-eminent under two names, Shang-ti and Thien (T'ien), with the former standing most pre-eminent as “almost a monotheism”. “To call it polytheism is doing more than justice to the spirits of hills and rivers which still fall within the natural system of things.” Ernest H Vines, *Gems of the East - Or God in Every Nation: A Booklet on Comparative Religion with a Brief Introduction to Some Non-Christian Religions*, 3\(^{rd}\) ed (Sydney: West Publishing Corp, 1970), pp 54-5.
By Confucianism is meant the complex system of moral, social, political, and religious teaching built up by Confucius on the ancient Chinese traditions, and perpetuated as the State religion down to the present day [sic]. Confucianism aims at making not simply the man of virtue, but the man of learning and of good manners. The perfect man must combine the qualities of saint, scholar, and gentleman. Confucianism is a religion without positive revelation, with a minimum of dogmatic teaching, whose popular worship is centered in offerings to the dead, in which the notion of duty is extended beyond the sphere of morals proper so as to embrace almost every detail of daily life. 29

If one has regard to the religious conceptions at the time of Confucius one will certainly find, as Baker has pointed out, various forms of animism as well as ancestor worship:

Religious conceptions prevailing at the time of Confucius, furnished by an ancient native religion, were expressed both in the early writings and in the popular superstition. His “religion” undoubtedly inculcates the worship of the forces of nature, or perhaps the spirits which govern natural phenomena. These spirits, however, are all subject to a personal, Supreme Ruler, who governs creation. As Shang Ti, He is sacrificed to by the Emperor. As T’ien, or Heaven, in the impersonal or less personal sense, all men are His generation and may cry to Him. Filial piety demands also that the departed ancestors shall not be forgotten, but be worshipped in sacrifice.’ [W E Soothill, The Three Religions of China.] In other words, from oral and written tradition, four main features emerge which were adopted by the Confucian system. These were, first, the conception of Providence; second, the idea of Secondary Spirits; third, the cult of Ancestor Worship; and fourth, the institution of the Imperial Sacrifice. 30

However, even if Confucianism is understood in these wider more inclusive terms, the fact remains that the religion in itself is highly rationalistic, possessing “no supernatural concept of the sacred or ideas about salvation and a future life” and “no doctrine of salvation”, 31 certainly not as those

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31 Living Without Religion: Eupraxophy (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1994), p 66. It should be noted that the San Chiao (“Three Religions”) of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism often intermingle and peacefully coexist. Confucianism provides the moral and social ethics, Taoism contributes a sense of communion with nature with concomitant duties and responsibilities, and Buddhism provides the notion of karma and the doctrine of rebirth. All three religions are “not regarded by the Chinese as mutually exclusive systems, but are recognized moods of China’s religious consciousness”: Norman Baker, in J N D Anderson [ed], The World’s Religions (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1960), p 161. However, Ross points out that Confucianists often accuse both Buddhists and Taoists of turning their backs on other human beings “seeking after what was best for them personally”: Floyd H Ross and Tynette Hills, The Great Religions by Which Men Live (New York: Fawcett, 1965), p 96. Taoism would appear to be predominant: “From the dawn of Chinese history it seems that the
terms are ordinarily understood in Western religion, and for the most part the sheer down-to-earth practicality of Confucius’ teachings stands in objective contradistinction to the “puerile and profitless superstitions into which, in his day, the popular religion had sunk.”

Chinese author Lin Yutang has written that Confucius was a true Humanist and that Confucianism is “Chinese Humanism” in which there is a total love of life and the things of this world:

For the Chinese the end of life lies not in life after death, for the idea that we live in order to die, as taught by Christianity, is incomprehensible; nor in Nirvana, for that is too metaphysical; nor in the satisfaction of accomplishment, for that is too vainglorious; nor yet in progress for progress’s sake, for that is meaningless. The true end, the Chinese have decided in a singularly clear manner, lies in the enjoyment of a simple life, especially the family life, and in harmonious social relationships. … There is no doubt that the Chinese are in love with life, in love with this earth, and will not forsake it for an invisible heaven. They are in love with life, which is so sad and yet so beautiful, and in which moments of happiness are so precious because they are so transient.

What can we Unitarians learn from Confucianism? First and foremost, we can learn that no system of morality or code of ethical behaviour is honourable or of any practical utility unless it has, as its essence and motivation, the cultivation of loving kindness, generosity, moral equanimity, honesty, self-reliance and awareness of self and others. In addition, any system of morality and code of ethics must have a principle-based context in the wider society of which its adherents are members. Much the same sentiment was expressed by the American Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson:

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Chinese have held but one religion, that of the TAO. This religious concept has permeated all Chinese culture, life and art and literature.”  


Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.  