

# Ignore the Gods

## *Confucius and Plato*

CONFUCIUS, the philosopher of the Shantung Peninsula

of China, and Plato, the philosopher of the Attica Peninsula of Greece, both lived in the fifth century B.C. Yet they were not contemporary. Confucius died during the first half of the century, and Plato was born during the last half.

Vast human communities in both East and West still live in the long shadows of Confucius and Plato. The concerns of these two philosophers, one from Asia and the other from Europe, in some ways anticipate the commitments of Marxism twenty-four centuries later. Confucius, Plato, and Marx converge in their conviction that human well-being depends on right political institutions—religion is an irrelevant nuisance. A later chapter will describe the twentieth-century

Marxist political experiment.

Both Confucius and Plato sought to free people from enslavement to the gods of nature, fate, and location. This chapter probes the reasons these philosophers believed the gods do not contribute helpfully in providing the foundations for wholesome community. What are the implications of building community on a philosophical rather than a religious foundation? These are the intriguing issues which set the tone for this chapter.

### **Chinese Philosophy**

The Forbidden City in Beijing is a key to understanding the significant influence Confucianism has had on Chinese society. The City was built early in the fifteenth century; by 1925, twenty-four emperors had ruled from this fortress whose architecture exuded Confucian themes. The massive entrance adjoining the northern boundary of Tiananmen Square is the Heavenly Peace Gate. People crossing a small moat into the first spacious courtyard can choose from five bridges, each representing a Confucian virtue—benevolence, righteousness, rites, intelligence, or fidelity.

Inside the City, the first courtyard leads into the Palace of Supreme Harmony. Beyond that palace is a second, several hundred meter courtyard leading to an ascent into the Palace of Complete Harmony. Then a third courtyard leads to the highest palace, Preserving Harmony. The emperor lived adjacent to the Hall of Mental Cultivation. The Hall of

Heavenly Purity was where the emperor welcomed foreign guests. These palaces form the heart of the City.

Our university student informants were thankful that the era of Confucian examinations is no more. The highest level examinations were offered only every three years. Three hundred of the best students across China qualified; they gathered for the examination in the highest palace, Preserving Harmony. The emperor presided. Those who failed were sometimes so depressed they committed suicide. Those who passed became the counselors to the emperor who helped direct the affairs of government. Lower level examinations determined who was eligible to counsel on provincial or county affairs.

The scholars and the emperors they counseled ran a tight ship. Our eager guides informed us that the vast courts without trees were for security, so ambushes against the authorities would be impossible. And they described the beatings and executions of dissidents in these courtyards. When subjects wished to petition the emperor and his court of scholars, they bowed prostrate beseeching for an audience.

On October 1, 1949, Mao Tse-tung stood on the balcony above the Heavenly Peace Gate entrance to the Forbidden City. He faced tens of thousands of revolutionaries thronging Tiananmen Square and declared the establishment of the immortal Peoples Republic of China, a revolution that would reach from China to the ends of the earth. In this defiant gesture, Mao Tse-tung intended a break with twenty-four

centuries of Chinese political thought; the vanguard of the communist proletariat would forever replace the scholars of Confucianism as the determiners of political philosophy.

Soon the communist regime in China had built a new "forbidden city" on the western edge of Tiananmen. When in June 1989 students from across China brought their petitions for change to Tiananmen, they prostrated themselves before the communist "forbidden city," beseeching for an audience. But instead of dialogue, they received bullets. The communist dictatorship of the proletariat could be even more repressive than the authority of the Confucian scholars had become in a previous era.

Tiananmen Square and these two adjacent "forbidden cities" are a dramatic statement of the juxtaposition of Confucian scholarly salvation and the communist revolutionary salvation offered by Mao Tse-tung. A later chapter will explore the utopia offered by communism. This chapter explores ancient themes that have molded China for more than two thousand years.

### ***P'an Ku***

First we look at the ancient yet enduring Chinese worldview in which Confucianism was formed. In contrast to Hinduism or Buddhism, the Chinese believe that nature is real and beautiful. Heaven, humanity, history, and nature are all interrelated. The Chinese have a long view of history and an appreciation for nature.

According to the legends, Chinese history goes back two million years, back to when the first archetypal man, P'an Ku, carved out the earth. As is typical of ontocratic worldviews, at the death of this divine man, his

remains became the natural features of China, the mountains, wind, clouds, rain, thunder, fields, stars, and metal. The insects on his body are the people. It is thus not surprising that prior to the radical secularism of Marxism, natural phenomena such as earth mounds or the sky were freely venerated as divine.

This land of P'an Ku is the Middle Kingdom, which is the center of an orderly cosmos. This ancient worldview suggests that China is at the center of the global community. Worldviews resist change. It is not surprising that even in modern times it is rare for top Chinese political leaders to travel elsewhere in the world. Why should they venture away from the center of the cosmos? Rather, let the rest of the earth come to China.

### ***Yin-Yang***

Chinese culture is influenced by the notion that good and evil always coexist and interrelate. This idea is rooted in the *yin-yang* (female-male) principle which pervades traditional culture. All existence is an expression of the dynamic tension and relationship between these female-male principles.

Just as it is natural for female and male to coexist, so it is also natural for evil and good to interrelate and coexist. In fact, every twenty-four hours the drama of the interaction between good and evil is evident in the rhythm of day and night. Day is good and night evil. A folk saying

indicates that is why the cock crows at the beginning of the dawn; he is announcing the return of the good.

There is nothing anyone can do to prevent the rhythm of *yin* and *yang* or day and night. So relax. The ancient sage or sages of Tao (the way of nature) philosophy pushed this concept far indeed. Good and evil shall always coexist. Happily, even in evil times one can always be assured that in time good will reappear.

However, be aware that even the good is interpenetrated with evil, and that which appears to be good to one person may be evil to another. Thus one can never say categorically that this is evil and that is good. Taoist moral ambivalence has left an enduring imprint on China.

That ambivalence informs the attitudes of many Chinese toward the catastrophic suffering of the great leap forward when thirty million people may have died and the horrible upheavals of the cultural revolution. "Mistakes were made, but there has also been much that is good," a variety of Chinese people told us during a 1994 visit. These included those who had suffered most unjustly.

Taoist moral ambivalence also informs Chinese perplexity about U.S. concerns for human rights in China. University officials commented to me, "It is not good to jail dissidents. However, political stability is good. Why can't Americans understand that good and evil must intermingle?"

### ***Wu-Wei***

The notion of maintaining a relaxed spirit in the face of adversity or apparent evil is the soul of Tao philosophy. This philosophy is described in the ancient documents known as "The Way of Life of Lao- Tzu." The central theme of Taoism is *wu-wei*. This means: Don't be meddlesome! Through nonaction let things take their course! Don't interfere in the rhythm of good and evil.

Listen to the counsel of Lao-Tzu:

Since the world points up beauty as such,

There is ugliness too.

If goodness is taken as goodness,

Wickedness enters as well.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere Lao-Tzu observes that even God moves in the spirit of *wu-wei*.

God's Way is bound to conquer all But

not by strife does it proceed.

Not by words does God get answers;

He calls them not and all things come.

Master plans unfold but slowly,

Like God's wide net enclosing all;

Its mesh is coarse but none are lost.<sup>2</sup>

The spirit of *wu-wei* is the way of Tao, which is the way of nature and



of God. The one who follows Tao is the one who flows with the natural stream of nature. This is true strength, just as the flowing water is stronger than the stone. Over time the hard stone becomes smaller and at last disappears, overcome by the gentle meandering stream. Lao-Tzu, winsome philosopher of China's ancient past, would have winced had he met his biblical prophetic contemporaries, who denounced the evil authorities of their day with somewhat less patience than it takes to wait for a stone to erode away in a stream of water.

The Tao art of harmonizing with the life flow of the universe may involve the early morning practice of gentle shadow boxing amidst the tranquil greenery of a grove of trees as the eastern sky begins to lighten. Whenever I am in Hong Kong, I love an early morning jog on a grass-covered hill just off Waterloo Road. As I jog I feel like an elephant thundering along amidst a herd of gentle gazelles; scores of shadow boxers are inviting their bodies and spirits to absorb the tranquillity of a new day dawning. Some of them carry a bird in a cage, and the bird may chirp in accompaniment with the gentle movements of its human escort.

The commitment to Tao is personal. It is not a community but individual enterprise. Governments and societies should avoid interfering with the whims of the individual. The strong emphasis on the individual in Taoism has left an enduring impact on Chinese culture. "Save face" is a Chinese axiom.

In popular culture, Tao became a source of empowerment. It merged

with folk magic known as *qigong*. Like the *mana* of the Melanesian islanders of the south Pacific, *qi* is the impersonal energy which provides the dynamic potency to the universe. Qi can be manipulated for the well-being of the person or for the destruction of enemies.

Yet qigong is not that harmless. In the past two millennia, this expression of the Taoist worldview has become occult. This may be an aberration of Tao but is nevertheless very real. The personal empowerment offered by qigong is especially attractive to people who feel their lot is hopeless. In desperation they may reach for the potentially destructive empowerment offered by occult expressions of qigong.

### ***The Emperor and the Cosmos***

The laissez-faire approach of the Taoists to reality was too gentle for the Confucian philosophers. They sought a much more active and political approach to human problems. The well-being of the political order was the center of their interest. This conviction that a healthy political order is essential for wholesome society is rooted in the worldview that China is the center of the cosmos.

The traditional Chinese theory of history is that the qualities of the Chinese emperor affect the quality of the cosmos. Bad emperors create disequilibrium in China and the cosmos. The whole global community is affected adversely by bad Chinese emperors. The rule of good emperors is characterized by harmony in Chinese society, nature, and the whole

world. Heaven has determined that this be so.

Chinese history was written to demonstrate this cosmic fact. If an emperor's rule was characterized by social upheaval, international convulsions, or natural disasters, he was obviously not a good man. If there was tranquillity, then he was a good person. This philosophy of history influenced the way the official records were written. Accounts had to demonstrate the axiom that good rulers create well-being in the cosmos; the historians doctored the data to establish the point.

The notion that there is harmony in the cosmos when the political leaders are good might have informed political developments in 1976. After the deaths that year of both Chou En-lai and Mao Tse-tung, the nation and government decidedly discredited the "Gang of Four" who had been intimately involved in the center of power. The disastrous upheaval of the Cultural Revolution and natural disasters, such as the catastrophic Tangshan earthquake of August 1976, suggested that something was wrong at the center of power during the later years of Mao's life. Any leader whose rule is accompanied by such disasters should be suspect.

## ***Government and Well-being***

The mission of Confucius, and those who carried on his efforts after he was gone, was to develop a political philosophy which could assure that emperors and the political processes would function in a good manner. This was consistent with the worldview that a righteous political order in China assures the well-being of the cosmos.

The basic teachings of Confucius, the political philosopher, are recorded in the *Analects (Lun Yu)*, a collection of sayings of Confucius as well as his disciples and colleagues. Three other major works also contain Confucian philosophy—*The Great Learning (Ta Hsueh)*, *The Doctrine of the Mean (Chung Yung)*, and the *Book of Mencius*.

The emphasis of these volumes reveals a worldview and value system committed to social proprieties and belief in an intimate relationship between person, society, and cosmological order. Good government is the key to cosmological harmony, because the people will imitate their rulers. The example of the rulers is far more important than the laws they pass.

Who gives the emperor the authority to govern? The ancient traditions said heredity and heaven. The Confucian philosophers debated the issue of authority for a government. While philosophers such as Mo Tzu believed that heaven gives the emperor and government authority to rule, Confucius himself radically desacralized government. He stripped government of any claim to divine right rule. Instead he

anchored the right of government to rule in morality. He believed that the will of heaven as well as the functioning of nature were moral order. The emperor had to be a moral person, a virtuous ruler, or he would lose the mandate of heaven.<sup>3</sup>

Neither divine right nor heredity are the final word; virtue is the criterion to judge the legitimacy of government. The people the emperor governed should be capable of assessing whether their rulers were virtuous. In this Confucius was over two thousand years ahead of the European Enlightenment! To enable the subjects to express themselves effectively on matters of such importance, Confucius campaigned to provide universal formal education for all who were capable of study.

Confucius enjoyed questions and discussions concerning religious matters, but, like some of his Greek contemporary philosophers, he was not persuaded that spirits and divinities actually existed. He opposed any religious practices which inhibited the integrity of the political process or were dehumanizing in any way. He insisted on divorcing ethics and politics from religion. He was a secular man indeed!

### ***Li***

The ethical path is the way of the ancestors, known as *li*. Confucius believed that cosmic harmony depended on the commitment of the people to live in harmony with the *li* of their ancestors. In Taoism the way of nature is emphasized; in Confucianism it is the way of the ancestors which is center stage.

The Confucian notion is that in the golden age of the ancestors there was perfect cosmic harmony. This is because the attitudes and actions of the ancestors were right. The li of the ancestors demonstrates right relationships in every dimension of society—between ruler and subjects—between father and son, between husband and wife, between oldest son and younger sons, between elders and juniors.

The commitment to li has provided Chinese society with enormous stability and durability. Even when Chinese people move to lands far from their motherland, for many of them li continues to be their primary ethical gyroscope.

At a meeting with Chinese immigrants to the United States, I asked, "What is your greatest concern about living in this country?"

"That our children will lose touch with the way of our foreparents," was their instant reply. "American culture seems to have little depth. We hope our children will not become too Americanized. We want them always to appreciate the values of our Chinese culture."

In response to that concern, Chinese communities in diaspora often arrange classes on Chinese languages and Confucian values for their offspring. They instruct their children in the Chinese way of life. Yet there are difficulties. Confucianism is a national rather than a global ethic. There are no Confucian disciples traversing the globe attempting to encourage non-Chinese people to accept the Confucian way of life. Only Chinese people can follow the way of li.

A national ethic such as *li* also creates difficulties for minorities in China. Whose ancestors are the ideal model? Neither Confucianism nor Mao's brand of communism have nurtured a healthy affirmation of the diversities that respect for ethnic integrity demands.

However, Confucian values have provided a strong and self-assured identity for multitudes of modern Chinese wherever they may reside in the global village. These values preserve their strong sense of community identity and ethnic pride.

### ***Shu***

What are these treasured Confucian values? The kernel is *shu* (fellow feeling or reciprocity). The essence of *shu* is summarized in that universally celebrated Confucian statement, "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others."<sup>4</sup>

Notice a similarity between this Confucian moral kernel and the so-called golden rule of Christian faith, which affirms, "Do to others as you would have them do to you."<sup>5</sup> The Christian commitment is active. The Confucian commitment seems more quiescent. These commitments would be affirmed in most societies.

For Confucius *shu* was jovial and practical idealism. He believed society should function with compassion for the poor. Good government should provide opportunities to enjoy life for everyone. Loyalty and respect for the family is the foundation of all other human relationships.

The whole ethical system is infused with themes of filial piety. However, a family-first ethic is inclined to nurture nepotism and corruption!

Shu is a happy responsibility. For Confucius these duties of right relationships were a joyful enterprise which included song and celebration. However, for some of his fellow philosophers that was not the case. For them duty was a somber enterprise; song was never appropriate!

### ***The Higher Type of Human***

Confucianism is optimistic about human nature. The intention of the whole political system is to enable people to live virtuously and happily. The truly virtuous person is the higher type of human (*chun-tzu*, meaning a prince or superior person).

That is what Confucianism is about—the ordering of society so the higher type of person emerges. This superior person is righteous, altruistic (jen), and an example of social proprieties (li). The key to the whole enterprise of creating the higher type of person is the virtue of the emperor and the manner in which he governs.

The ancient sage declares, "If there were a true king upon the throne of China, unquestionably Manhood-at-its-best would prevail in one generation."<sup>6</sup>

This is indeed the gospel of political salvation! It is a distant echo of the nineteenth-century vision of the ideal communist man who would be created through communist political and educational formation. Yet



there is also a great difference in the two movements. In dramatic contrast to Marxism, Confucianism abhors coercion. Being a good example, rather than laws and coercion, is the essence of good government.

### ***Modernity***

Today a fifth of the world's people reside in China. The Confucian ideals still significantly influence this most populous nation on earth and also many of the 100 million Chinese in diaspora. The Confucian culture is a web which binds these amazing people together. How should Confucianism be assessed in the light of modernity in the global community? We make several observations.

First, the traditional Chinese ontocratic worldview was not significantly touched by Confucianism. The masses still believed that nature was divine. Consequently they continued to be vigorous worshipers of various expressions of nature, such as mounds of earth they perceived to be the female counterpart to the divine male heaven.

Only much later, when the Chinese people began to encounter the rigorous monotheism of Islam and the biblical gospel, did a genuine break with the worldview that nature is divine commence among some Chinese people. This break was necessary for Chinese society to embrace at a worldview level the assumptions of modern scientific methodology. The worldview of modern science is not compatible with notions that the gods and nature are one.

At midcentury the Marxist revolution ruthlessly expanded the break with the ontocratic worldview which Christianity and Islam had begun. It did this through a sometimes violent revolution grounded in a radical atheistic secularism.

Second, the fixation on li provides tremendous resistance to change. Early in the Confucian movement, the focus on li began to become a rigid doctrine and discipline.

Scholars took up the mantle of studying and applying li. The primary function of the higher educational system was the study of li in the form of the classics. It became the responsibility of the scholars to counsel government and society on the right way to do things, and that right way was always the way of the ancestors of antiquity.

The conservation of enduring values is the great advantage of this system. Yet the worldview has no "theology" of history on the move. Progress in Confucianism is movement toward retrieval of an ideal which has been in the past. There is no inclination toward cultural change in an unfolding future.

How can Confucian society adapt when the realities of global community require change? Examples of the issues are the attitudes toward children or womanhood. In the ancient traditions, a duty was to marry and have many children. Modern ecological and demographic reality demands a change in that value. In relation to womanhood, the Confucian ideal is strongly oriented toward the male.

Yet in the modern global community many societies insist on male and female equality. Certainly the qualities of human relationships which li reveals will always be relevant. However, the scholasticism, rigidities, nepotism of a family centered focus, and orientation toward the past of classical Confucianism are less than helpful.

The Marxist revolution attempted to break the link between modern society and classical Confucianism. Even filial piety was critiqued as inspiring corruption. Consequently the filial piety which has graced Chinese culture for millennia is under severe stress.

"My grandparents love me, but I do not like them," bluntly expounded a Beijing university student to my wife and me during a stroll through Tiananmen Square. "I seldom visit them even though they are near my residence. I do not need them."

In any society a break between generations is tragic; in a traditionally Confucian society it is especially distressing. Imagine the pain of any parents or grandparents whose progeny have spurned them, but especially of those who have always believed that the essential quality of human life is filial piety.

However, although the modern Peoples Republic of China attempted to break with the rigidities of classical Confucianism, enduring qualities of this ancient Chinese sage will always influence Chinese society.

Recently my host in a breakfast meeting in Singapore commented, "We in Singapore value the principles of Confucian ethics. We feel those

values are contributing to our prosperity and stability."

Singapore is a beautiful city. The modern buildings are state-of-the-art architecture. It has almost no unemployment or slums. Although it is a dynamic industrial city, air pollution is rigidly controlled. The hedonism of modern Western cultures is prohibited. The business atmosphere vibrates prosperity.

Although Singapore is a Christianizing city, my host affirmed that the Christian leaders in this postmodern technological global city desire to preserve the enduring virtues of the sage from the Shantung Peninsula who lived some 2,500 years ago.

A Singaporean taxi driver surprised my wife and me by asking in his street English, "You flush toilet today? One hundred dollars fine if not you flush toilet."

He continued, "Singapore good city. No problems here because government make so many good rules, like must always flush toilet. Follow good rules wise government make, then all things good. That why Singapore so nice. But don't forget—do rules always."

Later a Singaporean businessman picked up the same theme, "We have no unemployment or homeless people because government and society work together cooperatively."

Recall the teachings of Confucius on the relationship between a virtuous government and the well-being of the people. Both the taxi driver and the businessperson were describing a government which they

perceived as being virtuous, and they were pleased with the results—a prosperous people!

Nevertheless, a political ethic grounded in Confucianism can only survive if the majority are ethnic Chinese. That was the point a Singaporean businessperson made to me during an elaborate Chinese New Year's dinner. He said, "It would be catastrophic for Singapore if the Chinese became the minority. Our system can only work when Chinese with Confucian values are in control."

As we enter the twenty-first century, the global community will be increasingly challenged by the dynamism of traditionally Confucian societies who have managed to drink from the fountains of secularization while at the same time maintaining a healthy commitment to the enduring graces of shu (fellow feeling and reciprocity). The qualities of self-discipline, integrity, hard work, and loyalty which characterize Confucian ethics are a good preparation for over a billion people intent on exercising their rightful role in the global community.

However, modernity has put Confucian political philosophy to a severe test, including Mao Tse-Tung's Chinese version of communist political salvation. The role and political philosophy of China is undergoing an astonishing metamorphosis. A five-thousand-year turning point in Chinese political culture and worldview commenced in 1971, when U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger visited Beijing. That

event ushered China into the community of nations.

For five thousand years the Chinese self-perception had been that the Chinese nation was the center of the cosmos. Then in the nineteenth century, a great humiliation commenced as Western powers trampled on this proud people and culture. The communist revolution sought to reinstate China as the primal nation among the nations. Mao's revolution would bring salvation to the whole world. However, the cultural revolution created shambles of that dream. In two decades of the communist revolution, China was in the throes of a profound identity crisis.

Then came Kissinger's visit. He helped open the door for the People's Republic of China to assume a seat in the United Nations Security Council as one of five permanent members. China is now recognized as an equal among equals; it is respected as one of the five great powers with the authority to veto decisions of the Council.

China is neither the center of the cosmos nor the downtrodden pariah. Surely this must be a five-thousand-year watershed development. China is undergoing an unprecedented worldview paradigm shift. Chinese intellectuals are propelled into a quest for a fresh philosophical perception on the meaning and place of China in the global community. These are times of incredible intellectual ferment in China.

There is urgent need for a fresh philosophy of nationhood and

government which provides the spiritual and intellectual framework for authentic Chinese participation as an equal partner in a global community of nations. The ancient sages such as Confucius never struggled with those sorts of issues; they assumed China was the center of the cosmos. Modern global realities do not sustain that assumption. These are the issues: What is the role of China as one among equals in a pluralistic community of nations? What kind of political philosophy can equip China for nurturing the well-being of her people, including her ethnic minorities, and for authentic participation in the global village?

### **Plato's Problem**

We turn now to another people in another continent whose quest for universal truth also led them to challenge the authority of the gods. These were the philosophers of the Greek Peninsula of Attica.

The sages who converged at the Aegean port city of Athens were not the only philosophers of the Mediterranean region. Around the sixth century B.C., other schools also flourished in locations such as Italy or Mesopotamia.

Yet it is the Athenian experience which has most affected Western culture. An exploration of that development is necessary for some understanding of the religious and ideological tapestry of modern Western societies.

The Athenian Greeks were strategically located to experience

religious pluralism. The thriving commercial centers of Greece were the meeting places of the peoples of the entire Mediterranean region. Each people group contributed their own pantheon of divinities.

The gods embodied expressions of natural or human phenomena—Poseidon, the sea god; Demeter, the goddess of fertility; or Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Some were linked to the cycles of nature. In the mystery cults, the worshipers identified with the experiences of the dying and resurrecting gods whose annual death and coming back to life caused the cycles of winter cold and death and summer warmth and life. The Greek pantheon of gods enlarged and adapted to accommodate the divinities of other peoples of the region.

### ***The Gods Also Sin***

The gods were not characteristically righteous. The stories of the exploits of the ancient divinities of Greece described by Homer in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are not flattering from a moral perspective. No caring father or mother would desire their children to follow the moral example of the gods. It was not uncommon for sexual license to be included in the acts of worshiping the Greek gods. Especially among the philosophers, the immorality of the gods encouraged skepticism concerning their validity.

Recall that Confucius also attempted to drive a wedge between religion and morality. Neither he nor the Greek philosophers perceived that the gods were of any help in encouraging moral order. Recall the



words of Xenophanes in the preface: "Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all things that among men are a shame and a reproach—theft and adultery and deceiving one another." <sup>7</sup>

The skepticism of the Confucian and the Greek philosophers concerning the gods is strangely modern. We have observed that modern anthropological and psychological research has demonstrated that people are indeed inclined to worship divinities who are in their own likeness. Sigmund Freud was so impressed with the evidence that he dismissed all belief in a god or gods as purely need-inspired illusion.<sup>8</sup> Many of the Greek philosophers experienced similar skepticism.

Yet the philosophers as well as modern humankind discover that the gods are not easily dismissed. Even if they are the creations of the human mind, as Freud suggests, their power over people is real, formidable, and binding.<sup>9</sup>

The philosophers sought for the one universal principle which was the key to understanding all reality. Was the universal principle fire? Perhaps air? Maybe very small particles in constant movement (atoms)? Exploring the various dimensions of that quest for the one unitary principle is not necessary here. Our intention is to focus briefly on the stream in that quest for the unitary principle which has most significantly affected Western culture—Platonism.

### ***Godless Government Might be Good***

Plato was a disciple of the Socrates whose "know thyself" has been taught to Western high school students for many centuries. Socrates sought to comprehend the truth through the process of questioning and discussion. He was dismayed by the irrelevance of the gods to the quest for the moral good.

Yet from the perspective of the political powers, reverence for the gods was necessary to preserve political stability. The gods maintained the political and social order, immoral as they might be. Athenian leaders feared that the ideas of Socrates, which were infiltrating the minds of the young people, threatened the stability of the state.

Consequently Socrates was sentenced to death by drinking hemlock. Although he had opportunities to escape, he refused to do so for that, it seemed to him, would be a moral digression. He believed that the virtuous person must be ready to accept the consequences of his actions.

Plato and Aristotle carried forward the quest for the universal truth which so characterized Socrates. Yet by questioning the authority or even existence of the gods, the philosophers were indeed challenging the sacred basis for the existence of all social institutions including government. That was a revolutionary idea in a global community in which all societies perceived that the integrity of social and political institutions were based on their connections with divinity.

Typically governments everywhere were ontocracies—that is, divine power and political authority merged. In societies such as Egypt, the

head of state was a god. To drive a wedge between the gods and the political order seemed a dangerous experiment. Yet that is exactly what Platonism attempted. So did Confucianism.

### ***Seeking Universal Truth***

If the political order does not need the sanction of the gods, from whence then does it acquire sanction? Plato struggled with that question. His *Republic* is a political philosophy which is an attempted response. Both Confucius and Plato believed that political institutions which had been stripped of their sacred or divine nature needed the counsel of the philosophers to function properly. The philosophers were responsible for helping to replace the gods as the guardians of the state and social institutions. Plato taught that the philosophers were needed to guide the state because it was they who had developed the intuitive skills to perceive the truth.

And what is the truth? The ideal universal good. The principle which unites the whole universe is the ideal good. The particular expressions of material visible forms should be expressions of the ideal. The ideal can be perceived through intuition.

Plato referred to this gift of intuition as the *logos* (word) which is present in everyone. However, some people are more apt than others in perceiving the logos. Through discussion the notions of intuitive truth can be processed, tested, confirmed, and understood. This is the work of

philosophers—to perceive the ideal and counsel on how to apply that ideal.

By challenging the stranglehold which the gods of nature had over social institutions and the natural processes, the philosophers freed the mind for an analytical study of the forms present in the material world. Aristotle was especially effective in carrying on that quest. His observation and category approach to the study of the material earth is the forerunner of modern scientific methodology. The descriptions of his engines still fascinate students of physics. Aristotle defined the skills of right thinking. His methodology for logical reasoning is still a standard inclusion in courses on right reasoning and logic in multitudes of universities in the modern global village.

The intellectual breakthrough of these philosophers of the Acropolis is astonishing and revolutionary. Their insights, if pursued to a conclusion, would free nature and social institutions from the power of the gods. The particular forms of the material world could now be investigated without so much as a nod of respect in the direction of the gods of nature whom the myths had portrayed as the powers which determined natural phenomena. Enterprising minds could make other engines, just as Aristotle had done. The accountability of the state could shift away from the gods who didn't seem to care all that much about human well-being anyway. New reference points for political authority could be developed—the will of the people or the counsel of the

philosophers.

### ***The Gods Won't Die***

Although these breakthrough philosophical ideas were present and persisted into the coming centuries, not much really happened in society as a whole. Just as the philosopher Confucius could not break the power of the deities of China, so also the philosophers of the Acropolis had almost no evident effect on the religious practices or worldview of the people of the marketplaces of Athens. The philosophers seemed incapable of really touching the masses. The gods did not die or go away.

Vigorous polytheism persisted. The worldview of the people as a whole continued unchanged. For the masses the activities of the deities and natural phenomena were one. The power of the gods and the authority of government merged. Aristotle's engines were interesting, but they were never applied to practical human experience in a manner conducive to human progress. The engines and the gods were an unnatural mix.

Just over four centuries after Plato, a Jewish Christian apostle arrived in Athens and walked in the Athenian market. The account states that "he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols."<sup>10</sup> This Jewish Christian teacher was Paul. Just as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle had done many centuries earlier, Paul climbed the Acropolis and met with the philosophers.

Although the philosophers derided his message with laughter, three centuries after that meeting, the idols of Athens were no more. Even the Parthenon for Athena, the goddess of wisdom, which overlooks the Acropolis, had been transformed into a Christian church. What was the difference between Paul's message and Plato's?

The differences are explored in the next chapter, which introduces biblical faith. They derive from the experience of a people whose history began many centuries before any of the Greek philosophers were on the world scene. This people lived at the crossroads of the continents, namely Israel. They were historians rather than philosophers. They

believed in only one universal, righteous, personal, Creator God who reveals himself in history. That is why they were historians.

They engaged in recounting their history rather than in philosophical speculation. This people spoke of repentance rather than enlightenment. They understood repentance to mean turning away from gods created by people and turning toward the one and only God who has created people. They believed that God had chosen them to be a light to all nations in the global community. The next several chapters explore the history and mission of this people.

At this point it is helpful to observe that, metaphorically speaking, there were shackles around the feet of the philosophers of the Acropolis. These shackles prevented them from effectively communicating to the masses their gospel of freedom from the deities.

The first shackle was that the philosophers had no awareness of purpose or movement in history. History and human society were going nowhere. The historical perspective of the philosophers was not much different from that of the polytheists. Both struggled with

the question of the ultimate meaning of human existence.

It is noteworthy, however, that the same impetus which led the Greek philosophers to observe nature accurately also propelled a quest for accurate historical observation. Herodotus, a contemporary of Socrates, is the father of Western historiography. His passion for objectivity has inspired similar commitment in the souls of many modern historians. Yet what is the direction of history? What purpose does the study of history serve? What is the meaning of it all?

A second shackle was the elite and impersonal nature of Platonic philosophy. The ideal good was static. It was a principle, not personal. Thus the person is really on her own. She must develop the skills of intuitive insight. What if she does not possess those skills? Or if she does possess those skills, what if she desires to worship and relate to a god? The very nature of Platonism guaranteed that it would always remain the conversation of the elite and never move the masses.

A third shackle was the inability of the Platonic stream in philosophy to embrace the material world with enthusiasm. The ideal good was a principle other than the material. That which we see is only a shadow of the real which is the ideal good. Applied to the person, the body is then second-rate compared to the spirit in the person.

Thus the philosophical quest entices one away from a celebration of the material dimensions of life. In the rather earthy societies of the



Mediterranean region, there was not widespread enthusiasm for philosophies which did not celebrate the wonder and goodness of the body and the material aspects of existence.

### ***A Home for Philosophy***

For more than five hundred years the philosophies of Athens had been bereft of a spiritual home. The polytheistic, mythical, and ontocratic worldview was incompatible with the orientation of the philosophers. It is, therefore, not surprising that some theologians in the early Christian movement embraced Greek philosophy enthusiastically. These fathers of the church found in philosophy a natural ally in their abhorrence of polytheism and in their basic affirmation of the order and rationality of nature. Over time it was the church which provided a home for the intellectual breakthrough known as Greek philosophy.

Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria described aspects of the attraction well when he exclaimed that although philosophy had some useless "weeds," it nevertheless was a "schoolmaster" preparing people for Christ. He believed that the ideal good of philosophy was a preparation for the God of the biblical Scriptures.<sup>11</sup>

It might even be that the original Platonic notion of the universal ideal good was influenced by the people of Israel, who were the harbingers of biblical monotheism. In the fifth century A.D., North African philosopher and theologian Augustine commented on Plato's

travels in the Mediterranean region in his quest to learn what he could from other peoples about the nature of truth.<sup>12</sup> Those travels would have provided opportunity to interact with biblical monotheism.

However, the accommodation between church and philosophy was not completely comfortable. The writings of the early church fathers reveal vigorous debate and interaction with the philosophers. Some insisted that there could be no alliance between "Jerusalem and Athens."<sup>13</sup> The tensions between biblical faith and Greek philosophy are significant.

- The Bible describes the material creation as very good. The philosophers had a low view of the material universe.
- The philosophers had difficulty perceiving that history has any real significance. Biblical faith views history as real and meaningful.
- Biblical faith is permeated with hope and movement forward. The philosophers were inclined towards a cyclical or nonprogressive view of history.
- Plato and his colleagues reflected on the ideal good as a universal principle. Biblical faith invites encounter with the personal righteous Creator of the universe.
- The philosophers were sanguine about human reasoning discovering the truth. Biblical faith is persuaded that God reveals truth primarily through his revelation acts in history.

For many centuries the church and Greek philosophy were locked in dialogue and accommodations; that dialogue persists.

Nevertheless, it was the church as well as Islam which nurtured the wisdom of the philosophers of Athens century after century. In the course of time, the church deposited that wisdom in the care of those who helped to form the movement known as the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is therefore not surprising that there are striking parallels between the philosophies of Descartes and Socrates, between Rousseau or Marx and Plato. This anticipates a later chapter.

### **Confucius, Plato, and Marx**

It is surprising that Confucius and Plato had such similar perceptions concerning the relationship of the gods to the political and moral order. Although the early Confucian philosophers and those of the Acropolis were contemporary, six thousand miles of land separated them. Their thought developed in radically different cultures, that of China and Greece. Surely they never had the opportunity for cross-fertilization of ideas.

Yet both the Confucian and Platonic philosophical streams agreed—the gods are not helpful in nurturing a humane moral and social order. They were convinced that religion does not necessarily create good

people. In fact, the gods seemed to influence society toward immorality. Thus both systems consciously turned away from the gods. Nevertheless, neither philosophy was capable of turning the people away from the gods! Only a few heeded the counsel of the philosophers.

Both Confucianism and Platonism struggled with the questions of where moral and political authority can be found. Both movements celebrated the qualities of a virtue which is intuitively understood, although Confucianism also put great stock in the way of the ancestors in defining the nature of virtue. They both insisted that virtue is benevolence in action.

Both Platonism and Confucianism believed that the political order needs to take the counsel of the philosophers. The philosophers give right guidance to the political and social institutions. From whence do the philosophers gain their wisdom? In Confucianism the wisdom of the ancients, *li*, is right. In Platonism the key wisdom comes from the universal ideal good which is intuitively perceived and provides right guidance. Both systems moved into rigidity. The *li* of Confucianism reveals only one right way. The ideal good of Platonism is also unbending. There is only one right form and function of government.

There are parallels between these philosophical movements of about twenty-five hundred years ago and twentieth-century Marxism. A later chapter will probe the issues more deeply. For now it is sufficient to note that in Marxism there are also the rigid and unbending laws of

dialectical materialism, which remind one of the rigidities of the ideal good and the li. In Marxism there is the communist party, which informs the government on right policies. This is a modern form of the philosophers of Platonism and Confucianism who were to instruct the government on right behavior.

Communism, like these ancient philosophies, believes strongly in the essential goodness of humanity and the need for a right political and educational system to release and enable the flourishing of goodness. In Platonism and Confucianism the test of goodness is action; in communism also *praxis* (action) rather than theory is the essence of the good. Communism agrees with these ancient philosophies that the gods do not have a positive influence in developing wholesome local and global community. These philosophies of Greece and China are agnostic or indifferent to a god or the gods. Communism denies their existence. They all agree that social relationships and political institutions must develop independently of any influence from the gods.

The three philosophies are convinced that they have insights which can benefit the whole world. For Confucius the development of a harmonious political order in China will bring harmony to all people— in fact, to the whole cosmos. For Plato anyone anywhere with intuitive gifts can perceive glimpses of the universal ideal good. For Marxism the classless society brought about through the revolution led by the workers of the world will bring utopia to the entire global community.

Each system has a plan which can bless the whole world.

It is also noteworthy that the "isms" which these ideologies have spawned throughout the centuries have tended to take on the power of the very divinities which the philosophers had tried to unseat. An absolute philosophy or ideology can become as demonic as any of the ancient gods.

Did the Confucian sages ever dream of that possibility when Mencius, the trusted disciple of Confucius, traveled from noble court to court in ostentatious wealth?

Mencius justified his opulence by declaring, "The worth of the scholar is greater than that of any ruler!"<sup>14</sup>

Alas! The gods had returned in the robes of a philosopher!

### ***Reflection***

1. Why did Platonic and Confucian philosophers attempt to separate the power of the gods from both political authority and morality?
2. Consider reasons for the persistence of the gods (of the ontocratic worldview) in spite of the philosophical objections.
3. What is the source of truth in Platonism? In Confucianism?
4. In what ways does the Chinese view of the relationship between the cosmos and China affect the role of China in the global community?