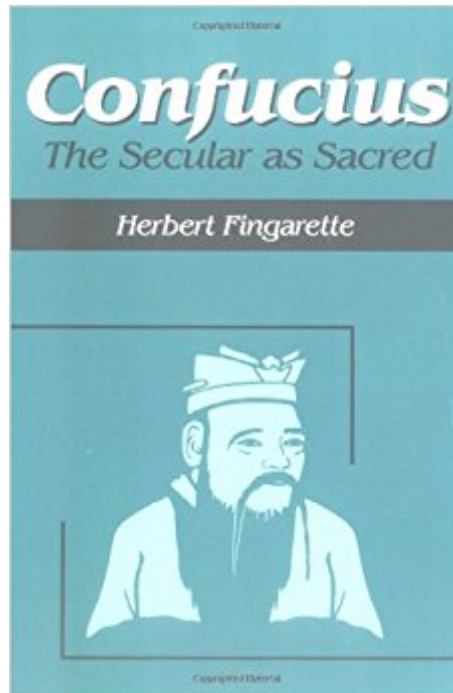


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Confucius: The Secular As Sacred (Religious Traditions Of The World)



Synopsis

Book by Fingarette, Herbert

Book Information

Series: Religious Traditions of the World

Paperback: 84 pages

Publisher: Waveland Press (June 1, 1998)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1577660102

ISBN-13: 978-1577660101

Product Dimensions: 8.3 x 5.3 x 0.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 3.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (11 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #514,157 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #83 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Other Eastern Religions & Sacred Texts > Confucianism](#) #4204 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Eastern](#) #26279 in [Books > Education & Teaching > Schools & Teaching](#)

Customer Reviews

This book is essential reading for anyone seriously interested in Confucius, Confucianism, or early Chinese thought in general. It is quite convincing on some points, but also very problematic on others. Fingarette was a mainstream Western philosopher, who said that when he first read Confucius, he found him to be a "prosaic and parochial moralizer." However, he eventually became convinced that Confucius had "an imaginative vision of man equal in its grandeur" to any that he knew. Fingarette is at his best explaining the importance of ritual in Confucianism. Most of us nowadays think of rituals as useless affectations. However, Fingarette shows that Confucius regarded rituals (from handshaking to funerals) as an important part of being human. It is when we participate in such ritual activities that we are most distinctively human. In addition, ritual has the power to enable humans to work together without the need for coercion. Perhaps if we in the West can recover the feeling for the importance of shared, sacred rituals, we can help give more unity to our chaotic society. Fingarette was also deeply influenced by Western behaviorism, and this leads to some of the less plausible aspects of his book. He wishes to deny that there is any "internal" dimension to Confucius' thought. If what Fingarette wishes to claim is that Confucius did not think of human psychology the way that, say, Augustine or Descartes did, then he is quite correct. (But then

who is Fingarette arguing with? No serious interpreter I know of has read Confucius as a Cartesian.) However, Fingarette sometimes seems to want to claim that emotions and attitudes are, for Confucius, perfectly public states.

This book offers a unique perspective on the Confucian vision. As someone who has studied Confucius and Confucianism in Chinese for more than ten years, I believe that Fingarette has revealed an important aspect of the original vision of Confucius even though the book has some flaws. (That is why I have only awarded it four stars.) He is as careful with the text as he can be without being an Orientalist and without expertise in classical Chinese language. This is commendable. Fingarette's main argument is that rituals (li) played a central role in Confucius's thinking not only because of their social significance but also because of their religious or spiritual significance. In fact, Fingarette goes on to argue that the social significance derives from the religious significance. I generally agree that this is indeed one of Confucius's most important teachings, and that it is under-appreciated or misinterpreted in modern scholarship. I also agree with Fingarette's view that Confucius saw human civilization as a perfect embodiment of the Way if it is united under the central symbol of holy ceremony. As Fingarette neatly points out, modern Western thought has gravitated towards a utilitarian view of responsibility, which is in stark contrast to Confucius's view of responsibility as personal commitment. Fingarette, to his credit, avoids framing the discussion around individual and society. For Confucius, the ethical life is largely a problem of personal commitment (or will) rather than a problem of decision. It is a pity that Fingarette did not develop the notion of committed self-cultivation further. I would recommend Confucian Moral Cultivation by P J Ivanhoe for readers interested in this important theme.

Don't be fooled by the nondescript academic looking cover. This is a book for any educated reader. If you have ever thumbed through the Analects by Confucius and wondered why he was by far the most influential thinker in China's history, this book provides the answer. According to Fingarette, Confucius believed that the characteristics of humans which make us different from animals have an almost magical quality. This quality is most pronounced as it relates to li which is a term similar to holy ritual or sacred ceremony. Li involves respect of others and sublime patterns of behavior for mourning, marrying, fighting, and being a prince, a father, a son and so on. Professor Fingarette describes li as something that captures the essence of what makes us human, and the deep response that li provokes only occurs if the custom or ritual evolved from earlier traditions, it cannot be legislated or mandated: "He who by reanimating the Old can gain knowledge of the New is

indeed fit to be called a teacher." New conditions always require that traditions be reanimated, and a successful government, Confucius insists, takes advantage of traditions which raise the civilized above the barbaric: "govern the people by regulations, keep order among them by punishments, and they will evade shamelessly. Govern them by moral force, keep order among them by ritual, and there will be not only shame but correctness." Li makes difficult tasks simple and brings order to chaos: "With correct comportment no commands are necessary, yet affairs proceed." Fingarette writes that our body of culture makes possible behavior which is distinct from acting on our instincts, or from treating others as animals or objects.

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