Confucianism: A Religious Doctrine or Moral Thought

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Abstract:

Chinese civilization is one of the Far Eastern civilizations that emerged and developed from the primitive and Stone Ages, it influenced and was influenced by other civilizations and cultures, particularly those of the ancient Near East, where this civilization reached the height of its development in the mid-second millennium BC, and it was known for its rich history of events, developments, ideas, and achievements in various fields.

The importance of this research lies in its attempt to highlight aspects of ancient Chinese civilization, particularly, in the field of thought and belief, given its focus on humanity and ethics, as we focus on thought, belief, and religion, specifically the most famous of the known religions, Confucianism, which was founded on an ethics focus, where it was thus, a philosophical thought through which Confucius sought to strengthen the individual's religious conscience, thus automatically submitting to social laws, and it also had a profound impact on establishing the social order due to the principles it embodies, to the point that some believe it cannot be considered a religion, but rather a social and moral system.

Keywords: Ancient China, thought, ethics, belief, Confucianism.

1. Introduction:

Chinese civilization is among the Far Eastern civilizations that emerged and developed from the primitive and Stone Ages, it influenced and was influenced by other cultures, especially those of the ancient Near East, and it reached the peak of its development in the mid-second millennium BC, with the emergence of ruling dynasties and families, including the Shang dynasty, which ruled China's first city, Anyang; there, ancient Chinese people were able to establish and build a civilization despite the natural obstacles that characterized the region, where the remains of the ancient human in China, known as Peking Man, indicate the earliest human settlement in the Paleolithic period in China, which witnessed the Late Stone Age revolution around 3000 BC.

Some researchers believe that China's history and events are not precisely known before 1800 BC, and that the years following this date are approximate, as the precise history begins with the year of Confucius's birth (551-478 BC), it is worth noting that Chinese history is replete with events and developments. In this study, we will address aspects of thought, belief, and religion, as Chinese history and Chinese thought are not devoid of myths and legends like other ancient civilizations, and among the most famous religions is Confucianism, whose main principle was a focus on morality, where it was thus a philosophical thought through which Confucius sought to cultivate religious awareness in individuals so that they would automatically submit to social laws, and it also had a profound impact on establishing social order due to the principles it promotes, to the point that some believe it cannot be considered a religion, but rather a social and moral system.

1.1 Study Problem:

The importance of this research lies in the fact that it will clarify aspects of ancient Chinese civilization, particularly in the field of thought and belief, as it focuses on humanity and morality, and we focus in this research on Confucianism; therefore, we pose the following fundamental question: Is Confucianism a religion or a philosophical and ethical thought?

2. Chinese Philosophy: From Ancient Misconceptions to Practical Ethics:

For a long time, Chinese ideas and philosophy remained obscured in ancient history, leading some to believe that this region and its people lacked civilization or intellectual thought, this misconception arose partly from the complexity of the Chinese language and the inaccuracies of early translations, however, the reality is quite the opposite, where Scholars have diligently studied Chinese philosophy, gaining insight into the Chinese mind and spirit, and they have recognized the unique ability of the Chinese soul to transform moral theories into practical ethics. Rooted in the principles of righteous behavior, Chinese philosophy begins with theories of virtuous conduct and foundational principles of goodness, ultimately becoming an integral part of the ethics practiced by ordinary people.

Chinese philosophy was closely connected to and intertwined with religion, as both philosophical contemplation and religion share a common origin and source: the soul and conscience, however, while philosophy relies primarily on absolute reason, religion often depends on tradition in many aspects, as the most valuable philosophical inquiries are those aligned with true religion, and they offer nothing that contradicts sound reason.

It is well known that ancient Greek philosophy often clashed with religion due to the corruption and lack of integrity on one side, and a similar conflict occurred in Europe during the Middle Ages, where both philosophy and religion deviated from their true paths, because philosophy abandoned its commitment to reason, becoming entangled in illusions, fantasies, and superstitions, and it strayed from its authentic purpose, religion inevitably suffered the consequences.

In contrast, philosophy in China was based on ethics, and religion was based on polytheism, however, they met, and religiosity and philosophy proceeded in a balanced and well-controlled manner, thus, Chinese philosophy was based on organizing human behavior, reforming ethics, and implementing them, while religion called for good treatment among people, and both fall within the mold of ethics[1].

The Chinese religion was based on the worship of heaven, earth, spirits, mountains, and rivers, with sacrifices offered to the five elements to which all existence was attributed: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth[2], where the theory of the five elements dates back to the first millennium BC, with its earliest known reference in the eighth century BC; In this context, the name Shi Pu of the Zhou Dynasty is mentioned, as he formulated the theory of the five elements, which is considered one of the oldest philosophical hypotheses in Chinese history, and in addition to the aforementioned elements, the primary concept encompasses the directions of north, south, east, west, and center, forming the core of this theory.

According to the early Chinese belief based on the theory of the five elements, all things were created through the fusion of earth with metal, wood, water, and fire; these elements form the foundation of all living beings in the universe. In this sense, the hypothesis regarding the creation of the universe was characterized by spontaneity, and the five elements, which have held philosophical significance since their inception, experienced notable development during the Eastern Zhou era, beginning in the seventh century BC.

China is regarded as one of the most sophisticated nations of the ancient world in terms of non-religious human philosophy, as among its most remarkable contributions is the text known as the I Ching, or Book of Changes, which is considered one of the earliest written expressions of Chinese metaphysical thought, and tradition attributes its authorship to King Wen of Zhou (1152–1056 BC), the founder of the Zhou dynasty, where the concept of Yin-Yang was first documented in the Book of Changes, marking the earliest recorded philosophical idea in Chinese history, and this text stands as the oldest of the Chinese classics and serves as a foundational reference for all subsequent Chinese philosophical traditions, including Confucianism[3].

3. Confucianism:

Confucianism emerged in the sixth century BC and was named after its founder, Confucius, whose biography and teachings are widely transmitted, not all of which are historically acceptable.

Confucianism is a worldly social doctrine that aims to achieve the greatest possible degree of social justice in a feudal, bureaucratic society[4] by returning to the ways of the wise ancient kings and citing mythological historical texts. This led Confucius to describe himself as a transmitter, not a reformer[5].

4. Confucius (551 BC – 479 BC):

Confucius, whose original name was Kong Qiu and whose family name was Zhongni, was born in the kingdom of Lu, now known as Shandong in China, he was commonly referred to as Kong Futz, with "Kong" being his family name and "Futz" meaning sage or master; this name was later Latinized as Confucius.

Born in 551 BC into a family of royal lineage, Confucius belonged to one of the most distinguished clans in China, tracing their ancestry to Emperor Huangdi[6], where his father, a military leader and city governor, passed away when Confucius was only three years old, leaving him in poverty with limited means, and despite these hardships, he pursued knowledge with determination and resilience.

From an early age, Confucius diligently studied and applied the religious beliefs of ancient thinkers, which left a profound mark on his character and worldview[7], and his extensive knowledge of Zhou dynasty rituals and ceremonies gained him significant recognition; consequently, Zhao, the Duke of Lu, sent him to the royal court of the Zhou dynasty to study their ceremonial practices under the guidance of court historians.

Due to the outbreak of civil war in Lu, Confucius relocated to the State of Qi; however, he later returned to Lu, where he devoted himself to teaching and compiling ancient Chinese

classics, as his unwavering dedication to education and the preservation of traditional knowledge established him as a foundational figure in Chinese philosophy, with his teachings continuing to influence Chinese thought for centuries[8].

Despite the dire circumstances in which Confucius lived, he retained a sense of his family's glory, which fostered within him humane qualities such as compassion for the weak, humility, and love for others. Confucius learned at a young age what enabled him to view life from a forward-looking perspective and to study people's natures and how to reform them; he married before he reached the age of twenty and had one son[9], but this marriage did not last because his and his wife's ideas and outlook on life were incompatible[10].

Confucius had a strong desire to guide people and correct their behavior in life, so he wanted to be a teacher and educator, but this was not achieved at first because he was performing public work; he was appointed to some administrative work related to agriculture, and he accepted this job not willingly but under duress, due to his need and poverty, nevertheless, he cared about the education of his family and those who joined them, so his home became a destination for students of knowledge. Later, he was appointed as a professor at the age of twenty-two, which was his original desire[11], where he established a curriculum for his educational program that relied on transmitting his knowledge orally, so he taught his pupils various sciences and arts available at his time[12].

Confucius began to disseminate his views, principles, and teachings and worked to instill them in the souls of his young disciples, whom he carefully nurtured with these principles, where they became a group of adherents to his ideas, embracing his message and sincere in their commitment[13]; these principles he advocated stemmed from his influence on the reality of Chinese society and his reflections and insights into the conditions required for an ideal society. Confucius was not only a teacher, but also an intellectual, therefore, he sought to connect with one of the great philosophers, Lao-tzu[14], as he met with him, became acquainted with him, and engaged in dialogue with him, however, they did not reach an agreement, and they fell out[15].

Confucius began traveling from province to province, spreading his ideas and urging his companions and followers to uphold good morals, as he said of himself in the Book of Dialogues: *"I devoted myself to seeking knowledge at the age of fifteen; at thirty, I adhered to the path of virtue; at forty, I no longer had any doubts about the truth of things; at fifty, I learned about fate and destiny; at sixty, I listened attentively to all truth, knowing and understanding it; and at seventy, I did not transgress the bounds of upright conduct".*
Confucius focused his travels on guiding and enlightening rulers, believing that the ruler's righteousness and good stewardship of the people led to their righteousness, as he believed that wise politics and good treatment of the people were sufficient to replace the law and prevent the spread of corruption[16].

After Confucius returned to his state during the reign of Ding, Duke of the Kingdom of Lu, he was appointed mayor of Zhongdu[17], where he contributed to shaping the kingdom's policy for ten years, where he used this opportunity to instill his teachings among the people

through persuasion, and he succeeded, making his city a model to be emulated, and he was subsequently appointed vice governor of the province and then Minister of Justice, continuing his noble mission based on virtue and morality, especially among the country's senior officials, as he was assisted in his work by some of his friends who had learned his teachings, and during his reign, peace and tranquility prevailed among the people, and upright and virtuous morals became the dominant feature of society.

This situation did not last long. Some rulers did not adhere to Confucius' teachings and, after being tempted, succumbed to their whims, especially those who disliked Confucius's promotion of virtue; when the city's governor and prince disobeyed Confucius's instructions, he saw that the state's affairs could not be straightened out without its ruler being unrighteous, where he urged the prince to uphold righteousness, but he was unconcerned.

Confucius then returned to his travels, traveling through China's provinces and cities, continuing his call to persuade their kings to adopt virtuous behavior, although some rejected his message, he did achieve this by increasing the number of his disciples, who took up his teachings, reaching three thousand or more.

After this tour, Confucius returned to his homeland of Lu, where the prince honored him, however, he did not obey him like other rulers and princes, instead, he devoted himself to studying with his friends and pupils, where he was nearly seventy years old[18], and toward the end of his life, he preferred to withdraw from society to devote himself to organizing and summarizing ancient Chinese books and writing a history of China[19], thus adding another work to immortalize himself.

After his death, Confucius left behind disciples who undertook to continue spreading his teachings in China, where seventy-two of them excelled and worked to spread his doctrine, until it became the official doctrine of the country from the late second century BC[20].

Confucius did not claim to be a prophet or a messenger who received revelations, he was simply a wise man rather than a religious man, however, he had a religious feeling that made him respect the gods and be keen to perform their religious rituals and rites[21].

5. Confucius's Works and Books:

Confucius wrote five sacred books, none of which deal with religious worship, these are:

- The Book of Rites, which he wrote to discourage people from engaging in religious rituals[22], it describes ancient religious rituals and addresses the political system of the Zhou Dynasty;
- The Book of Changes, contains magical formulas, incantations, and texts explaining cosmic and natural phenomena, it also touches on metaphysics, although it does not delve into metaphysical matters;
- The Book of Chronicles[23], which contains a history of Chinese kings and emperors;
- The Book of Spinning;

- The Book of Spring and Autumn, records events and developments in the Lu Dynasty.

He attached to these books four studies known as the Philosophers' Books, where his books focused on purifying and refining the soul and keeping it from falling into sin[24], and these four books are:

- The Analects of Confucius, which contains a collection of Confucius's opinions, advice, and positions, compiled and organized by his disciples;

- The Great Science, which contains his most prominent teachings on the system of government;

- The Doctrine of the Middle;

- The Book of Mencius, contains Confucius's maxims and proverbs with commentaries and marginal notes by Mencius[25].

Confucius died in 479 BC after a life described by some as full of failure, but his influence on China was so great that he was sometimes called the "uncrowned emperor of China".

6. Confucius's Doctrine:

Confucius received the religious teachings prevalent among the Chinese in his early youth, reviving them and documenting their principles, he did not discuss them, nor did he advocate for a doctrine, rather, his goal and objectives were based on advocating upright and righteous behavior, and he was a wise philosopher who adhered to the doctrine of ethics, while his doctrine was similar to that of the ancient Chinese, based on the heavens, the spirits controlling the phenomena of things, and the spirits of the ancestors.

The ancient Chinese did not believe in heaven or hell, punishment or reward, as Confucius adopted these beliefs, and he did not believe in the afterlife, nor did he contemplate life after death, rather, his concern was to reform this worldly life, where in response to a question from one of his disciples about the fate of souls after death, he said, *"We were unable to serve the living, so how can we serve the dead! We have not learned about life, so how can we know what comes after death!"*

7. Confucius and Ethics:

The morality of the ancient Chinese before Confucius was based on virtue, as for them, human beings were inherently good, and the path to goodness was moderation and control over all personal actions, where compassion prevailed among members of society, and the laws of morality were inseparable from politics because ruler could not make people correct if he were not correct.

Although the Chinese were pagans and did not have a divine religion, justice prevailed in society, as did perfect morality for some time, however, this situation did not last, as in the seventh century BC, China was ruled by a dynasty that spread corruption and injustice, plunging the people into chaos, injustice and tyranny spread on the part of rulers and princes to other states and provinces, and this was reflected in Chinese society, which fell into a swamp of vice and moral decadence.

By the end of the seventh century and throughout the sixth century BC, figures emerged who worked tirelessly to rescue society from the clutches of corruption and

return it to the virtuous morals of earlier eras, the most prominent of these were Lao-Tzu and Confucius.

Confucius devoted his efforts and thoughts to reforming Chinese society, as his views on this path were based on three principles: the first, clarifying the moral foundation upon which virtues are based; the second, reforming society and encouraging it to adopt upright behavior; and the third, reforming the system of government and guiding it to virtue[26].

Confucius viewed ethics as the foundation upon which every society is built and as the true search for true knowledge, as he may have thought and experimented a lot to arrive at what he believed in and called for, and he cannot deny that he was influenced by the Chinese social environment, both positively and negatively, however, his moral contribution, scientific style, and humanitarian tendency formed a doctrine that influenced those around him, from his supporters to his opponents, where he left a solid example that generations after him continued to inherit[27].

Regarding his philosophy, the first aspect to mention is its theoretical part, where he introduced the theory of meaning and designation, focusing on the assignment of names in this regard, Confucius emphasized the importance of understanding the meanings of names and words, believing that they directly reflect the entities they represent, as he lived in a time of moral decay and oppressive rule in China, where language was manipulated to undermine ethical values, consequently, he stressed the necessity of accurately defining the meanings of words to preserve sound and upright principles, where he responded to a question from one of his disciples on this matter, stating:

"If names are not correct, language will not align with the truth of things. When language fails to reflect reality, communication becomes chaotic, and all affairs suffer, as a result, propriety and music will decline, reasoning will falter, and justice will not be served, and when punishments are not applied to those who deserve them, people will no longer know how to conduct themselves, therefore, the virtuous man insists that names correspond to their proper meanings, for only then can speech be reliable, and actions follow accordingly; a man of integrity never takes his words lightly, nor does he neglect the precision of his expressions"[28].

He also advocated for sound reasoning in all that an individual learns, on this subject, he stated:

"One who learns without reflection is lost in confusion, and one who reflects without learning is in danger of error".

Confucius believed that the pursuit of knowledge should not rely on mere speculation; true knowledge, in his view, is derived through virtue, though virtue itself is not equivalent to knowledge, he maintained that virtue is innate within human beings, but the conscious pursuit of it represents the pinnacle of humanity, where he expressed this idea in his book "The Analects", as follows:

"A man of noble character seeks virtue, while a man of lesser character seeks pleasure, as the virtuous man contemplates avoiding vice and fulfilling his duties, whereas the inferior man thinks only of personal gain, where the noble man stands on the side of righteousness, while the lesser man stands on the side of profit"[29].

Confucius believed that a person should constantly observe themselves to avoid straying from their natural disposition and succumbing to desires and pleasures, and he also emphasized self-reflection and the monitoring of one's conscience, encouraging the awakening of the inner, self-reproaching voice that holds one accountable for any improper actions, as through this process, an individual gains control over their desires[30].

Thus, Confucius built his humanistic doctrine on the concept of shaping the ideal individual, a person who becomes a model of righteousness in all aspects of life; from this perspective, it is evident that morality begins with the individual, where each person must reform themselves, remain vigilant, and restrain their desires, as when an individual adheres to virtues and rejects vices, this inevitably reflects positively on society as a whole; in other words, the virtue of the individual translates into the virtue of society.

Confucius regarded societal reform as a secondary concern, believing it could only be achieved when individuals committed to self-improvement and those in positions of governance upheld moral principles[31].

Confucius's moral philosophy rested on three core principles:

- The first was filial piety, emphasizing respect for parents and the preservation of family unity[32];
- The second involved promoting virtue gradually and gently, tailoring moral guidance to the individual's capacity[33];
- The third principle was the power of setting a good example, as Confucius believed that an individual's upright conduct could inspire and influence others[34].

He also championed the concept of reciprocity, encapsulated in his maxim: *"Treat others as you would like to be treated"*; in his teachings[35], Confucius emphasized virtues such as sincerity, faithfulness, benevolence, and ethical conduct, where filial piety and sibling respect were particularly significant, as he considered them the pillars of humaneness and integrity, and he linked filial piety to the observance of rituals, encouraging people to serve their parents dutifully in life and honor them through proper burial rites upon their death.

Contrary to the views of Laozi, the founder of Taoism, who advocated for withdrawal from society to attain virtue, Confucius believed that engaging with society was essential for moral reform, and while Laozi saw isolation as a path to spiritual purity, Confucius argued that virtuous individuals should participate in society to guide and uplift others.

During a notable exchange with Laozi, Confucius questioned this philosophy, asking:

"If every individual withdrew into solitude, who would build cities, cultivate the land, and master the crafts? Who would ensure the continuity of human civilization? And if the wise and virtuous abandoned society, who would guide and educate the people?! Should humanity be left adrift, without direction or moral instruction?"

Believing in the transformative power of moral guidance, Confucius engaged directly with communities, offering counsel and promoting ethical conduct.

Another key disagreement between Confucius and Laozi centered on the appropriate response to wrongdoing, as Laozi advocated for forgiveness, suggesting that harm should be met with compassion, in contrast, Confucius believed that justice demanded a fair and proportional response; he maintained that it was neither just nor beneficial to pardon

wrongdoing without consequence; for him, justice was not synonymous with leniency but with the equitable treatment of all actions.

8. Confucius and Politics:

Confucius's interest in this context was limited to the morals of rulers, not the nature of the system or method of government, as he emphasized what they should follow to improve their rule and the morals of the common people[36].

He believed that politics is not separate from morals, because those who separate them fail to understand the purpose of politics or the purpose of morals[37], as he said in this regard: *"A righteous politician is not only one who can rule with justice and fairness, but a true politician, who can, discipline the people so that there is no injustice"*[38]. He believed that this could be easily achieved because rulers and kings in politics influence politics more through their morals than through their laws, as through their morals, virtues, gentleness, and good treatment, they set an example for the common people, which ensures the well-being of the people, and their obedience and loyalty.

According to Confucius, one of the essential qualities a ruler must possess is the trust of the people, which he regarded as fundamental to gaining their love and support, additionally, he emphasized the importance of rulers adhering to the principle of listening to the voices of their citizens[39].

Confucius believed that the ruler's integrity alone was insufficient; it was equally important for the ruler to appoint virtuous individuals to assist him, this would not only strengthen his leadership but also enhance people confidence in his governance, and he insisted that those seeking official positions should remain committed to their responsibilities and the greater good, rather than pursuing power for personal gain.

A position of authority, in his view, should not be sought for the sake of status or dominance[40], instead, genuine dedication to reform and loyalty to one's duties should guide the ambition for leadership because, for Confucius, the ultimate measure of success was not merely attaining a position of power[41], but proving oneself worthy of it through competence and moral conduct[42].

According to Confucius, virtuous individuals should withdraw from office if the government becomes corrupt and their efforts to reform it prove unsuccessful[43], where he himself chose to step down when he observed the ruler of his province succumbing to personal desires[44].

Confucius advocated for establishing a just system within a chaotic feudal society plagued by wars between states, and he supported the principle of inclusive education and believed that diplomatic and administrative positions should be entrusted to the most academically qualified individuals, rather than those of privileged social backgrounds; in his view, the true purpose of government was to ensure the people's welfare and happiness, which could not be achieved through oppressive laws and arbitrary practices, instead, he called for the skillful application of traditional customs and moral norms.

He further asserted that since every individual is naturally capable of learning, they also possess the ability to make sound judgments about truth and morality, additionally, he emphasized the necessity of withholding judgment in cases of doubt, where he believed in

the existence of a moral order governing the universe and maintained that the most valuable subject of study for humanity was human nature itself, not the scientific analysis of the natural world.

Rejecting superstition and the belief in divine miracles, Confucius promoted a rational and pragmatic outlook, as his philosophy centered on addressing social issues and improving human conduct, with the conviction that ethical behavior and moral responsibility were the keys to a harmonious society[45].

9. How Confucianism Became a Religion:

Confucianism became the official doctrine of the bureaucratic society in China during the Han Dynasty, as Han Kao Tsu, the first Han emperor, made offerings to the Khong Dynasty temple in honor of Confucius in 195 BC; and in 59 BC, the Han Emperor Ming Ti ordered offerings to be made in every school throughout the country. He thus transferred the worship of Confucius from the Khong Dynasty to the state, transforming him from a mere role model for students to a patron saint for learned civil servants.

Confucianism thus became a cult and religion based on a kind of heroic veneration, taking some of its components from the worship of natural gods and ancestor worship, however, since the concept of priesthood was incompatible with Confucian thought, the guardians of the new religion were local scholars and high-ranking officials.

At the beginning of the imperial era, the official state religion was based on the high priest, to whom the sacrifices made at the altars of various temples, such as the Temple of Heaven and Earth, the Temple of the Sun, and others, were directed, where the sacrificial rituals were sanctioned by the Confucians, and they even participated in them as scribes or courtiers, even though these rituals were not part of Confucianism and its teachings[46].

After Confucius's death, his followers sanctified him, as they offered sacrifices to him during several pilgrimages, accompanying their celebration of this ritual with singing and dancing to the tunes of music when visiting his shrine[47], where his birth anniversary became an official holiday, celebrated annually in temples dedicated to him throughout China[48].

These are generally the ideas that Confucius brought, and stemmed from his sincere belief in reform and spreading the virtues of morality, whether for the common people or for the ruling class, as one of his students said about him: (The rank of Professor Confucius cannot be reached by anyone, just as the sky cannot be ascended to by anyone.. "If the professor had a share of emirate or leadership, the saying would apply to him: If he raises the people, they rise quickly, and if he guides them, they hasten, and if he comforts them, they take refuge from him in abundant shade. If he lives, he lives in glory, and if he dies, souls encounter regrets at his death. So how can anyone other than him reach his rank?"), this [49] thinker and philosopher is still revered and honored by China, despite its different beliefs.

10. Conclusion:

From this study, we conclude that ancient China, like other civilizations, witnessed the emergence of religions, beliefs, rituals, and religious practices, where we focused on Confucianism, which emerged in the 6th century BCE, as Confucius did not establish its principles and teachings as a religious doctrine or creed, but he adhered to the prevailing Chinese beliefs of his time and practiced their rituals in accordance with traditional teachings.

We conclude this study with a quote from Will Durant[50], reflecting Confucius's teachings:

"The ancients who wished to spread the highest virtues throughout the empire began by properly governing their states, and when they sought to govern their states well, they started by organizing their families, when they wished to organize their families, they focused on cultivating themselves; in their pursuit of self-cultivation, they first purified their hearts, and to purify their hearts, they worked to be sincere in their thoughts, and to achieve sincerity of thought, they expanded their knowledge to the greatest extent possible, for such expansion could only be attained through the pursuit of the truth of things".

This quote serves as a comprehensive summary of Confucius's philosophy and principles, which are fundamentally grounded in ethics and the moral development of the individual, family, society, and the state.

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