

Confucianism and the Liturgy: An Analectical Argument for the High Church Traditions

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Abstract: In Confucian thought, there exists a functional view of rituals in which the participation in ritualistic practices brings about human flourishing. Call this the Confucian Ritual Principle (CRP). Utilizing contemporary psychology, in this paper, we argue for CRP. After linking rituals to human flourishing, we argue that on the hypothesis that Christianity is true, we would expect God to establish highly ritualistic and dogmatic liturgies. Put slightly differently, we argue that we should expect what we call 'high church' on the Christian hypothesis. We then move to engage two objections to our argument. First, we respond to an argument that low church traditions are compatible with CRP. Second, we respond to an objection that argues against the ritual thesis, based on the flourishing of low church traditions.

Keywords: Low Church, High Church, Confucianism, Analytic Theology, Rituals, Rites.

The High Church Thesis (HCT) is roughly that God has established highly ritualistic liturgies, and, precisely following said liturgies are necessary for maximizing the ability for the Church to flourish. One can contrast HCT with The Low Church Thesis (LCT). LCT is the thesis that God has not established highly ritualistic liturgies. In this paper, we argue for HCT. We do this by first surveying and then utilizing resources found within the Confucian tradition. Specifically, we discuss and then argue for the Confucian Ritual Principle (CRP). CRP is simply a principle

that states that ritualistic practices are connected to robust human flourishing. We then move to argue that given the truth of CRP, one should expect HCT more than LCT. We conclude by responding to two objections. First, that low church traditions are compatible with CRP. And, second, that the flourishing of low church traditions acts as a counterexample to CRP.

1. Confucianism and Ritualistic Practice

Confucian thought heavily emphasizes a virtue ethics of happiness or flourishing. The central teaching of Confucius is namely that all human persons possess a fundamental moral obligation to realize happiness in oneself, and in others, through the cultivation of virtue (Van Norden 2011, 21). Confucian virtues include righteousness, dutifulness, trustworthiness, and courage. However, all of these virtues are contingent on the primary Confucian virtue of *rén* (仁), translated as “goodness” or “humaneness”. Kongzi illustrates how flourishing is achieved by way of cultivating virtue:

Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things. Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy (Confucius 500 BCE).

Kongzi goes on to stress how one cannot have a well-ordered family or state, if the root of order is neglected. For Kongzi, the way to cultivate virtue is through ritualistic activities (*lǐ* 禮). As Victoria Harrison puts it, “Although there was some dispute between later Confucians (particularly followers of Mengzi and Xunzi) about the role of the rites in the moral life, Kongzi’s view seems to have been that the rites codified the life of human excellence and by following them exactly one could eventually come to live a perfected life (Harrison 2012, 109).” Indeed, Kongzi stresses in the *Analects* (section 12.1) the importance of *lǐ* in the cultivation of *rén*, and Bryan Van Norden claims that this particular passage seems to indicate that

Confucius intended for *lǐ* to apply holistically to ethical action (Van Norden 2011, 25). For example, one should treat their parents (2.5) and their subordinates (3.19) according to *lǐ*. Cultivating virtue by following *lǐ* isn't just linked to these actions however. In book X of the Analects, Kongzi gives a very detailed description of what following *lǐ* would practically look like. There is a proper way to speak (10.1), relax (10.6), eat (10.7), receive a gift (10:20), and sleep (10:21). From Kongzi's detailed description, it becomes clear to the reader that ritual practices are fundamental to developing virtue in oneself, and in turn, aiding the society in its own flourishing.

2. The Plausibility of CRP

As mentioned above, we will call the view that participation in ritual practice is connected to robust human flourishing, the Confucian Ritual Principle (CRP). CRP seems to be supported by contemporary psychology and sociology. According to Nicholas Hobson and others, ritualistic practices functionally serve as regulators of (1) performance, (2) emotions, (3) social connections (Hobson et al. 2017, 3–4). Other research has shown that there is also a link between participating in what is called 'extreme rituals', and charity (Xygalatas et al. 2013, 1602). First, ritualistic practices are often associated with contexts in which a person, or group of persons, are expected to perform a task – for instance an athlete preparing for a game or a student preparing for an exam. When accompanied by a ritual, the participant often becomes motivated towards their current and future goals, in addition to experiencing a heightened sense of personal involvement (Hobson et al. 2017, 7–8). To some degree, therefore, a ritualistic practice may aid an individual – or group of individuals – in performing well in a particular task by allowing them to focus and invest their energies toward an excellent performance(s). Second, ritualistic practice has also been associated with contexts "characterized by negative emotions such as high anxiety, uncertainty, and stress" (Hobson et al. 2017, 5–6). Typically, the negative emotions are significantly diminished after the exercise of some ritual. This means that if an individual practices some ritual in a context of emotional deficit – or namely an emotional state that diverges from one's desired state – then it's likely that these practices will help regulate the deficit. Simply put, rituals aid in regulating negative emotions. Third, ritualistic practice has been observed to be essential to the functionality of large groups by acting as a means through which social connections are reinforced, and an individual's place in the group reaffirmed. Indeed, "the function of a shared group ritual is to allow an individual to participate fully in the social world by affiliating with fellow group members, reaffirming one's position in the group, and sharing in important social conventions and cultural knowledge"

(Hobson et al. 2017, 11). Finally, there is some evidence to suggest that an individual who participates in more complex or extreme rituals, will be more financially charitable than those who participate in less extreme rituals. For example, in one study, those who merely participated in or observed the rituals of singing and corporate prayer, donated less money than those who participated or observed rituals that included piercing body parts, dragging large cultic structures, and walking barefoot over rugged terrain (Xygalatas et al. 2013, 1602).

The last two benefits mentioned relate to how individuals connect and benefit their community. For the sake of this paper, we will assume the Aristotelian doctrine that humans are social animals. For a human subject to flourish, the subject must have certain external goods available to her. For example, the individual needs to be part of a flourishing society and the individual requires robust friendships (Besong 2018, 54). Cultivating charity among one's community and cultivating group identity are necessary preconditions for obtaining these external goods. And, rituals seem to be crucial to developing robust charity and group identity. We think we have good reason to affirm CRP. Now, having given a primer on how psychology supports CRP, we move to develop our argument for HCT.

3. An Argument for High Church Traditions

If the human design plan is such that ritualistic practices enable flourishing, why wouldn't God utilize such ritualistic practices to enable the Church to flourish?¹ Recall that the psychosocial effects of rituals that are conducive to human flourishing are the regulation of performance, emotions, and social connections.² With respect to performance(s), recall that there are several actions that Christ willed for His people to perform – some of which include earnest repentance (Matthew 3:8; Matthew 4:17, Romans 2:4, etc.), good works (Matthew 5–7, Romans 2:6, Matthew 25:35–40, etc.), and the spreading of the gospel (1 Peter 3:15, Mathew 28:19, 2 Corinthians 5:20, etc.) Similar to how the athlete makes use of her ritual prior to her game, and the student utilizes her rituals to aid her on her exam, wouldn't God want to utilize rituals to aid the Church to be more focused and invested in her repentance, good works, and the spreading of the gospel? It seems plausible that God would

¹ Note, we are not arguing that Confucius himself would agree with our argument. Rather, we are merely utilizing a principle found within Confucian thought to argue for HCT. Thus, if one is inclined to read relativism or quasi-relativism (as one reviewer pointed out to us) into the *Analects* (specifically 11.22), that doesn't possess a threat to our argument.

² In what follows, we assume the view expressed in Kongzi's *The Great Learning*, that societies (or in this case, the Church) flourishes when individuals flourish.

make the most of His design plan by designating ritualistic practices that ultimately aid His purposes for His Church.

Of course, performance isn't the only reason why God would want to utilize rituals. It seems likely that God wants us to correctly participate in His designated rituals that aid in regulating emotional deficits in order that we might learn to further rely on Him, rather than extraneous modes of comfort. Indeed, scripture consistently teaches to not rely on one's own strength, but on God's strength – Exodus 14:14, Jeremiah 17:5–9, Proverbs 3:5–6, 1 Peter 5:7 to name a few. God continually calls His people to Himself (Romans 8:28), and to take refuge in Him (Psalm 46:1–3). Furthermore, an individual's reliance on God may contribute to the deepening of their relationship with Him, and as such, gives us reason to expect that God would utilize the ritualistic psychosocial effect of regulating emotional deficits in the context of liturgy.

Finally, given that rituals induce social cooperation, wouldn't we expect God to institute rituals in religious contexts so that individuals help one another on their Christian journey? With respect to maintaining unity amongst his people, recall first how Jesus prayed to the Father that His Church may be one in John 17:22–23, “[the] glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (ESV 2016). Instituting rituals – especially a tradition with a heavy emphasis on rigid ritualistic practice – would only further incline His people to unite and care for one another.

Ilona Rashkow seems to agree with our point as she argues that the complex ritual practices of the Israelites helped to “enforce group commitment and thereby foster social group stability” (Rashkow 2015, 1). For instance, the unique Hebraic rites of passages such as circumcision, men's required study of the Torah (and others such as donning the Tefillin or fasting on Yom Kippur), marriage, and the process of burial and mourning, all uniquely reinforced a shared group experience (Rashkow 2015, 2–4). Indeed, there is a way in which Israelites lived their lives – the progressing of which is marked by these concrete rites of passage (Rashkow 2015, 3). In fact, Rashkow claims that

[rather] than regard [biblical] cultic activity as the neurotic manifestation of arbitrary regulations ... such activity can be seen as a way to understand these practices as the way [sic] ancient Israelites told their story of origin, brought the presence of the divine into their daily lives, resisted assimilation, and allowed all community members to participate in religious life (Rashkow 2015, 2).

In other words, these rituals were not simply arbitrary rules to follow fabricated by people. More so, they were activities that acted as a means to usher God's presence into their lives, resist outside influence, and reinforce their social connections. This of course leads to a problem for low church advocates. Namely, if rigid rituals were so important for the flourishing of God's people in the Mosaic Covenant, why would it not be important in the New Covenant?

Overall then, it is entirely plausible that given the connection between ritualistic activity and robust human flourishing (CRP), God would indeed establish a Church which emphasizes ritualistic activity (HCT). We argued that God would utilize rituals to aid His people in repentance, good works, and spreading the gospel. Moreover, God would aid in the Church's relationship with Himself through the psychosocial effect of regulating emotions. And finally, God would keep Christians unified as well as encourage radical altruistic behavior through rigid ritualistic practice. Having explicated this matter, we now proceed to engage two potential objections to our argument.

4. Potential Defeaters

4.1. *Can Low Church Traditions make sense of CRP too?*

First, low church traditions may be thought to possess enough ritualistic activities that God's Church would still be able to flourish to a sufficient degree. Perhaps one could even take this objection a step further by suggesting that low church traditions may be able to *invent* their own rituals such that they could just as effectively bring about a similar amount (if not the same amount) of flourishing as higher churches.

Our response is three-fold. Although we agree that low church traditions can make sense of CRP to some extent – for example, low churches practice corporate prayer and reading – we don't think that this should lower our credence much – if at all – for thinking that God would likely ordain the Church to utilize higher liturgies. Now, with respect to why, we think one needs to take into account that low church traditions on average (1) celebrate significantly fewer amount of rituals, (2) practice them with a far less sense of importance, and (3) practice them with significantly less frequency.

With respect to (1), the more rituals established within the tradition, the more opportunities for flourishing the participants of the tradition will have. In a strong sense, virtually every high church tradition practices the traditional liturgy – which consists broadly of two to three scriptural readings, a homily, kneeling and standing,

a time of confession, a time to recite a creed, and communion – in addition to various prayers that may be said throughout the day – such as the book of common prayer or the liturgy of the hours. In some cases, there are high church traditions that share rituals such as the sign of the cross, liturgical seasons, feast days, and more. These are but a handful of rituals that are emphasized in high church traditions, and thus on average, high church traditions in general can be seen as possessing far more opportunities for flourishing.

With respect to (2), high church traditions stress the importance of performing each ritual in a specific way that is determined by the context. Stressing the importance of rightly performing rituals is considered an essential component of Confucius's original view of ritualism and can be itself classified as a ritual. First, in the *Analects* (7.9, 10.7–10.23), Confucius is depicted as someone whose entire life revolved around ritualistic activity— a ritual for eating, a ritual for drinking, a ritual for getting up, a ritual for winding down to sleep, a ritual for mourning, a ritual for sitting. Everything, as much as possible, is to be performed in a ritualistic sort of light (12.1). Accordingly, this sort of intensity is mirrored in rituals performed by high church traditions. This sort of intensity (the importance found in the particular details) can be considered a sort of ritual itself, and as such, increases the capacity for flourishing for individuals within high church traditions.

Consider how high church traditions possess a particular manner in which one reads scripture and celebrates communion, as well as a particular order in which one celebrates the service in general (See Ratzinger 2000). When reading scripture, oftentimes there is a manner in which the reader should approach the scriptures and announce which readings they are. When celebrating communion, there is a particular order/manner in which the elements of bread and wine are to be handled, prayed over, and distributed that cannot be tampered with. When celebrating the liturgy, there is a particular order which the service must unfold. None of these are easily changeable, and all of them are practiced with the utmost sense of respect and reverence. However, low church traditions lack such order when reading scripture, celebrating communion, or handling service in any normative way. Indeed, there is no normative manner in which their tradition requires them to approach or announce the scriptures. There is no normative way in which the bread and wine need to be handled, prayed over, or distributed. There is no normative way in which the service needs to be celebrated. All of these are flexible and can very well change according to the local pastor. Therefore, low church traditions fail to practice rituals with the same sort of particularized importance as high church traditions such that they cannot make sense of CRP – especially as originally seen by Confucius himself – anywhere near as well as high church traditions can.

With respect to (3), low church traditions do not celebrate rituals with the same frequency as high church traditions – and we should expect higher frequency of rituals given God’s desire for us to flourish. Take holy communion as an example. Typically, low church traditions celebrate communion on a monthly or quarterly basis. High church traditions celebrate communion *every week*, and some traditions celebrate it *every day*. There are some churches within the low church traditions that celebrate communion every week, but these churches are so far and few between that one could hardly say that a specific low church tradition is the grounding for their weekly celebration or that their low church tradition is responsible for making this a normative custom.

What about the possibility that low church traditions can invent their own rituals such that they can bring about the same amount of flourishing as high church traditions have? Our response is two-fold. First, even if a handful of churches invent an adequate amount of rituals, nevertheless the whole of the tradition (comprised of other churches) will likely not conform to their increase in ritualistic activity. Thus, the tradition, cannot be considered one that emphasizes ritualistic activity. So, for instance, if there were a handful of non-denominational churches that emphasized new ritualistic practices, these churches would be vastly outnumbered by the remaining non-denominational churches such that the non-denominational tradition as a whole *cannot be said* to emphasize ritualistic practices. Second, even if the overall low church denomination did institute robust rituals that were frequently practiced, it would seem like the low church denomination would no longer be a low church denomination. It would be a high church denomination. Therefore, it matters not that some churches can invent rituals.

4.2. Why doesn't it seem to play out?

The second potential objection relates to the current state of high and low churches. It seems that the truth that rituals lead to human flourishing fails to pan out with respect to high church traditions. Indeed, it seems as though we should expect an ongoing flourishing of high church traditions over low church traditions since they emphasize rituals. To the contrary though, low church traditions now seem to be on the rise over high church traditions. Although there have not been exact statistical studies done with respect to how much high church traditions have decreased overall, according to a 2017 article written by Pew Research Center, some of the data seems to suggest that lower church traditions have been rising (Sahgal 2017). For instance, on average, Pentecostalism has been rising in areas such as Africa, Latin America, and Asia, while Protestantism has been rising over Catholicism in Latin

America. Although not all Protestants are to be considered Low-Church (e.g. Anglicans and Lutherans), nevertheless, the fact that Protestantism has been rising over Catholicism in Latin America may be considered as indirect evidence suggesting that higher church traditions are losing out on average.

Our response is four-fold. First, the fact remains that Catholicism and Orthodoxy are still the predominant Christian traditions in the world, and there is some evidence to suggest that higher church traditions are still predominant over lower church traditions within Protestantism. According to the same article by Pew Research Center, Catholics comprise 50.1% of all Christians worldwide, Orthodoxy 11.9%, Protestantism only 36.7%, and 1.3% “other” Christians. Although Protestantism certainly holds a significant amount of the Christian population, by no means do they hold the majority. How much more if we take out the populations belonging to high church traditions within Protestantism? Then what would be left of the low church traditions? Indeed, another article written by Pew Research Center indicates that out of the 14.7% of U.S. Adult Population that represents mainline Protestantism, Anglicans/Episcopalians are 1.2%, Methodists 3.9%, Lutherans 2.1%, and Presbyterians 1.4% (Lipka 2015). Thus, if you add the percentages up, within the United States alone, high church traditions represent 8.6% / 14.7% of the U.S. adult population – which means they are roughly 60% of the Protestant population in America. Although America doesn’t represent the entire world, nevertheless perhaps this may indicate to us just how “low” the numbers really are for low church traditions. Second, the claim that low church traditions are on the rise rests on shaky empirical grounds. Sure, Pentecostalism is on the rise, and Protestantism is rising in Latin America where Catholicism is dropping. However, does this somehow mean that all low church traditions on average are rising? Of course not. That may very well be the case, but, as far as we can tell, there has yet to be a survey that compares the rate at which all low church traditions are increasing (or decreasing) in population with the rate at which all high church traditions are increasing (or decreasing).

Furthermore, even if it were the case that low church traditions rate of increase was higher than high church traditions, so what? The number of participants of a tradition is only one way of measuring how the tradition is flourishing (if it is a way to measure flourishing at all). The low church advocate will need to do significantly more work to show that high church traditions are not flourishing more.

Finally, we have not argued that a high liturgy is sufficient for the Church to flourish. Rituals enable the Church to flourish robustly but that does not guarantee that it will. We have argued that given how God has designed us, it is likely that God ordains high liturgies. It might be the case that lower churches are flourishing

more than high churches, however, given their minimalistic approach to rituals, they won't be able to flourish as they ought. Higher churches on the other hand, have a much higher ceiling for flourishing.

We have gone through two potential objections and found both wanting. The first claimed that practitioners in the low church traditions could utilize rituals in a similar way as practitioners in high church traditions. However, this cannot be the case because low church traditions on average celebrate a significantly less amount of rituals and practice them with a far less sense of importance and frequency in comparison to high church traditions such that they cannot make use of CRP to the extent that high church traditions can (and do). The second objection claimed that complex rituals don't enable flourishing in an ecclesiological context as low church traditions seem to be rising over high church traditions. However, we argued that there are several reasons to doubt that this claim is justified. Overall then, we think that given CRP, it's likely that HCT is true.

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