

Introduction

In 1978, astrophysicist Michael H. Hart published a provocative book that ranked the one hundred people who had most influenced world history. Hart's book, titled simply *The 100*, argued that the five most influential persons who ever lived were the Prophet Muhammad, Sir Isaac Newton, Jesus of Nazareth, the Buddha, and Confucius—in that order.¹ The book's appearance caused quite a stir, especially among folk who thought their particular hero was not rated highly enough or did not make the list at all. Much of the controversy was due to the failure of many to understand the author's intention. Hart was not trying to evaluate and rank the *best* persons who had ever lived. He was merely making judgments about the *impact* on history of prominent individuals. Certainly he had a point. While we might quibble about the order, any list of, say, a dozen persons who have most affected the course of human events would surely include Muhammad, Jesus, the Buddha, and Confucius.

While the historical influence of these four can hardly be doubted, what prompts this study is not simply an interest in history, although that fact alone certainly merits comparative investigation. My fascination with this quartet of sages derives from another concern, the same interest that led me to the study of religion and philosophy in the first place: the desire to know how to live life well. After over thirty years of studying the world's religious and philosophical traditions, I am convinced that these four figures represent some of our finest teachers of the art of living. There are others whom I might rank with Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad, but no one who excels them. By their lives they have inspired me—and obviously countless others—with their dedication to living deeply and thoughtfully and with the courage they mustered in the face of adversity.

Because of their dual significance—as persons who decidedly shaped history and as teachers who offered compelling visions of how to live—this book addresses both historical and philosophical interests. We will talk

1. Hart, *The 100*.

about who these men were and what they said but also about the import of their lives and teachings for us today.

The approach to our study is simple, but it requires a bit of explanation and some justification. The overall structure is twofold. We will first study each figure separately, as an individual situated in his own time and place. Then, after considering each person independently, we will turn to a comparative study of their lives and their teachings.

The study of the four as individuals follows a chronological order. We begin with the most ancient figure, Confucius, followed by the Buddha, then Jesus, and finally Muhammad. This sequence implies nothing other than the passage of time. I am not suggesting any kind of philosophical, moral, or religious advancement or regression; we are merely considering these persons in the order in which they lived. Although there are occasional references to preceding chapters throughout the book, it is not essential that these four figures be studied in the order presented here. One might easily begin with Muhammad and end with Confucius.

To introduce each man, I will sketch out the historical and cultural framework that informed his life and worldview. In each case, we will see that he was born into an ancient culture in the midst of great changes. We will examine the nature of the cultural turbulence of his day to provide the essential details for understanding each man in greater context.

The study of his historical situation will be the background against which we will recount the major events in the life of each teacher. We will first examine the nature of the source materials for our biographical sketches and discuss some of the problems in obtaining a historically accurate picture of each of our sages. I will explain where the most recent scholarship draws the line between fact and legend in the accounts of their lives; often, there is considerable disagreement among scholars as to where that line should be drawn. As our discussion of their lives unfolds, we will begin to notice some remarkable similarities amid the obvious differences. We will observe how all four are reported to have had a royal or aristocratic lineage and yet were unable or unwilling to take advantage of the benefits of that heritage. We will note the accounts of unusual circumstances surrounding the conception and birth of each of the four and see some atypical features in their families of origin. In the life of each we will explore the pivotal moments of transformation in which some new insight is realized or new revelation received. Our biographical sketches then close with discussions of their later years and their deaths. Along the way, we will try to get a sense of the personal qualities and attributes that made these individuals who they were.

Outlining the life history of each figure will provide the framework for examining the essential components of his teachings and practices. In studying the wisdom these sages offered, we will be interested in a set of common questions. First, we will ask: How did each of the four understand the nature of the world and ultimate reality? This question puts us in the realm of what Western philosophy calls metaphysics. Metaphysics is that aspect of human thinking that reflects upon the fundamental character and qualities of reality in its broadest sense. Whenever we wonder about the origin of the universe or whether there is something deeper or something more to the world than the way it appears, we are entering the realm of metaphysics. Metaphysics tends to be a highly abstract way of thinking, since it tries to grasp the nature of reality in its entirety. Within this category, we will examine the way each of our subjects thought about the nature of the divine and the ultimate powers governing the world.

The next questions of our set pertain to what theologians and philosophers call anthropology. Anthropology in the philosophical sense should be distinguished from the academic discipline that also goes by that name. While the discipline of anthropology tends to focus on specific human groups, philosophical and theological anthropology is interested in understanding the nature of humanity in a more universal way. It wants to know whether or not there is such a thing as human nature and what the character of this nature might be. Philosophical anthropology investigates the distinctive qualities of being human and reflects on the meaning and purpose, if any, of human existence. As we study our four sages, we will look carefully at what each of them said—or assumed—about the nature of humanity. We will ask: What did he think about existence and the attributes of the self and of society? How did he envision the final fulfillment of humanity and human individuals? How did he understand the relationship between human beings and the rest of the world, including the ultimate reality?

Exploring the metaphysical and anthropological aspects of the teachings of each sage will clear the ground for discussing and understanding the moral principles each advocated. Here we enter the branch of philosophy and theology known as ethics. We will ask: How did each of the four think we should treat our fellow humans and other beings? What was the basis for his ethical views? Did he see proper human behavior as rooted in the will of a god or in the structure of the cosmos itself? Or did he think that morality was simply a social convention invented by human beings to facilitate our survival as a species but without any connection to a transcendent reality? These are the questions that will take center stage when we consider the ethical dimension of the teachings of the four.

Our final area of interest is spiritual discipline. When we move into this aspect of the sages' teachings, the central question that will occupy our attention is: What activities did each teacher encourage as a means of attaining full humanity and relating to the ultimate or fundamental reality? Within this category, we will explore the place of such things as ceremony and pilgrimage, feasting and fasting, and prayer and meditation in cultivating the life of the spirit. Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad did not become the persons they were merely because they were endowed with certain gifts of understanding and insight. They all practiced specific regimens that enabled them to refine their innate talents and to deepen their wisdom and compassion for the world. Those of us who study and write about such persons often neglect the role of spiritual practices in their teachings, preferring instead to focus attention on their ideas and beliefs. I hope to counterbalance that tendency by placing special emphasis on the practical disciplines they observed. I contend that by stressing spiritual practice, we are being more faithful to the lives and teachings of our four subjects, each of whom made *acting* a certain way as important as—if not more important than—*believing* a certain way.

To conclude the study of each figure as an individual, we will examine the reverberations of his life in its immediate context and in world history. The principal focus of investigation now turns to the development of the traditions with which he is associated and to the way his life and teachings were interpreted in the years subsequent to his death. Our study of each figure therefore begins in history with an examination of his cultural context, and returns to history with a consideration of how his life affected that context and the world at large.

Before we move on to discuss the comparative feature of this course, let me comment briefly on how I have structured the consideration of each teacher. First, I have separated the study of each man's life from the study of his teachings. I am not very happy about doing this. What troubles me about this division is the fact that in a very important sense, each man's life *was* his teaching. To modify a phrase from Marshall McLuhan, the man was the message.² The Hasidic tradition of Judaism relates the story of the famous rabbi Leib Saras (1730-1796), who had just returned from a visit to *his* rabbi and was asked by family and friends what words of Torah he had learned. Rebbe Saras replied, "I did not go to my teacher to hear his words of Torah; I went to see how he ties his shoelaces."³ All good teachers know they teach as much by example as by the words they utter.

2. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.

3. Kurzweil, *On the Road with Rabbi Steinsaltz*, 143.

This was especially true for the individuals we study here. Confucius was the exemplar of the kind of person he taught others to be. His protégés gained as much from observing him act as they did from listening to him talk. The Buddha not only spoke about the path to *nibbana*, or nirvana, as it is better known; he walked that way himself, and others could see the fruits of *nibbana* in his very life. The apostle Paul, perhaps the most important interpreter of Jesus, never once cited one of Jesus's parables or sayings; Paul was almost exclusively concerned with the crucified and resurrected Jesus, as if to suggest that in those events of his life the real significance of Jesus was revealed. Aishah, one of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad, was once asked about the personal qualities of her husband, and she replied, "His character was the Qur'an."⁴

These observations all indicate that the lives of these four were inextricably connected to their teachings, yet I have structured these chapters in such a way that puts their lives and teachings asunder. How do I justify this? The reason is simple: to make things clearer. Later in the book, we will compare and contrast the patterns of their lives and the content of their teachings, and it will be much easier to do that once we have teased out the points of comparison as carefully and clearly as possible. We need always to bear in mind, however, that this analytical separation is an artificial one, created for the sake of helping us to see how the lives and teachings of these four both parallel and diverge. Fortunately, the fact that we cannot ever completely and neatly divide their lives and teachings will constantly remind us of the artificiality of this division.

The way we shall study the teachings is by means of another contrivance. Confucius did not sit down with his students and say, "Today, students, I'll be discussing my metaphysical position and my understanding of ultimate reality." Jesus did not gather his disciples by the Sea of Galilee and give them a lecture on his anthropological views of the nature and destiny of human beings. It might have made things easier for twenty-first-century scholars if they *had* taught that way, but I suspect they were not terribly concerned about packaging their ideas for the benefit of twenty-first-century scholars. These sages taught with yarns and parables, aphorisms and proverbs, and of course with their very lives. They were not academic philosophers and theologians, and for that we can all be grateful!

Obviously, none of our four teachers would have presented their ideas in the way we will study them here. But again, the rubrics we use are for the sake of clarity and to facilitate our comparative interests towards the end of the book. Someone else writing about these four—or any one

4. Al-Adab Al-Mufrad, Hadith 308, <http://sunnah.com/urn/2203080/>.

of them—might use a different set of categories to present their ideas. The framework I have suggested provides the best way *I* know to keep the material clearly organized, but it is not the only way. My discussions will certainly be colored by those aspects of the lives and teachings of the four that I find important and interesting. I will choose to highlight certain things and deemphasize others. For better or worse, there will be much of my own thinking involved in this study. Yet the same would be true of *any* presentation of their lives and thought. No one escapes this fact of interpretation. Please consider me as only one voice in vast chorus of interpretations seeking to understand the lives and teachings of these great sages. I encourage you, therefore, to read the interpretations of others and, more importantly, to read the words of these sages for yourself and form your own opinions about their views.

We should also note that the categories we will use—metaphysics and ultimate reality, anthropology, ethics, spiritual practices—do not all occupy the same place or play the same role in the teachings of these four. While Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad all had things to say that fit under each of these rubrics, they did not all assign equal importance to each area. For instance, Confucius was far more concerned with ethical matters than he was with the question of ultimate reality. Jesus did not speak as much about spiritual exercises as he did about his god and appropriate human behavior. Furthermore, these categories will not always appear as discrete subjects in our analysis. In some cases, for instance, metaphysics and anthropology necessarily converge, as when the human being is regarded as a part of the ultimate reality. For some of the sages, ethics is an essential component of their spirituality. These categories are thus a kind of typology that seems nice and neat in theory but is not always as well-ordered when we begin the work of analyzing the actual teachings.

One final comment on methodology: Often, these four are regarded as the founders of four of the major world religions. For the purposes of this study, it is important that we try not to think of them too much in this light. None of these figures thought his mission in life was to establish a new religion; in some senses, in fact, each of them understood themselves as calling their contemporaries to return to ancient truths. Describing Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad as religious “founders” may distort our understanding of the way they thought of their own lives and might expose them to judgments better reserved for those who call themselves their followers. Let us not make the mistake of evaluating any one of our four sages on the basis of what we think of the religion that developed in his wake. It is not intellectually responsible to impute uncritically to Jesus

the views of Christians or to hold Muhammad accountable for all actions carried out in the name of Islam.

It is also important to remember that these figures are often associated with religions *other* than the one they ostensibly founded. The Buddha, for instance, may have spent a significant part of his life as what we today would call a Hindu, although that label would not have been available to him during his lifetime. He would not have identified himself as either a Hindu or a Buddhist. Furthermore, the Buddha is *still* associated with Hinduism, as many Hindus regard him as a manifestation of the god Vishnu, and he even played a small but fascinating role in Christian history, as we shall see when we study the Buddha's legacy to the world. And although Jesus is frequently called the founder of Christianity, Jesus was not a Christian. He was born a Jew and remained a Jew all his life. If this were a text on the founders of the world religions, I would probably name the apostle Paul the founder of Christianity, not Jesus. Christianity is the religion *about* Jesus, but it was not the religion *of* Jesus. Moreover, Jesus is a major figure in Islam. He is embraced by Islam as a *muslim*, that is, one who submits to the will of Allah, and as a great prophet to the world, second only to Muhammad himself.⁵

Let us therefore refrain from thinking of these four primarily as representatives or founders of four major religions. We will consider them first and foremost as individual teachers in their unique historical and cultural settings, and only secondarily in relation to the very complex realities that became the religions with which they are commonly associated.

The final part of this study will offer us the opportunity to reflect on Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad from a comparative perspective and to discern ways in which their examples and teachings can continue to nourish the human spirit. One part of our analysis will be devoted to comparing the patterns of their personal lives. Although they were unique individuals separated by time and place, certain features of their biographies are surprisingly similar. I have already mentioned that they each lived at a time of cultural upheaval and that each could lay claim to an aristocratic heritage. We will also see some other unexpected commonalities, such as the fact that each survived at least one assassination attempt. Another section will compare their teachings and practices. We will ask: Were these sages actually saying the same thing, as many today would like to believe? While I think the answer to that question is basically no, at least on one essential point they do seem to agree, which is the conviction that self-centeredness thwarts human happiness and well-being. To counteract selfishness, they all taught methods for cultivating humility and compassion

5. For more analysis of these issues, see Muesse, "Crossing Boundaries."

for others. In the final part of the book, we will try to garner enduring lessons from these four and apply them to the world today.

One might contend that trying to compare these four figures is like comparing apples and oranges. Each was a unique individual and his significance for his followers was and is equally unique. In the minds of Christians, Jesus is the savior, the second person of the Trinity, the divine in human form. Some Christians might think, therefore, that he should not be placed on the same level as the other three—or any other human being. For Buddhists, the Buddha was indeed a human, like Jesus and the others, but by attaining Buddhahood, he transcended even the gods and so rose to a rank not only beyond the human but also beyond the divine. Muhammad, for Muslims, was one in a long line of over one hundred thousand prophets who presented Allah's will to humanity. But Muhammad was, nonetheless, different from all others; he was god's *final* messenger, the "seal of the prophets." His message was the *final* revelation, Allah's ultimate communication to the world. That fact sets him apart from all other humans, including the other prophets like Jesus.

On what basis, then, can we compare these four? In a sense, trying to compare them really *is* like comparing apples and oranges (and pears and bananas, to extend the metaphor a bit to fit our discussion). But the fact is, you actually *can* compare apples, oranges, pears, and bananas. After all, they are all edible fruit, contain seeds, and grow on trees. Although different in many ways, apples and oranges do share some bases for comparison, and so do Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. For instance, they were all human beings—even though some of them were subject to claims of divinity or something greater—and they were all teachers of wisdom and compassion. On these points I think everyone will agree, including those who want to press further to claim a particular uniqueness for one or another sage. And so it is on this basis that we will take up our study. We do not deny that Jesus was the messiah for his followers, or that the Buddha excelled the common lot of humanity according to Buddhists. But the focus of our study will be their human lives and their vocations as teachers of wisdom and compassion.

When we discuss Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad, we are not merely speaking of historical figures like Napoleon or Marie Curie or even Michael Hart's number-two figure, Isaac Newton. For billions of persons around the world, one or more of these four is a *sacred* figure, which puts him in a different category altogether. In this work, I will strive to be sensitive to these sentiments. Accordingly, we will not attempt to rank these four in relation to one another. Although we will compare and contrast these individuals with each other, we will do so to gain deeper insight into

their lives and teachings, not to rate them. I will do my best to treat all four with an even hand and show no favoritism to one over the others.

SAMPLE