

REVIEW & ANALYSIS OF LECTURES BY PROFESSOR MARK W. MUESSE: CONFUCIUS, BUDDHA, JESUS & MUHAMMAD

By

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Introduction

As religion comes to occupy the forefront of the socio-political stage, the academic arena, which has always been enamored with religious discourse, has now begun to dissect the purpose of religion: What each faith has to offer and what religion offers, on the whole, to humanity. Professor Mark W. Muesse in his set of lectures *entitled "Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad"* does precisely this. He considers the teachings of each of these men in light of their historical context and personal circumstances, and tries to redefine each man's character based on his intent and action, rather than the persona imposed upon him by his followers. He acknowledges that western media's portrayal of Prophet Muhammad has been unfair particularly his teachings regarding women's rights and warfare.

All the Four Sages Preached and Practiced Noble Life but Their Teachings were Different

Professor Muesse outlines that each sage strove to inculcate within himself and within his followers the will and struggle to live the noble life, and that each teacher emerged in a time of cultural turmoil or political upheaval, and either rejected prevalent cultural norms or redefined them to abide to a higher or nobler purpose. What that purpose was, varied between them, as did their declared paths to achieve their respective purposes. But ultimately, Muesse argues that while each sage taught different stratagems for seemingly different goals, all four sages are

*"among the most important and influential persons in history. They are remembered for the examples of their lives, their insights into the human condition and the nature of ultimate reality, and the religious movements they inspired. It would be hard to name another set of four persons who have more deeply affected so many lives."*¹

Muesse goes on to provide the scope of his research:

*"We will attend to the similarities and differences in their messages, in the patterns of their lives, and in the ways they impacted their followers and the rest of the world."*²

¹ Muesse, Mark W. Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. (Virginia: The Great Courses, 2010), p. 1.

² Ibid.

Muesse begins first and foremost with the assertion that all four men did not, as per the modern viewpoint, teach the same thing. Their approaches, he argues, were different in theoretical and conceptual terms and emphasis was laid on different elements.³ Indeed, these four sages posited a different solution to the prevalent problems of their time and their understanding of the prevalent issues stemmed from the cultural framework within which they emerged. However, all of them were keen on what is today termed as “meditation,” and all were very conscious of human suffering⁴ and presented their followers with unique theological perspectives on human suffering, and offered unique solutions thereof:

“For Confucius, humans were simply unable to live in harmony with one another because they had neglected the ancient ways of virtue as taught by the sages of the golden past. The solution to that problem was to instill moral virtue by means of education, example, and self-cultivation. For the Buddha, beings suffered because of their fundamental ignorance about the true nature of reality and themselves. They wrongly believed in a permanent and substantial self, which led them to crave and become attached to world in constant flux. The proper objective for human beings was to practice the manifold path that fosters insight into the world as it is and eases the desperate attempts to grasp and cling to what is impermanent. For both Jesus and Muhammad, human beings have departed from the way established for them by god. Jesus was especially concerned with the social distinctions imposed on the culture in which he lived. He envisioned a day in which those distinctions were shown to be meaningless and he urged his followers to join him in living as if the kingdom of god were a present reality. Muhammad shared Jesus’ concerns about social distinctions and the regulations that harmed human well-being, but he viewed these concerns in light of the human tendency to forget god and put other realities in the place where god should be: at the center of all we do and think. The Prophet revealed specific ways for people to remember their god and submit their wills to al-Lah.”⁵

The theoretical differences between them are outlined also in their differing understanding of humanity’s ultimate goal or destiny:

“The final destinies envisioned by the four sages are as different as their estimations of the human predicament. For Confucius, the goal of human life was perfect goodness, bringing to full manifestation our potential for being humane. Confucius promised no blissful afterlife for the hard work of moral cultivation. Goodness...is its own reward...The Buddha promised the end of the suffering and liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. For Jesus, the reward for living a life centered in god was eternal life, participating in the kingdom established by god, when the values of the current world would be turned on their head. To Muhammad, those who have submitted themselves to al-Lah will enjoy paradise...”⁶

³ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴ Ibid., p. 471.

⁵ Ibid., p. 467.

⁶ Ibid.

Although each sage espouses a different end to living out the noble life, all nonetheless agree that the end to such a life will be a positive one, and one well worth striving for. But what are the obstacles to living the noble life and arriving at the ideal destiny? While each sage may have outlined multiple obstacles to this goal, each sage identifies “*self-centeredness...at the heart of human misery.*”⁷

*“Confucius...did not engage in much discussion about the nature of the self or the causes of self-centeredness; he simply offered practical advice for living with greater concern for the well-being of others. He invited his followers to treat others in the manner they would treat themselves...The Buddha not only offered practical advice for living selflessly; he went even further to argue that the self, as that concept is ordinarily understood, is a complete fiction, an illusion, with no basis in reality. When the selfless nature of human existence becomes apparent, persons cannot but help living compassionate lives, taking the suffering of others as seriously as one’s own suffering... Muhammad and Jesus...taught practical wisdom for living life in a more wholesome and liberating way. For Jesus and Muhammad, self-centered living was at the root of the injustices they observed in their societies. The rich and the powerful had become so self-absorbed and concerned with their own pleasures that they neglected the well-being of everyone else. Confucius, too, saw this problem in the rulers of ancient China and urged them to return to the old rituals to remind them of their responsibilities to ensure that virtue flourished in their kingdoms.”*⁸

Interestingly, Jesus saw the ailment of self-centeredness plague not only in wrongdoers but also the righteous, who had become more absorbed with ensuring their holiness than in aiding those in need.⁹ And Prophet Muhammad saw self-centeredness come alive not only in persons but also in *corporate bodies*. “*Muhammad was critical of the way the self-interests of the tribe or clan came to override the basic demands of justice.*”¹⁰

But again, even as Confucius, Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad converged ethically upon the issue of “self-centeredness,” their paths diverged upon the matter of addressing this issue. Jesus and Muhammad agreed that overcoming self-centeredness required dethroning the self and placing in its’ place the entity of God. The Buddha however believed that clinging to any such beliefs would prove troublesome as all such beliefs were mere illusory attachments. To recognize the illusory nature of self was sufficient in overcoming it. Confucius, on the other hand believed that living out one’s life according to the example of the sages of old, and recognizing and abiding by one’s duties would ensure the mastering of the self as the web of human relationships would become dominant over it.¹¹

Historical Contexts of the Four Sages

⁷ Ibid., p. 468.

⁸ Ibid., p. 468-9.

⁹ Ibid., p. 469.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 470.

The patterns of the lives of each of these men seem to take similar trajectories. Each one struggles with the reality they are faced with and aspires to find some solution to the moral issues at hand. Their historical contexts may have been very different but their beginnings are rather similar. Muesse writes that:

*“Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammad all started out with little and accomplished their feats in spite of their humble beginnings. Only the Buddha began with everything and chose to give it all up.”*¹²

All these sages, except for the Buddha, were born of humble origins and endured many worldly hardships. Records indicate that Confucius’s father died and his mother raised him in poverty. The *Analects* (the official compilation of his teachings) state Confucius was “skilled in many menial things” which, according to Meusse, is indicative of Confucius having to take lowly jobs in his youth. Despite this, Confucius managed to acquire a good education because of his membership to the “shi,” an emerging class of gentlemen.¹³ Jesus was born into the peasant class, and worked as a laborer.¹⁴ Similarly, Prophet Muhammad was born to a widow, who died a mere few years after his birth. Prophet Muhammad was then passed on from one relative to another.¹⁵ And upon maturity, Prophet Muhammad had to struggle as a shepherd until he found work as a caravan merchant.¹⁶

The Buddha, on the other hand, was born to a life of great wealth and ease, all of which he ultimately abandoned in search of enlightenment. He thus passed his days going from being an ascetic to eventually becoming a monk and living out a life of extreme simplicity.¹⁷

Despite their humble circumstances, these men did have personal histories which were indicative of a noble heritage.¹⁸ The Buddha was obviously of noble status since he was born into a household of wealth and political power.¹⁹ The remaining sages though not the aristocrats of their time, still retained some aspect of nobility. Confucius, though endured poverty, was born into a class of prestige. Jesus’ ancestry was linked to Israelite royalty and Prophet Muhammad was born to the Quraysh tribe of Mecca, a tribe of some prestige, charged with the care of the Ka’aba, which had fallen on hard times.²⁰

All the Four Sages Taught that Nobility Overrode Heritage

But despite their notable heritages, all four of the sages believed and emphasized that

¹² Ibid., p. 145.

¹³ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 250.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 355.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 356.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 155-6.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 449.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 142-3.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 450.

nobility was a matter of spirit and character and could be cultivated through intent and discipline.²¹ Confucius, who lived in a culture which believed that even barbarians could become civil should they adopt the rituals, beliefs and actions of the educated, placed great emphasis on learning and believed that through learning and particularly by learning the teachings of the sages of the past, the pursuer of knowledge, regardless of his social ranking could himself become a sage.²²

The Buddha believed and taught that enlightenment could be achieved by anyone who sought it, for all people were one and the same, trapped as they were upon the wheel of life and thus enduring all the occurrences of its turning such as sickness, old age and ultimately death, over and over again as the belief of reincarnation asserts.²³

Jesus believed that the Kingdom of God would prove heavenly for those of meek stature. That those in this life who squandered their wealth and sought power and disregarded the suffering of the weak and poor would be condemned when the Kingdom of God came to.²⁴ Essentially, Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God would belong to not any particular people or class but those who strove to bring about the Kingdom of God.

Prophet Muhammad's teachings revolved around submission to God and to fulfilling an ethical vision of society, characterized by equality and justice:

“Near the end of his life, Muhammad gathered together members of the Muslim community and delivered his final public address, sometimes known as the Farewell Sermon. In that discourse, which is reported in several collections of *hadith*, Muhammad succinctly restated the understanding of humanity that underlies the entire Qur'an:

All people are from Adam and Eve. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, and a non-Arab has no superiority over an Arab; a white has no superiority over a black nor does a black have any superiority over a white, except by piety and good action.

For Muhammad, the descent of all humanity from the same ancestors entailed two important principles. First, all human beings are prone to some steadfastness that led to the banishment from paradise, and second, all human beings are fundamentally equal before god. Tribal and clan affiliations are of no significance. Ethnicity and skin color mean nothing. The only distinguishing trait of any significance is whether or not one surrenders to al-Lah and acts with justice and humility. ...Jews, Christians, or the members of any religion who followed the will of al-Lah were accounted by Muhammad among the righteous and the heirs of paradise. To surrender to the will of al-Lah did not mean that one had to refer to the ultimate reality by that name.²⁵

²¹ Ibid., p. 449.

²² Ibid., p. 82.

²³ Ibid., p. 159.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 275

²⁵ Ibid., p. 409.

Thus, each of these four men, three of them of humble origins and all of them of noble background, taught that all of humanity is fundamentally the same, that there is no marker of distinction greater and more relevant than the ones acquired through the cultivation of character.

Accordingly, and as mentioned, each of these men also taught their followers to remain attuned to the suffering of others and strive to minimize that suffering.²⁶ Confucius, after leaving his political post, traveled the countryside, and while doing so provided aid and support to those in need.²⁷ The Buddha emphasized generosity and compassion as integral to mastering one's self and achieving "nirvana," the ultimate goal in Buddhist ideology.²⁸ Jesus condemned the wealth and power of the Roman Empire instead emphasizing charity and humility.²⁹ Prophet Muhammad was deeply averse to the ethnic divides that emerged from the pre-Islamic tribal system of Arabia, which made all the more vulnerable those members of society who belong to marginalized groups.³⁰ All of these men taught their followers the inherent equality of all persons and the importance of compassion towards one's fellow beings.

Western Media has been Unfair to Prophet Muhammad

However, as can be observed by anyone who has had some exposure to modern day Western media, only three of these sages have been given the respect and adulation they deserve for the momentous positive changes they brought about and for the long lasting philosophical and just and tenable teachings they left behind. Indeed, Confucius and Buddha have been heralded by modernity as great philosophical and spiritual teachers. Jesus, although endures speculation at the hands of science, regarding his Virgin birth and Divine origins has not had to endure the ridicule and insult the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (saw) has endured. Muesse does an excellent job of addressing the Orientalist objections that haunt the Western world regarding the Prophet. He contextualizes the Prophet's actions and teachings, providing a historical rationale for both. The two main concerns, which Muesse addresses and which have plagued Western society, regarding the Prophet Muhammad's character and conduct, have been his teachings regarding women's rights and warfare.

Western Media & Gender Equality in Islam

Muesse states the status of women in Islam is spiritually equal to that of men, but also states that Prophet Muhammad viewed women as having roles and responsibilities distinct from those of men and states that whether this amounts to inequality is a matter of debate.³¹ He then goes on to discuss matters such as inheritance, marriage and divorce and provides reasoning behind the Islamic law upon these matters as it pertains to

²⁶ Ibid., p. 471.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 211.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 275.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 357.

³¹ Ibid., p. 412.

women, and finally arrives upon the conclusion that to declare Muhammad a feminist would be an “anachronism”, but Muhammad certainly raised the status of women in a society that was defined by its patriarchal nature and which was steeped in practices oppressive to women.³²

In pre-Islamic Arabia, there was no limitation on the number of wives one may have, but Muhammad, prior to his ministry maintained a monogamous relationship with his wife Khadija, while the norm was to have many. With the dawn of Islam, the number came to be limited to four. However, Muhammad, according to Quranic injunction was permitted more due to his status as a Prophet. History tells that most of his marriages were of a political nature, to cement political alliances.³³

The number of the Prophet’s wives has come under intense scrutiny in the Western world and his marital relations have often been made a target of lewd ridicule. But Karen Armstrong, in her biography of the Prophet traces the historical Christian mindset that led to such feelings and which continues to dominate the Western world even today. She writes that while Christian Europe was lost in the dark ages, and as Islam flourished, some Christians (though not all of course) held a contradictory opinion of Islam wherein even as they admired and applauded its progress, they were repelled by the success granted by God to the infidels.³⁴ In the eleventh century, under the leadership of the Pope, as Christian armies pushed back the borders of the Islamic Empire, many a myth emerged and developed about Muslims and their Prophet Muhammad (saw). Particularly crude accounts were formulated which revolved around the aspect of the Prophet’s multiple wives. But these feelings, according to Armstrong, were less a hatred of the Prophet and more a response to the emerging Christian doctrines, under the leadership of the Pope in the eleventh century. Armstrong writes:

“At a time when the Church was imposing celibacy on a reluctant clergy, the astonishing accounts of Muhammad’s sexual life reveal far more about the repressions of Christians than about the fact of the Prophet’s own life. There is a definite note of ill-concealed envy in this depiction of ‘Islam’ as a self-indulgent and easy going religion.”³⁵

Armstrong goes on to state that much of the modern Western viewpoints on Islam, including lewd remarks surrounding Muhammad’s marital life, first emerged during this period and instead of being debunked by scholarly efforts, were only further augmented by them.³⁶ And unfortunately, these myths have followed us to our present, to a point where we are well-nigh unable to disregard them for the tall tales that they in fact are.

In her second biography of the Prophet, Armstrong goes on to provide the reasoning behind the Islamic permission for up to four wives. She writes that polygamy was not

³² Ibid., p. 415.

³³ Armstrong, Karen. Muhammad: A Prophet of our Time. (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 148.

³⁴ Armstrong, Karen. Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet. New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 22-24.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 27.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

intended to “gratify the male sexual appetite,” but was meant to provide security to the disenfranchised women from the harsh life of Arabia. Women were considered property and would be passed onto male heirs upon their “owner’s” death. Widows, orphans and female dependants, were then used to acquire money or gratify sexual desires: they were sold into slavery, married off to the highest bidder (as per pre-Islamic tradition, the groom had to pay a bride-price to his wife’s “guardian”), or sexually abused.³⁷ The Quranic injunction allowing men up to four wives was put forth in this context i.e. to provide security to disenfranchised women, who without male guardianship in an extremely patriarchal culture were often preyed upon. Furthermore, taking on more than one wife was only permitted when the groom could ensure equal and fair treatment, and *only* four wives were permitted, whereas the prior Arabian culture encouraged taking wives, without limitation and without any reference to their rights and/or treatment. And the Quranic verse allowing a Muslim man to have up to four wives, particularly came after the “Battle of Uhud,” when widows and orphans were in abundance.³⁸ The Quran sought to redress a social problem not to enable nor encourage sexual licentiousness. Indeed, as Muesse also relates: “Given the rampant intertribal warfare, women significantly outnumbered the men and without male protection and support, their lives could be miserable indeed... In practice, Muhammad’s teaching helped ameliorate the harsh conditions under which women lived by encouraging men to treat them with kindness and provide for those who especially needed it.”³⁹

Western Media and the Concept of Islamic Jihad

The second issue that Muesse addresses at length is the concept of Islamic Jihad. First and foremost, he underscores the distinction between the lesser jihad (warfare) and the greater jihad (the struggle to conquer one’s self).⁴⁰ He goes on to make mention of Muhammad’s very just warring practices (referred to by ethicists as “just war theory”)⁴¹, wherein captives were taken and treated justly and without cruelty, and wherein Muhammad did not permit mutilation of corpses, and distributed with fairness the spoils of war.⁴² To preserve his small community and ensure the survival of his message against the harsh, unforgiving and battle inclined Meccans, Muhammad and his followers eventually took up arms.⁴³ Muesse does write however, that in the battles that occurred later in his life, Muhammad did not show the restraint he did in previous battles. A shadow of militarism prevails over his last years, which the West has trouble accepting. Muesse gives the arguments of what he calls “apologists”: that when an ally, the Jewish tribe of Qurayzah betrayed him at the Battle of the Trench, Muhammad showed no clemency and his army killed the men (apart from those who converted) and took the women and children as slaves. He did this primarily because he had acquired a reputation for being soft-hearted and this perceived weakness was making his enemies

³⁷ Armstrong, Karen. Muhammad: A Prophet of our Time. (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 147

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

³⁹ Muesse, Mark W. Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. (Virginia: The Great Courses, 2010), p. 413-14

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 387.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

ever bolder.⁴⁴ Another argument he states, is that Muhammad was simply following the example of the ancient Israelites. Muesse writes that “*each of the many arguments makes valid points, but whether these observations amount to justification for bloodshed is still another matter.*”⁴⁵

Armstrong however offers an alternative view of the matter. She argues that because the ally in question was the Qurayzah, the third tribe to betray Muhammad, one of the other two having proved to be a threat even in exile, Muhammad was bound to act. But he did not declare a policy of no mercy upon the enemy. Instead he offered the Qurayzah an arbitration, wherein, a third party, one agreed upon by both Muhammad and the elders of the Qurayzah, would determine the fate of those who committed treason. The fate decided upon was death and as Armstrong relates no one, not even the Qurayzah were surprised by this. It was part of the prevalent cultural norm and an aspect of tribal law. And it was not an attack upon the Jews as such, but merely a punishment against treason, for even the surrounding Jewish tribes did not interject, well aware of and accepting it as tribal custom.⁴⁶

About this incident, Hadhrat Mirza Bashir –ud-Din Mahmud Ahmed emphasizes that if Jews had agreed to be punished under Islamic law, they would have received a lighter punishment. But the Jews were punished by the arbitrator in accordance with the laws of Moses. He explains:

*If the Prophet was cruel to the Jews why was he not cruel to other people on other occasions? There were many occasions on which the Prophet’s enemies threw themselves at his mercy, and never did they ask in vain for his forgiveness. On this occasion, the enemy insisted on a person other than the Prophet making the award. This nominee of the Jews, acting as an umpire between them and the Muslims, asked the Prophet and Jews in public whether they would accept this award. It was after the parties had agreed, that he proceeded to announce it. And what was his award? It was nothing but the application of Law of Moses to the offence of the Jews.*⁴⁷

Conclusion

Professor Mark W. Muesse, in his set of lectures titled “*Confucius, Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad*,” proves himself to be a fine scholar who aims to understand what these four men had to offer to their followers, and thus how they acquired the great following that they did, and what their teachings can offer to humanity as a whole. He strives to understand their socio/political endeavors in light of their historical contexts and personal circumstance. His work is a rare glimpse into the actual *struggle* of these men to rise up out of their personal obstacles and redress the social issues of their times. Muesse’s

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 437.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 433.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 162-3.

⁴⁷ Ahmed, Hadhrat Mirza Bashir-ud-Din Mahmud Ahmad, “*Banu Quraiza Punished*”, Introduction to the Study of the Holy Quran, Islam International Publications Limited, 1996, p. 223-224

perspective is secular, refreshingly unbiased, honest and foremost, as stated, contextual. His work is a phenomenal breakthrough in the study of religion, as he lays out the teachings of these men, not as their followers understood them, but as these four men intended them to be understood. Muesse has done what few scholars have managed to do: set aside his contextual time period and re-enter the time period of the great personalities he studies. As the world sees the re-emergence of religion, and witnesses a rising fundamentalism within every faith, and academics and scholars struggle to understand this re-emergence that has occurred despite the prevailing scientific order, Muesse offers his readers a profound window into humanity's need and struggle to follow a path of nobility, as embodied particularly in the historical characters of Confucius, Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad.