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## The Royal Institute of International Affairs

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### Review

Reviewed Work(s): Confucianism and Human Rights. by Theodore de Bary and Tu Weiming

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Source: *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, Vol. 74, No. 4 (Oct., 1998), pp. 921-922

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Royal Institute of International Affairs

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2625389>

Accessed: 14-05-2019 01:29 UTC

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flat. He is no more inclined to lean on Milosevic now than he was in 1995. Milosevic on the other hand is a very quick study. Just as in the Bosnian war, he is masterful at exploiting western differences on Kosovo by bringing in the Russians to serve his interests. And, over all those roast lamb dinners before and after Dayton, Milosevic has learned how to manipulate Holbrooke to his own ends. He will love this book.

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**Confucianism and human rights. Edited by Theodore de Bary and Tu Weiming.** New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 1998. 327pp. Index. £32.00. ISBN 0 231 10936 9.

Central to the vigorous debate on so-called 'Asian values' is the relationship between Confucianism and internationally recognized human rights. Theodore de Bary and Tu Weiming have collected essays from 18 leading Western and Chinese authorities on Confucian traditions who debate and discuss this relationship. The essays are a product of two conferences on 'Confucianism and human rights' held at the East-West Center in Honolulu, initiated and organized by the American Committee of the International Confucian Association with the assistance of the Confucius Foundation in Beijing. Further publications are anticipated from subsequent meetings.

I approached this book with much scepticism, as collected essays from conference proceedings are notoriously of uneven quality and often lack overall coherence. I was delighted to discover that these criticisms do not apply to *Confucianism and human rights*. The book is a critical and refreshing contribution to the growing literature on cultural relativism and, in particular, on Asia and human rights. The essays are uniformly solid, well-researched, and clearly written. The volume brings important insights into how human rights concepts relate to or are congruent with Confucian principles and practices.

Key to this discussion, of course, is how one formulates and defines 'human rights'. For example, Henry Rosemont Jr (p. 54) and Randall Peerenboom (p. 234) primarily equate human rights with political and civil freedoms and the radical autonomy of the individual, and thus find little commonality between Confucianism and modern human rights. Support for this position can be found in the use of Confucianism by conservative leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime minister of Singapore, who emphasized the Confucian work ethic and social discipline to support his authoritarian, law-and-order style of politics. This interpretation of Confucianism—a justification for limitations on individual freedom and a strengthened state—leaves little room for any human rights.

A differing approach is taken by most of the other contributors to this volume. De Bary states 'our own approach is long-term. It acknowledges that historical conditions and cultural differences may affect both people's understanding of human rights and their practice of them, but it also affirms the possibility of working out some consensus on fundamental human values, in the light of which cultural differences may be—if not reconciled—at least recognized and respected' (p. xix). The editors remind us that this was the approach taken by the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Radical individual autonomy was not inscribed into the Declaration. In fact, 'Confucian and Mencian concepts of humanity and humaneness (*ren/jen*) were accepted, at the insistence of the Chinese delegation, as keynotes to the Declaration, to be enshrined in its preamble in the family-centered language of the Confucian Analects, e.g., the saying "All men are brothers"' (p. 7).

Sumner Twiss argues that it may be possible for new understandings of human rights to develop out of different cultural traditions. 'Human Rights in general are compatible in principle not only with cultural traditions that emphasize the importance of individuals within community (which is a more apt characterization of Western liberalism) but also with cultural traditions that may emphasize the primacy of community and the way that individuals contribute to it—that is, both more liberal individualist and more communitarian traditions' (p. 34). Julia Ching notes that 'support for certain human rights concepts can be found in the writings of leading

Confucian thinkers, early and late' (p. 79). And Wejen Chang concludes that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive but complementary (p. 134).

Irene Bloom documents the many ways in which human dignity took form in the thought of Mencius, and writes '[T]his is not to suggest that Mencian Confucianism was generative of democratic ideas or of human rights thinking, but, rather, that its fundamental intuitions—with their crucial affirmations of human equality, responsibility, relatedness, and respect—are consistent with and morally and spiritually supportive of the consensus documents that figure so importantly in our emerging modern civilization' (p. 111).

The essays in this volume greatly enrich the debate on these pivotal issues. The editors of *Confucianism and human rights* give the last word to Louis Henkin, and I will follow their lead. Henkin argues that the human rights idea is not alien to Confucian values. ' [It] is not monolithic, imperialist. It does not demand uniformity, conformity. It allows—indeed it insists on—large autonomy for individuals as well as for societies. The ideology it insists on is a minimum, the minimum required for individual human dignity. Are these not also the imperative of Confucian values today?' (p. 313).

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**The warrior's honor: ethnic war and the modern conscience.** By Michael Ignatieff. London: Chatto and Windus. 1998. 207pp. Index. Pb.: £10.99. ISBN 0 7011 6324 0.

Half a century after the United Nations issued the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the vast majority of the earth's population is still not aware of the 'right to have rights', as Hannah Arendt stated in her *Origins of totalitarianism* (1968). Authoritarian leaders, sultanistic regimes, the absence of the rule of law, the lack of democratic institutions, weak and corrupt civil administrations and law enforcement agencies, disabled societies and stumbling economies, conspire against the empowerment of individuals, leaving them prey to demagogues and dictators. These are some of the features Michael Ignatieff identifies as the grounds on which *fin-de-siècle* ethnic strife and new wars flourish, towing in their path and often to their deaths or endless suffering individuals who have not yet managed to exit from their 'self-inflicted immaturity' (Immanuel Kant).

What is the 'mature' developed world, aware of all of these sufferings and political catastrophes, to do? And why should it do anything? Should it intervene, or succumb to the 'seductiveness of moral disgust' (p. 72)? Moral obligation, stemming from the universalism of the Enlightenment and the liberal democratic principles, has in fact already set the agenda. In an ever more interrelated world the moral obligation reaches 'beyond our nation, family, intimate network' (p. 4). This moral obligation, coupled with *realpolitik*, has driven intervention during this first post-Cold War decade in countries where gross violations of human rights have been committed.

Ignatieff's approach is unique because he jabs his pen and mind into the heart of Western assumptions, values and beliefs as they are confronted by the 'ethnification of politics' (Claus Offe) and collapse of states and societies. The author illuminates the political, social, historical and psychological complexities of these issues through a series of five essays. The questions they raise are fundamental to our understanding of key underlying questions of international politics. Whether considering the fact of intervention and engagement and its mediation through governments, multilateral organizations, NGOs and the media, or the character of the new ethnic wars fought mostly by irregular troops, or the uneasy cohabitation of a world of 'zones of safety' and 'zones of danger' (p. 6), Ignatieff's personalized accounts and insights constantly jolt the reader into a much needed politico-philosophical reflection on events whose shorthand names are Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, Haiti.

Difficult questions are raised more often than answers given. Even though faced with the dilemma of steering between the 'Scylla of hubristic overcommitment [to intervene] and the Charybdis of cynical disengagement' (p. 100), (between universalism and relativism), Ignatieff, advocating ethics of responsibility, assesses the possibilities for a middle course, which would