

# Empathizing (Confucianism)

## Solutions to Social Disintegration

Confucius lived at a time when Chinese culture was in a state of considerable disarray and anarchy threatened. Confucius and his contemporaries advocated differing solutions to China's problems of that day. Legalists believed that a strict "law and order" approach was best, with stringent laws and severe punishments. The Mohists thought that love would solve China's problems, extending that love even to one's enemies. The Taoists were more individualists and advocated finding peace through the natural world and its rhythms. Confucius, on the other hand, emphasized human, social relationships. He believed in the power of good example, especially on the part of political leaders and rulers. He also taught that justice was the best response when dealing with wrongdoing. Many people in our own culture believe that we are experiencing a kind of cultural disintegration similar to that Confucius faced. Invite the students to consider whether there are groups within our culture whose ideas seem to echo those of Confucius and his contemporaries, and discuss which approach or approaches hold the most promise as a long-term solution. Also, invite the students to think about what kind of society each approach might bring about over the long term.

## The Structure of Human Relationships

Confucius advocated a highly structured society with clearly defined roles based largely on hierarchical relationships. The Five Constant Relationships and the Rectification of Names are good examples of this attitude. In our own culture, we tend to emphasize equality and informality in relationships much more than the importance of one's place in a structured hierarchy. Ask the students to think about the advantages and disadvantages of each way of thinking about society and which sort of society they would prefer. Encourage them not to make this too simple, noting that if we're to empathize with the Confucian way of ordering society, we must see it in its own context rather than imposing our twenty-first-century perspective on it. They might also wish to compare Confucius's teaching with that found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 1928–1948.

## Making the Mundane Meaningful

The student book talks about Confucianism combining the idea of *li* both as sacred ritual and as proper behavior in a situation. Proper behavior—doing things with meticulous attention to correctness—even in mundane, routine tasks can make all the events of life a sacred ritual. Ask the students to think about their daily lives, especially the routine, "meaningless" tasks they do. Have them consider what ways these tasks might be transformed by following Confucius's description of proper behavior. They may wish to compare this with the idea of doing all things for the glory of God.



## Why Do You Study?

One of the statements attributed to Confucius in Analect 14.24 concerns study (see page 141 in the student book). Have the students list the variety of reasons they study, and ask them if they agree with Confucius's statement about why people study today. Invite the students to consider whether they think following Confucius's way would make them better students. Ask the following questions: What role does study play in your life? Does it seem to be primarily concerned with the acquisition of knowledge or with becoming a better person?

